




COLONIAL AMERICA AND COMMODITY HISTORY: THE PLURALITY OF TIMES OF HISTORICAL CAPITALISM

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DEBATE

Colapso ambiental e histórias do capitalismo

ABSTRACT

This rejoinder addresses many of the issues raised by the commentaries of Crislayne Alfagali, Jack Bouchard, Mary Draper, Waldomiro Lourenço Jr, and Jason Moore regarding my article, “Commodity Chains and the Global Environmental History of the Colonial Americas”. Like that article, this piece is divided into three different sections. First, I discuss several issues related to the discipline, and take the opportunity to further develop some arguments from my initial intervention, particularly the discussion on methodological nationalism. Next, I survey the potentialities and limits of the history of commodities to think about the history of capitalism. Finally, in the third and last section, I explore the debate on the knowledge of Africans and Amerindians in the construction of the Atlantic world as a strategy to tie many of the issues discussed throughout the text.

KEYWORDS

Colonial America; Commodity history; Plural times.

It is a great honor to have my own article discussed in such detail and with such insights as can be seen in the debate section of the current issue of *Esboços*. My initial contribution was written after an invitation to present a paper at the First Symposium of Global History, hosted at the Federal University of Santa Catarina in 2019. Since then I was able to reconsider and refine some of my readings and arguments based on our initial discussion, beginning with the original title of my piece (“Commodity Chains and the Global Environmental History of the Colonial Americas”). The commodity chain approach is but one promising way to write commodity history, not the only one. My intention was to offer a broader overview of different forms of writing based on the historical trajectories of specific commodities. The reference to a “global environmental history” in turn was also not the best description of my interests, since I am less interested in discussing the specific fields of environmental history and global history (in this sense, I fully agree with the excellent comments offered by Jack Bouchard on both fields) than in thinking about the specific history of capitalism and the place of nature in it based on a concept of plural time. Finally, I decided to change “Colonial Americas”, plural, to “Colonial America”, singular. Thus instead of circumventing the long dispute over the concept of America, as its plural form stimulates us to do, I kept the concept in its original continental interpretation for reasons that I believe will be clearer by the end of this essay.¹

HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CAPITALISM, IN CAPITALISM

Notwithstanding the many critiques of the works of Immanuel Wallerstein over the last half century (some of them fair, others not), one of his most important contributions was to seriously consider the relationship between capitalism and the structures of knowledge of the modern world, including the social sciences. At the time of his writing, that meant challenging the modernization theories that were hegemonic in North American universities and that were part of the author’s own education. Wallerstein was obviously not the first one to challenge the modernizing paradigm, and considered himself to be only one of a long lineage of critics, incorporating fundamental contributions from Latin American, Caribbean, and African social scientists; he was nonetheless one of its harshest and most persistent critics, carefully considering the usefulness of concepts such as “society,” which has in fact been widely used in unreflective ways and not only by modernization theorists. The idea of a world-system emerged in this process as part of his work as an Africanist during the 1960s and his growing perception that the prescriptions offered by modernization ideologues took the nation state as their unit of analysis (and, consequently, of action), ignoring wider processes - especially the capitalist world-economy and the interstate system that supported it - that shaped and was shaped by those national realities.²

I begin with these considerations because one of the main aspects of my initial contribution was indeed to suggest that historians have a lot to gain from a serious dialogue with the world-systems perspective. The search for this dialogue comes from

¹ On the concept of América cf. Moya (2011, p. 5).

² For an overview of his trajectory and the world systems perspective, cf. Wallerstein (2000).

the perception that we are living in a structural crisis of various levels, or an eco-crisis, to use the term of Luiz Marques (2018), which has in capitalism its fundamental motor. Thus my interest in the debates generated by global history are connected to an effort to understand the structural dimension and *longue durée* characteristics of capitalism as a historical system, a system that is at the basis of our crisis, as well as the place of colonialism within its development. In this first section I would like to explore two less central arguments from Crislayne Alfagali's and Mary Draper's comments (to which I return in the third section), related to theoretical frameworks, and one more central in Waldomiro Lourenço Jr.'s comment, on interdisciplinarity, in order to expand this discussion on our discipline and the history of capitalism.

I agree with Alfagali that there are various efforts to integrate the history of colonial Brazil to broader processes and that the Atlantic has been perceived as a "space that connects the history of Brazil to the history of the world" (2021, p. 730). However, I would like to emphasize the differences between those perspectives because I don't think that the expansion of empirical research can solve one of the main problems outlined in my article, which is how to think of the colonial Americas as part of the history of capitalism. To further explore one of the examples cited in her commentary, the concept of the "Atlantic system" used by Fragoso, Guedes, and Krause (2013) is largely used as a synonym of empire in the book. References to capitalism briefly appear in discussions of the English empire, but the common idea in many of Fragoso's works, including this one, is that capitalism was born in England and from there it spread to the rest of the world after the Industrial Revolution; there are frequent references to an ideal capitalist world, governed by the rules of supply and demand, in opposition to the catholic logic of the "Portuguese Atlantic system" (for a critical assessment, cf. MARQUES; MARQUESE, 2020). One of the main inspirations here is the work of Robert Brenner, which I discuss further in the following section. A radically different conceptualization of the "Atlantic system" can in turn be found in the work of Márcial Berbel, Rafael Marquese, and Tâmis Parron, *Slavery and Politics* (2010) (which I had the opportunity to translate into English a few years later). Here the concept was used to describe two sets of empires (the Iberian Atlantic system and its northwestern European counterpart), which were in turn constituted and constitutive of historical capitalism. It is a "set of sets," to cite the Braudelian formulation, which makes this historical Atlantic a fundamental component of the history of capitalism.

