

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

Benjamin L. Read (2012), *Roots of the State: Neighborhood Organization and Social Networks in Beijing and Taipei*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Through a comparative approach, this text analyzes the role of state-sponsored neighborhood organizations in large cities in China and Taiwan. The author, however, also takes into consideration analogous phenomena studied by other experts in highly diverse cities in Asia's East and Southeast such as Jakarta and Singapore.

Benjamin Reid, who is an Assistant Professor in political science, has surprisingly made use of an empirical research approach that is very similar to the anthropological one in terms of *modus operandi*, since both in Beijing and Taipei he carried out a veritable fieldwork, gathering important ethnographical data that becomes very useful from an analytical point of view. This proves that this essentially anthropological strategy is likewise useful in case of a political science theme.

The book builds on a fundamental premise that is also its recurrent theoretical theme; i.e., that the separation of liberal origin between state and civil society, as conceived in the United States and to some extent in Europe, is practically nonexistent in the Asian societies studied by the

author. In Asian cities, from Beijing to Jakarta and from Taipei to Singapore, neighborhood organizations reveal a peculiar overlapping of state and civil society that may appear odd and even absurd to a Western observer. In European societies of liberal derivation and especially in North America, the state's presence in these grassroots urban organizations would be viewed as encumbering and awkward, if not unacceptable and illegitimate. In East and Southeast Asia, instead, the participation and intervention of a strong and at times repressive state is deemed legitimate to some extent, if not indeed expedient in the various urban contexts studied by the author. In his book, Read cogently illustrates how the grassroots administrative organizations succeed in networking at a local level, thus in everyday life, with the community's fabric of social relations.

Thus, this book represents an important critical response to those naïve, yet hegemonic forms of universalism often found in political visions and analyses by which even nowadays the American model of democracy, as Woodrow Wilson had envisioned, can and ought to be exported and possibly imposed on societies with highly different historical and political heritages.

At this point, we ought to take a closer look at the text's details highlighting Asian peculiarities in contrast with Western actuality's alleged fundamental difference. In the first place, in order to understand how and why the government-sponsored neighborhood organizations work, we need to take into account, as Read underscores, the specific social representations and perceptions that vary in relation to each society, but that especially in Beijing and Taiwan's case, studied empirically by the author, show many similarities as well as some differences.

Read observes that these organizations have both critics and advocates, but in general are appreciated as well as supported, albeit mildly and never enthusiastically. These stances stem from a cultural ideal grounded in the conception of a harmony and merging of state and society that with good reason can be called an *organic statism*. Those who collaborate with these district and neighborhood organizations are not overly content, but they accept them and cooperate with them for the sake of a harmonious model of society. With these organizations, the implicit paternalism is not an obstacle in everyday life, though it does not elicit any patent enthusiasm.

The socio-structural question linked to the above involves the peculiarity of relationships within and around the state and state-controlled district and neighborhood organizations. In the first place, Read points up that social relations between the inner circle of staff members, associates and ordinary neighborhood residents are not typically horizontal. Most times these asymmetries entail hierarchic and clientelist power relations. In fact, the leaders of the state and government-controlled organizations enjoy a certain amount of social prestige and charisma, also because they are able to provide important services to the individual residents to which the latter respond with counter-performances based on the principle of *balanced reciprocity*, in Marshall Sahlins's terminology. The resulting networks are characterized by highly personalized relationship systems that those Chinese concerned classify as forms of *guanxi* based on favor exchanges. The term *guanxi* immediately brings to mind the Russian phenomenon known as *blat*, which Alena Ledeneva in her book on this topic defined as *the economy of favors*, thereby giving the phenomenon a systemic, hence nearly generalized dimension. It is important to note that Reid rightly warns us against emphasizing the *guanxi* element in the cases he studied

since it occurs along with the neighborhood association members' and residents' interest in their neighborhood's common good. Therefore, aside from the undeniable forms of personal egoism, there's more. This way the author avoids an Orientalist view that would reinforce the conception of a virtuous *West* and a vitiated *Rest*.

Finally, one last important aspect examined in depth by the author and corroborated by the empirical data is well worth mentioning; namely, a critique of the so-called civil society studies. Because of their far too rigid and dichotomous conceptualizations, these studies tend to exclude the state and state-sponsored neighborhood and district organizations analyzed by Reid from that cluster of voluntary and non-governmental organizations, which, from an overly Western stance, are deemed as the essence of civil society. In fact, as the author cogently substantiates, many citizens are proud to serve the nation through the organizations analyzed in this study. The comparative analysis of neighborhood and district organizations in East and Southeast Asia indicates that, despite the state's at times rather intrusive presence, their members boost the sense of responsibility and trust as well as actual participation.

