Muleteers and Cart-Drivers:
The Dynamics of Capitalism in the Rural Global South.

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Abstract: This paper is about the ways in which rural communities reacted towards programs of land reform in the nineteenth-century. It speaks to a global history by comparing two very different contexts. Land reform in Indian Berar meant equalization and homogenization in land tenure, and a transfer of power from local elites to the colonial government; in the Ottoman Empire, the reforms intended to unify practice were negotiated locally between elites at various levels, different regional forces producing diverse outcomes. Despite these differences in the establishment of property, the repertoire of actions developed by peasant societies at this historical juncture remains very similar. The implication is that despite the differences in the transition to capitalism, this moment of history can still be apprehended in terms of a unique dynamic operating on a global scale. This paper attempts to do that from the vantage point of those peasants who, rather than work the land, and owning one or a few draft animals, made their livelihood in the transport of goods and persons. Beginning with the mule drivers of Ottoman Lebanon and ox-cart drivers of Indian Berar, the argument broadens to bring Chinese rickshaw pullers and Latin-American gauchos into the story. While land reform in those various contexts was articulated very differently, it still produced very similar economic pressures, which these agents, by the nature of their trade, perceived and acted on ahead of others. Land reform is most often thought of as a process that makes markets. Paving the way for direct taxation and commercial credit, it is perceived as opening the countryside to global capital and tying it into the global market. What this picture leaves out is the local economy that comes undone when the reforms divert resources for the benefit of global capital. By smuggling, these actors fought to preserve a local economy killed by state policies and the barriers to entry inherent in the new scale of production and marketing. They also fought against a new precariousness that arose when the diversity of articles available for the peasants’ daily consumption diminished.
1. Introduction

This paper is about the ways in which rural communities reacted towards programs of land reform in the nineteenth century. It speaks to a global history by comparing two very different contexts: the Ottoman Empire and colonial India. The most compelling pushback against a global-history approach comes from postcolonial historiography. Authors affiliated with the Subaltern Studies group assert that capitalism in the colonial world turned out fundamentally different from the model presented in “Western theories” because the rule of the colonial elite amounted, in Ranajit Guha’s famous phrase, to “dominance without hegemony,” where hegemony is defined as reliance on consent rather than coercion. This paper argues that despite the differences in elite initiatives for the establishment of property, the repertoire of actions developed by peasant societies at this historical juncture remains very similar. The implication is that despite the differences in the transition to capitalism, this moment of history can still be apprehended in terms of a unique dynamic operating on a global scale.

The first part of this paper draws on the existing literature to describe the long-drawn development of reforms in the Ottoman Empire, with an eye on the Lebanese mountain. This rough sketch will highlight the details that matter for a contrast with the swift and efficient transition effected upon the colonization of Indian Berar. Set against these contrasts, the remainder of the paper describes very similar forms of rural resistance across both contexts through a very specific lens: the vantage point of those peasants who, rather than work the land, and owning one or a few draft animals, made their livelihood in the transport of goods and persons. Beginning with the mule drivers of Ottoman Lebanon and ox-cart drivers of Indian Berar, the argument broadens to bring Chinese rickshaw pullers and Latin-American gauchos into the story. While land reform in those various contexts was articulated very differently, it still produced very similar economic pressures, which these agents, by the nature of their trade, perceived and acted on ahead of others — and which can be brought together into the fold of a global history of capitalism.

2. Land Tenure in the Early Nineteenth Century

The history of land reform in the Ottoman Empire is a field of adamant contestation not least because the subject often plays into the broader “West and the rest” debate. An earlier literature had held that the majority of agricultural land in the empire was miri or state-owned in an absolute sense until the 1858 Land Code, which finally made purchases of miri land possible. Historians arguing against that narrative are far from agreeing among themselves. Some have presented Ottoman reform as a belated measure finally giving legal expression to effectively private rights to land developed over two centuries. Alternatively, the Land Code of 1858 is described as an effort to dissolve tribal and village community and reestablish state

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3 Thenceforth referred to as “the Mountain.”
control over land administration, which was eroded as of the seventeenth century.\(^6\) In a way, a more recent literature reconciles these divergent views. Perhaps inspired by critical legal theory, definitely cognizant of the dissonance between written law and practical application, it highlights nuances in the processes and degrees to which private property in land took shape across the empire. It also offers an alternative whereby Ottoman reforms are neither a failed attempt at the creation of modern private property on the Western model, nor a simple imposition by the dynamics of global capital on an otherwise reactive Ottoman state, nor a reaction by that state against the dynamics of global capital. Rather than treating the Land Code of 1858 “as bearing unitary meaning and intent,” Martha Mundi and Richard Saumarez move beyond legal formalism to address a much more complex reality, where the social application and political practice of law are fields of negotiation among different actors imbued with subjectivity and divergent motivations, and where legal vocabularies emanating from within the Ottoman tradition itself get contested within that same tradition, and change over time.\(^7\) This casts the nineteenth-century Tanzimat as less of a watershed. Nonetheless, for the sake of an orderly narrative within the page limit, we will start there.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, most agricultural land in the Ottoman Empire was miri, or officially belonging to the imperial government. Peasants enjoyed usufruct as long as they paid their taxes. This land could be converted to private (mülk and vakıf) if that served the public interest – if it meant the broaching of previously uncultivated land, or the support of religious or educational institutions. Even this right of ownership, however, although inheritable and entitling its owner to rent, was not absolute. A layering of claims on the land, equally legitimate and mostly inalienable, stemmed from usufruct rights and additions of terraces, trees, and buildings.\(^8\) The state collected its claims largely through iltizam arrangements – a claim to specific state revenue farmed out to an individual, the multazim, for a fixed period of time, in compensation for state service. These tax farmers operated within a hierarchical provincial power network that ultimately answered to a judicial, financial, and military central administration.\(^9\)

The Mountain, in the words of Engin Akarlı, “was linked to this network, but peripherally so, since its so-called muqata’jis were able to establish themselves more firmly and autonomously” than multazims elsewhere.\(^10\) A muqata’ji’s claim to authority stemmed largely from society rather than sanction from his superior within that power network. He had an independent claim to the control of military and human resources in his estates, and had the support of the peasantry, who worked “in quasi-feudal dependence” on him. As was the case in other mountainous areas, the labor invested in the building and maintenance of terraces, as well as the upkeep of trees or vines over a number of seasons, and the need for fertilizers, meant that communal farming or land rotation was less frequent than in other regions. These factors provided the objective basis for the peasantry’s support of an entrenched leadership, whose moral and political authority guaranteed long-term security.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) *Idem*, 15.

