

History 79e:
Commodities in International History
Fall 2011

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This reading seminar uses the study of commodities to introduce students to some of the great opportunities and challenges facing historians interested in global or international history. It offers both a sampling of different approaches to writing historical essays related to one of the most innovative and dynamic fields of history.

The history of commodities has recently become fashionable among popular and academic historians, and with good reason. Commodities rarely respect traditional political or national boundaries, and are a welcome tool for scholars seeking to transcend those boundaries in their work. To follow a commodity from its agricultural (or biological, or geological, or industrial) origins through its production, distribution, and consumption is frequently to follow it across broad swaths of space and time. It involves thinking globally, but also across the socio-economic spectrum. It transcends geographic, cultural, and political boundaries between East and West, North and South, Atlantic and Pacific, and also methodological boundaries between cultural, economic, business, and environmental history as well as the history of food, of technology, and of ideas.

At the same time, however, the study of commodities presents several pitfalls. Histories of commodities can become prosaic and anecdotal, with more narration than analysis. The challenge of dealing with large expanses of time and space can lead to broad and superficial arguments. In addition, the close examination of one commodity can overly elevate its importance, in the same way that a biography of one individual tends to emphasize his or her potential to change history single-handedly. In this course, students will read multiple histories of commodities with a critical eye, looking for techniques that work, and those that do not.

We will begin with a brief introduction to some of the methodological issues presented by global history. We will then focus on one commodity each week. In conclusion, students will present their portfolios to the group.

PORTFOLIOS

Students will create a portfolio of essays on a commodity of their choosing (in consultation with the instructor). Each student will choose one commodity *not represented in the list of common readings* and prepare a portfolio of four short (5-7 page) essays on that commodity. Each essay should take a different approach or treat a different aspect of the history of the chosen commodity (inspired by our shared readings). Final portfolios must include revised & improved versions of all the submitted essays, a bibliography of sources available on the commodity in question, and at least one image. In addition to the essays prepared during the

term, final portfolios must include a fifth, historiographical essay. They can also contain other types of material, based on student interest: for example: graphic representations (art, advertising), musical works, timelines, chemical formulae. Please consult the website for examples of previous years' submissions.

Our last two meetings will be devoted to student presentations introducing the chosen commodities.

In addition, each student must create or enhance a webpage (as part of the course website) for one of the commodities we discuss in class.

PLEASE SEE THE HANDOUT ON ASSIGNMENTS FOR MORE DETAIL

9/6 **Introduction**

9/13 **International History, Global History**

Frederick Cooper, "Globalization"

David Armitage, "Is There a Pre-History of Globalization?"

John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade"

9/20 **Commodities**

Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*

- Appadurai, Introduction
- Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things"

Karl Marx, *Capital*, ch. 1: "The Commodity"

9/27 **Pineapple**

Gary Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones*

*** First essay due ***

10/4 **Sugar**

Sidney Mintz: *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, selections

Vincent Brown, "Eating the Dead: Consumption and Regeneration in the History of Sugar"

B. W. Higman, "The Sugar Revolution"

10/11 **Tobacco**

Allan Brandt, *The Cigarette Century* (2006)

*** Second essay due ***

10/18 **Bananas**

Dan Koeppel, *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit that Changed the World*

Phillip Bourgois, "One Hundred Years of United Fruit Company Letters"

10/25 **Grain**

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, selections

*** Third essay due ***

11/1 **Cocaine**

David Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*

Sigmund Freud, "Über Coca"

Alison Frank, "The Contradictions of Free Trade Imperialism: Cocaine Smuggling from the Austrian Empire to India"

11/8 **Cotton**

Sven Beckert: "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War"

CA Bayly, "The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700-1930"

*** Fourth essay due ***

11/15 **Slavery**

Sebastian R. Prange, "'Trust in God, But Tie Your Camel First.' The Economic organization of the trans-Saharan slave trade between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries"

Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, selections

11/22 Student Presentations

11/29 Student Presentations