

NEW DIRECTIONS IN COMMODITY CHAIN ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

While some researchers have considered commodity chain analysis to be a tool or method that is "innocent of theory," or can be combined with any theory, this paper argues that it has a specific set of theoretical investments. It argues that commodity chain analysis emerged in response to criticisms of the determinism, economism, and western bias in earlier development paradigms. Drawing on recent scholarship, it argues that researchers have turned to the study of commodity chains to provide situated and contingent accounts of global political economy that are historically specific, sensitive to culture and meaning, and attentive to subaltern perspectives.

INTRODUCTION: A METHOD WITHOUT A THEORY?

Commodity chains have always been central to development discourse. Colonial relationships were structured around the flow of sugar and coffee, spices and bananas, and of course, slaves. Early theories of dependency and

underdevelopment took the unequal terms of these commodity exchanges, and their legacy in the post-colonial period, to be a key factor explaining the distribution of poverty and underdevelopment in the 20th century. In these early formulations, theorists embedded their discussions of commodities and commodity chains within broader frameworks of class struggle or world systems dynamics. In the 1980s, this changed, however. As post-modern theories and the end of the Cold War posed challenges to these large paradigms, some scholars began to embrace the study of commodity chains as a *methodological* strategy that permitted them to continue empirical work despite loosened theoretical moorings. They sought to disentangle the approach from the theories that had structured its inquiries in the past.

At times, researchers argued that commodity chain analysis was a method or approach that was “innocent of theory.” For example, Phillip Raikes and his colleagues, speaking of the French *filières* tradition, claimed that it “is seen by many adherents as a neutral and purely empirical category.” They also described it as “less a theory than a meso-level field of analysis” (Raikes, Jensen, & Ponte, 2000, p. 2). Researchers who sought to dis-embed commodity chain analysis from theory referred to it as an “approach,” an “analytical tendency,” a “heuristic tool,” a “framework,” and a “model.” Many who turned to commodity chain analysis as a data-gathering strategy argued that it was well suited to capturing the complex transactions of an era of globalization and corporate domination of agriculture. For example, Bill Friedland (1984, p. 223) suggested that it was a method that made sense at a time when diversified farming was giving way to specialty production of particular crops or animals. Others held that, with the declining relevance of national accounts data for understanding trade and economic policy, the commodity chain provided a way to encompass the array of actors and institutions involved in what Harriet Friedmann (1993, p. 52) has called “private global regulation.” As an analytical tool that did not begin with a presumption that states or particular institutions would be key actors, they argued that it could grasp the evolving organizational aspects of international trade, the linkages that animate it, the coordination that makes it possible, and the new global bodies that regulate it.

These claims created an image of commodity chain analysis as innocent of, or untouched by, theory. Yet, in a related way, some scholars have suggested that it has an opposite tendency to promiscuously consort with theories of any origin. It could be argued that the method has provided a haven where researchers from disparate paradigms meet and a free space for mixing and matching different theoretical traditions. Friedland (1984, p. 222) has observed that while his version of the method which he calls

commodity systems analysis owes much to neo-Marxist labor process paradigms, it also had “honorable antecedents in [the] mainstream functionalism [of] industrial sociology.” Other researchers, like Jane Dixon (1999) or Peter Jackson (1999), have sought to combine political economic analysis with the study of meaning and cultural value along the commodity chain. A cursory review of studies from the 1980s to the present that have used commodity chain analysis reveals that researchers have combined it with the following theoretical frameworks: institutionalist economics, business theories of competitive advantage, labor process studies, regulation theory, convention theory, actor network theory, political economy of development or agriculture, world systems theory, dependency theory, transaction cost approaches, neo-Marxism, network analysis, social constructionism, and industrial upgrading.

This paper has a primary and a subsidiary purpose. The first is to address the question: “does commodity chain analysis have a theory?” But to answer this question, it will digress to explore the historiographic puzzle of why commodity chains became so popular in the late 20th and early 21st century. The evidence suggests that the analysis of commodity chains helped researchers to resolve, at least provisionally, some deep issues facing modernist development theory. Observing these theoretical maneuvers suggests that the method can never be “innocent” of theory, that researchers have deployed it most effectively in concert with highly sophisticated theory, and that there are ways to do so that are responsive to critiques of modernist development paradigms.

