

Culturas agrícolas em movimento

Moving Crops

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Francesca Bray, Barbara Hahn, John Bosco Lourdusamy and Tiago Saraiva,
Moving Crops and the Scales of History (Yale University Press, 2023), 338 pp.

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Resumo

Resenha do livro “*Moving Crops and the Scales of History*”, de Bray, Lourdusamy e Saraiva.

Palavras-chave

Culturas agrícolas, história global, espaços de cultivo

Abstract

Critical review of the book “*Moving Crops and the Scales of History*”, by Bray, Lourdusamy e Saraiva.

Keywords

Crops, Global history, croppaces

The study of crops has long captivated historians and other scholars, such as anthropologists, who have provided rich narratives about their production, trade, and consumption. The existing scholarship is extensive, with some commodity histories standing out as among the most well-known and highly regarded global histories of recent years. Connected to these histories, we have seen significant methodological and theoretical advancements, including the concepts of “commodity chains” and “commodity frontiers”, and even the reconsideration of the “second slavery” in the production of sugar, coffee, and cotton in the Americas during the 19th century.

Moving Crops and the Scales of History offers not only a fascinating global history but, more importantly, a historiographical critique and a new methodological approach. It engages deeply with existing scholarship, providing both a series of intriguing and unexpected commodity stories as well as tools for future research. The authors primarily engage with the current body of work while proposing a new critical methodological and conceptual framework, which they term the “cropspace” method. This approach aims to transcend the traditional timelines, regions, and scales typically used in global history. According to the authors, a “cropspace” is “an assemblage formed around a crop: the heterogeneous elements or actors brought together in a specific place and time that make and grow that crop” (p. 4). This constellation of human and non-human actors that form a “cropspace” are those that enable crops to grow and move. In this regard, the authors emphasize that crops are materially and institutionally rooted in specific places, and therefore, locality should be taken as seriously as long distance connections and movement.

The book explores the history of crops and their movement through six key axes: time, place, scale, actants, compositions, and reproductions. The authors adopt a comparative approach, juxtaposing global case studies that reveal different combinations of these axes. One of the book’s strengths lies in its impressive consideration of a wide variety of crop histories across different temporal and geographic scales. Among the case studies considered are major global commodities like rice, wheat, tea, cotton, and rubber, as well as crops typically studied by anthropologists and cultural historians rather than economic historians, such as oranges, dates, marigolds, and yams. This innovative approach gives significant attention to products intended for local consumption and subsistence. This diverse range of cases makes for an engaging read, though the rapid succession of commodity stories can occasionally feel disjointed.

Each of the six axes of crop cultivation and movement is addressed in a separate chapter. The first chapter explores multiple time scales, periodization, and the temporalities of plants and humans. Using the examples of rice, cocoa, dates, and millet, the authors demonstrate that even though natural and social worlds have their own rhythms, humans have historically modified crop cycles through transplanting, acclimatization, and breeding. In this chapter, they highlight commodity histories beyond their peak periods, addressing issues related to the memory of “cropscares”, as well as the resurrection and survival of crops on smaller scales. Another significant reflection on historical time is the challenge to accepted divisions such as wild-domesticated, nomadic-sedentary, and modern-premodern. These divisions have traditionally been used to tell world histories, but their boundaries and temporalities are not linear.

Chapter Two explores the “nature of place-making” (p. 59), highlighting the significance of seriously considering place in the development of global commodities and the persistence of subsistence agriculture. The authors skilfully blend macrohistorical narratives of well-known global agricultural products, such as cereals, with a particular focus on relatively minor subsistence foods like tubers. Notably, they introduce the term “para-commodities” as an alternative to the concept of “anti-commodities,” a term coined by Sandip Hazareesingh and Harro Maat to capture the diversity of local production forms beyond global markets and their value as acts of resistance and reaction. By rooting specific crops in small, seemingly isolated places while addressing broader issues, the authors effectively bridge historical sociology and global history (with their emphasis on connected histories and movement) with anthropological research on localized peasant societies. In their words, they examine a crop “first as a product of place and then as a connector of places” (p. 91). This chapter stands out for its surprising case studies and its discussion of semi-domesticated crops, as proposed by anthropologist Laura Rival, as well as the challenges of transplanting a crop to a new environment, that often result in failure.

In Chapter 3, the authors explore the issue of the size and scale of production units, demonstrating that, while this is a crucial debate, it is ultimately contingent. The size of cropscares has varied throughout history in response to both moral and material values, despite the prevailing belief that larger farms are inherently more efficient and productive. This belief has been central for example to the narrative of the rise of enclosure in 18th-century Britain and its connections to the birth of the Industrial Revolution, a story we often shared with our students uncritically. To support the argument that

the size and scale of production are indeed contingent –and that there are often processes of scaling down cultivation– the authors examine cases such as tobacco in the American South, coffee in Ethiopia, tea in India, and water management in China.

Chapter 4 addresses how “cropsapes” are composed of both humans and non-humans, challenging the traditional nature-human dichotomy in agricultural history. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s work, among others, the authors argue that non-humans, such as plants and animals, function as actants with power but without intentionality. To explore the agency of these non-human actants, they examine a diverse range of cases, including rubber, eucalyptus, cinchona, and even elephants in the expansion of British India. Particularly striking is the case of wild rubber production in the Brazilian Amazon during the 19th century. The tapping practices of rubber workers in the wild proved difficult to control and standardize to meet the production rhythms required by global industries, such as those manufacturing pneumatic tires. At the same time, commodity production in the Amazon was constrained by the ecological challenges of transitioning from wild to cultivated rubber, which repeatedly failed due to a leaf fungus. However, this focus on the failure of rubber plantations in the Amazon during the 19th century should not overshadow the importance of the labor, skills, and knowledge of local rubber tappers, as well as their subsistence economies and conservation practices.

Chapter 5 examines “cropsapes” as complex “compositions”, defining them as ecosystems composed of diverse crops, wild plants, trees, and labourers. The aim of this chapter is to move beyond the traditional plantation paradigm –which tends to simplify and standardize ecosystems– and instead explore the rich diversity of relationships between societies and commodities in other contexts of cultivation or semi-cultivation. The authors address several significant topics in agricultural history, including polyculture (or companion planting), crop rotation, and shifting cultivation, with particular emphasis on swidden systems (slash-and-burn) of polyculture. Although such methods are often perceived as archaic and low in productivity, examples like Milpa agriculture in Mexico and Central America demonstrate high productivity and provide essential food and resources to local economies.

The final dimension explored by the authors is plant reproduction. In Chapter 6, they consider the knowledge and technologies essential for crop reproduction, including seed selection, recombination, processing, and waste management. Their focus is on everyday technologies such as seed collection, fermentation, packaging, and manuring, rather than on the mechanical or

biological innovations that often dominate historiographical discussions, particularly among economic historians. The book concludes with a brief epilogue, in which the authors advocate for a new approach to writing crop histories. They call for a method that, while revealing global processes, is deeply rooted in local histories and avoids a strictly linear narrative.

The book is not only provocative and original but also truly experimental, as the authors themselves acknowledge. The four authors describe their approach as one of experimental co-writing throughout the entire book, rather than each authoring separate chapters. Beautifully written through a collaborative effort, it offers a rewarding read, though its theoretical density may make it less accessible to a general audience than the authors intend.

In sum, the authors present a magnificent book that will serve as a foundational guide for writing new and richer histories of crops, capturing how they are both rooted in specific locations and move across different places, connecting the local with the global and the small-scale with the large-scale. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in agricultural, environmental, and technological history, as well as landscape studies and global and comparative history.

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