

Global Commodities: Special Issue of the *Austrian Journal of Historical Studies*

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Harvesting coffee, Sao Paulo, Brazil. 1923. Artemas Ward, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The history of capitalism has gained renewed attention over the last decade. This renaissance has materialized in a broad spectrum of book publications, ranging from short introductions to comprehensive collections, monographs, and handbooks (Kocka, 2016; Neal & Williamson, 2014). Scholarly efforts for a new history of capitalism emerged from developments not only within but also beyond the academic field – first and foremost by the Great Recession of 2008,

highlighting the vulnerability of neoliberal capitalism to fundamental crises (Tooze, 2018). In this regard, historians and other scholars from the social sciences and humanities have rediscovered commodities, both as an object of study and as a research perspective on more comprehensive objects.

The concept of commodity provides a cornerstone for the study of capitalism. Classical scholars such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Karl Marx define the commodity

as a value-bearing product to be sold in a market (Sammond, 2007). While Karl Polanyi (2001) takes up these theoretical strands, he draws a distinction between genuine and fictitious commodities: whereas the former are conceived as goods and services produced for sale on the market, the latter – most importantly, labor and land – are not produced for market sale. The commodification of labor (i.e. society) and land (i.e. nature) through the implementation of the “free market” utopia by liberal nation states in the nineteenth century is said to lead to disaster. Once the disruptive effects of the “free market” become apparent, counter-movements to marketization would retreat from the tenets of market self-regulation (disembedding) to protect society and nature through regulatory institutions (re-embedding).

Polanyi’s Great Transformation, centered on the “double movement” of liberal marketization and protective counter-movements, can be read as a history of capitalist globalization *avant la lettre*, of what is usually termed the “first wave of globalization” (Osterhammel & Petersson, 2007). Since the underlying conceptualization of commodity lacks any notion of transnational relations, further waves of global connection – reflected by the introduction of the term “globalization” in the 1990s – have called for a world-historical notion of commodification. The concept of commodity chain, introduced by Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, offers a response to this challenge:

What we mean by such chains is the following: take an ultimate consumable item and trace back the set of inputs that culminated in this item, including prior transformations, the raw materials, the transportation mechanisms, the labor input into each of the material processes, the food inputs into the labor. This linked set of processes we call a commodity chain (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1977, 128; see also Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1986).

World-systems analysts apply the concept of commodity chain in order to reveal the emergence of a politically mediated division of labor incorporating core and

(semi-)peripheral world regions into a global capitalist economy.

Recent approaches, most importantly global commodity chains (GCCs) and global value chains (GVCs), have shifted away from this long-term, world-historical perspective – which is deeply rooted in socio-economic thinking – towards more short-term and more narrowly industry- and firm-centered analyses (Bair, 2008; Grewe, 2019). For instance, Gary Gereffi’s GCC approach focuses on the modes of governing buyer-supplier relationships, comprising several dimensions: the transformation of raw materials and other inputs into final products; the spatial configuration; the governance structure, which oscillates between producer-driven and buyer-driven chains; and the institutional “rules of the game” (Gereffi, 1994, 1995). The GVC approach has further differentiated this typology into five governance structures (hierarchy, captive, relational, modular, and market) and regards these as determined by three variables: the complexity of transactions; the ability to codify transactions; and the capabilities of the supply base (Gereffi, Humphrey & Sturgeon, 2005; Humphrey & Schmitz, 2000). Moreover, economic geographers have argued for a re-embedding of commodity chain research under the label of global production networks (GPN). In contrast to GCC and GVC approaches, GPN scholarship emphasizes the multi-scalar dynamics of globalization, i.e. the embeddedness of global networks in national, regional, and local contexts, including state and non-governmental actors (Hess & Coe, 2006).

