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Book Review: Sri Lanka's Remittance Economy: A Multiscalar Analysis of Migration-Underdevelopment

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abroad. Lori shows how waiting for the situation to improve grinds people down and how it leaves incredible paper trails from marriage, birth certificates, school attendance, and so on, where all must be documented. Far from being “undocumented,” her study shows, people in such situations are obliged to spend an enormous amount of time and money to document their presence over decades.

In short, this book is a remarkable piece of scholarship. It theorizes the question of precarious citizenship among settled groups and migrants that do not fit the historical narrative of postcolonial states. It shows how precarious citizenship evolved historically and how contemporary migration “management” tools, such as the issuance of biometrical identification cards, compounds these individuals’ precarious citizenship status. Most importantly perhaps, the book accounts for the disturbing effects that bureaucratic practices have on the lives of people in countries that have the means to integrate these people in their citizenship regimes but choose not to do so.

Withers, Matt. 2019. *Sri Lanka's Remittance Economy: A Multiscalar Analysis of Migration-Underdevelopment*. Abingdon: Routledge. 188 pp., \$155.

Reviewed by: Sokchea Lim, *John Carroll University, Department of Economics and Finance*
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Given recent developments in many poor countries in terms of international migration and remittances, there are many reasons to read Matt Withers’ *Sri Lanka’s Remittance Economy*. Especially for Sri Lanka, a better reason would be that the World Bank recently classified this country as an upper-middle-income economy that has left behind similar remittance-dependent countries in the region. Withers starts the book nicely by briefly touching upon the history of temporary migration, the motives behind it, and its link to development in Sri Lanka, drawing upon the World Bank’s ‘triple win’ thesis — a win for migrant workers, a win for labor-sending countries, and a win for labor-receiving countries. Though there is not much controversy over the last win, the first two wins are very much debated in the literature and they constitute the focus of Withers’ work. Withers also provides a good overview of the theories and debates around the migration-development nexus and touches upon the multi-scalar approach used in his book. The book offers a full chapter on the political economy of uneven development in Sri Lanka, discussing colonial and postcolonial development, the existence of class structure and its link to neoliberal development, and development during the open economy.

This book’s important part is the multi-scalar analysis, which includes a country-level analysis of *forced migration*, a community-level analysis of the differences in local institutions or *place*, and an individual-level analysis of migrant *status*. Withers uses fieldwork data to provide a good account of temporary labor migration and underdevelopment in Sri Lanka. He discusses the reasons for what he calls forced

migration in the face of financial necessity, the livelihood of different communities from different geographic locations — including Akmeemana, Negombo, Polgahawela, and Thavapuram — and, most importantly, the comparison and contrast of migrant workers' pre-migration aspirations and post-migration expenditure outcomes. While some migrant workers were able to achieve their pre-migration priority, including housing, others were hampered by debt repayment and came short of their expectations.

From there, Withers unpacks migrant workers' debt issues by discussing the recruitment practices and exploitation of migrant workers by what are called "merchants of labour." More than two-thirds of migrant employment is arranged through private agents. Migrant workers from the Tamil-Hindu community of Thavapuram, an isolated region, are at a disadvantage in this system, paying higher recruitment costs and earning lower income than those from the three other regions. As they are exploited by private recruitment agencies and moneylenders, these migrants accrue greater debts than migrants in other regions do. Withers attributes this uneven development to civil war, economic marginalization, and a dearth of migration knowledge. He also blames inadequate government responses to this exploitation from labor merchants.

Withers offers a paradox of migration behavior, challenging the assumption of rationality in neoclassical economics, by providing evidence of the devaluation of workers' self-esteem or "*status*" and the conspicuous consumption of migrant remittances. He argues that degraded working conditions at home *force* Sri Lankan men and women to seek jobs in West Asia, mainly as low-skilled workers and domestic workers, respectively. Withers also reports migrants' complaints about overwork, physical abuse, and struggles with foreign foods, languages, and climates as the main hardships.

These Sri Lankan migrants, Withers suggests, project their success and reclaim their social status by means of conspicuous consumption when they return home. He describes this behavior as a false pretense of "success" that misleads prospective migrants. However, I would argue that, given the circumstances, these return migrants behave based on a rational, utility maximization and the sense that the satisfaction of being looked upon favorably in the community is worth spending on jewelry, clothing, and durable goods.

To examine remittances' impacts on Sri Lanka's macroeconomy, Withers first uses fieldwork data to trace key decisions in the transfer and consumption of remittances. One possible claim of a macroeconomic benefit of remittances is that they increase Sri Lanka's foreign-exchange earnings, allowing the government to borrow at a lower cost from the international financial market. Withers argues that the government's use of its borrowings is constrained by the Dutch Disease and path dependency.

Finally, Withers addresses the claim of triple wins from temporary labor migration. While the evidence is apparent for the migrant-receiving country's win, Withers questions the win for migrants and for migrant-sending countries like Sri Lanka. I

agree with Withers that Sri Lanka's current development policy of subordinating migrants has shifted their local production overseas, benefiting receiving countries at the expense of its own development. I would further argue that the potential gains for development for all are to facilitate capital flows to poor countries, not alleviating labor needs in rich countries by ways of labor migration. In addition, another aspect that I would expect Withers to explore is the impact of labor loss on Sri Lanka's domestic wage and manufacturing sector.

This book can be a good reference for both researchers and practitioners, especially policymakers in countries seeking migration as a path for development. Overall, the book is well organized, and it provides a summary of theoretical background, concrete methodology, and well-presented results from fieldwork. One area in which I disagree with Withers is his labelling of this temporary labor migration as *forced* migration. Withers suggests that these Sri Lankans do not make rational decisions, but are pushed into migration by degraded working conditions at home and pulled by the false narratives of return migrants. I believe that, on the contrary, given the circumstances and information available to these migrants, they maximize their utility by equating their current well-being with the expected return from migration.

García, Angela. 2019. *Legal Passing: Navigating Undocumented Life and Local Immigration Law*. Oakland: University of California Press, xii. 267 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

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In *Legal Passing: Navigating Undocumented Life and Local Immigration Law*, Dr. Angela García contributes to the literature on immigration enforcement by showing how immigrants respond to pro- and anti-immigrant policy at the local scale. The book's most direct target is attrition through enforcement. As discussed in Chapter 3, "attrition through enforcement" is a mosaic of anti-immigrant policies implemented by state and local jurisdictions across the United States and is animated by the idea that creating an inhospitable pro-enforcement climate will compel immigrants to leave a given jurisdiction or even the country itself. In *Legal Passing*, for instance, we learn that Escondido, California, limited undocumented immigrants' access to rental properties, partnered with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to create an arrest-to-deportation pipeline, and used so-called quality-of-life property ordinances as a pretext to police Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. Immigrants in Escondido experienced these strategies as a "heightened sense of deportability" (115). This is attrition through enforcement *par excellence*. But do attrition-through-enforcement policies work as intended? And what are their effects on immigrants' lives?