Mercury and the Making of California: Mining, Landscape, and Race, 1840–1890
Andrew Scott Johnston
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The historiography on mining in the US West has metamorphosed in recent decades. Vernon Jensen, Melvyn Dubofsky, and other scholars in the 1950s and 1960s focused largely on the radicalism evinced by the region’s miners. The emergence of new historical methodologies in the 1970s and 1980s greatly expanded the scope of mining history. As a result, a host of talented historians have breathed fresh life into mining history by deploying insights from the new social history, Native American and indigenous studies, women’s history and gender analysis, environmental history, critical race studies, science and technology studies, and transnational approaches. Andrew Scott Johnston’s *Mercury and the Making of California: Mining, Landscape, and Race, 1840–1890* draws upon and advances this new scholarship.

“No all of California history,” Johnston points out, “matches the mythical ideals of the gold rush.” He wonders: “What if, instead of the Golden State, California were the Quicksilver State?” (1). *Mercury and the Making of California* shifts our perspective and casts California’s history in a different light from that of the gilded fables spun in the wake of James Marshall’s epochal 1848 strike at Sutter’s Mill. Contrary to myth and legend, mercury mining began before Americans conquered California. Instead of the hardy prospectors that figure centrally in tales of stalwart forty-niners, Johnston shows how British capitalists and Latin American miners—chiefly Mexicans, but Chileans, too—combined to drive rapid development in the quicksilver sector. By 1851, California accounted for roughly half of global mercury production—a figure that remained essentially unchanged for the following four decades.

Like other recent histories of mining in the American West, *Mercury and the Making of California* eschews old exceptionalisms and adopts a more global perspective. Because virtually every method of extracting precious metals from raw ores devised prior to the 1890s depended on mercury, quicksilver has always played a subtle but significant role in solidifying the economic might—and hence the military power—of a succession of great powers, from Bourbon Spain to Hapsburg Austria. At the same time, mercury also underpinned the rise of extravagant private fortunes, most notably those of the Fuggers and the Rothschilds. With the cession of the Oregon Country and the American conquest of Mexico in the late 1840s, British hopes of engulfing California into its rapidly expanding empire evaporated. However, this did little to dampen the enthusiasm for California quicksilver of Barron, Forbes, and Company, a British merchant house whose reach extended from Mexico and South America to Hong Kong. With the world’s two other major centers of mercury extraction located half a world away, in Spain and present-day Slovenia, the British owners of California’s New Almaden Mine had an advantage through much of the Pacific World. Most of the mercury marketed by Barron, Forbes made its way to the far-flung hinterlands where gold and silver were mined and processed.

Though British capital launched California’s mercury industry, a new American firm—the Quicksilver Mining Company (QMC)—assumed control after a hot contest marked by land claims cases, injunctions, Supreme Court decisions, and armed standoffs between federal troops and the QMC’s private forces. After the takeover, mercury production increased more rapidly than ever before. Increased supply, though, soon precipitated a
steep decline in mercury prices on global markets. As the QMC faltered, several competitors entered the breach. The 1870s witnessed a quicksilver boom, which led to the development of new mercury mines up and down the Pacific Coast Range, but this surge of expansion soon dissipated. By the late 1880s, California’s mercury industry entered steep decline because of a state prohibition against hydraulic gold mining, the legalized harassment of Chinese miners (who dominated the workforce at most of California’s newer quicksilver properties), and the eclipse of mercury amalgamation by new methods for refining gold and silver.

Johnston proves an adept business historian, but he wisely refuses to analyze the story of California quicksilver only from the top down. Indeed, he spends most of the book’s second half focusing on work, workers, and power. He develops a “typology” of quicksilver mines, then proceeds to compare and contrast the labor systems, racial hierarchies, and mining-camp communities that developed, depending on timing, location, economic networks, geologic factors, and other variables. Not surprisingly, he maintains that deep-seated racial hierarchies shaped virtually every aspect of work and life throughout California’s mercury-producing hinterlands.