COMMODITY CHAIN ANALYSIS AND THE CRISIS OF DEVELOPMENT THEORY

The rise in the fortunes of commodity chain analysis in the 1980s coincided with a widespread critique of “development” as a practice and of development theory as an ideology. Fueled by new post-structuralist approaches in the humanities and social sciences, and by the beginning of the end of the Cold War, critics expressed skepticism about all grand “theories of everything,” but especially about those that celebrated and promulgated western models of “progress.” These critics took development theory, both neo-classical and marxist, to task for its economism, its determinism, and its western bias.

1 The force of these critiques left many development scholars casting about
 3 for ways to do research that addressed social and economic change that
 5 were not implicated in economism and determinism, did not reify capital
 7 and its processes, and did not make western hegemony seem inevitable. As
 9 Lourdes Gouveia poignantly formulated the question: "how far can we
 11 carry our rejection of all attempts to delineate the contours of a social
 13 epoch? Can we avoid exaggerating the solidity of our social structures...and
 still speak...of relatively durable macro-institutional arrangements...?"
 (1997, p. 306). Many researchers saw commodity chain analysis, at least
 initially, as offering an alternative to a modernist development theory that
 one that dealt with "relatively durable macro-structural arrangements" that
 that provided more room for contingency and agency as well as for dis-
 course and culture.

Jane Dixon has explicitly suggested that the analysis of commodity chains
 and its offers such a "way out" of the impasse created by the critique of
 development. She has argued that it can be adapted to post-modern the-
 17 oretical perspectives because it "demands an actor orientation and is context
 and case specific." She suggested that it is consistent with a social con-
 19 structionist approach and amenable to discussions of "consumers and oth-
 ers responsible for the commodity's social life." (1999, p. 151). In a similar
 21 way, Watts and Goodman (1997, p. 13) have noted that commodity chain
 research avoids the grand generalities associated with discourses of devel-
 23 opment and globalization by focusing on distinct commodity-specific or
 sectoral dynamics, and by highlighting what Laura Raynolds and others
 25 have called "the multiple trajectories associated with agrarian internation-
 alization." Goodman and DuPuis (2002, p. 13) have asked whether the
 27 method might be amenable to the analysis of culture and consumption, and
 while they remain critical of the degree to which it has incorporated such
 29 analysis to date, they point to its *potential* for "looking at the 'life of things'
 in society, a life that goes beyond the fetishized sphere of exchange...to the
 31 reproductive world in which things gain other meanings." So to what extent
 can commodity chain analysis bear the weight of these expectations? And,
 33 more specifically, *how* do researchers see it as resolving the three specific
 criticisms of development theory mentioned above?

COMMODITY CHAIN ANALYSIS AND DETERMINISM





Critics of development theory frequently have pointed to its reliance on a totalizing logic of capital accumulation that spreads over and colonizes spaces. Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson (1996) give us a somewhat more poetic version of this claim when they refer to capitalism as the “heroic/transformative agent of development and modernity; ... the phallus that structures social space and confers meaning upon social practices and positions.” The questions these critics raise are about the way in which certain patterns of change appear inevitable in development discourse, in which the activities of different spheres appear to be functionally integrated, and in which the space for innovation, resistance or counter-hegemonic practice is limited or absent altogether.

Even at the pinnacle of political economy’s prestige in the sociology of development and sociology of agriculture, researchers who studied commodity chains were always somewhat aberrant in the detailed nature of their accounts of world system dynamics. In their early accounts of California lettuce and tomato commodity chains, Friedland and his collaborators, for example, laid out a Marxist labor process framework. They defined the key categories of mode of production, social relations of production, and the technical division of labor. Then they said that having “set the stage” they would move on to a more concrete analysis of agriculture. It is at this point that Friedland elaborates his well-known “five foci” for commodity systems analysis: production practices, grower organizations, labor markets, science, and marketing and distribution systems. The story that these authors produced, about the complicity between growers and the state in structuring immigration from Mexico to the U.S. through the *bracero* program and the delicate interplay between new technologies and the supply of labor, was not abstract and determinist, but deeply historical and aware of political contingency (Friedland & Barton, 1975; Friedland, Barton, & Thomas, 1981).

