FEEDING AND CLOTHING THE WORLD: CASH CROPS AND GLOBAL HISTORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Conference at the GHI Washington, June 2–4, 2011. Conveners: Shane Hamilton (University of Georgia), Ines Prodöhl (GHI). Participants: Warren Belasco (University of Maryland), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Patricia Clavin (University of Oxford), Sterling Evans (University of Oklahoma), Fritz Georg von Graevenitz (European University Institute, Florence), David Hamilton (University of Kentucky), Shane Hamilton (University of Georgia), Elizabeth Heath (University of Chicago), Jan Logemann (GHI), Rudolph Ng (University of Heidelberg), Tore Olsson (University of Georgia), Adina Popescu Berk (Columbia University), Ines Prodöhl (GHI), Jenny Smith (Georgia Institute of Technology), John Soluri (Carnegie Mellon University), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI), Amrys Williams (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Rebecca Woods (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Andrew Zimmermann (George Washington University).

This conference brought together primarily U.S. and European historians researching agricultural topics related to cultural, social, and economic aspects of a global history of cash crops. The wide range of presentations assured that the discussion would not be limited to mere histories of agriculture but would provide a panopticon of the theme. Ines Prodöhl opened the conference by sketching the broad topical framework that would serve as a guideline for the final discussion. She posed questions about the economic and cultural consequences of the increasing production of cash crops. Global trade relations had a strong impact on different life patterns. Likewise, the processes and outputs of exchange as well as the practices of transcultural interaction strongly influenced the perception of this global interconnectedness, she argued.

In her keynote address, “Cash, Crops, War, and Peace,” Patricia Clavin highlighted the opportunities and geographic diversity of studying this subject that, seemingly more than any other, is so interwoven with concerns about prospects for peace and welfare. First, she emphasized the unique opportunity studying cash crops provides for exploring the relationship among globalization, nationalism, and imperialism, whether in terms of national political reactions to globalization or new imperial appetites for colony-grown cash crops. The resulting welfare gap between North and South is a historically underdeveloped research area. Secondly, cash crops are well suited
to researching internationalism and international institutions, especially the League of Nations and its affiliated organizations. Although the International Labor Organization promoted global peace through global justice, the League’s approach to peace followed a traditional path toward global security. Historically and thus historiographically, it seems that the League’s peace movement neglected economic and social concerns and separated political from social and economic issues. Agriculture, especially, played a central role in international relations. Economic internationalism could have contributed greatly to the political integration of the world by “de-nationalizing” international policy. Finally, Clavin noted that the Eurocentrism of both the League and current historiography has failed to fully represent the geographic range and globalization of cash crop production. Asia and Africa have to be taken as part of that globalization. Visions of common social and political rights emerged from a troubling unevenness of global welfare. Agriculture was at the core of philanthropic visions of how to feed the world. With these issues in mind, Clavin argued, one can detect a central continuity and lesson from dealing with global cash crops that has been the central linkage of global agriculture and security, of cash, crops, war, and peace.

The first panel, “Transnational Institutions,” opened with a talk by Sterling Evans on “Fiber and Food: How Mexican Agaves Enabled U.S. and Canadian Wheat Production in the Early Twentieth Century.” Evans pointed to the interconnectedness of production of binder twine made of agaves from Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula and the production of grain in the U.S. and Canada: the twine was needed for the binders used in harvesting the corn. This suggested both a production chain in the international agricultural sector and illuminated part of the history of the industrialization of agriculture. Mexican twine production was halted completely when North America introduced the combine harvester-thresher.

Tore C. Olsson’s paper on “Corn versus Cotton: Monoculture, Subsistence, and Market Integration in Two Green Revolutions” followed. He showed that the “Green Revolution,” as it is commonly understood—that is, as a series of developmental transfer projects designed to increase agricultural yield—did not emerge as a monolithic project of North-South domination, nor should it be seen as an idealization of technology in the twentieth century. Instead, this development policy has to be seen as a set of specific choices made for a certain environment. However, the larger political and economic
structures into which the development projects had to fit eroded their intentional specific character.

David Hamilton underlined the historiographical importance of international commodity agreements in his talk, “Global Markets in the Age of Global Crisis: The Great Depression, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and International Commodity Agreements.” He connected the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and the search for an international commodity agreement on the wheat sector to a wider project of the New Deal makers to return to a more liberal free trade economy through intervention, which created a new relation between national and international markets. Thus, the AAA has to be seen as a part of a wider global market idea and also as a tool of international cooperation.

Amrys Williams concluded the panel with her paper, “America’s Grassroots Ambassadors,” elucidating the internationalization and extension of the 4-H Club in the postwar era. This was one of the most popular and successful programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Service for modernizing rural life in Asia and Africa. International activities of rural youth were seen as the natural setting for introducing new techniques and practices to rural populations worldwide and, therefore, for development policy. But, at the same time, the program also served as an ideological instrument in Harry S. Truman’s policy of containment as it promoted global economic development along capitalist, industrial, commodity-production lines.

