

British Academy BARDA Award 2008-2010 (BARDA-48854)

‘Changing Cultures of Competitiveness’

Political Economy Research Centre Lancaster University

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A) Synopsis of Research

This research had three dimensions. First, it developed a cultural political economy approach to changing cultures of competitiveness in terms of discourses (e.g., ‘economic imaginaries’) and policy practices. Second, case studies of Hong Kong/Pearl River Delta and India illustrated how competitiveness ideas are being reinterpreted and combined at different sites and scales. In the former case, a global city region is being re-integrated with the ‘motherland’ in a context of ‘catch-up competitiveness’. India is still developing its national competitiveness strategy but has major local experiments oriented to poverty-reduction around building competitive micro-clusters. A major policy implication of the case studies is the importance of a multi-scalar approach that would enable researchers and policy-makers to identify the best scale(s) to ‘get competitiveness right’. Third, this research examined the rise of ‘BRIC’ (Brazil, Russia, India and China) discourse as a new competitiveness imaginary, especially as this concerns China and India.

B) Project Aims and Preliminary Results

The project enables the advancement of knowledge and policies in three ways.

First, it develops Cultural Political Economy as a new and distinctive approach that combines the ‘cultural turn’ with political economy. It takes seriously the role of discourse in shaping ‘economic imaginaries’ and the institutional mediations of competitiveness as policies and practices. It seeks to synthesize critical discourse analysis, evolutionary and institutional political economy, state theory and governance theory, and critical geo-politics. This approach is gaining attention as an emerging interdisciplinary perspective in geography, (international) political economy, sociology, narrative analysis, and area studies. To further advance this knowledge, a Cultural Political Economy Research Centre (CPERC) was set up in 2009 in Lancaster University with a dedicated website (<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/cperc>). The PI and CI have already been invited to conferences and workshops interested in this approach, e.g., plenary

speakers at the 4th International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis on *Discourse and Power in Global Political Economy*, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kassel, Germany between 25-27 June 2009. The PI and CI are co-authoring a major book with 9 main chapters (c150k words), with the title *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Taking a Cultural Turn in Institutional Economics*, to be submitted to Edward Elgar in 2010. This book forms second volume of their joint work. The first volume on *Beyond the Regulation Approach: Putting the Capitalist Economies in their Place* (2006), Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. This won the Gunnar Myrdal Prize of the European Association of Evolutionary Political Economy. Edward Elgar is also planning for a book box for the two volumes.

Second, academic and policy work on competitiveness is pervasive, especially in business studies, management literature and policy documents. This project advances critical knowledge and understanding on competitiveness (and its changing nature) by treating it as cultural as well as material phenomenon from a cultural political economy perspective. It seeks to explore how this body of discourse and practices became important and how they changed and reinterpreted at different sites and scales. The PI developed the idea of 'knowledge brand' to capture the importance of international business schools, think tanks and policy makers in packaging and marketing this body of knowledge. Michael Porter from Harvard Business School and his trilogy on competitiveness form the backbone of this brand. This brand has been recontextualized at different sites and scales. Fieldwork on Hong Kong/Pearl River Delta and India has already generated preliminary results on how this body of knowledge is being recontextualized and reinterpreted by local chamber of commerce, think tanks, international organizations (e.g., UNIDO) and development agencies (USAID, DFID, GTZ and SIDA). For example, in Hong Kong/Pearl River Delta, it is interpreted as related to service growth (e.g., logistics) and technological upgrading, both tied to the 'catch-up competitiveness' of a 'global city region' that is undergoing its re-integration with the 'motherland'. In this regard, competitiveness is both an economic and a nationalist project that enters into policy rhetoric at the scale of global city region with diverse impact on different clusters. In the case of India, competitiveness discourses and practices are less successful on the national level because of India's Gandhian and Nehruvian traditions of, respectively, self-sufficiency and decades of import-substitution policies. However, with the gradual neo-liberalization of India since the 1990s, competitiveness 'thoughtways' and practices have been combined with poverty-reduction strategies that operate primarily at the local level of micro-cluster building in different sectors (e.g., clothing and textiles, leather). This Cultural Political Economy perspective has important intellectual and practical use-value added in research and policy terms respectively. For research, this approach highlights the recontextualization and hybridization of different competitiveness imaginaries that are congenial to national/local concerns and priorities with uneven impact upon different clusters and their workers/citizens. In policy terms, it is important to recognize that competitiveness discourses and practices are not only national but also urban, regional and local.

However, these scalar dimensions are not all equally important for competitiveness projects to succeed. Depending on the case and location, some work better on the national scales while others are more likely to be successful on the urban and local scales. This research contributes by identifying the need for a more multi-scalar perspective, including issues of inter-scalar articulation, in contrast to the more mono-scalar approaches to competitiveness that have tended to dominate to date in the work of case and government departments. It is important to consider the scalar issue *ab initio* to ‘get competitiveness right’ in Asia and in Europe.

