Willem van Schendel (ed.). *Embedding Agricultural Commodities. Using historical evidence, 1840s-1940s.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017). 193 p. ISBN 9781472461865.

In *Embedding Agricultural Commodities*, edited by Willem van Schendel, diverse historical sources figure as protagonists. Each is the product of (neo)colonial endeavours to accommodate the cultivation of profitable cash crops to particular environments. In that way, the compilation links the daily struggles of nineteenth and early twentieth century agricultural investors, planters, workers and scientists to the everyday struggle of twenty-first century historians. The red thread is the process of ‘embedding’, defined as the insertion of new commodities and production modes into specific social contexts and the efforts made to make these last. Polanyi, and later Granovetter, developed the term to stress how economic developments are embedded in social relations, and not the other way around (p. 3). All contributions emphasize that embedding is ‘not a state but a balancing act’ (p. 4).

Between van Schendel’s methodological introduction and van der Linden’s theoretical epilogue, the book comprises six in-depth analyses from the vantage point of one specific historical source (a diary, petition, mail report, book review, scientific study, and survey). Case studies cover indigo, coffee, tobacco and sugar, and link British India and Dutch Indonesia to Cuba under neo-colonial U.S. tutelage. An outlining of the global trajectories of these commodities is provided (oddly placed at the end of the book), but no specific comparison is made. However, the authors do explicitly refer to each other, hinting at a sustained collective discussion anticipating this publication.

The book has a double ambition. A first objective consists in the methodological evaluation of the potential and restrictions of particular sources to trace embedding processes. Not the (limited) range in places and commodities, but the variation in sources and source contexts structures this compilation. Second, the case studies seek to gain deeper empirical knowledge about the mechanisms and the success of making and keeping a specific crop embedded.

While starting from a shared concept, an overly narrow definition was avoided. Rather, embedding is broadly approached as a continuous renegotiation over the accommodation of global commodities to local conditions. Critical source interpretation unveils how the big Eurocentric ‘embedding’ ambitions are pursued through trial and error and often lead to an unstable outcome. In the analysis, the ‘agents of embedding’ (p. 5) take centre stage, and the social context in which they operated is specified, thereby giving a face to an often perceived anonymous process. In so doing, the authors evidence how the pretended adjustment of pre-existing socio-economic systems provoked tensions between individual agency (of industrial entrepreneurs in chapter 2, or scientists in chapter 6) and structural forces, between different production and labour systems (for example coffee smallholder versus plantations in chapter 4, or forced tobacco contracts versus free cultivation in chapter 5), between established and new (Liberal) political agendas (chapter 3), and between longstanding and modernized cultivation techniques (as in Cuban sugar production, chapter 7). These tensions could disrupt (through violent resistance, chapter 5) or halt (through conservative ‘reluctance’, chapter 7) the embedding of agricultural commodities. Across the case studies, the management of knowledge (production) emerges as the underlying driver of these struggles and could be added to the conditions which van der Linden identifies as essential to successful embedding, i.e. the management of nature, market links and labour (p. 168).

It is key to remark how the book brings the capitalist world back to its agricultural roots. To question its dominant industrial face is in line with a current regained awareness of global capitalism’s rural origins.[[1]](#footnote-1) As exposed in the concluding global reflection, the ‘transcontinental (re-)embedding’ of cash crops was and remains structured by the transfer and adjustment of agricultural labour and resources within the South, managed by states and companies in the North (p. 150). By shifting the focus towards the local dis-/re-embedding power games at play, the authors provide critical global studies of commodity production with a richer empirical insight into the messiness of this unequal exchange.

Another significant contribution is the book’s revaluation of the historian’s real craft. As historical commodity production research will increasingly engage with new digital techniques, the art of ‘reading against the grain’ becomes ever more critical to preventing sources from being reduced to database stuffing. Still, the book could have exploited more its interdisciplinary and comparative potential by reflecting on the methodological implications of different (for example oral or non-textual) sources and the digital turn, and on the relevance of the gained insights for the study of other regions, time frames and (non-agricultural) commodities. Overall, the publication makes an eloquent appeal for in-depth research into the local power dynamics of the seemingly teleological and uniform trajectories of agricultural globalization.

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1. This rediscovery is exemplified in the international and interdisciplinary networks coordinated by some of the authors. See: <https://commoditiesofempire.org.uk/> and <https://wigh.wcfia.harvard.edu/commodity-frontiers-initiative>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)