

## **Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development.**

Daromir Rudnykyj. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010. 304 pp. \$65.00, cloth; \$24.95, paper.

*Spiritual Economies*, written by anthropologist Daromir Rudnykyj, deals with the confluence of religious and economic discourses and practices in post-development Indonesia. The empirical focus is the implementation an increasingly popular human resources program, developed by Ary Ginanjar, entitled “Emotional and Spiritual Quotient” (ESQ), in one of the largest state-owned steel enterprises in the country (Krakatau Steel), in which the author conducted an extended ethnographic observation project.

ESQ aims to meld traditional Islamic spiritual practice with secular norms and values associated with business success. According to Rudnykyj, this is an example of a larger movement of “spiritual reform” within the economic sector sweeping certain segments of the developing world. Proponents of this new movement criticize the failure of the traditional developmental state (symbolized in this case by the long-standing Suharto regime), which is attributed to its attempt to divorce the process of economic development from the spiritual life of individuals. The new spiritual reformers such as Ginanjar see economic progress as inherently tied to religion and spirituality and conceive of religious practice as a natural source of everyday discipline, ethical guidance, and behavioral control, all of which are redefined as valuable assets with a clear applicability to the task of making Indonesian companies and workers competitive in the global arena. Imagine *The Protestant Ethic* becoming a standard text in business school courses on work and motivation, and you will get a good chunk of the picture. As Rudnykyj convincingly shows, these reformers see religious piety not as an obstacle to development but as Indonesia’s greatest

competitive asset. All that is required is the proper canalization of the spiritual impulse via such media as ESQ training seminars to unlock its potential for increasing the bottom line.

The theoretical conversation into which this study falls is the interdisciplinary study of “religion in the age of globalization.” The standard whipping-boy line here is the traditional developmentalist (modernization) narrative in which development is inherently tied to secularizing forms of Western economic rationality, is antithetical to traditional religious practice, and is a state-led technocratic project from above, separate from the spiritual and ethical lives of individuals. The contemporary counter-story, to which this book contributes, is that reality is more complex than this, that there is no unilinear pathway to modernity, that religion can actually be resurgent in the wake of neo-liberal globalization and that, as this book attempts to document, “tradition” and modernity can be intertwined in complex and counter-intuitive ways, sometimes even feeding off one another. In this particular case, the latter dynamic takes the form of Islamic spiritual practice being repackaged and sold as a key input for the generation of productive, docile middle managers and line staff.

Although Rudnyckyj is an anthropologist, his approach to the subject should be familiar to sociologists, as it is decidedly Weberian. The basic argument is that religion can—as a source of disciplined, methodical patterns of behavior and practice and as the primary motivator for the attainment of both this-worldly and supernatural rewards—enter into the economic development process as a facilitating input. That said, the conceptual bases of the analysis are beset by a set of analytic problems, some of which are irresolvable with the theoretical framework that Rudnyckyj chose to delimit his project.

Rudnyckyj's main conceptual task centers on answering the key question in any case-based study, "What is this a case of?" Rudnyckyj's answer is that the rise of spiritual/business programs such as ESQ in the Indonesian context can be thought of as an example of the emergence of a *spiritual economy*. He claims that he is using the notion as an "ideal type" in the Weberian sense, but the reader soon discovers that rather than being a strategic accentuation of a historically specific configuration of factors, the notion of a "spiritual economy" is instead wielded as a "typological-concept," not an ideal type in the strict Weberian usage of the term. For Rudnyckyj, a spiritual economy is simply a type or variant of a neo-liberal economy, one that happens to use spirituality as a way to inculcate and justify neo-liberal values and practices and one in which religious motivations grounded in the imperative to live an ethical life and to achieve certain supernatural outcomes are co-mingled with economic motivations grounded in the desire to conform to exogenous norms of economic rationality and to gain this-worldly (material) rewards. In this respect, there might be other spiritual economies out there that could be classified as another example of Rudnyckyj's typological concept. But this does violence to Weber's conception of what an ideal type is, since for Weber, ideal types were not concepts that subsumed numerous historical exemplifications, but an accentuation of historical configurations that were "one of a kind," unique, and therefore of universal significance and value. Rudnyckyj is thus ultimately ambiguous as to whether the case of ESQ in post-developmental-state Indonesia is unique, and thus significant in this sense, or whether it is just one example among many others in the contemporary developing world.

Moreover, in attempting to differentiate his concept of spiritual economy from other cognate ideas in the anthropology of globalization literature, such as the notion of "occult economies" developed by the Comaroffs, Rudnyckyj gets into some theoretical hot water. Initially, he is

quick to point out that his approach is different precisely because such concepts presuppose that the co-mingling of spiritual notions and economic action is an irrational response produced by people for whom neo-liberal globalization is an exogenous force beyond their full understanding or control. According to this Marxian-inspired perspective, the development of occult economies is a form of defective “cognitive mapping” that could be remedied by a more sophisticated understanding of how the global economy actually works. Rudnyckyj notes that his concept of spiritual economy presupposes a much more voluntaristic framework in which people willingly manipulate and adapt religious symbols and practices for strict economic purposes, or erase any sort of incompatibility between the two domains, in the pursuit of concrete interests. But no sooner has Rudnyckyj noted the incapacity of the Marxian approach to understanding the religion-economy nexus than he argues for a Foucauldian understanding of his own case, in which “Islam is invoked to elicit subjects complicit with norms of efficiency, productivity, and transparency” (p. 139). But it is clear that a Foucauldian conceptualization of the notion of spiritual economy as a form of governmentality is as powerless to account for agency and subjectivity as is the standard Marxian approach.

