Book Review

Benjamin Selwyn (2017) *The Struggle for Development.* Cambridge: Polity Press. ISBN 9781509512782. E-Book $19. Paperback $23.75. Hardcover $67.50.

Reviewed by
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The Struggle for Development makes a compelling case for a labour-led development in our crisis-ridden times. Drawing insights from Marxist intellectual traditions and feminist theories, Benjamin Selwyn advances a *social relational* conception of class to analyse the ongoing struggle for human development (p. 14, italics in original). "Class" and "non-class" forces are diverse and intersectional. Going beyond the narrowly defined productivist paradigm, Selwyn highlights that "class relations of exploitation (re)produce themselves via myriad forms of hierarchical and oppressive social relations, such as gender, race and sexuality" (p. 15). The intertwined spaces of production and social reproduction are controlled to drive capitalist development, rather than towards human well-being for all, despite fierce challenges from workers and their families as well as supporters in globalised development.

The book comprises six chapters. Chapter 1 challenges the assumption of economic and social growth through global economic integration as widely shared by national governments, businesses and transnational institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the International Labour Organization. Fundamentally, capitalism is a dynamic system of exploitation. The pathways to attracting foreign investment and further opening of domestic markets with access to land and workers, particularly in poor developing countries, have turned out to be highly controversial if not deadly destructive. As evidence shows, the premise of neo-liberal development is based on endless capital accumulation and unconstrained market competition at the expense of workers and the environment. The construction of a "win–win" scenario by elites for humankind in the Global North and South is, in the perceptive understanding of Selwyn, a "big lie".

Chapter 2 elaborates on the coexistence of immense wealth and massive poverty amid capitalist expansion around the globe. Over the past decades, the World Bank has slightly adjusted the International Poverty Line to US$1.90 (Purchasing Power Parity per day), reflecting a level of consumption that the Bank considers to be the dividing line between extreme poverty (below the line) and poverty (above the line). But this benchmark is inherently flawed and inhumanely low. The economists ignore the context in which low-income workers and their families are desperately making their living, such as engaging in life-threatening casual jobs and cutting their expenditure on food and clothing to barely survive. The line demarcating the "poor" and "non-poor" is simply a monetary figure. If it was linked to an individual's basic needs, then it would be much, much higher than US$1.90 a day. Moreover, women workers are generally undervalued. At home, women take the double shift by supporting their spouses and raising their children (the labourers of the next generation) but their labour is not paid. Gender-blind proponents of mainstream development economics go so far as to claim a rising global "middle class", thus sustaining the myth of capitalist

globalisation by referencing a very low and completely arbitrary figure.

The incorporation of populous China and India into the world economy has reshaped labour relations and regional and global production networks. Chapter 3 examines the proliferation and impact of global value chains on employment and working conditions. Contrary to the claims of economic upgrading through engaging in transnational subcontracting, evidence clearly shows the squeeze on wages and the precariousness of work in supplier factories down the value chains. Lead firms retain high value-added, core competence such as research and development, branding and marketing, while contracting suppliers to process components and assemble products at the lowest possible cost. The use of "flexible" labour to meet the boom-and-bust production cycles is frequent. At the point of production, young female migrants and other less-protected workers are increasingly drawn into labour-intensive and capital-intensive industries. This proletarianisation process has been partly promoted by state-guided industrialisation, migration and urbanisation strategies. Hundreds of millions of peasants and rural labourers are on the move, oftentimes leaving behind their children and the elderly. Looking closer, local government officials are incentivised to classify "transient" migrants as inferior, second-class citizens in order to evade the basic responsibility of providing them with education, housing and healthcare. The collusion between capital and the state has deepened class and social inequalities. In this light, global value chains should be reinterpreted and renamed "global poverty chains".

