

Senior Editors' Note

International Labor and Working Class History 81 opens with a cutting-edge special issue on “Labor and Global Commodities” envisioned, organized and edited by Mary Nolan (New York University) and Mae Ngai (Columbia University). It engages a central subject in world history and contemporary globalization that has generated popular trade books on commodities ranging from salt and cod to bananas and tea. *ILWCH* 81, however, is notable for stretching our notions of commodities and their history in several challenging new directions. The global reach of the special issue is seen in the geographic spread of its articles across all five major continents.

Nelson Lichtenstein, making a case for the return of merchant capitalism, argues that manufactured goods like computers and cell phones can now be viewed as commodities because they are largely generics made by a small group of little known Asian manufacturers, whose sales have more to do with their marketing by the Walmarts of the world than with their particularity.

April Merleaux then uses the debate over sugar tariffs in early 20th century United States as a lens to view the ways in which race informed the debates over empire and labor migration. The place, price, and labor force of sugar production shaped U.S. political culture and policy toward its new insular colonies and semi-colonies.

Augustine Sedgewick's article also uses U.S. policy towards foreign produced commodities as a window through which to analyze larger issues. In her case the commodities are low-wage Latin American knock-offs of labor-intensive European and Asian consumer goods. Her larger concern is the New Deal promotion of both a “consumers’ republic” in the United States and economic and social development in Latin America. Unlike earlier historians, who saw these policies as independent if parallel, Sedgewick argues that they were two parts of an integrated process: an international division of labor in which the U.S. worker would enjoy the higher wages of skilled labor and then become the mass consumer of low cost Latin American imports made with low wage labor.

Elizabeth Bini extends the special issue's exploration of commodities and labor in a different direction. She analyzes the formation of a new kind of service sector worker who sells the refined commodity—in this case gasoline—to the emerging mass market of motorists in postwar Italy. Comparing Esso (Standard Oil) to AGIP, the Italian national company, Bini underscores the impact of American models of marketing and scientific management, which AGIP modified with Italian corporatism and paternalism, and spread throughout Africa. There it expanded as part of Italy's postcolonial foreign policy.

International Labor and Working-Class History

No. 81, Spring 2012, pp. 1–3

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doi:10.1017/S0147547912000014

The final two articles in the special issue extend its exploration of commodities in a very new and different direction. They explore the environmental impact of commodities on both workers and local residents. Gabrielle Hecht charts the efforts by South African mining companies to make the risks of radon gas in their uranium mines and radiation in their uranium processing plants “invisible.” During apartheid, they prevented data collection and denied that radiation problems existed. But with the end of apartheid, a group of determined scientists made the “nuclearity” of the uranium industry visible and public.

In India, Amanda Ciafone shows us, neighboring residents, more so than workers, bore the negative environmental impact of Coca-Cola plants. The plants consumed and polluted local water sources, at the expense of both agricultural production and personal survival, leading to an “environmentalism of the poor.” Ciafone traces how poor rural villagers protested Coca-Cola’s “water mining.” They drew upon both Gandhian ideas and modern technology to link up with national and international environmental actors, force a plant closure, and compel Coca-Cola to pledge to become “water neutral” in India.

This issue also includes two review essays. In the first, Andrew Urban continues the theme of commodities and labor through a comparative exploration of three noteworthy books – Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City*, Gary Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* and Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire and the Globalization of the New South*. He comments on the history of rubber in Brazil, pineapples in Hawaii, and cotton in Togo. But Urban and the authors of these three books are less concerned with the specific commodity than with the “historic relationship between commodities and labor on a global scale.” They explore the sociological theories of labor and race developed in the global North to interpret the exotic other and the projection of fantasies about tropical lands and peoples into these commodity-based colonial projects.

The other review essay is very different in both subject and tone. Using Margaret Paxon’s, *Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village*, Jessica Allina-Pisano’s, *The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village: Politics and Property Rights in the Black Earth* and Douglas Rogers, *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals*, Tracy MacDonald explores contemporary rural life in Russia and Ukraine and the relationship between the “historical Soviet countryside and the Post-Soviet present.” These studies reveal changes and continuities in three disparate parts of the former Soviet Union. Among the continuities, MacDonald finds that the majority of the inhabitants of these rural areas continue to be subordinated in changing power relations that have left them as poor peasants or sharecroppers. Another theme is the dialogue between memory and history. In all three cases, the post-Soviet period is one of uncertainty for those without power or connections to power, while those who were Communists in the Soviet period maintain their ambitions but now pursue them in new guises.

Finally, we have a “Classics Revisited” reconsideration of Miriam Glucksmann’s 1982 autoethnography—under the pen name Ruth Cavendish—of gender and factory work in late 1970s London, *Women on the Line*. This section includes a reflection, thirty years later, by the author on her political motives and personal memories. She concludes that her analysis of class, ethnicity and gender in the workplace remains relevant, but now can be applied to service work in Britain and to factory work in the global south. This assessment is confirmed by the other comments in this *Classics Revisited*: Anna Pollert, whose own book, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* offers a complementary ethnography from a more academic perspective; and Carol Wolkowitz, who sees *Women on the Line* as an early exploration of the embodied aspects of gendered work that prefigured her own book, *Bodies at Work*. Pun Ngai, on the other hand, offers a summary of her own research on migrant women factory workers in 21st century China, from her own book *Made in China*. Ngai considers the continued relevance of *Women on the Line* to our understanding of the experience of female factory workers in the contemporary Global South. At the same time, she also sees its relevance for noting the differences that other management policies, such as obligatory residence in gendered company dormitories, make in the Chinese case. In a perceptive introduction to this *Classics Revisited*, Dawn Lyon contextualizes both *Women on the Line* and these commentaries on it, including a conversation with Glucksmann upon the publication of a new 30th anniversary edition.

We also want to alert you to our very special next issue: our 40th anniversary issue. We are taking the occasion to look back on the past four decades of *ILWCH* and of labor history and to look forward toward the new directions that both may take in the near future. The issue will feature an interview with the late David Montgomery, a manifesto by Marcel van der Linden and comments on global labor history and current new directions in labor history around the world by members of our editorial and consulting boards, including Dorothy Sue Cobble, John French, Prasannan Parthasarathi, and Xiaodan Zhang.

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