

ARENAS IN GLOBAL HISTORY: COMMODITY FRONTIERS  
REJOINDER

## Commodity frontiers: concepts and history

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‘COMMODITY FRONTIERS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE GLOBAL COUNTRYSIDE: A RESEARCH AGENDA’ provides an opportunity to connect recent topics in global history, environmental history and the new history of capitalism. I will first summarize the key points of the paper and the way it engages in particular with global economic history. I go on to discuss key concepts of commodity frontiers and frontier zones, and set out and critically assess the historical phases delineated in the article.

I welcome the position of the authors on aspects of the research strategy they offer to global historians; histories of natural resources and of the countryside and its peoples have not been sufficiently addressed by global historians. I argue, however, that the large-scale theory of commodity frontiers conflates too many concepts, leaving confusion rather than clarity of analysis. There is a great need for new histories of the natural world, rural and forest communities, of common lands and agriculture and of natural resources. Commodity frontiers, as defined and used in this article, unless carefully refined, cannot, I fear, open the deep historical analysis and comparative and connective history I identify with global history.

Commodity frontiers as a concept has been defined as the processes and sites of the incorporation of resources into the expanding capitalist world economy. To quote the authors

‘commodity frontiers identify capitalism as a process rooted in a profound restructuring of rural societies and their relation to nature. They connect core processes of extraction and exchange with degradation, adaptation and resistance in rural peripheries.’

The authors argue that commodity frontiers have dispossessed peoples of lands and rights, and reconfigured the countryside, and they draw examples from the commodity histories of sugar, soy, coffee, cotton, then copper, palm oil, wheat and coal. They draw sources of their concept from World Systems Theory and Commodity Chain analysis, and especially from the work of Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015).<sup>1</sup> Moore is said to have brought nature into the history of capitalist development; he challenged the binaries between nature and society; nature and capital, and argued that capitalist surplus has been based as much in the extraction of surplus value from ‘cheap natures’ as it has been from wage labour. Those ‘cheap natures’ include food, labour power, energy and raw materials. He collapsed the division between extraction and production, and Marx’s division between absolute and relative surplus value in a bid to more fully connect natural resources, food production and unwaged labour into the history of capitalism.

Moore, furthermore, connected his broad concept of commodity capitalism with a concept of ‘frontiers’ which links ‘cheap natures’ with colonialism, imperialism, slavery and the subordination of women; ecological destruction becomes part of the dynamic of capitalist development.

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<sup>1</sup>Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London, 2015).

Moore's 'frontiers' clearly connect with the major themes of global history. The authors build on this framework, and aim to apply it to a history of the restructuring of rural societies. They pass on to their concept of 'frontier zones'. These they define as sites of shifting sets of 'localized' activities to 'secure access to labour and land for globalized commodity production'. They here, however, conflate the history of rural societies with land and labour for 'globalized commodity production'. They convey these 'zones' as arenas of 'resistance' and negotiation in the larger panning of the onward march of capitalist development.

The authors link these concepts of 'commodity frontiers' and 'commodity zones' to historical phases of capitalist development encapsulated in four 'commodity regimes'. These are:

*First:* an early capitalist commodity regime marked by dispossession from land and nature, and the use of unfree labour, for example, the sugar commodity frontier (1600–1850).

*Second:* an industrial commodity regime, marked by greatly increased use of fossil energy, prominent roles of industrial markets and interventionist states and the appearance of multinational capital, and including dispossession of land rights and large-scale colonial projects. (1850s–1970s).

*Third:* a corporate commodity regime of greater corporate ownership, intensified capitalist agriculture and an ideology of free commodity markets (post-1970s).

*Fourth:* a contemporary commodity regime, post-2008 marked by fiscal and food crises, green capitalism and the fourth industrial revolution of information technologies; robotic technologies and platform capitalism.

Each of these schematic historical phases, they argue, experienced periods of conflict, resistance and 'friction' generating capitalist response as a series of 'fixes', spatial, technological, state-led and corporate in turn. They present capitalism as an adaptive and flexible system; frontier expansion in space, resource extraction and agricultural production is part of the story; that adaptation takes place in response to a series of frictions and fixes.