\(^10\) *Ibid*.

3. Global Commerce and Land Reform

Land tenure relationships in the Ottoman Empire were disrupted at the turn of the nineteenth century due to the commercialization of the countryside. Tobacco became the principal export, going mostly to Egypt, where it was rolled into cigarettes. The Egyptian cigarette became a sought-after article of luxury in Europe, and tobacco prices rose steadily throughout the nineteenth century. This soon became the richest sector in agriculture, and some rural regions rapidly specialized in tobacco cultivation in response to foreign demand, namely Salonika, the shores of the Adriatic and of the Black Sea, and particularly Latakia on the Syrian coast. Tobacco was also grown in the Mountain, particularly in the region of Kura and in the southern-most parts; but the most important export of that region was silk. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, demand for the Mountain’s raw silk from the cities of the Syrian interior, France, and Egypt increased significantly. Maritime trade developed fast along the Syrian coast, and mulberry trees, alongside other cash crops such as vines and olives, expanded at the expense of grains and the varied products of subsistence farming. By the early nineteenth-century, the Mountain imported up to 65 percent of its grain consumption from Egypt or the Syrian interior.

The growing capacity of this economy to generate cash soon attracted the attention of the state and of elites at all levels, who fought for control of this trade and the profit it generated by championing competing political projects for the region. In a more developed version of this project, this narrative can serve to frame various events from the period often presented separately in terms of parochial identity politics and confessional tensions: the revolt, in 1820, of peasants in the northern areas refusing to pay additional taxes imposed by a new provincial...
governor in Akka; the mounting tensions among the *muqata'ajis*; the expansion of the Maronite Church’s land possessions and influence, and its new role as the mouthpiece of the grieved peasants of the North. The biggest contender for control over the growing Syrian-Egyptian trade, however, was the separatist provincial governor of Egypt, Mehmet Ali. Ibrahim, Mehmet Ali’s son, occupied Syria in 1832. Under his rule, Beirut rose to prominence among the ports of the Syrian coast, and the Beirut-Zahle road was opened to link the interior to the port. This expanded markets and credit to the peasants, encouraging the shift to planting mulberry trees, olive trees, and grapevine, as well as tobacco. Most importantly, with the spread of sericulture and demographic growth, land increased in value. At the same time, the land tenure and sharecropping systems restricted the peasantry’s access to land, which was horded by the elite and the church in the form of private trusts referred to as *waqf* or *vakıf*. This period again saw peasant rebellions, in Hawran in 1837-1838, and in the northern parts of Mount Lebanon in 1840.

The real threat to Ibrahim’s project, however, was not this subaltern resistance, but the retaliation of a new Sultan in Istanbul. In 1839, the latter promulgated the *Tanzimat*, a regime of reforms promising fair taxation, an end to trade restrictions, security of property and life, and the equitable treatment of all subjects before the law. The thrust of the Gülhane rescript, the *Hatt-ı Hümayun* of 1839, and of the programmatic directive that followed it in the *nizamname* of 1840, was to remove the tax farmer, cast as parasitic, so that more justly assessed taxation develops the wealth of the productive households of the empire. While the reforms were framed within a discourse about protecting the peasantry against excessive exploitation, in practice, they promised to disentangle land from the web of layered rights that prohibited its commercialization, so that it could serve as collateral. The production of cash crops for a global market necessitated credit, and credit required collateral. In that sense, the reform program announced in 1839 catered to the interests of European industrialists, creditors and financiers, who would profit from that financing and that commerce. The edict also stated: “Everything that can impede commerce or agriculture shall be abolished. To accomplish these objects means shall be sought to profit by the science, the art, and the funds of Europe.” Thus it promised to open the region up to European capital. Effectively, European states, in support of their own capitalists, soon backed the Sultan: in 1841, Ibrahim was pushed back by a joint British, Austrian, and Ottoman campaign. In this account, the Land Code and the reforms more generally cannot be separated from the 1838 trade conventions signed by the Ottoman state with the British, French, Russians, and Austrians, inaugurating a period of free trade. This open-door policy gave Europeans and their local associates an advantage over other local merchants, landed notables, and artisans, who became dependent on the former for credit and business. In this context, the land reforms are an episode in a larger story of elites contesting control over resources through competing political projects and in various shifting alliances.

4. The Content of the Reforms

Given the government’s limited administrative capacities, a first “great attempt” to carry out the reforms to the letter foundered as early as 1843 in the face of vested interests. The

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20 Mundi and Saumarez, *Governing Property, Making the Modern State*, 41, 44.
government then turned to cooperation with the middling elites. In the mid-1840s, it was decided that *iltizam* and *timar* holdings would only be abolished or annulled after their holders passed away. The land would then be reissued as *tapu*, a permanent lease of state-owned arable land, creating landholders with usufruct rights who then rented their land out to cultivators.\(^{23}\) The principles enunciated in the 1839 rescript were not stale, however. In the Mountain, for instance, the tax-farmers who had been ousted by Ibrahim for siding with the Ottomans returned to reclaim estates they considered their own, only to be faced by peasants who refused to be considered tenants. Perceptions of proprietorship were already changing, but they were still being disputed. As the lords were Druze and the peasantry Maronite, the conflict turned into a bloody sectarian war in 1841. As a solution, the central government split the region into two *qaimaqamiyyas*, or districts. It attempted a cadastral survey but was blocked by the *muqata’jis*, who fought among themselves and against the peasantry to assert control over as much land as possible.\(^{24}\)

The *nizamname* of 1840 was developed in the late 1840s in laws that would culminate in the 1858 Land Code (*Kanun-i Arazı*), in the 1859 *Tapu Nizamnamesi*. These laws made holdings divisible, abandoning the Ottoman tradition of the indivisible “cultivator’s lot;” they affirmed a holder’s right to rent out his land or lend it (these were valid means for ensuring its cultivation, the holder’s obligation) and by allowing sales to a lender that would be reversed upon full repayment, they introduced a form of mortgage on *miri* land, despite formally maintaining that *miri* land could not be pledged for debt. Usufruct rights to *miri* land thus came to be passed down as property rather than office; for all practical purposes, they became an estate.\(^{25}\)

