

COMMENT

Suggestions and Debates: *The World of Sugar* and the Commodity Frontiers Initiative

Historical Materialist Anthropology and *The World of Sugar*: Cross-Disciplinary Research Agendas

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Abstract

Ulbe Bosma's book on the global history of sugar offers fundamentally new insights into the nexus of technology, corporate capital, government policies, and ideologies of progress in the making of commodity frontiers. From the perspective of historical materialist anthropology, it is important to broaden the research agenda even further. With reference to Maussian historical personae in the making of global capitalism, for example, a long history of raiders of state budgets emerges from Bosma's work. Incorporating Sidney Mintz's work on *Sweetness and Power* on a critical extension of world-system theory reveals, for the case of colonial and postcolonial Mauritius, that economic subsystems and local responses to slavery and indenture have a permanence for kinship structures, social policies, real estate markets, trade union legislations, and postcolonial development policies in special economic zones. Such a widened focus allows for the incorporation of the Caribbean Plantation School theorists into our analysis of sugar commodity chains within a comprehensive world systems perspective beyond the commodity frontiers agenda.

The World of Sugar, Ulbe Bosma's monograph at the centre of this dossier, is a formidable step forward for the global history of sugar, for commodity histories more widely, and for our knowledge about the on-the-ground operations of historical capitalism. It is a page turner that will serve as a stimulus for future research in global history, labour history, commodity histories, and neighbouring disciplines such as historical geography, critical political economy, and economic anthropology.

Insights from Bosma's book open up new vantage points for teaching students across disciplines about the relevance of global commodity histories. I can already report successes for sociology, criminology, and social anthropology students fascinated by learning about the links between flapjack snacks with Golden Syrup and the Tate & Lyle-sponsored Tate Galleries in London. The billboards on the Silvertown mill in the London Docklands illustrate Tate & Lyle's operations within the conjunctures of global trading regimes – from “Save Our Sugar” protesting European Union preferential quota

waivers in the late 2000s (Figure 1) to “Keeping the Nation Sweet” emblazoned on a British national flag after Tate & Lyle’s support for Brexit.¹

Expanding contemporary research on the uneven and combined development of capitalism, *The World of Sugar* “uncover[s] how the state and ideologies have played a crucial role in shaping the course of capitalism.”² Expanding on his long-standing expertise on technological innovations in the sugar sector, Bosma shows how advances such as the installation of vacuum pans for cane processing in mills were tied to state economic policies underpinned by contested notions of progress. In the French Empire, for example, tensions arose “between the Saint-Simonian industrialization ideology and the plantocracies who distrusted new technology as a threat to their autonomy and the existing social order.”³

Taking cues from Sidney Mintz’s earlier work on the global and Caribbean historical anthropology of sugar and global capitalism, this contribution engages with Bosma’s book and the commodity frontiers (CF) research agenda with reference to my own work on the changing incorporation of Mauritius into the capitalist world system via sugar cane plantations since around 1800, the rise of special economic zones (SEZs) in the post-1945 world system under US hegemony, and a Marxian anthropology of the world system more generally.⁴

As the first of three interventions, I juxtapose the analytical gains from *The World of Sugar* – particularly its extension of Jason W. Moore’s commodity frontiers (CF) agenda and Bosma’s proposed periodization of capitalism – with earlier agendas. These include Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein’s initial global commodity chains (GCC) research programme,⁵ Mintz’s concern with non-Western origins of capitalism, David Harvey’s notion of capital’s spatio-temporal fixes,⁶ and Giovanni

¹For Tate & Lyle’s pro-Brexit campaign, see Ulbe Bosma, *The World of Sugar: How the Sweet Stuff Transformed Our Politics, Health, and Environment over 2,000 Years* (Cambridge, MA, 2023), p. 302.

²Ulbe Bosma, “*The World of Sugar* and the Commodity Frontiers Initiative: An Introduction”, *International Review of Social History* (2025), preprint, p. 6.

³Bosma, *The World of Sugar*, p. 111.

⁴Patrick Neveling, *Manifestationen der Globalisierung. Kapital, Staat und Arbeit in Mauritius, 1825–2005* [Manifestations of globalisation. Capital, state, and labour in Mauritius, 1825–2005] (DPhil thesis, Halle/Saale, 2012); *idem*, “A Periodisation of Globalisation According to the Mauritian Integration into the International Sugar Commodity Chain (1825–2005)”, in Jonathan Curry-Machado (ed.), *Global Histories, Imperial Commodities, Local Interactions* (Basingstoke [etc.], 2013), pp. 121–142; *idem*, “Export Processing Zones, Special Economic Zones and the Long March of Capitalist Development Policies During the Cold War”, in Leslie James and Elisabeth Leake (eds), *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence* (London, 2015), pp. 63–84; *idem*, “Flexible Capitalism and Transactional Orders in Colonial and Postcolonial Mauritius: A Post-Occidental View”, in Jens Kjaerulf (ed.), *Flexible Capitalism: Exchange and Ambiguity at Work* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 207–234; *idem*, “The Political Economy Machinery: Toward a Critical Anthropology of Development as a Contested Capitalist Practice”, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 41:2 (2017), pp. 163–183; *idem*, “Genealogies of a Miracle: A Historical Anthropology of the Mauritian Export Processing Zone”, in Ramola Ramtohul and Thomas Hyland Eriksen (eds), *The Mauritian Paradox: Fifty Years of Development, Diversity and Democracy* (Reduit, 2018), pp. 107–122.