There are key points global historians can take from this approach, especially the incorporation into histories of capitalist development of rural societies, 'nature', environment and natural resources. Our national and regional economic and social histories for generations past have done this. European economic historians, during this past generation, following on the work of E.A. Wrigley, have analysed industrialization as a transition from organic to inorganic energy sources, as wood and water power gave way to iron and coal-based technologies and power sources. He distinguished a key turning point during industrialization in the transition from an 'advanced organic' economy to a 'mineral-based energy economy'.<sup>2</sup> Global historians, such as Ken Pomeranz, also pinpointed environment, energy and resources as the key to the 'great divergence' between China and Europe. Coal reserves and their new uses and the 'ghost acres' of colonial resources from the late eighteenth century onward stimulated Europe's 'divergent' growth path.<sup>3</sup> Their work draws on deep generations of economic historians, some of whom have referred to capitalism, others to agrarian change and agricultural revolutions, yet others to early industrial or proto-industrial development, and others to industrialization. Many historians, be they world historians, comparative historians or historical sociologists have compared these processes. The issue is how to connect them, and this is where global historians can contribute, and to do so by potentially drawing on concepts such as 'commodity frontiers'.

This article may provide the first entry into ways of connecting these rich histories of rural societies, resources and environments from various parts of the world. It raises key questions,

<sup>2</sup>E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance & Change. The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge, 1988). Also see his *Energy and the English Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000).

but its pathway is problematic. It adapts a very large framework drawn from Moore; few would challenge the connections between nature and capitalist development, nor those between unwaged labour and capitalist development. We do, however, run into problems in failing to distinguish analytically between the extraction of natural resources and manufacturing, or between nature as soil type/fertility and agricultural production. Marx's own analysis of the dynamic of capitalist development, furthermore, relies fundamentally on the distinction between absolute (derived from extending output through drawing in more inputs of labour and more resources) and relative (derived from productivity increases using the same inputs) surplus value. I will examine these distinctions in more detail in the next section.

The authors need to more clearly define their concepts and to engage with basic economic concepts such as land, labour and capital. They frequently combine all three of these concepts. Each of these categories of the economy yields a surplus; these yields have been long distinguished by the classical, Marxist and neoclassical economists alike, as rent, wages and profits. These economists included Marx; but in this article, rent, wages and profits are all are treated as similar manifestations of relative surplus value. Marx clearly distinguished the processes, which increased absolute surplus value: extraction, extending frontiers, increasing labour power through longer days, more labour and greater intensification of labour, from processes yielding relative surplus value: labour and capital productivity growth especially through technological and scientific change including those affecting raw materials. The concept of commodity frontiers deployed by the authors, in contrast, seeks to combine resources, agriculture and rural society into one unit, and all of these, in turn into industrial and financial capitalism.

Sticking in the first instance to rural geographical areas, we do need to distinguish discussion of resources from the discussion of agriculture. The first is extractive; the second is productive economic activity that builds on resources. The first yields a surplus in the form of rent; the second yields profits if based on wage or unfree labour, or it yields family household income if based on peasant or independent holdings. Certainly, the land and all it entails should be incorporated into histories of capitalist development, but we also need to separate out the extraction of limited resources and agriculture practiced on limited land and soil fertility from technologically enhanced agricultural, mining and industrial production. The first is extensive and intensive use of resources and labour yielding absolute surplus value; the second yields higher productivity in the use of resources, land and labour, and yields a relative surplus value, the key form of surplus value which enables the continued dynamic of capitalist development.

Clarity of concepts can help us to integrate the histories of resources and rural society with that of capitalist development, and in ways that go beyond a sweeping statement of capitalist exploitation. As historians, we need to ask 'what is rural society? Looked at historically, this is a space outside the city, but one engaged in many economic activities, from the extraction of all manner of natural resources, food collection and cultivation, manufacture and distribution.'<sup>4</sup> We need to ask just how capitalist development, in different spaces and chronologies, affected all of these activities and the people who lived by them. We need, furthermore, to ask 'what is nature' and 'what is the landscape'? These are historical developments, made by man as much as by phys-

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<sup>4</sup>See the historical research reaching back into the 1970s on 'proto-industrialisation' and the 'industrious revolution': Franklin Mendels, "Proto-Industrialization: The First Phase of the Process of Industrialization," *Journal of Economic History* 32 (1972); P. Kriedte, H. Medick, and J. Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before Industrialization* (1977), (English Translation, 1981); Maxine Berg, Pat Hudson, and Michael Sonenscher, eds., *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory* (Cambridge, 1983); Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and The Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2009). For a recent excellent survey of the historiography and social science theory of proto-industrialization, proletarianization and the connections of the countryside to industrialization, see Jan de Vries, "Rethinking Protoindustry: Human Capital and Rise of Modern Industry," in *Reinventing the Economic History of Industrialisation*, eds. Kristine Bruland, Anne Gerritsen, Pat Hudson, and Giorgio Riello (Montreal & Kingston, London, Chicago, 2020), 107–126.

ical environment, and long predating what we may understand by capitalist development.<sup>5</sup> Historians also seek to learn more about natural resources and the history of extractive processes, and in ways that go beyond the traditional approaches we see in ‘commodity chains’ or ‘histories of the coal industry’. There were many varieties of industrialization; equally, there were many varieties of rural specialization and commercialization. It is simplistic to encase the history of land and rural society into a discourse of ‘extraction’. Any model developed will need to be refined spatially and historically to engage with the great varieties of rural economies and resource extraction and development.

