



**COMMODITY
FRONTIERS**

Issue 2, Spring 2021

Stimulant Frontiers

The Journal of the Commodity Frontiers Initiative

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Commodity Frontiers

Capitalism, Contestation, and the Transformation of the Global Countryside
The Journal of the Commodity Frontiers Initiative



Image: *Llamas grazing behind the old signboard of the “Cuprita” copper mine, Bolivia.* Source: Hanne Cottyn, 2018.

Mission Statement

Commodity Frontiers is the Journal of the Commodity Frontiers Initiative (CFI). Edited by a group of scholars and researchers from various disciplines and organizations in the CFI Network, the Journal explores the history and present of capitalism, contestation, and ecological transformation in the global countryside. The point of departure is the commodity frontier concept, which describes sites and processes of the incorporation of “resources” into the expanding capitalist world economy; resources like land, raw materials, knowledge, and labor. In the past 600 years, commodity frontier expansion has been characterized by ecological and distributional conflicts; the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples and other groups; racialization and othering across colonial, settler colonial, and postcolonial geographies; and the production of class, gender, race, and other inequalities.

Each themed issue of *Commodity Frontiers* includes articles about theorizing, studying, and teaching with commodity frontiers. The Journal features reflections and reviews on the uneven and often violent dynamics of capitalist expansion, social change, and ecological transformation on global as well as local scales, in the past and at the present. Contributors include historians, social scientists, (political) ecologists, artists, and activists who work on global commodity production and circulation, rural societies, labor history, the history of capitalism, colonial histories, social metabolism, and conflicts and counternarratives in the countryside. *Commodity Frontiers* endeavors to carry out one of the central goals of the CFI: to provide long historical perspectives on problems that are often assumed to be modern, and to link historical and contemporary research to critically recast our thinking about sustainability, resilience, and crisis.

Commodity Frontiers is a biannual open-access publication housed at commodityfrontiers.com, through [Commodity Frontiers](http://CommodityFrontiers) in the Open Journal System at Wageningen University, and distributed through email subscriptions. Its editorial collective is committed to inclusive, anti-racist, anti-sexist, decolonial scholarship and politics.

Objectives

Commodity Frontiers aims to provide accessible content from multiple perspectives on the past, present, and future of commodity frontier expansion and dynamics. We feature research and educational activities undertaken by academics, artists, activists, and other civil society actors. By inviting short contributions from our multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral networks, and distributing the open-access Journal through our website and the Open Journal System, we aim to reach a broader audience than typical academic publishing allows. We strive for “real-time” reports and reflections on contemporary issues, and contributions that link past and present.

Editorial Process

The articles in *Commodity Frontiers* are not double-blind peer reviewed. Rather, Section Editors purposely invite contributions related to the theme of each issue from experts in respective fields. All articles are reviewed by Section Editors and at least one Editor-in-Chief.

Contributions

Articles that appear in *Commodity Frontiers* are invited contributions. We do not accept uninvited manuscripts. If you would like to contribute to *Commodity Frontiers* or the CFI, there are four routes.

Article contributions: If you would like to contribute an article to one of the sections of the *Commodity Frontiers* journal, please send a short note with your contact information and your area of expertise to the section editors (contact information is on the website) and to Mindi Schneider (mindi.schneider@wur.nl).

Journal theme proposals: If you have an idea for a themed issue of the journal, please send inquiries to Mindi Schneider.

Lexicon entries: We are building a *Commodity Frontiers Lexicon* that will be housed at the CFI website. If you would like to contribute an entry to the Lexicon, or if you would like to write a response to an entry that’s been published, please contact Eric Vanhaute (eric.vanhaute@ugent.be) and Claudia Bernardi (clod.zeta@gmail.com), the Lexicon editors.

Round Tables: We will occasionally host virtual round tables on the website and social media to debate concepts, approaches, and politics surrounding commodity frontiers. If you would like to contribute a round table proposal, please email Mindi Schneider.



Acknowledgements: Mindi Schneider does the design and production work for *Commodity Frontiers*, and manages the Open Journal System and the CFI website. Special thanks to Marjolijn Dijkman for our logo and cover design, and for invaluable design advice. Thanks to Rachel Steely for her essential work as our social media manager. Thanks to all of the contributors to this issue for sharing their work and insights.

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

Editorial Introduction

Commodity Frontiers 1, Spring 2021

Stimulant Frontiers

Mindi Schneider and Ulbe Bosma

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.

Mindi Schneider and Ulbe Bosma
Amsterdam and Utrecht
15 April 2021

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The Coffee Frontier in Proto-Colonial and Colonial Angola

Jelmer Vos

Keywords: Angola, coffee, colonialism, commodities, settlers, smallholders

Coffee plantations were unquestionably one of the defining features of Angola's colonial landscape. From the 1870s to independence, coffee was the main export of this former Portuguese colony, barring a couple of intervals during which rubber and diamonds held first place. During this time, Angola ranked consistently among the world's largest robusta producers, which it might still have been today had the country's civil war (1975-2002) not made commercial farming all but impossible. In Angolan popular memory, coffee occupies an ambivalent position: for some people it brings up memories of colonial forced labor, while others recollect stories of successful family farms. My research project, "Coffee and Colonialism in Angola, 1820-1960," aims to reconstruct the multiple, intertwined realities behind these contrasting memories. Focusing on northern Angola, where smallholding and estate farming always coexisted, it investigates how African farmers, colonial settlers, foreign traders, and global consumers shaped one of the oldest commercial coffee frontiers in sub-Saharan Africa. In doing so, it reflects on the question to what extent "colonialism" is the proper lens through which to study the history of coffee cultivation in Angola.

In and outside academia, people often associate coffee with the history of European colonialism (Wild, 2005). The observed connections are multiple. Coffee spread from Ethiopia and Yemen across the world's tropical zones through European imperial networks. While other crops and plants have followed similar trajectories, for many the global coffee trade has come to exemplify the modern world economy's intrinsic inequalities and exploitative nature. Grown in the Global South, for long coffee was consumed almost exclusively in the Global North, where consequently most value was added to its

production. Slavery and other forms of coercion were often central to its cultivation, notably in the Caribbean, Brazil, and the Dutch East Indies. Although in Latin America coffee growing took off after producing countries gained independence in the early 1800s, in many parts of Africa – the biological home of the world's two main commercial varieties of coffee – coffee developed as a cash crop under colonial rule. In the East African highlands, where climatic conditions made growing arabica coffee possible, European settlers dominated production with the backing of colonial governments, leaving the cultivation of the sturdier, but financially less rewarding robusta trees in the lower climatic belt to small African farmers (McCook, 2019). African colonies mainly produced for metropolitan markets, creating commodity chains that continued to shape the global coffee trade after decolonization (Talbot, 2004).



Photo: Coffee bush near Mucaba, Uíge, Angola, 2011.

Coffee and Colonial Exploitation
My research on the history of coffee cultivation in Angola interrogates this common connotation of coffee with colonial exploitation. It does so specifically by placing

the Angolan coffee economy in its global context and by examining the reasons small farmers became involved in cash-crop production. The aim is not to deny the importance of empire and colonialism to Angolan coffee's history – fundamental transitions in the Portuguese empire in the early 1800s formed the background to an emerging coffee trade, and colonial rule played a crucial role in its later development – but rather to add complexity to broad generalizations about the way global forces and local dynamics interacted.

Most of the historical literature on the Angolan coffee economy has concentrated on the early settlers from Portugal and Brazil, the “coffee barons of Cazengo,” as David Birmingham (1978) aptly called them, who from the 1830s with the help of enslaved workers crafted the first coffee plantations out of Angola's indigenous *robusta* forests. It is important to recognize, however, that the rapid expansion of coffee cultivation in the second half of the century was mainly the work of independent African farmers living away from Portugal's proto-colonial enclaves. Sources in Portuguese and Angolan archives document how by cultivating wild and semi-wild stands and via plant transfers these small, entrepreneurial farmers radically transformed the Angolan coffee landscape, demarcating the space within which a new generation of colonial settlers from the 1920s built their coffee estates. In this regard, the history of coffee production in Angola resembled the “cash-crop revolutions” unfolding in other parts of Africa, which stemmed from indigenous, rather than colonial knowledge and initiatives (Richards, 1985).

Another important dimension of the Angolan coffee economy was that, from the beginning, local traders mainly exported to countries other than Portugal. Angola produced far more coffee than the small metropolitan market could absorb. As African *robustas* conquered their place in the world coffee trade during the first half of the twentieth century, two industrialized nations without colonies in Africa, namely the Netherlands and the United States, turned increasingly towards Angola for their *robusta* supplies. After World War Two, with the collapse of Indonesian *robusta* production, roasters in both countries became heavily

dependent on Angolan producers. To study the history of Angolan coffee, therefore, it is necessary to think outside the imperial box and look for records beyond the colonial archive. My research has drawn, for example, on the records of Dutch trade companies and coffee roasters to document the global – instead of imperial – connections between African coffee growers and European consumer markets.

Grown to a large extent on settler farms struggling with chronic labor shortages, coffee cultivation was heavily dependent on a system of labor coercion the Portuguese government developed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The use of slavery and forced labor in the Portuguese empire is well known, though strangely there are only a few detailed histories of labor in colonial Angola (Ball, 2015; Cleveland, 2015). The coffee estates were major consumers of compulsory contract labor, and my research is in part an effort to document this crucial episode in Angolan history. Using a series of labor inspection reports from the coffee districts in the 1940s and 1950s, I argue that colonial forced labor on the one hand grew out of an earlier history of proto-colonial slavery, but was on the other hand a response to specific problems created by settler colonialism. The settler economy was itself a particular historical outcome shaped by nineteenth-century precedents and by colonial policies aimed at stimulating white migration (Castelo, 2007).

African Entrepreneurship
But the story of Angolan coffee cannot be written purely through the prism of colonial exploitation. African smallholder production grew in the twentieth century alongside the settler plantations and, given the nineteenth-century pattern of frontier expansion mentioned above as well as the prevalence of smallholding in other producing countries, it is almost certain that small farmers would have been more successful if the Portuguese government had given them free rein, as happened in Kenya in the 1950s (Hyde, 2009). While proportionally not as dominant as before, after WWII African farmers still accounted for a quarter of Angola's coffee outputs. To understand the involvement of these small farmers in export

production it is important to move beyond a longstanding and persistent view of economies in the Global South as primarily raw material suppliers to the industrialized core of the world economy. Such a view not only neglects the significant amount of processing of primary commodities that has historically taken place in the Global South (Clarence-Smith 2018). It also creates a one-dimensional picture of commodity producers as people lacking agency and economic motives of their own. In my research, I specifically point to the influence of material culture on cash-crop farming in Angola, which was rooted in precolonial consumer cultures and was a more important driver of agricultural entrepreneurship than colonial tax imperatives or cultivation schemes. A variety of historical accounts – by missionaries, travelers, businessmen, and statisticians, among others – indicate that the reasons for individual farmers to turn to coffee growing had less to do with the hut tax, and more with their search for material comfort, status, and economic security (Vos, 2018).



Photo: Coffee berries drying in village near Mucaba, Uíge, Angola, 2011.

Apart from the history of settler estates and forced labor, there is thus a story to tell about local entrepreneurship in the development of the Angolan coffee economy. Such a story resonates with documented cases of small farmers in Tanzania and Cameroon, who from the 1920s onward adopted coffee as a cash crop to increase their purchasing power.

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Rural households invested coffee revenues in a wide range of things, including school fees, bride-wealth, cattle, textiles, bicycles and sewing machines (Curtis, 2003; Eckert, 2003; Baroin, 2007).

Commodity Frontiers

That brings me, finally, to the concept of a “coffee commodity frontier.” In northern Angola, this frontier was first crafted out of natural coffee reserves by entrepreneurial small farmers, who grew coffee in what we now call agroforestry systems. Subsequent expansion mainly happened within zones already opened in the late nineteenth century. The North Angolan coffee forests showed a remarkable capacity to regenerate; by the 1960s, after a century of commercial exploitation, they were by far not yet exhausted. The Commodity Frontier scholarship generally discusses frontier development as the outcome of an expansionary capitalist world economy, historically centered in the industrializing Global North, which continuously seeks out new areas of the “global countryside” for resource extraction as older frontiers become degraded and depleted (Joseph, 2019). My research contributes to this literature in two ways. First, it demonstrates that coffee commodity frontiers can be sustainable, especially when developed within a forest environment, as has been the case in Angola, Ethiopia, and Uganda, for instance. Secondly, it shows that local circumstances and contingencies condition the social, economic, and ecological transformations in frontier regions resulting from their incorporation in the global economy (Bosma & Curry-Machado, 2012). To avoid the risk of reducing the relationship between global capitalism and frontier regions to a story of “impact” and “resistance”, which easily leads to a simplistic local-versus-global view of history, it is important to recognize that despite structural inequalities in the world economy people in the Global South have often been active participants in the making of commodity frontiers.

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Jelmer Vos is Lecturer in Global History at the University of Glasgow. He has written on the Atlantic slave trade, the ivory trade, and the Angolan rubber trade, and is the author of *Kongo in the Age of Empire, 1860-1913: The Breakdown of a Moral Order* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2015). He is currently writing a monograph on the history of coffee cultivation in northern Angola and is also co-editing the *Oxford Handbook of Commodity History* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

*All photos provided by the author.

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Teaching the History of Drugs as Commodities: A Talk with Historian Paul Gootenberg

Elisabet Dueholm Rasch

Keywords: teaching, history, commodities, history of drugs

Paul Gootenberg is SUNY Distinguished Professor of History and Sociology at Stony Brook University (New York) and Chair of History. He is a global commodity and drug historian trained as a Latin Americanist at the University of Chicago and Oxford. His works include *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (UNC Press, 2008), *Cocaine: Global Histories* (Routledge, 1999) and with Liliana M. Dávalos, *The Origins of Cocaine: Peasant Colonization and Failed Development in the Amazon Andes* (Routledge, 2018). From 2011-14 he chaired the Drugs, Security and Democracy fellowship (DSD) of the Soros Open Society Foundation and Social Science Research Council. Gootenberg is General Editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Drug History* and President-elect 2021 of the Alcohol and Drugs History Society (ADHS). He regularly teaches courses at Stony Brook about the history of commodities and drugs. What follows is an edited transcript of an interview he had with Elisabet Rasch, one of the editors of the *Teaching Commodity Frontiers* section, in February 2021.

Elisabet: *How long have you been teaching courses like 'The History of Drugs in the Americas?'*

Paul: I began as a more conventional economic historian, trained in the 1980s. I worked on trade policy, but was always drawn to commodities. My first couple of books were about guano, which was a huge export boom product from Peru in the 19th century. And it got me kind of a name in that area of economic history, perhaps, in retrospect, as a specialist in odd commodities! Commodities melded into my interest in drugs in the mid-1990s, as I got fascinated by cocaine and drug history in a broader sense.

While I was entering this new area of research and writing, I developed courses that would go with it, and you can sometimes learn a lot from doing the courses that clarify issues. By the late 1990s, I was already trying out courses on the history of drugs.

And then shortly after that, I wrote a chapter for a volume, called *Between Silver and Cocaine*. That book, about commodity chains in the long run, had a notable impact in the field of Latin American history. We met many times as a commodity studies group, long before it



became the international field it is today, with multiple seminar series and even Ivy league glamor. By 2000, I had defined myself as a commodities historian. I began teaching specialized courses, especially at the graduate level, about the history of commodities.

I used to have 70 or 80 students in my undergrad commodity history course. But now with the history enrollments going down, it's more like 25, so it's more intimate. With the history of drugs, I decided to never teach a large lecture course. I just didn't want to get that notoriety. I would only focus on reading-intensive seminars with undergraduates, you know, 20, 15 students, maybe 30 students, because I wanted them to learn to grapple with these texts that I thought were far more serious about drugs, and not see the field as something sensationalistic.

You can imagine the types of students you might get who were like, wow, that's so cool, you might get a suspicious crowd! And I genuinely want to make it into something that can be intellectually uplifting. I make that clear when I teach these types of classes. I say, the one thing I don't want you to do in this class is spill out your subjective opinions about drugs, your drug experiences. We're going to look at challenging texts. We're going to look at long-term histories. We're going to try to really critically interrogate categories of thinking about "drugs."

Elisabet: *So, students reading serious texts is your way of dealing with the sensational part of teaching drugs history?*

Paul: Yeah, I try to bring in new academic books and to make it about intellectual controversies. My main drug seminar, which I teach to small groups of like 20-30 students, I start with reading Wolfgang Schivelbush's book. He's a well-known German writer who wrote an early influential book, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants*. It's a great idea-generating book about what mind-altering "drugs" are, and how their meanings change over time. It's an eye-opener for students, using the European history of coffee, tobacco and alcohol. It conveys what sociologists might call the "social constructivist" perspective on drugs, mixed with Marx and Weber as well.

Recently I began contrasting it with more rigorous academic work, especially the book by Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World*. It's about the same time period, but she develops a quite different thesis about the ways that drugs travel across Atlantic space and carry symbolic meanings and transform their meanings over time--many of which originate, in her view, in subaltern or indigenous cultures of the Americas.

Elisabet: *What's the importance of teaching this historical dimension of drugs?*

Paul: Well, it is a fascinating topic and writings about drugs are both more and more interesting and more and more rigorous. It's a good tool for developing students' reading and critical skills and they just get a far more deeper understanding of the historical or social roots of the ways we think about drugs today. Drugs are not at all new, and students learn that most drugs were not even strictly illegal until the early 20th century. They also might gain new ways of reasonably assessing the failures of drug prohibition in the United States and globally, and for understanding the current opioid "epidemic" in the United States and the unprecedented scale and changing composition of its victims. With all the turmoil surrounding drugs, having a more rigorous background in these debates helps.

Elisabet: *How do you use "drugs" as a way of looking at political, colonial and decolonial relationships in your courses?*

Paul: In my advanced commodities graduate seminar, now called "Commodity Histories and Modern Capitalism," I begin with a book by Timothy Brook called, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*. It's superb. He's a specialist on China, but he intricately connects what begins to happen in China and East Asia in the 16th and 17th century to the Dutch East Indies Company, the VOC.

