Dilip Dutta
Development under Dualism and Digital Divide in Twenty-first Century India

Reviewed by Tom Barnes

This interesting book attempts to develop and apply theories of uneven economic development to the social problem of unequal access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in contemporary India. The author argues that the ‘digital dividends of the rapidly spreading digital technologies in the Indian society as a whole are far from satisfactory’ (p. 200) and underpinned by the ‘tyranny of structural dualism’ (p. 203).

The book appears in a ‘Dynamics of Asian Development’ series edited by the well-known scholar of Indian political economy, Anthony P. D’Costa. It has six chapters in total: an introduction on economic dualism, two chapters on India’s post-independence economic development, a chapter on social sector development programs and on digital inequality, before concluding the book with a chapter which combines the author’s empirical and theoretical concerns.

One of the most striking feature of the book is its level of empirical and descriptive detail. Aside from any other features, scholars and students interested in studies of economic development in South Asia could ‘mine’ the book for its extensive presentation of data. For example, there are a phenomenal 54 statistical tables in the book.

The level of descriptive detail means the book is not an easy read. Also, although the title of the book refers to India’s ‘digital divide’, only one chapter (Chapter 5) focuses on this. Nor will Dutta’s account of dualistic development suit every development scholar or political economist, with
its contrast between a ‘traditional’ (or ‘pre-capitalist’) sector and a ‘modern’ (or ‘capitalist’) sector. Such language resembles the approach of very early - some would say outdated - theories which treated the informal sector as a ‘waiting room’ for people who could be brought into the formal industrial sector if only the appropriate growth-oriented economic policies were pursued by an ideal government (Geertz 1963; Hart 1973).

Criticisms aside, Dutta offers an interesting account of India’s failure to embark upon the type of state-led, industry-based development envisaged by policymakers in the 1950s and 60s. He presents economic dualism as akin to ‘compressed capitalism’ (D’Costa 2014) - which is another way of saying ‘uneven and combined development’ - and argues that Indian society is in a state of ‘disarticulation’. His understanding of development draws eclectically from class-based theories, especially those of Pranab Bardhan, and New Institutional Economics.

Two chapters on economic development history are very useful. Chapter 2 on the period 1947-1980 charts the first few Five Year Plans, the crises of foreign exchange and food production in the 1960s, the Green Revolution in agrarian technology as well as handy information on uneven development performances based on State-level data. Chapter 3 on the period from 1980-2017 joins a cast of critical international scholarship which places the origins of India’s high growth economy in the carefully-managed, gradualist changes of the early-to-mid 1980s rather than the ‘neoliberal’ radicalism of the early 1990s.

Among a range of policy initiatives, I found the brief sections on the recently-enacted Goods and Services Tax (GST) (pp. 108-112) and Narendra Modi’s radical ‘demonetisation’ policy (pp. 107-108) - that is, the sudden abolition of ₹500 and ₹1000 cash notes in late 2016 - timely and welcome. In both cases, more information and analysis would be useful; particularly in relation to Dutta’s intriguing but unelaborated claim that demonetization is likely to generate ‘a reduction in the degree of dualism’ (p. 108).

In Chapter 5, the author lays a claim for the usefulness of actor-network theory and national innovation systems analysis to explore India’s digital divide. This chapter offers some highlights, including a historical summary of the IT industry in India - one which compares favourably with other critical overviews (Saraswati 2012; D’Costa 2014) - and analysis of uneven IT-based development between Indian states. Dutta offers a further
A descriptive account of recent developments in the platform economy like Babajob, UrbanClap, etc - India’s versions of Airtasker and the like.

In short, this book represents a welcome attempt to locate the inequalities of social access to new technology within India’s chaotic economic history. The overall detail on government-level data and the chapters on India’s post-independence economic development are especially recommended to students interested in the political economy of South Asia.

References

Matt Withers
Sri Lanka’s Remittance Economy: A Multiscalar Analysis of Migration-Underdevelopment

Reviewed by Christine Brickenstein
Matt Withers’s first book, Sri Lanka’s Remittance Economy: A Multiscalar Analysis of Migration-Underdevelopment, constitutes a thoroughly researched analysis of Sri Lanka’s remittance dependent economy. Withers, a temporary labour migration expert with a background in Political Economy, competently utilises a mix of qualitative research and historical structural analysis to explore how remittance dependency ultimately reinforces underdevelopment and creates long-term unsustainable outcomes.
Sri Lanka constitutes an interesting and relevant case study for the author’s hypotheses as the country has a longstanding history of uneven development and foreign dependency dating back to colonial and pre-colonial times.

