



B O O K R E V I E W

The Sea, Seafaring, and the Birth of the Modern World

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Campling, Liam, and Colás, Alejandro (2021), *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World*, Verso Books, London, New York, 432 pages.

This book is a brilliant articulation of how the interaction of the system of capitalism with a natural resource – the sea – helped create the modern world. The authors test their bold hypothesis by exploring the events, processes, structures, institutions, and attitudes that have had a bearing on this interaction in the modern and early modern periods. When set against the more general “land-based” arguments for the rise and influence of capitalism, their fresh approach draws our special attention.

The authors argue that the “terraqueous” nature of the sea catalysed and added to the process of capitalist development. Their formulation that the sea not only “facilitate[s] modernity but is constituted by it” (p. 5) runs counter to previous efforts to analyse the role and influence of the sea in history. Capitalism’s encounter with the sea for competitive accumulation is one of the main concerns of this book. The authors offer, for example, empirical and analytical insights into how activities such as the slave trade became entirely commoditised under capitalism. Their argument is carried further in separate but integrated discussions on “Circulation,” “Exploitation,” and “Logistics.” Their instructive (though somewhat crowded) survey covers the phases of commercial, industrial, and neoliberal capitalism.

The three-pronged survey (that is, with respect to circulation, exploitation, and logistics) underscores how land-based infrastructure and social networks impacted the reproduction of capitalism at sea. This is sharply illustrated by their focus on the “circulatory” nature of capital, with information and interpretations marshalled from sources world-wide to show how the circulatory nature of capital gets its special edge and capacity. The factors that were especially instrumental in giving

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circulatory capital such an edge included “natural harbours, tidal streams, seasonal weather, water temperature, shoals, reefs, and so forth” (p. 30) as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Special navigational instruments, the science of cartography, the development of ship designs and so on (p.40), which were already available from previous periods of seafaring, aided this process. Other factors such as the development of bills of exchange, joint-stock companies, and instruments such as marine insurance also played a role.

Together, these factors intensified market integration through the sea. In the early stage of capitalist development, these favourable factors valorised commodities and money over and above productive capital. The authors also point out that mercantile circulation and overseas trade played a major role in the genesis of capitalism during what they call the “long sixteenth century.” These processes later impacted merchants in the process of integrating circulation with production.

Once shipping networks, followed by land-based transport systems, were built up, an economic system based on long-distance exchange of goods followed (p. 67) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To maintain such networks—by preventing pirate attacks and other types of losses at sea – new types of legal instruments and surveillance systems were also developed. There occurred a transition from the earlier mercantilist transactions into circulation of value through trade in manufactured/industrial goods. This brought in its wake “the steamship, refrigeration, canning, ironclad vessels and undersea telegraphic cables” (p. 81). These developments required stations for refuelling in different parts of the world. It also led to the development of the rights of nations to naval surveillance of the open seas. States that could do so set up strict surveillance systems in areas that were relatively vulnerable for shipping. International disputes arose as did different types of negotiated agreements to resolve them. As the authors put it, “...like any extractive space, it [the sea] also needs regulation, delimitation and policing – that is, an order” (p. 106). This need for “an order” persists to this day. At the height of such competitive intra-capitalistic dealings, the extraction of maximum productivity remained the basic premise of any unit that operated at sea.

Accompanying these processes were many forms of human exploitation. Slaves, prisoners of war and conscripted labour were used as crew, for example, and were exploited directly through physical coercion. Therefore, a strange “coexistence” of “metropolitan freedom and imperial disciplinary practices” [at sea] (p. 122) came into being. It is not surprising at all, as the authors tell us, that “the first recorded maritime trade union in Britain appeared in 1825 (among the coastal sailors) ...spurred by the success of their resistance to impressment” (p. 137). The conflict eventually led to various ways through which capitalists could contain the growing militancy of organised maritime labour. One such instance cited by the authors concerns the Japanese in the 1960s and 1970s. When wage costs increased, they sold their ships to Flags of Convenience (that is, a system where some post-colonial

states used their sovereignty to allow ships from any part of the globe to register under them with much less supervision of crew members' rights and other regulatory features) and then chartered them back under less rigorous labour laws (p. 150). Such adjustments were enacted elsewhere too.

Since capitalist appropriation requires the commodification of things, maintaining such a balance at sea became all the more problematic. A specific discussion of this issue is undertaken in this volume. As early as the 1600s, with the establishment of the first joint stock company, the search in international waters for seals, walrus and whales had begun. The competition between nations was especially sharp in fishing for tuna, which according to a US Secretary of the Interior, soon became the "magic word" for any country which looked to the sea for food and profits (p. 199). Imperial struggles for appropriating the wealth at sea, with the emergence of zones which ultimately became zones of international control, are analysed in the book within the context of geoeconomics and geopolitics.

The primary requirement of capital is to be in circulation globally. For this the oceans obviously played an important role. While Britain built up its dominant role at sea through colonial institutions, the US did so by building advanced maritime technologies and logistics. Other countries that entered the arena of competition also tried their hands at domination in their own sphere, or at least to the extent of keeping their share intact. An entirely new system of "off-shores" was introduced in the interests of capital from the mid-nineteenth century. They were not mere tax havens restricted to maritime regions, as the authors explain (p. 268). Rather, they operated as 'secrecy jurisdictions' across the world, on land and sea. Sovereign nations provided "safety, stability and connectivity necessary for the discrete conduct of major international business transactions" (p. 277). Campling and Colás have traced the connections between such tax-havens to the "juridico-political authority of past feudal and colonial institutions." Like Flags of Convenience, the off-shore is yet another area that is made exempt from laws, regulations and supervision that are present in regular centres of business interactions. Many islands (60 per cent of off-shores are on islands) or small states are willing to pursue this type of transaction; the authors suggest (p. 271), when they do not have any export potential beyond tourism and fish. According to the authors (p. 288), these secrecy jurisdictions channel a significant part of the wealth generated through business transactions at sea.

In conclusion, the book tries to list possibilities for emancipation from capitalist exploitation, making use of the terraqueous nature of the sea. One such possibility is in the area of "progressive forms of internationalism" (p. 134). Though there were earlier attempts like the Pan-Africanism of Marcus Garvey or of communist anti-colonialism of Ho Chi Minh, attempts at internationalism with respect to oceanic spheres of influence will have to face the decisive role played by the state in

combining freedom and stability over territorial waters while maintaining the global circulation of capital.

Campling and Colás show tremendous skill in substantiating their initial hypothesis that capitalism in interaction with the sea helped create the modern world. They have pursued almost every event of significance that occurred historically across the oceans. Despite the sheer scale of their canvas, with their analysis going back and forth through different time periods, successive modes of production, and the role of different political regimes, their book maintains a welcome readability. This is particularly creditable given the complexity of their new hypothesis on the sea-based origins of capitalism.