From Sugar to Oil in the Americas: A History of Commodities

HIST266/ENVS 266 From Sugar to Oil in the Americas: A History of Commodities

TTh 925am in Williams 211 & 110pm in CNS 115

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“…certain commodities are predisposed to certain social consequences.”

--Steven Topik and Allen Wells, The Second Conquest of Latin America

Karl Marx defined commodities as

"An object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production."

In this course students will gain an understanding of the way in which commodities fit into the larger fabric of Atlantic world history since the 15th century. Our focus will not just be on what was produced and traded throughout history, but also on how historians, economists, and other social scientists have interpreted the social, political, environmental, and economic significance of particular commodities. Thus, while the course might appear to be about inanimate objects, it is in fact a course that focuses our attention on how these objects have shaped the human experience. To a large degree, the course is premised on the notion that the material world shapes human's social, political, environmental, and economic behaviors and attitudes. We are also interested in how the study of commodities forces us to consider the relationship between Latin America (the main focus of the course) and the United States. While in many cases, the commodity is produced in Latin America and consumed in the United States, the relationships are usually far from straightforward. In some of those cases, such as bananas, production is also in the control of US economic interests, where in others, such as coffee, production is in national hands.

Throughout the semester, we will return to a set of questions. What are commodities and what accounts for their rising and declining value? How and why do particular commodities give rise to various systems of labor? What are the social, economic, environmental, and political consequences of different commodities? Why, in many cases, does a commodity boom give rise to rising standards of living for some but deteriorating conditions for others? How and why do certain commodities become fetishes? Why do some commodities become illegal and how does this change the social relations that develop from their production and elaboration? How and why do humans convert nature into something with monetary value or symbolic power?

ICC DESIGNATION: QUEST FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE
An examination of commodities in the Americas also leads us to contemplate questions of Sustainability. Commodity production, paradoxically, can promote economic sustainability of given communities, regions, or nations. Yet those same productive systems can undermine the creation or survival of integrated and holistic networks of production, subsistence, and consumption. Monoculture and extractive industries (especially mining and oil production) also can create environmental dangers in which the short term economic gain may be off-set by longer term environmental damage, social dislocation, and even economic downturns.

* Students taking this course for ICC Credit will upload a relevant document before the end of the semester.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

1. Understand and analyze historical scholarship (secondary sources), primary sources (including memoirs, photographs, films, business reports, statistics, etc.) through the lens of the humanities.

2. Recognize and appraise existing historiographical arguments about different commodities by a close examination of historical scholarship. Students will be required to assess that scholarship and come to their own conclusions.

3. Describe and interpret the values, beliefs, and behaviors of self and others in the context of historical and/or contemporary issues surrounding the production, transport, and consumption of commodities.

I reserve the right to change or modify assignments. If I do so, it will be with advanced warning. I will never increase the work load, though I may add quizzes if I feel that the majority of the class is not doing the readings, or is reading the assignments in a careless or indifferent manner.

**Books**

Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*

Tucker, Richard. *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World* (Rowman and Littlefield) 9780742553651

Course Packet (available at bookstore)

**Assignments:** Please note: all papers must be paginated and properly cited with Turabian style. (Note: The library’s noodles.bib site can show you how to cite in the various formats).

**Short Essays. (4 essays each worth 10% of grade= 40%)**

**Fictional commodity:** Write a TWO page single-spaced essay about the history of an imaginary and ridiculous commodity. In this essay, provide at least SIX examples of how your commodity fits into the Mintzian perspective. You must include at least one example for each chapter that we have read and discussed. You must provide footnotes with the page number of Mintz. Do not stuff your short paper with long quotations from Mintz. The following is a partial list of commodities to explore: sparrows, love, clouds, My Little Pony, pine cones, footnotes, marshmallows, bichon poos (actually that one is real), questions, toilet paper rolls, and used diapers (or the contents thereof). Remember that the fake commodity occurred in the past and your essay must be historical.
NOTE: This is an experimental assignment, but it will be graded according to the regular conventions of academic writing. You must demonstrate that you understand some of Mintz's key objectives and ideas.

