



## Reviews



### Key Issues in Global Studies

—Diana Brydon

Bales, Kevin, and Becky Cornell. *Slavery Today*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 1998. 144 pp. \$11.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-773-9. Print. Groundwork Guides.

Caplan, Gerald. *The Betrayal of Africa*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2008. 144 pp. \$11.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-825-5. Print. Groundwork Guides.

Laxer, James. *Democracy*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2009. 144 pp. \$11.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-913-9. Print. Groundwork Guides.

Laxer, James. *Empire*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. 144 pp. \$11.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-707-8. Print. Groundwork Guides.

Lorinc, John. *Cities*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2008. 144 pp. \$11.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-819-4. Print. Groundwork Guides.

Siddiqui, Haroun. *Being Muslim*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. 144 pp. \$11.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-887-3. Print. Groundwork Guides.

These guides are part of a larger series, *Groundwork Guides*, designed to provide an overview of key contemporary political and social issues in an informative and accessible format. The mandate is to provide both a lively introduction to the subject and a strong point of view. These books achieve that goal, and in a manner that encourages readers to think more deeply about the issues they raise. Their inclusion of Canada in the wide range and historical sweep of their subject matter is a special virtue for Canadian readers.

With globalization, Nancy Fraser argues, “it is not only the substance of justice, but also the frame, which is in dispute” (170). The *Groundwork Guides* consider some of the key frames through which aspects of globalization are understood today: through concepts such as democracy and empire, through practices as varied as slavery and being Muslim, through the continentalist perspective provided by Africa, and through the local view provided by cities. As the series shows, each perspective reveals different facets of global history and global practices today, and each introduces a territory in which both the substance and the frames of justice are in dispute.

The disciplinary frames through which these authors work are also interesting for the views they offer, and fail to offer. They are written from a range of positions: by academics, activists, a journalist, and a government advisor. In this diversity, they may reflect the fragmentation of authority that accompanies

globalization, with other knowledge producers now challenging the authority of the academic voice. The proliferation of private think-tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) after the end of the Second World War, the rise of the Internet in the last decades of the twentieth century, and the increasing legitimacy granted indigenous knowledges in roughly the same period have meant that people now have alternative sources to consult for data and analysis. These books are based on research and each includes an index, a modest grouping of endnotes, and a brief page or so of suggested further reading. These arrangements make the books reliable introductory guides, suitable for a wide range of readers. The primary target audiences include high-school students and the general public; however, the books are sufficiently engaging and informative to prove useful for university students entering a new field and for professors whose specialities have directed their reading elsewhere.

While there seems to be considerable room for individualized approaches, certain features remain common to all. In addition to a narrative of approximately six chapters, the books include graphs, maps, timelines, and short embedded testimonies, case studies, or illustrative histories that break up the text and present useful information in a variety of memorable formats.

Based on my personal interests, I chose the

selection above from a wider list of titles; I have been regretting that I did not ask for the book on oil as well, since I would have been interested to see the synergies developed between that topic and some of the books in my selection. Although none of these volumes explicitly references the others, numerous concerns link them into a wider project, that of showing the continuities within Western capitalism between imperialist policies and global presents. If there is a common theme connecting these volumes it is a concern with how to achieve equality and social justice under the changing conditions of globalization. Each topic is located in its historical context and involves attention to its global, international, and local Canadian dimensions. Most begin with a salutary challenge to conventional wisdom.

Kevin Bales and Becky Cornell's *Slavery Today*, one of the more compelling texts, begins with the statement, "Although many people think slavery is a thing of the past, it exists all around us" (7). After an opening chapter introducing "The New Slavery," the text moves back in time to survey slavery throughout history, types of slavery, and slavery around the world before returning to "Slavery and Globalization." This chapter notes how globalization makes everyone complicit: "All of us support and profit from slavery in some way, even if we don't mean to or don't realize it" (82). This theme recurs in Gerald Caplan's *The Betrayal of Africa*, where many of the current problems in Africa

are attributed to colonialism and neo-liberal policies. Such a realization might spur a desire for remedial action, but Caplan indicates there are conflicts over how to remedy Africa's plight and Bales and Cornell warn their readers there are serious disagreements about how best to tackle the problems of contemporary slavery. These difficulties derive, in part, from the many types of slavery in practice today. "The most common types of modern slavery," they argue, "fall into three main groups: human trafficking, debt bondage and forced labor" (41). To further illustrate this complexity, they provide snapshots of slavery in six different countries: Japan, Brazil, Mauritania, the United Arab Emirates, India, and the United States. Individual stories further illustrate the different experiences of slavery. Nonetheless, while slavery "is packaged in many different ways," it has at its core "the loss of free will and control by violence, no payment and economic exploitation" (41). Given this definition, they estimate there are approximately "27 million slaves in the world today" (107).

