

## DISSERTATION SUMMARY



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# ‘Our land abounds in nature’s gifts’: Commodity frontiers, Australian capitalism, and socioecological crisis

Matthew D. J. Ryan 

Discipline of Political Economy, The University of Sydney, Camperdown, New South Wales, Australia

## Correspondence

Matthew D. J. Ryan, Discipline of Political Economy, The University of Sydney, Camperdown, NSW 2050, Australia.

Email: [matthew.ryan@sydney.edu.au](mailto:matthew.ryan@sydney.edu.au)

## Funding information

Australian Government; The University of Sydney

**KEYWORDS:** Australia, capitalism, coal, commodity frontiers, sugar, wool, world-ecology

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** N01, P10, P18, Q33

*The dissertation was completed in 2023 in the discipline of Political Economy, within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney, under the supervision of Professor Adam David Morton and Dr Gareth Bryant.*

*It was financially supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Stipend Scholarship, a travel grant from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and a completion scholarship from the University of Sydney.*

## COMMODITY FRONTIERS AND THE CAPITALOCENE

We live in a time of socioecological crisis. So great are the mounting impacts of human society on our planet, geologists have begun considering the ‘Anthropocene’ as a new stratigraphic period. Over the past two decades, this concept has been widely adopted and contested across the humanities and social sciences, apparently undermining entire disciplinary definitions, presenting fundamental challenge to theories and assumptions. The ramifications of this realisation are condensed by Bonneuil and Fressoz (2013/2016, p. 19) who argue that

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The Anthropocene is an event, a point of bifurcation in the history of the Earth, life and humans. It overturns our representations of the world... the Anthropocene idea abolishes the break between nature and culture, between human history and the history of life and Earth.

The concept remains heavily contested, but can be summarised as the idea that humanity has, through the emission of greenhouse gases associated with industry and agriculture, begun shaping the very geology of our planet.

My thesis begins from this context, from the pressing contemporary conjuncture of fires, floods, ecosystem collapse and – paradoxically – rapid expansion of fossil capital in the form of natural gas, and other follies. It has been argued that this moment calls for ‘urgent histories’ (Rees & Huf, 2020), that the ‘shock of the Anthropocene’ ought to ramify through how we approach our work as historians. It is for this reason, that my work considers how the radical implications of our current crises might cause us to reconsider histories of capitalism in Australia.

Debates around the conceptualization of the Anthropocene have generated several neologisms that offer to capture this historic process with greater precision: pyrocene, plantationocene, Cthulucene, necrocene, to name a few. Each brings attention to the limitations of the Anthropocene as an analytic frame. This has been consistently argued by Jason W. Moore; ‘the Anthropocene perspective engages the really big questions of historical change... These are questions that the Anthropocene can pose, but cannot answer’ (Moore, 2016, p. 80). This, due to its reinforcement of the philosophical separation of Society and Nature, and its tendency to homogenise all of humanity into the *Anthropos*. This too-broad analytic also leads to vast differences in periodisation, with dramatic political implications. Within that conceptual debate, the ‘Capitalocene’ has been proffered as a periodization that is historically, analytically, and politically preferable. This concept clearly names *the socioecological relations of capitalism* as productive of our current crises. By framing the problem in this way, ‘we move from the consequences of environment-making to its conditions and its causes... [In-so-doing] a new set of connections appears...’ (Moore, 2016, p. 78). We begin to identify the ‘world-ecology’ of capitalism as ‘a relation of capital, power, and nature as an organic whole’ (Ibid., p. 81). It is the argument of my thesis, that capitalism is now the primary determinant of the production of nature, and resultant socioecological crises. We live in a conjuncture of socioecological crisis; we live in the Capitalocene.

For an economic historian, these are strong claims – characterising socioecological relations on the continent of Australia as specifically capitalist, and then arguing that these relations are directly responsible for contemporary socioecological crisis. The twin purpose of this thesis was to develop a theoretical framework to explain and characterise these relations and their internal relationships, but also to specify these theoretical claims historically. The way this was achieved was by deploying the concept of “commodity frontiers” as both scope and method. Following Beckett's (2014) *Empire of Cotton*, commodity frontiers are an emerging theme in global and economic history. More and more scholars are looking to these moments in space and time, to explain capitalism's expansionary dynamics – and, in some cases, to make general arguments about the nature of capitalism itself.

What, then, is meant by ‘commodity frontier?’ There is an emerging trend across social-scientific disciplines, to focus on specific commodities to explain capitalism in general, while capturing the messiness of place and agency – that is, the study of ‘commodity frontiers,’ and their relation to the world-systemic whole. For example, Ross (2017) surveys several

commodities to characterise empire as ecological, spanning cotton, cocoa, rubber, tin, copper, and oil across the tropics. Ghosh (2021) sees broader implications in the story of nutmeg as the story of colonialism and climate crisis. This is an intriguing recent development, especially considering Marx's (1976/1992, pp. 125–138) own use of the general form of the commodity as the departure point for his critique of political economy. Contrasting Marx's abstract beginnings, however, this emerging contemporary literature is grounded in empirical consideration of the commodity frontier, following the argument 'that studying the global history of capitalism through the lens of commodity frontiers and using commodity regimes as an analytical framework is crucial to understanding the origins and nature of capitalism, and thus the modern world' (Beckert et al., 2021, p. 435).

