



Book review

Debal Deb, 2009. Beyond Developmentality: constructing inclusive freedom and sustainability, with a foreword by Richard Norgaard, Earthscan, London. p. 583, ISBN 978-1-84407-711-3

The author of this book hails from West Bengal, and was directly or indirectly schooled by ethno-ecologists and environmental historians of India, such as Kailash C. Malhotra and Madhav Gadgil. His initial work was on communitarian forest conservation and management. He has training as a biologist and ecologist, he researched forms of shifting cultivation, he knows about sacred groves, he could teach ecological anthropology, he also picked up a large amount of resource economics (as shown in the very useful “technical boxes” in this book), and he is a social scientist that applies evolutionary theory. He has worked also with Vandana Shiva, an activist-scholar against globalized corporate agriculture. Being from West Bengal, he must have absorbed Marxist theory in his early university days, and this book is also a contribution to a developing body of eco-Marxism although the author is not always kind to Marx.

Another reason for Deb's interest in Marxism is that West Bengal has been long been governed by a Communist party. In April–May 2009, after the book was published, that party sustained heavy electoral losses because it mishandled industrialization by antagonizing peasants. In two instances, in Singur and Nandigram in 2007, the government wanted to give land to industry, and tried to evict peasants. This resulted in violence, not least at the hands of formal and informal government security forces. In the neighbouring state of Orissa, the mining and heavy industries are evicting thousands of poor people – and nevertheless in Orissa the local political party in power in the state increased its share of the vote in the 2009 national elections, paying no political price for the killings in Kalinganagar in 2006 and elsewhere. In West Bengal, on the contrary, the Communist party lost many votes.

The author was obviously impressed by the Nandigram and Singur events (and other similar events elsewhere in India against peasants and tribals). In West Bengal, the government seemed not to have learnt anything from the critiques of development, from the praise for food sovereignty, from the views on alternative forms of industry that ecological neo-Gandhians, political ecologists, sociologists of science and technology, ethno-ecologists, agro-ecologists and energy engineers, have proposed in India.

The Communists of India (that in the previous parliament had an important role, with nearly 10 per cent of seats), have taken a knock, foreseen by the author of this book. Their enthusiasm for nuclear power (certainly not to be found in Marx's writings), the unreflective drive for industrialization, nullified previous efforts in favour of the peasantry and tribal people, supporting (as they did) Joint Forest Management in the villages. In Nandigram and Singur they had to choose, and they chose the wrong turn.

The book is however not about West Bengal, or Indian politics. The book is a remarkable treatise on the possibilities of a transition to eco-socialism (not based on the State) written in Berkeley, California from 2001 onwards, influenced by the critiques of development by Arturo Escobar, Richard Norgaard and others (but not yet Serge Latouche). The book attempts to cover the whole world with emphasis on the United States and on India. The background in India is useful for the study of agriculture, e.g. the author refers to the analysis by Albert Howard in the 1940s of organic, sustainable agriculture, so distant from the everyday culture of the United States, a nation without peasants. This background is also useful to the author when he writes against the facile generalizations of Orientalism and when he reassesses the colonial period.

The authors asserts with reason that the concept of development is used, as in “sustainable development”, in the sense of economic growth. Therefore, the author then writes a competent chapter on the critiques of GDP from the point of view of ecological economics, and also carefully describes and takes sides on the debates on “weak” and “strong” sustainability. He also devotes a chapter to a critique of modern agriculture and of plantation forestry. He has read Mishan and Huetting, who wrote on the environment and economics already in the 1960s and 1970s, but disappointingly does not take into account Georgescu-Roegen or K.W. Kapp, something that might be remedied when further editions of this book (that will perhaps become a classic in the field of sustainability social science) are published.

The first half of the book is then a good summary with examples drawn from different parts of the world of the main body of ecological economics, including discussions on resilience, population ecology, the economics of communitarian resources including some game theory, the discount rate, the economics of biodiversity, and consumption theory, all this with many entertaining and erudite footnotes. The author has the ability to make mathematical models accessible and interesting to readers otherwise inclined.

The second part of the book goes beyond ecological economics since it traces the pre-requisites for an eco-socialist transformation. The “social metabolic” part of such a socio-ecological-economic-political transition is not as well explained as it could have been. No discussion of material flows, energy use, or the HANPP (human appropriation of net primary production) is carried out, but then the book was written some years ago already, before the methods for the study of social metabolism became a staple of ecological economics and industrial ecology. Table 3.1 on indices of environmental impact by country, has some mistakes. “Electricity use” means actually in one column carbon dioxide production in tons, and the figure for China's share of carbon dioxide production is totally wrong.

The technical, “industrial ecology”, analysis of transitions is not as good (except for the sections on agriculture) as the analyses of social movements of resistance around the world, the growth of environmental ethics, the debate on the market versus the commons, and

the attempt to “ecologize” Amartya Sen who still refuses to recognize industrial development itself as a destroyer of the freedom to choose one’s good life, a destroyer also of environmental equity and inter-generational rights. What does “freedom” mean in a process of drastic changes in property rights and enclosure of commons (as in India), and in an unequal world where economic growth cannot be the solution because it is indeed the problem?

Another chapter (chapter 8, with 100 pages) deals with what Deb calls “superstructural” aspects of science and corporate power, never found in books of ecological economics or industrial ecology. These aspects are essential to his argument. It is difficult to change the educational system towards greater appreciation of the environment, still a minor part of the contents of the media and of the political debates compared to mainstream praise for “development” understood as uniform economic growth and “advances” of technology. One must then look at the way that political power operates in society, including a study of corruption, and an analysis of corporate control over the media.

In conclusion, the author achieves his objective of showing the social prevalence of the notion of “development” and the means by which this has been achieved. He criticizes “development” from social and environmental points of views, and he attempts to provide an alternative path, North and South. Apart from this great and attractive purpose, the book is also useful for the historical descriptions of colonialism, for the analysis of agriculture and forestry, for its clear teaching of neoclassical resource economics but also of ecological economics, for the discussions on environmental ethics and the notion of “freedom”.

Finally, although Deb is a brilliant and original thinker, his chapter on population is in my view not so good. It contains a competent summary of the mathematics, practical for students, but then the author launches a repetitious attack on Malthus and racist Malthusianism (which certainly exists), showing no awareness of feminist Neo-malthusianism around 1900 in Europe and the United States, or of the debates from the left in favour of birth control and women’s freedom in India (e.g. E.V. Ramasamy “Periyar” in Tamil Nadu).

The book covers a vast comparative terrain, and inevitably there are some mistakes in it. One I have noticed, and that bothers me, is that is his discussion on Nazism and environmentalism, Deb “discovers” Alwin Seifert (p. 252), a pioneer of landscape protection who beautified Hitler’s motoways, “forgotten in the history of environmentalism” as shown by the “fact” that Ramachandra Guha and myself (in *Varieties of Environmentalism*, 1997) “never mention Seifert”. Actually Seifert is explicitly mentioned when we dispose of the red-herring of “Nazi environmentalism”. I remember putting this paragraph in our book in a meeting with Ramachandra Guha in Berlin when he was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Deb often uses and likes Ramachandra Guha’s work on the “environmentalism of the poor” in India. So this minor mistake is unfortunate.

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