



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Book Review

Citation for published version:

Turner, O 2016, 'Book Review: Globalization and transnational capitalism in Asia and Oceania, edited by Jeb Sprague' *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, vol 22, no. 1, pp. 191-193. DOI: 10.1080/13547860.2017.1260888

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13547860.2017.1260888](https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860.2017.1260888)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



BOOK REVIEW

Globalization and Transnational Capitalism in Asia and Oceania, edited by Jeb Sprague, London, Routledge, 2016, xiii+322 pages, £100 (Hardback), ISBN 9781138016224

The rapidly evolving dynamics of the Asia Pacific have become a magnet for scholarly attention. This attention centres primarily around China's fast-paced material development and its consequences for the region, with its political-diplomatic, economic, military-security, social, and cultural transformations variously explored and in combination with one another. The literature is also typically framed by an adherence to the notion that it is nation states: China, Japan, the Philippines and so on, and the web of bilateral and multilateral ties that appears to bind them together, which are the fulcrums of these transformations. For the editor of, and contributors to, *Globalization and Transnational Capitalism in Asia and Oceania*, this represents the fundamental dissatisfaction from which their volume departs.

As Jeb Sprague asserts in his introduction, the book "looks at the reality behind this façade of nation state competition" (p.3). The aim is to escape the "zombie language of the Westphalian, state-centric approach" (p.4) which endures despite the world having undergone deep and powerful transfigurations. For Sprague and his colleagues, power and authority can no longer be accurately mapped around the boundaries of nation states. In what many call the era of globalisation, both are seen to flow seamlessly *through* countries and regions, and cannot be meaningfully conceived as the capabilities and behaviours of China, Vietnam, Indonesia and others *per se*, but as those of groups whose allegiances lie not with nationality, but with the rewards of capitalism the agenda of which they broadly control.

The book is theoretically underpinned by the global capitalism school (GCS) and its analytical focus on transnational class and social relations in a world transitioned from its previous international phase of world capitalism to the current global phase of world capitalism, where national economic structures are integrated into global structures of economic activity (p.3) dominated by particular sets of economic/political/technocratic/consumerist elites (p.7). At the heart of the book lies today's Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC), "a class in and of itself whose material basis is in TNCs [transnational corporations] and the accumulation of global capital" (p.6). From here the book is organised into five sections: Transnational capitalist class; Labor and the global economy; Finance and production capital; Transnational dynamics and (under)development; and Transnationally oriented elites and the state apparatus, within which the authors examine their applications across the Asia Pacific and Oceania.

The book has a number of strengths. It forces us to look beyond the state actors which have signed up to regional multilateral practices such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and to reassess them as the domain of elites with interests across multiple economies and powerful interests in blurring the boundaries between them (chapter 3). So too does it ask us to reconsider the 'rise' of new global powers and the extent to which we confuse the rise of China, India and others with the rise of concentrated factions *within* these states who increasingly dictate the forces which propel them (chapter 4). The underbelly of China's 'rise' is afforded particular attention, including analyses of how its political and economic elites (many in government) are tied to the global finance sectors (chapter 2) and offshore banking regimes (chapter 9), and the impacts of transnational capital on China's working class (chapter 6). Scholarship on the 'rise' of the BRICS nations as a possible counterbalance to Western hegemony has become an industry in itself, but here attention turns to the exploitative practices of BRICS elites and local class struggles and popular resistances that align with others around the world, including those of the West (chapter 15).

The volume is stitched together by a common conceptual thread which gives the book a continuity that many will find appealing. Others may find it repetitive in parts, as on occasion the chapters tread similar or identical theoretical grounds before turning attention to the empirical matter (though in an edited volume designed to allow readers to pick and choose individual chapters, this can be difficult to avoid). As with any collection of ideas some chapters are more convincing than others, and some readers may not be entirely persuaded by the arguments. One criticism could be for example that, rather than a “façade”, the state-centric approach essentially dismissed by this volume could instead be better presented as one piece of the larger puzzle; ‘competing’ Marxian vs Westphalian models are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Specifically, while the role of transnational elites in the Asia Pacific has certainly been unduly overlooked to date, their influence is perhaps more central to certain realms than others.

Contemporary China-Japan relations for example are steered in no small part by the memories of historical conflicts and injustices which date back centuries. Powerful knowledges or national myths of the Chinese/Japanese Other and the ‘threats’ they represent are domestically ingrained and function in the formulation and advancement of economic-political-security policy. Similarly, the unprecedented failure of ASEAN in 2012 to issue a joint statement (including on the South China Sea disputes with China) from its annual meeting was blamed on host Cambodia’s reluctance to upset allies in Beijing. Cambodia’s political-economic relations with China have been close since the latter aided the former during its war with Vietnam in the mid-1970s. Understandings of statehood and territorial sovereignty are also a key policy issue across contemporary Asia and such discourses are not simply peddled by government or elites onto a passive populace, as they continually reinforce one other; for China, Vietnam, the Philippines and others the South China Sea disputes are about (among other things) national integrity. For China, the perpetual issue of Taiwan has been a matter of state sovereignty since at least 1949. With popular support the governments of India and Japan continually press for a permanent presence in the UN security Council, on the grounds of state pride and recognition.

This is not to refute the validity of the volume under review. It is to say that the book complements rather than disproves much of the (‘state-based’) literature to which it responds. The landscape of the Asia Pacific and Oceania and its modern day transformations are driven by more than class structures and capitalism which are one (very important) part of a highly complex picture. The inextricable forces of memory, identity, culture, nationalism, and so on, along with the roots of inter-state relations, and specific issues like Taiwan and the South China Sea and their centrality to enduring conceptions of statehood, cannot be removed from the equation or simply reduced to class conflict, though that is never the explicit claim of the book. Crucially, these forces often predate the onset of the global capitalist phase described. In short, states—and in particular ideas about the state—still very much matter in the contemporary Asia Pacific.

This volume however is an extremely valuable addition to the literature. It casts its net wide but retains a consistent worldview which is compelling and thought-provoking. The authors are right to assert that, to a significant extent, we now live in a qualitatively different world; the forms of ‘hyper-capitalism’ we see today have caused a dispersal in authority away from nation states and mean that continuing to ignore the types of actors and networks of power explored in this volume would be nothing short of naïve. With patterns of wealth accumulation continuing in the direction of a relative few, the issues raised by this book are extremely timely, and will likely only become a matter of increasing salience for the Asia Pacific and Oceania in the future.

Oliver Turner
Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Edinburgh, UK.
oliver.turner@ed.ac.uk

