

2005

Book Review: Douglas Northrop. *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia*. Cornell University Press 2004

Marianne Kamp  
*University of Wyoming*, [mkamp@uwyo.edu](mailto:mkamp@uwyo.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.uwyo.edu/history\\_facpub](http://repository.uwyo.edu/history_facpub)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Publication Information

Kamp, Marianne (2005). "Book Review: Douglas Northrop. *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia*. Cornell University Press 2004." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47.4, 894-895. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S001041750522039X>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Wyoming Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Wyoming Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact [scholcom@uwyo.edu](mailto:scholcom@uwyo.edu).

# CSSH NOTES

Scott Cook. *Understanding Commodity Cultures: Explorations in Economic Anthropology with Case Studies from Mexico*. Lanham, Rowman & Littleford Publishers, Inc., 2004, xi, 349 pp.

Economic anthropology has two 'sacred' field sites—one in Melanesia, the other in Central America—and the empirical data gathered from these sites has set the theoretical agenda for the sub-discipline. Malinowski conducted seminal fieldwork in both of these areas and the respective subjects of his investigations tells us much about the socio-economic concerns of people in Melanesia and Central America. His classic ethnography on the Kula exchange system of the Milne Bay area of Papua New Guinea, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, established Melanesia as the classic home of gift exchange. The postwar ethnographies have only served to confirm the passion Melanesians have for creating intricate forms of gift exchange: Andrew Strathern's *The Rope of Moka*, introduced us to the ties that bind the 'big men' in the Highlands; Michael Young's *Fighting with Food: Leadership, Values and Social Control in a Masim Society*, challenged us to rethink the social role of food, and so on. These ethnographies, and many others like them, have provided the ethnographic base on which general theories of the gift have risen, Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, being the best-known recent synthesis. The product of Malinowski's Central American fieldwork, *Malinowski in Mexico: The Economics of a Mexican Market System* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), which he wrote with J. de la Fuente, has not had the impact of *Argonauts*, for a number of reasons, including the fact that an English translation of the 1957 Spanish edition took some twenty-five years to appear, and that his research, carried out in 1940, was not pioneering in the same ethnographic and theoretical way that *Argonauts* was. His Mexican work was part of a long tradition of American scholarship on the peasant-artisan commodity producers of this area. Commodity production and exchange is to the people of Central America what gift exchange is to Melanesians. However, the exchange of commodities in Central America is a not ceremonial ritual, but rather everyday reality that the people must undertake in order to survive. It has been this way for centuries, which is why Central American ethnographers have devoted so much time to describing and analyzing petty commodity reproduction. This is not to say that market exchange is unimportant for the people of Melanesia, but what sets Melanesia apart is that gift exchange has flourished under the impact of capitalism, and it is this question that

0010-4175/05/892-896 \$9.50 © 2005 Society for Comparative Study of Society and History

commentators have tried to describe and explain. What then are the peculiar social conditions found in Central America that account for the specificities of the economy found there? What conceptual frameworks have economic anthropologists developed to come to terms with these facts?

It is these questions that Cook tries to answer in his *Understanding Commodity Cultures*. The book is not only a comprehensive intellectual history of the prominent anthropologists who have written on the economy of Central America, it is also an original theoretical treatment of commodity culture. The book is a very impressive achievement: the synthesis of a lifetime's work that draws heavily on Cook's extensive fieldwork in Mexico and his wide reading of the ethnographic and theoretical literature.

Four chapters in the first part of the book contain detailed critiques of the main concepts advanced by various well-known economic anthropologists. He examines George Foster's notion of the "limited good," Redfield's "primitive merchants," Sol Tax's "penny capitalism," and Wolf's "peasant economy." Interestingly, he also devotes one chapter to the realistic fictional narratives of B. Traven, an ethnographically trained Mexican novelist whose work is "a tribute to the resilience and ingenuity of Mexico's peasant artisans" (p. 41). Two core chapters in the middle of the book aim "to set the groundwork for new theoretical approach to economic anthropology" (11). He does this by means of a re-examination of the "great debate" in economic anthropology from a "Twenty-First-Century lens." It is here that he develops his notion of "commodity culture(s)." This is then used to develop an ethnographic critique of the 'peasant-artisan' literature in Central America, including the Oaxaca Valley Zapotec, The Maya of Chiapas, and the Gulf Nahuatl of Veracruz. The book concludes with a look at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the question of migration and identity in the "new transborder space."