As these brief comments point up, this is a stimulating book with several innovative and original argumentations from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view. The author perceptively and cogently reviews some key concepts (such as civil society, for example) that are under debate not only in political science, but also in political anthropology. In terms of empirical research, instead, the author has chosen an approach that is very familiar to anthropologists; i.e., field research. In my opinion, the experience of immersing himself in two urban realities in East Asia is precisely what enabled him to reconsider in a legitimately critical manner those theoretical conceptions of Western origin that prove to be deceptive and misleading because of their eurocentrism.

Christian Giordano  
University of Fribourg, Switzerland  
[christian.giordano@unifr.ch](mailto:christian.giordano@unifr.ch)

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Matthews, Gordon, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Carlos Alba Vega (eds) (2012)  
*Globalization from Below: The World's Other Economy*.  
London and New York: Routledge.

This important book offers a state-of-the-art account of what Brazilian anthropologist Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, who contributes a magisterial closing analytical review of its findings, terms the 'non-hegemonic world system'. It offers an essential complementary perspective to

studies of transnational activist movements and localized ‘grassroots’ movements that could reasonably be described as ‘resisting’ aspects of contemporary neoliberal capitalist accumulation, either by refusing to collaborate or by actively seeking to pursue alternative economic models. This is a book about people who are, by and large, seeking to participate in a world economy in which neoliberal capitalist principles and global corporations are hegemonic, contributing in their own ways to the extension of neoliberal-style market society. Yet they can only be successful, if they are successful at all, by evading the costs associated with official rules and regulations on tariffs, trade, taxation, and intellectual property rights, exploiting the opportunities for appropriating value that exist within the interstices of dominant systems of production, exchange and consumption, and creating their own market niches by exploiting the gaps in regulatory regimes and corruptibility of those charged with their implementation. The book’s twelve case studies include African traders who bring cheap mobile phones from Chinese factories back to their regions of origin, family businesses in Hong Kong that try to establish small manufacturing operations in China, Mexican and Filipina traders who take

used clothing over international borders, and an array of other purveyors of contraband, pirated and fake-branded products that enable lower-income groups some participation in globalized patterns of consumption. Even if much of this participation is inferior in quality to that enjoyed by the more affluent, the advance of copying technologies may, as Ribeiro observes in his closing remarks, progressively undermine the rents accruing to the owners of global ‘superlogos’ even as it contributes to ‘the fetishized (re)production of social identities and of distinction’ characteristic of the virtual age (p 233).

The contributors advance earlier debates about the ‘informal’ economy (with an enhanced attention to transnational processes that reflects patterns of urban development since the 1970s) as well as engaging more recent anthropological work on illegal and illicit economies. The analyses emphasise connections across the blurred boundaries between the economy documented by conventional statistics and the less readily quantifiable but pervasive activities that constitute globalization from below, using ethnographic research to offer a wealth of new insights. Alan and Josephine Smart show us, for example, how the days in which Hong Kong’s petty investors could

prosper in Guangdong passed as the development that they helped to kick-start turned towards higher-tech products that required large-scale corporate investment, although the fortunes of the family that they studied revived its fortunes a little back in Hong Kong as a result of growing fears about the safety of foodstuffs produced on the mainland. Vera Telles writes on the ever more complex interconnections between the gamut of illegal activities ranging from drug trafficking to street trading that emerged in São Paulo as people sought to rebuild livelihoods in the wake of the loss of factory jobs and precarianization of work during the 1980s, emphasising ‘the games of power and negotiation’ that go on in the ‘folds of the legal and illegal’ (p. 98). Carlos Alba charts the emergence and proliferation of organizations that represent and control Mexico City’s armies of street pedlars. Both these analysts highlight the political dynamics of informal urban markets, which include clientelism linked to electoral processes as well as everyday processes of corruption and multiple levels of extortion, to which police, public functionaries, politicians and street trader organisations are equally central. Both Brazil and Mexico also offer us examples of the way that big national and transnational retail chains can engage

in illegal importing. As Alba points out, when registered companies are the origin of contraband sold by street traders, non-hegemonic globalization is in a symbiotic relationship with the hegemonic. As he and Gordon Matthews observe in their introduction, the book is about parallels as well as contrasts between these ‘levels’ of the contemporary world system, but what it does especially well is explore their articulations.

