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SOJOURN Symposium

On *Along the Integral Margin: Uneven Development in a Myanmar Squatter Settlement* by Stephen Campbell. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022.

Review essays by Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Shae Frydenlund, with a reply from Stephen Campbell.

Keywords: Non-normative labour, squatter settlement, urban development, capitalism, Myanmar.

Review Essay 1: Elliott Prasse-Freeman

Rampaging elephants and cyclone-induced floods spur rural-to-urban migration; a collector of recyclables wanders too near to someone's shop, is knifed in the belly and dies; a nine-year-old girl is removed from school to toil beside her mother in a shrimp processing plant; scavengers scour open fields to find worms for eel bait; young men sell themselves into indentured servitude on offshore fishing rafts though they know some will not return; debilitated and exhausted bodies find ways to eke out an existence and make it through the day. These are the lives led by denizens of Yadana, a squatter settlement in peri-urban Yangon, that are illuminated with equal parts analytical precision and ethnographic compassion in *Along the Integral Margin: Uneven Development in a Myanmar Squatter Settlement* by anthropologist Stephen Campbell.

And while these "margins" as introduced above may appear far from normal in "transition"-era Myanmar—it of the breathless economic growth reports and glittering playgrounds for bourgeois

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consumption that defined the decade from 2011 until the military coup of February 2021—Campbell insists that they are indeed the norm. Accepting but exceeding the long-standing anthropological imperative to "make the strange familiar", the book shows that these margins are not simply normal to Myanmar, but integral—important, essential, necessary—to capitalist accumulation and reproduction as it plays out today.

Spread across seven chapters (but using, efficiently, only 145 pages), the book is organized around the lives of the dwellers of Yadana, the pseudonym for an area on Yangon's urban peripheries of approximately four thousand people. The first two chapters describe how the residents settled in Yadana, with Campbell telling a history of capitalism in Myanmar—from colonialist extraction to military-state capitalism under the (misnamed) Burma Socialist Program Party (1962–1988) to the authoritarian neoliberal military-state (1990–2011)—through the lens of the labour struggles that he argues spurred reactions by the military-state-capitalist assemblage (more on this below). When the "transition" arrived, peasants were told life would improve. But for those who did not own the means of production (land, fishponds, etc.), social reproduction became increasingly impossible. This situation generated massive in-migration to urban areas such as Yangon, not for formal jobs—such jobs were scarce—but because farm households could not support so many individuals. Campbell hence links the two domains, pointing out that "the dynamics of capitalist transformation in Yangon's industrial zones cannot be understood apart from rural experiences of dispossession and government neglect" (p. 51).

But just because formal jobs were few does not mean that labour opportunities were lacking. The book's middle chapters explore the way that Yadanites make a living—Campbell conducted a census of the settlement, collecting data on income and other demographic features, which supplements his ethnography of the squatters. Yadanites, he finds, scrape by through petty vending, collection and resale of waste, animal husbandry, construction and portering. While at first glance many of these tasks seem relatively "autonomous"—

workers would seem to be able to decide how much to collect and whom to sell goods to—Campbell observes how capitalist relations resembling the wage form re-emerge even here, through the power of capital. For example, if a waste collector wants to use a collecting cart owned by the recycling plant to which he sells his plastic, he can only sell his plastic to that plant; if the eel merchant provides short-term loans to his worm collectors, then the worm collectors cannot seek better worm prices elsewhere. These monopsonist merchants can be understood as a latch linking seemingly disconnected zones, aggregating and then connecting diffuse materials (trash in a gutter; worms hiding in a field) into productive processes; as Campbell puts it: "the merchant operates as coordinator of a dispersed division of labour" which s/he incorporates into broader supply chains (p. 82). Concomitantly, even as he deconstructs the formal/informal divide to show that informal work is more a part of formal capitalism than it appears, Campbell also shows how even "formal" labour—work in factories that is ostensibly regulated by national law—is often in reality governed by the whims of line managers and factory owners who squeeze more surplus value out of workers than the law permits, by using verbal abuse, forced overtime, physical beatings and physical exhaustion that often makes workers assess that life is better outside the formal sector.

