

Book Review

Broke but Unbroken: Grassroots Social Movements and Their Radical Solutions to Poverty

by Augusta Dwyer. Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011. \$19.95 CAD paperback. ISBN: 9781552664063. Pages: 1,169.

Reviewed by Sabrina Fernandes¹

In *Broke but Unbroken*, Augusta Dwyer uses journalistic narratives to describe and examine stories of struggle, despair and success about four social movements: the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, the Peasant Union of Indonesia (SPI), the Indian Alliance, and Argentina's National Movement of Factories Recovered by Workers (MNFRT). The title term "broke but unbroken" provides the synthesis of what the book sets out to do: identify the intersections of hopelessness and hope where grassroots social movements concentrate their efforts on diminishing poverty in a more sustainable and effective way than governments or aid institutions. By collecting personal anecdotes and situating them in the broader social and political context of social movement struggle against capitalism and globalization within their countries, she connects the four movements as they work towards what Dwyer refers as imagining grassroots solutions to their daily struggle while promoting sustainable alternatives to problems created from local and global sources as a way to fight poverty rather than simply coping with it.

A major theme throughout the book is how the movements are reconfiguring the way poverty has been approached by policymakers and aid institutions. Dwyer emphasizes that the tactics of grassroots social movements are often misunderstood or misrepresented because of the way Western society has been shaped to think about poverty: as something so complex only elite experts from government or global institutions can manage it. In fact, grassroots tactics are perceived as out of the ordinary because they combine methods of protest and resistance with the search for and implementation of sustainable solutions. One of the

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ways this is done is through decentralized/horizontal decision-making, to which the author credits many of the success stories experienced by the movements. For the MST, decentralized decisions have been fundamental to the maintenance of such a diverse and widespread movement. The support for organic farming, for example, is a solution from below that has enabled MST farmers to keep afloat through small-scale organic production while avoiding the replication of the unsustainable industrial agricultural system they fight against. It is “production based on our values,” one member says in reference to the rejection of chemical pesticides and fertilizers while ensuring that members can make a living from farming with fair prices and distribution of land and resources. This is also reflected in the relationship between forest dwellers and the forest in Indonesia.

Education is explored as another common element to grassroots movements’ strategies. More often than not, research on grassroots movements highlights how “raising awareness” is a priority but only superficially explores how movements’ organizational structure and their educational strategies are deeply entrenched. Dwyer corrects this gap by analysing education as a fundamental strategy of grassroots movements that truly believe in participatory democracy and autonomy. For the MST, education is such an important tool that it has established its own schools, training centres, and universities (p.18). For the SPI, the alliance between students and peasants strengthened their cause. In India, former slum dwellers take the role of educators in order to help others make a living and access secure housing (p. 89). For the MNFRT, education means access to training and information so that every worker has the knowledge to run the cooperatives (p.145).

The book’s narratives are well analysed in a critique of capitalism and the impact of globalization on people’s right to food, water, housing, and job security are also complemented with secondary literature. These include references made both by Dwyer and by the movement members themselves demonstrating how grassroots movements perceive the merging of theory and practice to be essential for the creation of alternatives. This shows how these movements’ strengths go beyond organizational capacity; an argument she notes has been promoted in neoliberal thought to disconnect poverty alleviation from the need to actually transform political and economic systems. She challenges this view by proposing that, for example in the case of peasant movements in Brazil and Indonesia, “through direct action and the physical taking of land, their members are challenging the definition of empowerment

that obscures the material basis of power” (p.78). Instead of promoting “empowerment” through aid, structural adjustments, and even some forms of microcredit, which the author argues do not always address the root of the problem and fail to take into account particular traits of each society and culture (p. 99), grassroots movements link it to changing mindsets, stronger class-consciousness, and the continuous flow of support that comes from community solidarity.

Although it is easy for the reader to get lost in the personal anecdotes of movement members, Dwyer’s narrative style is effective because it brings a human face back to the understanding of social movements. By shifting power to those telling their own stories, she creates counterframes to the ones promoted by opposing politicians and mainstream media. The book shows how it is in fact the innovation behind the movements’ methods and the way they reflect the consciousness of the millions of people represented that make the movements capable of building resilience even when it is hard to develop solutions to crises. The author demonstrates this through examples of creativity, solidarity and strength when groups find themselves at a critical point; when it is *sí o sí* (yes or yes), as an Argentine factory worker put it. The combination of inventiveness, optimism, and altruism, which Dwyer successfully highlights, works because it is so novel and unusual to strategies inherent to capitalist dominance associated with conformism to systematic poverty and inequality that it shakes its structures and creates positive new ways of thinking and producing. These alternatives contrast with traditional policies and government initiatives that the movements claim have not provided a long-term solution but simply a way to “manage their poverty better” (p.99).

By presenting four grassroots movements from distinct parts of the world in a unifying way, Dwyer shows that, despite their many differences and peculiarities they share similar strategies, visions, and even transnational networks of support. That is mostly because they share a common enemy centered on capitalism and globalization, although it takes many shapes: agribusinesses, hydroelectric dams, mining, colonial states, corruption, perverse laws, and even conservationists. The portrayal of how movements have confronted these forces shows that, in addition to direct action and similar strategies, it may be necessary to negotiate and compromise in order to guarantee a reasonable outcome for the membership. While Dwyer shows some of these movements’ successful stories, she poses the question of whether their methods can be replicated and bring about positive returns in places other than

the countries she explores. By interweaving the stories of other, some smaller, movements, she shows that replication is possible though their success can only be sustainable when shaped towards the need of a wide membership, which emerges when the movement favours ideas from below through horizontal decision-making based on collective needs, autonomy, and the principle of solidarity within grassroots organizing (p.21). But the question remains on whether the changes are sustainable. The author argues that as long as the economic system persists in creating poverty, the poor will keep fighting. The analysis of the cooperatives in Argentina demonstrates the constant struggle with cycles of poverty and inequality and how crisis tends to return and create new vulnerabilities requiring movements to maintain their search for sustainable solutions to their problems in a way that prevents community gains from becoming losses.