The concept of ‘frontier zones’ does offer historians the possibility of locally based research in the context of global questions, but not yet in the way conveyed by the authors. The frontier zone, as the authors present it, is a space where there may have been resistance, conflict or negotiation over extraction for global commodities, but in their hands this is predetermined, their space fixed and structural; as such it detracts from what ‘locality’ offers the historian. ‘Locality’ entails the deep archival research that uncovers the nuances, the unexpected, the individual lives and events that appeal to so many historians. Global history gives us a framework where we can seek to compare different frontier zones over time as they were accessed for different global commodities, but historians can offer the deep histories that lift such comparisons beyond the superficial. And the sources and historiographies at this local level are rich in long traditions of agrarian and rural history, in industrial and local archaeology, in climate and geological histories, in legal and folkloric histories. We need to draw on this work that has been done, rethink it and enrich the concept of ‘frontier zones’.

The four ‘commodity’ regimes which the authors set out cover 600 years, and the ‘fixes’ associated with them by the authors are thus far somewhat simplistic; they are also Euro/American centric. How does China’s Song dynasty industrial and resource development fit into ‘early capitalist commodity regime 1600–1850’? Does ‘Corporate Commodity Regime’ help us to understand Mao’s China? Where does Africa’s long economic history, land extensive, resource-rich, poor and unequal fit with these regimes? ‘Colonial Projects’ in ‘Industrial Commodity Regime 1850s–1970s’ is not enough. East and South Asia provide another conundrum for the commodity regimes in their own environmental histories of resource-saving and labour intensity.<sup>6</sup> More fruitful comparative work might focus on concrete empirical resources and geographical spaces: water, forests, minerals, soil; plains and deserts, river valleys, mountains and maritime spaces. We need to move beyond the Euro-centric historical chronologies and periodizations, which still continue to dominate our global histories.

The authors suggest a research strategy for global historians which will engage with the commodity frontiers framework. What they call for is all very laudable, and brings together some more traditional and some newer methodologies. These are first, wide-ranging comparisons over time and space, and collaborative and discipline-crossing research networks. While such comparative approaches have long been engaged with by economic and social historians reaching back at least to the work of Marc Bloch in the first part of the twentieth century, the collaborative and discipline-crossing networks have more often been aspirational rather than practical.<sup>7</sup> While the Annales School fostered collaborations with geography and anthropology, there have been few collaborations among historians and those in the natural and environmental sciences. The authors’ research strategy also calls for an inductive approach to both localized experiences and globalized systemic movements. One hopes that serious local and primary source-based

<sup>5</sup>See Christopher Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600* (Edinburgh, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>See Gareth Austin and Kaoru Sugihara, eds., *Labour-Intensive Industrialization in Global History* (Abingdon, UK, 2013); Kaoru Sugihara, “Varieties of Industrialisation: An Asian Regional Perspective,” in *Global Economic History*, eds. Tirthankar Roy and Giorgio Riello (London, 2019), 195–214.

<sup>7</sup>See Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (1914), trans. French (Manchester, 1954).

research will continue to be part of any good historian's identity. The final elements of the authors' research strategy, data collection at subregional and cross-national levels and drawing on publications of multiple commodity frontiers at different historical periods are both now much greater possibilities than in the past due to the massive digitization of sources, but as research strategies, they have also long been the common practice of economic historians and historical sociologists working collaboratively.

Our current research priorities on unsustainable extraction of natural resources and environmental degradation challenge global historians to uncover, compare and connect a long history over the 600 years posited by the authors, and indeed beyond this, of the exploitation and restructuring of rural societies and their resources. This is what is at the heart of the 'commodity frontiers' agenda for historians, but how do we action this? We need to do much more to integrate resources and environment into the long history of capitalist development as this connected the parts of the globe. In doing so we do not, however, need to set out on some new intellectual frontier to endorse a poorly specified concept. Instead, historians can build on long historiographical traditions of local and regional history, draw these out from their recent shadows into the spotlight of global historical comparisons and connections and stimulate new grounded and empirically informed research on resources and environment.

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