⁵Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Patterns of Development of the Modern World-System”, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 1:2 (1977), pp. 111–145; *idem*, “Commodity Chains in the World-Economy Prior to 1800”, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 10:1 (1986), pp. 157–170.

⁶David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, 2003), especially pp. 109–111. For the notion of a geographical seasaw of capitalism, see also Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (London, 2010).



Figure 1. The Silvertown Tate & Lyle Factory.

Source: Patrick Neveling, 2013.

Arrighi's related concept of historical fixes of capital, driven by a succession of hegemonic powers.⁷ Second, I relate Mintz's alternative world systems theory (WST) concept of "local response" to a peripheral location within *The World of Sugar*, the small island British colony – and later postcolonial nation – of Mauritius). Although sugar cane was the one commodity that drove the historical incorporation of Mauritius into the capitalist world system, the island's latecomer position as a major sugar producer provides us with a corrective to Bosma's examples from the Caribbean and Southeast

⁷ Giovanni Arrighi, "Spatial and Other 'Fixes' of Historical Capitalism", *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 10:2 (2004), pp. 527–539.

Asia and his focus on the global sugar bourgeoisie. In Mauritius, sugar capitalism developed into a particular economic subsystem, shaped by local responses from capitalists, workers, government administrations, trade unions, and other actors. These dynamics provide new insights into sugar capitalism and its afterlives in social policies, kinship structures, trade union laws, and real estate markets, opening the CF agenda to labour histories, political histories, and life histories of sugar cane workers and mid-level capitalists, among others.

Third, Bosma draws attention not only to technical innovations – such as vacuum pans and steam engines – but also to innovations in capital accumulation. Using again the example of Mauritius, innovations in colonial policies, labour relations, and post-colonial strategies of capital accumulation in the sugar sector informed the export processing zones (EPZs) and SEZs that mushroomed across former plantation colonies in the decades after World War II.⁸ Moving up the scale of analysis from my second intervention, this third intervention combines meso-level and macro-level analyses to argue for the inclusion of one of the Global South's leading critical political economy movements, the Caribbean Plantation School, within the theoretical portfolio of sugar's global history.⁹

In conclusion, these three interventions offer future cross-disciplinary research agendas such as a look beyond the frontier at the articulations of global sugar capitalism with local and national economies, a strengthening of the GCC approach that incorporates the CF agenda, and periodizations of commodity capitalisms globally and nationally as different from the periodization of global capitalism *sui generis*.

Global Sugar Commodity Chains in the Historical Fixes of the Capitalist World System

Bosma identifies the works of Moore, Philip McMichael, and Harvey as key theoretical components of the CF research agenda, which periodizes capitalism's history along four distinct commodity regimes. The first period – from the 1500s – followed the accumulation logic of Harvey's spatial fix. The “geographical relocation of the production process” incorporated vast world regions via original accumulation by dispossession, such as slavery, land grabbing, and genocide. Steam and steel, as well as liberalizations of the global labour regime, ushered in a second period led by a statal fix. Neoliberal ideology paved the way for a third period of “globally operating corporate capitalism” from the 1970s. The combined fallout from these three periods culminated, by the turn of the millennium, in environmental crises that now question the system's very logic to “privatize profits and externalize social and ecological costs”.¹⁰

Since the macro-analytical potential of *The World of Sugar* and the CF agenda hinges on Moore's commodity frontiers approach, it is important to revisit the latter's ambition to defend Hopkins and Wallerstein's GCC research programme against postmodern and poststructuralist critics who claimed that “world-systems [theory] is incapable of

⁸Neveling, *Manifestationen der Globalisierung*; *idem*, “Flexible Capitalism and Transactional Orders”.

⁹Norman Girvan, “Caribbean Dependency Thought Revisited”, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* / *Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 27:3 (2006), pp. 328–352.

¹⁰Bosma, “Introduction”, p. 3.

theorizing” the diversity of incorporations into capitalism across the planet and its various dwellers.¹¹ Importantly, the GCC approach was designed as a method (and not as a theory) to accurately map the dynamic articulation of trade relations, surplus extraction, and hegemonic actors along the two axes of the world system: the relations between core and periphery as regions and the relations between dominated and dominant states.¹² Harvey’s spatial fixes, and even more so Neil Smith’s geographical seesaw of capital, consider how corporations position themselves between these axes as capital moves from core to periphery in search of higher profit margins, then returning to previously abandoned locations once they have reconstituted as new peripheries.¹³

Bosma’s work reminds us that sugar industries create spatial and temporal fixes for capital due to the recovery costs for cultivating land, bringing in (forced) labour, setting up (industrial) mills, establishing the networks and infrastructure for trading, and setting up institutions to police and govern plantation regions and colonies. One of the book’s particular strengths lies in its wealth of rich mini-histories of national and colonial development policies that have the potential to challenge seminal works in history, social anthropology, development studies, sociology, and beyond. The following juxtaposes Bosma’s findings on technological innovation and state development policies as spatial fixes for sugar capitalism in nineteenth-century Egypt with Timothy Mitchell’s Foucauldian critique of orientalist development planning, which fails to consider state intervention via subsidies in Egypt in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars.