A central conceptualisation of the commodity frontier, however, is attributed to Jason W. Moore, whose formulation is '[v]alued by a growing number of scholars from different disciplines as a problem-oriented transdisciplinary approach to historical processes' (Beckert et al, p. 440). For Moore, along with co-author Raj Patel,

Capitalism not only has frontiers; it exists only through frontiers... Through frontiers, states and empires use violence, culture, and knowledge to mobilise natures at low cost. It's this cheapening that makes frontiers so central to modern history and that makes possible capitalism's expansive markets (Patel & Moore, 2017, p. 19).

Unacknowledged by Beckert et al, however, is the deep well of historical materialist antecedents that inform Moore's work, and thus they truncate the possibility of commodity frontiers becoming a more radical epistemological departure. Another way of framing the approach of my thesis, then, is: in what ways might a commodity-frontier history of Australian capitalism contribute to a sufficient politics for the Capitalocene?

## A NEW VANTAGE POINT ON AUSTRALIAN CAPITALISM

Beginning from the above theoretical and conjunctural vantage point, the thesis set out to account for the origins and character of capitalism, on the continent now known as "Australia" – a scope which demands some justification. There is the danger of reading history backwards, thereby erasing the contestation and contingency of both the invasion of the continent by British settlers, and presuming the eventual federation of the colonial States of Australia into a single national entity. This is noted by Bongiorno (2019, p. 194), who warns

a national history that treats 'Australia' as its basic unit of study inevitably misses something of the contingency of such a category. 'Australia' is the product not only of a local political settlement but also of global and transnational forces such as imperial conquest and decolonisation, industrialisation, migration, the expansion of capital, the development of trade, and exchanges of information, knowledge, ideas and culture. The best national histories treat the nation-state as embedded in global networks shaped by these forces. But it remains a valid criticism that most national histories deal inadequately with such challenges.

The category of the 'commodity frontier' does some work toward this end, in its attention to the global nature of local forces and drivers – a 'world-ecological' approach to Australian

capitalism is necessarily global. But Bongiorno is still right to note that such a category is nevertheless an abstraction that will obscure some things. A further justification for this abstraction emerges from the aim of producing politically useful history. Although contentious, we might follow Marx and Engels (1848/2010, p. 18) here, in that ‘the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie.’ That is, struggles within, against, and beyond the Australian state (itself a condensation of class relations) demand theoretically and historically informed understandings of the nature and origins of the Capitalocene.

An eco-Marxist history of Australian capitalism does not yet exist. There have been welcome recent calls to revive a historical materialist historiography in Australia, and an emerging appreciation of the urgent need for such histories in the context of the climate crisis. There is also an appreciation of the role that environmental history might play in ‘saving the world’ (Brown et al., 2008). But these suggestive openings have not yet carried through to a serious world-ecological consideration of Australian capitalism. This lacuna is identified by Julie McIntyre (2021, p. 73), who notes ‘Australian historians of labour and environment do not participate in international debates about whether or how to consider the historical intersection of nature and labour, or, indeed, nature, labour, and capitalism.’ Encouragingly, McIntyre (p. 97) goes on to note that world-ecology and the Capitalocene offer ‘potential common ground for activist historians.’ It is on this ‘common ground’ that this thesis situates itself, making a novel and significant contribution to this lacuna. But the intent here is to go beyond simply addressing a national historiography, looking to also contribute to achieving the necessarily international project that is world-ecology. That the world-ecology literature is yet to incorporate the colonisation of Australia into its account of world history is a serious limitation – especially when in some ways we might see the Australian colonies as the ideal-typical settler colonial project of British empire and capital for the period. Global conversations around world-ecology and the Capitalocene might find Australian history an important piece in the world-historical puzzle that is the uneven development of the capitalist totality.

So, there is a need for a world-ecological history of Australian capitalism, and this is a justification of the scope for this thesis. But going further, this selection of scope draws on feminist theories of situated knowledge. I, the author, wrote this thesis about Australia because it is where I am. I grew up on Anaiwan land, in a town founded by squatters who had violently seized that land from Indigenous inhabitants, who had fought fiercely – but unsuccessfully – to hold onto their Country (Clayton-Dixon, 2019). As explored in Chapters 3 and 4, that process was determined by the commodity frontier of wool, searching for cheap nature, compelled forward by the expansive tendencies of value and the environment-making colonial state.

