

Christian G. De Vito and Alex Lichtenstein, *Global Convict Labour*. (Leiden: BRILL, 2015). 526 p. ISBN 978-90-0428-501-9.

It is a common Eurocentric misunderstanding that the emergence of modern free market economies, and the dominance of wage labour as the most common labour relation, have resulted in the gradual disappearance of unfree and coercive labour practices, such as slavery, serfdom, or indentured labour. As a contrast, the volume *Global Convict Labour*, edited by Christian De Vito (International Institute of Social History and University of Leicester) and Alex Lichtenstein (Indiana University), demonstrates that throughout history free and unfree labourers have coexisted and collaborated, in the workplace, within local and national societies, and as part of globe-spanning economic systems. The industrial revolution in northwest Europe and the rise of the English working class could not have been possible with the

labour performed by slaves in the southern states of the US. Similarly, the arrival of free settlers in the southernmost tip of Argentina was facilitated by the establishment of basic infrastructures by prisoners.

To demonstrate this point, the articles in *Global Convict Labour* focus on one of these unfree labour relations in particular: convict labour, which took place within prisons, in labour camps, in large designated areas or under close supervision in free society. The contributions do not concentrate on the rehabilitative or punitive functions of convict labour, but describe prison populations primarily as an easily deployable workforce in the hands of states and prison authorities. Prisoners were often mobilised in times of crisis and war, and were used to perform tasks that were otherwise difficult to fulfil. As Stacey Hynd mentions with regards to British Colonial Africa: 'Throughout the colonial period prisoners constituted a cheap and constant reserve pool of labour for use in the underpaid and unpopular tasks of sanitation work, portering, packing goods, general maintenance and unskilled domestic work.' In this volume, prisoners are not regarded as people who are temporarily removed from society, but rather seen as an extremely unfree group within the working population at large.

In an introducing chapter, the editors convincingly argue for the application of a global history approach and for the expansion of the time frame to pre-modern times. In this way, they want to counter conventional analyses that describe the rise of the modern Foucauldian prison as an irreversible trend, with the GULAG and Nazi camps as odd anomalies. In subsequent chapters, *Global Convict Labour* indeed provides the reader with a very rich collection of fifteen case studies from around the world, running from the days of the Roman Empire to the Apartheid era in South Africa. The essays show that even in modern times, prisoners were used to do the dirty work of empire. They often prepared the ground for indentured and free labour, and helped to establish, maintain and expand weakly embedded state structures. As Timothy Coates remarked with regards to the vast Portuguese Empire: 'Without convicts at the oars, it would have been impossible for Portugal to man its galleys.' The same could be said of the mines and quarries of the Roman Empire, the maintenance of roads and railroads in British India, and the expansion of the timber industry in Soviet Russia.

Yet, it could be argued that except for the introducing chapter and the contribution of Maxwell-Stewart about Australia, most of the articles do not apply a truly global history approach, characterised by a special interest in cross-border interactions or local manifestations of global phenomena. Despite the stated objective to look for methodological approaches 'that avoid Eurocentric perspectives and point instead to transnational linkages as a constituent element in penal labour regimes', most of the authors discuss a geographically confined space; a specific location, a region, a country, or, indeed, a global empire. Moreover, almost

all the case studies discuss Western punitive regimes, either in a Western or a colonial context. Exceptions are perhaps the contributions of Salvatore and Aguille about Latin America and Stephan Steiner comparing the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. It would have been interesting to include, for example, a study on prisoners in the Mughal Empire, Japan or Qing China.

Nevertheless, the cases in *Global Convict Labour* are well researched and have considerable comparative value. Many authors actively discuss differences and commonalities with other case studies. Several articles address the fact that public campaigns to abolish convict labour were often not motivated by humanitarian concerns, but rather by fear of competition by underpaid prison workers. Six authors also make the observation that there was a disconnect between the rhetoric of imperial reform and the stubborn reality of continued coercion and exploitation of labour on the ground. These and other findings make it worthwhile to read the separate case studies in coherence, and convincingly show the relevance of a labour history approach in prison studies.

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