

Editorial Introduction

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Stimulant Frontiers

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Stimulant (n):

1. An agent (such as a drug) that produces a temporary increase of the functional activity or efficiency of an organism or any of its parts.
2. A stimulus: something that rouses or incites to activity.

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Plant-based stimulants abound in our world today. Coffee, tea, and maté are the “cups of ambition” that launch many of us into days of work, care, and play. We might take our hot beverages with a spoonful of sugar for an added kick, and to sweeten the bitterness that comes in our morning (afternoon, and evening) cups. Sugar comes to us in many other forms throughout the day, from fruits, to candies and chocolates, to soft drinks and artificial flavors, to the processed foods that increasingly occupy the shelves in food markets across the globe. Many of us smoke tobacco and marijuana. Many of us chew coca leaves and khat leaves as we have done for millennia for their stimulating effects, and sometimes to ward off hunger. Many of us consume processed or derivative versions of stimulant plants—like cocaine—in situations that span from “recreation” to addiction and many socially uneven points in between.

That the caffeine, sucrose, fructose, caffeine, nicotine, and other chemical compounds contained in stimulant plants produce “a temporary increase of the functional activity or efficiency of an organism” is clear from the daily practices of groups of people around the world. Perhaps less clear is that these plants are also *stimuli* in Merriam-Webster’s second sense that “rouse or incite” economic, political, and social activity. Stimulant

plants have long histories as smallholder crops, as plantation and industrial crops, and as commodities. A handful of stimulants played important roles in the rise of modern capitalism and imperialism, and their cultivation and trade continue to powerfully shape landscapes and social relations.

Over the past 600 years, five crops have emerged as omnipresent stimulants in terms of cultivation and trade: sugar, coffee, tobacco, cocoa, and black tea. They originated in three different continents: sugar and tea in Asia, coffee in Africa, and tobacco and cocoa in Latin America. Cocoa may be the oldest domesticated crop of the five, as its cultivation began 4,000 years ago in present-day Mexico. Early records of tea drinking and the making of crystalline sugar both date from the third century AD. Sugar was the first stimulant crop to be globally traded, from fourteenth-century southeast China, South Asia, and Egypt, where it was cultivated at a considerable scale. Coffee spread a little bit later, from Africa to Arabia and farther into Asia, whereas tobacco and cocoa, beloved among Indigenous peoples of Latin America, were brought to Europe after Columbus’s voyages and spread from there to Asia and Africa. The global tour of tea only began in the nineteenth

century, when Java, Assam, and Sri Lanka emerged as major tea exporters. The stories of these five leading stimulant crops made true global detours over the past hundreds of years. All started their social lives adjourning ritual sessions in various global locations. Gradually, through colonial and capitalist circuits, their cultivation spread and transformed, becoming recognized as remedies for disease and fatigue, and entering the households of the well-to-do.

Consumption of stimulants subsequently percolated to the labouring classes to become essential parts of everyday life in the hectic modern industrial world. At different times and places, stimulants were prized for ascribed medicinal properties, for keeping people awake (which was good for business), and for muting hunger (which was good for politics). Next to their development into mass commodities, stimulant crops almost invariably lost their ritualistic and pharmaceutical status.

Stimulants were inexorably linked to colonialism, with the five leading crops playing a key role in the rise of modern capitalism and imperialism at a terrible price. Two thirds of all Africans who were

made to take the Middle Passage ended up working sugar plantations in the New World. Many of the nearly one million enslaved people brought to New England in the eighteenth century were put to work in tobacco fields. Nineteenth-century coffee fields in São Paulo also employed enslaved labourers. Coffee was the mainstay of Dutch colonial rule over the Dutch East Indies from late eighteenth until the late nineteenth century. To obtain tea from China, the British started their notorious opium trade, culminating in the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century, waged by the Western powers against China. Nineteenth century imperialism in Asia was built on the cultivation and trade of sugar, tea, tobacco, and coffee. In the twentieth century all five stimulants were included massively in soldiers' rations during the colonial wars and the First and Second World Wars to enhance their energy and morale.

