

## Book Review

Armytage, Rosita., *Big Capital in an Unequal World: The Micropolitics of Wealth in Pakistan*. 206pp., Berghahn Books 2020

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Rosita Armytage's ethnography of the business elite in Pakistan is a welcome addition to the growing body of anthropological work in Pakistan following on from the likes of Ammara Maqsood's *The New Pakistani Middle Class* (2017, Harvard University Press), Stephen Lyon's *Political Kinship in Pakistan: Descent, Marriage, and Government Stability* (2019, Rowman and Littlefield) and Frembgen and Rollier's *Wrestlers, Pigeon Fanciers and Kite Flyers* (2014, Oxford University Press).

Armytage's fieldwork spanned some fourteen months mainly in the cities of Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. The first half of the book sets the scene for the specifics of ethnography that follow in the latter half of the book. However, while those readers conversant with Pakistan may find parts of the first half familiar, especially the economic history that is part of chapter 2, the early chapters, and particularly chapter 1, benefit from the author's ability to bring the methodology of her fieldwork into the main body of the text. Pakistan is not an easy place to do fieldwork, and during the time the author collected her material security concerns would have qualified it as a dangerous research site. This would have particularly been the case for foreign researchers at a time when militant activity was peaking in Pakistan. Fieldwork would have been a daunting and challenging experience in what is not immediately a welcoming environment.

Armytage discusses many of these methodological issues as she explains how she gained access through a series of gatekeepers and key informants and how she built rapport through participant observation at social events. This subsequently allowed her to hold more formal interviews. Of particular note is her description of her ambivalent experience as a foreign female researcher undertaking fieldwork in what is almost an exclusively male domain. Unsurprisingly, she had to deal with the sexual advances and 'hustling' that female researchers very often face during fieldwork. But on the other hand, as a foreign researcher and an overt outsider she was given access to male informants that would have been far more

difficult for a local female researcher because of cultural norms. The process of gaining entry to what is a tightly knit and closed group allows Armytage to introduce the dynamics of class, gender and power amongst her 'tribe' and how these shape the interactions of elites with one another, and with outside observers.

Discussion of the fieldwork methodology leads to one of the issues that strikes the reader early on. Armytage's work is an example of the still relatively rare occurrence of anthropologists 'studying up'. Traditionally, anthropologists have focussed on studying 'disempowered' groups and in these instances it is nearly always the case that the power dynamic between ethnographer and informant is heavily skewed in favour of the anthropologist. But following Laura Nader's (1972) call for a reappraisal of ethnographic methods to include studying groups that wield power in society, even in excess of the ethnographer, there have been studies that have examined powerful groups such as politicians and businessmen. Armytage's work falls squarely in this category. In *Big Capital in an Unequal World*, the anthropologist enters a world of elites where power is firmly in the hands of those that are being studied, a point that is forcefully made in the book when one of the informants makes clear the ease with which he could evoke deniability for himself and the elite as a group. It is also clear that access could easily be withdrawn if the researcher failed to follow the rules of access.

Following on from methodological concerns, the book proceeds to provide essential background material by setting out a historical account of the emergence of Pakistani business. Here the author brings in an interesting perspective which focuses on analysing several pivotal moments of crisis and instability in relations between the ruling classes and the state (loss of East Pakistan, military coups, changes in democratic governments) that surprisingly provided new opportunities for the elite to flourish. But these ruptures in the political history of Pakistan also meant that what constituted the elite shifted and changed with new groups gaining entry

particularly in the form of the military and political groups. The most interesting thread of this analysis relates to Armytage's description of the uneasy accommodation that the disparate groups of elites come to in order to advance their overall interests through the partial capture of the state. Much of this is born of the instability that surrounds them and the relevant chapter identifies the strategies of collaboration that have enabled the Pakistani elite to gain and secure economic and political advantage over the past eighty years despite extreme political and economic instability. Thus, we now have the state in the hands of landlords, industrialists, bureaucrats and the military establishment. To this the more recent entrants include commercial bankers, urban real estate developers and parliamentarians. In fact, Armytage concludes that state capitalism in Pakistan is marked not by the intense competition that marks global capitalism but by intense alliance making.

