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Review of Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China. **Martin King Whyte.** Reviewed by **Richard Levy.**

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Martin King Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, (2010). \$27.95 (paperback).

Martin Whyte directly challenges the common perception that inequality in China is so extreme and unjust that China is sitting on a 'social volcano' of unrest. Whyte's data and conclusions are based on sophisticated survey research in 2004 (and make no claims for the subsequent period). His conclusions are startling. Whyte argues that most Chinese accept the present inequalities as individually earned, rather than the result of an unfair economic structure. Thus social justice is not a major issue. Moreover, most Chinese are optimistic about their future economic prospects. Farmers, who are not among the major winners in the reforms are, surprisingly, the most optimistic (although also the most supportive of an egalitarian distribution system). Where there are critical views, they cannot be predicted by economic or social status. Rather, they are linked to individual experiences that occur across class, geographic, gender and Party membership lines. Since they are spread so widely, the likelihood of a single dissatisfied group's mobilizing against the state is small. What most Chinese desire is a market economy with a welfare state supporting those in need.

In explaining why Chinese may hold these views, Whyte argues that: (1) Where the equality of the Mao period (largely within rather than across work units) was frequently unjust, now people see inequality as largely resulting from individual efforts and thus largely just; (2) Where farmers under Mao were virtually bound to the land through the household registration system in a nearly feudal fashion, now they are free to leave the countryside and seek employment elsewhere; and (3) Chinese economic growth has been so massive that it is a non-zero sum game in which there was, at least initially, 'reform without losers,' and rural poverty has been reduced by some 90%. This all contributes to the fact that Chinese are more accepting of inequalities and more optimistic not only than those in the post-socialist Eastern Europe countries but also, in numerous cases, than people in Western Europe and Japan.

There are, however, serious questions about Whyte's underlying framework. Whyte shows that the vast majority of Chinese (71.7%) think national income gaps are too big. Since this is lower than the 85-95% in Eastern European countries undergoing shock therapy in the 1990's and is basically in line with the 65-78% in the U.S. (1991), U.K. (1991), Japan (2006) and W. Germany (1991) (p. 71), and these countries have been stable, Whyte implies that this undermines claims China is sitting on a social volcano. In so doing, he leaves aside any acknowledgement of the mechanisms that create and preserve such inequality and resulting resentment in China and elsewhere—issues that are certainly relevant for social work.

Whyte argues that for centuries in Pre-Liberation China, Chinese peasants were not bound to the land (as in feudal Europe), so there were few social obstacles to social and geographical mobility for them, especially in a context in which "a strong government that will monitor and maintain the fairness of economic competition" (pp. 14, 195) This oversimplifies and exaggerates both the degree of social mobility and the role of government in assuring fairness.

Where he argues that many Chinese are dissatisfied with unfair institutional preferences in China, i.e., the absence of a level playing field, the tendency for inequalities to continue because they benefit the rich etc., he implies that such inequalities are temporary weakness of China's market system. But these are not temporary weaknesses. In fact they become more exaggerated when capital is concentrated, as evidenced in "actually existing" capitalist societies.

Whyte's framework leads him to claim that where anger and/or resentment exists, it is more frequently about procedural than distributive injustice. But if economic inequalities influence political power and process, e.g. the Party's support of the newly wealthy for village leadership positions, then this is not simply an issue of fair process. He does not acknowledge that the market can be and is manipulated by the powerful. When powerful interests acquire a farmer's land "without proper consultant or compensation," he attributes resentment to problems of process rather than the underlying inequality (p. 196).

In short, White's book is extremely provocative, challenging the "common sense" of most Western scholars and much

of the Chinese leadership. While the data must be taken extremely seriously, the conclusions the author draws from his data about the lack of social volatility are based in large part on oversimplifications and assumptions which merit more extensive consideration before the conclusions should be accepted.

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Philip McMichael (Ed.). *Contesting Development: Critical Struggles for Social Change*, (2009). Routledge. 274 pages. \$39.00 (paperback).

As with all of Philip McMichael's work, this thoughtfully edited collection forces a reconsideration of simplistic narratives of social change and development that identifies a long march to neo-liberal democratic hegemony. Building on a tradition of work including Wolfgang Sach's *The Development Dictionary*, Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development* and, recently, James Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, this work—through focusing on those at the limits or boundaries of the development project—suggests that development is anything but linear and comprehensive in its scope.

The collection contains case studies of organizations and groups who have been excluded from the development project and have contested their exclusion—and more broadly development itself. Ranging from studies of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (those who live voluntarily in shack settlements [shanty towns]) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, through to Brazilian soy bean farmers, to the established Brazilian *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST, Landless Rural Workers Movement), this collection provides a fascinating overview of current struggles for social justice. Raj Patel's chapter on *Abahlali baseMjondolo* describes a movement of shack dwellers who, through contesting housing policies and decision-making structures of the state, have sought to recreate an active and engaged form of citizenship that the African National Congress (ANC), since coming to power in 1994, has increasingly attempted to silence. The paradox of the ANC—that the party of liberation now plays a role in silencing