

BOOK REVIEWS

Bjork-James, C. 2020. *The Sovereign Street: Making Revolution in Urban Bolivia*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

According to Carwil Bjork-James, the author of the work under review, ‘revolution has become a Bolivian tradition’ (p.51). However, this nation with a modern history grounded in collective struggle, is deeply divided across lines of, amongst others, race, class and geography. Those who dwell within the confines of Bolivia’s cities are insinuated to be either ‘*creole*’ or ‘*mestizo*’, wealthier and Spanish speaking. Conversely, Bolivia’s indigenous population, who have predominantly lived in rural settings — although this historic division has become less stark owing to the trend of rural to urban migration — embodying different cultural practices and speaking *Quechua* or *Aymara*. This historically embedded divide between the predominantly urban, wealthier, Spanish speaking and traditionally rural indigenous residents is a theme coursing through Bjork-James’ work.

This divide substantively exists today. A manifestation of this is the chewing of coca leaves, a practice which is deeply entrenched in indigenous identity. Coca leaves, coincidentally, are the central ingredient of cocaine and as a result, Bolivia has been placed under significant pressure from the U.S. backed war on drugs to eradicate not only the plant, but vicariously, those livelihoods which depend upon its cultivation. As a component of his ethnographic research, Bjork-James attended a ‘chew-in’ protest,

organised in conjunction with efforts by the government of Evo Morales to revise international drug laws which, according to the author, view coca chewing as ‘an illegitimate vestige of the past which must be eliminated’ (p162). This demonstration was held outside the U.S embassy in La Paz.

The significance of this protest is the act of ‘being indigenous in public space’. Not the coincidental use of space by those of indigenous heritage, but rather a ‘performance of indigeneity’ which takes place beyond its usual place, thrust upon the urban realm and, subsequently the symbolic seat of power. Amongst the demonstrators, Bjork-James identifies a range of signifiers utilised, such as ‘ethnically marked dress’, the ‘use of indigenous languages’ and the flying of the Wiphala, an iridescent checkered-flag which symbolises the native peoples of the Andes. The author argues that the protestors are ‘refusing to act in a way that accepts traditions of creole/mestizo presentation as necessary to interact with the state’ and as a result, the protestors are ‘taking steps to redefine who may be considered capable of government and political self-representation’ (p. 164).

The seizing of public space is a tactic utilised across the Bolivian activist left. Bjork-James conducted his field work across 2010-2011, temporally situating it in and amongst the global wave of public space occupations, embodied by the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. However, the purpose of occupying public space within the Bolivian context is not homogenous. Whilst the Occupy movement centred upon the seizure of

symbolic space, the indigenous activists of Bolivia lay claim to not only symbolic space, but also spaces which are central to the functioning of the city as a whole. In the chapter titled *'The Power of Interruption'*, Bjork-James claims that 'space-claiming protests make an impact by seizing spaces where goods and people flow and changing them into spaces of protests and blockage' (p. 101). Here the author cites the protest handbook *Metodos de Lucha*, within which it is argued that the force of these blockades emanates from 'their implications for the overall unfolding of economic and productive activities' and is seen to be a 'tool for winning concessions from the state' (p. 102).

Although not referenced within the text, this insinuation of 'blockage' recalls Bruno Latour's notion of the 'intermediary' and the 'mediator', where the former 'transports meaning or force without transformation' and the latter 'transforms, translates, distorts and modifies the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry' (Latour 2005: 39). By strategically blocking a targeted intersection or street (or multiple), the protestors are able to effectively lay siege to an entire city by slowing the flow of goods, services and, most importantly, food. They turn the quotidian intermediary of a traffic intersection into a rupture within a system, a mediator which imbues everyday consumption patterns with scarcity, only to be alleviated by authorised force and violence or by concession to the demands of the protestors.