From there I move to Sidney Mintz and his mid-1980s classic historical anthropology of sucrose. A lot of the commodity literature has a strong global component, and look at the different power relations that become subsumed in commodity production and

commerce, and commodity connections and consumption patterns. A long-term perspective opens students to larger social and political commodity relations, for example, behind the birth of capitalism and the roles of slavery and colonialism in those still controverted processes.

Elisabet: *How do you use Mintz's idea of "food drugs" in your course?*

Paul: In my undergraduate commodities course, called "Empire of Goods," I periodize, to simplify, trade goods as "Colonial," "Capitalist" "Industrial, and "Global" goods—in an overlapping succession since the 15th century.

The first part of the course though is about cacao and colonial products generally. Cacao became an early Spanish commodity in the 16th century following the conquest of Mexico. In fact, cacao beans really had been a major indigenous Mesoamerica market good, one of the most vital inter-regional trade commodities in the Aztec Empire, as well as the pre-Aztec realm. Cacao becomes chocolate, first as a luxury beverage, through Spanish imperialism, into, over time, a larger European good. So, I use the category "colonial good." Cacao was an exemplary colonial good: so many of its characteristics fit it into a mercantilist mold, its coercive colonial labor systems, its aristocratic Catholicized consumption forms when chocolate was a drink, before its modern industrialization as a hard product and candy by the 19th century.

The second part is about "capitalist goods," or the transition to capitalism. Here is where I turn to Mintz and his category of "drug-foods." I like *Sweetness and Power* pedagogically because it is a process-oriented book. But it's difficult for undergraduate students! It's not the best organized text in the world, but it's rich with ideas and implications. Using Mintz can begin to tease out questions like: why was sugar a crucial good in the creation of capitalist relationships? Not just with plantation slavery in the Caribbean, but also with the related creation of working-class consumption, the larger shift in political economy in Britain, in the 18th and 19th century from mercantilist- towards free trade capitalism and empire. It's a transitional

reading between colonialism and industrialism, over two centuries, to see how Atlantic capitalism emerges along with its products like sugar, tea, coffee. I also lecture about other products that are instrumental or part of the transition to capitalism on a global scale—including, haha, again, Peruvian guano!

And then the third part of the course, I call it "industrialism" where I deal with products that have an industrial character or make-up to them. They're more homogenous and mechanical in production. They are for mass consumption markets. There's a full dislocation between their origin and their uses. The example that I use for that is about bananas. Bananas, even though an agrarian or botanic product are heavily industrialized, a lot of chemicals, mass scale production. Every banana is monocultured. The best book to use is John Soluri's environmental-labor history, *Banana Cultures*, which illustrates the late 19th-century industrial good and market connection between the growing mass-market US and Honduras, a so-called "Banana Republic."

Elisabet: *How do you approach the history of illicit drugs in your teaching?*

Paul: Basically, it's also about a long-term process as well of changing political-economy regimes. I use books, that explore these shifting historical processes in detail. One of the books that I use to explore illicit drugs or the making of illicit drugs would be my own, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug*, which is a long-term history about Peru and its relationships to shifting global commodity chains in Europe, United States, and even SE Asia. First, is the making of an actual commodity out of cocaine during the 19th century. Cocaine was discovered in 1860, and has a long relationship with indigenous Andean coca leaf, a different if related thread of the narrative. But in the early 20th century, cocaine then becomes increasingly marginalized as a commodity. And by the 1940s, I argue in my research, cocaine becomes transformed into a fully illicit drug. From there grew these huge networks of illicit cocaine, which are what we see today in the global drugs trade from Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.

Elisabet *Does the illicit character of cocaine influence the way you teach these processes?*

Paul: Yes, I think so. I mean, you have to unpack illicitness, trying to find a cogent historical analysis of why certain commodities become illicit commodities and how does the illicitness affect the commodity and cultural usage. In the first instance, it was useful to begin grasping drugs as ordinary commodities. And a lot of drug studies have done that. It's not something new. When you treat drugs as a commodity, you kind of take away a lot the obfuscation or sensationalism in how they're dealt with in the media, not to mention how they are treated by states and in politics.

So, it's an excellent first step in sort of de-sensationalizing and perhaps objectifying as much as possible the study of drugs. But I don't think that goes far enough, because it becomes very simple to just say, drugs are commodities just like other commodities. They're not. Drugs are different from other commodities because they contain chemicals that can directly change consciousness And the changing of consciousness itself has powerful religious, medical, social, all kinds of

symbolic connotations. Those implications were classically dealt with by anthropologists, in ethnobotany, but I think they're vital to reinscribe into the historical study of drugs.

Elisabet: *What do students find challenging or what do they like, about these courses?*

Paul: Students like history courses that relate to things that they know about and that they have an intrinsic stake in. So, drugs or even everyday commodities can be easily relatable to issues that they're thinking about or experiencing. And for one reason or another, student populations know an awful lot about drugs! Drugs are intriguing in so many ways. They're absolutely everywhere in film and television drama now, with all taboos falling. Some students suffered through anti-drug propaganda in school before university, and want to recover from that. Some of them have had personal experiences with drugs, lots of drugs, certainly cannabis and alcohol, or hallucinogens like Ecstasy, or know people who are hit by the opioid problems in the United States. So, it shows you can actually study and learn a whole new way of historical thinking about something you already know superficially in the culture

BOOKS Commonly Used in Undergraduate Drug and Commodity History Courses

Drugs:

Campos, Isaac (2012) *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs*. University of North Carolina Press.

Gootenberg, Paul (2008) *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug*. University of North Carolina Press.

Farber, David (2019) *Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism, and the Decade of Greed*. Cambridge University Press.

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang (1992) *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, Intoxicants*. Vintage Books.

Additional Readings:

Bourgois, Philippe (1995) *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge University Press.

Campbell, Howard (2009) *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez*. University of Texas Press.

Courtwright, David (2001) *Forces of Habit: Drugs & Making of the Modern World*. Harvard University Press.

Lamb, F. Bruce (1993) *Wizard of the Upper Amazon: The Story of Manuel Córdova-Ríos*. N. Atlantic Books.

Stevens, Jay (1988) *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*. Perennial.

Commodities:

Coe, Sophie and Michael (1993) *The True History of Chocolate*. Thames & Hudson.

Mintz, Sidney W. (1985) *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Penguin.

- Soluri, John (2005) *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Agrarian Change in Honduras and the United States*. Univ. of Texas Press.
- Topik, Steven, Carlos Marichal, Zephyr Frank (eds.) (2006) *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000*. Duke University Press.
- Graduate Commodities Seminar (2018):*
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- Elmore, Bartow J. (2015) *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism*. Norton.
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*All photos provided by the author.

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Working the Rural-Urban Divide: Alexander Day Traces a Century of Agricultural Modernisation in China's Present-Day Tea Capital

Mindi Schneider

Keywords: tea, China, industrialization, labor process, rural-urban divide, social reproduction

Alexander F. Day is a historian of modern and contemporary China, focusing on peasants, food, and agrarian change. His forthcoming book takes tea as a lens on agricultural modernization. Situated in *Meitan* county in *Guizhou* province—the county that currently boasts the largest planted area of tea in China—his research traces the interplay of tea, labor, and political economy and the shift from household production to industrialisation from the 1920s to the present. Day combines archival research and fieldwork, making regular trips to *Meitan*, where he collaborates with local tea historians. His work connects the past and the present, and provides insights into how studying the contemporary period sheds light on earlier periods and vice versa. The following is a lightly edited version of our interview about Alexander's current book project.



Workers preparing soil for tea planting in Meitan, early 1960s. Photo used with permission of the China Tea Industrialization Museum in Meitan, Guizhou, China.

Mindi: *Your current book project is a history of tea production in Southwestern China from the 1920s to the present. How did you come to this topic, and what are your central questions?*

Alexander: For one, my first book was a historical look at contemporary debates on the peasant and how the changing figure of the peasant relates to visions of historical

transformation and politics. Although I went to the countryside quite a bit in the process of doing research to visit various projects, the arguments in that first book were from a rather abstract view, distanced from the actual countryside. As I got thinking about what I would do next, I wanted to get out of Beijing and spend more time in the countryside - especially in a specific location - to research

and watch the developing importance of a place. I decided to base myself in *Meitan* county in *Guizhou* province.

I also wanted to move more towards the social history and political economy of rural China. More specifically, I was inspired by Jacob Eyferth's book, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots*, a study of a community of handicraft papermakers in rural Sichuan. Eyferth showed how the rural-urban split—the contemporary politics of which I investigated in my first book—was produced in the 20th century through the industrialization of handicraft industries. I wanted to follow a different commodity, one a bit closer to a food product, to see how this split occurred. I landed on tea production.

As a processed agricultural commodity, the whole tea production process can take place within a single household, or it can be divided into farming and initial drying taking place on the farm, and final processing, blending, and packaging in more factory-type situations. In other words, the rural-urban divide can take place within the labor process itself. I have

been looking at how the process of moving from the first form to the latter occurred—the industrialization of tea processing—including what effects it had socially and how it spatially transformed tea production and *Meitan* county. Further, I wanted to look at tea production in the Southwest in particular because it was less tied into the export market than in central and eastern China. In this context, I can watch the shift from household production to industrialization over about a 100-year period up to the present.

Mindi: *What's distinctive about tea for studying the labor process?*

Alexander: The two book-length studies of tea production in China leading up to the period I focus on, one by Robert Gardella and the other by Andrew Liu, both show the decline of Chinese tea production under the pressure of competition from British India. Liu argued that the labor process of Chinese tea producers underwent some transformation because of this competition, but that competitive pressure was not just felt in terms of price competition but, probably



Workers grading tea leaves in Meitan, early 1960s. Photo used with permission of the China Tea Industrialization Museum in Meitan, Guizhou, China.

more importantly, in terms the quality of the commodity produced. The much smaller scale producers in China produced tea of uneven quality compared to that of new competitors. One of the key trends that I am tracking is how this problem of tea quality led to a push for greater control over the labor process of tea production, initially in processing, but also on the farming end as well. Quality comes to mean different things at different times, depending on the overall structure of the political economy of agricultural production. So, once the Nationalist state comes to focus on raising tea production and exports in the mid-1920s, tea “quality” suggests the production of generic enough tea of a particular quality grade to be blended and sold for export. This remains true into the 1970s, though the structure of tea production and the political economy changes. From the 1980s, with the spread of tea production back into the household, quality tends to decline, but a focus on more unique qualities of tea grows along with the domestic market. This laid the groundwork for new forms of industrialization and vertical integration of tea production as *uniqueness* becomes the key to domestic sales.

Overall, crucial in this long trajectory is that under different political economies different forms of integration of the two main aspects of tea production implied different ways to control the labor process. So, under the Nationalists from the 1930s through the 1940s, the state focused on controlling tea processing by concentrating processing in industrial facilities and improving technical processes. Tea farming was only transformed to a minor degree. Under the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s and 1960s, tea farming and processing was integrated in a very concentrated form, with all processes directed from the top down within a single production unit. From the late-1960s, however, some tea farming and initial processing was dispersed to agricultural communes and brigades. This decentralization was accelerated in the 1980s, as commune and brigade tea production was turned over to household. It was only after the domestic tea market boomed from the late 1990s, that a new form of vertical integration took hold in the industry, with the labor process of farming indirectly controlled

by mostly private processing firms through contracts and cooperatives.

Mindi: *How do you conceptualize tea in this study? (Is it background, is it the topic, is it a lens, is it a human-nature relation, etc.)*

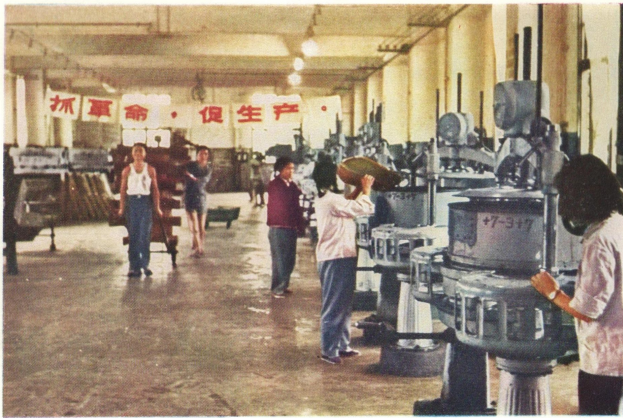
Alexander: In this study, I mainly look at tea as the result of a set of biophysical and labor processes. As I said, those processes come to be controlled in various ways at different times. So part of my study of the labor process of tea production looks at how the labor process intervenes in and is shaped by the biophysical processes of the tea plant. While the labor process can intervene in the nature process—the biophysical process of the plant—those biophysical processes create friction for production as well. From the 1940s, technicians and workers in the *Meitan* tea industry continually attempt to change and shape the biophysical processes of the tea plants there, by breeding, changing fertilization methods, changing processing technology, etc. And, of course, all of these involve controlling and changing the labor process. As a social history and political economy, it is important to stress that while the biophysical nature of the tea plant creates frictions as well as opportunities for tea producers, it is labor and the control over the labor process that are the agents in this story.

Mindi: *The period of your study – 1920s to the present – spans profound political economic changes in China. Why is this particular period important for your research?*

Alexander: This study tries to retell the story of agricultural modernization through the transformation of a single agricultural commodity in a specific county. This is a particularly important period for the modernization and industrialization of tea production, newly under pressure from global capitalist competition. While the transformation begins a little earlier in Eastern China, in the Southwest, tea was less integrated into the international market until the 1930s, especially following the Japanese invasion in 1937. Thus in *Meitan*, for the most part, the whole process was located within households until the beginning of 1940, when the Nationalists set up an experimental tea farm and processing factory there. Tea was small scale, distributed, and mostly consumed

by the household that produced it. When this transformation begins in earnest in 1940, the Nationalist state and its local representatives are there to document its progression.

Originally, I was going to end the study in the 1970s, but as I visited *Meitan* several times from 2015 on, the county became the largest tea producer by planted area (although another county claims it has since regained the title). I increasingly felt the contemporary period of reintegration helped us to understand the earlier developments there, in particular, how the overall political economy of society shaped forms of integration and labor control in the industry.



涪潭茶场的揉捻车间一角。

“A corner of the kneading and twisting workshop in the Meitan Tea Factory”, late 1960s. Photo used with permission of the China Tea Industrialization Museum in Meitan, Guizhou, China.

Mindi: *The rural-urban split in China is central in much of your work. In your first book you looked at the role of the peasant in the reform-era (post-1978) rural-urban split, and your current book examines the role of the labor process in producing the 20th century split. Can you explain the rural-urban split, and its importance to your study of the history of capitalism in China?*

Alexander: As in other places, capitalism’s emergence produced spatial unevenness in China, as did the halting attempt to escape the dynamics of capitalism from the 1950s through the 1970s. As others have also stressed, the rural-urban split that I look at is a modern phenomenon. The divide, such an important topic in China especially from the late 1990s into the 2000s, can look rather abstract in the discussions of intellectuals and

policy makers in Beijing. But on the ground, it is produced in many different ways with differing temporalities and periodizations depending on how you study it. The emergence of the rural-urban split in *Meitan’s* tea production, in other words, is a quite different story than that of Eyferth’s papermakers in Sichuan, even if both could be conceptualized as producing a rural-urban divide.

When the Nationalist experimental tea farm and factory arrived in *Meitan* in 1940, the county was overwhelming rural and the county town quite small. But as the process factory was taken over by the new Socialist state in the early 1950s, the county town grew along with it. In other words, as labor processes originally contained within the household were divided and subsumed under the state industrial structure, the spatial structure of the county shifted, a rural-urban divide emerged within the county itself. But the process didn’t stop there, in the 1960s a new processing factory was built in the fields themselves and some production returned to the “rural” in the communes and brigades, only to disperse even more in the 1980s back into rural households. These transformations continue today, producing new forms of unevenness.

Mindi: *How do you see the rural-urban divide in relation to social reproduction in any of the periods you study?*

Alexander: When looking at the organization of production and control over labor, the issue of social reproduction is front and center. *Meitan* was a quite poor, rural county when the Nationalists arrived looking for a place to set up the model tea farm and processing factory in 1939. While rural China has been quite commercialized for a long period of time, commercialization was very uneven, and looking at tea production in *Meitan*, most households that produced tea processed and consumed it in the household or at most sold it into the local market. And this is true of other agricultural goods as well. In other words, there wasn’t a clear divide between production and social reproduction—both were contained within the family form.

My study, in a sense, tracks the breaking apart of that family form and the continual restructuring and reorganization of production and social reproduction in a series of new forms. So in the 1940s, a divide is introduced between tea growing and processing, with the latter beginning industrialization and tea undergoing commodification. As processing enters the factory, social reproduction remains in the household. The county town grows and is transformed from a mainly administrative and small commercial population to one that now undertakes production; likewise, production itself is split between rural villages and the more urban county town. Under the CCP in the 1950s, both farming and processing tea is taken over by the state-owned factory but certain features of social reproduction are also increasingly controlled by the factory as well, in part to reduce labor costs.

Both aspects, however, largely return to the family in the 1980s, and tea production devolves and spreads back into households. As this happens, rural labor in the county migrates to more distant urban centers, while other members of the family remain in rural *Meitan*, where kids are raised and farming continues. In the 2000s, as tea farming takes on a new, more industrialized form of integration, labor flows back into *Meitan* to a certain extent; in fact, as the tea industry recently expanded dramatically, migrant labor from neighboring counties began to do seasonal work in Meitan's tea industry. So while the control over labor or the labor process is a central concern of the project, so too is how labor is reproduced, how both are continually changed through a series of spatial and formal transformations.

Mindi: *How do you see the rural-urban divide playing out in labor and/or peasant politics today?*

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¹ See Day, A.F. and Schneider, M. 2018. "The End of Alternatives? Capitalist Transformation, Rural Activism and the Politics of Possibility in China," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(7): 1221-1246.



Worker loading tea leaves to be fired in Meitan, 2018. Photo: Alexander Day.

