

Toby Green, A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution

Philip S. Zachernuk

Volume 85, printemps 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070932ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0000>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Zachernuk, P. (2020). Compte rendu de [Toby Green, A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 85, 335–337. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0000>

most influential food retailers, food insecurity is on the rise in the UK and a new underclass of workers is struggling to escape poverty. Like their Victorian and Edwardian counterparts, today's counter attendants, fast food cooks, and restaurant hosts, and servers endure poor working conditions and have limited access to either social benefits or opportunities for advancement. Yet, perhaps research like this will help us better understand and confront the grim realities of living under capitalism: chronic poverty, precarious employment, exploitative business and labour practices, and extreme income inequality.

One area that might have received more attention in a longer monograph is the significance of gender to capitalism and food distribution systems. Rioux briefly discusses the feminization of the retail workforce and hints at the gendered division of labour in the marketplace and cooperatives. Though Rioux writes that women were not often employed in food distribution before 1914, women's work appears to have been both visible and critical to the survival of market stalls and outside shops alike. For example, the hiring of cheap female workers was a systematic and deliberate business strategy for the then-expanding retailer, Marks and Spencer. Women also worked for meager wages as porters in the Flower Market and pea pickers and walnut shellers during the fruit season, while daughters and wives of stall- and shop-owners worked long hours for no pay. However, Rioux does not engage with more complex questions about gender's relationship to labour and the (re)production of capitalism. I wonder, for instance, how Britain's modern system of distribution and the new patterns of consumption it helped produce confronted, altered, or reproduced contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. The answers to these questions might help us unpack

the dynamic ways that axes of oppression connect to and overlap with one another, giving rise to conditions of socio-economic precarity under capitalism.

The monograph may have also benefited from a brief discussion of primary source material and a note on the limitations of the project. Subheadings or sections in the bibliography would also be helpful for readers. These are minor quibbles, however, and do little to detract from the value of this brief but important study on the geography and dynamics of food distribution in modern Britain.

NASTASHA SARTORE
University of Toronto

Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2019)

DESPITE DECADES of effort by Africanist historians, Africa remains perennially misunderstood, falsely disconnected from the stream of history. Historians of the Atlantic world and early modern globalization have made some advances in bringing Africa into their accounts, but a longstanding reductive approach remains in place. West Africa is commonly understood through the Atlantic Slave Trade and reduced to being a victim of external depredation, or set apart as a place waiting to be awoken from stasis. Toby Green's book not only pushes non-Africanists to think afresh about how they locate Africa in history but does much to push Africanists and suggest paths they might take.

Two ambitions shape this wide-ranging and sweeping treatment of Atlantic Africa from the late 14th century to the mid 19th century. Part I asks how Africa's engagement in the Atlantic economy, initiated on largely favourable terms by sovereign states, eventually put Africa

at an entrenched disadvantage which has persisted since. Green presents five case studies ranging geographically from Senegambia to the Kongo, and chronologically from the 15th to the 17th centuries, to illustrate variations on a common theme. Africans largely welcomed Atlantic trade. Indeed, Green shows how the early trade with Portugal was built on goods, business arrangements, and state systems already connecting West Africa to global markets across the Sahara, contrary to common notions that European trade brought West Africa out of isolation. African rulers, merchants, and workers not only managed these Atlantic connections well, they shaped how the early Atlantic world developed. They traded such goods as gold, peppers, and captives for cowrie shells, copper, and cloth, with regional variations. As Europeans expanded the import of cowries directly from the Indian Ocean (instead of the established overland route), the more ample flow of money allowed African economies to expand and intensify. But this exchange also had negative effects. West Africans became dependent on this inflow of currency. They also established a pattern of trading away "hard" currencies (gold) for currencies which also had other uses (iron, copper, cloth). The metals also become tools and weapons; cloth was also worn and displayed; cowries also sustained rulers' prestige and ritual power. Meanwhile, the Europeans, who also never stopped having similar multiple uses for gold, gradually acquired the modern habit of treating it as capital to be accumulated. The enlarged flow of cowries, and Europeans' growing output of inexpensive cloth, created inflationary pressures which undermined Africans' buying power for European goods. Even strong states, dependent on revenues and currency circulation in their internal economies, found themselves obliged to produce more captives to obtain enough

currency, driving the slave trade forward in all its destructive force. The long-term impact was not only the pressure to trade away captive labour, but also Africa's relative loss of currencies with durable value in global markets, creating an imbalance of capital which benefited the West.