Cook's notion of "commodity culture(s)" does not admit of simple summary; suffice to say that it owes much to a critical, ethnographically informed reading of Marx, Polanyi, and many leading theorists of commodity reproduction. The concept is one of some generality but Cook strays little from the ethnographic terrain he knows best. The book will be of specialist interest to Central Americanists but also of general theoretical interest to economic anthropologists. Economic anthropology is going through something of a renaissance and this important erudite work can only give impetus to that movement. Cook's gift to economic anthropology has been to synthesize the one hundred years of economic thought and ethnographic analysis from one of economic anthropology's 'sacred' sites. His work points to the need for a comparable synthesis from the other 'sacred' site in Melanesia. Such a work would, along with Cook's book, provide the necessary foundations for a revitalized economic anthropology for the twenty-first century.

———Chris Gregory, Australian National University

Douglas Northrop. *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia*. Cornell University Press 2004. xvii + 392 pp. ISBN 0801439442.

Central to Douglas Northrop's archivally based study of the Soviet attempt to unveil Uzbek women is the argument that the Soviet Union was a colonial empire, one where Bolsheviks tried to transform daily cultural practices and gender relations against the wishes of most Uzbeks, who responded as colonial subjects by using weapons of the weak. Northrop's use of previously unavailable Communist Party documents allows an exploration of the Party's arguments for and against unveiling, and describes the Party's surprise at the vehemence and violence of anti-unveiling resistance in Uzbekistan. Starting with the 1927 Communist Party initiation of the *Hujum*—or campaign against veiling in Soviet Uzbekistan—this work's exclusive focus on the unveiling campaign allows Northrop to reveal that resistance to unveiling and other laws concerning "liberation" continued into the 1950s, and to examine the ways that intrusion into family life and cultural practices served the Party as a tool for defining loyalty during the Stalinist period. Northrop far exceeds Gregory Massell's *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (1974) in exploring Party arguments over policies toward Central Asia.

Northrop agrees with Massell's basic assertion that the Communist Party started the unveiling campaign because it saw Central Asian women as potential substitutes for a proletariat, believing that if the Party offered them liberation, they would become loyal transformers of society. He then outlines the ways that this vision failed: through the "complex social and subaltern strategies pursued by individual Uzbek men and women in dealing with an alien state . . . [ranging] from apparent support to active opposition, from studied obliviousness to passive resistance to the spreading of gossip and rumors" (p. 347). What emerges is a careful, nuanced look at a variety of Uzbek social responses to Soviet laws and the Party's unveiling campaign. Relying heavily on reports from the OGPU, or secret police, Northrop seeks the voices of Uzbeks who opposed Soviet initiatives for ending polygyny, establishing minimum marriage age, and ending bride-price, all of which were defined as "crimes of daily life" and banned, and he finds a widespread anti-Soviet Islamic discourse and embedded cultural practices that solidified and expanded Uzbek resistance to the Soviet state. Uzbeks responded angrily to unveiling and, Northrop argues strongly, came to define their own identity through reinforced women's veiling.

A few cautions: In spite of the title, this is a book about Uzbekistan; other Central Asian republics receive only a few mentions and no analysis. In substantiating his thesis that Soviet rule in Central Asia was colonialism, Northrop minimizes liminal voices. The author dismisses Uzbek supporters of unveiling as "few," and unrepresentative of Uzbeks; he defines as subalterns only those who directly resist, not those who work within institutions and reinterpret and

