

# Modernity experienced at an everyday level

Nira Wickramasinghe has published an important work that moves readers' attention towards an aspect of Sri Lanka's history that is often neglected in historical works on Sri Lanka, namely how modernity was experienced at an everyday level under colonialism.

Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits

**Reviewed publication:** Wickramasinghe, N. 2014. *Metallic Modern. Everyday Machines in Colonial Sri Lanka*, Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books, ISBN: 9781782382423

*Metallic Modern* is written in a pleasant and playful manner. Yet it is a dense and serious book that touches upon the very nature of history writing and reworks our notions of time and place, of what makes an event important and what needs to be recorded for posterity. The richness and originality of this publication should not come as a surprise for those who are familiar with the author's earlier works, all written in a style reminiscent of French social historians, where theory is never overbearing but insinuates itself in the narrative. Furthermore, in a period where Sri Lanka's history is often assumed to be one single national narrative this book is a timely intervention to help put *things* into perspective.

*Metallic Modern* departs from conventional writings on the colonial history of Sri Lanka. By digging into new archives, visual, business, personal such as the police entry of a tailor called Pieterz in 1912, the Singer Papers in Wisconsin (USA), colonial records in Britain and newspaper advertisements in Sri Lanka, Wickramasinghe has beautifully captured the intersections of many histories; social, cultural, political and economic, criss-crossed by considerations of gender and religion, and most valuably, material and ideological histories, all in a single, small book. The style of writing and the way the materials are organized and presented, the way themes and objects reappear in chapters inadvertently, constantly challenge readers (in a positive way) to draw lines and connections.

In this book, the author has very successfully painted a picture of how non-elite groups in Sri Lanka encountered modernity most directly through their use and adoption of machines (i.e., sewing machines, gramophones, trams, bicycles and industrial equipment) and grew into modern day global consumers. Further, this book is very much a reflection on the 'Sri Lanka modern' that was, as the author argues "created out of the mould of consumerism and commodification"[5]. The story that is being told through the use of machines is multiscalar: it moves seamlessly from the self, to the streets of the city where in 1915 rioters began to use trams and bicycles, the Buddhist world and the world at large under the throes of a first globalization.

*Metallic Modern* is composed of an introduction, 8 short chapters and a conclusion. The beautiful illustrations used in the book, some of which are original sketches obtained from private collections, tell us a unique story as we sift through the pages. In the introduction, the author provides a dense theoretical and methodological discussion to place her chosen approach in the wider field of history writing. She situates the book in a wide terrain and engages with scholarship on empire, the Indian Ocean and global history. By doing so, the author intentionally snaps readers out of their familiar mental boundaries of the 'island' Ceylon and its history. Chapter 1 tells the story of the invention of the Singer sewing machine and investigates how it fashioned a market imaginary in the British Crown colony of Ceylon. This chapter offers a different take from that of economists and economic historians, who tend to dominate the history of industrial capitalism and consumption, and shows how and



Above: 19th century sewing Machines, Armley Mills, Leeds, United Kingdom. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy David Dixon.

why ordinary colonized people consumed global products in the age of industrial capitalism. While lamenting about the lack of sufficient data to write a history of consumption in South Asia, the author deftly extracts anecdotes from the Singer archive in the USA to illuminate the story of colonized people as consumers. Chapter 3 of the book, entitled *Paths to Buddhist Modern: From Siam to America*, discusses how in colonial Sri Lanka, first a few men from Buddhist monastic communities and then larger and more diverse groups used ritual performances, language and travel to subvert the authority of the colonial state and in chapter 5, how Japan became the model of an Asian modern for people in colonial Sri Lanka.

Using the gramophone (chapter 4), and trams, cars and bicycles (chapter 6) the author compares and contrasts how in the crown colony of Ceylon, and in other colonized territories, modernity was practiced through machines. Chapter 7, entitled *Tailor's tale, machines in the home*, provides an interesting account as to how material modernity entered ordinary homes. Although not explicitly stated, one of the main strengths of this chapter is the insights it offers into the gendered nature of modernity experienced and established in the crown colony through the sewing machine and the 'job of the tailor'. Probing further into such questions along the gender-political-power intersections could have provided greater insights into history as 'his-story and her-story too'.

This book is academically rich, analytically sophisticated and full of insightful interpretations that make it a valuable source for scholars and students from multiple disciplines. It will also be a pleasant read for those who are simply curious about the dusty machines that sacredly and majestically occupy a small corner of their grandparents' homes, still covered with a cloth.

