
Jutta Gutberlet. *Recovering Resources—Recycling Citizenship: Urban Poverty Reduction in Latin America*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2008. 212pp.

As environmental concerns have moved increasingly to the centre stage of development thinking, so too have the important dimensions of human environmental interaction come to the fore in development research, some of which have barely attracted attention in past years as the subjects of analysis and policy formulation. Waste management, especially solid waste management in urban settings, is one of these dimensions, and is the focus of this very detailed and accomplished monograph by Jutta Gutberlet of the University of Victoria.

Gutberlet's argument is set out clearly as advocating,

“...[an] approach that not only encourages but mandates resource recovery as the necessary end of the product life-cycle, and that implements inclusive waste management as a contribution to social justice.” Gutberlet goes on to clarify the possibly nebulous expression “inclusive waste management” by stating, “...I mean strategies that involve the recyclers organized into associations, cooperatives or other forms of community organizations in selective waste collection...the potential to be environmental stewards...[and] expanding the capacity of generating income for the poor” (p.4). And so the major themes of the book are stated at the outset: the organization of informal sector waste collectors, including participatory governance of urban waste collection; the creation of local solutions to the urgent problem of urban waste; and the reduction in poverty of those living in *favelas*, *poblaciones callampas*, and similar urban settlements through informal sector employment shorn of social stigma and precariousness. These ideas are given a solid empirical basis through a number of case studies—all of them in Brazil, a country in which Gutberlet has worked and periodically lived for decades, through which she seeks to illustrate the accomplishments, and pitfalls, of her main themes.

Purely as a work of international development research, this book has many virtues. Gutberlet provides a detailed survey of the environmental and urban context of her research, and many may find the book useful purely for the generous overview of the “landscape of the debate” in which her own argument unfolds with regard to waste management, urban consumption, population growth, social exclusion, and similar themes of global import. There is a chapter on the health consequences of urban waste recycling, especially in the *barrios populares*; there is also a chapter on waste recycling as informal sector employment contributing to income generation; and there is a chapter on living conditions in the *barrios* in which informal urban waste recycling takes place. These contextual offerings hang together well and instill an encouraging confidence on the part of the reader for the author’s considerable knowledge of development in general and an excellent knowledge of the data crucial to her specific area of research. Moreover, after so many years of hearing of “narratives”, “voices for the Other”, and similar sallies into the borderland between fiction and empirical research, it is satisfying to find Gutberlet inclined to let the realities of the *favelas* be the final judge of whether her argument and approach have anything

to recommend themselves to us. In this she is unstinting in the details she provides of her experience with the “Pedra sobre Pedra” community of greater São Paulo.

A number of international development concepts have the ability to induce an unpleasant shudder in those inclined towards clearer thinking in our area of research: “sustainable”, “inclusive”, “integrated”, to name a few of the more popular ones, are often waved about like magic conceptual wands with a view to casting a wishful spell over the often intractable complexities of development problems in order to transform them, in our minds at least, into compliant eidetic pets we can harness to our latest fashionable development thinking. Gutberlet is fond of “integrated”. She wishes to integrate the thinking around 1) social economy and social solidarity, 2) resource management, especially environmental best-practice about co-management (meaning community/experts), and 3) governance, especially participatory governance fostering citizenship. A convenient Venn diagram on page 11 provides a visual depiction of the desired theoretical approach. However, like most Venn diagrams used in our field of research, it provides little more clarity as a visual model of the approach than the trope “integrated” it is supposed to make more comprehensible. Nonetheless, Gutberlet attempts to show in situ through her case studies how such an “integration” would take place in the real world. Again, it is satisfying to come to grips, through the author’s experience and insight, with the real complexities of the problem she is attempting to ameliorate, although, in the end, the data provides much more support for parts of her argument than for the viability of her integrated, participatory, sustainable and inclusive approach to urban waste management.

Gutberlet is inclined towards what may be described as a UNDP-style approach to development. In this approach there is much talk of “social exclusion”, “participatory governance”, “co-management”, and similar progressive ideas. Yet, as in the UNDP’s publications advocating policies stemming from these ideas, there is to be found, inserted here and there, a tip of the hat, a nod if you will, to the primacy of the market. In UNDP publications, this takes the form of the appearance of—apropos of nothing and inserted amongst the ardent writing about social exclusion and the like—statements such as “...and of course a viable market that will foster growth”. Gutberlet’s version of this is her observation that, “Solid waste is as much a resource as other natural commodities for which

there is supply, demand, and a price”, an observation stated simply and without comment as a natural fact of the world.

Many development thinkers have serious reservations about this approach. It may be, to speak to the focus of Gutberlet’s research, that conceptualizing, and subsequently reifying, waste as fundamentally a commodity subject to supply, demand and a price is in fact part of the waste problematic. Gutberlet alludes to the dominance of the “waste market” by corporate giants such as Onyx, Sita and Rethman, et al., and this, in turn, might have suggested to Gutberlet a different approach to urban waste, one more along the lines of a structurally oriented political economic approach. According to the latter approach, advocating locally organized waste recycling as a form of income generation which may contribute towards poverty reduction—although it may be a short term anodyne to hideous and appalling social conditions—may be missing something important. If the poverty of urban *barrios populares* is, in fact, a very real built-in feature of a thoroughly marketized developing socio-economy, then the fundamental origins of poverty are structural, not circumstantial. By accepting the naturalness of the market as fundamental and taken-for-granted—and ardently advocating, at the same time, for participatory governance, co-management, an end to social exclusion, an end to stigma, etc.—Gutberlet risks not just the incomprehension of many readers regarding the viability and cogency of her approach, but also, if her approach becomes widespread and implemented, it risks creating a mass of employed poor living in only marginally better conditions than their destitute neighbours. Without doubt, in the human living conditions that Gutberlet describes any improvement is, indeed, better. I read Gutberlet’s book with interest and appreciation because of this, but a long-term, viable contribution to urban poverty reduction it may not be. Pretending to be the latter may destine her “integrated and inclusive” approach to becoming part of the problem, rather than part of the problem’s solution.

I would definitely recommend this book to those not only concerned with waste management and urbanization and development, but also to those wishing to see how an intelligent researcher grapples with the overwhelmingly complex problems of development in an urban setting.

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