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Review

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Overview of those to come: Chinese “bricks” in the global economy



Li Peilin, MK Gorshakov, Celi Scalon,
 KL Sharma (eds.), *Handbook on Social
 Stratification in the BRIC Countries: Change
 and Perspective*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd,
 2014, 846 pages [in Serbian]

In a very short time period, the acronym BRIC has become recognizable to the extent that it is no longer necessary to further explain its meaning. The term was coined by the British economist Jim O’Neill, who playing with the English word “bricks”, entitled his 2001 report for the Goldman Sachs investment bank *The World Needs Better Economic BRICs*. The author wished to emphasize that the “world needs better economic bricks” by connecting on a global scale countries with growing economic potential – Brazil, Russia, India and China – countries which, as O’Neill predicted in later papers, could considerably alter the global economic order by the middle of the century.

It is precisely these better “bricks” which have attracted such great interest on the global

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level. The report directed the attention of other countries and investors towards regions which were known respectively as “the global factory” (China), the “global raw material base” (Brazil), the “global gas station” (Russia), and the “global office” (India). Not only that, the economic potential of these countries elevated their cooperation to a higher level resulting in the first BRIC summit held in 2009 in Ekaterinburg. The second summit was attended by South Africa.

Although they share economic interests, which are recognizable on the global level as well, other segments of these societies remained in the background and are less known to the general public. This problem was addressed by a team of sociologists, who published the comprehensive study *Social Handbook on Social Stratification in the BRIC Countries: Change and Perspective*, edited by Li Peilin, M. K. Gorshakov, Celi Scalon and K. L. Sharma, who was the author of all nine studies relating to India. This handbook was the result of the agreement on cooperation, signed in 2009 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Russian Foundation for Humanities (RFH), and later extended to include sociologists from Brazil and India. The handbook contains 36 articles, divided into nine thematic units, with extensive data, graphs and tables, as well as a rich bibliography, which helps future researchers. The handbook was translated and published in Serbia by the Zavod za udžbenike in 2014, one year after the first edition (translated by Miljana Protić).

From first pages one is able to see that by filling in the gaps in existing literature this “comparative study helps us achieve a better

understanding of the economic and social growth in these countries but also lead us to unveil the mystery of how these emerging powers, with dramatic differences in history, geography, culture, language, religion and politics could share a common will and take joint action”. Li Peilin addresses this question in the introduction, where he stresses that “it is the profound social structural changes in these countries that determine their future, and to a large extent, will shape the socio-economic landscape of the future world”. The significance of the effort is proved by the list of 28 associates, whose brief biographies are presented in the pages following the introduction.

The first part of this comparative study titled “Changes in social stratification” contains the following analyses: “Social stratification and its transformation in Brazil” (C. Scalon), “Changes in social stratification of Russian society within a period of transformation” (Z. T. Golenkova and M. K. Gorshakov), “Social stratification and change in contemporary India” (K. L. Sharma), “Changes in China’s social stratification since 1978” (Li Peilin).

The second part of the handbook is dedicated to studies of the working class: “Labor, workers, and politics in contemporary Brazil: 1980-2010” (M. A. Santana), “The working class in a transitional society: from the Soviet Union to the Russian Republic” (Z. T. Golenkova and E. D. Igitkhanian), “The urban industrial working class and the rural peasant working class in India” (K. L. Sharma), “The status quo and change in the working class in contemporary China” (Li Wei and Tian Feng).

The peasantry of these countries is analyzed in the third part of the book: “Brazilian peasantry: a history of resistance” (M. de Nazareth Baudel Wanderley), “The transformation of the social structure in modern Russia” (A. A. Hagurov), “The differentiation of the peasantry in India since Independence” (K. L. Sharma), “Rural society and peasants in China” (Fang Ping).

The fourth section of the *Handbook* focuses on business enterprises and entrepreneurship: “Innovative entrepreneurship in Brazil” (S. K. Guimarães), “The development of entrepreneurship in Russia: main trends and the status quo” (A. Chepurenskiy), “Tradition and entrepreneurship of Indian private entrepreneurs” (K. L. Sharma), “China’s fledgling private entrepreneurs in a transitional economy” (Chen Guangjin).

The fifth part of the book presents studies of the middle class, both from the historical and the contemporary perspective: “The formation of the middle class in Brazil. History and prospects” (A. Salata and C. Scalón), “The middle class in Russian society: homogeneity or heterogeneity?” (N. E. Tichonova and S. V. Mareyeva), “The rise of the middle class in India since Independence” (K. L. Sharma), “The heterogeneous composition and multiple identities of China’s middle class” (Li Chunling).