For all these changes, it was only as of the 1870s that the relations of persons to property began to be modified on the ground. Until the laws of 1871, taxes were imposed collectively on the village, the village administration being then responsible to distribute them within; and it was not until 1871 that survey teams were mandated to enter the villages, carry out a *yoklama* or roll-call, and update all property titles. Prior to that, the laws of the 1840s offered the option of obtaining new, standardized certificates of landholding, and even when this option turned into an obligation in 1860, the initiative rested on the holder of land and provincial officials, and surveys did not intrude into the countryside.\(^{26}\)

Regulation issued as of 1871 no longer referred to *miri* land separately, considering it alongside *mülk* and *vakıf* land under the all-encompassing category of “immovable property” (*emval-i gayr-i menkule*), and all these became subject to a uniform system of registration. With time, a single property tax, the *vergi resmi*, came to replace the variety of particular customary (örfl) taxes. The administration of property and persons (*emlak ve nüfus*), responsible for the registers of population, of property titles, and of crop and *vergi* tax, was introduced at the *vilayet* level and then at the more local *kaza* level. The individuation of tax responsibility was largely achieved by the end of the nineteenth century.\(^{27}\)

In the Mountain, the *muqata’jis* having imposed harsh tenancy conditions on the peasantry, a revolt began in Kisrawan in 1858-1859, the peasants expulsing the Khazin *muqata’jis* and taking over their property. The peasants further South were soon moved by the same spirit—here however, the peasants were Maronite while the lords were Druze, and the strife soon turned sectarian, the European powers each intervening on behalf of a sect. This was resolved

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\(^{26}\) *Idem*, 48-51.

\(^{27}\) *Idem*, 43, 50-1.
with an organic statute called the “Règlement for the Reorganization of Mount Lebanon,” instituting the mutasarrifiyya ruled by a centrally-appointed Christian governor in consultation with a locally elected council. Each village elected a sheikh, and those sheikhs elected the councilors. That council had the power to veto tax increases, and had the prerogative of internally distributing the centrally imposed tax burden. A “rather simplistic and rudimentary” survey to count the population as well as measure and assess the value of cultivated land and income-yielding buildings, begun in 1861, was completed in 1869. This survey provided the basis for the property tax, which remained fixed until the mandate period.  

5. The Role of the Regional Elite

The Tanzimat made regional elites in the Ottoman Empire integral to the reform effort. In fact, the reforms were effected by regional councils bringing together local “quasi-elected” elites and central government officials. Local elites also came to populate the newly created administrative structures. The negotiation of the legal categories and terms of land registration occurred at the level of the district and then in every village between representatives of the central administration, a regional elite, and actors in productive systems on the ground, who shaped different outcomes in different local political economies. Mundi and Saumarez thus refer to a “political administration of property.”

Different patterns emerged. In some villages, land came to be registered in individual plots on the ground; in others, all the land beyond the village site itself was allocated to holders as shares in big blocks defined by borders and size. The latter system reflected anterior administrative practice:

_The documents concern the village as a whole, the fiscal evaluation of land and the identification of right-holders rests with village headmen and regional leaders [...] the village contains both persons and lands described to the state official but without definition of the internal allocation of land to persons; and the fiscal value of land is fixed as an average across all lands of the village._

This allowed periodic land redistribution to continue. The only innovation was the definition of a number of shares in the blocks of village land and their distribution among individuals. A share entitled its holder to land of an average quality and entailed the payment of an equal portion of the tax. This practice was deeply connected with its antecedent of block imposition of taxes on the village as a unit, and perpetuated “systems of production entailing networks beyond the individual owner [...] , albeit modified by the freezing of the quantum of right, its assignment to individuals, and subsequent devolution on the model of inheritance.”

With time, many peasants in the silk areas of Syria, Mount Lebanon in particular, became small landowners. Independent of the landed elite, they fell prey to the extortions of merchants and

29 Starting with the Vilayet Law of 1864, a series of laws to 1871 reorganized the hierarchy of administrative units, introducing the post of muhtar, a functionary confirmed by the district kaimakam and a council of village elders. In 1877, municipal administration was introduced. See Mundi and Saumarez, _Governing Property, Making the Modern State_, 43, 45, 50.  
30 Idem, 3, 7.  
31 Idem, 75.  
32 Idem, 235.
brokers. Forced sales in compensation for unpaid debt or tax arrears were introduced in the empire in a law of 1862 and developed over the early 1870s, but the peasant’s own house and the miri fields necessary for the sustenance of his household were excluded. In any case, as long as the social networks governing production on the land were not broken, commercial capital was very weary of foreclosing on land and actually assuming ownership. Merchants and ex-tax farmers did ended up obtaining title to whole villages when the villagers, fearing conscription and taxation, fictitiously registered their lands in the name of a regional leader, thereby becoming tenant farmers to tribal leaders and townsman on lands they formerly cultivated for their own. Although the Land Code asserted the awarding of rights to cultivators, merchants, persons with connections, and those with the wealth to hire scribes could bias the process.33

6. Comparison to Colonial Berar

In the pre-colonial Berar village, production was organized within the balutedari system under the social and political control of a dominant family or clan. As in the Ottoman case, the system did not define property in land but rights on the land: It was based on a master-servant relationship rooted in the caste hierarchy, whereby the balutedar had the right to a share of the product of the lower-ranked asami.34 Here, reform resulted more directly from the global market’s incursion: the British takeover in 1853 was partly motivated by manufacturers in England worried about the disruption of their imports of raw cotton from the Americas with the eminent threat of the Civil War. The balutedari system of self-sufficient villages, being geared towards subsistence farming, was swiftly replaced with the khaledari system, where the khaledar was a government-registered tenant paying revenue directly to the government.35