Today, stimulants remain among the most produced and traded commodities. For coffee, tea, sugar, and cocoa, sustainability and green capitalist initiatives for “organic” and “fair trade” incarnations of these crops contribute to their ongoing



Tea fields in Meitan county, Guizhou province, China. Source: Alexander Day: 2018.



Bolivian coca growers celebrate the United Nations acceptance of coca leaf chewing. Source: [Matthew Straubmuller](#), 2013 (image cropped to fit).

success; so too do initiatives and research to capitalize on the fungibility of sugar in particular. People and places (social relations and ecologies) are unevenly transformed as these stimulant frontiers expand, contract, move, and are remade. At the same time, zones of cultivation for “illicit” stimulant crops are thriving and expanding, straddling boundaries between shifting notions of legality and illegality, even amid violent and often lethal attempts to contain them.

Stimulants have, in their own ways, played a leading role in shaping today’s globalised world. Their world-shaping power stems from their double role: as “agents” that stimulate bodies, and as things that “rouse and incite” capital, capturing both aspect of the Merriam-Webster definition above. In this issue of *Commodity Frontiers*, contributions center on the histories and presents of some of the leading stimulant crops and the sites and processes of their cultivation, expansion, and transformations. Contributors

variously consider stimulants from the perspectives of bodies and capital, sometimes touching on their overlaps.

In the opening article, Jelmer Vos (pp. 1-4) discusses his project, *Coffee and Colonialism in Angola, 1820-1960*. His research highlights the history of local entrepreneurship and the role of precolonial consumer cultures in the development of the Angolan coffee economy and the sub-Saharan coffee frontier. These stories—of what people were doing before and alongside the arrival of settler estates and forced labor—are often overlooked.

Moving to sugar frontiers, Allan S. Queiroz (pp. 41-47) shares insights from his ethnographic fieldwork on sugarcane plantations in Alagoas, Northeast Brazil. He examines labor precarity and job formalization for cane cutters, situating their experiences and struggles in histories of agro-industrial labor exploitation and immobilization, deregulation, reforms, and social movements.

Tea is the subject of two articles in this issue. In an interview with Mindi Schneider, Alexander Day (pp. 10-15) shares his work on tea frontiers in Southwest China from the 1920s to the present. His project retells the story of agricultural modernization in China by tracing the interplay of tea, labor, and political economy and the shift from household to industrial production. In their article on tea infrastructures in postcolonial Kenya, Hannah Elliott and Martin Skrydstrup (pp. 16-23) share their research on notions and practices of tea “quality” and the role and use of tea as a “political crop.”

The issue also includes articles on “illicit” stimulant frontiers. In Elisabet Rasch’s interview with Paul Gootenberg (pp. 5-9), they discuss methods and practices for teaching the history of drugs. Gootenberg shares his approaches for dealing with the sensational aspects of teaching about drugs (especially to undergraduate students), including how he uses illicit commodities as a lens on the history of capitalism, slavery, and colonialism. Their article includes a list of books that Gootenberg uses in his undergraduate and graduate seminars.

Serena Stein and Katie Sandwell’s article (pp. 24-32) looks at what illicit crop frontiers bring to our understandings of the uneven histories of capitalism. Their

article is based on coca, khat, and kratom frontiers, and reflects conversations with Asmin Fransiska, Lisa Gezon, and Kristina Lyons, scholars who have long been embedded in research on these stimulants.

Maarten Vanden Eynde’s article (pp. 33-40) recounts his interview with Roger M. Buerger and Sophia Prinz from the Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich, Switzerland. The museum owes its existence to the coffee and cacao trade, and currently endeavors to “use raw materials as a guide for deciphering how our modern world works” (from museum website, quoted p. 33). In the interview, Buerger and Prinz share their approaches to interpreting and curating raw materials and their histories.

Rounding out the issue are Erich Landsteiner and Ernst Langthaler’s article (pp. 48-53) that offers a summary of a special issue of the *Austrian Journal of Historical Studies* on global commodities, Robert Fletcher’s op-ed (pp. 54) on the newly released *Dasgupta Review* from the UK on *The Economics of Biodiversity*, and Claudia Bernardi’s (pp. 60) curated list of events and announcements related to the CFI.

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