In an early variant of what we today would identify as South–South policy transfer, the Ottoman governor “Khedive Muhammad Ali ordered the building of a factory based on Jamaican technology”, enlisting the expertise of French engineers. This early “Saint Simonian ambition” triggered a legacy of Egyptian sugar production for global markets throughout the nineteenth century and up to the present. Ali’s first-generation successor subcontracted a French engineer with a portfolio of successful ventures in state-of-the-art sugar factories to ramp up Egyptian production. His second-generation successor hosted a “state banquet during the Paris World’s Fair of 1867” to recruit a French multi-colonial/multinational construction company to build hundreds of kilometres of railroad tracks and sixteen factories that turned a substantial section of the Nile into a global hub for cane sugar production.¹⁴

Mitchell’s seminal book on Egypt, *The Rule of Experts*, says many important things about the sugar cane industry’s impact on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt. Yet, Mitchell leaves out the major infrastructure deal brokered at the Exposition Universelle, a detail that would have strengthened his critical discussion of the presentation of universal statistics and the development of the “great land map of Egypt” during the 1850s, later showcased in the Egyptian pavilion at the World’s Fair.¹⁵ The

¹¹Jason W. Moore, “Sugar and the Expansion of the Early Modern World-Economy: Commodity Frontiers, Ecological Transformation, and Industrialization”, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 23:4 (2000), pp. 409–433, 411, my addition.

¹²Hopkins and Wallerstein, “Patterns of Development”; *idem*, “Commodity Chains”.

¹³Harvey, *New Imperialism*; Smith, *Uneven Development*.

¹⁴Bosma, *The World of Sugar*, pp. 119–120.

¹⁵Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), pp. 87–88, 100.

wider issue emerging from this insight is that Mitchell's focus on Orientalism and the power of technology and science in his book *Colonising Egypt* ignores what the CF agenda and the GCC approach champion,¹⁶ namely, the study of capitalist infrastructure and labour relations as part of Egypt's dynamic incorporation into the capitalist world system.

Despite its strengths in advancing our knowledge of uneven and combined regional integration, *The World of Sugar*'s misses an opportunity to offer a more critical theorizing of commodity capitalism. Rather than providing a clear definition of capitalism, Bosma inserts a moral assessment, suggesting that the central argument of Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* is that "the history of sugar shows how modern consumption, global inequalities, and the emergence of modern capitalism are all part of the same massive transformation of our world", thus unveiling the "Janus-faced" confluence of material progress, exploitation, and environmental destruction in capitalism's planetary expansion.¹⁷

This differs from Mintz's project to shift the debate on the origins of capitalism from a Western-centric position towards the articulations of capitalism in global peripheries. His 1977 critique of Wallerstein's WST, *The So-Called World System: Local Response and Local Initiative*, argued that sugar cane was introduced independently in Brazil and the Caribbean (instead of moving from the first to the second), with the origins of the "large-estate form of production" using African enslaved labour in fifteenth-century Portuguese Sao Tomé. This, he suggested, made Sao Tomé another possible location for the origin of the "capitalistic" relations of production whose totality later became operational in the Caribbean (and not in England, as others would have it at the time).¹⁸

Turning to the frontiers of capitalist relations of production, Mintz's larger project in *Sweetness and Power*, with its aim to "show the special significance of a colonial product like sugar in the growth of world capitalism", was a logical point of reference for Moore's CF agenda.¹⁹ Challenging the belief held by most students in the mid-1980s that "capitalism itself became a governing economic form in the late eighteenth century and not before",²⁰ Mintz takes us back to early Portuguese and other European ventures in cane sugar production to show that the emergence and continuity of plantations fed by enslaved labour within capitalism's system of free wage labour "has to do with the ways how economic systems grow and change, and with the chain of causation that leads from one stage to another".²¹ Inevitably, sugar capitalism has a different periodization than global capitalism. Given sugar's long history in the global articulations of capitalism, Arrighi's concept of historical fixes is central to such an advanced analysis as it offers a WST understanding of the broad strokes that the competition of imperialist

¹⁶Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA, 1988).

¹⁷Bosma, *The World of Sugar*, pp. 2–3.

¹⁸Sidney W. Mintz, "The So-Called World System: Local Initiative and Local Response", *Dialectical Anthropology*, 2:1 (1977), pp. 253–270, 254.

¹⁹Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York [etc.], 1985), p. xxix.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 55.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 59.

powers over hegemonic control has left on the global and regional articulation of the capitalist world system.²²

To bring Bosma's concerns about the exhaustion of our ecosystems and economies after too many years of capitalism full circle and feed them into current debates about just transitions from (fossil fuel) capitalism to a better mode of production, it is important to highlight the empirical correctives his work offers to Mintz's and others' claims that plantations merely combined the worst of both worlds – feudalism and capitalism. Where Mintz argues that the capital invested in plantations did not generate significant profit and that labour regimes and operations remained largely unchanged over decades, if not centuries, Bosma has written a global history that reveals the shockingly vast profits and the meticulous and vicious constant adjustments, innovations, and even revolutions in the colonial sugar regimes.

Looking beyond labour regimes (though less so than Mintz), Bosma retraces how, in moments of crisis, different European imperial powers drew on the expertise of artisanal sugar producers in China, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, even when these artisans had been previously removed from world market connections, often forcibly. At the same time, he points to the reuse of sugar cane's industrial infrastructure for tourism industries and world-market manufacturing enterprises in light consumer products. A future project (central to my third intervention below) could be to incorporate the many examples of reuse of once abandoned lands, factories, and societies already trained for exploitation by sugar production into the analytical framework of the geographical seesaw of capital as developed by Smith.²³

Local Response

As Bosma suggests, the CF agenda and *The World of Sugar* are an invitation to disciplines neighbouring global labour history to engage in the emerging conversations on socially and ecologically just transitions from the current conjunctures of capitalism. In this section, I take up this invitation. As a first step, it is important to refocus the conversation on how capitalism is framed, both theoretically and within research paradigms. The critical historical anthropology of Mintz and Eric Wolf links the uneven and combined articulation of capitalism at the local scale to the changing logic of accumulation of capitalism as a mode of production at the global scale. Like all markets, capitalism's commodity markets are "mechanisms of social articulation", with periods of expansion opening up "new theatres of operation and new zones of supply" and bust periods questioning contemporary accumulation strategies and throwing "populations caught up in the web of capitalist linkages" into depression.²⁴ As detailed in the previous section, historical anthropology shares much with the CF agenda, albeit from a vantage point that scales up from the local to the global in the study of capitalism.