In contrast to their protracted character in the Ottoman Empire, Laxman Satya conveys the abruptness of the reforms in Berar: “On the spot assessments were made with strongmen of the village. The responsibility of revenue payment was taken away from the village as a whole and imposed on individuals [...].”36 Village representatives were responsible for collection, but each individual was held accountable for his own tax. The local elite was completely sidelined. The Berar Commission executing the reforms consisted of British civil and military officers, the only Indians it incorporated being the village headmen (patel) and accountants (patwari) in the lowest ranks. After the 1860s, the services of the patel and patwari were disposed of too, when it was found that they were undervaluing the richer fields. In fact, equalization was the order of the day in Berar, and the colonizer had the technological capability and administrative capacity to accurately measure and equalize. As of 1857, elaborate survey and settlement operations, headed by British officers, advanced brashly, leading to outright revolt in the same year. Nonetheless, the fields were delineated on the ground with narrow strips of fallow land, earth mounds, or erected stones.37

In both the Indian and the Ottoman contexts, several new taxes came to be imposed. While the amount of tax imposed by the central Ottoman government on Mount Lebanon was fixed, the local governing council raised a bazar tax, a sheep and goats tax, road charges and a vehicle tax, the stamp tax, as well as salt and tobacco annuities. The new taxes in Berar

35 Idem, 48, 55.
36 Idem, 55.
37 Idem, 56-63, 84-5.
included cotton and minerals taxes, stamp duties, and a forest tax. In both contexts, the increased taxation, along with demographic growth and pressure on the land, led to severe soil exhaustion and fragmentation in ownership, which in a vicious circle raised debt levels even more, accentuating soil exhaustion and fragmentation. The consequences were a massive wave of emigration and the wide spread of sub tenancy. 38

Still, the situation in colonial India was harsher than the one in the Ottoman Empire. Like the Ottoman peasant, the khatedar had the right to sublet his land as long as it remained committed to cultivation. In contrast, however, the Indian peasant who failed to pay his dues forfeited his right to the soil, trees, and buildings on the land. 39 Although the Ottoman Land Code ruled out village rights to land, it did protect certain collective rights, albeit asserting only established custom as their basis, without providing a mechanism for their legal definition: roads, places of worship, space for cattle and carts, woodland, threshing grounds, and pasture were to be protected from private encroachment. 40 By contrast, the Berar Land Revenue Code privatized grazing land, pasturage, threshing floors, storage, and standing room for cattle. Trees, brushwood, jungle, and other natural products became government property, to be disposed of from occasionally by public auction. The Indian peasant was suddenly forced to pay for fodder and fuel. Grass and firewood being no longer freely available, the manure that had fertilized the soil came to be used as fuel, which exacerbated soil exhaustion. 41

On the eve of the First World War, land within the Ottoman village was highly fragmented after generations of divisions among heirs. 42 In Berar, “the share of each cultivator barely sufficed for the support of his family.” 43 Still, famines hit Berar as early as 1868-1869 and then 1871-1872, whereas they only hit Lebanon on the eve of the WWI. 44 The question then arises: were the reforms in the Ottoman Empire and those in Berar fundamentally different phenomena? Or was the difference a matter of degree? How significant is the contrast between reforms undertaken in negotiations between various levels of local, entrenched elites, and reforms dictated directly by the freehand of global capital? The next section attempts to study both contexts within a single framework, capturing similar economic pressures from the vantage point of the mobile margin of peasant society.

7. Muleteers and Bullock-Cart Drivers as Epitomes of Peasant Resistance

The Lebanese mule drivers’ role as a mobilizing force in the various peasant revolts to 1860 has gone unnoticed by historians. The leader of the revolt of 1858, Tanyos Shahin, was not a peasant, but a farrier turned muleteer. 45 Mansur Butrus Abu Antoine and Butrus Tannus, captured during the same uprising by the local Khazin muqata’jis and beaten until blood “ran down their bodies as if it were water,” were the muleteer of the village of Rayfun, and the muleteer of the village of ‘Ajaltun. 46 Appearances such as these in the written record become compelling when one considers how muleteers were consecrated in Lebanese literature. In

39 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 70.
40 Mundi and Saumarez, Governing Property, Making the Modern State, 46.
41 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 47, 78-82.
43 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 77.
44 Aaron Tylor Brand, “Lives darkened by calamity: Enduring the Famine of World War I in Lebanon and Western Syria” (Ph.D. diss.: American University of Beirut, 2014); Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 73.
1904, Ameen Rihani, an Arab nationalist and a major figure in the emigration (mahjar) literary movement, produced an Arabic novel entitled *The Muleteer and the Priest*. It told the story of an encounter between the two characters in a public carriage carrying them from Beirut up the Mountain. On the way, in the course of conversation, the muleteer Abu Tannus gets carried into a rant, accusing all clergymen of hypocrisy, exploitation, and theft. The wealthy Pastor Yusef is ultimately convinced. Consumed with remorse, he resigns his privileged position with the Maronite Patriarch to join Abu Tannus in his peregrinations, walking with him behind his mules, distributing flour to the poor. The German translation was subtitled: *Die Geschichte Einer Verwandlung* (The Story of a Transformation). The cleric’s transformation, which stands for the wider social transformation that the author hopes for, is brought about by the muleteer. The factual basis notwithstanding, what warrants the author’s choosing of a muleteer to be the agent of social change? The peasant revolt of 1858 was the last one before the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. As of that date, rural societies expressed their opposition by acquiescing to smuggling. The Lebanese muleteers were central to this daily and individual form of resistance. This led them to occupy a very special place in local lore.

Despite the differences between the Ottoman and Indian contexts in terms of the process of reform and the actors involved therein, the peasantries of Mount Lebanon and Indian Berar reacted in similar ways to the onslaught of the state and global capital: they turned to banditry. Also, the actors leading that resistance shared surprisingly similar profiles. The remainder of this paper considers side by side the Lebanese muleteers and the Banjara bullock-cart drivers of Berar. The latter were “the carriers of goods and services in the Deccan plateau. In addition to being traders, they hired carts to other traders and merchants.” Similarly, in a dictionary of trades compiled by the Damascene sheikh al-Qasimi and his son around the year 1900, a muleteer, or *mukari*, was defined as the owner of mounts who transported people or merchandise from place to place. “He either rented out his services, or engaged in commerce himself [...].” As of the 1860s, just as the Lebanese muleteers engaged in smuggling as a form of resistance, so too did the Banjara take to dacoity and highway banditry. Also, the actors leading that resistance shared surprisingly similar profiles. The factual parallel is also hinted at in the novel itself: we are told that Abu Tannus hated clergymen and engaged in commerce himself [...].”

