

Book Review

Eli Friedman (2014)

Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China.

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Many important books start with a good puzzle, and Eli Friedman's *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China* begins with one of significant implications: Why, given all of China's efforts since 2002 to decommodify labour, do labour protests continue unabated? The answer, Friedman explains, is that the trade union system in China has appropriated worker representation; as result, the powerful waves of labour protests against marketisation have failed to institutionalise decommodifying reforms. The premise of Friedman's analysis is that if workers control their unions, and if, in the process, labour (including migrant labour) is decommodified, then the intensity of labour insurgency will decline. But the unleashing of workers' power by allowing for democratic and representative unions is a change that the state and its official labour centre, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), do not want to make. As a result, China remains stuck in an insurgency trap.

Thus, while Polanyi assumes counter-movement demands will be institutionalised, Friedman does not. Rather, he argues that while marketisation may engender a counter-movement in terms of mobilisation, institutionalisation does not necessarily follow. This is because – and here Friedman builds on Weber's concept of “appropriated representation” – the state granted the ACFTU exclusive representation rights to all workers, including migrant workers, without establishing a system of democratic representation. Having established his overarching argument, Friedman then delves into important nuances. What the state does at the national level – for example, to enact pro-labour reforms – can be very different from what it does at the local level, where local officials form alliances with local capital and seek to increase their revenue while maintaining labour control. Leadership also matters; within the confines of the Chinese system of labour relations, having a leader who was once a factory worker and who prefers to spend more time at the union office than at the local district council office may influence whether a leader accepts the status quo or pushes for reforms. Economic structures, including the relative weight of foreign to national investment, and migrant worker status also have a profound impact on the dynamics of protest.

Researching the politically sensitive questions of democratic representation and countervailing forces in China is not easy. Learning Mandarin is only the first obstacle. Getting folks at all levels of Chinese society to tell you what they actually think and why they do what they do is a much deeper

¹ In July of this year, the *Global Labour Journal* organised a panel of book review presentations at the International Sociological Association's Forum of Sociology in Vienna, Austria. This review was presented there.

challenge. Mixed methods only begin to explain the approach taken by the author. Friedman ventures into the pool halls of Zhejiang to talk to workers, gleans insights from dinner-time conversations with labour leaders in a small apartment in Guangzhou, and accompanies international trade union delegations to high-level union meetings in Shanghai and beyond. Friedman studies regions and he studies sectors. He takes us down to the local level and into the factories. Here is where the state–capital alliance in favour of the latter is most pronounced. Local state officials have strong economic incentives to develop good ties with investors and less of an interest in de-commodifying labour. At the same time, it is at the factory level where unions are the weakest. This is because the long reach of official unionism tends to end at the factory gates. Filling this void in worker representation is management, often in the form of a human resources director in the guise of a union president.

Friedman's persistence in getting the story right allows him to see things that even local labour leaders missed, such as when the leaders from Guangzhou assumed the sectoral agreements of Zhejiang were a model to emulate. On paper, the agreements looked exemplary. Upon deeper inspection, Friedman finds that not only were the agreements not enforced, but many firms and workers purportedly covered by the agreements did not even know they existed. In Guangzhou, he tells the powerful story of a dynamic union leader who became a symbol of reform and hope for many workers, and then was not only removed from her post, but was also falsely charged with corruption. During all these cases, the irony is that, while the state was able to use its power to undermine attempts at reforms with the goal of weakening labour, labour insurgency only escalated more. The curtailment of reforms gave workers no other option. Hence, the continuation of the insurgency trap.

My one observation of substance about Friedman's argument is that China is an exceptional case, and the dynamics of the insurgency trap are thus unique to China. He points out how the continued power of the Communist Party over unions makes China different from former Soviet bloc countries. He emphasises how current international dynamics make China different from the Asian tigers, specifically Taiwan and South Korea. And he points out how the massive size of China – and the ability of capital to move *within* China and thus impose an *internal* spatial fix – makes China different from most developing countries, which are much smaller. All these factors are no doubt true. Yet, taken from a slightly higher level of analysis, lessons from the insurgency trap are relevant for many other cases. This is because what is important is not just the outcome of the analysis – an insurgency trap with certain Chinese characteristics – but rather the variables that influence potential insurgency traps. I would suggest that appropriated representation (or union-free workplaces) and labour commodification are rather ubiquitous today. Moreover, examining the Chinese case in comparative perspective also highlights some factors that may have been under-examined, notably variations in national state openness, labour market conditions and working-class discourse.

Comparing the Chinese case to another one-party state, Vietnam, Friedman observes that the Vietnamese state is more tolerant of protest than the Chinese state. I would agree. Friedman does not refer to Cuba. Here I would suggest that Cuba sits on the opposite end of the spectrum, with greater state control relative to China. By incorporating variation in degrees of state control in these socialist, one-party states, all of which are pursuing degrees of labour-commodifying policies under conditions of appropriated representation, we see very little protest in Cuba, considerable protest in China, and the greatest amount of protest in Vietnam. So perhaps it is not the uniqueness of China that we observe, but rather variation in the intensity of relevant factors. In some socialist states, I

would suggest that state discourse on workers also matters. In Vietnam, which officials still refer to as a “worker state”, when the government, party and official union representatives go into striking factories, they always find that at least one factor that the workers were striking needs to be addressed because, in their view, workers cannot be 100 per cent wrong in their grievance. Workers see this, and they strike again, and again.

Elsewhere, we find the case of Mexico, where the dynamics of appropriated representation through “ghost unions” and “protection contracts” are notorious, as is labour commodification. But the scale of labour unrest is much less, relative to China. Why might this be the case? Here an incorporation of labour market dynamics is helpful. While export manufacturing workers in China face relatively tight labour markets, in Mexico unemployment and under-employment are high, which means replacing striking workers is easy, thus undermining worker mobilisation. In the Middle East, several countries (such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan) explicitly prohibit migrant workers from joining or leading unions. An analysis of migrant worker exploitation, marketisation and appropriated representation might lead one to suggest that labour protest would be common, but state control, exercised by the threat of removing work visas, keep labour protests at bay.

Let me conclude by noting that, having read his book very carefully, it appears Friedman is not an enthusiast of commodification. However, by highlighting the relevance of his analysis beyond China, he just might find that the sales of his book would increase even more. This would be a good outcome, because this book deserves to be read by all scholars concerned with labour, workers’ movements, and all struggles for social justice.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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