While many can successfully survive from week to week and year to year, others are not able to pay off their accruing and compounding debts. Families in this predicament are forced to pursue options outside of Yadana. Some indenture their daughters into servitude as domestic labourers, while families with able-bodied men may have them head to the offshore raft fishing industry. The raft fishing industry, which harvests ten thousand tons of seafood annually, much of it for domestic consumption, requires men to work "on an ocean-going raft made of nothing but bamboo poles, anchored some eighty miles out in the Bay of Martaban for eight months straight … tasked with lowering and drawing every six hours a twenty-to-thirty foot long 'tiger mouth' net, and then sorting, boiling, and drying on board the catch of mostly prawns" (pp. 112–13). Those who survive

the work describe how fights, sadistic overseers, malnutrition and illness produce what Campbell calls an "industry that devours its workers" (p. 112). The most bracing aspect of this necroeconomy is that it is often transparent about these effects. While some are deceived into slavery, many are not: "accounts ... of trafficking and violence in the raft fishing industry are in regular circulation among Yadana's residents" (p. 117). Despite this knowledge, year after year the settlement's residents "accept offers of what seem like large wage advances" (p. 117). The most devastating aspect of this industry is that as it churns through the lives of poor young Burmese men, the product produced by their low wages—shrimp paste—is the cheapest form of protein available nationally. As Campbell puts it: "Unfree labour of Myanmar's offshore raft fishing industry subsidizes everyday social reproduction across the country" (p. 121).

The final chapter describes the labour mobilization that is conducted in Yadana, tracing a novel form of union action in which organizers such as union leader Sandar Oo, seeming to recognize the false dichotomy of the formal/informal labour divide, "understand the union's mandate broadly—a social role that she articulated like this: 'For the most part, we help migrants who have fallen into distress [*doukkha*]'" (p. 131).

Hence, while the book ends on an uplifting note, this turn back to the power of labour strikes an ambivalent note that warrants further reflection. On one hand, Campbell identifies the way in which Yadanite politics is almost reflexively, naturally, a radical one. As he puts it: "Residents of the Yadana settlement did not articulate an explicitly anticapitalist politics" but rather their politics "emerges here out of proletarian survival tactics, irrespective of participants' expressed political commitments" (p. 54). It is therefore not surprising that "collective proletarian struggle remains widespread and vibrant across Myanmar's expanding industrial zones" (p. 140). But on the other hand, all along *the Integral Margin* the reader observes the progressive deterioration of conditions for workers in Myanmar. Recall that Campbell had described Myanmar's capitalist history "not as the unfolding of a pregiven capitalist logic but as a series

of contingent adaptations by state actors to proletarian and peasant unrest" (p. 15). Here Campbell evokes a position articulated by the Italian Marxist Matrio Tronti, an argument that was made explicit in Campbell's first book about Burmese migrant labourers on the Thai/Myanmar border, where he wrote: "The particularities of capitalist development, argued Tronti, were best understood not as neutral technical innovations but as reactions to the threats to capital accumulation and managerial prerogative being posed by concrete working-class struggles" (Campbell 2018, p. 12).

Yet, if this dialectic is such that labour impels responses by capital, is it enough to celebrate labour's agential role when the dialectic "resolves" at each stage in intensified exploitation, rather than revolution and liberation? In other words, if capital never lets any crisis go to waste, what is the efficacy of Myanmar's labourers creating crises? What happens when a crisis is so resolved? When struggles end in the last instance in failure, do they become reminders of the inefficacy of mobilization? Conversely, however, is it possible to perceive a residue left by these struggles that outweighs the materially worse position that workers are left in? Can such a residue be re-invoked and re-signified as a resource in further struggles?

This question is particularly potent currently, at the time of a massive countrywide revolution against the military coup. While the immediate protests and the general strike were led by the "margins"—female workers from places such as Yadana—to what extent are these elements still relevant in the revolution, and to what extent have they been marginalized by mainstream liberal desires to reinstall the pre-coup status quo of quasi-authoritarian neoliberal plutocracy?

