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HIST 3029: Transnational History

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Book Review

Kurlansky, Mark. *Salt: a world history*. New York: Walker and Co., 2002.

From prehistory to industrialization, from Africa to Europe, America to Asia, the salt in the dish in front of you possesses a history much longer than you would expect. While someone might think that this common flavoring is too ubiquitous to be researched academically, a mature historiography of salt already exists.<sup>1</sup> The most representative salt history works include S. A. M Adshead's *Salt and Civilization*,<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Bergier's *Une histoire du sel*<sup>3</sup> as well as Robert P. Multhauf's *Neptune's Gift*,<sup>4</sup> which all appear in *Salt: A World History*'s bibliography. However, apart from the general introduction of salt history, Mark Kurlansky also cites various works focusing on a specific time period or geographical area to expand the narrative. For instance, there are Jacques Nenquin's *Salt: A Study in Economic Prehistory*<sup>5</sup> and A. R. Bridbury's *England and the Salt Trade in the Later Middle*

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<sup>1</sup> William D. Phillips, "Review of Mark Kurlansky *Salt: A World History*," *Itinerario* 28 (2004): 111, accessed March 26, 2014, doi: 10.1017/S0165115300019343.

<sup>2</sup> S.A.M. Adshead, *Salt and Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Bergier, *Une histoire du sel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Robert P. Multhauf, *Neptune's Gift: A History of Common Salt* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Jacques A. E. Nenquin, *Salt: A Study in Economic Prehistory* (Brugge: De Tempel, 1961).

Ages.<sup>6</sup> It also encompasses Zhong Changyong, Huang Jian and Lin Jianyu's *China's Zigong Salt*<sup>7</sup> and Paul E. Lovejoy's *Salt of the Desert Sun: A History of Salt Production and Trade in the Central Sudan*.<sup>8</sup> Just by scanning the bibliography, readers can already conjecture the length, breadth, and complexity of the history of salt shown in *Salt: A World History*, which then fashions itself as a necessary reference for future publications.

More importantly, though, instead of purely collecting bits and pieces, Kurlansky manages to weave all these disparate pieces of historical knowledge into a smooth narrative. Although the whole book is divided into three sections and twenty-six chapters, they are all connected with each other through the chronology; the fluent shift between subjects and activities makes the overall storytelling more comprehensible and convincing. Part of the reason that Kurlansky is able to write this history book in such an engaging way is owing to his long-time experience as a journalist. The constant writing for newspapers and magazines enables the author to spot the most attractive information and transform it into an interesting story easily. In addition, Kurlansky's work demands that he travel around the world to investigate. It is this experience that offers him a world vision, and the capability to link various parts of the world together. Nonetheless, although Kurlansky is able to tell a very interesting story, his journalistic experience might not be helpful in terms of crafting a clear and argumentative thesis. In *Salt: A World History*, a conclusive thesis is completely missing,

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<sup>6</sup> A. R. Bridbury, *England and the Salt Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

<sup>7</sup> Changyong Zhong, Jian Huang, and Jianyu Lin, *中国自贡盐 [Zhongguo Zigong yan; China's Zigong Salt]* (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, *Salt of the Desert Sun: A History of Salt Production and Trade in the Central Sudan* (Cambridge [UK]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

whose influence on the book will be carefully discussed in the evaluation.

Apart from the introduction of salt history as well as the author's experience, this book review is structured to summarize the main points of *Salt: A World History* and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, which disqualify this publication as a world history narrative.

In the first section, the book talks about the production and use of salt in ancient civilizations, from China to Africa and Europe. While it pays more attention to the political states and public constructions at the very beginning of feudal China, it focuses more on markets and economic activities around salt in Africa. Then it turns to the legendary Celtic salt miners, who only appear in Greek and Roman historical records as terrifying giants. They are followed by a historical account of the Mediterranean, from the rise and fall of the Roman Empire to the emergence and expansion of Venetian salt production and trade. It also traces major Italian ports and traders like Marco Polo traveling across continents via the Silk Road for goods like salt, as one of the reflections of early cross-cultural exchange.

