

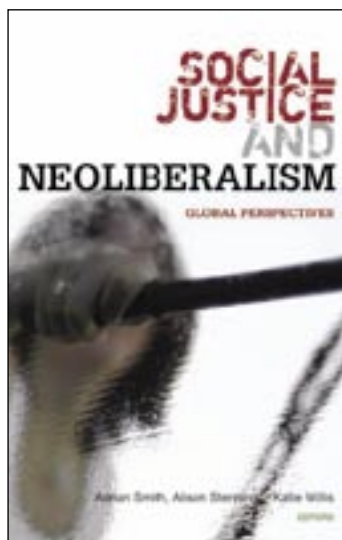
Social Justice and Neoliberalism

Global Perspectives

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Following the tradition of critical geographers, *Social Justice and Neoliberalism* explores the expansion of neo-liberalism into different spheres and spaces of everyday life. It consists of a collection of essays by writers from the global South, the West and the former “communist” East. The essays are grounded in extensive and often longitudinal field work examining the lived experiences of neo-liberalisation in nine countries: Argentina, Peru, the UK, Ghana, Turkey, Germany, Poland, Slovakia and South Africa. They provide fine-grained and nuanced analyses of marginalised people and communities and their resistance to capitalism and its geographies.

Refreshingly, the case studies go beyond the economic to highlight aspects of social justice such as dignity, respect, and the emotional cost of commodification, insecurity and individualisation. The book identifies four interrelated themes: resistance to neo-liberalism; the forging of new identities, subjectivities and forms of democratic governance; the link between social justice and the impact of neo-liberalism;

and experiments in alternative, non-commodified economic arrangements.

Resistance to neo-liberalism includes mass-based social movements, such as the living wage campaign in the cities of London and Manchester, but also localised and less ambitious initiatives. The latter include the barter networks organised in Argentina following the economic crash of 2001, in which local communities developed alternative currency forms and spaces for non-capitalist forms of exchange. The backdrop to this essay is a comment on the fickleness of a neo-liberal order that made it possible for Argentina to so rapidly move from the status of IMF “poster child” to “problem child”. An essay on Turkish women garment workers in the small-scale sweatshops found in Istanbul’s periphery, “Bargaining with the devil”, deals with strategies of resistance that draw upon kinship networks and informal co-operation in the face of repression and the precarious nature of their work.

The second thread in the book relates how labour market restructuring and employment flexibility creates a discourse of “individual opportunities” alongside a “reality of labour market marginalisation and the emergence of in-work poverty”. Dominant perceptions concerning hard work, reliability and application form a common theme. The chapter on young Turkish women workers talks of the perceived essential characteristic of “nimble fingers”. Similarly, “Travelling neo-liberalism”, a chapter on Polish and Ghanaian migrant workers in London, shows how workers find it nearly impossible to ensure a reasonable standard of living, despite their “hard work”. This and other chapters also relate the international division of labour and its racial and gendered character – a reality that some political economists have called global apartheid.

The book also explores how neo-liberal policies are constituted through contingent social relations. They are seen (following Polyani) to be “embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and non-economic”. To illustrate this dialectic, the essay “Confounding neo-liberalism: Priests, privatisation and social justice in the Peruvian Andes” considers the relationship between neo-liberalism and the “non-economic” through an account of the work of religious social activists.

The book concedes that some of the projects described might be attempts to create temporary conditions for a gentler, kinder capitalism. Still, it argues, such initiatives – although in their infancy and often contradictory – allow for the development of alternatives to rampant marketisation and commodification in that they “provide glimpses of present and future opportunities to imagine and enact alternative scenarios”.

Given the profound nature of the capitalist crisis, even mainstream economists are acknowledging, albeit grudgingly, the failures of neo-liberalism. All those who continue to defend neo-liberalism, despite its obviously devastating effects on human beings and nature, will do well to read this impressive contribution.

