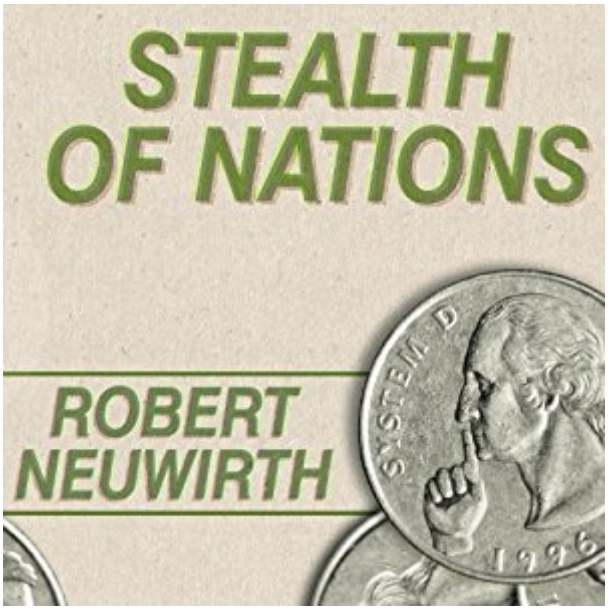
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Stealth Of Nations: The Global Rise Of The Informal Economy



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Synopsis

Thousands of Africans head to China each year to buy cell phones, auto parts, and other products that they will import to their home countries through a clandestine global back channel. Hundreds of Paraguayan merchants smuggle computers, electronics, and clothing across the border to Brazil. Scores of laid-off San Franciscans, working without any licenses, use Twitter to sell home-cooked foods. Dozens of major multinationals sell products through unregistered kiosks and street vendors around the world. When we think of the informal economy, we tend to think of crime: prostitution, gun running, drug trafficking. Stealth of Nations opens up this underground realm, showing how the worldwide informal economy deals mostly in legal products and is, in fact, a ten-trillion-dollar industry, making it the second-largest economy in the world, after that of the United States.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I sought out this book because I wanted to learn more about the Informal Economy and the implications for the future of world development. The first chapter or so of the book reinforce this feeling, underscoring how important it is to understand what happens in the "System D" or "Informal Economy". I found the book was interesting but not especially enlightening. The book primarily consists of "slice of life" features of various individuals who make a living without relying on infrastructure or paying taxes. These are fascinating, but I already a lot of these from feature-length articles written in new media - and most of them were better written! I was really hoping to get a book more from a book.Here’s just one example. At one point he interviews someone who has a

sizable and successful business in the Informal Economy who explain the problems they have getting a loan. Later in another chapter he interviews a development expert who says that actually businesses have no difficulty getting loans and what they really need is infrastructure. Neuwirth makes no attempt to connect this analysis to the earlier section, let alone resolve the apparent clash in perspective. In the string of experts he interviews in the same chapter, the analysis feels both small and isolated. Speaking about infrastructure, well-functioning governance and a healthy tax base is what is necessary to bring that about. But the Informal Economy is built no discussion about how to unify these forces into a functioning society or even whether society is going in the direction.Neuwrith makes the very important point that the very existence of the Informal Economy puts to rest any claim that markets are unnatural product of Western hegemony or corporate oppression. But while he is quick to protect the developing world from Marxist fantasy, he seems to instead indulge in libertarian fantasy. The upshot of every chapter seems to be "Isn't this amazing? Markets!" but I would I preferred something for substantial. There is no description at all about the dark side of the Informal Economy - nothing about envrionment degradation, crime, the difficulty government protection of life and property and whether big informal business should ever start paying taxes. Its not just that these are absent from the analysis, but there conspicuously absent from the "slice of life" that makes the majority of the book. And its not a matter of debunking misconceptions either - other works don't have any difficulty finding these stories.

Three and a half stars. This was a very difficult book to for me to rate. It is a well written and entertaining travelogue style look at the informal economy around the world. It doesn't matter if you call it Systeme D, Jua Kali, or the grey market; it exists and it is huge.All throughout this book I was reminded of my High-School English teacher, who tried to relate "The Stranger" and "Siddhartha" (existentialism and situational ethics) with a profoundly Lutheran fundamentalist perspective. She didn't do a bad job, she just had great difficulty in separating the material from who she was. Neuwirth has a much similar problem; he seems to glorify in the ingenuity and determination of people trying to get by yet he is repulsed by the sheer dynamism and indifference of the free market. The whole book is a dialectic argument with himself over the power of the marketplace to provide solutions, and the desperate want and need to control and regulate it.Keynesian economists despise and belittle Systeme D because they cannot understand it, other Statists fear Systeme D because they cannot control it. The future of freedom is here, if it isn't first crushed by collectivists trying to 'help'.

At a time when we have serious concerns over unemployed and underemployed, about regulation that strangles or stifles business, and taxation and tariff rates that drive prices through the roof, this fascinating little gem grabs you from the start with stories and data about the 'real' economy around the world, where currently fifty percent (and moving towards sixty percent) of the billions of working people in the world are doing so in the 'informal' economy, below the radar, off the official record, not part of world GDP. Neuwirth cites an estimate that this 'informal' economy amounts to about $10 trillion dollars annually, or about one-eighth of the world economy. Why so many people and so little economic impact? Because the margins in this business are razor-thin, where unfettered and, yes, in some cases, illegal, immoral and unscrupulous business better expresses capitalism than does the image of the multi-billion dollar global corporation.Working his way through South America, China and Africa, Neuwirth meets and understands the people, their motives, and their practices. He is not writing about the darkest side of the economy, i.e., sex, drug and nuclear weapons trade, but rather the basic human element of survival, where entrepreneurs with a real flair for business work deals between Nigeria and China, dealing only in cash, bribing and smuggling, and providing a living for tens of millions of people. One can't decide if this is the solution to world economic problems, the 'real' economic problem itself, or just a grey underground world of questionable practices. Yet as scholars and over the years have noted over the years, the practice of these entrepreneurs are not that morally different from that of the established corporations. While I am not ready to go that far, read it and decide for yourself.

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