

REVIEWS

Roundtable Review Discussion†

Empire of guns: the violent making of the Industrial Revolution, by Priya Satia. New York: Penguin Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 528. Hardback £25.50, ISBN: 978-0-735-22186-4.

INTRODUCTION

This roundtable review brings together historians from a range of fields to address Priya Satia's landmark book *Empire of guns: the violent making of the Industrial Revolution*. The book argues that the Industrial Revolution was powered by Britain's violent imperial expansion across the globe, and driven specifically by the British gun trade, which had a central node in the English city of Birmingham. In the eighteenth century, Satia argues, Birmingham became the 'capital of the global trade in arms', even as guns themselves became a 'critical currency in global trade' and 'instruments of global violence' (pp. 6, 8, 11).

At the core of *Empire of guns* is the Birmingham gun-maker and Quaker Samuel Galton and the controversies that swirled around the ethics of Galton's profession (Galton refused to accept particular responsibility, seeing 'guns and war as products of an entire economy rather than any individual's moral decision'; p. 11), but the book also operates at the national and imperial scale, considering the global expansion of the British imperial state, while also engaging deeply and comparatively with South Asian and African histories of the gun trade in this context. Methodologically, *Empire of guns* is attentive to cultural and material histories of firearms, but also engages centrally with the economic history of the Industrial Revolution and with the political history of empire in global, comparative perspective. Chronologically, meanwhile, the book ranges across the period from the seventeenth century to the twentieth and attends fiercely to the contemporary stakes of gun control and the global arms trade.

In line with the scope and sweep of the book, we have assembled a group of scholars with a variety of expertise to evaluate *Empire of guns* for the readers of the *Journal of Global History*. Judy Stephenson's contribution emerges from the field of economic history and reflects on Satia's claim that 'war made the Industrial Revolution' from a methodological standpoint attentive to quantification, exploring current scholarship on the contribution of militarization to British industrial output in the eighteenth century and setting Satia's work into conversation with alternative accounts of the Industrial Revolution. Kate Smith's contribution then pivots from histories of production to those of consumption, introducing the category of gender and drawing on insights from the new material history. Smith incisively shows how Satia's book impacts on current understandings of consumption and capital, pointing to further avenues for research and new definitions of these categories. Next, moving from the field of British and British empire history to that of African history, Giacomo Macola tests Satia's use of the West African gun trade, arguing that she underestimates the role of the African trade in driving economic and industrial change in the English Midlands. Furthermore, he suggests that histories of the rise of modern 'globalization' must pay more attention than has hitherto been the case to African consumer demand as a global force. Building on this perspective, Devyani Gupta then contributes a view from what she argues is

†This exchange emerged from a roundtable debate at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Modern and Contemporary History in June 2018. Dr Simon Yarrow and Professor Karen Harvey generously fostered and encouraged this event. I am grateful to the participants in the roundtable and most of all to Priya Satia for her participation.

an unfinished colonial perspective. Despite being a work focused on British history, Gupta notes that the book alludes to and highlights (often indirectly) the immense significance of global networks and their intertwining, through the unstoppable march of imperialism, in shaping historical developments worldwide. Against this background, she argues that the reader ought to be encouraged to reconsider the characteristics and role of key historical and analytical concepts such as the state, elites, capital, public and private spheres, and, above all, empire, cogently raising the question of how to position Satia's book athwart multiple fields and how best to parse its categories of analysis.

Finally, Priya Satia responds to the reviewers' criticism and insights, staking out areas of (dis) agreement, as well as some of the ways ahead that the book generates for the multiple historiographical debates that it revises.

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Empires, guns, and economic growth: thoughts on the implications of Satia's work for economic history

Whoever speaks of the Industrial Revolution speaks of . . . ? According to Priya Satia it is guns that we should associate with modern economic growth. The thesis that the Industrial Revolution was borne of war is not a new one; in fact it is a steadily emerging and important focus of current research.¹ Satia's thesis takes it one step forward by suggesting that twenty-first-century violence is borne of the Industrial Revolution. To what degree is this an argument that should be taken up by economic historians, or, more precisely, to what extent can economic history support this view? Although economists view the Industrial Revolution as the dawn of the miracle of economic growth, the processes and effects of that revolution have always been contentious in economic history, and commonly linked to exploitation, inequality, and the decline of the values of a moral economy.² *Empire of guns* sits within a burgeoning literature in histories of capitalism which associate the commencement of capitalism with industrialization, and slavery, racism, and inequality. An interpretation of Satia's thesis is that the Industrial Revolution is to blame for modern terrorism as well; if so, then industrial capitalism is truly damned. By contrast, the trend in economic history over the last two decades has been to associate industrialization with enlightenment, technological innovation, and improved living standards.³

As Satia charts very well in her opening chapter, the militarization of the British state and the Industrial Revolution were contemporaneous. State demand and investment in warfare

¹P. K. O'Brien, 'The contributions of warfare with revolutionary and Napoleonic France to the consolidation and progress of the British Industrial Revolution', LSE Economic History Working Paper 264, 2017, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/82411/> (consulted 15 July 2019).

²For descriptions of what has at times been a violent debate, see E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The standard of living during the Industrial Revolution: a discussion', *Economic History Review*, 16, 1, 1963, pp. 119–34; D. McCloskey, *Bourgeois dignity: why economics can't explain the modern world*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010; N. Crafts, 'Explaining the first Industrial Revolution: two views', *European Review of Economic History*, 15, 1, 2010, pp. 153–168.

³R. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in global perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; J. Mokyr, *The enlightened economy: an economic history of Britain, 1700–1850*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.