

Book Reviews

On Barak, *Powering Empire. How Coal Made the Middle East and Sparked Global Carbonization*, University of California Press, 2020, pp. 344.

The present work by social and cultural historian On Barak is the result of an extremely ambitious research. The originality of this book is due in part to the methodological approach, and even more so to the logical structure, which permeate the book, alongside the content.

The roots of this original approach and the peculiar way it analyses the relationships between the elements of the argumentation can be traced back to the poststructuralist thought. In particular, as the reading may suggest and as the conclusions clearly indicate, the author refers to argumentative and reasoning structures that have their roots in post-modernism, and go back, as stated, to Deleuze and Guattari's text "A Thousand Plateaus". Following this line of thought, Barak recalls the notion of "rhizome" traced by the two authors – a concept taken from botany and already used metaphorically by Jung to indicate the "hidden expression of life force" – that permeate the argumentation strategy. In fact, based on the rejection of the classical, as well as dialectical or linear logic, the term "rhizomatic" indicates a type of research that proceed by multiples, favouring horizontal and non-hierarchical relationships among the objects of analysis.

In tracing the manifold impact that steam technologies had on a part of the middle east region, the book focuses on the importance and multifaceted nature of "coal", thus on the relationship between its use and the representation that accompanied it, retracing an analogy with those regarding oil and its derivatives. Thus, the core thesis of the book is the rejection of something like a "fuel regime" – as Barak notices all social and cultural contexts depend on the interaction between different and non-mutually exclusive energy sources.

Therefore, the study focuses on the area between Aden and Port Said in a variable time horizon, spanning from the end of the 18th and the early 20th century. In turn, this "inter-imperial" space relates to and is shaped – according to Barak's analysis – by its closeness and

connections with India, the Horn of Africa, the Mediterranean and therefore England. Space and dynamics are co-implicants and co-determinants, the historical narrative unfolds through the different dynamic links between the poles of this space. The ports and coal filling stations are portrayed alternately as islands or as determining elements of the – consequently – multifaceted inland spaces, but also as points manifesting *per-se* dynamics and as part of migratory routes. The key connections between these points were the shipping routes, which in turn shaped geography and were affected by the navigation technologies used, and thus by the transition from sail to fossil engines – a particularly interesting element, that deserve a further analysis.

The text is essentially divided into two sections with the first one focused on the factors related to the configurations and dynamics of the coal-based system and their representation. This is based on the different perspectives from which space could be considered (the first chapter is called “water”), the relationship between organic bodies, the steam engine, and thermodynamics; both from the point of view of material interactions and representative links and analogies. Resorting to the same evocative character, the titles of the second and third chapter are, respectively “animals” and “humans”. The best and most fortunate section of the book is part of the chapter called “humans” where the author, starting from the workers’ strikes in various coal-related industries, traces the interaction between local and global dynamics by virtue of the direct relationship constituted by the coal distribution network. This first part ends with the chapter on “environment”, in which space, the dynamics determined using technologies and the environment are prospectively considered as co-implicated.

Particularly interesting is the section of the chapter devoted to the criticism to the World System Theory based on the concept of weight, which explains, somehow, Barak’s method of argumentation. It is argued that the importance given by scholars belonging to this school to the different added value of industrial products and raw materials is to the detriment of... “weight”. In Barak’s view the fact that coal, a raw material, was an export product of Great Britain would invalidate the whole World System Theory. The maybe simplistic idea that the ships shuttling between the metropolis and the colonies were loaded with goods both on the outward and inward journeys is sufficient for the author to refute the existence of anything resembling an unequal exchange. Although this does not detract from the originality and interest of the theses presented, in this – but also in some other cases – the conclusion seems too clear-cut for the explanation put forward in favour, and perhaps underdetermined in reference to it.

The last two chapters are explicitly dedicated to the analysis of the

cultural perception of certain concepts and their interpretation based on the different cultural context of application – as it becomes clear in the case of geology. While the comparison between “risk” and “*rizq*”, that is overly important in determining the causal role of the diffusion of insurance, conducted in the chapter with the same name, is both original and compelling, the rest of it is devoted to tracing what the author defines a “metaphysics of risk”. The last chapter, on the other hand, traces similarities and differences between the concept of ‘hidden treasure’ and that of fossils, hence, in the author’s line of reasoning, fossil fuels.

This text, full of interesting details, allows for the consideration of multiple facets of what was, and what it meant, the exercise of colonial power in a space that was not strictly colonial. At the same time, it offers an unconventional view of the representation that yesterday and today accompanies energy. It is a text that deserves to be read not only for the bibliographical research work done by the author, for the audacious storytelling and some keen observations, but also because it stimulates a timely reflection on the perspectives of contemporary historiography.

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