This is connected to one of the main points of my article: the commodity approach can help avoid the separation of Atlantic empires into reified units and move towards a truly systemic understanding, one that reveals not only the connections between these different empires, but their place within the broader reality of the capitalist world-system, as Dale Tomich has noted (2004, p. 233). This is what I try to show with my brief discussion of Brazilian gold. The connection between slaves diving in the rivers of Minas Gerais and the expansion of the access to money in eighteenth century Britain was not merely a historical curiosity, but a key component of the making of the modern world. Are there different "social logics" in Minas Gerais and London? Obviously yes. But they are connected by capital, just like the intensification of the exploitation of slaves in the Caribbean sugar islands was articulated to the expansion of new patterns of consumption and labor in northwest Europe, one of many other possible examples that can be explored when we consider the historical trajectory of specific commodities. Tying all this together is a specific conceptualization of capitalism and of the place of the Atlantic world in it. While exhaustive archive research is important,

the conceptualization and theoretical clarity that will give meaning to that material is equally crucial.

Mary Draper suggests that the recent approach of a “Vast Early America,” born within the Ohomundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, offers a powerful way to deal with the many problems raised in my original contribution. Here I would like to further explore the so-called “methodological nationalism” that was only superficially discussed in my first intervention, dealing with the Brazilian and US historiographies without paying attention to the different educational systems, with their circuits of ideas and people, and to the different positions of each country in the world system.³ A detailed analysis of these differences would exceed the limits of the present rejoinder, but it is important to note that in the US much of Global History (or Atlantic, or imperial, among other variants) often carries a hidden nationalism within its supposed universalism. I have not read so many works inspired by the “Vast Early America” approach and I think that the excellent examples described by Draper speak for themselves. But having read the founding text by Karen Wulf, cited by Draper, I am not sure whether this is not another historiographical creation to “integrate the Other into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms, in our tongues,” to repeat Adelman’s citation that opens my original article. “A capacious approach to early America shows us a past that was infinitely complex, dynamic, globally connected, and violent,” Wulf argues, “and it also still shows us - better shows us - the origins of an ambitious, powerful, and democratic nation” (WULF, 2019). How far are we from a teleological approach that takes the nation state - the US, to be more specific - as its point of arrival? To reinforce an earlier point: my critique of “methodological nationalism” is not only the search for a broader approach, but part of the perception that capitalism is a historical system that transcends traditional political frontiers since its inception, thus my call for a stronger dialogue with the world systems perspective. Unfortunately, Wulf’s piece does not have any reference to capitalism or capital. Our starting (and arrival) points are, therefore, radically different. While Wulf is looking at the diversity at origins of an “ambitious, powerful, and democratic nation,” I am interested in a critical approach that considers the motor of the structural eco-crisis of our times, which includes the democratic regimes themselves. This is why I have used, since my first intervention, Wallerstein’s concept of “centrist-liberalism”, which is part of what he describes as the “geoculture” of capitalism. In spite of all its problems, it helps us think about our own research agendas and historiographical practices.

Methodological nationalism is less ashamed of itself in Brazil and in the humanities here we focus mainly on ourselves, a reflection of our peripheral position in the world. We import manufactured products from the center (concepts and theoretical references) and occasionally export primary goods (primary sources and specific studies of them). How many historians on the pages of *William and Mary Quarterly* (or *American Historical Review* or *Past and Present* or [fill in with the mainstream North Atlantic journal of your preference]) have used theoretical perspectives coming from Latin America in the construction of their arguments? Aren’t there theoretical works that are good enough to establish more serious dialogues with North Atlantic historiography? I don’t think this is the case. After all, cepaline thought and dependency theory are the basis of the world systems perspective. Some of the richest reflections on the relationship between capitalism and slavery, to mention another example,

³ I would like to thank Rafael Faraco Benthien for calling my attention to this problem.

were produced by Brazilian marxism in the 1960s and 1970s, as I have tried to show in a recent work (MARQUES, 2022). However, precisely when a global neoliberal adjustment took place, during the 1980s and 90s, we became satisfied with our peripheral condition, opening franchises of the latest historiographical turns produced in great academic centers of the North Atlantic in opposition to a supposedly amateur historiographical past, a sort of pre-history of the discipline in which archives were not very well known.

