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by Stefan Manz and Uwe Spiekermann, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2026, 258 pp., £104 (cloth), ISBN: 9780198966951

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BOOK REVIEW

Making food empires: German technology and global mass production, 1870–1914, by Stefan Manz and Uwe Spiekermann, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2026, 258 pp., £104 (cloth), ISBN: 9780198966951

Food is not often placed among the engines of globalisation in the modern era, which tend to include imperialism, finance, communication, migration, and political cooperation and conflict. But in this new volume by Stefan Manz and Uwe Spiekermann, food takes centre stage. Balancing the histories of science and technology, commodity and business history, and the transnational biographies of immigrant entrepreneurs, Manz and Spiekermann place German migrants and German knowledge at the centre of a dramatic transformation of food production on a global scale. Germany proves central to the text, but the book draws on archival and print sources from over a dozen countries, from Scotland to Antigua, and from Australia to India.

Manz and Spiekermann argue that Germany was a crucial node in the globalisation and industrialisation of food in the decades before 1914. This was because German science, technology, entrepreneurs and migrants circulated through and transformed global markets and imperial networks. They forged a food empire that was not territorially or nationally bounded but rather transnational and trans-imperial in construction. Scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs crisscrossed national and imperial boundaries, carrying knowledge, machinery, production techniques and business practices with them. The result was the emergence of increasingly standardised, mass-produced and branded foods that came to define global markets.

In addition to an introduction, conclusion, and initial contextual framing chapter, the bulk of the book structure centres on three couplets of chapters focused on sugar, rum and beer. The first chapter in each couplet covers the contours of production, regulation and sales, and the second presents a biography of a German migrant or migrant family that transformed the global histories of their respective commodities. Throughout, Manz and Spiekermann emphasise particularly German dynamics – foundational histories of food science in German universities, for example – as well as dynamics of immigrant entrepreneurship that exist beyond German experiences including kinship networks, knowledge flows and community insularity.

Sugar, beer and rum take central stage because they make clear how science and technology developed in Germany or carried by German migrants shaped the technological globalisation of food. The two chapters dealing with sugar are in many ways emblematic of how the authors present arguments across the rest of the book. In the first, chapter three, Manz and Spiekermann rethink the competition between colonial cane sugar and continental beet sugar. Often

positioned against each other as commercial and business rivals, the authors argue that cane and beet sugar – and for that matter alternatives like sorghum and saccharine – were all part of an increasingly interconnected world of knowledge, engineers, machinery, patents and production techniques. Advances in beet sugar production in Germany stimulated the modernisation of cane production worldwide.

Chapter four then shifts to the global entrepreneurial biography of Claus Spreckels, the 'Sugar King' of California and Hawaii. Spreckels built an empire heavily dependent on German knowledge, technology and migrant mobility. He repeatedly returned to Germany to acquire machinery, technical knowledge, and engineers and other experts that could help create an increasingly rationalised agricultural-industrial system in the United States. He was not simply reproducing German practices – in fact his Germanness seemed somewhat irrelevant to him (pp. 87–8) - but drawing on German practices and knowledge, he navigated multiple networks, languages, markets and technical systems. His career demonstrates how migrants could function as brokers between different economic and technological worlds to construct a 'food empire'.

The subsequent chapters on rum and beer follow this basic approach while also raising different sorts of questions. The chapters on rum present some of the most interesting material in the book. Rum, as a commodity, was historically an extremely complex and variable product, not just in its various forms of colonial production, but perhaps more so in multiple European cultures of processing, blending, modifying and imitating. German and Austrian chemists thus understandably struggled to scientise and define authentic or pure rum. That work then transformed industry, production, and thus market availability. When chemical engineer Georg Stade established a rum refinery and experimental station in British Barbados in the 1890s, he imported German machinery and applied laboratory-based chemical engineering to rum production thus creating the island's largest rum producer. His career and application of German science revealed the trans-imperial character of the global modernisation of production.

While the rum chapters feel tight, those on beer open other sorts of questions. True to form, Manz and Spiekermann point to how immigrant entrepreneurs in Milwaukee drew on German brewing expertise and technological infrastructure – refrigeration, microbiology, new machinery and standardisation – to make a new kind of beer possible in the United States. In so doing, they explicitly argue *against* changes in taste and consumer culture, which is, to my mind, a mistake. In fairness, Manz and Spiekermann never set out to write a book that addresses such questions, but scholarship on beer in this period has increasingly sought to incorporate industrial and consumer histories and has made increasingly convincing cases about a global transformation of taste apace the lager revolution. More pointedly, the decision to treat 'Germanness' primarily as an entrepreneurial or marketing category leaves unexplored the social processes by which an immigrant ethnic identity was being remade through consumption and new forms of hybridity in the diaspora.

Scholars of technology, food industries, globalisation, capitalism and immigrant entrepreneurship will find much to praise in this book. In the

final analysis it attempts to explain a global revolution in food systems, knowledge and diets through a transformation of mass production at the level of science, technology and industry. German science and technology provided 'a central node in facilitating mass production on a global scale. That technology was not necessarily visible to consumers but was instead embedded in the sugar they ate and the beer they drank, no matter whether that beer was British, German, Dutch, Danish, American, or Japanese' (p. 196). For readers of this journal, it may be worth emphasising that Manz and Spiekermann are less interested in migrant communities or experiences of mass mobility than in migrants as agents of technological and entrepreneurial transfer. The book treats kinship networks, knowledge flows and mobility as mechanisms through which food technologies and businesses travelled, but they do not consider questions about migrant communities or the larger diasporic experience.

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