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**Goodwin-Hawkins, Bryonny ORCID logoORCID:
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John M. Hobson (2021). *Multicultural Origins of the Global Economy: Beyond the Western-Centric Frontier*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Paperback, 506pp.

Reviewed by **Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins**, Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, UK, Email: bgoodwinhawkins@glos.ac.uk

Trade flows, air routes, shipping crews, skiing holidays: COVID-19 has revealed the interlaced intricacies of the modern global economy. As connection became contagion, the pandemic also prompted more than a little wistful reflection on globalization's promises – less so on globalization's origins. The standard account of how the global economy came to be casts industrial inventors and East India Company traders in a potted plot sweeping from colonial expansion to unfettered 'freedom' after 1989. The story sometimes urges celebration, sometimes mourns carnage, but almost always describes a wave of unstoppable change radiating from Europe or 'the West'.

John M. Hobson's latest book aims to shake these Eurocentric certainties. The core of his argument is that another globalization existed before and beside the regularly rehearsed temporal markers of (seemingly) Westernized modernity. Hobson calls this the 'First Global Economy' and sketches its shape from c.1500-1850. Across the first eight chapters, the book details how, during this period, inter- and trans-continental trade routes criss-crossed much of the globe through interconnected commodity chains. Gold, silver, ivory and slaves were bought and sold in effectively globalized markets that were – crucially – cohered by cotton textiles from India.

By centering the role of Indian cottons in weaving trade routes together, Hobson works to overturn entrenched assumptions that globalization emerged from a European 'big bang'. Chapters 3 and 4 reconstruct the entangled trade relationships between the Indian subcontinent, Africa and West Asia. With one foot in international relations and another in historical sociology, Hobson deftly draws his material through to restore a picture of Indian structural power (Chapter 5) and illumine the mediating role of Multānī merchant finance (Chapter 6).

China earns reconsideration, too. Chapter 2 opens the empirical analysis by framing China today not as 'going global' for the first time, but global *again*. Throughout later chapters, Hobson picks at longstanding axioms about Chinese insularity, with Britain often emerging the more anxiously protectionist. Though distilling the book to such pithy reversals does little justice to the intricate historiography, Hobson does have a knack for crafting a compelling takeaway message.

Much of this knack obviously draws from Hobson's forging in global political economy debates. This is his ninth book, and he squarely inhabits the authorial 'I' as a scholar who has been both well tested and taken critique as a challenge to engage ever deeper. The book is often a master class in argumentation, as Hobson assembles his arguments and explicitly tries the evidence against a succession of claims and counter-claims. For example, a critical interlocutor (or uncle at a dinner table) might ready the classic counterattack: *but Britain industrialized and India and China did not!* Hobson anticipates this objection, tacking textile industrialism (Chapter 11) and coal and steel (Chapter 12) in turn. Labor and environment shape the latter re-telling, while the textiles case adds a tarnish to well-polished beliefs in 'Great British' ingenuity by restoring the Indian market dominance that drove invention by necessity.

Not one, but two distinct Eurocentric narratives are targeted for dismantling here. The first is that familiar arc of Western agency and exceptionalism – a story so often pairing a (racialized) superiority complex with dogged historical tunnel vision. Revisionist critiques of this story already have a firm academic foothold (albeit awaiting wider circulation and a truly decolonized curriculum), and Hobson's efforts to add evidence will doubtless find an agreeable readership. Taking on the second narrative courts rather more controversy. Hobson insists that, just as it is plainly Eurocentric to picture globalization as the triumphalist march of 'the West', it is equally Eurocentric to pessimistically paint 'the rest' into passive victimhood. To be clear, Hobson does not dispute the atrocities and traumatic legacies bequeathed by

colonialism. But he does refuse a guilty verdict that forecloses non-Western agency. Chapter 3, for example, recalls the slaves traded in the Indian Ocean, with Chapter 4 following up by re-positioning African elites as actors in internal and global slave markets. For Hobson, the 'Eurofetishist' disavowal of these complex realities leaves millions of lives effectively "erased from our world historical memory" (109).

Such complexity is the book's boon – and at times the reader's bane. A book of this ambition necessarily demands breadth and depth of research. Hobson delivers, from excursions through smelting history to a deep dive into the Kingdom of Mysore. Although archive-steeped historians will sniff at the secondary sources, the impressive, diverse reference list is likely to be eagerly perused as a trove for teaching and study alike. Drawing all these links together is difficult work and – as Hobson's valiant attempt to diagram a 'dodecagonal global super-commodity chain' might suggest – the reader may sometimes boggle at the scope of it all. Hobson can be unhelpful here, not least by seeming incapable of letting a repeated phrase go without reducing it to an acronym. NGCPE, IPE, RIPE ... the effect is often frustratingly akin to being adrift in someone else's notes. 'ICT' as shorthand for 'Indian Cotton Textiles' introduces an odd anachronism given the contemporary prevalence of 'Information and Communications Technology', while many a female reader will be mystified by Hobson's recurrent beef with 'BBT' (Basal Body Temperature?).

These tics do suggest the absence of a firmer editorial hand, and a scholar with less reputation and fewer positional privileges may have faced rather more red pen. Perhaps that reflection betrays my own lingering discomfort with the book: it is fair to call *Multicultural Origins of the Global Economy* a magnum opus; it is also fair to consider – as Kaveh Yazdani and Dilip M. Menon (2020) have recently suggested – that truly globalizing histories might require setting aside the model of a lone all-seeing scholar writing a magisterial monograph in favor of multiple voices and decentered expertise.

Placing myself as a reader is an apt end to this review. I was at once the right and the wrong reader for this book. My research in Britain's former textile industry heartlands has certainly led me on occasion to uncritically recite the glib 'history' that Hobson pulls painstakingly apart. My upbringing in a settler colony still grappling with never-quite-post-colonial stories also takes me at times to the recriminations Hobson complicates. I was educated on the first; more mildly nudged on the second. Yet, I quickly realized I was not the reader Hobson *really* wants to influence. In the introduction, he sets a stall for a 'New Global Political Economy' to rival and rile International Political Economy and International Relations. Hobson's excursus speaks to those who have a fully formed opinion of the California School and await the next British International Studies Association conference. Only these can really judge whether his (sub)disciplinary project succeeds, just as only those with historical expertise will be able to critically assess the empirical evidence.

No doubt, this book will earn a readership split between converted and critical. Specialist readers should come armed with plenty of sharpened pencils. Graduate students and early career scholars seeking a theoretical camp in international studies may find much to admire in New Global Political Economy. Foes old and new will enjoy digging up historiographical howlers or wagging dog-eared copies of *Das Kapital*. But while the book would benefit a readership in the social sciences more broadly, it may not offer the textual concessions necessary to get readers – especially student readers – through to the end. For the generalist reader, this is rather a book to dip into than take on cover-to-cover. So, skip the introduction, let the footnotes sail on by, and sit with that most important message: we need to critically revise our understandings of how the global economy emerged and when, and, to do so, we need to provincialize Europe and globalize Asia and Africa.

References

Yazdani, K. & D.M. Menon (2020). *Capitalisms: Towards a Global History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.