REVIEW ESSAY

Ethnographies of the super-rich

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Rosita Armytage. 2020. *Big capital in an unequal world: The micropolitics of wealth in Pakistan*. London: Berghahn Books.

Ashley Mears. 2020. *Very important people: Status and beauty in the global party circuit*. New York: Princeton University Press.

With “billionaire space tourism” entering the public lexicon and the revelation that the wealthiest in the United States pay little to no income tax (Eisinger et al. 2021), the lives and influence of the ultra-wealthy have emerged as an urgent theme in public debates about inequalities. In this context, a new generation of ethnographies has emerged that ground the stratospheric numbers bandied around in discussions of extreme wealth by exploring the everyday lives, spaces, and communities of wealth elites and the intermediaries who enable them. In this review, we focus on two recent contributions that expose the gendered nature of contemporary elites and shine a rare light on wealth elites in the Global South and the exclusive circuits of a VIP party scene: Rosita Armytage’s *Big capital in an unequal world: The micropolitics of wealth in Pakistan* and Ashley Mears’ *Very important people: Status and beauty in the global party circuit*.

The geography of extreme wealth has seen a shift in recent years. While the established wealth centers of Western Europe and North

America are still significant, wealth concentrations in Asia, Russia, and the Middle East are rising steadily as wealth redistribution from the bottom to the top intensifies across the world. In *Big capital in an unequal world*, Armytage provides an engaging and intimate account of Pakistan’s wealthy business elite, their families and friends, and their interactions with politicians and the government regulators tasked with monitoring them. Chapter 1 introduces Armytage’s entrance into the highest levels of Pakistani business and politics, her ethnographic approach and the central question driving her research: how is economic power in Pakistan acquired and protected? In chapter 2, she contextualizes her ethnographic research by linking her participant’s family histories with historical events of wealth accumulation and elite formation in Pakistan. She shows how, as new elites emerge with various civilian and military regimes, the established elites mobilize to exclude competitors from the informal forums where business and politics are conducted. In chapter 3,

Armytage explores social and cultural practices of distinction between old and new money, taking in membership of exclusive private members' clubs and prestigious boys' schools. Chapter 4 engages with marriage and the central role of family in the gendered reproduction of elites, where marital ties play a role linking families, and not just individuals, into strategic alliances. Beyond the homosocial environments cultivated through marriage and the private members' club, chapter 5 explores the affective and instrumental relationships fostered through the more ethnically diverse and variously affiliated elites invited to private parties. A culture of exemptions is the focus of chapter 6, which focuses on how elites navigate and direct the legal and regulatory structures that determine flows of wealth and opportunity within the country. Armytage's key argument is that Pakistani elites retain a hyper-localized and socially embedded form of business, finance, and politics that challenges widely held assumptions that the world is transitioning toward an era of globalized and standardized capitalism (Armytage 2020: 160). While a powerful and compelling contribution, Armytage might have strengthened this argument by drawing out further parallels alluded to in the conclusion between her research and the centrality of personal networks to the functioning of capitalist economies in the Global North (ibid: 156), such as those explored in ethnographies of Wall Street (Ho 2009) and US hedge fund firms (Tobias Neely 2018).

If Pakistan's business elites generate their wealth and influence largely in Pakistan's urban settings, Mears' *Very important people* takes us on a tour of the hypermobile transatlantic party scene, hopping from New York to Miami, Cannes, and Ibiza. Part-thrilling, part-nauseating, the book provides a personal guide to this VIP party circuit focused on the gendered, classed, and racialized power dynamics at play. To reveal the organizational achievement behind the competitive rituals of ostentatious consumption and waste she documents, Mears focuses on the promoters who decorate the parties of the 1 percent through providing the

young women—called girls. Chapter 1 opens in an opulent restaurant in Manhattan to introduce us to the key hierarchies of this VIP scene and contextualize it against a wider context of “the new gilded age.” In chapter 2, Mears follows promoters in their everyday often mundane pursuit of new girls to join them at parties. Chapter 3 explores the potlatch ritual of “bottle trains” of champagne delivered by waitresses adorned with sparklers and the hierarchical topography and internal boundaries of status in the VIP club scene. The concept of “girl capital” is introduced in chapter 4, which outlines the valuable role that girls play in generating social connections and money for promoters, and status for global (male) elites, and contrasts this with the women's inability to transform their “girl capital” into financial rewards for themselves. Chapter 5 explores the careful balance as promoters straddle the fine line between befriending and “managing” the girls who they encourage to come to parties with them. In chapter 6, Mears considers the possibilities and limitations of social mobility for promoters, who are *in* but not *of* the VIP circles they enable and frequent. Mears situates the VIP parties she documents in the context of “global shifts in capital and consumption among the nouveau riche that make this dreamworld possible” (Mears 2020: 52). She makes a compelling argument that the apparent “globalization” and “democratization” of extreme wealth call for greater scholarly focus on the shifting terrain of pecuniary might and the ways this remains rooted in masculine domination and white supremacy. We might add that Mears' argument could have been even more powerful had she more forcefully drawn out how the transatlantic VIP party circuit she writes about, and whose “strange” rituals she successfully makes sense of, are just as local and provincial as elite formations in the Global South. The question is, who can represent their life as unmarked, normative, and “global”?

