

### Review: Lucia Pradella; Thomas Marois (eds.): Polarising development: marxist perspectives on neoliberalism and its alternatives

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Addis, A. (2016). Review: Lucia Pradella; Thomas Marois (eds.): Polarising development: marxist perspectives on neoliberalism and its alternatives. [Review of the book *Polarising development: alternatives to neoliberalism and the crisis*, ed. by L. Pradella, & T. Marois]. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 8(1), 87-89. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-62528-8>

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Book Review:

## Polarising Development: Marxist Perspectives on Neoliberalism and its Alternatives

Annalisa Addis\*

*Polarising Development. Alternatives to Neoliberalism and the Crisis*, edited by Lucia Pradella and Thomas Marois.

The volume edited by Lucia Pradella and Thomas Marois aims at laying the foundation for a Marxist-inspired approach to the study on development and the (capitalist) economy. In the introduction, the editors present the theoretical underpinnings of the book and justify the necessity of debating radical alternative approaches to neoliberalism in view of the crisis that has been unfolding since 2008. The remaining 22 chapters that compose the volume contribute to shedding light on various aspects of the debate on radical alternatives to neoliberalism and are organised in two parts: 'Alternative Themes', dedicated to the analysis of capitalist development and its (potential) alternatives, and 'Alternative Cases', which analyses capitalist development in various regions of the world. The distinction between the two parts is not clear-cut, as most chapters in the first part also feature case studies, and case studies from the second include reflections on specific themes.

Part I 'Alternative Themes' includes eleven chapters analysing a range of themes and issues. Most of them revolve around the analysis of key features of the current economic system, from workers' impoverishment in Western Europe (chapter 2 by Lucia Pradella) to the relocation of industrial production (chapter 5 by John Smith and chapter 10 by Andreas Malm), as well as international migration (chapter 8 by Pietro Basso). Two contributions challenge the status quo by presenting a range of present-day as well as historical alternatives to the neoliberal practices: chapter 3, written by Thomas Marois, focusing on non-capitalist baking systems, and chapter 11 by David A. McDonald, which explores a range of different options for non-private provision of public services and goods. Chapter 4 by Benjamin Selwin expands on a theme already touched in the introduction – that of the inherent authoritarianism of statist political economies, where socio-economic development is pursued through strong state intervention in industrial planning. In chapter 6, Alfredo Saad-Filho explains that the 'Rise of the South' narrative is not historically accurate and introduces the notion of 'Uneven and Combined Development' (subsequently used by Baba Aye in chapter 19 and by Angela Wigger and Laura Horn in chapter 21). In Chapter 7, Jerome Klassen focuses on the decline of the United States' hegemony and the shift towards a multipolar geopolitical order. In Chapter 9, Sarah Miraglia and Susan Spronk adopt a socialist-feminist approach, presenting case studies of women's resistance to neoliberalism from Cambodia and Venezuela. Part I of the book is closed by Hugo Radice's chapter, which advocates for a utopian dimension in contemporary socialism, arguing that such an element was indeed present in Karl Marx's own work.

The eleven contributions listed in part II 'Alternative Cases' serve to analyse capitalist development across the world, mostly in Latin America (chapters 13 by Abelardo Mariña.Flores, chapter 14 by Jeffery R. Webber, and 15 by Leandro Vergara-Camus) and Asia (chapters 16 by Dae-Oup Chang, 17 by Tim Pringle, and 18 by Rohini Hensman). There is only one contribution that deals with sub-Saharan Africa, chapter 19 by Baba Aye, which gives a broad overview of the post-colonial development of the entire continent, with brief references to Nigeria and South Africa. North African countries are featured in chapter 20 by Adam Hanieh, who deals with the Arab Spring revolutions as examples of challenges to neoliberalism. In chapter 21, Dezmet Özmen Yilmaz discusses socialist-feminist alternatives

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to neoliberalism in Turkey. Finally, chapters 22 by Angela Wigger and Laura Horn and 23 by David McNally focus on crisis and resistance to austerity in the European Union and in the United States, respectively. The inclusion of industrialised countries is intentional: a key stance taken in this book is that the term ‘development’ does not merely apply to studies on the global South, but also to analyses of capitalism and its alternatives in Northern/Western countries that would normally fall in the domain of economics (p. 2).