The point here is not to seek refuge in some sort of academic third-worldism; after all, one of the main figures discussed here is Immanuel Wallerstein, a US sociologist. But I would like to stress that his perspective (as well as that of other researchers associated with the Fernand Braudel Center), although frequently described as outdated by many historians, was the product of an open dialogue with social scientists established outside the main traditional circuits of the North Atlantic. A quick look at the pages of *Review*, the journal of the FBC, shows the presence of a large number of authors from different parts of the world since its early issues, with high-quality theoretical and methodological debates that dealt with issues that are frequently the same ones that historians behind the latest historiographical turns present as completely new (for other examples, cf. MARQUES, 2020). The concept of *second slavery*, which has inspired a number of works in Brazil and the United States, and that was created by Dale Tomich within the Fernand Braudel Center, was largely inspired by the theoretical perspectives of figures such as Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco e Antônio Barros de Castro (cf. MARQUESE; SALLES, 2016).

In this sense, I agree with Waldomiro Lourenço Jr. when he argues that interdisciplinarity is a constitutive aspect of our historiographical practices. I would still argue, however, that this has not stopped disciplinary prophets from outlining and guiding the sort of interdisciplinary dialogue that should be open to the field (BENTHIEN, 2020). It is true that “history has descended from its tree many years ago” (LOURENÇO JR, 2021, p. 768), but a lot has also changed since the open dialogue with geography, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and anthropology that marked the birth of the Annales school with Febvre and Bloch. Looking at the history of the discipline might be useful here as well. See, for example, the interdisciplinary proposal that Giovanni Levi (2018) offers in his evaluation of Global History, which privileges literature and a certain kind of anthropology against historical sociology and its “broad generalizations.” The “use of the microscope” should be the tool for “historians to be in touch with primary sources and archives, thus being capable of formulating new readings and questions.” The archive then becomes the starting point for questions that should at least relativize the weight of the old categories of the social sciences.

In Brazil, to go back to the example given by Alfagali, Fragoso opens his book with the observation that the “novelty of the profession of historian in Brazil” in the 1980s revealed “the precarity of previous historiographical interpretations, thus making it necessary to get down to business and work in the archives” (FRAGOSO, 2013, p. 7). In relation to the history of slavery, Sílvia Lara in turn believes that in response to “broad explanatory schemes” we should look “at the primary sources in its vastness of individual registers, without a theory that hierarchizes what is or isn’t ‘important, what can or cannot be ‘exemplary.’” In this way we can reveal the “complexity of social processes;” an urgent task, in her view, “especially when some of us revive old systemic interpretations of slavery, recovering explanatory logics and debates of decades ago” (LARA, 2018, p. 17). The different citations above show a tendency



that has become very strong in the discipline (and this is the reason why I spoke of a possible “disciplining” of the perspective of commodity chains by the editors of *From Silver to Cocaine*), which is a sort of legacy from the linguistic and cultural turns, as Gary Wilder argues in an outstanding essay, and that, ironically, bring together “empiricist historians” and “historians influenced by poststructuralism” in a shared “allergy to structural explanation”. The archive then becomes the instrument for producing small truths, glimpses of light in a world of darkness created by the old approaches, which are seen as invariably mechanistic and teleological. Based on the archive, generic conclusions are then offered as great theoretical insights, such as the “indetermination” of social reality, the multicausality of processes, the limits of power (WILDER, 2012, p. 730). Complexity has become the privileged refuge of the historian, demarcating and restricting the permitted and desirable interdisciplinarity.

Although speaking of interdisciplinarity as an inescapable aspect of our discipline, Lourenço Jr. is somewhat surprised by the proposed dialogue with the work of Wallerstein and Hopkins, lamenting the use I make of Fernand Braudel - in his view, cited only to reinforce empirical arguments. But doesn't the passage of my text that calls his attention (“the concept of commodity chain can offer a powerful instrument to understand the plurality of times of capitalism as a historical system and its shifts over time”), cited three times in his commentary, express a perspective inspired by a braudelien theory of plural times? When I argue that a careful reading of *The Mediterranean* does not fit the description that Chakrabarty makes of Braudel, I mean that the latter offers powerful theoretical tools to deal with the same problems raised by the Indian historian, the same ones that Lourenço repeats in the conclusion of his text. Notwithstanding the differences between Wallerstein and Braudel, and I agree with the comparison offered by him, it is precisely the dialogue between these two figures, and others associated with them, that interests me here. This is why I also did not restrict myself to the original formulation of Hopkins and Wallerstein (curiously, while surprised by my interest on this formulation, Lourenço Jr. believes that I did not fully explore their approach as I should have done), preferring instead to look at a few works that, in my view, expanded their original perspective in new, richer directions.

