

Commodity Frontiers in Historical Capitalism

The third annual conference of World-Ecology Research Network (20-21 July 2017) focused on '[Women, Nature, & Colonies](#)'. Under the umbrella of the network, which promotes the study of historical change "as if nature matters", junior and senior scholars from around the globe gathered in Binghamton, New York, to discuss power, reproduction, and unpaid work in the capitalist world-ecology. On the initiative of Prof. Dr. Marion Dixon of the American University (Washington DC) and Dr. Hanne Cottyn of Ghent University (Belgium), a double panel was set up, titled 'Commodity Frontiers in Historical Capitalism'. Although the panel was eventually restructured by the conference organizers for the sake of practicality, the concept of 'commodity frontiers' remained omnipresent in the conference.

Despite this rescheduling, we here present the contributions of the panelists in relation to the panel's purpose. The coherence in the panel lays in the adoption of 'commodity frontiers' as a lens on places in world-ecology: on how capital accumulates in nature and how nature works through processes of capital accumulation. A first panel, in which plantation economies take center stage, brought together in-depth historical research on the political economy and political ecology of a range of plantation commodities (tea, sugar, coffee, rubber) across the Indian subcontinent, Japan and Congo, in different periods in the 19th and 20th century. The presentations of Dr. Sven Van Melkebeke (Department of History, Ghent University) and Prof. Dr. Wendy Matsumura (History Department, UC San Diego) focused on one particular "strategy" to facilitate the expansion of commodity frontiers; the organization of mass agricultural production under the model of a plantation economy. Van Melkebeke's presentation on "*Coffee production in the colonial Kivu: the State, settlers and the mobilization of land and labor*" analyzed the different ways in which settlers have mobilized land and labor in order to develop their coffee estates after WWI. By zooming in on diverging local conditions and tensions between settlers and the colonial state, his paper demonstrated how active intervention of the colonial bureaucracy reshaped the regional ecological, political and labor landscape. In her paper on "*The Post-World War I formation of an autarkic regional sugar economy and the reconfiguration of the boundaries of "domestic" agriculture*", Matsumura illuminated the links between the transformation of Japanese sugar policy, the dispossession of tens of thousands of sugar producers in Okinawa to the empire's newly acquired South Pacific mandates (and potential site of a plantation economy), and impacts that this new rounds of enclosures had upon small farming households that remained to form the new "domestic" agriculture.

A second panel links the concept of commodity frontiers to the debate on 'the End of Cheap Nature'. Through empirical analyses on frontier making in an age in which commodity frontiers appear to be exhausted, the panel addressed the question on what is "new" about 21st century frontiers in particular places such as the Andes, Laos and Egypt. The presentation of Dr. Hanne Cottyn (Department of History, Ghent University), titled "*The rural Andes between community and commodity: commodity production, land privatization and communal resistance in the late 19th century*" started by questioning the notion of "survival" when explaining the coexistence of

communal land systems with a globalizing commodified land system. Tracing Andean land system trajectories since the 19th century privatization reforms, she stressed the role of complex local negotiation strategies between communities, local elites and the state in the restructuring of power and property relations. Prof. Dr. Marion Dixon (School of International Service, American University) introduced the notion of “desert frontier”. Her presentation “*Land reclamation and expanded commodity production in the longue durée*” she contrasted this notion with Moore’s (2015) commodity frontiers, as the desert frontier has required considerable capitalization and has been dominated by large-scale investors. These levels of required capitalization exposed the contradictions of bringing unpaid work/energy (of the silted soil, aquifers, ancestral lands, and on and on) into the circuits of capital. Bringing ‘conservation’ into the world-ecological framework, Dr. Michael Kleinod (Southeast Asian Studies, Bonn University), in his paper “*The making of the Lao uplands as recreational frontier*”, scrutinized the historical making and recent make-up of the uplands of Lao PDR as “recreational frontier” of nature reserves and ecotourism. In contrast to conservation’s roots in colonial forestry, its current role lays in actively under-producing resources.

Together, the papers made an important contribution in stressing the need for, and proving the added value of, more in-depth empirical knowledge about the conditions under which commodity frontiers shift and the dynamics of frontier-making processes across time and space.