

REVIEW

Ways of thinking about poverty in Peru

A huge amount has been written about poverty in Peru over recent years; indeed, there has perhaps been more success in studying it than in reducing it. One of the problems facing those interested in Peru and its social problems is how to navigate your way through this large literature whilst making sense of the diverse conclusions reached. To help you with this, a very useful short (only 32 pages) publication from the University of Bath is available that guides the non-specialist reader through the bibliographical maze.*

The publication is premised on the view that there is more than one way to view the problem of poverty. Most of those who write about poverty do so through the optics of their own particular discipline. Indeed, it is always remarkable how little genuine inter-disciplinary work there is on social problems that are, by their nature, multi-disciplinary. Usually, economists talk to economists, anthropologists to anthropologists, sociologists to sociologists and so on, whereas each of them have crucial things to say to each other. The University of Bath's short publication has the additional merit of discussing the literature written from each of these disciplinary perspectives, and it is telling how discrete each of the bibliographies actually is.

In seeking to highlight and remedy this problem, the Bath team go back to the work of Adolfo Figueroa at the Catholic University in Lima, undertaken in conjunction with Teofilo Altamirano and David Sulmont. Figueroa, an economist who has done more work than any other on income inequalities, has sought to get beyond the preoccupation with *measuring* poverty and inequality and to grapple the much more ambitious goal of *understanding* their *dynamics*.

To this end, he seeks to bring in the political and cultural as well as the purely economic aspects of social exclusion. He argues that there are societies, mostly in developing countries, where ethnicity and political disadvantage compound the problem of exclusion, helping to explain why there are certain social groups that consistently remain at the bottom of the pile. Peru, he says, is typical of what he calls a 'sigma society'. By this he means that it is a country that became a capitalist society on the basis of a rigid social differentiation that prevented people acquiring the skills or 'assets' required to climb up the social ladder.

This attempt to theorise inequality is at odds with much of what is written on poverty and social policy. But how can policy on poverty work unless it is based on some sort of theoretical framework that helps explain why it persists? The lack of success in reducing poverty in Peru in recent years -- despite the amount of money spent on its alleviation -- is a powerful argument why those interested in the subject should take Figueroa's ideas to heart. The University of Bath pamphlet is a good place to begin.

John Crabtree

* *Poverty Studies in Peru: Towards a more Inclusive Study of Exclusion* by Teofilo Altamirano, James Copestake, Adolfo Figueroa and Katie Wright. WeD Working Paper 05. Published in December 2003 jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council and the

University of Bath. Available from WeD ESRC Research Group, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY.