

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Empowerment Now!**

*David Barkin\**

**Philip McMichael, ed. *Contesting Development: Critical Struggles for Social Change*, Routledge, 2010.**

In line with the other books he has authored in his prolific career, McMichael has compiled here a collection of fifteen essays, which offers a privileged view of people's struggles against the intensifying process of global integration and domination by capital. As he states in the preface, the stars of this collection are "the misfits, or market casualties...the excluded, the displaced, and the dispossessed" (xiii). Written by "an extraordinary collective of thoughtful and committed junior activist-scholars" (11), these essays offer a vivid portrayal of the mobilizations to demand empowerment and, even more important, an insightful analysis that challenges the reader to rethink the way in which social science and the development community portray "reality" and use their portrayal to exacerbate the horrors of international assistance.<sup>1</sup> It would be an excellent complement to his textbook, *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective* (Pine Forge Press), and provides new evidence of the thesis he brilliantly summarized in the title of his article, "Peasants Make their Own History, but Not Just as They Please. . ." (McMichael 2008).

The book is not simply a paean to the wonderful efforts of local heroes fighting against the inroads of international capital. Instead, it offers a nuanced examination of a broad range of confrontations between people and the dominant forces in their societies. Wide ranging as it is—with case studies from nine countries—the book's overall impact is to leave the reader with the distinct feeling that the official development process is bankrupt and that there is a great deal of room for constructing the "other worlds" so ardently clamored for by the *altermundistas* attending the World Social Fora and the many protests at the international gatherings that leaders convene to attempt coordination of their policies.

The contributors address key issues involving how readers in the developed countries should question their own educations, their own ideas about how societies develop, and, most importantly, their ignorance about the extraordinary lengths to which people around the world are willing to go to defend their dignity, their resources, their history. If there is one overarching lesson to be drawn from this collection, it is that people are actively engaged in rewriting their history, reclaiming their past, and contradicting the notion that progress is a unilinear path from backwardness to modernity. In doing so they are also developing a new social theory, and, hopefully, contributing to the demystification of some of the shibboleths in uncritical textbooks assigned to the intended audience of this book in the English-speaking "advanced" world.

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<sup>1</sup> Save the coordinator, and with one notable exception, Raj Patel, who is a respected activist who writes prolifically on progressive struggles in the Third World, the authors are all junior faculty members committed to understanding and promoting alternative paths to social change, "multivalent response[s] to a singular project of global development" based on the "market episteme" ( 10).

The chapters cover a wide range of countries—eight in the “Third World” and Japan—while also offering a surprising view of the World Social Forum. Taken as a whole, the book clearly shows how the diverse reform processes, anchored in a firm belief in the “saving” power of the “free market,” have betrayed more than one ingenuous participant (e.g., D. Da Costa’s insightful article on West Bengal and A. Zalik’s comparative analysis of how elections in Nigeria and Mexico were strongly impacted by global market forces). In her detailed study of soybean producers in Brazil, Emelie Peine documents the way in which ideology has erroneously deflected the soybean producers’ understanding of the cause of their plight from international capital (agribusiness) to the Brazilian state. Similarly, the export orientation of present development economics is shown to be a treacherous route that does not generate the promised benefits.

Another theme of great import is the questioning of the naïve assumption that education is good, period. Readers follow the fate of people in India who graduate only to find that the jobs are not there, while the stereotypes of gender discrimination in Mexico clearly move readers to ask: what are the best forms of education, what are the lessons to be taught, who should do the instructing, and—most difficult of all—what kind of society should the educational system serve and contribute to?

Local movements throughout the world are addressing the problem of creating alternative options and a better quality of life by also protecting the environment and nature’s biodiversity: “they are not constrained or inclined to work to realize the development vision of liberal modernity” (McMichael and Morarji, 239). These efforts are not abstract battles to protect pristine landscapes, but specific struggles that emanate from a realization that a more appropriate and knowledgeable interaction with ecosystems will enable people to enjoy a more productive, high quality life. This is illustrated by N. Ali, who questions the high-mindedness of conservation agencies through a study in Pakistan. The notion that nature should be protected from people, as the original formulation of UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Program suggested, does not address the fact that people all over the world have developed mechanisms to protect their communities and themselves by learning more both about how the areas in which they live are organized and about the value of biodiversity for their communities.

Another theme cogently addressed is the contribution of democracy to people’s well-being. It is clear that existing institutions are not ensuring that popular participation empowers people to become effective watchdogs over the exercise of power by their elected officials. As a result, grassroots struggles to protest against and actually stop the inroads of rapacious corporate intervention require people to recognize the need to go beyond the limits of institutionalized opposition (see the essays by Patel, Zalik, Swords, and Menon).

Finally, Kelly Dietz’s discussion of the autonomist efforts emerging from the anti-militarist struggle aimed at U.S. bases in Okinawa is worth mentioning. The author has clearly shown how the ongoing assaults against people and their societies around the world are continually moving them to deepen their understanding of global processes while also facilitating their efforts to propose interesting alternatives that will contribute to building the “other worlds” that we so desperately need.

By focusing on people and asking “Whom do development institutions serve?” this book offers a valuable and accessible teaching tool for undergraduate classes in the social sciences. Now that climate change is finally being thrust (or imposing itself?) onto

the political and scientific agenda, the book's relevance extends further into the natural sciences that increasingly have to incorporate political debate and social impacts into their course material.

#### **References**

McMichael, P. 2008. Peasants make their own history, but not just as they please. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8 (2-3): 205-228.