COMMODITIES AND MONEY

In his commentary, Bouchard raises fundamental questions about an approach focusing on commodities. One of the most important is related to the difficulties of the histories of commodities to shift from one scale to another. According to him, it is impossible to inductively build an understanding of global capitalism based on a commodity chain (or a group of them, I would add). Michael Taussig's critique of Wolf and Mintz, which I briefly discuss in my article, points to that difficulty. As Bouchard argues, “we must have a conception of global capitalism in order to write the kinds of commodity-chain histories which have analytic power, in order to link the commodity to something greater” (BOUCHARD, 2021, p. 708). I agree with his statement and believe that historians of capitalism must engage, for example, with the bibliography on critical theories of capitalism, an essential move to think about the categories that we use in our historical narratives. Just like Marx offered an enduring *critique* of political economy, these works offer powerful tools for us to think about the analytical categories



inherited from the modernizing paradigm, which shaped and continues to influence social sciences as a whole.⁴

However, I also do not think that this analytical movement can be made exclusively from “logical-deductive” concepts, in a procedure that usually leads to the projection of a homogeneous time of capital over historical reality (HAROOTUNIAN, 2015). In the specific case of Marx’s *Capital*, Dale Tomich argues, the theoretical categories help us structure the historical investigation but do not replace historical analysis and interpretation; it is necessary to move from a historical theory to a theoretical history. Such a movement allows “histories to be reconstructed as histories of capital expressed through the histories of nations, states, and empires rather than formulated as histories of nations, states, or societies” (TOMICH, 2015, p. 367). The same is true for the history of commodities, which can then become more than the histories of cotton, sugar, guns, or money. I would only add that the movement between these different forms of reflection must be a permanent exercise, so that historical theories and theoretical histories become part of a unified movement to understand the past and present of world capitalism.⁵

On top of this fundamental premise, which I believe is shared by more than one commentator (although differences certainly exist in terms of which theories are more or less appropriate for our main subject, the history of capitalism), Bouchard also lists four more practical points for us to build more effective histories of commodities. The first one is to expand the number of histories of commodities, a suggestion that I could not disagree with. These histories of commodities, however, will only be effective if they are explored within the broader theoretical discussion that Bouchard, myself, and many others are calling for. Otherwise we might end up with histories of commodities as a pile of bricks that do not necessarily lead to stronger foundations.

The suggestion must also be qualified by Bouchard’s previous comments on the limits of studies focusing on a single commodity, as he shows in the excellent example of cod. We must indeed avoid by all means the temptation to inflate the importance of our objects of research, paying attention to the broader relations that are part of that history, not only in the sphere of production (one of the strongest points in the original contribution of Hopkins and Wallerstein), but also in the competition with other commodities in the spheres of circulation and consumption, as Bouchard notes. And all this should be understood in processual terms, which is what I believe the author is telling us with his stimulating discussion of the ship as a “macro-organism”. With more space and time, the case of Brazilian gold, for example, could be explored with more attention to the many activities that made mining possible in the first place, as well as its reproduction over time, looking at the development of the foodstuff producing sector that fed enslaved laborers or the many tools used in the extraction and refinement of the yellow metal. The circulation and consumption of this gold, in turn, can only be

⁴ By “critical theories of value” I mean a great number of works that, despite their differences, explore the more philosophical aspects of the work of Marx and his conceptualization of capital. For an overview, cf. Elbe (2013).

⁵ I emphasize this point because, in my view, this philosophical discussion around capital also has much to gain from a more serious dialogue with historians, going beyond a dogmatic categorical critique, such as that offered in Kurz (2014). Joseph Fracchia’s (2004) critique of Moishe Postone (which can be extended to Kurz and much of this bibliography linked to the “critique of value”) around the relationship between transhistorical categories and historically specific categories of capitalism (or any another economic-social formation) points precisely to some problems present in the historical theory underlying such works.

fully understood with reference to other precious metals, as Braudel and many other historians of his generation knew all too well; dialectics that are not as clear in some recent discussions on the global circulation of silver (e.g. POMERANZ, 2000, p. 269-273). In the early eighteenth century, the expansion of the flows of silver to Asia was strongly connected to the ascension of Brazilian gold, as discussed in a recent co-authored article with Rafael Marquese (MARQUES; MARQUESE, 2020).

Having said that, I do not think that the focus on a single commodity is necessarily problematic. Some sort of selection is always necessary since a total history (in its most vulgar sense of totality by addition) of commodities seems to be an impossible task for any one individual or group. The most important procedure is to always consider the commodity as a unit of observation instead of a unit of analysis, that is, to avoid closing the history of the commodity in itself. By doing this we can not only find entanglements such as the ones between Brazilian gold and US ships that I explore at the end of my article, but also keep the systemic dimension - that of historical capitalism - as a key element that gives meaning to that history and is itself formed by it. Such a procedure can be used in studies other than that of commodity histories; from very specific regional histories to the history of great nations, from the biographies of great merchants to that of a single slave. Braudel's advice about the dangers of the division between the economic, the political, and the cultural are worth remembering here: "In practice, I can only recommend that when making out divisions we try to keep an overall vision in mind: this is bound to loom up here and there in the argument and will always tend to reintroduce unity, warning against false assumptions that society is a simple matter" (BRAUDEL, 2016, p. 460).