Although all the contributions rest on ethnographic foundations, the book is divided into two parts that reflect the methodological trade-offs between dealing adequately with questions of geographical and organizational scale and offering thicker ethnographic descriptions of how people navigate the fuzzy boundaries of the legal and illegal in everyday life and understand the ‘licit and illicit’ from their own subject positions in complex webs of relationships. Lynne Milgram notes, for example, that her Filipina clothing and cosmetics smugglers defend the social legitimacy of their business activity, its ‘licitness’, against the state’s political insistence on its illegality. In the only chapter that deals with a street market in the global North, Robert Shepherd offers a fascinating account of the tensions between the largely white vendors in an established Washington D.C. market

subject to increasing civic regulation as a 'neighbourhood' space, and immigrant vendors relocated to a parking lot across the street: the latter cheerfully insisted that they simply sought to make money, but did so by capitalizing on the performance of the ethnic identity that their customers (misguidedly) deemed indexical of the authenticity of what they sold, whilst the former sought to put themselves on the moral high ground in this battle of identity-(re)construction by presenting themselves as educators, artists and activists engaged in social projects of benefit to the global South.

The chapters vary in terms of the thickness of their ethnographic description, but all recognize the importance of historical contextualization. In an opening chapter that looks at recent reconstitution of the historical 'Silk Road', Olivier Pliez seeks to capture the broader organizational logic of the movement of garments between China and North Africa, something that could not easily be grasped simply by a localized study of any of the 'anchor points' of this network and may outlive recent geopolitical perturbations. The scale as well as historical depth of analysis is also ambitious in José Carlos Aguiar's use of commodity chain analysis to explore the roles of different actors and their transnational connections in the

development of the pirate CD market in Mexico, and Fernando Rabossi's account of the range of actors involved in the development of the 'bag trading' of the Paraguayan-Brazilian-Argentinian tri-border area. Both chapters enable us to understand the way that shifting patterns of state intervention and the international evolution of the capitalist economy shape the complex local articulations between the legal and illegal that emerge through a perspective that includes the processes of non-hegemonic globalization.

But as Gordon Matthews points out in his analysis of the coming together of traders from the most peripheral regions of the global South to buy the products of China's 'low-end manufacturing' in the hyper-neoliberal space of Chunking Mansions in Hong Kong, however much such 'small entrepreneurs of globalization from below' seem able to outwit agents of globalization from above striving to eradicate illegalities, we need to remember that fundamental inequalities are maintained in our present world by the fact that capital is free to move across borders but labour is not. Yang Yang's account of African traders in Guangzhou emphasises the while going to China may offer Africans new and better opportunities for personal advancement within the global economy, the hostility of the social

environment makes this a 'bittersweet' experience. Méliissa Gauthier's discussion of the impact of U.S. border securitization on Mexico's border-crossing 'ant traders' highlights a series of important further paradoxes. The livelihoods of these smugglers depend on the existence of international borders (so the open borders that Matthews advocates might not be advantageous to all participants in globalization from below). In the past, they could count on a combination of corruption and pragmatic 'flexibility' on the part of officials to maintain a border that operated in a way that made their smuggling viable. New technologies justified by the need to address the traffic in arms that fuels drug wars and the flow of narco-dollars seem to have had little impact on those problems but have made life more difficult for small-scale smugglers. Gauthier (p. 151) remains sceptical about the practical possibility of border security policies overwhelming the illicit networks 'which are culturally and socioeconomically part of the borderland economy' in the North, and are equally integral to Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, as Rebecca Galemba (2009) has shown. Yet it is clear that borders remain key sites of contention in the processes of both hegemonic and non-hegemonic globalization, and their

securitization may be another way of seeking to resolve the contradictions of Northern models of development by promoting 'adaptive self-reliance' in the global South. As Mark Duffield (2010) has pointed out, microcredit schemes are one such lever of 'adaptive self-reliance' and in another chapter of the present volume Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay uses microfinance provided by for-profit institutions as an example of how 'high-end globalization needs a quarantined low-end globalization to continuously provide for itself the conditions for its hegemony' (p. 183). His historically nuanced analysis of the evolving relationship between hawkers and shopping mall developments in Calcutta shows that synergistic relationships can be established with corporatized retailing giants, but also suggests that we need to see the deepened hegemony that may lie behind continuing co-existence, in terms of winning the consent of poorer citizens to urban redevelopment programs and incorporating more of them into the processes of accumulation associated with the construction of housing and extension of consumer credit.

This book does not include any case studies from Europe, and it remains to be seen how effective current efforts on the part of 'old' centres of accumulation to

'quarantine' low-end globalization on an international scale will prove as the weight of the global South in world capitalist accumulation continues to increase. But the subtle analyses offered here take us beyond polarized visions of the world as a slum or corporate sweatshop, on the one hand, and neoliberal fantasies of the poor lifting themselves up by the bootstraps of heroic entrepreneurialism, on the other, towards deeper, more critically nuanced, and ethnographically grounded understandings of the articulations of globalization from above and below.