Alexander: The classic, sharp institutional rural-urban divide, largely a product of the political economy of the second half of the twentieth century, is dissolving at present. This does not mean that divisions have completely disappeared, but that institutional differences have lessened and flows increased. Over the past 20 years, capitalist agrarian change has picked up speed; land transfers have escalated; and, more permanent urbanization of once-rural populations has increased. With these changes, I would argue that the Reform Period is now over. One of the side effects of these changes is that some of the politics of possibility in rural China have been foreclosed as well¹. For example, while the number of rural cooperatives has climbed dramatically over this period, the form they have taken has been fashioned by the capitalist context in which they have emerged. The more politicized forms of collectives promoted by rural activists have been sharply curtailed. While various kinds of rural politics may still be possible, I think critical politics of the excluded is less and less determined by the rural-urban divide compared to 20 years ago.



Fields of tea in Meitan county, Guizhou province, China. Source: Alexander Day: 2016.



Mindi Schneider is Assistant Professor in the Sociology of Development and Change at Wageningen University. She specializes in development sociology, agrarian political ecology, and commodity studies. She is a leader of the CFI and collaborates with Alexander Day on the [Feeding China](#) project.



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*All photos provided by Alexander Day.

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The True Price of Quality: On the Infrastructures of Tea in Postcolonial Kenya

Hannah Elliott and Martin Skrydstrup

Keywords: tea, price, quality, infrastructure, postcolonial Kenya

Ultimately, the bottom line of competitiveness will be the quality of tea we produce. I therefore appeal to our farmers to strive to produce quality tea that will help fight poverty.

-Kenya's third president, Mwai Kibaki, 21st July 2011

In Kenya, tea is a “political crop” (Ochieng 2007). Tea is one of Kenya’s largest exports and is an important foreign exchange earner and source of revenue. At the same time, tea is key to the livelihoods many smallholder farmers in central Kenya and west of the Rift Valley, so that the price of tea is a recurrent focus of political campaigns. Keenly aware of tea’s political and economic value, county governments grapple with the national government over tea policy, while key industry actors challenge and resist attempts at reform. These politics around the “true” price of tea are situated in and regenerated through the infrastructures through which Kenyan tea is produced, processed and marketed.

In January 2020, in his State of the Nation address, Kenya’s fourth president Uhuru Kenyatta informed Kenya of his commitment to tackling the problem of the low price of tea. His speech was aimed at the country’s hundreds of thousands of smallholder tea farmers who collectively, as shareholders of the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA), produce 60 per cent of Kenya’s tea. In contrast to his predecessor, Mwai Kibaki, quoted above, Kenyatta suggested that low prices were not a reflection of low quality. Rather, the true price of smallholder tea was being distorted by colluding interests at the Mombasa tea auction where much of Kenya’s tea is bought and sold.

The President’s speech came at a moment when tea was selling for record-low prices at the auction. It also coincided with the authors’ fieldwork in Mombasa among the brokers who value tea (Skrydstrup), and in Kericho, west of Kenya’s Rift Valley, on the multinational tea plantations and smallholder farms that produce it (Elliott). Drawing on ethnographic material from these sites, in this article we examine the conflicting truth regimes about the price of Kenyan tea that converge on debates about “quality”. We make sense of these conflicting regimes through an analytical approach that foregrounds the infrastructures through which tea has historically and contemporarily been produced and traded.



This framed picture of Kenya’s third President Mwai Kibaki comes into view for every visitor to the EATTA auction, as it hangs in the stair hall up to the theatre immediately after the restricted access entrance. (Photo: Skrydstrup, 2020).



The Mabroukie tea plantation in Limuru, central Kenya. Established in 1924 by Brooke Bond Kenya (later Unilever Kenya), Mabroukie was the Kenyan colony's first large-scale tea plantation replete with its own factory. While large, multinational tea plantations dominate the landscape west of Kenya's Rift Valley, Mabroukie today is the only multinational-owned tea plantation east of the Rift. (Photo: Elliott, 2018)

How tea moves: The infrastructures of tea

Tea's arrival in Kenya closely followed the establishment of the East African Protectorate in 1895. Initially a plantation crop, tea was legally restricted to colonial settlers and multinational companies. Following the Second World War and growing anti-colonial sentiment, moves were made to loosen these restrictions, and in 1954 the legal ban on Africans growing tea was lifted. The KTDA, mandated to promote smallholder tea production, was owned and controlled by the state in conjunction with multinational tea companies and determined who could grow tea, where and how tea could be grown, and was empowered to inspect, grade, accept or reject smallholder leaf (Ochieng 2010: 142).

Introducing smallholder tea production was a huge project that demanded significant resources and investment in infrastructure

such as nurseries, factories and roads. KTDA's administrative powers, strict control and monopoly over smallholders became a source of contention among farmers who felt that their interests were not adequately represented. Contentions between smallholders, agribusiness and the state induced a number of reforms to the KTDA through the decades that followed the 1954 reform, ultimately culminating in KTDA's privatization in 2000 (Ochieng 2010). The Kenya Tea Development Agency, with the same acronym as its predecessor, was a private holding company owned by the smallholders who held shares in it, diminishing the government's role in the smallholder sector to regulatory functions.

Tea factories send the majority of processed tea for sale via the Mombasa tea auction, a trading platform which traces its genealogy to the East India Company's London Tea

Auction (est. 1679). By the mid-20th Century, trade peaked in terms of volumes handled, when about one third of all teas worldwide went through London. However, in Kenya a handful of tea producers, buyers and brokers formed East African Tea Trade Association (EATTA) and held the first tea auction in Nairobi in 1956. In 1969, six years after Independence, the auction moved to the shipping port of Mombasa, where it continues to this day as the largest tea auction in the world in terms of throughput. The London Tea Auction held its last sale in 1998 and Mombasa now claims to be “The New Rome”, where all tea trails lead.



A multinational tea company’s “buying centre” for smallholder tea in rural Kericho (Photo: Elliott, 2020).



Unilever tea factory, Limuru. Lipton is a Unilever brand which blends tea from a range of sources, including tea grown on its own and other multinational plantations as well as higher quality smallholder tea (Photo: Elliott, 2018).

In 2008, further measures were taken to liberalize the smallholder sector, so that multinational and private tea factories could also purchase green leaf from smallholders. Today, smallholder tea farming areas are dotted with buying centers for numerous factories, and individual farmers often supply multiple factories. New private factories have mushroomed off the back of the reform as investors compete for smallholder leaf. These new tea infrastructures overlay the late-colonial infrastructures described above.

A ssessing qualities in aprons

In the course of Skrydstrup’s ethnography at the EATTA Tea Trade Centre in Mombasa, he participated in several tea tastings performed by brokers as part of their weekly routine to prepare the sales catalogue for the auction. The tea taster would either be an apprentice or a certified taster. The taster would have an assistant who prepared everything: lining up about 250-350 different cups up in rows under standardized lightning, making the qualities of the dry leaves visible and comparable, the nose (smell) and appearances of the infused leaves and at the bottom the color, hue, saturation and taste of the tea liquid discernable for the connoisseur. Enter the tea broker in his tie and apron holding the “golden spoon”. The assistant would then jot down the sensory/pallet experience for every cup captured in the tea lingo numbering several hundred terms, like bakey (overfired in the manufacturing process), malty (slightly overfired teas, can be desirable), polyphenols (stringent compounds in the liquid). Brokers claim that a few master tea tasters are able to distinguish upwards 2500 different teas.

After the tea tasting, brokers compile the sales catalogue for the teas they have been appointed to sell. Tea lots are auctioned according to an “open outcry system”, where the broker “reads the mood of the room”, as described by one senior broker, and then tries to knock off the teas at the highest price. If there is no interest in a certain lot or the bids are too low, the broker is entitled to call it an “outlot” and defer bidding to the next auction. Apart from tasting, preparing catalogues and samples and knocking off teas “in the docket”, brokers write market reports, undertake factory visits to advise on market

trends and fine tune processing and often socialize in various sports clubs with buyers and blenders and other members of the so-called “tea fraternity” in Mombasa. One senior broker described the objective ethos of his profession in this way:

I’m in tea and I don’t want to go into politics. This is my work and this is how I do it. For me to do it, I’ve got to be qualified. I’ve got to have the know-how. I’ve got to be professional. And I’ve got to have the knowledge of the crop and I’ve got to have the knowledge of processing. That’s it!

Generally, the brokers operate with an ethos of objectivism, professionalism and integrity, which is regulated by formal rules (the EATTA Rule Book) and more informal social etiquette, revolving around memberships in the prestigious sports clubs of Mombasa.



Above: Wesley from Tea Brokers East Africa Ltd. is tasting samples to prepare the auction catalogue. Notice the dry leaf on top, the infused leaf below and the liquid at the bottom. The broker assess qualities of all three states. Below: Mary, Joe and Cecilia from Combok Tea Brokers Ltd are discussing whether a Pekoe Fanning One is bakey or not, meaning overfired in the manufacturing process (Photos: Skrydstrup, 2019).



“The President talked to the wrong people”

In the aftermath of President Uhuru’s State of the Union address, which explicitly suggested that low prices were the result of unequal exchange relations within the tea supply chain, many brokers shrugged their shoulders and said that the President had “talked and listened to the wrong people”. However, in closer circles, they could be more candid: “Don’t you think it is contradictory,” said one prominent broker and continued “when he [the President] says there are cartels where there are brokers, but states that he wants 80% of all our teas produced to be sold through the auction?” The broker provided the answer himself:

As the President, he can’t be contradicting himself. He knows there are cartels. He also knows that the farmer is not getting his rightful returns. But if you look at how much a broker is getting from the 480 million kilos of tea of which 70% goes through the auction: 0.75% in commission. What is KTDA earning for offering their service to the farmer: 2-3%. Then go and work out how much a farmer is losing because he has employed a broker who offers a service by displaying and continuously improving the quality that he is producing. So where are the cartels?

Across the board, brokers explained the historically low prices with reference to the forces of supply and demand and the critical issue of quality. In most of these storylines, brokers defined quality in agrarian terms, such as the weather, terroir and methods of cultivation and processing. Lamenting the current direction of the industry, a broker evoked a certain nostalgia for the time when there was stricter agrarian control: “In the past there were regulations. You could not plant a bush without a license. You could not establish a factory unless you had your own tea. This was ‘the-old-set-up’, as they say. But now tea is all over the place”.

Asked about why Rwandan teas and small-scale KTDA farms in central Kenya fetched much higher prices at the auction than so-called plantation teas, a broker explained this

with reference to the legacies of agrarian infrastructures:

KTDA was set up with very high standards, defined by the Special Crops Development Authority set up by the British. When Kenyans took over, they continued to improve on those standards. So, a farmer would not be allowed to grow tea unless they followed the dotted line and in every aspect managed the farm. Today the standards of tea - particularly in Central Kenya - is amazing and remains some of the best in the world. (...) The plantations on the other hand, were set up basically to supply tea to the home market [implying the British Empire] and they were at that particular time focused on producing mass volumes, rather than good quality and that is the difference.

This justification for differential price formation at the auction with reference to the temporal trajectories of tea quality as an imperial and post-colonial project resonates well with Sarah Besky's work (2020) on the auction in Kolkata (India), where good tea quality registers as uniform, consistent and replicable on a mass scale. It follows that the tastings performed by the brokers in Kolkata and the associated lingo of briskness, brightness, biscuit and burnt in effect discipline and control the bodies of female tea pluckers on plantations thousands of miles away (Besky 2020: 49). According to Besky, this standardized quality reproduces the colonial plantation system and renders the Indian tea industry resistant to change and reform. In the Kenyan tea industry, quality seems more of a discursive/vernacular artifact that serves contemporary justifications of asymmetrical exchanges within the supply chain. Here, the disciplining in Besky's sense is rendered through the regulatory visits of brokers to factories to advise on manufacturing. However, brokers' differentiation between smallholder high quality and plantation low quality, broadly located east of the Rift Valley in central Kenya (where the tea industry is dominated by smallholders) versus west of the Rift Valley (where plantations dominate) sits awkwardly with Besky's argument about quality in the Indian tea industry.

Regarding this distinction between the quality of small-holder teas vs. the plantations, a prominent broker noted that the multinational plantations produce most of their teas through machine plucking, which is "the lowest of the lowest quality, as a machine picks everything". Here, the machinery/labor issue is the critical issue, however this distinction between the labor of the hand vs the machine in the making of quality amounts to more than different modes of agrarian production. It is an infrastructural layer produced by particular historical trajectories.

However, tea brokers in Mombasa do not speak in any unified and essentialized voice. Rather than the properties of soil, weather and good crop husbandry, another senior broker introduced the properties of markets to decode quality:

Quality is relative to the market (...) What I do as a broker is to assess the capability of the factory to meet [different] preferences. And I'll advise them. If your leaf is not noticeably black, because you have used machines, I'll rather give you advice to make teas that are better in hue, which will attract the markets in Europe. If I look at your teas and they are almost jet black and labor is not an issue, then I'll advise you as a producer to make teas that will attract the Pakistani and Afghanistan markets. And they'll pay better anyway.

In this notion of quality, we begin to see something more than a uniform notion of standardized quality disciplining the bodies of tea pickers. We are led to see how the properties of markets and the performance of brokers to make such markets seem critical to understand quality as a process of qualification (MacKenzie, Muniesa & Siu 2007). In "The Economy of Qualities", Callon states: "All quality is obtained at the end of a process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradeable good in the market." (Callon et al. 2002:199). However, does this constructivist - and agnostic - notion of quality capture what is at stake? We are missing a deeper temporal

dimension; the performativity of brokers is predicated on a layered tea infrastructure produced by colonial legacies through the coming into being of smallholders versus plantations and the stabilization of KTDA in postcolonial Kenya. Brokers' quality distinctions between "east and west of Rift" reproduce the dialectic between smallholder production and plantations, which constitutes part and parcel of this layered infrastructure of tea.

“We are not enjoying the fruits of our teas”

In spite of the emphasis on the superior quality of smallholder tea emanating from brokers' tasting rooms and the auction hall in Mombasa, this superiority was not reflected in prices paid to Kericho smallholders in early 2020. Elliott spent time with members of a smallholder cooperative supplying tea to a Kericho-based multinational, though many also sent tea to KTDA, other multinationals and private factories. A recurring theme amongst farmers was the question of why smallholder quality was not rewarded by price. As one farmer put it, "We should be earning more money. We are not enjoying the fruits of our tea. It's a lot of work on the ground".

From its inception in the 1950s, quality was at the heart of the smallholder tea project in Kenya and deemed essential to its success. The early smallholder tea project in Kenya was highly coordinated and controlled by the colonial authorities. In particular, emphasis was placed on "plucking discipline" and the "two leaves and a bud" that provided the benchmark for "proper" tea harvesting across the British Empire. As a result, smallholder tea was superior to plantation tea, where hired laborers were paid according to volume and thus incentivized to prioritize quantity over quality.

The job of producing quality tea in Kenya has been that of the smallholder. Critics of contract farming arrangements have argued that agribusiness shifts the burden of quality standards to smallholders while sector-wide low prices endure, whereas agribusiness profits from economies of scale. During Elliott's fieldwork, industry actors would often explain the quality disparity between plantation and smallholder tea through the

romanticization of smallholder labor. "A farmer will look at it [their tea farm] like a pet", one factory manager commented. Yet, conversations with smallholders highlighted another side of the quality story. Many expressed frustration at KTDA's lack of flexibility and readiness to reject farmers' tea. KTDA was "too stuck on quality", one smallholder complained.



A smallholder demonstrating "two leaves and a bud" tea plucking (Photo: Elliott, 2020).

Since 2008, smallholders have been able to sell green leaf to factories of their choosing. Multinationals have proved popular due to their superior collection services, looser quality requirements compared to KTDA and, initially, decent prices. Recognizing the superior quality of smallholder tea, multinationals process smallholder leaf separately from that harvested from their own estates and sell it under its own "mark", typically at a higher price. Nevertheless, in the context of rock-bottom prices in early 2021, suspicion lingered among smallholder outgrowers about multinational companies' practices, such as mixing smallholder tea with plantation tea to improve its quality and suppressing prices paid to outgrowers. The Kericho County Governor presented an alternative interpretation for enduring low prices. Because multinationals such as Unilever produce tea on plantations in Kenya but also have subsidiary companies which buy Kenyan tea, he argued, this allows them to buy high quality smallholder tea at low prices which they can blend with lesser quality plantation tea.

In addition to the multinational companies, tea brokers were accused of distorting what the Governor described as "proper principles of supply and demand". Farmers east of the Rift received significantly higher payments, which the Governor hinted was due to ethnic favoritism among brokers who hail from

central Kenya, a region that has historically been politically and economically empowered relative to other parts of the country. The Governor lifted the cup of tea he had been served by his secretary to his lips as he enacted broker tasting: “25 dollars”, he pronounced. “Next, my home region: ‘More polyphenols: 30 dollars!’”. His critique attested to a theme that was reiterated throughout Elliott’s fieldwork: that brokers’ methods of valuation were not “objective” and thus could not establish “true prices”.



The tea auction hall during primary grades on a Tuesday. Notice the monitors by the docket are black. During my first fieldwork in March 2019, they were live and recording all transactions (Photo: Skrydstrup 2020).

Waiting for “true price” Through articulations about quality, as expressed by the brokers, smallholder farmers and County Governor cited above, conflicting truth regimes emerge about the price of tea. For the Kenyan President, the price of tea became a political, actionable problem, and his directive expedited a range of initiatives to

restore tea’s “true price”. However, the multiple and divergent political interests at stake in Kenya’s tea infrastructures make reform a complex task. In 2020, the government announced that all tea would be required to pass through the auction, reinforcing its place as obligatory passage point within Kenya’s tea infrastructure. While the auction was widely suspected for its lack of transparency, it remained the key public infrastructure through which the government could govern the tea trade and facilitated the extraction of taxes and revenues from the financialization of tea. The Government’s directive has met resistance from otherwise opposed parties, such as county governors and multinationals, who have an interest in maintaining or fostering direct sales mechanisms – that is, private infrastructure between producers and buyers – as a means of establishing higher prices.

