

Jonathan Rigg. *Southeast Asia: the human landscape of modernization and development*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2003. 386 pp.

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I have not encountered a book on modernization and development in Southeast Asia as comprehensive and exhaustive as Jonathan Rigg's *Southeast Asia: The Human Landscape of Modernization and Development*. It covers a wide variety of topics that ranges from the rise and fall of Southeast Asian economy to the everyday lives of farmers and factory workers in the outskirts of the metropolis. However, nothing is more exciting in this book than the conundrum posed by Rigg that all things considered development and modernization have indeed "lifted millions of people out of poverty and raised living standards on a broad front for the great majority of the population of the region" (338) on the one hand, and the widely held view that poverty is still the main problem facing many, if not almost all, Southeast Asian countries today. Untangling this conundrum is what Rigg painstakingly tries to do in this book.

This book is a second edition of the one that was published in 1997. It still comprises four main parts but with an additional 60 pages of new and insightful empirical data (see Part III and *passim*). Part I, "Southeast Asian Development: The Conceptual Landscape of Dissent," explores a variety of theoretical issues that emerge in the debate among scholars between the proponents of the "miracle thesis" and those who are critical of this thesis. Part II, "Marginal People and Marginal Lives: The 'Excluded'," examines and assesses the "impact and effects of modernization and development on people and places" (xv), especially those who were excluded—or what Rigg describes those who "missed out" on development. Then, in Part IV, "Change and Interaction in the Rural and Urban Worlds," Rigg takes us to the ways in which various social actors and agents make sense of the opportunities and challenges that development has offered. This is the most stimulating part of the book as Rigg invokes narratives after narratives of local people without losing his empirical ground as a social scientist. Part IV of the book, "Chasing the Wind: Modernization and Development in Southeast Asia," concludes with a critique of "post-development."

Although this book is a revised version of the 1997 edition, it still remains as dogmatic as in its earlier view that the modernization project

in Southeast Asia is a success; not even the so-called Asian crisis in the 1990s “wipe out the successes of the past,” Rigg claims (xi). He then goes on, dismissing “post-development,” and even citing how the “modernization ethic” has been “Asianized” (329), suggesting that it is not foreign but rather part of the local landscape. It is, according to him, such an ethos that has driven Southeast Asia to fare relatively well compared with countries in Africa. The euphoria in his tone about the success of Southeast Asia would not however stand scrutiny for such euphoria is arguably not all there is in Southeast Asia. It is a one-sided rendering of the development drama in Southeast Asia. In contrast to Rigg’s claims, most of Southeast Asia is beset with a huge foreign debt problem, urban and rural landlessness, widening gap between the rich and the poor and so on. While undeniably a wide range of people in Southeast Asia may have “benefited” from development and modernization, they have done so, but not without costs—costs that resulted in social exclusion, dislocation and marginalization of several groups in the region.

It is in these terms that I criticize Rigg for he couched his data in terms of how well they might fit in with his argument that Southeast Asia has indeed succeeded in improving the material well-being of people in the region. This point is very disconcerting because rather than providing answers why there is income inequality or why non-farm activity is increasingly common, Rigg simply presents the facts, and gravitates from one theoretical perspective to another, depending of course on which explanatory model is suitable. He states, for instance, that “the debate over the links between poverty and growth should really be framed in terms of who is benefiting the most” (104). He then goes on to state that “if it is the rich, then inequalities in economy and society will widen; if it is the poor, then inequalities will narrow” (104). This is, of course, oversimplified, if not deceptive, for it does not provide us with any clue at all with respect to structural conditions as to why inequality exists in Southeast Asia. It is also not helpful insofar as making us understand the sociopolitical context of inequality. He hardly mentions various hierarchical power relations to say the least, and how landlords (or “bosses” if you will) wield their political power in the countryside to maintain control over economic resources. Rigg fails to address this issue; he seems merely to want to point out that inequality exists in Southeast Asia. One wonders if it is a manifestation of his clearly functionalist, perhaps even fatalistic, approach.

In Part IV, Rigg dwells lengthily on the question of whether peasants are pushed out of agriculture or pulled into factories. Or, put differently, do employment opportunities in factories outweigh the costs of employment in agriculture? There is no doubt that this question is more complex than one might think, but for Rigg it all comes down to this: "The decline in the returns to farming and the shrinking of the land resource...have emphasized to many young (and older) rural inhabitants that farming will not easily secure an adequate livelihood in the future" (204). Again, he resorts to a narration of facts that farming, aside from being given "low status," has increasingly become unattractive given that yields are declining, prompting peasants to seek nonfarm alternatives by migrating to the cities in search of jobs. On the other hand, we are left with the impression that peasants are making a "rational" choice for opting to take (either permanently or semipermanently) on nonfarm work. The point that I am driving at here is that while farmers in reality have diversified their activities to cope with the declining returns of farming, Rigg could have gone beyond this reality, and made a case by pointing out that the political economy of farming remains tied to the issue of peasant landlessness and powerlessness, the inability of governments to provide support infrastructure or otherwise to farmers, and so on. Does this mean though that factory employment is the solution to problems faced by farmers? Rather than address this question squarely, Rigg renders an ambivalent portrayal of factory work as a "mixed blessing" of exploitation and development, and at the same time being elusive as to which solutions are better for countries in Southeast Asia.

While development in Southeast Asia implies that on the one hand multinational corporations are needed for capital, technology and market connections, workers on the other hand are left with no choice but to surrender their labor to these companies at all costs. In the long run, development is sublated, for it not only lacks an autonomous technology, but also leaves most Southeast Asian countries with no recourse other than to import technology from the developed countries, making them what Paul Virilio calls "hypermodern." In the meantime, too many Southeast Asians have no choice but to work in factories under exploitative conditions, become prostitutes, and migrate to other countries in search of employment. ❀

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