

## Colonial Agricultural Modernities: Capital, Concepts, Circulations

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Host institution: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin/Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin

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Over two days, this workshop funded by the Otto and Martha Fischbeck Stiftung framed new questions about modern and current-day histories of plantation regimes. Workshop presentations exposed relations across oceans and continents, across different imperial and national formations, and across different time periods in the study of plantation histories. Our inquiry incorporated methodologies drawn from global history, imperial history, social history, conceptual history, and economic and ecological history. Individual papers explored the intertwinement of different plantation complexes over the *longue durée* of modern global capitalism, across the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Participants inquired the dynamics of conceptual and material change in histories of agro-industry, especially with regards to transition periods in historical time over the past two centuries. They also shed light on relations between disparate historical time periods, such as between the early nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries. We explored connections among plantation regimes that emerged through the mobility of money, credit, capital, labor, and biota. Papers also interrogated transformations of the concepts that anchored these elements in economic and political discourse, and which continue to guide scholarly inquiry of them. We discussed shifting legal regimes that adjudicated ideas about rights, property, and personhood, and we examined emerging scientific discourses that both produced and were produced by reorganizations of production and consumption.

### Session 1

Moderator: Daniel Schönplflug, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin

**Ulbe Bosma**, International Institute of Social History.

#### **Enlightenment in the Global Periphery: Tropical Agricultural Innovation in the Age of Transition 1750s-1860s**

By the mid-eighteenth century experiments in chemistry, physics and botany marked the beginning of what would eventually transform the business of tropical commercial agriculture beyond recognition. The fact that the world was running in different gears featured particularly strongly during this period, 1750-1850s – what historians, following Reinhart Koselleck, have termed a *Sattelzeit*. This paper considered how tropical agriculture, and in particular sugar commodity frontiers, registered this global *Sattelzeit* especially palpably. New concepts about science and society intermingled with material transformations that came with the onslaught of mechanical, botanic and biotic transformation, and human migration. The paper considered the role of local colonial bourgeoisies -- circles of wealthy persons who increasingly invested in tropical agricultural production – in driving these intermingled conceptual and material transformations.

**Alberto Alonso Fradejas**, Transnational Institute, Leiden

#### **Flex Crops and the Multiple and Converging Crises of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Agro-Industry**

This paper examined a scalar transformation in the size and intensity of agro-industry after about 2004, marked especially by the expansion of “flex crop” commodity frontiers. The aggressive expansion of flex-crop soy and oil palm across South America has significant implications for the agrarian and rural populations of countries such as Guatemala. In the Guatemalan context, which was taken as the case study for the paper, the rise of flex cropping has gone hand-in-hand with massive increases in foreign direct investment by large multinationals, but also with the mushrooming of a “surplus labor pool” of mobile and shifting workers. These workers cross multiple economic boundaries in their search for employment, including geographic boundaries between small-hold farms and large-scale plantations, as well as political-economic boundaries between legal and illegal economies.

## **Session 2**

Moderator: Dilip Gaonkar, Northwestern University

### **Sascha Auerbach, University of Nottingham. “A Kidnapper of Young Pigs”: Race, Labor Control and the Overseer State in the British Caribbean and Southeast Asia 1838-1913.**

This paper reexamined the role of the state in the tropical colonies of the post-emancipation British Empire, arguing that labor organization, rather than the occupation of new lands, became the cornerstone of colonial governance. The rise of indentured labor was central to this process, and was accompanied by the emergence of new concepts about work, rights, and personhood. This coercive labor system, while encompassing only a minority of the colonial workforce, provided employers and administrators with the leverage necessary to manage the totality of plantation and mining labor organization across different colonies. This focus on comparative labor organization across the breadth of Britain’s tropical possessions, the paper argued, invites a re-examination of both the relationship between the modern state and the individual, and the role of individual and collective responses to colonial authority.

Preben Kaarsholm, Roskilde University, Denmark, and re:work, Humboldt University, Berlin.

### **From Abolition of the Slave Trade to Protection of Immigrants: Danish Colonialism, German Missionaries, and the Development of Ideas of Humanitarian Governance from the Early 18th to the 19th Century**

This paper studied the trade in slaves from India, especially with reference to Danish networks and related that history to the opening up of evangelization missions on the Indian subcontinent, especially in the Danish Indian colonies of Tranquebar and Searmpore. Danish missionaries were involved in abolitionist projects from an early date, beginning in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The paper asked questions about the concept of “abolition” as it developed within an uneven imperial terrain created by Danish missionaries embedded within the structures of the British East India Company. Connections with the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 were also explored.

