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## **Toby Green, A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2019)**

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us with his might,” and “All the world that’s owned by idle drones is ours and ours alone.” Nor would they appreciate the verse in Joe Hill’s song “Mr. Block,” a song that might have been included here, where a mistreated worker turns to “the great AF of L” for help, hoping Samuel Gompers would “fix that foreman right.” Instead, “Sam Gompers said ‘You see, you’ve got our sympathy.’” As another Wobbly songwriter, Al Grierson, used to say, “You know, you can sub in the name of every AFL and CLC president from Sam Gompers on in this song and it scans perfectly. Coincidence? I think not!” These songs remind us that the labour movement has a rich, militant, and radical history. They are also one way to help invigorate a movement that has been throttled by sclerotic leaders for decades and is only recently showing signs of new life. Sarah Ogan Gunning’s “I Hate the Capitalist System” is a good place to start.

Callahan and Moore have also recorded these songs in an accompanying CD. Their sparse arrangements and strong vocals evoke the origins of the songs and deliver them with power and verve. They remind us that singing together is itself a small exercise in solidarity: a few people start off, others join in, and if it is a little rough in places, we get it more or less right by the end as we support and lift each other. We need more collections, notably from those groups omitted from this collection and from contemporary workers and struggles, but this is “a history of struggle in song,” meaning it is neither “the” history nor an attempt to gather up the music of people today. It fulfills its function as history with the precision of the scholar, the engagement of the folksinger, and the hope of the activist.

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**Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2019)**

DESPITE DECADES of effort by Africanist historians, Africa remains perennially misunderstood, falsely disconnected from the stream of history. Historians of the Atlantic world and early modern globalization have made some advances bringing Africa into their accounts, but a longstanding reductive approach remains in place. West Africa is commonly understood through the Atlantic Slave Trade and reduced to being a victim of external depredation, or set apart as a place waiting to be awoken from stasis. Toby Green’s book not only pushes non-Africanists to think afresh about how they locate African in history, but does much to push Africanists and suggest paths they might take.

Two ambitions shape this wide-ranging and sweeping treatment of Atlantic Africa from the late 14th century to the mid 19th century. Part I asks how Africa’s engagement in the Atlantic economy, initiated on largely favorable terms by sovereign states, eventually put Africa at an entrenched disadvantage which has persisted since. Green presents five case studies ranging geographically from Senegambia to the Kongo, and chronologically from the 15th to the 17th centuries, to illustrate variations on a common theme. Africans largely welcomed Atlantic trade. Indeed, Green shows how the early trade with Portugal was built on goods, business arrangements and state systems already connecting West Africa to global markets across the Sahara, contrary to common notions that European trade brought West Africa out of isolation. African rulers, merchants and workers not only managed these Atlantic connections well, they shaped how the early Atlantic world developed. They traded

such goods as gold, peppers, and captives for cowrie shells, copper and cloth, with regional variations. As Europeans expanded the import of cowries directly from the Indian Ocean (instead of the established overland route), the more ample flow of money allowed African economies to expand and intensify. But this exchange also had negative effects. West Africans became dependent on this inflow of currency. They also established a pattern of trading away “hard” currencies (gold) for currencies which also had other uses (iron, copper, cloth). The metals also become tools and weapons; cloth was also worn and displayed; cowries also sustained rulers’ prestige and ritual power. Meanwhile, the Europeans, who also never stopped having similar multiple uses for gold, gradually acquired the modern habit of treating it as capital to be accumulated. The enlarged flow of cowries, and Europeans’ growing output of inexpensive cloth, created inflationary pressures which undermined Africans’ buying power for European goods. Even strong states, dependent on revenues and currency circulation in their internal economies, found themselves obliged to produce more captives to obtain enough currency, driving the slave trade forward in all its destructive force. The long-term impact was not only the pressure to trade away captive labour, but also Africa’s relative loss of currencies with durable value in global markets, creating an imbalance of capital which benefited the West.

