



ARTÍCULOS

Commodity Frontiers: Capitalism and Contestation in the Countryside

Hanne Cottyn [hanne.cottyn@york.ac.uk]
University of York

commodityfrontiers.org
encuentro.website

This brief paper explores the potential and limits of the concept of 'commodity frontiers' to further develop the notion of 'contested territories' theoretically and methodologically. I start from empirical research on 'contested territories' in the Bolivian and Peruvian Highlands to introduce the concept of commodity frontiers, drawing on the approach of the cross-sectoral network 'Commodity Frontiers Initiative'.

Contested territories in the Andean Highlands: Communal resistance to commodified land rights.

My own research deals with contested territories in the Andean highlands in the context of liberal land reform. Focussing on rural societies of the Peruvian and Bolivian altiplano, I am essentially looking at communal territories in which community control over land has formed the spine of social and economic relations. In the late nineteenth-century, the breakthrough of wool and mining commodity booms gave viability to liberal ideas that fundamentally challenged communal land systems. Similar to other Latin American countries, new land legislations were designed seeking to standardize the relation to land, inspired by the fiction of "perfect" property rights. Rather than a smooth transition to mobile land markets, the altiplano witnessed the expansion and consolidation of a semi-feudal hacienda system, albeit without eliminating communal socio-territorial logics. The profound restructuring of power and property relations in Andean communal territories sparked a cycle of indigenous uprising. Through archival research and fieldwork, my research traces the historical trajectories of highland areas where lands remained in hands of the community. I argue that far from constituting passive territories overlooked due to private and state disinterest in these semi-desert pastoral lands, I am looking at negotiated territories. These territories did not just "survive," but are the outcome of a long history of renegotiating and reinventing territorial autonomy. Episodes of contestation provide a productive lens on such processes of (re)negotiation and (re)invention.

Commodity Frontiers: What, why, how?

My research triggered me to rethink the relation of (territorial) change and contestation in peripheral places to processes of globalization. In an apparently homogenising world in which land is increasingly

concentrated in the hands of selected group of owners, we observe how a substantial part of (rural) populations worldwide are still in control of their land and territory. Recent findings demonstrate that a surprisingly large share of the world's land area—an estimated 65 percent—is held under customary systems by indigenous and peasant communities across all world regions (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2015). In trying to understand these contradictory local-global entanglements, the concept of “frontier” emerged, particularly influenced by the notion of “commodity frontiers”.

Initially coined by geographer Jason W. Moore (2000), “commodity frontiers” is developing into an interdisciplinary field of study concerned with the global and environmental history of the expansion of capitalist production processes. On a conceptual level, the commodity frontier captures capitalism's inherent contradictions that drive a constant search for new sources of energy, in ever-greater quantities. Commodity frontiers, then, refer to the progressive appropriation, and often dispossession, of places and people as new and cheap reserves of natural resources and labour. Starting from this notion, the Commodity Frontier Initiative emerged as an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral platform to study the ever-changing efforts to control nature, land and labour, and the counter movements these efforts have engendered. Rather than reiterating a closed definition of the concept, this initiative adopts the frontier concept as an analytical device that challenges the old core-periphery nomenclature in the study of historical capitalism.

In this endeavour, rural territories are consciously taken centre stage. This approach brings our analysis to the Caribbean sugar plantations rather than the factories of Manchester. In seeking to generate a deeper understanding of the role of the global countryside in the emergence and consolidation of capitalism over the past 500 years, the study of commodity frontiers reveals how the contemporary rise in conflicts branded as “socio-environmental” is not a new phenomenon.

The location, imagination, extraction and exhaustion of new reserves of resources gives shape to spatial formations – frontier zones. This is a deeply gendered and racialized process that cannot only be understood in terms of radical, violent transformations of space, but also in terms of specific ideas about who can use what kind of resources, and the systematic legal, discursive and violent undermining of cultural understandings of landscapes. This is what Lund and Rasmussen (2018) define as ‘frontiers of contestation’, where pre-existing systems of resource control, authority and institutional norms are perceived as suspended, making way for new ones. Frontiers appear not as the linear movements across space—as they are usually imagined in Turnerian ways (1920)—but as discursive, political and physical operations of territorial (re)invention.

A Latin American perspective Commodity Frontiers.

In my own research I adopt commodity frontiers as an analytical lens on how communal territories are being divested, imagined and (re)constructed as ‘cheap’ reserves for accumulation through cycles of resource extraction and indigenous land struggles. This resonates with the growing interest in territorial rights and struggles in twenty-first Latin America. Over the centuries, the trajectories of old and new commodity frontiers have transformed Latin America's societies and deepened the region's relation to the global economy. This gave shape to critical challenges for their national economies and for social and environmental justice, yet in the analysis of global transformations the role of Latin America still tends to be reduced to that of a passive periphery.

Empirical research on contested territories in Latin America and the further conceptual elaboration of commodity frontiers can develop as mutually strengthening endeavours. The study of Latin America can generate deeper insight into how expanding extractive economies and the proliferation of ecological

distribution conflicts constitute interlinked phenomena (Temper et al. 2015). The other way around, commodity frontiers offers in a *longue durée*, global and systemic approach to transformative processes of incorporation and resistance in the region. The concept brings in historical depth, revealing how insight into historical communal struggles can provide lessons for the analysis of socio-ecological justice struggles in the neoliberal age. Moreover, the concept provokes critical questions on academic and policy debates over sustainability and their implications for territorial struggles. Contemporary attempts to frame a “global agenda of sustainable growth” are backed by a mainstream and a-historical understanding of sustainability that sweeps the (re)territorializing effect of capitalist growth under the carpet.

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