This takes me to the second point raised by Bouchard, on thinking about the world system as an ecological relation instead of purely economic. The double objective of my article was to explore the brief history of two specific commodities to show how the approach allowed an articulation of the colonial history of the Americas to the history of capitalism and, in this process, incorporate the temporality of nature. However, as Bouchard and other commentators have noted, I ended up focusing more on the first aspect, especially in the case of Brazilian gold. I would only like to stress that, like Bouchard and Jason Moore, especially when the latter argues that the modern world system "is a world-ecology" (MOORE, 2021, p. 743), I try to understand the development of capitalism through nature and not only in the dualistic terms of its devastation. In this sense the central goal was to think how a mineral and its extractive processes were constitutive of the history of capital, although I do agree that, with more time and space, the issue could have been better explored. This is what I tried to do in another recent work, inspired by a small, but extremely rich bibliography on the environmental history of mining in Brazil (MARQUES, no prelo b).

Bouchard's second point is also connected to the third, on the need to seriously consider consumption, which in turn raises questions about structures of thought and cultural practices. This passage of his commentary shows that the classic separation between economic, political, and cultural history, a separation that also bothers Alfgali, is not very useful when trying to think about capitalism as a historical system, specially when used in rigid ways, to go back to Braudel's earlier point. "Not that I believe," the French historian argues,

that capitalism can [...] be explained by material or social factors or social relationships, but one thing seems to me to be beyond

doubt: capitalism cannot have emerged from a single confined source: economics played a part, politics played a part, society played a part, and culture and civilization played a part. So too did history, which often decided in the last analysis who will win a trial of strength (BRAUDEL, 2016, p. 402-403).

The approach focusing on commodities is one of the tools to explore these different parts, including the ecological, and their dynamic articulations over time and space. Moore seems to move in that direction when arguing that commodity frontiers cannot be understood only in economic terms because they are the result of geocultural and geopolitical processes that create the conditions for their expansion (MOORE, 2021).

The last point raised by Bouchard, which is very stimulating and perhaps the the most divergent in relation to my initial contribution, is that we should shift our focus from “flows” to “transformations,” the latter understood as “moments when the physical, cultural and economic properties of the commodity are changed through human action” (BOUCHARD, 2021, p. 710). The contrast between flows and transformations carries some resemblance with the separation between circulation and production that appeared in Marxist debates on the transition to capitalism, the same ones that are at the center of Moore’s contribution. Bouchard does not approach the issue in the same rigid terms of those debates, but I am not sure if our focus should really move from flows to transformations, as suggested by the author. Productive processes are indeed strategic moments to track the appropriation and transformation of extra-human nature, but one of our greatest challenges is to understand them as part of a contradictory whole. In this sense, flows appear to be dialectically inseparable from transformations. As Marx suggests, “production, distribution, exchange, and consumption” are “members of a totality, distinctions within a unit” (MARX, 2016, p. 53). This articulation appears in a more concrete way, for example, in the famous statement by Moore that “Wall Street is a way of organizing nature” (MOORE, 2011), an idea that largely inspires my insistence on the connection between London and the mining frontiers of Portuguese America.⁶ Instead of shifting the focus, therefore, I believe that only by treating all these different spheres in an integrated way that we can write a materialist history (in the end, the source of my interest on environmental history) of highly abstract processes such as the reconfiguration and generalization of money in the modern era.

When talking about the reconfiguration and generalization of money in the modern era I am obviously talking about the history of capitalism, whose origins occupy pride of place in Moore’s commentary. Although my initial piece did not deal with this specific issue, Moore offers a great contribution by moving the conversation to the debate on the transition, a discussion that can certainly help us think about the contemporary challenges imposed by the environmental collapse (or crisis, in the Wallersteinian sense used by Moore).⁷ The author significantly advanced one of the

⁶ A connection that is also explored by Moore himself in his exceptional analysis of the ascension of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century (MOORE, 2010).

⁷ I completely agree with Moore’s critique of the perspective of Jared Diamond and others. The idea of “environmental collapse” in my piece is inspired by the work of Luiz Marques (2018), which has a wide circulation in Brazilian academia and certainly does not support the sort of neomalthusian/neohobbesian perspective that can be found in part of the green thought. I agree that “crisis” or “eco-crisis”, as Marques himself uses in his work, might be an even more useful concept than environmental collapse.

“nondebates” of the 1970s, as described by Giovanni Arrighi (1998), by combining elements of the perspective of Robert Brenner and Immanuel Wallerstein to present a rich interpretation of the history of the capitalist world system that places class struggle at its center. I am not sure, however, if the separation between circulation and production that animated many of those earlier debates can be dismissed as a misperception, since the same kind of logic can still be found in a large number of works inspired by Brenner’s perspective, which continues to conflate everything under the rubric of a “commercialization model” (WOOD, 2002, p. 11-21). Even critics of Brenner reproduce this opposition, repeating some of the problems that we can find in much of Political Marxism (e.g. ANIEVAS; NIŞANCIOĞLU, 2015, p. 171-172).

