

The Economics of Peace and Security Journal

© www.epsjournal.org.uk, ISSN 1749-852X

Book Review

Roberts, David. 2008. Human Insecurity. Global Structures of Violence. London: Zed Books. 208 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84277-824-1 (hb) 978-1-84277-825-8 (pb). Price: £55.00 (hb) £16.99 (pb).

by Bjørn Møller (4 April 2008)

This short book on (the lack of) human security in today's world is a combination of theory, analysis, and advocacy — and not altogether satisfactory. A very large part of its pages are devoted to the many instances of human (in)security, with a special focus on women suffering from sexual violence (e.g., wife battering), murder, gender-biased infanticide, and the like. These parts of the book are quite good and persuasive but no better than reports from organizations such as Human Rights Watch or the UNDP's Human Development Reports on which the author's account is partly based.

The theoretical parts of the book are either convincing but trivial or innovative but unconvincing. For example, human insecurity is defined in terms of “avoidable deaths,” which makes sense, but this is not really new. Nor is the reference to Galtung's controversial concept of structural violence as (almost) synonymous with human insecurity particularly surprising. When it comes to identifying causal factors — the author's main concern — it is, likewise, hardly new to blame the neoliberal order with its free market, privatization, and slimmed-down state functions. Whereas the author, as so many others before him, certainly has a point in blaming international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the IMF and World Bank with their unfortunate structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and aid donors with their neoliberal conditionalities, this is, again, neither new nor argued persuasively. The case for such attribution of blame might have been made in comparative terms, either by comparing human insecurity before and after an SAP or by comparisons of countries beyond the orbit of the neoliberal order. For instance, is human insecurity in North Korea not at least as endangered as in Mozambique?

Concentrating on formal and informal institutions and regimes such as the IFIs, the author to his credit also looks at domestic institutions in Third World countries yet without really trying to determine the relative strengths of the two. He mainly points to the convergence of the two, claiming that the international neoliberal order perpetuates exploitative and unfair institutions in the Third World. But this does not amount to a theory of causality.

One of the domestic institutions responsible for the maladies is, according to the author, that of “andrarchy,” i.e., rule by men. This claim is partly original, or at least the wording is — a Google Scholar search yields a mere 35 hits for andrarchy, most of which do not correspond to the author's definition of the term as a “gender-partisan ideological domination and rule structure that generates and sustains the general relative power of males over females globally” (p. 140). As in so much of the critical feminist literature that seems to have inspired the author, the terminology is unclear and the argumentation fuzzy. In what sense are, for instance, issues such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, or missile defense “masculine” (pp. 158-9)? Moreover, while there can be no denying that most of the world's heads of state or government have been male,

women like Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, or Golda Meir made it to the top of their societies' political hierarchies seemingly without this making much of a difference to human (in)security issues. This is certainly a puzzle which ought to have been addressed head-on.

Even less convincing are the alleged links between andrarchy and neoliberalism and its postulated theoretical companion, realism. Neither are theoretical neorealism and real-world neoliberalism particularly closely linked (indeed, some would argue that they are diametrical opposites), nor can one prove that the theory is masculine or andrarchic simply by referring to the fact that most neorealists and classical realists are men; so are most liberalists, social constructivists, and post-structuralists as well as most painters, novelists, and composers. The author fares no better in the attempt to link neoliberal order and andrarchy, admittedly an almost impossible task if both are as all-pervasive as claimed. It would have seemed appropriate, however, to at least address the question of why the neoliberal order, its other faults notwithstanding, has been accompanied by such intuitively counter-andrarchic measures such as the enfranchisement of women and the signing of several international conventions making equal rights for women compulsory.

In conclusion, the book has some value as a debate book but does not live up to the standards one would demand of an academic treatise.

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