

EDITED BY
WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL

Embedding Agricultural Commodities

Using historical evidence,
1840s–1940s



Embedding Agricultural Commodities

Over the past 500 years, Westerners have turned into avid consumers of colonial products and various production systems in the Americas, Africa and Asia have adapted to serve the new markets that opened up in the wake of the 'European encounter'. The effects of these transformations on the long-term development of these societies are fiercely contested. How can we use historical source material to pinpoint this social change? This volume presents six different examples from countries in which commodities were embedded in existing production systems – tobacco, coffee, sugar and indigo in Indonesia, India and Cuba – to shed light on this key process in human history. To demonstrate the effectiveness of using different types of source material, each contributor presents a micro-study based on a different type of historical source: a diary, a petition, a 'mail report', a review, a scientific study and a survey. As a result, the volume offers insights into how historians use their source material to construct narratives about the past and offers introductions to trajectories of agricultural commodity production, as well as much new information about the social struggles surrounding them.

Willem van Schendel has served as Professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam and as head of the South Asia Department, International Institute of Social History. Among his recent books are *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India* (with Joy Pachuau); *A History of Bangladesh* and *Global Blue: Indigo and Espionage in Colonial Bengal*. Recent co-edited volumes are *Labour Migration and Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: Critical Perspectives* and *The Bangladesh Reader: History, Culture, Politics*.

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Willem van Schendel served as Professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam and as head of the South Asia Department, International Institute of Social History. Among his recent books are *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India* (Cambridge University Press, 2015; with Joy Pachuau); *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and *Global Blue: Indigo and Espionage in Colonial Bengal* (The University Press Limited, 2006). Recent co-edited volumes are *Labour Migration and Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: Critical Perspectives* (Routledge, 2012) and *The Bangladesh Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke University Press, 2013).

1 Embedding agricultural commodities

An introduction

Willem van Schendel

How can we use historical source material to pinpoint social change? *Embedding Agricultural Commodities* shows six different ways, based on different types of historical source. Each chapter is concerned with the same process: the embedding of commodities in existing agrarian systems. Embedding is the term we use for the process of forging an agricultural commodity chain: introducing a new cash crop and making sure it endures.

Approaching this process from six different vantage points, we demonstrate how important it is to pay close attention to the sources of knowledge on which we base our analyses of social change. They shape our understandings of the past but what do they tell us, and what not? The more we understand how they came about – who wrote them, for whom they were intended, and how they impacted on subsequent social change – the more we are able to assess their usefulness and their limitations.

This volume presents an introduction to the use of sources and it does so by looking at a key process in human history: the way we seek to manipulate the world around us to our own advantage. The focus of this book is on how different historical sources help us understand the insertion of new agricultural commodities into pre-existing social and economic arrangements. To this end, we consider different locations and periods. Our case studies deal with Indonesia, India, Bangladesh and Cuba and they run from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The main commodities that we look at are tobacco, coffee, sugar and indigo. The book concludes with a chapter that considers these four commodities together to explore the global dimensions of embedding and to argue for the agricultural roots of globalization.

The sources

We have selected six types of historical source on the embedding of commodities. We explore the usefulness of a diary, a petition, a ‘mail report’, a book review, a scientific study and a survey. Each chapter features one of these sources and, as we shall see, each source has its own strengths and limitations. Historians would label these documents ‘primary sources’ because they were created by participants in (or observers of) the historical events that they describe.¹ They

are also similar in that they are texts – rather than images, material objects, or other relics of the past.²

But they differ from each other in many other ways. First, they began life in diverse places: three of them were crafted in various locations in British India, and one each in Cuba, the Netherlands East Indies and the Netherlands. Second, they were written in the languages of three different colonial regimes – English, Spanish and Dutch – over the course of a century of rapid change, from the 1840s to the 1940s.³ Third, half of them remained unpublished (and can now be found in archives in India, the Netherlands and Britain), two were published in limited editions by government presses (a few copies are now in specialized libraries) and one was published as an article in a Dutch literary journal. Only this last one can currently be found online in full-text version. Finally, these sources vary in size from a couple of pages (the petition) to a five-volume manuscript running into hundreds of pages (the diary).

Variation is even more striking if we consider the authors and their intentions. The creators of four of the texts were Europeans writing in colonial settings, one was in post-independence Cuba, and one in the Netherlands. Three texts had a single author, one was co-authored by a married couple, and the other two were a group effort. All authors except one were male.

