

## Book Review

**Jan Breman (2016) *On Pauperism in Present and Past*.**

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*Reviewed by Kristin Plys, University of Toronto, Canada*

Jan Breman's *On Pauperism in Present and Past* (2016) is a master work of a mature scholar. As such, it strikes a delicate balance between theory and empirics, local and universal, macro and micro, and presents a provocative and innovative way of thinking about the working poor in the Global South.

Breman's investigation of the role of the pauper in the era of neo-liberalism takes the reader from the British Industrial Revolution to contemporary Gujarat where, through time and across space, he identifies similarities in ideas, policy and the political economy of the pauper. After first providing historical background on the origins of the pauper and social policies in Britain during the Industrial Revolution, Breman shows how policies aimed at combatting pauperism failed to diffuse to the colonies. He then examines poverty in Gujarat, relying on decades of rural ethnography to demonstrate how the social structure of the village changed from independence to liberalisation and beyond. The book shows how the few mechanisms put in place to prevent destitution – including serfdom, state welfare, trade unions and employment opportunities in the formal sector – have been eroded over the course of the twentieth century, leaving the poor with little hope of meeting their own basic needs. Because migration from villages to cities is one common strategy of eking out a means of survival, Breman then takes the reader from the villages of Gujarat to the slums and pavements of Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat and the sixth largest city in India. He details how slum clearances forced the city's most vulnerable residents to the outskirts where their lives became markedly worse and even more precarious. The circulation of the poor between city and village, Breman shows, is a result of their inability to earn a viable income in the village on the one hand and, on the other, their inability to gain a foothold in city life. The poor, as Breman demonstrates, are excluded not only from the possibility of living without precarity, but also from the social life of the city. Finally, Breman shows how the state and capital are complicit in the pauperisation of most of India's poor as increasing inequality has benefitted both national and global capital and been politically expedient for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's Hindu nationalist party.

The longitudinal ethnographic methods employed in this study allow Breman to access data and speak to theories that elude researchers whose survey data, ethnographic data and/or fieldwork is restricted to a much shorter time horizon. In so doing, Breman's study, like any ethnography, focuses on individuals in a very specific setting, but in adding a historical dimension to his research, he is able to link local processes to national and global trends of political economy. Thereby, he employs a careful and deliberate use of multiple registers and multiple units of analysis to the end of a thorough critique of the political economy of capitalist development as seen from Gujarat.

In my view, the two most significant contributions of the book are (1) situating pauperisation in the postcolonial context, and (2) its thorough dissection of the Gujarat Model of development. I was fascinated by the comparisons and connected history between pauperism in Early Modern Britain and British India. Breman narrates that in the colonial centre, the state eventually adopted policies designed to aid the pauperised, while in the colonies the poor were left to the whims of private charity. In pre-colonial India, landowners felt minimal obligation to bonded agricultural workers, but by the turn of the twentieth century this arrangement began to erode, and landlords began to dismiss bonded agrarian labour, thereby condemning them to certain death by starvation should they fail to find some means of providing for their basic needs. Poverty in the colonies, Breman argues, was far more brutal than in Britain, and was exacerbated by colonial policies that largely eschewed state responsibility for the poor. And even though, as Breman posits, “pauperism is the outcome of capitalism” (p. 7), colonial officials, through comparisons between parts of India and parts of East London, made attempts to evade the conclusion that colonialism and capitalism brought poverty and immiseration to India.

Furthermore, Breman details how sending the poor of the metropole to the colonies was seen as an ideal mechanism for eradicating the “undesirable” underclass from Britain. Through these policies, Breman contends, the lower classes were seen as a form of “savage” that should be sent to the colonies where they found another type of “savage”. However, in the current conjuncture, settler colonialism is, for many reasons, no longer a viable option. As Breman views social policies related to pauperism as hinging on the fact that Britain was an Empire, this postcolonial analysis of pauperism left me wanting to know more about how poverty in core and periphery remain, to this day, a consequence of colonialism. Perhaps Breman’s line of thinking will spark a new research programme on poverty in world-historical perspective.