When Mintz began his research on Puerto Rican sugar cane plantation workers in 1948, he did so as part of a team of PhD students led by the cultural anthropologist Julian H. Stewart. The *People of Puerto Rico* project started the careers of many

²²Arrighi, "Spatial and Other 'Fixes'".

²³Smith, *Uneven Development*.

²⁴Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, CA, 1997 [1982]), pp. 310–311.

leading critical US cultural anthropologists as well as an early generation of Puerto Rican anthropologists. The team's homonymous book publication has Wolf among the co-authors and is a "landmark in anthropology" because different locations in the US dependency were studied as "modern societies" (as opposed to the 1940s and 1950s mainstream anthropology approach that deemed the victims of colonial oppression as backward).²⁵ In methodological and analytical terms, "modern" meant that the project team studied different agricultural sectors, labour relations, and rural and urban populations from a comparative perspective with regard to their (historical) incorporation into the world economy. Thus, the book has many features of today's comparative studies of the uneven and combined incorporation of populations into global capitalism during colonial and postcolonial periods.

Mintz branched out from Puerto Rico and published historical anthropologies of Caribbean regional incorporation into global capitalism before confronting and advancing the rapidly expanding reach of WST. To this day, *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life Story* is unmatched as a book-length biography of an anthropologist's key interlocutor and captures the life and times of Don Taso as he moves from supporter of the social democratic and *independista* Parti Popular Democratico (PPD) in the 1940s to evangelical Christianity owing to his disappointment over continued US political and corporate hegemony in Puerto Rico during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁶

It is such biographies of workers in the cane fields across the colonial and postcolonial world that are largely absent from Bosma's book. Several vignettes on the family histories and corporate biographies of the global sugar bourgeoisie provide poignant insights into their scheming for higher capital accumulation in the world system. Some of the most brilliant insights, though, come from transhistorical comparisons, such as when Bosma discusses the Philippines under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and the Dominican Republic under dictator Rafael Trujillo and concludes: "They used their office as president to raid the sugar industry just as Mamluk sultan Barsbay had raided the Karimi bourgeois in early fifteenth-century Egypt."²⁷ The carving out of homologous business models and political and economic personae across centuries and vastly different periods of capitalist accumulation runs through Bosma's book as one of several secondary and tertiary global history narratives; and this particular narrative could be developed into a future study of types of personhood in the capitalist world system.²⁸

The question, then, is whether an additional global historical narrative of enslaved, indentured, and free wage workers, or of those who worked their way up colonial hierarchies into middle management, business ownership, and political positions, could lead to similar insights into transhistorical personae and personhood. The

²⁵Sydel Silverman, "Introduction: The Puerto Rico Project: Reflections Sixty Years Later", *Identities*, 18:3 (2011), pp. 179–184.

²⁶Sidney W. Mintz, *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History* (Westport, CT, 1974 [1960]); Neveling, "Export Processing Zones".

²⁷Bosma, *The World of Sugar*, p. 277.

²⁸The inspiration here, in my view, is not for a Brechtian-type collective persona representing a particular class position, but for a post-individualist approach that champions personhood (*personne*) over selfhood (*moi*) in the spirit of French social anthropologist Marcel Mauss. See Burkhard Schnepel, *Könige, Narren und Träumer. Essays zu einer Ethnologie der Person* (Berlin, 2019).

global impact of radical fighters and leaders for emancipation and equality such as Toussaint L'Ouverture and Sojourner Truth comes to mind here. Megan Vaughan uncovered the global movements of freed slaves from the Antilles to Mauritius in court documents about the killing of an especially brutal former owner by one of their former slaves who recognized them on the streets of Mauritius around 1800.²⁹ Truth and Justice Commissions in Mauritius and other regions are part of the after-lives of slavery across the globe. In Mauritius and elsewhere, academics such as Vijaya Teelock have written detailed accounts of the lives and times of enslaved workers and maroons.³⁰ The co-authored book by Cuban anthropologist Miguel Bernat and *cimarron* Esteban Montejo stands out among this body of literature, with publications in several languages.³¹

The autobiographies of leading national politicians and entrepreneurs with family histories of indenture and slavery constitute another body of literature on which such work can draw. The Mauritian politician Sir Satcam Boolell, for example, recounts in his memoirs the struggle for independence, sharing anecdotes about standing for member of parliament in a constituency long controlled by the plantation bourgeoisie, who ran a marionette candidate equipped with substantial campaign money and supported by their networks. Other stories in Boolell's book offer short yet important insights into the negotiations over the Yaoundé II round in 1972, the road to the Lomé Convention, and the 1958 European Development Fund.³² Future labour histories, political histories, and economic histories of commodity frontiers and commodity capitalism can draw on these rich veins of academic, political, and autobiographical historiographies.³³

The focus on middle managers, politicians, and entrepreneurs outside the strata of the global sugar bourgeoisie takes us to the second step, where historical anthropology offers important contributions to Bosma's book and to a future research agenda. Again, this takes a cue from Mintz's analysis of (early) regional incorporation, which points out that plantation economies have an enduring effect locally and regionally as they create "economic subsystems".³⁴ These subsystems and their legacies are worth closer scrutiny, firstly with regard to the long-term social, kinship, and gender relations they generated, and secondly with regard to the class composition and the particular strategies of capital accumulation in colonial and postcolonial economies.

