

The Urbanization of People: Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City

Abstract

Over the past forty years, the urbanization of capital and the state have proceeded apace in China. Labor has also become increasingly urbanized, as hundreds of millions of rural residents have relocated to cities and found employment in the country's vast manufacturing, construction, and service sectors. But the urbanization of labor has proceeded much further and faster than the urbanization of people—rural migrants have been included in cities as workers, but often subject to expulsory pressures as full social beings. This lecture will identify the mechanisms China's megacities have used to manage the flow of people, investigating the ways in which bureaucratic rules are implemented and resisted in practice, and the social consequences of this regime of governance. Professor Friedman refers to the urban state's approach to managing population flows as "just-in-time urbanization," in which the aim is to admit just the right qualities and quantities of labor at just the right time. While this utopian vision of a frictionless union of the appropriate qualities and quantities of labor and capital in space and time can never be realized, the social implications of this strategy are profound and grim: a new socio-spatial hierarchy is taking shape in which elite cities are reserved for elites, and nominally public services such as education are reserved for those who need them least.