



Economy and Society

RC02 2019 QUARTER 4 NEWSLETTER

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear RC02 Community,

In 2019, your Program Co-organizers for the Fourth ISA Forum of Sociology, Nadya Araujo Guimaraes and myself, have been busy organizing two conferences for 2020.

The ISA Forum will be held July 14-18, 2020 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The topic of economy and society is a large one, and we are organizing or co-organizing 26 sessions under this big tent. Nearly all these sessions were filled through competitive calls for abstracts advertised in this newsletter as well as cognate listservs. As detailed elsewhere in this newsletter, we have an open competition for Registration Grants that are designed to promote access and participation at the Forum by conference participants who are student members or members from middle- and lower-income countries.

We are also organizing a full day pre-conference entitled, "Cultural Analyses of the Economy" on July 13, 2020. We will have two keynote speakers. Philippe Steiner (Université Paris-Sorbonne) will open the pre-conference with a lecture titled, "Culture and the Economy: From Horkheimer to Bourdieu and Beyond." Our closing keynote will be delivered by Frederick Wherry (Princeton University). There will be no registration fee for the pre-conference. As detailed elsewhere in this newsletter, we have two open calls for abstracts for the pre-conference with closing deadlines of January 5, 2020.

I encourage you to mark your calendars for both conferences in Porto Alegre from 13-18 July 2020.

We'll have our interim Business Meeting at the Forum. In the meantime, if you have any comments, ideas, or would like to volunteer your time to advance our Research Committee, please don't hesitate to contact me: Aaron.Pitluck [at] IllinoisState [dot] edu.

Also, in this quarter's newsletter, Manalisa Sarmah and Laletendu Kesari Das offer a preliminary report on ongoing research about the politics of private school accreditation in India, and Dustin Stoltz reviews Steve Viscelli's *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream* (UC Press).

Aaron Pitluck

RC02 President (2018-2022)

SUBJECTIVE UNDERPINNINGS OF 'OBJECTIVE' SCHOOL ASSESSMENT SERVICES IN INDIA

BY Manalisa Sarmah and Lalatendu Keshari Das

INTRODUCTION

In the post-1991 period, the education sector in India, primarily at the school level, embraced private/corporate funding to ensure that "quality" education is imparted to students who can afford it. Meanwhile, the word, quality, has become a

benchmark to wedge distinction between 'underperforming' government schools and creative and 'entrepreneurial' (privately held) public schools. What is more, in the absence of proper oversight of the quality aspect of education from the statist and quasi-state agencies, a number of private players have emerged to take their place. The authors argue that in the name of improving quality through 'objective' assessment of schools, these for-profit firms have come up with ways to redefine the meaning of quality and the processes to achieve it. This, in turn, has created a niche market for the production, distribution and consumption of educational commodities, both in hardware and software. Especially schools with limited financial resources are put under immense pressure to buy these commodities.

This note is a part of an ongoing research in which the first author has spent almost fourteen months in the field, conducting participant observation with students studying in a charity run vocational training centre, a private school assessment company based in Mumbai and an education solutions provider catering to the K-12 sector in Hyderabad, India.

THE POLITICS OF PRIVATE SCHOOL ACCREDITATION IN INDIA

Education, both at the school and higher levels, has always been a bone of contention in India. As for most of its recorded history, education was a prerogative of few upper caste groups. It was also gendered, as women were not allowed to study, barring few celebrated exceptions. The first post-Independence census of 1951 in India recorded a literacy rate of 18.33 percent (male 27.16 percent and female 8.86 percent). With the initiatives of the governments, both at the federal and provincial levels, literacy rates as per the 2011 census has increased to 74.04 percent (87.23 percent for male and 65.46 percent for females). But as the Pratham's

Annual Status of Education Report 2015¹ shows, despite an increase in school enrollment rate as well as percentage of literate children in India, the quality of education remained dismal. The report states that of all the students across India attending Standard V in state-run schools, only 42.2 percent were able to read and comprehend Standard II texts. This was also the case with other classes too. And Pratham's 2018 report reiterates that these figures have only marginally increased to 44.2 percent.² These observations were as true for state-run schools as for their privately held counterparts.

In such a scenario, assessment of schools become an important part of the Indian education system. Not only does it refer to the achievement of educational objectives on part of the students and teachers, but it also gives a cumulative understanding of where a particular school stands in relation to others, both at the national as well as at the global level. With respect to the second part of its definition, it provides an abstract model that acts as the benchmark against which schools can compare their performance and identify areas for improvement. The areas can broadly cover— leadership and management, teaching and learning, the child, the curriculum, community and partnerships and infrastructure and resources.

