

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

WALLACE CLEMENT and LEAH F. VOSKO, eds., *Changing Canada: Political Economy as Transformation*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, xxxii + 498 p., \$85.00 hardcover, \$32.95 paper.

Changing Canada is the latest entry in an ongoing series edited by Clement and others' documenting the evolution of the so-called "New Canadian Political Economy" (hereafter simply PE). As suggested by the very broad title, it covers an impressive range of hot-button topics ranging from social programs to international finance. The aim of the collection, according to the editors, is threefold: "to 'explain the "economy" and market forces so that political and social interventions can direct economic processes;" "to investigate how changes in the organization or disorganization of capitalism are producing new types of transformations and forms of resistance;" and to "examine the limitations and possibilities of political economy as an approach to understanding social change, suggesting ways in which earlier assumptions and foci in the field itself ... need to be maintained, shifted or displaced" (p. xiv). The question for the reviewer is how successful are they in carrying off this ambitious agenda? My answer: much more than one might suppose.

At this point there is something I should confess. My reason for taking on this review was not because I am an expert in PE, but because I am not. I thought it would be an incentive to engage with an increasingly influential field of endeavour that I have generally found not only boring but repellent. While I have come across useful individual studies in the course of my research on topics like social policy and unemployment, my overall impression of PE coming into this project was that most of the work carried out under the umbrella is narrow, doctrinaire, and reductive. Particular bugbears include its doggedly macro perspective, its dismissal of some of the—to me—most important components of social reality, from agency to interaction to the production and circulation of meaning, and its reliance on one-size-fits-all imported models and theories. I was pleasantly surprised, therefore, when my expectations were rather resoundingly confounded. True, there are still a few pieces in the traditional mode—abstract, polemical, larded with academic jargon. Taken as a whole, however, the volume does an exemplary job of providing its own counterbalance. Particularly striking is the emphasis on Canadian differences in many of the pieces, the inclusion of hitherto ignored subjects like culture, and the space given to self-critique.

Among the more notable entries from the standpoint of convention-bending are Mel Watkins' essay on globalization, with its insights about how Canada's relationship with the world is mediated through its relationship with the U.S.; Pat Armstrong, Mary Cornish, and Elizabeth Millar's anomalously personalized colloquy on the blunders, ad hockery, and general messiness which has characterized the struggle for pay equity; Vic Satzewich and Lloyd Wong's elucidation of the ways in which the experience of immigration and the self-imaging of immigrants affect, as well as being affected by, economic conditions; Sam Gindin and Jim Stanford's astute though depressing disquisition on the state of the Canadian labour movement; and last but not least, the most non-traditional pieces in the collection, Robert Holland's and Fuyuki Kurasawa's articles on youth and pop culture respectively, with their no-holds-barred assessments of what has been missing from traditional PE practice, what it has cost in terms of analytic force, and what should be done to remedy the gaps. The one thing that all of these pieces have in common is their resistance to the knee-jerk application of abstract categories that is all too often the hallmark of PE. Without losing sight of the traditional preoccupations of the field—power, ideology, contestation—these authors also convey a rich sense of the complex, unexpected ways in which these forces and projects play out in real life. That my prejudices were so largely disconfirmed does not mean that I have no reservations about this collection. One thing that struck me, for instance, was the somewhat ambiguous treatment of the headline topic of transformation. While the title implies that PE itself is a force for change, this promise is not borne out in the individual essays. Some of them describe transformations already underway, including within PE itself. Some of them call for transformation in the future, through political or social action. Some, like William Carroll and Elaine Coburne's article on protest movements, do both. Apart from providing motivation by revealing the rot, however, it is difficult to see how PE actually offers any new tools for the would-be reformer. If anything, these essays show why PE, on its own, is unlikely to promote real change. The biggest problem is its simplistic view of causality. Over and over we are told that the root of present evils was the late-seventies' triumph of the neoliberal agenda. Apart from a few references to economic crises, however, no-one actually explains how this triumph was achieved. No matter how powerful the forces of capitalism, we are, after all, still a democracy. How did the Right shanghai the popular imagination? What was it that induced so many people to buy into, and continue buying into, a political program that was/is so demonstrably against their own interests? Because of its neglect of subjectivity, PE is singularly ill-equipped to answer these questions. Holland and Kurasawa suggest some potentially fruitful correctives, but so far the work has not materialized. Until it grasps the symbolic as well as the economic wellsprings of change, PE is not going to crack the problem of transformation.

My other and perhaps more important concern has to do with the content of the book. It is clear from the editors' introduction that this collection is intended for classroom use. But what classrooms? For a course "about" PE, it could be an extremely valuable resource. For a course "about" Canadian

society this text presents some problems. While most of the participants offer sound, thorough, interesting reviews of their various subject matters, with the critical perspective functioning primarily to provide an interpretive framework, there are a few entries in which the privileging of certain topics and emphases leads to misrepresentation. In some cases (Vincent Mosko on communications, Roger Keil and Stefan Kipfer on urban politics, Laurie Adkin on environmentalism) it is the old problem of a transnational focus obscuring local particulars. In others, it is the eagerness to make a political point that gets in the way. In Judy Fudge's and Leah Vosko's article on contingent work, for example, the authors' fixation on gender oppression leads them to oversimplify what is in reality a very complex phenomenon. Among the facts they ignore or downplay are that many part-time workers, especially female ones, don't want full-time jobs; that other demographic groups (youth, the disabled, older workers) are also overrepresented in the category; and that much of the recent increase in non-voluntary part-time work is among disadvantaged subgroups of men, many displaced from the shrinking industrial sector.

How serious are these problems? Because of the intended audience for this collection, the few bad apples can't just be seen as examples of what needs to be "fixed" in PE—if they were, one could say that the other essays in the book offer adequate compensation. In a book for students, however, biased or partial treatments presenting themselves as objective analyses have to be viewed as at least problematic.

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