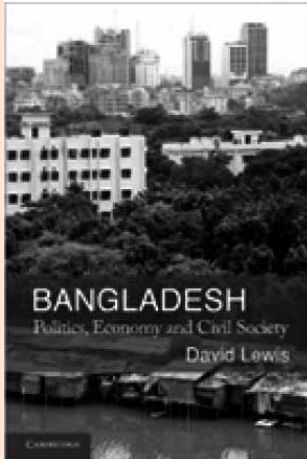


An Epistemological Paradox: How Best to Understand Bangladesh?

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Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society

David Lewis

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David Lewis, the author of *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society* (2012), and LSE Professor of Social Policy and Development, is quite right when he says Bangladesh is little known to the western world except for its pervasive image of a disaster-prone, poverty-stricken and donor-reliant country. The book, in this respect, serves the purpose well as it highlights the considerable progress Bangladesh has made since its independence in 1971, challenging prophecies that the new state would be unviable (12-13). There is acknowledgement that Bangladesh has expanded its food production, developed important new export industries such as readymade garments, improved areas of its healthcare and education, for which Lewis has generally applauded concerted government action and innovative work of some of its NGOs in partnership with donor agencies. By doing so, however, Lewis has opened up the reader to question his authorial stance of the book and his methodology relative to the investigation.

Lewis has worked on Bangladesh for long in various capacities in NGOs and for research, but personal, professional, and political interests, although external to research, are not always “epistemologically irrelevant values” (Phillips and Burbules 52-55). This is more so because the book is not based on any empirical research, but a narrative review of literature, many of which are commissioned research by international agencies and the government, and locally-produced, unverified media reports. A narrative review, contrary to a systematic review, is susceptible to the subjectivity of the author although personal and professional interests do not automatically damage the internal validity of any research. Talking about methodological decisions, Lewis argues that applying a political economy approach (10), mixing economic,

social, and political dimensions together, is a methodologically solid approach to capture various forms of power and its negotiation in the policymaking of Bangladesh. This approach, despite being a commendable effort, is a particularly big challenge for Lewis' book to paint a rounded picture because of scanty available research, centralized bureaucracy and its thin connection to local government offices (Sabharwal and Berman 203), and the complicated and evolving policy network that is currently prevalent in Bangladesh. Lewis' eight chapters have four consecrated foci—Bangladesh's economic success and its sustainability in the global economy, its development industry with a huge number of NGOs, the country's tryst with democracy with its claim of being "moderate Muslim," and its environmental challenges with increasing threats of global warming and the country's large population.

In his bid to offer a sociopolitical background of Bangladesh, in chapters two, three and four, it becomes progressively clear that Lewis fast forwards the political events of the 1970s and its differential impact on Bangladesh's foreign policy and reliance on aid money. Therefore, his explanations on the deep-rooted religious tension in society, its politicization and connection to the formation of a "new middle-class and its uneasy relationship with 'old elite'" remain broad-brush and superficial (16-19). This is, for instance, evidenced in his comment that "(r)eligion and politics were only weakly linked together in the public sphere during the years before and immediately after liberation" (28). Similarly, the era of electoral democracy since 1991 in Bangladesh demands a more careful analysis on the nature of politicization in the bureaucracy and its subservient and "cover-my-back" philosophy, the achievement in enrolment in primary education amidst widespread speculation of declining standards, the corruption and "mastanisation" behind the rhetoric and discourse of development and their various manifestations in both city and rural areas and so on. Lewis mentions the confrontational politics of the two mutually-loathing political parties of Bangladesh and their binary effect on people, economy, and democracy, but downplays the impact of "conservative Islamisation" in the society because "the complex blend of culture, language and religion developed through the centuries ... challenge(s) the binary notion of religious ideology and practice" (204).

The book would have required a more thorough analysis on this had it been published following the political events of 2013 and its aftermath in Bangladesh. Lewis' definition of civil society (chapter five) and its composition with NGO leaders, their political affiliations (and tension with government), trade unions, student organizations, and other civil society organizations, appears to have excluded the rising presence of media and corporations in Bangladesh, and societies outside the metropole at large. Lewis briefly mentions Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus and his bitter relationship with the current government (124) to exemplify the tension between the civil society and the lawmakers, and also to emphasize the absence of a powerful civil society to critique the government, but in the process overlooks the role of the pro-government civil society which consolidates the authority of governmental and executive power. He did a commendable job in highlighting the various sites of policy production, its interpretation and implementation in Bangladesh within different logics of practice, but the complex manifestations of the power relationships across the local, regional, national and the global policy players have not been covered adequately, particularly in the spirit

of what Lingard and Ozga term “policy creation community” where various sets of policy agents and agencies, located at bureaucracy, civil society and donor-agency levels, actively take part in the dynamic. Chapter seven of the book, the penultimate chapter before conclusion, is a powerful manifesto of Bangladesh’s economic success on the back of liberalization, cheap labor and labor migration, indeed so much so that Bangladesh’s developmental paradox, that the country remains developed and underdeveloped, rural and urban, and its people both literate and illiterate, is swept under the carpet. In sum, Lewis succeeds, adopting a fine-grained political economy approach, in his assessment of Bangladesh’s economic success and debunks the negative image of the country to the outside world. But his interpretations to fathom the country’s deep-rooted problems of malgovernance, its position in the regional and global policy network, its location in its power relationship with aid agencies and the sustainability of the economic progress require further analysis in order to recognize the change, with positive and negative consequences in different sections of society, that has taken place in Bangladesh.

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