Another important contribution of this book is in its analysis of the Gujarat Model. While the Kerala Model has been much celebrated by sociologists as a way to egalitarian and sustainable development (even though gender inequality remains rife in Kerala), the Gujarat Model has received far less academic attention beyond South Asia, perhaps because it typifies a model of growth that greatly increases inequality while provoking caste and communal violence. However, now more than ever, this model needs to be vetted by researchers. Narendra Modi, one of its key architects, was elected Prime Minister of India in 2014 and has since begun to apply this model across India. But even though the Gujarat Model is gaining traction in India and beyond, Breman is careful in how he generalises the lessons of his research. One of the key insights is that the casualisation and informalisation of labour in Gujarat is not an innate condition of labour markets in the Global South, but that it is advancing and transforming in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. The undoing of formal labour contracts, trade unions and other forms of more stable employment, however, were coupled with slum clearances that deepened and intensified poverty and inequality in Ahmedabad. The few resources on which the poor relied – including sewerage, water, electricity, health care and education – vanished overnight, and the physical and social distance between work and home vastly increased. This distance created new obstacles for the poor including increased transportation costs, lack of steady employment and income, and less creditworthiness or access to credit. At the heart of the Gujarat Model, Breman illustrates, is the removal of the working class from the city at the cost of their exclusion and greater immiseration.

An interesting component of Breman’s analysis of the Gujarat Model is the role that Hindutva plays as an ideological mechanism. It is clear from the data presented in the book, and from the

rhetoric during and after the Gujarat Riots (a premeditated attack on Muslims that was carried out with the complicity of the state government) that poverty and inequality fuel Hindutva, and that Hindutva is in turn used to obscure increasing inequality. But what exactly is the mechanism by which the ideology of Hindutva is mobilised to do this work? Why does Hindutva (and other forms of religious extremism for that matter, such as ISIS in Western Asia or the Christian Right in the United States) resonate in contexts of growing inequality? How exactly is this ideology mobilised to serve the ends of the state, and how does it resonate differently with individuals given their relative position in the income distribution? While I am sympathetic to Breman's larger argument about Hindutva and the Gujarat Model, I wished that he had presented data that directly addresses these concerns.

For reasons detailed above, *On Pauperism in Present and Past* should be required reading for development studies, as it fundamentally challenges ways of thinking about the rural and urban working poor. Breman's work led me to question whether existing development scholarship truly understands the plight of the pauper, and whether the policies proposed by it have any chance of successfully combatting poverty in the Global South. This is particularly salient for development economics, as Breman's work can be read as a counter-argument to *Poor Economics* (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011) – the book that recently revolutionised thinking in development economics. Both propose that talking directly to the poor helps us better learn about poverty, and both argue that even if economic growth is not tied to poverty eradication, combatting poverty is nonetheless important. However, Breman's decades of fieldwork show two fundamental flaws in Banerjee and Duflo's logic and, as a result, in the thinking that plagues contemporary development economics. Far from Banerjee and Duflo's conclusion that history doesn't matter and that eradicating poverty is simply a matter of enacting the right policies, Breman masterfully demonstrates that history matters deeply and that the logic of capitalism is the root cause of extreme poverty.

At several points in the book, I kept thinking about Harry Braverman's (1974) question of whether it is better to be exploited or unemployed. I found myself asking whether the root cause of pauperisation in Gujarat is the result of labour's exploitation by capital *or* by labour's exclusion from participation in the capitalist world economy. In applying this line of inquiry to Breman's case of workers subjected to the Gujarat Model of development, I now question whether Braverman's dichotomy remains useful for thinking about the worker in the Global South. Because what Breman masterfully demonstrates through this window into the everyday lives of the working poor is that they are both exploited *and* excluded. Furthermore, he shows that the conditions of exploitation and exclusion that render pauperisation largely insurmountable cannot be easily disentangled from one another. Many of the working poor, Breman observes, are excluded at some point in their life course, making it easier to accept low wages at a subsequent point, only to later be discarded and once again join the ranks of the excluded. Breman illustrates the many ways in which the state and capital use exclusion to exploit labour, and also use exploitation to exclude the reserve army of labour, thereby creating an ever-deepening pauperisation of the working poor, not just in Gujarat, but any place where one finds similar politico-economic structures.

## REFERENCES

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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