



Asia After the Developmental State: Disembedding Autonomy

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To cite this article: Kanishka Jayasuriya (2019): Asia After the Developmental State: Disembedding Autonomy, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: [10.1080/00472336.2019.1572210](https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1572210)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1572210>



Published online: 31 Jan 2019.



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BOOK REVIEW

Asia After the Developmental State: Disembedding Autonomy Toby Carroll and Darryl S. L. Jarvis (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

A declaration of interest: I have a strong endorsement of this collection on its back cover. In this review, I elaborate on the reasons for this strong endorsement. The book is an innovative analysis of the developmental state seeking to critique the statist explanations of East Asian industrialisation. There is a substantial literature challenging the notion that East Asian industrialisation was driven by getting the “prices right.” We know that the interventionist and activist state was pivotal to the Northeast Asian industrialisation process. The early work of developmental state theorists such as Chalmers Johnson and Alice Amsden provided the ammunition for this view of East Asian Industrialisation. Much of this work has been central to the more recent policy-oriented work of Ha-Joon Chang and Dani Rodrik in articulating a defence of interventionist and dirigiste policies against the neo-liberal orthodoxy.

This book is a critique of these technocratic ideas of development based on the analysis of East Asian industrialisation. It takes aim at these, not from the “getting the prices right” perspective, but from a framework that provides a central role to social and class relations in shaping developmental strategies. In a nutshell, the book argues that the technocratic conception of getting the institutions right – through policies and capacities – overlooks the fact that these institutions are the historically contingent products of a political struggle that entrenched particular power blocs. This institutional fetishism of the statist literature reflects a failure to understand the use of such institutions as sites of class conflict, and results in an inability to understand some of the profound changes and challenges – including the rise of inequality and precarious work – in East Asia since the heyday of work on the developmental state.

Three key themes run through the book: first, the notion of state as a strategic terrain of class conflict and reproducing capitalist social relations. While not all contributors place equal emphasis on the importance of class conflict – this reflects some divergence within the volume – all of them point to the absence of politics in explaining shifting trajectories of the developmental state. The class perspective is most clearly expressed in the chapter by Carroll and Jarvis, particularly in their detailed critique of the notion of autonomy, and notions of institutional quality and bureaucratic capacity as the key elements of the statist or neo-Weberian approach. In essence, the editors argue that notions of class conflict and labour subordination were obscured from this statist perspective. It elided notions of social forces and their shifting alliances around particular political projects that made it impossible “to explain the developmental state and those forces transforming it” (22).

Two key points follow from this critique. One is the obscuring of the notion of social forces and alliances which makes it difficult to understand the disembedding of autonomy, which is such a marked feature of the developmental state. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why statist had to explain the dynamics of the Asian crisis in Korea, for example, by notions of policy error rather than the shifting relationship of forces within the power bloc. The clearest example of this critique is Carroll’s chapter on the shift from the developmental state to forms of deep marketisation that are reshaping the architecture of the state by deepening and consolidating market forms of development. This is a concept that Carroll and Jarvis have explored in several works and Carroll’s standalone chapter in this volume

engages this concept of deep marketisation directly with the developmental state literature making the point that developmental state theorists, in their institutional fetishism, fail to conceptualise the social foundations – the shifting class relations – that are shaping patterns of deep marketisation. This chapter is excellent and in itself worth the price of purchase.

The other key point that the editors highlight is the under-theorised notion of the state in much of the literature thereby reflecting that debates on the capitalist state during the 1970s were not resolved as displaced within notions of state capacity and autonomy in a way that bracketed the understanding of the state as a capitalist state. After all, the developmental state was a specific form of capitalist state (and an exceptional state) that in my view reflected particular patterns of uneven and combined development of global capitalism. Cammack's chapter is a characteristically trenchant treatment of this in arguing that the "developmental and neoliberal models were conjunctural responses to the world order prior to the point at which it became all embracing" (141). While I would have preferred a more explicit foregrounding of the point, this book brings back into the discussion the developmental state as a capitalist state within the context of the global capitalist order.

Cammack's argument reflects another key dimension of this approach to the developmental state as a capitalist state and the explicit incorporation of the developmental state within the structures of global capitalism and a political strategic order dominated by the USA. Carroll and Jarvis, for example, note the importance of global value chains in shaping patterns of industrialisation. They are less clear about how the global value chain analysis could be incorporated into the transformation of class – particularly the growth of transnationalised capital – and the way it plays out within the state. This is a question that needs to be pursued if this research agenda is to be consolidated.

The second theme that runs through the book is a theorising global context of the developmental state and its implications for state transformation in East Asia. Richard Stubbs, in his contribution, analyses the facilitative conditions of the developmental state, noting the importance of the Cold War and the broader strategic imperatives in promoting supportive coalitions for the developmental state. He analyses competing coalitions – neoliberal and developmental – in East Asia and the way these coalitions are linked to the facilitative global and regional security and political relations. Stubbs makes a compelling argument, although it might have been useful – in terms of the underlying thesis of the book – if the fractions of capital composing these coalitions could have been fleshed out.

The third theme explored in this collection is the growing challenges of inequality, social policy and precarious work. The book has several chapters outlining the growing importance of the politics of social policy in East Asia. In these chapters there is a strong focus on the former centrally planned economies of Vietnam and China. M. Ramesh and Azad Bali discuss health care policies in China, concluding that progress has been achieved in building administrative and political capacity but with only limited reform in building depth of coverage. This chapter, with its emphasis on state capacity, seems to be a neo-Weberian holdout from the social forces approach outlined in the introductory chapters. These themes are further explored by Ka Ho Mok and Anthony Welsh's analysis of higher education. There is useful material in these and other policy-oriented chapters but they seem to diverge from the theoretical perspective outlined in the introductory chapters.

More in line with the editors' theoretical framework is Jonathon London's exploration of the distinctive varieties of capitalism in China and Vietnam shaped by the institutional legacies of what he calls the Leninist state in Vietnam and China. In a similar manner, Mark Beeson's chapter on China probes the way a distinctive capitalism has been shaped by domestic economic structures and policies, particularly via state-owned enterprises. Darryl Jarvis, in his chapter on Malaysia – written before the 2018 election – notes how the neoliberal agendas of privatisation have proved useful not "because of economic or political necessity, but often because the way in which they extend the reach of state rents" (229).

In conclusion, this is an excellent book. It provides a powerful critique of the developmental state perspective and a new research agenda focussed on understanding the capitalist state in East Asia. It eschews notions of state capacity and institutional quality to locate the developmental state in the context of the uneven development capitalism – in global, regional and national frames – at the centre of its analysis. One caveat: there is a well-developed critical and Marxist literature, particularly in Japan and Korea, that has challenged some of these perspectives but this has largely been absent in the mainstream debates about the developmental state. I hope that the argument of this book draws attention to the work of these radical scholars. The editors in their chapters, and Carroll's standalone chapter, have provided an excellent critique of the statist perspective and charted a constructive research agenda for the analysis of the developmental state. The book gets high praise for charting an interesting and provocative research agenda for future researchers and students. Highly recommended.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1572210>