Mauritius – a small island nation in the western Indian Ocean – is among the colonial and postcolonial sugar-cane-producing regions that features mostly on the margins of Bosma's book. The island's western location was outside the monsoon-driven precolonial trading routes of the Indian Ocean. Dutch colonial rule began

²⁹ Megan Vaughan, "Slavery and Colonial Identity in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 8 (1998), pp. 189–214.

³⁰ Vijaya Teelock, *A Select Guide to Sources on Slavery in Mauritius/Slaves Speak Out: The Testimony of Slaves in the Era of Sugar* (Belle Village, 1995); *idem*, *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in 19th Century Mauritius* (Moka, 1998).

³¹ Esteban Montejo and Miguel Barnet, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (London [etc.], 1966).

³² Sir Satcam Boolell, *Untold Stories: A Collection of Socio-Political Essays (1950–1995)* (Stanley, 1996).

³³ For an effort to incorporate such histories into a long-term study of a colonial and postcolonial plantation economy, see Neveling, *Manifestationen der Globalisierung*.

³⁴ Mintz, "The So-Called World System", p. 253.

without a prior resident population and resulted in the destruction of many subtropical forests for ship repairs before maintenance costs became too high. The French, who took control of the island in 1735 from the neighbouring island now known as Réunion, transformed Mauritius into a free port for privateering letters and established some sugar cane plantations. Colonists from impoverished regions in northern and central France obtained royal concessions, with titles approved after the land had been made arable. Large plantations had up to 500 slaves, whereas smaller ventures drew on the labour of a dozen or so slaves, meaning that settlers and enslaved lived in remote settings in awkward family-type units where European heads of household enforced brutal regimes, involving sexual relations with enslaved women who also nursed the slavers' children. Vaughan has captured these relations in the stark statement that all kinds of body liquids flowed between the slavers and the enslaved in Mauritius.³⁵

The long-term repercussions of these relations for the Mauritian Creole community have been grave and continue to this day. Slavers enforced a matrilineal kinship structure on their victims so that their illegitimate offspring from raping or sexual intercourse with enslaved women would not appear in their patriline. This legacy shaped later household structures within the Creole population, which have often been misidentified as "matrifocal" because of endogenous cultural predispositions when, in fact, the cultural predisposition was slavery and the plantation society. Instead, the myth of Creole predispositions for matrifocal households served as a convenient explanation for the late colonial British state to blame poverty on the lack of sexual morals and instability in marital relationships among Creole men. Social anthropologists fitted with grants from the London Colonial Office, such as the US-American Burton Benedict, cemented these stereotypes not only for Mauritius, but also for other late colonial British dependencies.³⁶ The "Culture of Poverty" trope coined by the US-American social anthropologist Oscar Lewis misrepresented slum dwellers in Puerto Rico and migrants to US cities as stuck, lacking ambition, and suffering from depression in spite of embracing the social mobility options open to them.³⁷ Matrifocal kinship structures served as the culprit for what, in fact, stemmed from a lack of equality triggered by the highly uneven industrial development of Puerto Rico.³⁸ Similarly, Mauritian poverty had more to do with the failure of the colonial monocrop export-oriented policies in a postcolonial era characterized by volatile sugar prices and a late colonial economy controlled by the Mauritian plantocracy than it had to do with household structures and individual and family decision-making.

Indentured labourers from British India and elsewhere recruited after the abolition of slavery were subject to a different economic subsystem as the Mauritian sugar industry's articulation with global capitalism changed profoundly, even as indenture's

³⁵Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham [etc.], 2005).

³⁶Burton Benedict, "Education without Opportunity: Education, Economics, and Communalism in Mauritius", *Human Relations*, 11:4 (1958), pp. 315–329.

³⁷Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York* (New York, 1966).

³⁸Helen Icken Safa, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality*, Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology (New York, 1974).

labour regime shared many features with slavery.³⁹ Crucially, from its inception in colonial government labour immigration policy and labour regimes enforced by the sugar bourgeoisie after the abolition of slavery in 1835, that economic subsystem evolved over the following two centuries in ways that diverge significantly from the findings presented in Bosma's book.

The Mauritian economic crisis of the 1840s, for example, was less about a drop in colonial state funds due to shortfalls in tax levies for indentured labour recruitment and more to do with a failure of corporate decision-making. Put simply, the Mauritian bourgeoisie nearly choked owing to their insatiable appetite for cheap labour as the island racked up massive bills for indenture contracts, recruiter fees, and shipping, as well as a trade deficit with the subcontinent due to increased imports of basic commodities consumed by tens of thousands of indentured labourers. The impact of the British banking crisis of 1845 arrived in Mauritius in 1847 when the local *Banque de Maurice* had to cease commercial operations because it could no longer draw on fresh capital from London, and local debtors were unable or refused to honour financial obligations, in part because the island ran out of coinage as remittances from indentured labourers flowed back to British India. The bank had been established by members of the local plantocracy as part of the political compensation package put in place in 1833 by the British colonial administration to appease plantation slave owners rioting against abolition, alongside rights to print a local newspaper and establish a Chamber of Commerce.⁴⁰ The bank's default is a telling example of the fiscal problems caused by high net-worth individuals' business and spending decisions across capitalism's history.

