

**Armytage, Rosita. 2020. *Big Capital in an Unequal World: The Micropolitics of Wealth in Pakistan*. London: Berghahn Books. 206 pp. Pb.: 39.86€. ISBN: 17892 06162.**

Book review by

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The lives of global elites often seem wholly removed from “ordinary” lives – not least because of how globalized media forms (e.g. television, tourism brochures, TikTok) sometimes seem to relentlessly glamorize eliteness. So-called “super-rich” lifestyles are nowadays intensely mediated through value-adding everyday practices of disavowal and distinction, in ways which disguise their banal, everyday violence, assert elite forms of charismatic authority, and naturalize globe-spanning inequalities.

In response comes the “ethnography of the micro-politics of elite lives” (p. 17) in Rosita Armytage’s excellent *Big Capital in an Unequal World*. With parallels in other recent scholarship on transnational elites, Armytage’s monograph explores the “hidden”, undeniably secretive and secure lives of Pakistani society’s upper echelon, providing a compellingly-written account of how Pakistan’s most wealthy families interact with political and governmental actors (including those monitoring elite influence). This book explores manifold ways that elites induce deference, presenting them authentically and sympathetically, while still steely determining how they drift above the 99% as a stubbornly-unknowable economic stratum.

*Chapter 1* outlines her central research question, examining the “social lives of Pakistan’s business and political elite ... [demonstrating] how an elite group can shape and determine the economic and political structures of the nation” (p. 17). Armytage helpfully asserts the (strategic) place of instability within these lives at the beginning of the story she weaves. In a risky and unstably governed free-market context like Pakistan, the will of the market is ... the shifting desires of the nation’s most powerful” (p. 16). This chapter, importantly, addresses the challenge of accessing elite lives; the archetypal “studying up” to which so many (if not enough) anthropological projects aspire. *Chapter 2* marries accounts of research participants’ family histories with Pakistan’s traumatic history before, and since, 1947’s Partition, and shows how informal ties intertwine with the emergence of new enterprise, elites, and civilian and military regimes. *Chapter 3*

elaborates on the distinctions between old and new money. Through theoretically robust analysis of how elite and fraternal institutions operate, Armytage shows how they aid alliance formation and concentrate power in the hands of the few. Private parties and impermeable membership organizations create intimacy which abrades ethnic and institutional difference. Nevertheless, at the same time, this sense of comradeship is troubled by divisions between “established” and “new” elites. *Chapter 4* discusses how marital and reproductive ties enmesh families and individuals in strategic alliances, and *Chapter 5* explores how these intimate relationships are inflected by ethnic and urban/rural division. *Chapter 6* pushes back against assumptions of increasingly standardized modes for capitalist exploitation by describing how a distinct “culture of exemptions” allows elites to navigate (and thrive within) Pakistan’s poorly-regulated, hyper-localized business, ethno-religious and political milieu – where elite businessmen develop their own vocabulary for describing the in/appropriateness of extra-legal, il/licit or im/moral behaviour (p. 139). As Armytage concludes, the global nature of elites’ social and business networks does not imply a universal, well-integrated global elite. Members of the “global elite” in Pakistan are neither rootless nor nomadic. Although they can afford to transcend the limits of (e.g. Pakistani) citizenship, for varied affective and instrumental reasons elites often remain “mired in the political, economic and social base of their countries of origin” (p. 167).

Acknowledging well how the transnational elite class works to obfuscate the harmful effects of capitalism and its in-built unsustainability – perhaps especially starkly in Pakistan – this book ably describes how transactions, alliances, friendships, and rivalries of members of the elite constitute “the major conduit for flows of domestic capital” (p. 158). Armytage’s work stands out for depicting capitalism as a social, interpersonal project, practiced not only through offices or sites of production, but forged in private members’ clubs, elite school boards, and artfully-presented canapés at private parties for the rich and powerful.

Especially valuable is Armytage’s contribution to literature exploring family dynamics, kinship relations and marital strategies as central to the reproduction of elite families globally: how “a specifically gendered structure of political and economic power” (p. 96) reflects the central place of women in intra-elite “domestic economies” as important as the political-economic context dominated by men beyond their compounds. Perhaps the most enthralling sections of the book were those which shed light on how these members of the “1%” are not simply gossipy, petty, calculated or untrustworthy in their relationships, but at times eye-opening unreflective about how the intimate networks they create (and powers they possess) are exceptional. These networks exist in (or *as*) a markedly extra-legal, “immoral and capricious state” (p. 140). Yet as Armytage notes, “cultivating an adequately broad network of individuals with some degree of influence is important for *all* citizens in Pakistan’s unstable state context” (p. 122, my emphasis). Her work nicely demonstrates the impact of elite privilege without demonizing those who enjoy it.

Armytage may have done well to tease out more fully the ways in which the “established” and “nouveau” elite (the latter locally the *Navay Rajee*) are scaled with/against each other. Although

the reader gleans much from discussions of how these groups intermingle and “play off”, clearer definitions about how hierarchies between classed personae exist in tension would have been rewarding. Another, simpler way of saying this is to note how this study of “micro-politics” could have better accounted for what, and *how* social relations scale as “micro” (and what then becomes “macro” and why). Armytage’s ethnographic detailing would have been enriched through discussing how her race and citizenship enabled access to this landscape. When elites so readily “shape the rules, regulations and institutions of governance and ensure a culture of exemptions” (p. 3), one must reflexively account for how their engagements with academic practice can themselves serve as cosmopolitan accessorizing: window-dressing for research participants’ imaginaries and “borderless” lifeworlds.

Overall, this book is a useful resource for those wishing to understand Pakistan’s elite, and especially, a handy exploration of the gendered dynamics of intra-elite networking. Its many insights should prompt deeper, enriched discussion of the consequences of elite family networks on how the “rest” live – reflecting colonial pasts and imperiling potentially just futures, both inside and beyond Pakistan.