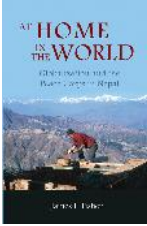


REVIEW: *AT HOME IN THE WORLD: GLOBALIZATION AND  
THE PEACE CORPS IN NEPAL*

Reviewed by Sienna Craig (Dartmouth College)



James F Fisher. 2013. *At Home in the World: Globalization and the Peace Corps in Nepal*. Bangkok, Thailand: Orchid Press - Bibliotheca Himalayica. +218pp, 21 b&w illustrations, endnotes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-9745241572 (paperback, 25USD).

It is something of a truism - if not a cliché - that cross-cultural encounters of the kind epitomized by the United States Peace Corps program can be life-changing experiences. Immersion into landscapes, languages, and cultures half a world away from where one is brought up cannot help but be transformative. Some flourish under the disorienting - or reorienting - spell of culture shock and emerge perhaps less certain about the world but more enamored of it. Others find such experiences tumultuous, sometimes making a hasty retreat back to familiar geographies or making it through these experiences but opting not to repeat them. In the case of James Fisher, his deep dive into the peoples and cultures of the Himalaya as part of Peace Corps 1 in Nepal (1962-1964) shaped not only his views of the world but also his professional trajectory in profound ways. Peace Corps was Fisher's gateway into a life of ethnographic exploration, teaching, and anthropological collaborations stemming half a century.

*At Home in the World* tells the story of the first cohort of PCVs (Peace Corps Volunteer) to come to Nepal. Interwoven into the text are details about the history of Peace Corps and of American and Nepali politics circa the mid-twentieth century. It is also a text populated with reflections of Fisher's fellow PCVs, gathered through letters, ethnographic observation, and interviews Fisher conducted over the years. So, while the book is very much about a dialogue between Fisher and other PCVs as well as between Americans and Nepalis:

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At its heart...this book ultimately stems from my desire to understand my own experience and life. But...I am no memoirist; I am an anthropologist, and my way of understanding is to look at my subjects through an anthropological lens (xvii).

The framework through which Fisher shapes the book is that of globalization - a concept that has been widely theorized for the past two decades, even as the lived experiences that give it meaning continue to change. Throughout the book, Fisher takes a straightforward view on what globalization means. It is primarily a way of understanding points of encounter in which people are drawn ever nearer each other, at once literally and figuratively: "the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across time and space" (5). The book at times waxes nostalgic, but is also - true to Fisher's ethnographic eye - committed to being an honest, detailed recounting of how things were then and how things are now, as he and his Nepali and fellow American interlocutors engage in the "dialectical process of globalizing and being globalized" (185).

Chapter One begins with John F Kennedy's eponymous call to "ask not what your country can do for you..." and goes on to describe the circumstances under which the Peace Corps was envisioned. Fisher also frames the book as a whole, including some discussions of the political economy and idealism that made such a venture possible, and the anthropological theories that help drive Fisher's understanding of the Peace Corps experience. In Chapter Two readers travel alongside Fisher and the other volunteers who formed Peace Corps 1, examining their backgrounds and motivations. In Chapter Three, the real sense of "Nepal 1" takes form as Fisher describes the early training of this group, first at George Washington University in Washington D.C., through an Outward Bound program in Colorado, and, finally, as they arrive in Nepal.

Chapters Four and Five mirror each other. The first of these chapters explores what happened after Nepal 1 arrived: how they found living in Kathmandu, how and why they were posted in specific locations, and most of all how they came to engage with Nepali communities when they were often under-prepared or unclear on what it was they were supposed to be doing. Some took to the challenges of intervening in rural Nepali agriculture or the educational system with thoughtfulness, some with naïve zeal, and others with trepidation. There are some hilarious recountings of cultural *faux pas*, most of them involving barnyard animals and well meaning PCVs. Chapter Five is Fisher's take on the ways that Nepali

individuals, families, and institutions navigated these cross-cultural encounters and their own sense of what "globalization" and "development" might have meant at the time. This chapter also raises the question of who benefits from having PCVs in-country. What was in it for Nepal and Nepalis?

The final two chapters of the book follow a similar pattern. Chapter Six is more focused on the experiences of Americans from Nepal 1 after they returned from their two years in-country, and Chapter Seven focuses on the ways that globalization has impacted Nepal and Nepalis, but also, equally, about how Nepal 1 volunteers continued to reference their years in Nepal throughout their lives. Although few from this first cohort of volunteers have had as an extensive, ongoing relationship with Nepal as Fisher, some did. It is worth mentioning that Mike Frame, of Mike's Breakfast, the Kathmandu restaurant - er, *institution* - was among the cohort of nearly eighty eager individuals who made the trek to Nepal in 1962.

At times the book reads a bit like stepping into a scrapbook, with more quotidian detail than is perhaps necessary to the initiated or the uninitiated, for different reasons. Yet the book rings true in the places where Fisher prompts us, through the looking glass of his own experiences and those of others, to consider what we noticed the first time and still notice in contemporary moments of cross-cultural exchange what has become routine; where the social, cultural, and political-economic unevenness still lies; how friendships are forged and maintained; and how we come to accept that there are many ways to be and act in the world, and that there is never one right answer.

In his Conclusion, Fisher says:

What we did is not necessarily what we thought we were doing at the time. Our earnest desire to do good - i.e., to *accomplish* good - could be equally and ultimately doomed to fail, and some seem to have concluded something like that. We thought we were going to save the world but most of us came to the gradual realization that we were only, or at least mainly, saving ourselves... Whether the Peace Corps helped the world or not it did change many American lives profoundly and that was, and continues to be, a good thing (181).

True enough.