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BOOK REVIEWS

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Lindtner, Silvia M. (2020) *Prototype Nation: China and the Contested Promise of Innovation*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ ISBN: 978-0-691-20767-4, 280 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by *Amitrajeet A. Batabyal*, Rochester Institute of Technology

After first explaining that the term “prototype” is commonly used to refer to something that is built to either model or test demand from, for instance, investors, the author asks whether this term continues to retain its usefulness when it is employed more expansively to refer to a city, a region, or even a nation such as China. Her objective here is to study how prototyping at vast scales can “be viewed as a promising way to intervene in entrenched structures of inequality, exploitation, and injustice—and how this promise became a demand for individual self-upgrade and economic development” (p. 1). Put differently, the author uses the term “prototype” as an analytical concept “to attend to a broadening disillusionment with digital technology and the IT [information technology] industry” (p. 3). In what follows, rather than provide a tedious chapter-by-chapter review, I shall sample selectively from the book’s seven chapters. This ought to give the reader an adequate flavor for the intellectual contributions of the book.

The author spends a lot of time studying what she calls the making of technology or “maker movements.” This is because when people are permitted to make their own technologies, they will, at least in principle, own the goods they make and hence have much greater autonomy over how their technologies are used and, by extension, their own lives. So far, so good, but some parts of this discussion are quixotic. For instance, the author refers to “neoliberal demand” as being something that requires “that one convert the self into human capital” (p. 13). To me, human capital is something that one acquires—education, skills, experiences—to increase one’s value as either a part of a specific production process or, more generally, in the marketplace. If anything, attributes are being added to oneself; hence, it is unclear what conversion of the self means.

What roles have the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and China’s coworking spaces played in the attempt to achieve technological parity with the West? We learn that to

demonstrate that China is both creative and innovative, somewhat unexpectedly, the CCP and the various coworking spaces have aligned their respective projects. In addition, the CCP's attempts to conceptualize China's "makerspaces" as incubators for people who can then model what the author calls "the good life" (p. 43), has generally been seen as a positive development. One key reason this has happened is that these activities have been consistent with the CCP's attempts to propagate an image of China in which this nation is not just a copycat but an innovator.

A key point made by the author is that "flexible work and the creative industry appear desirable rather than what they are—coercive..." (p. 73). But if work is flexible, it should, at least, be less coercive than it otherwise would have been. So, how exactly are flexible work and the creative industry coercive? In this regard, it seems to me that a more elaborate defense of this claim is required and that it is insufficient to quote Angela McRobbie, who appears to be asserting that even though unleashing one's creativity may hold the promise of "self-reward," job insecurity continues to be a concern.

Focusing on the "Shenzhen prototype of the professional..." (p. 115) the author points out that even though this individual has some positive attributes, he overlooks the fact that "the engineering and design fields have gendered and racial inequalities, often justified by the claim that these types of expertise are difficult to democratize" (p. 116). The suggestion here is that the justification offered is spurious and that the task is not difficult. Alternately, it may be true that such democratization is a non-trivial task. In either case, it would be nice to have more meaningful commentary on the case the author believes is pertinent and on what needs to be done to bring it to fruition.

Since the notion of human capital is repeatedly a feature in this book, it is worth evaluating the author's many claims about this concept. On p. 120, she endorses that neoliberal rationality remakes the human being as human capital. Now, depending on an individual's circumstances, it may be rational for him or her to acquire human capital. This notwithstanding, if we think of human capital as a factor of production— a standard interpretation in economics— it is difficult to see how rationality remakes a human being into human capital. The author claims that "human capital is all but a natural outgrowth of economic development" (p. 120). This claim appears to have causality flipped around. In other words, the general acquisition of human capital in a society leads to economic development and not the other way around.

