– BOOK REVIEW –

COMPETING POWER: LANDSCAPES OF MIGRATION, VIOLENCE AND THE STATE

By Narmala Halstead
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Reviewed by
Arpita Das, Wellington

Narmala Halstead opens her book by stating: 'This book cannot be defined in terms of the starting point of my research. It is not unusual to hear anthropologists say they have ended at a different place from their starting position' (p.viii). In saying this, she encompasses the essence of 'fieldwork' and field realities for the researcher. Thus, what started out as a book of migration in Guyana shifted to include structural violence in its myriad forms; from the micro to the macro.

Competing Power is based on long term ethnographic research in Guyana and the Guyanese diaspora in New York which is a prime migration destination for Guyanese. Drawing on different research periods from the 1990s to 2012, the book starts with migration accounts and socio-political and economic conditions. It is updated to include changes in the local dynamics brought about by the discovery of oil. Halstead uses case histories from her fieldwork participants supported by archival materials, data from court documents, reports from commission of inquiry and surveys of emerging social media sites to capture the ways in which people are viscerally and corporeally entangled with their surroundings.

Halstead highlights the unique geographical and societal contexts of Guyana as the lone British colony in a continent surrounded by former Spanish colonies and with a sizeable population of Indian origin. The first chapter delves into this historical setting that set the stage for outward migration, detailing the targeted race-based violence which emerged from a specific series of events and the political climate of the 1970s during the People's National Congress government under Linden Forbes Burnham (1968–85). The second chapter explores how power negotiations are carried out in the background of illegality,

such as corruption aided by the State and its actors. By means of individual accounts, it captures how 'creative' ways are found to overcome the structural violence, forge new relationships with the state and exit the Guyanese physical space but not necessarily as a total disengagement. The following chapter details ethno-political banditry in a local setting, which involves analysing how individuals either engage or disengage a local setting with differing degrees of violence, while bidding for varying forms of empowerment. In this process the local shifts along the spectrum of being valued where local politics and violence compete for visibility. The fourth chapter is probably the essence of this work. Through an exposition of various case studies, the experiences of individuals – their everyday negotiations to straddle the local conditions of violence and actualise their goal of outward migration as globalised locals – come to the fore. Migration and the agency it generates is understood in terms of social imaginaries, as something which enables individuals to overcome the problems of living with violence and obtain social justice. Illegality becomes normalised as people strive to evade structural violence and change their local lives. Varying experiences of migration characterise the power and the ingenuity to negotiate with the State, its officials, and the blatant violence at the level of the local. This is carried on to the next chapter which builds on individuals who have been introduced to us previously who become 'experts' by their 'increased' understandings beyond the local. With this, the stage is set for the transformation vis-à-vis power relations between the newly empowered local resident Guyanese and the returned migrant. The ensuing power relations allow for new claims where people seek rights in the local setting and where there are expectations of justice within a local level to counter structural violence (p.150). In the quest for rights in a new space, case studies and accounts bring out the different bids for power where a local context of big and small public displays and contestations remains relevant.

This chapter considered shifting power relations on the ground as efforts were made to speak out against corruption and abuse by state officials. These competing sites signal the continued presence of empowerment located on the outside which makes the local feel devalued unless supported by powerful or big friends. The state continues to view the individual as a problem even as the individual seeks to complain against the illegality of the states. The next chapter looks at individuals and migrants' bid for power in the collective space envisaged between the state and the citizen. In this collective setting, citizens are expected to behave and conform to a localised understanding of the world citizen. Introducing state reforms at various levels also builds on the notion of the 'problem' individual rather than the failure of bureaucratic systems. It shows that ideas of empowerment have to consider, or shift, power relations embedded

in complicit practices as habits of realising the state. The final chapter picks up on the 'problem' individual and the 'isolated state' in the new spaces that are created with the introduction of external empowerment and the co-sharing of power. Political problems shift into social spaces in which migration changes are made to cohabit with larger mandates – both through local action and intervention by external partners. In these reimagined social spaces, Halstead highlights that ultimately people are made complicit in the responsibility for shared governance even as they act to show their capacities outside of local restrictions (p.221).

Halstead's book advantages the voices of the participants and is successful in bringing out often silenced voices. The way in which the author ventures into considerably divergent ethnographic territories, while beautifully accomplished, at times risks overshadowing the core of the book. What holds the studies together, however, is the honest admission that the incompleteness characterises the mobility of the participants and the researcher. While looking at migration as fluid for the individuals and the spaces that they occupy, it holds true of not coming back a full circle.