Review Essay II: Shae Frydenlund

At its heart, Stephen Campbell's ethnography of working life in Yadana, a Myanmar squatter settlement, is a radical and deeply humane study of the conditions of possibility that undergird urban capitalist development. The book is grounded in the central argument

that livelihoods thought to be at the margins of capitalism are at its centre. By attending to the multiple forms of labour undertaken by the settlement's residents, who are subject to diverse forces of compulsion and discipline, Campbell challenges the claim that non-normative labour arrangements are by definition non-capitalist. Rather, capitalist production—and capitalism itself—is relationally constituted in and through what is considered its outsides and opposites. Simultaneously concise and vast in theoretical scope, Campbell's follow-up to his *Border Capitalism, Disrupted* shows how capital accumulation in normative factory settings—such as the garment factory in his first book—are co-constituted alongside relations of production and reproduction outside those walls.

Each chapter centres on a different margin to support the core thesis that informality and non-normative labour relations are the scaffolding of capitalist modernity and urban development. The book opens with a class-centred reassessment of Myanmar's economic development, showing how marginalized histories of proletarian struggle and colonial-racial labour hierarchies have shaped Myanmar's state formation to the detriment of the proletarian classes. Myanmar's so-called transition, Campbell argues, is actually passive revolution wherein the bourgeoisie made select concessions to liberalize the political sphere and benefit "formal" workers while sowing precarity in the countryside and informal sectors (p. 32). Meanwhile, the seizure and privatization of public services by the military and later by a quasi-civilian government demonstrate that the "transition" was and is a process of dispossession, enclosure and displacement that ultimately instantiated a violent process of labour market flexibilization (p. 26). The end result of this flexibilization, Campbell shows, is a propertyless majority for whom the promise of good jobs never materialized. Read alongside recent analyses of Myanmar's "transition" that illuminate racial, ethnic and gendered dimensions of political transformation (Pavin, Prasse-Freeman and Strefford 2020; Hedström and Olivius 2022), the book draws attention to the significance of labour politics and class struggle in shaping contemporary Myanmar.

This critical reassessment of Myanmar history is the foundation for Campbell's argument about the role of fringe work in Myanmar's urban development and in capitalism more broadly. The book's second chapter offers a materialist account of the intimate and acutely spatial linkages between rural dispossession and urban development, showing who exactly "transitioned" where in the wake of Cyclone Nargis and agricultural transformation. In one of the book's most powerful passages, a dispossessed farmer cogently sums up the political economy of transition in Myanmar: the country's minority of wealthy farmers and business people thrive and the working poor scrape by in Yadana. Throughout the subsequent chapters, which follow residents of the Yadana squatter settlement as they toil in street vending, garment factories, water spinach plots, home factories and offshore fishing rafts, Campbell links the specific material conditions of each labour arrangement to broader processes of both rural dispossession and capitalist circuits of value. In so doing, he shows that everyday production of supposedly non-capitalist arrangements, such as the construction of squats and collection of waste, actually engenders capitalist production and rule at multiple scales.

For example, squatters obtaining bills of sale for their dwellings re-embed capitalism into erstwhile non-capitalist property relations, while municipal officials exploit the labour of independent waste collectors by selling supposedly exclusive access to collection areas (p. 40). In the latter case, municipalities offload the costs of urbanization onto vulnerable migrants who clean the city—a move that critical geographers have identified as part of a broader pattern subsidizing growth and prosperity through low-wage and unpaid migrant labour (Reddy 2016; Frydenlund 2020). At the same time, formal workplaces such as factories are revealed to be rife with conditions generally thought of as existing only in "unregulated" informal sectors—wage theft and forced overtime being two of the most common.

