

## Book Reviews

Karin Lurvink, *Beyond Racism and Poverty. The Truck System on Louisiana Plantations and Dutch Peateries, 1865-1920* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018). 269 p. ISBN 9789004351806.

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In her book, Karin Lurvink dedicates herself to the Truck System, a labour system in which workers were remunerated not in money but through the company store. The Truck System was a global phenomenon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and existed in both agrarian and industrial sectors. Lurvink thoroughly examines this system in two different agricultural settings, sugar and cotton plantations in Louisiana and peateries in the Netherlands. By doing so, she contributes to recent historiographical efforts to move beyond regional approaches and connect labour history to a global perspective.

Lurvink's endeavour is promising, particularly for American historiography: She aims to move the focus away from slavery and its legacy, and to paint a more nuanced picture of racism and its impact on labour relations. For both the American and the Dutch context, she looks at the up- and downsides of the truck payment, the advantage and disadvantages of the company store, and the mobility/immobility of the workers. Great findings are the relation between the Truck System and the scarcity of cash money – which partly explains its emergence (e.g. the payment of truck was relevant where the circulation of money was problematic) (p.112-113) and the re-evaluation of a number of stereotypical depictions persistent in the existing scholarship (e.g. its emphasis on payment in alcohol and the alleged overpricing in company stores) (p. 74, 85). The title *Beyond Racism and Poverty* is nicely picked, even though racism is first mentioned on page 126 only (near the end of chapter 4) and remains marginal until chapter 6. The real discussion on racism is limited to chapter 7, which is also the most well-argued and well-written part of the book and very commendable.

According to the author, the book's most relevant contribution lies in its treatment of employers. Lurvink wants to move away from the normative representation of employers as the 'bad guys' (p. 4). Chapter 2 does however paint a rather dismal picture of the situation of workers and emphasize their vulnerable conditions and practices of exploitation. In other words, the perspective of the em-

ployers could have been engaged with more critically. The observation that 'Louisiana planters found it difficult to make the freedmen work as hard as they had when they were slaves under the whip' (p. 124) is a case in point. Of course this was a problem but mainly because employers expected people they poorly paid to 'work as hard' as when they were 'under the whip'. The background was that they insisted on the same profits as under slavery. The conclusion that it was the employers who 'tried to survive' (p. 134) painfully disregards the living and working conditions of the labourers in contrast to those of the employers. The author's account in this regard reads as if she remained undecided as to whether the labourers were exploited because the employers had no other choice, or whether the labour relations could also have been constructed otherwise. For the Netherlands, Lurvink provides more insights on this question, by distinguishing between large-scale and small-scale peat owners, with the latter often living in modest conditions themselves.

Although overall well accompanied by graphs and tables, some data provided in the book raises questions. A good example is the observation that the average purchases on credit by plantation labourers increased from 0.25 dollars to 881.54 dollars per year between 1866 and 1916 (p. 61). This is a 3,526-fold increase (or with monetary fluctuations taken into account, a 2,400-fold increase) – that is not explained. The use of language also leaves some room for improvement. This is a pity, as Lurvink otherwise connects primary sources research with an excellent knowledge of secondary literature and the academic field she moves in.

The question remains whether the case studies really lend themselves for a comparative study. Throughout the book, the discussions of the Dutch peateries and the Louisiana plantations rather read like a contrast than a comparison. To take just one example, on page 85 Lurvink concludes that she cannot speak to whether the goods were overpriced. Yet, to really know whether the Louisiana company stores were too expensive, had too high interest rates, or too narrow benefit margins, it would have been useful to compare them to non-company stores that were likewise located in remote areas in Louisiana instead of comparing them with Dutch peatery stores. The comparative value often lies rather between American plantations during and after slavery. Indeed, this book is a more rewarding read for those interested in the transition from slavery to post-slavery than those looking for a geographical comparison.

All in all, how the system worked and what the tokens looked like is very well explained and pictures complement the vivid descriptions. Generally speaking, Lurvink adds new perspectives to the existing literature and dares to contradict other historians. This is a welcome contribution by a young scholar.

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