
In this broad-ranging book Peet aims to show the origins and social geography of the global hegemony of neoliberal economic policy-making, shaping national policies around the world. He claims this power over economic policy-making has accumulated into a limited number of Western cities over the past decades, and is exerted by a relatively small group of expert policymakers. He distinguishes three forms of power (economic, ideological, and political) and traces their concentration into global governance institutions like the G7, European Union, and IMF. The author has a distinctly critical perspective, drawing on the work of for example Gramsci as well as Foucault. One of the main strengths of the book is Peet’s attempt to operationalise this abstract theoretical framework (based on concepts such as ideology, hegemony and discourse) into what he calls critical institutional analysis, building a ‘geography of power’.

After elaborating his theoretical perspective, the author proceeds with an empirical examination of the different forms of power and how this leads to hegemony (chapters 2–4). Economic power is associated with the emergence of global finance capital as the dominant capital fraction in capitalist societies and is further supported by the easy movement of economic policy-making elites between investment banks, government and certain academic centers (illustrated by short biographies of key figures in US economic policy-making, pp. 38–40). His discussion of ideological power is rooted in the debate between Keynesian and neoclassical economics (with the latter gaining dominance) and a deconstruction of the ideological underpinnings of neoclassical economics. The last form of power (political) is elaborated by an analysis of the role of think tanks, the example of the money-driven nature of American elections and discussions
of the Washington consensus and Millennium Development Goals. The empirical part of the book is concluded by two separate chapters on South Africa and Latin America representing respectively a subhegemonical (ANC losing its communist streak) and a counterhegemonical (Chavez, Morales and the MST in Brazil) response to the global hegemony originating in the periphery.

Peet’s commitment to a more equitable world free of dehumanizing poverty breathes from every page. Unfortunately, it is also one of the weaknesses of the book, in that the author’s dismay about the current injustices in the world (and yes, there are a lot of those) results in rhetoric distracting from and interfering with his core arguments. Proving that economic policy the world over is determined by ‘a few thousand people in a few cities’ is already a formidable task without at the same time showing that democracy is flawed, neo-conservatism evil, and the US invasion of Iraq unjust. Yes, the real world is full of complex interdependencies, but that is why good academic books need a clear focus and argument.

A good part of his argument against neoliberal policy is based on the claim that poverty is caused by the wealth of others, a rather stark claim which is virtually unsubstantiated in this book. Instead, global and national developments in income inequality are used (as in figure 1.1) as supporting evidence. This however, neglects the issue of absolute versus relative incomes, and does not necessarily entail causality in a growing world economy. Furthermore, looking only at relative income distributions he ignores for example Human Development Index data which show improvements in the human condition in almost all regions in the world since 1975.

More problematic is the author’s implied intentionality on the part of the elite. When discussing neoclassical economic theory, Peet argues that not only in practice neoclassical theory turns out to be beneficial for the capitalist class (‘rich people’), “economics is a fiction, a story made up (...) to serve an interest” (p. 82, emphasis added). With such implied intentionality, it becomes easier to understand why Von Hayek and Von Mises are denounced as ‘disgusting people’ (p. 81). US Congress senators are claimed to be the servants of the capitalist class since their campaigns depend on (large amounts of) donations. Democracy is hence for sale, and Peet reveals without as much as a reference that the senators are rewarded for their subservience by excess returns on their investments (which in my view can