
Claudio E. BENZECRY, *The Perfect Fit*
(Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2022, 264 p.)

Since reading *The Perfect Fit*, an illustration from the book lingers in my memory. It captures a scene in an office in Dongguan, a megacity at the heart of China's Pearl River Delta Economic Zone, a region once dubbed the "world's factory". The image shows a woman standing on a table. All the walls around her are papered with sketches of shoe designs. She is a model, although neither her body nor her face are visible. Both, as it happens, are unimportant. This is because she is not a traditional model: she is a *foot* model. It is her feet that matter. But not both of them: to be more precise, only her right foot matters. Her left foot merely plays a supporting role in the scene, which explains why it is bare and standing on tiptoes trying to match the height of the right foot—the star of the show—which is sheathed in a knee-high, white-heeled boot. There is another woman in the picture. She is sitting on a chair and leaning awkwardly over the desk while taking the boot's measurements.

Like any good ethnographic picture, this image has a voyeuristic appeal that allows us to feel like the proverbial fly on the wall—witnessing, unobserved, what seems to be the random choreography of a quotidian moment. However, we soon learn that there is nothing random about that moment and its choreography. The scene in the picture is an almost-perfect replica of a scene that has already taken place 8,000 miles away in New York. It was there that the boot was originally designed, and that is also where it will be marketed and sold. There, another foot model stood on another table, working with another shoe technician who was taking the measurements of the boot prototype that is now in Dongguan. The mirror-image relationship between these two scenes is not accidental; this is a carefully designed procedure, and it is necessary for this mirroring to occur in order to make sure that the boot will fit perfectly onto *any* foot of that size. This is why the model in our picture was chosen: not because of the aesthetic qualities of her right foot, but because her right foot happens to be close to the standard "American" foot—quite a rarity in China, where the average calf, foot, and leg measurements differ from those of the USA. In order for the shoe to be made global, it must fit (comfortably) onto that particular model's right foot. This is what is at stake in the scene captured by the picture: those in it are crafting

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the link that allows passage from the local to the global to take place. And this is the central mystery *The Perfect Fit* seeks to solve: how is it possible that the largest scale (the global) can ultimately depend on the smallest of objects, like a foot?

The Perfect Fit is a fascinating exploration of what the global is, how it is done, and perhaps more interestingly—at least for this reader—how it is undone. Writing a book about globalization in this day and age may seem a daring proposition, especially when taking into consideration the tsunami of publications on the topic that we have been subjected to over the last couple of decades. And yet, *The Perfect Fit* manages to offer us something genuinely new. Benzecry achieves this by skillfully inverting the perspective through which the study of the global has usually taken place. Rather than approaching it from the top down, we are invited to do so from the bottom up. This inversion allows Benzecry to explore a host of moments, actors, locations, forms of labor, and practices that have typically been absent from analyses of globalization. Most such studies have tended to focus on the large-scale processes driven by markets, governments, international organizations, and corporations; or, alternatively, on the laborers exploited by these processes. Amongst other things, what has been missing from these narratives is an account of the mid-level actors and practices that make globalization possible on a day-to-day basis. And this is what *The Perfect Fit* offers. It does so through a riveting ethnographic tour de force that takes us through some of the key agents, practices, and locations that make the global shoe possible. These range from the developers and designers in New York, looking for ideas on specialist websites, through the fancy stores of Nolita and the Lower East Side, and the small tanneries and factories in Tuscany producing high-end brands, to the shoe models and technicians in China and Brazil working to materialize those designs, as well as the production managers and trade agents who coordinate the work of all these different actors and locales to make sure that the end result is a shoe that will be a perfect fit for any kind of foot.

When it is described in this way, we may be tempted to think of *The Perfect Fit* as another example of that subgenre of globalization stories that follow the life of a particular commodity around the world—commodities like T-shirts, cars, tomatoes or, in this case, shoes—to reveal the perverse geographies of inequalities and exploitation that define contemporary global trade. Unlike those studies, however, *The Perfect Fit* does not simply aim to provide a global ethnography tracking the movement of a commodity. Instead, its goal is to produce an *ethnography of the global* that helps us to understand the minutiae of the seemingly mundane

processes and agents that make the global possible and that maintain it on a daily basis. By offering us this new perspective, *The Perfect Fit* adds much-needed nuance and texture to the existing narratives about globalization, which, when seen from afar, tends to appear as sleek, imposing, distant, and on an impossibly abstract scale. But when we get closer to it, as Benzecry does in this book, it appears in a different light: as a messy, complex, contradictory, and profoundly personal reality.

One of the most fascinating elements of this book is how the global is not just a matter of standards, networks of expertise, infrastructures, and the like; it is *also* something that is enacted through the intimate vectors created by affective relations. It is these affective relations that work as the connective tissue allowing the simultaneous transmission of standards and tacit knowledge that makes globalization possible. A case in point is that of foot models, like the one standing on the table in the image mentioned at the beginning of this review. The selection of these models is not simply a question of finding feet that meet certain standards; rather, it is a question of finding models who can learn different forms of tacit knowledge, such as how to become acquainted with the particularities of each brand and how to feel the idiosyncrasies of each shoe, as well as how to talk about these matters. No wonder, then, that—as Benzecry tells us—it takes at least a couple of seasons for a model to move beyond being “just a foot” and for the necessary trust to be built up between them and the designers and technicians they work with, in order to allow the transmission of the different tacit forms of knowledge that make standardization—and globalization—possible.

Through the performance of this anatomy of scale, the global appears as a paradoxical reality, at once distant and proximate; abstract and concrete; pervasive and localized; powerful and fragile. Its contradictory nature is vividly portrayed in the last part of the book, “The Global in the Rearview Mirror”—perhaps its most captivating part, at least for this reader. This section takes us from Dongguan to Novo Hamburgo in Southern Brazil, which was once one of the world’s shoe production capitals; it held this status from the 1970s until the mid-2000s, when global shoemaking relocated to China in its never-ending search for lower production costs. Walking through the barren landscape of abandoned warehouses in Novo Hamburgo and talking to workers reminiscing about a long-gone golden past, Benzecry offers a different narrative of globalization, one in which it does not appear as an inescapable part of the present or as an unavoidable part of a predestined future, but as the memory of a past suspended between nostalgia and melancholia. In this way, *The Perfect Fit* offers us a powerful reminder of the *fragility of*

globalization, reminding us that it only exists to the extent that it is sustained, and that it ceases to exist as soon as those practices, actors, and technologies are no longer in place. In doing this, Benzecry disrupts the hegemonic narrative according to which globalization is an unpreventable by-product of progress, capitalism, and modernity by showing us that it is, in fact, a contingent, fragile, and highly localized reality that is always at risk of coming undone. Benzecry brings this last point home beautifully in the book's "Coda", in which he narrates his return to Dongguan on the completion of his fieldwork in 2017, and his realization that the city was beginning to look like Novo Hamburgo, as producers had begun to migrate to Ho Chi Minh City in search of lower production costs.

The Perfect Fit is recommended not only to scholars interested in globalization but to anyone interested in exploring how good contemporary ethnography should be done. Truly a joy to read, the book is written in agile, elegant, eloquent, and suggestive prose, which will surely help expand its reach beyond the frustratingly narrow confines of contemporary academia.

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