Book Review

The Devil's Milk: A Social History of Rubber,

by John Tully. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2011. $24.95 US.
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Reviewed by James Braun[1]

Drawing upon Marx's famous formulation of commodity fetishism, John Tully seeks to uncover "the whole buried world of social and ecological relations" that have historically constituted the production of rubber and its derivative products (p.359). Rubber, Tully argues, is an indispensable commodity for the industrial age, facilitating revolutions in transportation, sexuality and communications (p.41-45). Its myriad industrial applications and unique properties meant that government and industry were prepared to go to great lengths to secure a reliable supply, abusing workers and ecologies in their wake. From the Amazon rubber boom to the rise of synthetic rubber production in World War 2, Tully documents the history of rubber production and processing "inextricably bound up with the rise of capitalism, imperialism and modernity" (p.345).

Although Tully presents his book as "a social history of rubber," his methodology focuses narrowly on labour history. From the subtitle, one might expect a comprehensive investigation of how rubber transformed everyday life from the viewpoint of "ordinary" people. The book hints at interesting directions such a history might proceed, but only ever briefly engages with them. The development of the rubber condom and its associated controversies suggests transformations in sexual and religious politics (p.44-45). Likewise, the pneumatic tire had crucial implications for the ascendancy of truck transport over rails, but the political and social contests that facilitated this change are glossed over (p.139-40). The subjects of Tully's history are primarily workers, and their lives away from the worksite are not given much consideration.

Most of the book documents in detail the brutal labour practices that characterized (and continue to characterize) the rubber industry. Wild rubber tapping in the Amazon and the Congo, driven by extortion and

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sadism, was supplanted by hevea plantations and indentured labour in Malaya, Liberia and Indochina, and ultimately synthetic production in World War 2 after Japan captured most of the world's natural rubber supply. His study of rubber production and processing begins with the early industrial revolution in Britain, but is primarily focused on the birth and growth of the pneumatic tire industry in Akron, Ohio. Despite rubber's many applications, this is a reasonable limit on scope; as Tully notes, by the end of World War 1, Akron tire plants processed roughly forty percent of the world's supply of raw rubber (p.138).

His discussion of worker resistance is somewhat uneven. Resistance tactics in Akron, Indochina and Auschwitz are discussed at length, whereas one is left with the unlikely impression that indigenous workers in the Congo and the Amazon hardly fought against their oppression. The methodological challenges of writing history from the perspective of rubber tappers or plantation labourers are obvious; nevertheless, a social history should seek to highlight the agency of its subjects and to make visible the world as they understood it, not to merely paint them as the passive victims of forces from above. Tully makes good use of Tran Tu Binh's memoir, a seminary-educated Communist organizer who worked as a coolie "in order to carry out Communist agitation among the Michelin estate laborers" in Indochina, but such first-hand accounts are exceedingly rare (p.239-40). Innovative readings of other types of sources would shed a much-needed light on these hidden histories, a task crucial to Tully's project.

Among Tully's admirable achievements is to bridge the histories of colonial rubber extraction and metropolitan rubber processing. Imperialism is a key theme of his work; at each stage in the rubber industry's development, political and economic power intertwines transnationally to secure the rubber supply so vital to industrial modernity. Among the more notable examples: British capital and Peruvian desperation to assert sovereignty in the Putomayo valley facilitated Julio César Arana's murderous rubber fiefdom (p.90-100). Leopold II of Belgium's instincts for political aggrandizement and financial enrichment coincide in his reign of terror in the Congo (p.102-103). Strikebreaking tactics developed by Firestone in Akron are used against plantation workers in Malaya (p.273). IG Farben's collusion with the Third Reich creates legal complications for US efforts to develop synthetic rubber during the Second World War, via Farben's agreements with Standard Oil (p.322-323). Throughout this history, capital operates both as a productive and constraining force, both feeding the ravenous resource appetites of metropolitan industry and frustrating the efforts of those who would put a more "human face" on the labour processes involved.

Given the importance of the colonized world in this book, there is space in his analysis to interrogate the coloniality of processes that brought rise to the rubber industry. The narrative he sketches in Chapter One, of rubber as a Mesoamerican article of ritual and curiosity transformed by European science and rationalism into a utilitarian commodity for industry, should be familiar to post-colonialists and other critics of modernity. The foundations of this rationalism have been thoroughly dissected, but Tully does not engage with those critiques. Rubber fetishism is described briefly as a cultural aberration on rubber's march to utilitarian respectability, but could be used as an avenue to explore ongoing affective relationships to rubber (p.45-46). Implicit in Tully's discussion of worker resistance in Malaya is an acceptance of a normative, Eurocentric conceptualization of economic organization. Tully describes how trade unions and strikes emerged from "primitive protests" such as assaults on overseers and desertion, but he misses how this tactical evolution normalizes the relations of the capitalist wage economy imposed by European imperialism (p.260-270).

In some respects, Tully has done for rubber much of what Sidney Mintz did for sugar. In highlighting "the social character of the commodity of rubber," (p.20) he demonstrates the crucial and brutal relationship between the metropolis and periphery that produces industrial capitalism. In other words, metropolitan machinery would not run without a steady stream of peripheral resources.