



THE COMMODITY FRONTIERS INITIATIVE

# COMMODITY FRONTIERS IN LATIN AMERICA

REPORT ON THE COMMODITY FRONTIERS INITIATIVE WORKSHOP AT  
THE 36<sup>th</sup> CONGRESS OF THE LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

By Hanne Cottyn and Deborah Delgado, workshop organizers

The Commodity Frontiers Initiative (CFI) organized an interactive workshop on “Commodity Frontiers in Latin America” at the Latin American Studies Association Conference in Barcelona (May 23-26, 2018). The workshop addressed the question: *Why and how do we use the lens of the “commodity frontier” to study current transformations in Latin America in relation to the structural transformation of the countryside and extractivism?*

Six members of the CFI network from diverse disciplinary, regional, and thematic areas of expertise shared their thoughts on commodity frontiers.<sup>1</sup> The workshop approached commodity frontiers as an analytical lens for examining and explaining the inherent ecological contradictions of expanded commodity production in the Latin American context.

Instead of reifying a single reading, the workshop started from a broad working definition that understands ‘commodity frontiers’ as the historical and current processes of appropriation, and often dispossession, of nature, land, and labor

as new reserves for capitalist expansion.

Guiding questions for the discussion were:

- *To which processes and geographies do we refer when we speak about ‘Commodity Frontiers’?*
- *How can this concept contribute to the study of Latin America?*
- *Which methods and analytical tools are relevant to the study of Latin American commodity frontiers?*

## Defining Commodity Frontiers

The centrality of Latin America in academic and societal debates on resource extraction, sustainability, and crisis is no coincidence. Over the last five centuries, the expansion of global commodity frontiers has been essential to the transformation of Latin American landscapes and societies and has deepened the region’s relations to the global economy.

In the same vein, the development of commodity frontiers at a global level cannot be understood without foregrounding Latin

America and the Caribbean. The workshop aimed at fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue on the potential and limits of the concept of the commodity frontier for the study of Latin America, on the one hand, and on the contributions of scholarship in Latin American Studies to the analysis of commodity frontiers on a global level, on the other hand.

The workshop was organized into several rounds of questions and reactions, and developed through alternating interventions by the panelists and the audience, who switched freely between English and Spanish. In the first round, the panelists gave brief opening statements on the concept of commodity frontiers in the study of processes of social change in Latin America and the Caribbean. Several potential definitions and key dimensions of the study of commodity frontiers emerged from this opening discussion.

As an ecological economist, Joan Martínez-Alier (Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and the Environmental Justice Atlas) stressed the “entropic”—not circular—character of the industrial economy as a necessary point of departure to understand the contradictions of current ‘sustainable development’ discourse and the many ecological distribution conflicts that this produces.

Relying on a long trajectory with the Commodities of Empire project, Jean Stubbs (the School of Advanced Study and the Institute of the Americas in London, and the Commodities of Empire British Academy Research Project) drew attention to the challenge of defining commodities beyond a strictly economic approach.

Drawing on a recent publication with Christian Lund, Mattias Borg Rasmussen (Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen) elaborated a complex definition of frontiers as the discursive, political, and physical operations that classify resources as vacant, as free, as ungoverned, and as mutually constituted by processes of territorialization.

In line with this emphasis on a non-economistic interpretation of frontier processes, Kristina Dietz (Lateinamerika-Institut and the Global Change - Local Conflict research group at the Freie Universität Berlin) identified commodity frontiers as a useful concept to overcome an excessively national, hierarchical, and dichotomous perspective on the dynamics of expanded commodity production, which nonetheless still lacks a comprehensive conceptualization of social action.

Bringing in insights from her research on the oil frontier in the Peruvian Amazon, Deborah Delgado (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú) brought in Nixon’s concept of ‘slow violence’; a violence that is incremental and that works on different temporal and spatial scales.

Closing the round of thought-provoking opening statements, Reinaldo Funes Monzote (Universidad de La Havana; Yale University, the Geo-Historical Research Program at Antonio Nuñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Humanity) approached commodity frontiers through their visualization, in this case in the Cuban landscape over the last two centuries, hence underscoring the issue of materiality in the study of commodity frontiers.

Frontiers were addressed in terms of energy and materiality, time and space, and social action; they are place and they ‘take’ place; they are global and local; they emerge and are contested. A first round of reactions from the audience pushed the panelists to delve deeper into questions such as ‘What do we understand by commodities?’; ‘What do we actually mean by a ‘frontier’?’; and ‘Why a frontier perspective?’ As Rasmussen rightfully underscored, it is hard to think about frontiers as something that just erases everything. Rather, frontiers are about transformations, the transformation of spaces and of social orders.