Local responses by the national sugar bourgeoisie to changes in capital accumulation in the world system are potentially more crucial for labour histories of slavery, indenture, and free wage labour than those of the global bourgeoisie most prominent in Bosma's book. One remarkable local response of the Mauritius sugar bourgeoisie to the, at times, heavy fluctuation of London and world market prices for sugar cane was the outsourcing of operational risk to the Mauritian population. Three periods of *morcellements* (parcelling plantation land and selling it off) put the growing of sugar cane into the hands, first, of freed slaves, who bought plots from the 1850s; second, of indentured labourers from the 1870s, who had to obtain land in order to have residence rights after their contract ended; and third, again, of former indentured labourers and their descendants in the 1920s.

The 1920s sale of plantation lands in particular was a formidable rip-off of smallholders by the plantocracy, many of whom had been making more money as real estate brokers since the 1870s than they could ever make with plantations. With a brief boom in sugar prices after World War I, numerous households of former indentured labourers bought land and set up small planter businesses. The share of large plantation estates in agricultural land under cane dropped by three per cent to fifty per cent and the share of land farmed by tenants dropped from above eighteen per cent to less than nine per

³⁹ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London, 1974).

⁴⁰ Neveling, *Manifestationen der Globalisierung*, pp. 137–138. The default of the *Banque de Maurice* came at the end of the period of frantic recruitment of indentured workers and is a different issue than the taxes levied by the legislative council to support recruitment, as reported in Bosma, *The World of Sugar*, p. 140.

cent from 1920 to 1922. The share of small planter businesses skyrocketed by more than twelve per cent to over forty-one per cent in 1922. This was when Britain abandoned the imperial quota system and global sugar prices moved towards rock bottom during the 1920s recession. By 1930, hundreds of small planter businesses had gone bankrupt and were left with mountains of debt. The few winners among the sugar bourgeoisie in the recession mopped up the land, and those who steered through the 1930s were the only substantial beneficiaries of the British colonial government bailout of 1937, when the Mauritius Agricultural Bank absorbed the debts of large businesses at new, much lower interest rates from commercial banks such as Barclays.⁴¹

The above points towards the particular histories of sugar capitalism and commodity capitalism more generally during global crises. In Mauritius, the Great Depression of the 1930s set the stage for the dominance of a few corporations and families over the Mauritian economy that persists to the present day, many of them joint ventures between Franco-Mauritian plantocrats and English investors. Mauritian sugar has experienced several periods of boom and bust in the past 200 years or so. While some such periods were caused by global economic shifts, changing multilateral trading agreements, and recessions, others were caused by long droughts linked to El Niño and by cyclones that devastated the harvests and sometimes, as in 1960, most of the dwellings on the island. A future global business history of sugar capitalism might gather data on these events across the many plantation economies and develop a CF research case for understanding and better handling the impacts of the twenty-first-century ecological crisis that will shape the future of sugar and other agricultural produce.

At the same time, a critical global labour history of sugar may learn from the reaction of Mauritian small-planters and workers, who in 1937 took to the streets and threatened to take over plantations and mills. Historians have so far linked the rioting only to the so-called uba canes, grown widely by small planters, for which millers suddenly reduced purchasing prices in 1937.⁴² Yet, reports from a British colonial survey commission and from local historians clearly indicate that the unrest was closely linked to the bankruptcies of the late 1920s; to the control of negotiations with Britain over sugar prices by the Mauritian Sugar Syndicate, which only represented large corporations; and to the small planters' knowledge about the benefits of the International Sugar Agreement of 1936, which never "trickled down" into their household budgets.⁴³

The Mauritian case is another example of the fact that rioting is one of the few feasible options for super-exploited workers and planters in the capitalist world system, and it is telling that this local response ushered in trade union recognition after years of struggles and appeals to the International Labour Organization.⁴⁴ The fact that the Mauritian trade union recognition served as a blueprint for the London Colonial

⁴¹Neveling, *Manifestationen der Globalisierung*, pp. 173–188.

⁴²William Kelleher Storey, "Small-Scale Sugar Cane Farmers and Biotechnology in Mauritius: The 'Uba' Riots of 1937", *Agricultural History*, 69 (1995), pp. 163–176.

⁴³Neveling, *Manifestationen der Globalisierung*, pp. 153–190.

⁴⁴Richard Croucher and John McIlroy, "Mauritius 1938: The Origins of a Milestone in Colonial Trade Union Legislation", *Labor History*, 54:3 (2013), pp. 223–239.

Office's rollout of trade union legislation across several British colonies underscores the importance of studying "local responses", not simply because they are local, but because they often become global innovations with the potential of ushering in just transitions.

Afterlives: Special Economic Zones

As my opening remarks on Tate & Lyle's corporate scheming on Brexit show, Bosma takes the historical analysis of the colonial sugar bourgeoisie far beyond the colonial period and up to the present. Under the chapter heading "Failed Decolonisation", he analyses the impact of post-1945 bilateral and multilateral trading agreements – including the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement of 1951, the US import quota system, and, later, the Lomé and Yaoundé Agreements of the European Economic Community – as state capitalist measures to keep now independent former colonies in check and simultaneously subsidize the continued operations of Western multinationals such as Tate & Lyle.⁴⁵ In an early move to protect their interests during a rapid shift in the global economy, multinationals such as Handels Vereeniging Amsterdam sold their expertise to "aspiring sugar producers throughout Africa and Asia". Instead of running their own factories, they capitalized on their monopoly expertise in technology and management and, at the same time, benefited from Western development aid schemes while protecting themselves from nationalizations in assertive postcolonial nations such as Indonesia, before the Suharto dictatorship.⁴⁶

