

12-1-2017

Rehbein, B. *Society in Contemporary Laos: Capitalism, Habitus and Belief*. New York, NY. Routledge, 2017.

Julie Bridges

University of Louisiana at Monroe, bridgeje@warhawks.ulm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bridges, Julie (2017) "Rehbein, B. *Society in Contemporary Laos: Capitalism, Habitus and Belief*. New York, NY. Routledge, 2017.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 24.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1389

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol9/iss1/24>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Rehbein, B. *Society in Contemporary Laos: Capitalism, Habitus and Belief*. New York, NY. Routledge, 2017.

Throughout the last decade, Laos has experienced vast transformations due to exposure to capitalism. This has created social inequality throughout the country, broadened the variety of habitus, and generated new forms of ethos. Laos is a very poor nation located in Southeast Asia, where there is a minimum of 48 languages spoken. Vientiane is the capital and largest city of Laos. The primary religion practiced is Theravada Buddhism.

Society in Contemporary Laos: Capitalism, Habitus and Belief, set as a sequel to *Globalization, Culture, and Society in Laos*, analyzes the configuration of capitalism and religion in the social culture of Laos. Rehbein argues that there is a link between ethos and social culture stating, “There is not one capitalism within Laos; instead, it is interpreted differently in each socioculture and within each social group and even context” (p. 46). Both socioculture¹ and social groups are constantly subject to change. The main argument seen throughout the book is that meanings of “capitalism” and “religion” differ based on the different social cultures present within society and that these meanings are controlled by the connections and intersections of history, social settings, transformations, habitus and ethos.² The author explains, “There is neither one capitalism nor one religion in any given society. And we have to determine empirically which forms there are and how they relate to social structures” (p.18). To understand the author’s argument, it is important to note that both objective and subjective layers exist to make up a society and that all layers are dependent upon one another. Objective layers include factors such as culture, society, socioculture, and social environment, whereas subjective layers include groups, habitus, and ethos. Even though all layers are dependent upon each other, the objective layers shape the subjective layers. Religion helps to maintain social order across the objective and subjective layers.

Organized into three parts and twelve chapters, *Society in Contemporary Laos: Capitalism, Habitus and Belief* presents research that was collected over a fifteen-year period, consisting of data from an illustrative face-to-face quantitative survey and eighty individual interviews, with interviewees representing all parts of Laotian society. The survey considers ethnic variation and age to give an overall representation of Laos. Men and women are represented equally, though peasants are underrepresented in the survey. Rehbein and professors from the National University of Laos conducted the interview interpretations and field studies that took place. The university will be using the empirical research from this book for their own purposes and other publications that are to come in the future. The empirical research comes from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology approach, while Max Weber’s theory of rationalization was used as the focus of the study.

Part one of the book is divided into four chapters and discusses capitalism and sociocultures using the history and transformations that have taken place within the culture of Laos. Chapter one concentrates on the history of Laos and explains that the layered configuration of society is due to reproduction, rapid change, and untimeliness. Chapters two, three, and four examine the colonial, socialist, and capitalist transformations that have occurred in Laos, incorporating rulers, social status changes, and lifestyles within the villages. Figures are provided throughout these chapters that give a good visualization of the changes that have occurred to social structures throughout the colonial, socialist, and capitalist transformations. It is thought that the French intervention that took place during the colonial transformation started the formation of Laos, while the American intervention of the 1970s set the stage for the transformation to a socialist society. The goal throughout the socialist transformation was to turn

the peasant society of Laos to socialism without ever becoming a capitalist society. Despite this effort, Laos ultimately underwent a capitalist transformation, which caused a rapid change in Laotian social structures.

Part two includes four chapters and addresses habitus groups, inequality, and the emergence of classes within Laos. Qualitative interviews were used to break down habitus groups into clusters of categories using different traits and characteristics in chapter seven. It was surprising to see that Laos could be broken down into just four categories: depressed habitus type, traditionalist, disciplined, and ambitious. Chapter five introduces capitalism and the inequality of social structures by describing what happens to social structures and cultures when two transformations occur rapidly over one generation. Chapter six uses a methodological approach to describe a combination of factors that played a role in the emergence of social classes in contemporary Laotian society, including education level, monthly income, profession, ethnicity and father's profession. Chapter eight is titled "Milieus and Language-Games" and seeks to link language and social boundaries, pointing out that even though all Laos citizens should be equal, a person who does not have a full understanding of Lao culture and language is at a disadvantage.

Part three focuses on the structure of Laos with regards to religion. Chapter nine explores the function of religion within the Laotian society, pointing out that capitalism needs religion for systematic, symbolic, and psychosocial reasons. The objective layers of religion are outlined in chapter ten, indicating that each social environment creates its own variant of religion. Chapter eleven shows the link between religion and the capitalist ethos. A case study of Ban Pha Khao is presented in chapter twelve, showing the relationship between ethos and religious beliefs. The village Ban Pha Khao was selected for the case study because the village has undergone rapid transformation, which made it a good microcosm in which to examine the effects of the capitalist transition in Laos, and because the location was convenient. The conclusion of the author's studies is also offered at the end of part three.

Rehbein places an emphasis on understanding the importance of earlier sociocultures in order to fully understand Laos as it is today. Due to the focus on socioculture, habitus, work ethic and religion, *Society in Contemporary Laos: Capitalism, Habitus and Belief* will be of interest to the fields of study pertaining to sociology, religious studies, and Southeast Asian studies. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the author is able to successfully show the relationship between ethos, capitalism, and society. Although Laos has changed dramatically over the past decade, precapitalist sociocultures persist and continue to shape culture and society in contemporary Laos.

¹ Sociocultures are the cultures—i.e. the habits, traditions, and beliefs—found within various social groups within society.

² Habitus, a concept developed by anthropologist/sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the "physical embodiment of cultural capital," and describes the "tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the world around them and react to it," including "individuals' deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions," which are developed as a result of lived experience. Relatedly, ethos refers to the "characteristic spirit" of a culture or community.