

Towards a World Community or a Class Project?

Bharat Ramaswami

GLOBALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by Frans J. Schuurman

Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2001, pp. Rs. 275.00

GLOBALIZATION UNMASKED: IMPERIALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer

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The idea of a world community has been visible for many decades in the form of the United Nations and its affiliated organizations. International agreements such as on trade, environment, disarmament and biodiversity have bolstered the notion of global governance. While these treaties themselves are usually contentious, there are fewer disagreements on the need for forums for global cooperation even when countries complain about the unequal distribution of bargaining power.

If globalization were limited to participation in world affairs through country governments, it would at worst provoke a yawn. But there are other things happening as well – trade, internet, cell phones, satellite television, movies, terrorism and McDonalds. Arguably, these take us also in the direction of a world community – which for many people is not just less welcome but also worthy of spirited resistance. These “globalizing” activities, for want of a better term, are largely because of private actions and motivated by private interests. Governments can control or promote these activities. The focus of international treaties in recent years has been to define the extent to which governments can regulate trade, copyright, investments and (foreign) media.

The book edited by Frans Schuurman is a collection of essays that were originally presented at a workshop at the University of Nijmegen (Netherlands) on the significance of globalization for the field of development studies. Unlike the subject of study, the collection of authors in this volume is very non-global. Of the 13 authors, nine are academics based in Netherlands, two are drawn from Britain and there is a solitary representative each from Germany and the US.

In the introductory essay, Schuurman poses the challenges of globalization for development studies. According to the author, the dominant paradigms are endangered because globalization (a) unravels the supposed homogeneity of the Third World, (b) questions the unconditional belief in the concept of progress and (c) undermines the nation state as an analytical frame of reference. In another essay, Schuurman attempts a synthetic review of the way in which theorists in the development studies tradition have defined globalization and evaluated its encounter with the nation-state.

For students in the field, the two essays by Schuurman would probably be the most useful chapters of the book.

Essays in the first part of the book continue the theme of globalization and development studies. Although Schuurman sets the stage, the other essays in the first part do not systematically follow through the issues framed by the introductory chapter. Albrow concludes that development studies must go in the direction of global studies but is silent on how such “global studies” might work in practice. Similarly, De Ruijter is occupied with notions that are better descriptions of globalization. The author concludes, “Development studies refers to the co-existence of many worlds, each with its own ‘logic’. A new narrative has emerged in which multiplicity, diversity, specificity, ambiguity and ambivalence are key-terms”. Like many of the other papers in this collection, this paper is content with arguing the case for description rather than demonstrate the analytical value of the new labels for the development process and policies.

The second half of the book consists of essays on specific aspects of globalization such as human rights, multinationals and the environment. Perhaps the papers that best illustrate the methods of cultural theorists are the chapters by Marianne Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan and by Tine David and Francien Van Driel both of which examine the connection between globalization and gender. Both papers reject what they call narrow materialist perceptions of gender analysis that confines itself to the impact of globalization on the economic status of women. The Marchand and Runyan paper examines the gendered constructions of globalization by analysing the relations of domination that are sustained by gendered symbolism and metaphors. David and Van Driel emphasize the multidimensionality of gender. As an instance of it, they show that the concern about female-headed households in poverty analysis reproduces the “old discourse of the male breadwinner” and ignores the other dimensions of gender.

James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer have written an old fashioned Marxist tract and makes for an interesting contrast with the postmodern inspired writings in development studies. It is as if the fog of postmodernism lifts

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to reveal a sparse but clear-as-daylight landscape. Globalization is nothing but a class project – it is the agenda of individuals who seek to advance the interests of a new international capitalist class. For this reason, the authors prefer another term that they say has greater explanatory power: imperialism.

For a Marxist, an important issue is to situate globalization within the history of capitalism. Petras and Veltmeyer, however, do not dwell too much on such issues that are likely to be of interest only to other Marxists. As globalization is an extension of capitalism and class struggle to a wider scale, there are not many “new” things to explain. The authors refer to the coming crisis point in globalization but wisely desist from a detailed analysis except to point out that globalization has yet to enter its “final phase”.

True to its title, the emphasis in the book is to blow the cover of imperialists masquerading their policies and programmes as globalization. Particular attention is given to the experience of Latin America, privatization programmes, the promotion of democracy in the Third World by the developed countries and to foreign aid projects. The poor record of the public sector is attributed to bureaucratic statism while China is regarded as a disaster waiting to happen. NGOs receive a special blast for acting as a ‘neo-comprador’ group that trades “in domestic poverty for individual perks”. The authors particularly dislike the notion of civil society that NGOs use to claim space for their actions, because that is just a cover up of class antagonisms. The authors conclude with their vision of a socialist paradise. Expectedly, it begins with state ownership of all economic enterprises and productive assets. Yet the authors believe that it can be so designed that consumers and local citizens will be the ones that drive economic decisions. It will be no haven for the slothful – incompetent workers would be fired; absentee workers will have their salaries docked. Does that sound like something familiar? The market for instance?

Bharat Ramaswami is a Professor in the Planning Unit of the Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi. Currently, he is on leave at the India Development Foundation, Gurgaon.