
BOOK NOTES

Lockner Marais, Philippe Burger, Malene Campbell, Stuart Denoon-Stevens and Deirdre van Rooyen (eds)

Coal and Energy in South Africa: Considering a Just Transition

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 260pp., hardback, \$147.

This is the first book to appear in a series of Edinburgh Studies in Urban Political Economy, featuring international contributions on contemporary urban and regional problems and policy issues. To begin the series with a book on an African non-metropolitan region is a signal that substantial attention is to be paid to the Global South rather than the more usual ‘world cities’ focus characteristic of urban geographical studies.

The exclusive focus of the book is in on a region with heavy dependence on mineral extraction, particularly coal. Like the Australian economy in recent times, South Africa has a very mining-dependent economy, and big capital is epitomised there by the energy giant Eskom that has - both during and after the *apartheid* era - been such a major force in shaping the nation’s economic orientation. Of course, it is also inherent in the spatial political economy of mining that particular regions are focal points for the resource extraction. In the South African case, the region centred on Witbank, 105 kilometres west of the nation’s capital, Pretoria, is a major coal mining hub, currently providing about half of the nation’s total energy needs. The surrounding Emalahleni municipality’s population of nearly half a million people has depended overwhelmingly on the 22 coal mines in the area, both directly for jobs in mining and indirectly for the income flowing to other local businesses and services. But the regional economy’s unsustainable character has become increasingly evident. Its institutions and people are facing increasing social economic and political stress, adding to the environmental stresses - particularly relating to water - that are the all-too-familiar corollary of regional specialisation in mining.

‘Book notes’

Journal of Australian Political Economy

No. 89, pp. 158-62.

This book's 17 chapters, written by 32 contributors, point to the main dimensions of the conflicting interests and stresses. Considerable emphasis is placed on the tensions between the mining companies and the local government. The question of 'who should fix the potholes in the local roads?' doesn't sound like the most profound issue of capital-state-labour relations but it is evidently a symptomatic concern. The tension between the mine workers and other people whose future is becoming increasingly uncertain as the mines close also receives attention. However, there is rather less emphasis on the racial dimension than one might expect for a South African analysis, given the distinctive and long-standing divisions of labour that have existed in the mining sector. More focus is put on spatial fragmentation, health, environmental damage, and community wellbeing.

Overall, the book seems well researched, as one would expect from a publication written mainly by a range of local academics. It explores the problems in detail but has significantly less to say about political responses and possible solutions. The absence of a regional plan or strategy for managing the economic, social and political processes of transition is evidently a major concern. Reassurances that air and water pollution will diminish as mines close seem slim compensation for the predictably widespread job losses. The editors do include a chapter at the very end, titled 'Is a Just Transition Possible?', in which they point to current attempts to develop the area as a 'renewable energy hub'. However, their conclusion offers little hope, as they say: 'we doubt renewables will provide an alternative of sufficient scale, and as a result the inequalities brought by mining are likely to be perpetuated'. That being so, the question of the political economic responses, whether predicted or prescribed, would be interesting to explore more deeply as the situation evolves.

John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark

The Robbery of Nature:

Capitalism and the Ecological Rift

Monthly Review Press, New York, 2020, 386pp, paperback, \$39.

This book comprises a collection of essays, some of which have been previously published, focused on a Marxian view of the ecological rift and the expropriation of nature under capitalism. To the authors credit, this is

more than a ‘bundling’ of previously published material, much attention having been paid to the overall coherence and continuity of the argument. Overall, the clear intent is for the book to present a comprehensive defence of Marx against critics, such as Alfred Schmidt whose book, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, depicted Marx’s views as anti-ecological, reflecting the characteristic ‘Enlightenment’ views of that era. To the contrary, Bellamy Foster and Clark argue that Marx’s distinctive development of the labour theory of value did not ignore the importance of nature; and that Marx paid substantial attention to the ecological rift that resulted from the economic system expropriating or ‘robbing’ nature.

The book’s authors pay considerable attention to land, both in its physical form - which tends to be degraded where land use is driven by short term capitalist imperatives – and its close relation to the accentuation of social inequalities through practices such as rack-renting. This concern to blend political economy and ecology is broadened by drawing on social reproduction theory and ecological feminism, particularly the work of Ariel Salleh. The need to deal with the anthropocentric problem of ‘speciesism’ is also addressed. In these ways, both as a defense of Marx against his critics and as a contribution to modern eco-socialist thought, the book offers a window into arguments developed by Bellamy Foster and like-minded authors who have contributed to anti-capitalist political economic and ecological analyses through articles in *Monthly Review*.

