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On: 09 July 2011, At: 13:55

Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Peasant Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjps20>

Rural social movements in Latin America: organizing for sustainable livelihoods

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Available online: 08 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Adrienne Johnson & Anthony Bebbington (2011): Rural social movements in Latin America: organizing for sustainable livelihoods, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38:3, 651-653

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.583807>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Rural social movements in Latin America: organizing for sustainable livelihoods, edited by Carmen Diana Deere and Frederick S. Royce, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2009, xx + 356 pp., US\$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3332-7

Academic interest in food politics and the impacts of neoliberal policies on rural livelihoods has generated a particular concern for the roles that transnational movements might play in forging more socially just policies governing the production and exchange of food. These struggles over food and food sovereignty are, in turn, tied to the contentious politics of land tenure, labor rights, access to natural resources and cultural autonomy. These different domains of contention run through *Rural social movements in Latin America: organizing for sustainable livelihoods*, a collection of analytical and testimonial essays that offer readers much insight into the contemporary dynamics of Latin American social movements while detailing the rich histories of struggle against neoliberal attacks on the livelihoods of Latin American women, men, farmers and indigenous groups. While the book says relatively little about such deeply contentious themes as climate change, biofuels and natural gas extraction, the contributors still manage to cover an admirably broad field of struggle, speaking to mobilization around alternative models of development, food sovereignty, agrarian reform, mining, women's and indigenous people's rights, the utilization of information and communication technology and migration. What makes the collection particularly valuable is that its different chapters are written from a range of subject positions – of activists, academics and more general movement supporters. By including this diversity of voices, Deere and Royce capture the heterogeneity of contemporary movements in the region while offering a balanced set of interpretations that are of value for activists and academics alike.

The book grows out of an explicit attempt by academics based at the University of Florida to engage with social movement leaders in an exploration of the visions of development that inhere within such movements. Most of the leaders invited into the initiative came from organizations that were linked to the Latin American Coordinator of Rural Organizations (CLOC), La Via Campesina or the Continental Coordination of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Abya Yala. These transnational movements have different membership bases (rural workers, indigenous peoples and peasants) and the editors' introductory chapter explores the political concerns as well as the converging and diverging visions that emanate from these varied constituencies. Autonomy and self-determination tend to characterize the demands of indigenous peoples' organizations, while CLOC and La Via Campesina are more concerned with critiquing the anti-peasant and polarizing nature of neoliberal policies and with forging concrete alternatives that prioritize varied dimensions of social justice such as gender, ethnicity and racial equality (p. 3). Despite their different emphases, the editors claim that the movements share a common concern that the penetration of neoliberal globalization has waged an

exclusionary war against much of the rural population of Latin America, making livelihoods ever more precarious and exacerbating already difficult living conditions. In the face of these pressures and the normative commitments that underlie them, Deere and Royce argue that social movements have become increasingly assertive, spurred on by the 'unprecedented attack on rural livelihoods unleashed by neoliberal globalization' (p. 5). At the same time, these movements have taken advantage of the region's shifting and overall more open political terrain, further contributing to their increasingly visible and vocal political participation.

The chapters of the book are organized around four major themes: the globalization of struggle; mobilizations over land and territory; social justice and livelihoods; and transnational organization. The balance of the first section, 'Globalizing the struggle, globalizing hope', is more informational than analytical, providing very useful details on the structure of La Via Campesina and the demands of some of its most active members. Rosset's chapter is an interesting discussion of the benefits of alternative forms of land reform and the impacts that these could have on peasant livelihoods and, more generally, access to food. The 'Guidelines for the future', with which he closes his chapter, resonate with the other two contributions in this section (by Desmarais and Tiney) in that they lay the foundations for a viable alternative globalization. These accounts add richness to the book, as their authors have intimate and often first-hand experience of the emergence and struggles of these movements. One consequence of this intimacy and conviction, however, is that the arguments lack a certain self-reflexivity, which leaves some issues hanging. In particular, the questions of why neoliberal policies were enacted in the first place, and how far (and under what conditions) the proposed alternatives might actually be feasible are left unanswered.

