

REVIEW ARTICLE

A MATERIALIST APPROACH TO EARLY MODERN GLOBALITY

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Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World.

By Timothy Brook. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2008. Pp. 288. ISBN 10: 1596914440;
13: 9781596914445.

Despite the main title and the dust jacket design (I first found this book in the museum bookstore of the National Gallery in Washington DC), this is not a book of art history but rather a book of socio-economic history in a Braudelian sense, as its subtitle suggests. I call it “Braudelian” partly because the author sees the early modern world in terms of seaborne interconnectedness on an inter-regional scale. It is not a wild association at all to those who know his earlier work, especially his co-edited book (with Gregory Blue), *China and Historical Capitalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), in which he collaborated with historians/historical sociologists of the very loosely bound circle of the world-systemists, namely R. Bin Wong, Francesca Bray, as well as none other than Immanuel Wallerstein.

But what really reminded me of Braudel in reading this book was the way Brook reads the paintings of Vermeer. When I first read Braudel’s *Civilization and Capitalism* in my first year of graduate school, I was shocked by how he read Spinoza. He showed no interest in Spinoza’s thought per se. He was interested only in what kinds of fabrics, metals, and food-stuffs were mentioned in the allegories used in Spinoza’s texts. He uses Spinoza as a witness from the past who testifies about material life in Dutch society in the seventeenth century. In this sense Fernand Braudel is certainly a materialist, and so is Timothy Brook in *Vermeer's Hat*.

You cannot describe, much less paint, things which you have never had a chance to know. You fill pages or a canvas with what you do know, especially when you write or paint without any specific intention. In such materialized unconsciousness, so to speak, the world inhabited by the artist as one of many people living during that period is inevitably reflected. Brook argues, “If we think of the objects in them [the paintings of Vermeer] ... as doors to open, then we will find ourselves in passageways leading to discoveries about the seventeenth-century world that the paintings on their own don’t acknowledge, and of which the artist himself was probably unaware” (p. 9). In other words, he is trying to show the material contexts in which the objects in the paintings could not be painted in

any other way. By asking why this object is painted here and why it is painted like this, the socio-economic conditions within which the flows of those objects were possible are revealed, and more importantly, the spatial scope and historical depth of such flows are to be illustrated.

Brook starts the first chapter with *View of Delft*, one of Vermeer's earliest surviving works, which depicts Delft as it actually looked from the south, probably in 1660 or 1661. He picks up two objects in this painting as "doors to open". One of the doors is the sea vessels being repaired, which he reasonably identifies as herring buses. Opening up this door reveals the global cooling that occurred between 1550 and 1700, one result of which was the southward movement of fish stocks in the North Sea. Dutch fishermen profited from this. The other door is just a long roof on the left side of the canvas. Again he plausibly identifies this as the roof of the warehouse of the Oost-Indisch Huis (East India House), the home of the Delft Chamber of the Dutch East India Company (VOC).

Global cooling and the center of a vast web of international trade. Global synchronism and inter-regional connectedness. These are two major themes of this book. Brook chooses six more art pieces by Vermeer and his contemporaries to explore these themes. Chapter by chapter, he picks up one key object, seemingly rather casually painted there in most cases, in each piece.

In Chapter 2, where Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl* is featured, he addresses himself to the hat on the officer's head. But, the key object is not so much the hat itself as the felt of which the hat is made. Through this door, he takes us to the story of Samuel Champlain, the leader of a French mission on the St. Lawrence River. His itinerary is interwoven with the cross-cultural trade in fur, the raw material of felt, in the seventeenth century. Many important themes, such as the nascent consumer society in Western Europe, the rivalry between English, French, and Dutch powers in the New World, the cross-cultural encounters between Europeans and natives and the complicated connection of European interests with the local structure of conflicts among the groups of native peoples, evolve around the inter-regional flow of fur.

