

ARENAS IN GLOBAL HISTORY: COMMODITY FRONTIERS
REJOINDER

Comments on time, space and method for the study of commodity frontiers and the transformation of the global countryside

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I am drafting this rejoinder during social distancing confinement as the world grapples with the most challenging pandemic threat in a century: a global outbreak of respiratory disease caused by a novel betacoronavirus that triggers an ailment known as COVID-19. As I write, much remains unknown about the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its transmission to human populations. At this time, it appears that a chain of zoonotic transmission connected bats in rural southwest China, commodified domesticated or wild animals, and human consumers in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, the initial site of person-to-person spread.¹ In short, COVID-19, presently shuttering schools and overwhelming healthcare systems around the world, is a phenomenon of commodity frontier dynamics in the age of global capitalism.

In one sense, frontier dynamics like this are nothing new. Human modes of subsistence, production and exchange always and inevitably generate interfaces of exploitation with wildlands as well as extractive entanglements with non-human nature. These relationships routinely break down. Archaeologists, historians and environmental scientists have millennia of records that document how deforestation erodes mountain soils and exacerbates flooding, mine tailings pollute waters and poison downstream residents and microbes migrate from animal hosts to human populations. Almost 20 years ago, a group of botanists, historians and anthropologists organised a symposium to detail three thousand years in the spatial history of lowland Mayan human-wildland interface – demonstrating that evolving relationships between people and the non-human world long predate capitalism.²

By contrast with that interdisciplinary group of Mayanists, the authors of ‘Commodity Frontiers and the Transformation of the Global Countryside: A Research Agenda’ (hereafter ‘Commodity Frontiers’), Sven Beckert, Ulbe Bosma, Mindi Schneider and Eric Vanhaute (all historians except Schneider, a historical sociologist) do not seek to theorise the human-wildland interface as such. Their interest, rather, is to interest historians of capitalism in the concept of the countryside. Thus, they offer a research agenda about the incorporation of land, labour and resources into the capitalist world economy. They take a Wallersteinian perspective in which the clock of modern global capitalism begins to tick in the fifteenth century, and they argue for the importance of the commodity frontier concept (they use the terms frontier and countryside interchangeably) for understanding the origin and nature of the modern world.

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ‘Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary,’ March 15, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/summary.html>.

²Arturo Gómez-Pompa, Michael Allen, Scott Fedick and Juan Jiménez-Osornio, eds., *The Lowland Maya Area: Three Millennia at the Human-Wildland Interface* (Binghamton, New York: Haworth Press, 2003).

The authors do not offer an explicit definition of their key spatial concepts – commodity frontier and countryside – nor a geography or taxonomy of commodity frontier types. It would be helpful to do so. Frontier is a capacious term. In one sense, a frontier is the obverse of a border. It is a locale of complex loyalties in which multiple states have limited capacity to demarcate and control territory and people.³ A different notion, especially in a North American tradition that follows Frederick Jackson Turner, takes the frontier as a sparsely populated region amenable to settler colonialism, which allows favoured immigrants under the protection of legal and military authority the opportunity to readily expropriate land and resources. Alternatively, frontiers may be purely metaphorical. For instance, for sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, the commodity frontier is an entirely conceptual notion that represents ‘a certain cultural edge beyond which the idea of paying for a service becomes, to many people, unnerving’.⁴

Although these concepts of the frontier differ substantially, they have in common the sense that there is some literal or conceptual terrain that an agentful entity has not yet succeeded in fully monetising or exploiting. In that way, the frontier is quite different from the countryside. The countryside is rural space that may be entirely settled and fully commodified via alienable land, hired labour and profitable goods that are produced there. According to Raymond Williams’ classic work of Marxist literary theory, the ideological work that the concept of the countryside performs is simply to be a discursive counterpoint to the city. The countryside is construed as timeless where cities are dynamic, and simple and pure where cities are confusing and adulterated. This is despite the fact that, as Williams pointed out almost half a century ago, the capitalist city and its rural mirror are always materially inextricable from one another, a shared market within which commodities, capital and labour circulate together.⁵