The other great “nondebate” of the 1970s discussed by Arrighi, that between Wallerstein and Braudel (which is briefly discussed by Lourenço Jr.), can help us advance in this discussion. Despite all possible criticisms of the ambiguities and categories used by Braudel, few historians understood and explored so well the dynamic relationship between these different spheres of capitalism as the French historian. By outlining the essential quality of capitalism as its “unlimited flexibility, its capacity for change and adaptation,” Braudel avoids rigid separations such as that between commercial, industrial, and financial capitalism, usually thought of as chronological phases by some marxists. For him, capitalism is at home ground in the long distance trade and finances of the early modern era, but this did not stop it from engaging with productive enterprises such as the slave plantations of the Caribbean, the modernity of which impressed figures such as W. Sombart and C.L.R. James in the first half of the last century, and became even more clear when compared to the challenges that capital faced in Europe itself. Here is one of the greatest merits of Braudel: dealing with the expansion of capitalism in processual terms, paying attention to its multiple scales and the unequal development that came from them. “Every activity had to overcome the obstacle of physical distance,” the historian argues in *Mediterranean*, and “it is with a constant awareness of the problems of distance that the Mediterranean economy with its inevitable delays, endless preparations, and recurrent breakdowns must be appreciated” (BRAUDEL, 2016, p. 375).

The relativization of the separation between financial, commercial, and industrial capitalism (and, consequently, that between production and circulation) is explicitly incorporated by Wallerstein (1991). The actual “nondebate” between the two, according to Arrighi, could be found in their different conceptualizations of capitalism and the search for its origins in distinct places: “Wallerstein looks for them in the organization of agricultural production in the territorial states of northwestern Europe” while Braudel “looks for them in the organization of long-distance trade and high finance in the city-states of northern Italy.” This is a fundamental difference because I believe that, following in the footsteps of Braudel, we should read Iberian overseas expansion over the long sixteenth century in relation to the expansion of the capitalism of the Italian city-states instead of the territorial states of northwest Europe in the mid-seventeenth century. The Mediterranean, with its world connections, is a more appropriate unit of analysis to understand the early overseas expansion than Portugal or Spain or even the Iberian Peninsula, if considered in isolation (BRAUDEL, 2016; VERLINDEN, 1953). However, Brenner and many scholars inspired by his work treat those spaces in rigid ways, imposing on them the feudal label and making reference to them as the antithesis of the capitalist states of northwest Europe, especially England. Even critics such as Anievas e Nişancioğlu, who try to incorporate the history of colonialism into the

history of capitalism, argue that “the plundering of the Americas functioned as a means of ‘primitive accumulation’ on a Europe-wide basis which overwhelmingly benefited two latecomers, Holland and England, at the expense of the more (feudally) advanced colonising powers, Spain and Portugal” (ANIEVAS; NIŞANCIOĞLU, 2015, p. 143). The units become isolated; the contribution of Iberian powers - feudal by nature - to the development of capitalism is somewhat involuntary, a contribution through the process of “primitive accumulation” for the real capitalism of England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is not a word about the Italian financial capitalism and its absolutely central role in the Iberian expansion of the early modern era. Thus when Anievas and Nişancioğlu decide to focus on the specific role of slave plantations in America for the development of capitalism, the analysis becomes profoundly anglocentric. This is not surprising since the two authors isolated and put the Iberian world into the feudal “box” - as, in some ways, João Fragoso also does.

With this rigid contrast between Northwest Europe and the Iberian world, this marxist historiography is very close to institutionalist studies that take an ideal capitalism (represented in practice by England) as its main theoretical basis. Perhaps the origins of this problem can be found in the colonial world itself, with the slow penetration of images of the *leyenda negra* into European economic thought, especially in Britain. In the seventeenth century John Locke spoke of how “it is death in Spain to export money: and yet they, who furnish all the world with gold and silver, have least of it amongst themselves. Trade fetches it away from that lazy and indigent people, notwithstanding all their artificial and forced contrivances to keep it there” (LOCKE, 1824, p. 72). This statement, repeated by many mercantilists of the following century, expressed a worldview that would reappear, in different ways, in a number of works of political economy in the following centuries, at times emphasizing the bad quality of institutions, at others the persistence of specific cultural traits. It is possible to track elements of this comparison, under a new guise, in modernization theories or even in recent works on global inequalities. In other words: the rigid separation between England and Spain (or northwest Europe and the Iberian world) became part of the geoculture of capitalism, appearing in the contemporary historiography of various theoretical persuasions. Ironically, the construction of the linear temporality of Eurocentrism in the long sixteenth century, which received a fundamental Iberian contribution, as Anievas and Nisancioğlu show, would eventually be reinforced by the construction of an internal Other within Europe itself, represented by that same Iberian world.

