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Book Review

Hopped Up: How Travel, Trade, and Taste Made Beer a Global Commodity

Oxford University Press, 2024: 352 pages

Reviewed by Ethan Shapiro

Jeffrey M. Pilcher's *Hopped Up* serves up a finely crafted global history of beer that traverses centuries of trade, migration, and technological innovation. The book navigates an ambitious chronological and geographical scope, inviting readers on an intoxicating, international voyage that spans from ancient brewing traditions to the contemporary craft beer renaissance. In seven chapters, Pilcher masterfully traces the beverage's dynamic history, uncovering how capitalist transformations have shaped and re-shaped beer—its material forms, markets, and meanings—across sociocultural contexts.

Dislodging contemporary beer categories from static narratives of timeless tradition, Pilcher's thesis frames these standardized styles as contingent and ever-evolving products of capitalist development shaped by transnational flows of people, knowledge, and technology. While pre-modern societies contained rich brewing variations, from Incan *chicha* to Babylonian “one-year-beer” to Chinese *Qu*-based beverages (pp. 19–40), Pilcher shows that systematic codification of beers is a distinctly modern phenomenon—even as such

classifications harken back to imagined pasts. Thus, “the beer mug” becomes “a lens for viewing the history of that [capitalist] world system and the lives of people caught up in it” (p. *viii*).

After reviewing pre-capitalist brewing, the book explores beer's entanglements with capitalism. As markets expanded under mercantilist trade, producers and urban authorities sought to classify alcoholic drinks, giving rise to styles like northern German hopped beer, Japanese *morohaku* sake, and London porter. These styles resulted less from terroir than from growing networks of commerce, regulation, and the increasing need for product differentiation. Similarly, the iconic lagers of the nineteenth century—Pilsner, Munich, Vienna—were innovations made possible by the mobility of skilled workers, the diffusion of brewing technologies, and the internationalization of ingredients and techniques. European imperialists promoted industrial beers as symbols of modernity, while colonized peoples incorporated them into local drinking cultures. Through the twentieth century, beer styles were further

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taxonomized through the construction of distinct “national” traditions—ironically enabled by transnational relations. These national boundaries were exceeded by the century’s end, as liberalized markets, corporate restructuring, and intensified advertising transformed beer into global brands. Far from a static category, the pale lager is revealed to be the ever-mutable outcome of ongoing global exchange, blending British industrial techniques, Bavarian fermentation, Japanese filtration, Mexican malting, and varied local adjuncts. Finally, as it sought to codify its stylistic difference from mass-market lager, the craft beer movement relied on the same infrastructures of supply, equipment, and expertise developed by corporate brewers.

Throughout this narrative, Pilcher consistently foregrounds the dual social life of beer, as both an anchor of community and a marker of distinction. Beer has long strengthened social bonds, whether in neolithic fields or working-class pubs, while also expressing social hierarchy through tiered consumption systems, from tributary empires to the modern proliferation of “premium” brands. These dynamics of solidarity and stratification are explored extensively in relation to gender and race, including women’s changing roles in brewing and drinking cultures, and the racialized regulation of alcohol in colonial contexts. However, far from reducing beer’s meaning to its social uses, Pilcher attends deeply to the ways in which its sensory properties interact with local social and symbolic worlds. For instance, the clarity and crispness of pale lager aligned with Japanese culinary aesthetics, while the pungency of wild yeasts and strong hop flavours, pathologized in nineteenth century hygiene discourse, signaled authenticity for craft brewers.

Alongside its analytic richness, *Hopped Up* stands out for its exceptional chronological range. This expansiveness allows Pilcher to reframe the history of beer not as a linear tale of European expansion and technological progress, but as a dynamic and polyvocal

process marked by continuities and contingencies, domination and resistance. Furthermore, in contrast to the predominant national and regional focus of beer scholarship, this book adopts a relentlessly global framework, revealing how beer styles and meanings emerge through cross-cultural encounters and transnational flows. With anthropological attentiveness, Pilcher traces the ways that commodity beer is continually recontextualized and localized as its geographical mobility grows alongside that of its makers and drinkers. The analysis also reveals a vigilant materialism, situating beer’s symbolic meanings within political economic relations and technical infrastructures. At each turn, Pilcher’s historical narrative carefully avoids technological determinism—unlike some popular and academic accounts of beer’s commercialization—by showing how brewing innovations co-evolve with shifting tastes, social meanings, and power relations. His approach is impressively interdisciplinary, weaving insights from neuroscience, microbiology, and sociology to illuminate the historical significance of this world-historic beverage.

Hopped Up will appeal to a wide audience across fields including anthropology, sociology, food studies, and science and technology studies, and will be especially valuable for readers interested in the cultural and political economy of food and drink. Scholars of social distinction will find valuable material in Pilcher’s analysis of how everyday consumption practices—from chicha feasts to craft connoisseurship—reflect and reproduce gendered, racial, and class stratification. Those studying imperialism and nation-building will appreciate the book’s careful attention to the role of beer in colonial governance, modern citizenship, and nationalist projects. Canadian food scholars will welcome its thoughtful engagement with Canada’s beer history, from colonial-era brewing to EP Taylor’s postwar consolidation and the nation’s craft beer boom. More broadly, the book’s

transnational approach offers an essential complement to local analyses by situating Canadian brewing within wider networks of migration, knowledge, and trade. Finally, *Hopped Up* will be indispensable for craft beer scholars, offering a critical corrective to celebratory accounts by placing the movement within the longue durée of capitalism.

The book's extraordinary geographic and temporal ambition is perhaps also its primary limitation. Some readers may desire more treatment of specific cases than a

global, centuries-spanning account can provide. Yet this is the inevitable trade-off of a project that synthesizes centuries of beer's history across continents and cultures. In providing an expansive yet concise history of a ubiquitous commodity, *Hopped Up* serves as a shining reminder of how everyday articles of food and drink have participated in the making of the modern world.

Ethan Shapiro is a Sociology PhD student at the University of Toronto. His research currently examines the Canadian craft beer industry to understand the everyday social processes behind cultural markets.