An Age of Revolution in the Global Economy: Rethinking Social Struggles and Transformations in Western Africa’s Zones of Rurality (ca. 1500-ca. 1800)

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The paper examines the complex contradictions and crises of agrarian social realities in western Africa from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century in their engagements and violent confrontations with local political and urban systems. Relations and strategies of accumulation, domination, subordination, and marginalization defined the functioning of these systems. On the other side, rural communities encountered directly or indirectly the effects of an expanding mercantile capitalist world economy, exemplified in the coercive Atlantic slave trade. Western Africa’s rural communities lived in the shadow of surplus appropriating political and urban systems of local ruling classes who maintained commercial links to the world economy. Through histories of continuities and discontinuities surplus-producing rural communities operated economically as sites of subsistence and market production and politically as sites of tribute, labor, confiscations, and war booty. Embedded in situations of displacement and dispossession, rural folk created alliance networks, performed migrations and pilgrimages, and developed new modalities of public life and new collective identities in order to gain control over the conditions of their lives. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, for example rural communities in the Senegambia region and in the Upper Niger and Middle Niger Basins were the social and political agents in emancipatory projects, realized as revolutionary jihad and millenarian movements. Through an analysis of textual and other sources the paper
seeks to bring to light the hidden history of agency, collective resistance, and the radical Islamic tradition in western Africa's zones of rurality.