The book begins with an overview of the theoretical framework of the historic nexus of migration and economic development, employing a historical-structural approach at different scales of analysis to explain uneven development. Chapter two then applies this approach to the Sri Lankan context to describe the importance of temporary labour migration not only as a livelihood strategy of an individual basis but also as a means to ensure economic stability on a macro level.

What follows in chapters 3, 4, and 5 is a discussion of the fieldwork findings undertaken by the author. Understanding the aspirations of migrants where foreign employment has become a survival strategy, in combination with an increasing deregulation of foreign employment, leads the author to question where participation in temporary migration can be located along the continuum of free choice and forced migration. Structural inequalities are then analysed through the medium of place, referring to geography, demography and cultural structures in explaining imbalances of recruitment practices, resulting in variations in migration outcomes across different communities.

The last chapter of fieldwork findings is dedicated to applying the concept of status to migrant agency. While migration presents individuals with opportunities to reclaim status through purchases of status-enhancing goods, as well as the participation in what many communities perceive as prestigious programs, it creates a paradox of migrant agency that is most dominantly characterised by vulnerability, exploitation, gendered working realities and the hardship and uncertainties faced upon return from foreign employment.

The book culminates with two chapters outlining the migration-induced underdevelopment of Sri Lanka’s economy, skilfully drawing out the uneven ‘wins’ of temporary labour migration.

What’s new? Withers’ skilfully argued and sensitively presented analysis successfully challenges the widely recognised ‘triple-win’ impacts of temporary labour migration. He shows that the benefits are skewed towards migrant-receiving countries, and that wins for migrants and migrant-sending countries remain empirically unsubstantial, in fact
creating path dependency where repeat migration is needed to ensure economic survival.

This analysis is timely in a context where remittances have exceeded official development assistance and, in some instances, direct foreign investments. As such, this is a book that deserves to be widely read and is suitable not only for migration scholars, honours students but also policy makers involved in the management and creation of temporary labour migration programs. It fills a gap in current debate where risks and adverse consequences of temporary labour migration tend to be overlooked.

Tom Slee

*What's Yours Is Mine: Against the Sharing Economy*


Reviewed by Thomas Klikauer

One of the prides and joys of the sharing economy is a company called Uber that offers inexpensive transportation similar to the standard taxi service. But Uber’s aggressive expansion into virtually every major city of the globe is not welcomed everywhere with open arms. In 2016, the British GMB union (General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union) accused Uber of misleading its drivers. In a long-awaited judgment, an employment tribunal agreed with two drivers for the ride-hailing app that Uber drivers were not self-employed and should receive the ‘national living wage’, annual leave, and other benefits.

In *What's Yours Is Mine: Against The Sharing Economy*, Tom Slee examines the sharing economy’s great Uber-con. He starts his nine chapters by defining the sharing economy as a wave of new businesses that use the internet to match customers with service providers for real-world exchanges such as short-term apartment rentals, car rides, or household tasks’ (p. 9), with Uber and Airbnb being the most prominent examples. He then goes on to consider the view that the sharing economy – or, better, the companies that are its centrepiece – offers people to ‘take control of their lives by becoming ‘micro-entrepreneurs [while applying their] egalitarian vision built on peer-to-peer exchanges rather than hierarchical organisations’ (p. 10). Beyond these fluffy pronouncements, he points out
that the sharing economy is in reality governed by ‘corporate juggernauts [often establishing] a new form of surveillance where service workers must live in fear of being snitched on’ (p. 10). In other words, there are real ‘contradictions built into the name sharing economy’ (p. 11). Rather than its idyllic image, its corporations create ‘a new form of precarious work’ (p. 13), comprehensively ‘failing to deliver on their promises of democratisation and equality’ (p. 15).