As part of the government’s efforts to recenter the auction in Kenya’s tea infrastructure, an initiative to move from the traditional outcry system to a new e-trade platform has long been in the making. The rationale for introducing electronic trading is the expectation that an e-platform would bring transparency, more buyers in actual competition and thus higher prices and higher earnings to the farmers. Yet, the resistance to this new mode of trading among brokers, the Herculean organizational task of implementing it, the lack of stable digital infrastructures and COVID-19 has delayed the official launch date. As of yet, the tea trade is still waiting to be digitalized. As one broker said in a recent interview with a twist of irony: “We are still waiting for them to switch it on.”

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*All photos provided by the authors.

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Illicit Crop Frontiers: Colonialism, Commodification, and Countermovements

Serena Stein and Katie Sandwell

Keywords: coca, khat, kratom, “war on drugs”, prohibition, development

Zones of cultivation for plants like coca, khat, kratom, and cannabis are thriving, in some cases despite protracted, violent, and lethal attempts at containment through state re-territorialization -- and often, state terror. These plants straddle the borders of legality in many places where they are grown, participating in the cultivation of agriculture frontiers characterized by uncertain and unpredictable openings and closings, and changing distributions of harms among plants and human communities. Scholars and activists question the ideology and efficacy of transnational and state programs to eradicate crops and criminalize farmers, bringing new attention to these commodities and the impacts of their contested legal status. There is also a rising appreciation of Indigenous and traditional cultivation of these and other plants, and of the importance of decolonizing their uses against backdrops of botanical speculation, piracy, colonization, and trauma. Finally, these illicit agricultural frontiers stand to be dramatically reconfigured in the face of changing drug law regimes.

Coca (*Erythroxylum coca*) is a plant native to northwestern South America. The practice of chewing and brewing coca leaves has a long history among Indigenous peoples in the Andean region, who use this mild stimulant to suppress hunger, thirst, pain, fatigue, and altitude sickness. In the 1860s, scientists isolated and synthesised cocaine for use in manufacturing medicines, beverages (like Coca Cola), and tonics. Coca leaves were declared an illegal substance in the *1961 UN Convention on Narcotic Drugs*.



Khat (*Catha edulis*) is a plant native to the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The practice of chewing khat leaves and shoots reaches back to the 12th century, becoming more widely spread in the 14th, and concentrated today in Yemen and east Africa. Khat production and use has spread, and in some cases transformed. Leaves are processed into two distinct compounds - Mephedrone and methylenedioxy-pyro-valerone (MDPV) - which are illegal in several jurisdictions, including the US (where they are sold as “bath salts”) and in the UK, where they are generally snorted or ingested.



Kratom (*Mitragyna speciosa*) is a plant native to, and grown in, Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and Malaysia. People in the region have long used kratom to relieve pain and reduce fever, either by chewing or brewing the leaves. Today kratom is increasingly sold as a commodity in the US and elsewhere - in powder form, in capsules, and as a tea - as a novel psychoactive stimulant or sedative, and to treat opiate addiction.



For this essay, we invited three scholars to comment on the frontiers of coca, khat, and kratom where they have long been embedded in research: **Asmin Fransiska** in Indonesia, **Lisa Gezon** in Madagascar, and **Kristina Lyon** in Colombia. We, the authors, edited these comments, and put them

into a conversation exploring illicit¹ crop frontiers today; what is shared and distinct among these frontiers, the frictions and countermovements within them, and their actual or potential connections to broader agrarian movements. As we relay the commentaries, we offer a few contours of what *(il)licit crops frontiers* bring to our understanding of the uneven histories of capitalism. We offer three propositions about (il)licit crop frontiers, and draw out key dynamics for ongoing study.

Proposition 1. Illicit crop frontiers tend not to be exhausted, but remade. They may appear transient and unstable but are cultivated over long histories of colonization and failed attempts at state control. Rather than occupying zones of progressive appropriation, they often escape incorporation and slip in and out of legality, and of state and transnational control.

Asmin Fransiska is a human rights advocate and an expert in drug law, international criminal law, and women's and children's rights. She notes that illicit crops have been central to empire- and nation-building and development, carrying farmers along in the tides of the shifting legal status of crop plants. Coca, for instance, was an important colonial commodity in Indonesia from the mid-19th century. Fransiska states that "coca plantations dominated Bogor, West Java, making the island a noted global producer of coca, even compared to Latin America. By 1912, Indonesia exported more than 1,000 tons, which was more than the rubber export." Motivating the export boom of coca and other medicinal and traditional plants were nation-building efforts: "[The] Indonesian government exported cannabis, to gain money toward restoring places that were ruined in the war of independence."

Yet, there remained a vacuum in policy regarding the cash-cropping plants that were lucrative, but growing controversial worldwide: "Over time, coca was prohibited. The legal consequences of cultivating grew increasingly punitive: farmers were detained and punished in the criminal justice system, and [the government] even imposed a death penalty under a draconian, but still unclear law." Under threats of violence, some farmers changed to less problematic crops, sometimes entering into highly exploitative markets such as tea in Java, or palm oil on Sumatra Island. Moreover, many farmers were caught up in

competitive regional and international economies where they competed with nearby agricultural booms.

More recently in Indonesia, kratom has become an important export crop for farmers in places where small-scale gold mining and rubber plantations have dominated. According to Fransiska, farmers cut into ancient forests to plant kratom trees, and the most successful among them are driving the latest models of motorcycles. Hundreds of tons of Indonesian-processed kratom, in powder and pill form, is estimated to leave the country monthly, and is sought after by people around the world seeking pain relief beyond pharmaceutical industry opioids that easily lead to dependency.

While kratom teeters in US regulatory decisions (it is currently legal at the federal level), local consumption in Indonesia is prohibited. Fransiska emphasizes that there are multiple kratom frontiers across Southeast Asia where laws concerning its production and consumption are treated in separate spheres, leading to inconsistent stances on the plant, and inconsistency across the region: A proposed Indonesian law would ban exportation, even as other countries are amending narcotic acts to formally legalize the plant.

Legal ambiguity also surrounds khat. Lisa Gezon, a cultural anthropologist, discusses how in Madagascar, protracted ambiguity

¹ The term "licit" can be controversial, because it carries legal weight beyond that in "illegal," and because even crops and substances subject to strict regulatory control and prohibition generally have some "licit" or permitted uses (e.g. medical cocaine and heroin). However, the interfaces between national and international scheduling and regulatory regimes can make common language challenging. Finding a shared category is further complicated by the interplay between *de jure* and *de facto* policies that render parameters of "licitness," "legality," and "controlled substances" obscure. The use of 'illicit' here is used to capture a wide spectrum from quasi-legality to tight regulatory control and prohibition targeting substances and crops, and does not represent a moral judgement about the qualities of these plants, their production, or their consumption.

surrounding the legal status of khat is an enduring situation that periodically disrupts frontiers of production but does not usually halt cultivation. That is, when a crop is 'not illicit,' farmers can ultimately find themselves in an enduring, stable frontier of production that exceeds cycles of opening, closing, and abandonment that mark other commodity frontiers, such as mining.

Gezon explains, "khat is officially legal to produce and consume in Madagascar, but my interviews and casual conversations revealed that many people are unclear about khat's legal status. Some are concerned that its legal status may change, as there is vocal opposition to it in many places in Africa." This, perhaps, lingers from the British colonial period in northeast Africa and Yemen when there was outright prohibition of the stimulant plant (Gezon 2012).

Gezon continues, "In Madagascar today [khat is] mainly cultivated by smallholders on less than 2 hectares." Many smallholders can profit from cultivation. However, as many farmers² have substituted the production of staple food crops with khat, concerns over regional food security - primarily that of urban consumers in the capital city - increasingly shapes legalization debates. "The legitimacy of concerns about regional food supply became particularly apparent during the political crisis of 2002, during the civil upset surrounding a presidential election. People realized the extent of their dependency [on farmers]" and seemed to panic over the threat of khat, not to public health as a stimulant, but to political stability amid potential food shortages. "Legitimate concerns about food supply are entangled with stigma attached to the crop, with pressure from international actors pursuing prohibitionist regimes, with political-economic factors like the presence of export markets for other commodities, and with ideological beliefs related to development."

Trajectories of frontier making in the Andean region are also intimately tied to colonialism and ongoing public and policy debates surrounding the cultivation and legality of coca. In her work accompanying citizen-led and community-based agrarian and environmental initiatives in the western Amazon of Colombia and the Andean-Amazonian foothills and plains of Putumayo over the last 17 years, Kristina Lyons shows how the dynamics of armed conflict, narco-trafficking, extractivism, and colonization have profoundly shaped this landscape.

Lyons explains, "Interethnic rural communities are often caught between economic options based on illicit crops, cycles of deforestation, extensive cattle ranching, other unsustainable agricultural models or employment with extractive industries, having little access to appropriate technical assistance based on local Amazonian ecosystems and ancestral and popular knowledges." Lyon describes Putumayo's ecologies as "diverse with a range of soils, microclimates, wetlands, torrential and meandering rivers, varied forest cover, medicinal plants, agrobiodiversity, strategic watersheds, biological corridors, foothills and plains." Here, the histories of illicit crops cannot be abstracted from the broader history of colonization, imperialism, and capitalist expansion. "The role of illicit crops within these processes is neither simple nor unitary. They can serve to consolidate or undermine state power; can fuel violence and dispossession or provide much-needed lifelines for small-scale producers; and can be inserted into large-scale international commodity markets, or relatively isolated from them."

Militarized geopolitical interventions and Andean-centric policy making often create conditions for the presence of illegal armed groups and illicit economic activities: "The inextricable links between agrarian and environmental histories and political violence helps us to understand how and why different

² In writing on farmers and their grounded realities across disparate frontier settings, the authors are cognizant that the rights, welfare, and aims of various agrarian communities and cohorts are not homogenous nor have unified interests in agrarian struggles with government agencies, NGOs, legal regulation, and international markets. Additionally, when referring to 'farmers,' we do not mean to exclude the array of people involved in cultivation, including landless laborers, women (who often provide unpaid labor), traders, and transporters who are not necessarily seen as 'farmers' or 'growers' but have livelihoods, however precarious, based on farming and the agricultural sector.

groups came to settle in these territories, as well as the lasting influence that processes of

colonization have had on the region's indigenous peoples and small farmers.”

Proposition 2. Illicit agricultural frontiers are made up of crops whose dangers to producers and consumers are uncertain. Incomplete, contested, and shifting state control often leads to the violent repression and eradication of illicit crops co-existing with passive tolerance of their traditional and medicinal use.

Producers of illicit crops and their communities exercise different political strategies in relation to the regimes that shape their livelihood possibilities. Where producers of illicit crops have supportive relationships with the broader communities in which they are embedded, this can support discussions of the role that illicit crops play in society, development, and livelihoods. However, the narratives of “the war on drugs” continue to present profound challenges for producers, whether through stigmatization and marginalization, or the threat and reality of violence, criminalization, and forced eradication.

Shifting and sometimes capricious legal regimes have major impacts on the lives and livelihoods of producers of illicit crops. In Fransiska's words “Indonesian society lives under fear of a ‘war on drugs’ narrative. Most people are lost in the conversation since the government imposed a single narrative upon an array of drugs as being ‘dangerous.’ (Yet local populations have different histories with the plants). Aceh province has a unique history with cannabis, using it regularly for cultural and social activities.”

The Indonesian government has limited research on illicit crops, making it harder to gather evidence about potential medicinal and other uses. “This law impacts many other types of drugs, including but not limited to khat/kratom and coca. Therefore, the first thing to do is revise the law to allow the researchers to work under health and social fields, in the process also encouraging society to talk about drugs. Open civic safe spaces are urgently required.” These kinds of discussions can be important for society on the whole, and especially for producers of illicit crops: “The agrarian communities face too high [a] risk when their activities relate to the (il)licit economies.”

Where crops are not formally illicit, a contested or marginal status still has major impacts on political economies of production, and on producers' lives. In Madagascar Gezon highlights how local/national regimes are impacted by the international drug control regime: “The government of Madagascar has to answer to international actors, too, including the WHO and governments where khat is illegal and upon whom Madagascar is dependent.” In a previous publication she argued “This label of illegality has a concrete effect on the lives of Malagasy (and any other khat-involved) people. Even though khat is legal in Madagascar, the government of Madagascar receives millions of dollars in funding from the United States and other lenders. Its leaders cannot afford to upset them by embracing a substance they find deplorable. People in Madagascar feel the hegemony of the WHO indirectly, then, as they must please lenders who accept WHO pronouncements.”

“The government is also under pressure to earn hard currency, to grow its GDP, which khat does not help it do. Although khat is a major means of subsistence for northern Madagascar it circulates almost entirely outside of the purview of government record keeping and tax collecting. It is grown for consumption mostly within the local province of Antsiranana, with some going by plane to other regions of the country. People do not sell khat in large quantities internationally, even illegally. As in other countries where it is grown, khat receives little to no attention from agricultural extension agents either at the national or international donor level.”

Yet, in the absence of formal recognition or support, growers and people who consume Khat are willing to defend its position in their communities: “In 2008, a rumor spread that the government was considering making khat illegal, and I was told that it nearly incited a riot.” Khat chewers are aware of the

contested and unclear legal status of the plant, and, in Gezon's research, spoke heatedly about actively protesting changes in law if necessary.

In Colombia, Lyons notes that "the latent threat that aerial fumigation with glyphosate ... as well as the continued forced eradication of illicit crops are a constant risk for coca growing communities, and exemplify the state's non-compliance with the country's peace accords. As a friend in Putumayo recently described it, 'we are experiencing a regression without precedent.' The lack of the most basic respect for life and guarantees for social leaders is an enormous challenge that impedes advocacy work, community organizing, and oppositional politics. By this, I am not suggesting that people have stopped organizing, defending, opposing, and enduring. I am highlighting the enormous difficulties that rural communities, ex-combatants, and social leaders face right now

in many regions of the country that were epicenters of decades of war. One of the greatest challenges of the post-peace accord transition is the level of environmental degradation that is occurring in territories that were left vulnerable to new arrangements of armed actors and the incursion of extractive industries after the official demobilization of the FARC-EP. Furthermore, the peace accords did not structurally change the country's highly concentrated property regime or national development model that is reliant on intensifying industrial mining, oil drilling, and industrial/plantation forms of agriculture."

The spectrum of state responses, from violent repression to passive tolerance, condition the possible forms of resistance and political action available to growers of illicit crops, and shape emerging illicit plant frontiers.

Proposition 3. Illicit crop frontiers are dynamic sites of agrarian countermovements that partially intersect with broader agrarian movements, but also provoke tensions among groups.

The contexts of kratom, khat, and coca production provide powerful illustrations of countermovements unfolding in response to repeated repression, environmental destruction, and living with regulatory uncertainty. In what follows, our contributors share their thoughts on mobilisations.

Kristin Lyons

"There are many examples of rural mobilizations, including dispersed and networked efforts of local communities and citizen-led initiatives to transform the socio-environmental conflicts and political instability plaguing the Andean-Amazonian region. Many of the alternative proposals frame their efforts in terms of cultivating and recovering Andean-Amazonian identities, memory, territorial ordinance, alternative agriculture, ecological restoration, defense of water, food autonomy, anti-extractivism, *buen vivir* (living well), autonomous communities, as well as the defense of human rights, guarantees for social and environmental activists, and the implementation of the country's peace accords. These accords were signed in 2016 between the national

government and FARC-EP guerrillas to officially end over fifty years of armed conflict between these actors. Unfortunately, key components of the peace accords, such as the National Plan for the Integral Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS), integral agrarian reform, and Development Plans with Territorial Focus (PDET) have not been upheld or successfully implemented. These components are vitally important for so many municipalities of the Amazon and other frontier regions of the country that were epicenters of violence and that continue to be immersed in conflicts.

Moreover, the geopolitical pressure exerted by the United States and its role in the cocaine supply and demand chain continues to be enormously influential in Colombia. The war on drugs is extremely lucrative not only for narco-trafficking and money laundering organizations, but also for the military industrial prison complex of the United States. Ethnically diverse rural communities, urban, and peri-urban residents have different strategies in terms of their advocacy efforts and relations with the state. Most, if not all of

the regional examples of transformative policies and respect for constitutional and human rights, the limited recognition of the rights of nature, and municipal autonomy in the defense of ecological and social patrimony, have been a result of citizen mobilizations, political protest, strikes, and community organizing.

There is a protracted legacy of agrarian movements in Putumayo that have protested repressive antidrug policy and proposed alternatives to the current logics of the war on drugs. Many community organizations and networks in Putumayo are attempting to multiply agroecological and Amazonian agricultural practices, create opportunities for scientific tourism, *bien vivir* and ecotourism, and recover and reactivate local economic practices that do not only rely on commodification or capitalist-based forms of exchange. While they may seek to intervene in public policy debates, these counter-movements are not necessarily state-centric in their approach to achieving change.”

Asmin Fransiska

“In Indonesia, there is an urgent need for political discussions that encompass not only the rights and perspectives of people who use drugs, but also of producers of illicit crops. Public discussions tend to be dominated by a narrow set of specialists, especially law-enforcement, with civil society and affected communities rarely represented. The survival of the growers will be maintained when the local government protects them. The local government knows their own society better than officials. But, these plants become ‘5-year issues’- that is, too politicized during elections.” This dynamic shapes the governmental approach to kratom, with the perspectives of growers not necessarily well represented, for example, in discussions about a potential ban on kratom exports from Indonesia.

“We need more time to advocate for other perspectives or other sides of drugs in our society. The agrarian communities face too high risk when their activities relate to the (il)licit economies. The greatest challenge for advocacy is current Indonesian drug law: We need to revise and open the discussion not only for the user or consumer of drugs but also to the farmers or prospective farmers.”

