



Book Review

The Making of an Indian Ocean World-Economy, 1250-1650. Ravi Palat. 2015. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan. 317 pages, ISBN 978-1-1375-4219-9. Cloth (\$109.99)

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“Sharply put, Eurocentric notions of long-term, large-scale social change can be de-centered from world historical studies only if we can resuscitate the particular dynamics of change in historical systems outside the privileged arena of Europe before they were subordinated to the drives of the capitalist world-economy” (28). This sentence, taken from the introduction of Ravi Palat’s recent book, nicely illustrates the complex and somewhat paradoxical aims of the work under review here. It argues against Eurocentric notions of change and in favor of studying particular dynamics outside of Europe, while it also points to subordination, at some non-specified moment in time after the period under study, of these areas to the capitalist world-economy emanating from Europe.

This theoretically complex puzzle, which is skillfully laid out by the author, sets the work on a potential collision course with most of the more recent historical theories of change. Historians of the Great Divergence debate, such as Kenneth Pomeranz and Jack Goldstone, have tried to argue that there are striking parallels and remarkable similarities in economic outcomes in Asia and Europe before the Industrial Revolution. In general, global history makes a strong point of arguing that interaction and connections helped shape the modern world. Yet, despite the difference in



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approach Palat proposes, he has the same goal as most of these recent historical theories: contesting Eurocentric notions of change. What distinguishes his approach is that he does not search for resemblances in the development of Europe and Asia, but rather is more interested in how their trajectories differ. His book is based primarily on a very thorough and erudite reading of secondary literature, which he uses to explain the particular development path of Asia over four centuries. In addition to this well-presented general history of Asian development, he also provides more in-depth analyses drawing on primary sources—for example, relating to taxation on the Coromandel Coast—which add new insights regarding state formation in that area. This makes it a refreshing and interesting book to read, given the author’s eye for detail and depth in combination with his skill at piecing together complex theory.

Before going further into the ramifications of Palat’s theoretical choices, I will first simply summarize the historical argument presented in this study. Palat’s core claim is that historical development in South India should be seen in its own right and not in comparison with historical developments in Europe. Development is a key word here, of course, as most historians have come a long way in finally acknowledging that regions outside of Europe were not structural non-developers before the arrival of Europeans. Palat is completely right that “South India rarely figures in contemporary debates on comparative world history” (1). The main goal of the book, then, is to bring “South India and the Indian Ocean back in” (ibid). Even more ambitiously, the author argues that other Asian regions discussed in the book were all on a comparable developmental path in the period under study.

The first step Palat makes in acknowledging that these societies had their peculiar development paths distinct from the West is pointing out that the socio-economic structure, which he views as determinant of socio-historical change, was based on different vectors in Asia than in Europe. The process of change in societies based on wet-rice cultivation followed a different path than societies where agriculture was based on other staple crops. Palat points to a number of well-known differences, such as the fact that the high seed-to-yield ratio of wet-rice allowed for rice-growing regions to sustain much larger population densities than those devoted to other staple crops. The cultivation of rice is also most efficient under conditions of small-plot, labor-intensive farming. In turn, this means that while its cultivation places no economic premium on using sophisticated technological implements, it does benefit from skilled labor. This is further underlined by the study of primary sources, which Palat uses to show that state bureaucracies on the Coromandel Coast were mainly involved in questions of water-management, and less so in matters of land property, as water was vital to rice-cultivation.

These arguments are further elaborated with claims about how state formation in Asia differed from the European path. This is illustrated in what I would call ‘war horse theory.’ Palat argues that, in general, the rulers in Asia had easy access to taxation and were mainly worried about

intrusion from non-sedentary people away from the coasts. As such the *liaison dangeureuse* between the state and merchants in order to fund war, which Palat contends was common in Europe, was not necessary in Asia: The populations and territories of Asian rulers were abundant, and their tax systems sufficient for providing protection. Instead, Asian states and rulers were rather vulnerable to “depredations by nomadic peoples” (9), who had abundant pasture to sustain the number of horses required to control large populated empires. In contrast, rice-production implies a lack of pastures and horses, which meant that most large empires established their capitals in the borderlands between wet-rice cultivation areas and arid areas with available pasture land, which offered rulers the best of both worlds. In short, this dynamic led to a specific pattern of state formation in large parts of Asia.

