yet, Sariola tries to argue, they have ‘agency’. This is because they act to improve their condition wherever they can, in small ways, and as the ability to act qualifies as ‘agency’, they are in fact not passive victims, but show resourcefulness and ‘agency’. Though one has to sympathize with Sariola’s clear commitment to her informants and though her compassionate interest in telling their story is undeniable, her argument regarding sex workers’ ‘agency’ are not convincing. Mahmood’s arguments work better in a context – such as the mosque movement in Egypt – where women are engaged in ideological training and where their ideological commitment is to values that appear to benefit men far more than women. Sariola simultaneously argues that sex workers do ‘resist’ sex work without condoms whenever they can; so, these Tamil women are clearly not ideologically indoctrinated to believe that they ought to allow men to infect them. However, Sariola’s sex workers do make an exception regarding condom use with their husbands and boyfriends. Despite the fact that these women know that their male partners are often unfaithful to them, and often have multiple partners, the women insist that as a sign of their trust within a ‘special’ relationship, they will not use condoms. This provides a striking parallel to similar findings elsewhere, including South Africa (cf. Hunter, 2010).

What Sariola tells us about HIV-AIDS in Chennai/India is deeply disquieting. She argues that the massive reduction in AIDS cases that has been claimed by the Indian authorities has to be treated cautiously and seen in the light of the fact that Indian NGOs dealing with the ‘education’ of sex workers regarding safe sex practices are abysmally inept – and often dishonest – organizations. On the one hand, the NGO staff, who are often middle class, lecture the sex workers and tell them they ought to quit their dreadful profession. On the other hand, the NGOs’ primary interest is not in safe sex but in keeping alive their own funding. Given their dislike of ‘real’ sex workers – and the shame and humiliation faced by sex worker women who prefer to keep their distance – quite often, NGOs ‘recruit’ healthy non-sex worker women and persuade them (with incentives) to take the medical check-ups intended to screen sex workers. The results of the check-ups are consequently good and the NGOs add these results to their statistics on their ‘defeat’ of HIV–AIDS. By Sariola’s account, the whole situation is a farce, with international donors being taken for a ride, while the NGOs rake in the donor funding – and leave the sex workers to sink.

Despite Sariola’s attempts to inject vigour and hope into her tale, her vivid and meticulously detailed case histories remain utterly bleak – and suggest that there is yet another sombre and tragic parallel with the South African situation. Hunter (2010) found that it was impoverished young women who were most likely to die from AIDS in South Africa, and given the high degree of patriarchal and class-based gender oppression in India, it is more than likely that this is true of India as well. Sariola deserves praise for tackling a difficult subject and her book makes a valuable contribution to the study of gender and sexuality in India. Sariola’s study also makes it clear that much more research is urgently needed to clarify what precisely is happening regarding HIV–AIDS in India – the situation at present remains inexplicably obscure.

Reference

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Few books, less so edited volumes, make one sit back and say this is an important and unique contribution. Such is Alternatives to Privatization, which is nothing less than a critical renaissance in the study and assessment of sustainable public services in the Global South. The book’s guiding theme is straightforward: real alternatives to privatization not only continue to exist but should be defended, improved and reproduced according to a normative logic that breaks with neoliberal market-oriented profit imperatives. Backing up this claim, the authors of Alternatives to Privatization provide, first, a research-generated theoretical model to assess what constitutes a successful alternative to private provisioning and, second, ample case studies that put into practice the model and concretely substantiate the book’s substantive claim that the privatization mongers are wrong.

In reading the book, you will first come across its distinctive analytical and methodological framework. The editors begin by defining alternatives as public entities that are fully state owned, but also include non-state, not-for-profit entities operating independently of the state (p. 3). The complexities of marketized and corporatized state entities are also addressed. In this, the Alternatives research project is not a statist reaction to rise of market imperatives. First and foremost, the authors emphasize that real alternatives need to be radically democratized or risk various forms of public and state ownership reproducing neoliberal market-oriented and class-based oppression (p. 158). State ownership, in and of itself, is no simple alternative. The theoretical basis of this claim flows from an understanding of the many varieties of states as ‘contested forms of class rule’ (p. 175). Reflecting its foundations in critical social sciences, the book concludes with an important call for academic research to better connect with frontline action and policy decisions in ways oriented towards positive change (p. 502).