As Slee writes, ‘strangely, considering the language of altruism and generosity that is so often used to describe it, the sharing economy is overwhelmingly made up of commercial organisations rather than non-profit; [overall] three kinds of services dominate: hospitality (43%), transportation (28%) and education (17%)’ (p. 23f.). In his chapter on ‘A Place to Stay with Airbnb’, Slee notes that there are three types of accommodations offered by Airbnb: a) shared rooms; b) private rooms; and c) entire homes/apartments. In New York, for example, 60% of all rentals are entire homes, not rented out by people occupying a house and sharing a spare room with strangers, as the idyllic hallucination of Airbnb likes to imply. These are commercial activities akin to online mini-hotels. Unlike regulated hotels with proper fire exits and sanitary standards, however, these online mini-hotels are deregulated and may even represent ‘a movement for [even greater] deregulation’ (p. 26). Deregulation allows corporations such as Airbnb to make their own rules, issuing, for example, ‘30,000 words contracts suiting mostly the corporation rather than those renting rooms’ and, above that, Airbnb ‘knows rules when it suits them’ (p. 41). These contracts are written against people while protecting the corporation and fitting in with a general quest for deregulation. Airbnb steam ahead even when ‘smaller independent hotels and B&Bs complain that they have to register’ (p. 42) while Airbnb is not obligated to do so. Virtually the same applies to Uber’s domination of ride-sharing. For room sharing, as for the ride sharing business, virtually the same trajectory applies: the ‘original motivation based around community and around an interaction that [was] not primarily economic’ has been replaced with a ‘hunger for growth [and a] rapid expansion’ (p. 54). This led to an ‘erosion of the original model’ (p. 54). What we see now is profit as the ‘end game of a large company’ (p. 54). These corporations are ‘successful in economic terms [but they have] completely failed to challenge current economic models’ (p. 54). Beyond that, they have also failed ‘to deliver on sustainability or community ideals’ (p. 54). This is what defines the companies of the sharing economy.
Uber is largely free of standard regulations, for example, those requiring taxis to have mandatory ‘quotas for child-friendly vehicles, suitable for disabled passengers, accommodate service dogs, and meet other universal access requirements’ (p. 61). On top of that, Uber claims that its drivers can earn up to ‘$90,000 in New York and $74,000 in San Francisco’ while usually not mentioning that this presumes ‘working over 40 hours per week’ (p. 63). In reality, however, typical annual earnings are closer to $45,000 (NY) and $37,000 (San Francisco) with some earnings are as little as ‘$30,000’ (p. 64). When a journalist looked to find a $90,000 Uber driver, Slee notes that, he ‘came up empty handed [while Uber] never backed up its claims’ (p. 64). In addition, ‘over time, Uber has taken a larger and larger slice of every fare’ (p. 64). Costs such as ‘vehicle operation, repairs, insurance, maintenance, petrol, depreciation […] were not factored in’ (p. 66) when Uber claimed drivers can earn $90,000. When the journalist Emily Guendelsberger took to the road as an Uber driver, she made $9.34 per hour (p. 66) which is below the US minimum wage.

As Slee notes, all this remains camouflaged behind the prevailing ideology of being a ‘partner, self-employed entrepreneur’ (p. 72) or a ‘micro-entrepreneur’ (p. 79). The micro-entrepreneurs of the sharing economy are not only exposed to stifling contracts written by well-paid corporate lawyers and starvation level wages, they are also exposed to a relentless ‘reputation system’ (p. 100). On this, a Wired magazine journalist commented, ‘I’ve ridden with a 4.7 star driver who wears gloves and opens passenger doors and a 4.7 star driver who couldn’t pass a road test’ (p. 100). Based on numerous examples and studies, Slee reaches the inevitable conclusion: ‘the sharing economy reputation systems are broken’ (p. 100), adding that ‘reputation systems are no substitute for regulation. Instead, they are a substitute for a company management structure’ (p. 101). But what about being rated as a company rather than using ratings against its (semi)employees? One finds, not surprisingly, that ‘Uber has had an F rating from the Better Business Bureau for some time, primarily because of its persistent failure to respond to customer complaints’ (p. 104).

In short, ‘terrible things happen to people in hotel rooms and taxis too but there is a mechanism to hold hotels and taxi companies responsible’ (p. 105). Instead, the sharing economy relies on its self-invented ratings system that has mutated into a ‘denunciation system […] a form of surveillance [that is] turning us into a society of snitches’ (p. 108). Historically, snitching may date back to when Facebook started as a ‘hot or not’ web site (p. 110) invented to spy on and rate female students.
Today, a much more advanced corporate ratings systems does it for them, supporting large corporations but not employees. The same corporations also insist that the internet, hyper-individual self-employment and ‘entrepreneurship […] is the right way to solve social problems’ (p. 140). It is not surprising that one of Uber’s founders is a ‘follower of Ayn Rand’ (p. 143): Rand was a writer of crypto-philosophical novels fancying über-individualism, neoliberalism and the free market, and an admirer of disgraced former US president Richard Nixon.

A market-driven approach can go badly wrong. As Slee notes, ‘Uber had to back down after a 2014 hostage crisis in Sydney’s central business district, a tragedy that left three people dead. During the confusion of the early stages of the crisis, as people fled the centre of the city, Uber hiked prices by up to a factor four, at one point charging a minimum fare of $100’ (p. 143). Uber’s motto might well be ‘there is money to be made from other people’s misery’. Quite conceivably, ‘Uber has no idea about sharing and community’ (p. 144). All this leads Slee to the conclusion that ‘in a few short years the sharing economy has gone from the generosity of what’s mine is yours to the self interest of what’s yours is mine’ (p. 163).