The government schools in India, particularly the elite ones such as Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Kendriya Vidyalaya, conduct periodic school inspections to assess different aspects of their functioning. They don't, however, give a comparative assessment of a particular school vis-a-vis other ones. Similarly, a few private schools

¹<https://img.acercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Reports/ASER%202014/National%20PPTs/aser2014indiaenglish.pdf>
²<http://img.acercentre.org/docs/ASER%202018/Release%20Material/aserreport2018.pdf>. There is variation between states and within the rural and urban settings. The states of Himachal Pradesh and Kerala topping the chart with 74.5 and 73.1 percent, respectively. States like Assam (33.5 percent) and Madhya Pradesh (34.4 percent) adorn the bottom of the table.

operating under the aegis of trusts also have school inspections. But, no such thing as an overall assessment is administered.

In fact, the newly emerging private companies in the field of education are trying to bridge this gap. The main plank of their business is to give clients a satisfactory assessment of their schools on the parameters listed above and offer suggestions for improvement. As opposed to the state-run assessment institutions, these private companies operate with a profit motive, and their revenue comes from keeping the clients forever dependent on the former's suggestions for improvement. For example, the assessment firm that we studied was conceived by a British entrepreneur in association with an Indian socialite. The model of assessment their firm was based on was a US model, in which access to information and communication technology (ICT) was given more importance than other ways of teaching and learning.

It was observed by the first author during their assignments that the lead assessors continuously gave better rankings to schools who were better equipped with ICT applications, such as mobile phone-based applications or hardware, like Smart Boards. In fact, we found an underlying nexus between ed-tech companies and private assessment companies in which the latter actively suggest the products produced by the ed-tech enterprises. Our ed-tech firm, on which we have done an in-depth study, receives reviews from these assessment firms to boost up its sales. This is not to say that the firm was entirely dependent on assessment companies for its revenue, however, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two.

Questions, such as 'what a happy face looks like', 'what a good classroom looks like', 'what a good assessment looks like, etc., , are used to classify different schools located in different geographical

and socio-cultural spaces. To cite an instance, for one of the school assessments in Nagaland, the lead and associate assessors assigned were from the Indian state of Mumbai. The school, which they visited, was located in a remote district in the state of Nagaland, and it was primarily attended by students from a tribal community. None of the assessors had ever been to that region before. Coming from a metropolitan city like Mumbai, the assessors, as was noted by the first author, harboured several prejudices against the students, teachers and people from the administration . In private conversations, the assessors termed the members of the school as "uncivilised", "animal like", "undeserving", "careless", "dumb", among others. Moreover, the school did not have much ICT products to show. The personal biases of the assessors, compounded by the dearth of observable ICT products, resulted in a lower ranking for the school. This can reflect poorly on the school, which has to operate on a tight budget. Moreover, it is not the school's fault if the trust under which it operates doesn't provide adequate funds for the professional development of teachers and maintenance of infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The idea of 'making secure judgments' for school assessments is fraught with problems, when a huge amount of data has to be collected over a span of two-three days. How can we ensure 'objectivity' when data is ambiguous, generic in nature and susceptible to multiple interpretations? Schools have their own ethos and operate within a particular cultural setting. Unless school assessments are decoupled from for-profit business models, on the one hand, and assessors are given training to handle their personal biases in terms of cultural differences, quality education in India will remain a realm of the privileged.

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BOOK REVIEW: *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream*, by Steve Viscelli

Reviewed by Dustin Stoltz

Without stretching the metaphor far, trucking is the lifeblood of most contemporary economies. In 2017 there was almost 17 million tons of freight shipped in the United States. Trucking accounted for over half, pumping \$66.5 billion worth of products and raw materials to every corner of the country, from Manhattan, New York to Manhattan, Montana (see Figure 1). Without trucking there is no Amazon or Apple, no Target or Walmart, no Coca-Cola or McDonald's. If trucking is so indispensable, then, why aren't truckers valued?

Focusing specifically on the long-haul, full "truckload" segment of the industry, Viscelli's *The Big Rig* (UC Press) tells the story of how one of the most successfully unionized jobs became one of the most precarious. For almost three decades after World War II, into the late 1970s, trucking was a respected blue-collar occupation with high wages and stable profit margins in the United States. During this time, the labor market was controlled by one of the most storied unions of the 20th century, the Teamsters. Then, on the heels of rising fuel prices and stagflation in the 1970s, deregulation transformed the industry. Carter signed the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 into law believing that it would

reduce the costs for consumers, "because almost every product we purchase has been shipped by truck, and outmoded regulations have inflated the prices that each one of us must pay."

