Further to carrying over our Commodities of Empire 2020 workshop, please find the revised Call for Papers for September 2021. We ask all who submitted proposals for 2020 confirm their interest in carrying over their original proposal or, if they so wish, submit a revised proposal. Please note that, while we aim to hold the workshop on site at the University of London, should Covid-19 restrictions be in force, our fallback option is to hold the workshop virtually, and we shall keep you duly informed.

Call for Papers

‘The Raw and the Refined: Commodities, Processing, and Power in Global Perspective’

Commodities of Empire International Workshop, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2-3 September 2021

There has long been a tendency to suppose that commodities exported from the Global South

have been ‘raw’ and destined for manufacture in the Global North. They have certainly been

labelled as such. The assumptions underlying this stated division of labour derived from theories

of colonial pact, underdevelopment, dependency, and unequal exchange. However, prior to

export, many commodities were subjected to a growing degree of processing, which was

increasingly industrial and capital-intensive in nature. Thus, sugar famously came from ‘factories

in the fields’. The industrial treatment of goods prior to export became the road to development in Japan (silk and tea) and Australia (wool and flour). Commodities were processed to varying

degrees, partly due to their physical characteristics, such as the need to prevent spoiling (sugar,

palm oil, meat and fish), or to save on transport costs (mineral ores and timber). However, the

same commodity was processed to a higher degree in different localities, indicating that other

factors were at play, such as cost, productivity, and availability of capital, labour, land, energy,

and technical education. Policies of settlers, merchants, and imperial powers further affected

outcomes, while organised labour sought to keep manufacturing jobs located in the Global North.

In this two-day workshop, we aim to explore, through case studies, how and why the history of

commodity processing unfolded so unevenly. We are interested in all geographical regions and

approaches from various disciplines. Papers will be grouped in thematic panels, pre-circulated to

workshop participants, and panel discussion will be opened by a chair/discussant. Paper-givers

can then reply succinctly, giving way to open discussion. Papers presented at the workshop may

be considered for online publication in the Commodities of Empire Working Papers series:

https://commoditiesofempire.org.uk/publications/working-papers/. We encourage graduate

students to propose papers, and we have limited funds to help them, especially those coming from the Global South. Those receiving funding will be asked to submit revised versions of their texts as Working Papers.

Please e-mail expressions of interest, with a title and an abstract of no more than 300 words, by

31 March 2021, to: commoditiesofempire2021@gmail.com