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## Living in the urban periphery of Hà Nội

Hòa Mực, in the past a small village (203 inhabitants in 1923) in the urban periphery of the Vietnamese capital city Hà Nội, stands central in this book. Danielle Labbé, attached as urban planner to the University of Montreal describes and analyses with much detail the changes that took place in the village during almost a century.

Hans Schenk



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*Land Politics and Livelihoods on the Margins of Hanoi, 1920-2010*, Vancouver: UBC Press, ISBN: 9780774826679

IN FOUR CHAPTERS a chronology covering major periods in the history of Hòa Mực has been followed: early urban influences during the French regime (1920-40), the initial decades of the North Vietnamese socialist transformation (1940-65); the difficult period till the economic renovation of the Vietnamese economy (Đổi mới, 1965-80); and the current reform period from 1980 onwards. During each period a major theme is the interaction between the villagers and the spatially, administratively, economically and otherwise expanding forces originating in the nearby big city. Oral history is her major source of information. The voices of (elder) villagers sound throughout the book (naturally supplemented by the usual primary and secondary oral and written sources of bureaucrats, planners, etc.) and make her study a mixture of a social-geographical, historical, anthropological, political and planning monograph.

### Villagers dealing with the state

During the French regime, villagers developed side occupations, especially weaving, by taking advantage of the close proximity of the urban markets. During this period, the village developed its peri-urban character, "blurring of the rural/agricultural and

urban/industrial distinctions and categories."(42). During the first decades of the socialist regime, this characteristic was very welcome: its workers could contribute to the industrial development without claiming urban welfare benefits such as housing. From the 1960s onwards, Labbé observes an "informal *in situ* village urbanization process" (69). On residential plots in the village – land that was not included in agricultural land socialization – private economic activities were performed, including housing, and contrary to formal politics. She concludes that these informal developments in Hòa Mực are not a sign of a weak state. She uses the concept of flexible planning that allows for diverging interests under the same political umbrella.

Logically then, the well known economic reforms (Đổi mới) of the mid 1980s are in Labbé's view not really a fundamental watershed in Vietnam's societal course, but rather a more gradual change. However, she distinguishes two phases of the reform period after 1980 as far as the process of peripheral urbanization processes are concerned. Initially, private informal economic and housing activities were normalized in a discretionary way by the local administration and later acknowledged by the state and included in the so-called 'State and People Work Together' approach. This resulted in a massive outburst of privately built two to four storey 'urban style' houses and neighbourhoods: the physical incorporation of peri-urban villages in the city.

Above: Urban Sprawl of Hanoi. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of Gavin White on Flickr.com.

### Villagers and the market

However, the mid 1990s, argues Labbé, form a real watershed in the time-line of the transformations that took place in Hòa Mực (and for that matter, in quite some similar villages adjacent to Hà Nội). The peri-urban space was reorganized by the inclusion of several rural districts within the urban administrative realm. The former village in a rural district thus became a ward in an urban district in 1997. At the same time the 'State and People Work Together' approach was abandoned and replaced by a new model of urbanization, that of the 'New Urban Areas'. These areas were to become the shop window of what Hà Nội's urban planners and politicians were to convey to the world: a modern city with a "global image of order" (108). An essential aspect of the creation of the 'New Urban Areas' was that agricultural land was expropriated and handed over to the state (for the construction of infrastructural projects) and state-owned and foreign real estate developers. This changed the life of the villagers completely. Land got a commercial value, could be marketed and turned into a gold mine for many villagers. Of course, the villagers complained about the financial compensation for the expropriated land, but also moral issues were voiced and described by Labbé, such as social justice, corruption and greed. She quotes an elderly villager: "In the past, Uncle Hồ [Hồ Chí Minh] took the land of the rich to share it with the poor. Nowadays, it's the opposite: the people's land is taken and shared between officials and developers without any measure to ensure that the inhabitants have a future after the land is gone" (154). There was, Labbé states, a "moral-territorial order", shared feelings about social justice in the village community, for which the villagers fought since independence and shared as well by both the villagers and political elites. The new logic of urban development has violated this order as private economic gains have replaced the well-being of a community.

Even though Labbé mentions protest movements in Hòa Mực and indeed the land grab may have corroded the regime, a sad conclusion suggests itself after reading her fascinating and detailed book: the villagers could cope with the 'state': a colonial administration and a socialist regime, use it and make the best of it. They were, however, less able to cope with the coalition of real estate business and state officials: the 'market'. Comparative research may be useful to see if, and to what extent, Hà Nội has become just another South- and Southeast Asia metropolis regarding its growth and expansion into its urban periphery.

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