After further exploration of the difficulties in addressing the problems it describes, each book concludes on a more hopeful note. Bales and Cornell provide a detailed and practical chapter, "How We Will End Slavery," which is in keeping with their activist, civil-society roles. Kevin Bales is president of Free the Slaves, the US sister organization of Anti-Slavery International, the world's oldest human-rights



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group. Becky Cornell is an aide in the United States Congress, where she serves as an advisor on human trafficking and human rights. Royalties from the book are being donated to Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan. The Timeline that concludes the book shows the long history of slavery from around 6800 BC, when the development of the first city in the world in Mesopotamia coincided with the first known instances of slavery, to the first global report on forced labour published by the International Labour Organization in 2005, the 2006 appointment of the first UN Goodwill Ambassador for the Abolition of Slavery and Human Trafficking, and campaigns against slavery in shrimp farms in Southeast Asia in 2008. In *The Betrayal of Africa*, Gerald Caplan describes the solution of Africa's problems as ultimately a matter of political will, in Africa and elsewhere, and concludes with the belief that it will be civil society that reshapes that will: "The model is the grandmothers across Africa raising their orphaned grandchildren and other vulnerable children—dedicated Africans explaining to us what they need to do the job, and us giving as much of the needed help as we can" (128).

*The Betrayal of Africa* includes a map of African empires and kingdoms from AD 500–1700 (15) and a reminder that "sub-Saharan Africa was home to a series of great empires": Mali, Kanem-Bornu, Asante, Songhai, Zimbabwe, and Axum (16–17). This is especially useful since these earlier empires are omitted from James Laxer's *Empire*, which is more concerned with Western empires and with what he terms the current American Empire. According to Caplan, "The story of Africa is literally the story of the human race" (7). The origins of all human life can be traced to Africa. This is where the human story began. He suggests that "Africa is both a continent and a universe, or, more accurately, many mini-universes" (7).

Recognizing that “[t]reating Africa as a single entity has been a trap for many” (9), he is careful to stress its diversity and to counter the “racist stereotypes of Africans as primitive savages” that live on from colonial times today (16). He discusses the ravages of colonialism and the apartheid system in South Africa before turning to the problems in Africa today, surveying the situation of women, urban slums, life expectancy, and education. The statistics he cites are grim, but he also includes sections on local activists for change and tells the stories of their initiatives that seldom make it into the news. His section on African democracy not only notes local corruption, but also includes reminders of Western complicity: “In almost every case of egregious African governance, you can be sure to find Western influences playing a central role” (69). He discusses events such as the Rwanda genocide, the debate about the efficacy of foreign aid, the role of neo-liberal economics, the growing influence of Chinese capital, and the importance of South Africa to the future of the continent as a whole. Throughout this highly informative and thoughtful survey, he stresses that the problems are major and “all of them must be tackled at the same time because they all interact” (126). The solutions, in his view, require an entirely new approach to Africa by outsiders, who need to recognize the harm their policies have caused. He notes: “Many speak without irony of the desire to ‘give something back,’ without realizing the cruel reality of

the phrase. In fact, that’s exactly what the rich world should do. We should give back what we’ve plundered and looted and stolen” (127). Caplan, a well-known Africa specialist and activist, makes a convincing case for understanding Africa within colonial and global contexts.

Caplan’s attention to the urban crisis in Africa is given a broader context in John Lorinc’s *Cities*, which notes that, in 2008, for the first time in history, “more than half of the world’s 6.6 billion inhabitants were living in cities rather than rural areas” (7). Lorinc’s discussion of cities addresses questions of social justice, democracy, and slavery, which are explored from different angles in the other texts. Lorinc argues that, “due to global population trends and mass urbanization, it is increasingly at the level of the city that such challenges are experienced most acutely” (15). His examples are drawn from the full range of human history and geography, including mentions of “ancient Babylon, Athens, Alexandria, Imperial Rome, Kyoto” (9), Beijing from the 1400s onward (25), and various colonial cities, such as Delhi, old Montreal, and Havana (26–27). Chapters address urban forms and functions, sprawl, transportation, poverty, and environmental issues, before concluding with a final chapter on crime, epidemics, and terrorism. Types of cities considered include sacred cities, political cities, imperial cities, colonial cities, merchant cities, industrial cities, immigrant cities, and global cities.

