

Book Reviews

Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore. *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. 328. \$34.95 (cloth), \$24.95 (paperback and e-book).

Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore's *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* argues that, beginning in the early modern period, nature; money; work; care; food; energy; and lives became things and became cheapened—devalued culturally, politically, and economically to serve an insatiable hunger for growth and profit. Emerging out of the demographic and social catastrophe of the Black Death, capitalism's constant demand for growth and profit has created new frontiers to ensure that these things remain cheap. This is not a history of the world in objects but rather “things,” which only achieve a conceptual and practical coherence through “armies and clerics and accountants and print” (3) and which can be messy and indefinite; the authors admit that “lives” are not a thing like the others but “it would have made for an infelicitous title to admit this earlier” (182). Despite the occasional fuzziness, “cheap things” is analytically useful, particularly in the classroom, because it provides a way to organize big, often abstract, processes.

Although the title promises “a history of the world,” the book is more properly understood as a history of the capitalist world system, a concept identified with Immanuel Wallerstein that the authors have developed extensively in their other work. Patel and Moore ground their analysis of their cheap things and the processes that create them through the use of several recurring examples—Spanish colonization of Madeira, Christopher Columbus, and the chicken nugget, most prominently—that ensure continuities across chapters dedicated to each thing. This decision makes the prose readable but means that many of the book's examples focus on Europe and European colonialism. There are exceptions, such as the authors' cleverly written discussion of the “upsets to a

particular hegemonic order of liberal internationalism” (199) that takes India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi as an example—a refreshing departure from journalistic and scholarly accounts of this trend fixating on the United States and western Europe. Patel and Moore’s focus on Europe’s early modern expansion and imperialism is essential to the book’s argument. Peoples, states, and nations around the world have shaped their environment, often in ways that appear destructive, but, as the authors note in a discussion of deforestation, “China’s world-ecology wasn’t committed to global conquest. Europe’s was” (164). The ecology underpinning capitalism, they argue, has created global crises even as it has reduced “most humans into the category of Nature rather than Society” (94), leaving them cheapened and ripe for exploitation.

Patel and Moore ask that readers “evaluate [the book’s] merits with this in mind: we must think and act as if our lives depend on it” (xi), and this sense of urgency pervades the work. Any book covering more than 500 years of history, let alone one promising to move beyond a national or regional focus, requires simplifications and omissions. Specialist readers will find opportunities to critique Patel and Moore on details, interpretation, or emphasis. Patel and Moore are explicit about their political commitments and conclude with a set of suggestions for a “restoration ecology” (207) to create a new set of social, political, and environmental relations. Teachers using this book should prepare to discuss not only the past but also the present and the future. Patel and Moore have produced a powerful, coherent, and deeply historicized account of our environmental crises. Moreover, it is one that treats questions of gender, race, class, and power as integral to understanding crises that otherwise might be separated out as just environmental. That they have done so while connecting pressing present questions with late-medieval and early modern history makes this book particularly valuable for teachers wishing to address environmental issues

without doing a history of the present. This is an urgent, engaged text written accessibly and concisely that can open up paths for history students and teachers to engage with some of the most critical issues facing people and the planet.

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Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen. *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 220. \$18.95.

Every survey of American history discusses the importance of abolitionist John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859. Few narratives, however, also argue that the importance of John Brown's martyrdom is forever tied to another event that occurred a month later, the publication in London of Charles Darwin's *On the Origins of Species*. Both opponents and defenders of slavery in the United States interpreted the meaning of Brown's raid through the powerful lens of Darwin's ideas. As historian Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen explains in *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History*, abolitionists argued that Darwin confirmed the common origins of both whites and blacks while defenders of slavery and, later, Jim Crow found the notion of the "survival of the fittest" a potent rationale for rigid racial hierarchies.

Such intellectual connections "across national [and] temporal borders" and "across borders within American culture" lie at the heart of Ratner-Rosenhagen's accessible survey of American intellectual history (4). Ranging from European exploration of the New World to more recent debates over postmodernism and globalization, Ratner-Rosenhagen manages to accomplish two goals within a concise work: a survey of major intellectual developments in American history and a valuable introduction to the work of intellectual historians. She enriches the genealogy of American thought with numerous comments about the goals