



Book Review

Poverty as Ideology: Rescuing Social Justice from Global Development Agendas

Fischer, Andrew M. (2018). London: Zed Books. ISBN 9781786990457 (cloth) CDN\$134.95; ISBN 9781786990440 (paper) CDN\$42.95; ISBN 9781786990471 (e-book) CDN\$31.38. 298 pages.

SEAN FIELD

University of St. Andrews, UK

This is an excellent book. Over the course of eight chapters, Fischer outlines how global development agendas led by the World Bank and IMF, and cheered on by popular financial media like *The Economist*, have and continue to be driven by capitalist ideologies and supported by unreliable statistical data. Fischer's analysis is sharp, thorough, and pulls few punches in his critique of Amartya Sen, intergovernmental institutions, and neo-classical economists whose voices ring loud in development and poverty study circles.

The first chapter begins with Fischer's main contention: "it has become widely accepted, even among more critical scholars that global poverty has fallen over the last several decades" (p. 1). Fischer calls this common assertion into question in the pages and chapters that follow. He asks: "but what does this actually mean, in particular for poor people?" Conventional wisdom informed by World Bank data has "settled on the narrative that income poverty had fallen" but deferring to this data "as if they are accurate", he argues, "carries the risk of being co-opted into the political projects that they have been designed to serve" (pp. 2-3). Fischer's aim is to demonstrate that concepts and methods in poverty studies are "fundamentally political and ideological" (p. 22) and that measures and programs designed to identify and address poverty are largely inadequate.

There are three central arguments in the book. The first is that poverty is inherently political because of the choices and norms that define its purported meaning and measurement. The second, which is less clear in its articulation, is that absolute poverty measures, which focus only on the very poorest, are minimalist in their thresholds (reducing poverty to absolute destitution) and

Correspondence Address: Sean Field, Department of Social Anthropology, University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, UK, KY16 9AJ; Email: sf95@st-andrews.ac.uk

ISSN: 1911-4788



undermine more robust universalistic measures that would be more effective in reducing poverty in the short term and also in addressing its structural causes. The third argument is that money-metric, multidimensional, and social exclusion measurements of poverty underestimate or incorrectly measure poverty. The reductive abstractness of these measures, Fischer argues, conceals the complexities of actually living in poverty in different places and times, favour urban-dwelling wage-earning commoditized lifestyles over agrarian and subsistence lifestyles, and reflect the liberal and neoliberal biases of relatively privileged poverty experts living in the Global North.

Following the introduction, in Chapter Two Fischer tackles the politics of representation, prioritization, and the production of social statistics in poverty studies. Addressing the politics of representation, the author questions who controls narratives about the last 40 years of global capitalism, in particular, claims that globalization and free-market capitalism have lifted people out of poverty. He argues that the choice of 1990 as the benchmark year for the Millennium Development Goals is a revisionist attempt to erase “the memory of previous gains and the damage that was done to development in the 1980s” (p. 31). Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries were arguably at their worst point in a generation after a decade of debt crises, austerity, and structural adjustment, so that “things could have presumably only gotten better” he argues (p. 30). Since then, rampant inequality has been framed as “not a problem as long as poverty is falling” (p. 29) and countries have focused on growth-based strategies rather than distributive and redistributive strategies, side-stepping the problem of wealth polarization and leaving capitalist forms of exploitation intact. The best way for the poor to get out of poverty, following the ideology of growth-based strategies, is for the poor to work themselves out of poverty, give up subsistence farming, and take a wage-job in the city – an assertion that Fischer rejects.

In Chapters Three through Five, Fischer addresses money-metric, multidimensional, and social exclusion approaches to poverty. The “fundamental problem with money metric measures,” he argues, is that “they are biased by design against universalistic and de-commodified forms of social provisioning” (p. 62), because they focus on individual-level commodity exchange. Money-metric measures of expenditure also “do not indicate how expenditure is financed” (i.e., through earnings, savings or debt), which is important to their interpretation (p. 71). Comparing subsistence food provisions with food that is bought and consumed, money metrics tend to favour commodity-based food consumption relative to subsistence food means by ignoring or underestimating the value of the latter (p. 61). In the case of labour, calculating the value of domestic labour by multiplying the reference wage by the number of hours worked “is not necessarily appropriate” because of the vitalness of the labour in “achieving a minimum standard of consumption” he argues (p. 63). The well-known World Bank Purchasing Power Parity metric defining the poverty line,

Fischer contends, is “not clearly grounded on any social scientific approach to measuring basic needs” (p. 76), and measures such as \$1.20 per day poverty lines are minimalist, whittled down, and “to a large extent meaningless” (p. 106)

Multidimensional and social exclusion measures of poverty are scarcely better, if not worse, he argues. While multidimensional measures attempt to address the money-oriented problems of money metrics, they “do not fundamentally resolve the problems associated with money-metric poverty lines” and in some cases add more confusion (p. 109). Referring to the UNDP’s Human Development Index and similar indices, he asks “what does the resulting number of the composite indicator mean?” (p. 117). Social exclusion measures, meanwhile, distract “attention away” from actual poverty measures, he argues (p. 151). Inclusion does not imply quality, equity or equality, and exclusion can be experienced by upwardly mobile middle and lower classes as well as elites, an argument for which he draws on his own research experience in Tibet. More problematic, he argues, is the idea that exclusion from capitalism is the source of poverty, rather than exploitative forms of inclusion.

