

Book Reviews

Liechty, Mark. 2010. *Out Here in Kathmandu: Modernity on the Global Periphery*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari Press.

In *Out Here in Kathmandu: Global Modernity at Periphery*, Mark Liechty scrutinizes the cultural practices of Kathmandu middle class, a theme he has researched over the past two decades. The book includes nine chapters, divided into three sections. Anyone who is familiar with Liechty's first book *Suitably Modern* (2008[2003]) will readily recognize that his latest venture is an extension of the themes and ideas he advanced in that book.¹ Liechty is concerned with theoretical and methodological debates in Western academia regarding the anthropological study of social classes and their reproduction. He draws on Marxist theories of class conflict, domination, and cultural politics, but it is Max Weber's "intermediate strata" thesis that informs the core of the book.²

In contrast to the conventional concept of class which considers some "objective" factors such as income, asset, and division of labor as the defining features of a social class, Liechty argues that a social class is better understood as a way of becoming and framing social experiences. The book is thus about "middle class-ness" rather than a middle class, understood in conventional sense. If class is a way of becoming, then it is necessarily cultural. Liechty's major concern in the book is then to understand *how middle class culture works in producing and reproducing its social life*. He examines over two hundred interviews, numerous texts, field observations, and commodities. Throughout the book, readers

¹ Liechty carries over major themes, theories, and methods from *Suitably Modern* into the book under review. These issues are thinly-spread throughout *Out Here in Kathmandu*. Readers interested in those issues are advised to go through part of his first book. I will freely draw on *Suitably Modern* whenever the context demands so.

² It appears that Liechty largely approves Marxist cultural theory even if he cautions against "economic reductionism." This approval, however, sits uneasily with his use of narrative theories as "methodological" tools. Whereas Marxist cultural theory often depicts culture as "false consciousness" or "ruling class strategy," narrative theories, I believe, presuppose a different model of human cognition. It is the narrative theoretical and ontological presuppositions that inform Liechty's much of the empirical description in *Suitably Modern* and *Out Here in Kathmandu*.

encounter stories, performances, imaginations, fantasies, and bodily experiences that collectively produce and reproduce middle class-ness in Kathmandu, a place the author calls a periphery of late capitalist modernity.

Liechty locates the middle class cultural project in Kathmandu in a web of power relations that is simultaneously global and local. The cultural project is global in that it is shaped by forces of late capitalist modernity, and marked by mass-mediated commodities, ideas, and ethos of consumerism. It is global also in the sense that Nepalis (and foreigners) are aware that Nepal constitutes the Other of Western capitalist modernity. The middle class cultural project is local in that the middle class-ness in Kathmandu is constitutive of (local) class struggles and stories. The middle class cultural project thus becomes relevant and meaningful only in relation to its class Others – “decadent” elites and “vulgar” working classes, and the project is articulated through locally-rooted stories of honor, life styles, and suitability. Throughout the book, Liechty’s middle class respondents, trying to become modern yet uniquely local, i.e., Nepali, struggle to live with, negotiate, and overcome numerous riddles and contradictions.

Central to the theoretical project of the book is Liechty’s theory of media effect. In chapter two, he contests the existing theories of media effect in sociology and media studies, advancing his own concept of “consumer sphere,” a consumer fantasy zone, which works through “media assemblages,” a commercial practice in which different media cross-reference consumer goods and desires. Media assemblages do their tricks only after they interact with local cultural practices such as that of inside-and-outside-home rules (*ghar bhitra ra bāhira*). When consumers participate in this powerful consumer space, they neither resist nor are they complicit with capitalist commercial and cultural practices. Such a conceptualization of media effect directly informs many empirical chapters in the book.

In the third chapter, Liechty reviews Nepal’s long political and trade history, listing a number of forces that fuelled the growth of the middle class in Kathmandu – political change in 1950 and 1990, state-led modernization, massive expansion of education, new occupations created by the state and the nongovernmental sector, growing suburbanization, expansion of tourism, and the proliferation of mass media. He argues that Nepal’s history before the 1950 political change was marked by “selective exclusion.” After Prithvi Narayan Shah founded modern Nepal and especially, during the Rana regime, foreigners, Europeans but not

necessarily South Asians, were largely barred from entering the country, but the same logic was not extended to foreign goods. Nepali rulers considered foreignness both as dangerous and useful. It is useful because it helped create the logic of distinction through which the rulers saw themselves and their subjects. Liechty offers an intriguing description of the Rana mode of distinction through the use of visual commodities. In any case, the Ranas foreshadowed later developments in which consumption practices would take central stage in social and cultural life of Kathmandu middle class.

