

BOOK REVIEW

Terry Gibbs and Garry Leech. 2009. *The Failure of Global Capitalism: From Cape Breton to Colombia and Beyond*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press. ISBN 978-1-897009-32-1. Paperback: 19.95 CAD. Pages: 176.

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The Failure of Global Capitalism is a clearly written and poignant little book that provokes critical thought about the deficiencies and inequality within capitalism beginning with its very title. The book is effectively researched and utilizes a variety of sources building linked arguments that stem from the authors' research both in Atlantic Canada and South America. 'While the central theme of the book is the failure of global capitalism, Cape Breton and Colombia constitute the North-South thread running through the narrative' (15). From this premise, the *impact* of the industrializing global South on the post-industrial global North is adamantly emphasized throughout the text. It is easy to dwell in the relative affluence of our highly developed region of the world and forget the true cost of building and maintaining our economic advantage in the global capitalist system. The true cost of the system is borne on the backs of workers in the global South who have a very clear sense of how global capitalism has intertwined the fates of declining and rising industrial countries in the North and South. Gibbs and Leech summarily claim that the book is actually about 'understanding' the 'connections and the necessity of acting both locally and globally' in order to 'move beyond the global capitalist model' (16).

The discussion of the origins of industrial capitalism in Cape Breton begins with a typical description of how Innis' 'Staples Theory' is applied to coal and steel production in the region – just as it has been repeatedly applied to regional industries across Canada – and advances to the reliance of the liberal economic elite on a supportive state that facilitates the exploitation of local workers. More interesting insights are revealed in the radical socialist tendencies of the unionizing steelworkers (affectionately nicknamed 'Cape Breton Bolsheviks'), and the aggressive anti-union campaigns perpetrated by the elites of private industry, media, and the state (that are paralleled in Colombia's current coal industry, a century later). However, the generalized discussions of the history of Keynesian

economics and subsequent elite-motivated political policy shifts toward neoliberal ideology as *the* global economic system garners criticism given the probable background knowledge of this book's target audience.

Gibbs's and Leech's examples of the degree of (neoliberal) ideologically motivated 'activities' facilitating the shift toward global capitalism in the Colombian context was the most astonishing discovery found in the book. A poignant example recounts how:

two hundred soldiers, police and private security personnel forcibly displaced residents from the small Afro-Colombian town of Tabaco in northeastern Colombia. As bulldozers flattened their houses, church and school, stunned media representatives caught the destruction on film...More than seven hundred people were forcibly displaced to allow for the expansion of the world's largest open-pit coal mine, El Cerrejón (47).

As Gibbs and Leech reference this example throughout the book, it serves as a reminder of the brazen audacity of capitalism to forcibly consume anything it desires based on the growth imperative. Also – given Nova Scotia Power's closure of the last Cape Breton mine in 2001 – Cape Bretoners are now reliant on coal extracted at El Cerrejón and other global mines and must feel a double burden wondering if the continuation of their community's livelihood as a regional coal producer might have averted the displacement of a whole community. Perhaps the authors do not touch on this point because they know that under global capitalism's need for growth, Tabaco would have not survived in any event.

The authors identify neoliberalism's local political collaborators in the murder of 1,165 union leaders in Columbia between 1994 and 2006, while the concurrent imposition of structural adjustment policies have dramatically reduced oil royalties and increased environmental degradation. The authors also present alternatives to global capitalism such as Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution and the self-sustainable community of Las Gaviotas. Unfortunately, this section of the book had the tendency to 'wander' into tangential topics – such as neoliberal policy changes in the global coffee trade affecting Colombian coffee prices – that did not emphasize the interconnected regional social relations inherent in the use of Colombian coal in Cape Breton as effectively as in previous examples.

This book concludes by making the argument that capitalism not only reinforces current global economic disparities, but it is the root of them and requires them to function. The strength of the book in elucidating this argument has consistently been that the relative wealth of the global North is inseparably linked to the impoverishment of the global South. The

only way to resist future ecological and economic disasters is to fundamentally change the global economic order in favour of a more sustainable system (including dramatic reductions to individual consumption levels): 'Consequently, the only response to the unsustainable model of global capitalism is for us to wage a revolution within ourselves. First, we must revolutionize the way we think. And then we must revolutionize the way we live' (136). While this statement effectively expresses the ethos of critical theory, it was disappointing that basic conceptual terminology – such as 'periphery' – and primary references to Marx make such a late appearance (first appearing in the conclusion), seeming to be almost an afterthought. A more apparent Marxist analysis throughout the book would have added theoretical explanations to augment the research on how global capitalism functions; although critical theorists such as William I. Robinson and Vandana Shiva were effectively utilized nonetheless.

I would likely recommend this book to people with an intermediate knowledge of globalization and North-South political economy to receive the full benefits of its high-quality, regionally specific research. I would also recommend this book for instruction as a case study as part of a wider set of readings in global political economy (in conjunction with Theodore H. Cohn's *Global Political Economy*, for example). Even though the book does not reveal groundbreaking proclamations about the future of contemporary capitalism, it does excel in its specific subject matter.