



Book Review

Home SOS: Gender, Violence, and Survival in Crisis Ordinary Cambodia.

Katherine Brickell. The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers), London, UK and John Wiley & Sons Ltd, Chichester, UK; Hoboken NJ, USA, 2020, pp. xviii + 262. ISBN 978-1-118-89832-1 (hbk); 978-1-118-89835-2 (pbk); 978-1-118-89843-7 (ePDF).

This is an important book with theoretical interventions and insights that take us beyond the confines of both Cambodia and Gender as analytic categories, even while remaining solidly grounded in each. Expanding the terms under which we conceive gender-based violence, Brickell puts forward a novel approach to social analysis that I will call a ‘home-based’ analysis. Through the lens of the home, which she argues is ‘intimately connected, rather than sealed off’ from the impacts of political processes (p. 8), this book connects the seemingly disparate episodes of forced eviction and domestic violence. Working to dissolve structural and analytical boundaries, *Home SOS* shows how these phenomena have implications across sectors. Domestic violence can be understood as a forced eviction, instigated by a woman’s husband, and forced eviction can be understood as domestic violence, instigated by the state against families. This juxtaposition reframes forced eviction as a particular type of gendered violence and asks us to see it in the same register as domestic violence, and as part of the slow violence of domestic crisis in Cambodia—and elsewhere.

Brickell situates the Cambodian present as one moment in a long line of crises, noting that the extreme ‘unmaking of space’ associated with the Khmer Rouge (KR) years pales in comparison to the ways that capitalist extraction un-makes space in the contemporary era. This is an important point that emerges out of her case studies and echoes voices from many parts of the country. Her analysis marshals scholarship on the crisis ordinary, bio-necropolitics and precarity, intimate wars and the slow violence embedded in diminishing rights to dwell. Structured by seven chapters, the book first presents the social situation in contemporary Cambodia as the culmination of a long-smoldering ‘fire in the house’ (Chapter 1), giving rise to ‘domestic crisis’ (Chapter 2), which is framed within ‘national trajectories’ (Chapter 3). She then presents 3 ethnographic chapters that juxtapose data from incidents of domestic violence and forced eviction showing elements of ‘attrition warfare’ (p. 67), resistance (p. 109), and lawfare (p. 156), concluding with a discussion of ‘dwelling in the crisis ordinary’ (p. 195). The overall effect of the book is powerful, linking as it does so many elements of violent neoliberalism (Springer, 2015) through the centering force of the home.

Rights-based systems of justice give rise to what Brickell calls an ‘altruistic necropolitics’ (p. 75), in which legal structures facilitate the war of attrition that wears down resistance. Domestic violence and forced eviction reveal this foundational structure of the law in different registers. Laws for the former fall outside ‘traditional’ norms, which makes them socially risky for women from the start. They are also inconvenient for the mostly-male institutional actors. Attempts by victims to invoke domestic violence laws slip into a system-sustaining spiral that privileges marriage over safety, sending women back into abusive homes. Eventually women stop trying and

passively stay in their violent homes. Forced eviction shows the active side of attrition warfare through which what government agents call, 'modern, sustainable, forward-thinking and socially responsible development' (p. 89) rolls over the lives of the insignificant. The families in the not-yet-formalized settlements surrounding the Beung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh learned they were legally disposable when water displaced from the lake flooded their homes. Over time, their verdant protests were worn down through failed attempts at adequate compensation, repeated incarceration, and the generalized violence of state actors against peaceful protestors.

The issues that Brickell brings forward open a wide space where the happy story of Cambodia's transition from battlefield to marketplace, can be more aptly and broadly understood as disparate and various 'battlefields of the marketplace' (p. 59). I find her analysis extremely relevant to my own work, where I can transpose the issues she brings forward in *Home SOS*, directly into Cambodia's corner of our unfolding global environmental crisis. In this arena, laws designed to reduce carbon emissions and biodiversity loss go against market-based values of land-use, profit, and production, and as such are not really desired and are both created and enforced in ways that sustain, rather than change the existing system. At the same time, the laws governing land use are aggressively managed to ensure that all users of land and resources are upholding the values of development and growth. For Brickell, the home is a traditional place where human families dwell. Using a 'home-based' method I would say that the planet is the home upon which all families dwell, which is dismissed in ways that are eerily similar to events described in *Home SOS*. The slow creep of environmental violence (Nixon, 2011) as the market transforms the land and its inhabitants is hardly remarked in the change from war to peace—making it obvious that an absence of war does not imply the presence of peace.

Neither does the presence of law imply the application of justice. Changes to the law 'forms part, rather than is unsettling of, hegemonic social relations' (p. 110), not changing but reworking the status quo. Brickell shows us a legal system in which laws unrelated to women nonetheless solidify hierarchal capitalism in and through the lived-in domestic home, which are 'built into the infrastructures of the extra-domestic home' (p. 207).

Within this insightful and important book, I have two critiques. The first concerns Brickell's (and others') critique of patriarchy. The 'patri' gives the violence a particular form, but any hierarchically informed structure of inherited privilege will give rise to violent exclusions and elite abuse (Padwe, 2020). The other, more important critique is the way she refers to 'Cambodians' and the crisis ordinary as if her sample applies to all Cambodians. Not so. There are increasing numbers of middle class families rising in the cities whose experience of 'crisis ordinary' is qualitatively different than those described in this book. They are NGO workers, employees in the emerging business, and governance industries. Many in this middle-class are quite satisfied with their consumer lifestyles of cars, coffee shops, and shopping malls, even as their fellows, both human and non, are consumed by the global economy. This is an important blind spot, because it entangles all those reading and writing books and their reviews with the slow violence of the crisis ordinary. We are part of an interconnected system: 'In the forest we have only one mother', is a Cambodia proverb that exposes yet another mother whose 'gendered geographies of death' absorb and administer, but also contest the 'extra-domestic and its crisis ordinariness' (p. 31).

Courtney Work
National Chengchi University
Accepted: 17 November 2020

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