

Review - Winner Take All

Written by Ross Anthony

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ROSS ANTHONY, DEC 11 2012

Winner Take All: China's Race for Resources and What it Means for the World

By: Dambisa Moyo

New York: Basic Books, 2012

Dambisa Moyo's latest book *Winner Take All: China's Race for Resources and What it Means for the World* examines the rise of China within the context of global commodity markets including oil, gas, minerals, food and water. A trap into which many books covering China's global ascent fall is that there is a myopic focus on China; it is excised from vaster economic processes and presented as if it alone is scrambling to secure the globe's remaining resources. A major strength of Moyo's book is that she persistently situates China as one of many players in the global commodity markets. Through the presentation of numerous data sets, the author offers a counter-reading to a slew of biased writing, often in the media but also in academia, which presents China's growing role in the trade and consumption of global resources without any critical reflection on the Euro-American sphere's continued domination of these markets (not to mention the colonial relationships which helped cement them).

Consider some of the following figures from the book: the average American consumes 25 barrels of oil per year while the average Chinese consumes 2.2 barrels per year; China has 35 cars per thousand people while the US has

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800 cars per thousand people; Americans spend 70 per cent of their GDP on consumption (Europe is at 60 per cent) while the average Chinese only spends 35 per cent. The dearth of critical reflexivity in much current literature is alarming in that it demonstrates how easily otherwise astute and objective authors can slip into the un-nuanced, binary mode of “west versus the rest”. Nevertheless, that being said, Moyo’s book is equally at pains to point out that China’s relentless quest for economic growth, through domestic development and as global manufacturer, will see its claim to many non-renewable resources to increase in the future. Thus, in situating China’s shift toward a market economy as part of a set of larger, international problems, which extend beyond the narrow confines of nation-states, Moyo is able to shift the “China rising” debate into one of global economic significance. In this regard, Moyo’s book can be situated within the finer tradition of “China’s rise” literature.

Through the constant contextualization of China’s growth as part of a broader global emphasis on growth, Moyo avoids the temptation of using such figures to paint China as the world’s bully. Rather, she poses far more fundamental questions regarding the logic of relentless economic growth and consumption spreading to new, populous quarters of the globe within a world of finite resources. To take an example, in 2006, China consumed 23 per cent of refined copper supplies but by 2010 it had reached 41 per cent. This figure is predicted to rise by 6 per cent annually up until 2025. As China continues on its path toward being a consumer nation, its people will buy more phones, drive more cars and eat more food. Moyo notes that the Chinese government plans to build 225 new cities of at least 1 million people by 2020 as part of a plan to streamline migration from the countryside. The rise of an increasingly middle class China functions as a symptom of a much vaster problem: namely that planet can ill afford a culture of speculation and consumption – so long enjoyed by the west – functioning at an increasingly global level. The author points out a major ethical dilemma in this regard: what right do developed nations, the largest consumers of commodities, have in insisting that countries such as China curb their growth? How, for instance, can Americans insist that Chinese ease off on a car-buying (which is currently a craze in China and contributes to a third of its oil demand) when they themselves own twenty times more cars per thousand people? As Moyo puts it:

The notion of asking consumers to scale back their consumption demands dramatically is a tall order, particularly when hundreds of millions of people living across the emerging world are learning to aspire to the middle-class standards of the West – replete with goods and services that absorb vast quantities of the earth’s land, water, energy, and minerals each year.

In the final section of the book, the author lays out a series of solutions to this dilemma. Concrete suggestions include the use of more fuel efficient cars, the recycling of cell phones and a scaling back on global military spending. She also rightly calls for the development of global regulatory bodies which have greater powers of enforcement. A major obstacle in achieving such aims lies in the interests of nation states, which exert influence on commodity markets in numerous ways, not least of which is energy and food security. Moyo argues that it is not only China, with its massive state-owned enterprises and huge currency reserves, which harnesses commodity markets for national interests. American protectionism and cosy relations between government and oil companies are similar in kind. Still, the author insists that of all the countries in the world, none has developed such a co-ordinated state policy of resource accumulation as China. This scramble, she argues, is driven by a fear that economic stalling would lead to huge internal political problems within the country. Thus, China’s commodity bonanza is crucial to its stability.

The picture which Moyo paints is Malthusian in nature, with rapid economic and population growth continuing until at least 2050, where the earth will have reached a population of over 9 Billion people, many of whom will be joining a consumer orientated middle class. A massive challenge the world faces in this regard is that the rationale of economic growth and consumption are so ingrained that there is a general impoverishment of ideas in terms of how the system might be changed. As Moyo states, for many in rich countries, the threat of resource scarcity “simply does not feel real”; motivation for action may only come when it is too late. Herein lies a core message of the book, namely that the world does not yet possess the institutional or conceptual apparatus to deal with the coming commodity shortages which will occur over the next few decades. From this perspective, the kind of parochial China-bashing witnessed in recent years deliberately obscures an increasingly global problem in which we are all implicated. As the final sentence in the book exclaims: “This fight is about life or death”.

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