By viewing the urban realm as both symbolic and systemic simultaneously, the

indigenous protestors of Bolivia are able to demonstrate their legitimate claims to greater representation in the former, whilst turning the screw in the latter. To this end, Bjork-James cites the work of Victor Turner and argues that the seizure of public space opens up a theoretical rift in between the actual and the potential future of political life in Bolivia, overlapping uncertainties regarding the future of the physical and political space in a manner which renders social values and structures malleable. Through claiming urban space, the arena upon which the possible is enacted, is erected.

The Sovereign Street investigates the urban realm as a means of instigating revolutionary, or at least, transformative politics, rather than as an entity to be studied in and of itself. However, through this rich and erudite ethnography, which not only introduces the reader into the complex and world of Bolivian politics, but also inducts them in the realities of indigenous struggle, the reader stands to view the city from the perspective of those on the periphery, where the city is not an identity or something to be fought for, but rather something to be utilised as a means to an end.

Reflexively speaking, this work raises questions of contemporary urbanism beyond the plazas and blockades of La Paz or Cochabamba, encouraging the reader to ruminate over who or what claims legitimacy within the urban realm. Whilst this reviewer would like to have seen more concerning the legitimacy of some of the tactics used by the protestors, the potential one-sidedness of the ethnographer's

allegiance has afforded intimate access to a transformative period of modern history, brought to life vis-a-vis a vivid, well informed and highly captivating piece of work which will be of interest to any reader interested in the art of urban protest and the often-volatile politics of South America.

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Will Brown

Loughborough University, U.K.

w.brown@lboro.ac.uk

Garth, H. 2020. *Food in Cuba: The Pursuit of a Decent Meal*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Garth spends a lot of time with residents of Santiago de Cuba as they try to acquire food to feed themselves and their families, and ultimately, as she argues, to nourish and sustain their identities. It's not easy. We are introduced to several families and individuals who are stranded somewhere between food poverty and 'a decent meal,' or what Garth calls 'the politics of adequacy'. Here struggles with the availability of food have less to do with the caloric intake necessary to get through the day, as she notes, 'mere survival', and more with the social and cultural dimensions of food and eating, or the 'good life'. Essentially, she is arguing for the availability of culturally appropriate food. While this argument is frequently made on behalf of immigrant groups in urban areas, the context here, Cubans in Cuba, is novel to say the least.

Part of the issue of the politics of adequacy is that the majority of Santiago's food system exists somewhere between the state-controlled communist bodegas, where monthly rations are available, and the black market, where vendors, many of which operate illegally selling stolen or pilfered foodstuffs, sell to close friends and neighbours. Preparing a decent meal therefore relies on spatial and familial networks, but also, for most, a *doble moral* (double morality) or a *doble conciencia* (double consciousness). One must stay true to Guevara's 'New Man' ideology, putting others, especially family and neighbours, ahead of one's self, which for many still represents *Cubanidad* (being Cuban). Cubanidad, though, also entails eating correctly. This both involves acquiring and cooking certain foods, but also doing so in the 'correct way', which in today's Cuba, especially for marginalized populations, involves making use of those stolen goods often at the expense of neighbours and even family members. Thus, being correct and being Cuban involves implicit contradictions and numerous workarounds. Garth shows how this creates constant anxiety and stress, especially for women, who despite ideals of gender equality, are largely responsible for what is eaten.

Food is thus part of *la lucha* (the struggle) to maintain identity and to feed others. La Lucha, as Garth notes, is solved both at home and in the labour of 'being in the street'. At home, women come up with solutions to make decent (read 'Cuban') meals, often on a tight budget, often without access to the necessary foods, and often while working outside of the home. Then

they take to the street to put plans of food acquisition into play (though sometimes there are exceptions as husbands will also help source food). Thus, ‘the tensions of the politics of adequacy are wrapped up in particular socialities of food provisioning and gendered subjectivities’ (p. 84). These socialities are mediated by class and race, but also by urban assemblages.