Methodologically and theoretically, the book is a work of dialectics. Campbell advances an anthropology of relational difference—a dialectical approach that disassembles dichotomies—to show that "apparent differences are not inherent qualities but

relationally constituted through their very opposition" (p. 144). From this perspective, capitalism is not characterized by a singular labour arrangement, long understood to be the "formal" full-time work of the Standard Employment Relations, but rather by myriad non-normative relations that exist within and alongside so-called normative relations. Analyses troubling the neat distinction between formal and informal sectors are not new in the field of labor history; however, Campbell's approach is unique in that it operationalizes social reproduction theory to disassemble the formal/informal binary at the scale of the everyday. Campbell's approach is novel in that it operationalizes social reproduction theory to disassemble this formal/informal binary at the scale of the everyday. His rewriting of Myanmar's economic transition and theorization of capitalist labour relations is a welcome intervention in the field of Myanmar studies and the broader field of labour history. The book also offers rich terrain for engagement by feminist geographers and Marxist-feminist theorists by detailing the role of gendered discipline in value extraction, relational production of state, community and bodily scales, and the reproduction of everyday life in Myanmar through (deadly) unpaid and unfree labour.

Campbell's theorization of labour unfreedom (chapter 6), one of several sub-arguments nested within the book's core thesis, is among the book's most valuable contributions. The tragedy of worker torture and death illustrates the compatibility of extrajudicial violence and "formal" capitalist industry (in this case, the production of a staple food). Campbell's discussion of offshore fishing work adds another perspective to a growing literature querying the role of death and debility in capitalist accumulation (Prasse-Freeman 2022; Frydenlund and Dunn, forthcoming). Unlike Prasse-Freeman's necroeconomy, where death is a step-in production, murder in Myanmar's offshore fishing sector is deployed as labour discipline among workers experiencing acute market dependence. While Campbell humanely and nimbly situates death within his critique of transition narratives, which include Zaw Lin Oo's murder (chapter 1), forced migration from the countryside (the threat of rampaging elephants and the aftermath of Nargis, as highlighted in chapter 2) and conceptualization

of unfree labour arrangements, debility also appears as a consistent force of compulsion shaping the materiality of non-normative labour arrangements but is not necessarily named as such. There are injured backs, tired limbs and psychological trauma—does the condition of life between health and death inform capitalist labour relations in Myanmar and elsewhere? I believe so. Future writing on precarious, devalued and unfree labour in Myanmar and elsewhere might benefit from deeper engagement with the relationship between debility and working life.

Campbell's engagement with Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) lends theoretical richness to understandings of the relationship between social reproduction and production, of essential and surplus labour. The book scales up core lessons of social reproduction feminism: where SRT feminists broke ground in offering a unified theory of social reproduction and rejecting the subsumption of reproduction to capitalist production, Campbell's dialectical method unifies not only social reproduction and production, but also freedom/unfreedom, surplus/essential, factory/home, development/underdevelopment, and ultimately capitalist/non-capitalist. In so doing, he emphasizes the political possibilities that accompany a more capacious understanding of labour and the proletariat class.

Recognizing non-normative workers and their varied acts of solidarity in the settlement strengthens and extends Campbell's rebuke to deproletarianization theory in his first book. Far from disappearing, proletarian politics are alive and well among squatter residents, thought to be irrelevant to an imagined standard of labour unionism. Additionally, Campbell's conceptualization of non-normative proletarians and co-constituted labour arrangements sidesteps a trap that Marxist-feminists long ago spotted in traditional Marxist organizing—the separation and subsumption of reproduction to production, which neglects race and gender and limits the terrain of radical struggle to the wage relation. Moving from a unified theory of labour to a dialectical theory of labour, Campbell opens opportunities for thinking through inclusive proletarian politics that recognize the material linkages between unwaged and waged work

without confining struggle to one type of work or class relation. In other words, thinking capaciously about non-normative work invites critical scholars of Asia and global capitalism alike to use labour relations as a lens to understand sweeping political and economic change while supporting solidarity between waged workers and those inhabiting the integral margins.