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49 The novel was translated into German as *Der Eseltreiber und der Priester* by Ursula Assaf and Simon Yussuf Assaf, and appeared in three editions (Geneva: Patmos, 1996; Dusselrof and Zurich: Patmos, 2003; and Mannheim: Patmos, 2011). Excerpts of the latter can be accessed online at www.patmos.de/der-eseltreiber-und-der-priester-p-8038.html (accessed on December 1, 2015).

50 The publisher of the German translation claims that Rihani’s enchanting tale is based on a true story, which at the time caused great stir in Lebanon. The publisher’s description of the novel can be accessed online at www.patmos.de/der-eseltreiber-und-der-priester-p-8038.html (accessed on December 1, 2015). The factual parallel is also hinted at in the novel itself: we are told that Abu Tannus hated clergymen and had numerous stand-offs with them, including one that took place during a lecture given by the author of the novel, on the evening of February 9, 1901. See Rihani, *Al-Mukari*, 15. An account by Rihani of his travels around the Mountain, published posthumously, showed that Rihani had toured on mule-back. He was guided by a muleteer who certainly had a lot to do with the novel at hand, written a couple of years after the journey. See Ameen Rihani, *Qalb Lubnan [The Heart of Lebanon]* (Beirut: Dar al-Rihani, 1970).


This paper argues that both the Banjara bullock-cart drivers and the Lebanese muleteers can be studied as instances of Hobsbawm’s social bandits. According to Hobsbawm, banditry as a mass phenomenon is symptomatic of rural societies resisting the increasing control of states and the full development of capitalism:

*This is what links the semi-nomadic economy of clan herdsmen, who traditionally supplied the major source of bandits in the Balkans and Anatolia, the free gauchos of the nineteenth-century Argentine plains resisting the city and bourgeois property laws jointly with their rural chieftains, and the twentieth-century Colombian coffee-growers protecting “their” bandits. All resist the encroaching power of outside authority and capital.*

Importantly, the bandits that count as “social” are those that remained part of the “peasant moral universe.” The identification of the muleteer with peasant society is established at the outset of Rihani’s novel. When the character of Abu Tannus is introduced, the narrator states: “He is one of the peasants of Mount Lebanon.” Then he corrects himself: “I was rash and general, saying he is one of the peasants. In fact his trade is distinct from farming and agriculture. […] He is one of the muleteers […]” It can be surmised that muleteers are peasants whose inherited share of land was so small as to be insufficient to their sustenance, who thus sold it and engaged in transport and petty commerce. In contrast, the Banjaras were a migratory people, distinct from the settled peasantry. Still, Berar was a central transit point in the Deccan plateau, and its peasantry was familiar with the Banjaras. The latter took quarters in the villages of Berar throughout the monsoon season, and paused there throughout the year, resting their animals in preparation for another journey. In exchange for the hospitality of the local peasantry, the Banjaras herded their cattle in the open fields, thereby fertilizing them. “The Banjaras “communicated with the village at the social, cultural, and commercial level.” They also brought the peasants the varied articles of their daily consumption. Thus Satya speaks of “a close amity between the people and the Banjaras.” As the bullock cart entered the village, children ran behind it and jumped on board. The familiarity evoked in that scene is an indication of the organic relation of the village community to the cart driver.

8. Why Rural Transport?

These activist muleteers and cart drivers are reminiscent of Eric Hobsbawm and Joan Scott’s “Political Shoemakers.” The latter article, which inspired this section of the paper, starts with a quote from a Frenchman writing in the 1850s: “Is there a riot? Does an orator emerge from the crowd? It is without doubt a cobbler who has come to make a speech to the people.” According to Hobsbawm and Scott, the shoemaker’s activism “was clearly tied to the material conditions of his trade and from it stemmed his ability to be a village politician.” What is it about rural transport that inclined its workers towards militantism? Hobsbawm and Scott note that their subject was self-employed, mobile, in contact with large numbers of humble people,

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56 *Idem*, 172.
59 *Idem*, 263.
60 *Idem*, 249.
62 Hobsbawm and Scott, “Political Shoemakers,” 98.
and independent from patrons, wealthy clients and employers. All these attributes are equally true of workers in rural transport, who owned means of production. A study of rickshaw men who led popular revolts in republican China notes that these individuals were “freer and more independent than many workers,” and thus acquired a reputation for combativeness. Flexible and mobile, the Banjaras were described as “hardy, frank and independent people.” In the words of the German publisher of Rihani’s novel, Abu Tannus comes across as “a cheerful, direct person who does not conceal his views.”

The Lebanese muleteer, explains the narrator of Rihani’s novel, is innately intelligent because he spends most of his time in contemplative solitude, in the tranquility of mountains, valleys and plains. Precisely because of this solitude, one can imagine the muleteers and cart drivers to have been open and ready for conversation when in company. The muleteer, according to Rihani, collected many anecdotes with which he entertained his passengers. Where the muleteers met each other at the inns, the Banjaras crossed roads at markets and fairs. On those occasions, these actors could share the news of the day glanced while roaming different parts. “Trading in goods and services from bazar to bazar kept the Banjaras in close touch with the local populace and trade.” In fact, Tanyos Shahin, the leader of the peasant revolt of 1858, had traveled particularly widely for the times. As he often worked for the missionary school in Rayfun, the Lazarist monks had obtained for him credentials from the French consulate that allowed him to pass internal borders. Travel was equally important in the character construction of Rihani’s muleteer, for it allowed Abu Tannus to reckon that poverty was not a circumstantial problem besetting a number of individuals, but a society-wide, structural issue:

Running behind my mules, roaming the mountains from the south end to the north, I realized that the rich among the people were very few, countable on the fingers of two hands. And I realized that the people, consisting of sharecroppers and muleteers and peasants, did not own anything. Where are the mountain’s goods then? In whose hands are they? In whose coffers is the money accumulating? Who is eating the harvest?

