

Call for Papers:

Commodities of Empire Annual International Workshop

2-3 September 2026, Spanish National Research Council, Madrid

Locating Knowledge: Science and Technology in Commodity Frontiers

Organisers: ‘Commodities of Empire’ British Academy Research Project, ERC Consolidator Grant WILDHIST (GA: 101171213), and the AMBTEC project funded by the Spanish State Research Agency (PID2023-149806NB-I00).

Deadline for abstract submissions: 14 February 2026.

<https://commoditiesofempire.org.uk/events/>

The scientific and technological dimensions of commodity history have long attracted attention, with recent work offering comprehensive accounts of the transnational movement of experts, technologies, and scientific ideas. Yet the skills, techniques, and expertise required for resource extraction and processing in and around commodity frontiers remain less thoroughly explored. This workshop seeks to redirect attention to these frontiers of commodity production as sites of knowledge generation, codification and exchange from early modern times to the present. While remaining attentive to imperial, trans-imperial and transnational knowledge networks, the primary aim of this workshop is to examine commodity frontiers themselves as key locations for the development of techno-scientific knowledge and practice by both local and transnational actors. We are especially interested in historical research on indigenous technologies and traditional practices of commodity production, many of which held central economic and cultural significance.

The workshop also welcomes works that reflects on the historiographical and epistemological implications of recognizing local protagonists –such as indigenous peoples, colonized populations, and migrants at commodity frontiers– as active contributors to the production and circulation of knowledge. The workshop further examines the role of institutions and associations (cooperatives, workers’ unions, botanic gardens, agricultural stations, etc.) that operated in these regions as generators, intermediaries, translators, and sometimes gatekeepers of knowledge.

The workshop aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to make the history of science and technology less Eurocentric and US-centric by explicitly broadening inquiry into knowledge histories in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while remaining open to cases from all geographical regions. By placing local knowledge at the center of global commodity history, it frames commodity frontiers as complex technological landscapes and sites of experimentation shaped by plural socio-economic and ecological contexts as well as by unequal power relations. The workshop therefore invites papers that critically engage with these trans-local dynamics and local-global articulations, while also illuminating alternative histories of the making of scientific and technological knowledge.

Potential topics might include, but are not limited to:

- Commodity frontiers (such as mines, plantations, ranches, forests, seas) as sites for the generation and codification of multiple forms of knowledge that were potentially but not necessarily global, including histories of experimentation, science, and bioprospecting.
- The role of workers at commodity frontiers (from agronomists, engineers, and foresters to miners, farmers, missionaries, and medical healers) in adapting or reinventing technologies, with attention to differences in status, expertise, and authority.
- The development of botanical and artificial substitutes such as for example in the case of rubber, indigo or quinine, including R&D processes aimed at replacing commodities produced in the Global South.
- The technological landscapes and networks of commodity production, including the coexistence of traditional and new techniques and the role of indigenous, creole and hybrid methods.
- Channels and constraints for technology transfer and trade, including the export of processing equipment, know-how, and machinery.
- Resistance to and subversion of new technologies and the non-circulation of knowledge.
- Institutions and spaces (including peasant cooperatives, processing workshops, agricultural stations, forest camps, concessionary companies and scientific organizations), and their experimental and research practices.
- The expansion and subversion of infrastructure for the production, trade, and distribution of commodities, including cargo services, railways, rivers, and the use of animals.
- The plural forms of measurement, codification, and arrangement of knowledge about commodity production in reports, treatises and maps, as well as in oral testimonies, collective memory and material culture.
- The ecological entanglements and impacts of localised technologies and scientific practices of commodity production, both of new methods and traditional techniques.
- The material itineraries of resources, standards, instruments, and professionals, including technical assistance, South–South exchanges, and trans-local circulation.
- Interactions between human and non-human actors, including the development of localized techniques for pest and disease control.
- Local ingenuity and inventive activity in commodity frontiers, as evidenced in business archives but also in other forms of records, including collective frameworks of knowledge production and sharing.
- Socio-technical imaginaries of agricultural modernization and mass commodity production prior to and during the “Green Revolutions”, or narratives of small-scale forms of production better adapted to local conditions.
- Methodological innovations, including digital humanities projects and visual histories relevant to the topic of the workshop.

The confirmed keynote speaker is Prof. David Edgerton (King’s College London).

This two-day workshop will be held at the historic Residencia de Estudiantes of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) in Madrid. This workshop is a collaborative venture between the Commodities of Empire British Academy Research Project, the European Research Council Consolidator Grant WILDHIST (ID: 101171213), and the AMBTEC project funded by the Spanish State Research Agency (PID2023-149806NB-I00).

Costs of accommodation in Madrid will be covered for all participants. Limited funding, subject to resources, is also available to cover travel expenses for early-career scholars, particularly for those coming from the Global South. Selected participants will be asked to seek their own institutional support for travel, in the first instance.

Papers will be grouped in thematic panels and pre-circulated to all workshop participants. Proposers should be aware that authors will not present their own papers at the workshop: instead, a discussant presents an initial summary and critique of the papers to facilitate discussion. Paper-givers will then have the possibility to reply succinctly, and this will be followed by open discussion. Publication options will be discussed at the workshop and your attention is drawn to the Commodities of Empire Working Paper series: <https://commoditiesofempire.org.uk/publications/working-papers/>

Please submit a paper title, an abstract of no more than 300 words, and a two-page CV, by 14 February 2026, to david.pretel@csic.es

We will notify authors about the acceptance of their papers by 20 March 2026.

They will then be asked to submit a draft paper of approx. 4,000-5,000 words (not counting footnotes and bibliography) at least 3 weeks prior to the event.

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