Focusing on the role of the postcolonial state, Bosma analyses the political and economic export-oriented development projects of several sugar cane colonies after independence. As Bosma accurately argues for the cases of Mauritius and Taiwan, these were often drivers of expanding the exclave-type status of plantations towards EPZs and SEZs.⁴⁷ Global history research has emphasized this point for some years now, at the same time identifying a much higher number of late colonial and early postcolonial plantation economies that set up SEZs following the example of the US dependency Puerto Rico in the 1940s.⁴⁸

It remains important to identify analytical pathways that more closely link the historical development of sugar cane plantation economies with the dynamics of capital accumulation in the world system, in this case for the decades following World War II. As noted earlier, the impact of the residential colonial sugar bourgeoisie on the long-term economic development prospects of postcolonial nations was, in many instances, more significant than Bosma shows. Scholars from Caribbean and Latin American postcolonial nations rejected W. Arthur Lewis's "dual economy" development model, which called for state-funded industrialization to capture the abundant supply of cheap labour in the Caribbean. Instead, Lloyd Best, George Beckford, Norman Girvan, and, later, Kari Polanyi Levitt and others developed a sophisticated analysis of poverty traps and obstacles to the development of local entrepreneurship independent from

⁴⁵ Bosma, *The World of Sugar*, p. 279.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 281–282.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 282–283.

⁴⁸ Neveling, "Export Processing Zones".

world markets. As drivers of such underdevelopment, they identified, firstly, “epistemic dependency” as a reliance on external development policy analysis; secondly, “dependent monetary economies” with local currencies tied to metropolitan currencies and export markets; and thirdly, modified plantation economies of postcolonial Caribbean states in which “new industries are owned by multinational corporations that control decision-making, investment, technology, the supply of inputs, and the processing and disposal of outputs”.⁴⁹

Essentially, this “New World Group” formed at the University of the West Indies, also known as the Caribbean Plantation School, argued that instead of a “dual economy”, a multilinear dependency produced by local historical political economic and contemporary geopolitical economic conditions held back the former sugar plantation colonies after independence. In Mintz’s terms of “local response”, this is an analytical approach to understanding the long-term impact of sugar cane industries on colonial and postcolonial societies and economies developed from within the sugar-producing regions.

Turning again to Mauritius, the diversification of the economy away from monocrop export-orientation dependent on sugar began in the 1930s, long before the 1970 EPZ programme, when local entrepreneurs tried to establish export markets for aloe fibre products in an attempt to compete with the South Asian hemp industries. From the 1950s, a neo-Malthusian paradigm employed by capitalist bloc nations during the Cold War to “explain away” the persistent global failure of capitalism’s promise to create wealth for the many was propagated by the London Colonial Office and some former governors as the cause for escalating Mauritian underdevelopment. A Puerto Rican-style development scheme for pioneering industries that would diversify the Mauritian economy was first suggested by British economist James Edward Meade, following a survey mission sponsored by the Colonial Office, which he had led to Mauritius in 1959 and 1960. Preferential credit lines and unexpected technical assistance funding from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) after two devastating cyclones in 1960 turbocharged the colony’s manufacturing industrialization drive with the construction of a power plant, roadworks, and state-owned working-class housing projects. With Meade’s support, a local entrepreneur won tax and customs waivers as well as additional subsidies from the colonial government in 1965. An industrial estate that would house many of the early export processing zone factories received credit lines from the IBRD, and a national development bank began operations soon after Mauritian independence in 1968.⁵⁰

Yet, the main challenge was to bring the Mauritian sugar bourgeoisie on board, as they would be the main source of local capital for manufacturing-driven industrialization. A local economist’s survey missions to early export processing zones in Taiwan, Singapore, the Republic of Ireland, and Puerto Rico proved instrumental here. Eduard Lim Fat’s findings were published with high visibility for the sugar bourgeoisie and their managers and business advisers in the two leading national newspapers, in the monthly in-house magazine of the Mauritian sugar industry, and in the long-standing

⁴⁹ Girvan, “Caribbean Dependency Thought Revisited”, p. 335.

⁵⁰ Neveling, “Genealogies of a Miracle”.

agricultural research magazine *Revue Agricole*. Mauritian corporations rushed into the zone during the early 1970s state of emergency, when a rising socialist movement generated fears of nationalization among the bourgeoisie. Many initial joint ventures with Hong Kong capital were converted into fully Mauritian-owned EPZ companies controlled by the bourgeoisie, versatile in the 1980s in sugar cane agriculture, textiles and garments and electronics assembly, knitting and weaving factories, and increasingly in tourism and financial services. The vessels that allowed for such postmodern “privateering” were the national Development Bank of Mauritius and the Mauritius Commercial Bank, the first controlled mostly by board members from the private sector and the second owned by shareholders from the Mauritian bourgeoisie.⁵¹

When I conducted ethnographic research in Mauritius in the 2000s, several former sugar mills had been refurbished to house textile and garment factories. The names of plantation estates now also featured as brands for companies such as Ferney Spinning Mills. Contract workers from East and South Asia and from Eastern Africa worked alongside Mauritians in the EPZ factories, recruited by intermediaries whom the Franco-Mauritian factory owners once again called “sirdars”, reviving the terminology of the era of indenture. The local bourgeoisie displayed a relentless appetite for unlimited supplies of labour, fearing nothing more than a local working class with full employment that could demand higher wages and better working conditions. Workers, in turn, identified EPZ factories with the darkest days of French colonialism under the brutal regime of the Code Noir, framing their resistance to the EPZ regime as a fight for the unfulfilled promises of political and economic independence.⁵²

Both echoing and contradicting the theses of the Caribbean New World Group, local responses in postcolonial Mauritius were driven by, on the one hand, a socialist opposition seeking to turn epistemic dependency on capitalist developmentalism into an epistemic independence – pushing for the nationalization of industries – and on the other by a local sugar bourgeoisie that enjoyed the benefits of legal multinationalism protecting them against nationalization and granting them tax and customs-free manufacturing in the EPZ.