Short highlighted sections address the many ways in which cities provide concentrated case studies of most of the major issues facing the world today. After defining the city in “What is a City?” (19), Lorinc describes the ways in which cities have been connected with the growth of capitalism in “Urban Markets” (28) and how their spatial arrangements reflect and exacerbate the growing inequalities between rich and poor in “Gated Communities” (38–39) and “Gentrification and Poverty” (96). “Density Debunked” (40), “Transit Oriented Development” (77), “Biking in Bogota” (88) and “A Brief History of Sewers” (130–31) consider the organization of urban space. “Sprawl and Obesity” (44) documents the ways in which the organization of urban life impacts human health, “The Urban Heat Island Effect” (51) considers the impact of urban life on the environment, and “The War on the Plastic Bag” (61) notes an urban campaign to save the environment. Items as varied as “Janitors for Justice” (94) and “Urban Crime: Personal Perception and Statistical Reality” (112) consider the connections between cities and movements for social change. Such revealing examples make complex issues accessible. The graphs and statistics provided are also illuminating.

The encouragement of a strong point of view leads to memorable texts in *Slavery Today* and *Being Muslim*, but works less well in *Democracy*. Here, Laxer’s dismissal of theory leads to a conventional text, useful and informative enough, but unimaginative,

particularly in its treatment of globalization. The middle chapters of the book describe the state of democracy country by country in a series of listings that quickly become tedious for the sequential reader but could prove helpful to the browser. Laxer also presents the conventional view that democracy is Western in origin without documenting some of the challenges to this view. The timeline that concludes the book reflects the narrative of its opening chapters: it jumps from fifth-century-BC Athens to the 1776 US Declaration of Independence. There are no indigenous groups mentioned in the Democracy Timeline (where one might have expected at least some reference to the Six Nations Confederacy) and no reference to the date in 1893 when New Zealand granted the vote to women, even though it preceded Norway in 1913, which appears here as if it were the first. Laxer has missed an opportunity to explore the rethinking of democracy that has come with globalization, which challenges the assumption that the nation-state is the necessary and natural container for democracy. While he acknowledges that the perspective must be “planetary” (122), he locates that perspective in the nation-state, arguing that “the democratic agenda needs to return effective power to nations so they can design their social systems, govern their own economies and act as stewards for their share of the planet” (124). For Laxer, equality, rather than autonomy, is “[a]t the heart of the democratic project” (118). Such a view makes

it difficult for his view of democracy to accommodate notions of group rights, asymmetrical federalism, or forms of citizenship now being theorized that deviate from the liberal norm.

While the strong point of view has its virtues, in this case it is clear that it can also blur or shut out other perspectives. Nonetheless, he raises important questions for contemplation. On the one hand, he suggests: "There is no compelling evidence that there is a universal yearning for democracy, in all cultures and social settings . . ." (113). On the other hand, he concludes the book by suggesting that democracy holds the best hope for the future of humankind, asserting: "Democracy has always been rooted in hope" (128).

Given Laxer's authorship of both, links between *Democracy* and *Empire* are especially strong, but *Democracy* also cross-references issues addressed in Caplan's *The Betrayal of Africa* and Haroun Siddiqui's *Being Muslim*. Read together, these books gain in richness and coherence, presenting interlocking histories of oppression and resistance, while suggesting that such knowledge might create the kind of purposeful agency to justify their hopes for a better future.

Laxer's *Empire*, like his *Democracy*, presents a standard, largely Eurocentric view of the topic from a political-science perspective. Nonetheless, the book usefully draws links between empire and slavery,

and between earlier empires and the contemporary American empire. The book provides readers with a chronology of empires worldwide (listing Egyptian, First Han Chinese, Aztec, and Inca empires alongside European examples), combined with a well-documented critique of how empire operates, largely through US hegemony, today. Short boxed segments document such varied topics as "Indigenous American Civilizations," "Adolf Hitler's Third Reich," "Imperial Journeys," "The Quest for Irish Freedom," and "India's Struggle Against the British Raj." The main narrative concludes with the US invasion of Iraq and the reminder that "[i]f empire remains a potent force in our time, the power of those who are determined to resist the sway of empire is the other great fact of our world" (122).