The following section covers Medieval Europe, from Sweden to England, Holland, France and Germany, as well as Poland and Russia. It talks about their environmental conditions, natural resources, and recipes of salted fish. More importantly, the section also sheds light on how salt as a crucial means for storage caused competition and conflicts among neighboring countries. After introducing the urgent need for more and cheaper salt in Western European countries, the book turns its attention to the voyages of discovery, before which there is a half-chapter reference to Native Americans. It mainly talks about how the

colonizers cooperated in the exploitation of local salt production, but also about how the salt trade greatly accelerated the independence of the United States, the French Revolution, and the American Civil War.

The last section begins with scientific breakthroughs related to salt in the industrial era, which heavily influenced the development of transportation, technology, and geology in Europe and North America. It also looks at how salt is related to liberation movements in the Third World and to the commercialization of salt in America and post-Cultural Revolution China, which led to the fading of many traditions. How modernity changed people's attitudes toward food and popular taste is carefully meditated in these chapters. Finally, the author ends the book by pointing out a continuing confusion towards the true value of salt in human society.

All in all, the book presents a chronological account of salt's economic, political and cultural impacts on the world, which perfectly visualizes this human necessity in human history. Furthermore, this food history also involves other historical approaches including colonialism, industrialization, independence movements and scientific progress in order to expand and enrich the whole narrative.

When it comes to the strengths of this book, there are three significant points. First of all, the book contains graceful language and interesting story telling, which could draw common readers' attention to serious historical issues. To explain, as a gift from past journalistic experience, Mark Kurlansky possesses his own writing style and characteristic storytelling.

His language is described as “breezy and comfortable;”<sup>9</sup> his writing skills and fame have made all of his works attractive to mainstream readers. As a consequence, the author’s reputation and abundant experience in journalistic writing grants this book not only a beautiful narrative style, but also a huge readership among the mainstream public.

Secondly, it is undeniable that this book gathers a huge amount of diversified facts about salt throughout history. The narrative mentions most continents and historical eras. The comprehensive collection of information not only gives readers a wonderful experience traveling around the world while reading a four-hundred-page book, but also a world vision and consciousness. If such a common and subtle object is able link most parts of the world together, what and who can be totally isolated from the others in contemporary society? As a result, the book presents more than the history of salt, but also the history of communication or even globalization, from the Silk Road to the voyages of discovery, and on to the present. The reason for this integration is also pellucid: humans cannot live without salt, and humans have reached out and interacted in order to gain more salt.

But most importantly, the superiority of this historical account comes from its special perspective into common people’s mentality. To be more specific, apart from the macro narrative, which mainly focuses on decision makers and their decisions, the author also includes common people who were directly influenced by these decisions and whose reactions affected the implementation of these monumental policies. As a matter of fact, on

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<sup>9</sup> Phillips, *Review of Salt*, 111.

the one hand, the real state of these lay folks is mostly ignored in the hegemonic narrative because it is hard to measure and somewhat subtle; on the other hand, it is the everyman's mentality that reflects the realities in the community and explains the reasons for many social events, especially in food history. For instance, when the story comes to China, the author constantly quotes his conversations with local people to reveal ideas existing in Chinese society today. For example, one Chinese cook said that "MSG, or monosodium glutamate, was needed because Chinese food does not directly use salt."<sup>10</sup> This preference sets Chinese habits of eating and consuming salt apart from the rest of the world. In a more representative example, the author records the life of a soy sauce trader sticking to an old-fashioned life style. He also observes that "most Chinese still eat the old foods."<sup>11</sup> As a sharp contrast to the modern image of new China, the author manages to show the nostalgia of these people towards a more traditional life style and the cultural heritage that was strong in the past but has been enduring huge shocks from a modern market economy. This special sentiment can only become apparent after in-depth communication with the most anonymous people. And this is precisely the way to include the multiple voices from among the "invisible and silent" masses that have the greatest power towards the development of history.