Lisa Gezon

Ideological tensions are linked to visions of development in Madagascar in a self-intensifying loop. In short, khat is not part of the formal, regulated global capitalist economy because it is not formally traded. Therefore, it does not generate export earnings for the country. In other words, it does not provide a country with a way to earn hard currency or to increase their GDP. Despite the considerable revenues it provides to small scale farmers, it does not fit into formal economic development plans and is therefore discouraged or ignored. Yet, this marginality can also be understood as a kind of resistance to specific ideologies of development. I have argued that the khat economy could be seen as a public secret. It is an economy that can be interpreted as alternative to the global capitalist economy because its aims are more oriented toward continuity and subsistence than toward expansion and capital accumulation. The case of Madagascar does not reveal a neat tale of either participation in or defiance of global capitalism. The cultural economy of khat embraces its own set of goals, motivations, and rewards—ones that do not always line up with the Weberian work ethic that is an important contributor to growth-oriented capitalism.

Despite their lack of financial power, marginalized people around the world negotiate the conditions of their lives in significant ways. Understanding khat as operating outside of the workings of the formal economy and the logic of accumulation is valuable not only because it exonerates the supposedly lazy ‘natives’ from the ‘crime’ of irrationality: it also points in a direction that some argue could save our planet because of its orientation toward holistic wellbeing and localized, subsistence-oriented resource use. This resistance, however, does not often take the form of organized or formal political action, as Malagasy farmers remain quite independent. I would say that the biggest challenges to advocacy would be the lack of organizations that provide the opportunity to come together and make a unified voice. Beyond that, even if there were such an organization, there is not much compelling anyone with any authority to respond to them.

The best chance they have is actually reactive: any attempt at undue enforcement of things that have a negative outcome for farmers (or consumers) will meet with tremendous resistance. As long as khat is not actively suppressed, farmers will continue to grow it and people will continue to chew it. Farmers' independence and ability to react nimbly to changing conditions keeps them resilient."

Kristina Lyons

"Right now, it is ever more crucial for the creation of broad alliances versus sectorial or identity-based politics. Socio-ecological conflicts are not separate from struggles over the violation of human rights. Violence against the territory and guardians and defenders of rivers, land, and forests are integral and intersectional problems. Alliance building between indigenous, Afro-descendent and campesino shared rural realities while respecting ontological differences and particular colonial genealogies is an important step toward building interethnic territorial ordinance and conviviality. When consumers in cities or towns support surrounding rural producers, they begin to repair ruptured metabolic relations between urban areas and countryside and support the defense of territories from

extractive industries and systematic forms of dispossession. Urban residents who care for and defend their water sources with the rural communities that act as guardians of these waters create the possibility for new water accords between all residents and beneficiaries of a watershed. Urban consumers can reactivate local economies and agrobiodiversity by purchasing food from local farmers and engaging in just economic practices and modes of exchange.

In Colombia, coca, marijuana and poppy growers have long engaged in debates with the state over legalization. Taking inspiration from Peru and Bolivia, coca growers have proposed that the state purchase coca derived products from them for medicinal, cosmetic, and nutritional uses. However, these proposals have not materialized vis-à-vis structural-level policy changes or the democratization of drug policy. As I mentioned before, what I have learned here in Putumayo, is that alliance-building extends far beyond only human-human relations and begins with attending to intra-dependencies, capacious empathies, and ethical shifts in the relations between all beings, elements, and processes that compose and decompose life in a particular place or territory."

Conclusion: Toward Comparative Crop Frontiers

This exploratory conversation highlights some of the complexity and comparative potential across illicit crop frontiers:

- i. the legal status of the plant (from marginal but tolerated, to criminalized and actively repressed -- often with different regimes alternating and coinciding
- ii. the insertion (or not) of the illicit crop into global commodity chains
- iii. the presence of powerful non-state actors who may have competing territorial interests, which may in turn be linked to the marketing of illicit crops
- iv. the presence or absence of other commodity frontiers (mining, energy, etc.) which may be in competitive or complementary relationships with the illicit frontier.

The commentaries also highlight a range of dynamics that provide a basis for ongoing study:

- How do producers of illicit crops face similar struggles to other small-scale agricultural producers including marginalization, lack of access to resources, and limited representation in state decision-making? Are there significant differences between producers who are interested in pursuing a development trajectory based around export-oriented commodity production at an increasing scale (whether licit or illicit) and those aiming to pursue alternative livelihoods based around principles of autonomy, local (food) sovereignty, and ecological harmony and stewardship?
- Illicit crops can provide a lifeline to small-scale and near-landless farmers, offering comparatively high returns from very small parcels of marginal land. Because of their durability and high value relative to volume, how might illicit crops avoid some obstacles which limit access to markets for other cash crops produced in remote areas?

- Here we see that in Madagascar khat is still only weakly inserted into international supply chains, mainly serving local (or national) markets for traditional, medicinal or recreational use. It is produced as a cash crop, at a relatively small scale. The scale of kratom cultivation in Indonesia has increased, with production oriented mainly for export, but its present and future legal status is ambiguous and uncertain. How do both crops provide livelihood options for small-scale producers while being seen as competing for resources with “legitimate” crops, especially those “legible” to the state by being commercialized, taxable, and seen as reliable sources of foreign currency? Does this result in intermittent state pressure that ranges from passive (e.g. lack of agricultural extension and other support to producers of illicit crops) to stigmatization and potential criminalisation of growers?
- In Colombia, coca has been profoundly but unevenly inserted into international illicit markets with powerful non-state actors playing a key role in controlling (access to) these markets. Coca production has therefore been embroiled in extremely complex and devastating conflicts. Some proposals from local communities in Colombia aim to transform coca production to serve local and national levels in traditional and medicinal markets. This draws on the experience of Bolivia, which re-acceded to the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (after previously withdrawing) with a reservation allowing it to regulate domestic licit coca markets. How does this create the possibility of shifting the legal status of illicit crops in ways that could be beneficial for communities and smallholders?
- Finally, in what ways do regulatory pressures and perceptions of illicit crops create tensions among transnational agrarian groups and frontier communities? When governments or NGOs pursue “crop substitution” strategies or “legal licensing”, how do policies and programs generate hierarchies and discrimination among various groups of farmers and other rural workers?

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Image credits from p 30: 1/ Agência Brasil. 2006. *Coca leaf, in Bolivia* (image cropped to fit). 2/ Ferdinand Reus. 2009. *Man enjoying his qat in Sana'a, Yeman, January 2009* (image cropped to fit). 3/ Uomo vitruviano. n.d. *'Mitragyna speciosa' leaves* (image cropped to fit).

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A New Museum Order: Representing the Lasting Legacy of Raw Materials: A Conversation with Roger M. Buergel and Sophia Prinz

Maarten Vanden Eynde

Keywords: museology, art, human history, raw materials, globalization, colonial heritage, relational aesthetics, interdependency, transculturalism, temporality, memory, remembering

In the framework of the 2nd Commodity Frontiers Initiative Journal with the theme of ‘Stimulants’ I could not have wished for a better-suited match to interview than Roger M. Buergel and Sophia Prinz from the Johann Jacobs Museum, which owes its existence to the coffee and cacao trade, but more importantly is unique in its endeavour to lay bare the intrinsically interwoven histories of commodities. The museum is dedicated to the global interdependencies of our life-world that become especially clear when tracing the history of important trade goods and their transport routes.

Maarten Vanden Eynde: *What intrigued me most about the statements that feature on the website of Johann Jacobs Museum, and more particularly in the research section about Raw Materials, is the part about the influence of the distribution of scarce resources on human history. It introduces the importance of cocoa and coffee, but also gold, crude oil, rubber and rare earths, as storytellers or protagonists in a story. ‘Telling these stories is one thing’ it states. ‘Being able to interpret them is another matter entirely. And yet that is exactly what our exhibitions aim to do: use raw materials as a guide for deciphering how our modern world works.’ Could you elaborate on how these materials, or the objects and documents that are used to tell their story, communicate, or how they are aided within the museum to speak about their previous life, use and importance?*

Roger M. Buergel / Sophia Prinz: Curatorially speaking, the first thing to do is to turn the material, be it opium, coffee, rubber or diamonds, into something strange. You want to induce people to digest the material’s presence, apart from any idea, or even promise, of narrative. There are some devices we tend to borrow from post-conceptual installation art, e.g. highlighting a material in its obstinate being-thereness. If you can make people ask in front of a piece of rubber: ‘What the hell is this?’ then you have already achieved something. The second

thing to do — again, curatorially speaking — is to keep the momentum, the sense of slight irritation that encroaches upon you as a visitor if the museum refuses to tell the truth, to explain, to enlighten you, whatever. You share a space with, say, a piece of natural rubber (caoutchouc), and next you see in a corner of the gallery a tiny photograph (black-and-white, dating back to the era of King Leopold’s plunder) of a Congolese whose skin is almost covered with rubber. Or you encounter a small screen with a movie by Melanie Smith about contemporary Fordlandia: images absorbing jungle life that has reconquered the by now ruined factories and facilities brought by Henri Ford to the Amazon Rainforest in the late 1920s. Visiting the exhibition and contemplating the different objects, you are hardly overburdened with information. But you are fed bits and pieces that tickle your imagination of the big picture. On it goes to the next gallery where you get more bits and pieces. This, in a nutshell, is our curatorial method. There is hardly a story or only of the shaggy dog-variety. There is no clear timeline, no authorial categorial framework (departments of „South America“, „Islam“ or „Modernity“, for example), although with some luck you might stumble into a department for “rubber”.... Essentially, there is a mere constellation of things, a constellation of objects and texts

that even may appear contingent, but calls in any case for the visitor's sensory and intellectual collaboration.

MVE: *Isn't this constellation of things, or the breadcrumbs that are left throughout the exhibition, still semi-consciously curated though? Or do the cross-references, narratives or historic links reveal themselves after the fact, after the opening of the exhibition? If you take coffee or cacao for instance, which are very much related to the history of Johann Jacobs Museum, I can imagine that there are too many objects, documents and photographs to show all of them at once. So a selection needs to be made, and by making that selection, one is already assembling the pieces of a complex puzzle that hopefully will be made whole by the visitor.*

RMB/SP: The Johann Jacobs Museum has no collection proper except for a few pieces to which we will come back in a minute. All our exhibitions on global trade and the migration of form are based on loans or collaborations with artists. But to answer your question about the curatorial process first: yes, curating is no dreamwork, the choices are made deliberately and sometimes intuitively too. This said, you cannot plan, control or determine how people look and relate to objects or constellations of objects. Some people will prefer a sense of direction, a kind of museological order imposed by the institution (allowing them to walk from the "19th century" to the "20th century, for example). Other people might actually like to get lost — as in Venice where getting lost gives you a chance to discover something new. In short, there is play at work in curating and the visitor has to accept it, which in turn implies that his or her "will to know" gets curtailed severely. Fundamentally, the exhibition experience is an aesthetic experience — a type of experience that forces you to reflect upon your expectations and assumptions as well as on your habitual modes of perception and understanding. Aesthetic experience paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of one's own role in the world. The ground is slippery though... While the Johann Jacobs Museum is indeed connected to coffee and cocoa — the endowment of the Jacobs Foundation of which Johann Jacobs Museum forms a part,

was generated by a coffee brand (Jacobs), while the Jacobs Holding is a majority shareholder of Barry Callebaut¹ —, there is no collection worth its name except for a few pieces.

There is a coffee pot, for example, that was commissioned by the VOC in Jingdezhen around 1700. While the model, including the decorative design, came from Dutch craftspeople, it was up to Chinese potters and porcelain painters to turn the pot it into something real. But what do you do as a Chinese painter if you cannot identify a Dutch windmill? You have never seen a windmill in China, and thus you render it as... a flower! In other words, the pot is both a result of global trade between China and the West, and the carrier of a brilliant cultural misunderstanding. This is the kind of story you can tell but, perhaps, you also want to talk about the blue colour and the cobalt from which it was derived...

MVE: *Given the complex nature and intertwining history of the wide variety of raw materials, how does the museum facilitate the surfacing of these embedded stories, taking in account the often contradicting memories or emotions that are connected to them? How do you include multiple perspectives for instance, or a 'heterogeneity of voices' when talking about the same historic event? How do you display contradictory temporalities?*

RMB/SP: The Chinese cobalt for potters in Jingdezhen came from Persia, and was paid for with silver the Spanish extracted from mines in South America. Today's cobalt comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and drives batteries. The piece of rubber mentioned above allows you to connect the ecology of the plant with the first telegraph cable between Europe and the US. We think that these phenomena are less contradictory than complex. They appear contradictory only if you insist on a certain order of knowledge. True, museums, being both brainchild and Western treasure troves of the long 19th century tend to reproduce this order. This is one more reason for wanting to get rid of them, as in the "Mobile Worlds" exhibition, but more to that later.

¹ Barry Callebaut is among the world's largest cocoa processors and chocolate manufacturers, with an average annual production of 2.1 million tonnes of cocoa & chocolate.



«A Season in Shell» by Zbeng Mabler, Johann Jacobs Museum 2013/14, installation view, courtesy JJM.

The „multiple perspectives“ you are claiming should in our view be part of the museum’s *modus operandi*. There is for sure an emphasis on multiple perspectives, participation and diversity in today’s museum world, but this emphasis tends to remain exterior to the exhibition form. It is a political marketing ploy, nothing more. If an institution is truly interested in multiple perspectives, it has to leave the curatorial comfort zone and start undoing the institutional architecture, including its power structure. For instance, you have to invent ways of working on eye-level with miners in Kivu² and also with Glencore³-traders, knowing fully well that such a method (if improvisation is a method) won’t guarantee an outcome. As a rule, curatorial work becomes interesting at the point at which the exhibition-form is not treated as a given. Collaboratively, with the

Kivu-miners and the Glencore traders, you have to invent a way of dramatizing the material, cobalt or coltan, for example. Then you stand a chance to arrive at multiple perspectives. In other words, multiple perspectives won’t happen if they are not built in from the beginning—an integral part of the project’s texture.

MVE: *This sounds almost ‘too good to be true’, being able to include such a variety of voices in the making of the exhibition, but is this already in practice an actual part of the Johann Jacobs museums modus operandi, or are you referring to museums in general? If you are indeed talking about the Johann Jacobs Museum, could you give some examples of successful outcomes of this improvisation method, implementing these ‘multiple perspectives’ and letting them solidify in the final outcome?*

² Kivu was the name for a large region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo under the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko that bordered Lake Kivu. It included three sub-regions: North Kivu, South Kivu and Maniema, corresponding to the three current provinces created in 1986.

³ Glencore is an Anglo-Swiss multinational commodity trading and mining company supplying metals, minerals, crude oil, oil products, coal, natural gas and agricultural products worldwide.

RMB/SP: We can talk only about our own work but, of course, many colleagues share similar ideas. More importantly, many artists like Allan Sekula for example, were after this type of improbable encounter. It is tough so because the attempt to engage communities or individuals with completely different mindsets can be quite frustrating, even though the outcome might prove fruitful. But there is no alternative if you want to reach a level of curatorial formalization that is not determined by the visible or invisible confines of institutional architecture (the written or unwritten rules of how to do things).

The term „successful“ is a double-edged sword too. If you work with fragile people, migrant teenagers from the Middle East or Africa with no residence permit, for example, you might be able to achieve something. But there is nothing you can or want to show, because you need to shield the teens from the authorities. Still, working with these teens is extremely enriching as they both know and understand a lot about, say, gold mining in Ghana, piracy in Somalia or the Chinese presence in Africa. They are your experts albeit not in the official sense of the word. And they are your audience too.

MVE: *Coming back to the modus operandi of museums, is this also relating to the 'new museum order', as proposed in the exhibition "Mobile Worlds or the Museum of our Transcultural Present" that took place in The Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (MKG) in 2018, in which the traditional departments such as 'antiquity' and 'modern', 'European' and 'Asian' or even 'art' and 'non-art' were merged in order to represent society's transformation as a result of globalization? There was hardly any contextualisation of the exhibits on display, and interpretation was left largely to the visitor. Can you talk a bit more about this approach and the way in which it was perceived?*

RMB/SP: *Mobile Worlds* followed a slightly different track than what we do at Johann Jacobs Museum. The Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg (MKG) has an encyclopedic

collection similar to the V&A⁴. This type of museum was a fruit of the World Exhibitions, even literally, as its founding director went on shopping sprees to Vienna in 1873 and Paris in 1900.

The challenge was to come up with an exhibition model that would do justice to some global political entanglements of the 19th century, between Western powers and Japan, for example, or between Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil, and the African West Coast. Differently put, could we make objects reveal certain political patterns or layers while involving the visitor in the exhibition's compositional moves?

The visitors were not completely left on his or own; there was a catalogue. Still, you want people to have a chance of making their own moves and do their own imagining and thinking. Alois Riegl, the eminent Viennese art historian and contemporary of Freud, talked about „attentiveness“. If you neutralize the intellectual and aesthetic challenges or explain away the problems, you condemn people to consumerism. They become dull rather than attentive. To give you an example from *Mobile Worlds*, look at this football.

The football was displayed suspended in a vitrine, referencing Jeff Koons' *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985). Art people would get it and make the link to a post-Duchampian discourse on art and ontology. Other people would just be happy to encounter a football, children certainly. The football is even signed —by Pelé (or Edson Arantes do Nascimento), one of the greatest players of all time. Some visitors will become sentimental about the 1970s and, perhaps, share their memories. If you look closer at the signature, you realize that Pelé was drawing a spiral. What could be the meaning of the spiral?

A few steps away from the football you encounter a bowl from Bahía (the Brazilian North-East), a loan from the Lina Bo Bardi⁵-collection of folk art. There is a spiral on that

⁴ The Victoria and Albert Museum in London is the world's largest museum of applied and decorative arts and design, as well as sculpture, housing a permanent collection of over 2.27 million objects. It was founded in 1852 and named after Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

⁵ Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992), born Achillina Bo, was an Italian-born Brazilian modernist architect who devoted her working life to promoting the social and cultural potential of architecture and design.



Football, signed by Pelé», from the Docker's Museum by Allan Sekula, at «Mobile Worlds» (2018), Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg, courtesy M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Belgium.