In Part II Green foregrounds another important ambition of this large book in a series of six thematic essays focused on the period from about the late 17th century to the early 19th century. Green wants to render Atlantic Africa a fully historical part of the dynamic Atlantic world. African societies were not only deeply challenged by the rise of the Atlantic world, but also responded and contributed to it in patterns that reached

across land as well as around the Atlantic. Many factors are put in play – one of the strengths (and points) of Green’s approach – and this web of forces cannot be adequately conveyed here. The broad story is one of building revolutionary tensions which would break out in the 19th century. Captured by their dependence on foreign trade, West African states increasingly used captives as a currency which could resist inflationary pressure. This, of course, placed African productive labour in the service of Europe as it robbed Africa. The violence of enslavement disrupted African societies. Extraneous factors, like the 17th century little ice age, destabilized food supplies. But this was also an era of inventive adjustment and growth, pursued in various African registers even as it was entangled in Atlantic currents of change. As in early modern Europe, the expansion of trade and currency supplies inspired the development of fiscal-military states in Africa, which gathered tax revenue to assert their power. Some states, Asante for example, were more robust than most, in part because they had supplies of gold which ameliorated the inflationary pressures felt everywhere. Importantly, African responses to these challenges were not static, either on the part of the rulers and merchants, or of the commoners exposed to the predations of the former. New religious practices, new ethnic and political identities, new accounts of history formed. The destabilization and resistance in Africa connected to similar trends in the Atlantic. Enslaved African soldiers deployed their skills in the rebel armies of the Haitian Revolution. Ideas of reform against the slaving order flowed in both from the Atlantic and Islamic worlds. The crescendo of jihads in 18th and 19th century West Africa, with their embedded rebellions against enslavement, were not only contemporary with upheavals in Europe, the Americas, and

the Caribbean, but also linked to them as revolutions against a newly oppressive economic and moral order. Even as Atlantic Africa became more harmed and troubled, its people generated robust and resilient cultural institutions which flowed into the Atlantic, carrying with them experience establishing quilombos as sites of escape and resistance, Islamic notions of rights and freedoms, and much more. Green not only presents Africa's history as full-bodied, but also bridges the gap that so many historians assume divides the precolonial from the colonial, finding in the centuries before the European partition of the continent the roots of not only Africa's impoverishment relative to Europe, but also its contemporary politics of popular resistance to predatory elites.

The arguments in *Fistful of Shells* can be fitful at times, repeated in various contexts, interrupted by digressions, articulated with varying degrees of clarity. This book would be difficult to use as a whole in undergraduate teaching. A coda to Part I and a prologue to Part II, however, usefully bring the diverse case studies of the former and the overlapping essays of the latter into focus. Green is not persuasive on all points, but that is not really the point. He wants to provoke his readers to think about Africa differently, as dynamic, complex and connected. He draws causal chains together that are at least arguable – and often convincing – to fight the longstanding habit of not looking for these connections. Green examined archives around the Atlantic world to collect stories and artefacts which connote the legacies of Africans' historical presence in music, food, architecture and memory, and uses these to pointedly remind us that Africa remains woven into the Atlantic world today. For both Africanists and non-Africanists, this book sets by way of example a commanding challenge to finally dispense with

habits of mind dating from the Atlantic slave trade era which unwittingly reduce Africa's historical importance and generative power, and to start making the connections which reveal West Africa's dynamic history within its shores and within the Atlantic world.

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**Mike Gonzalez, *In the Red Corner: The Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2019)**

MIKE GONZALEZ'S BOOK brings to the English-speaking world an interesting overview of the life, thought and political praxis of José Carlos Mariátegui La Chira, a Peruvian Marxist who is considered one of the greatest thinkers in Latin America. In simple prose, without the intention of delving deeply into the debates he explores, Gonzalez fluently presents, in just over 200 pages, the Andean author's historical context and intellectual development, tracing a succinct and introductory description of his life and work.

In the opening chapters, he explores Mariátegui's personal and cultural background, sketching the steps of his trajectory towards Marxism: his activities as an activist journalist; his exile and eventual embrace of communism and other contemporary thinking in Europe; his work with the magazine *Amauta* (a term that would become his nickname, whose meaning in Quechua is "wise"), an editorial project that was proposed not only as a "group," but as a "movement" of "organic" intellectuals (in the concept of Gramsci), and that would be the basis of the construction of its "revolutionary nucleus." Later, the book approaches his classic work, *Seven Tests of Interpretation of the Peruvian Reality*; deals with the issues that involved the founding of the