Nonetheless, apart from the advantages of this narrative, its weaknesses should also be recognized. Most significantly, there are two major problems with the book: its lack of argumentation and its Eurocentric point of view.

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Walker and Co., 2002), 395.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

For one thing, this history book is more descriptive than argumentative. Although the story is told in the chronological order, which makes the narrative appear coherent and structured, it does not have a thesis to link all these diversified facts together spiritually. Hence, it is more like a primary text presenting a compilation of historical knowledge about the history of salt. Without an argumentative introduction or conclusion, it is really confusing what the message that the author wants to tell through this book is. Furthermore, this absence of argumentation confines this book within the circle of popular writing and leisure reading, rather than an academic publication with a clear educational purpose.

Although some reviewers understand the sentence that “salt has been important throughout history” as the main thesis, the statement does not require much argumentation in its support when society has already admitted its validity in daily life.<sup>12</sup> However, seldom do the critiques go one step further to discuss the book’s connotations in terms of these basic facts. Though they recognize that the book aims at revealing the continual significance and discontinuous valuation of salt in different periods of human society, they fail to ask what this continuity and discontinuity signify. However, in my opinion, the book deserves further elaboration and deeper exploration because there are coherent and profound themes hidden behind the factual display.

On the one hand, in terms of why salt could push all this economic and political progress, the power of human desire should be fully realized. Salt, as a human necessity,

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<sup>12</sup> *Phillips, Review of Salt*, 111.

automatically becomes one of the basic and fundamental material desires of human beings. According to the book, because of salt, ancient Egyptians started markets and Roman merchants fostered trade between continents with the byproduct of a cultural exchange. It is also disclosed in the book that salt is one of the crucial reasons for the independence of the United States and Gandhi's Liberation Movement. Although slogans of these revolutions were gradually polished into advanced catchphrases like "human rights" and "freedom," the book actually uncovers that part of the essence of these rebellions was still the fighting over the distribution of salt to fulfill human desire. Hence, through tracing the crucial role of the symbolic salt in some of the most decisive events in human history, the author points out directly that to a great extent, it is the desire of obtaining and preserving basic material necessities, including salt, that motivates humans to push the progress of history. A similar argument has been made about spices by Jack Turner in *Spice: The History of a Temptation*.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, although salt has played a crucial role throughout history, this chronological account stages the transformation of its value over time. While ancient Chinese theorist Laozi treated the possession of salt as the major indicator of a country's wealth and medieval Norwegians were dreaming of a salt cake every day, nowadays, possessing and storing salt is being taken for granted internationally and salt is even used to "blanket highways and support the cult of the car."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the book points out that it is the

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<sup>13</sup> Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Regina Schrambling, "NaCl," review of *Salt: A World History*, by Mark Kurlansky, Walker and Co., *New York Times Book Review*, February 24, 2002.

progress of economic infrastructure that caused the transformation of understanding and value. The book constantly stresses the discovery of new locations and technologies, and especially industrialization, which completely changed the modes of production and increased productivity. And just because this economic progress enhanced supply to the point that it exceeded demand, contemporary society was enabled to use salt to fulfill secondary needs: instead of worshiping salt, people began to take its abundance for granted. Hence, by describing the history and development of this natural resource comprehensively, the book highlights how the progress of the economic infrastructure influences common people's mentalities via the lens of salt.