In addition, Brook emphasizes Champlain's ambition for a northwest passage to the Pacific. It was not only fur but also China that drove Champlain to explore further west into the continent. As is repeatedly mentioned in this book, the seventeenth century was no longer the age of great discoveries (for Europeans). But the world was not yet closed. While people were driven by uncertain information often mingled with wild imagination and crude desires, they were forced to improvise on the spot when they actually encountered the reality of the other.

In the next chapter, Brook turns his eye to the china dish under a heap of fruit in Vermeer's *Young Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window*. Of course it is common knowledge that porcelain was one of the major products for which early modern Europeans sailed all the way to Asia. However, by focusing on the construction of aesthetic taste for porcelain, the author helps us to widen our temporal and spatial scope with which to view historical globalization.

For example, while it is well known that the blue-on-white Meissen porcelain imitated Chinese wares, especially Jingdezhen ware, it is far less known that this style, deep cobalt blue lines and figures on a pure white background, was not originally Chinese but rather borrowed. Such a style was only possible after Mongol rule, under which Chinese potters

first gained access to Persian cobalt, which is superior in quality to the Chinese. They used this imported high-quality cobalt, and also adapted Persian designs, to sell their ceramic products in the Persian market, and this is how the “quintessentially Chinese” porcelain style was originated. In brief, one must bring what Janet Abu-Lughod called “the thirteenth century world system” into view in order to see the origin of Meissen.¹

Another example is the tulips painted on exported Chinese porcelain. When the big boom of Turkish tulips hit northern Europe in the 1620s, Jingdezhen potters painted tulips on their dishes, even though they had never seen a real tulip. Brook urges the readers to see how rapid the global feedback of market information was, and also how swiftly the Chinese potters responded to it. He also pointed out that “when the tulip market famously collapsed in 1637, the VOC rushed to cancel all orders for dishes decorated with tulips” (p. 75).

This chapter also deals with the Dutch idea of “free trade”. While Brook reconfirms that Grotius’s *Mare Liberum* (“The Freedom of the Sea”) is the watershed work which theoretically established the principle that all people have the right to trade, he also points out that this apparently “modern” principle was significantly blurred in practice. On the one hand, the duty of converting the heathen was often mixed up with material interests in the riches of Asia, and on the other hand, the VOC typically (ab)used the logic of Grotius’s argument to justify their use of force wherever they were blocked from trading. Thus freedom of trade was, in short, actually more like freedom of piracy. At the very least, it was significantly different from “free trade” in the modern world after the nineteenth century.

Modernity in European societies is also the theme of the fourth chapter. The painting discussed in this regard is *The Geographer* by Vermeer. The key object is the globe, which Brook identifies as Hendrick Hondius’s 1618 version of one originally produced by his father in 1600. Examining a surviving copy of this globe, Brook reads Hondius’s words printed on it, which explains the rationale of revising his father’s work:

Since very frequent expeditions started every day to all parts of the world, by which their positions are clearly seen and reported, I trust that it will not appear strange to anyone if this description differs very much from others previously published by us . . . We ask the benevolent reader that, if he should have more complete knowledge of some place, he willingly communicate the same to us for the sake of increasing the public good. (p. 87)

Brook interprets these words as a sign of what today’s sociologists consider the essential feature of modernity, that is reflexivity: institutionalized circular processes in which all kinds of knowledge are supposed to be fed back to actual social processes, which in turn requires updating the knowledge further on. It is impressive that Brook emphasizes the modern attitudes of European people and society in the seventeenth century, especially when he draws a sharp contrast between European and Asian attitudes toward new geographical knowledge. In the episode of *Nossa Senhora da Guía*, a Portuguese vessel wrecked on the southern China shore, Brook maintains,

¹ Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

the two worlds that encountered ... existed at opposite ends of the range of global experience available in the seventeenth century: at one pole, those who had lived their lives entirely within their own cultural boundaries; at the other, those who crossed those boundaries on a daily basis and mixed constantly with peoples of different origins, skin colors, languages, and habits. (p. 95)

Obviously, the former are typical Chinese villagers on shore, and the latter the crew and the passengers of the *Guía*. Although Brook also emphasizes that Europeans were only in a minority of those on board even in the European vessels which dominated the sea-lanes, still he maintains that, in the seventeenth century, it was only Europeans who reflexively accumulated ever-increasing geographical knowledge from their inter-cultural experiences. Not only villagers on the Chinese shore but also other non-European peoples in the ships navigating the globe did not accumulate the knowledge from their experiences, at least not in a way that altered their cognitive framework in respect of the world. I will return to this issue later in this review.

