

Schiffauer, Leonie. *Marketing Hope: Get-Rich-Quick Schemes in Siberia*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019. 186 pages, 10 illustrations, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-78920-012-6. Hard bound \$135.00; e-book \$34.95.

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Leonie Schiffauer's *Marketing Hope* is a brilliantly researched and captivatingly written monograph on multilevel marketing and pyramid schemes in Aga, a small district in southeast Siberia. It is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in and around Aginskoe, the district centre, as well as other related contexts such as company events. On the one hand, the book explores the inner workings of such "get-rich-quick" schemes, looking at their hierarchies, rituals, and promotional materials. On the other hand, and significantly, it directs its attention at the ways in which these entrepreneurial pursuits are part of local sociality. As such, they both influence it and are themselves shaped by it.

The book starts with the broader context within which the entrepreneurial schemes should be seen. Aga is a multi-ethnic district with a Buryat majority, as well as a substantial Russian population. Once a quite wealthy and rather autonomous district, since 2008 administrative restructuring, it has lost its autonomy and its special economic and political status, which has meant economic decline, vividly summed up by the author: "the flow of money has dried up and today the facades of the smart new buildings are crumbling, the heating in public buildings is turned off too early, the better-quality computers and printers have been taken to Chita, and state employees sometimes receive their salaries several months late" (9). This recent downward economic trend adds to the more general socio-economic volatilities and vulnerabilities in the broader region of which Aga is part, brought about by the post-Soviet failures of shock therapy. It is in this context – shaped also by both Soviet informal economy and by Buryat cultural logics which foreground kinship and mutual help – that the "get-rich-quick" schemes find fertile ground.

In some ways, the book is a well-known anthropological story of a given economic and cultural model that finds local expressions and meanings in new contexts. The author accessibly lays out the US-based history of direct selling and multi-level marketing, closely tied to the American Dream, as well as to local economic and legal models. She then looks at the globalization of this business model, also exploring its controversies. While multilevel marketing is mostly accepted as a legal entrepreneurial model and pyramid schemes are illegal in most parts of the world, Schiffauer notes that it is often difficult to distinguish between the

two, and that they both “occupy a grey area between legitimate economic activity and financial fraud” (67).

Both elsewhere and in Aşağı, multilevel marketing and pyramid schemes are part of “spiritual capitalism,” a trend most notably explored by Daromir Rudnyckij in Indonesia. It encourages the forming of spiritual communities and a particular shaping of self “for the purpose of cultivating a particular work ethic as well as for recruiting and motivating their salesforce” (86). In both kinds of entrepreneurial ventures, the author witnesses narratives of conversion, the importance of pilgrimage (to training seminars and conferences), proselytizing, as well as ritualistic elements in meetings that mirror religious and spiritual movements without directly involving religious ideas. In addition, multilevel marketing and pyramid schemes are not just about business, but they are also about shaping and disciplining the self through the particular frameworks and hierarchies offered by the companies.

While some aspects of the described multilevel marketing and pyramid schemes are widely recognised globally, much of the book is about how they play out in local society. Here, the author contributes to the underexplored question of how such schemes influence existing social relations and are themselves shaped by them. Of particular interest in the Buryat case are kinship relations. As the emic wisdom of local direct sellers goes, Buryats have many relatives who can be invited to participate in the schemes or at least buy the products. While this could be interpreted as corporate exploitation of employees’ social capital, such reliance on one’s kin is locally seen as mutual support. Recruiters understand their activities as providing their close ones with opportunities to get rich as well as openings for self-improvement, and sellers wholeheartedly praise the quality of the products, thus framing their entrepreneurial efforts as a beneficial deal to their kin and friends. Another way in which mutuality is supported in these entrepreneurial pursuits is through gifting the products to one’s social circle either as a way of potential recruitment or in case they pile up due to unsuccessful selling efforts. In either case, the products end up strengthening one’s social ties and likely reaping reciprocal reward in the future.

However, overall, such mutuality in multilevel marketing and pyramid schemes often strains one’s kin relations and friendships due to the pressure to sign up for the schemes or buy products, and because of common financial loss resulting from these schemes. What becomes very important then, according to the author, is the wholehearted belief in the schemes, as well as in the product itself (which analysts often underplay as being of secondary importance). In

exploring the products, Schiffauer looks at the many ways in which value is attached to them: it is not just about use-value but also “the cultivation of long-term economic and social relationships”, which have “both symbolic and emotional dimensions” (133).

The strength of the book lies in the ethnographic exploration of how the “get-rich-quick” schemes interplay with local sociality, thus highlighting the embedded nature of economic life. Schiffauer localizes capitalist practices and personhood, showing how they translate into local contexts. She manages to demonstrate the dire social and economic consequences of entrepreneurial ventures that are locally propagated by the very people who end up being disadvantaged by them, while empathetically showing the social and cultural logics of such seemingly self-destructive pursuits. The book thus contributes much to economic anthropology, especially on topics of distribution, consumption, exchange, and value.