**Kurlansky vs. Bolster.** In a three page essay, considering the differences and similarities between Kurlansky and Bolster in terms of sources, argument, and purpose, who made a more convincing argument and why? In your answer, consider what distinguishes the work of the professional historian (Bolster) from that of the popular writer (Kurlansky). Set aside the question of which piece you found more enjoyable or easy to read. I do not care which one you enjoyed more. That is irrelevant.

* Note: this essay will serve as an early assessment of reading and writing skills. If there are serious problems with the paper, you will be invited to talk with me about a program to help you work on writing during the course of the semester. By agreeing to the program, you will commit to weekly sessions with the Writing Center and I will allow continued rewrites of all papers.

**The Slave Trade: An Exploration in Sources and Methods**

The goal of this assignment is to help students develop a clearer idea of how to find primary sources, how to use them, and how to employ the conventions of historical citation. If that all sounds a bit much, don't worry.

1. Go to “Enslaved, Enslaver, and Commodification” file in Sakai
2. Browse the on-line databases and locate a primary source that interests you and that relates to the secondary source you read for the 2/12/2018
3. Examine the source carefully and also read any material that describes the source.
4. Write a three paragraph essay. Each paragraph needs to have at least 6 sentences each. In the **first paragraph**, describe the primary source using your own language. Make sure to explain who created the source, why they created it, and what purpose it served. If it is a visual document (photograph, painting, etc) describe its physical features. In the **second paragraph**, place the document into a historical context using the secondary source you read for class. This paragraph should have at least two footnotes that explain the document's historical context. In the **third paragraph**, explain what the document tells us about slavery, the slave trade, and/or the commodities that enslaved people worked. In this paragraph, you can develop your own ideas about "meaning" and "significance." You can explore how the document changes your ideas about the history of slavery.
5. Grading criteria. The grade is based on the following: grammar, syntax, correct usage, and spelling; coherence of the essay; evidence that you read the materials.

**New Commodities**

Option 1. Commodities and New Forms of Coercion: In a three page, double spaced essay, compare and contrast the systems of coercion that developed around **two** of the following commodities: coal, nitrates, coffee, bananas, sugar (in modern period) and rubber. The labor systems all entailed some form of coercion, but with important differences. In your essay, explain how geography (natural and national), the nature of the substance being harvested, mined, or collected, politics (from the local to the international), and cultural attitudes help us to understand the differences and similarities. If you choose a commodity w/ relatively little coercion, explain why. Your essay should have at least 8 citations from the relevant sources Please use footnotes. I will not accept electronic submissions without a prior agreement.

Option 2. Write a manifesto from the point of view of either workers or managers/business owners. How do you interpret the kinds of labor systems involved in your industry (coal, nitrates, bananas, coffee, or sugar-in modern period). If a worker, how do you make the argument against the system. If you are a manager/boss, how do you
justify the system. In addition to citing the relevant literature from class, you need at least TWO footnotes from the time period from The New York Times or another primary source from the time period. Please footnote. I will not accept electronic submissions without a prior agreement.

**FLEFF response paper (5%)**

Attend one FLEFF film and write a two page response, explaining how the film fits with the themes of our course. This is not a film review. I’m not interested in the lighting or if you thought the film was boring, or whatever.

**Research Proposal (No grade-failure to hand this in will result in a Zero for the final research paper)**

The research proposal will be a one page single-spaced explanation of what you are researching, why it is important or interesting, and how you will integrate readings and discussions from class into the paper. The proposal will also have at least 8-12 sources, which should include at least two primary sources. For each source, please write a line or two explaining what it is and why you are using it. In order to proceed to the final paper, you must receive full credit for the proposal. If the proposal is less than satisfactory, we will talk and figure out how to improve the project. As a general rule, I encourage students to develop very specific research agendas out of the desire to answer a question or set of questions. We will talk about what constitutes a viable and historically relevant topic throughout the class. Research topics MUST have a Latin American, Caribbean or United States focus. I strongly recommend that you select a commodity that has a clear thematic or actual tie-in to course material. I’ll discourage super-creative or "edgy" projects unless you can convince me that you can handle it.