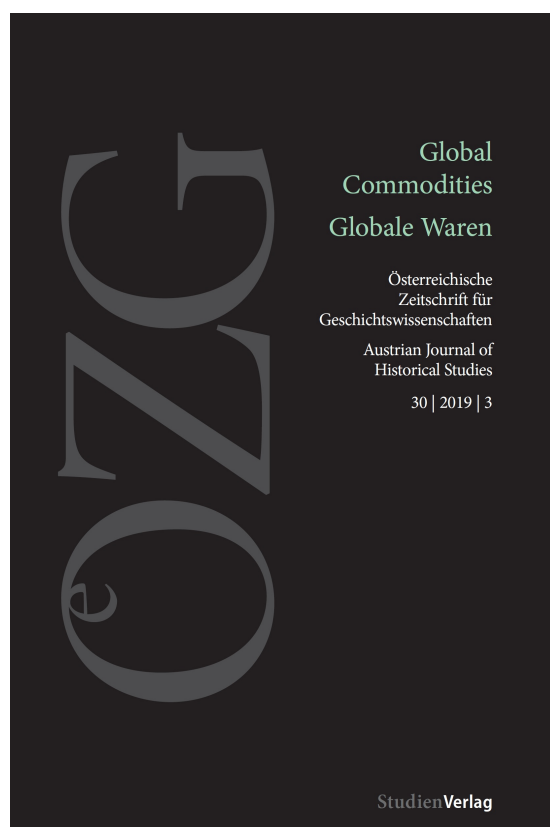
The sheer size of this flourishing literature highlights the appeal of chain and network metaphors as tools for conceptualizing globalization in the field of commodity studies. However, some critiques of these approaches have recently emerged: first, they emphasize the centers of the capitalist sphere rather than the peripheries, thus neglecting the contested incorporation of labor and nature in remote areas. Second, they tend to underestimate the “more than human” dimension of commodification, thus neglecting the agency of non-human entities, both organic and inorganic. To address these issues, Jason Moore has introduced the concept of commodity frontier from a world-

ecological perspective. It extends far beyond Frederic Turner's classical frontier thesis, which argued that the frontier experience shaped collective identity in nineteenth-century North America (Turner, 2012). As "a zone beyond which further expansion is possible" (Moore, 2000, 412), the commodity frontier directs our attention, first, to the more or less contested places of incorporation into the space of the capitalist world economy and, second, to the intersection of society and nature in the accumulation of value along the commodity chain ("world ecology"). Since capitalism depends on growth, frontier expansion is inherent to capitalist development: "the extension of capitalist power to new, non-commodified spaces became the lifeblood of capitalism" (Moore, 2015, 19). After the colonization of the last non-incorporated territories in the "golden age of resource-based development" (1870–1914), global capitalism shifted from extensive to more intensive forms of incorporation (Barbier, 2011, 2). With reference to Ricardian classical economics, we may distinguish between external frontiers as zones of the extensive incorporation (i.e. "widening") of new spaces and internal frontiers as zones of the more intensive incorporation (i.e. "deepening") of already commodified spaces (Willebald & Juambeltz, 2018; Carlson, 2001).

This debate has recently been addressed by a special issue of the *Austrian Journal of Historical Studies* 30/3 (2019) on *Global Commodities*, edited by ourselves (open access). Focusing on coca, coffee, gold, soy, sugar, and tea, the articles aim at tracing the emergence of commodity chains through the expansion and contraction of commodity frontiers. Frontier shifts imply complex – and potentially conflicting – interactions shaped by as well as shaping socio-natural systems. Thus, the contributions reveal commodity chains and their frontiers to be subject to negotiations between multiple actors, both human and non-human. Each of the contributions concentrates on one or more world region(s) of frontier shifts, while taking into account the transregional, transnational, and transcontinental connections via commodity chains. Thereby, these commodity-focused histories reveal the

benefit of combining global with regional or even local perspectives (Joseph, 2019).

Steven Topik discusses the vast expansion of coffee production in Brazil during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a case of the adaption of an external frontier to an internal one. Coffee trees were transplanted to Brazil in 1727, but the early coffee economy catered primarily for the internal market. External events and international politics such as the revolution in Saint Domingue, until then the world's foremost coffee exporter, the disbanding of the mercantile system and British merchant capital led to the expansion of coffee cultivation on virgin land based on slave labor. Topik lays particular emphasis on changing labor regimes and scales of coffee production evolving from huge plantations cultivated by slaves to smaller holdings worked by immigrant sharecroppers and colonists to freeholders. Large-scale plantations and the use of slave labor were not inherent to coffee cultivation, but rather constituted a colonial heritage linked to 300 years of sugar production. Drawing on large numbers of immigrants from Europe, the *colono* system that replaced slavery after abolition combined aspects of peasant production and wage labor. Families became the basic work units,



