

## **Local Subversions of Colonial Cultures. Commodities and Anti-Commodities in Global History**

**Edited by Sandip Hazareesingh and Haro Maat**

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**Book review by Amenah Jahangeer Chojoo**

This book brings new perspectives to the study of peasant histories that were subjected to the process of colonial disruption with the introduction of commercial crops. While the hegemonic drive to obtain crops that suited the tastes and needs of the colonial masters is well documented, its limited success in some sectors is less well-known. The process of commodification of agriculture, sustained by European research in tropical plants, cannot claim complete success in subverting pre-colonial agrarian systems and life styles. Indeed, this policy did not go without resistance from local people. The latter had on their side, intimate knowledge of the environment, climate, soil and crop diseases. Most of all, the need to cultivate staples for the consumption of the peasants and their families proved the strongest motive for resistance. Indeed, while the colonial powers advertised their efforts at maximizing profits as modernizing influences, supposedly to improve production through better seeds and agrarian techniques, their poor assessment of the local environment as well as peasants' values and attitudes often led to food security failures. Such episodes reinforced peasants' determination to raise "anti-commodities" to ensure their families' survival and perpetuate some strongly held traditions.

This book deals with subtle forms of peasant resistance such as quiet struggles over seeds, water, taxes, rents and labour. As such it breaks new ground, in continuation with the theoretical focus of James C. Scott (1985), who writes: "The argument to be developed here is that much of the politics of subordinate groups falls under the category of "everyday forms of resistance," that these activities should most definitely be considered political, that they do constitute a form of collective action, and that any account which ignores them is often ignoring the most vital means by which lower classes manifest their political interests!"

The theoretical underpinning from political science is combined here with the contemporary understanding of sustainable development to analyse various forms of resistance through the choices and quiet actions of peasants. This interdisciplinarity offers an interesting thrust to this book.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, J. C. (1985) *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 33.

The case studies have been taken from various sub-regions in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, while the time setting is mostly the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Authors Paul Richards, Haro Maat and Erik Gilbert investigate the cultivation of rice in West Africa, the Netherlands Indies and East Africa respectively in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, Sandip Hazareesingh and Simeon Maravanyika take up for their part, the study of peasants' reaction to the cultivation of tobacco and cotton in Bihar, Dharwar (India) and present day Zimbabwe respectively. Focusing on the rural economy of Cuba, Jonathan Curry-Machado investigates small holders at the margin of sugarcane plantations. Lauren Minsky investigates the Health and the Politics of Waste in colonial Punjab while David Hyde studies non-agricultural proletariat working for East African railways and harbour during the post-World War II period.

### **Anti-Commodity**

The connecting principle of these diverse chapters is the concept of "anti-commodity". This composite word does not appear in the dictionary and should be construed as the contrary of commodity. The latter, according to the Oxford dictionaries ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)), means "a raw material or primary agricultural product that can be bought and sold, such as copper and coffee". An anti-commodity should therefore, be understood as any product that has no commercial value because it is not for sale, such as food grown for one's own consumption or an artwork that has become a public good. However, in this book anti-commodity refers not only to staples grown for the families' consumption but to modes of production and integration of commodities in the social and cultural life of peasants. According to the editors: "The concept of anti-commodity can be defined 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, rather than simply a momentary form of protest or reaction. It refers to a range of local productive processes associated with values other than purely economic, that are either maintained from the past or originally created to confront the various modes of commodification, primarily but not exclusively unleashed by European colonial hegemonies" (p.6). We are here more in the political process of resistance, either by the crops grown or the method of cultivation, as a means to assert one's own ways of doing things, as opposed to the ones imposed from the top by hegemonies. However, the concept is stretched to refer to a wide variety of situations of resistance to colonialism.

The authors have endowed the concept with a varying connotations and theoretical colorations, some more convincingly than others. Discussing rice cultivation in West Africa, Paul Richards associates the commodification of red rice with slave trade, where humans were commodified along with the food they required to survive, while white rice and locally modified seed varieties are associated with

emancipation. For Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, attempts by the British to introduce yellow (cigarette) tobacco in Bihar failed because the black variety, introduced earlier, became popular and was socialized into local customs. The black variety is considered as anti-commodity because the preparation techniques and usages were opposed to what the colonial power intended. Harro Maat engages, for his part, with the development of commercial production of rice and other cash crops in present-day Indonesia under the impulse of Dutch colonial power in early nineteenth century. Several episodes of food shortages convinced farmers to grow upland (dry) rice as an anti-commodity to safeguard their staple production. For Jonathan Curry-Machado the cultivation of food crops by smallholders at the frontier of the all-encroaching and all-powerful sugarcane plantations in Cuba constitutes an anti-commodity vision of “little Cuba”. According to Sandip Hazareesingh, the attempt by the British colonial government of India to replace local varieties of cotton by reputedly more profitable foreign varieties in the Dharwar district of present-day Maharashtra was resisted by the farmers. Despite the backing of colonial science and technology the experiment failed miserably because the peasants chose to cultivate food crops and local Kumta cotton, which was more adapted to the local environment and well-integrated in their holistic approach to agriculture. As such, they were in an anti-commodity logic of resistance. Lauren Minsky, for her part, applied the concept of anti-commodity to the resistance of peasants of the Punjab to sanitization projects, as they had witnessed the adverse environmental impact of canal-building and use of town waste as fertilizer. As far as David Hyde is concerned, he defends the Marxist approach to the notion of commodity in capitalism, which releases powerful anti-commodity crisis tendencies. The wage bargaining process of workers of the East African railways and ports (1945-1960) is interpreted as anti-commodity, par excellence. As for Erik Gilbert, rice cultivation along the Swahili Coast has been closely linked to its role as a marker of identity and status that responded poorly to market forces. As such, the attitude towards rice is considered as an anti-commodity.

### **Usefulness of the concept**

The theoretical construction around the concept of anti-commodity is innovative because it interprets peasants’ quiet resistance as the outcome of accumulated knowledge of the local physical environment and wisdom about food security as forming an integral part of the local culture and lore. As such, it demarcates from competing theoretical frameworks such as subaltern studies, which attempt to analyse subaltern political resistance through a cultural analysis of their conditions, using the Marxian lens and later, post-marxian and postcolonial perspectives<sup>2</sup>. The subaltern condition is considered to be based on class, caste, age, gender or office.

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<sup>2</sup> Chaturvedi, V. (2007). *A Critical Theory of Subalternity: Rethinking Class in Indian Historiography*. *Left History*, Vol 12 No. 1, pp. 9-21.

According to Guha (1999)<sup>3</sup> subaltern politics tend to be violent because they have to resist elite domination and various types of coercion in their daily lives. As such, quiet resistance is ignored or discarded as unimportant.

The authors in this volume highlight a variety of situations of resistance to colonialism and give a plurality of meanings to the concept of anti-commodity. This makes it at times unconvincing as a theoretical stance. Undoubtedly this theoretical approach to resistance has great usefulness when it advocates for a sense of rural ecology, where social and physical environment blend together to achieve sustainable lifestyle among rural communities. This holistic approach opens up new perspectives in social and development studies

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<sup>3</sup> Guha, R. (1999). *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Duke University Press.