

Book Review Essay

What about Global History? Recent Research on Tobacco Production in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, 18th to 20th Century

Barbara Hahn. *Making Tobacco Bright. Creating an American Commodity, 1617–1937*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 2011. x + 236 pp. ISBN 978-1-421-40286-4, \$63 (cloth).

Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff. *Colonising Plants in Bihar (1760–1950): Tobacco Betwixt Indigo and Sugar*. Gurgaon, India: Penguin Random House 2014. xvii + 464 pp. ISBN 978-1-4828-3912-8, \$56.88 (paperback).

In the last two decades, the history of commodities and trade goods such as cotton, indigo, and sugar has received much attention. Historians now routinely follow commodity chains around the globe, linking local or regional stories of production and consumption with imperial contexts or the creation of nation states. Discovering the “Empire of Cotton,” Sven Beckert has vividly shown how Great Britain emerged as the center of industrialized cotton manufacturing during the nineteenth century, while the production of raw cotton increased in various parts of the world.¹ Other scholars have more thoroughly discovered the global transfer and circulation of knowledge and agricultural science on plants or cash crops that emerged in line with their worldwide diffusion. Narratives on products, goods, and commodities have thereby helped to bring economic and cultural histories into a new and inspiring dialogue.²

Although somewhat overshadowed by histories on sugar and cotton, tobacco also has stimulated several works.³ Both Barbara Hahn’s book

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1. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2015).

2. Prakash Kumar, *Indigo Plantations and Science in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Ulbe Bosma and Jonathan Curry-Machado, “Two Islands, One Commodity: Cuba, Java, and the Global Sugar Trade (1790–1930),” *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids (New West Indian Guide)* 86 (2012): 237–262. Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

3. Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence* (London: Routledge, 1995). Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff's book represent two recent examples. In the following, I first give a brief overview of both books. I next suggest a spatial opening of both narratives toward a more global horizon by which the British–Indian and U.S. tobacco production could be more thoroughly incorporated into border-crossing connections and circulations, structures, and contexts. This would help, as I argue, to highlight the entanglement of both case studies. Finally, I provide perspectives for a more global—yet not less empirical—investigation of tobacco history in the modern age.

Barbara Hahn begins her book with quite a different start. Analyzing the history of tobacco production in the United States since the late eighteenth century, her interest concentrates on the creation of “Bright Tobacco,” which eventually became the dominating tobacco type in the age of the cigarette in the twentieth century. The first chapter sheds light on the late colonial period's inspection laws in Virginia, which attempted to exclude “anything except first grown leaves” (9) from transatlantic trade networks. While such a limitation figured as an essential standard for Bright Tobacco from then on, other contemporary discussions (e.g., on curing technologies) were still fuzzy. Chapter 2 argues that types, terms, and categories of tobacco mainly circulated in merchant networks without much meaning attached to consumers or to state policy. Even after the secession from Britain, the agricultural and manufactural sectors of tobacco production remained closely intertwined, enabling farmers to trade, process, and purchase tobacco in family businesses. Bright color, as Hahn mentions rather casually, slowly became a marker to separate raw tobacco for European consumption from darker leaves for African markets.

Compared to the stabilization attempts that accelerated after the Civil War, early nineteenth-century categories had interchangeable features. Hahn's third chapter gives much importance to the newly evolving administrative dimensions of the U.S. federal government and its legal tax-based separation of manufacture and agriculture. Bigger firms, such as the American Tobacco Company, began to incorporate smaller enterprises, displaying a certain tendency toward monopolistic organizations of private tobacco businesses. As Chapter 4 demonstrates, post-antebellum manufacturers gave new attention to distinguish their tobacco goods by using standardized raw tobacco. In this context, new fertilizers such as guano, known since the 1840s, were applied more systematically, and various actors in the tobacco business began to support agricultural science as a tool. By classifying types of tobacco and linking regions to production methods, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) federal census from 1880 represented a further step toward stable tobacco types. Though flue curing

was not yet perceived as a “natural” characteristic of Bright Tobacco, the technology spread westward, benefitting from the post-antebellum sharecropper farming that succeeded the larger slave-based production.

