
REZENSIONEN | REVIEWS

**Sanjay Subrahmanyam: Europe's
India. Words, People, Empires,
1500–1800, Cambridge MA/London:
Harvard University Press, 2017, 394
pp.**

Reviewed by
Matthias Middell, Leipzig

Sanjay Subrahmanyam has emerged not only as a polyglot mediator between South Asian and Western European history, but also as a brilliant theorist of what he calls “connected histories” who is not satisfied with the stereotypes left by a long Eurocentric tradition of historiography. The present volume impressively shows how this Eurocentrism can be pulverized if one puts to the test the myth of peoples without history and memory by bringing to light the material actually available, which abounds much more than the prominent fiction of a lack of sources documenting non-European worldviews would like. At the same time, the author uses very cautiously and precisely interpreted examples to familiarize the reader with the methodological pitfalls of analysing the reciprocal observations that he is passionately

interested in. For example, when François Bernier in his well-known work *États du Grand Mogol* reports on the court of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, although mainly dealing with the competition of European powers for influence in South Asia, is this in any way about India, which Bernier had actually travelled to, or is this just the occasion to bring a very European observation to the people?

The book was written (or at least inspired) by the author's stay in Berlin at the beginning of the new millennium and thus at a moment when the slogan “Kinder statt Inder” (children instead of Indians) was gaining popularity. And this in a place that celebrates the consumption of currywurst as a local top highlight! This leads Subrahmanyam to the question, or at least reinforces its urgency, of what is the actual image of India and Indians Europeans, and what is the starting point of such an image. This is reason enough to delve deep into the lore of the three centuries known as the early modern period, i.e. the time before the advent of industry. The first chapter is extensive in length and breadth, being devoted to the arrival of the Portuguese in South Asia and reconstructing in detail a very specific European-South Asian encounter that was a result of the peculiarities of the Portuguese Empire, which had half of the globe guaranteed to it by the Pope and yet

could often only be present selectively and temporarily, as well as of the changing political and sociocultural configurations on the Indian subcontinent.

When speaking about India, religion and religious differences fascinated Europeans in a unique way, and the author devotes another large chapter to this topic, impressively problematizing whether this is an interest in religion in the narrower sense, or rather a discussion of the philosophical foundations and cultural patterns of the Mughal Empire.

Subramanyam dedicates the following 60 pages to James Fraser, one of the many authors and collectors of the Enlightenment who did not achieve world fame but who, however, were crucial for the dissemination (and, as the author demonstrates very precisely, for the co-production with local informants and sources) of knowledge about distant regions. These authors selected what seemed to be particularly revelatory and attractive in their respective social contexts and in turn prepared this selected knowledge for a regional community of readers (and practitioners).

That cultural encounter and mutual knowledge was not and could not be a peaceful, symmetrical process free from claims to power and oppression. Such circumstances are dealt with in the fourth chapter under the heading “The Transition to Colonial Knowledge”, with which two central arguments are linked: on the one hand, the foundation of this knowledge and curiosity arose before colonization, and, on the other hand, colonization adapted all knowledge to the new context of exploitation and domination.

The volume would not be typically Subramanyam if it did not leave another barb

shortly before the end and change the direction of analysis. Whereas the main focus was previously on what kind of image the various Europeans had of the various Indias, in the concluding chapter he examines the interest of Indians in Europe and summarizes the outcome of this reversed perspective in three stages. At first, the Europeans were of interest, but not Europe as a somehow relevant geographical entity. These Europeans could be observed as arrivals who wore good clothes, but were not very careful about personal hygiene in a way that was shocking for contemporary Indians. They were technically gifted and experienced in navigation, but not particularly confident or brave militarily on land (p. 309). It was only after the English, Dutch, and French also began to appear in larger numbers in the later seventeenth century that the Mughal court became increasingly interested in the form of government in faraway Europe and in the apparent political fragmentation in the late stages of the early modern empire. But it is only in the second half of the eighteenth century (and thus considerably later than, for instance, in the Ottoman Empire) that documents (in Persian and Malayalam) can be found in greater numbers in which South Asian travellers disseminated their impressions of their experiences in Europe. The book is at once elegant and a little unapproachable because the alternation between the detailed presentation of examples, which demonstrate the author to be a scrupulous worker in archives and libraries, and concise theoretical conclusions, which are placed in the respective debate with only a few brushstrokes, presupposes a great resolve in the reader while encouraging the intellectual gratifi-

cation from exploring the chapters. In the end, Subramanyam's book is an extremely important contribution to the history of transregional relations between 1500 and 1800.

Andrew B. Liu: *Tea War. A History of Capitalism in China and India*, New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2020, 335 pp.

Reviewed by
Peer Vries, Amsterdam

The book under review could easily have been three books. The first is about the actual 'tea war', the fierce competition between China and India as tea-producing countries during the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries. Their tea trades were organized quite differently. In China tea was grown on family farms, then brought to 'factories' in market towns by tea peddlers to be processed by seasonal labour, and then brought to tea warehouses in coastal ports to be purchased by foreign trading companies. Liu convincingly claims that the peasant households and inland tea factories appeared to be independent firms but were in fact "enmeshed in crippling relationships of financial dependency" (p. 243) to the tea warehouses. The seasonal labour force in the tea factories became subjected to an increasingly strict and coercive labour-regime. In India, British officials and planters at first tried to replicate the Chinese model by bringing

in Chinese 'experts' and peasants, but ultimately decided to grow tea on large plantations and undertake all of the tasks involved themselves, from clearing the land to packaging the finished leaves. Initially they hoped to use free wage labour. As that did not work out, they increasingly began to use indentured labour whose position became all but undistinguishable from that of slaves. The Indian 'formula' became so successful – at least for the investors – that in the beginning of the twentieth century Chinese went to India to 'learn the trade' and make it more capital-intensive. The second book deals with changes in thinking about economics, especially about labour, production and value and considers these changes as induced by changes in the actual economy. For China it postulates a shift in opinion from a pro-merchant stance in which the merchant was considered as someone who facilitated exports to an anti-merchant stance in which the merchants' activities were increasingly described as 'non-productive' and only 'exploitative'. For the case of India, the author shows how, when setting up a tea trade based on free labour did not work, it was argued that India did not have a labour market of free moving labour and that therefore planters, helped by government, had to fall back on a more coercive system of indentured labour. In the twentieth century, Indian nationalist then increasingly began to hold the position that in India, like in the West, labour ought to be free, which would have the added advantage that it would also be more productive.

The third book, or rather collection of long excursions that for the author clearly counts as the major contribution of the