Perpetual witnesses joined through their work to the basic rhythms of rural life, ever present on the street and at markets, rural transport workers had a privileged perspective of society at large.

More generally, travel expands the universe of possibilities; it certainly fosters a readiness to accept new ideas. In his continual peregrinations, the muleteer met people from all ranks and discovered many villages. Tanyos Shahin, it turns out, learned a lot from his discussions with the Lazarist missionaries as he drove them back and forth. Not only could he repeat French republican ideas of social justice; but he also ended up “half-literate,” and by some accounts

63 Idem, 103.
65 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 247, 259.
66 From the description of the novel on the publishers’ website, patmos.de/der-eseltreiber-und-der-priester-p-8038.html, accessed on December 1, 2015.
67 Rihani, Al-Mukari, 8-10.
68 Idem, 13-4.
69 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 254.
70 Makdisi, “Corrupting the Sublime Sultanate,” 194.
71 Rihani, Al-Mukari, 36-7.
72 Idem, 10, 14.
even spoke some Italian. In that he resembled the rickshaw men, who were marginally literate, and knew “a smattering of foreign phrases for the tourist trade.” Similarly, mingling freely with people from all across the sub-continent, the Banjaras spoke many languages, and acquired the ability to communicate with very different people with equal ease.

More importantly, since he was likely to be his clients’ creditor, the muleteer was probably linked with them by bonds of confidence, just like the Banjaras were “trustfully employed […] by ever suspicious Indian merchants, traders, and moneylenders.” A person in this position “had license to express his opinions, which there was no reason to distrust.” The muleteer or the cart driver had conversations with his numerous clients individually rather than in big groups, on the lonesome journey between villages. At the same time, he could always find an audience, and like the rickshaw pullers, had the power to spread rumors and to move individual grievances into the public realm. For all these reasons, he was strategically well placed to circulate ideas and perhaps even mobilize for action.

Briefly put, the seclusion of the muleteer or cart driver during his journeys threw him on his intellectual resources, and his trekking exposed him to the ideas of a wider world. He had the luxury of thinking, watching, and conversing intimately with persons from all walks of life, even while at work. He was well informed, open-minded, and articulate. His economic independence combined with his organic connection to peasant society made him a plausible spokesman. What justified his banditry, to his own eyes and to his community?

9. Smuggling as Social Banditry

The previous section argued that in both contexts under consideration, the purpose (or, at least, consequence) of land reform was to encourage the production of cash crops for the global market. The taxes entailed and the debt that ensued forced the peasant to take advantage of the economies of scale inherent in exports. Cotton in India, as well as tobacco and silk in Lebanon, were only viable investments if sold to the larger interests. Land reforms were merely one of the legal innovations working alongside technical innovations, such as railroads, to exterminate the local market networks. While these forces provided the global market with a vital primary material, they also meant the dying out of the local economy. Necessarily, the actors to apprehend this trend first and foremost were those working in rural transport.

Speaking of Indian Berar, Satya states:

The region in pre-colonial times exhibited the vibrancy of buyers and sellers […]. In this type of a mobile society the Banjaras were a very important factor. […] By the time of colonial takeover the Banjaras had developed a complex network of fairs and bazars along which their carts moved.

While bullocks and buffalos moved well in the wetlands, the Banjaras used horses and mules in the dry lands. Where their carts could not make it, such as in the region above the ghats, the Banjaras “slung” the merchandise “pannier-fashion on the backs of camels and donkeys.”

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73 Kerr, Lebanon in the Last Years of Feudalism, 22; Yazbak, Al-Judhur al-tarikhiyya, 268.
74 Strand, Rickshaw Beijing, 41, 57.
75 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 247, 249, 252.
76 Idem, 247.
77 Hobsbawm and Scott, “Political Shoemakers,” 103-4.
78 Strand, Rickshaw Beijing, 63.
79 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 260.
Banjaras thus established the link between the forest dwellers and the inhabitants of the plains, supplying the needs of each from the other. “The Banjara caravans came from all directions heavily laden with the needs of the populace” at every village fair and weekly Bazar in pre-colonial Berar.80 Similarly, the Lebanese muleteers exchanged the mountain’s fruits and olive oil against the wheat of Hawran in the south of modern-day Syria, as well as textiles and food bought in the cities along the way.81

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, the transport infrastructure developed quickly. In the aim of opening the country to the world market, the colonial administration built roads ahead of the railway.82 In this aspect the situation was similar to the one in the Ottoman Empire. The Beirut-Damascus road, linking the hinterland across the mountain range to the rapidly developing port, was completed in 1863. In place of the three days’ journey on horseback from Damascus to Beirut across the mountain, it offered a daily coach service that took a mere thirteen hours. At the turn of the century, a railroad connecting the two cities through the mountain (quite literally, by a tunnel) made the journey even shorter, and exponentially increased the transport capacity. Built and run by foreign capital, that same line extended to the grain-producing region of Hawran.83

This had been an important route for the muleteers. Modern transport not only put rural transport workers out of business. It also undid local trade networks more generally. The Damascene sheikh al-Qasimi records in his dictionary:

> A very frequent trade before the railroad passed through, there used to be no less than two hundred muleteers in Damascus on any single day, or more. [...] This was very lucrative to the people, merchants, grain vendors, fodder vendors and innkeepers. All this has come to be missed in Damascus; this trade has declined infinitely, and those who practice it have become very few in numbers, God only knows the reason why, there is no Lord but He.84

These developments parallel the ones in Berar, where “the diversity of products available at [...] fairs gave a tremendous degree of choice to the people in articles of daily consumption which became scarcer [...].” 85 According to Satya:

> The railway in Berar primarily transported cotton but the Banjara bullock carts carried both cotton and grains. After the demise of Banjaras the cotton was transported by European firms and moneylenders in their own carts. The grain supply became more localized as the ‘old grain carriers of former years before the days of the railway’ disappeared from the roads and became cultivators. With this disappearance many small articles of daily consumption which were hitherto available to the village population were no longer available.86

In short, with the land reforms, resources converged towards the railway system that thrust them into the global market. Where global capital did not have to contend against a local elite, the transition effected by the forces of supply and demand was hastened with further