Author's Response: Stephen Campbell

It is humbling to read such insightful and generous reflections on *Along the Integral Margin* by two scholars whose own work I hold in high regard. Both Elliot Prasse-Freeman and Shae Frydenlund have in their research and publications wrestled with the difficult and often tragic nexus of violence, dispossession and labour in Myanmar, and among Myanmar migrants/refugees abroad. In their respective reviews, they have each, with perspicacity and political commitment, illuminated aspects of the book in ways that help this reader think further and differently about the fraught dynamics of labour in Myanmar.

A useful starting point for thinking further, and perhaps differently, about the book's analysis is Prasse-Freeman's reflection on my reading of working-class struggle. As Prasse-Freeman correctly points out, I argue in the book that disparate labour struggles in Myanmar have "spurred reactions by the military-state-capitalist assemblage". He clarifies that I borrow this line of argumentation from the Italian *operaista* Mario Tronti. What Tronti ([1964] 2019, p. 65) argued, specifically, was this:

> We too saw capitalist development first and the workers second. This is a mistake. Now we have to turn the problem on its head, change the orientation, and start again from first principles, which means focusing on the struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development is subordinated to working-class struggles; not only does it come after them, but it must make the political mechanism of capitalist production respond to them.

However, given the dire conditions of life and labour for the residents of the squatter settlement where I carried out my research—conditions that have deteriorated markedly since Myanmar's 2021 military coup—Prasse-Freeman raises an important question: Is *Along the Integral Margin*'s author viewing workers' struggles in Myanmar through rose-tinted glasses? In other words, just because the military-state-capitalist assemblage is reactive to workers' struggles, does that mean these reactions necessarily lead to improved conditions for workers and their families? The answer to the latter question is, of course, no. But I will get to that in turn. First, it is worth rereading Prasse-Freeman's contention in full:

> Yet, if this dialectic is such that labour impels responses by capital, is it enough to celebrate labour's agential role when the dialectic "resolves" at each stage in intensified exploitation, rather than revolution and liberation? In other words, if capital never lets any crisis go to waste, what is the efficacy of Myanmar's labourers creating crises? What happens when a crisis is so resolved? When struggles end in the last instance in failure, do they become reminders of the inefficacy of mobilization?

An initial point of clarification is that, in my reading of Hegel, contradictions are never resolved. They are only ever sublated—*aufgehoben*, a word that in German has the dual meaning of "to preserve" and "to put an end to" (Hegel 2010, pp. 81–82). "Something is sublated", wrote Hegel (2010, p. 82), "only insofar as it has entered into unity with its opposite." This means that, where capital is reactive to workers' struggles, the result is not resolution, but instead a transformation of one contradictory social formation into another, which inevitably reveals contradictions of its own. The new arrangement is not necessarily "better" for workers. But new contradictions can open different avenues for struggle that may enable workers to push for improved conditions, or perhaps even to achieve something more radical.

Consider the 2011–12 introduction of new legislation in Myanmar legalizing trade union formation and formalizing tripartite industrial

dispute resolution mechanisms. As discussed in *Along the Integral Margin*, the years immediately preceding this legislation—2009 and 2010, specifically—were marked by a wave of wildcat strikes across Yangon's industrial zones, "with one day seeing 10,000 workers taking part" (p. 138). In the face of this unrest, the new labour legislation was explicitly aimed to "ward off strikes" by channelling workplace grievances into restrictive bureaucratic mechanisms (p. 139). After the new legislation was passed, many workers went on to pursue their grievances through the formal tripartite process. And in the decade preceding the coup, workers organized themselves into almost three thousand registered enterprise-level trade unions.

To be sure, workers and unions continued to face employer recalcitrance and government repression during the so-called transition. And some registered unions were in fact employer-created "yellow" unions. Nevertheless, the new legislation did provide some legal cover—albeit inadequately enforced—that workers used to their advantage when organizing. And although the new legislation was meant to curb strikes—by, for example, requiring government mediation as a first step and prohibiting wildcat work stoppages—extra-legal strikes continued throughout the "transition" period. So, although "transitional" Myanmar's sectorally selective liberal labour compact was meant to contain disruptive labour unrest, it simultaneously created new legal space for worker organizing and opened different avenues for struggle, both of which workers used to mobilize and push for improved conditions, while also continuing with extra-legal work stoppages.

