

BOOK REVIEW

Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping our World

Doug Saunders, New York: Vintage Books, 2012. 366 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-307-38856-8 Paperback.

Reviewed by Franklin Obeng-Odoom

School of the Built Environment, University of Technology, Sydney

One of the greatest anomalies in the social sciences is the ever increasing tendency to subdivide. Migration is one unfortunate victim. There is a field of research called 'migration studies', different and distinct from urban studies, and development studies. In a debate with the economist Gustav Ranis, the distinguished migration scholar, Stephen Castles argued for a holistic approach towards migration studies in his paper for the Social Science Research Council Conference, held from 28 February to 1 March, 2008 in New York. I too consider this fragmentation disturbing. Urban scholars have always been interested in migration and, while urbanism is not all about migration, migration constitutes an important part of the field. The subdivision and territorialisation lead to a loss in our understanding of the migration phenomenon.

In *Arrival City*, the journalist, Doug Saunders tries to see both like an urbanist and a migration writer. Seeing as an urbanist, he explains the processes of rural-urban migration and how cities across the world are expanding because of an urban drift of dwellers in the countryside. Wearing the hat of a migrationist, he describes how migration into some of the world's biggest cities such as Nairobi, and London, Toronto, Amsterdam, and Istanbul is changing their urban environment. From both perspectives, cities are important. To this extent, *Arrival City* has a similar emphasis as *Triumph of the City*, a book written by Harvard University economist, Edward Glaeser.

The concept of 'arrival city' refers to various experiences. The arrival city is that part of the village which has become urbanised. It is also that part of the already established city where migrants first settle when they move away from their village. The arrival city is the part of Paris and Chicago, among other cities of the world, where transnational migrants settle when they arrive in the host country for the first time. These parts of the city serve as springboard for migrants to jump to the more affluent neighbourhoods. Although the arrival city may be regarded as the 'margins' (p. 57), it is 'neither rural nor urban' (p. 16). It is the peri-urban. The arrival city performs many functions but, according to Saunders, its most important function is to provide opportunities for social mobility. Synonyms such as the 'gateway city' (p. 82) clearly emphasise this function. Others such as 'outskirts' (p. 71), 'slum' (p. 11), 'informal settlement' (p. 13), and 'informal economy' (p. 41) are commonly used in reference to the lack of such opportunities, but they also connote or constitute 'arrival'.

The author believes that 'arrival cities' should be encouraged, defended, and extended. While he identifies a few failed 'arrival cities' such as many settlements in Chad, Ethiopia, and Niger, He argues that they would disappear if there were investment in title formalisation, education, financialisation, and entrepreneurship (p. 270). The test of an 'arrival city' is based on how much social mobility role it performs. Proof that some residents in the 'arrival city' are becoming real property owners marks the beginning of the arrival function. In many instances, Saunders praises self-help and endorses it, as de Soto does in *The Other Path* and in *The Mystery of Capital*. There is a slight variation in the resulting prescription, though. Saunders makes a stronger case for state intervention in markets. However, the 'theory of the state' advanced is one of welfare, so the distinction between his work and that of de Soto is one of form; not of substance. Accordingly, the book's thesis will be met with similar criticisms as its forbears (see, for example, Benda-Beckmann, 2003) and recently by Australian critical social scientists, Kathryn Davidson and Brendan Gleeson (see, for example, Davidson and Gleeson, 2013).

The book succeeds in doing what it promises to deliver, but it makes some fundamental conceptual mistakes. While recognising that the dichotomy between rural and urban can be blurry, it surprisingly fails to understand that the formal-informal bifurcation is equally problematic. The informal sector provides accommodation, work, and a venue for socialisation for those in the formal sector of society, a systemic and structural connection long identified by critical scholars such as Princeton University sociologist, Alejandro Portes. Further, several studies have shown that the informal sector or the 'arrival city' is not only occupied by migrants from the village seeking to enter the formal sector. There are long-term urbanites; some of them professionals, others fresh graduates, and many more students. The roots of these different classes of migrants are not all necessarily in the country as Saunders claims. Other migration flows recently emphasised by University of London scholar Deborah Potts, such as urban-urban migration, migration from primary cities to secondary cities, and secondary cities to primary cities, are all ignored in Saunders' account. Also, research on peri-urban agriculture published in 2011 in this journal by Phillipe Lebailly, Damien Muteba, and Ludovic Andres and in journals such as *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* (e.g., by Yasin Abdalla and his colleagues, 2013) casts doubts on the simplistic categorisation of agriculture as a rural activity. Indeed, Kwaku Obosu-Mensah's book, *Food Production in Urban Areas* shows that most arrival residents continue to farm in the city, that is, urban farmers tend to have rural backgrounds contrary to the claims in the book under review.