For the remainder of this review, we discuss three key themes and contributions that we see as central to both books.

The social reproduction of “ruling classes”

In both books, capitalism emerges as a grounded and socially embedded project, enacted in offices and factory floors, but also in the living rooms, private members’ clubs and parties of the rich and powerful, where deals are made and relationships forged. For Armytage, “the transactions, alliances, friendships, conflicts and competition engaged in by members of the elite at the individual and family level constitute *the* major conduit for flows of domestic capital” (Armytage 2020: 158). Mears similarly demonstrates how the ritualized male bonding at VIP parties – lubricated by girls, bottle trains, and drugs – are important spaces for deal-making and networking for finance and business elites, which help us understand the hyper-masculinized cultural norms more generally shaping influential sites and institutions of global capitalism, such as Wall Street.

Both books also demonstrate the ongoing importance and contemporary mechanisms of elite closure and the forging of class solidarity, whether it operates through a national upper class connected through business, familial and social bonds, or a transnational community of hedonism with its own culturally prescriptive and circumscribed social scene. Accordingly, Mears documents the making of “dreamworlds” that,

provide social space for rich and powerful men to develop a closed global community and cultivate the shared cultural values and beliefs that drive contemporary capitalism. In these places, elites can foster a sense of belonging with each other. And researchers know almost nothing about what happens there. (Mears 2020: 49)

Armytage, in turn, tracks how the carefully crafted guest lists of her participants’ private parties create a space of intimacy for Pakistani business and political elites who may be functionally useful to one another, helping cultivate

class comradery and a shared ruling class identity across ethnic and institutional differences (Armytage 2020: 127–128).

Intra-elite diversity and hierarchies

As well as revealing some of the mechanics of how elites socially reproduce themselves, both authors also examine the internal fractures within elites, including between old and new money. Mears’ new elites include globally connected and hypermobile “internet entrepreneurs,” “Russian oligarchs,” “Saudi princes,” and “hedge fund titans.” She paints a picture of a “flattened global field of wealth” where “elites are no longer anchored to the normative holds of local communities” and their established modes of distinction. In the more anonymous context of international VIP parties, processes of distinction are not as clear cut as in more established elite scenes and ostentatious displays such as bottle trains are one of many new “strategies for status marking . . . that would make little sense in the structured local orders prevalent only a few generations ago” (Mears 2020: 248). For Armytage, elite distinction is also established in spaces of hedonistic leisure, but drinking and drug taking have to be navigated carefully in a society where religious norms are widely observed, with guests framing photos carefully to keep the whiskey out of shot. She tracks the changing meanings and tensions associated with elite status, focusing on lingering British colonial norms, displays of ostentatious wealth, liberal worldviews and adherence to religious and conservative social values.

For Armytage, the globalization of elites’ social and business networks does not imply a “tightly integrated global elite.” Her study provides valuable empirical nuance to claims that we are witnessing the emergence of a “global super class.” Many elite Pakistanis seek investment opportunities abroad and send their children to prestigious international schools in the United Kingdom or the United States. However, many of her participants noted,

That they could not possibly move elsewhere, despite often holding a second citizenship in a Western country—as life would be simply too dull, both in terms of the absence of the rich networks of which they were a part in Pakistan, and the near unrivalled turbulence of Pakistani politics. (Armytage 2020: 167)

Moreover, while some elite members or groups can transcend “the social barriers that defy their acceptance outside of domestic borders,” many of her participants find themselves “on the outer of the social worlds” in the global urban centers, such as London, where they temporarily reside. Here they are unable to command the same status that they derive, for instance, through family history and connections in Pakistan. Armytage argues,

This exclusion reveals the image of a roving, homeless global elite to be a falsity: the global elite remains deeply mired in the political, economic and social base of their countries of origin. (Armytage 2020: 167)

This important point is mirrored in Mears’ study, particularly in the ways VIP party-goers narrate distinctions between supposedly tasteful and tasteless displays of wealth. Many of the wealthy male clients Mears interviewed took pains to distinguish themselves from,

non-Western outsiders, like Russian, Arab, and “crazy rich Asian” spenders who jointly manifested as the spectre of irrational status-seeking . . . [with one wealthy participant describing] Saint-Tropez as ruined by these outsiders from the nouveau riche. (Mears 2020: 102)

Similarly, another wealthy client who Mears spoke to,

was hardly alone in invoking the cultural inferiority of non-Western ethnic clients.