The question of income inequality is addressed in the articles given in the sixth part of the *Handbook*: “Income inequality and social stratification in Brazil: key determining factors and changes in the first decade of the 21st century” (L. G. Costa and C. Scalón), “Income

inequality in Russia” (Y. Epikhina), “Poverty and income inequality in India’s urban and rural areas” (K. L. Sharma), “Structural characteristics and trends of income inequality in China” (Chen Guangjin).

The seventh section is dedicated to the problem of education inequality: “Education inequality and social stratification in Brazil” (M. da Costa, M. C. Koslinski and L. G. Costa), “Inequality in education: the case of Russia” (D. L. Konstantinovskiy), “Education and social stratification in India: systematic inequality” (K. L. Sharma), “Educational inequality and educational expansion in China” (Li Chunling).

Consumer practices in the BRIC countries are examined in the eighth section: “Beyond social stratification: a new angle on consumer practices in contemporary Brazil” (M. Castañeda), “Consumption and lifestyle in Russia” (P. M. Kozyreva, A. E. Nizamova and A. I. Smirnov), “The new emerging consumption class and their lifestyles” (K. L. Sharma), “The stratification of consumption among social classes, occupational groups, and identity groups in China” (Tian Feng).

The ninth and final section of the book is entitled “Class awareness and values” and includes the following articles: “Working class formation in Brazil: from unions to state power” (A. Cardoso), “The research of class and group consciousness in contemporary Russian society” (F. M. Chernysh), “Social-class connection and class identity in urban and rural areas” (K. L. Sharma), “Stratum consciousness and stratum identification in China” (Li Wei).

The work of Chinese authors presented in this book contributes to a deeper understanding of societal relations in China, which have brought about the increasing importance of Chinese “bricks” in the global economic structure and the ever more active role the country has in other segments of global relations. The predictions given in the book, observed from a time distance since the period when the analysis was performed, can now be clearly outlined in practice. Among others, one of the predictions that should be mentioned is that of Li Peilin from the first part of the book in which the author states that “the transformation that the social structure of China has experienced after the reform and opening up to the world is truly profound and the trend which this transformation creates will determine the directions and future of China”. In his article, Peilin mentions that “as urbanization gradually continues in China, due to an aging population and changes in labor supply, the era of Chinese cheap labor will gradually pass”. A prediction that is now reality is also made, namely “China’s future economic growth will have to shift from ‘made in China’ goods to ‘Chinese own brand’ goods, so the comparative advantage of Chinese labor will increasingly be reflected in the quality of its work”.

On the topic of relations within Chinese society, the final article in the book by Li Wei addresses class consciousness and identification in China, reminding the reader at the very start that “in the thirty years since the beginning of the reform and opening to the world, China has undergone a transformation from an agricultural

society to a modern industrial society and has moved from a planned economic system to a market economic system”. Because of this, the author explains “its social strata also experienced a great stratification of interest, with each social stratum experiencing self-identification and the formation of group consciousness, which, in turn, influenced the emergence of discord and a fragmentation of the identity of the strata.” Li Wei defines class consciousness and social stratum consciousness as well as the consciousness of social stratification, which involves the public perception of social differences. Further on the author analyses the consciousness of stratum identity, examining whether the individual perceives the boundaries of the social stratum they belong to and whether they recognize the interests they share with other members of their stratum, as well as the consciousness of conflict between social strata, which further points to the public perception of the relations between social groups. It is in this section that the author explains how such societal stratification based on interests took place and the resultant conflict of interests, claiming that the cause of this is that “from members of work units connected with the state, citizens have become more independent ‘social persons’, while labor relations, which were once ruled by the state, have become market-conditioned.” On the basis of this analysis the author makes several conclusions: that the majority of Chinese society feels that there is a conflict between social strata, that awareness of conflicts of interest between social groups is most pronounced among civil servants and

those who classify themselves within lower social strata, while conflicts of interest between social groups are mainly manifested in the division between the wealthy and the poor, in an industrial conflict and strained relations between managers and the people. One of the examples that Li Wei offers as an illustration of the particularities of the emergence of social strata in China is that “with a more sensitive classification of strata, private business owners would rather be classified as ‘middle class’ or even ‘working’ and ‘rural’ than to describe themselves as members of the ‘business owner class’”. The author points out that this is a “specific phenomenon that has never been noticed in the Western theory of class analysis”.

Because of the examples we have given and many others relating to the four countries,

the *Handbook on Social Stratification in the BRIC Countries: Change and Perspective* is a valuable comparative study for all those who in the current global balance of power are working together to secure not only their “place under the sun” but also assume an active role on the international stage through the identification of common economic as well as political and security interests. The book also provides a wider context for the understanding of international relations during the period of globalization. Regardless of the time distance since its publication and the fact that more than a decade has passed since the idea was first born, the value of this book is that it is still fresh enough to help its readers understand current events, analyze what has been achieved in the meantime and predict future processes.