The second drawback of the book stems from its Eurocentric perspective. Most representatively, this so-called "world history" of salt is entirely structured along a Western timeline. To be more specific, with a brief introduction of ancient civilizations at the beginning, Mayan culture in the middle and the Salt March in India as well as Cultural Revolution in China at the end, the book seems to offer information kaleidoscopic enough to paint a world pattern. However, it becomes obvious that the author first constructs a complete narrative from the Roman Empire to medieval Europe, and then to the new continent where the current United States are located. The final step is to add anecdotes from other places to diversify the overall storytelling. As a result, whenever readers need to be challenged and excited, there appears a certain amount of writing on exotic subjects. But it seems that the Middle Ages only happened in Europe, while all other civilizations totally disappear after the

prosperous exordiums. Although some of the “exotic” cultures come back at the end, the author presents how the modernity and commercialization inevitably assimilated non-Western countries despite local people’s adherence to traditional lifestyles. As a consequence, it is very clear that the main subject of the book is salt in Western history. And even though there are some delineations of salt in non-western cultures, the way that the book presents and structures them makes these inclusions and descriptions of exotic countries an attractive showcase only.

Furthermore, according to the book, when white conquerors arrived, they brought and invented new and effective ways to produce salt for the whole population, which reinforces the stereotype of the invaders as the bringers of civilization. Consequently, America is later depicted as a place occupied by those white people who had resided there for a “long” time, contributed enormously to its progress, and had to fight on their own land for their own rights, such as salt. Native Americans, on the other hand, completely disappear from the narrative after the Great Discovery, and it is implied in later depictions that these natives should always be grateful for what the white conquerors brought: a new way to make salt and an imposing modernity.

Reasons for this Euro-centrism may be partly attributed to the book’s target audience: Western mainstream readers. After all, it is written as popular non-fiction book, with all the economic concerns that come with this particular kind of publication; to attract readers is one of its primary tasks. However, I am very skeptical whether the book should be exempt from

the critique of Euro-centrism because of this excuse. There are two main questions concerning this inquiry.

On the one hand, should different standards be applied to evaluate academic and non-academic world-history narratives? Namely, should the public be more tolerant toward nonacademic books' Euro-centrism because it is not that serious? Or should we be even more critical about these popular narratives because they could reach and influence a wider public, who may possibly have less of a critical attitude and are vulnerable to implied and unspoken ideas? I believe the latter.

On the other hand, with the publisher and potential audience mostly residing in the West, how can the mainstream Western writer take the other part of the world seriously? And how can the narrative attract readers without using exotic stories as a selling point? In other words, how can popular writing with an educational mission, especially when borrowing the term "world history," magnetize readers but avoid appealing to Euro-centrism, when these two tasks seem to be quite incompatible? For me, the most important thing is to clarify that it is the respectful attitude toward other cultures and voices that matters the most in world history rather than any amount of factual collection. And only with this attitude can any writing become really attractive because it stages the real world history. Only if the author bears the danger of a possible unconscious Euro-centrism in mind, could he or she avoid the trap of Western hegemonic narrative when claiming the book as world history research. But based on this criterion, strictly speaking, *Salt: A World History* is not qualified as a world history

book for its obvious Eurocentric and hierarchical point of view.

To conclude, although the lack of argumentation could be refuted by visualizing profound themes hidden in the book, it is the Eurocentric tone that calls into question its fundamental status as a world history narrative. Furthermore, what I am criticizing is more than the fact that the author does not include enough about non-Western cultures, but the fact that his Eurocentric perspective reflects a prevalent attitude. It is the attitude of general readers to search for texts which confirm their previous knowledge, but who are not willing to have their ideas challenged by a book. It is also this attitude, cultivated in larger social contexts, that determines and limits readers' angles in which to perceive the world, which world history really wants to cast doubts on, and change. As a result, the book provides an opportunity to examine and discuss the responsibility of nonacademic historical writing, especially when it calls itself world history. Rather than merely collecting more diversified facts, it is more significant to bear this message in mind: everyone is born equal and every culture is equally important in the framework of world history. All in all, although whether the book is really a world history book can be widely debated from various aspects, the discipline can learn abundant lessons from this book regarding how to extend their narrative into the public sphere.

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