Thus far, "the vast majority of development literature and policy analyses are based upon elitist conceptions of social change, where states and corporations are identified as primary development actors" (p. vi). Chapter 4 posits "elite subjects" in relation to "subordinate objects" to interrogate the capital-centred development approach. The dominant classes treat labourers as one of the factors of production. They prescribe skills training to raise labour productivity – that is, to increase the rate of exploitation. At the same time, they advocate deregulating the labour market, wherein employers should enjoy the right to hire and fire workers in response to demand. Social insurance payments for the unemployed should be reduced or eliminated. In the face of large-scale protests initiated by workers and other oppressed social groups, however, some concessions were made with the primary aim to resume production and socio-political order. Minimum wages – not living wages – are promulgated in specified jurisdictions. As wages are low and benefits very few, many workers need to do massive amounts of overtime, thereby destabilising social and family lives. Worse yet, the enabling right of trade union organisation is curtailed by both the bosses and the state. Workers are seen as "objects" of top-down development processes.

As an antithesis to capital-centred development theories, Chapter 5 narrates the conception and evolution of a labour-led model by spotlighting the self-organisation of labouring classes. Against all odds, the (re)composition of labourers is taking place in various local communities. Concrete examples include landless peasants who occupy agricultural land to farm, homeless people who claim their human right to live, and laid-off workers who take back abandoned factories to produce. A labouring class in unity – when overcoming and transcending intra-class divisions and fragmentations by gender, citizenship status and racial/ethnic differences – can better resist exploitation to reclaim agency, human dignity and collective capacity. Through coordinated actions, even when they are under-funded and short-lived, labourers can "generate developmental improvements for themselves and their communities" (p. 101).

In the conclusion, Chapter 6 envisions the institutionalisation of a democratic political economy based on active participation of labourers. Social ownership instead of private or state ownership of means of production, suggests Selwyn, is critical to possession of workers' power. Labour is to be effectively coordinated to produce use values for people. "The identification and satisfaction of communal needs and purposes", in the formulation of the book, "will be predicated

upon cooperation within and between workplaces and communities" (p. 131). At stake is the creation of a cooperative rather than a dominating relationship.

I applaud the author's great effort to promote an alternative development framework against the intensification of capitalist encroachment of the life world. Unyielding to the destructive dynamic, Selwyn calls for "progressive social scientists, activists, development theorists and practitioners" to support labour-led development both practically and theoretically (p. 154). He himself sets a good example by documenting the working masses' hard-won victories for a better future, rather than offering consultancy services to elitist power-holders to preserve the status quo. He challenges the arguments of pseudo-scientists who speak of achieving unprecedented growth and prosperity under the global trade regime, which has in fact legitimised labour commodification and fossil fuel extraction.

Indeed, the big question of strengthening labour struggles and fostering social unity requires deep commitment of progressive individuals and groups. Selwyn emphasises worker–community cooperation and a bottom-up perspective of governance. At the higher level, a form of central coordination should be defined and mutually agreed by the concerned community. But what are the necessary conditions for the emergence of such a democratic state? How do grassroots labouring classes actually conquer political and economic power in the anticipation of strong resistance? On reflection, Selwyn contends that some political parties are potential allies, especially in the run-up to elections; however, the long-term outcomes of voting politics can be uncertain. In authoritarian regimes controlled by the party-state, the sharing of power by the ruling class with ordinary people is relatively even more limited. In brief, I would welcome deliberations of more detailed strategies on political activism.

At the time of writing, when wealthy nations have far greater access to COVID-19 vaccines and other vital medical supplies than poor neighbourhoods, *The Struggle for Development* refreshes the urgency for "a radical democratisation of resource generation and political structures" (p. 152). Investments in safeguarding people's health and safety must be reprioritised. A labour-led socialist development underpinned by democratic governance and technological innovation is worthy of *our* concerted effort.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JENNY CHAN is an assistant professor of sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She is the co-author, with Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, of *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers* (Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, 2020). She also serves on the Advisory Board of the *Global Labour Journal* (2019–present) and is a vice-president of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Labour Movements (2018–present). Her research, currently funded by the Early Career Scheme of the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong, focuses on labour, class and the Chinese state in an era of oligopolistic globalisation.
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