The second panel, “Colonial Transitions,” started with Rudolph Ng’s presentation, “Colonos Asiáticos: The Foundations of the International Sugar Trade in the Late Nineteenth Century,” which investigated the role of Chinese coolies in Cuba. Characterizing the global Chinese coolie trade not so much as a part of international “migration” but rather as a late form of slavery, Ng demonstrated how Chinese coolies fulfilled an economic and social function in Cuba. This contrasts with the usual understanding of Chinese coolies being connected with a political function there as freedom fighters during the Cuban War of Independence against Spanish rule. Economically, their main legacy was to enable the planters to buy enough time to make a smooth transition from a labor-based to a mechanized production system. Socially, the Chinese coolies were a critical force in transforming the entrenched Cuban white-versus-black social paradigm into a more pluralist perspective.
Andrew Zimmermann’s paper, “Sugarbeets, Cotton, Palm Oil: Cash Crops and the Freedom of Labor in the Atlantic World between the Civil War and the First World War,” aimed to understand commodities in terms of markets and labor. Zimmermann discussed the development of standardized agricultural commodities and the racial identities that accompanied them. This connection makes it plain that capitalism has to be understood as a particular form of labor control. Finally, Zimmermann also presented some reciprocal transnational influences in his three commodity case studies. For example, cotton production in the American New South was repeatedly held up as an example that colonial authorities used to introduce large-scale cotton monoculture into colonial Africa.

Elizabeth Heath concluded the panel with a presentation on the historical development of the French colonial sugar industry in Guadeloupe in the late nineteenth century, entitled “Beet vs. Cane: Writing a Global History of a Sugar Island’s Decline.” Although the Guadeloupean sugar industry faced a structural crisis, France kept supporting it. The reason for this has to be seen in Guadeloupean sugar producers’ success in positioning their interests in terms of French national interest. This positioning raised the question of citizenship in the metropolitan and colonial contexts, wherein the ancien colonies were located in the French nation. This led to a new pacte colonial, which impacted the social class and racial structure of Guadeloupe. While the sugar producers became “French” in their consumption habits and tastes, the working class maintained its own culture.

The third panel, on “Regulation and Speculation,” started with Adina Popescu Berk’s presentation, “Market Disruptions: Famine and Speculation on International Grain Markets, 1888-1909,” which focused on the perception and contemporary conceptions of markets and market disturbances. It built on the view that market disturbances were seen as “artificial” when they were caused by speculation and as “natural” when caused by unfavorable climatic circumstances. Popescu Berk showed how the quest to analyze market forces in this period indicates that there was a sense of helplessness in the face of a market that was difficult to comprehend and seemingly impossible to control.

Fritz Georg von Graevenitz’s paper, “From Disposal to Provision: Facets of World Wheat Planning in the Depression Years (1927-1939),” looked at two early and significant instances of international grain
market intervention. First, Graevenitz explained how international market planning marked a kind of Europeanization of the markets. Promoted by a transnational European interest group within the League of Nations, international commodity agreements became a tool for intergovernmental regulation of international markets. This kind of internationalism would later fit European protectionism and replace the League’s quest for global free trade. Over the course of the 1930s, however, international commodity agreements became an instrument of provision rather than a tool to manage global overproduction. It proved to be the conceptual origins of a world food board.

Jenny Smith rounded out the panel with her paper, “The Great Grain Robbery and the History of Futures during the Late Cold War,” which sought to elucidate the lasting effects of this event on the Soviet Union. The “robbery” occurred in 1971, when the Soviet Union purchased almost 30 percent of the U.S. wheat crop at low prices using U.S. government export subsidies. Smith showed that the roots of the Soviet Union’s economic decline are to be found in a set of agricultural reforms which forced the Soviet Union to buy grain internationally rather than in sclerotic bureaucracy or military folly. She explained, furthermore, how the Cold War affected the nature of cash crops at the generic level, the environmental level, and at the level of circulation and consumption.

The fourth and final panel, “Globalizing Animal Products,” began with John Soluri’s presentation, “International Wool Markets and Sheep Ranching in Southern Patagonia, 1890-1960.” He illustrated how the fortunes of sheep ranching in southern Patagonia were initially tightly linked to global transnational networks of production, distribution, and consumption in the absence of regional centers of consumption. In the mid-twentieth century, this circumstance gave rise to an “import substitution industrialization” in Patagonia designed to expand national markets for wool and meat. Soluri looked at sheep breeds in Patagonia to examine the interplay of economic and ecological forces as well as effects on local ecologies and labor processes.

Rebecca Wood’s paper, “Breed, Culture and Economy: The Australasian Frozen Meat Trade, 1880-1920,” explored the cultural dimensions of the global imperial trade in frozen mutton meat. Woods did not focus on the odds of establishing this trade between Great Britain and its colonies but rather underscored perceived cultural affinities
between colony and metropole together with economic necessities as the rationale for empire trade in wool and meat. Meat became a focal point for the construction of a colonial identity that combined British heritage with the colonial locus.

The final discussion, which began with the observation that the conference had featured a wide range of analytical perspectives on the question of cash crops in a global historical context, was shaped by three main points. First, in researching the history of cash crops, one should think generally about the notion of commodification. The history of cash crops demonstrates not only a general process of commercialization but also how the commercialization of human labor proved to be a socially disintegrating force. Second, finding a common periodization for cash crops in the twentieth century turned out to be difficult. While World War I and II were certainly important in shaping global cash crops’ flows and methods of production, they nonetheless fail to provide period-defining caesurae for historians in this context. “Interwar,” for instance, might not be a useful term here. The global history of cash crops might contribute to a depiction of a crisis of capitalism and its periodization. Third, many of the papers examined the local and regional cultural implications of global market structures. This reveals the specificity of agriculture as a topic of global history. Since agriculture lacks clear profit margins and is deeply rooted in a particular society, methods of production are not chosen exclusively on the basis of rationality but also on the basis of cultural and social practices.

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