

Bray, Francesca; Peter A. Coclanis (Hrsg.): *Rice. Global Networks and New Histories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015. ISBN: 978-1-107-04439-5; 445 S.

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Rice is one of the most widely consumed staple foods in the world.¹ Throughout its history, it has been more than just a crop or commodity of one area of the world; the cultivation, trade and consumption of rice has affected vast parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Furthermore, rice comes in numerous varieties, all of which rely on different ways of cultivations, organizations of labor, environmental aspects and power structures. While scholarly attention has already widely been given to rice in its various areas and means of production, few scholars have asked what the similarities or distinctions between regional histories of rice might share. The editors of *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*, Francesca Bray, Peter A. Coclanis, Edda I. Fields-Black and Dagmar Schäfer, set out to connect the debates and problems associated with the history of rice that have to date been seen as separate. As Francesca Bray puts it into the introduction, the book attempts „to write a history of rice and its place in the rise of capitalism from a global and comparative perspective“ (p. 3).

Rice is indeed an impressive collaborative work, connecting Asia, Africa and the Americas through the lens of one commodity. The book covers rice cultivation in Punjab, Bengal, Japan, Senegal, Guinea, Sumatra, Sierra Leone, Java, China, Vietnam, and the US at different times and with a wide set of individual research questions. The volume reflects the diverse scholarly backgrounds of its contributors, who are specialized in different disciplines and geographical areas. Consequently, the volume's chapters are indeed very diverse; however, in the introduction, Bray frames the various histories convincingly to understand rice as a significant commodity in the emergence of colonialism, industrial capitalism, and the modern world order (p. 35).

All fifteen chapters are situated in early

modern and modern history, with most of them looking at the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The chapters mainly address questions of cultivating rice and the impacts of growing rice on social relations, power structures and environmental matters in the regions under considerations. Less often the authors address the question of trading and consuming rice, with some significant exception, e.g. Sui-Wai Cheung's study on the importance of taste and consumer choice for China's rice industry in the eighteenth century or Seung-Joon Lee's work on China's rice imports and merchants.

The volume is organized into three sections. The first part covers concepts of purity and „promiscuity“ [sic] as two important aspects in modern agriculture. Rice is largely self-pollinating and less „promiscuous“ [sic] than most cereals, thus, the control of variation, the breeding and maintenance of pure strains and the production of grain that meets certain standards has always been part of the crops history. While most chapters fit into this category, such as David Biggs's chapter on modern rice cultivation in the Mekong Delta or Bruce L. Mouser et al. on Sierra Leone, others are at odds with this category, though nevertheless extremely insightful and also important for historians in general. Historian Peter Boomgaard and statistician Pieter M. Kroonenberg joined forces to critically re-evaluate Clifford Geertz's portrayal of Java and his exceedingly influential Agricultural Involution theory from some 55 years ago.² Geertz had assumed a – what he called – ‘mutualistic’ relationship between sugar and rice, which led to growth without development. According to Geertz, population growth was absorbed by wet-rice and sugar cultivation with no structural economic and social changes taking place. Boomgaard and Kroonenberg challenged this assumption by taking a very close look on the available data. Based on their findings, they found

¹The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization lists the crop as the agricultural commodity with the third-highest worldwide production, after sugarcane and corn, see FAO Statistical Pocketbook: World Food and Agriculture 2015, p. 28.

²Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963.

Geertz in many of his facts regarding Javanese economic growth and especially his assumption of the rice-sugar relation wrong. They suggest to drop Geertz's term Agricultural Involvement completely from the discourse. Because Geertz's theory was extremely influential for many scholars, Boomgaard and Kroonenberg's study seems to be hidden in the volume's section on purity. The editors should have considered opening up an additional section on historiography, since other chapters deal with narratives on rice as well, e. g. Walter Hawthorne's on the „Black Rice Debate.“ Furthermore, Bray's frames historical debates in her introduction as well.