The author provides an illuminating discussion of what she calls China's "entrepreneurial factory" (p. 174). We learn that two processes were involved in building this factory. First, certain people were seen to be the prototypes of a desirable, cosmopolitan worldly citizen. Second, there was a concerted attempt to upgrade specific urban spaces and infrastructures "in order to create a sociomaterial milieu that modeled happiness and the good life, thus inducing desires in people who did not (yet) have access to these spaces to self-upgrade..." (p. 174). This discussion is lucid. Still, then the author goes on to comment on the relevance of the desire in people to "self-upgrade from economic to entrepreneurial subjects..." (p. 180). It seems to me that the notion of an economic subject is more capacious than the notion of an entrepreneurial subject. If this is correct, why is an entrepreneurial subject not an economic one? Exactly what kind of self-upgrading leads to the conversion of an economic subject into an entrepreneurial subject, and why does it make sense to think of

these two subjects as disjoint? Unfortunately, there is no clarifying commentary on these points.

The author appears to endorse the viewpoint of those such as Lyn Jeffrey who have attempted to dispel “the associations between Chineseness and a lack of creativity, both in China and in Silicon Valley” (p. 195). But she does not explain why there are so many stories in the Western press about the systematic theft of American, and more generally Western, intellectual property by a variety of Chinese actors. She then goes on to endorse a perspective which says that the “nature” of the capitalist market is such that it involves believing “that markets self-regulate and operate based on some inert quality of capital itself...” (p. 216). Unfortunately, this displays a somewhat limited understanding of contemporary capitalist markets. Most economists and policymakers understand that there are many circumstances in which markets do not work well and that activist governmental action is called for in such circumstances.

In conclusion, regional scientists will find that this book provides an unusual perspective on the working of modern China in the areas of technology and innovation. Although the author makes several valid points about the emergence of China as a modern technological powerhouse, as I have attempted to highlight in this review, *Prototype Nation* also contains several unfathomable statements about various aspects of modern China. Therefore, subject to this caveat, I recommend the book to readers who would like to learn more about how researchers working in science and technology studies approach questions about the position of China in the international political economy of technology production.

Bongardt, Annette, Talani, Leila S. and Torres, Francisco (2020) *The Politics and Economics of Brexit* Edward Elgar Publishing, Northampton United Kingdom. ISBN: 978 1 78897 797 5, 240 pp., \$40 (ebook).

Reviewed by *Joel Kirsch*, Johns Hopkins University

As the title suggests, Annette Bongardt, Leila Talani, and Francisco Torres examine the politics and economics of Brexit from the perspectives of the United Kingdom and the European Union.

The book is divided into two sections: the first focusing on the political landscape leading up to Brexit and the second on the economics. Each section is comprised of logical chapters. Following the contextual discussion in each chapter, we are given a thoughtful section of Notes that exhaustively covers all the political, legislative, and economic factual details backing that chapter.

The text opens with an overview of the political landscape that led the UK to trigger the Article 50 clause of the Treaty of the European Union and the EU’s historical friction with the UK’s membership. This set of foundational facts is an exceedingly helpful framework for readers who may have only a cursory knowledge of the subject and seasoned EU/UK political scholars.

The approach to the political side is refreshingly neutral for a subject so notoriously polarizing. Instead, we are taken, in detail, through the rationalization of Brexit. That is,

how it made sense both for the UK and the EU for Brexit to occur. In section 2, Bongardt and Torres go so far as to suggest that the key to the EU's sustainability is European nations that are "committed to an ever-closer union" and any country that is not all-in would be better served, and better serve the EU as a whole, to invoke Article 50. This point is driven home through a detailed review of the UK's historical departure from EU standards and the routine exceptions adopted to derive sovereignty in UK policy that are contrary to the predominant philosophy of the EU. This is crucial to the point of EU commitment, as the UK has been effectively distancing its own policy from the EU since its inception, selectively opting into or out of immigration and economic policies as they saw fit.

