

LIST II, HT, SS

HIU34574 Commodity frontiers: Labour, nature and capital in global history (Katja Bruisch)



Image credit: People with baskets and sacks pick cotton on a plantation. Coloured lithograph after J.R. Barfoot (1840). Wellcome Collection

Things like sugar, cotton, copper, petroleum, or palm oil have become so embedded in our ways of life that we struggle to conceive of a world without them. Their presence is the outcome of a long history of frontier expansion during which the social and ecological costs of economic growth were placed on people and nature at the social and geographical margins of modern capitalism. This module engages with a new body of scholarship on commodity frontiers to think about the intersection of labour, nature, and capital from the early stages of European colonialism until the age of neoliberalism. Classes will feature case studies of labour exploitation and ecological disruption, but also resilience and resistance in places as diverse as Caribbean sugar plantations, central African copper mines, or Indonesian palm oil plantations. Over the course of the term, we will discuss concepts and frameworks through which historians have tried to understand the social and material entanglements of the world economy, such as commodity chains, world ecology, (neo-)extractivism, unequal ecological exchange. The final 5,000-word essay will be a historical exploration of a place or commodity of your choice. Over the course of the term, you will be given research prompts and feedback intended to support you on your journey to the final paper.