**Research Paper (20%)**

Your final paper, which will be 6-8 pages in length, must adhere to standard historical citation methods. You are also required to incorporate some of the major historical themes and problems into your paper from the other commodities that we have studied. Your paper must focus on a single commodity, or a theme or problem closely related to it. I recommend that you spend some time over the first two months of the semester looking at the website Learning Historical Research. Because we live in a world that is dominated by electronic media, we will spend a fair amount of time thinking about how to assess sources, both paper and digital, and how to use a variety of sources effectively and wisely. As a general rule, the only acceptable internet sources are those that are accessed via Ithaca College Library’s website. These include such sites as J-Stor, Project MUSE, etc. There are also useful internet sources that are connected with major research libraries and other institutions dedicated to the dissemination of research. If you are not clear about an electronic source (and I would err on the side of caution), speak with me first. Failure to follow these guidelines will result in a failing grade on the final paper.

* Alternative delivery: I may allow students to create websites in lieu of formal papers. I’m working on it!

**Research Presentation:** Research teams will organize and present on their general topic and also on their individual research projects. Students will only be graded on their own research projects.

**Final Exam**

Due Date: **May 14 by 5pm** via BOTH DROP BOX

In three pages (double spaced), please answer the following questions. One page per answer. Don’t go over four pages (please)

1. How has oil changed the history of commodities? Give concrete examples.
2. Locate a current news story about one of the commodities that we have studied since Essay #3 and analyze how the historical material in the course can help us to better understand the contemporary problem or issue. The essay should be a maximum of 2 pages. Please cite at least ONE reading assignment.

3. Describe an important source that you used in your research paper and explain why I should consider assigning it next time that I teach this course. In what ways does the reading complement or perhaps challenge other arguments and ideas of the course?

Grade: I will grade the essay using two criteria. First, I will assess the care with which you write the essay. Second, I will assess how effectively you make your arguments.

(10%) Participation: This grade is exclusive of the presentation and research group work and also of attendance. Students will be active participants in all class-time activities. If you do not like to speak in class, you need to come to talk with me. Unless told otherwise, I will assume that a quiet student has not done the reading. Students with a strong aversion to speaking in class can do other sorts of work to compensate for not speaking in class. Students who don't do the readings, but fill up class time with lots of talking will also receive poor grades. Students who never speak in class, or only speak for the sake of speaking but say nothing of substance, should expect to get a zero for participation.

Grading Rubrics

Students will be apprised in a timely manner of the grading rubric for all papers. Although not a perfect instrument, it is designed to give you, the student, a clear idea of what factors go into the determination of your grade. More importantly, it will serve as a reminder to you of what constitutes good writing. Finally, it will help me to provide consistent grading and comments so that you may improve as writers and thinkers. Here is a sample of a rubric to give you some idea.

Academic Honesty

"Academic honesty is a cornerstone of the mission of the College. Unless it is otherwise stipulated, students may submit for evaluation only that work that is their own and that is submitted originally for a specific course. According to traditions of higher education, forms of conduct that will be considered evidence of academic misconduct include but are not limited to the following: conversations between students during an examination; reviewing, without authorization, material during an examination (e.g., personal notes, another student's exam); unauthorized collaboration; submission of a paper also submitted for credit in another course; reference to written material related to the course brought into an examination room during a closed-book, written examination; and submission without proper acknowledgment of work that is based partially or entirely on the ideas or writings of others. Only when a faculty member gives prior approval for such actions can they be acceptable."

-Article 7.1.4. Ithaca College Policy Manual

Students found to be in violation of this policy will be expelled from the class, will receive a failing grade and will have their name reported to the appropriate college authorities.