Installation of coffee paraphernalia on the wall of Johann Jacobs Museum, courtesy JJM.

bowl, too. In fact, the spiral is a deeply ingrained motive in Afro-Brazilian decorative patterns. Next you encounter a piece of West African-textile with a spiral-pattern, and next to it a photograph by Guilherme Gaensly that was shot at the port of Santos. It shows carriers with heavy sacks of coffee on their backs, ready to bring them on board of a ship destined for Hamburg. Slowly but surely the few coffee beans spilled under the football start to make sense. You draw the connection between African textiles, the slave trade, plantation colonialism, coffee, the port city of Santos and FC Santos, the club of Pelé. In our view, this is the way to show coffee beans in an exhibition that addresses global trade, the museum's colonial heritage and Western fictions of planetary order.

MVE: *Is the experience of the visitor in the museum mainly visual, i.e. through the reading of text or the viewing of illustrations or images? Or is there also a focus on other senses, like hearing, smell or touch?*

RMB/SP: With Zheng Mahler from Hong Kong (an artist and anthropologist-couple) we staged an exhibition in 2013 that basically consisted of 2 tonnes of Abalone-shells. „A season in shell“, this was the exhibition's title,

addressed the low end of global trade between China and Africa, featuring a Somali trader who shipped the Abalone from Somaliland via Zurich to China. As you will guess that this was complex project, containing infinite layers, and logistics (shipping animal products, and so on) was nightmarish. Precisely because of its nightmarish character, it was also revelatory and entertaining. The shells, when they arrived in Zurich and were brought to the gallery, smelled like hell. After a couple of hours, the offices had to be evacuated. In other words, sensual experience matters a lot, but it would be naive to attribute it a critical function *per se*. Curatorially speaking, the difficulty lies in organizing or articulating a sensual experience like smell, and to use the senses in order to challenge perceptual habits.

MVE: *Thank you Roger M. Buerger and Sophia Prinz for your time. I think we touched upon some vital issues of exhibition making and the possibilities of objects to communicate complex interrelated stories about commodity frontiers. I would love to hear more about it, but we reached the limit of our word count, and I smell some fresh coffee being brewed somewhere... Time for a break!*



Chinese blue and white 'Europa and the bull' coffee pot, Kangxi (around 1700), courtesy JJM.



Roger M. Buerger is the founding director of Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich. He curated «Mobile Worlds» with Sophia Prinz at the Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg (2018), «Suzhou Documents» with Zhang Qing at the Suzhou Art Museum (2016), «Garden of Learning» at the Busan Museum of Art in South Korea (2012), and was Artistic Director of documenta 12 (2007).



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Maarten Vanden Eynde is a visual artist and co-founder of the artist run initiative Enough Room for Space. His practice is embedded in long term research projects that focus on numerous subjects of social and political relevance such as post-industrialism, capitalism and ecology. Since 2020 he is a PhD candidate at the UiB / University of Bergen in Norway focusing on material traces that could represent human presence on Earth in the far future.

*All photos provided by the author.

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Labor Commodification in the Sugarcane Plantations of Alagoas, Northeast Brazil

Allan S. Queiroz

Keywords: Brazil, sugarcane cutters, labor commodification, labor reform, precarity

In 2018, an opinion piece in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* questioned ‘Should we prohibit the poor from having degrading jobs?’ The article was a reaction to the shutdown of a flour factory in the state of Alagoas, Northeast Brazil, on which labor authorities found 87 people working in conditions analogous to slavery. For the author, cutting labor rights and protections would benefit the working poor with job creation, implying that they should be forced to accept any working conditions to make ends meet. In colonial Brazil, too, workers were forced to work under painful conditions, the difference being that they were enslaved subjects. This seemingly innocent defense of the exploitation of the poorest reveals the challenges that workers face under contemporary capitalism in Brazil, where the frontiers of labor commodification¹ are being pushed far below the line of human dignity.

Since the interim government of Michel Temer approved the Labor Reform (Law 13.467) in 2017, it has become cheaper to hire and fire workers. The reform consisted of a downward regulatory overhaul that modified more than 100 articles² of the 1943 Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT by its acronym in Portuguese), Brazil’s legislation regulating capital and labor relations until the day. CLT has never been applied in its entirety, neither in urban nor rural Brazil. The country’s ruling classes have always disputed labor regulations and protections with the

complicity of state authorities. Since the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, they reorganized themselves around an authoritarian project of power, which is widely backed by agribusiness and industrialists, given Bolsonaro’s promises to boost market freedoms by reducing social and labor rights. Here I focus on the case of the sugarcane plantations of Alagoas, Northeast Brazil, where I have been carrying out fieldwork since 2012 to explore a couple of questions around labor precarity and job formalization using oral history interviews, documents, and labor process observations. Between May and August 2019, I returned to the field to undertake exploratory fieldwork about the consequences of the labor reform in terms of the working conditions and rights of the sugarcane cutters.

Brazil’s sugarcane cutters and have never experienced a process of labor decommodification. The sugarcane agro-industry that employs cane cutters has historically used patterns of labor exploitation and immobilisation (slave, tenant and flexible, informal labor) under deregulated conditions that linked the right to survival to degrading labor. With the transition to a ‘free labor’ society in the nineteenth century, and in anticipation of the 1888 Abolition, rising concerns with disciplining rural workers appeared in the transcripts of Alagoas’ first agricultural association in 1877. Landowners demanded repressive measures to curb the

¹ By labor commodification I understand the capitalist wage work relationship whereby dispossessed workers are dependent upon the sale of their labor power for their survival.

² In total, 106 articles were modified: 54 were amended, 43 new ones inserted and 9 revoked. See Confederação Nacional da Indústria. 2018. *Modernização trabalhista: lei nº 13.467 de 13 de julho de 2017, panorama anterior e posterior à aprovação*. Brasília: CNI.



The mills closely control the labor process and expect cutters to strike the cane at ground level, as the highest amount of sucrose is in the lower part of the plant. Repetitive movements during cane cutting generate many musculoskeletal disorders among rural workers. Source: Allan S. Queiroz, 2013.

free movement of labor and attests of moral and civic behavior from those workers hiring out their labor to the plantations (Manuel Diégues Jr. 2012). Slaves were gradually replaced by tenants who exchanged labor for a residence with access to a plot of land, on the condition that they were unrestrictedly subordinated to the labor demands of the landowners. Thus, the landowning capitalist class in the Northeast of Brazil adopted the system of *morada*, which incorporated tenant workers as a source of cheap, dependable, and controllable labor. These tenants or *moradores* formed a specific type of rural proletariat that became ‘immobilized’ through moral and economic debts and had barely no access to social or labor rights (Heredia BMA de 1988; Heath 1981).

Although the CLT already granted rights to rural workers, and in 1963 a specific legislation extended more rights and protections, in fact, these regulations were almost never applied nor enforced in rural Brazil. Rural workers made several organizational efforts for better working and paying conditions and access to land in the 50s and 60s, such as the Peasant Leagues, which were crushed by the 1964 dictatorship. At that time, the various segments of the agrarian ruling class – *senhores de engenho* (traditional landowners) and *usineiros*

(capitalists concentrating land and industry) - waged a dispute for power and resources in line with state-sponsored modernizing projects during the 1970s and 1980s. The dispute culminated with the dissolution of labor tenancy relations, the expansion of plantations tied to the modern sugar mills (*usinas*) and the utilization of informally hired, unprotected casual labor. Despite the non-compliance with labor laws, the sugarcane agro-industry was considered ‘the most important historical experience of state intervention in a set of activities in Brazil’ since the creation of the Institute of Sugar and Alcohol in 1933 (Ramos 1999). That is, in the course of the twentieth century, the Brazilian state intervened and subsidized the expansion of the plantations and capital accumulation at the expense of the rights and protections of rural workers.

Under the 1988 Constitution, it was no longer possible to ignore that rural workers were subjects with rights: constitutional social and labor rights were equalized for both rural and urban workers. After decades of informal jobs, the rising job formalization of the 1990s became associated with better wages, benefits, and entitlements to social protection. However, cane cutters also saw their work effort quadruplicate in the following decades. The sugarcane agro-industry raised the bar of

work effort using piece wages and a series of incentives to increase workers' output.

Around 2008, the 'National Agreement to improve working conditions in sugarcane' promised to extend new rights and a better quality of life for sugarcane workers. The agreement responded to the numerous deaths by overwork in São Paulo's plantations, Brazil's largest sugar and ethanol producer (Alvez 2006). Most claimed lives were of migrant workers coming from Northeast Brazil. At the same time, the agreement was an attempt by the Brazilian state and agro-industrial capital to clean up the image of Brazilian commodities in global markets. However, the situation of precariousness and super-exploitation of labor underlying ethanol and sugar production was kept intact. The agreement expired in 2012, upon which São Paulo and the other largest producing states in Brazil speeded up the harvest's mechanization, replacing people with machines. But in Alagoas, the harvest remains mostly done by manual labor.

Alagoas' rural workforce is hired through formal contracts to cut sugar cane manually from September to March. Rural workers can only keep their jobs if they attain high production quotas. While they used to cut between one to two tons of cane as informal workers in the past, they are now expected, as formal workers, to cut above four to seven tons per day. Many cutters, however, surpass those exigencies to make better wages. Piece wages lead to a critical situation in which you are convinced that 'the more you cut, the more you earn'. As a result, work accidents and work-related illnesses became endemic in the sugar industry. Occupational illnesses include a generalized cramp that might lead to death, which the Alagoas' workers dubbed 'kangaroo' (Queiroz and Vanderstraeten 2018).

Most of the men and women that I have interviewed over the years consider themselves biographically as rural workers. Their *carteiras de trabalho*, a Brazilian document that became a symbol of citizenship and formal employment, display that they have been incorporated into this sector as 'permanently temporary' workers. Their work cards are filled with years of temporary jobs on the plantations, revealing

their precarious access to social and labor rights. The patterns of precarious employment are combined with recurrent unemployment and gaps in pension contributions. In other words, job formalization has meant a process of incorporation into a precarious citizenship. Moreover, due to the practiced piece wages, which in the plantations reflects the extraction of surplus-value based on the intensification of work, job formalization has been accompanied by a more intensive and health-threatening commodification of labor.



Mr João and his four work cards documenting his working life in the plantations. Source: Allan S. Queiroz, 2015.

Cane cutting is a backbreaking, labor-intensive activity and the seasonal cutters receive not more than one and a half minimum wage monthly. Given the seasonality of sugarcane harvesting, the cutters also experience recurrent unemployment during the slack season, creating many insecurities for them and their families. In 2011, Alagoas' sugarcane workers mobilized to fight the precarity of rights imbued in their work contracts. By law, seasonal contracts are terminated without social protection at the end of the harvest. That year, sugarcane workers held numerous road blockages to fight for more rights and protections in the period of unemployment. They interrupted the feeding of the mills crushing the cane to produce sugar and the transport of sugar to the port of Maceió. Consequently, the blockades disrupted both the production and the shipment of commodities to global markets, affecting the mills' profits.

In response to labor unrest, the mills implemented new hiring strategies to reach a labor compromise. They started signing full-time contracts, which were forcibly



Cane cutters blocked a road near the plantations of Usina Seresta. In the last decade, wildcat strikes, road blockages, and work stoppages were common forms of collective action undertaken by sugarcane workers against their precarious situation. Source: Patrícia Bastos, 2011. Image reproduced with permission.

terminated by the end of the harvest. Seasonal workers accessed more rights and unemployment insurance and could guarantee food security for their families for a few months during the offseason. Such ‘innovations’, which had been considered fraudulent by the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE), led to a situation in which social protection mechanisms intensified the work effort in the plantations. Because the unemployment insurance was calculated based on the last wages received, workers began to expend greater physical effort to receive higher benefits, which increased the already high workloads to which they are exposed in the cane fields.

During the fieldwork, I observed that workers and their families had suffered many losses due to the Labor Reform. The cutters are now experiencing unfair wage deductions, underpayment, and more difficulties in accessing occupational health and safety at the workplace. In the plantations of a large sugar mill, workers have to produce 85 tons of cane cut in a fortnight to receive their weekly rest. That is, they must cut on average seven tons per day, from Monday to Saturday; otherwise,

the mill steals their benefit. There are also quotas for doctor visits. Moreover, they are also working longer hours (above 44 hours) without overtime pay and experiencing delays in the payment of wages and severance provisions. According to the president of Alagoas’ Federation of Rural Workers (FETAR/AL), Antônio Torres, some sugar mills are now paying wages below the minimum stipulated by the legislation and abusing labor outsourcing, which was prohibited in the plantations until recently (Interview with Mr. Torres, 2019). The reform wielded much power to employers who already counted with a series of mechanisms to extract surplus value from rural workers under degrading working conditions.

It is well known that an authoritarian labor politics prevails in the sugarcane plantations of Alagoas. Workers often relate a series of harassments, abuses and coercion at work. Those voicing their grievances are fired and blacklisted. Workers are also expected to comply with productive expectations; otherwise, they are sacked. In the isolation of the plantations, law and rights cease to exist,

and managerial despotism prevails. One cane cutter experienced a series of intimidations and was coerced to cut cane in undesirable circumstances. The mill's agricultural manager forbade him to jump back on the bus if he did not cut the cane. That day, he said, 'I was forced to work'. After a series of dissatisfactions at work, toiling under extreme conditions, he had a stroke. For him, 'the only right we have is the right to work'. That is not an isolated case. Although it has become extremely challenging to undertake fieldwork in Alagoas' plantations, once you establish trust relationships, the very interviewing process becomes an encounter during which rural workers voice their discontent about unfair labor management practices and exploitation.



Cane cutters enjoy a lunch break under a tree. Without proper accommodation, they sit on their thermal bottles. Source: Allan S. Queiroz, 2015.

The reform also increased the unpaid work time. For example, commuting time (*horas in itinere*), a time during which workers were legally considered to be at the employer's disposal, is no longer paid. According to one cane cutter, the loss corresponded to a drop in 5% of his paycheck. This is not only an extension of the unpaid work over the working day, but it is also a precarization of working conditions. During commuting, often done through buses in poor conditions, many fatal accidents occur every year. Now, employers can claim they are no longer responsible for workers' lives during commuting time.

With the Labor Reform and other downward regulatory shifts ongoing in Brazil, what is at stake is the expansion of the frontiers of labor commodification. Workers sell their labor power under flexibilized and cheapened conditions, with fewer rights and entitlements

to pension, and become increasingly dependent on employers as well as vulnerable to market forces. The job creation argument used to approve the Labor Reform was mismatched by the statistics, which show that Brazil's labor market is now primarily creating 'intermittent' jobs. (Folha de S. Paulo 2021). This new modality allows employers to hire out workers with no guarantee of a minimal number of working hours and income. That is, the reform institutionalized conditions to expand the working poor; those who despite their access to paid work remain under the poverty line. Notwithstanding the race to the bottom in terms of labor exploitation brought about by the reform, I believe the counterpoint is being built by the social experiences in the heart of Alagoas' plantations. For instance, rural communities are now occupying the lands previously explored by industrial agriculture and recreating the plantations as spaces of agroecology.

Various social movements that struggle for land rights and agrarian reform in Alagoas, including the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) and the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), occupied the lands of the bankrupt Usina Laginha in 2013 (Uol Notícias 2018). Laginha was owned by João Lyra, who was once Brazil's richest member of Parliament, worth an estimated \$140 million, that subjected workers to modern-day slavery (Nova Cana 2014) and was exposed by the Panama Papers. Laginha's lands were repurposed into family agriculture, and it now benefits about 10 thousand peasants, including former sugarcane workers. Once occupied by plantations serving global markets, the land now supports the communities cultivating it and the local markets. The settlement conditions are far from ideal, but the peasants now have a place to call home and land access to cultivate subsistence plots, commercialize surpluses, and push demands for agrarian reform of those lands. This is only one example of labor decommodification amidst a context of setbacks in social, labor, and agrarian reform policies set in motion by the Bolsonaro government.

Long before the advance of sugarcane fields over the Zona da Mata region of Alagoas in the twentieth century, that land now occupied

by peasants saw the rise of the most significant struggle for freedom in Brazil. The *Quilombo dos Palmares* was a rebel polity constituted by runaway slaves from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth century that resisted colonial oppression for more than 100 years. Fast forward to the present, former wage workers are now growing their food after liberating themselves from the exploitation of their labor under intensified conditions. This echoes the past struggles for

freedom and justice rooted in that territory and serves as a basis for transforming the future. At a time when the ruling classes are pushing to remove social and legal barriers to the expansion of degrading work, the social struggles for land rights and an agrarian reform that works for the people that decouples survival, housing and food security from market constraints remains an essential alternative for a more socially just and equitable future in Brazil.



During an interview, a cane cutter showed his worn-out shin guards, a mandatory PPE in the cane fields, and a broken thermal bottle. Workers related many difficulties in having their PPE's replaced. Source: Allan S. Queiroz, 2015.

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

Erich Landsteiner and Ernst Langthaler

Keywords: coffee, coca, gold, soy, sugar, tea, commodity frontiers



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).

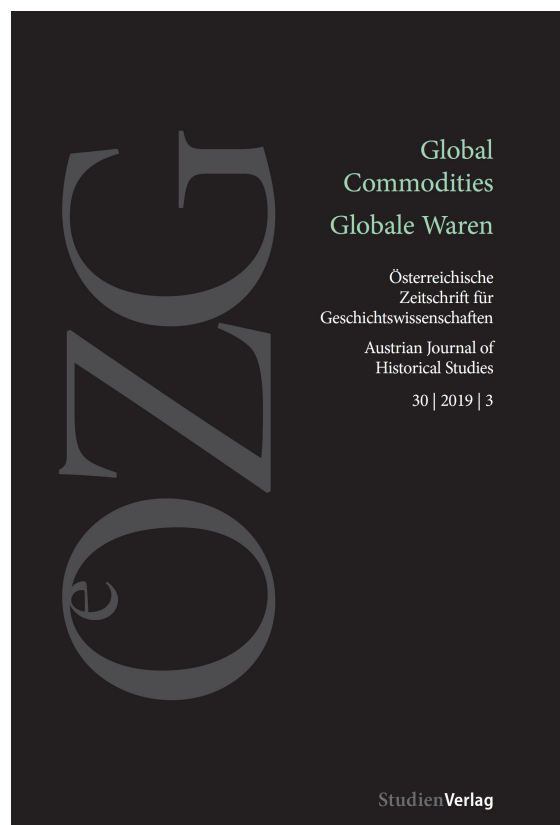
The sheer size of this flourishing literature highlights the appeal of chain and network metaphors as tools for conceptualizing globalization in the field of commodity studies. However, some critiques of these approaches have recently emerged: first, they emphasize the centers of the capitalist sphere 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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Malthus in Smith Clothing: *The Dasgupta Review*

Robert Fletcher

Keywords: Dasgupta Review, Malthusian legacies, biodiversity, population, natural capital, ecosystem services

In this op-ed, Robert Fletcher reviews *The Dasgupta Review*, a report commissioned by the UK Treasury Department on *The Economics of Biodiversity*, which was released in February 2021. Fletcher argues that rather than offering a fresh or timely analysis of biodiversity loss and how to counter it, the Review continues a long line of similar reports that leave capitalism in the background as a given, and lay blame for what ails the world at the feet of "population." Such disavowed capital-centric Malthusianism, Fletcher argues, renders the popular report a distraction from desperately needed analyses of the political economy of biodiversity loss.