However, it was also the political protest of farmers and their organized agitation around 1900 that helped to further stabilize tobacco types. Chapter 5 analyzes the agrarian protest against big tobacco business grading and pricing policies. Hahn shows how farmers took up existing categories of tobacco quality, set by nineteenth-century merchants, manufacturers, and administration, not only to advertise their products but also to improve their position toward the companies. Mythologizing the origins of production methods, farmers began to organize their protest by emphasizing the quality of their raw tobacco while agitating for “scientific agriculture” and further government support. However, it was mainly the state, as Chapter 6 shows, which affected a real “closure” of tobacco categories. By the 1920s, the USDA had created a solid classification for tobacco, in which 315 publicly known types of tobacco were reduced to six. Limiting production to quotas, a new legal framework was constructed to link regional cultivation to farmers’ apparently “natural” ways of farming. In this quasi-natural order of varietal types, flue curing became a necessity for the production of Bright Tobacco, which overshadowed the fact that types were contingent outcomes of different stages in American history.

While Hahn’s book is strongly concentrated on the genealogy of Bright Tobacco, Sinha-Kerkhoff’s book provides a wider account on colonial India, focusing on the region of Bihar. Her main interest is in the changing ways of the colonial state’s “improvement” policies, starting in the eighteenth century. As the first chapter shows, it was only after American Independence that the British East India Company (EIC) began to consider Bihar for additional regional trade, as a substitute for the Chesapeake Bay’s tobacco that had been exported to European markets roughly for two centuries. Agronomic improvement began to be fostered in the early nineteenth century—after the trade monopoly of the EIC had been abolished—when British state officials imported seed from the imperial botanic center in Kew Gardens and other regions.

Changes in European consumption during the first half of the nineteenth century, as discussed in Chapter 3, notably with the rise of the cigar, led to strengthened considerations on Indian tobacco exports. It was hoped that the older usages of Bihari tobacco, for hookah smoking and tobacco chewing, could be reorganized using the model of Cuban and Philippine cigar wrappers, which became the ideal for British officials and savants alike. Starting in the 1870s, agricultural science was more thoroughly applied, and even became

an institutionalized factor for improvement with the creation in 1905 of the Pusa Agricultural Research Institute. Originally established to encourage Indian tobacco planters, the influx of European capital and landowners more and more transformed an apparently “native production” (see Chapter 4). Supporting planters with physiological botany or agricultural chemistry, research at Pusa also made it possible for U.S. tobacco curing experts to circulate through the region.

As Chapter 5 shows, the political transformations of the British Empire, and the global spread of cigarette smoking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on the one hand, enabled a more centralized state improvement policy in Bihar. Pusa, however, not only became a regional research center but also an imperial one, providing knowledge for various tobacco cultivation areas in India and other parts of the British Empire. On the other hand, the focus on development can be seen as a reaction to increasing boycotts of Indian nationalists against “foreign goods,” including cigarettes. In this context, the institute and the British Imperial Administration for Agriculture began to support the creation of Bengali-run cigar and cigarette factories, promoted the application of “scientific manufacture,” and generally stressed willingness to cooperate. Pusa began to test new procedures of curing technology that was aimed to produce Bright Tobacco, which had become more and more in demand in the Atlantic markets, as Hahn’s account has already shown.

As noted in Chapter 6, as similar in the United States, the period up to the 1920s paved the way for monopolistic trusts and a new state cooperation with British-American Tobacco (BAT). Globally searching for raw tobacco, BAT perceived Bihar tobacco as an important source. This regime of improvement, as Chapter 7 shows, collapsed between 1920 and 1950, when antismoking debates, extended political protests, and already conflicting financial dependency of Indian farmers on European capital began to overlap. For Indian nationalists, BAT cigarettes had to be replaced by “Indian” products, although the company never stopped claiming an “Indian” origin for its goods. Noncooperation and civil disobedience increasingly became Indian strategies to redesign the British Empire after World War I, which weakened the position of BAT and the governmental improvement program. The political protest, as Chapter 8 discusses, helped to finally end the British state development for tobacco. The newly created Bihar government began to concentrate on the improvement of cane sugar, which was perceived to be more beneficial for the province and an important part of the “national economy.” BAT and British officials, however, continued to apply tobacco knowledge to other regions in India, which were believed to be more submissive to imperial rule.

