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ARBEITSVORHABEN

Tourism as a Commodity Frontier: A Global History

The history of the making of the modern world is a history of the expansion of commodity frontiers. Over the past 600 years, these commodity frontiers—processes and sites of the incorporation of resources (land, energy, raw materials, knowledge, and labor) into the expanding capitalist world economy—have moved at ever accelerating speed across vast areas of the globe, incorporating ever more land, ever more labor, and ever more resources. If the seventeenth century's most important commodity frontier was sugar, the nineteenth century's cotton, and the twentieth century's fossil fuels, in the twenty-first century the most consequential commodity frontiers might very well be tourism. Last year, a staggering 1.4 billion tourists crossed international boundaries. They spent time along the world's coastlines, visited historic sites, enjoyed urban life, and climbed the world's highest mountains.

As a commodity frontier focused on services, not agricultural or mineral commodities, the rapidly growing number of tourists draw on the land, labor, and resources of the places they are visiting—leading to local economic growth, to be sure, but also to vast dispossessions, exploitation, commodification, and environmental degradation. In Barbados, local farmers are displaced from coastal areas to make space for resorts; in Venice, inhabitants lose access to housing to tourists; in Korea, foreign sex workers serve the tourist clientele under conditions of servitude, and tourism-induced water shortages wreak havoc on local ecosystems. The CO2 emissions produced by tourism, an estimated 8 percent of the world's total, undermine the very viability of human life on earth.

Unlike existing studies of tourism, I want to research tourism as a new kind of commodity frontier, comparable to that of sugar, rubber, or copper, and I want to study it historically as well as from a global perspective. I will chart how that commodity frontier has moved around the globe since 1850, touching down in ever more places, accelerating after 1945 and then becoming a tsunami-like force in the twenty-first century. I want to chart the global trend but also look closely at a variety of very local histories to understand how tourism has affected local labor markets, environments, and societies.

Recommended Reading

Beckert, Sven. The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

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