

Britain population – including the sailors and agricultural workers who lived in highly coactive and precarious conditions – were excluded from its provision.

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LIU, ANDREW B. *Tea War. A History of Capitalism in China and India.* [Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Colombia University.] Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) [etc.] 2020. xi, 344 pp. Ill. Maps. \$50.00.

Through the story of tea, *Tea War* contributes to the emerging field of comparative regional histories of capitalism. It examines the cases of the industry in China, the birthplace of tea, and the colonial Indian industry, which became the world's largest tea producer, over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book demonstrates how global market competition forged mutually constitutive linkages between two divergent production systems and reshaped the social economy of tea production in India and China.

Tea War's empirical and theoretical expanse is formidable – its analytical approach, based on the commodities lens, enabling it to skilfully navigate this expanse. The book breaks down the workings of the tea economy into constituent parts – its production, distribution, its knowledge-production in political-economic terms, and the reapplication of that knowledge to the process. In Liu's words, “the global story of tea thus entailed both a history of novel forms of economic life and a history of transformations in economic thought” (p. 4). The study concerns the period of “interregnum between early modern commerce and high modern industry” (p. 13). The author refutes the regional cultural differences as reasons for their commercial divergence. Instead, Liu focuses on the universal emergent features “that they shared in common with the rest of the industrial world” (p. 5). The eventual fates of the two industries, i.e. economic divergence, is then best understood as the product of “a unified story of global interaction, one mediated by capitalist competition” (p. 4), rather than culturally specific properties operating in isolation.

The book is divided into two parts comprising seven chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters trace the historical evolution of tea production in China, from servicing a narrow market as a luxury article to the immense scale demanded by the subsequent expansion of demand in the West. This evolution entailed rising control by merchants of the production process, involving intensifying labour inputs and consistently expanding the division of labour.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the efforts of the British colonial state to emulate Chinese tea production in the eastern Indian state of Assam, fuelled by the London-centred investment boom in the colonies. The initial failure of these efforts led the colonial state to reassess the reigning free-market principles and to adopt an interventionist approach in its stead. This state interventionism included labour indenture policies

that remained the hallmark of colonial Indian tea production until the early twentieth century, and, according to Liu, the most significant reason for its success. There were also other channels of state support, such as subsidies through grants of “free land” and “revenue concessions” (p. 82). Chapter 4 foregrounds the widespread use of unfree labour and extension of the social division of manual labour as the cause of innovation and technology and not its result.

The disarray felt in China from the pressure of Indian competition generated debates and a reassessment of principles of value previously rooted in agriculture and trade and later increasingly attributed to labour (Chapter 5). In the shorter, second part of the book, Liu traces the historical, “paradoxical” origins of political-economic ideas that ossified the primitive features associated with traditional economies like China and India. In the case of India, the reasons for its backwardness were seen in the prevalence of unfree labour, and in the case of China the same was located in comprador merchants and categories of productive and unproductive labour (Chapters 6 and 7). In both these countries, however, the very same factors had contributed to the expansion of their tea industries.

The book goes on to reassess the central political-economic tenet on the relationship between free (wage) labour and capitalist development, arguing for the historical congruency between capitalist development and forms of labour usually identified with non-capitalist societies. This takes on relevance as regions integrate into the global commodity flows and “the social compulsion to grow and produce for the world market has come to dominate everyday life” (p. 79). The rationalizing forces of the market do not overhaul production processes at once, but older labour regimes and forms associated with “paternalism” and/or unfree relations continue, albeit subjected to newer rhythms of work.

These production arrangements entailed a labour process that was made “more specialized, coordinated, and efficient” by adopting “a two-pronged strategy of time measurement and labour discipline” (p. 55). In China, “most traditional and purportedly primitive technologies could be, and were, deployed as tools of industrial labour management” (p. 70). These involved the use of a “peculiar type of non-mechanical time keeping device: incense sticks that burned at a regular rate” (p. 63) and “local legends and idiosyncratic customs and traditions” (p. 73) to impose intensive work schedules and exacting disciplinary routines on the workers. In India, the absence of market institutions precipitated a failure of initial attempts “to foster a spirit of enterprise” (p. 92). This failure generated an interpretation of India as an “exceptional region”, which justified the adoption of an “exceptional approach” (p. 85), taking exception from universal values of human equality and dignity and implementing labour indenture policies, or “slavery of the mildest form” (p. 102).