Since ‘Commodity Regimes’ is not particularly concerned with distinctions and definitions, the authors are free to explore the widest range of capitalist production arrangements that exist outside of cities. Functionally, this means that they focus on the agricultural products of early modern plantations (e.g. sugar) and late modern factory farms (e.g. soy and beef) and on the wildland that they consume, and they additionally discuss extraction of the products of Cheap Nature (to use a term from Jason Moore), such as timber, ore and furs.⁶ As Beckert, Bosma, Schneider and Vanhaute point out, historians have written global histories of many of the specific commodities that they reference. However, the scholars who have done so have generally left the theorisation of the commodity frontier concept to sociologists like Jason Moore, geographers like David Harvey and human ecologists like Alf Hornberg. It is perhaps a truism to note that there is a rough methodological divide between conceptually minded historical social scientists and empirically minded historians, but that does not make it incorrect. Thoughtful efforts to bridge the gulf, such as ‘Commodity Frontiers,’ are always welcome, and I am confident that the article will generate the kind of new historical research that the authors intend to stimulate.⁷

In that spirit, the remainder of this rejoinder focuses on three interlocking points that may help to animate a new research agenda about the history of capitalism as a phenomenon of frontier geographies. First, I suggest some strategies for anchoring world-systemic dynamics of commodity history to the history of the *longue durée*, recognising the fluid character of frontiers at long temporal scales. Second, I emphasise the urgency of centring the brutal history of conquest and the resistance of colonised peoples. Frontiers are, after all, locations where expropriative states and

³As this pertains to cartography, I have been influenced by Monica L. Smith, ‘Networks, Territories, and the Cartography of Ancient States,’ *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 4 (2005): 832–49.

⁴Arlie Russell Hochschild, ‘The Commodity Frontier,’ in *Self, Social Structure and Beliefs: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Jeffery Alexander, Gary Marx and Christine Williams (UC Press, 2004).

⁵Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁶Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (Verso, 2015).

⁷I have not read the newly published book edited by Sabrina Jospeh, entitled *Commodity Frontiers and Global Capitalist Expansion: Social, Ecological and Political Implications from the Nineteenth Century to the Present Day* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), but it appears to be a partial exception to this generalisation.

colonisers violently encounter resistant indigenous residents. Third, I explain how an approach focused on frontiers as locales on the geospatial earth would bring to life the digital research methods that the authors propound in their conclusion. As a shorthand, I think of these three points as time, place and method.

Time

Immanuel Wallerstein proposes that the capitalist world system began during the long sixteenth century. However, other theorists, including Christopher Chase-Dunn, André Gunder Frank and their collaborators, retort that large-scale structures of economic exchange and core-periphery geographies date back in time at least as far as the middle ages, or even, depending on definitions, to the Neolithic revolution.⁸ Chase-Dunn, for instance, argues that world systems may historically be numerous, overlapping and very small. As an abstraction, they may exist in any locale where production and exchange are structured around a central Bulk Goods Network that is surrounded by a larger Political/Military Network, in turn by a Prestige Goods Network and finally by a vast Information Network which may receive only rumoured news about life in the core. Each Political/Military Network defends a populous centre within which a dense transportation network permits cheap and heavy goods circulate easily: the Political/Military Network is roughly coterminous with the frontier.⁹

According to Chase-Dunn's formulation, this spatial structure is a phenomenon that exists at all times in history. Settlers, protected by military force, have always been compelled or invited to occupy certain land and extract its resources. They do so in places that they deem capable of withstanding more intensive occupation and exploitation according to the technologies of production that exist at that time. As states succeed in establishing defensible linear borders, yesterday's frontiers become today's Bulk Goods Network; as a large enough number of people reorganise space through residence, legal regimes, physical infrastructure and spatial representation, today's countryside becomes tomorrow's cities. Mines and forests may intensify to become farmland or may be abandoned as wasteland. A research agenda about the history of commodity regimes in the countryside must be not only a history of capitalism but also a spatial history of world-systemic peripheries and the dynamics that make them mutable and unstable.