In Chapters Six and Seven, Fischer returns to some of the overarching issues discussed in Chapter Two while drawing on examples raised in Chapters Three through Five. It is here that he outlines his holistic two-by-three framework for addressing poverty. In these chapters, Fischer’s Marxian leanings come to the surface. He argues that “economic science... has not solved the question of how labour is fundamentally valued” (p. 204) and that “wages differences cannot be discerned through simple comparisons of labour productivity” (p. 205). Addressing the terms of trade where labour is exchanged for wages is fundamental to transforming poverty, not reductionist productivity rubrics that suggest that if only the poor worked harder or smarter, then they would work themselves into prosperity. It is a myth, he argues, that “the rich are rich due to their greater productivity,” and this myth “lies at the heart of ideological efforts to legitimate the inequalities of the current world economic order” (p. 206).

A critical structuralist institutional political economy approach, which he advocates for, must question “who creates value” and “who controls” value (p. 185), as well as scrutinize the “ideological assumptions... built into our paradigmatic conceptions of... poverty and development” (p. 186). Shifting definitions of universalism from equal access to access regardless of quality, and development policies that segregate and target the needy rather than society as a whole, have done little to resolve poverty and have undermined efforts to address its structural causes, he contends. Fischer concludes the book by arguing that deconstructing “prevailing poverty approaches is needed for instilling humility and a healthy dose of scepticism” (p. 259). Global development agendas, he argues, need to be re-politicized and universalistic social policies advanced as viable options if we wish to address the causal sources of poverty (p. 274).

This book touched on, and deconstructed, many familiar topics from my graduate training in agricultural economics and international development studies. The book tackles many of the critiques that I heard, thought about, and discussed with others during this graduate training. What I really like about Fischer's analysis is his attention to detail, such as spelling out what he means by defining key terms. I also really liked that he seems to be addressing multiple audiences – economists, the international development community, practitioners, academics and students.

There are a few relatively minor points that could have made the book stronger. First, the definitions in Chapter Six regarding how Fischer uses the terms “structuralist” and “critical” could have been moved up into Chapters One or Two where he offers other key definitions that he deploys throughout. Second, I am uncertain about the validity of his assertion that ambiguity in the social exclusion literature on poverty is a more serious criticism than Eurocentrism (p. 165). While he contends that Eurocentrism “can be dealt with by loosening institutional specifications of the concept” (p. 165), I remain unconvinced and would have like to have a bit more explanation.

In his definition of profit in Chapter Six, Fischer outlines a simple agrarian example of a farmer who plants 10 kilograms of grain and harvests 110 kilograms. After the landlord, the money lender and taxes are paid and after the grain eaten by mice or gone mouldy is deducted as depreciation “the grain left over is profit” he says (p. 195). I disagree that this constitutes profit, at least in the Marxian sense. The “profit” in this example is instead retained value created by the farmer through their labour; profit is value retained from other peoples' labour and extracted by paying them less (in wages for example) than the value they created through the product of their work.

Finally, I was struck by some of the vagueness in Fischer's two-by-three “holistic framework” for conceptualizing poverty (p. 188). The framework is composed of two dimensions, each with three constituent elements. The first-dimension is the creation and division of wealth, and its three elements are production, distribution and redistribution. The second-dimension deals with “secondary, indirect and aggregated factors influencing the first” and its three elements include supply-side factors, demand-side factors and the terms of trade and wages. The elements of the framework are each well explained, illustrated with key examples, and relatively easy to understand. However, the framework offers few specifics on how it might be implemented. Perhaps this was intentional; by keeping his framework general it lends itself to adaption to a variety of places and contexts. The author could have included a section tying the dimensions and elements of his framework together in one example after laying out his framework, which I think would have clarified some of the vagueness around how all the elements of the framework fit together, and would have illustrated how it could be applied.

There are many great arguments raised in this book, with ample examples, data, and literature to support them. Amongst them is Fischer's engagement with Sen, which features prominently but not exclusively in Chapter Four.

While Sen's entitlement theory is centred on command over resources, his revised capabilities theory is more individualistic and neoclassical in its formation. Fischer charges that Sen's "Liberal theoretical stance and ontological individualism" made his theories "amenable to mainstream adoption" (p. 137), even though they side-step questions of systems, structure, and inequality by relying on neoclassical economic theory for explanations.

I highly recommend this book. Fischer is provocative, thorough, and thoughtful in his analysis. The book should be required reading for graduate students pursuing poverty or development studies and for practitioners engaged with designing, identifying, measuring, assessing and delivering poverty abatement and relief programs. The book might be a bit dense for first- and second-year undergraduate students, and may be more palatable for undergraduates if assigned in segments or selected chapters.