This ability of a colonial state to implement policies that ensured plantations with an adequate cheap and captive workforce subject to arduous work schedules and factory discipline is a case in point for “colonialism in action”⁴ and, as such, a “modern” affair with a historical precedent in other colonial plantations. Nonetheless, it was also

⁴“Colonialism in action” is a term borrowed from Debdas Banerjee, *Colonialism in Action: Trade, Development, and Dependence in Late Colonial India* (Hyderabad, 1999).

consistent with the historically prevailing unequal institution of caste-based labour divisions in India, a point that the author does not dwell upon. Liu argues that the ability to super exploit the workforce because of these unfree and paternalistic labour relations was a source of considerable profits for the merchants and plantation owners in India and China and hence significant in the expansion of production for the market.

Liu uses evidence of these different paths to increased labour productivity in India and China to extract the general tendency in diverse regional production regimes. These general tendencies were, as noted earlier in the review, in common with the rest of the industrializing world. Expanding production for the market, irrespective of its form, led to a careful study of and delineation of the various tasks/steps involved in tea production and an assessment of an average magnitude of time required to complete the task. Irrespective of subjective/individual differences, the workers then were made to adhere to this time constraint, maximizing “the amount of time spent working within a given period” (p. 69). These time units then “transformed from a measurement of activity into a ‘normative measure *for* activity” (p. 69).

These labour-intensifying efforts took shape in China and were inherited in Indian plantations, where the plantation managers were able to “further break down the production process”, where “workers were only asked to perform simple manual operations applicable across different processes” (p. 144). The workers could then be “more easily substituted by tools” (p. 145). Liu describes this progressive breaking down of skilled and complicated labour processes into simpler sub-tasks, which simultaneously deskilled labour and eventually resulted in technical innovation in the colonial Indian tea industry. It is in the Indian case that we find direct evidence for the conformity between unfree forms of labour and modern capital-intensive facilities like tea plantations and factories. Through this, Liu also challenges the dominant narrative that accounts for the eventual success of colonial Indian tea in terms of its technological superiority. Liu contends that colonial Indian tea’s world dominance preceded technological divergence and was more likely due to its ability to exploit cheap labour.

It follows from Liu’s analysis that labour-intensive forms or sweated labour are consistent with productivity gains through technological advancement. These processes need not be temporally separated but can be simultaneous. Even with differences in the systems of production – peasant and seasonal migrant workers working out of their farms and manufactories in China, and plantation-cum-factory indentured labour in India – intensification of labour preceded and then progressed alongside productivity gains through technology adoption.

In all, Liu makes a convincing case for the historical congruency between different forms of labour and capitalist accumulation by unearthing their general universal tendencies. However, he stops short of analysing potential economy-wide effects of the phenomena so deftly analysed for the case of the tea industry. For this, he can scarcely be faulted given the already vast expanse of his book. However, the issue itself needs flagging in order to avoid falling into the pitfall common in modern economic historiography of an over-enthusiastic macroeconomic generalizing of micro phenomena. The lessons for these are readily drawn from the literature on North–South and South–South divergence.

Liu locates his work in the recent critical scholarship on divergence that questions Euro-centric explanations for the North–South divergence. He underscores continuities in the labour-intensive work processes in tea manufacturing as in China and

India with the literature on the industrious revolution, which implies a virtuous cycle of demand-led growth – that is, higher and more diversified work inputs in order to consume more. A substantive part of this demand was for commodities produced in the Global South through unfree forms of labour – like tea, sugar, and coffee. It is unclear how this virtuous cycle is compatible with coercive labour forms that depress workers' incomes and hence economy-wide demand. Liu also links colonialism with the ability of the state to institutionalize indentured labour practices – resulting in higher levels of capital accumulation within the Indian tea industry. The implications for the Global South where these labour regimes were implemented were unlikely to be virtuous as, despite more intensive work regimes and higher labour inputs, demand remained constrained – with implications for growth. Naturally, a corollary would be that the product of this cheaper labour, for investors and consumers alike, is directly transferred to the Global North.