Partha Dasgupta. 2021. *The economics of biodiversity: the Dasgupta review*. London: HM Treasury. ISBN 978-1-911680-29-1. Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>.

Commissioned by the UK Treasury Department and released to much fanfare in February 2021, the *The Dasgupta Review* is the latest (and, at 21 chapters and 600+ pages, longest) in a series of similar reports endeavouring to demonstrate the economic importance of *in situ* natural resources in order to motivate their sustainable management. This tradition stretches back at least to the 2005 *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, then traces forward through the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (TEEB) and *Green Economy* initiatives, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development's (WBCSD) *Vision 2020* report, the Capitals Coalition's *Natural Capital Protocol*, and on to other more recent initiatives like the 2020 *Financing Nature* report from The Nature Conservancy (TCN) and the Paulson Institute, among many others.

Following on this august legacy, the *The Dasgupta Review* reiterates a series of well-rehearsed arguments to make its case for the importance of biodiversity to economics and policymaking. Natural resources, it asserts, have been unsustainably managed in the past due in substantial part to the fact that they have not been incorporated into economic



decision-making; hence the ecological impacts of economic activity have been largely overlooked in the headlong rush for human development. Consequently, the *Review* explains, conventional economics has driven a "wedge between the prices we pay for Nature's goods and services and their social worth", with the discrepancy between the two values obfuscated in the form of "what economists call 'externalities'" (p. 6).

This wedge, the *Review* asserts, is due largely to the fact that "three pervasive features – *mobility*, *silence* and *invisibility* – make it impossible for markets to record adequately the use we make of Nature's goods and

services" (p. 31, emphasis in original). Properly valuing resources' contribution to human livelihoods via new methodologies developed by ecologically-minded economists will thus facilitate their incorporation into decision-making processes, and hence planning for their optimal allocation by both governments and private firms. "[I]n order to judge whether the path of economic development we choose to follow is sustainable", the *Review* concludes, "...nations need to adopt a system of economic accounts that records an inclusive measure of their wealth", namely a system "that includes Nature as an asset" (p. 5).

So far, so familiar. In building on its plentiful predecessors, the *Review* further intensifies a characteristically neoliberal approach to conceptualizing human-nonhuman relations emphasizing the latter's instrumental exchange value. The approach has already been thoroughly critiqued by an extensive body of research and analysis (see e.g. Büscher and Fletcher 2020).

Dasgupta's logic becomes far more circumspect, however, when it comes to explaining how we got into this mess in the first place, and how we can act now to get out of it, given that we currently possess the requisite knowledge. In terms of solutions, the *Review* introduces and endorses an extensive grab bag of tools to facilitate sustainable resource management, including the use of protected areas (PAs), ecological restoration, and so-called market-based instruments (MBIs) such as ecotourism, payment for ecosystem services (PES) and the REDD+ (Reduced Emissions from avoided Deforestation and land Degradation) mechanism. It also advocates action by multiple actors at every level in "polycentric" fashion, asserting that correction of our present course

...requires not only national and intergovernmental engagement, but engagement by communities and civil societies throughout the world. The economics we construct here is neither entirely top-down nor entirely bottom up; it is also lateral. It advocates institutions that encourage information and directives to flow in every direction. (p. 33)

Within this promiscuous and seemingly democratic embrace, however, the *Review* returns time and again to one particular issue to which it attributes much of our current resource "overshoot": human population growth. In so doing, it builds upon another venerable tradition within discussions of both development and environmental politics, fingering "overpopulation" as a main cause of the problems we confront (see Fletcher *et al.* 2014 for an overview of this history). Yet its treatment of this issue is deceptively ambiguous. On the one hand, the *Review* is at pains to distance itself from a troublesome Malthusian legacy. "There is a risk", Dasgupta admits, "that *any* study of the overshoot in the global demand for the biosphere's goods and services that includes population as a factor is read as a Malthusian tract. But that would be to misread the *Review* entirely" (p. 33, emphasis in original). Like Thomas Homer-Dixon (pioneer of the popular environmental security perspective) before him, however, such explicit disavowal belies the reality that Dasgupta "places much more weight on population growth than he is prepared to admit" (Peluso and Watts 2003: 95).

The overpopulation scapegoat

In countering a Malthusian reading of his text, Dasgupta defines his aim as instead "to explain how individual and group actions over the years have led globally to" our current environmental predicament (p. 33). To develop this explanation, the opening Chapter 0, "How we got to where we are", begins with a very brief history of everything, outlining the origin of life on Earth before describing humans' emergence as a distinct species. "As our human numbers grew", the *Review* then explains in its first mention of ecological consequences, "our impact on the planet increased with them" (p. 22).

The first reference to Malthus comes soon after, with Dasgupta relating that "Rev. Thomas Malthus postulated that population size and the standard of living had kept each other in check throughout history in what we would today call a low-level equilibrium" (p. 25). Outlining the well-established rebuttal to this thesis demonstrating that technological advance has facilitated intensified resource use allowing carrying capacity to expand to accommodate population growth far beyond this minimum threshold, Dasgupta then counters this counter by turning to Jared Diamond, whose own allegiance to Malthus is explicit (his chapter in *Collapse* on the

Rwandan genocide is titled "Malthus in Africa" [Diamond 2005]). Referencing this same text, Dasgupta cites Diamond as having identified:

...a common pattern in past collapses: population growth that followed access to an abundant ecosystem made people intensify the means of food production (irrigation, terracing, double-cropping) and expand into marginal land. Growing populations led to a mining of their ecosystems. That left communities vulnerable to climatic variations, as there was little room left for either mistakes or bad luck. (p. 29)

As human population and resource use increased in concert over time, the *Review* explains, it reached a point where "the excess of impact (I) over the biosphere's regenerative rate (G)" became evident (p. 32). Echoing the ubiquitous $I=PAT$ equation, the *Review* describes this outcome as one of "Impact Inequality", in terms of which " I is in turn decomposed into three factors: human population numbers, global GDP per person, and the efficiency with which we convert the biosphere's goods and services into GDP" (p. 32-33). (Here again, ambiguously, the *Review* acknowledges and warns against the potential "that the Impact Inequality and the decomposition of the impact we have chosen to work with will be read as a piece of Malthusian arithmetic" [p. 33]).

Further on, the *Review* introduces another infamous proponent of population control, Garrett Hardin, and his controversial "Tragedy of the Commons" thesis (1968) (which, contrary to its popular framing, was actually about global population growth and not the pastoral overgrazing it employed as a metaphor; and which should be read in relation to the white nationalism that underlies Hardin's "lifeboat ethics"). While acknowledging that subsequent research has countered Hardin's pessimistic predictions by documenting numerous examples wherein sustainable resource management seems to have been achieved by so-called common property regimes (CPRs), the *Review* goes on to claim that many of these examples have in fact not been sustainable, and that a main reason "CPRs have deteriorated in many places is rapid population growth" (p. 212).

In focusing on family planning as an instrument of environmental management in a subsequent chapter, Dasgupta reemphasizes that "[e]xpanding human numbers have had significant implications on our global footprint, and the global population is only expected to continue to rise" (p. 491). Notwithstanding this reality, however, "[t]he SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] are reticent about family planning, and yet it is hard to imagine that they can be met without addressing the subject" (p. 237). Likewise, the *Review* points out that researchers "have sketched scenarios of lower global population growth that lead to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions by 16-29%. And yet, the Paris Agreement of December 2015 on climate change made no mention of population" (footnote #283 p. 238).

All in all, then, the *Review* asserts:

We should therefore ask whether the biosphere could support on a sustainable basis a global population of between 9.4 and 12.7 billion, which is the error bar round the UN Population Division's population median projection of 10.9 billion for year 2100 (UNPD, 2019b) at the material standard of living we are encouraged to seek. In effect we are asked in contemporary growth and development economics and the economics of climate change to imagine that the population numbers being projected today will be able to enjoy, at the very least, the current global living standard, even while making smaller demands on the biosphere than we do currently. (p. 32)

Our present situation, Dasgupta consequently claims, is "analogous to each of a crowd of people trying to keep balance on a hanging bridge, with a risk of bringing it crashing down" (p. 33).

This persistent if piecemeal overshoot narrative combines to conjure a "... demographic presence that vastly exaggerates the causal significance of population in" resource degradation (Peluso and Watts 2003: 93), as copious social science research has sought to explain (see again Fletcher *et al.* 2014 for an overview). Of course, as



previously noted, population growth and control are certainly not the only issues addressed in the extensive *Review*. But it is the only thing to which its author returns with such consistency throughout. It is emphasized far more, for instance, than the MBIs (Market Based Instruments) that feature centrally in most other reports in this tradition.

There is a good reason for this emphasis. As we have discussed elsewhere, the interrelation between social inequality and ecological destruction can be explained in one of two ways: as a function of human population growth creating resource scarcity; or as a product of a capitalist economic system demanding unsustainable resource use to facilitate economic growth that has little to do with satiating the needs of the human collective, but rather with enriching a select few at the expense of the rest – as well as at the expense of the planet as a whole (Fletcher *et al.* 2014). While the *Review* frequent insists that all "people do not experience increasing resource scarcity in the same way" (p. 5), nowhere does it explore people's differential contribution *to* this outcome, for instance, in recent research demonstrating the vastly outsized greenhouse gas emissions produced by the lifestyles of billionaires (Wilk and Barros 2021). Like its famous I=PAT predecessor (Durham 1995), Dasgupta's impact Inequality Indicator in fact achieves the opposite, homogenizing the global population and its impacts and hence neglecting to differentiate among those

produced by different people in vastly divergent circumstances.

Naturalizing capital

This inattention to political economic structures and the inequality they produce is partly a function of the way that capitalism is naturalized throughout the *Review*, such that it effectively becomes the background reality unpinning, and hence unquestionable within, the framework of analysis. This builds on yet another long discursive tradition stretching back to Adam Smith's famous characterization of capitalism as an expression of humans' ostensible natural "propensity to truck, barter, and exchange" (see Graeber 2011). Similarly, the *Review* asserts that "[w]hether as farmers or fishermen, hunters or gatherers, foresters or miners, households or companies, governments or communities...[w]e are all asset managers" (p. 35). Consequently, all of our resource use decisions can be understood as "responding to an asset management problem" (p. 36). From this perspective, "the economics of biodiversity" naturally "becomes a study in portfolio management" (p. 4).

Indeed, on this same basis the *Review* asserts that it is in fact "[l]ow market prices for Nature's goods and services" that "has encouraged us to regard ourselves as being external to Nature" (p. 31) in the first place! Consequently, "To detach Nature from

economic reasoning is to imply that we consider ourselves to be external to Nature" (p. 496) (as if [neoliberal] economics were the only lens through which humans could conceivably connect with nonhumans).

But the *Review* goes far beyond Smith to maintain that capitalist logic is ascribed not only within human consciousness, but within the biophysical world too. Following on the long tradition of similar reports to frame nature as a repository of "natural capital" delivering "ecosystem services" to humans, the *Review* explicitly defines "Nature" as a particular "class of assets" (p. 35) and thus directly equates it with "the many other assets we hold in our portfolios, such as the vehicles we use for transport, the homes in which we live, and the machines and equipment that furnish our offices and factories" (p. 4). Within this frame, the *Review* is able to go so far as to claim that "Nature has features that differ subtly from produced capital goods" (p. 6) – as if the latter were primary and the former derivative, rather than vice versa.

Indeed, far from problematizing the inequality and resource degradation produced by political-economic forces, the *Review* actually works to explicitly counter such a focus on differential impacts and their perpetrators, instead asserting:

Just who is responsible for a particular harm is often neither observable nor verifiable. No social mechanism can meet this problem in its entirety, meaning that no institution can be devised to enforce socially responsible conduct... It would seem then that, ultimately, we each have to serve as judge and jury for our own actions. (p. 6)

As a result of this emphasis on individual fault and accountability, most of the *Review's* prescriptions for corrective action remain individually-focused as well (yet another grand tradition in environmental politics; see Maniates 2001). This is true of its advocacy of family planning, of course, but also of its curious endorsement of environmental education as a main policy instrument in the *Review's* final pages. Here, Dasgupta explains:

Neither the rule of law nor the dictates of social norms are sufficient to make us account for Nature in our daily practices. Institutional rules, no matter how well designed, would be insufficient for eliminating environmental externalities. We will have to rely also on *self-enforcement*, that is, be our own judge and jury. And that cannot happen unless we create an environment in which, from an early age, we are able to connect with Nature. (p. 496, emphasis in original)

In this way, paradoxically, the *Review* concludes by contradicting its own endorsement of economic valuation as necessary for effective action, in asserting that such action in fact "cannot happen unless we develop an affection for Nature and its processes" (p. 6). Yet critics have long warned that such "intrinsic" affection for nonhuman nature may in fact be "crowded out" by the very sort of "extrinsic" motivation via instrumental valuation that the *Review* promotes in preceding chapters (see Rode *et al.* 2015).

Conclusion

An entirely different approach to the issues the *Review* aims to address, but one so far outside its periphery that it is beyond discussion therein, is advocated by Peluso and Watts in their critique of Homer-Dixon:

[R]ather than presuming or starting with scarcity (or abundance), analysis... should begin with the precise and changing relations between political economy and mechanisms of access, control, and struggle over environmental resources. Scarcity and abundance are historically (and environmentally) produced expressions of such relations, and as such should not be the starting point of an analysis. (2003: 93)

Let us hope that *The Dasgupta Review* does not end up distracting too much from this other analysis that remains so desperately needed.

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Events and Announcements

Claudia Bernardi

This section aims to improve communications between initiatives, artists, activists, scholars, and research groups engaged in the study and politics of commodity frontiers. Here you will find the latest news recommended by people from the Commodity Frontiers Initiative.

This is a first selection, and we would be happy to add further events on our website, in social media, and in future volumes of *Commodity Frontiers*. Please send your announcements to Claudia Bernardi (clod.zeta@gmail.com), or contact us through the [website](#), [Twitter](#), or [Facebook](#).

Upcoming Workshops, Webinars, and Conferences

Conference: Sixth European Congress of The European Network in Universal and Global History (ENIUGH)

15-19/06/2021

Addressing the exposure to and challenge of historical and contemporary mechanisms and policies of marginalization and exclusion in their relation to past and present cultures of integration, we hope to stimulate a reflection on the normative underpinnings of societies. With the Sixth ENIUGH Congress, we will also continue to explore the relations, transfers, and entanglements between states, peoples, communities, and individuals, situated in or spanning different regions of the world in a comparative and a *longue durée* perspective. The common emphasis is again a commitment to transcending the confines of national and Eurocentric historiographies.

<https://www.meetturku.fi/en/meet-turku-en/references/eniugh-2021>

<https://research.uni-leipzig.de/~eniugh/>

Symposium: Latex. Critical Inflections on (Neo)Extractivism in Latin America

27-28/09/2021

ICI Berlin

The symposium seeks to examine and question the different modes of extractivism that have marred and marked the histories of Latin America and the Caribbean. The distinctive qualities of rubber (plasticity, isolation, expansivity, erasure) are the starting point for a contemporary inquiry of (neo)extractivism. Its political, environmental, cultural and social facets are to be analyzed, in particular as they are critically undertaken by literature and the visual arts. Artists and scholars will explore this mode of accumulation in its intimate relationship to the production and circulation of theory and cultural capital; to epistemicide and necropolitics; and to a restrictive worldview of 'nature' as an inert reservoir for economic exploitation.

<https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/latex/>

Conference: Rural History Conference 2021

23-26/08/2021

European Rural History Organisation (EURHO)

The aim of the conference is to promote a dialogue between rural history researchers which aims to surpass national frontiers, cross chronological barriers and break down disciplinary boundaries. Previous conferences have dealt with such diverse topics as food markets and food security; agricultural landscapes then and now; rural politics; agricultural innovation; plant and animal improvement; garden

history; peasant economies; poverty and social relations in the countryside; gender and work in agriculture; enclosures, property rights and the commons; rural textile industries; urban agriculture; climate change and agricultural production; and the agricultural transformation.

<https://www.ruralhistory2021.se/>

Conference: "Universo Canavieiro e Realidade Alagoana: terra, trabalho, poder e meio ambiente" (*The world of sugarcane and Alagoas' Reality: land, labour, power and environment*)
25-27/ 05 /2021

The event will feature researchers and professors from Brazil and abroad to discuss the sugarcane universe from multiple themes and analytical approaches.

There will be an opportunity to present research in the following Working Groups: 1) labour, migration and class conflicts; 2) modernisation, crisis and technological innovation; 3) environment, territory and agrarian question. The seminar will accept abstracts and articles from researchers, postgraduate students, undergraduate students and professors. The conference will be live broadcast on Youtube.

Deadline for abstracts submission: May 1st.