These assemblages involve keeping tight social networks to help one score deals and look for opportunities across the city; the bodega that receives 100 pounds of fruit that will go bad in a day or two and thus must unload it quickly throughout the neighbourhood; the neighbour that ‘finds’ 10 pounds of rice; co-workers who look the other way or whom also steal only their appropriate share; or the shop owners who will kick back to close customers meat scraps for a soup. It also involves dependency on neighbours. Other urban issues, however, complicate these assemblages. For one, *la lucha* often involves illegal assemblages (people who take some of those pounds of rotting fruit and sell them on the street). Likewise, blackouts and refrigeration issues make food storage problematic, so *la lucha* becomes a daily event. This is especially true for the marginalized, but as Garth shows us with several vignettes, middle-class Cubans are also constantly confronted with the politics of adequacy. While ‘the ethics of acquisition’ differ for lower and upper-income households (the *nivel de cultura*, one’s economic place in the city), and thus community obviously matters, geography also matters, as the ability to

make dense networks increases the number of opportunities to make a decent meal.

Garth’s work is a beautiful ethnography. While the stories feel somewhat redundant, the redundancy eventually culminates in the last few chapters into a palpable frustration that every day becomes mired in *la lucha* for culturally appropriate food. Here the build-up of the cacophony of marginalized voices gives way to a breaking point, where, while pessimistic, residents nonetheless wait for the past (the nostalgia associated with the satiation of the past) to become present.

I have only a few minor complaints of *Food in Cuba*. At times Garth hints at the global industrialization of food as a reason for food poverty and the changes in Cuban diets, but we only get glimpses into how non-Cuban foodways are replacing traditional foodstuffs. Also, while the blame seems to fall squarely on the Cuban economic system’s inability to keep up with wages, how much of *la lucha* is due to the American embargo and ‘payback politics’ is not known. Other issues, such as commodity fetishism are playing some part, and she notes the need to be well dressed rivals the need to eat in a specific way, but again, the reader is not left with a good idea of how much other issues are to blame. Likewise, there are many structural barriers that receive scant attention.

Ultimately, though, Garth’s study of marginalized Santiagueros and their ‘ingestive practices’, portrays a particular kind of living, involving intimate socialities and intimate performances, where one is constantly negotiating the fine line of acting ethical and losing one’s Cubanidad. It is an

important part of a larger body of work in anthropology that portrays the urban precariat making do in the grey zone. It should be widely appreciated by those working at the intersection of urban and food studies.

Daina Cheyenne Harvey
College of the Holy Cross, U.S.A.
धारवेय@holycross.edu

Özden-Schilling, C. 2021. *The Current Economy: Electricity Markets and Techno-Economics*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

In *The Current Economy*, Canay Özden-Schilling interrogates how and why electricity gave way to new markets in the United States over the past three decades. Throughout the book it becomes clear that this process was exceptional, as electricity has long been considered a good that is particularly unsuitable for privatization. Our general dependency on electricity, its price inelasticity, the high buy-in and maintenance costs of electricity networks and the regulatory frameworks introduced over the first half of the 20th century did not provide an ideal environment for free-market competition. The book provides an ethnography that depicts how scientists, regulators and other workers imagined and realized electricity markets despite these restrictions. In doing so, Özden-Schilling provides a fresh take on the ways in which technological and economic expertise shape and change contemporary capitalist markets while purposefully refraining from ‘taking neo-liberalism as an all-encompassing context’ (p. 112).

Özden-Schilling gives her perspective its theoretical backbone by marrying notions from Anthropology, Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Sociology to conceptualize what she calls *work cultures*. The concept draws heavily on the work of sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) and her concept of *tool kits*; the repertoires of habits and skills by which people devise strategies of action. More specifically, work cultures consist of the work-related habits and skills that are shaped by and shape, maintain and sustain specific fields of techno-economic expertise and the markets in which they figure. Building on the concept of work cultures, the key proposition of the book is that the inception and expansion of electricity markets in the U.S. is not only the product of political choices, but also that of ordinary workers bringing together heterogeneous techno-economic expertise as to imagine and realize new ways of energy provision; whether it be the expertise of the scientists who invented more efficient ways of distributing energy in the 1970s or the engineers who operate, maintain and innovate the electricity network.