Similarly, Heffernan and Constance, working on the U.S. poultry commodity chain in the 1980s, discussed the actions and interests of specific transnational corporations, including Cargill, Tyson, and Mitsubishi. They traced mergers and acquisitions, interconnections between firms, and changing patterns of vertical integration. The actions of these firms are not presented as the unfolding of an inevitable trajectory of expansion and accumulation, but as a process driven by named actors, and one that could



1 be derailed by contingencies such as diminished fossil fuel availability, national policies of food security, or new forms of global regulation. (1994).

3 More recent proponents of commodity chain research have argued explicitly that it provides an alternative to the totalizing frameworks of development theory. For Gereffi and Korzeniewicz (1994, p. 4) this is because
5 commodity chains are *embedded* in time and space, and analyzing them
7 demands attention to the organizational context. In a recent article, Friedland (2001) has suggested that  because commodities are linked to 
9 range concept of *communities*,  both spatially and functionally,  and
11 thus require analysis of *local* social institutions. Watts and Goodman (1997,
13 p. 15) have credited the study of commodity chains with offering opportunities to explore “the role of technology, the mediations of the state and
15 the agency of individual actors.” In general, proponents have suggested that
17 focusing on commodity chains provides an alternative to development theory’s fixation with “production,” an antidote to our tendency to see power
as flowing in only direction, and a cure for our willingness to attribute
change to abstract forces (like globalization or dependency) that have no
faces or addresses.

19 Two examples suggest how researchers have used the study of commodity chains to build contingency, specificity and multiplicity into their accounts.
21 In a widely read edited volume on commodity chains that appeared in 1994, Gary Gereffi, while operating within what is nominally a world systems
23 perspective, has argued for jettisoning concepts of national development and industrialization and replacing them with more open-ended accounts of
25 the networking activities of firms and the competitive dynamics of sectors. Focusing on the global apparel industry, he has created a “network-centered
27 and historical approach that probes above and below the level of the nation-state to better analyze structure and change in the world economy.”

29 Borrowing concepts from institutionalist economics and economic sociology, Gereffi has focused on strategies of industrial upgrading that explore
31 how developing nations where the least profitable parts of commodity chains have historically been located might “capture” more profitable
33 nodes. He examines how corporations construct networks to improve their position within commodity chains and how those who gain control over
35 certain nodes in the chain become “lead firms” that drive the entire industry or sector. Mapping these strategies and their changes over time, Gereffi
37 (1994) creates an account of development process that includes both state and corporate actors, is highly contingent and contested, and that captures
39 what he calls the “microfoundations of internationalizing trade networks.”

1 In a similar way, Harriet Friedmann (1978, 1993) has used the tools of
2 regulation theory to describe the construction of the world grain trade in the
3 post-World War II period. Regulation theory as an intellectual project has
4 emphasized the multiple, and historically specific, forms of capitalist accu-
5 mulation. In the words of John Wilkinson (1997, p. 311), it is indebted to the
6 "Annales school of history, to...institutional analyses of political science
7 and law, to Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' and to the social
8 science analysis of corporatism and procedures of coordination." Friedman
9 draws on its premises to construct her concept of the food regime, which she
10 uses to link international relations of food production and consumption to
11 forms of accumulation. As Dixon (1999, p. 152) has said, Friedmann's
12 concept of food regimes stands alone, within political economy, in ac-
13 knowledging gendered consumer practices and norms of consumption.

14 In a series of articles published in the 1970s and 1980s, Friedmann
15 mapped the set of national policies and international arrangements that led
16 to American grain surpluses from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the way in
17 which the U.S. government used food aid to create new markets for grain in
18 developing nations. This work was notable for the ways that it linked the
19 politics of grain production in the U.S. to the politics of grain consumption
20 in developing countries that received food aid and imported wheat, and for
21 the connections it drew between sales of U.S. wheat, the decline of native
22 grains, and proletarianization in developing nations (1978, 1980, 1987,
23 1993). In a sense it accomplishes what Goodman and DuPuis (2002, p. 9)
24 have called "the ambitious task of theorizing the ways that practices of food
25 provision and consumption are co-determined."