The overall national policy differences are, of course, center stage. Still, the book goes further into the specific UK parties' representation and motivations that contributed to a debilitating inability to form a cohesive set of terms around which an exit treaty could be written. To that point, in Chapter 4, Baroncelli and Rosini discuss the nuance of the United Kingdom's constituent nations. The degree of representation of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (all of whom rejected the Brexit Referendum along national lines), in addition to fundamental differences in opinion of Brexiters as to what the policy goals were, led to the shaky overall legal framework of UK referendums that are discussed at length. It is the agglomeration of these details that, the authors suggest, are responsible for the excruciatingly long gestation period of Brexit.

Section Two investigates the economic rationale underpinning the results of the Referendum, how economic performance and perception impacted the negotiation of the terms of the Brexit Treaty, and a forecast of the longer-term impacts. It begins by evaluating probable causes of Brexit, including trends of key economic indicators and social factors the authors describe as "social capital". The authors piece together an economic story that doesn't make a strong qualitative case for Brexit. For example, the UK and EU were experiencing low unemployment, and the UK itself was well below the EU overall. The UK's economic recovery following the Great Recession was much faster and exhibited higher GDP growth than its EU counterparts. This sets the stage for the overall argument that, absent clear economic hardship, social factors, or "social capital" as the authors describe it, were the underlying motivations for the invocation of Article 50.

In Chapter 7, Bongardt dives deep into the regulatory framework of the EU that the UK, for lack of a better word, resented but around which it had no choice to negotiate. The UK struggled for years to determine its national goals and how it could maintain the favorable terms it had as an EU member while enhancing the perceived sovereignty trade-offs that precipitated the Brexit vote. Throughout, the EU continued to evolve amid a changing world, reexamining the regulatory framework of the single market to improve outcomes for all the "Economic varieties of capitalism" and adopting economic and environmental sustainability initiatives that the UK would find were very much part of any agreement they would strike. This flows into the regional economic effects, as uncertainty around the outcome of these negotiations led to massive divestiture across industries from UK markets in favor of EU alternatives.

The authors close with a concise recap of the discussion and a look at the implications for the UK and EU going forward. The review of the political and economic factors concludes with an air of inevitability; that the UK was never pleased nor could likely ever be content

with EU membership in its purest form and that the EU would find better success achieving its own goals after their departure.

This book is exceedingly well researched and accessibly descriptive, providing a strong historical foundation and clear factual progression to the crucial points. It would be simple, and a popular approach, to skewer the UK decision or to fixate on the friction that accompanied EU membership in its “storming” phase. The approach here was anything but that, giving voice to all sides of the decision and a fair assessment as to the outcomes. It would be a valuable read for anyone looking for a deeper understanding of Brexit and the policy trajectories of both the EU and UK.

Byler, Darren (2021) *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony*. Columbia Global Reports, New York, NY. ISBN: 978-1-7359136-2-9, 159 pp., \$15.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by *Amitrajeet A. Batabyal*, Rochester Institute of Technology

It is now well known that in the aftermath of the dastardly events of September 11, 2001, the attention of many in the world has focused on terrorism in general and on Muslims and their religious practices in particular. The government of the People's Republic of China has used this terrorism rationale to scare the majority Han population, particularly those living in the northwestern province known as Xinjiang, about the various Muslim minorities such as the Uyghurs, the Kazakhs, and the Hui people. This fear campaign worked well and soon enough, “Han settlers in Xinjiang...feared a largely abstract, threatening stereotype of Islamic danger” (p. 18). This led to the gradual criminalization of Islamic practice and certain Uyghur and Kazakh cultural traditions. The ultimate aim of the so-called “People's War” on terror was to create a program that would prevent “Uyghurs from being Muslim, and, to a certain extent, from being Uyghur or Kazakh” (p. 19).

The communist government of China has built an elaborate fear-based infrastructure with technologically enabled surveillance at its center to keep primarily Muslims in Xinjiang under constant observation. What is particularly draconian about the government's approach is that it detained practically anyone it felt like, including those who had committed no crime at all. The rationale for this loathsome course of action was that even if a particular Uyghur, for instance, had committed no crime when detained, the government's surveillance system suggested that this individual was either capable of or was about to commit a crime and hence (s)he was a “pre-criminal!” In other words, the “surveillance system itself produced assumptions of guilt, of pre-criminality” (p. 24). The book under review uses the horrifying experiences of individuals who were once members of the euphemistically called “re-education centers” to tell a compelling story of human bondage, dehumanization, and state-sponsored cruelty against other human beings.