Space

The 'Commodity Frontiers' authors offer a history of commodity regimes in which the changing role of the state plays a major role, but they focus more on the large-scale dynamics of economic history than on governments and armies as such. In doing so, they evoke frontiers that are disconnected from metropolises, empires, colonies, military force and even active agency. They argue, for instance, that 'huge territories on all continents have seen their ecologies and societies radically reconfigured by the influx of new commodity production systems, outside capital, migrant labour and innovative technologies'. This is not wrong, exactly, except that it elides that fact that empowered collectives of people – governments and corporations – are the agents for reconfiguring ecology and society. Abstractions of capital, labour and technology cannot do that. Likewise, the 'Commodity Frontiers' authors note that one aspect of the history they detail is that 'native people have been dispossessed', but that formulation obscures the fact that whenever a commodity frontier came into being, it means that a particular army backed certain investors to expel or

⁸For a proposed medieval start date, see Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford University Press, 1989). For a Bronze Age inception, see André Gunder Frank and Barry Gills, *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand* (Routledge, 1994)

⁹Christopher Chase-Dunn and Kelly Mann, *The Wintu and their Neighbors: A Very Small World-System in Northern California* (University of Arizona Press, 1998).

exterminate certain people, to move new settlers onto their land, or else to transform them into capitalist subjects. From a world-systemic perspective in Chase-Dunn's tradition, each of those instances additionally represents the transformation of one society's core – which may or may not have included large and dense urban agglomerations – into another society's periphery.¹⁰

The existence of frontiers and countryside depends upon the control of territory. That, in turn, is a matter of political and legal power backed by military force, which also always produces resistance. A research agenda about commodity frontiers concerns a literal and material geospatial world and the laws and guns that keep it fixed in place. Maintaining that perspective is what allows historians to study 'local configurations of social space and social power' and to 'historicize particular responses to particular moments of commodity frontier expansion', as the authors recommend.

My understanding of countryside and frontiers as geospatial locations has been substantially influenced by the work of the environmental historian John Richards. In *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*, Richards argues that between about the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, growing populations of technologically ambitious people around the globe had a finite number of options about how to exploit the non-human world when land and energy became scarce. One possibility was to intensify production in the core, which is to say that state or private capital could invest in making agriculture more productive by deploying strategies like expanding irrigation, draining wetlands or terracing slopes. Agrarian geography of that kind was generally closely intertwined with urban space, and it transformed ecosystems as well as social and economic life. Another option was to intensify the exploitation of settlement frontiers through activities like clearing forests, resettling livestock, mining ores and hunting wildlife. These endeavours had a different set of characteristic impacts on the non-human world. A third option was to establish overseas colonies. In time, each of these strategies created characteristic urban, rural and frontier geographies, commodity repertoires and transformations of the biosphere. They were often all deployed by the same societies at the same time. A research agenda about the history of commodity frontiers might usefully take Richards' framework as a starting point in order to distinguish multiple coexisting spatial dynamics of commodity relations from one another.¹¹

Method

The Seshat Global History Databank is one methodological model for digital and quantitative spatial history at the global scale. The Seshat group aims to develop a comprehensive list of polities and to collect up to 1,500 variables of information about social and political organisation for each polity.¹² They use this information to test hypotheses about the rise and fall of large-scale societies over very lengthy time frames. They have already published several dozen articles based on the databank, on topics as broad as global patterns of social evolution and as specific as the spread of mounted warfare.¹³ The group also makes snapshot datasets available for download.

