

Review Essay

John Darwin. *Unlocking the World: Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam, 1830–1930.* London: Allen Lane, 2020. 496pp. ISBN: 978-1846140860. £25 hardcover.

Christina Reimann and Martin Öhman, eds. *Migrants and the Making of the Urban-Maritime World: Agency and Mobility in Port Cities, c. 1570–1940.* New York/London: Routledge, 2021. 304pp. ISBN: 978-1003088950. £120 hardcover.

Reviewed by **Agnes Gehbald**, University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland,
E-mail: agnes.gehbald@unibe.ch

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2022-0014>

Received March 4, 2022; accepted March 4, 2022

When exploring a process as diverse and diffuse as globalization, it is entanglements and networks that are most prominent in characterizing the historical origins of a worldwide transformation. This process was shaped notably by waterway connections through maritime trade, shipping routes, and sea conduits. As gateways between the ocean and the coast, large maritime cities formed an entry point for people, ideas, goods, money, animals, and germs. While port cities have always been a place of interaction and interchange, during the long nineteenth century and the expansion of colonial empires, they turned into protagonists in the process of globalization. With a broad interest in history for all things global, port cities have become integral to research and scholarship on global history. Two recent publications portray port cities as a category to analyze the global through a local platform. The first publication studies port cities as keys to “unlock the world,” as John Darwin labelled his monograph on globalization in the Age of Steam. The second publication, edited by Christina Reimann and Martin Öhman, examines the relationship of port spaces and migrants from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.

How to review such different publications? The first is a monograph by a distinguished historian, an opus containing nine chapters and almost 500 pages. John Darwin, retired Professor of Global and Imperial History at Nuffield College at Oxford, has been publishing broadly on the rise and fall of empires in history, studying the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas across the world. Previous books by the author include *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (2007), *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System 1830–1970* (2009), and *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (2012). His new book turns away from studying empires and brings the great port cities to the fore as the locus

of globalization at the turn of the century. The second publication is an edited volume of 11 chapters, including an introduction and an epilogue, the product of a joint effort compiled by Christina Reimann and Martin Öhman. Reimann is a historian at Stockholm University, focusing her research on port cities as complex spaces; Öhman is a researcher at the University of Gothenburg, working on the mobilization of associations in the United States. Though Darwin on the one hand, and Reimann and Öhman on the other, share the same research subject – port cities, global connections, and the making of the maritime world – the publications differ substantially. Reading both books together, the possibility of a promising approach emerges that can capture the dynamics and multifariousness of port cities. While John Darwin presents a comprehensive overview of the rise of ports and the making of a new global economy written by a single pen, the edited volume by Christina Reiman and Martin Öhman succeeds in narrowing down the topic through a focus on migrants as human agents in port cities.

Around the world, port cities simultaneously experienced a remarkable growth in the past centuries. During the period of industrialization, commercial and spatial structures transformed radically to facilitate transport and distribution. This process affected urban development in ports at various sites. Along with the use of new steam ships, large maritime cities changed in essentially similar modes, as Josef W. Konvitz, urban historian and researcher of port studies, has argued already in the 1990s. In the same vein, both publications under review examine several port cities, but rather than comparing them and analyzing the linkages, they provide a panorama of port cities that exposes the similar yet locally specific developments around the globe. In the style of empire research, Darwin goes through North America, Asia, and Europe – including a detailed panorama of sites such as Montreal, New Orleans, New York, Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore, Shanghai, Izmir, St. Petersburg, Marseilles, London, Liverpool, Antwerp, Hamburg – with some shorter passages about port cities in South America and Australia, and very little on African ports. While some of them – New York, London, Marseilles, Antwerp, and Izmir – figure also in the edited volume of Reimann and Öhman, the chapters cover other port cities, with case studies on Manila, Honolulu (Hawaii), San Juan (Puerto Rico), Helsingborg, and Barcelona. In their choice of the publication's time frame, Reimann and Öhman cover a long era that ranges from 1570 to 1940. However, apart from a study on the multi-ethnic population in early modern Manila Bay, the chapters mostly focus on the long nineteenth century, when technological and dynamic urban transformations took hold, beginning with a case study of migrant identification practices in 1744 and ending with mobility patterns of dock workers in the 1940s. While it does make sense to explore transient migration through a long historical perspective, mobility characteristically changed in comparison to earlier times when steamship

technology accelerated sea voyages. This is exactly what gives coherence to Darwin's time frame, for what he labels the Age of Steam, 1830–1930.

