

***The Political Economy of Southeast Asia: Politics and Uneven Development under Hyperglobalisation.* Edited by Toby Carroll, Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. Softcover: 412pp.**

As part of the Palgrave Macmillan’s series “Studies in the Political Economy of Public Policy”, this edited volume analyses the political economy of Southeast Asia through the lens of the Murdoch School of International Relations (IR). This school of IR thought emphasizes how class-based coalitions and social conflicts shape politics and the economy.

The book comprises fifteen chapters. Chapter One, by Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, begins by investigating how the region’s development has given rise to various “class forces”—the “powerful politico-bureaucratic networks”, the “dominant conglomerates” headed by “small ruling cliques of families and ‘crony capitalists’”, the “illiberal, consumerist ‘new rich’ and middle classes disinterested in democracy” and the “ravaged and disorganized working class and peasantry” (p. vii). The Murdoch School suggests that political and economic outcomes in the region are determined by the power relations and contests between these “class forces”. To advance this proposition, the authors expose the shortcomings of rival Weberian and historical institutionalist, while arguing that neoliberalism is better understood as an ideology rather than a proper theoretical framework (p. 7). Chapter Two, by Toby Carroll, provides a well-crafted overview of the region’s political and economic trajectories by positioning Southeast Asia in a broader global context. This allows readers to understand how the region’s political economy is path-dependent and shaped by various external elements such as the legacy of colonial rule, the relocation of Japanese production plants to the region in the 1970s and China’s recent ascendancy.

This is followed by thirteen thematic chapters that utilize the Murdoch School to examine specific issues. For example, in Chapter Three, Garry Rodan and Jacqui Baker contend that “crony capitalism” persists in the region and continues to influence policy-making in the ten regional states. Although elite-business connections have been undermined or disrupted since the 1990s by several factors—such as post-1998 democratization and decentralization in Indonesia and rising inequality in Singapore—these crony capitalists have successfully reconfigured themselves to maintain and even expand their ability to influence state policies. Chapter Eight, by Lee Jones

and Shahar Hameiri, demonstrates how “regulatory regionalism”, or the concoction of regional standards governing a specific issue area, is the outcome of contestations between pro-free market elites, protectionist oligarch businesses and entrenched bureaucracies. In Chapter Ten, Kelly Gerard and Charanpal S. Bal explore the two-tiered migrant labour system in Southeast Asia, particularly the differentiated treatment of low-skilled workers and highly-skilled professionals by the state and capital. While the former are harshly exploited, the latter are lured to work abroad with attractive packages, ranging from competitive salaries to long-term visas, to sustain the capitalist development of the region.

Some chapters employ an interdisciplinary approach, complementing the Murdoch School with other perspectives. For instance, Faris Al-Fadhat’s Chapter Seven applies the Amsterdam School, a framework emphasizing the roles of transnational segments of capital in shaping the socio-political configurations and forms of a state, to examine how the class of capital with international links, especially those involved in transnational value chains, can sway policy outcomes. Juanita Elias’ Chapter Nine, through the supplementary use of feminist scholarship, reveals how state power and capitalism have produced intertwining class and gender disparities in Southeast Asia. In particular, gender inequality has been “sustained through state policies and practices that typically fail to recognize the significant role of unpaid and underpaid feminized forms of work, often within the home” (p. 230). Paul K. Gillert’s Chapter Fifteen provides an ecological dimension to the Murdoch School’s emphasis on social conflict, with the author showing how hyper-globalization inevitably leads to environmental degradation with land, water and air pollution being “inherent in Southeast Asia’s mode of capitalist development” (p. 373).

Readers will definitely benefit from the wide coverage of issues in this book, with chapters discussing topics as diverse as state transformation, labour migration, economic aid and environment degradation. More importantly, these chapters cogently explore the political economy of Southeast Asia in a thematic fashion, instead of by using country case studies. Doing so not only allows the contributors to explore the interplay between the local, national, regional and international agents and coalitions, but also facilitates the inclusion of this volume as a course reading. Nevertheless, the book’s simple dismissal of neoliberalism as a mere ideology means that it fails to critically and carefully scrutinize this major IR school of thought. Other than alienating those who see neoliberalism as

a legitimate analytical framework, the book may also leave some readers to disregard neoliberalism as an important conceptual tool, even though it undergirds the origin and rise of “hyper-globalisation” as an idea.

Overall, *The Political Economy of Southeast Asia: Politics and Uneven Development under Hyperglobalisation* validates the Murdoch School’s ability to explain the many facets of the contemporary political economy of Southeast Asia. The book’s emphasis on the relevance of class forces, social coalitions and their contestations of power makes an important contribution to the literature on the political economy of the region.

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