Class Policies

Students are expected to come to class well-prepared to discuss the readings. I welcome questions about the readings and do not expect students to always understand everything that they have read. Consistent failure to come to class prepared, however, will lead to a reduction in your final grade. Students who consistently come to class late will be asked to explain their chronic tardiness to the entire class. Disruptive behavior, be it use of cell
phones, loud eating, passing notes, falling asleep, leaving the classroom and returning, etc. will result in a public
discussion of these behaviors, as well as other sanctions. CELL PHONES ARE BANNED FROM MY CLASS. You
cannot have them present/visible upon entering the class. While our class will address complex and controversial
issues, it will also be a space where everyone feels welcome and comfortable. To that end, I take any harassing,
threatening or disrespectful behavior quite seriously. Should you experience anything that troubles you, please
come to speak with me. If you do not feel comfortable, you can contact either the Dean of Humanities and Sciences
or my chair, Dr. Pearl Ponce. Useful campus resources include the Title IX SHARE office and the Bias Incident
Report

**Tribute**

Students who miss class because of their own moral failings and weakness (ie, you aren't sick or have a legitimate
excuse) are expected, but not required, to bring tribute to class as a sign of their deep contrition, regret, and
sadness. Historically, tribute can be anything from pecans from a family farm in Georgia, Capri Suns (though they
were later banned), cookies, crackers, a poem read out loud, etc.). Let your conscience guide you in making the
determination as to whether your absence should invoke a tribute payment. I will never ask for tribute so if you don't
wish to participate in this practice, you are free to abstain.

**Accommodations and Extra Help**

In compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable
accommodation will be provided to students with documented disabilities on a case-by-case basis. Students must
register with Student Disability Services and provide appropriate documentation to Ithaca College before any
academic adjustment will be provided.

There are also several great resources on campus if you need help with study skills or writing. Please contact the
Writing Center and/or Academic Enrichment Services directly, or come to speak with me about how to best take
advantage of their services. Before going to campus resources, come speak with me.

**Rewriting Policy**

If after the first writing assignment, I decide that your writing needs extra help, you should set up weekly
appointments with the Writing Center. If throughout the semester, you attend weekly tutoring sessions, I will give
you permission to rewrite all of the papers. This arrangement will be made on a case by case basis.

**Attendance Policy**

Excused absences include medical and family emergencies, religious holidays, and IC sanctioned activities.
Whenever possible, please give me advanced warning that you will be absent. Every three unexcused absences
will lead to a ¼ step reduction in your final grade. Although getting notes from a classmate is fine, you should not
count on getting a full report of discussions, observation of films, etc. If you miss a total of three weeks of class and
don't have a verified excuse, I will drop you from the class. If you don't show up for the first week, I will drop you. If
you have received permission from SAS to tape the "lectures" we should talk. There are no lectures in this class; it
is all discussion. More useful to you than taping the class will be to make it a regular practice to talk w/ me in person
and we can go over the readings and discussion. I will make every effort to accommodate your schedule so that this
happens.

**Attendance Poem**
The law requires an attendance policy that is rational and bureaucratic. The following essay and poem capture my true sentiments about attending or skipping class. See My New Attendance Policy

Class Schedule

1/21 Introduction: Why study commodities? and "How would you write the history of Garbage?"

1/23 Mintz, "Introduction" and "Food, Sociality, and Sugar" in Sweetness and Power

Questions: How did Mintz, who is an anthropologist, come to write a transnational history of sugar? According to his Introduction, what is Mintz doing in this book? What is his thesis? (We will all have to re-read the introduction at some point). Why does Mintz think food is important for historical and cultural understanding of people?

How do we study the history of commodities?

1/28 Mintz, "Production"

1/30 Discuss "Sleep Dealer" (watch film at home. Available on Media Gallery) and read

"And Even the Rain" (Sakai).