Unfortunately, *Arrival City* contains numerous egregious factual mistakes. The contention that understanding circular migration has eluded scholars (p. 45) is a case in point. While there is a scholarly study cited as a basis, this ‘proof’ referred to much earlier decades and was published in 1988! So, the claim is forced. Circular migration is a well-known phenomenon in migration and urban studies, and Saunders is not the first to have shed light on the topic. Also forced, if not faux or false, is the claim that the nature of the ‘arrival city’ and the work of its residents is ‘so completely misunderstood’ (p. 49). Among others, Keith Hart’s studies in the 1970s (e.g., Hart, 1973) and more recent studies and special issues in *Journal of Developing Societies* (vol. 27, nos. 3-4) and *Urban Anthropology* (vol. 40, nos. 3 and 4) have greatly expanded our knowledge of the phenomenon. Indeed, another journalist, Phillip Mattera, published *Off the Books* some three decades ago. Further, the context of the claims that the formalisation of title started in the 1990s and that it was de Soto’s *The Other Path* that changed the World Bank’s view (p. 286) is incorrect. Saunders is right that de Soto’s ideas influenced the World Bank, especially in its dealings with the so-called developing countries. However, the Bank’s main policy on land reform advocating this idea was published in 1975, not in the 1990s, as the Bank’s Lead Economist on agrarian matters, Klaus Deininger, notes in his joint paper published in *The World Bank Research Observer*. A more compelling analysis of de Soto’s work has been provided by the geographer, Alan Gilbert in a recent issue of *International Development Planning Review*. Neither de Soto nor the World Bank is the originator of the view that land should be regarded as property - as Richard Schlatter’s *Private Property: The History of an Idea* shows. Finally, Saunders’ claim that it is the *World Development Report, Reshaping Economic Geography*, published by the World Bank in 2009, that took a first large scale endorsement of ‘arrival city’ (p. 58), is erroneous. Other studies such as *The Challenge of Slums* appeared much earlier.

In short, the enthusiastic endorsements *Arrival City* has received should be viewed carefully. Certainly, it is promising that there is some attempt to marry migration, development, and urban studies. Also, the book’s spirited criticism of state-led attacks on arrival residents is consistent with empirical evidence collected by many social scientists around the world such as Australian anthropologist Robbie Peters whose book, *Surabaya, 1945-2010*, eloquently makes the point: attempts to remove arrival cities by state fiat commonly fail to achieve their expressed aims. Further, the lucid presentation of *Arrival City* is a credit to Saunders and his insightful analysis about how arrival residents become major political force for change is highly commendable. The concept of ‘arrival’ itself can be salvaged for further analysis. In particular, what we can call the ‘centralisation of the periphery’ can be subjected to more intensive studies to scrupulously untangle the social processes and consequences of greater connectedness of the periphery to the centre within, between, and across countries. However, as a teacher of political economy and urban economics, the factual and conceptual failings of this book and their consequences give me cause to worry. Like magnets, the book’s seductive title and easy writing style will attract students and policy makers alike. Unfortunately, unwary and uncritical followers of its thesis, interpretation, and analysis will be lead astray; perhaps with a whimper.

Franklin Obeng-Odoom is the Chancellor’s Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the School of the Built Environment, University of Technology, Sydney in Australia. His research interests are centred on the political economy of development, cities and natural resources. He is the author of the books, *Governance for Pro-Poor Urban Development: Lessons from Ghana* (Routledge, 2013) and *Oiling the Urban Economy: Land, Labour, Capital, and the State in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana* (Routledge, 2014). More about his work can be found on his website, <http://obeng-odoom.com/> He can be contacted at Franklin.Obeng-Odoom@uts.edu.au.

References

- Benda-Beckmann, F. V. (2003). ‘Mysteries of Capital or Mystification of Legal Property? *Focaal-European Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 41, pp. 187–191.
- Castles, S. (2008). ‘Development and Migration –Migration and Development:What comes first?’, Social Science Research Council Conference Migration and Development: Future Directions for Research and Policy’, 28 February – 1 March 2008-02-09, New York City.
- Davidson, K. and Gleeson, B. (2013). ‘The urban revolution that isn’t: The political economy of the ‘New Urbanology’, *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 72, pp. 52- 79.
- Deininger K and Binswanger H, (1999). ‘The Evolution of the World Bank’s Land Policy: Principles, Experience, and Future Challenges’, *The World Bank Research Observer*, *The World Bank Research Observer*, vol. 14, no. 2 , pp. 247–76.
- De Soto, H. (1989). *The Other Path*. Harper & Row Publishers, New York.
- De Soto, H. (2000). *The Mystery of Capital: Why capitalism triumphs in the West and fails everywhere else*, Bantam Press, New York.
- Elhadary, Y.A, Namati, H. and Obeng-Odoom, F. (2013). ‘The development at the peri-urban area and its impact on agriculture activities: An example from the Seberang Perai Region, Penang State, Malaysia’, *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, vol. 37, no. 7, pp. 834-856.
- Gilbert, A. (2012). ‘De Soto’s The Mystery of Capital: reflections on the book’s public impact’, *International Development Planning Review*, vol. 34, no.3, pp. v-xvii.
- Glaeser, E (2012). *Triumph of the City*, Pan Books, London.
- Hart, K. (1973). ‘Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 61-89.
- Lebailly, P. and Muteba, D. (2011). ‘Characteristics of urban food insecurity: The Case of Kinshasa’, *African Review of Economics and Finance*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 57 – 67.

- Ludovic, A. and Lebailly, P. (2011). 'Peri-urban agriculture: The case of market gardening in Niamey, Niger', *African Review of Economics and Finance*, vol. 3, no. 1. pp. 68-79.
- Mattera, P. (1985). *Off the books: The rise of the underground economy*, Pluto Press, London and Sydney.
- Obosu-Mensah, K. (1999). *Food Production in Urban Areas A Study of Urban Agriculture in Accra, Ghana*, Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Peters, R. (2013). *Surabaya, 1945-2010: Neighbourhood, State and Economy in Indonesia's City of Struggle*, NUS Press, Singapore.
- Schlatter, R. (1951). *Private Property: The History of An Idea*. Russell and Russell, New York.
- UN-HABITAT (2003). *The Challenge of Slums*, Earthscan Publications Ltd. London and Sterling.