This heavy-reliance on Foucauldian language and concepts throughout the study is a major conceptual flaw that unfortunately affects the viability of Rudnyckyj’s analysis at key points. One example is that the forced marriage between Weber and Foucault entails an ambiguous conceptualization of ESQ as a “tool” with which “subjectivities” are created by an unseen process and with which it is possible to “govern” entire populations of workers via the installation of these regimes. This also entails seeing “resistance,” and the fact that not all workers were necessarily duped into buying the whole package from management, as an unprincipled exception to the rule (as Rudnyckyj does in chapter 6) but not as a systematic

prediction from the conceptual framework. This also produces an evidential problem for Rudnyckyj. For though he is able to convincingly show that a good proportion of Krakatau Steel's management and some workers *appeared* to have bought into ESQ hook, line, and sinker (e.g., fervently believing that ESQ was an effective tool for the creation of a better company, better workers, and a better economy), it is unclear whether this program met any of the intended goals that it set for itself.

In essence, the idea that ESQ represents only superficially institutionalized window dressing, loosely decoupled from everyday activities, cannot be rejected at the end. Although there is a lot of talk (and a lot of implicit but unsubstantiated suggestions by Rudnyckyj) that ESQ *could* serve as a potent tool for the inculcation and internalization of neo-liberal values, there is little direct evidence that it functioned this way. Just because employers were made to attend the seminars en masse and these seminars appeared to provide a powerful emotional experience and to have become a managerial fad in post-Suharto Indonesia does not mean that they are making an iota of difference on the ground where it matters (e.g., worker productivity, managerial efficiency, increasing transparency). Tellingly, the last part of the book, entitled "Effects," provides no evidence of actual behavioral effects of ESQ. Instead, we are treated to mostly discursive effects (e.g., ESQ helping displace nationalist identification in favor of religious identity as a source of exclusion) or unintended effects (ESQ resulting in some forms of "empowerment" by previously subjugated low-level workers).

Rudnyckyj forgets about the difference between claims by proponents of a given cultural discourse as to its power and the fact of a cultural discourse actually being powerful (e.g., by having strong effects on action) at various points in his argument. For instance, in chapter 4, from

his observation that a lot of ESQ seminars were characterized by potent public displays of emotion and affect, he concludes that “affect was a powerful means to modulate, manipulate and reform the subjects of the emerging spiritual economy. . . . This new form of governing entailed the mobilization of J affect to forge a subject amenable to new norms” (p. 184). But evidence other than the statements of a couple of informants that participation in these affective displays resulted in the production of more pliable or more docile workers is mostly absent. In fact, Rudnykyj presents some evidence of disenchantment and skepticism within the top management of Krakatau Steel after the company had subjected its workers to fourteen sessions of ESQ. In this respect, the claim of powerful behavioral and psychological effects remains a presumption of the analysis (with Foucault rearing his ugly head again). The more plausible Weberian hypothesis that participation in recurrent affect-laden rituals actually prevents the incorporation of abstract rational norms into a methodical life pattern appears to be a stronger possibility in this case.

In the end, the forced marriage between essentially incompatible Weberian and Foucauldian formulations of the same cultural process results in a predictable weakness at the theoretical level: even though this is effectively an organizational ethnography, there is actually no theory couched at the organizational or even interorganizational level (e.g., the diffusion story is essentially cut short). Instead, spiritual reform exists either at the macro level as an all-powerful Foucauldian discourse (an abstract cultural and ideological force from without) or it exists at a micro level in the form of either internalized vocabularies of motive or in the form of Weberian-style micro-practices exemplary of ethical and disciplinary action.

As I have already noted, the lack of an institutional level grounding prevents Rudnykyj from ever considering a scenario in which spiritual reform is simply an organization-level discourse

decoupled from everyday activities. Instead, the cultural power of the discourse is presumed to exist in advance. This goes against what we know from recent advances in cultural sociology (e.g., the work of Ann Swidler): if a given set of discourses is not usable for a person in a given institutional context, then it will simply have little cultural resonance and power, contrary to what either Weberian or Foucauldian accounts would suggest. This is a possibility that is never considered in this study. In essence, Rudnyckyj trades Foucault for Marx but also keeps Weber in his attempt to portray ESQ and spiritual reform in general as both an ideology instrumental for the control of workers by elites and as an internalized cultural system motivating action from within. Both stances essentially make the mistake of taking the issue of cultural power for granted and never making it into an empirical question.

In spite of its rather serious conceptual flaws, there is no question that the empirical setting of this study is of inherent substantive interest. As we would expect from a well-trained anthropologist, Rudnyckyj does a fantastic job of giving us a “thick description” of the relevant setting, so that the reader does get a rich feel for what it is like to sit through an ESQ seminar. both from the point of view of the secular observer and from the point of view of the devout believer-employee. The study thus offers a detailed case-based window into the life of an organization undergoing rapid cultural change as enforced by top-level management, as well as a detailed description of an attempt at radical institutional entrepreneurship. We are privy to both the motivations of managers, in their role as true believers in the ESQ program, and the ambiguous reactions of workers as they are exposed to what is essentially a fairly shameless attempt to use religious imagery for the purposes of task motivation and goal alignment. Although there is no indication here as to whether this tactic failed or succeeded—most hints provided by Rudnyckyj imply no radical behavioral change with a lot of begrudging retention of

the status quo and a lot of symbolic change at the level of what people say—this study does provide us with a useful case of the pitfalls that may be encountered in undertaking such a risky move.

**Omar Lizardo**

Department of Sociology

University of Notre Dame

810 Flanner Hall

Notre Dame, IN 46556

olizardo@nd.edu