

CFP: The Raw and the Refined: Commodities, Processing, and Power in Global Perspective (London, 17-18 September 2020)

Discussion published by Jelmer Vos on Friday, February 7, 2020

Type:

Call for Papers

Date:

March 31, 2020

Location:

United Kingdom

Subject Fields:

African History / Studies, Asian History / Studies, Economic History / Studies, Latin American and Caribbean History / Studies, World History / Studies

Call for Papers: 'The Raw and the Refined: Commodities, Processing, and Power in Global Perspective', Commodities of Empire International Workshop, Institute of Latin American Studies, School of Advanced Studies, University of London, 17-18 September 2020.

There has long been a tendency to suppose that commodities exported from the Global South have been 'raw', and destined for manufacture in the Global North. They have certainly been labelled as such. The assumptions underlying this stated division of labour derived from theories of colonial pact, underdevelopment, dependency, and unequal exchange. However, prior to export, many commodities were subjected to a growing degree of processing, which was increasingly industrial and capital-intensive in nature. Thus, sugar famously came from 'factories in the fields'. The industrial treatment of goods prior to export became the road to development in Japan (silk and tea) and Australia (wool and flour). Commodities were processed to varying degrees, partly due to their physical characteristics, such as the need to prevent spoiling (sugar, palm oil, meat and fish), or to save on transport costs (mineral ores and timber). However, the same commodity was processed to a higher degree in different localities, indicating that other factors were at play, such as cost, productivity, and availability of capital, labour, land, energy, and technical education. Policies of settlers, merchants, and imperial powers further affected outcomes, while organised labour sought to keep manufacturing jobs located in the Global North.

In this two-day workshop, we aim to explore, through case studies, how and why the history of commodity processing unfolded so unevenly. We are interested in all geographical regions and approaches from various disciplines. Papers will be grouped in thematic panels, pre-circulated to workshop participants, and panel discussion will be opened by a chair/discussant. Paper-givers can then reply succinctly, giving way to open discussion. Papers presented at the workshop may be considered for online publication in the Commodities of Empire Working Papers series: <https://commoditiesofempire.org.uk/publications/working-papers/>. We encourage graduate students to propose papers, and we have limited funds to help them, especially those coming from the Global South. Those receiving funding will be asked to submit revised versions of their texts as Working Papers.

Citation: Jelmer Vos. *CFP: The Raw and the Refined: Commodities, Processing, and Power in Global Perspective (London, 17-18 September 2020)*. H-Empire. 02-07-2020.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/5293/discussions/5834594/cfp-raw-and-refined-commodities-processing-and-power-global>

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Please e-mail expressions of interest, with a title and an abstract of no more than 300 words, by 31 March 2020, to: commoditiesofempire2020@gmail.com.

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