

Book Review

Benjamin Selwyn (2014) *The Global Development Crisis*.

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Towards Labour-centred Development

In 2014, Ben Selwyn published the book *The Global Development Crisis*, in which he critically engages with market-led and state-led developmental models alike. Importantly, he puts forward the novel concept of labour-centred development. In this review, I will discuss the main contributions of this remarkable book and explore further the possibilities of labour-centred development.

Challenging State-led Development

In this highly accessible book, Selwyn makes three major contributions. First, he asserts that it is the sphere of the capitalist social relations of production in which exploitation takes place; here the majority of the population, workers forced to sell their labour power, is subordinated to the minority, capital which owns the means of production. Hence, even if the most brutal forms of exploitation such as child labour were abolished, workers are still being exploited in that the wage they are being paid is always less than the value of the goods they produce (p. 5). The notion of a “fair wage for a fair day’s work” simply makes no sense.

Second, there is general agreement on the left that liberal, market-led developmental models not only do not work, but that they are also highly exploitative for workers. In order to ensure a free market, liberals advocate that it has to be easy for employers to hire and fire workers and that production should not be hindered by trade unions, “onerous” health and safety regulations, or legally established minimum wages. State-led developmental models are, however, frequently identified as progressive alternatives, ensuring potential developmental catch-up, which is assumed to benefit workers in the end. As Selwyn, by contrast, makes clear in impressive conceptual and empirical clarity, state-led development has generally been based on the exploitation of labour. Contemporary statist political economists’ (SPE)

admiration for and advocacy of constructing strong, bureaucratically autonomous states that are able to rationally and effectively generate and allocate resources cannot hide the fact that these states are involved in overseeing and reproducing highly exploitative labour regimes where workers are regarded as fuel for the accumulation of capital. Contemporary SPE therefore ... should not be viewed as representing a progressive strategy for development (p. 52).

Selwyn points out that both List and Gerschenkron emphasised the important role of the state in late

development, combined with the assumption that “workers needed to be manipulated and disciplined by the state, and subject to a labour regime designed to generate rapid productivity increases for capital” (p. 182). The widely praised state-led development models in Asia, including examples such as South Korea or today’s China, are clearly characteristic of these types of labour repression and super-exploitation of workers. In short, state-led development is not a progressive alternative.

Third, it is the very notion of labour-centred development which opens up progressive possibilities of thinking about development in novel ways. Whether development is pushed by capital in the market-led developmental model or whether development is pushed by the state in the state-led developmental model, it is workers who are suffering. Hence, the attainment of development favourable to labour can only be the result of successful class struggle. As Selwyn asserts, “the extent of labour-centred development depends on the changing balance of class power” (p. 186). It is collective action by workers that will ultimately determine the extent of labour’s developmental potential.

The Need to go Beyond the Workplace

As impressive as Selwyn’s book is, there are a number of shortcomings in my view. First, Selwyn is aware of the fragmented nature of the working class and argues that the labouring classes need to be broadly understood, including informal workers.

The term ‘labour classes’ includes urban/industrial workers (‘the working class’ in traditional Marxian terminology), the ‘new middle class’ of white-collar workers and informal workers that populate the ever-expanding ‘planet of slums’. The definition extends to some workers in the rural sphere who are sometimes classified as ‘peasants’ (in particular the poorer peasants) (p. 16).

And yet, this is still to some extent a rather narrow definition focusing on the work process, overlooking the sphere of social reproduction including the looking after and bringing up of children or the care for the elderly, so essential to the reproduction of capitalism.

It is Harry Cleaver’s notion of “social factory” which allows us to go beyond Selwyn’s definition of labour. As Cleaver (2000: 70) argues, “the reproduction of the working class involves not only work in the factory but also work in the home and in the community of homes...; the working class has to be redefined to include nonfactory analysis”. Focusing on the “social factory” – that is, the workplace as well as the wider sphere of social reproduction – Cleaver was able to take into account all the other forms of unwaged activities, including child rearing and education, which are necessary for the reproduction of capital but which take place outside the workplace. Class and class struggle, as a result, take on a very different and much broader meaning. This notion of social factory thus provides “a theoretical framework within which the struggles of American and European students and housewives, the unemployed, ethnic and racial minorities, and Third World peasants [in the 1960s] could all be grasped as moments of an international cycle of working-class struggle” (Cleaver, 2000: 73). In short, a new definition of “worker” beyond the direct employee/employer relationship is necessary in order to incorporate the whole “social factory” of capitalism.

Equally, in today’s time of environmental crisis, struggles over the destruction of the

environment also need to be incorporated into analyses of class struggle. Nothing threatens labour-centred development more than the continuation of capitalism's relentless exploitation of nature, the very biosphere of human existence. Selwyn is silent in his book on the struggles over new nuclear energy power stations, the exploitation of tar sands or the shift towards fracking. The book still exhibits too close a focus on the traditional work relations between employers and workers, which overlooks the much broader dynamics of class struggle, well captured by the notion of "world ecology" (Moore, 2015).

Moreover, Selwyn focuses almost exclusively on capitalism, and thereby neglects the possibilities of resistance against capitalist exploitation emerging from non-capitalist spaces. Drawing on the work of the Rethinking Marxism group in his article "The Survival of Non-capitalism", Chris Hesketh (2016: 881) points out that "the overwhelming focus on capitalism can lead quickly to a problem: the assumption of cultural life, and all sites of socio-political activity are portrayed as being overwhelmed by, subsumed into, the dynamics of capitalism". While non-capitalist space is simply understood as a passive object waiting to be subsumed in the further expansion of capitalism, the possibilities of resistance, of labour-centred development in Selwyn's understanding, are not captured. As Kiado Crus, a local activist in Oaxaca, Mexico points out, "In Oaxaca we have thousands of hectares of communal land... This implies thousands of hectares of resistance" (quoted in Hesketh, 2016: 887). In short, when looking for possibilities of labour-centred development emerging in processes of class struggle, resistance from non-capitalist space needs to be taken into account as much as resistance from within the capitalist social relations of production.

Finally, although the concept of labour-centred development holds great potential, the actual examples provided by Selwyn are slightly disappointing. Grape growers in Brazil, the MST or occupied factories in Argentina – these are all examples which have already been extensively covered, including by Selwyn himself. There is little new here in the book.

Nevertheless, these criticisms should not make us overlook the significance of Selwyn's contribution to thinking about development. Rather than providing concrete examples of labour-centred development, the book is a call to us to carry out further research in theory and practical activities to contribute to a labour-centred development. The task remains clear. In the words of Selwyn, "the struggle against exploitation takes myriad forms and has many outcomes. The challenge of a labour-centred development is to conceptually connect these struggles and their potential outcomes to a vision of human development free from exploitation" (p. 208).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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