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Commodities, Empires, and Global History (Guest Editorial, Special Issue of the Journal of Global History)

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Editorial – Commodities, empires, and global history

Commodities are back in the news. The early twenty-first century seems to have witnessed an upsurge in the old conflict over valuable resources, leading to a global scramble for commodities, and bringing in its wake renewed international tension, war, dispossession, and environmental degradation. The Cold War clash of ideologies, it has been argued, has been replaced by global competition between Western consumer nations, Russia, and China, occurring over oil, gas, and other vital economic goods that are required for the smooth functioning of modern industrial societies.¹ In this view, we are witnessing ‘a new age of war’, most clearly exemplified by the American invasion and occupation of Iraq.² Meanwhile, the large-scale clearance of tropical forests for palm oil plantations, to satisfy a growing requirement for cheap vegetable oil used in the food, cosmetics, and biofuel industries, has been held responsible for rising emissions of carbon dioxide, the principle greenhouse gas and driver of climate change.³ War on Want, a non-governmental organization focusing on development, has recently highlighted the violent campaign to force peasants off their land in Columbia to make way for palm oil plantations, a process fuelled, it claims, by ‘Britain’s passion for chocolate, cakes and crisps’.⁴

Few can now doubt the renewed importance of commodities in the global political landscape of the early twenty-first century. Moreover, the current contests over primary resources, their acknowledged indispensability for present-day industrial societies, and their global features and reverberations have profound historical echoes. Most of all, perhaps, they recall the ‘great leap forward’ in the production, movement, and consumption of commodities inaugurated by industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. The growing resource, manufacturing, and consumption needs of industrializing societies, the emergence of the steamship and the railways, the ‘dematerialization of telecommunication’ – all escalated demand for raw materials and foodstuffs, and quickened and intensified commodity transactions, bringing profound changes to regions and societies in both south and

1 Michael T. Klare, *Resource wars: the new landscape of global conflict*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001.

2 Retort Collective, *Afflicted powers: capital and spectacle in a new age of war*, London: Verso, 2005.

3 ‘Demand for palm oil is “damaging the planet”’, *The Independent*, 9 November 2007.

4 ‘UK palm oil consumption fuels Columbia violence, says report’, *The Guardian*, 12 May 2008.

north.⁵ Production of raw materials and foodstuffs occurred overwhelmingly in regions of the south that were either already colonial possessions of rival industrializing European nation-states or were in the process of becoming so in the course of the nineteenth century. The industrial overproduction crisis in the last quarter of the century provided an impetus for the ‘scramble’ for new colonial territories on the part of rival European powers.⁶ Although the ‘scramble’ focused on markets for manufactures, rather than on temporarily cheap raw materials, it profoundly affected the conditions of production of tropical commodities.

This is perhaps, therefore, an appropriate moment for revisiting the social histories of commodity production, transactions, and consumption, under the changing conditions brought about by three crucial processes during the course of the past two centuries: first, the accelerated pace of mechanization of production and transportation; second, the growth in ‘imperial’ rivalries between industrializing nations on both the political and economic fronts; and third, the multiplication of different uses and social meanings of products, as they were relocated from the fields, forests, and mines of the south to the industrialized societies of the north. ‘Commodities of Empire’ is the theme of a new research collaboration between the UK’s Open University and London Metropolitan University. The project has a particular interest in exploring these processes from the vantage point of societies in the south that were subjected to colonial rule: in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The articles featured in this special issue initially emerged as papers presented at the project’s first international workshop, held in London in July 2007.

Historically, commodities had multiple social lives, partaking both in imperial endeavours and in local resistance to them. The varied movements embarked upon in the course of these life cycles – local, regional, across oceans and continents, within and beyond empires – make commodities a particularly apt mode of exploring global history. This is particularly the case because their transformations were also connected with social changes over vast geographical areas, in infrastructures, technologies, economies, ecologies, labour regimes, and patterns of migration and consumption. They offer an approach relevant to both ‘styles’ of modern global history identified by Patrick O’Brien: connections and comparisons.⁷ The focus on connections also suggests a potentially fruitful avenue for testing ‘globalization’ claims. The study of commodity movements, networks, and chains emphasizes the nature of their spatial connections, without any *a priori* assumption of ‘global’ reach. It enables the exploration of ‘the historical depth of interconnections and a focus on just what the structures and limits of the connecting mechanisms are’.⁸ The contributors to this special issue of the journal offer illuminating examples of both ‘connection’ and ‘comparison’ methods, as they explore a range of

5 Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the people without history*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982, p. 310; Roland Wenzlhuemer, ‘The dematerialization of telecommunication: communication centres and peripheries in Europe and the world, 1850–1920’, *Journal of Global History*, 2, 2, 2007, pp. 345–72.

6 David B. Abernethy, *The dynamics of global dominance: European overseas empires 1415–1980*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 220.

7 Patrick O’Brien, ‘Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history’, *Journal of Global History*, 1, 1 2006, pp. 4–7.

8 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in question*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005, p. 91.

commodity-related events and processes in various parts of the world that impacted differentially on each part. They do so, moreover, in a manner that is sensitive to the particularities of different historical contexts.⁹ Above all, they insist on the significance of the coeval nature of these processes, as they affected both south and north.