## WOOL, COAL, AND SUGAR

How, then, might we specify these expansive claims empirically? To do so, this thesis explored the histories of three specific commodity frontiers: *wool*, *coal*, and *sugar*. This prompts the question of why these frontiers specifically? Why not whale oil, wheat, iron ore, or any number of other commodities? Each of the chosen frontiers interrupts conventional historiographies of Australian economic development in important ways: a re-telling of the much-storied wool frontier allows us to reveal the centrality of land ‘cheapened’ through appropriation and extirpation; exploring the early extraction of coal, driven by the state and by capital, shows how ‘cheap energy’ underpins conventional emphases on urbanisation and coastal trade; and sugar brings into view that the importance of racialization as a strategy of ‘cheap lives’ and ‘cheap

labour,' one which continues and spreads beyond the initial invasion dualism of "White Settler" and "Black Indigene," patterning class, state, and nature with shifting categories of racial difference.

These three commodity frontiers weave together stories of invasion, dispossession, exploitation, class and state formation. In the process, they show that Australian colonial history can usefully be thought of as a process of bringing this continent into the socioecological totality of capital – and in-so-doing, setting in motion the crises that are with us today. The commodity frontier was the key mechanism of that incorporation.

The socioecology of Australian capitalism is also driven forward by contradiction and crisis. And while the contradictions of contemporary Australia are not direct, functional reproductions of those that emerged in the nineteenth century, they nevertheless have their roots in that past. Pastoralism and land clearing are, to this day, important contributors to both species extinction and climate change; fossil capital still patterns our urban spaces, capitalist value production, state formation, and directly drives global climatic change; and while the direct unfreedom of the sugar plantations is no longer with us, much of Australia's tropical agriculture is still reliant on racialized, 'cheap' migrant workers, reproducing the same soil exhaustion that began in the nineteenth century. In short, the spatial scope emerged from the strategic selection of three historically and politically important commodity frontiers: wool, coal, and sugar.

Temporally, the scope ran from the invasion of Indigenous Australia by the First Fleet, in 1788, through to the federation of the colonial states into the Australian state, in 1901. Simply, this is a history of the nineteenth century. This temporal scope was defined by the need to be broad enough to capture the movement and dynamics of the commodity frontier – demonstrating dialectics of appropriation and exploitation, of expansion and exhaustion, of commodification and decommodification – while operating within the strictures of a doctoral thesis. The combination of such a broad spatial and temporal scope within the bounds of a single thesis involved sacrificing a certain amount of empirical detail, but crucially ensured that the history produced could speak to the political and theoretical tasks that animated the work. The thesis does not mount a positivist argument that one or other commodity frontier was more 'important' in some way, but rather it sought to set the ground for further work to trace these commodity frontiers, and others, through to the crises of today.

## ARGUMENT

The thesis moves through theory and history to explain the origins of capitalism on the continent of Australia in a way suitable to our current conjuncture of crisis; it attempts to do history in 'urgent times.' We begin from a contemporary conjuncture riven with socioecological crises that demand theoretical and historical explanation – a conjuncture of mass extinction, of collapsing ecosystems, of accelerating climatic change – and seek to contribute to transcending those crises. The vehicle to achieve this end is the central, animating research question: how have 'commodity frontiers' shaped the socioecology of Australian capitalism?

In answering this question, we begin from a definition of capitalism as a historically specific totality of socioecological relations: processes of cheap nature, class formation, state formation, racialization, and gendered difference, driven forward by the structuring power of the value form. These tools help to situate the moment of the commodity frontier within the broader dynamics of world capitalism. These relations violently displaced extant Indigenous socioecologies, spreading across the landscape of Australia via the vehicle of 'commodity

frontiers.' In the thesis I trace the process of invasion empirically, and the production of cheap nature at the frontiers of wool, coal, and sugar.

In exploring the internal relations of these frontiers through space and time we find them bound within the same totality, defined by dialectics of appropriation and exploitation, of crisis and expansion, of cheapness and of great cost. Put simply, the thesis grapples with the political and analytical challenge of the Capitalocene; it looks to contribute to its undoing through a retelling of the history of the invasion of this continent, and an apprehension of the nature of capitalism. Through a history of commodity frontiers, we begin to appreciate capitalism as a socioecology of crisis. In this, we discover how historical materialism, especially in its eco-socialist and world-ecology contributions, render legible the production of nature and socio-ecological crisis in Australia. I hope that this possibly-polemic approach might challenge economic historians locally, regionally and globally to consider how their work contributes to the shared task of undoing the Capitalocene.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was supported by the Research Training Program Stipend Scholarship at the University of Sydney, funded by the Australian Government. I would like to acknowledge the enormous contribution to the work, and to my own intellectual development, of my two supervisors – Professor Adam David Morton and Dr Gareth Bryant. Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Sydney, as part of the Wiley - The University of Sydney agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

## ORCID

Matthew D. J. Ryan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7986-2919>

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