There is room to criticise the version of quantitative macroscopic history that Seshat represents. Hand-coded variables, based on modern historical scholarship, derived from primary source documents may add up to big numbers, but that does not mean that it equals objective truth.

¹⁰One text that is on my mind as I write this is James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹¹John Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Kenneth Pomeranz's work has also helped me to understand periphery creation as topic in the remodelling of the biosphere. In *The Making of a Hinterland: State, Society, and Economy in Inland North China, 1853-1937* (UC Press, 1993), he explains the systematic underdevelopment of an internal rural periphery with profound implications for the biosphere.

¹²<http://seshatdatabank.info/>.

¹³See the bibliography at <http://seshatdatabank.info/publications/articles/>.

At each of those steps, there are elisions, mistruths and biases. Nevertheless, Seshat is the best contemporary example of a successful project that has collated spatially referenced knowledge about particular times and places and used that information to draw global-scale conclusions about abstract social forces. A similar type of project for the history of the capitalist world system would be an exciting endeavour indeed.

It implies two agendas. One task is to georeference information about the sites of events that pertain to the creation, maintenance, transformation and demise of countryside and frontier commodity regimes. For example, it is one thing to discuss the conversion of forests to soybean farms as a general phenomenon. It is another matter to track when and where each instance of that activity has occurred. Collecting thousands of such cases would produce a map depicting the soy frontier as it has shifted over time. One could make similar maps for any number of historically significant commodities and then merge them together to model frontiers in general. The second related task is to iteratively define key concepts in analytically meaningful ways. For example, if one believes that a frontier has particular characteristics (such as certain modes of labour relations or forms of household organisation), it would be possible to encode historical literature with examples of time and places where those forms of social organisation have existed. If the information and the framework were good enough, those cases, too, would collectively constitute a version of the frontier. If the results were not satisfactory, that would offer an opportunity to turn back to a codebook and refine it further.

At one level, I admit that I am suggesting an impossibly ambitious task – a world-historical and world-systemic atlas of capitalism. However, after all, the ‘Commodity Frontiers’ article is intended to be an agenda-setting piece. Moreover, framed as a collective project that gathers a large number of specialist datasets collated using Linked Data methods, the venture appears bold rather than foolhardy. The World-Historical Gazetteer is an emerging instance of this methodological approach.¹⁴ The key task is to develop a good ontology with clear conceptual descriptions about terms and entities. Doing so would permit comparison between multiple frontiers and multiple commodities across centuries and around the world. This is a data modelling challenge, a task of operationalising theory to allow data collection and not an information technology conundrum.

Conclusion

The ‘Commodity Frontiers’ authors posit four phases in the history of commodity regimes, each characterised by a distinctive assemblage of resistance, contestation and contradiction. Until the mid-nineteenth century, capitalism involved the violent dispossession of people from land and nature, unfree labour, merchant capital, and contradictions and frictions resolved through spatial expansion. For the next century, the key features were the extraction and deployment of fossil energy, the emergence of industrial markets and multinational capital, interventionist states protecting privately held legal title, and contradictions and frictions fixed through mechanisation. According to the authors, things sped up after that. The 2008 financial collapse, in their story, concluded a half-century of concentrated transnational corporate power and expanding commodification of more elements of human activity and the products of non-human nature. Something new – green, authoritarian and digital – seems to be taking shape today.

At the moment – during the most severe global public health crisis in over a century, an epidemic driven through zoonotic contact at the shatter zone between wild nature, industrial agriculture and dense human populations – the 2008 financial crisis already looks like a quaint date to use for marking an epochally significant pivot in capitalist history. In the context of catastrophic climate change, 1973 may also soon seem like the harbinger of a future that has not yet arrived.

¹⁴<http://whgazetteer.org/>

It is my hope that the research agenda that the ‘Commodity Regimes’ authors propose, perhaps at a scale even longer than 600 years, will help to explain the vast global forces that they have identified.

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