

spotlight on the combination of resource-based economic growth and ongoing social and economic marginalization that make the country's eastern and central 'tribal belt' a source of widespread and sustained insurgency that remains surprisingly invisible within many accounts of India.

The final section, *Society*, opens with chapters on the nature of India's civil society and the contemporary role of caste within the country. These introduce the new reader both to important social structures that help to make sense of its economic and political development, and to debates on how these are being theorized within South Asian scholarship. The chapter on 'How much have things changed for Indian women?' reviews disturbing evidence on education and income inequalities, sex ratios and rates of female malnutrition, but the focus remains on the aggregate material effects of gender inequalities, rather than on a discussion of patriarchy and gendered practices. Here, and in the final chapter on 'Can India benefit from its demographic dividend?', there is a return to the slightly detached, statistical approach present within the earlier discussion of poverty.

The book's authors usefully deploy what is approximately a century of collective experience of South Asian studies to provide a comprehensive review of the debates which fall within the book's broad ambit. Anyone familiar with the work of each will occasionally be able to spot their individual contributions through the literature each engages with, but they would be hard-pressed to identify any variation in authorial tone or style – a seamless finish that is indicative of the quality and detail of the scholarship which underpins this book. If I had one slight regret, it was that they did not more directly draw upon their own considerable primary research, in Tamil Nadu (Harris), Bihar/Jharkhand (Corbridge) and Uttar Pradesh (Jeffrey): ethnographic work is discussed alongside statistical analysis, and there is proper attention given to regional variation, but this remains a

book that primarily aims to sketch out an overarching all-India picture. For the new student, a little more on how the questions it addresses impact on the lived experience of India's citizens would perhaps make this book more immediately accessible, although there is plenty of work within its comprehensive bibliography which would fill this gap. What is certain is that through its structuring questions and balanced and thought-provoking answers, *India Today* provides an invaluable introduction to the state of the world's largest democracy at the opening of the 21st century.

Reference

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Dawn Day Biehler, *Pests in the City: Flies, Bedbugs, Cockroaches, and Rats*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2013; 336 pp.: 9780295993010, £24.99/US\$34.95 (hbk).

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Dawn Day Biehler is a historical geographer of urban environments based at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Her new monograph, published by Washington University Press, is part of the Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books (WEBs) series, edited by William Cronon (based at the University of Wisconsin, where Biehler completed her PhD in 2007). The series aims to:

cast new light on the ways in which natural systems affect human communities, the ways that people affect the environments of which they are a part, and the ways that different cultural conceptions of nature profoundly shape our sense of the world around us. (p. ii)

Geographers have published in WEBs before: Dick Walker's (2008) *The Country in*

the City and Robert Wilson's *Seeking Refuge* (2010) both preceded Biehler's new book. Like Walker, Biehler is deeply interested in the 'nature' that exists in its supposed antithesis; and, like Wilson, she is also deeply interested in living non-human creatures. Like Walker, she highlights the macro-scale forces that govern human and non-human lives; but, unlike Wilson, her interest is in the 'pests' that have long posed public health threats in western cities. As such, Biehler's monograph is situated between four bodies of extant socio-environmental scholarship, namely urban political ecology, animal geographies, health geography, and studies of environmental in/justice. In spirit, if not letter, it echoes Susan Craddock's excellent *City of Plagues* (2000), but goes beyond a single-city focus (Craddock's was San Francisco) to study similar urban ecologies evident in several American cities over the last century.

Pests in the City organizes a mass of fascinating, and often disturbing, empirical detail within an elegant conceptual framework. In Part One, Chapters 1–4 describe the chronic problem of unwanted companion creatures in and near domestic spaces, especially in inner-city neighbourhoods where low-quality housing stock was (and remains) rented to low-income residents. Each chapter focus on a single pest, but with a different temporal emphasis (respectively: flies in the Progressive Era, bedbugs during the same period, German cockroaches after the Second World War, and Norway rats during the same period). In Part Two (comprising just two chapters), the focus switches from the pests to how low-income urbanites and activists together sought to politicize the pest problem, especially from the mid-1960s onwards (the period of the famous 'urban expeditions' led by Bill Bunge and co-workers). Despite decades of attempts by public health officials to eradicate urban pests, Biehler shows that it was only relatively recently that flies, bedbugs, cockroaches and rats have been more or less eliminated from row-houses and tenements in urban America.

Why were these officials seemingly slow to learn? Was it ignorance, a lack of resources, or some other reason? Here Biehler's conceptual framework shines an insightful light. For her, the persistent urban pest problem was a result of both unequal social relations and 'common sense' social conventions. 'Behind the backs' of inner-city residents were persistent inequalities organized along class and racial lines, with municipal governments frequently failing either to regulate private landlord behaviour sufficiently or to provide high-quality public housing itself. Interleaved with these inequalities of resources and power were social distinctions between 'public' and 'private', which affected the scale and kind of interventions urban health reformers felt were 'appropriate'. For instance, Biehler shows how, at various moments, these reformers assumed that mothers would (and should) bear responsibility for 'domestic' pest control, leaving them to tackle alleyways and sewers by spending public money. Yet pests, of course, did not respect this supposed divide between urban spaces, and rarely could mothers' actions manage all the micro-geographies of the home through which pests could infest buildings badly maintained by landlords. Biehler's closing statement is a fitting summary of her monograph, and so worth quoting at length:

[T]he mightiest of causes – racism, classism, urban disinvestment – have brought the most minute and mundane effects into the homes of low-income people. The creatures we call pests have stayed with us through a century in which housing and health officials and ecologists and pesticide proponents alike have promised modern and healthy living environments. Pests have violated such notions of modernity so long as we have underestimated their unruliness, their relationship to urban politics, and the niche created for them by urban inequality. (p. 215)

In short, Biehler's message is that the 'solution' to urban pest problems must mitigate (if not eliminate) the ecological effects of social

inequality and over-tidy social conventions. This goes well beyond dispensing expert 'advice' to renters or using technologies like pesticides.

Pests in the City has been trailed in two excellent journal articles (Biehler, 2009, 2010). Like this brace, the book is highly readable. Written in narrative mode (though in a non-linear way, since it switches between decades across chapters), it contains numerous arresting images of urban squalor and public health publicity. The Foreword by William Cronon sets things up very nicely, and there are detailed endnotes, a rich bibliography and a superb index for those who want to delve deep into the subject matter and the supporting archives and literature. Empirically, the book offers new insight into the root causes and (often inadequate) solutions to pestilence in inner-city America. Conceptually and topically, it might offer something new to geographers who work in one or more of the four areas of scholarship mentioned above. For instance, much recent animal geography tends – so far as I can tell – to underplay both 'pests' and the social inequalities that expose some members of modern society to their ill effects.

In sum, Dawn Biehler has authored a readable, superbly researched book that focuses on

an important subject. Despite her historical focus, she is well aware that pests remain an urban problem today, especially in most parts of the so-called developing world. For this reason her monograph has a strong contemporary relevance, even if the social conventions she rightly questions are not those that apply in many non-western contexts.

References

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