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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique

Patrick Bond & Ana Garcia (eds.), Pluto Press
2015

Reviewed by Karen Davis

MOST BOOKS WRITTEN by anti-capitalists that I have read focus on English speaking developed capitalist economies. *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique* provides a welcome addition to this literature. Importantly, it offers analyses of the barriers faced by those seeking to challenge capitalism, as well as offering some possibilities as to where we might go. In addition, because of the clear analysis of sub-capitalism and peripheries, it prompts readers from Aotearoa to rethink where we fit in the capitalist spectrum.

Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa make up the BRICS network, a term first coined as ‘BRIC’ in 2001 by a Goldman Sachs finance manager, and then extended to ‘BRICS’ a couple of years later when South Africa became part of this grouping.¹ The concern here, was to identify a group of emergent capitalist countries that could be useful sites of investment, as corporations in these locales were starting to expand outside national boundaries. Equal emphasis could have been placed on the MINT group (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey), or various other constellations of developing economies outside the G7.² However, BRICS, covering as it does 43 percent of the world’s population, has become the grouping with most political traction, leading to regular summits of the member countries since 2008. More recently, these summits have involved trade unions and NGOs, in both formal and informal capacities. This sequence of summits has led to the establishment of a global development bank, as an alternative to the World Bank, in addition to other regional development banks.

The rise of the BRICS, as a challenge to neoliberal forms of capitalism, has been welcomed in some quarters.³ The hope here being that the BRICS network could offer a different, perhaps fairer, model of capitalism. Legitimizing such a view are the challenges some BRICS member countries have posed to Euro-American political hegemony – examples being Russia’s granting of asylum to Edward Snowden, China’s version of state-run capitalism, and Brazil’s support for left wing governments in South America. As the various contributors to this collection show, however, the BRICS form of capitalism (in its current expansive stage) is brutalising and deeply exploitative, based as it is on extractivist industries and the dispossession of peoples. Against the hopeful, then, it can be seen that BRICS members are following the same imperialist capitalist trajectory as that traversed by the US, UK, Germany, Japan et al. Rather than competing with US or Western companies, the BRICS members are integrated into the same globalised capitalist system.

1 Patrick Bond and Ana Garcia, *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique*, 4.

2 *Ibid.*, 77.

3 See Radhika Desai, ‘The Brics are building a challenge to western economic supremacy’, accessed 5 November 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/02/brics-challenge-western-supremacy>.

The first five chapters of this collection develop a theory of BRICS as a set of sub-imperialist countries that are developing and extending capitalism. As with the former colonial powers, BRICS members are moving into other parts of the world. This often happens under the guise of 'South-South co-operation', but it primarily has the effect of allowing member countries' corporations to grow and profit from the exploitation of natural resources. The message conveyed in these chapters, is that exploitation by BRICS members is the same as any other pattern of capitalist exploitation. Far from challenging neoliberalism, or any other form of capitalism, BRICS members have followed the neoliberal line when it has suited them – which has involved minimising the role of state control as means of avoiding environmental legislation, or sidestepping the provision of basic human rights for local populations (sometimes with active anti-union practices).

The majority of chapters in this collection, and to me the more interesting, provide case studies of the operations of BRICS countries as they expand their economic interests beyond their own regions. These chapters provide interesting insights, although the analyses become depressingly familiar: Chinese oil companies violate environmental standards and expropriate indigenous lands in Ecuador; the Brazilian Vale mining company in Angola and Mozambique operates using poor labour practices; mineral extraction is interconnected with the supply of arms in African countries by Russian interests; an increasingly embedded neoliberalism in India; and South Africa's dominance of other Southern African countries. This is definitely not a portrait of 'capitalism done better'.

The final chapters look at the role BRICS members play in the context of globalisation, and asks what potential may still exist for a BRICS 'from below' capable of challenging capitalism. There is agreement across the contributions to this section that BRICS members differ regionally, linguistically and historically to such an extent, that there is little common ground on which solidarity might easily develop among the oppressed peoples of these countries. While trade unions and NGOs have met together alongside some of the later BRICS summits, a divide has opened between those who want to engage with the powers-to-be in hope of an illusory share of the capitalist pie for the interests they represent, and those who seek to develop a challenge from outside the emergent economic network in pursuit of common goods for all.

I would have liked to have seen more analysis of social movements in these countries. Are their commonalities between the landless peasants' movements in Brazil and India? Between workers' movements in South Africa and Brazil? Between the political unrest in China and Russia? In the absence of possible connections between such points of political unrest, the book risks becoming another depressing account of the problems of capitalism with no sign of hope.

At least talk is occurring of a 'BRICS from below', and I hope a future collection will begin to look into the areas of resistance that do exist. Is BRICS network a possible means of pulling together globalised solidarity and opposition to capitalism? Or will divisions prove insurmountable? Can people actually use the contradictions of an organisation created, in name, by a person from a capitalist investment bank as a catalyst for change? Or is it better to continue to work on other, perhaps more obvious, areas of solidarity – such as global labour struggles or climate justice?

Of use for the reader in Aotearoa is to reflect, comparatively, on where we stand in relation to global capitalism. Our version of neoliberal capitalism has shrunk the manufacturing sector to virtually nothing, such that it is now little more than an appendage to the Chinese economy. We rely on an extractive economy comprising dairy farming, timber milling, and mining on the one hand, and an over financialised investment economy on the other. Meanwhile, those of us working outside these fields of economic activity are left with an underfunded and overpriced service sector, hoping desperately that selling ourselves to the tourist industry will save us.

The analysis of sub imperialism developed in this collection can be applied to Aotearoa. A country that likes to pretend it exercises neoliberal leadership in the export world, but is in fact a country on the periphery of Australia, and which is now seen as a site for BRICS-style exploitation: American interests buy up our land, Australian interests run our banks, Brazilian and Norwegian interests chase after our minerals. The possession of a slightly 'greener' capitalism is not going to change the cumulatively devastating impact of capitalism as an exploitative and destructive system.

As seen in this collections' analyses of BRICS, the challenges to capitalism in Aotearoa are liable to come from below – from indigenous people, the unemployed and beneficiaries, organised labour, climate justice activists, women's anti-violence activists and more. These are the people I really want to hear about in the ongoing global work for a post capitalist future.

The 'BRICS from Below' alliance of organisations and academics has continued to network since their first summit held alongside the 2013 BRICS conference in South Africa. This book is the first publication of the group and I look forward to any future developments in this area.

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