Of course this occasional lack of self-critique is the flip side of one of the book's great strengths, namely the 'closeness' of many of its contributors to the issues that they discuss. As a consequence, the insights offered – especially by the more activist authors – feel accessible, free of academic baggage and to a considerable degree authentic. In this vein, the second section of the book, titled 'Land, territory and agrarian reform', brings together several activist-written pieces that convey a sense of the livelihood struggles characterizing contemporary rural politics in many areas of Latin America. Three of the four chapters address the role of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in land conflicts in Brazil, Bolivia and Colombia; together they make explicit that the MST is no longer a solely Brazilian phenomenon. In the section's last chapter, Alvarez changes the focus to concentrate on the mobilization efforts of indigenous and Afro-Colombian minorities in Colombia, specifically in recovering their territories and defending their cultures in the face not only of struggles over land, but also of paramilitary involvement and the illegal drug trade. The complex of violence, dispossession and neoliberal policies that have privileged the intensive exploitation of natural resources since the 1990s has put rural livelihoods under terrible pressure in these areas. Yet one of the interesting achievements of the mobilizations is that indigenous Colombians and Afro-Colombians have succeeded in launching social movement efforts that allow for a co-existence with the government that retains their respective cultures and identities.

In the third section of the volume, 'Sustainable livelihoods, social justice', case studies document and discuss livelihood struggles around dam construction, the impacts of mining operations, sustainable development projects, tourism, and women's cooperatives. The strength of this section is that it clearly illustrates the many different actors involved in both livelihood struggles and solidarity movements

in Latin America. Where the discussions are less strong is in exploring and making explicit the internal contradictions, tensions and uneven visions of alternative development that often exist within movements. One example of this is Librado's chapter supporting 'indigenous tourism' (p. 219) as an alternative development strategy. Unlike earlier authors who oppose dominant economic arrangements and the ways in which they commodify nature, Librado elaborates a less critical (albeit promising) alternative vision that sees local natural resource economies and the travel networks engendered by these economies as providing viable business opportunities for the livelihoods of indigenous groups in Mexico. One suspects that other contributors to the volume would be far less sanguine about the extent to which alternatives can be pursued within the context of actually existing capitalisms in the region.

This familiar (but nonetheless tremendously difficult to resolve) tension between critiquing neoliberal capitalism at the same time as having to seek alternatives from within it is also evident in Conroy's chapter in the book's final section entitled 'Transnational perspectives on organizing for social justice'. Conroy examines the fair trade movement and the struggles associated with creating alternative certification processes for commodities such as coffee. While the fair trade movement is a fine example of transnational human solidarity, the question remains as to how far it can deliver on the belief that 'another world is possible', as proclaimed by the editors in the book's introduction. The risk facing all such initiatives is that by taking as a given the role of consumption in driving meaningful, long-lasting change they end up privileging a view of the market as the main vector of social change while drawing attention away from the roles of the state, the public sphere and civil and political society. In this sense Jonathan Fox's chapter is a particularly strong and intriguing contribution. Fox explores how international out-migration can lead to new forms of mobilization and the emergence of what he terms a 'migrant civil society'. Fox suggests that the very act of migrating to the United States, and organizing from the position of migrant, has had the effect of making transnational collective action both more visible and, in some cases, more effective.

Rural social movements in Latin America is a fascinating book that provides an enormously useful view of the current state of social mobilization in the region. In particular, the inclusion of analyses by both researchers and activists gives the reader a clear sense of the varied and dynamic voices of contemporary Latin American social movements that are committed to creating sustainable alternatives for the future. For that reason, it is a highly recommended volume.

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Out of the mainstream: water rights, politics and identity, edited by Rutgard Boelens, David Getches, and Armando Guevara-Gil, London and Sterling, VA, Earthscan, 2010, xvii + 366 pp., US\$99.95 (hardback), ISBN 81844076765

This is a hefty edited volume that belongs on the shelves of scholars of Andean water rights and legal pluralism. The editors and authors include many of the leading international researchers in this area, especially the Dutch, a number of whom are