An Africanist's perspective on Priya Satia's *Empire of guns*

Empire of guns is both a work of economic history and an original contribution to social history. Although there is much to admire in Professor Satia's discussion of the cultural life of guns in Britain and the thorny ideological dilemmas confronted by such Quaker arms manufacturers as the Galtons, the book's main objective is to provide fresh perspectives on the British Industrial Revolution by placing state initiative at the heart of its development. Departing from traditional, 'liberal', understandings of the Industrial Revolution as the sole product of private enterprise and technological innovation, the author contends that it was state demand for military hardware – beginning, of course, with firearms – which transformed the British economy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, driving production forward in the metallurgical sector and related industries. And this, she continues, was only made possible because the long eighteenth century witnessed several protracted imperial conflicts. This line of analysis leads to the disturbing conclusion that, far from being an obstacle to economic growth, war and violence occupy a 'foundational role … in modern industrial and commercial life' (p. 12).

This is a powerful argument, rendered all the more convincing by Satia's dense scholarship and deep immersion in her sources, especially the records of the famous Birmingham gun-maker and contractor Samuel Galton Jr (1753–1832) and his predecessors. My primary concern, however, is that her emphasis on the requirements of the state and its agencies (most notably, the Office of Ordnance) might have led her unduly to play down the role of private demand and, specifically, the African trade in promoting economic and industrial change in the English Midlands.

The trade in inferior Africa-bound muskets was certainly 'unpredictable' (p. 54), and profit margins were possibly lower than in the case of state procurement. Yet numbers do tell a story. 'By 1754', we are told, Farmer & Galton 'were making 25,000 to 30,000 Africa guns a year and finding it difficult to meet orders' (*ibid.*). Writing in 1765, Lord Shelburne, the then President of the Board of Trade, estimated that 'Birmingham alone had been sending more than 150,000 guns yearly to the African coast during the preceding twenty or twenty-five years'.[1] And Birmingham continued to churn out enormous quantities of trade guns for Africa throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, when the increased scale of international warfare and the gun-makers' growing dependence on state purchases might have been expected to reduce their involvement in the private gun trade to Africa. This proved not to be the case, for, according to Joseph Inikori's forty-year-old research (whose conclusions are accepted by Satia), an annual average of about 161,000 British-made muskets were still imported into West Africa between 1796 and 1805, giving a grand total of more than 1,600,000 over that decade.[2] In the light of these staggering figures, it is not surprising that, testifying to the Board of Trade in 1788, the gun-manufacturer John Whateley stressed that the 'whole existence' of the Birmingham gun trade 'depended on the African market' (p. 125). What I *do* find a little surprising is that Satia should dismiss this testimony as mere 'strategic' talk, and contend that 'the African trade [was not] the unique mainstay [that Whateley] made it out to be' (*ibid.*).

The disquiet with which many Birmingham gun-makers greeted the abolition of the slave trade can also be taken as a good indication of the importance that they assigned to the African market. In fact, Samuel Galton and his fellow arm manufacturers need not have worried overmuch, for, even in the era of the so-called 'legitimate trade', Birmingham-made trade guns remained a key barter good for West African palm oil and other agricultural commodities. Thus it was that, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, between '100,000 and 150,000 Birmingham guns' continued to be 'exported to Africa annually' (p. 348), in spite of the coeval

[1] J. E. Inikori, 'The import of firearms into West Africa 1750–1807: a quantitative analysis', *Journal of African History*, 18, 3, 1977, p. 346.

[2] *Ibid.*

rise of Birmingham's global competitor, Liège, which would eventually become 'the world's leading arms manufacturing town, employing 40,000 home-based artisans in the sector in the last quarter of the nineteenth century'.[3]

What these figures indicate is that Africa-bound trade guns were, in the words of Emrys Chew, 'the most numerous and important product of the Birmingham gun trade' until at least the middle decades of the nineteenth century.[4] This is why Satia's claim that, unlike government demand, 'high demand from Africa could not prompt a leap in the scale of production' (p. 145) appears not to be entirely justified, or, at any rate, to cry out for further elaboration. Indeed, on the basis of the evidence presented in *Empire of guns*, a case could be made for arguing precisely the opposite, and that a full understanding of the dynamics of change in the British industrial economy between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot ignore the catalysing effects of the demand for consumer goods – including firearms and other metalwares – emanating from West Africa and other slave-based economies.

Instead of going down a 'neo-Williamsite' route and revisiting the much-debated relationship between slavery and industrialization,[5] I would like to conclude by suggesting that a focus on African consumer demand might be of some value in complicating current understandings of the workings of modern globalization. The story of the gun trade evokes an African centrality that most existing accounts of the growth of systemic economic integration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have tended to obscure from view. At the time, sub-Saharan Africa's increasing involvement in international trading networks – networks revolving around slaves, of course, but other African commodities as well – enhanced the African markets' ability to absorb unprecedented quantities of Western manufactures, of which firearms were but a part. Yet, barring a few pioneering studies – most notably, Jeremy Prestholdt's stimulating *Domesticating the world* (2008), a book that probably did not receive the attention it deserved – the role of African demand in fostering and consolidating global interdependence remains grossly understudied.

In my view, this dearth of scholarly investigation into the global repercussions of the predilections of African precolonial consumers is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it reinforces the misleading notion that it was only by being forcefully removed from Africa that its people could influence world history.[6] Second, it results in the continent being invariably construed as the passive periphery of globalizing extractive networks – both in the past and, by implication, in the present. The opportunity to confront these condescending and, more importantly, historically untenable views is too good for Africanists to miss.

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[3]Jean-Luc Vellut, 'L'économie internationale des côtes de Guinée Inférieure au XIXe siècle', in Maria Emilia Madeira Santos, ed., *Actas de I reunião internacional de história de África: relação Europa–África no 3 quartel do séc. XIX*, Lisbon: Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, 1989, p. 173.

[4]Emrys Chew, *Arming the periphery: the arms trade in the Indian Ocean during the age of global empire*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 26.

[5]See, for example, David Richardson, 'The costs of survival: the transport of slaves in the middle passage and the profitability of the 18th-century British slave trade', *Explorations in Economic History*, 24, 2, 1987, pp. 178–96.

[6]Patrick Manning, 'African and world historiography', *Journal of African History*, 54, 3, 2013, p. 330, n. 42; Toby Green, 'Beyond an imperial Atlantic: trajectories of Africans from Upper Guinea and West-Central Africa in the early Atlantic world', *Past & Present*, 230, 1, 2016, p. 94.