As mentioned above, at times it is not entirely clear how the distinction between ‘Alternative Themes’ and ‘Alternative Cases’ has been operated, since some of the contributions included among the former actually seem to focus on one or more case studies rather than on a theme. For instance, chapter 9 ‘Neoliberalism, Social Reproduction and Women’s Resistance: Lessons from Cambodia and Venezuela’ (written by Miraglia and Spronk) could have easily been included in part II, ideally before chapter 21 ‘Socialist Feminist Alternatives to Neoliberalism in Turkey’, given that they both present examples of resistance to neoliberalism from a socialist-feminist perspective. Similarly, a few chapters in part II introduce important themes such as decommodification (chapter 15 by Vergara-Camus), labour as an agent of change (chapter 17 by Pringle), or resistance to austerity (chapter 22 by Wigger and Horn and chapter 23 by McNally), which were not discussed previously. It adds to the confusion that despite the use of the adjective ‘alternative’, neither the themes nor the cases necessarily provide actual examples or models of alternatives to capitalism. This does not seem to be an oversight, as the description of the book structure included in the introduction mentions ‘alternatives’ only as one element of part I, whereas part II is supposed to ‘explore the specificities of capitalist development in Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, North America, and Western Europe’ (p. 2), rather than alternatives to such development.

The number of contributions and the variety of themes and approaches makes it difficult to come up with critical commentary on the volume in its entirety. Some of the chapters stand out from the rest in terms of clarity and logical flow of the central argument. In this regard, Chapter 11 by McDonald is in my view one of the best examples, as it effectively presents to the reader examples of actual alternatives to privatisation of public service provision. In his contribution, McDonald departs from the public versus private logic (as if there were only these two options) by acknowledging diversity in actual models of public provision, both in terms of objectives and of performance. Similarly, chapter 3 by Marois is quite effective in describing historical and contemporary examples of alternative banking arrangements, which support the central argument that breaking with capitalism is indeed possible and necessary.

Despite the diversity of the themes and approaches adopted – something that is acknowledged by the editors themselves in the foreword – there are some arguments that recur several times across the book. One notable example is the critique of the mainstream approach to measuring poverty and development, and particularly the equation between income growth and development. Unfortunately – but perhaps this would have been outside of the scope of this volume – no alternative measures are proposed. For instance, in chapter 2 Pradella points out that, from a Marxist point of view, the concept of impoverishment goes beyond consumption levels. However, she does not suggest a better way to measure poverty, and despite her criticism of ‘wage-based’ conceptualisations of poverty, she uses the monetary threshold of US\$2/day poverty line to give an estimation of the number of working poor (p.19). In a similar vein, John Smith dismisses official statistics and the accuracy of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) calculations, as they underestimate the contribution of Southern labour. Nevertheless, when presenting the case of Bangladesh (pp. 56-57) he refers several times to its GDP, despite having stated its inaccuracy.

One of the most disappointing aspects of this volume is the limited geographical coverage of the contributions. This could, to a certain extent, be linked to the refusal of the so-called ‘methodological nationalism’, defined as the acceptance ‘of nation-states as self-contained units of analysis’ (p. 2), as well as to the contributors’ own geographical expertise. At the same time, however, it is striking

to see that examples or case studies from China are included in six different chapters, and that as many as five contributions deal with one or more Latin American countries, whereas only two refer to African countries. What is more, the only chapter entirely dedicated to Africa, chapter 19 by Baba Aye, presents a very broad overview of post-colonial developments across the entire continent, failing to acknowledge the diversity of experiences. Furthermore, there is no mention of the experience of African socialism, despite it being influential during the decolonisation process.

In spite of the shortcomings mentioned above, *Polarising Development* provides an interesting and welcome collection of Marxist-inspired contributions on multiple issues related to development. By offering some examples of alternatives to neoliberalism (whether successful, failed, or still in progress), this book also effectively challenges mainstream views of economic development. As such, the book delivers on the promise of providing a first overview of contemporary Marxist thinking on development issues. Another objective of the book, as stated in the foreword by the editors, was to provide tools that could be used for the transformation of society. This has been fulfilled only in part, with only a few chapters – most notably those authored by McDonald, Marois, and Yilmaz – actually providing actionable examples that might inspire change in other contexts. All in all, *Polarising Development* remains useful reading for anyone willing to go beyond mainstream analyses of development processes.

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