In Part II, Green foregrounds another important ambition of this large book in a series of six thematic essays focused on the period from about the late 17th century to the early 19th century. Green wants to render Atlantic Africa a fully historical part of the dynamic Atlantic world. African societies were not only deeply challenged by the rise of the Atlantic world, but also responded and contributed to it in patterns that reached across land as well as around the Atlantic. Many factors are put in play – one of the strengths (and points) of Green's approach – and this web of forces cannot be adequately conveyed here. The broad story is one of building revolutionary tensions which would break out in the 19th century. Captured by their dependence on foreign trade, West African states increasingly used captives as a currency which could resist inflationary pressure. This, of course, placed African productive labour in the service of Europe as it robbed Africa. The violence of enslavement disrupted African societies. Extraneous factors, like the 17th century mini ice age, destabilized food supplies. But this was also an era of inventive adjustment and growth, pursued in various African registers even as it was entangled in Atlantic currents of change. As in early modern Europe, the expansion of trade and currency supplies inspired the development of fiscal-military states in Africa, which gathered tax revenue to assert their power. Some states, Asante for example, were more robust than most, in part because they had supplies of gold which ameliorated the inflationary pressures felt everywhere. Importantly,

African responses to these challenges were not static, either on the part of the rulers and merchants, or of the commoners exposed to the predations of the former. New religious practices, new ethnic and political identities, new accounts of history formed. The destabilization and resistance in Africa connected to similar trends in the Atlantic. Enslaved African soldiers deployed their skills in the rebel armies of the Haitian Revolution. Ideas of reform against the slaving order flowed in both from the Atlantic and Islamic worlds. The crescendo of jihads in 18th and 19th century West Africa, with their embedded rebellions against enslavement, were not only contemporary with upheavals in Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean, but also linked to them as revolutions against a newly oppressive economic and moral order. Even as Atlantic Africa became more harmed and troubled, its people generated robust and resilient cultural institutions which flowed into the Atlantic, carrying with them experience establishing quilombos as sites of escape and resistance, Islamic notions of rights and freedoms, and much more. Green not only presents Africa's history as full-bodied, but also bridges the gap that so many historians assume divides the precolonial from the colonial, finding in the centuries before the European partition of the continent the roots of not only Africa's impoverishment relative to Europe, but also its

contemporary politics of popular resistance to predatory elites.

The arguments in *Fistful of Shells* can be fitful at times, repeated in various contexts, interrupted by digressions, articulated with varying degrees of clarity. This book would be difficult to use as a whole in undergraduate teaching. A coda to Part I and a prologue to Part II, however, usefully bring the diverse case studies of the former and the overlapping essays of the latter into focus. Green is not persuasive on all points, but that is not really the point. He wants to provoke his readers to think about Africa differently, as dynamic, complex, and connected. He draws causal chains together that are at least arguable – and often convincing – to fight the longstanding habit of not looking for these connections. Green examined archives around the Atlantic world to collect stories and artefacts which connote the legacies of Africans' historical presence in music, food, architecture, and memory, and uses these to pointedly remind us that Africa remains woven into the Atlantic world today. For both Africanists and non-Africanists, this book sets by way of example a commanding challenge to finally dispense with habits of mind dating from the Atlantic slave trade era which unwittingly reduce Africa's historical importance and generative power, and to start making the connections which reveal West Africa's dynamic history within its shores and within the Atlantic world.

PHILIP S. ZACHERNUK
Dalhousie University