In Chapter 5, Brook picks up a ceramic plate with faux-Chinese decoration manufactured probably in Delft. A figure with a long-stemmed pipe is painted on it, in which he finds a door to another global commodity, tobacco.

It is simply refreshing, given that tobacco has been somewhat less often mentioned as an early modern global commodity than others like spices, porcelain, and silver, to see how rapidly and widely the practice of smoking spread after Christopher Columbus and his crew first saw indigenous people of the Americas smoking tobacco. It spread through the whole of Europe within a century, and reached China at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It took only a few decades after that for smoking to take root in Chinese culture. During the course of the eighteenth century, even manuals explaining the refined way of smoking for gentleman (especially those who had newly entered elite circles) were published and widely read, which means that there had developed a socio-cultural code of what Pierre Bourdieu called “distinction” about smoking.

This is not merely a matter of the accelerated flow of a new global commodity. Brook quotes an important concept here from the Cuban historian Fernando Ortiz, that of transculturation: “the process by which habits and things move from one culture to another so thoroughly that they become part of it and in turn change the culture into which they have moved” (p. 126). As tobacco became deeply incorporated into the Chinese way of life it changed the culture, and even the economy and politics, of Chinese society at the structural level.

The concept of transculturation quoted by Brook here should be understood in conjunction with his argument, in the previous chapter, about the characteristically reflexive attitude of Europeans in the seventeenth century, because it seems to imply the rejection of a simple dichotomy between dynamic Europe and static Asia. From the seventeenth century on, the expanded flow of things (and people, as is discussed later) did not merely bring about a quantitative change within the existing frameworks of civilizations but also shook and transformed the civilizational frameworks not only in Europe but also in Asia, as the case of tobacco implies. Indeed, virtually every part of the globe was involved, directly or indirectly, in this process, and in this sense, perhaps, the seventeenth century is

“the dawn of the global world”. The early modern European attitude of reflexivity he discusses is part of this contemporary picture and should not be simplistically equated with the dynamism of modernity *per se*.

In terms of this early modern globality, as we might call it, the two big issues are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, namely the flow of silver and the movement of people. In Chapter 6, Brook chooses Vermeer’s *Woman Holding a Balance*, and picks up the silver coin on the table, which he identifies as a silver ducat coin, as the door to early modern globality. There have been many contributions over the past few decades to the argument that the flow of silver linked regional economies on a global scale in the early modern world. While economic historians are not necessarily in agreement on whether silver in the seventeenth century was like the US dollar in the post-World War II world or was just one more global commodity whose flow was subject to the logic of merchant capital, Brook takes a more down-to-earth approach and focuses on Manila, one of the crucial nodes at which the global flow of silver was maintained.

Focusing on the 1639 Chinese uprising in the Philippines, Brook emphasizes the fragile footing on which the global flow of silver was based. He writes: “the trade between the Spanish and the Chinese in Manila always had balanced on a delicate pivot. Small crises of supply or liquidity could excite a larger crisis of confidence, shutting the whole operation down” (pp. 175–76). And, such fragility led to structural pressure on early modern globalization, and often erupted into massive conflict and crude violence.

On the other hand, from the perspective of individual agents rather than wider structures, this kind of fragility sometimes wreaked overwhelming disaster on – and/or brought fortuitous chances to – particular people, causing them to undergo transcultural movement. This is the theme of Chapter 7, in which Hendrik van der Burch’s *The Card Players*, from around the same period as the later works of Vermeer were painted, is featured. An African boy, situated at the center of the canvas, is the key leading to five examples of “journeys that dumped people in places and situations far from where they were born . . . three men in Natal on the southeast coast of Africa, seventy-two men and boys on an island off the coast of Java, a Dutchman on the Korean island of Cheju, an Italian on the coast of Fujian, and two homeward-bound Dutch sailors on the island of Madagascar” (p. 188).