Palat further argues that the efficiency of wet-rice agriculture had particular ramifications for how trade was organized. The enormous yield of rice facilitated an expansion of nonagricultural occupations and put downward pressure on labor costs, which, in turn, allowed crafts production and trade to flourish, and made South-India “...a major production site of the most widely traded manufacturing good before the industrial age—cotton textiles” (1). At the same time, it led to “more labor-intensive strategies as artisans specialized in ever-narrower segments of the production process” (147). All these things together meant that there was no premium placed on the accumulation of capital, in stark contrast to the European experience. Most traders were not involved in luxury trade, which was left mainly to ‘portfolio capitalists.’ Such capitalists were not merchants who had entered into state services, but rather high imperial officers engaged in commercial activities.

The last argument of the book illustrates how trade in the Indian Ocean was transformed by the arrival of European traders and companies. To a large extent, Asian traders were active in a different kind of trade, namely in what has been called a peddlers trade: “Being small operators eking out a bare subsistence, large numbers of peddlers ferrying low-value, bulk commodities from port to port wove a dense web of interrelations across the Indian Ocean and along its coastlines” (151). The competitive side of this trade leaves little room for the traditional view, based on the European experience, of seeing Early Modern trade as mainly conducted in luxuries for rich elites, with little impact on consumption in societies at large. Palat’s key point here is that the lack of accumulation by merchants meant that there existed “commercialism” in Asia, but not capitalism, because commercialism was not “embedded in the political system” (7).

The main thing Europeans brought to this setting was not more competition, but superior firepower and claims over the sovereignty of the seas. These claims were kept in check by the large terrestrial empires in Asia, although Europeans had more room to maneuver in the Eastern Indian archipelago against the small island states located there. And of course, the influx of precious metals fueled trade in the region from the late fifteenth century onwards. Only in the late

seventeenth century was the dramatic rise in the flows of Indian textiles to Europe a harbinger of things to come: the gradual incorporation of the world-economy centered around the Indian Ocean into the capitalist world-economy. Thus in the end, the story seems to stop exactly at the moment that Asian developments were cut short by the imposition of a capitalist world-system distinct from the ‘Indian Ocean World-Economy’ referenced in the book’s title.

The author makes some strong points in laying out his argument that historians have gone too far in stressing similarities between European and Asian economies. However, the author may be too rigid in imposing his own theoretical preferences on the historical material so skillfully laid before us. It escapes me how it is possible to claim to be non-Eurocentric when one still argues the capitalist world-system arose from Europe. It does not help either that the difficulties in defining capitalism make it unclear at what exact moment in time ‘capitalism’ arose from Europe and imposed itself on Asia. Moreover, how is it possible to argue that all indigenous developments in Asia cancelled out once these areas were finally taken into this European capitalist world-system, following the period analyzed in this book?

Palat also too easily dismisses the critique of world-system theory made by global historians. He argues that global historians are merely “replacing the triumphalism of the ‘rise of the West’ with the triumphalism of globalization” (214). For him, globalization is equal to celebrating the rise of the free market, which is not how most global historians view this process; rather, most define globalization as the process of increasing interactions on a global scale. What I found interesting about this book is that there are ample examples of how the wider world influenced Asian societies at their foundations, even before the latter were integrated into the capitalist world-economy. For instance, it clearly states that Asia was earlier in adapting crops from the Americas, such as sweet-potato and peanuts in China, which would not have happened without the discovery of the Americas. The author also shows how the influx of American silver brought by European to Asia helped commercialize the Indian Ocean, and populate and cultivate more arid zones in China. In contrast, while the influence of the wider world on Asia is acknowledged, the author fails to consider how Asia might have influenced the developmental path of Europe. He hints at the importance of Indian textiles for European East India companies, but he sees this trade as having an impact on India, not on Europe, which is a missed opportunity.

In short, the theoretical choices made by Palat are somewhat puzzling at times, but his knowledge of primary and secondary sources more than make up for it. Even when one does not agree fully with the theoretical implications of this book, it is a must read for any historian wanting to engage with the history of South India and Asia at large.