The second section of the book, which includes four empirical chapters, dwells on the relationship between mass media, consumption, and class dynamics. In ‘Social Practice of Cinema and Video-viewing in Kathmandu,’ Liechty shows how forms and practices of consuming visual media create particular types of sociability and class practices. These practices allow the Kathmandu middle class to separate itself physically and morally from working class. Growing video-viewing that began in the early 1980s, for example, increasingly segregated the middle class from their working class brethren. The middle class also claimed a moral high ground, justifying its choices of movies as “educational” and “useful.” In another closely related chapter, ‘Building Body, Making Face, Doing Love,’ Liechty explores why his interviewees frequently used English words – body, face, and love – even if they could have easily employed the Nepali language options. He then goes on to construct a structure of cultural practice, rooted in the use and utterance of those words. He argues that young men and women use mass media to *inscribe* middle class culture into their bodies.

In ‘Carnal Economies,’ Liechty examines commodification of food and sex, arguing that Nepali society in the 1990s had two social bodies – private spheres with the traditional cultural logic (of gender and caste) and a public sphere which has given way to class logic. He makes these arguments by examining emerging middle class practices regarding food and sex. I will revisit this argument later in this review. The final chapter of this section, ‘Kathmandu as Translocality,’ examines how tourist spots such as Thamel are stripped of their local and historical meanings and become fantasy zones. Here he argues that middle class foreigners imagine Nepal as a place of action, adventure, and unchanging traditional society. Local Nepali men, on the other hand, play toughness, imagine living in Western cities, and engage in sexual fantasies with white women. Once again, mass mediated objects – tourists brochures, guidebooks, movies, and novels – help create and sustain these images and fantasies.

In the third section of the book, which includes two chapters, Liechty discusses the impact of middle class cultural practices on the lives of women. He argues that like the European development of “public sphere,” Nepal’s newly created consumer public space is exclusionary. Women use the language of “freedom” and “modernity” than ever before, but they are excluded from and actually subject to physical threat in public places such as schools, restaurants, and work places. Traditional honor economy combines with modern consumerist ethos in a way that is hardly empowering for women. The final chapter dwells on the proliferation of pornographic movies among the middle class consumers in Kathmandu. Liechty argues that pornographic viewing is fast spreading among middle class men and through men among women. These new experiments of male sexual desire, however, create cognitive and experiential dissonance among the middle class women. These women thought that pornographic films might have been suitable for “Westerners” since the movies indicated excesses and indulgence, challenging the core of their self-conception as practitioners of “suitably modern.”

Throughout the book, Liechty shows that the middle class cultural project is full of confusions, riddles, and contradictions, creating anxiety and financial burden for the middle class. Narratives of modernity, suitability, and honor allow Kathmandu middle class to hide their class privileges. Moreover, the middle class cultural project commodifies intimate spheres including the body and sex. As the cultural processes are entangled into local cultural practices, the existing power relations are often reinforced. Gender asymmetry, for example, largely remains intact and has even worsened. In the end, both the local and global power structures are reproduced. The book shows that the middle class cultural project is a very potent, self-reproducing entity and that it is anchored into myriad of local and global forces.

There are, however, a few issues that remain underexplored in the book. Readers are likely to ask: to what extent are the middle class cultural practices, narratives, and politics unique to the middle class itself? In other words, readers grow interested in knowing about the class projects of the elites and working classes. I have yet another quibble with the author. Liechty dwells on the question of caste in chapter six and goes on to make a rather controversial claim – that the traditional cultural logic as expressed through the caste system has given way to class logic.³ My

³ Liechty is not alone here; Rankin (2004) and Pahadi (1992) have made similar points.

impression is that Liechty's "public sphere" may not be that public so as to warrant such a claim. On the surface, class logic seems to have governed the consumer space that Liechty describes, but I suspect that a close inspection of actual group processes could have revealed a complicated picture. His discussion of the parallel between the emergence of Habermasian public sphere – a space described as place for "critical rational discourse" about common good – and Kathmandu's emerging consumer space at times sounds odd. The claim that cultural logic has given way to the class immediately becomes suspect if we examine different institutional locations of "public sphere." Politics in contemporary Nepal, for example, is shot through with cultural logic (both caste and ethnicity). Similar phenomena have taken place in Western countries as well as other places that can be labeled "peripheries" of global modernity. The rise of religious fundamentalism in the West as well as in the peripheries is a well-known example. I suspect that the caste logic in Nepali society has gone the same contradictory fate as the gender logic that Liechty describes so nicely. These minor quibbles aside, this book, like his previous *Suitably Modern*, is an outstanding contribution to Nepal's sociology and anthropology of consumption and middle class cultural practices.

References

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