
Laurent GAYER, *Le Capitalisme à main armée: Caïds et patrons à Karachi* (“Les logiques du désordre”, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2023, 413 p.)

This is a very fine book. Firstly, from a material point of view, which is particularly noteworthy in these days of increasingly cheap and shoddily produced academic books. It is part of a new series published by CNRS Editions, on the “Logics of Disorder”, which generally pays special attention to the books that it publishes as products. These are printed on fine grain paper, have beautiful original dust jackets, and also include quality photos and illustrations. But, secondly, this is also a very fine book in terms of its content, the excellent research on which it is based, and the original ideas it puts forward. Drawing on “synoptic” research conducted between 2015 and 2022, Laurent Gayer offers us a superb and meticulous analysis of the micro-dynamics of the governance of violence, and the role that these can play in articulating processes of economic production and reproduction in the city of Karachi, Pakistan.

The latter’s industrial order is often characterised as being based on a dysfunctional form of predation “consisting in taking over the state, appropriating its material and symbolic resources while paralysing it in the exercise of its regulatory functions” [16]. Gayer suggests that what he poetically terms “the anxious fabrication of this industrial order” [22] is in fact more complex, and that far from being a dysfunction, the “disorder” inherent in capitalist predation in fact constitutes the very basis through which the relationship between wealth and power in the city is durably constituted. Or, to put it another way, that Karachi’s urban economic order is sustainably based on disorder.

This book thus follows on from Gayer’s previous work, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City*¹, but extends his analysis from the political to the economic realm. He argues that the seemingly contradictory relationships between capitalism, coercive power, predation, and lack of regulation cannot be analysed through a binary lens of law, on the one hand, and disorder on the other, but rather must be conceived through a cyclical “dialectic” between law and disorder. Gayer sees this dialectic as constituting a particular form of “armed capitalism”, which is characterised by “irregular” and “fragile” forms of capital

¹ Laurent GAYER, 2014. *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (London, Hurst).

accumulation, and whose rules constantly have to be renegotiated between the different actors involved—capitalists, security providers, the state, and workers. As a result, it also enables “Karachi’s industrialists to overcome political, social and health crises, and to secure and diversify their operations, and even sometimes to achieve exceptional windfalls” [396].

Gayer develops his argument in nine chapters. The first is general, considering the place of coercion specialists within the general dynamics of capitalism. Chapters 2 and 3 trace the history and development of Karachi’s manufacturing economy, providing us with the elements needed to understand the interdependencies between capitalists and security providers, as well as the way these links developed, strengthened, and institutionalised between 1985 and 2015, a process that is explored in Chapter 4. Using the specific example of a lynching, Chapter 5 shows how, while disrupting productive processes and the authority structure of the manufacturing world, urban conflicts in Karachi also create new opportunities for control and accumulation, in particular enabling capitalists to discipline their workforces. Chapter 6 explores both implicit and explicit forms of collusion with the Pakistani state, and in particular the way that new economic opportunities are created through the blurring of categories between the fight against “terrorism” and the defence of “industrial peace”. Chapter 7 offers a case study of the “Citizens-Police Liaison Committee” (CPLC), an institution that brings together police and employers, through which various forms of collusion are operationalised. Chapter 8 then looks at the multiple ambiguities of this collaboration, including the mistrust surrounding it and the institutional fragility that this entails, which Chapter 9 considers through an exploration of the legal proceedings that took place after an industrial fire which killed dozens of workers. The book ends with a very fine photo-essay on the “geographies of capital”, that provides a visual picture of the context described by Gayer. (It is perhaps a pity that this has been placed at the end of the book; I would advise readers to consult it after reading the introduction.)

Gayer concludes his magisterial empirical panorama by asserting that “the industrialists of Karachi have inserted themselves into this repressive capitalist configuration by conjuring... disorder. To conjure... can be understood in two ways: to act preventively to avert a danger or, more obscurely, to hatch a plot in secret”. This ambiguity lies at the heart of Karachi’s industrial capitalism and its methods of control. Conjuring up the spectre of chaos to threaten workers and to negotiate higher profit margins with impunity, the elites of Karachi have at the same time

endeavoured “to fight fire with fire, through ephemeral alliances with all that the city has been able to produce in the way of “big brothers” and petty thugs. By tying their destiny to the convulsions of a restless city as much as to the security plans of a praetorian state itself suffering from chronic nervousness, this conjuring of disorder has given birth to armed capitalism” [395-396].

Although he refuses to “pursue the illusion of a general model” [29], Gayer nevertheless argues that this “repressive configuration” of industrial ordering constitutes one of the basic forms of capitalism. In so doing, he obviously echoes the general idea put forward by Karl Marx that capitalism is an intrinsically “savage” process. However, it would perhaps have been interesting to develop a more detailed comparison with other regimes of authoritarian capitalism, such as the *dirigiste* dictatorial regimes of Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, or the neoliberal version associated with the proliferation of *maquiladoras* in Central America in the 1990s and 2000s. This would have allowed for an exploration of the potential existence and significance of variants specific to different contexts, periods and economic sectors. (Gayer’s study is limited to the textile and pharmaceutical industries.)

Even if Gayer explicitly claims a comparative approach, noting that “it was... very often by the yardstick of the Indian, American or Latin American experiences of capitalism that my understanding of the dynamics I observed in Pakistan was refined” [29], direct comparisons are in fact relatively rare in the book, making up no more than a dozen pages across chapters 5, 7, and 9 only. Developing a more systematic global empirical comparison would offer new points of observation, cross-checks, and descriptive labels that could enable us to think about urban capitalism differently, beyond the conceptual frameworks developed in relation to the experience and development of cities in Europe and North America, which remain the study’s principal touchstones. That said, it would have been difficult to develop such a comparison without sacrificing the detail of the Karachi case study so magnificently presented by Gayer. We should therefore perhaps simply hope that such a comparison will be the focus of his next work.

DENNIS RODGERS 