The position of the authors with regard to agricultural commodity production differed for each source. At the time of writing they were, respectively, the manager of an indigo factory in rural eastern India (the diary), 21 coffee-planters in South India (the petition), a bureaucrat (the mail report), an essayist (the review), two botanists (the scientific report) and an agronomist (the survey).

Who were they writing for and with what intentions? The audiences they targeted ranged from a single private individual (the diary writer's father) to the general educated public. Three texts were meant for the eyes of government officials only, and one sought to reach fellow researchers. It is hard to reconstruct exactly which combination of factors motivated the authors but their main concerns were clear enough. The diary was written as an act of self-expression and to sustain personal communication with a faraway relative. The main purpose of the petition and the book review was political lobbying – an attempt to change government policy. The mail report was a cog in the bureaucratic machine, intended to facilitate administrative processes. The scientific report and the survey were all about knowledge production and economic development.

These six sources provide contrasting entry points into the realities of how new commodities get – and stay – embedded in agrarian societies. They give an indication of the types of information that different remnants of the past can provide. But how do researchers use such disparate information to create a convincing narrative? This is what we turn to next.

The historian's craft in action: how do researchers interact with their sources?

The contributors to this volume have been working in the same field for several years and they have met as participants in a comparative research programme, workshops and conferences.⁴ Their individual projects have resulted in scholarly monographs and articles. One of the issues that kept coming up in discussions among them was the extent to which diverse sources of information constrain comparisons between cases. Another issue was how each researcher used and interpreted the historical sources at his or her disposal. Obviously, they all based their insights on many sources but the idea of this joint volume is to highlight just one. Each chapter concentrates on a single revealing source to explore its peculiarities and to demonstrate how the researcher used it in constructing a historical narrative, thereby shaping memory.⁵ The chapters demonstrate the historian's craft in action. They are not proffered as models to be emulated, but rather as an introduction to the quandaries and possibilities of the everyday work of historians.

In the following chapters, the contributors explain why they consider their selected sources to be especially significant and relevant. They explore the uses and limitations of each source: the perspective it offers, its biases and its silences. They also share parts of the source with us, both to give us a sense of the 'raw data' and to help us assess the veracity of their interpretations.

Interpretation of historical sources can take different forms, depending on what the researcher wants to accomplish. The shared interest of the contributors to this volume is to explore what the embedding of new agricultural commodities meant, how it was done and how successful it was. The selected texts act as empirical building blocks in the construction of narratives about this process in concrete cases. The case studies themselves are intended as building blocks for the construction of comparative understandings of how commodity production begins and continues.

The dynamics of embedding

The concept of 'embeddedness' first emerged as a significant scholarly concept when Karl Polanyi published his *The Great Transformation* in 1944.⁶ In this book, Polanyi analysed economic activities as being 'socially embedded.' Since then, the term has been used in many different ways.⁷ Of special interest to this volume is how the concept has been used in the study of commodities. In 1985, economic sociologist Mark Granovetter published an article in which he argued that standard economic accounts are 'under-socialized': they do not take sufficient note of the socio-structural contexts that shape economic behaviour.⁸ This idea – that 'economic activity is embedded in social relationships, not the other way round'⁹ – has had a considerable impact on researchers in the field of commodity chains. These researchers focus on the meso-level and assume that economic activity is embedded either in network structures or in social,

economic or political institutions.¹⁰ But they ‘typically do not analyse the long-term or underlying causes of the networks themselves’.¹¹

This is precisely what we aim to do in this book. First, we look at longer-term processes of embedding during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, unlike much commodity chain research, which puts emphasis on the behaviour of firms, we concentrate on how economic activity was embedded in agrarian networks and arrangements. And third, we treat embedding as a continuous process rather than as a single action; embeddedness is not a state but a balancing act.

In the following chapters, we explore several dimensions of the concept. All chapters deal with embedding in the sense of introducing a new commercial crop into a pre-existing agrarian order and the ensuing struggles between those who benefit from it and those who wish to dislodge, or disembed it. As all of our examples are from what is now the Global South – the ex-colonized world – the peculiarities of colonial rule play an important role. Chapters 2 and 3, especially, investigate how the exploitative relationship between Europeans and local populations was predicated upon entrenching the colonial administration in pre-colonial, patrimonial structures. We also examine moral issues beyond the mere profitability of colonial commodity production, notably discourses about property rights, labour relations, social justice, human mobility, coercion and environmental impact (for example, Chapters 2, 3 and 5).

