

Review of *The Power of Greed: Collective Action in International Development*

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***The Power of Greed: Collective Action in International Development*, Michael Rosberg, The University of Alberta Press (0888644299, \$34.95), 2005.**

For readers of this journal, this book is more attuned to those with a general concern for social development than a specific interest in the role of ICT. Rosberg's thesis is that much too much of the work of development agencies presupposes that their intended beneficiaries inhabit the same capitalistic social ethos as those agencies themselves. Once we recognise that many of the world's poor are enmeshed in networks of patronage or clientelism then we can adopt more realistic and sustainable aims for interventions.

At least, that is what I think he is saying. He does not make it any easier to discern his intent by what I regard as a sloppy use of language. "Greed" is a recurrent word in his book, not just the catchy part of its title. Now my understanding of the word signifies something excessive, a concern for more than is a person's due, in contrast to the rational self-interest that we ascribe to all but saints. But while Rosberg provides examples of reprehensible behaviour of various sorts, his fundamental understanding of what he so often calls "greed" is just rational self-interest: in one of the few positive examples he offers, Dalglish's bicycle couriers in Mogadishu realised that those who could read could make more money, and so the illiterate among them wanted to become literate. Wouldn't you?

Rosberg spends a good deal of time attacking the moralism of many development agencies and agents, both of the left and of the establishment. But his own retentions are, I think, there in the thought that learning to read just so you can make more money is somehow a matter of greed; it ignores the potential to enjoy Horace or Khayyam. They are also there, I fear, in the bitchiness of some of the anecdotal evidence – it sounds for all the world like expatriates bemoaning the natives over cocktails.

But let me briefly indicate the main line of thought. The book begins with a 20-page introduction by Sidney Greenfield, which sets out the main ideas behind what he and Arnold Strickon called the "populational decision-making model" of social change, a view of social interaction inspired by Darwin. Different individuals adopt different strategies; some blossom, some fade; a kind of natural selection moves the modal behaviour of the group in the more successful direction. There is no idea here that a society as a whole has an inbuilt tendency to move in one direction rather than another, the "organic" metaphor that has bedevilled thinking about development in so many areas. Add to this idea an awareness of the actual social relations in which people find themselves, which are a long way from the assumptions of Benjamin Franklin's self-help manuals, and you have a diagnosis of the chronic failure of many, perhaps most, development efforts sponsored by the World Bank and associated agencies.

And, with luck, you have, as Rosberg's suggests, possible strategies that may lead to genuine popular empowerment, that is to say, less reliance on pervasive but often multiple potential patrons. Rosberg's own text begins with diatribes against the moralists, "Morality is Blinding Us" and "Decision-making and Responsibility" -- in the latter chapter he recognises that the extensive auditing and accountability systems "developed" societies have set up show the need to curb

greed, laziness, and irresponsibility, even in conditions of comparative plenty. He then devotes a chapter to the history of Belize, his current home and the source of most of his examples. Two more chapters set out the problems for conventional development thinking posed by the clientelism typical of such societies and the failure of mainstream theorising to come to terms with them. Finally in chapter 6 we begin to see his positive: a stress on processes rather than structure and ways in which self-interest can foster (a certain amount of) concern for group interest.

But one's enthusiasm is somewhat dampened by at least two factors. One, which may be inevitable in a finite book, but is nonetheless damaging for the power of the argument is Rosberg's reliance on several occasions on imaginary cases. Having told us of Dalglish's real success in Mogadishu, Rosberg then invents a more ambitious way of dealing with street kids in Belize City. Sadly, as far as I am aware, it remains a fiction, though the problems created by unemployed and all-but-unemployable young men are certainly not unique to Belize. The second is his eventual acknowledgement that what had first been reported as mostly a success story of fishermen on San Andreas (an English-speaking island belonging to Nicaragua) was by no means as unambiguous. The ambivalences of mainstream development projects seem as prevalent among his preferred "demand-led" scenarios. Indeed, it seems to me an accident of circumstances that distinguishes his favoured projects from those he regards as failing, rather than some deep feature. He seems not to like the Grameen Bank, for instance, but praises other schemes that sustainably permit poor people to get access to credit.

My other thought on reading Rosberg's book was perhaps another acknowledgement of the need for an account of social change: that the histories of many societies would show us periods of dominant clientelism -- "rotten boroughs" or Tammany Hall -- that somehow they have now got past. All is not virtuous of course in Salisbury or New York, but things have changed in some respects. Just as we need the accidents of mutation for natural selection to work on, so we may also need the contingencies of history (besides the generalities of population decision-making) to show us how the trick is played.

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