

## Book Review

McCartney, Matthew and Zaidi, Akbar. ed., *New Perspectives on Pakistan's Political Economy: State, Class and Social Change*. 275pp., Cambridge University Press 2019

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Recognising the contribution of significant scholars is always a daunting task, and for Pakistan specialists, there aren't many social scientists more significant than Hamza Alavi. McCartney and Zaidi have put together an impressive collection to examine a particular aspect of the work of Hamza Alavi. His work remains important for students of Pakistan's sociology, politics and economy, but as the contributors to this collection demonstrate rather persuasively, his contribution was very much of its time. This is not to say that there are not aspects of his work that continue to be relevant and useful, but that the theoretical assumptions he made, as well as the societal changes that have occurred, render uncritical adoption of some of his key conceptual models unwise, at best.

McCartney and Zaidi lay out the premise of the collection by stating explicitly that this isn't a book *about* Hamza Alavi, but rather about social science in Pakistan. Specifically, they set out to look at the consequences of the widespread take up of Alavi's concept of the overdeveloped state on how scholars have understood the political economy of Pakistan. The volume is a welcome reminder that scrutiny of the giants, upon whose shoulders we sit, is healthy and can be productive. Everyone concerned with society and the state in Pakistan will no doubt have read Alavi's overtly Marxist sociohistorical analyses and will have taken away some key concept for use in their own work. The focus for this volume is his concept of the overdeveloped state in Pakistan, in which the bureaucracy-military complex hold disproportionate influence but in alliance with and to a large extent in the interests of metropolitan capital. Alavi contrasted the overdeveloped postcolonial state with an un- or under-developed society. The relatively small and fragile nature of Pakistan's civil society has, of course, been noticed by many, and leads to extensive discussion of the extent to which kin groups and NGOs might constitute a significant part of Pakistani civil society. One of Alavi's arguments was that the Pakistan post-colonial state that emerged following independence was the result of particular relationships between the propertied classes and the

military-bureaucratic oligarchy that maintained a kind of status quo. While providing some level of continuity and predictability, this nexus of power also noticeably held back the growth of societal institutions and structures. Such an analysis continues to be tempting today. The military is arguably as powerful and influential as it has ever been, though at least some of the top leadership appear to have learned their lesson about direct martial rule. The state bureaucracy, although no longer as attractive an employer as in the past, continues to form a large and powerful set of institutions across the country. The development of societal institutions continues to be weak, though undeniably there have been some major changes since the 1970s. This volume urges caution, however, in taking such a contrast of overdeveloped state versus underdeveloped society in any simplistic way. The book is divided into what could be called *pro*-Alavi and *anti*-Alavi chapters. Each contributor was asked to critically discuss the extent to which the notion of an overdeveloped state illuminated, or masked, key aspects of Pakistan today. These discussions make clear that that even when Alavi produced his seminal thesis, there were weaknesses in the argument, in part the result of weak empirical demonstration.

Akhtar and Zaidi must be given special attention in a review of this volume because it was their earlier work that stimulated the workshop that led to its production. In 2008, Akhtar effectively updated Alavi's 1972 argument for the Pakistan of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Akhtar, Aasim Sajjad. 2008. "The Overdeveloping State: The Politics of Common Sense in Pakistan, 1971-2007." Doctoral Thesis from the University of London). He argued that while Alavi was overly static in his analysis of culture, the foundations of his ideas about the overdeveloped state had held up remarkably well. Responding, in part, to Akhtar in 2014, Zaidi took a more critical stance and argued that Alavi's concept has no relevance for contemporary Pakistan (Zaidi, S. Akbar. 2014. "Rethinking Pakistan's Political Economy: Class, State,

Power and Transition.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 49 (5): 47–54). Both scholars recognise that the profound changes that have taken place in Pakistan mean that Alavi’s concept cannot be applied in its original formulation, but one suggests a modified version offers a valuable tool, while the other rejects it entirely. They both revisit their earlier arguments here, and their 2008 and 2014 articles may be seen as providing the core themes of the book. The contributions in this volume should be understood as providing vital evidence that allows readers to effectively evaluate which of these two is more persuasive.

