

---

---

**BOOK REVIEW**

---

---

Susanne Soederberg, ***Global Governance in Question: Empire, Class and the New Common Sense in Managing North South Relations.*** Winnipeg and London: Arbeiter Ring Publishing and Pluto Press, 2006 , 206 pp., \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by ***Dieter Misgeld,***  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto

Academics and activists who have followed the discussions of globalization in the World Social Forum literature and in progressive publications will readily agree with Soederberg that globalization does not simply signify an “inevitable and unstoppable” (26) process. In focusing on the concept of global governance, she contributes to the critical problematization of an international economic regime which all too frequently is treated as benevolent in its consequences and independent of politics. Soederberg strongly resists mythological descriptions of global (and regional) financial and other economic regimes, by pursuing an historical - materialist analysis of the emergence of the relevant organizations and institutions, always identifying the role of power, political influence and political planning in their construction. She nimbly walks the reader through a plethora of institutions which even the informed lay-person and political activist will not know how to distinguish. She obviously possesses enormous knowledge of their workings and their history. In this sense this is a very useful book to read, particularly for those who are not specialists in the fields of international relations, Third World development or the politics of international financial institutions.

For Soederberg, an historical materialist analysis consists of showing how the regimes of global economic governance (such the IMF, WORLD BANK, WTO and others) belong to global capitalism and how they have been shaped by struggles, conflicts and contradictions inherent in the social relations of production and their history. Thus she emphasizes the emergence of the U.S. as a driving and controlling force in the construction of global capitalism after World War II, beginning with the establishment of the Bretton Woods

System of International Financial Institutions and culminating in the “new development compact” or “Millennium Challenge Account” (MCA) put forward in 2001 by the Bush administration. Therefore our author maintains “that states continue to play a key role in mediating the contradictions of capitalist accumulation” (45) and given the central role of the U.S. in maintaining the neoliberally structured system of global governance, this emphasis on the continuing role of states quite logically leads to the claim that an imperial state such as the U.S., will “deepen and expand various strategies of exploitation” (46). Representing the “new” imperialism, it will advance international legal regimes and mechanisms which entail the increasing dependence and loss of sovereignty on the part of developing countries, not to mention the disastrous consequences for the well-being of most of the population in these countries.

The critique of neoliberalism therefore has to be a major concern of the book and Soederberg undertakes this task with determination. The neoliberalism which she attacks is the one relentlessly promoted by all the major actors in the system of global economic governance. It proclaims the need for the removal of controls on capital-flows and the deregulation of markets, for budgetary “restraint” and for strengthening market transactions by minimizing the role of the state, while supposedly also advocating the strengthening of legal regimes (patent-law, property law). In the final part of the book Soederberg mentions oppositional tendencies in the global South, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, Brazil’s Landless Peasants Movement, and the World Social Forum.

For her they represent “discontent with the existing governance structures” (155). Unfortunately, she lacks an adequately developed historical analysis which would match the level attained by Marxist and other progressive writing on Third World development. For someone familiar with literature on or from Latin America, her study does not reach either the depth of understanding of the suffering of oppressed peoples’ social experience, which Eduardo Galeano had attained in his classic writing, or the sophistication of J.Petras’ and H.Veltmeyer’s “Globalization Unmasked – Imperialism in the 21st Century”.

Thus, her Marxism comes across as somewhat anemic and formulaic. It follows that no comprehensive political perspective is proposed nor does she fully exploit the possibilities offered by the discussions initiated at World and Regional Social Summits and elsewhere. I suspect that Soederberg becomes the captive of the very field of study which she tries to transcend. The fields of international relations and (capitalist) Third World development studies operate on a level of artificial generality and fictional world-wide global reach that the actual experience of social groups and classes is completely overlooked. As Soederberg has taken determined steps to overcome this tendency, I would have liked to see her develop a methodology for engaging more directly with the experience of social groups and classes, for example, by developing the analysis of the Argentinian debt crisis

(120-123) and of the resistance in India to Coca Cola's attempt to gain control of water supplies (81-82). One would then enter into a field of regionally oriented studies, rather than staying on the level of presumptive global regimes. Nevertheless, this is an informative book, because overall the author works with her strengths and makes use of the detailed knowledge which she possesses of the workings of international financial regimes and their frequently arcane and insidious practices.