In several chapters, embedding takes on additional meanings. For example, it is also employed to examine the application of technical knowledge (notably Chapters 6 and 7), the competition between different forms of embedding (for example, smallholder versus plantation production, as in Chapters 4 and 5), and the embedding of production-enhancing commodities such as fertilizers, pesticides and improved varieties (Chapters 6 and 7). Embedding was also predicated upon ecological conditions and the biological requirements of individual crops, which put restrictions on their cultivation (Chapter 2). The interplay of various factors became apparent only by trial and error; the essentially experimental dimension of embedding is especially evident in Chapters 6 and 7. Finally, the embedding of new cash crops implied – or at least raised fears of – disembedding other crops, notably food crops and agricultural commodities produced for local markets rather than for Northern ones. The new cash crops also endangered trade in agricultural commodities within the Global South. Much of the resistance against new agricultural commodities stemmed from this perceived threat to local subsistence and South–South trade. This dimension – disembedding resulting from embedding – is examined primarily in Chapters 2, 3 and 7.

Giving a face to the agents of embedding

Each of the six chapters following this introduction uses a particular historical source as its starting point to explore the emergence of a new commodity production system. Rather than presenting this process as the outcome of faceless

economic forces and high-level abstractions (world market, state, empire), each chapter calls attention to the agents of embedding. Who were the driving forces behind this process and how did they achieve their goals? The answers show a remarkably varied picture. When we look at the everyday experience of the agents of embedding, it is important to keep in mind that successful embedding was far from assured: the history of agricultural commodity production is strewn with examples of failure.¹² Even in the best of circumstances inserting a new crop required careful social engineering. In none of our case studies did the process go smoothly; it always entailed a tussle between opposing social forces and its long-term outcome was determined by the relative power that the agents of embedding could exert over their opponents.

It is no surprise that each of the selected historical sources bears witness to this power struggle. The contributions to this book show that processes of embedding are complex and nuanced. Many players are involved in the initial phase, the start of a new production system. Once this is in place, however, the relationship between the players continues to develop and embedding becomes a process of continual readjustment and renegotiation to keep the forces of disembedding in check. Thus, embedding is not merely the insertion of an agricultural commodity and the formation of a commodity chain. It is the recurrent tending of that insertion lest the commodity chain snap. The social tensions involved can be enormous and they can play havoc with the wider agrarian system.¹³ The embedding of commodities is not an act; it is an iterative process.

Between forced cultivation and disembedding

The following chapters all deal with these dynamics. Ulbe Bosma (Chapter 3) describes the production of coffee, sugar and indigo in colonial Java as ‘forced cultivations’ and he also shows that it is essential to identify the primary power relations that allow forcible embedding. In the case of Java, it was an alliance between a colonial government seeking a stepped-up *mise en valeur* of their possessions and rural elites controlling a pre-existing system of labour services that forced unpaid cultivators to produce export crops. Once in place, the system required relatively little attention because cultivator resistance was weak and mostly took the form of avoidance rather than confrontation.¹⁴

Embedding was a far less steady process in colonial Bengal (in British India), as shown in Willem van Schendel’s contribution (Chapter 2). Here the protagonists were factory managers, landlords and peasants who formed an unstable and contested triangle of power. Unlike in Java, embedding the cash crop (in this case indigo) was a permanent headache because power alliances shifted incessantly. The managers – the main proponents of the indigo commodity chain – could never establish lasting partnerships. For over a century they lived precariously because they had to live in the countryside, close to the indigo fields, and they had to face seasonal confrontations with landlords and smallholding indigo cultivators.

Such patterns were not ‘colonial’ in the sense that they could be said to typify commodity production in a specific colony. As the contributions of Bhaswati

Bhattacharya (Chapter 4) and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff (Chapter 6) show, the process of embedding cash crops was far from uniform in British India. Local social and environmental conditions, the attributes of individual crops, and variations in policy produced distinct local patterns. Bhattacharya describes competition between two strategies to introduce coffee in South India: here local smallholders found themselves pitted against European plantation owners. The situation differed from that in Bengal (Chapter 2), where local enterprise was negligible. European coffee entrepreneurs in South India sought the active intervention of the state to outflank their local competitors and thus the state became a more prominent player in the process of embedding coffee plantations. In the case of cigarette tobacco in Bihar (northern India; Chapter 6) the state was even more directly engaged in promoting the crop and in uprooting a competing variety, tobacco for water-pipe consumption. As Sinha-Kerkhoff reveals, the colonial state invested in improving the quality of cigarette tobacco by means of botanical research and outreach. This chapter provides pointers to the intended and unintended effects of state-initiated 'research and development' on processes of crop embedding.