How do fictional discussions of commodities and commodification mirror or echo what we've seen so far in Mintz? What elements of both stories ring true, even if they aren't ‘realistic?’

2/4 Mintz, "Consumption

FICTIONAL COMMODITY ESSAY DUE

2/6 Fish

Mark Kurlansky, Cod (Penguin) Prologue, Part One and the Bibliography (different file) (Sakai)

Questions: What is surprising or unusual in Kurlansky account? What are his sources? What seems to be his thesis? Should history books have a thesis? Why?

2/11 Fish

W. Jeffrey Bolster, “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History: Maritime Communities and Marine Ecology in the Northwest Atlantic, 1500-1800,” American Historical Review 113:1 (February 2008)

Questions: What is surprising about Bolster’s argument and information? How does his article differ from Kurlansky’s book? How does one write the history of the ocean? What kinds of sources does the author use? Compare with Kurlansky.

BOLSTER v KURLANSKY ESSAY
2/13  Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Please also spend 10 minutes on "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database" and "Life of Enslaved" links which are in "Enslaved, Enslaver..." file in "Resources" (Sakai) How was the database created? What do the sources reveal to us about the nature of the trade? How does the story you are familiar with about slavery change after looking at these texts?

2/18  Enslavement, Enslaved, and Enslavers

Go to the File "Enslaved, Enslaver, and Commodification." and go the sub-file "Readings on Slavery." Print and read one of the articles listed. Come prepared to discuss the article's sources, argument, historiography (how it fits into what was written before it), and your personal reaction. Please also view first ten minutes of La ultima cena/The Last Supper (Cuba) on Youtube (there are versions with subtitles)

2/20  Coal: An Economic Accelerator

Read: Coal in Cuba article


QUESTIONS to Ponder:

What was the 'second' green revolution? How does the author seek to connect labor and environmental history? Why does author argue for a transnational history of labor and the environment? How does his approach compare with that of Bolster? What makes nitrate so valuable? What was the closed system and the open system in agriculture? How does nitrate contribute to the gulf between city and country? How and why does labor become commodified? In what ways do manual and mechanical labor feed off of each other? What is an "enclave" and how/why does it shape labor practices? What does Melillo say about violence, class formation, and labor organizing? Why is nitrate so important to industrial nations? How does Melillo link "Pacific World History" to "Atlantic World History?"

2/27  Research Methods: How to Find a Research Topic, Find Sources, and Frame a Research Question, while also keeping the house clean and remembering to send your Mom a card for her Birthday

3/3  Globalization, Industrialization and new Commodities

Reading: Tucker, Insatiable Appetite, Introduction and "Coffee" in Tucker

RECOMMENDED BUT NOT REQUIRED: "Mccreery Debt Servitude in Guatemala" (in "Coffee" File in "Resources" page in Sakai)

SLAVERY ESSAY DUE

3/5  Rubber
READINGS: Chapter 5-6 Devil’s Milk (Sakai) & "Rubber" in Tucker (read only to p. 139)

Reading questions: How and why do commodities generate coercive labor systems? What are the ingredients? What makes rubber unique? What is the difference between "wild rubber" and "plantation rubber?"

SPRING BREAK (3/7-3/20)

REMOTE CLASS EXPECTATIONS AND GUIDELINES

For each class meeting, you will be required to do one of two things to demonstrate engagement with the material. Here is the plan and schedule:

1. Monday and Wednesday you will read and view the assignment for the following day. This will include watching to a PPT with Audio. All supplemental materials will be in either the Modern World and Latin America file in Sakai or in "Media Gallery."

2. Tuesday and Thursday we will hold a Zoom session at 10am (for the 9:25am class) and 1:10pm (for 1:10pm class) EST. You may 'attend' either session. Please load Zoom onto your device. If you cannot Zoom with us see #3.

3. Post TWO comments or responses to questions I've posted to Forums on our Sakai site. In addition, you may post your own question.

