

Catholic critiques of globalisation

John Sniegocki, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Globalization: the Quest for Alternatives*, (Milwaukee WI: Marquette University Press, 2009), pp. 353.

Reviewed by Bruce Duncan

John Sniegocki has emerged as a significant contributor to debates about the ethics of economics in the United States, and this work fills a surprising void in the literature relating Catholic social thought to recent economic crises. Sniegocki is an associate professor of Christian ethics at Xavier University in Cincinnati Ohio. He received his PhD from the University of Notre Dame in 1999, and has published various articles, including on globalization, war and nonviolence, and the Catholic Worker movement.

After a very punchy introduction emphasising the dire circumstances in many poorer countries, Sniegocki develops his chapters looking first at development theory and practice, followed by another chapter on the “Failures of Modernizationist [sic] Development”, which in broad strokes moves from the role of colonialism and slavery in the development of capitalism and then into policies since World War II, especially focusing on the debt crisis of developing countries and structural influences on their economies.

Sniegocki’s target is the neoliberal ideology underlying the economic policies of the major western nations and many multinational companies. Had this book been written a little later, it could have included a more devastating critique of the neoliberal economic policies that have captured US administrations and global institutions in recent decades, especially of course the financial markets. As it is, he draws heavily from left-wing critics of globalisation, surprisingly omitting more main-stream economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, who could have added further weight to his analysis. He does refer to Stiglitz and Jeffrey Sachs in his June 2008 article in *Theological Studies*, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives” (321-39), but not in this book. Though he adds sections on more radical commentators and grassroots movements, most of his references are not as recent as one might expect.

The strongest chapter is on Catholic Social Teaching and Development, where he draws forcefully on papal and episcopal statements critical of capitalism, especially for the harmful effects of neoliberal economic policies in developing countries. He quotes John Paul II attacking “a certain capitalist neoliberalism that subordinates the human person to blind market forces... In the international community, we thus see a small number of countries growing exceedingly rich at the cost of the increasing impoverishment of a great number of other countries; as a result the wealthy grow ever wealthier while the poor grow ever poorer.” (p. 148).

Many readers may be surprised how closely the papal critique is in line with wider attacks on economic neoliberalism, presumably because of the Church’s immediate feed-back from how these policies have been affecting developing countries.

Sniegocki follows with a chapter critiquing the Catholic neoconservatives, Michael Novak, George Weigel and Richard John Neuhaus, who have tried to spin official

Catholic statements into a defence of neoliberal capitalism. This is not as strong a critique as he made in a longer article in *Horizons* in 2006, “The Social Ethics of Pope John Paul II: a Critique of Neoconservative Interpretations”. However, in this new book, he contrasts the neoconservatives with some more radical critics of current economics, including Mary Hobgood.

Chapters five and six sketch some of the grassroots social movements mobilising opinion and action, not just in protest against unfair economic policies, but organising local communities and movements to implement their own efforts at social and economic reform, emphasising participation, equity, mutuality and environmental awareness.

The final chapter, “Re-Envisioning Catholic Social Teaching”, examines what role Catholic communities could play in social reform. Sniegocki notes some weaknesses in Catholic teaching, particularly in offering a clear structural analysis of the mechanisms of capitalism responsible for injustice and poverty, and in acknowledging the key role of women in development. He concludes that Church social teaching offers critical moral principles and a community framework for a reshaping of economics to serve the wellbeing of everyone more equitably and with greater participation, learning to live more modestly within the limits of resources but with decent living standards for all.

This work by Sniegocki is an important contribution to the Church’s response to globalisation, though a second edition would need to update its critique and broaden its purview of economic commentators on the global financial crisis and its implications. It offers a valuable introductory text for university courses.