Overall, three features of the corporations of the shared economy remain noteworthy. These are that they avoid the expenses of: a) ensuring safety, b) providing universal access, and c) paying decent wages, trying, instead, to classify their employees as so-called independent contractors (p. 168). Yet these features may increasingly be problematic, given the British court case mentioned above and a rising awareness that the sharing economy is not much more than a great ‘Über-Con’.

Slee’s book on this topic is insightful and well-crafted, making a significant contribution to understanding the political economy that lies behind the shiny announcements of corporate public relations. It highlights the hidden costs that come with the mass media engineered idea of just getting a ‘cheap ride’ and a ‘cheap place to stay’. As in the case of cheap (and even designer) clothes that we buy at high street shops, Uber and Airbnb come with a hidden cost, not unlike the sweatshops that make much of that clothing. Beyond that, Slee also unmasks the façade of a ‘sharing economy’ that is no longer linked to the idyllic image of ‘sharing a room’ and ‘sharing a ride’, showing that those offering rides and rooms have long mutated into ruthless multi-national corporations solely dedicated to profits.
Hilda Bjorkhaug, Andre Magnan and Geoffrey Lawrence (eds)
The Financialisation of Agri-Food Systems: Contested Transformations

Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

This study of relationships between agriculture and financialisation helps to show the sources and nature of some of the stresses facing farming. The book's fifteen chapters analyse the financial interests that are changing the patterns of ownership, market values and uses made of land. Its coverage is international, including case studies from Australia, Canada and the USA, Norway and Sweden, Slovakia, Egypt, Japan and Brazil.

It may be regarded as a companion volume to this current special issue of *JAPE*. It does not consider labour and worker migration issues to any significant extent, so it's focus is quite different. However, it shows the source of some of the increasing economic pressures in agriculture, forcing the owners and users of rural land to achieve rates of return on investment that are competitive with other industries. Internationally mobile capital requires nothing less.

The book's focus is on the multi-faceted character of financialisation. The editors define this at the outset as 'the process through which financial actors, logics, and processes exert increasing influence over economic life' (p.1). As the book proceeds through its country case studies, the various dimensions of the financialisation process become apparent. We see the dominance of financial interests over a more straightforward productivist logic that has traditionally shaped smaller-scale agriculture. We see the changing face of capital, as it moves into rural land ownership and changes the character of farming. While this is not exactly the 'final frontier' in the globalisation of capital, it has particularly significant implications for land use, food security, food prices and the extent of foreign ownership and control over resources in individual countries.

The role of the state is a key feature. In some places it has evidently been a driver, working in tandem with the interests of corporate capital to restructure the rural economy as part of the broader neoliberal project. This close link with corporate capital is particularly evident in the case studies
of Japan (chapter 8), Brazil (chapter 9) and, to some extent, Sweden (chapter 14). In other cases, such as Norway (chapter 10) and Canada (chapter 12), a more regulatory character for the state has prevailed, putting a brake on corporate capital's territorial ambitions.

The variety and complexity of the ways in which changing land ownership and use are driven by financialisation emerges as a recurring theme in the book. Chapter 11, while warning against seeing financialisation as a 'steamroller', shows how in the Canadian prairie province of Saskatchewan it has 'underpinned instances of land concentration, value-chain grabbing, and 'elite capture' of state benefits by white-dominated financial interests and multinational businesses' (p. 238). Chapter 13 refers to the 'messiness' of the outcomes when financialisation processes interact with local interests. This emphasis on complexity is not surprising. It arises partly from the emphasis in the book on case studies. The mosaic of country-specific experiences reflects the variety of ways in which outcomes 'on the ground' are shaped by the prevailing conditions, interests and activities of the players in different localities.

The general lesson for political economists is that we must look at the land and at the financial pressures that shape its use, whether as a productive or speculative asset. The editors of the book seek to draw out some other lessons too. In their introduction, they note the 'long history of interaction between finance and food (p.2), and approvingly quote the view that financialisation should be considered as 'a complex social process involving actors from many backgrounds developing new practices, relations and technologies' (p.5). They also note the political dimension of financialisation, pointing out that resistance and contestation have shaped its course (p.7).

One of the book's co-editors, Geoff Lawrence, has been a leading figure in studies of the political economy of agriculture, and rural sociology too, over four decades. Among his other significant publications, he penned two articles on agriculture for this journal in its early years. It is a pleasure to see this latest volume, bearing the fruits of a productive internationally collaborative process. It is a timely contribution, helping us to understand what is happening at the interface of that most basic human activity - food production - and the processes of financialisation and capital accumulation. Understanding this complex and hazardous interface between capitalism and nature deserves a prime position in political economy.