

Workshop

“Commodity Frontiers: A research Agenda”

4-5 December, 2015

International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam



The transformation of the global countryside through the development of export-oriented agriculture and soil and labour exploitation has been one of the key processes in the emergence and consolidation of global capitalism during the past 500 years. We call for proposals for papers to be presented at a workshop to discuss how we can approach this momentous transition *theoretically* and *methodologically* through the central concept of the ‘commodity frontier’, a process of shifting incorporation of new supplies of land and labour for the global market.

The workshop aims to design an agenda for researching the past 500 years of capitalist growth from a bottom up and non-core perspective, conceptually and methodologically moving away from disaggregate geographical units towards integrating perspectives. The grand ambition to take up the global countryside as the central focus is in our view long overdue, both academically as well as politically. The World Bank in its 2008 report admitted its relative neglect of the rural parts of the world, in spite of the fact that the rural areas did more than the cities to reduce poverty over the last decades.¹ In short, it is time for a broad interdisciplinary programme doing justice both to the countryside and the historical perspective.

As historians our goal is to use this workshop to engage with colleagues from a variety of disciplines. Ecologists have long taken the historical dimension on board, constructing narratives on ecological frontiers and the socio-historical dimensions of agricultural innovation;² economists, agronomists, geographers, and social scientists have contributed to a historical understanding of processes of incorporation of large parts of our world geared to global commodity production;³ and World Systems

theorists have been playing a prominent role in the debate on commodity frontier, a term coined by Jason Moore.⁴

The methodologies discussed should enable us to link the local and the global *not* by starting at the global level, which most 'grand theories' and meta-narratives have done so far, but by departing from the commodity frontiers themselves. We think we can move from here to the regional and national levels and further upwards to the global level. Our 'bottom-up' and inductive approach also entails the inclusion of the perspectives of the agents on the ground. These not only include the plantation workers but also the smallholders. Moreover, we are aware of the fact that not all frontiers originating from or responding to demand from the 'core' but can emerge as local initiatives.

Our proposed comparative-inductive approach, within a long-term and global perspective, poses immense challenges in terms of collective and systematic data gathering. Today, however, important developments with respect to large data gathering, computational humanities and visualisation techniques will enable us to apply an approach, which can be described as "a non-experimental historical-comparative research strategy."⁵

Participants

We want to convene 25 experts for two days in Amsterdam, where each presents a short paper of 4,000 to 5,000 words.

Paper proposals should address the central concept of the 'commodity frontier' from a theoretical and methodological perspective, starting from case-based research.

To submit a paper proposal send paper title, abstract (max 500 words) and contact information to Ulbe Bosma, ubo@iisg.nl **before 1 July**

The selection result will be notified in mid-July. Lodging will be paid by the organizers, but we will not be able to offer financial support for participants' travel expenses.

¹ The World Bank, *World Development Report 2008. Agriculture for Development*, p. 3

² Wickizer, Vernon D, and Merrill K. Bennett. *The Rice Economy of Monsoon Asia*. Stanford University, Calif: Food research Institute, 1941; Baker, Christopher. "Economic Reorganization and the Slump in South and Southeast Asia." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 23.3 (1981): Bindraban, Prem S, and Rudy Rabbinge. "Megatrends in Agriculture - Views for Discontinuities in Past and Future Developments." *Global Food Security*. 1.2 (2012): 99-105; Barbier, Edward. *Scarcity and Frontiers: How Economies Have Developed Through Natural Resource Exploitation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

³ Barbier, Edward. *Scarcity and Frontiers: How Economies Have Developed Through Natural Resource Exploitation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Williamson, Jeffrey G. "Land, Labor, and Globalization in the Third World, 1870-1940." *The Journal of Economic History*. 62.1 (2002): 55-85.

⁴ Moore, Jason W. "Sugar and the Expansion of the Early Modern World-Economy: Commodity Frontiers, Ecological Transformation, and Industrialization." *Review*. 23.3 (2000): 409-433; Tomich, Dale. "Rethinking the Plantation, Histories, Anthropologies and Archaeologies." *Review*. 34 (2011).

⁵ McMichael, Philip. "Incorporating Comparison Within a World-Historical Perspective: an Alternative Comparative Method." *American Sociological Review*. 55.3 (1990): 385-397.