26 In later work, Friedmann and McMichael (1989) have described the
27 growth of the post-war agro-food commodity complexes that they call
28 "durable foods" and "intensive meat production." Within these complexes,
29 agricultural products such as soy or corn become part of commodity chains
30 that are "dominated at both ends by increasingly large industrial capitals."
31 Their account of the capture of agriculture by industry and the rise of new
32 forms of agro-industrial capital is macro in scale, but emphasizes contin-
33 gency and politics. For example, in discussing the growth of "durable
34 foods," Friedmann and McMichael emphasize that sweeteners and protein
35 fillers can be derived from a variety of sources, and that industrial actors
36 choose sources based on relative prices with prevailing techniques. These
37 prices and techniques are themselves political since agricultural policies
38 determine supplies and prices of grains and soy, while state-funded research
39 determines what technologies are available. There is no pre-determined
outcome here, as different branches of capital, distributed across national

1 boundaries, vie for ascendancy. In a similar way, they show that the growth
 2 of the meat/soy/maize complex depended on the negotiation of trade rules
 3 that permitted the transnational integration of the sector and that were in
 4 contradiction with the growth of the state system in the post-World War II
 5 period. The picture that emerges is one in which outcomes are contested and
 6 uncertain and in which not only capitalism, but the food sector itself, is
 7 highly differentiated. As Friedmann and McMichael (1989, p. 112) say, "not
 8 only is agriculture no longer a coherent sector, but even food is not."

9 The work of these researchers does not go as far as some critics have
 10 suggested it should in abandoning structural concepts and in specifying
 11 actors and processes. Busch and Juska, for example, have complained of a
 12 continued tendency, in commodity chain research, to "reify" corporate ac-
 13 tors. They have suggested that actor network theory, by focusing on ties
 14 between individuals, rather than institutions, offers advantages in account-
 15 ing for specific instances of corporate behavior and outcomes. Cargill Grain
 16 Corporation and national legislatures do not act, they argue, but rather
 17 individuals within the firm or the Congress (1997). This call to "deconstruct
 18 the institutional actors of political economy" is useful in putting names and
 19 faces on sometimes shadowy global actors. But it also skirts close to the
 20 edge of methodological individualism in refusing to acknowledge the role of
 21 institutional culture and practice, regulatory and legal conventions, and
 22 other sets of patterned and somewhat durable social relationships.

25 COMMODITY CHAIN ANALYSIS AND ECONOMISM

27 Critics of development theory have also argued that researchers have priv-
 28 ileged the economy over other aspects of life, seeing it as the fundamental
 29 determinant of social systems and historical events. To quote Graham and
 30 Gibson (1996, p. 24) once again, "within political economy and the political
 31 movements it has spawned or inspired, economic determinism has reigned."
 32 Critics argue that development theorists have paid scant attention to culture
 33 (except as an impediment to economic progress) and even less to meaning
 34 and to discourse.

35 For Jane Dixon (1999), the analysis of commodity chains provides op-
 36 portunities to draw culture and meaning in, because of the nature of the
 37 commodity itself. Commodities are not only central to trade, but to human
 38 physical comfort, to self-expression and to group representation. They can
 39 signify social status and the comforts of home. In her words, "moving
 beyond the exchange value of a thing to what Marx called its use value, and

1 beyond its production to those who process, advertise, sell, buy, and use it,
2 opens political economy to considerations of meaning and to the unwaged
3 work and play of the sphere of social reproduction" (1999, p. 157). For these
4 reasons feminist analysts, and a variety of post-modern theorists, have seen
5 commodity studies as occupying a ground where the material, the social,
6 and the meaningful meet.

7 One of the most successful accounts linking production and consumption,
8 culture and political economy in the study of a commodity is, of course,
9 Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1985). In this now classic work, Mintz
10 tracks the meteoric rise in sugar consumption in Europe from 1650 to 1900,
11 problematizing how this "demand" was created, how tastes evolved toward
12 a preference for sweetness, and how sugar moved from "a luxury, a medicine,
13 a spice" to a daily necessity. He shows how these changes depended on
14 the European seizure of colonies and the creation of colonial enterprises
15 based on slavery. He argues that sugar made visible the connection between
16 the will to work and the will to consume, so that new wage earners partly
17 worked to be able to buy it. But also its cheap calories and satisfying properties
18 reduced the cost of feeding European workers. In this way Mintz
19 argues, quoting Marx, "the veiled slavery of wage workers in Europe needed,
20 for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the New World."

