Poverty and Democracy is a worthy book achieved through an interesting methodology and arriving at some telling conclusions. The editors are political scientists from Philipps University, Marburg, Germany and the book is a culmination of years of research and fieldwork. The book sets out to examine the intersection of poverty and democracy from the perspective of shantytown dwellers in four countries: Brazil, Chile, Kenya and Ivory Coast. It seeks the ‘view from below’ through a process of comparable surveys of sixteen shantytowns in the four countries. Four doctoral students working with local academics and NGOs conducted the survey work.

The use of doctoral students in such a focused way is not unusual in the hard sciences and it is interesting to see this methodology employed in the social sciences. One of the strengths of this methodology is the specific country knowledge the researchers bring to this comparativist project. The survey methodology is also quite rigorous with 1600 individuals being surveyed allowing for quite robust statistical analysis (there are over 50 tables and figures).

Without challenging the process, I have to admit that I was never quite convinced of the validity of the statistical conclusions based on these surveys. It is hard to control for all aspects of language, cultural and particularist distortions that must inevitably creep in. For example, in the Ivory Coast there was a strong refusal to answer questions by the most marginalised groups within these marginalised communities, women and immigrant workers. Also the conclusion drawn from the questionnaires that 75% of shantytown dwellers vote is not tested against actual voting records. The surveys have been conducted at a certain moment in time and very different results could arise a decade later. Indeed there are significant discrepancies between the views expressed in the older favelas and those arising in new squatter camps. The authors themselves acknowledge
that it is difficult to reach the inductive conclusions about global poverty from the four country surveys.

The book spends most of its pages attempting to articulate the view of the shantytown folk on issues of membership of interest groups and political parties, attitudes to democracy and political leaders and questions of trust and representation. One of the strengths of the work is the clear division between these findings and their analysis. The concluding chapters attempt to draw certain common understandings. The most important finding is to debunk a cliché. The poor are not listless and apathetic, awaiting their fate passively. They are interested in politics and see politics as a means to escape their poverty. They join interest groups and follow relevant political developments. They see politics as directly relevant to their situation. In this regard the book adds some useful evidence to the pioneering analysis of Amartya Sen who argues the merits of democracy as a means of social uplift.

The penultimate chapter deals with the implications of this finding for development policy. Given the identification of poverty alleviation as the fundamental goal for so many development programs, the authors attempt to view the question ‘from below’. The issue then becomes what position development policy should have towards self-help groups established by poor people. Self-help groups with all their strengths and weaknesses are seen as key actors in the development process. The findings therefore dovetail usefully with the debate on development and third-sector policies currently underway in the OECD.

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