Uneven and Combined Futures for the Commodity Frontiers Research Agenda

Ulbe Bosma’s book develops new research pathways for historians studying global sugar and other commodity chains. The above has highlighted novel insights from Bosma’s CF agenda research, such as the long-term nexus between state policies, developmental ideologies, and technological innovations. Three cross-disciplinary interventions have pointed to future research themes. First is the macro level, such as the transhistorical study of political and economic personae and the relevance of spatial and historical fixes of (sugar) capitalism and the repurposing of industrial infrastructure for new sectors that Smith identifies as the geographical seesaw of capitalism. Second, at the meso-analytical level, sugar capitalism’s economic subsystems cast a long shadow on twentieth-century and contemporary kinship systems, social policies, and stereotypes along the lines of race and class. Local responses to the capitalist world

⁵¹Neveling, “The Political Economy Machinery”.

⁵²Neveling, “Flexible Capitalism and Transactional Orders”.

system from national bourgeoisie, working classes, academics, and colonial and post-colonial governments have shaped class structures, real estate markets, trade union legislation, and fiscal policies at the national and international level. Third, it has become evident that local responses and economic subsystems of sugar capitalism are shaped not only by historical periods of incorporation at the frontier, but also by the longer-term dynamic articulation of capitalism with the social structures it has created in previous cycles of accumulation.

An important counterpoint to the CF agenda emerges from these findings: substantial aspects of the world of sugar capitalism require the study of the frontiers' hinterlands, where incorporation into the world system has long been completed. I have argued that Moore's 2000 proposal for a CF research agenda was a defensive move, important for guiding critical political economy through the 1990s and 2000s postmodernist and poststructuralist drunkenness on ideological tropes of successful capitalist globalization, the end of history, and powerful civil societies. Since the global recession of 2008, and with the recent rise of neo-fascist movements, the need for critical political economy scholarship in the social sciences and humanities has become ever harder to dispute, while the 1990s triumphalism appears as one of the most significant mistakes in recent human history. This raises the question of whether now is the time to unify again the analysis of commodity frontiers, commodity chains, and global capitalism in general.

Advanced periodizations of GCCs will be important as we consider the links between booms and busts and the structural and organizational power of emancipatory (working-class) movements to liberate the planet from personae such as Elon Musk, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump, to name but a few. Beverly Silver's detailed analysis of the *Forces of Labour* across the historical development of different commodity chains can be further explored with the knowledge of highly sophisticated global commodity chain histories such as *The World of Sugar*.⁵³

I also plead for an even bolder approach to periodizations for single GCCs than Bosma proposes in the opening to this dossier. From the vantage point of Mauritius, the periodization of the sugar GCC begins with the first ventures into sugar cane growing with unlimited supplies of enslaved labour in the eighteenth century. From that point on, uneven and combined periodizations along the lines of class emerge. For workers and for Mauritian ecosystems, accumulation by dispossession continued throughout the nineteenth century – and to some extent reoccurred with the bankruptcies of small planters in the late 1920s. The colonial bourgeoisie, however, benefited from successive statal fixes with the 1825 incorporation of the island into the West Indian Sugar Protocol, followed by the ISA, the Lomé Agreements, and other multilateral agreements and arrangements (also boosting Mauritian incorporation into textile and garment GCCs, for example).⁵⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, identifying a distinct neoliberal period in Mauritius is problematic. This is because of the absence of Keynesian government policies (with some minor exceptions in housing and Fabian-style healthcare and education) and Fordist labour regimes (again, the small number

⁵³ Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge, 2003).

⁵⁴ Neveling, "A Periodisation of Globalisation".

of highly skilled technicians in sugar mills are an exception). In many ways, Mauritius appears stuck in a two-century-long gilded age that began with the post-1835 sugar sector modernization and centralization, spurred by slavers' compensation payments and the emergence of joint ventures between British and Franco-Mauritian companies in the same period. Strikingly evident is Bosma's fourth period – the ecological challenge for the Mauritian economy in recent decades – not least given the long history of cyclones and El Niño systems that seemed to escalate in the 2000s.

The most challenging part of the proposals for future research agendas in this commentary is to write a global history of Mintzian local responses (as opposed to the local knowledge fetishization of Cold War anthropology in the tradition of Clifford Geertz). Surveying Mintz's oeuvre, *Sweetness and Power* does not explicitly speak to the local response paradigm as the expansion of the world systems paradigm he worked towards during the 1970s. Instead, we find central clues in his earlier works on the Caribbean as a socio-cultural arena, published in the 1950s, and on creolization as the creation of a new society, published in the 1990s.⁵⁵ Wherever we take our next research steps from here, however, more books of the standard set by *The World of Sugar* will be of crucial importance.

⁵⁵Sidney W. Mintz, "Cañamelar: The Subculture of a Rural Sugar Planation Proletariat", in Julian Haynes Steward *et al.* (eds), *The People of Puerto Rico: A Study in Social Anthropology* (Urbana, IL, 1956), pp. 314–417; *idem*, "The Localization of Anthropological Practice: From Area Studies to Transnationalism", *Critique of Anthropology*, 18:2 (1998), pp. 117–133.