Abstracts should be sent to seminariouniversocanavieiro@gmail.com

Event website: www.seminariocanavieiroufal.com

Facebook event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/208767001006157/>

Calls for Papers

CfP: Dossier on Frontiers, Companies of Colonization, and Indigenous Peoples, 19th-20th Centuries

15/04/2021

Historia Crítica

In recent decades, frontier studies have allowed rethinking the creation of interstate delimitations as processes where local, national, and transnational actors intervene. In this dossier, we seek to highlight these interactions in different frontier spaces in Latin America in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially accounting for the role played by colonization enterprises in the attainment of the sovereignty of states and their incidence on the indigenous peoples who, until then, had remained at the margins of, or enjoyed relative liberty regarding, the organizational rules established under the colonial order and the nascent republics.

<https://revistas.uniandes.edu.co/callforpapers/histcrit>

CfP: Conflict in Rural Society

31/07/2021

Historia Agraria de América Latina

By bringing together research on rural conflicts in different regions and historical periods, this issue seeks to generate comparative reflections on the nature of conflict in rural Latin America and how it has evolved over time. Recognising that "rural society" is not a fixed object of study, the editors are also interested in articles that examine the role of conflict in creating and maintaining divisions between the urban and the rural. Work that promotes dialogue on different theoretical and methodological perspectives is especially welcome.

<https://haal.cl/index.php/haal/coloquio-historia-agraria>

CfP: The Raw and the Refined: Commodities, Processing, and Power in Global Perspective

31/03/2021

Commodities of Empire International Workshop

There has long been a tendency to suppose that commodities exported from the Global South have been ‘raw’ and destined for manufacture in the Global North. They have certainly been labelled as such. The assumptions underlying this stated division of labour derived from theories of colonial pact, underdevelopment, dependency, and unequal exchange. In this two-day workshop, we aim to explore, through case studies, how and why the history of commodity processing unfolded so unevenly. We are interested in all geographical regions and approaches from various disciplines.

Calls for Proposals

EXTRACTION: Art on the Edge of the Abyss

CODEX Foundation

Extraction is a multimedia, multi-venue, cross-border art intervention which seeks to provoke societal change by exposing and interrogating the negative social and environmental consequences of industrialized natural resource extraction. A global coalition of artists and creators committed to shining a light on all forms of extractive industry—from mining and drilling to the reckless plundering and exploitation of fresh water, fertile soil, timber, marine life, and innumerable other resources across the globe—the Extraction Project will culminate in a constellation of nearly fifty overlapping exhibitions, performances, installations, site-specific work, land art, street art, publications, poetry readings, and cross-media events throughout 2021 and beyond.

<https://www.extractionart.org/home>

Agroforestry with Perennial Crops, and the Contradictions between Commodity Production and Local Benefits

Frontiers

Agroforestry systems (AFS) as part of the practice, science, and movement of agroecology, are forms of land-use that combine wild and domesticated plants, crops and/or animals with trees, shrubs or other arborescent forms of life. These types of land-use mimic, to some degree, the structure, composition, and functions of natural ecosystems, allowing them to offer a range of environmental services. This is particularly the case for AFS with perennial crops, which are mainly valued as producers of commodities. We welcome original research, reviews, and perspective papers. We encourage submissions focused on the contributions of AFS with perennial crops and which emphasize the tensions, trade-offs and mutual benefits between AFS ability to produce commodities

<https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/13664/agroforestry-with-perennial-crops-and-the-contradictions-between-commodity-production-and-local-bene>

Vacancies and Residencies

Exhibitions

“Commodities of Consumption and Sites of Extraction in the Global South

Alliance Francaise De Lagos

A multi-faceted and ongoing artistic research project by the Nigerian artist Ndidi Dike who deals with the political dimensions of commodities—their consumption, circulation, manufacture, as well as geo-political policies that underwrite the control and extractive industries that govern natural resources and appropriation in Africa. This installation takes up consumer products connected with the transatlantic slave trade (along with current day global commodity markets), and highlights their materiality as potent metaphors.

https://www.goethe.de/ins/ng/en/m/ver.cfm?fuseaction=events.detail&event_id=22083197&

Other Announcements

Transition Minerals Tracker

Business and Human Rights Resource Centre

The updated and expanded tracker now monitors companies that produce a majority of six key commodities vital to the clean energy transition. The data demonstrates too often the production of these minerals is coming at the cost of frontline communities. Companies producing these minerals need to put in place stronger human rights policies and, more importantly, put these company commitments into practice on the ground.

<https://trackers.business-humanrights.org/transition-minerals/>

Prize: Walter Markov Prize 2021 and calls for applications.

15/04/2021

European Network in Universal and Global History (ENIUGH)

The prize honours an outstanding PhD- or MA-thesis that contributes to the research fields of Walter Markov, especially the comparative exploration of revolutions; social movements and decolonisation processes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; historiographical traditions in various national contexts, and academic internationalisation in the course of the 20th century. Papers that are submitted for the Walter-Markov-Prize are expected to take a global perspective on its subject, either by addressing it from a comparative point of view, by examining processes of cultural transfers, or by seeking to understand the entanglements of various spatial frameworks.

https://research.uni-leipzig.de/~eniugh/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Markovpreis_ENG_201201.pdf

Book release: *Mapping water in Dominica. Enslavement and Environment under Colonialism*

by Mark W. Hauser

Mark Hauser draws on archaeological and archival history from Dominica to reconstruct the changing ways that enslaved people interacted with water and exposes crucial pieces of Dominica's colonial history that have been omitted from official documents. The archaeological record—which preserves traces of slave households, waterways, boiling houses, mills, and vessels for storing water—reveals changes in political authority and in how social relations were mediated through the environment.

<https://uw.manifoldapp.org/projects/mapping-water-in-dominica>

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Agrarian Frontier Expansion and Conflicts over Labor: Labor Struggles in the Sugarcane Sector in São Paulo State in Brazil

Jan Brunner

Keywords: labor, trade unions, industrial agriculture, sugarcane, conflict, agrarian frontier, Brazil

Land grabbing and the expansion of the agrarian frontier

Commodity frontiers are processes and places of expansion and deepening of the capitalist mode of production, while extracting (new) raw materials. Commodity frontiers often involve an industrialization of production, which translates into a profound reuse of land and labor (Moore 2000). Currently, we are witnessing the expansion of the agrarian frontier: a global 'land rush', which is transforming vast tracts of land for the purpose of agro-industrial crop production. Multiple global crises—financial, energy, food prices—have led to an increase in global investments in land; in short, *land grabbing* (Borras et al. 2012). These agro-industrial transformations have various socio-economic implications; one key affected area is agricultural labor, which plays an integral role in people's livelihoods in rural areas. According to the International Labor Organization, 1.1 billion people globally work in agriculture—around 300 to 500 million of them as wage workers (ILO n.d.). Corporate investment in land and agro-industrial forms of production such as modern technologies, cultivation methods and (genetically modified) plants affect employment opportunities, labor processes and working conditions in agriculture, and profoundly shape conflicts over labor (Brunner & Pye 2019).

This article explores large-scale industrial agriculture and related conflicts over labor in Brazil. It does so through an analysis of the industrial transformation of the sugarcane sector in São Paulo state, a representative case

of recent agricultural changes and their effects on wage workers, trade unions and their struggles.

The agro-industrial transformation of the sugarcane sector in Brazil

Since colonial times, sugarcane production has always played an important role in the development of Brazil and has been interlinked with the development policy of the state. In this article, I focus on the industrial transformation of the sugarcane sector in São Paulo state, located in the southeast of the country, between 2002 and 2016.

After years of crisis, the sugarcane sector entered a new golden era starting in 2002, especially in the Cerrado region in the center-south. São Paulo state is the center of sugarcane production in Brazil, which rose from 176,574,000 tons in 2001/02 to 365,990,000 tons in 2016/17 (UNICA n.d.-b). This rise in production was fostered by the large expansion of the land area planted with sugarcane in São Paulo state, which rose from 2,661,620 hectares in 2002 to 5,590,586 hectares in 2016 (UNICA n.d.-a).

Several factors have enabled the expansion of sugarcane production. After the elections in 2002, the government of Lula da Silva (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, Workers' Party) supported the sector with cheap credits. The state development bank *Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico Social* lent the sugarcane industry credits worth around 28.2 billion Reais (around 4.2 billion Euros¹)

¹ In this paper, I use the exchange rate of March 1, 2020 for the conversion from Real to Euro, which was 1 Real : 0.15 Euro on that day (OANDA).



Mechanised sugarcane harvesting. Photo: Jan Brunner, 2017.

between 2003 and 2010. Furthermore, the invention of the so-called ‘flex-fuel car’, which runs on a combination of ethanol and petrol, led to an increase in the national demand for ethanol produced from Brazilian sugarcane. Beyond these national factors, global changes have increased the demand for sugar and ethanol from Brazil, including lower tariffs for Brazilian sugar exports to the EU and the growing demand for ethanol due to changing climate policies (Alves 2009, p. 159; Garvey & Barreto 2014, p. 57; WWF 2008, pp. 4-5).

The expansion of sugarcane production has been accompanied by the internationalization of the sector. Exports of sugar and ethanol and international investment in the sector have risen sharply. Due to new profit opportunities, international investors and corporations such as Shell, Mitsubishi and Louis Dreyfus Commodities have invested in the sector. In many cases, these investors have merged with Brazilian companies (e.g. Dutch Shell and Brazilian Cosan founded Raízen) or they have bought smaller, financially unstable Brazilian sugarcane companies, which also meant a concentration of capital. The global economic crisis of 2007/08 led to many bankruptcies of smaller Brazilian sugarcane firms and reinforced these twin processes of

internationalization and the concentration of capital (Garvey & Barreto 2014).

Another part of this transformation has been the mechanization of sugarcane harvesting. In São Paulo state, this process of mechanization was regulated indirectly by a law enacted in 2002, which set out the path for the full eradication of the burning of sugarcane by 2031. Since manual harvesting requires the burning of sugarcane, this law de facto brought about mechanization. The end of sugarcane burning was even accelerated, as the government of São Paulo and UNICA, the association of sugarcane companies, established a voluntary agreement (*Protocolo Agroambiental*) to end sugarcane burning by 2017. The rate of mechanization thereby rose from 33.3% in 2006 to 89.6% in 2014 (Baccarin, 2016 p. 122; Fredo et al. 2014).

Sugarcane burning has been contested by socio-environmental groups since the late 1980s due to health and environmental concerns. Yet it was the change of interests of the sugarcane companies that was crucial in bringing an end to sugarcane burning. Harvesting with modern machines is more productive and profitable compared to manual harvesting, and due to the inflow of capital from international investors and

financial support from the state, the expensive investments in harvest machines were made feasible. Additionally, sugarcane companies and the state had an interest in creating an image of 'bioethanol' as clean and green in order to accelerate these exports (Alves 2009; Andrade Júnior 2016; Reis 2017).

Effects on labor

The transformation of the sector, especially the mechanization process, has had a strong effect on labor. Traditionally, work on sugarcane fields was mainly done manually. During the harvest season between April and December, in addition to the local workers, many migrants from poorer regions of Brazil, such as the Northeast, came to work as manual harvesters. These manual harvesting jobs have largely disappeared due to mechanization, as reflected in the decline in the number of registered manual workers from 178,510 in 2007 to 55,530 in 2017. The elimination of these lower-skilled jobs left many workers unemployed, and labor migration largely came to a halt. By comparison, fewer higher-skilled occupations, such as harvester and tractor operators, were created: the number of these 'mechanized' jobs in São Paulo state increased from 24,279 to 41,517 during the same period (Baccarin, et al. 2020, p. 612; Barreto, 2018, pp. 209, 223-230). The mechanized work on the fields is done by teams of harvest machine drivers, tractor drivers (which accompany the harvest machines), truck drivers, fire truck drivers, mechanics and team leaders. Manual workers, such as plantation helpers or herbicide sprayers, do all the work that machines cannot do or are employed in cases where it is cheaper to use manual labor instead of machines (Barreto, 2018, p. 269; Silva, Bueno, & de Melo, 2014, pp. 89-91).

Workers mainly have formal work contracts. These vary from daily to seasonal to permanent contracts. In 2016, a harvest machine driver typically earned 1,500 to 3,000 Reais (225-450 Euros), sugarcane cutters 1,500 to 2,100 Reais (225-315 Euros) and all other manual workers 1,000 to 1,500 Reais (150-225 Euros) (Reis 2017, p. 208; Interviews with sugarcane workers and representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state 2016-2017).

Agro-industrial transformations and conflicts over labor

Traditionally, strikes, wildcat strikes and collective bargaining were the main means used by workers and rural trade unions in the sugarcane sector to enforce their claims. After mechanization, strikes and other collective actions were more difficult to organize and occurred less frequently. Due to the decline in manual labor, the president of one of the rural unions stated: "Nowadays, I lack the army to fight against the companies" (Interview, Jaboticabal, May 27, 2016). Additionally, the decrease in workers and union members has led to a decrease in the revenues and resources of rural trade unions. As a consequence, local rural trade unions (*sindicatos*) have had to cut back on spending and have reduced services such as workplace inspections, legal advice and medical consultations (Interviews with rural trade union representatives, São Paulo state, 2016-2017).

The mechanization of sugarcane harvesting has, furthermore, led to fragmentation between different trade unions. Legal disputes between rural and transport workers' unions were frequently required, for instance, to resolve the issue of representation of harvest machine, tractor and rural truck drivers. In Brazil, only one union can represent one group of workers in a municipality. Trade union umbrella organizations are fragmented, too, and rarely are such conflicts resolved (Interviews with representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016-2017).

Sugarcane companies use a variety of forms of control over their workers to prevent protests and ensure productive labor input, such as through the wage system, the use of supervisors or the layoffs of strike leaders. Due to the declining employment opportunities in the sector and increasing regional unemployment, many workers fear losing their jobs and are therefore more reluctant to organize collectively and accept worse working conditions. Marx refers to this in terms of the "reserve army of labor" (Marx 2008 [1890], pp. 657-670). The fear of becoming unemployed is widespread, not only among manual workers; harvest machine drivers, in the interviews, also mentioned their disinclination to protest. These workers are

aware that they have a relatively 'privileged' employment for a rural area, with a comparatively high salary, health insurance and medical services provided by the company, and a formal contract (Interviews with sugarcane workers and representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016-2017).

In consequence, strikes and other forms of collective action by workers and trade unions have declined. Collective bargaining, backed by law, remains an important means for workers and unions to enhance working conditions. However, the loss of bargaining power of manual sugarcane workers and rural trade unions has led to an increase in labor intensity (manual workers harvested 7.7 tons per day in 2000 and 8.7 tons in 2010) and lower wages for sugarcane cutters (Baccarin 2016, p. 130; Reis 2017, pp. 177-178; Repórter Brasil 2009, pp. 9-11). Machine drivers and their transport unions were able to use their higher bargaining power, due to their higher qualification levels compared to manual workers, to achieve moderate wage increases. Nevertheless, they were often unable to resist the insistence on long working hours (of up to 12 hours per day for drivers) in these negotiations (Interviews with different transport trade unionists, São Paulo state, 2016-2017).

In the period 2002-2016, the Brazilian government, led by the Workers' Party, improved conditions to allow for labor inspections of rural work. It increased the Ministry of Labor's budget for labor inspectors and prioritized the elimination of slave-like labor. In addition, the Ministry of Labor created a labor inspection group for rural areas in São Paulo state. A new labor directive, which specifically regulates working conditions (especially health and safety issues) in the agricultural sector (*Norma Regulamentadora 31*) was also implemented. In addition, the Brazilian government defined the sugarcane sector as a priority for the elimination of slave labor, as it sought to establish the necessary clean image for this key export sector. These changes have helped labor inspectors and prosecutors to sanction deviant companies (Anner 2008, p. 55; Coslovsky & Locke 2013; McGrath 2013; Interview with labor inspector, Batatais, March 28, 2017).

Strengthening labor inspections has improved the worst violations of labor standards in the sugarcane sector in the state of São Paulo. Better work safety regulations, improved workplace equipment such as fresh water and sanitation facilities and work breaks have helped to reduce the risk of accidents and work-related health problems, such as the fatalities that occurred among manual sugar cane cutters due to exhaustion in the mid-2000s. Slave-like labor, which was a major problem in the industry until the mid-2000s, has also been largely eliminated (Capitani et al. 2015; Coslovsky & Locke 2013; Interview with labor inspectors, Ribeirão Preto, November 4, 2016).



Strike of migrant sugarcane workers: "Where are our labor rights?", Source: Centro de Estudos do Trabalho, Ambiente e Saúde (Unesp Presidente Prudente), 2016

Conclusion
Agro-industrial transformations have an enormous impact on labor and workers, on trade unions and their struggles. In the case of the sugarcane sector in São Paulo state, this transformation has produced a few winners—namely 'mechanized' workers with better working conditions—but also many losers—in particular, manual workers who lost their jobs entirely or who must work long hours for low wages.

Increasing difficulties in organizing strikes and other collective protests due to the employment effects brought about by the mechanization of sugarcane harvesting have, in many cases, led trade unions and workers to modify their protest strategies. There is increased reporting of violations of labor standards to state labor inspectors, which has helped to improve the worst working conditions such as slave-like labor (Garvey & Barreto 2016, pp. 188-191; Interview with representatives of rural trade union, Cosmópolis, October 17, 2016 and transport trade unionist, São Paulo, March 8, 2017). Furthermore, rural trade unions (CONTAG, FERAESP) have tried to improve working conditions by participating in tripartite roundtables with the sugarcane industry (UNICA, Fórum Nacional Sucroalcooleiro) and government representatives. However, this strategy has had rather negative effects for rural trade unions in São Paulo state: working conditions have hardly improved as a

result, while such efforts also created fractions between rural trade unions (Interviews with rural trade unionists, Ribeirão Preto, March 29, 2017 and Cosmópolis, October 17, 2016).

The biggest challenge for workers and trade unions, however, is unemployment. Attempts to get sugarcane companies and the state to provide free training for unemployed sugarcane workers have hardly been successful, as only a few thousand have been able to participate in such programs. Another strategy employed by workers and trade unions is to engage in struggles over land (Interviews with representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016-2017). These are much more difficult than labor struggles, though at the same time they do attack the foundations of capitalism—exploitation *and* private property—more profoundly.

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*All photos provided by the author.

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