While, as a result of deregulation, "[l]arge companies now pay much less for goods... deregulation also brought lower wages, greater amounts of unpaid work, and less-desirable working conditions for truckers" (p. 39). *The Big Rig*, however, goes beyond this story and demonstrates how employers get people to accept these jobs anyway. Despite bad working conditions, and a successful history with unionizing, the industry today is not at risk of workers organizing: no one talks about unions. "Instead," Viscelli writes, "many talked about the possibility of becoming an owner-operator, or self-employed trucker who owns their own truck" (p. 20). In reviewing previous literature, Viscelli found that nearly everyone assumed owner-operators enjoyed more control. But, he soon found that owner-operators worked as contractors for trucking companies and could not easily be distinguished from the employees. In this context, Viscelli's main puzzle emerges: For laborers, working as an employee entailed low wages and low control over scheduling and work conditions. But, if contracting solved these problems, as many truckers were led to believe, why wasn't everyone a contractor?

For trucking companies, contracting was a survival strategy in the hyper-competitive early years of deregulation, providing a larger pool of cheap, flexible labor while shifting most of the risk onto the truckers. With contractors, carriers don't have to pay a range of costs associated with employees (health, retirement, Social Security, or Medicare); contractors paid for their own fuel, maintenance, and insurance; and contractors are less likely to unionize. Finally, because contractors are financially precarious and there are perceived costs associated with switching firms, they are likely to take any job the carrier offers and on the carrier's terms.

Weight of Shipments by Transportation Mode, 2017

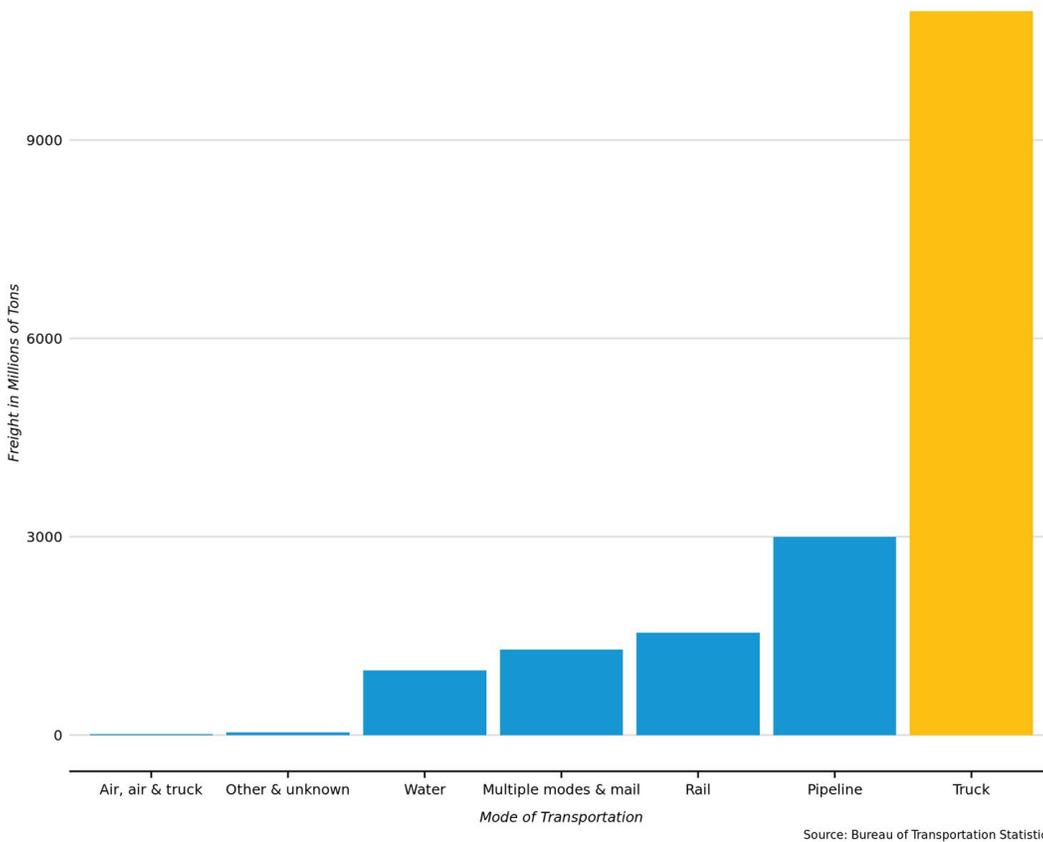


Figure 1. Trucks (yellow) haul much more freightage than other modes of transportation in the United States

There is no available data demonstrating that contractors are better off than employees, and, in fact, Viscelli’s data demonstrate the opposite. How is it that carriers keep a steady supply of owner-operators by convincing truckers that contracting is a better life? Although carriers are the primary beneficiaries of contracting, a variety of third-parties alongside the carrier make it so a “contracting discourse” surrounds the employees,

Otherwise, they will have an expensive piece of depreciating machinery generating no revenue, while still responsible for fixed costs.