and former plantations began to resemble peasant villages, but the Brazilian coffee economy continued its expansion. Ulbe Bosma offers a counterpoint to the dominant story of sugar as an external plantation frontier in the Atlantic world by drawing attention to peasant cane growing in several regions of Asia that existed long before European colonial powers developed their plantation regimes. Since it turned out impossible to transplant the plantation mode of production to Asia, the expansion of sugar production faced the challenge of how to align the agricultural and the manufacturing sides of sugar production. Solutions to this problem produced a variety of commodity frontiers in different parts of Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Java the Cultivation System, based on the collaboration of local elites and the colonial bureaucracy, was introduced to secure a steady provision of cane by peasant smallholders to the sugar mills. In India industrial sugar production turned to the processing of gur, a coarse sugar supplied by peasant cane growers. In the Philippines, where an external sugar frontier was established on the island Negros, landlords provided immigrant settlers with crop loans against high interest. Indebtedness and the ensuing loss of land rights turned these cane growers into tenants and sharecroppers.

Arnab Dey challenges the general view that the “development regime” in British India was an omnipotent apparatus, neglecting underlying particularities of society and nature. He provides a critical reflection on the discursive and practical struggles at the expanding frontier of the tea plantation economy of north-eastern India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that induced transformative changes to the region’s socio-natural shape. His study focuses on the relationship between the crop and its built environment to highlight the impact of tea on labor, disease ecology and modernist parables of “progress.” The author highlights tea’s role as an agrarian modernizer in a long-running tax debate as well as in the struggle with the tea mosquito bug. The article argues that the developmentalist credo in colonial (and postcolonial) India did not necessarily preclude the concrete living conditions it abstracted under an all-knowing language of state, commerce and “scientific” rationality.

Challenges to this regime in the form of localized contingencies, inter-species pathogens and fiscal expediency highlight its inherent variability from one setting to the next.

Bernd-Stefan Grewe draws on the concept of commodity frontier to explore the expansions and contractions of the South African gold frontier. He emphasizes the interplay of horizontal and vertical expansions of gold mining and their socio-natural impacts. Similarities and differences to its counterparts in the USA or Australia become visible in the South African gold frontier’s rapid industrialization, massive exploitation of low-skilled workers, and tremendous damage to the natural environment. In addition to these regional circumstances, the article also shows to what extent the global gold economy developed its own functional interrelations. For instance, gold as a means of exchange and value retention was not used up but stored for the most part; thus, South Africa could hardly push up the world gold price through limiting extraction. Overall, the study demonstrates how global and local dynamics interacted in diverse – and sometimes unexpected – ways.

Ernst Langthaler investigates agro-food globalization in the twentieth century through the lens of soy as a commodity. He applies a dialectical perspective: from an exogenous view, soy’s commodification was driven by state and corporate projects, widening and deepening the regional frontiers of global food regimes. From an endogenous view, soy as a versatile crop rich in fat and protein drove these projects as an element (industrial raw material, animal feed or human food) of socio-natural networks. The cases of Northeast China (external expansion), the US Midwest (internal expansion), and the Brazilian Midwest (flexible expansion) highlight various modes, systemic forces, and actors as well as socio-natural impacts of soy expansions as regional “fields of force” of globalization. Soy was not only passively transformed into a global commodity; it also played an active – albeit paradoxical – role as both protagonist and antagonist of the food regime.

Moritz Glanz analyses the development of the cocaine commodity chain in the Americas.

After a short introduction to the history of coca leaf growing and cocaine production in the Andean region, he explores how political, social and economic circumstances at the global, national, and regional levels influenced the development of coca and cocaine production during the last third of the twentieth century. He stresses the impact of illegality on the characteristics of the cocaine commodity chain and the constant process of adaptation in the context of repressive anti-drugs policies.

The special issue closes with a conversation between Rolf Bauer, Ernst Langthaler, and Sven Beckert, the author of *Empire of Cotton* (Beckert, 2014). Starting from his widely acclaimed bestseller, Beckert discusses the potentials and pitfalls of the new history of capitalism. He calls for analyzing “capitalism in action”, shifting research from anonymous forces such as global capital and nation state to concrete places, actors, and practices.

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*All photos provided by the authors.

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