The second half of the book is where the ethnographic detail begins to distinguish the analysis. Armytage introduces a series of key themes starting with the emergence of the nouveau riche (*Navay Raje*) and their reluctant incorporation into the established traditional elite circles. The tussle between old and new is epitomised by the nouveau riche's attempts to access the educational institutions and private clubs that were the preserve of the old elite. Armytage highlights this struggle through an analysis of the contested changes to the admissions procedure at Lahore's prestigious Aitchison College, where an enforced move towards 'merit' over 'historical nepotism' was enforced and then reversed. A second theme analyses the importance of marriage as a means of incorporation and alliance building linking together the groups that increasingly make up the elite – old wealth, new wealth, bureaucrats, military. The mutual benefit that accrues allows some to gain wealth, others to gain status. The nouveau riche have enormous new wealth but less in terms of status. The older traditional elite have status but not the vast increase in wealth that the *Navay Raje* have attained. However, cumulatively all groups enhance their control of the state apparatus. Furthermore, the analysis of the functional role of marriage allows not only a discussion on the use of marriage in order to consolidate power within the extended family but more intriguingly the relevant chapter examines how the extended family chooses appropriate marriage partners (endogamous, exogamous alliance, love marriages) and subsequently how the wife strengthens ties between the various branches of her extended family as well as the wider elite group through continuous acts of socialising. This allows a focus on gender and the role of women in what is otherwise a male dominated ethnography.

Apart from marriages and female socialising there is also the crucial strategy of elite male networking and socialising which thrives on reciprocity and allows for the preservation of elite power and influence. As with the social circle of the wives, Armytage uses ethnographic descriptions to highlight the networking, the unwritten mores and rules of the elite circle, the markers of wealth that define an individual's membership

of this class and how these are fostered and rigorously policed. And while we are given a glimpse of the alcohol, drugs and ostentatious lifestyles adopted the description is never salacious.

It is in these middle chapters that we get an idea of the 'micropolitics' of elite lives: the personal relationships, the daily lived experiences and the generational histories of Pakistan's most prominent and wealthiest business families. It is in the private networking and parties that take place behind closed doors and that define membership of the group that the reader comes to understand how deeply an elite group can shape and determine the economic and political structures of the nation. The chapters are brought to life through the detailed ethnographic descriptions of particular social settings, families and individuals. *Big Capital in an Unequal World* convincingly argues that it is the strength of the networks that are formed and the reciprocity between individuals and groups that give their members such an advantage in an unstable and often chaotic political and economic environment. While Armytage does highlight the importance of social networks and family in business in Pakistan, she also stresses that this makes business in Pakistan quite different from the impersonal and immediate transactions associated with global finance and capitalism. However, while the importance of patronage networks in Pakistan remain undeniable, their role in the politics and economics of the west needs to be recognised as well. In this instance Armytage overlooks the fact that there are important differences but also striking similarities in the way that patronage works in, for example, the economics and politics of the United States.

Rosita Armytage has compiled a fascinating ethnography of elite businessmen and their families in Pakistan. It is not the first study of these influential groups. In 1968 the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq put forward his thesis arguing that twenty-two industrial family groups had come to control the greater part of the industrial, banking and insurance sectors in the country. This had led to an enormous concentration of wealth and power in their hands. In Armytage's ethnography we meet some of these families again showing not only their resilience but also the fact that the system and strategies that they used to prosper still remain in place five decades later. This despite the fact that under Bhutto's nationalisation drive in the early 1970s some of these families lost almost 70% of their business assets. Armytage's work is a carefully constructed and nuanced picture of elites in Pakistan, enlivened by her rich ethnographic content which is used skilfully to illustrate wider findings. As mentioned, the book is at its best when the specific and the local is used to comment on global phenomena such as social class, capitalism and global development. If anything, the reader familiar with Pakistan will find the historical background less engaging (though necessary) and wonder if some of the *Navay Raje* or new elite in industrial cities such as Faisalabad and Sialkot could have provided a further contrast to what is already a nuanced and thoroughly contextualised piece of research.