Despite carriers' desire to use contractors, the early years of deregulation struggled with two problems: (1) keeping a steady supply of owner-operators and (2) carriers found contractors “unwilling or unable to submit to the dispatching requirements and maintenance schedules required by those firms” (p. 31). These were two problems carriers needed to solve. Here, the story of *The Big Rig* goes beyond how deregulation and declining unionization tipped the scales against truckers. It also tells the story of how employers engaged in collective action to increase the supply of contractors while increasing their exploitability.

making owning one’s own rig the logical step along a successful career. These third-parties actively shape information about increased income and control for owner-operators. Rather than antagonism between the owners of capital and the laborers, trucking companies present contracting as the means to become an owner of capital themselves: business partners. This discourse crafts the potential pitfalls as a function of individual failing: not everyone is cut out to be a contractor, it requires skill and discipline. Therefore, *The Big Rig* is also, in a sense, a production of culture story, how firms crafted the cultural milieu of drivers such that the contractor was made anew as a small-business owner, “one that saw taking whatever load was offered to them not as companies telling them what to do, but as doing what it takes to meet the needs

of their customers and a smart way to run their own business” (p. 127).

What about after truckers learn, through experience, that contracting is not as profitable or flexible as they believed? Carriers used two strategies to retain contractors, both involving third-parties. First, would-be owner-operators are often cajoled into leasing a tractor until they own it—forming a kind of “debt peonage” (p. 138). Carriers, realizing that leasing relationships would risk drivers being classified as employees (bringing all the requisite costs), work with third-party leasing companies to further distance themselves from the driver. Second, as they could not directly manage the contractors, as again this would mean they were employees, they used third-party companies, like American Trucking Business Services (ATBS), offer “business advice” to the new small business owners (p. 170). These business advisors, however, were often also in business with carriers, who would recommend, subsidize, or even require contractors to use their services. And, as one might expect: “the ‘business skills’ that firms teach contractors has nothing to do with things like maximizing the price they get for their services, and everything to do with being a better worker, having a better attitude toward management, and learning to survive on less income.” In particular, the advice serves to play up the costs the small business owner would have to shoulder should they decide to switch carriers in search of greater profits and freedom.

As C. Wright Mills famously wrote, the essence of the sociological imagination is about grasping the intersection of history and biography: when individual issues are seen as social issues. Reading Viscelli’s portrayal of the changes in the trucking industry over the last century, the intersection of my biography and the history of trucking was in full relief — a testament to the lucidity of his writing. My childhood was surrounded by all manner of tractors hauling long-haul vans, flatbeds, and bellydumps. Reading *The Big Rig* felt like sitting in a

truckstop booth again, listening to stories of the road. Most of the truckers I knew were anti-government regulation and anti-union, while dreaming of financial independence through contracting. None, however, seemed all that independent nor wealthy—indeed, the norm was long hours, living out of their rigs, and taking any job available. What seemed to my young mind to be simply “the way the world was,” was actually, as Viscelli demonstrates, the outcome of a collective class project.

But, this class project was not the class project of the laborers.

Viscelli uses a case study of a blue-collar occupation to demonstrate a major gap in the sociology of class and mobilization. Much has been written on the working class’s ability to organize, but the coordination of owners and employers is, very often, omitted. In *The Big Rig*, we see the coordinated effort of employers and third-party companies to socialize workers in such a way that they will accept a more precarious employment relationship. At a broader level, then, *The Big Rig* reveals the people weaving together precarity and independence under the banner of the American Dream. Just like Amazon’s Same-Day Delivery requires an army of workers, culture does not magically appear and shape our lives. There are flesh and blood people, brick and mortar organizations, actively producing this discourse. That such a coordinated class project might be present in other sectors and industries is a line of inquiry worth pursuing.

Dustin S. Stoltz is a PhD candidate at the University of Notre Dame, a Doctoral Student Affiliate of the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, and the Secretary of RCO2. His research draws on political, economic, and cultural sociology to examine the downstream consequences of stratification on the production and distribution of ideas.