

## Book Review

**Kevin Gray (2015) *Labour and Development in East Asia: Social Forces and Passive Revolution*. London: Routledge.  
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Kevin Gray's book is a broad, sweeping analysis of the developmental processes in four East Asian countries: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China. He examines each of these in turn, in the order of their emergence as important players in the international economy. Gray is critical of the fact that most of the mainstream literature about developmental states, as opposed to neoliberal democratic states, emphasizes the role played by the state and capital in developmental processes, but has neglected the role of labour (see Amsdem, Wade). He wants to bring labour back to centre stage. He disagrees with the widely accepted view on East Asian labour subjugation, and sets out to show that labour agency is as much a driving force in democratization as are state initiatives and the competitive forces between states under the pressure of globalization.

Gray proposes situating East Asia's industrialization in Gramsci's 'passive revolution' framework. He writes that state formation goes through 'a moment of passive revolution. . . [that] takes the form of a state initiative to respond to geopolitical pressures by ensuring the political rule of capital as well as pre-emptively adopting certain subaltern demands... The framework of passive revolution can help to place the analysis of labour and of class struggle at the centre of these processes' (p. 15).

The book consists of seven chapters. The introduction systematically spans more than half a century of state formation or re-formation before and after the Second World War up to the present. It is a comprehensive critical review of the literature on statist theories, developmental state theories, neo-liberalism and globalization. Chapter 1 seeks to establish a theoretical framework for examining the nexus between labour, international political economy and processes of developmental state formation. Gray is critical of the literature on globalization that laments a 'race to the bottom' in which workers are inevitable victims of highly mobile global capital. But he is also critical of Beverly Silver's (2003) conception of global labour, that 'where capital goes, militancy goes', for neglecting how the agency of the state has shaped labour regimes and for not delving into the specifics of how states inhibit labour consciousness.

The next two chapters examine the developmental histories of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Gray recounts in detail their post-Second World War state-building and how each country went through a period of passive revolution, entailing a suppressive labour regime under the tutelage of the United States (US). In Japan the suppressive period was very brief, and by 1946 Japan was a multiparty democratic state, with freedom of association and unrestricted union organizing. Nonetheless he characterizes Japan's late developmentalism as one of 'comprehensive labour subordination' (p. 50), a characteristic he thinks is also found in South Korea, Taiwan and China.

Gray is critical of Japan's well-known paternalistic labour regime that has been positively promoted by many Japanese scholars.

Chapter 3 describes the post-war developmental process of South Korea and Taiwan in turn. Both had a colonial past, and experienced post-war state-building with American intervention, authoritarian political regimes and suppressive labour policies that ended with the downfall of the Rhee regime in 1960 in South Korea and the end of KMT rule in the late 1980s in Taiwan. These revolutionary changes marked the emergence of neo-liberal capitalism and labour movements in both countries.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on labour and democratization. They document the democratization process and the rise of the labour movements in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan under global neo-liberalism. This was followed by a massive off-shoring of capital, which had a significant impact on labour and a return to passive revolution. Gray attributes the driving force of political democratization to the US, because the hegemon, he argues, felt challenged by the imbalance of trade with the East Asian countries. The US did an about-turn: from setting up and nurturing authoritarian regimes to urging them to democratize. Labour took advantage of this relaxation period in the 1980s to assert its resistance.

Lastly Chapter 6 focuses on the rise of China and the future of Chinese labour in the global economy. China's post-Mao labour regime is briefly summarized, and the chapter quickly turns to the emergence of China's labour movement. But the Chinese state is stronger and more interventionist than the other East Asian countries, and has implemented a passive revolution to 'harmonize' Chinese labour. According to Gray, as of 2010 a strike in Guangdong province instigated 'a qualitative shift towards a militant workers' consciousness capable of challenging Chinese labour subordination' (p. 151). He claims that the state began to adopt a more permissive labour policy. Concomitantly foreign capital has been moving away from China to developing countries that can offer cheaper labour. At this juncture, Gray leaves the future of Chinese labour in momentary limbo. This is an understandable approach, as Chinese politics is notorious for its unpredictability. Since Xi Jinping rose to power two years ago, when the book's research was completed, China has entered another suppressive period. Strikes in Guangdong have soared due to the closure and relocation of factories, and local state violence against workers and labour non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has reached unprecedented heights.

There are a few aspects of his argument that warrant debate. For instance, although Gray recognizes that Japan is quite different from its two neighbours, South Korea and Taiwan, evidenced by his devoting one chapter to Japan and another to South Korea and Taiwan combined, more emphasis could have been placed on their fundamental differences. While Japan has been a democracy throughout the post-war period, South Korea and Taiwan have not, until recent decades. As a consequence, Japanese labour has never gone through a long period of suppression as has been the case in South Korea and Taiwan. But in Gray's urge to place all East Asian states under the rubric of passive revolution, he has largely overlooked this major difference. China is also a very different variety of state from the other three. Some emphasis should have been given to the importance of the socialist ideological legacy and its impact on Chinese labour agency.

This problem is a symptom of what is sorely missing in Gray's framework: the importance of the relationship between ideology and labour agency. This is also where he mistakenly overestimates the role of the US in shaping the South Korean and Taiwanese political and industrial relations systems. The US did play a strong hand in establishing the three countries' post-war political systems (especially Japan under American occupation) in the first few years after the war, but as the three countries quickly developed their own trajectories, the US role has receded to become an umbrella for international security.

Japan's post-war industrial relations system is not totally dissociated from its pre-war system. In South Korea and Taiwan the suppressive labour regimes had roots in the pre-war period, and gave birth to social and labour resistance movements. That these countries subsequently became multi-party systems and later accepted freedom of association had little to do with the US. The maturation of labour agency, a major part in this and an element that Gray had advocated earlier in the book, should be brought back into analyses. To attribute the transition to democracy to a US change of mind is a misinterpretation of international relations and these countries' recent histories. Gray has forgotten that the US has been imposing its anti-communist and liberal ideology in East Asia all along, and this was not a sudden change of mind in the 1980s.

There is a large body of literature that argues that Confucian culture is a key element contributing to shared East Asian attributes of paternalism, submission to authority, collectivism, and so on. Even if we assume that Gray does not believe in culture as shaping human behaviour, he still should have reviewed this important body of literature. He also could have employed the concept of 'path dependency' taken by for these four states. After all, Gramsci's thesis of 'passive revolution' emphasizes the importance of national specificity in a state's development processes.

Notwithstanding these comments, Gray has written an informative and thought-provoking book. Teachers of global political economy and global labour studies will find it useful, as it critically summarizes writings on globalization and the rise of East Asia as an important industrial region.

#### REFERENCE

Silver, B. (2003) *Forces of labor: Workers' movements and globalization since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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