Marian Wilkinson

The Carbon Club: How a Network of Influential Climate Sceptics, Politicians and Business Leaders Fought to Control Australia’s Climate Policies

Allen and Unwin, 2020, 456pp., paperback, \$33.

Following the election of the ALP government led by Anthony Albanese, Australia’s next phase of wrestling with the challenge of climate change policies is being widely discussed. Hopes have also been raised by the remarkable electoral support for the Greens and ‘teal independents’ who based their electoral campaigns substantially on the case for bolder climate change policies. It is therefore pertinent and timely to reflect on the obstacles that have previously caused the nation to be such a laggard.

Investigative journalist Marian Wilkinson's book has strong relevance in this context, even though originally published during the climate policy doldrums of the Morrison government. It parades the distinctive array of political economic interests and institutions responsible for inhibiting progress to date, showing how key players in business, government, think tanks and the media have thwarted effective climate change policies. Indeed, it is always important to 'know the enemy', especially where that enemy has been so notably effective. As *The Carbon Club* shows in forensic detail, opposition to more effective policy has come - and will surely continue to come - from climate-change deniers and right-wing political organisations, encouraged by those sections of the media that routinely back reactionary positions.

This book is not the first to tackle the issue in this way. Clive Hamilton did so in a series of books exposing the 'dirty politics of climate change', notably *Scorcher* (2008) and *Requiem for a Species* (2010). Also more than a decade ago, Guy Pearce (2007), former staffer to a Coalition government Environment minister, shone powerful light on the 'revolving door' of corporate players, state bureaucrats and politicians engaged in frustrating progressive climate change action. Looking inside the corporations, research by Chris Wright and Daniel Nyberg (2015) has shown how the current business models and climate-warming practices are perpetuated, notwithstanding corporate claims about environmental concerns and commitments. And who would be surprised anyway? As political scientist Lindy Edwards (2020) has carefully documented, corporate capital has a long and substantial track-record of using its power and influence to derail potentially progressive public policies in Australia.

Wilkinson's book, seen in conjunction with these other investigations, shows how opposition to more effective climate change policies has worked through institutions such as think tanks and the media as well as the institutions of capital and the state. The sundry players might be described as a 'coalition of the unwilling', based in the interests of carbon capital but also capable of drawing on fractions of labour, most particularly workers in the mining sector when no alternative employment pathways are being offered. Now, with a new Federal government, the question arises of whether this nexus of interests could be severed by a substantive shift in state strategy - and how significant that shift might be, given that the government remains reluctant to prohibit new gas and coal mines. A 'solution-focused' analysis is necessary for such considerations, rather than the 'problem saturated' approach that *The Carbon Club* presents.

Although Wilkinson's book has an epilogue labelled 'The Road Ahead', it offers little guidelines or even possibilities for progress. Perhaps a fruitful starting point would be to recognise that the interests of capital, as a class, are not necessarily unified. Where climate change policies create opportunities to invest in restructuring industries, energy supply systems, transportation and urban development, profit-seeking capitalists can be expected to eagerly seize those opportunities. Other firms, recognizing that a stable social order and sustainable environment are important long-term business preconditions, may also be willing partners in a progressive reformist policy process. Thus, while Wilkinson's emphasis on the obstacles and opposition mobilized by the corporations and their ideological henchmen is highly significant, it is also timely to consider the potential building blocks for more positive developments.

Structural political economic conditions matter too, of course. Hence the need for deeper study of the current characteristics of capitalist economies based on extractive industries tied into fossil capitalism – as illustrated by the articles on the preceding pages of this issue of *JAPE*. Seen in this light, more ambitious climate change targets and stronger policies by an Albanese-led government are necessary and to be welcomed but are unlikely to be sufficient unless linked to substantial changes in the structures of political economic power.

References

- Edwards, L. (2020), *Corporate Power in Australia: Do the 1% Rule*, Clayton: Monash University Publishing.
- Hamilton, C (2008) *Scorcher*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Agenda
- Hamilton, C. (2010) *Requiem for a Species*, London: Earthscan.
- Pearce, G. (2007) *High and Dry*, Camberwell: Viking Press.
- Wright, C. and Nyberg, D. (2015) *Climate Change, Capitalism, and Corporations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Book notes by Frank Stilwell