Braudel can help us overcome those static structures of knowledge. Although frequently criticized for a certain flexibility or even imprecision in the way he uses his concepts, his intuitions open extremely rich possibilities of research (after all, an excessively rigorous history in theoretical terms is as useful for historical reconstruction as the poorest empiricism). One of them was his concern with the Italian city states, which offer a different perspective on the Iberian expansion, emphasizing its broader context and rejecting simple formulas, or the “false assumptions that society is a simple matter.” Braudel is not always explicit about this, but what is emerging in some Italian city-states is a new form of money, and this is an essential aspect to understand capitalism in the past or today.⁸ As Jairus Banaji argues, “the expansion of capital was an intrinsically global process, not least because it was spearheaded by the most liquid

⁸ This is a key argument in the work of Geoffrey Ingham (2004), a great reader of the Annales School.

and mobile forms of wealth which, strangely, Marxists have been reluctant to deal with and prefer to dismiss as ‘antediluvian’” (BANAJI, 2018). Braudel in fact shows ways in which a history of commodities can explore such changes, looking at the interconnected history of various precious metals and the new financial developments of capitalism. In his own words, “actual transactions involving merchandise and artificial transactions on the money market figure side by side” (BRAUDEL, 2016, p. 439).

THE SUBORDINATION, DESTRUCTION, AND INSUBORDINATION OF KNOWLEDGE BY CAPITAL

In their comments, Crislayne Alfagali e Mary Draper raise the excellent point about the importance of the knowledge of Amerindians and Africans for the making of the Atlantic world. I fully agree that this must be a central theme for any history of Atlantic commodities, not to mention Atlantic history in general. Looking at the historical trajectory of tobacco and chocolate, for example, Marcy Norton (2008) shows how a history of commodities can put the incorporation of those knowledges at the center of its narrative. More recently, Norton (2017) has reinforced that point by calling for a new conceptualization of technology that includes practices related to food, medicine, cures, the domestication of animals and plants, besides extractive activities connected to metals, pearls, and timber, among many other forms of landscape manipulation, as Draper also shows based on a rich recent bibliography. The example of manioc, mentioned by Alfagali, fits perfectly here, as the excellent research on tubers by Francesca Bray and others show (BRAY et al., 2019). Similarly, the ancient history of Amerindian manipulation of forests in New England was a condition for the history of timber extraction in the colonial era, as I try to show in my article with the brief discussion of the North American shipbuilding industry.

In the case of gold mining in Brazil, Alfagali mentions the practical knowledge of Africans related to the manipulation of metals and its possible circulation in the mining zones. The theme has received good contributions in Brazilian historiography, but can be further explored, as Alfagali’s own work shows, especially in a context of growing databases that are helping us better understand the origins of enslaved Africans - I am thinking, for example, about the possibilities offered by the analysis of African names (ANDERSON et al., 2013). In another recent piece about gold in Brazil, I also put the knowledge of Amerindians and Africans at the center of my analysis (MARQUES, no prelo). The Amerindian case is particularly interesting because there is no evidence that the originary peoples living in the zones that would later be transformed by mining had any experience with the extraction or manipulation of gold, as was the case in other parts of America such as Hispaniola or New Granada. Still, indigenous knowledge was key for mining enterprises, from the ancient paths built by those peoples to their technologies in the making of boats or the domestication of plants. The central inspiration here is Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, whose classic *Caminhos e fronteiras* (2008) places the violent subordination of indigenous peoples and the incorporation of their knowledge as an absolutely fundamental element for the settlement of Portuguese America. Moreover, mining experts from the neighboring territories of Spanish America were brought to the colony, as the same Sérgio Buarque (2007) shows, carrying with them techniques and practices that were also shaped by Amerindian and African knowledge in areas such as New Granada and Peru.



Besides showing the importance of that knowledge on commodity circuits, one of the most important aspects of the approach discussed here is that it allows us to understand how this process was itself part of the history of capitalism. A history of knowledge in the Atlantic that only celebrates the Amerindian and African capacity to think and act, or their humanity, to mention the great mark of the social history of slavery in the last half century (cf. SCOTT, 2014, p. 111), fulfills the important role of showing the diversity of agents that built the world in which we live, but can also be easily incorporated by centrist-liberalism, since it fits all too well in a present where the main political challenge is to improve a well established democratic system. Something like “the multicultural origins” of our times, the last phase of the great human adventure.⁹ The problem is that it is precisely this world that is at the basis of the contemporary eco-crisis. In methodological terms, the main danger is to reproduce the “common sense bourgeois realism” (SAHLINS, 2001, p. 20) that pervades many works dedicated to show the “agency” of subaltern peoples, leading to a methodological individualism that simply ignores the vast literature on action and structure in the social sciences.¹⁰