More noteworthy is Johnston’s skillful and incisive analysis of mining and community life at New Almaden, the first, largest, and best documented of all the quicksilver camps. “The story of the technology of the quicksilver industry,” he maintains, “is a story of power struggles” between investors, managers, and workers (114). The Mexican miners who initially developed the mines at New Almaden and its neighbor, Guadalupe, generally used what has been called the “practical or empirical system” of mining. American mining engineers derided such seemingly haphazard techniques as “the ‘rat-hole’ method,” preferring instead the “advanced ‘mining methods’ introduced by the swelling ranks of Cornishmen brought in by mine managers (139). Maps of New Almaden’s subterranean workings registered a subtle but decisive shift in 1877: Ore bodies, which miners had previously given names like Don Federico and O’Brion were now given numbers by the mine’s professional engineers. This change reflected and reinforced a broader reconfiguration of economic and social power that ramified, from the underground tunnels and chambers of the quicksilver mines to the towns above, as Anglo engineers, managers, and capitalists. From the industry’s inception, production at New Almaden was conducted via an intricate array of contracts. Miners organized themselves into so-called companies, which were almost always ethnically and racially homogeneous. These companies then competed against each other to win contracts from mine managers. Under this system, Mexicans and Cousin Jacks (Cornishmen) increasingly came to specialize in different tasks—the former in extracting ore through “tribute contracts,” the latter in extending the mine’s infrastructure through yardage contracts.

This “hybrid” of labor systems was rooted in European and Latin American precedents, Johnston persuasively explains, and was “recognizable” to miners who emigrated from both world regions (146). And yet this was also a form of hybridization that heightened the already considerable barriers between Spanish- and English-speaking workers. When New Almaden’s new American owners attempted “to increase regimentation and . . . cut the cost of labor,” (148) workers from Mexico, Chile, and other parts of Latin America united to launch five strikes between November 1864 and April 1866, but European miners refused to join them. Their refusal to strike enabled the QMC to remain in production with only minor delays. “With a workforce divided against itself,” Johnston concludes, “and
with workers who worked only with those who shared their ethnicity, the company successfully defended itself from the possibility of further mass strikes, and indeed there was never another strike by workers at New Almaden” (148–49). Despite this larger theme of ethnoracial antagonism, *Mercury and the Making of California* does offer one tantalizing glimpse of class solidarity. In 1880, 129 employees of the Guadalupe Mine—“Euro-American, Mexican, and Chinese—sued the company for wages due them” (198). Unfortunately, Johnston never details how this conflict was resolved, presumably because sources on labor relations in the quicksilver industry remain sparse.

In his closing chapters, Johnston turns increasingly to Chinese workers. At older mines, gangs of Chinese men hired through San Francisco’s Six Companies typically performed only the most hazardous or menial jobs. At most of the new quicksilver mines launched during the booming 1870s, by contrast, Chinese dominated the payrolls, laboring both underground and on the surface. As the Workingmen’s Party of California and its allies stepped up their anti-Chinese campaign, the quicksilver industry and its employees faced legal challenges to its reliance on Chinese labor.

*Mercury and the Making of California* possesses many strengths. Yet it also suffers from three major lacunae. First, the book devotes surprisingly little attention to health, safety, and the environment—a disappointing oversight given the extraordinary danger mercury presented to humans and other organisms. Second, while Johnston is right to contrast California’s quicksilver mines to its gold mines, he generally fails to consider the broader context of western mining. Readers familiar with the region’s coal and copper industries will note many intriguing but undeveloped points of comparison with Johnston’s story. Finally, though Johnston demonstrates that mercury mattered to California’s mining-based economy, he is ultimately more persuasive in showing how the state’s entrenched racial hierarchies shaped power relationships in quicksilver mines and camps. California clearly made mercury, in other words, but how mercury made California remains less clear than it ought to be. Despite these limitations, Johnston nonetheless makes a worthy contribution to our understanding of work, race, and power in western mining.

Thomas G. Andrews, *University of Colorado Boulder*

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**Fear Itself:**
The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time

Ira Katznelson

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*Fear Itself* offers a story in the tragic mode. The United States was saved, Ira Katznelson argues, from the possibility of an authoritarian response to the economic collapse and war through a costly compromise—one that condemned southern African Americans to further decades of Jim Crow and terminally weakened a promising labor movement. Behind this compromise, he argues, were two forces: the power of the southern Democrats in Congress, who stymied progressive reform, and fear—of depression poverty, foreign aggression, and