81 Al-Qasimi, Qamus al-Sina’at, 466.
82 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 57-8.
84 Al-Qasimi, Qamus al-Sina’at, 466.
85 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 256.
86 Idem, 264.
regulation. “The only way to channelize cotton to the world market was by shaping domestic demand.” Control of the cotton trade meant control of the fairs and bazars where most of the cotton traded hands – for which purpose the “Berar fairs Law” was devised. A “Thugee and Dacoity Department” soon followed, as well as a “pass-system” requiring the Banjaras to obtain a pass from the colonial authorities which they then had to show at every police station along their route; “the people who had hitherto moved freely all over Berar were now designated limited zones in which they could move” – all measures aimed at further limiting internal commerce, thereby speeding up the death of local industry.87

If dacoity was a sign of protest and anger on the part of these actors, smuggling was an effort on their part to stay in business. Yet that same activity benefited the peasantry more broadly. During the famine that preceded WWI in Lebanon, when the Turkish army was requisitioning foodstuffs, Druze muleteers in bands of fifteen to twenty undertook expeditions to the neighboring Druze mountain of Hawran, from where they smuggled back wheat.88 This was particularly vital to the peasantry when food was scarce.89

The inherent risk of smuggling increased the price of the trafficked food when it was sold in the villages, but it is interesting to note that the mountain smugglers were not regarded with the same social stigma as were the speculators and merchants of the town. [...] The character of the smuggler appears in numerous memoirs and recollections of the period, more often than not in laudatory terms. To some extent, this may have been because they were seen less as parasites seeking to exploit their own people, but rather as intrepid villains cast in the mold of Robin Hood, whose aim was to deceive the hated Turks to supply their own people.90

The social aspect of the muleteers’ smuggling was so unambiguous that it remains engraved today in the oral accounts of a third generation, which proudly relates these adventures as heroic deeds with an “epic quality.” Jammul Mahmud was a Druze muleteer from Mount Lebanon. On one of the smuggling expeditions, his granddaughter recounts, the snow was too deep to cross the mountain through the cedar forest as usual, and the convoy was forced to take the main Beirut-Damascus road. At the point that is highest in altitude, the pass of Dahr al-Baydar, in a watch house that still stands today, were stationed Ottoman soldiers who would extort taxes or requisition the grain. Under the cover of night, Jammul crept up to the guard shack, in which the soldiers were huddled around a fire. He cautiously inserted his walking staff through the handles of the double swinging doors, thus locking in the guards temporarily, and the procession of muleteers was able to pass the checkpoint in safety.91

The smuggling not only ensured survival in times of famine; more generally, it perpetuated the “traditional” marketing networks delegitimized by the new. It worked against state monopolies and barriers to entry inherent in the new scale of production and marketing, thus pushing back against the proletarianization of the peasantry. In the 1880s, French and British official reports accused “Druze nomads” of massive tobacco smuggling in and out of

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87 Idem, 260-1, 265-7.
89 Hobsbawm quotes a historian of Italy to the effect that “the rhythm of hunger determined [...] the rhythm of brigandage.” See his Bandits, 10.
91 Ibid.
Lebanon. As the Druze population was entirely settled, and in view of the bands of muleteers involved in wheat smuggling, it is safe to assume that the French reporters had confused these bands of muleteers for nomads. The Ottoman Public Debt Administration estimated that a good third of tobacco consumed in the empire escaped the control of a foreign-owned tobacco Régie during the first five years of operations from 1883. Quataert cited more drastic figures, such as the estimate of an Ottoman employee of the Régie that “official tobacco sales of nearly 6 million kilograms compared poorly with the 12 to 13 million that were sold illegally.” Years onwards, the Régie had to admit, “farmers’ resistance was so powerful that it had prevented the organization from securing its operations in most areas of the empire.”

The smuggling was as beneficial to the peasants as it was to the muleteers. The growers declared less than the surface they actually cultivated and sold the undeclared tobacco to the smugglers, at up to two or three times the Régie’s price. The higher price was considered a form of rectification compensating the cultivators for the loss of income caused by Régie practices. Smuggling also spared the farmer taxes, and shares to the landlord in case he was a sharecropper. The tobacco was then secretly sold in Damascus through the tutunji (tobacco vendor), or through farram al-tatan (literally the tobacco chopper), thereby sustaining local artisans who could not compete against the exporters for their primary material. For these reasons, these muleteers-turned-smugglers were considered men of worth in the peasant community. Tanyos Shahin, the head of the revolt of 1860, was a sort of folk hero.

For Hobsbawm:

The point about social bandits is that they are peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.

The Banjaras relied on extensive kinship networks and group solidarity to escape from village to village in hiding. Similarly, the convoys of muleteers that smuggled grain from Hawran relied on social networks for support. They rested at the houses of relatives and friends in villages along the way.

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94 Quataert, Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance, 19, 21.
95 Idem, 18-9; Thobie, Intérêts et Impérialisme, 187.
96 Al-Qasimi, Qamus al-Sina’at, 66, 337.
98 Kerr, Lebanon in the Last Years of Feudalism, 22.
99 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 256.
100 Hobsbawm, Bandits, 20.
101 Satya, Cotton and Famine in Berar, 253, 256, 271.
Not only was Jammul protected by the village community; he was also considered a leading member. He held the title of *shaykh al-shabab* – “a grassroots type of popular leadership” – literally meaning “the leader of the young men.” 103 As reported by his historians, Tanyos Shahin, too, “spoke with the authority of a man who knew he had the support, or at least the consent, of many of the *ahali* [people] of Kisrawan.” He “derived his authority from a genuinely popular base.” 104 This is why Rihani can envisage his muleteer threatening the pastor with this solidarity:

> And I am not alone. My brothers in poverty are many. And the monks I serviced as a muleteer only get richer as I get poorer. They get fatter as you see me get skinnier. I barely fill my stomach and my children’s, and I find myself indebted to the abbey and the grocer in the town.105

**10. Into the Twentieth Century**

A bandit may accumulate capital. His redistributions were often a price he paid for refuge, arms, or protection. “Unlike other peasants, he acquires wealth and exerts power.” He may secure land and merge with a new bourgeoisie.106 This view has been taken to its extreme by Anton Blok, who insisted that “we should treat brigandage and bandit myth as forces that weaken peasant mobilization.” In Blok’s analysis, if a bandit wants to remain “social,” his only protection is the peasantry, and that is certainly a week source of protection. The bandits that survive, then, are those that place their particular interests ahead of everything else.107