## Methodological Implications: Big Data, Digital Humanities, and Visualization in the Study of Commodity Frontiers

A next round with the panel shifted the focus to the methodological implications of analyzing the expansion of extractivist economies in the Latin American region. Interdisciplinarity is not just a fashion, but essential to the study of commodity frontiers. Moreover, new developments in big data gathering, digital humanities, and visualization techniques enable interesting new mixed-method possibilities and open perspectives for the study of commodity frontiers. As Rasmussen explained, the study of frontiers offers a window on a set of very different mechanisms, including violence, resistance, but also discursive formations, representations in literature, legal formations, etc.

Delgado pointed to the relevance of comparative empirical questions, multi-sited ethnography, and mixed-methods in studying commodity production beyond a developmentalist approach. In wanting to understand how capital works, we run the risk of restricting ourselves to the perspective of capital, unable to acknowledge ‘slow’ processes and the agency of human and non-human actors.

In addition, Dietz suggested the historical method of ‘radical contextualization,’ which she borrows from Argentinian scholar Javier Auyero, in order to understand the empirical side of the structural (class, gender, race) impacts of commodity frontier expansion into rural areas.

Here, Funes insisted on the fundamental contribution of the concepts of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, but also of food regimes, in historicizing capitalist development and bringing in commodity frontiers in the debate on the origins of capitalism. Taking the Caribbean as an example, Funes pointed out the contradictory nature of the ecotourism projects of today, which, despite a ‘sustainability’ discourse, demand an energy consumption incomparable with that during the birth years of capitalism in those very same islands.

Importantly, Stubbs raised the issue of collaborations beyond academia, when the boundary between researcher and activist becomes blurred. As researchers use historical sources to

understand the present dynamics around particular commodities in specific parts of Latin America, they get to know local people, and come to share their ‘*indignación*’. The Commodities of Empire project, for instance, is moving towards an audiovisual strategy and a digital strategy to involve local people and their local knowledge, and let them lead the agenda.

## Challenges

In a last round of interventions by the audience, more complex issues in the study of commodity frontiers were brought up. A list of key challenges in the endeavor of constructing an interdisciplinary and Latin America-focused collaboration around commodity frontiers can be formulated.

First, language poses a challenge in that it is tricky to translate concepts such as ‘commodities’ and ‘frontiers’ into Spanish or other idioms without reducing their subtle meaning.

Second, the study of commodity frontiers requires a truly global perspective and cross-regional comparisons, which remains particularly challenging within the field of Latin American Studies, given the fact that we, as researchers, are still to a large extent locked up in our disciplines and our regional and country-specific expertise.

Third, the study of commodity frontiers desperately needs more in-depth empirical insights. It needs to ask what is happening on the ground; how (the history of) particular places are re-signified; and why do people resist, oppose, or accommodate the changes that unfold as commodity frontiers advance or erode. Here, recent advances in Latin American Studies, such as on social movements, gender, and indigenous people can provide clues for the study of global commodity frontiers.

This workshop sought to formulate a solution to the ways in which Latin America still tends to be reduced to a passive periphery in the

analysis of global transformations. The aim of the workshop was not to ‘apply’ the commodity frontier concept to the region. Rather, it brought to the fore what Latin America can teach the global debate about the limits and perspectives of capitalist growth. At the same time, it pursued a

more comprehensive integration of Latin American ecological, social, and territorial dynamics in the study of globalizing commodity production without ‘flattening’ the region’s internal inequalities.

## Notes

1 Workshop participants featured: Joan Martinez-Alier, professor of Economics and Economic History, Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; Jean Stubbs, associate fellow at the School of Advanced Study, University of London, and the Institute of the Americas, University College London, and co-director of the Commodities of Empire British Academy Research Project; Reinaldo Funes Monzote, professor of History, Universidad de La Habana, and coordinator of the Geo-Historical Research Program at Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Humanity; Kristina Dietz, professor of Political Sciences at the Lateinamerika-Institut and project leader “GLOCON”, Freie Universität Berlin; Mattias Borg Rasmussen, assistant professor at the Department of Food and Resource Economics, University of Copenhagen; Deborah Delgado, professor of Sociology, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. The workshop was moderated by Hanne Cottyn, postdoctoral researcher at the Department of History at Ghent University.

## About the Authors

**Hanne Cottyn** is a postdoctoral researcher with the History Department and affiliate of the Ghent Centre for Global Studies at the University of Ghent. Her research addresses the transformation of communal land rights in indigenous communities of the Andean Highlands in the context of liberal land reforms in the late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bolivia. She can be reached at [hanne.cottyn@ugent.be](mailto:hanne.cottyn@ugent.be).

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The Commodity Frontiers Initiative is a network of individual scholars, research teams, and non-governmental organizations from all over the world. All participants have been working extensively on global commodity production, rural societies, labor history, and the history of capitalism, and have published some of the most important books in these fields. Together, they are expert on a wide range of global commodities, covering all the principle producing regions of the world, from the early modern period to the present day, employing a range of approaches, including social and economic history, anthropology, economics, sociology, political science, ecology, and development studies. For more information, please visit [www.commodityfrontiers.org](http://www.commodityfrontiers.org).

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