The destinies of the five “journeys” are widely varied. Some are tragic; others are rather like blessings in disguise. But, in every case, individual agents who found themselves on the “journey” had to improvise just to survive. At the same time, early modern globality was filled with spaces in which multiple cultures met and were forced to learn how to interact. Brook calls such a space a “middle ground”, following the American historian Richard White. What is important is that these middle grounds provided an opportunity for the encountering cultures to adjust their differences and to negotiate a relatively non-abusive coexistence. However, even more importantly, such opportunities disappeared with increasing rapidity in the course of early modern globalization.

All in all, early modern globality was much less fixed or systematized than the world after the nineteenth century. Linkages of places and peoples across the globe were often thin, fragile, fluid, and uncertain. But still, there was certainly a layer (or layers) of inter-connection on a global scale in the seventeenth century. Brook wraps up his arguments in the last chapter with the words of John Donne, the English poet and theologian: “No man is an island”.

But I personally prefer the other metaphor he quotes in earlier chapters, that of Indra's net, a Buddhist image of the interconnectedness of all phenomena. Brook explains:

When Indra fashioned the world, he made it as a web, and at every knot in that web is tied a pearl. Everything that exists or has ever existed, every idea that can be thought about, every datum that is true . . . is a pearl in Indra's net. Not only is every pearl tied to every other pearl by virtue of the web on which they hang, but on the surface of every pearl is reflected every other jewel in the net. (p. 22)

It somehow sounds like world of monadology, though each monad is open and linked with other monads here, unlike Leibniz's original concept of monad. Anyway, such a world of open monadology, so to speak, is a kind of system without center or systematized hierarchy. Brook argues, somewhat hastily, in the last chapter that the development of the modern state, that is, "public entities serving the interests of firms and populated by citizens earning private wealth" (p. 222), was the wedge driven into this system. The states fixed, systematized, centralized the floating interconnections in the seventeenth-century world, by closing down the middle grounds everywhere, and eventually transformed the early modern globality. The year of the Peace of Westphalia, 1648, is the symbolic origin of this process.

Thus, the author seems to see double movements of a sort in the seventeenth century between the forces which improvised linkages and the forces which systematized linkages. The former provided the necessary condition for the latter, but the latter overtook the former in the course of the seventeenth century.

It is not explicitly argued in what sense the seventeenth century is "the dawn of the global world". Did the improvisations attempted across the globe trigger a long process of globalization lasting down to today? Should historical globalization be defined in terms of the development of the state and the systemic formation of the global political economy? Or are we still in a long wave of double movement between improvisation and systematization of interconnectedness? Nor is it necessarily clear whether or how the seventeenth-century globalization discussed in this book is continuous or discontinuous with the later (British, American, and post-American?) phases of globalization. Perhaps these questions are simply beyond the scope of this book. But the readers are provided with a plenty of thoughtful hints with which to tackle them.

Those who are familiar with works such as Philip D. Curtin's *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Richard von Glahn's *Fountain of Fortune*, Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude's *The First World Economy*, and Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik's *The World That Trade Created* may find some of the arguments in this book already rather common. But it should be appreciated that those important issues on early modern globality which have been developed over the past few decades are here colorfully illustrated with vividly told episodes. Besides, this book is highly readable even for a general audience and so well structured that it looks as if it were itself Indra's net. Readers will be fascinated by the dense interconnections among the episodes the author presents. The topics relating to underwater archeology mentioned in some chapters are also significant as interdisciplinary inspiration.

For these reasons, this book is also extremely useful for educational purposes. It can be used as an introductory textbook on global history for motivated undergraduate students as well as young graduate students.