The methodological discussion proceeds by identifying alternatives by their objectives, of which five research-derived categories are offered: defending the status quo; revising the status quo; reclaiming public services; utopian models; and historical models (pp. 6–7). In order to achieve their ‘positive’ orientation to theory and practice, the editors then elaborate on a pivotal methodological aspect: the normative ‘criteria of success’ by which alternative service provisioning can be assessed in practice (pp. 18; 24–39). It is enough here to list the 11, distinctly defined, criteria that guide the case study research. These include equity, participation, efficiency, quality of service, accountability, transparency, quality of work-place, sustainability, solidarity, public ethos and transferability. Again, the authors provide a useful summary of how they operationalize the criteria (pp. 25–27), pitching them in dialectical terms that recognize ‘some universal notion of what constitutes an acceptable standard while allowing for differences across sector/place’ (pp. 18–19). This facilitates comparative analysis, validity, transparency and transferability (p. 492). As one reads, you develop a sense of sustained intra-project dialogue and engagement across cases and chapters, to which I will now turn.

There is neither space nor need to elaborate on the many case studies provided. Rather, I would like to merely signal the range of content. In Part I, a series of individual chapters focus in on the diverse actors involved in historical processes of neoliberal transformation and alternative struggles, including, but not limited to, class-based international regulatory institutions, organized labour unions, women’s organizations and broad-based social movements. In Part II, the case studies are organized along sectoral and regional categories. In each of the regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America, separate chapters address the water, health and...
electricity sectors. The individual case study chapters then attempt to identify and map out what public services exist in each sector and assess them according to the book’s criteria of success. As such, the book provides an unmatched global survey organized around comparable criteria.

By now, it should be evident that Alternatives to Privatization sits apart from the bulk of contemporary scholarship on privatization and state ownership. Two brief examples suffice to make the point. On the one hand, neoclassical scholarship is defined by the effective non-existence of alternatives to privatization for development and a normative orientation towards market determination. For example, in The Financial Economics of Privatization (2005), W.L. Megginson presents privatization not as a question of “if” but essentially how, when and at what pace. On the other hand, institutionalist and Keynesian scholarship is concerned with the nature of extra-market coordination and a normative orientation towards smoothing otherwise volatile capitalist developmental processes. For example, the popular Limits to Privatization edited volume by E.U. von Weizsäcker et al. (2005) does not take privatization as an end in itself as in neoclassical thought. Instead, they see a large number of possible institutional variations along the public–private continuum—from minimal exposure to market competition to outright ownership transfer—conducive to enhancing productive and service efficiency (pp. 6–7, 359–60). The key is effective institutional regulation of private and public actors (p. 9). In both cases, privatization is primarily taken as a technical process and decisions to privatize as largely foregone conclusions. The Alternatives book understands public provisioning as a far more socially located and contentious process, while maintaining a normative orientation towards defending and improving non-private alternatives.

A word on readership. There is plenty in here for all manner of academics and students. The grounded theory will spark the interest of those wishing to better understand the institutional structures in which alternatives exist, while the plethora of case studies will aid the research interests of students and academics alike. Moreover, there are numerous avenues left open for future research projects. Accessible language, moreover, means this text is open not only to advanced graduate students and researchers but also to undergraduate students, practitioners, policy-makers and social activists.

Finally, and despite my roundly positive assessment, it is evident at times that the integration of method into the separate analyses of concrete case studies is uneven. This naturally reflects the diversity of authors and academic backgrounds, and indeed characterizes most edited books. The unevenness also reflects the fact that to date, little systematic work has been done assessing actually existing public and non-state alternatives. Second, and perhaps more evident to me given my area of research, there is a gap in the discussion of public financing alternatives despite many of the cases highlighting finance as a key barrier to sustainability. In the end, however, these points should been seen less as flaws of the text and more as a call for further research into one of the most exciting and promising action-oriented research projects in recent times.

References

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