

concentrated in western Europe and North America bought raw materials and attracted labor from other parts of the world” (p. 220). I’m not entirely convinced that the enslaved would have recognized themselves in this depiction of the historical process. Just as any dialogue with Marxist or World-System scholarship on the same topic has been exorcized from the study, the classical Smithian argument resurfaces here simply by virtue of what is not explicitly written: profits derived from the slave trade, plantations, and colonization all over the world did not generate any significant wealth worth mentioning and cannot possibly be related in any way to the capitalist system itself. In addition, when Europeans were able to take advantage of their international political position it was because “technological and institutional changes were more likely to occur in Europe than in China” (p. 220). Essentially, claim the authors, “by 1500 the European and Chinese economies were on structurally different paths” (p. 100), well before any colonization occurred.

Surprisingly, Bin Wong and Rosenthal claim that this had nothing to do with class cohesion though they themselves juxtapose Machiavelli’s *The Prince* as required reading for European elites with the Confucian training depicted in the *Supplement to the Exposition on the Great Learning* by Qiu Jun (p. 209). That Europe thrived because its merchant class was able to graft itself on to institutional power structures in order to colonize and expand its own power is given no consideration. Nor is the enduring presence of internal class struggles in China: “When natural disasters or social problems emerged, officials, elites and common people often expected that joint efforts would resolve the crises” (p. 212). Though the authors do admit that “European monarchies had to find alternative paths to raise revenues” (p. 194), colonization appears so absent to this quest it makes one wonder what all the European warfare in the late medieval and early modern era (with its alleged benign unintended consequences), was actually about.

What makes this volume especially disappointing is that both authors, senior and tenured scholars in their fields, though liberated from the necessity to conform and speak to only one audience, have chosen to do exactly that. While in their conclusion they lament existing disciplinary conflicts between the social sciences, and especially between history and economics, the lack of dialogue with other (predominantly non-economic and non-Smithian) scholarship is a missed opportunity and greatly diminishes the overall value of the book. As in Rostow’s classic *The Stages of Economic Growth*,⁶ it would have been fitting to warn the uninitiated reader with an appropriate subtitle. Perhaps “A Smithian Manifesto” should have been considered.

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COX, ANTHONY. *Empire, Industry and Class. The imperial nexus of jute, 1840–1940.* [Routledge/Edinburgh South Asian studies series.] Routledge, London [etc.] 2013. xvi, 270 pp. £90.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000236

This book is about two cities—Dundee and Calcutta—and the history of the working classes in these two major centres of the jute industry up to the 1950s. Jute, Anthony Cox

6. Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960).

argues, like Gordon Stewart in *Jute and Empire* before him, has been neglected in histories of the British Empire. Stewart concluded from his detailed examination of the relationship between the two centres that jute represents a case of reverse colonialism, the Dundee centre in the metropolis being subservient to the Calcutta centre in the colony—an arrangement that served best the interests of the Empire.¹ Cox disagrees. The imperial nexus of jute, he holds, is not as unusual as it seems at first glance, since the Empire did not and was not meant to “protect and enrich all sections of British society”. The Empire was equally exploitative of industrial workers in the metropolis and the colony—and he presents significant similarities in these two centres in terms of wages and working conditions to support the argument.

Cox organizes his thesis around the notion of “paternal despotism”, a characteristic claimed as special to the Indian context by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his controversial *Rethinking Working-Class History*. In Chakrabarty’s view the working environment of Calcutta’s jute industry, structured by paternal despotism, ensured that workers did not become a working class but retained strong elements of pre-capitalist community formations.² Chakrabarty’s re-thinking has been further re-thought by a number of scholars, most importantly by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar in his seminal *Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*. Chandavarkar questioned the straitjacket of what he saw as an orientalist conception by which India remains forever short of modernity and bourgeois subjectivity and its workers denied the identity and politics of the working class.³ In this endeavour, Chandavarkar has been supported by other scholars who have urged considerations of caste and gender in understanding industrial workers in colonial India. Such work has sought to deepen insights that had already transformed labour studies with considerations of gender, race, and ethnicity in other parts of the world, in Europe, and the USA, as well as other peripheral locations, such as South Africa. In such broadening of the sociology of labour, class has increasingly become one of many categorical and political imperatives.

Anthony Cox strongly challenges this trend. He feels that the erosion of the primacy of class has been due to the growing currency of “[d]iscourse theory and feminist ideas” with “dire consequences” for the study of labour (p. 183). He is optimistic about the possibility of resurgence of labour studies. However, whether such a resurgence—and there does appear to be increasing interest in understanding the new challenges and dilemmata of labour in a period of global crisis—will restore “class” to its ideological pre-eminence appears doubtful. In fact, new research is venturing further into multiple directions, cultural spheres as well as the minefield of intersectional analyses.

It has been argued from the 1980s that the jute industry was structured crucially around its usefulness as packaging material for world commodity trade. Also, production was labour-intensive. Together, these factors drove millowners relentlessly towards flexibility. Cox relates these factors, as other historians have done earlier, to conditions of migration, in Calcutta as well as Dundee. In Calcutta, the strategy was to maintain a reserve pool of labour, hired for the day, allowing for adjustments in the very short term. The practice declined after the first round of rationalization in the 1930s. In any case, casualization remained the hallmark of the industry (noticeable even in the 1990s). In Dundee, such strategies resulted in feminization and juvenilization of the labour force, the manufacturing lobby successfully blocking reform efforts until World War II. Indeed, Dundee

1. Gordon Stewart, *Jute and Empire* (Manchester [etc.], 1998).

2. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History. Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, NJ, 1989).

3. Rajnarayan S. Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 1994).

continued to carry a disproportionate complement of child labour, which had less protection than in Calcutta, according to Cox (p. 70).