Though a further implication of production organizations on economy-wide growth is outside the scope of the book, it nonetheless needs acknowledgment for future work on this subject. Liu has argued that there are intra-industry inter-determinants of capital accumulation between India and China. This dynamic holds true for sectors within economies as well, but with different outcomes. A production organization that results in more capital accumulation within a specific industry may engender counter-movements in accumulation at the economy-wide level.

In terms of the South–South divergence, it is clear from Liu's description that Indian tea plantations were comparatively advantaged by access to large swathes of forest land and a captive cheap labour force. The plantation system was a more capitalized form of production from its inception. They were centralized, proximate to a factory setting, with related benefits of concentration and greater control over the entire production process – thus allowing for better management (p. 130). These factors were likely muted in the more dispersed peasant agriculture and manufactories of China.

The evolution of technology also needed regular infusions/access to capital. Innovation of novel technology, as Liu shows in his book, involved a considerable gestation period, which would necessitate trial, error, and successive improvements before these technologies could be successfully applied to the production process. This would have been not just a costly enterprise requiring regular capital infusions but plausibly also required a more widespread and coordinated knowledge economy. The ability to innovate, in the final instance, either an outcome of enlightened social-economy/scientific temper, availability of capital (related to colonial enterprise), scarcity of labour, or a high wage economy (again related to colonial migrations), or more likely a super determination of a number of these factors, remains a puzzle. Though the author “concedes” that once the technology was applied productivity grew immensely, he finds that the difference was only “quantitative”, underlying which were “qualitative” similarities (p. 148). However, the subtle qualitative differences in productive systems may eventually have resulted in quantitative differences, which in terms of economic divergence is significant.

Tea War is a significant addition to global histories of labour and capitalism. Liu lays bare how globalization or the expanding imperial nexuses of “interlocked commodity flows” reshaped production practices in different regions of the world. The big credit of this work is in its attempts to explain the mechanism through which seemingly archaic forms of labour were historically integrated into capitalist accumulation.

Liu engages with these arguments with intellectual dexterity and the presentation is lucid, replete with interesting historical details. As such, it is a must-read for those interested in contemporary social and economic history.

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SKOTNICKI, TAD. *The Sympathetic Consumer. Moral Critique in Capitalist Culture.* [Culture and Economic Life.] Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2021. x, 267 pp. \$90.00. (Paper: \$28.00.)

The recent revival of histories of capitalism has produced numerous insightful analyses, particularly about the history of inequality and a range of commodities. At their best, these accounts employ reflections on Marxist traditions of thought to assess the historical dynamics of specific cases. Following this line of inquiry, however, has induced many scholars to focus on the history of labour and the division of wealth, leaving the history of consumption to colleagues in the field of cultural history. Tad Skotnicki, assistant professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, therefore, provides a timely foray by foregrounding what he terms “the sympathetic consumer”. He conceptualizes the sympathetic consumer as a figure intrinsic to capitalist culture, relating to producers by means of commodities. Skotnicki singles out Karl Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism as the key to understanding consumer activism in Britain and the United States since the late eighteenth century. Abolitionists, co-operative organizations, and the American National Consumers’ League promoted a distinct ideal of consumption. They called on consumers to recognize their essential role in the international economy and spelled out the moral obligations on producers, which result from this position. *The Sympathetic Consumer* thus raises important questions about the utility of commodity fetishism and capitalism as interpretative frameworks for the history of consumer society.

Skotnicki’s emphasis is on the added value of understanding consumer activism through the lens of commodity fetishism. Marx famously remarked on the dual nature of commodity exchange in capitalist societies, which he deemed at once banal and strange. In everyday life, we hardly question the fact that we obtain money for our labour, which we then exchange for products without usually knowing who made them. The consumer activists who promoted sympathetic consumption, however, highlighted the strangeness of this process, admonishing people to take into account who was producing their everyday purchases and under what conditions. The book thus departs from an intriguing observation about how depersonalized goods provoke consumers to ask questions about them. Even as a product like refined sugar could be obtained without any knowledge of its region of origin, production, and distribution, consumers were prompted to question this faceless quality. Abolitionists, for example, questioned whether enslaved people had