

Book review

PAULA A. DE LA CRUZ-FERNÁNDEZ, *Gendered Capitalism: Sewing Machines and Multinational Business in Spain and Mexico, 1850–1940*. Routledge, New York, 2021. xi þ 189 pp., 12 b/w illus. £27.99 ebook; £27.99 pbk; £96 hbk. ISBN: 9780367770433(pbk)

An 1890 Spanish postcard depicting a woman in folkloric Spanish dress read: ‘In the humblest corner of the world: where there is a woman, there will be a Singer machine!’ (p. 17). The postcard examined by de la Cruz-Fernandez in the introduction of *Gendered Capitalism* perfectly condenses the aim and research methods of the book, which is the result of de la Cruz-Fernandez’s doctoral research. *Gendered Capitalism* reconsiders the unilateral prowess of the American multinational company through the peripheral voices of local sellers and consumers in Singer’s host economies by combining business history with material culture and gender studies. Whilst such a multidisciplinary approach is familiar to Textile History readers, the addition of everyday objects to business records reflects an ongoing disciplinary turn in business history. *Gendered Capitalism* brings together sewing manuals with visual records and Spanish, Mexican and American archival sources to create an interesting examination of the interchangeable roles between consumers and producers. For de la Cruz-Fernández, this in-between area can be understood by focusing on women’s domestic sewing and embroidery practices in the context of the multinational Singer. *Gendered Capitalism* aims to incorporate both women and ideas of domesticity into theories of business internationalisation. It builds upon gendered histories of consumption to address a paucity of literature on women’s agency within histories of modern corporations. *Gendered Capitalism* departs from a discussion of women’s productive consumption of Singer sewing machines to examine how women became marketing experts who shaped, bottom-up, the management and business culture of the American company. Singer grounded its sales strategies in the domestic sphere, which de la Cruz-Fernández theorises as the household’s system of meanings that were culturally constructed at a community level. De la Cruz-Fernández argues that Singer expanded globally through local engagement with consumers and markets. This was most evident in Singer’s first Spanish-speaking markets, Spain and Mexico, where local selling agents and customers

interwove Singer's technology with local customs. In doing so, *Gendered Capitalism* nuances assumptions around the Americanisation of global culture to reveal how Singer became, in Spain and Mexico, an aspirational national symbol of modernisation. The chronological framework, from 1850 to 1940, allows the author to track from the foundation of the company in 1851, the establishment of operations in Spain (1873) and Mexico (the 1880s), to Singer's evolving practices through moments of national economic and political turmoil (the Mexican Revolution in 1910–1917 and Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939).

A significant achievement by the author is to retain the focus on women and peripheral histories even when engaging with core questions of management and technological innovation. The first of four chapters, 'Multinational Threads: A History of Global Singer', provides what reads like an extended introduction, since here the author explains her framework and an overview of Singer's business model. Yet, this chapter also factors in women as technological testers and mediators in selling what was considered an item of heavy machinery as a domestic appliance. In Chapter 2, 'Singer in Spain and Mexico: A History of Collective Entrepreneurship', the author turns what could have been a straightforward history of the company's organisation into one centred on family-run shops and rural travelling salespeople, some of whom were women (from the 1930s) and how this organisational structure informed decisions at Singer's headquarters. Chapters 3 ('The Consumer as Marketing Expert') and 4 ('Female Economies in the Era of Global Capitalism') expand on women's activities. Particularly interesting is the study of Singer's female-driven Art Department (later labelled Educational), which managed the company's promotional strategies. The women employed by Singer's Art Department organised and designed the displays at international exhibitions and store windows and conducted demonstrations in schools, targeting girls and women. Singer facilitated a trustworthy atmosphere for female interaction, encouraging sales by showing Singer's suitability to produce traditional embroidery, or, indeed, by receiving training to become professional dressmakers. As Chapter 4 demonstrates, these skills along with Singer's system of financial credit, proved particularly useful to Spanish and Mexican women, whose possibilities to own property or develop a profession were, otherwise, constrained. With this last chapter, de la Cruz-Fernández extends the boundaries of

other studies of multinational companies by delving into the 'informal economies' that interlocked with these corporation histories. It should be noted, however, that on p. 123 there is a mis-referenced illustration; 'Figure 3.4' does not exist. In summary, Gendered Capitalism is a business history that speaks to textile historians. It follows the space between the home and the organisation of the multinational to investigate corporate values from a gendered perspective. It demonstrates clearly how a sales strategy based on familiarity facilitated Singer's global expansion.

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