negotiate change. Northrop argues that Bolsheviks misunderstood Uzbek society partly because “Few nonindigenous party members had much firsthand knowledge of or empathy for the Uzbek language, religion or culture . . .” and because they looked through an “underlying filter of class categorizations” (129). However, Northrop offers no alternative picture that would enable the reader to understand how Uzbek society operated. While Northrop contends that OGPU archival files were the best source for recording subaltern Uzbek voices (107), this reader wonders how much to trust the writings of a force made up of non-indigenous men who did not speak Uzbek, and who were not constant observers but were directed to trouble spots. And finally, Northrop’s inclusion of a photo of naked Uzbek women from a Russian medical journal in a section critiquing Russian Orientalism is not in keeping with the tone of the volume, which is both respectful of and sympathetic to Uzbek society.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *Veiled Empire* is a fascinating account of a radical Soviet experiment. Each chapter is packed with well-chosen and intrinsically interesting archival stories supporting the author’s themes and arguments, and numerous historic photos provide a wealth of imagery depicting Uzbek society in the first half of the twentieth century. These illustrations and Northrop’s thematic approach make this volume accessible to non-experts, and easily adaptable for the classroom.

———Marianne Kamp, University of Wyoming

Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar. *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power and Memory in Rajasthan*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

*In the Time of Trees and Sorrows* is an engaging and elegant exploration of the history of the former kingdom of Sawar, an area of twenty-seven villages in Rajasthan. The authors focus on the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, an era of dramatic changes in Sawar’s (and India’s) political and ecological landscape. Drawing on interviews with subjects of the former kingdom, mostly non-literate farmers, herders, and laborers, the authors provide a textured account of the pre-independence period (pre-1947) marked by what they term the “double oppression under colonial and regional rulers,” and a landscape rich with trees and wildlife, albeit resources to which the king’s subjects were mostly denied access (p. 1). This period is contrasted with the post-independence period, during which India’s princely kingdoms were absorbed in the Indian Republic, and the subjects of Sawar experienced “the sudden and radical transformation to democracy and modernity” (1). This latter period also witnessed, as the authors draw attention to from the outset, the complete devastation of Sawar’s landscape which “transformed from one of rich biodiversity of trees and growth to one where hillsides have been stripped of indigenous growth and are now dominated by a single alien species” (3). In bringing political and ecological histo-

ry into the same frame, Gold and Gujar explore a compelling paradox of the area's postcolonial history: as the residents of Sawar gained political rights, their environment was transformed and, in many ways, devastated.

The first four of the book's ten chapters engage a range of scholarly interests, including currents in anthropology (particularly the relationship between anthropology and history), historiography (pointing to the influence of subaltern studies), memory studies, and issues surrounding authorial voice. Each of these discussions draws effectively on existing studies, and points to the text's divergences from and contributions to a wide body of scholarship. The chapter devoted to questions of authorial voice is particularly compelling given the complex relationship between the authors. Gold is Professor of Religion and Anthropology at Syracuse University and Gujar is Headmaster of a Middle School in Rajasthan. The English-language text is composed by Gold, while both Gujar and Gold conducted a majority of the interviews transcribed in the text (in Hindi and Rajasthani). The care they give to elaborating the relationship between them—their varied influences on the course of research, interviews, and writing—gives depth to the reader's understanding of both the process of this work and the resulting monograph. Despite the careful attention they devote to describing the nature of this collaboration, however, Gold's voice permeates the text more obviously than Gujar's. This, perhaps, is inevitable given the language of the text and the broader theoretical literature with which it engages (which is principally in English).

The last six chapters of the book are largely devoted to ethnographic accounts of life in Princely and post-independence Sawar. These are interspersed with limited archival research that provides further context for the interviewees' responses to questions about *begar* (unpaid labor), courtly punishment, revenue demands, access to natural resources in princely/colonial Sawar, and the political and environmental circumstances in which they live in postcolonial India. Through these chapters the authors illustrate one of their central concerns: that for the residents of Sawar the benefits of democracy are inextricably tied to detrimental changes in their environment. The presentation of ethnographic material is coupled with detailed analysis that successfully links the discussion, grounded in its local context, to the broader intellectual themes with which the work is concerned.

*In the Time of Trees and Sorrows*, given the detail of its ethnographic account, its careful analysis, and its engagement with a broad array of intellectual currents, will be valuable to students of anthropology, history, the study of memory, and environmental and ecological studies. This book was awarded the A. K. Coomaraswamy Book Prize (for English-language work on South Asian Studies) by the Association of Asian Studies in March 2004, and, as this suggests, its will also interest many readers outside of these fields.

———Farina Mir, University of Michigan