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doi:10.1017/S0007680519000837

Reviewed by Amy Bentley

Shane Hamilton’s Supermarket USA: Food and Power in the Cold War Farms Race is a well-written, concise examination of the soft-power role of supermarkets during the post-World War II Cold War era. While other histories have detailed this era, none has employed a similarly sustained focus. The result is a top-notch volume that will be of interest to scholars and students of U.S. history, business history, Cold War politics, and food studies, as well as the generally educated reader.

Supermarket USA rests on two main premises. The first is that American supermarkets must be understood not just as retail space but also as the “endpoint of a supply chain dependent upon industrialized agriculture” (p. 2). In doing so, Hamilton rightly seeks to complicate the traditional historical narrative that artificially separates production from consumption. The second premise of the book highlights the early, substantial government support and subsidization of food research, production, processing, and distribution, which enabled supermarkets to thrive and dominate not only domestically but overseas as well. Hamilton explains, “The agricultural system that enabled the rise of the American supermarket was far from an embodiment of ‘free enterprise’; it was a product of powerful state investment in the science and technology required to maintain the abundance on display in mid-twentieth century supermarkets” (p. 2). To highlight these two premises, Hamilton has coined the phrase “Cold War Farms Race,” which he uses throughout the book. “If supermarkets were weapons” Hamilton notes, “it was because farms emerged as crucial battlegrounds in the economic contest between the US and the USSR” (p. 3).

Hamilton employs the “Chicken of Tomorrow” case to illustrate “an agricultural supply network willed into being by supermarket demands
and constructed in tight collaboration with government agents” (p. 38). In the 1950s, supermarkets were seeking more efficient, reliable supply chains for products proving popular to American consumers. An A&P supermarket director of poultry research suggested a contest for breeders to develop a chicken that would produce larger amounts of breast meat in a shorter period of time. Financed by both public and private funds, the competition was made possible in large part because of government-sponsored genetic research. The result was a revolution in poultry production. Within a decade, Hamilton explains, “two-thirds of the nation’s broilers could trace their genetic lineage to the Chicken of Tomorrow prizewinners” (p. 40).

The Cold War expansion of supermarkets overseas aligned with government aims of curbing communism. Public and private entities alike believed that American supermarkets’ overflowing abundance could convince citizens of other countries of the virtues of capitalism and American-style democracy. Hamilton explores the consequences of supermarkets as the “physical and symbolic bearers of American-style ‘economic freedom’ [as] they were shipped around the world as instruments of Cold War anticommunist campaigns” (p. 3).

For example, he describes in compelling detail Nelson Rockefeller’s IBEC Venezuelan chain of supermarkets. While the chain had its successes, it ultimately failed to shape local agriculture to reliably supply the stores and thus fell far short of its humanitarian aims to improve the food supply for all. Supermarkets were forced to source their groceries primarily from the United States and thus became vilified symbols of American imperialism. Hamilton goes on to detail perhaps the best-known chapter of American supermarket diplomacy: the expansion to and demonstration of goods in the Soviet sphere, including Yugoslavia and Moscow, the latter being where the famous Khrushchev/Nixon “kitchen debate” took place.

The story continues into the 1970s. Hamilton juxtaposes and finds similarities between the Soviet grain shortages and American overproduction of grain. Both involved concerted state involvement, the author notes, and both by this time were well involved in and affected by a global grain market. The U.S. grain glut had its effect on American farmers as well as consumers vis-à-vis agribusiness farm consolidation and price control. “In the decades that followed, the American food distribution system, constructed on an agribusiness foundation that prioritized efficiency and abundance over individual autonomy for either farmers or shoppers, increasingly penetrated the global food economy” (pp. 176–77). The book follows the story through the end of the twentieth century, as American transnational agribusiness corporations, including ADM and Walmart, “demonstrat[ed] U.S. farm and food power to the
world” (p. 179). Whereas in the mid-twentieth century there was a humanitarian impulse to provide food to war-stricken nations, a few decades later, Hamilton argues, U.S.-based transnational corporations rewrote the rules of global food production and trade “on entirely profit-driven terms. ... As distribution-driven agro-capitalism took command, the world’s farmers became embedded in a tightly regulated web of contract-driven agriculture” (p. 179).

I have a few minor quibbles with the book. Food, for example, was regarded as a weapon of war well before the Cold War period, including in a well-documented propaganda campaign during World War II. Further, supermarkets were not the only private entities driving agricultural production at midcentury. Industrial food manufacturers such as the Gerber Products Company also contracted with farmers, and largely dictated their planting and production schedules. Finally, the innovative explanatory term “farms race” can at times seem a bit forced. Overall, however, there is much to admire in this book. The author has done a great service by placing supermarkets within this political/economic framework. The book sheds new light on the subject, providing an important and valuable contribution to the historical record.

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doi:10.1017/S0007680519000849

Reviewed by Chinmay Tumbe

Business and politics in interwar India is a theme explored by so many historians that one wonders what more can be said about it. Plenty, it appears, after reading Medha Kudaisya’s book, a tour de force of intellectual history. It brings to life a ninety-page document dubbed the Bombay Plan, drawn up by eight leading Indian industrialists and officials in 1944 (and a ninth non-signatory intellectual), that set out a vision for India’s economic future after World War II. In seven chapters, the book covers the political and economic conditions that shaped the production of the Bombay Plan, the lives of the people who created it, the context and