To be fair to all the contributors, there is no one who argues that a wholesale, unmodified adoption of concepts from 1972 is useful for understanding contemporary Pakistan. Throughout every contribution the theme of change rings loud and clear. Pakistani society and state (including the military and the bureaucracy) are not what they were in the 1970s. McCartney argues that not only are they not what they were in the 1970s, but that to frame them as colonial legacies is itself unhelpful. They are unique postcolonial constructions that have shifted and adjusted to internal and external pressures continuously since 1947. Jan, Javed and Javid each highlight the declining power of landed ‘aristocracies’ and the rise of new classes. For Jan, it is the rural middle class, Javed focuses on the rise of bazaar traders and the informal sector, while Javid shows how local patrons have been able to extend their influence under the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment and that more broadly, this reflects a consolidation of civilian power in the post-Musharraf era. Despite this rise in civilian power, Shah provides a sobering reminder of the persistent despotic power of the state through its military, para-military and police forces. Like Javid, Shah recognises that such power is contested but argues that there have always been challenges to the military.

Two things that Alavi arguably neglected in his work was the notion of resistance and the importance of political parties. Many of the contributions here make clear that political parties are neither passive, nor ineffectual. There are regional variations in the relative power relationships between the military-bureaucracy and political parties. So while the armed branches of the state should not be under-estimated, nor should they be seen as holding anything like absolute power over the country. Many of the contributors show the extent to which power is contested unevenly throughout the country (Shah, Khan, Javid, Suhail, Armytage). Zia’s interesting, if polemical contribution, illustrates the weakness of fixating on men and neglecting both women and feminist critiques of dominant ideological assumptions. Zia’s challenge resonates well outside of Pakistan, though it may seem overly harsh on a left wing intelligentsia. How can the left deal with Islamic feminism that includes veiling and subordination in significant areas? Zia’s argument is clear—it cannot tolerate such feminism without betraying women. To see such Islamic feminism as a form of resistance, she argues, is to undermine other forms of more meaningful resistance that are taking place among women around the country. She may be right and

I certainly share her discomfort with the excessive focus on ‘the Muslim’ at the expense of other potentially salient identities. She has a particular gripe against the scholarship that has ‘framed and re-framed, packed and unpacked, feminised, de-radicalised and anthropologised’ (96) Muslim women at the expense of their working-class identities. This chapter is particularly intriguing because many of the other chapters are principally concerned with the rise of *new* classes that are shaping the political economy, while Zia reminds us that there is an *old* class that is being ignored by the great and the good of leftist scholarship.

The final chapter in the volume picks up a theme that seems ubiquitous since the Arab Uprisings—the media. Zaidi rightly criticised the absence of any attention to the media in Alavi’s work. Sulehria argues that this is partially justifiable because of the changes to the media in Pakistan since the 1970s, but that the significance of the media should not be over exaggerated either. After summarising Alavi’s under-developed notions of the relationship between ideology and the media, Sulehria discusses Zaidi’s counter argument that the media serve as an apparatus of counter-hegemony in today’s Pakistan. The de-regulation of the media under Musharraf certainly seemed to introduce a plethora of dissenting voices on television and in newspapers, but Sulehria argues that the media continues to form a crucial part of what Althusser called the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). Critically, he argues, this is predicated on framing Pakistan as a praetorian state that favours and centralises the military in its ideological formation. While one may quibble with the application of the term praetorian state, there can be little doubt about the extent to which the military are venerated in many arenas of public discourse in Pakistan.

This volume is a fascinating exercise in critically re-examining foundational theoretical tools used in the social sciences. It offers an invaluable collection of disparate views on some of the most influential ideas about the political economy of Pakistan. Some of the chapters delve into detailed empirical examples to illustrate areas of weakness or strength of the foundational concepts, while others develop coherent theoretical alternatives. Throughout the volume, there are a few things that genuinely stand out. First, Pakistan has changed and continues to change. Anyone who has spent time in the country over several decades, as I have, will recognise not only that this is a true description of the country, but that it is hugely important. In a recent Pakistan Workshop, some young scholars were highly critical of my early work and argued that what I described wasn’t the case. Indeed, they were correct, because the village that I encountered in the late 1990s is unrecognisable in the village I visit today. Similarly, the city of Lahore in which I was a reckless teenager studying in high school, is only occasionally visible today as I go about my work there today. And that is only since the 1980s. Alavi wrote about Pakistan in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (and beyond, but his most significant work focussed on these decades). It is not surprising that we can no longer go to the Alavi shelves of our book collections to find relevant

theoretical tools to make sense of Pakistan in 2019. However, it would be a mistake to dismiss those concepts and tools wholesale. Repeating the mistakes of the past is regrettable but avoiding doing so can only be accomplished through a careful reading of those pasts. There is continuing value in re-visiting the giants of days gone by because what they may lack in contemporary reference, they can make up for through the benefits of the accumulation of knowledge and ensuring that we learn both the positive and the negative of what has come before.

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