Effectively, Satya notes this interesting fact, which he does not explore at length, as it does not sit squarely with the rebellious resistance attached to the Banjaras: “when a Banjara tanda acquired some degree of material prosperity it preferred to settle down by adopting uppercaste customs, habits, and names.” 108 These actors, small-time merchants, were well placed to take advantage of the transforming economy. Because of his involvement in smuggling, the family of Jammul Mahmud did not suffer from the famine that swept through the mountain during WWI. Jammul’s smuggling not only supported his family and his community, we are told; it also “brought him a moderate degree of prosperity,” and ultimately “allowed him to acquire enough money to purchase land.” 109

As the sight of the muleteers walking behind their animals on the winding mountain roads became less frequent, the figure came to embody the nostalgia of a time that passed. In 1904, Rihani wrote:

> The muleteers and their mules form the railroad that extends into all the regions of the mountain. But the difference is wide between the locomotive of the muleteers and the locomotive of the railroad. If the former kicks, it hurts its owner, but if the latter kicks, it hurts the people on whose expense it lives. The

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104 Makdisi, “Corrupting the Sublime Sultanate,” 194-5, 204.
106 Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 95, 105, 118.
former never complains, and the latter is never content. The former walks silent, and the latter walks in a clattering commotion. The former never tires from work, and the latter always needs a renewal of its commercial strength. The former embodies the natural virtues of animals, and the latter represents the ambitions of the companies established by man.\textsuperscript{110}

Rihani’s contrast of the muleteer and the railroad reflects a deeper concern with the metamorphosis. The literary genre of the Arabic novel, in itself, was the result of a tension between the two principal forces, “variously known as the old and the new, the traditional and the modern […]; more specifically, the encounter with the West, its science and culture, on the one hand, and on the other, the rediscovery and stimulation of the great classical heritage of Arab-Islamic culture.” \textsuperscript{111} Where the new literary form reflected a desire to modernize, resort to the classical heritage or focus on the traditional peasantry could be read as the affirmation of an imagined identity in the face of dissolution in a globalizing world – both on the part of the author and his readers, all members of an emerging middle class.\textsuperscript{112} This was the case in nineteenth-century Argentina. As integration into the global market drew waves of immigrants to the Rio de la Plata, romanticists resorted to the figure of the gaucho to affirm a national identity. Similarly, in China, writers and poets often featured rickshaw-men as central characters – so often that one can refer to “rickshaw works” as a literary genre, dealing with themes ranging from the mysteries of life to the nature of capitalism.\textsuperscript{113}

With time, the social structures that had supported peasant resistance changed. Some smugglers accumulated wealth and ultimately integrated an emerging middle class. Inevitably, the muleteers, cart drivers, gauchos, and rickshaw pullers were displaced by railroads and motorcars. Yet all these characters figured in the early twentieth century as protagonists in novels. To borrow Walter Benjamin’s stirring prose: “The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual.” \textsuperscript{114} All these characters effectively witnessed firsthand the dissolution of community. Their reappearance in the burgeoning literary genre gives their story an epilogue, and their historian a sense of the visceral angst that accompanied the crossover into modern liberalism.

11. Conclusion

The Lebanese muleteers engaging in banditry and revolt have an echo as distant as 1910 Mexico, in the horseman and muleteer Emiliano Zapata. Their stories, the stories of the cart drivers, hold both particularity and resonance. The particularity gives the reader a sense of the concrete material of palpable life behind the history; it sheds light on mentalities, on the subjectivity that led people to see certain uses of land, price movements, or marketing arrangements as unjust. The resonance makes the history relevant to a wider theoretical context. Land reform is most often thought of as a process that makes markets. Paving the way

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{110} Rihani, \textit{Al-Mukari}, 11-2.
\item \textsuperscript{112} For a link of the novel as a literary form and the formation of a middle class, see Walter Benjamin “The Storyteller,” in Dorothy J. Hale, ed., \textit{The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000} (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 365.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Benjamin “The Storyteller,” 364.
\end{itemize}
for direct taxation and commercial credit, it is perceived as opening the countryside to global capital and tying it into the global market. What this picture leaves out is the local economy that comes undone when the reforms divert resources for the benefit of global capital. By smuggling, these actors fought to preserve a local economy killed by state policies and the barriers to entry inherent in the new scale of production and marketing. They also fought against a new precariousness that arose when the diversity of articles available for the peasants’ daily consumption diminished, the famines that hit the global South in the latter half of the nineteenth century being merely climactic moments of a broader underlying trend.115

The story of the actors working in rural transport can seize all that; it can inform the study of what Eric Vanhaute called the social frontiers of the capitalist world economy, from a unique vantage point that highlights the subjectivity of historical agents within the structure; and social history on a small scale can cross over into global history.116 A global history approach reveals that, despite their particularities, many societies around the world underwent similar transformations at the same time. Land reform in Berar meant equalization and homogenization in land tenure, and a transfer of power from the dominant families to the government; in the Ottoman Empire, the reforms intended to unify practice were negotiated locally between elites at various levels, different regional forces producing diverse outcomes. Despite these differences, the repertoire of actions developed by rural communities at this historical juncture remains very similar. The implication is that despite the differences in the transition to private property, this moment of history can still be apprehended in terms of a unique dynamic operating on a global scale. While land reform in all those contexts was articulated very differently, it still reflected very similar economic pressures, which these agents, by the nature of their trade, perceived and acted on ahead of others – and which can be brought together into the fold of a global history of capitalism.117

115 Here is perhaps another instance of scarcity resulting from the spatial and economic restructuring accomplished by global capitalism. See Carl Wennerlind, “The Historical Specificity of Scarcity: Historical and Political Investigations” (Ph.D. diss.: University of Texas at Austin, 1999).
117 “As world market integration increased price risk and monopolists squeezed peasants worldwide, resistance took various forms, from smuggling, banditry, and the murder of moneylenders, to outright revolts.” See Beckert, Empire of Cotton, 338.
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