

REVIEWS

The making of an Indian Ocean world economy, 1250–1650, by Ravi Palat. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. xii + 305. Hardback £79.99, ISBN: 978-1-137-54219-9.

Ravi Palat has produced a wide-ranging, engaging, and authoritative study, synthesizing an impressive array of secondary literature while offering incisive new readings of well-known primary sources. Although this is ostensibly a book about trade and politics in the Indian Ocean world, he takes aim at the towering works of global comparative history, arguing that ‘capitalism’ is an inherently Eurocentric paradigm, too readily accepted as a model for charting economic development outside ‘the West’. Traditional and accepted motors of historical change, ‘derived from the particular experience of northwestern European societies’, ‘obliterate the distinctiveness’ and ‘deny the possibility of alternate patterns of social evolution’ (p. 26). The globalization of trading networks from the sixteenth century onwards does not account for the dissimilar patterns of European and Asian economic change, and ‘revisionists’ have therefore misconstrued ‘divergence’ through teleological assumptions of an unrelenting and universal modernity. Palat promises ‘a way to put Eurocentric models of societal transformation in their place’ (p. 27), and his book makes a fine contribution to that end.

Building from a well-founded and now resurgent body of Indian Ocean scholarship, which has often focused on economic histories of the early modern period, and takes as a key concern the transformative effects of successive waves of European imperialism, Palat reaffirms the key findings of Ashin Das Gupta, Sinnappah Arasaratnam, and others: Europeans remained economically weak and politically vulnerable throughout the period in question, and were for the most part subordinated and subsumed by long-extant, dynamic trading networks and political relationships. The bullion that they brought (closely following Om Prakash’s influential model), and the limited but severe violence that they inflicted at sea, certainly shaped markets and trade; but they were not in themselves revolutionary. Regardless of Palat’s intended contribution to theories of ‘divergence’ between Asia and the West, his study enlivens a field that has seldom overlooked southern India – and indeed, has occasionally been criticized for being overly India-centric. While usefully curtailing K. N. Chaudhuri’s millennium-long life cycle of Indian Ocean history (to a mere four centuries), Palat inherits a similar debt to Immanuel Wallerstein and Fernand Braudel in taking an avid interest in monsoon winds, microclimates, river valleys, and soil conditions. These geographies of production shaped patterns of trade and manufacturing in ways that were fundamentally different from how ‘capitalism’ developed in Europe, regardless of scholars’ well-worn assertions regarding the providential presence of coal.

The first chapter surveys the development of wet-rice cultivation in select regions of South and Southeast Asia, relative to parts of China (and, to a lesser extent, Japan), the ‘intensification’ of which promoted denser settlement and a corollary specialization of labour. More people became better fed, and could dedicate their working lives to increasingly specialized artisanal production. But, unlike in Europe, wealth did not accumulate in centres of political control, and thus cannot rightly be considered ‘capitalist’ in the sense that has dominated the major comparative frameworks following Wallerstein. There was less incentive for such a concentration of wealth in the political centres of the regions compared here (including peninsular India, southern China, and Tokugawa Japan); these economies’ ‘industrious revolutions’ (following Jan de Vries) dispersed production across hinterlands, and thereby reduced scope for collaboration between mercantile and governing elites.

Having established the importance of riziculture (and geography more broadly) to the development and interaction of producers, markets, and states, in the second chapter Palat considers how large territorial empires in Asia were shaped politically by military and technological developments that, again, differed fundamentally from corresponding patterns of change in Europe. Much weight is given to the key commodity of horses, which not only connected powerful states like Vijayanagara with overland and maritime trading routes issuing from central Eurasia and the Persian Gulf, but also inhibited the early development of defensive gunpowder weaponry. Given that mobility was essential to empire-building, early firearms were impractical for the invading horsemen that transformed Eurasian polities. Geography favoured cavalry and mounted archers; artillery was less powerful, and more easily withstood by prevailing fortification techniques. Moreover, technologies of European violence were not revolutionary in themselves, being quickly adapted and reproduced (or commissioned) by local states; any firepower advantage (at least on land) was effectively neutralized until at least the late eighteenth century.

Violence at sea was another matter, and at several points in the book Palat reflects the nuanced position that has now become a point of historiographical consensus: although merchants in the Indian Ocean were not immune to predatory seafaring before the Portuguese encounter, 'Europeans deployed violence on a qualitatively different scale' (pp. 21, 152); but they failed for centuries to disrupt existing patterns of trade and commodity flows. European companies were largely dependent upon the goodwill of local polities, and their increasing claims to various forms of 'sovereignty' over the seas only heightened their responsibility to trade peaceably or risk losing access to crucial markets.

In the third chapter, Palat hones his argument that Eurocentric assumptions about the nature of capitalist development have been 'mired in teleology' (p. 148) and generally misapplied to the early modern Indian Ocean world. There was nothing 'pre-modern' or 'proto' about Asia's industrious revolutions; intensive riziculture promoted the specialization of labour, which was increasingly dispersed into the countryside. Urban centres functioned as sites of trade and administration, but by no means monopolized artisanal production. An abundance of mobile, specialized labour reduced the need for labour-saving technologies (notably in textile production) that promoted industrialization in Europe.

The final chapter approaches the book's temporal endpoint of 1650 by considering European mercantilism in terms of a wider economic 'maturation' in Asia, downplaying formerly held notions of revolutionary rupture and Western-led transformation. It details the limited impact of European interventions in regional trade and politics: the desperate, bloody, but ultimately ineffectual violence of the Portuguese *cartaz*, for example, is convincingly dismissed as 'arbitrary acts of piracy' (p. 186). These prompted 'realignments' of trade rather than wholesale 'fragmentation' (p. 190), underscored by Dutch merchants' ability to forge trading relationships (particularly in southern India and Japan) at the expense of their Iberian rivals. The long-standing need to diversify exports away from silver bullion encouraged the Dutch to intensify involvement in the 'country trade' across the Indian Ocean, alongside their ruthless exploitation of spice-producing territories in Southeast Asia. The inherent competitive weakness of European exports meant that Asian production remained essential, and (rather than being displaced) was in fact bolstered by increasing integration into the global economic networks being traversed by European ships. Only 'the dramatic rise in the flows of Indian textiles to Europe' (p. 211) in the late seventeenth century began fundamentally to change the dynamics of Indian Ocean trade within a global capitalist system dominated by European imperial interests.

Ultimately, Palat undersells his book's most important intervention. He offers much more than a critique of the divergence debates led two decades ago by the likes of Kenneth Pomeranz and Roy Bin Wong. As a work of Indian Ocean history, the book serves as a

stimulating contribution to a well-developed literature marked by rigorous economic analyses and its own totemic debates about the nature and impact of European imperialism. As such, it stands as essential reading for students who are relatively new to Indian Ocean historiography, furthering an argument that echoes the best of this scholarship.

Simon Layton
Queen Mary University of London, UK
E-mail: s.h.layton@qmul.ac.uk
doi:[10.1017/S1740022819000263](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022819000263)