The nine chapters of Darwin's monograph follow a two-tier structure: Part One describes the "making of global connections" in a chronological manner from the origins of port cities in the old world to their rise during the steam age. While the book title announces a focus on the steam age, the author extends this chronology, with several overviews reaching back further. By asking broad questions in the style of world history, this first part starts to examine the evolutions of maritime trade and water control, with a focus on Eurasia more than 4,000 years ago. In the discursive intro, ports are only part of a sideshow in the narrative of geopolitical convulsions which reorganized the maritime world. Finally, after a technological revolution instigated by the Scotsman James Watt, steam power took hold in Britain and then Western Europe from the 1860s and 1870s on. This initiated a "steam culture" under European hegemony, as Darwin lays out in reference to the great divergence debate. Apart from the author's excessive use of "revolution" in conjunction with technology, transport, commerce, capitalism, and the maritime world, all of which were induced by steam, it is indeed impressive to read about the convergence of transport lines and the great sea gateways when he traces the logistics of railway mileages and coal bunkering. Particularly in the first part and, in fact, throughout the book, geopolitical explanations are stressed to explain a new global economy that was shaped by steam-engines in ships and locomotives, and which took place in certain port cities around the globe.

Part Two of Darwin's book is about "the dominion of steam" with five chapters dedicated to single great ports – the hubs, where traffic concentrated, and from where the hinterland was influenced. During the steam age, these globally connected but unequal port cities transformed remarkably. In these interconnected economies, the reader learns about the traded commodities, especially sugar, tobacco, coffee, rubber, and cotton. There is also detail, for example, regarding New York's part in the cotton trade with New Orleans, and its role as a financial center similarly to London's, providing necessary investment for railway constructions and waterborne highways, which ultimately gave rise to its status as an Empire City. In addition, there is coverage of the competition between the old European ports of Antwerp and Hamburg which acted as entrepôts for colonial products bound for the North European hinterland, and Bombay's ascendancy to a Victorian metropolis and premier port as chief exporter of cotton to Europe and opium to China. The chapters stand on their own, which inevitably leads to some repetitions, for example in the discussion of the opening of ports in Asia or South America. Reading about the development and growing importance of ports, one is reminded of the Gibbonian story of the rise and fall of empires that Darwin has handled in previous publications. It is intriguing to find out not only about the

progress and growth of ports – a common narrative for a history of the global nineteenth century, highlighting acceleration and mobility – but also about the failures in port planning. Such disconnections are the topic in the “crises of the metropolises” in Europe, as well as in the last chapter about the fall of Smyrna during the interwar years, which forms a sort of conclusion for the whole book. Masterly narrated, one keeps reading through the hundreds of pages and follows Darwin’s thesis of globalization “in phases” from, what he terms, “Columbian Globalization” through the steamship era up to a striking interpretation of “our” globalization era in the last pages of the book. Darwin’s narration is especially enthralling when he combines technological developments, industrialization, imperial connections, and geopolitical transformations of the “steamship globe,” which are enriched by maps of sea connections and port topographies. Based exclusively on English-speaking scholarship and published by Penguin & Allen Lane, the book aims for a broader readership beyond an academic audience. Altogether, this is a breathtaking work of synthesis. That said, one might ask to be provided with more explanation of the dependence between the ports discussed in separate chapters. A link between these sites can be found through the people in the port cities, and is present in Darwin’s analysis of groups of coal-heavers, dockworkers, and a merchant elite, who made the ships move, but there is little about soldiers, passengers, and migrants – not even a proper index register entry – who moved between the ports, passing transiently.

