

Vulnerability and Violence: The Impact of Globalisation

Peadar Kirby

Reviewed by Stephen McCloskey

There has been an extensive amount of recent literature on the subject of globalisation, which may make informed readers weary of a new text on the subject or uninformed readers unable to assess the relative merits of the competition. However, Peadar Kirby's insightful treatment of the subject offers fresh analysis to the more seasoned exponents of political economy, international development and the social sciences, and a comprehensive, accessible guide to globalisation to those new to this area of discourse.

Peadar Kirby has become an articulate and prominent voice on the left in Ireland through his previous work on Irish economy and society, Latin America and development theory and practice. In his new book he introduces the concept of vulnerability as a means of capturing more accurately the societal impact of globalisation as states have increasingly prioritised the market over social needs. Kirby suggests that "vulnerability may be a much more appropriate category to capture the distinctive ways in which the economic, social, political, cultural and environmental changes associated with the term 'globalisation' are impacting on all of us, especially the poor, while the term 'violence' constitutes both a cause of vulnerability and also an expression of it".

Educators working in the field of international development regularly characterise their working objective as eliminating poverty through social justice and inclusion. But if pressed, could we define our notion of poverty and outline the causes of social injustice in a meaningful way? We can reach for the United Nations' annual Human Development Report to statistically analyse macro trends in social and economic development but how far does this data reflect the impact of decreased social cohesion and security at a micro level?

Kirby convinces us that an understanding of vulnerability can identify what matters to the poor and what they regard as the underlying threats to their social wellbeing. These threats include the erosion of assets - education, health, family, community, land, the environment - that collectively represent the fabric of society. Therefore, "[p]oor people's fears derive from a lack of assets and from anxiety about their ability to survive in increasingly unpredictable and insecure environments". Kirby outlines many of the now familiar causes of this anxiety including a rapacious

consumerism that fosters individualism, debt and the illusion of success. Where we once consumed to live we now live to consume with corporate-driven globalisation re-fashioning the individual's relationship with the state.

The post-war Keynesian social compact that allowed a modicum of state regulation of market forces and creation of the welfare state was largely dismantled by the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, with the former famously declaring that "there is no such thing as society". This neo-liberal dictum consigned the losers in the new era of globalisation to look to the market rather than the state to resolve their problems.

Kirby argues that the absence of a social compact and prioritisation of the market has created identity politics at a micro level with mixed results. Social groupings are emerging on the basis of common interests or beliefs such as religion, language and indigenous values and can either progressively challenge the causes and effects of vulnerability (the Zapatista Movement is a good example) or violently assert their identity (as in Rwanda or the Former Yugoslavia) and add to social polarisation. The essence of vulnerability is its capacity to analyse the wider cultural, psychological, environmental and political outcomes of neo-liberal globalisation which often defeats more conventional approaches to poverty analysis.

Kirby maintains a persuasive theoretical basis throughout and the book is rooted in an impressive range of multi-disciplinary sources. Each section of the book is supported with inlaid boxes containing useful examples of how the issues interrogated are manifested in society making them useful reference sources.

The book's conclusions include a positive enthusiasm for the alter (not 'anti')-globalisation movement which has "put the proponents of neoliberal globalisation on the defensive and opened new spaces for mobilising the powerless". It is rightly argued that the gravity of environmental denudation and growing social polarisation means that "this is not a time for tinkering... but a time that calls for more bold and fundamental transformations". In advocating agency and action Kirby advises that we should all "firmly ground ourselves in the conviction that we are living and working not to sustain the present order but to transform it".

While this book is ostensibly targeted at third level education and would enrich any course on development, political economy and globalisation, it has a relevance, like the subject in hand, that impacts on all of us.

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