The contributions to this volume show that agents of embedding could be entrepreneurs, managers of plantations or factories, smallholders, landlords or state officials. They could be outsiders or locals. They could form alliances to enhance their impact but they were never able to get their way without opposition. None of our cases support the idea of all-powerful cash crops effortlessly imposed on supine colonized societies. Resistance took many forms. We have seen how some Javanese cultivators used avoidance protest: they moved away from areas of forced cultivation. In his essay on sugarcane growers in Cuba, Jonathan Curry-Machado (Chapter 7) explores another form of defiance when he speaks of 'reluctant embedding.' Cultivators showed aversion to new varieties, were deliberately sluggish in developing Cuban cane hybrids and postponed the introduction of scientific approaches at all stages of cane farming. Such foot-dragging has been described as a practice of everyday resistance.¹⁵

A more confrontational strategy is highlighted in Ratna Saptari's analysis of the burning of tobacco-drying sheds in Java (Chapter 5). Taking her cue from an official's report, she explores how this official, and other bureaucrats in Java, interpreted these incidents. They were worried about the breakdown of law and order, which the burnings seemed to indicate, and they were confused about their meaning. Was arson a weapon in the hands of disgruntled tobacco cultivators? Or were the arsonists actually employees of tobacco companies? Could the fires be seen as attempts to disembed tobacco cultivation, or were they better understood as tactics to improve work conditions, or eliminate the competition?

Linking colonial empires

Chapters 2 to 7 in this volume are arranged chronologically, according to the date of the historical source from which they take off. This means that we take the reader on something of a rollercoaster ride through three colonial empires

– British, Dutch and Spanish – and their aftermaths. Chapters 2, 4 and 6 provide examples from the huge colony of British India. Our cases deal with three distinct regions. Bengal (now divided between India and Bangladesh) is in the east, Mysore (an indirectly-ruled kingdom; today part of the Indian state of Karnataka) is in the south, and Bihar (today a state of India) is in the north. Unfortunately, sketching the broader contours of this colony is beyond the scope of this volume – but for a first introduction to its agrarian history, we can refer the reader to David Ludden’s *An Agrarian History of South Asia*.¹⁶ Chapters 3 and 5 take their cases from Java, the central island of the Netherlands East Indies (today: Indonesia), which became a testing ground for one of the world’s most ambitious and massive colonial attempts at embedding agricultural commodities for the European market, the ‘Cultivation System.’ For overviews of Indonesia’s agrarian history, see Elson’s *Village Java under the Cultivation System* and Pelzer’s *Pioneer Settlement in the Asiatic Tropics*.¹⁷ Chapter 7 examines Cuba, which was part of the Spanish empire until 1898. For a classic introduction to its agrarian history, see Fernando Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint*.¹⁸

Even though each case study in this volume focuses on local networks and agricultural arrangements, the sources reveal that embedding commodities involved long-distance connections that went well beyond the boundaries of empire. In addition to tracing the obvious links to metropolitan markets, the following chapters also document connections across imperial boundaries, for example, between the Caribbean, India and Java (Chapters 2 and 7); and between India and Arabia (Chapter 4). The historical trajectories that agricultural commodities followed across the world should be studied from the perspective of multiple colonies and empires, just as we must study them across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods.

This is exactly what Marcel van der Linden does in the final chapter (Chapter 8), which can be read as an extensive epilogue and contextualization to the six case studies. A wide-ranging excursus on the *longue durée* of agricultural embedding, it does not focus on a particular source but provides a global framework to the four agricultural commodities – indigo, sugar, coffee and tobacco – with which this volume is concerned. Drawing from a wealth of evidence, this chapter traces myriad commodity connections across the world, resulting from mobile agricultural commodities being sequentially embedded in – and disembedded from – local production systems. It demonstrates the importance of looking at agricultural commodities as plural rather than single, both in terms of succession – how, over the centuries, commodities succeeded each other in local agricultural production systems – and in terms of coexistence – how several commodities were often embedded simultaneously in such systems.

But it also tells an even larger story. It argues that the very notion of ‘mobile production’ – the idea that production systems that generate commodities for global or regional markets may be transferred from one part of the world to another – *originated* in agriculture, and only later gained ground in the processing industries. Hence the chapter’s title, ‘Globalization’s Agricultural Roots’. It throws new light on the importance of agriculture in the making of today’s world.

