

lack of attention to power dynamics prevents them from being revolutionary. In his telling, incommensurability among moneys is not a problem but a solution. In a world where wealth inequality continues to rise and where FinTech companies make huge profits getting money from one circuit to another, it is difficult to feel so sanguine.

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VRIES, PEER and ANNELIEKE VRIES. *Atlas of Material Life. Northwestern Europe and East Asia, 15th to 19th Century*. Leiden University Press, Leiden 2020. 340 pp. Ill. Maps. € 49.50.

Any dictionary will explain that an atlas is a collection of maps normally bound as a book. Those maps can represent the surface of the earth but also the solar system or the anatomy of living bodies. Historical atlases follow a different epistemology. Since they cannot depict observable reality, they use complex processes of abstraction to transform verbal and numerical data into spatial images. Beyond the well-established historical atlases in book form, nowadays a wealth of visual materials is available online. The ready availability of all sorts of maps on the internet may explain why a different type of atlas that still works best as a bound volume has gained new-found importance: the illustrated compendium, where an extensive field of knowledge is covered through a well-integrated combination of text and maps. The *Atlas of Material Life* belongs to this composite genre. The written text was contributed by Peer Vries, the distinguished methodologist and economic historian, while the maps are the work of Annelieke Vries, an experienced cartographer. The book is also replete with charts and statistical tables. The result is a substantial volume that does not compete with what is to be found in cartographic databases. It is unique in its special way.

Still, more has to be said on the form of the book and the intention behind it. Peer Vries begins his Introduction with a powerful and irrefutable statement: “In a world where in principle more than enough information is available, one needs a good reason to publish yet another book” (p. 9). The main reason is to provide “basic facts” (*ibid.*), especially for the use of undergraduates who love to discuss theories without, in many cases, possessing the empirical knowledge required to ground those theories in historical reality. Therefore, the book’s avowed goal is “to show, not to prove” (*ibid.*). While aiming at comprehensiveness, the author resists the temptation of encyclopaedic completeness. The book is precise in its limited time frame. It covers a “long” early modern age from the fifteenth to the late nineteenth century, though we occasionally learn something about the Black Death or about China during the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279). More characteristically, the geographical focus lies on two particular parts of the world, one quite small in spatial terms, the other

considerably larger: Northwestern Europe (especially the Netherlands and Great Britain) and East Asia, both in its continental (China) and insular (Japan) parts. This is more than enough for a book of 340 pages.

But what is material life? There are basically two different answers to this question. In a tradition epitomized by the first volume of Fernand Braudel's acclaimed trilogy of 1979, it would be the way in which societies from the village or small group upwards organize their collective survival and well-being by developing habits of producing and consuming; by and large, material life is everyday life. In a second, and much more recent, line of enquiry, material life is "materiality" – the world of tangible objects, partly created by human beings but often assuming a life of their own and becoming historical actors in their own right. What both tendencies have in common, in spite of many differences, is their insistence that the material world mostly serves as a limit to human possibilities – materiality's major effect on societies is constraint.

Though Peer Vries and Annelieke Vries do not explain their own concept of "material life", their preferences are easily discernible. They show little sympathy for the mystification of objects that is a hallmark of the New Materialism, and their indebtedness to the Braudelian tradition is obvious. Yet, in his Introduction, Peer Vries revealingly pays homage to less prominent authorities: the great agrarian historians Wilhelm Abel (1904–1985) and Bernard Slicher van Bath (1910–2004). Both these past masters were economic historians in a more technical sense than Braudel. They were interested in how agrarian societies functioned at various levels and where they contained seeds of change. This acknowledged ancestry indicates that in the *Atlas* material life basically means the economy. Of the nine chapters of the book, the first three – on "geography and demography", "energy", and "resources" – pave the way for two chapters that portray premodern economies in their basic equilibria: one on agriculture and another on "exchanges" (mainly migration, bullion flows, and intercontinental commodity trade).

The chapter on exchanges is particularly interesting since Peer Vries uses it to set the global scene for what follows in the rest of the book. Human beings, money, knowledge, and commodities circulated around the world. Yet, Vries does not continue in this vein and does not write the economic history of the early modern era as a history of emerging world markets and of consumer cosmopolitanism. Rather, exactly in the middle of the book, he settles on what turns out to be the fulcrum of the volume: the question of economic growth. That huge topic is unfolded in all its dimensions over the remaining four chapters, culminating, not surprisingly, in a discussion of the Great Divergence. Vries offers an excellent survey of the topic and elegantly sketches his own position. Having monitored the debate for more than two decades in an endless stream of publications, he does not repeat his critiques of the leading scholarly players in the field. Thus, the *Atlas* is not the best source for watching Peer Vries in critical action. For that and for a more detailed elaboration of Vries's own answers to the many questions raised in the debate on the Great Divergence, readers should turn to the various other books he has published during the past ten years.

It does not take long to discover that Vries finds it hard to be faithful to his initial promise "to show, not to prove". In fact, he does not just compile data. While in the *Atlas of Material Life* he is more volubly descriptive than when he writes in a strictly argumentative mode, he habitually puts individual pieces of information in broader

contexts, which is always an act of interpretation. With Peer Vries, a single fact or figure gains significance only when it can somehow be related to an argument. This is why the book does much more than fill the knowledge gaps of undergraduate students and non-specialized readers. It serves as a school of historical thinking. However, there are limits to this virtue. The omission of references, apart from a general bibliography, makes it difficult to pursue specific topics further and gain a precise understanding of nuances in the literature. More unfortunate is the absence of an index that would have helped to mine the riches of the book.

The *Atlas of Material Life* stands out on three points in particular. First, it introduces the practices, if not the fully developed methodology, of comparison between Europe and its quintessential East Asian “other” in an accessible, unobtrusive, and data-rich way. Thus, it helps students with a European or Western educational background to incorporate China into their mental horizon and may induce a habit of never again seeing the alleged success stories of early modern Britain and the Netherlands in isolation from the wider world.

Second, Peer Vries is very good at dealing with quantification, something that is all too often regarded in global history studies as unnecessary pedantry. As in many previous publications, Vries draws the reader’s attention to the limits of the knowable, the illusions of exactness, the perils of estimates, and the strength of common sense in assessing claims of accuracy. For very good reasons, he is always a defender of the “order of magnitude” that may serve as a reasonable substitute for chimerical precision. Even a vague idea of quantitative relations can yield important insights. Among many things that novices to global economic history should be able to take away from this book is a realistic attitude towards numerical thinking.

Third, Annelieke Vries’s maps are always devised with a keen eye on the usefulness that the authors consider a defining feature of their *Atlas*. The cartographic techniques used here are consciously conventional, eschewing, for instance, the visual rhetoric of advanced digital cartography as exemplified in Philippe Rekacewicz’s long-term work for *Le Monde diplomatique*. Many of the maps included here are derived from existing publications. In such cases, Annelieke Vries’s gentle art lies in modifying the available versions. When one of her maps is “based on” an existing model, one can be sure that it has either been simplified or made more complex depending on the context where the map is employed in illustrating a verbal statement.

On the whole, this is a textbook in the best sense: useful in many different respects, pleasing in its visual appearance, and never concealing the personal voice of a committed scholar and teacher.

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