BOOK REVIEW


‘MAKE POVERTY HISTORY’: a plastic wristband, a slogan and a vision of a world transformed. In 2005, a coalition of more than five hundred groups—trades unions, NGOs and grassroots organisations—put their names to an ambitious anti-poverty campaign which sought nothing less than the transformation of the rules of global trade, ‘a fundamental rethink of the rules of the relationship between the poor and the rich world’. Within 6 months, nearly nine in ten Britons polled were aware of the campaign—thanks in no small part, as even casual viewers of British television output at that time can attest, to its stark, celebrity-infused ‘clicking fingers’ advertising campaign. Cameron Diaz. Click. Pause. Hugh Grant. Click. Pause. Emma Thompson. Click. Pause. Bob Geldof, of course. Click. Each click of celebrity fingers, 3 sec apart, representing the untimely death ‘from poverty’ of a child somewhere in the world.

If Make Poverty History raised awareness of the reality of massive global scale inequality and the vulnerability of hundreds of millions of the world’s poor, its almost-namesake Making Poverty: A History raises fundamental questions about the processes underlying those inequalities and vulnerabilities. Thomas Lines offers a rigorously researched and compellingly argued account of the ideologies, policy instruments, institutions and historical moments that underlie the present plight of the rural poor. His is a story of 900 million largely agriculture-dependent rural people enrolled in, and at the mercy of, global commodity markets controlled by and for powerful actors: developed countries, international organisations and massive, vertically integrated corporations that control supply chains and mercilessly drive margins downward. Lines the activist, Lines the academic, and Lines the (Green Party) politician are all in evidence in a book that offers not only finely honed critique but also specific policy prescriptions. His is a pragmatic agenda that urges the reform of international trade rules in ways that respect local and regional autonomy; the strengthening of nation-state control over food production and food security are crucial, he argues. What is required, he suggests, is a refocusing of international trade rules on the ‘needs and interests’ of the rural poor: living wages, stable and adequate prices and more flexible trade rules that no longer rigidly demand damaging export orientation. Ultimately, his optimism is underpinned by the belief that markets, since they are socially produced by/for (particular) people, can be re-made by and made to work for the poor.

Overall the book begins to address four core questions: What is poverty? Where is poverty? Who is poor? and, crucially, How is/was poverty reproduced? Lines highlights the divide between urban/industrial economies and rural/agrarian economies demonstrating the historical association between economic development and a move away from agrarian economies. Perhaps most compelling is the historical account of the continuity of uneven power relations between developing countries and, first, their colonial powers and, later, the rules and institutions of international trade (Chapter 2). In terms of the latter, Lines sets out a fairly detailed account of those specific policy initiatives and simplistic/universalist neoliberal developmental rationales implicated in the present plight of the world’s rural poor. Specifically, Lines takes us on a tour of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) policies that led (and lead) developing countries to fall into an ‘export orientation trap’ (39) where an ideological advocacy of specialisation and comparative advantage are operationalised not as entrepreneurial dynamism in a market economy but as stasis leading to narrow dependence on unstable, or collapsing, commodities. Countries that have been able drastically to increase their national incomes by developing non-agricultural exports (such as oil in the cases of Nigeria and Angola) nevertheless have populations whose livelihoods are based primarily on agriculture. But
even as the total volume of international commodity trading has increased significantly, the monetary value of trade has, in many cases, declined—in the case of cocoa exports by seven per cent per year since 1977.

Throughout, Lines highlights a rural-urban divide that exists both between and within nation-states: the world’s poor are concentrated in rural areas, and particularly in politically and economically isolated regions. The ‘geography’ of poverty at a global scale, Lines argues, is a geography of isolation: physical isolation from populations and markets, as well as economic isolation manifest in limited land holdings/rights, a lack of capital and the vagaries of insecure/seasonal labour demand. Lines takes issue with claims for a reduction in levels of absolute poverty on two main grounds. First, such claims are based on data that mask the massive unevenness of economic development between countries. The flagship economic successes of India and China skew analyses in favour of the rising living standards narrative, obscuring the stagnating and declining economies elsewhere (particularly in Africa). Second, even as India’s GDP boomed in the 1990s, inequality increased: there is evidence that nutrition in rural states had declined between the early 1990s (when market reforms were instituted) and today. Lines cautions against uncritical use of data that tend to underestimate the severity and prevalence of absolute poverty, and to mask the massive inequalities within as well as between nation-states.

The later chapters provide a powerful indictment of the failures of commodity markets to do what they’re supposed to—‘to get the prices right’ (81) in the language of the World Bank in the 1980s (Chapters 3 and 4). International tariffs and other instruments, in this analysis, are not simply ‘distortions’ to the proper operation of the free market—as the neoliberal analyses of the World Bank and IMF would have it—but responses to the failure of markets to respond (as they are supposed to) to price signals. This analysis draws out starkly the inconsistencies between the universal laws of ‘blackboard economics’ of supply/demand and elasticity and the unique, messy and socially produced reality of each individual commodity market.

Overall, this book achieves a good balance between readability and scholarly rigour presenting a clear narrative that marshals appropriate empirical data. When students in undergraduate development or regional geography classes ask us ‘why is that country poor?’ Lines’ book suggests some thought-provoking answers.

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