Plants, sources and historians

The iterative nature of embedding – the forging *and* tending of an agricultural commodity chain – is reflected in each of the historical sources and the six different entry points they provide to six historical examples of embedding. Together with the comprehensive overview of the final chapter they present an unusually broad vista of the vicissitudes of embedding cash crops in existing agrarian orders. They help us to understand the forces that ‘agents of embedding’ employ as well as the opposition they unleash as a result of their actions.

Each of these historical sources has its limitations and biases. Assessing these, as we do in the following chapters, requires knowledge of how they came about, who wrote them, for whom they were intended, and how they impacted on subsequent social change. Such an assessment establishes the usefulness of a source for historians in constructing convincing narratives of the past – in this case, promoting insights into the dynamics of embedding. Thus, the contributions to this volume explore histories of agrarian embedding but, beyond that, they allow us to observe how historians embed historical sources into their renderings of social change in the past.

Notes

- 1 Primary sources are the raw materials of history. The term ‘secondary historical sources’ refers to works, such as this volume, that offer interpretations of primary material to support an argument. For introductions, see John Tosh. *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 6th ed., 2015), 74–88; and Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.). *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
- 2 These sources are not entirely textual; some contain illustrations.
- 3 The diary is the earliest (1840–56), followed by the book review (1860), the petition (1864), the mail report (1902), the scientific report (1910) and the survey (1946).
- 4 The contributors participated in the research programme ‘Plants, People and Work: The Social History of Cash Crops in Asia, 18th to 20th Centuries’ (International Institute of Social History, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)) and participated in conferences of the ‘Commodities of Empire Project’ (funded by the British Academy), the German Centre of Excellence ‘Cultural Foundations of Integration’ (University of Konstanz, Germany), the Department of History, Gadjah Mada University (Yogyakarta, Indonesia) and the International Convention of Asia Scholars, Daejeon (South Korea). We wish to express our sincere gratitude for the financial support our research programme has received from the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the International Institute of Social History.
- 5 Georg G. Iggers. ‘The Role of Professional Historical Scholarship in the Creation and Distortion of Memory’, *Chinese Studies in History*, 43:3 (2010), 32–44.
- 6 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).
- 7 For overviews, see Greta R. Krippner and Anthony S. Alvarez. ‘Embeddedness and the Intellectual Projects of Economic Sociology’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33 (2007), 219–40; Jens Beckert. *The Great Transformation of Embeddedness: Karl Polanyi and the New Economic Sociology* (Cologne: Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Societies, 2007; www.econstor.eu/).

- 8 Mark Granovetter. 'Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problems of Embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, 91:3 (1985), 481–510.
- 9 Timothy J. Sturgeon. 'From Commodity Chains to Value Chains: Interdisciplinary Theory Building in an Age of Globalization'. In Jennifer Bair (ed.) *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 120.
- 10 Bob Jessop distinguishes three levels on which the study of social embeddedness can focus. In addition to interpersonal relations and networks it can concentrate on inter-organizational relations ('institutional embeddedness'), or on relations between different institutional orders ('societal embeddedness'). Polanyi's work dealt with this third level; most economic sociologists' with the first two. Bob Jessop. 'The Social Embeddedness of the Economy and its Implications for Economic Governance'. In Fikret Adaman and Pat Devine (eds.) *Economy and Society: Money, Capitalism and Transition* (Montreal: Black Rose Books), 199–222.
- 11 Gary G. Hamilton and Gary Gereffi. 'Global Commodity Chains, Market Makers, and the Rise of Demand-Responsive Economies'. In Bair (ed.) *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, 140.
- 12 See Alfred Crosby. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (rev. ed.), 2004); Brett M. Bennett. 'A Global History of Australian Trees', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 44 (2011), 125–45; and Sandip Hazareesingh. 'Cotton, Climate and Colonialism in Dharwar, Western India, 1840–1880', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 38 (2012), 1–17.
- 13 For a consideration of the term 'agrarian system', see Willem van Schendel. 'What Is Agrarian Labour? Contrasting Indigo Production in Colonial India and Indonesia'. *International Review of Social History*, 60:1 (2015), 1–23.
- 14 Michael Adas. 'From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23:2 (1981), 217–47.
- 15 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
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- 17 R. E. Elson. *Village Java under the Cultivation System, 1830–1870* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994); Karl J. Pelzer. *Pioneer Settlement in the Asiatic Tropics: Studies in Land Utilization and Agricultural Colonization in Southeastern Asia* (New York, NY: American Geographical Society, 1945).
- 18 Fernando Ortiz. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Random House, 1970).

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