

**Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás**, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World*, New York: Verso, 2021. ISBN: 9781784785239 (cloth); ISBN: 9781784785260 (ebook)

Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás' recent book, *Capitalism and the Sea*, is an ambitious, systematic, and convincing account of the reciprocal impact of capital upon the salt-water world in the past 400 years. The book is at once an important addition to and a referential text for the rising interdisciplinary field of critical maritime studies – a formidable ocean of research spanning histories of maritime colonialism, including piracy, slavery and revolution, macro-economic approaches to capital circulation in the oceans, studies on borders and border crossers, securitisation and state control over maritime spaces, maritime legalities and materialist perspectives on ports, logistics, chokepoints and labour, as well as ethnographies of marine biologists and maritime activists (for recent additions to a rapidly expanding literature, see Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018; Cole 2018; Dua 2019; Khalili 2021; Mathew 2016; Mawani 2018; Scott 2020).

Campling and Colás undertake an almost encyclopaedic endeavour on presenting the rise of oceanic capitalism from a perspective of historical materialism. Having served as editors of the eponymous journal *Historical Materialism*, they deploy it in conversation with a political-economic geography of the seas. The book is divided into six chapters plus an introduction and conclusion, reflecting structuring logics that permeate the oceans. Methodologically, the authors discern three broadly spatial phenomena (“order”, “appropriation”, “offshore”) and three mainly temporal processes (“circulation”, “exploitation”, “logistics”). They also look at technological innovations (e.g. the steamship), geopolitical changes (the rise of imperialist navalism), economic transformations (foundation of chartered companies), and legal conventions (freedom of the seas).

The authors' working definition of capitalism is both universal and idiosyncratic. They perceive it as a mode of production with its own distinctive logic of competitive production and accumulation of value through the appropriation of nature, which nonetheless

finds diverse expression in concrete social formations across different geographical and historical contexts. They divide its development into three phases: commercial capitalism (from 1651 to 1849); industrial capitalism (from 1850 to 1973); and neoliberal capitalism (from 1974 to the present). Nonetheless, the book argues for a methodological attention on specific terraqueous sites (ports, offshores, exclusive economic zones) for the reproduction of capitalism, arguing against more abstract approaches that are somewhat blind to strategic territorialities.

My main takeaways from the book are the following.

First, the “maritime factor” has been fundamental in the making of capitalism; indeed, the book opens with the claim that global capitalism is a seaborne phenomenon. The authors apply a dual use of “factor”, i.e. as a socio-natural force with its own material properties and effects and as the figure of the merchant or company representative posted to factories overseas. In the first part, Campling and Colás undertake a historical-sociological account of the maritime factor in the birth of capitalism, while remaining steadfast in their emphasis on terraqueous sites of capital expansion: ports, docks, ships, company offices, trading posts. They then proceed to examine the maritime factor in different phases and fields of the development of capitalism, identifying it as an aggregate result between the physical-material qualities of the sea and the constant push for commodification. They make a convincing argument that overseas trade was critical in producing and integrating various forms of financial capital – public debt, bank loans, insurance policies, bills of exchange, bullion transfers – into a global single market.

Second, the legacies of colonialism and seaborne slavery are inexorably central in the development of maritime capitalism. Many legal-economic forms that rule contemporary capitalism, e.g. the insurance industry, the incorporated business, the international law, but also theories of risk and practices of offshoring, developed first in the sea and were repurposed to the requirements of capital accumulation on land. For example, insurance calculations included the naturalisation of slave insurrection as a natural peril at sea. By identifying the VOC (Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie – Dutch East India Company)

and the EIC (English East India Company) as the quintessential origins of commercial capitalism, Campling and Colás make an argument about the colonial origins of (seaborne) capitalism. Here, the historical insights into the maritime roots of Lloyd's and the London Stock Exchange are particularly captivating.

Third, there is no such thing as free seas, if they ever existed: maritime trade is far from a free-floating market, much less “a lawless frontier or a libertarian utopia” (p.69). Rather, states have always been and still are introducing “legislation, regulation and management aimed in large measure at reproducing at sea the property relations that obtain on land” (ibid.). Navies, subsidies, maps, legal conventions, and the strategic control of routes, borders and ports are tools that states deploy to tame the seas. The maritime origin of the joint-stock company is evidence for the colonial origins of contemporary maritime capitalism, as well as for the symbiosis between overseas trade and postcolonial state formation. Furthermore, the gradual professionalisation of the Royal Navy, the rise of navalism during British dominance, and US-led militarisation and global South-driven decolonisation in the post-WWII era are episodes in a long history of ordering the sea. In parallel, the hybrid state-capital schemes of the flag of convenience and offshore financial centres highlight that powerful states are actively allowing such lax regimes of labour and taxation to proliferate.

Fourth, the sea has been a place for both “free gifts” and the primitive accumulation of capital. Macro-historical processes such as the enclosure of commons and the commodification of maritime resources have striated the world oceans to the effect of over-exploitation and intensification. Today, there is no tragedy of the commons if it ever existed. There is rather a tragedy of commodification that calls for regulation and further politicisation of the sea. Today, multiple tragedies of commodification, exploitation and deregulation are causing the irregular movement of profits, populations, and pollutants that capitalism has deemed excess.

General points notwithstanding, the book is at its strongest in its empirical specificity. The part on the tuna industry is replete with empirical insights, obviously based on original

research. The chapter on offshoring is also refreshing, important and innovative. Readers might have liked to see more on the unmaking of capitalism at sea, as in resistances, systemic failures and imaginaries of commons. Mainly, if not solely, piracy seems to hold a cardinal place in disruptions of commodity chains. Furthermore, my sense is that the authors, in their drive to describe the smooth circulation of value at sea, tend to take for granted the forms of violence that these phenomena unleashed upon people and places. Besides, although their focus on materialism is consistent, one might have expected a part on the production of material techniques that serve the purpose of knowing and conquering the sea, such as cartography, oceanography, and indeed geography. Another issue is the rather single focus on the circulation of merchandise, particularly in the post-war era of containerisation, thus leaving out the entire field of transporting energy (such as oil and gas) at sea. Finally, the epilogue dwells on post-capitalist futures and maritime radicalism, which is mainly analysed through environmental concerns and labour struggles. Here, border crossers, “piratical” and indigenous communities defending “pastoral commons” and activists for refugee rescue and anti-embargo solidarities are missing. This is even more notable given the declared focus on life lost at sea during the slave trade in the introduction of the book. It would be an oversight to consider these processes and resistances as irrelevant to contemporary “capitalism at sea”.

No doubt, this book is an important inspiration and reference for students and researchers of oceans, capitalism, and maritime politics. Sometimes, the impressive breadth and depth of information presupposes some prior knowledge of maritime history; otherwise, one might end up truly lost at sea. At other times, the book reads like a historical account with a sustained focus on causal hierarchies and macroeconomic processes, all the while adopting a view from the shores of imperial and postcolonial England. Overall, *Capitalism and the Sea* does a great job in offering a concrete analysis of the emergence and the contours of contemporary capitalism, emphasising that to comprehend, challenge or counter it one must also take to the sea.

## References

- Alimahomed-Wilson J and Ness I (eds) (2018) *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain*. London: Pluto Press
- Cole P (2018) *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press
- Dua J (2019) *Captured at Sea: Piracy and Protection in the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Khalili L (2021) *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*. New York: Verso
- Mathew J (2016) *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Mawani R (2018) *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Scott J S (2020) *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*. New York: Verso

Nikolas Kosmatopoulos  
Departments of Political Studies and Anthropology  
American University of Beirut  
nk106@aub.edu.lb

November 2021