Ports were evidently essential to the transcontinental movement of commodities. The simultaneous emergence of Bombay and Glasgow as modern global ports in the late nineteenth century was, Sandip Hazareesingh argues, no accident but was driven by commercial networks with overlapping interests in both places, based on the cotton trade and the new possibilities of steam-shipping and related industrial innovations. Bombay's sub-imperial function was crucial, and the Scottish merchants who dominated these networks had a keen eye for enhanced worldwide business opportunities in an age of imperial expansion, while also enjoying privileged access to both imperial and colonial governments. The connected histories of these ports at this particular historical juncture also suggest a more complex model of causation of British 'imperial' processes than the single, metropolitan-focused paradigm advanced in Peter Cain and Tony Hopkins' well-known thesis.

While industrialization clearly provided imperial Britain with enhanced power, the declining and only slowly industrializing imperial power of Spain, in contrast, seemed during the same period to offer its Cuban colony new possibilities of indigenously led development based on sugar. Cuban entrepreneurs initiated the introduction of the latest steam machinery to the island's sugar industry, supported in the process by the labour of migrant engineers from industrializing nations and the capital of foreign, merchant-led companies. Importantly, Jonathan Curry-Machado shows that these transnational networks were promoting a 'sub-imperial globalization', independent of the designs of rival imperial nations. However, although Cuba emerged as the world's leading sugar producer, the escalating costs of the new steam technology led to growing dependence on non-Spanish merchant banks, which gradually came to control the island's sugar production and trade. Liberation from Spain led to domination by the United States.

Nevertheless, the vitality of local processes, in the form, for instance, of peasant choices over the growing of particular crops or of anti-colonial rebellions, could influence economic outcomes and change imperial policies. In a comparison of the Bengali and Piedmontese silk industries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Roberto Davini argues that Bengali peasants were largely able to dictate the terms under which they were willing to increase silk production, as demanded by the East India Company. This was the result of the relative scarcity of labour in silk-producing areas, an ability to grow alternative and more remunerative crops, and the retention of a great measure of autonomy by South Asian mercantile communities. While Bengali producers were able to improve their conditions through obtaining higher prices, Piedmontese silk producers had far less bargaining power in a local context of agrarian labour abundance and merchant control over all stages of the silk production process, a system that was effectively policed by the Piedmontese government.

⁹ For a timely critique of the 'generic colonialism' practised in much of the field of postcolonial studies, see Cooper, *Colonialism in question*, pp. 12–26.

David Hyde's analysis of coffee production in late colonial Kenya shows how interacting local and global processes could bring about profound changes in colonial government policies. Faced with the Mau Mau rebellion, the Kenyan colonial government regarded the welfare of the local coffee industry as crucial to generating the tax revenues to meet its escalating costs. The industry was in a global crisis, owing to increased supplies of coffee on world markets, brought about by the increasing production of the major Latin American growers. As coffee prices fell, the colonial government was left with little option but to promote Kenya's African peasant producers, who could grow high quality Arabica coffee much more economically than white settlers. The local coffee industry was thus restructured, with profound effects on the economic and social relationships that underpinned Kenya's independence.

In other circumstances, however, imperial authorities were able to resist the pressure to intervene in favour of local groups and interests, particularly where perceived 'national' interests clashed with 'imperial' ones, often in situations of commodity competition, both between different colonial territories of the same power and also between these and other global producers. Thus, as Ayodeji Olukoju shows, the British government, in the 1920s and 1930s, persistently refused to intervene on behalf of Nigerian, and more widely West African, producers of palm oil and palm kernel oil. Britain first declined to impose retaliatory tariffs on American manufactured exports to West Africa, in response to American duties on West African oils, not wishing to unleash a trade war with the new economic superpower. The British further refused to impose differential duties on producers of palm oil in Indonesia or on Norwegian companies extracting whale oil, partly because British companies had substantial interests in these sectors.

From the late nineteenth century, the increasing prosperity of western Europe and the United States, brought about by industrial production and expanding imperial and world markets, led, for the first time, to the phenomenon of mass consumption, involving middle-class and even working-class consumers in 'home' countries. Various forms of advertising were used to foster domestic demand for a wide range of 'exotic' products, portrayed as having origins both distant and imperial. Kaori O'Connor focuses on how empire foodstuffs were promoted in Britain in the aftermath of the First World War, through recipes, menus, and cookbooks. She shows that the king's acceptance of a Christmas pudding entirely made up of ingredients from different parts of the empire was part of an attempted reinvention of empire as a peaceful commercial civilization, with the king as presiding father figure. Advertisements and posters targeted women, particularly housewives, who were urged to follow the king's example. They were now assigned a crucial role in the popularization of empire foodstuffs, which coincided with the emergence of middle-class women who aspired to novel ways of cooking and eating that reflected their new status.

The articles featured in this special issue collectively illustrate the principal themes with which the 'Commodities of Empire' project is concerned. They identify concrete historical changes, reveal inequalities in political and economic power, demonstrate patterns of local resilience, provide insights into local-global interactions, and emphasize the importance of communications and culture. Much historically sensitive work remains to be done on the nature, extent, and limits of a 'globalized' world, which commodities played such a fundamental part in bringing about. There is here the potential to make a significant

contribution to the evolution of global history, by realigning the lens away from teleological ideas about 'globalization' and the power projections of various imperialisms, and towards a focus on emerging thinking about the plurality of spatial linkages, networks, and connections, which were more than local but less than global. This also involves the recognition of the agency – in all its complexity, unevenness, and contradictions – of those living in the colonized spaces of the world.

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