

BOOK REVIEWS-REVUE DES LIVRES

1. J.P. DICKENSON et al *A Geography of the Third World*. (Methun and Co. London, 1983).

Reviewed by Sam MOYO*

This book is a victim of both its theoretical position and the scope of the task it sets for itself. It is, therefore, difficult to see its usefulness for the general reading of its prescribed audience, advanced high school and university students.

To begin with, the Third World is too vast a region to discuss in a single volume as is clearly evident in the numerous «factors» the authors marshal in order to define unity among the countries as a region. Secondly, the book is overly ambitious in its attempt to discuss every aspect of Third World economies, agriculture, mining, energy, industrialization, urbanization, population, planning, external relationships, spatial interaction and history. The book thus not only tries to cover too much but also unduly compartmentalizes issues. A further related weakness lies in the catholic nature in which *all* viewpoints on issues are treated — albeit inadequately — in a self-proclaimed attempt to be «neutral». As a result, the book alternates between encyclopedic detailing of facts, figures and maps and questionable generalizations about the region with very little explanation of processes. The theoretical weakness of the book lies in its consistent refusal to discuss the development of capitalism and the logic of imperialism as a central process underlying development in the so-called Third World.

As a result, it seems this book is potentially misleading to young African students and dangerous because it surreptitiously advances a form of ideology which seeks to «depoliticise» the necessarily political debate over underdevelopment. The review that follows, therefore, briefly outlines chapter by chapter, some of the problems and pitfalls inherent in this book. The chapter on history is a rather sketchy description of the colonization of the whole region concluding that the effects of colonization were the establishment of a dual economy, which is only described but not explained in terms of the development of capitalism. This is not surprising, given the ambitious task the authors set for themselves and their «neutrality». What is interesting is their suggestion that independence was given to most of the countries and that the very idea of nationalism was transmitted to the colonial elite by the Europeans. Here the book demonstrates banal functionalism and almost racist diffusionism which completely ignores the material basis and social forces underlying Third World struggles for independence. This theoretical framework

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in fact pervades throughout the book. To top it all, the chapter concludes that colonialism should not be seen as entirely negative (p. 39) as it set the basis for independent development – even if it was imperfect ! To support this view, the chapter splashes out pictures of hotels – e.g. Kenyá's Norkfolk Hotel – which presumably portrays this so-called basis for development.

The chapter on population is mostly a catalogue of well-flogged descriptions of the demographic features of the Third World, which in the end suggest that there are too many people in the region, in spite of the author's reservations about the concept of over-population. A malthusian logic is revealed in the discussion on population control as this is seen to be imperative due to the largely subsistence economies of the region.

Chapters 4 and 5 on agriculture and rural development are unfortunate, as they reinforce many more myths than they claim to destroy about peasants. They also shy away from explaining the forms of penetration of capitalism in rural economies and the marginalization of the peasantry. Although the authors are quick to say peasant farmers are not 'conservative' (p.39), they go on to emphasize the economic sacrifices peasants make for leisure (p.94) and suggest that peasants do not make the best use of land as they are only concerned with making the best use of available labour. Clearly such generalizations have long been refuted, especially when consideration is made of the responses by peasants to capitalist exploitation. The main conclusion of these two chapters is that the problems faced by Third World peasants today arise from the 'nature' of their original subsistence tradition and this seems to be given naturally – which fails to respond to external pressures for commercial production. Further pressures on the peasants are created by a hazardous physical environment and rapid population growth, which has resulted in a production crisis and an «evolution» of inequalities made worse by social, economic and political «instabilities» (p.104). These chapters thus demonstrate a functionalist evolutionary view of rural development, where certain characteristics such as migrancy merely «evolve» and problems arise due to natural physical and human conditions. The role of the state, of capitalism in its various forms of penetration and of class struggle are thus given no attention in the so-called arena of rural development.

The chapters on mining, energy, manufacturing, and urbanization are not worthy of much treatment as they are largely descriptive. The section on industrialization is typically voluntaristic in its treatment of reasons for industrialization. Here we are told how the Third World countries have tried to industrialize: it is because they have tried to emulate the western world and were influenced by the «demonstration effects» of Soviet industrialization. Also these countries' attempts at industrialization are portrayed by the authors as merely an assertion of economic independence. In essence, we do not learn anything new from these chapters, as they do not take into account the objective imperatives placed on new states by internal class struggles, poverty and the international division of labour.

The chapter on internal interaction attempts to demonstrate that such interaction within Third World countries is limited. The authors then assert that, «the limited interaction is both a cause and effect of low

levels of economic activity and technology». (p.209) The star-piece of this chapter is a presentation of a mechanistic spatial model of the ideal-typical transport network development in the Third World, which they say represents the history and goals of colonial development based on external trade. Here again no attempt is made to explain the social and economic forces underlying this «limited» development as trade is dealt with as an epiphenomena which simply follows from colonization. Also obvious questions such as the poor interaction among Third World countries in the context of imperialism are not clearly addressed because of the authors' «neutral» theoretical framework.

Typical of most geographical discourses this book treats national development planning in the Third World in distinct isolation from its position in the World Economic System. Hence the mystification of «external relationships» — treated in a separate chapter — discussed in terms of political and economic association, international trade, resource transfers and aid etc ; with no reference to the internal logic of capitalism in the phase of imperialism and its various forms of penetration.

As a result, the book seems optimistic that political organizations such as OAU, UNCTAD, etc, which have pursued debates on the NIEO stand a good chance of... «restructuring the continuing exchanges between rich and poor to promote a more equitable distribution of benefits». (p. 243).

In conclusion, this book strikingly lags behind recent progress in geography as a discipline. The trend towards geographic interpretations of the world political economy and the fruitful discourse between physical and social scientists on such matters is clearly lacking.