Each proceeding chapter discusses a significant work culture and the building blocks it provides for the current electricity economy in the U.S. The first building block, that of regulation, is mostly attributed to policy makers, who in the 1980s, used their regulative power to create a more fruitful environment for electricity markets to thrive. Rather than understanding deregulation as a removal of rules to give market logics free reign, Özden-Schilling insists deregulation means

just the opposite, arguing that it was changes to, and the introduction of, (new) sets of rules that made electricity markets possible. Chapter 2 takes us to the work floor of a data company whose primary task revolves around forecasting electricity's demand and supply mechanisms for electricity traders. This chapter thus demonstrates how electricity markets, like many other contemporary ones, are represented by data collection, the workers who compile them and the traders who use them. In chapter 3, it becomes clear that engineers imagine a completely different electricity market compared to its current form. They strive for optimization of the grid to efficiently balance supply and demand in real-time, rather than a market based on forecasting using yesterday's data. An engineer's pipedream, it seems, as it proves hard to incorporate human agency into an otherwise calculable non-human system. Finally, the penultimate chapter discusses protest around changing electricity markets. We follow activists who, not unlike the engineers, contend with the current electricity economy by actively, yet sometimes unknowingly, pursuing similar optimizations to force down prices and stop the construction of new visible infrastructures like wind mills or power plants.

All-in-all, the book succeeds in its main objective by convincingly arguing and describing that it takes 'a number of groups, steeped in particular work cultures, to make, maintain, transform and populate new economies' (p178). Although only alluded to in the book's epilogue, this conclusion seems particularly relevant in

light of current calls to realize more sustainable forms of electricity provision. All too often, approaches and debates around such a transformation overlook the intricate interplay between the social, political, technological and economic aspects of electricity provision, which leads to reductionist methods and quick-win solutions for change (Kenis and Lievens 2017, Savini and Bertolini 2019). Yet, especially because Özden-Schilling acknowledges that current electricity markets centre around pluralistic techno-economic visions, it seems overly optimistic when she concludes that people could simply step out of their work cultures to find consensus on new forms of electricity provision. Transition studies, albeit from a macro-perspective, theorize how path dependencies, political interests, sectoral boundaries and uncertainty prevent us from bridging the gap between different visions on the future of electricity, and have not yet found a solid solution to overcome such barriers (see e.g., Grin et al. 2010, Avelino et al. 2016, Castán Broto et al. 2019). From this perspective, *The Current Economy* opens up promising avenues for future researchers to theorize and investigate up-close Özden-Schilling's claim that such barriers could indeed be traversed, and how this could in some way unite current techno-economic visions to realize another much needed paradigm shift in electricity provision.

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Darren Sierhuis

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
d.sierhuis@hva.nl

Xu, F. 2021. *Silencing Shanghai: Language and Identity in Urban China*. Washington DC: Lexington Books.

Given the current, and occasionally disturbing, fascination with the People's Republic of China, Fang Xu's *Silencing Shanghai: Language and Identity in Urban China* is a welcome addition to the limited, non-ideological, scholarship about the world's largest country that continues to suffer from ideological bias and related western exoticism. Employing a wide range of multimodal methods, quantitative and qualitative data, and linguistically-informed rich ethnography, Xu describes, discusses, and gives close up examples of the impact of a century of intensive Chinese nation-building, and subsequent neoliberal globalization of this great city on the

everyday lives of its native and increasingly non-native (internal and external) migrant populations.

As a claimant to being a *Shanghairen* (native Shanghai person), Xu is especially concerned with what she sees, and records, as their marginalization in what essentially is their own hometown. As the title announces, the main focus, I would call tool, for the analysis is the sociolinguistic narrative of the increasingly rapid loss of the ages-old Shanghai 'dialect'. Actually, from an historical point of view this dialect would (as did Sicilian, Catalan, etc.) qualify as a unique language itself. The unique Shanghai 'dialect' was the product of centuries of economic, cultural, and political cross-currents. This, I believe, is one of the most important core lessons to be learned about China from this book which focuses on the evolution and revolution of only a single ancient to modern city. As complex as Shanghai's story is, how much more complex is the four-millennial history and contemporary reality of a country with 1.4 billion people and a powerful and growing (currently second largest, global) economy?

