



Resources and their substitutes: natural surrogates and synthetic competitors in world history

Organizer: Moritz von Brescius (Harvard/Bern)

JUNE 8 2022 – JUNE 9 2022

Harvard University
Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies

In cooperation with:
The Weatherhead Initiative on Global History (WIGH) &
The Commodity Frontiers Initiative (CFI)



WEDNESDAY, June 8, 2022

9.00–9:15: Welcome and Introduction

Elaine Papoulias, Executive Director, Center for European Studies (Harvard)

Moritz von Brescius (Harvard/Bern)

9:15 – 10:15: First Keynote Lecture

Corey Ross (Birmingham):

The Ecological Life of Things: Environmental History, Commodity Production, and Commodity Substitution

10:15-10:30: BREAK

10:30–12:00: Panel I: Ivory, its Uses and Substitutes

Robert Friedel (Maryland): Rescuing Elephants: Ivory, Scarcity, and Material Choice

John McNeill (Washington): East African Ivory and Yankee Ingenuity, ca. 1820-1930

Commentary: Jessica Wang (University of British Columbia)

12:00–1.30: BREAK

1:30–3:00: Panel II: Medicinal Resources and Substitutes

Anna Winterbottom (McGill): Substitution, Confusion, and the Origins of Aloe vera

Harold J. Cook (Brown), *Quid pro quo*: Substitutions among Medicines or Bodies?

Commentary: Mary Lindemann (Miami)

3:30–5:15: Panel III: Asian Commodities

Jessica Ratcliff (Cornell): “Improving” Colonial Market Knowledge in Mid-nineteenth-century Britain: The Decline of the East India Company’s Monopoly and the Rise of the Economic Museum Movement

Prakash Kumar (Pennsylvania State University): Global Indigo Texts

Commentary: Ghulam Nadri (Georgia State)

THURSDAY, June 9, 2022

9:00–10:00: Second Keynote Lecture

Edward Melillo (Amherst): When Silver Bullets Miss their Marks: Reflections on the Promises and Failures of the Synthetic Age

10:15–11:45: Panel IV: The Science of Polymers: Rubber and Synthetic Fabrics

Moritz von Brescius (Harvard): Entering the Rubber World: Perceptions, Industrial Uses and the long Quest for Substitutes

Erin Freedman (Harvard), Polymer Science and the Birth of Synthetic Fibers

Commentary: Erika Rappaport (Santa Barbara)

11:45–1:00: BREAK

1:00–2:30: Panel V: Oils and Substitutes

Fredrik Jonsson (Chicago): The Great Coal Panic and the Invention of Modern Scarcity

Jonathan E. Robins (Michigan), 'What Nature Provided': Palm Oil's Changing Fortunes 1800-2020

Commentary: Arnab Dey (Binghamton)

2:30–3:00: BREAK

3:00–4:30: Panel VI: Early 'Plastics' and Plastics

Suzanne L. Marchand (Louisiana State University): On Porcelain and its Substitutes

Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent (Paris), From Substitution to Colonization. Synthetic Polymers as Candidate Markers of the Anthropocene

Commentary: Jeffrey L. Meikle (University of Texas at Austin)

4:30–6:00: Concluding Discussion

Input paper by Edward Barbier (Colorado State University): Reflections on Resources and their Substitutes from the Perspective of Scarcity and Frontiers throughout World History

Conference Commentary: Stuart McCook (University of Guelph)