The Journal of Peasant Studies

Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 0306-6150 (Print) 1743-9361 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjps20

Local subversions of colonial cultures: commodities and anti-commodities in global history

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To cite this article: Koen Beumer (2018) Local subversions of colonial cultures: commodities and anti-commodities in global history, The Journal of Peasant Studies, 45:2, 480-483, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2017.1420595

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1420595

Published online: 11 Jan 2018.

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Importantly, *Corridors of power* not only critiques the environmental aid apparatus, but also offers some thoughtful ideas on how to make the process more democratic and successful moving forward. Corson notes that the 'corridors' must become more inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives, and calls for a 'transformation in who travels through the corridors of power' (219). One could also add that the corridors themselves need to change. As Corson notes, people with the best intentions often find themselves conforming to the contours of the 'corridors' through which they travel – whether those of Congressional processes, conference agendas or economic budgets. As Corson illustrates, it is only by shaping corridors to conform to grassroots ideals – rather than the other way around – that one can realize the true promise of transnational networks to forge more equitable, diverse and thriving landscapes.

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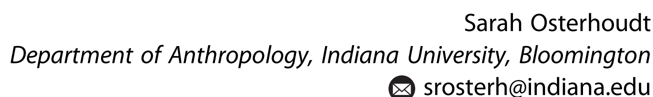
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https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1420596

Local subversions of colonial cultures: commodities and anti-commodities in global history, edited by Sandip Hazareesingh and Harro Maat, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, xi + 213 pp., US$61 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-137-38109-5

Colonial archives can easily give rise to the view that colonial agriculture was a remarkably successful enterprise, whose all-conquering drive to extort commodities from colonies and sell them on the world market left no room for alternatives. The edited volume *Local subversions of colonial cultures: commodities and anti-commodities in global history* draws on a variety of different sources to show that alternative modes of production persisted and that the local production of primary goods can be a feasible alternative to the commercial capitalism of colonial governments.

The volume is one of the outcomes of a collaborative research project among Wageningen University, the Netherlands, and the Open University, UK, that was funded by the humanities division of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Through a series of nine historical case studies, the volume provides insight into the various ways in which local farmers resisted colonial regimes by maintaining local agricultural practices that opposed the imperatives of global markets.

This is, of course, not entirely new. Already over four decades ago, as the authors rightfully highlight, Teodor Shanin noted that the peasantry clearly had not read the script of its historical demise. The evidence provided by the various chapters – that also during colonial times, local production systems were not entirely replaced by commercial capitalism – hence adds further

empirical substance to an already well-established fact. The distinct contribution of the volume to the literature on commodification and farmer agency, however, lies in the concept of the 'anti-commodity'.

The introduction defines anti-commodity as 'an enduring form of production and action in opposition either to actual commodities and their existing functions, or to wider social processes of commodification' (6). The focus therefore does not reside with practices of subsistence farming or protests to the imperatives of global markets per se. Instead the concept of the anti-commodity draws attention to how commodities and their counterparts shape each other in local contexts. This offers a new perspective on the various ways in which farmers seek to develop sustainable modes of food production that engage with the production of commodities but simultaneously shield farmers from becoming overly reliant on market forces. This is an interesting and important contribution.

The volume consists of an introduction and nine historical case studies. Four case studies are situated in Africa, three in India, and one each in Indonesia and Cuba. Three case studies focus on rice, two on cotton, and one each on tobacco, sugar, labor power and sanitary works. Each of these case studies illustrates that the enduring production of anti-commodities cannot be understood in isolation from the very commodification processes that they resisted.

For instance, the chapter by Jonathan Curry-Machado describes sugar plantations in Cuba. The author shows that regions that turned all available land into plantations eventually fared much worse than those areas that tolerated employees also growing non-commercial crops on their own little plots. These non-commercial crops in the end sustained sugar as a commodity by providing the necessary food and income for plantation workers. The chapter by Sandip Hazareesing, meanwhile, shows how farmers in India continued to grow local cotton varieties in opposition to colonial policies. These varieties could not be used by the British factories and hence were not profitable for the colonial government. However, after a number of seasons with irregular rainfall, these local varieties proved to be much more resilient than the varieties pushed by the British colonizers.

Two other noteworthy chapters are those by Harro Maat and Erik Gilbert. In his chapter on the Netherlands Indies, Maat provides a detailed description of upland rice as an anti-commodity. He describes how the colonial administration in the Netherlands Indies, in attempting to increase their control over food production, aimed to dissuade farmers in upland areas from growing rice, as it could hardly be grown profitably under those conditions. However, farmers in upland areas withstood this pressure and continued to cultivate rice. Maat convincingly argues that upland rice persisted as an anti-commodity not only because of its fundamental social significance, but also because the maintenance of rice as an anti-commodity made economic sense for the farmers, as growing rice alongside cash crops allowed farmers to spread unpredictable costs over more forms of production.