## **Session 3**

Moderator: Vincent Houben, Humboldt Universität

**Leida Fernández-Prieto, CSIC, Madrid.**

### **A Laboratory for Colonial Agricultural Modernity: Sugar and Slavery in Cuba from the 1750s to the 1870s.**

A transition towards a language of political modernity in Ibero-America took place between 1770 and 1870. These years coincide with the rise and fall of the slave plantation in Cuba. This paper explored the development of the concept of “prodigal tropical agriculture” with the application of steam and steel technology. Cuban colonial elites around 1800 perceived their fertile island as the ideal place to implant the plantation model of the small Caribbean islands and develop it into a modern industrial tropical agriculture.

**Ulrike Kirchberger**, Universität Kassel.

**Ecologies beyond the Plantation Economy: Biochronologies in the Indian Ocean World, 1850-1920.**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thousands of species of plants and animals were transferred between Australia, South Asia and Africa. They were transferred by humans for economic, scientific, aesthetic and other reasons. European settlers, for example, transported cattle, horses and sheep between the three destinations discussed in the paper, changing the ecologies of each location. The paper reconstructed some of these transfers in terms of diverse human and non-human “agencies” and “biochronologies”, including those of plants, animals and bacteria. The paper inquired into the concepts and protocols of nineteenth-century conservation science in mediating these transfers.

**Session 4**

Moderator: On Barak, Tel Aviv University; re:work at Humboldt Universität

**Rachel Kurian**, Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and the Humanities.

**The industrial Plantation under Colonialism in South Asia: Finance Capital, Price Takers, and Labour Regimes.**

One of the distinct characteristics of plantations is the incorporation of several ‘foreign’ categories in the production process, with capital, management, land, and labour from different regions being combined for the cultivation of cash crops, which were then exported to “foreign” consumers. This paper focused on the plantations in South Asia under British colonialism, and explored “the importance of distance” and of “risk capital” in explaining the interwoven history of regional and trans-regional labor recruitment, expatriate management, colonial statecraft, and the continuities of coercive force on plantations from the period of the abolition of slavery in the 1830s to the period after the abolition of indentured labor in 1917.

**Kris Manjapra**, Tufts University.

**Forms of the British Multinational in an Axial Period: Force, Race, and Finance on Colonial Agro-Industrial Frontiers, 1830-1890.**

The rise of multinationals is a process closely associated with our general understanding of plantation economies. The diverse forms of multinationals in the period from the 1830s to the 1880s were various, however, and included the “archaic form” of the East India Company, as well as agency houses, family “proto-multinationals”, and trustified corporate conglomerates. The paper considered an era marked by changing concepts and practices for organizing, mobilizing, and integrating agro-capitalistic activity in order to profit under horizons of increasing risk.

## **Session 5**

Moderator: Andreas Eckert, Humboldt Universität

**Zach Sell**, Brown University.

### **Limited Growth: U.S. Settler Slavery, Colonial India, and Global Rice Markets, 1830-1870.**

This essay began with the examination of the history of one commodity: Carolina rice on global markets. It examined the transforming lived realities of enslaved people who cultivated Carolina rice in the mid-nineteenth century alongside changes in rice milling. The paper concluded with a consideration of colonial projects to introduce Carolina rice cultivation to India between the 1830 and 1870, and connections with the development of prisons in colonial India.

**Claiton da Silva**, UF Santa Catarina, Brazil.

### **Science and Agriculture: The IRI Research Institute and its role in the occupation of the Brazilian Cerrado (1946-1963).**

This paper considered the agricultural interventions into the Brazilian Cerrado – forest and savannah land in the Brazilian interior – that commenced after 1945, under the guidance of an American scientific agency (IRI Research Institute) supported by Nelson Rockefeller. The agency directed its efforts, during the late 1950s, to producing knowledge on how to increase the fertility of the Brazilian Cerrado. These conceptual innovations had significant implications for ecologies and economies in Brazil, and went on to influence “savannah reclamation” in other parts of the world, such as in Africa.

**Closing Remarks** were provided by Ulbe Bosma and Andreas Eckert.