

Pacific Periphery and Californian Center?

Sugar Business in the American West in the late 19th Century

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The 52th International Conference of Labour and Social History, which took place in the Austrian industrial town Steyr, September 15-17, 2016, was dedicated to the analysis of “Commodity Chains and Labour Relations” (http://www.ith.or.at/konf_e/52_ueberblick_e.htm). While the concept of “commodity chains” is mostly interested in the management of value and profit creating, eighteen presentations tried to include questions of power relations and labor recruitment to query dominant ideas of producer- or buyer-driven chains. Uwe Spiekermann used the example of the Hawaiian cane sugar and the Californian beet sugar industry, to underline the importance of labor for the establishment of the first vertically integrated sugar company in the world by the German-American immigrant entrepreneur Claus Spreckels (1828-1908). Entitled “Labour Shortage as Task and challenge: The Hawaiian and Californian Sugar Industry in the Late 19th Century,” Spiekermann’s contribution analyzed the immense efforts to attract first German and Norwegian, then Portuguese, and finally Chinese and Japanese laborers to work on the sugar fields of Spreckels’ “Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Company.” Such contract work, however, caused public debates in Germany and the U.S. on labor protection even in the Pacific periphery. This was important, when Spreckels started to establish beet sugar production on U.S. soil in the late 1880s. He transferred models of labor recruitment and the transformation of large rural regions from the periphery to the California center to erect immense sugar factories on the fields and to form a more flexible sugar company, integrating cultivation, transport, production and wholesale trade of sugar in the American West. Again, he tried to attract “white” labor to work for him—and ended up with thousands of Japanese contract workers cultivating the sugar beets. A conference volume is planned for 2017.



Japanese Cane Sugar Workers at Maui, Hawaii, c. 1890 (Courtesy of the Hawaiian States Archive)