

Book Review

**Selwyn, Benjamin (2014) *The Global Development Crisis*.
Cambridge: Polity. ISBN 9780745660158**

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Benjamin Selwyn has written an important book which makes a very strong case for thinking about development from a labour perspective. It interrogates the thought of a number of non-neoliberal political economists and offers a critique of their approach to labour and development. The book concludes by outlining his own preferred approach, a labour (rather than state or capital) centred conception of human development.

Parts of the book have appeared in different forms in various venues. Chapter three 'Karl Marx, Class Struggle and Labour-Centred Development' was previously published in this journal (Vol. 4, No. 1), while other parts of the book have appeared in *New Political Economy*, *Economy and Society* and *Economic and Political Weekly*. Despite these earlier forays into the subject matter, the book does not read as a collection of separate articles. It flows well and makes a single coherent argument, drawing upon a wide range of development and political economy theorists.

Selwyn begins by noting the stubborn persistence of vast concentrated wealth and mass poverty. He quickly dismisses liberal arguments that poverty is caused by people's exclusion from the market and that the market is a neutral meeting place for the distribution of resources. Rather than review debates between liberals and their critics, his focus is upon key non-(neo) liberal theorists of development – Fredrick List, Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Schumpeter, Alexander Gerschenkron, Karl Polanyi and Amartya Sen.

One by one the author sketches out the shortcomings of key non-liberal thinkers. Statist political economy (List, Gerschenkron) is revealed to be premised upon strategies of labour suppression. Schumpeter's insights into the dynamics of capitalist creative destruction is undermined by his failure to note stratification of the global system and the role of capital – labour conflict in animating creative destruction. Polanyi's critique of the liberal market utopia is praised, but his failure to explore the link between market exploitation and social resistance is viewed as a major shortcoming.

The book also contains a chapter on Amartya Sen who is unlike the other thinkers in that his philosophy can be categorized as liberal. However, he is not a neoliberal and is included because of a strong critique of obsessively growth focused development. The author shares Sen's skepticism of growth based development, but faults him for viewing markets as liberating and a realm of freedom. The optimistic view of development based on improving human capabilities runs up against the inequalities of the market and political power supporting those inequalities.

Whereas the faults of non-Marxist writers are highlighted, Marx and Trotsky are reread in a sympathetic light. Thus, Marx's writings which demonstrate non-determinist and non-orientalist views are mobilized against those that do show these tendencies. The key point made is that Marx stressed the role of laboring classes in advancing development. Trotsky is viewed as sharing Gerschenkron's insights into late development, but with the added benefit of focusing upon the class conflicts generated by combined and uneven development.

Selwyn both examines Marxist thought and constantly uses it as a measuring stick to evaluate other thinkers. Thus, his primary knock against several of the critics of liberal development theory is that they pay insufficient attention to labour and class. They are not sufficiently Marxist. Indeed, the critique that theorist X has neglected a vital Marxist insight is a major theme of the book. This does open up a problem however, which is what has been the fate of development projects inspired by Marxism? Selwyn's response is clear, but unsatisfactory. He advances the well rehearsed argument that states such as the Soviet Union, China and Cuba were not really Marxist, but state capitalist (pp. 20, 49-50). Surrounded by a hostile international system they were forced to suppress their own workers in order to accumulate capital as quickly as possible if they were to survive. It is not that there was a problem with Marxist theory, the application of the theory was problematic. Here the argument becomes uncomfortably close to that of neoliberals arguing that structural adjustment and austerity policies in the developing world in the 1980s were not misguided, their failure was caused by improper implementation. The theory is never at fault, just the implementation.

This brings us to the final chapter of the book which moves from critique of others to proposals for an alternative model. Selwyn argues for a labour centred conception of development which understands capital-labour conflict to be at the centre of state strategies, views such conflicts from a labour perspective, and sides with the laboring classes attempts to improve their human development (p.145). Development projects should be evaluated on their ability to improve human development for labour. Selwyn draws upon previous work to demonstrate how a rural workers union in northeast Brazil has been able tip the scales of local development more in favour of workers. Further examples from Bolivia and Argentina are provided. The last pages make a case for increased economic democracy as the cornerstone of development. The precise form of this development is left open ended, depending very much on the nature and goals of local struggles.

Selwyn acknowledges gaps in his study. These include a lack of writers from the south, inattention to the issues of the environment, and gender and labour internationalism. It is impossible to address every issue in one book, but a key question is whether the perspectives omitted from the book might change its central argument. For example, would an acceptance of an environmental critique to the limits of growth challenge the orthodox Marxist perspective? Is it not the case that Marxists have been as committed to growth and participated in environmental destruction alongside their capitalist rivals? Would a labour centred development strategy be less driven by consumption? If so, how and why?

The Global Development Crisis is a rich and provocative analysis of the place of labour in non-liberal theories of development. The complexities and nuances of the author's argument cannot be adequately addressed in a short review. The book will be of particular interest to several audiences. One group is composed of people concerned with theories of political economy and the role of labour in those theories. Another group is the development studies community which continues to struggle with labour's appropriate place in development theory. A third group is labour studies students and scholars that are also concerned about development. Whether one shares the orthodox Marxist approach of the author or not, the book's argument is both engaging and thought provoking.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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