4. Office hours: I'm not going to hold regular office hours. If you want to Zoom, email me and we'll set it up.

5. Written assignments stay the same: research proposal, 1 last analytical essay, 1 research paper, and 1 final exam. (NOTE: I am adjusting the requirements in light of the challenges we are facing. IF YOU ARE FACING A CRITICAL SITUATION, we will figure out an accommodation including an Incomplete. I'm not sure about "Group work" and "Research Presentations." If Zoom is working, I can imagine figuring that out.

3/24 Banana

Instructions:

1. Review PPT in "Bananas" file in Resources. The PPT will include Audio

Tucker, "Bananas" to page 65 & John Soluri, “Banana Cultures: Linking the Production and Consumption of Export Bananas, 1800-1980,” in Banana Wars: Power, Production, and History in the Americas (Duke) (Sakai) & Tucker, “Bananas” What are the major differences between coffee and bananas? How do the two compare with what we know about sugar? What kind of argument can you make for the importance of bananas in political, cultural, and economic terms? Why is the banana industry dominated by US interests in a way that coffee is not?

3/26 Primary Sources on Sugar (Sakai)

Read Tucker, Chapter 1 “Sugar” pp, 7-25

Read the primary source "Cuba Review: 1922" and watch the film "Cuba: Island of Sugar, 1923" that are found in the Sugar" file in Sakai.

Come to class ready to talk about what the sources reveal about Sugar, American economic penetration in the Caribbean, etc. How does the modern sugar industry (since the XIX century) differ from it earlier forms? What were the continuities? Ruptures?
3/31  Commodities on Hoof

Tucker, Chapters 5 “Cattle”

How, when, and why does cattle become a widely traded commodity? What needed to happen politically, technologically, and economically, for Central American meat to be traded globally? Think about links with oil? How does the story compare with that of other globally traded goods? What are the environmental impacts?

Watch "Tomi Lahren on Beef" video in "Cattle" file (Resources). Explain why her analysis of the beef industry is ahistorical. Read some of the articles and watch the other videos for additional insights.

4/2  "You Can’t Cheat an Honest Man"- WC Fields: Ponzi Schemes and other scams

Research Proposal is DUE to DROP BOX by 4/2

4/7  OIL

“Extreme Oil,” PBS at https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/extremeoil/index.html (some material may no longer be available so do what you can) Please read "The Journey," "The History," and "The Science." What are the unique historical characteristics of oil. In what ways does its history fit with what we have read thus far. How is oil a "game changer" in our class? What was surprising to you in the website? What are the social, environmental, and political ramifications of the story of oil? See "Iran Coup 1953 OIL" document in "Resources" (in Oil file). What happened in Iran in 1953? Why? What was the relationship between the cold war, oil, and the history of Iran's relationship w/ the rest of the "West?"

4/7 DRUGS

Read: "Marijuana, Assassin of Youth" by H.J. Anslinger (in "Drugs" file in "Resources") and Ed Vulliamy, "Mexico's War on Drugs is One Big Lie" in "Drugs" file in "Resources"

4/9

NEW COMMODITIES ESSAY

RECOMMENDED BUT NOT REQUIRED: Read: Elaine Carey, "Selling is More a Habit than Using" in "Drugs" file in "Resources"

4/14  WATER and the FUTURE of COMMODITIES

4/16  Research Groups

4/21  Presentation
4/23 Presentations

4/28 Presentations (also Jonathan Ablard and Grace Kneebone's birthday! Please wish us a happy one)

4/30 Presentations

5/4 Wrap Up and discussion of final exam

5/7

FINAL EXAMINATION TAKE HOME EXAM and Final research papers are due on 5/14 at 5pm. ELECTRONIC SUBMISSIONS are NOT accepted unless you have prior approval from the instructor.

Recommended readings:

DEPENDENCY THEORY TURNED ON ITS HEAD

Reading: Martha Menchaca, *The Politics of Dependency: US Reliance on Mexican Oil and Farm Labor* (excerpt) (Sakai)