The great synchronizer of those multiple times - from the millennial knowledge accumulated in different parts of the world to the more immediate time of production, circulation, and consumption of commodities - is capitalism and it is this structural dimension that cannot be forgotten in the analysis. This is in fact a field that could be further explored by a theoretical history. The last decades have witnessed the appearance of a number of works on the role of knowledge in capitalism, with a few even talking of a “cognitive capitalism” as the main form of the system today. However, the few reflections that explore the theme in historical terms use very restricted interpretations of the history of capitalism. Carlo Vercellone, for example, presents a linear narrative of three phases of capitalism, the first (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries) was characterized by formal subsumption, with works in the putting-out system and artisans in general controlling knowledge; the following industrial phase was marked by the simplification of activities and the incorporation of knowledge in the form of fixed capital and business organization; finally, since the crisis of Fordism we have entered into “cognitive capitalism,” marked by “diffuse intellectuality” and the central role of the production of knowledge at a moment when labor has supposedly become increasingly imaterial (VERCELLONE, 2007). Besides the many criticisms coming from the sociology of contemporary labor, it is worth asking how a broader conception of the history of capitalism, as the one offered here, in which the knowledge and technologies of Africans, Amerindians, Europeans, and Asians were widely appropriated, reconfigured, and exploited since the long sixteenth century, could contribute to this conversation.

Not everything, however, was appropriated; much was also destroyed. Entire languages disappeared and with them much knowledge of the world - the epistemicides that Boaventura de Souza Santos (2015) talks about. The historiography of agency

⁹ See, for example, representations that slave action in the Haitian Revolution produced an expansion of illustrated values initially formulated only for the white man. This seems to me to be the sense of the criticism and provocation of Susan Buck-Morss (2009) in suggesting that the Haitian Revolution was part of a jihad (thus reversing the sign to what at the beginning of the 21st century was seen by many as the great threat to liberal democracy in the West). Some of the problems of this historiography are discussed in Geggus (2011).

¹⁰ Part of the problem in agency analyzes was inherited from E. P. Thompson, who, as Perry Anderson (1980) well shows, ended up flattening multiple scales to discuss human action.

frequently raises its desire to see survivals and resistance to a level that the conquest of America itself seems to have been another myth (RESTALL, 2003). Its destructive dimension is nonetheless unavoidable, as contemporary commentators such as Davi Kopenawa (2016, p. 407) frequently note; the history of commodities can help us understand this process in historical terms. State and church were fundamental parts of this process, offering the basis for geopolitical and geocultural constructions that not only made the elimination of specific aspects of Amerindian and African cultures a central goal, but also created the conditions for the expansion of the commodity frontiers themselves, as Moore argues. And it was the expansion of those frontiers - that, ironically, depended on the incorporation of knowledge - that became one of the main motors of the destruction of entire populations, with their ways of life. In my original intervention I tried to show the relationship between the building of a ship that would eventually carry enslaved Africans from the Gold Coast to Jamaica and the expansion of conflicts involving indigenous populations living in the western parts of Maine and New Hampshire. The focus on the commodity can offer many other examples, such as the one mentioned by Draper on deforesting - a necessary condition for the establishment of plantations - in Barbados, which led to the enslavement not only of Africans, but also of indigenous groups from other parts of the Caribbean. In those processes, the line separating the incorporation from the destruction of knowledge was very thin.

Finally, not everything was appropriated or destroyed. By putting frontier conflicts at the center of the story, an approach focusing on commodities can also show the different cases of more direct resistance to that expanding world. The examples are various, from the wars that accompanied the expansion of the silver frontier in northern Mexico in the sixteenth century to the long history of the fur trade in North America. In the Brazilian hinterland, British engineers defended the expansion of the rail network as a strategy to fight the botocudos, who continued to terrorise the imagination of precious metals prospectors in the late nineteenth century (FISCHER, 2018). At the same time, maroon communities were established by Africans who escaped from the commodity frontiers across the early modern era, communities that also depended on the circulation of specific knowledge and practices. As Judith Carney shows, the creation of maroon communities in Maranhão made wide use of the knowledge of rice production carried by Africans coming from specific parts of West Africa (CARNEY, 2002). That all these formations and acts of resistance could have a wider political impact is clear when we look at examples such as those of maroons in Jamaica (O'SHAUGHNESSY, 2000) or the many individual slave escapes in the context of the tensions that would ultimately lead to the US Civil War (OAKES, 1986).

In sum, it is not a matter of rejecting the "agency" of enslaved and subordinated populations across the Atlantic, but of understanding how it could take different forms according to structures - the set of sets - within which it took place. Only in this way can we understand the different contexts of mobilization of those forms of knowledge and their different uses, at times opening the way for the mobility and improvement of specific individuals and groups while also reinforcing or shifting wider structures of domination. The results of those relations of force should not be established beforehand but explored as objects of investigation. The history of commodities offers one strategy for us to look at the everyday lives, actions, and ideas of the vast number of individuals who were caught in the productive and extractive networks of the Atlantic without losing sight of the broader structures that shaped and established limits to those same actions.



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