

Review - Multipolar Globalization: Emerging Economies and Development

Written by Sérgio Costa

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SÉRGIO COSTA, SEP 19 2018

Multipolar Globalization: Emerging Economies and Development
By Jan Nederveen Pieterse
London: Routledge, 2017

For those who are familiar with some previous books by Jan N. Pieterse, such as *Ethnicities and Global Multiculture*, *Development Theory* or the co-authored *The decolonization of imagination*, the present book is both welcome and unexpected. It is welcome because the author gives those who are interested in understanding current global configurations, a compact and outstanding sociological analysis of contemporary shifts and turns in globalization. On the other hand, the book is unexpected because of its genre. While most of the previous books of Jan N. Pieterse are brilliant contributions to the broad field of social theory, the present book is what Germans call *Zeitdiagnose*, that is a diagnosis of the present time. It is needless to say that this is not a hierarchical distinction. That is, a *Zeitdiagnose* is not a minor contribution in comparison to his theoretical books. A good *Zeitdiagnose* is a job for big sociologists. It requires profound historical knowledge, a multi-theoretical lens and, on top of this, an inquisitive and sensitive mind to discern what is fortuitous and what is persistent, what is really relevant and what is just trendy in the overflow of existing information.

In the specific case of the topics treated in the present book, solid expertise in economics and finance capitalism is also required. Pieterse has this expertise, which is rarely found in contemporary sociologists but was abundant among the founders of the discipline, such as Karl Marx and Max Weber. The book defends a clear and convincing main thesis, according to which emerging economies and societies have turned globalization from a first Great Britain- and then US-dominated game into a multicentric process whose range and consequences are not yet clear. These shifts, which have been misrepresented in Western media, are linked to crisis and dynamics of capitalism but also to the agency emerging societies and their institutions have had.

The nine chapters of the book are consistently organized to develop this encompassing argument. The book starts with the general idea of multipolar globalization in chapter one, goes on to oriental globalization and the emergence of Asian and BRICS economies and from there to the consequences of these transformations for social inequalities and governance. The 2008 crisis and the representations of the new global configuration in Western and emerging societies' media, as well as reflections on debugging social theory have also received proper chapters.

As insightful as the idea of a multipolar globalization might be, it raises issues about both the multipolar *and* globalization. As far as multipolarity is concerned, the empirical evidence the book collects to demonstrate the increment of East-South commercial relations and the development of economies in Asia and in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is strong and thoroughly convincing. Even if the B, the R and the S in the BRICS-constellation, that is, Brazil, Russia and South Africa have recently faced serious troubles, the weight, especially of the C, China, makes the idea of a multipolar world economy real.

However, the author seems to attribute a more encompassing connotation to the adjective 'multipolar', including in it a process of decentring politics and culture. Nevertheless, emerging economies, even in the case of China, have not

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been disputing world hegemony in the same way as Europe, and later the US, have done. They simply do not have an alternative model to neoliberal globalization. In fact, emerging societies are driving forces of neoliberalism, as this becomes obvious in the behaviour of the growing middle classes in these countries. While their consumption is an engine of economic growth, middle classes in emerging economies rather cope with and imitate what is supposed to be Western as they contest Western hegemony. Hence, the 'multipolar reconfiguration' of the world, contrary to the thesis defended in the book, does not substantially affect the cultural and political domains; it is restricted to the economic field.

As far as globalization is concerned, some recent and crucial developments such as Brexit and Trump's efforts to renationalize politics and the economy are addressed only in the concluding remarks of the book, leaving some decisive questions unanswered: Is the nationalist backlash led by the bipolar US-president rather a reaction against a multipolar world or against globalization itself? Or to put it in other terms, the Hungarian President Viktor Orbán, often says that in former times Hungarians believed that their future was in the European Union, but today they are sure that the future of the European Union is in Hungary and in its ultranationalist policy of closed borders. Hence, the question at stake is: is multipolar globalization, as defined in the book, compatible with the impressive expansion of nationalist neoliberalism in the era of Trump and Orbán?

Besides these questions concerning the concept of multipolar globalization itself, this timely book raises issues on more specific points. Accordingly, the discussion on global inequalities which represents a stupendous scholarly work has been able to condense in a few pages a dense discussion of central findings of contemporary research on inequality. There we can find, for instance, an explanation why societies with an abundance of natural resources are – with only few exceptions – highly unequal. In these contexts the rich capture of the state, transforming this key institution into an instrument of wealth concentration.

The book also convincingly shows that inequalities should be researched along their specific configurations at the national and regional levels, what is called in the book "multicentric perspectives". However, the author, defending his multicentric perspective, rejects global inequality approaches: "Adopting multicentric perspectives means no longer focusing on global inequality (or globalization and inequality) but on inequality within regions and countries" (p. 87). Instead of *either* a regional/national *or* a global perspective, research on inequality needs both: regional/national *and* global perspectives. At least two thirds of existing social inequalities derive, according to global inequality scholars, not from racial, gender or class classifications but from nationality, that is national citizenship. Therefore, research concentrated exclusively at the national and regional level apprehends only one third of existing inequalities. It is true that the instruments for promoting redistribution are virtually a monopoly of national states which only redistribute among their own nationals. But global inequalities cannot simply be analytically and politically ignored, also because national inequalities are linked to global inequalities. That is, the position which, let's say, soy farmers from Paraguay or oil millionaires from Brunei occupy within the global social structure, gives these actors the power to reject redistributive policies at the national level.

This leads me to the final chapter in which the author engages with debugging social theory. Also, at this level the book offers an impressive diagnosis of deficits and blind spots found in both classical social theories and alternatives offered by postcolonial and southern theories. Accordingly, the "software updates" social theory urgently needs should be provided by a multicentric approach which methodologically assumes the shape of layered, multilevel analysis. In Pieterse's multicentric approach there is only a limited space for postcolonial theory since postcolonialism is focused, according to him, only on "reinterpreting colonialism".

It is true that several postcolonial and decolonial scholars are involved in producing caricatures of globalization as a linear continuation of colonialism. But it is also true that some postcolonial contributions are rather concerned with understanding complex interdependences between world regions, between past and present patterns of capital accumulation, or between labour regimes and economic chains disseminated in different countries. In these cases, the concepts of *colonialism* and *postcolonialism* do not stand for specific historical formations, but for models of interconnection and interpenetration between regions, social groups, regimes etc. I am thinking of concepts such as *entangled modernity* and *cunning states*, coined by Shalini Randeria or *entangled inequalities* as used for researching inequalities found in Latin America. In these cases, regional or national specific configurations are very

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much considered. However, these local configurations are always studied along their insertion in global webs of interdependence. Those postcolonial contributions which focus on the structural entanglements between different world regions as well as on the interdependencies between the local, the national, and the global levels remain essential for complementing multicentric or multilevel approaches usually blind to processes, flows and power asymmetries that transversally trespass different levels or layers of analysis.

About the author:

Sérgio Costa is a professor for Sociology at Freie Universität Berlin and the chair of the Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America (Mecila.net). He has vastly published in his areas of expertise which are: social inequalities, democracy and differences, postcolonial theories.