In contrast to the distanced voice of the political expert in *Democracy and Empire*, *Being Muslim* offers a more experiential and sometimes impassioned voice but also a liberal perspective that is consistent with the tenor of the series. What follows is based on my reading of the first edition of this text. A second, revised edition with different page numbers appeared as this review went to press. This book begins with a dramatic challenge to dominant assumptions in the West: "Contrary to the popular belief that the West is under siege from Muslim terrorists, it is Muslims who have become the biggest victims of the attacks of September 11, 2001, as inconceivable as that would



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have seemed in the aftermath of the murder of 2,900 people" (11). Sometimes, Siddiqui seems to be using this claim as a form of special pleading, as when he writes of the aftermath of the Danish cartoons incident: "No grievance justifies violence. But the biggest victims were Muslims themselves" (48).

Somewhat to my surprise, Siddiqui does not entirely contradict one of George W. Bush's more outrageous rhetorical questions: "Why do they hate us?" Instead, he claims: "The fact is, they hate the United States not for what it stands for, but for what it has done" (17). Such moments show the difficulty of speaking for a large and very disparate group. Siddiqui is Muslim and speaks as a Muslim at times in his text, but, at this moment, he seems to be describing a subsection of the larger whole, whose analysis he endorses but whose hatred he does not. The pronoun "they" performs this distancing work. As a Muslim living in Canada, Siddiqui makes his identification with Western democracies clear, writing: "Shortsighted policies have given our democracies a bad name" (19). This observation comes in reference to the case of Maher Arar, which is also cited in Laxer's *Democracy*.

Siddiqui, however, raises an issue not addressed by Laxer, claiming that "there is a debate in democracies over whether freedom of expression has limits" (46). In addressing the case of the Danish cartoons, he asks, "How does a democracy decide which hate is worse?" (48). Once again, hatred strikes me as an inappropriate lens through which to focus these difficult political questions. Siddiqui's pronouns reflect his complex identifications with the different angles from which this incident might be seen. He approaches the issue first through a Muslim-identified perspective, highlighting Western double standards in adjudicating such cases, and then identifies with the North American community whose shortcomings have been exposed: "Our



inconsistencies finally caught up to us" (49). My point here is that Siddiqui negotiates a difficult balancing act, seeking to explain groups whose positions have been opposed in polarizing ways to each other. The book is informative, insightful, and useful, ranging from Muslim humour and hip hop to Islamophobia, and seldom shying away from the more difficult issues.

The one case where I think he fudges a bit is in discussing the hijab debate. He writes, "A simple scarf. That's all a hijab is. Yet it has the power to unnerve Europe, and parts of the Muslim world. . . . There's something about this small piece of cloth that unnerves democrats and despots alike" (52). I find this statement disingenuous. It is not the hijab but what it represents to different groups that causes the consternation: to various feminists, a desire to control women's bodies, a fear of women's sexuality, and a challenge, even to some an affront, to the equality rights women have won through difficult struggles; to Muslims, a sign of piety or modesty or proper behaviour; to the secular state, a challenge to its right to regulate religious

display. The situation is complex and it is not helped by suggesting it is only about a simple scarf after all. Although he provides a box defining both the *hijab* and the *burqa* (55), he confines his argument at this point in his text to defending the right of women to wear the hijab in public places. Later, in a longer and more detailed chapter on "Women," he challenges the Western media stereotype of "women walking around in tent-like garments," pointing out that "[a] majority of Muslim women do not wear the hijab" (112). In this chapter, he seeks to present a more nuanced picture of the complex cultural and religious issues involved in understanding women's lives in relation to the Qur'an, Muhammad, Sharia, and Islamic Feminism. The book successfully conveys the diversity of Muslim beliefs, and the global charts of Muslims by region and language and by sects and spiritual divisions are especially helpful.

In sum, this is an excellent series, highly recommended to readers interested in the complex cultural and political issues of our day.

## Works Cited

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