

## Editorial

The graph, in which the lines for the proportion of the urban and rural world population intersect at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has left a deep impression. It seems to demonstrate that not only the highly developed countries, which had already experienced a dramatic decline in the percentage of their rural population into the single digits since the Second World War, have left their agrarian past behind them, but that the future of the whole world now lies entirely in the cities – either in the few global cities that are becoming crucial hubs and nodes of power in a transnational world economy that is becoming increasingly de-territorialized, or in the many growing urban agglomerations of Asia, Latin America, and Africa, which seem to be inexorably expanding their specific patterns of inequality into their surrounding areas. Agriculture, farmers, and rural political movements have been largely marginalized in all of this – even if food studies have reminded us how profoundly an increasingly globally interacting food industry impacts the lives of city dwellers.

Just a few weeks after Russia's attack on Ukraine in spring 2022, however, it became obvious how massively this seemingly regional conflict was disrupting the fragile links of world nutrition. For a moment, Africa's fight against hunger was decided at the Dardanelles, and a year later Polish farmers fiercely resisted cheap exports from the fertile Ukrainian black soil regions. Both events starkly highlighted the importance of agricultural production and its social and political contexts for a more precise understanding of today's global dynamics. At the same time, this connects them to two classic historiographical trends: the interest in post-colonial nation-building and in national and transnational development policies. In both lines of research, the development of agricultural performance was for very long the main focus. By contrast, the continuity of agricultural policy from the colonial state to the developmental state of the post-colonial era has received little attention, especially for Eastern and Southeastern Asia.

Recently, however, there seems to have been a return of the rural world to global history. The formative power of land distribution (and the favouring of certain grains and crops associated with it and with climatic and soil conditions) for pathways of social development is once again being given more attention in order to explain regional differences in

the policies of empires, nation states, and international organizations. The observations on the very long-term differences in the significance of labour, capital and land also underlie the comparative considerations of Austin and Sugihara on the factors determining development (or attention to and control over these factors) in Asia, Africa, and Europe, which arose in the context of the great divergence debate.

The present issue focuses on the continuities and ruptures of the twentieth century and contributes to the current discussion of the transimperial legacy even after decolonization. The interest in learning processes across the borders of individual empires proves to be particularly fruitful because in this way not only local and global trends can be brought together, but also environmental history, food history, social and cultural history can be placed in a new relationship to the political history of individual empires and their successor states. The village is a necessary focus in order to work out the agency of people in rural areas and to avoid reducing development in the countryside to an effect of urban and international elites. At the same time, it is clear that the debate on agricultural development has had a major impact on the strategies of decolonization, post-colonial development, and the rivalries of the Cold War far beyond the borders of the village and rural areas.

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