We learn about the experiences of people such as Vera Zhou, a Hui person and also a student at the University of Washington in Seattle, Qelbinur Sedik, the daughter of Uzbek and Uyghur parents and a primary school Chinese language teacher in Urumqi, and the Kazakh farmer Adilbek who made the mistake of returning to Xinjiang—he hoped temporarily—from Kazakhstan where his wife and children had already moved.

Consider first the inexplicable case of Vera Zhou. She assumed that because her father

and boyfriend were both Han, she would be protected from arbitrary behavior by the Chinese authorities even though her identity card clearly said that she was Muslim. Unfortunately, her assumption proved erroneous, and she was picked up by the authorities for being a “cyber pre-criminal” and led away into one of the many detention centers to be “re-educated.” The author describes Vera’s unenviable life in her detention center and points out that one of the most terrible things for Vera was her not knowing whether she would ever be released. To survive in her hellish environment, Vera repeatedly told herself that there was no reason for her incarceration, that it was random, and that she had not done anything to deserve her horrible fate.

In the case of Qelbinur, because her birth certificate said she was a Uzbek, had been educated in China, and held a senior position in her primary school, she believed that she would not be the victim of arbitrary behavior by the Chinese authorities. However, one day she was offered a job that she could not refuse. She would have to teach Chinese to “students” at a “centralized controlled education training center” (pp. 64-65). Her “students” or detainees were treated horribly in the so-called training center. They had to take turns sleeping on the concrete floor of their cells. In addition, “[t]he detainees were deeply fearful. Their voices trembled when they answered questions in class” (p. 70). The stress of having to teach scared and treated detainees made Qelbinur physically sick. She was admitted to a hospital and because of her ill health, she was allowed to retire. A key point that contributed to Qelbinur’s misery is her recognition “that she was playing a role in the dehumanization of other Turkic Muslims...” (p. 82).

The Kazakh farmer Adilbek noticed the process of dehumanization first hand in his detention center after the Chinese authorities unaccountably picked him up. The “detainees were forced...to sit still for most hours of the day — a form of physical torment that prevented them from relaxing and over time began to wreak havoc on their bodies” (p. 88). Adilbek’s condition in the detention center improved a little fortuitously. The authorities holding him realized that he was not Uyghur, but Kazakh. He was then placed in a separate area. After being transferred, the guards did not beat him anymore. A key point made by the author here concerns the extent to which the Chinese authorities have pursued a divide-and-conquer strategy by separating families. This not only contributed to the sense of powerlessness felt by individual family members but, in addition, we learn that family “separation is now endemic throughout Uyghur and Kazakh society” (p. 100).

A key point made by the author concerns the vital role played by technology in furthering the Chinese government’s attempts to classify and then intrusively monitor Muslims in Xinjiang. In this regard, the applications produced by Chinese technology companies such as Megvii were giving rise to “profound effects in Chinese counter-terrorism operations far from the beige office building in Redmond [Washington] or the white-walled showrooms in Beijing” (p. 127). Further, in this COVID-19 era, the Chinese government, in collaboration with Chinese and occasionally Western technology companies, has enhanced its ability to create “data-intensive infrastructure systems [that] produce flexible digital enclosures throughout the nation...” (p. 134). A salient point that emerges from this discussion is the need to comprehend that in contemporary times, large-scale surveillance is substantially a Chinese problem, but not exclusively so.

In conclusion, this book does an excellent job of delineating the extreme brutality of the

technologically enabled Chinese state and the extent to which it is willing to go to destroy the humanity of a large number of people whose only crime appears to be that they are Muslim. As such, I recommend this book to all readers who would like to know more about life in the modern-day equivalent of Nazi era concentration camps and the extent to which it is possible to ostracize already marginalized people.