Review: Flip-flop: a journey through globalization’s backroads

Liz Heron

Liz Heron is an independent writer based in London, UK.

Book reviewed

I’ve known Caroline Knowles for a number of years and from time to time I’ve heard accounts of her research trips to Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Once I emailed her and got a reply from a rubbish tip outside Addis Ababa where she was busy with interviewees. She doesn’t stick to the safest, most comfortable routes on a trail, and she is more intrepid than her university will allow her to be.

The trail she’s been following is the life cycle of the flip-flop, and the results have recently been published. In Flip-Flop: A Journey through Globalisation’s Backroads she tracks the manufacture of the flip-flop, from the plastic’s liquid source in the Kuwaiti oilfields to the petrochemical factories of South Korea, where polyethylene and other thermoplastic resins are made, to be shipped onwards to China and the flip-flop factories around the city of Fuzhou. China has ten major container ports from which some fifteen million tons of manufactured goods are transported annually worldwide. From their forty-odd destinations Caroline chose Ethiopia as her endpoint; it’s a significant importer of flip-flops and now also produces its own (and has even started making shoes for export to Italy). That huge rubbish tip outside Addis Ababa is where the worn out articles end their days, there to be rescued (and sold for recycling) by large numbers of scavengers – modern-day chiffoniers who depend on their pickings for a livelihood, risking injury as they vie with the bulldozers.

Whether it’s the scale of Chinese shipping, the economic background to piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the chemistry of plastics or the mechanised processes of production, Caroline is punctilious in mapping the global traces of this lowly and low-cost product. The flip-flop does have its variations in quality and styling and can even be a pricey designer purchase, while at the same time being distinguished as the first form of footwear for many of the world’s poor who hitherto went barefoot. Her book offers many insights into the chain of connections required for it to reach African market stalls and European or US department stores.

The book’s real heart, however, lies in its probing of what all this means for the lives

---

1 This review was first published on Liz Heron’s blog at: http://lizheron.wordpress.com/2014/07/08/flip-flop/
of those engaged in such a globally connected enterprise, and some of those for whom these connections intersect with patterns of migration – although, as we all know from daily news reports, the movement of products and the capital inherent in them is much less constrained than that of individual workers desperate to escape poverty.

There are interviews with oil workers, from a geologist to managers and derrick men at a drilling operation in the desert north of Kuwait City. In South Korea, where migrants arrive from many other parts of Asia, there’s an overview of the petrochemical boom. We learn about low-level entrepreneurship in China, about the gender division of labour in Chinese flip-flop factories, and the high-intensity demands made on some of these workers for rewards that fall far short of adequate living standards. In the Fuzhou Economic and Technical Development Zone (the Zones have their own rules and regulations) work is often precarious as rural migrants compete with the more settled labour force in and around the city. One couple interviewed, in their 80s, struggle to make a living after being torn away from farmland designated for industrial development.

People tell their stories of how work is organised and within what hierarchies, what pay means in terms of hugely varying living conditions and welfare provision, what potential exists for children’s education and for secure old age. All these are explored and set within a context of everyday life and both social and physical landscapes. This focus shows us how globalisation is experienced at the local level and at the level of individual biographies.

The flip-flop trail is only one strand in the vast economic web that we know as globalisation. It’s a good place to begin unpacking that term, to glimpse what the world’s disparities in wealth and well-being might really mean. I’d recommend starting the trail with chapter two; the first chapter is really for sociologists curious about methodologies, and can more easily be read once you finish the rest of this brave and ambitious book.

©Liz Heron 2014