The low wages, insecurity of employment, and poor working conditions led, in both cities, to the political mobilization of labour, and there was more or less continued agitation from 1916 to 1923 in Dundee, while Calcutta witnessed a jute general strike in 1929. Cox explores the rise of the communists in both centres and the links between them, arguing that the “class against class” line adopted by the party in 1928 had a significantly adverse impact in Dundee, while in Calcutta, the strength and ferocity of strike action in 1937 demonstrated the continued relevance of communist activists. Eventually, Cox argues, the 1930s witnessed the unmaking of the imperial nexus: Indian millowners increasingly eroded the monopolistic control of European capital in Calcutta; and Dundee witnessed a gradual masculinization of jute labour. The outbreak of war in 1939 provided a brief respite for the industry, but after the war there was not only a political dissolution of the “imperial nexus” but also major restructuring of the industry in both locations with improvements in wages and working conditions.

The category of class has never ceased to be an important plank in labour studies. This book seeks to rehabilitate “class” as *the* (rather than *a*) category of analyses on two counts. First, of course, the book focuses on the formation of the working class in two different contexts—the metropolitan (Dundee) and the colonial (Calcutta), to show that their very different histories produced nevertheless similar outcomes. The reason for this is, Cox argues, that the two industries grew under the same general ownership and management arrangements and drew on each other to develop strategies of labour control. The interface between patriarchal forms of labour control in Dundee and racialized forms of labour control in Calcutta produced a “process of dialogic interaction” (p. 184). The shorthand for this, indicated in the title, is the “imperial nexus of jute”. Though the nuts and bolts of the “imperial nexus” is not expounded as clearly as one may have wished, the financial and commercial links between the two centres of the industry are explored and are held to have produced similar social processes, such as migration, and similar political expression, in the form of radical collective struggles, in both centres.

These are not in themselves remarkable and other examples could be added. For the author, the significance of these common experiences is in the lie they give to the conventional assumption of the working classes in the imperium being better off than in the colony – i.e. in the usual deployment of imperialism in understanding the much greater gains made by labour in the metropolis in comparison to the colonies. He draws on Eric Hobsbawm’s theories of labour aristocracy to explain its unique and narrow character in the Dundee jute industry, but clearly does not agree with the notion that imperialism has shaped working-class politics in Great Britain in the early twentieth century.⁴ According to this book, the imperial nexus of jute worked in such a way as to nullify the benefits of the Empire for the Dundee jute industry, or at least its workers. One wonders: is this because Dundee is in Scotland?

The second argument about class has more possibilities for a generalized thesis on labour politics, but is not fully explored, especially in the Calcutta part of this book. The differences in ethnicity, religion, and gender were not divisive, argues Cox, rather they constituted nodes of political mobilization leading to “revolutionary moments” of collective struggles. Consequently, he is somewhat dismissive of scholars who have found that social differences do divide workers. It is the question of gender that is inescapable in Cox’s tale of two cities. In Dundee women outnumbered men by three to two; in

4. Eric J. Hobsbawm, “The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century Britain” (1954), in *idem, Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), pp. 272–315.

Calcutta, there were four women to eleven men. The contrast in the sex ratio in the population mirrored their numerical significance in the jute workforce. At the Dundee end, more than half the workers were women; in Calcutta's jute mills, they were about one-fifth and declining from the 1930s. Despite this stark contrast in the gender composition of the workforce in the two centres, Cox's conclusion regarding similar outcomes renders gender somewhat logically redundant. He is impatient of Eleanor Gordon's view that gender structured the experience of women workers and that patriarchy was oppressive within as well as over the working classes.⁵ Cox does not, however, explain the masculinization of the jute workforce in Dundee, a factum made to bear in his narrative a major explanatory burden for the breaking of the imperial nexus in the 1930s. He also believes that I succumbed to colonial and bourgeois stereotyping in arguing that relationships based on sexual love and emotional bonds could nevertheless be unequal; or that poor women could assert their agency as much by challenging brahminical norms of chastity as by collective action in the workplace.⁶

The evidence Cox offers contra misguided feminist scholarship remains incomplete on many counts—instances of trade-union support of women's strikes does not, per se, nullify the possibility of ideologies of gender being shared across classes (what the author terms patriarchal blocs) operating against women workers. Indeed, histories of varied industries in many other parts of the world—in China and Japan, for instance – have shown how patriarchal ideologies helped to devise draconian labour strategies. In the last thirty years, debates between formal/informal, organized/unorganized labour have turned crucially on questions of feminization—i.e. the perceived power of gender to recategorize and therefore to divide labour. It is not clear what can be gained at this point in time by ultimately denying the historical significance of categories such as gender (and caste, race, ethnicity) in complicating class and inflecting in myriad ways identities based on political narratives of class.

If the steady trickle of scholarship on jute labour in the last thirty years can be deemed to have begun with Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Rethinking Working-Class History*, Anthony Cox's contribution helps fill a gap. Chakrabarty's book argued a specificity, virtually a uniqueness, of Indian industrial labour, against the foil of an abstracted ideal-type based on E.P. Thompson's characterization of the English working class. Most scholars of Indian labour, though most do not go as far as Chakrabarty, do still give more or less elbow room to the colonial context. None of the many historians of the jute industry have explored the possibility of fleshing out the specificity of the colonial context by a comparative study of Dundee and Calcutta. We have always known though, that Calcutta and Dundee, bound and conflicted in so many ways by the golden fibre, cannot be understood without reference to each other. Cox's book demonstrates how comparative labour history can sharpen our understanding of contexts and causalities; indeed, more such work may begin to pose new questions and enrich labour history.

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5. Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1991).

6. Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge, 1999).