The second section focusses on environmental matters in regard to risiculture. Rice has always been grown in a diversity of rain-fed and irrigated agricultural environments, such as dry uplands, terraced hillsides, lowlands, coastal wetlands, deep water environments, and swamps. Controlling and channeling fresh water has thus always been part of cultivating rice, which in turn has led to social and demographic transformations within rice-growing societies. Thus, the chapters in this section focus on human interaction with the environment and the effects of the environment on human actors and their societies. Throughout its history, cultivating rice has required increased labor inputs to build the infrastructure for controlling and channeling fresh water worldwide, and many rice-growing societies have used coercion to recruit and maintain the necessary labor.

Lauren Minsky analyses and compares late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century health and experiences of rice cultivators in Punjab and Bengal, regions at opposite ends and ecological extremes of South Asia's Indo-Gangetic plain. In both regions, rice cultivators experienced a marked rise in disease morbidity during the principal commercial harvest seasons, and Minsky shows that those experiences were shaped by environmental changes associated with the intensive production of rice. In Punjab and Bengal, an increase in commodity production for global markets was accompanied by a concurrent increase in social inequality. In this context, seasonal hunger, malnutrition, and immunological vulnerability became significant features

of life. Other chapters in this section that have a strong focus on environmental matters are those by Edda L. Fields Black on rice in the Upper Guinea Coast and by Hayden R. Smith on South Carolina.

The third section addresses questions regarding the relations of power, coercion, and control over the production of rice. The first chapter in this section covers a part that is connected to what became known as the 'Black Rice Debate' to historians. Proponents of the thesis, such as Judith Carney, start the American rice narrative with enslaved West Africans, who, in the late seventeenth century, transferred through their enslavement by white Europeans their agricultural knowledge on cultivating rice to South Carolina and other parts of the Americas.³ Advocates of the Black Rice Debate hold that skilled rice farmers from Africa's Upper Guinea coast introduced the technology important for the establishment and expansion of lowland South Carolina and Georgia's eighteenth-century rice-based plantation system.

Peter Hawthorne sets out to give the Black Rice Debate some reconsiderations. He sees evidence for the application of African knowledge to some aspects of plantation agriculture and rice cuisines in Carolina and Amazonia, however, he reframes the debate by considering the cultural meaning that work had for Africans. Hawthorne stresses the point that work over rice in the Americas was a 'deculturing' experience (p. 280). Africans' hard work in the rice fields brought few positive social rewards in the New World, as it formerly did in on the other side of the ocean. Upper Guinean farmers brought with them knowledge of how to work efficiently over a difficult crop, but the ties between that work and African concepts of personhood, ritual obligation, and collective cultural identity were broken.

Peter Coclanis' following chapter on White Rice covers a part in American risiculture that is distinctively shaped by male, white farmers. He offers a story on the development of modern rice cultivation that reaches back to

³ Judith Ann Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

farmers in the Southwestern States Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas from the 1880 to 1914. Coclanis writes about migrating farmers who fled poor living conditions in the Midwest in the hope of finding better conditions in the Southwest. His story is one of agricultural transubstantiation, meaning that these farmers implemented and improved the methods they had formerly used for wheat production on their new rice production. Additionally, he stresses the importance of networks and nodes in agricultural and technological innovation. Coclanis doesn't touch on the question whether or not America's first rice culture regimes were African and thus Black, but he demonstrates that the origins of modern rice cultivation in the United States were Midwestern and white.

The editors of this volume give short introductions to each section, which tremendously help the reader gain some general knowledge on shared histories and historiographies associated with rice. Other than that, the chapters are only loosely connected, as they deal with so many different geographic regions and localities. In his foreword, Giorgio Riello says that 'the history of rice throws at us a series of different questions and is characterized by the co-existence of different scholarly traditions and debates' (p. xvii). *Rice* clearly brings most of these traditions and debates to the forefront by connecting them with a global perspective. In doing so, the volume substantially contributes to an understanding of rice as a global commodity that has significantly shaped our modern world.

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