Based on her own personal, as well as excellent scholarly preparation for conducting this on-going study, Fang Xu critically examines the changing local and national power relations which affected the emergence of Shanghai, first as a cosmopolitan metropolis and, now, as what I would classify as a complex megalopolis of almost 25 million inhabitants. She pays particular attention to how the linguistic and other more and less authoritarian policies of the centralized Chinese state

attempted to guide Shanghai's metropolitan development and many subsequent redevelopments. Of major importance have been attempts to control and direct migration within the country; for example, in the granting of legal resident permits (*hukou*). As Xu notes, migrations have had powerful effects on the relations between resident cohorts of the city, especially as to who can claim to be a Shanghairen as opposed to *Waidiren* (Outlander). Migrations, of course, have also affected changes in what once was a more cohesive local dialect. She also gives many examples from her extensive interviews of how the spoken language newer and older residents use, almost determine, and in most cases affect, the tenor of social relations.

Ironically, and in contrast to the stereotype of The People's Republic of China as being a 'communist' society in which hierarchical social classes do not exist or at least are restrained, Xu pointedly notes how many of the policies set by the national, regional, and local states actually favour the variously advantaged groups such as the highly educated professional classes and successful entrepreneurs. As the valued resources of every society are limited, the working-classes and the poor suffer as a result.

The key to Xu's analysis is the promotion of the Mandarin Chinese language to the exclusion of other methods of oral linguistic expression. The power of this state-building or cultural cohesion-building policy all but forces people not to use the dialect in most common social intercourse and requires the use of *Putonghua* (Mandarin) in legal as well as

other governmental services and administrative matters. Although she describes a much more complex local linguistic universe between variously defined 'insiders' and 'outsiders', the common thread is, with a few recent attempts at cultural revivals, the accelerating disappearance of the Shanghai dialect, which she bemoans in her title as 'Silencing Shanghai'.

'In the re-globalizing process, the city has regained its status as a cosmopolitan metropolis, though one tightly controlled by the central government. To achieve this, Shanghai's own urban linguistic heritage has been sacrificed, the built environment had been remade, millions of Shanghairen are displaced and dispossessed, and millions of internal migrants have adopted the city as their new home.' (p. 201)

I have conducted a great deal of visual research in China during which I focused in the disappearance of urban vernacular landscapes as a consequence of the state-led global city-building processes in Shanghai as well as in other major cities such as Beijing, Xi'an, Shenzhen, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. Although not as personal, I appreciate Fang Xu's feeling of 'loss' in the linguistic vernaculars. During my visual work in China, I have also captured, in images of impressive residential and commercial buildings, the architectural realization of the 'China Dream'.

"China Dream," is an idea introduced by President Xi Jinping in a speech in November 2012. In his speech, he used the phrase to mean

the ‘rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,’ but the exact implications of this political ideal remained vague, without clear parameters. This, a practical explanation of what exactly the “China Dream” means for the lives of ordinary people remains elusive, aside from the idea of upward mobility similar to the former Chinese Communist Party Secretary Deng Xiaoping’s vision for achieving Xiaokang, or middle-class standard of living.’ (p. 67)

I must note at the end of this review, that despite its modest 276-page length, *Silencing Shanghai: Language and Identity in Urban China* covers much more territory than I would be able to cover, even in a long review essay. In essence, it is a book that ought to be read in its entirety. As to the future of Shanghai, and by extension, China

itself, Fang Xu firmly ties it to the potential success of China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative to create a Greater China on the international stage.

Future research is needed to investigate the potential impact of BRI on the fates and futures of urban and regional languages along the Road, the potential of Putonghua rising to the status of global language to compete with English, and the possibilities of new global cities in the global south fighting to preserve and revive their vernaculars, so that they are not plastic fake after all, but authentic and unique in beautiful audible ways (p. 216).

Jerome Krase

Brooklyn College CUNY, U.S.A.

jkrase@brooklyn.cuny.edu