## References

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John Gledhill

University of Manchester

[john.gledhill@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:john.gledhill@manchester.ac.uk)

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Xuefei Ren (2013), *Urban China (China Today)*.  
Cambridge: Polity Press.

Impressively, shortly after publishing her first book *Building Globalization: Transnational Architecture Production in Urban China* (University of Chicago Press, 2011) which focused on

transnational architecture and its profound effect on the development of urban space, Xuefei Ren offers us another new perspective on urban spaces and urban society in a broader sense. She does so in her *Urban China (China Today)*. Among the great number of geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists who are working on urban China, Ren is a pioneer who writes comprehensively about the history, present and development of China's urbanization in governance, landscape, migration, inequality and cultural economy.

Drawing on the astonishing fact that in 2010 about 50 percent of the national population lived in urban areas — 129 Chinese cities had over 1 million residents, and another 110 cities had a population of between half a million and a million (p. xiii) — Ren tries to understand how China has become urbanized over a short period of time and what an urbanized China means for its citizens and for rest of the world. She urges that that a thorough understanding of urban transition in China can open paths for developing new urban theory and vocabularies (p. xvi). This useful book consists of 6 chapters covering the general urbanization of china cities. Each chapter presents an important analytical dimension on urbanization.

Chapter 1 starts by explaining the different model of economic development in China. Ren makes a courageous attempt to assess China's distinctiveness through a broad range of development theories, including 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' or the 'Chinese ascent' under history-specific conditions and institutional innovations (p. 5). Citing historical and statistical data, Ren introduces the debate on the rise of China, looking at urban demographic shifts and at the historical evolution of the country's urban system. Ren then illustrates in Chapter 2 the changing governing structures and institutions, such as the Communist Party, *danwei*, *hukou*, community organization, government at different levels and non-state actors. Chapter 3 examines landscape changes, discussing a variety of settlement types found both at the center and on the periphery of cities.

In Chapter 4, writing about the 221 million internal migrants in the urban areas who, due to the *hukou* system, are not entitled by the same citizen rights as local residents, Ren argues that 'the new Chinese city has become a strategic site where citizen rights are being reformulated' (p. xv). Ren pays special attention to the formation of ViCs (Villages-in-the-City) and to the factory

labor regime, labour protests and state responses. In Chapter 5 she addresses social and spatial inequality and highlights the role of urban renewal in producing both wealth and poverty. Chapter 6 introduces the cultural industry, looking at examples of consumption and nightlife, and the art districts. The discussion shows how the urban cultural economy brings both freedom and disempowerment, and how the cultural industry has given rise to new forms of state control and intervention.

Methodologically, the book draws on quantitative and qualitative sources, the former originating mainly from the National Statistics Bureau of China, which is the only general and comprehensive dataset that outsider scientists can access. Unlike official literature that only pays attention to the 10-15 largest cities, Ren offers many examples from smaller cities, towns and villages in order to examine the regional variations that have emerged from her analysis of a massive amount of literature, newspapers, online sources and anthropological observations. Ren does not provide a detailed description of how she designed and implemented her research. Instead, she vividly reports the stories related to her own experience, which is innovative and, to some extent, pioneering. For instance, she tells us how her family

developed urban space from state owned apartments to four private properties located both in the north and south China (p. 65). Later, drawing vividly on the experience of an old friend, she explores the relationship between middle classes and cultural economy in Beijing (p. 172).

Theoretically, the central theme running through the book is 'the changing citizenship entailed in the urban process', and the various examples demonstrate how 'the Chinese city has become a strategic ground for reassembling citizen rights' (p. xix). However, despite her claim of a 'comprehensive' reading (p. xvii), Ren fails to mention other important dimensions of citizens' rights in urban society, such as religion, environmental pollution, political participation and civil society. This gap needs to be filled.

Moreover, the book does not offer a detailed analysis of all the dimensions under study, as it covers too many related topics. Readers might want to refer to the other readings on the topics treated in each chapter. To cite a few, one would think of works such as Chen et al's (2001), Bray's (2005) and Whyte's (2010).

The questions that it leaves unanswered quite apart, this book does succeed in raising the level of discourse about urban China. It is a very timely book which that offers most up-to-date

information. Notably, this is a book published in March 2013 that contains data updated to July 2012. As a general introduction of urbanization in China, it covers an interdisciplinary field ranging from geography to sociology, anthropology and political science. This is a must-read introductory book for all those who wish to get a broader view of China's cities and for those who may want to gain a deeper understanding of the different dimensions of urban life.

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### Rumin Luo

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Germany  
[luo@mmg.mpg.de](mailto:luo@mmg.mpg.de)