That said, we can now turn to Prasse-Freeman's follow-up question: "Is it possible to perceive a residue left by these struggles that outweighs the materially worse position that workers are left in? Can such a residue be re-invoked and re-signified as a resource in further struggles?" My answer to this question is a confident yes. Specifically, worker organizing during the "transition" fed into Myanmar's post-coup revolutionary uprising. The uprising began as a nationwide protest movement and general strike catalysed by factory workers—mostly young women in their late teens and early twenties—who took

to Yangon's streets on 6 February 2021. As Myanmar labour activist Ko Maung (2021) argues, "had workers not previously organised unions inside their factories, the protests that catalysed the Spring Revolution would not have happened. The February 6 protests ignited the anger of people across the country and led to nation-wide protests in the days that followed." Meanwhile, workers who were politicized by participating in workplace organizing have gone on to support the armed revolution in financial and other ways.

Of course, workers who during the "transition" were de jure or de facto excluded from the formal liberal labour compact have faced different challenges. But as Shae Frydenlund points out in her review, such legal-political exclusion does not mean that these informal workers were labouring "outside" or independent of the formal capitalist economy. She also helpfully underscores the point that *Along the Integral Margin*'s core thesis aims to challenge not just the reified formal/informal dichotomy, but also the related dichotomies of "social reproduction and production … freedom/unfreedom, surplus/essential, factory/home, development/underdevelopment, and ultimately capitalist/noncapitalist".

This dialectical understanding of relational difference is pertinent, I would suggest, for responding to Frydenlund's proposal that critical scholars of labour attend to debility and death in the workings of capitalist production. Specifically, she writes, "future writing on precarious, devalued and unfree labour in Myanmar and elsewhere might benefit from deeper engagement with the relationship between debility and working life". I agree.

In an influential article on rural dispossession, Tania Murray Li (2010) argued that neoliberal governments in the global South have taken an attitude of "let die" towards dispossessed populations whose labour is deemed redundant to the needs of capital. Dispossessed of their rural smallholdings, ex-peasants, Li argued, have been largely excluded from capitalist employment. The result has been malnutrition, illness and premature death for those vulnerable individuals who have sought to get by without wages (Li 2010, p. 66). A corollary to this argument seems to be that premature death among

pauperized ex-peasants is itself an indicator of their redundancy to the needs of capital accumulation. But as Frydenlund points out in her review, debility and premature death are also often the fate of individuals whose labour is still very much required by capital. This understanding likewise informs Prasse-Freeman's (2022) notion of necroeconomy: a system of value extraction wherein vulnerable wage labourers are "willingly" employed under conditions conducive to debility and death, such that the categories of indispensability and expendability are not mutually exclusive. Mostafa Henaway (2023) summarizes this logic succinctly in the title of a recent book: *Essential Work, Disposable Workers*.

As illustrative of this dialectic of indispensability/expendability in *Along the Integral Margin*, both Prasse-Freeman and Frydenlund home in on the notorious case of Myanmar's raft fishing industry, which operates off the coasts of Pyapon, in the Ayeyarwady delta, and Ye, in southern Mon State, and in which debility and death from malnutrition and violence are rife. What is additionally significant about the raft fishing industry is that it provides eighty per cent of the seafood consumed in Myanmar in the form of fish/shrimp paste (p. 121). As a relatively affordable source of meat protein, the latter is a staple food across the country. In sum, the fact that certain workers are prematurely "let die" by employers and governments is not in itself evidence that their labour is redundant to the needs of capital. It is, however, indicative of their perceived replaceability.

In their respective reviews of *Along the Integral Margin*, Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Shae Frydenlund have called attention to pressing issues that deserve further discussion and debate. They have, in short, provided penetrating commentaries on the book. For that I am indebted. I look forward to continuing the conversation in the years ahead.

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