

Book Review

Kaur, Ravinder. *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020, 346 pages.

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You are mistaken if you think that only by reading the title of the book you will get a theoretical foundation on capitalism in India. In the subtitle, the author indicates that capitalist dreams and nationalist designs are aimed at a broader audience: as an articulating category for those subjects, and for those who claim they are living in a “capitalist society.” The reading I provide in this review seeks less for empirical data and more for the elaboration that sustains it. By outlining her empirical/ethnographic approach to the World Economic Forum (WEF), which took place in Davos, Switzerland, in 2012, the author amplifies the debate: the position of developing countries grants them the space where the future, as opportunities, innovation and imagination are operational to attracting investment and consumers. Making countries “brands of the nation” means, in this sense, “nations packaged and advertised as ‘attractive investment destinations’ in global markets” (1).

The book unfolds a thematic discussion in the making of a new brand nation that questions the role of the third world in the capitalist economy as presented in the introduction: Would the “third world” finally get out of the “waiting room of history” to enter the pantheon of the most competitive economies in the world? Why were such economies unfolding post-colonial and post-communist pasts now seen as “lands of opportunities” by entrepreneurs from the “first world”? In Kaur’s words: “the third world was no longer a dark container of deprivation and overpopulation but a rich reservoir of resources and raw talent bolstered by its youthful demographic dividend waiting to be trapped by innovative entrepreneurs” (5).

The *Brand New Nation*, as Ravinder Kaur argues, emerges as a new form of engagement in a capitalist economy throughout the building of a brand-nation in the global economy. In this capitalist geography, we see Asia, Africa, and Latin America become more than a “utopian dream of political liberation.” We are talking about reshaping the capitalist geography dismantling the hierarchies that have been established by its dualities: “north/south, rich/poor, core/periphery, developed/developing, and empire/colony seemed superfluous in the large-scale transformations redrawing the twentieth-century world map” towards economic independence and a fair redistribution of the world’s resources (7).

Following this new understanding of the nations, a “New India” was presented as an image of “desire” by Indian investors and the India growth stories unveiling the success and unlimited potential of the nation to investors were all willing to project India’s image through aspirations, promise, potential, talent, and limitless opportunities and growth: “India was called to perform hope and promise for global capital” (8). What are the implications of thinking about third-world nations as an “investment destination”? For the author this model creates a “new imaginary of the national territory as an infrastructure-ready enclosure for capital investment, its cultural identity distilled into a competitive global brand and its inhabitants—designated as a demographic dividend—income-generating human capital that can be plowed back to generate more economic growth” (8).

This phenomenon, especially visible in “emerging markets,” seems to produce a fast track to utopic futures where the “good times” are placed for investors in the WEF. The new temporal rhythm of global trade and capitalist modernity reveals the urgent call for economic reforms. As the author puts it, it “is not just the nationalist dream of getting ahead of the first world but also the fear of being stopped, of being permanently left behind by global capital” (9). Capitalism, in this sense, would represent a “magical moment that promises progress and prosperity but also the promise of effacing the shame of colonial subjugation and violence” (10). We could argue this point: what is so magical in this promise that it does not consider the very early relation between capitalism and colonialism in India or elsewhere? Is the fact that colonizers do not come by sailboat anymore?

The possibilities of building a different world were presented in the second chapter, “Economy of Hope,” in order to discuss the designs of the dreamworlds of “New India” from the moment that the economy opened in the

historical event of postcolonialism. Kaur makes an important statement: “The production of hope unfolds along with the production of new imaginaries and epistemes” (53). This idea has influenced the branding of nation-as-commodity. It is a new way of rediscovering a familiar world as its potentiality once again becomes visible as a commodity in the world. We also could say that capitalism might have given people other possibilities of dreaming, shaped as a promise of capitalist expansion, uplift, and dynamism, but it has also given rise to the exploitation of people.

In the third part of the book, “Anxiety,” the past and the future seem so far from each other—the new time seems to address the anxieties of these temporalities. Regarding this point, a question could be raised by social scientists: “Why invest in emerging markets?” Why open new markets for territories when the first world is already at the top? This reimagination of the cartographic development of the world invokes a sense of potentiality and promise alongside economic optimism. What if we have been too optimistic about capitalism? If a New India is promised in the upcoming “good times,” that is not something that will only have to be dealt with the future, but will also impact the “Uncommon future” of poor people, Muslims, and Dalits in India, shaped by an “authoritarian populism”—strengthened by liberal free markets and populist cultural nationalism (245).

The experience of “good times” seems to effectively turn post-socialist and post-colonial pasts of the “third world” into market territories as an indicator of attractiveness gearing up to pro-market reforms. The prefix “New” plays an important role in branding a “New Nation,” but what does the “new” have to do with these reforms? The idea, as suggested in the book, was raised as an “authoritarian populism” (246) in this liberal framework of free markets. Something that is shaped as newness appears as a subjective category, a temporary break from all that was before a “dreamworld” that reinforces in the Indian scenario, a “common” Hindu political-cultural order branded as a profitable asset to avoid the Other, or the so-called “uncommon.”

One last word of warning. Hasty readers may conclude that a discussion of capitalism has an authoritarian, centralizing, and elitist bias, and that it consequently fails to consider the heterodox ways that societies organized themselves, the ways of resistant minorities and of all those who could not be controlled by the orthodoxy of the market. Or, even worse, that it does not have any relevance. But this conclusion would be a misunderstanding of this text,

by considering it an attempt to defend a better anthropological approach to capitalism than that provided by a simplistic view.

Kaur's efforts in this book are largely aimed at challenging the idea that markets and economic interdependence evoke an egalitarian condition of pure free will. The second idea is that multiculturalism does not require capitalism to thrive. What we have seen is that capitalism is reforming itself once again, and the association of multiculturalism with free markets seems to produce a national enclosure of investments in alliance with hypernationalist cultural politics to produce a permanent state of hope attached to the promise of good times. This perception drives people to consume not only goods, but also the experience of a globalized cultural identity.