

**Shaun Breslin**, *China and the Global Political Economy*, Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, International Political Economy Series, 2013 (first published in 2007), pp. 256. ISBN 978-1-137-35520-1 (paperback).

Shaun Breslin's magisterial *China and the Global Political Economy*, originally published in 2007, is now available in a 2013 paperback edition with a short postscript reflecting on the impact of the 2008 global economic crisis. Covering a wide array of topics and bringing together an impressive amount of empirical data, the book seeks to provide an all-round assessment of political and economic change in China's post-Maoist reform era, and how China's rapid growth has affected both the global economy and Chinese society itself.

The key mission of the book is to produce what Breslin terms a 'tempered' counter-narrative to the 'exaggerated' conclusions about the impact of China's reforms that have emerged in a plethora of popular writings in recent years, and which exert influence on policy makers and the public imagination alike. Breslin seeks to counter voices on both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, there are those (sometimes from within US strategic think tanks or Chinese government offices) who predict that China will inevitably grow into a military contender challenging US hegemony and/or an economic 'superpower'. On the other are those observers who come to the exact opposite conclusion (often through studies of China's domestic challenges), that collapse of China is imminent. Breslin's cure for both types of sensationalism consists in sticking to the well-tryed and sound scholarly virtues of a) relying on extensive empirical data, and b) focusing more on retrospective analysis of what has already happened and why, than on predicting what is going to happen in the future. The target audience is scholars of international relations (IR) or international political economy (IPE) who are not China specialists. However, Breslin also hopes to demonstrate to China specialists versed in the disciplinary tradition of area studies, how the analytical tools of IPE can be drawn upon to achieve a deeper understanding of China's unique historical experience. It is thus Breslin's intention to illustrate how China's development is shaped in the interplay between 'endogenous' and 'exogenous' factors, and in the process of doing so, to avoid false dichotomies such as 'domestic-international', 'economics-politics' and 'state-market' that constitute hindrances rather than helpful tools for deeper understanding.

Breslin's ambition to work within an explicitly critical and non-statist scholarly approach is operationalized in Chapter 1 through the crucial

adoption of Harold Lasswell's distributive definition of 'politics' as the study of 'who gets what, when and how'. Drawing on this definition, Breslin makes it his overall focus to assess 'which groups, classes and/or interests' both within and outside China 'have gained what from China's re-engagement with the global economy' (p. 33). It is this attention to identifying the winners and losers of China's rise that really makes Breslin's book stand out as a useful contribution to existing literatures. Whether or not one agrees with the moral pertinence of applying such a sociological balance sheet approach, it does in any case provide Breslin's book with an analytical value-added in comparison with many other studies of Chinese politics and economics, which are often concerned with explaining how institutions work functionally rather than which social groups benefit. To give but one example of this approach, Breslin rejects the idea that the USA as a whole has either lost or won as a consequence of China's reforms, suggesting instead that 'while US workers might be losing, many US companies are not only gaining, but also generating this economic growth in the first place' (p. 192). The Lasswellian stance is what brings definite analytical shape to Breslin's skilful attempt in the remainder of the chapters to get beyond the conception of 'China' as a unitary actor simply identifiable with its central state executive.

Each of the chapters 2 through 5 focuses on a different empirical aspect of China's reforms. Chapter 2 discusses China's domestic economic reform programmes from plan towards market since 1978. As an example of the lexical approach deployed throughout the book, Breslin in this chapter alone gets through, in a swift but apt manner: the changing base of the Chinese Communist Party's ideology and legitimacy, the incremental-experimental nature of reforms, the role of local governments, the liberalization of state-owned enterprises, tax reform, constitutional amendments, and – in the Lasswellian spirit – the collusion between the political and the emerging economic elites as the 'winners' of reform. The last section raises the theoretical issue of whether China qualifies as a capitalist country. Breslin answers in the positive. However, given that Breslin, as an IPE scholar, has the tools at hand for a more systematic comparison of China's emerging political-economic system, it is a pity that this section is only two pages long. Chapter 3 looks at how China was gradually 'opened up' to foreign investments, and discusses the global political implications. Breslin tracks this process from the 'relative isolation' of the Maoist era, to the 'liberalizing logic' that accompanied the entry of China into the World Trade Organization after 1999. Chap-

ter 4 makes the important methodological argument against a 'statist' research agenda that China's economy is in fact more globalized than it appears at a superficial glance at 'bilateral' statistics of trade and investment between nation states. Available figures on international trade and investment involving China might be quite misleading for several reasons (e.g. practices such as smuggling, round tripping, capital flight and Hong Kong's position as a transit point). Breslin also shows how the deep integration of Western multinational firms in China, which is largely ensured through subcontracting to intermediary companies, tends to go amiss when one relies only on national-level statistics. Chapter 5 is the most IR-focused chapter, dealing with a wide array of geopolitical implications of China's economic rise.

Chapter 6 usefully runs through various internal contradictions and sociological challenges emerging out of China's 'reform and opening up'. However, Breslin almost apologizes (p. 158) for providing what he terms a 'laundry list' of China's problems—environmental issues, poverty, unemployment, corruption, low-wage exploitation—and how these might be spilling over into increasing social unrest and class formation. This gesture seems unnecessarily cautious for two reasons. First, the analysis in Chapter 6 seems neither more nor less 'laundry list'-like than the collation of issues in preceding chapters. Second, the attention Breslin pays to the unevenly distributed social consequences of reform for the Chinese population is entirely confluent with his Lasswellian theoretical framework. Indeed, one could argue that the 'who gains' approach would have been incompletely executed had it not been for Chapter 6. If there is anything problematic about the set-up, it is rather that Breslin focuses almost exclusively on the *domestic* consequences of Chinese reforms, thus paradoxically reproducing the domestic/international dichotomy. Surely, China's key 'domestic challenges', such as the threat of ecological collapse and the prospect of regime destabilization are, and should be discussed as, problems with global consequences.

Furthermore, it must be conceded that the book's ambition of covering a very wide empirical ground makes it a quite dense read in terms of the amount of information and data provided. But then again, temperate 'grey-scaling' naturally makes for more demanding reading than monochromatic polemics, which seek to deliver one central message or 'China Story' only. It is moreover fortunate that the comprehensive index makes it possible to navigate one's way to the most immediately relevant passages and use the book as an easy-to-consult handbook. In conclusion, Breslin has contributed a seminal account of how we should

think about China's development after Mao. It is a book that makes good use of the potential of critical social science to provide perspectives on social reality that may run counter to the ways of seeing that result from the instrumental rationality of both state and market actors. As such, it can be highly recommended both as an empirical primer for non-specialists in the Chinese case, and as an IPE toolbox for rethinking China, for more seasoned Sinologists.

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