Whereas Maat contrasts upland rice as an anti-commodity with the pervasive commodification of lowland rice in the Netherlands Indies, Gilbert offers a compelling account of how rice along the Swahili coast was never turned into a commodity at all. Whereas most agricultural products along the Swahili coast were turned into tradable products from the early nineteenth century onward, rice continued to be grown exclusively for household consumption. Gilbert demonstrates that the refusal to turn rice into a commodity was a form of resistance to market forces that can largely be attributed to the social significance and status that rice enjoys. Rice was adopted at the same time that Swahili elites accepted Islam, and – like Islam, stone houses and imported ceramics – rice offered status to those who consumed it, linking them to the prestigious societies of South and Southwest

Asia. Whereas cassava and maize were just regarded as food, rice was a status staple, eaten at weddings and other cultural events, coming to function as a marker of an elitist identity that helped to distinguish Swahili elites from their inferiors and from other Africans in the interior.

These and other case studies convincingly highlight the value of focusing on anti-commodities in describing how local people in different colonies critically engaged with the commodification of agriculture by colonial governments.

A shortcoming of the book is that the chapters are seemingly presented in no particular order and there is no concluding chapter. This lack of overarching conclusions partly seems to stem from the authors' insistence on the interpretative flexibility of the anti-commodities concept. Yet while it is certainly important to remain sensitive to the various incarnations of anti-commodities in different contexts, theses differences could also have provided a starting point for further theorizing.

This is particularly manifest in ostensibly different interpretations of anti-commodity that run throughout the book. One of these interpretations starts from the view that commodities are objects that can be sold on the market. Objects are not readily available for the market, however, and all sorts of work is required to turn them into marketable products. The anti-commodity, in this reading, may facilitate such processes of commodification. Harro Maat, for instance, follows this interpretation when he previously defined anti-commodity as 'production processes that are *complementary* to processes of commodification but are generally perceived to be of lesser or no significance because production is smaller or more dispersed' (Maat, 2015, 337, italics mine). The aforementioned chapter by Jonathan Curry-Machado on sugar in Cuba also follows this interpretation when demonstrating how small plots with non-commercial crops were crucial in sustaining sugar as a commodity.

Other chapters, however, seem to interpret the term in a way that more closely resembles the work of Karl Marx. In his work on commodity fetishism, Marx (1992) mainly draws attention to the particular types of *relationships* that are required for objects to function as commodities, for instance between laborers and capitalists. By this logic, if commodities are objects that create commercial relationships, then anti-commodities are objects that create relationships outside these commercial logics.

Erik Gilbert's chapter on rice production on the Swahili coast that was discussed above, for example, interprets anti-commodities in this way when demonstrating that local communities refused to sell local rice varieties because rice was an object for identity formation. The refusal to sell rice did not contribute to processes of commodification but rather helped Swahili elites to gain social prestige by distinguishing themselves from their inferiors and those in the interior. And Simeon Maravanyika shows in the chapter on cotton in Zimbabwe that local people refused to grow cotton because their religious leaders told them it would bring bad luck. This sense of the anti-commodity does not draw attention to production practices that *enable* capitalist markets but instead draws attention to production practices that *undermine* commodity production and help to sustain social relations outside the commercial realm. Whereas both interpretations highlight the value of the anti-commodity concept in understanding how alternative systems of agricultural production can be sustained, they also highlight very different relations to processes of commodification and bring into view rather different types of agency of local populations.

Also without such a concluding chapter, however, the volume convincingly demonstrates the value of the anti-commodity concept. The book is a pressing invitation to further investigate anti-commodities in order to engage with the various ways in which local farmers maintain resilience in the face of the imperatives of global markets.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1420595

Concentration and power in the food system: who controls what we eat? by Philip H. Howard, New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, 216 pp., US$23.99 (paperback), 978-1-472-58114-3

There have been many books published on the activities of corporations within particular sectors of national food systems, such as on the supermarket and seed sectors, or on particular transnational corporations, such as Coca Cola, Monsanto and Cargill (Kneen 2002; Burch and Lawrence 2007; Pechlaner 2012). But few books have analyzed corporate concentration across the food system, either within nations or globally, with one notable exception being Clapp and Fuchs's (2009) excellent edited collection *Corporate power in global agrifood governance*, that explores the nature of corporate power with case studies focused on the seed-biotech sector.

Philip Howard's book *Concentration and power in the food system: who controls what we eat* takes a critical look at increasing levels of corporate concentration in the US food system, and the ways in which corporations build and exercise their market power. Howard is already well known for his work on corporate concentration, including his excellent visualizations, a series of which feature in this book. Howard's visuals are a great asset for researchers and in teaching and activism, as they clearly map the interlocking power within the food sector and help illustrate how multiple apparently discrete smaller companies and brands are actually part of the same centralized ownership. In addition to extending some of his own previous work here, Howard also builds upon the earlier work of Bill Hendrickson and Mary Henderson, who have for many years documented the level of concentration in various US food supply chains at different points in time. Howard's book is succinct, but its scope is impressive, providing a broad survey of the extent and consequences of corporate concentration across the US agro-food supply chains. While the focus is on the USA, all of the biggest actors have a prominent place in world markets, so the subject should be of much wider interest in itself, and Howard does make references to the activities of some of these global corporations in other countries on a number of occasions.

The book is structured in chapters focused on particular segments and products within food systems, including agricultural inputs, farming, primary processing, trade, packaged foods, alcoholic beverages, distribution and retailing – and includes case studies on specific products, such as beer, soy milk, soy beans, dairy, pork, bagged salad, and the organic food chain. In each sector, Howard identifies the dominant corporations and their market shares, including the CR4 values, a metric which highlights the market share of the top four corporations in a given