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In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa’s Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World

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addresses its nature as a distinct place, especially in drawing out processes of fragmentation and marginalization. But in contrast to the balanced, sympathetic ethnographies, the conceptual claims are more stringent, deterministic, and exclusive, especially in respect to issues of political economy, evidenced, for example, in Widick’s casual pejorative comments regarding private property rights. The ‘straightforward’ empirical descriptions of conflicts tend to lead to rather sweeping and at times opaque criticisms of capitalism as a whole without much attention to questions of social choice. Possibly the idea of social evolution should be given more attention. Alternatively, the book’s objectives might have focused more explicitly on understanding the contemporary crisis over the redwood forests in Humboldt County. As Humboldt continues to change, social imaginaries will doubtless be shaped by past conflicts (and routines), but they will also involve new beliefs and attitudes, not least by an influx of residents with no connection to the locality’s past. In the intertwining of history and geography, which is more powerful?

In summary, Trouble in the Forest is a provocative contribution to the growing literature on resource wars. If its reliance on culture theory will perhaps repel some readers, the ethnographical empiricism of the book provides a broad overview of the shifting politics of resource wars. The next two taking a long-term perspective to issues of political economy, evidenced, for example, in Widick’s casual pejorative comments regarding private property rights. The ‘straightforward’ empirical descriptions of conflicts tend to lead to rather sweeping and at times opaque criticisms of capitalism as a whole without much attention to questions of social choice. Possibly the idea of social evolution should be given more attention. Alternatively, the book’s objectives might have focused more explicitly on understanding the contemporary crisis over the redwood forests in Humboldt County. As Humboldt continues to change, social imaginaries will doubtless be shaped by past conflicts (and routines), but they will also involve new beliefs and attitudes, not least by an influx of residents with no connection to the locality’s past. In the intertwining of history and geography, which is more powerful?

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mar the text other than the erroneous use of ‘understated’ instead of overstated (p. 178) and nearly verbatim repetition of a discussion of hurricanes and root crops (pp. 112 and 118).

Many will bemoan the brevity, however. The ten chapters cover a mere 180 pages, somewhat overbalanced by the some ninety pages of endnotes, bibliography, and index, as wonderful as those appurtenances might be. Most readers will want more of this engaging book but will also understand that the long neglect of this topic necessitates that many places such as Mexico and themes such as fishing do not make an appearance. Yet such regional and thematic lacunae merely emphasize how any one questioning about for an interesting and significant research problem will find no better starting point than this book.

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For reasons that remain murky to me, there has been a veritable explosion of interest in the geographical characteristics of European colonialism over the past twenty years or so, particularly among British geographers. As much of the writing is in a self-consciously ‘critical’ mould, it is difficult to put this down to the parallel nostalgia for at least the British version of colonialism on numerous recent BBC programmes and in the writings of conservative historians like Niall Ferguson. I think some of it, if only more recently, is owed to a reaction against the enthusiasm for joining US imperial adventures on the part of contemporary British governments enthralled by ‘punching above their weight’ in world politics, as the popular boxing metaphor would have it, by recapitulating and putting into practice an older colonial mentality. Much more, it seems to me, is owed to a disciplinary self-discovery of how actively involved our geographical forebears were in the colonial enterprise.

Whatever the precise reason for the new focus on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonialism, however, there has been a wide-ranging re-encounter with broader theoretical issues relating to colonialism, the nature of the colonial ‘experience’ particularly from the ‘native’ point of view, and the specifics of colonial imaginations and the practices associated with attempted realizations. Geographies of Empire is an outstanding synthesis of much of the recent literature particularly adept at both showing how much geographers were involved in colonial activities and in describing the broad theoretical and empirical dimensions of the workings of European colonialism. The chapters move progressively from a discussion of concepts and frameworks for thinking about colonialism and empire through a series of rich empirically focused chapters on population movements and settlement, land expropriation, exploration and geographical knowledge and the role of geographical societies in encouraging and justifying colonialism, to more thematic chapters on the mapping of empires, colonial ‘civilizing’ missions, environmental transformations, transport and communications, urbanization, the economic geography of empire, and decolonization.

Particularly notable, in my view, are the chapters on geographical societies, mapping empires, and transport and communications. More generally, Robin Butlin’s masterful command not only of secondary theoretical sources but also of the myriad empirical details of the colonial enterprise across eight different empires and numerous continents is astounding. I think that the move beyond the British and French cases to consider in almost equivalent detail most of the European states that ever had colonial empires is one of the most important contributions of the volume. The author’s ability to retain the reader’s attention across almost 700 pages of excellent prose and many useful maps and illustrations is also well worth mentioning. A book of this type could easily have become a book of lists or a simple exegesis of more original works. This is a synthesis that truly marks out an intellectual territory that will repay traversal by those with more specific interests.

Inevitably with a work of this scope, there are points of contention. For me, one concerns the selection of the works of Cole Harris and Donald Meinig in the theoretical chapter in a section on ‘imperial landscapes’. I cannot say that after reading the entire book I understand the purpose of including this discussion, other than that the works of these two are important statements by historical geographers about the course of colonial settlement in North America. The relevance to the broader issue of colonialism as adumbrated in the rest of the book remains elusive. Likewise from the theoretical chapter, the discussion of ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’ tends to rehearse issues, about ‘gentlemanly capitalism,’ ‘imperialism as the highest form of capitalism’ and so on, that hardly figure at all in the rest of the book. A crisper focus on the ways in which different ‘waves’ of colonialism, from the Portuguese to the Belgian, perhaps, had differing narratives and consequences associated with them, might have served the rest of the book better than the presently predominant cause-seeking arguments about whether this or that ‘factor’ was determinant. The understandable resistance to extending the book to cover the US and Russian cases also makes some of the more general arguments made at the outset without much by way of contemporary justification for the notion that we live in a ‘colonial present’ beyond a wink and a nod to translatio imperii. Finally, perhaps some greater engagement with works placing European colonialism within a critical geopolitical frame of reference, beyond the brief conspectus on Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, would have given the book something more of its own theoretical framework. At the moment the theoretical overview at the beginning and the richly empirical chapters that constitute the body of the book are at something of odds with one another.

I would hate to end on a negative note. This is a work of deep learning about and an obvious familiarity with a vast literature on the historic course of European colonialism from the medieval period to the recent past. The book is clearly organized and extremely well written. It will pay reading by all those with even the slightest interest in the historical geography of European colonialism and its continuing effects around the world into the present day. I see little possibility any day soon of a book appearing that will challenge this one as the essential synthetic survey of its subject. That can be said of very few books indeed.

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This book on the regulation of prostitution in colonial Bombay contains much that is relatively familiar to historians of the policing of prostitution and sex work. Professor Tambe’s