

Bruce Knapman, *Fiji's Economic History, 1874-1939: Studies of Capitalist Colonial Development*. Pacific Research Monograph no. 15. Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University, 1987. Pp. xi, 153. A\$12.00.

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This volume deserves a wider readership than that which is likely, given its publication as a monograph. Although it is a reworking of a Ph.D. thesis, careful editing has removed the turgid prose, interminable footnotes, and literature reviews that often characterize such works and has made this into a readable, relevant, and stimulating book.

Despite its title, the book is not, in fact, a comprehensive summary of Fiji's economic history throughout the colonial period, and readers in search of a reference work on this subject will be disappointed. Instead, Knapman has confined himself to the period before the outbreak of the Second World War and has attempted to analyze the nature of colonial

capitalism in Fiji by means of six case studies. He examines, in turn, the role of the dominant Colonial Sugar Refining Company, the indigenous noncapitalist sector, the rise and fall of white planter settlement, shipping, merchant companies, and colonial monetary policy. These chapters analyze a great deal of data that, in many cases, are seen for the first time and Knapman proves adept at using both such detailed material from archives and more macro-economic statistics. Thus, for those with a specialist interest in Fiji, there is a greater insight into, for example, the pricing policies of the C.S.R., the transformation of merchant capital, or the reasons why high export earnings were not translated into increased domestic consumption and incomes of Indian sugar laborers remained very low.

The chapter on the indigenous noncapitalist economy introduces a new level of debate on Fijian historiography. To date there has been a basic division between those who see the colonial policy of conservation as a laudable effort to protect indigenous polities and societies and ease the traumas of incorporation by Western capitalism, and those with a more cynical eye who view conservation as merely a means to lower the costs of social control and assist the penetration of foreign capital. Knapman, however, takes a different tack, though on balance he tends perhaps to the former view. He argues that conservation did not trap indigenous Fijians in a world without opportunity or economic incentive and many were able to exploit new opportunities in wage laboring, production, and trade. It was a far from static sector in the economy and the colonial state did not so much "conserve" as facilitate gradual change. While this must be accepted, it does not end the debate, for economic change occurred at a time of selective political and social ossification--particularly the entrenchment of a privileged elite who were able to exploit both traditional status and colonial protection to enhance its power and wealth. This, together with Indian and foreign dominance of entrepreneurial activity, has constrained indigenous Fijian social and economic transformation and is behind much of the political and economic crises that have surfaced in the past two years.

However, although the selected case studies are, in some ways, unconnected they do allow for an understanding of the central features of Fiji's colonial economy and the dynamics of change simply because they cover the most important sectors of the economy. And, more than an examination of the impact of capitalism within Fiji, these case studies also provide much insight into the development of Australian capitalist enterprise in the Pacific, for it was Australian capital that was dominant in Fiji.

Perhaps of greatest interest to more general readers, though, is the final chapter. Here, Knapman addresses more general theoretical issues. Although he demonstrates (probably more effectively than did previous authors such as Jay Narayan [1984] or William Sutherland [1984]) just how exploitive and inequitable colonial Fiji was, Knapman attacks the neo-Marxist view that colonial capitalism “underdeveloped” Fiji. In this, he is reminiscent of other revisionist economic historians such as Paul Mosley (1983), who use empirical data and economic analysis to question the assertions of radical historians and political scientists. It is usually a convincing approach. Knapman’s critique of the underdevelopment hypothesis has two sides. First, he shows how the view is both theoretically unsound (being tautological and simplistic) and empirically invalid, for it denies the evidence of significant income and infrastructural growth in colonial Fiji, despite exploitation and inequality--Fiji, after all, achieved very high rates of exports per capita by tropical country standards. Secondly, he states that, for all its faults, colonial capitalism in Fiji was simply the best alternative, others being “utopian or inferior” (p. 142). Colonial capitalism offered many opportunities as well as significant constraints.

Such is the contribution to the debate: informed analysis, aware of the unhappy, iniquitous, and unstable nature of colonial Fiji, but sufficiently sober to discount the often facile rhetoric of underdevelopment theory. Overall, this work makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Fijian and Pacific history. As well as filling a major gap--the lack of studies on Fiji’s economic history--it is economic history that addresses political and social issues and thus is of interest to those working in other disciplines. It stimulates a debate on Fijian underdevelopment that is bound to continue, now much better informed.

REFERENCES

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- Narayan, Jay. 1984. *The Political Economy of Fiji*. Suva: South Pacific Review Press.
- Sutherland, William M. 1984. *The State and Capitalist Development in Fiji*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Canterbury.