

Comments from Penny for the reading group 29. August 2013

Thanks for circulating the readings - I've jotted down a few brief notes so as to join in the discussion at a distance. Just a few notes on what I found useful and some questions at the end. In general I found the Tsing piece more provocative but as Elisabeth says the other piece also raises some issues because it has more detail of a specific case.

I am intrigued by Tsing's discussion of supply chain capitalism - commodity chains subcontracting, outsourcing - 'autonomy of component enterprises is legally established even as the enterprises are disciplined within the chain as a whole. (148) For me there are useful comparisons here with the out-sourcing of government functions and the tension between autonomy and centralised control. This is something I'm looking at in terms of state infrastructures. Who has to build and maintain these infrastructures - who stands to profit - who takes responsibility. Important labour issues here about the work involved - in building but also in the management of payments for services.

Tsing also focuses on questions of diversity within structures of power - and wider discussions of wealth and justice that can't simply deploy older models of monolithic power (or descriptions blind to the differences internal to for example the work force). Important links here to Povinelli's work on late liberalism - which also focuses on the centrality of diversity alongside increasing regulation. The trope of 'bordering' comes to mind as a useful one here.

On scale - How can we imagine the 'bigness' of global capitalism (that is, both its generality and its scale) without abandoning attention to its heterogeneity? Supply chains offer a model for thinking simultaneously about global integration, on the one hand, and the formation of diverse niches, on the other (150). /Can we link this in some way to retail data - because the integrative aspects of the supply chains are dependent on the generation and movement of data - recording transactions - keeping auditable accounts etc. As Tsing points out - the move is from work to management itself as that which is centrally managed. Data work must be a large part of how 'bigness' is not just imagined but also enacted.

Her hopeful suggestion - that supply chains cannot be fully disciplined from inside the chain - so supply chains are in the end unpredictable - and marked by 'contingency, experimentation, negotiation, and unstable commitments' (151). /This is a somewhat unclear line of argument - I would have liked to see a more detailed example here.

An interesting point also about how successful firms influence the organisation of capital - shaping what counts as 'big' - successful firms as models for capitalists - guiding our ability to imagine the size, spread, and generality of capitalism (154). /This point connects well to the suggestion that we need to attend to the demarcations between what the centre looks to control and what it does not want to control. /The Wal-Mart model - control of prices, marketing, logistics and no-control of labour arrangements, environmental practices, subcontractors' investment strategies.

It is this question about what is regulated and what isn't and who by that links to the ship-breaking article. Ship-breaking an interesting example because ship-breaking highly regulated in Europe - and unregulated in Bangladesh - where international law does (or could in theory) operate. Can we think about labour in relation to the cross-cutting regulatory frames - not just about what the centre/the corporations do and don't want to control - but what other institutions (such as state institutions - nationally, and legal institutions - internationally) do and don't want to control. This would be a call to develop the comment that there can be corporate scandals about labour conditions with no change - 'scandals don't destroy the system' - but presumably there are interesting (and fluctuating) limits here (the regulation of migrant labour comes to mind here as a parallel case or fluctuating regulation).

Putting this together with the earlier point - I wonder how the tracking of spaces of non-regulation (finding and reproducing non-regulated labour) works in relation to the tracking of information (regulating that labour)? How do these dynamics co-exist?

My questions link to things we discussed last time about the undertheorization of state presence.

In connection with what we read last time - I'd also like to see how these ideas play out ethnographically in ways that allow us to consider how the playing out of affect works - how the values of entrepreneurship and autonomy work - in what context do they work - in what contexts are they challenged? These aspects are developed more clearly in the mushroom ethnographies so perhaps unfair to ask for it here too!

I look forward to hearing how the discussions go.

Best wishes

Penny