The publication by Christina Reimann and Martin Öhman puts this group of migrants and their agency in ports on center stage. The different chapters are case studies about either individuals or specific cities which highlight mobile people, the spatiality of ports, and the long-distance transmissions and exchanges through both sail and steamship. Forming part of the Routledge Advances in Urban History series, the publication’s studies address the process of urbanization and port spatiality, framing ports as sociospatial environments at the interface of an urban-maritime world. As the editors point out in their Introduction, the focus of study is on the entanglements between port cities and migration, asking about the mutual transformation, the agency of migrants in ports and the impact of port city spaces on the experiences of migrants. Aiming to integrate spatial and migration history, such an approach conceptualizes urban spaces as more than mere scenery, but as a particular environment that mattered and influenced migrants in their actions and routes. With separate quarters and waterfront buildings including piers and warehouses, ports as diverse as Manila, Izmir, and New York had a particular urban design (studied in the chapters of Birgit Tremml-Werner, Fatma Tanis, Carola Hein, and Martin Öhman), a built environment that hosted migrant families on the move. Many of the migrants passed through the port as a place of transit for various reasons. As in the case of Syrian emigrants who traversed Marseille on their

way to Latin America (topic of Céline Regnard), or German revolutionary leaders who emigrated to North America with the purpose of returning (in the contribution of Sarah Pantner); the cases studied disclose the experience of transience as a central feature of port cities.

Mobile people in ports are the protagonists of the different chapters of the publication by Reimann and Öhman. Among the migrants, the chapters also tell the stories of further migrating subjects of seafarers and traders, dockworkers and simple passers-through. This approach of studying specific groups of peoples allows for insight into migrant experiences whether in self-narratives of emigrants, particular emotions in a transit port, or interviews conducted after assaults in the port area. On an individual level, a case study is dedicated to the career of the Dutch Carel Hendrik Bloebaum, an engine room operator and fireman on ships (in Kristof Looockx' chapter), while another one is about the group of dockworkers in Barcelona (in the chapter by Jordi Ibarz). In addition, the topic of ethnic identity and gender is central to the chapters' discussion. While most who passed through ports were men, several of the publication's case studies dedicate special attention to female mobility. Migration patterns and trajectories reveal the activities of female port workers as foreign prostitutes in Antwerp or London (as studied by Hilde Greefs, Anne Winter, and Brad Beaven), and individual fates as in the story of Annika Åqvist, who arrived without a passport as a stranger in Helsingborg during the mid-eighteenth century (in the contribution of Sari Nauman). Though the case studies in the single chapters are diverse – in scope and tone – this volume is more than the sum of its parts as the thread of transient migration in port cities runs through the whole publication. The publication's coherence is also thanks to the compelling epilogue by Joseph Ben Prestel, who offers some further conceptual considerations, scrutinizing with a sensitivity towards positionality – often a Eurocentric one – for looking at the particularities of port cities and mobility in a global framework.

The history of port cities discloses several paradoxes of globalization. In Darwin's interpretation of steam globalization, the free-trading, free-moving world did not exist without economic coercion, slavery, and indentured labor, while migration was often accompanied by racial exclusion, and cosmopolitanism went hand in hand with nationalism and imperialism. Very similar contradictions and complexities can be found in the volume by Reimann and Öhman in the contrasting themes of mobility and immobility, acceptance and rejection, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, diversity and homogeneity, segregation and interaction. Whereas environmental problems are left aside, the two publications address disease, poverty, and overpopulation which repeatedly challenged port city practices, revealing how the process of globalization took its toll. Though covering an array of topics, one might wonder about the sites left out of the global

connections and ask for an integration of ports along the transpacific road or along the West African coast, which figure less prominently. Both publications – wisely – refrain from a comparison of port cities but expose largely synchronic developments and characteristics. Though constituting similar spaces in an urban setting in the age of globalization, port cities tell different histories of a global economy and migration around the world. As an analytical tool, port cities enable the study of these complexities, yet as both publications demonstrate, a port city was a microcosm itself that must be analyzed along with its history, in its specific context and framework, with its respective connections, and the people passing through.