. . . The most ridiculous of spenders were often those perceived as non-white or non-Western, like “the Russians,” or the Saudis and others with “Arab money.” (Mears 2020: 91)

These discourses worked to delegitimize the wealth and cultural competencies of non-Western wealth elites, which Mears analyses as “a response to the global crisis of whiteness, or even ‘white panic,’ which describes anxieties of changing class and racial hierarchies in American society and around the world” (Mears 2020: 103). Such displays of anxious whiteness reflect, at least to some extent, real shifts in racialized economic and political power. In East Asia, Mears suggests, whiteness was no longer necessarily considered at the top of the hierarchy of elite customers of VIP clubs, nor were white women necessarily considered “the most central signifiers of status” (Mears 2020: 103).

Gender and positionality

Both authors center the gendered structuring of capitalism in their work. The crude objectification of women is central to the social formation that Mears describes: the quantity and “quality” of girls is a measure of the status of the club, the promoter, and the elite clients. Women are turned into the luxury commodity of “girls,” the excessive accumulation of which fulfills the same function as the ritualistic waste of alcohol and money. Accordingly, Mears describes how one man “was surrounded by an excess of girls, more than any man could realistically consume” (Mears 2020: 108). In this context,

actual sex between girls and clients is not the main point of having so many models in attendance; rather, it is the visibility of sexiness in excess that produces status. A high quantity of girls is visual testimony to the client’s importance; it enables him to show off an excess of beauty. While for the promoters, women are a ticket to the

upper echelons of the American Dream.
(Mears 2020: 77)

For the women, the gain mainly revolves around short-term “free” access to clubs, drinks, food, company, and the flattery of being deemed attractive enough. However, time is ticking as their value declines fast. “In this rarefied world there is an unspoken but widely understood logic: girls are valuable; women are not” (Mears 2020: 34). Given their central role in the book, the girls in Mears’ book get to talk surprisingly little and their explanations and views could have been centered more. As Mears writes, girls play a central role in elite men’s pursuit of status and wealth. Though their appearance, girls generate enormous value for the club industry, the individual men operating within it, and the larger urban economy of New York City (Mears 2020: 33). Although at the center of the particular party economy she describes, the girls can feel like a decorative backdrop in her book, not unlike in the VIP scene she so skillfully reveals.

The world that Armytage studies is politically and economically dominated by men, but women are central “in managing the domestic economy of intra-family elite relations” (Armytage 2020: 96). While Armytage was allowed to visit offices, parties, and lunches with wealthy male business elites in Pakistan, she was denied access to aspects of their lives they deemed private, uninteresting, or potentially unfavorable, such as their wives or damaging court cases. Besides relationships, Armytage managed to establish directly with female members of the Lahori established elite or the girlfriends, friends or mistresses of elite men, her predominantly male participants acted as gatekeepers, occasionally allowing her to be welcomed into women’s areas of their home, but usually keeping her apart from their wives (Armytage 2020: 43).

In these highly gendered elite worlds, the positionality of both authors, as female, young, white-passing and from the Global North, profoundly shaped their access and the ways they were treated by participants: whether the Western researcher as cosmopolitan accessory who,

for once, wasn’t researching political conflict, poverty or development, as in Armytage’s case; or providing the body capital of a girl with the added prestige of being a professor wanting to research promoters, as in Mears’ case. The characteristics that enabled their access on the one hand, also constrained it on the other. In this context, Armytage’s book would have been strengthened by a more explicit and sustained discussion of how her own whiteness and citizenship structured and facilitated her research.

Concluding remarks

Through remarkable access, rich descriptions, and incisive analyses, both authors deepen our understanding of the reproduction of elites and inequalities. Both provide important insights into the spaces and relationships through which capital is accumulated, channeled, and secured by elites, all the while taking seriously the question of gender, “race,” nation, and sexuality as it relates to class formation. Their books provide rich resources for future research to explore old and new forms of elite integration and division, the ways in which these remain profoundly racialized and gendered, and the shifting geographies of wealth accumulation. Lastly, and crucially, in an increasingly interdependent and unequal world, these books enable us to better understand the consequences of elite formations for all of our lives.

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