Third, as the project progress, the PI recognized the importance of incorporating a crisis dimension into the project. This was absent in the original proposal. Subsequent work includes the examination of the impact of the crisis upon these economies, especially the rise of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) imaginary. This re-orientation seeks to update and contribute to an under-researched area on BRIC and the changing nature(s) of the competitiveness of these economies and their emerging fields of cooperation as well as rivalry. Concentrating more on China and India, this research examines the tendential re-orientation of competitiveness of China from export-oriented towards more internally-driven dynamics that can contribute to global consumption, international lending and green competitiveness. With this additional crisis dimension, the PI hopes to contribute to knowledge on the BRIC economies and their specific ways of reinventing competitiveness imaginaries.

C) Publications

Books:

Sum, Ngai-Ling and Jessop, Bob (2011) *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Taking a Cultural Turn in Institutional Economics*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar (manuscript to be submitted to publisher at mid-2010)

Sum, Ngai-Ling (2012) *Cultural Political Economy of Competitiveness* (proposal to be submitted to Routledge RIPE series in June 2010)

Journal Articles:

Jessop, Bob and Sum, Ngai-Ling (2010) ‘*The development and potential of the cultural political economy: on logics of discovery, epistemic fallacies, and the complexity of emergence*’, New Political Economy, 15 (3) (in press).

Sum, Ngai-Ling (2010) ‘*The Cultural Political Economy of Transnational Knowledge Brands: Porterian Competitiveness Discourse and its Recontextualization to Hong Kong/Pearl River Delta*’, Journal of Language and Politics, 9 (3) (in press).

Sum, Ngai-Ling (2009) *'The Production of Hegemonic Policy Discourses: "Competitiveness" as a Knowledge Brand and its (Re-)Contextualization'*, Critical Policy Studies, 3 (2): 184-203.

Sum, Ngai-Ling (2008a) *'Struggles Against Wal-Martization and Neo-liberal Competitiveness in (southern) China: Is Post-Neoliberalism an Alternative?'*, Development Dialogue, 51: 67-81.

Sum, Ngai-Ling (2008b) *'Neoliberalism and Cultures of "Competitiveness" in East Asia: Numbers, Clusters and Chains'*, Memoirs of the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, 50-67.

Sum, Ngai-Ling (forthcoming) *Financial Crisis and the Discourses of Hope: Construction of BRIC and the Case of China*, Third World Quarterly (to be submitted in April 2010).

Book Chapters:

Sum, Ngai-Ling (2010) *'The Making and Recontextualization of Knowledge Brands Across Different Sites and Scales'*, Geographies of Brands, A. Pyke (ed) Cheltenham: Edward Elgar (accepted by editor).

Sum, Ngai-Ling (2009) *'Cultural Political Economy of Neoliberalism: The Production and Negotiations of "Competitiveness" as Hegemonic Logics'*, Economic Transitions to Neoliberalism in Middle-Income Countries, ed. A. Saad-Filho, & G. Yalman, London: Routledge, 47-61.

D) Conference Papers

Invited conference papers of the PI:

'Cultural Political Economy of Competitiveness', paper presented to the "Welfare State Transformation Since 1970: Comparative International Perspectives.", the University of Chicago's Centre in Paris (France), 24-25 April 2009.

'A Cultural Political Economy of Knowledge Brands: the Porterian "Competitiveness" Discourse and its Recontextualization in the Urban Redevelopment in Hong Kong/Pearl River Delta', paper presented to the 5th East Asian Regional Conference in Alternative Geography, National University of Seoul, South Korea, 13-16 December 2008.

Invited Public Lecture and Plenary of the PI:

'Developing a Cultural Political Economy: Connecting Discourses and Materialities',

public lecture in the Nehru Memorial Museum Library, New Delhi, India, 2 April 2009.

'Cultural Political Economy', plenary speech in the 4th International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis on *Discourse and Power in Global Political Economy*, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kassel, Germany, 25-27 June 2009.

Forthcoming invited conference of the PI:

'Cultural Political Economy of Global City Region: Competitiveness-Integration Order in the Pearl River Delta', a Joint International Symposium organized by Beijing and Minnesota Universities on Making Global Cities and World Economic Crisis, Shenzhen Air International Hotel, Shenzhen, China, 4-8 January 2010.

Forthcoming conferences of the PI:

'The Cultural Political Economy of BRIC', XVII International Sociology Association, Gothenburg, Sweden, 11-17 July 2010.

'The Cultural Political Economy of Competitiveness: China and India Compared', EAEPE Conference 2010, Bordeaux University IV, Bordeaux, France, 28-31 Oct 2010.

Invited conference paper of the CI:

'Cultural Political Economy of Competition, Competitiveness and the Competition State', Annual conference on 'Sources of National Institutional Competitiveness' (SONIC), Centre for Business and Politics, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, 27 March 2009.