The two books provide plausible interpretations of tobacco's imperial and national histories (Hahn) and imperial frameworks (Sinha-Kerkhoff), from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. Particularly inspiring, however, is the combination of perspectives that both authors use to approach their subject. Although the history of tobacco is told in each case from a certain angle—Hahn with an interest in technology and Sinha-Kerkhoff coming from a history of science—both authors elegantly include processes and facts from the history of tobacco consumption, trade, or labor. While the two books provide unexplored evidence from source material, they are also fruitful rereadings of older studies that are far from being synthesized. Finally, Hahn and Sinha-Kerkhoff suggestively manage to not only integrate state actors, companies, or agricultural scientists but also to emphasize the importance of various subaltern groups, from Indian manufacturers to U.S. farmers.

However great the inspiration each work provides, both accounts lag behind recent developments in global history that scholars have begun to explore and conceptualize.⁴ This might be most evident for the limited adaptations of perspectives that studies on border-crossing commodity chains have opened up.⁵ Although neither author ignores the fact that export trade networks geographically linked their cases with other regions, they nevertheless stay in the boundaries of British India and the United States. Both contain only some information on the structural change of export markets and cultures of consumption, as the shift from cigar to cigarette smoking occurred. However, it would have been interesting to more closely highlight the role of different actor groups beyond the investigated territories: merchants, state officials, and also consumers from Europe, Asia, or Africa could have been given more agency and importance as explanatory factors for the two argumentations.⁶ Hahn's book, especially, would have benefited from explaining why cigar and cigarette consumption never completely outdated snuff or chewing tobacco, still important for the Italian state tobacco organization. The similar interest of African regions for Kentucky's darker tobacco types (43, 46, and 68) could have been further discovered to avoid too much of a teleological story that excludes concurrence for Bright Tobacco.

4. See, more generally, Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2016).

5. Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, Zephyr Frank, eds., *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500–2000* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2006).

6. For the agency of consumers, see Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Berg 2006).

Finally, the circulation of agricultural science and knowledge, which neither book acknowledges systematically enough, provides another promising object for more global investigations. In this respect, it also seems problematic that the authors tend to downplay the importance of improvement and agronomy before the mid-nineteenth century, while recent works actually prove different on those points.⁷ Apart from this, it would also be important to reconsider the dependency of U.S., British, and Indian experts on centers of knowledge outside their respective territorial frames. The strong mid-nineteenth-century interest for the reproduction of Cuban cigars and cigar wrappers, vividly discussed in the United States as well as in India, could be explored more thoroughly from its scientific dimension. As Jean Stubbs had shown, the state of Connecticut or the Dutch colony Indonesia became testing grounds for experiments with Cuban cigar leaf cultivation starting in the 1860s and 1870s.⁸

Such a border-crossing view might also help to draw both research results together into a more synthesized global history of tobacco production since the eighteenth century. This seems particularly evident for the early twentieth century: the American and European desire to strengthen the production of Bright Tobacco for cigarettes helped to reimagine the recently conquered African environments as new spaces for the exploitation of tobacco resources. American experts, as well as research from the Indian Pusa Institute, became important knowledge resources to enable such plans in colonies such as Rhodesia or Kenya.⁹ It remains a task for further investigation to more thoroughly analyze the influence of Indian and American tobacco expertise in the context of colonial Africa. Such an endeavor would be an interesting example to show how one could benefit from writing a global history of commodities and trade goods.

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7. Peter M. Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment: Knowledge, Technology and Nature, 1750–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015).

8. Jean Stubbs, “El Habano and the World It Has Shaped: Cuba, Connecticut, and Indonesia,” *Cuban Studies* 41 (2010): 39–67.

9. For an exclusive focus on the transfer from the United States to African regions, see Barbara Hahn, “Paradox of Precision: Bright Tobacco as Technology of Transfer, 1880–1937,” *Agricultural History* 82 (2008): 220–235.