21 While in this brief formulation Mintz' account would appear to fall into
22 the category of totalizing explanations, it is full of contingency, agency, and
23 strange historical accident. As he notes "because the whole process from
24 the establishment of colonies, the seizure of slaves, the amassing of capital,
25 the protection of shipping and all else...took shape under the wing of the
26 states, such undertakings were at every point as meaningful politically as
27 economically" and the outcome of political struggles between industrialists
28 and mercantilists, colonists and metropole were uncertain in each era. Consumer
29 taste is not simply a matter of free will, in his view, which would require
30 us to assume "that each and every Briton, day by day and year by
31 year, chose individually to seek and consume sucrose" in greater and greater
32 quantities. But neither is it simply dictated by those in power; rather, it is the
33 result of a complex interaction between the availability and marketing of
34 goods by capitalist firms and local practices of consumption that include
35 food habits and cuisine. Mintz (1985, p. xvii) has said that "as one attempts
36 to put consumption together with production...there is always a tendency
37 for one or the other to slip out of focus." But in his book, economy and
38 culture are tightly bound together as he shows how the first sweetened cup
39 of tea prefigured both new social relations and new meanings of work and
40 self (1985, p. 214).

1 A more recent study that illustrates the inseparability of cultural and
economic processes in the life of a commodity is Melanie DuPuis' (2002)
3 account of how milk became a staple in the American diet. Her book in-
vestigates the changing cultural landscape within which milk drinking be-
5 came popular, including the portrayal of milk as "the perfect food," which
tapped into concepts of perfectability in American public life. She describes
7 the 19th century public rhetoric and debate that created milk as a new,
modern food that was complete and brought the purity of farm life to urban
9 consumers, even before pasteurization and refrigeration had rendered milk
safe for these populations. Examining why this should have been the case,
11 she shows how this trend was driven by a complex array of factors, includ-
ing growing numbers of women working outside the home, the loss of fam-
13 ily-based "communities of practice" within which knowledge about breast-
feeding of infants was transmitted, middle and upper class ideas of genteel
15 femininity, and the industry's development and advertising of new products.

Turning to the production side, she details shifts in the social, political
17 and economic relationships of dairy farming from the late 19th century to
the present. She contends that milk is different from many other commod-
19 ities, such as wheat, rice or orange juice, because people have been unwilling
to adopt its concentrated or powdered form, and must be consumed within a
21 short period. This has meant that production continues to be local rather
than global, organized in "milksheds" around urban centers. She describes
23 the way in which this organization creates competition among producers
from different regions, which in some places has allowed policy makers or
25 large buyers to control milk prices. But she also shows how policies in each
of the three big milk states in the U.S. have evolved differently, as policy-
27 makers and organized public actors weigh the protection of small farms
against the provision of cheap milk.

29 Like Mintz, DuPuis' work shows the interplay between the ways in which
milk was used, the ways it was thought about, the transportation systems
31 that moved it, and the interests that profited from it. By focusing on key
debates in public institutions, she is able to show how market forces, re-
33 sources, and culture meet. What links the work done by farm extension
agents in New York State with the habits of milk consumers in New York
35 City in her account, is the way that power has structured what they both
take for granted about milk, about health, and about proper farming.

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COMMODITY CHAIN ANALYSIS AND WESTERN BIAS

A third critique of development theory has argued that while it has pretended to speak from the neutral position of science, it has represented western interests and values and has left no space for subaltern voices. In the words of Akhil Gupta: "The 'modern,' the celebration of western progress, civilization, rationality and development, came to be instituted as a global phenomenon through colonialism... . After the formal demise of colonialism, one of the chief mechanisms by which this self-representation has been promulgated has been through development discourse." Calling it "orientalism transformed into a science for action," Gupta (2000) argues that "development discourses, with their built-in teleologies and spatial hierarchies, created subject positions that reinscribed inequalities after the dismantling of colonial rule." Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson (1996) have concurred. They write: "During the post-World War II period, bourgeois economic development theory installed industrial capitalism at the pinnacle of economic and social evolution, constituting the western experience of capitalist development as the model and measure for all the world." They argued that both mainstream and left development discourses shared this view of capitalist development as the "motor of history," differing principally "in how to read such a change: was it the coming of an earthly kingdom or ... a process of devastation and laying waste?"

Here, I will turn briefly to research I conducted in the late 1990s on the global apparel industry as an example, because my use of commodity chain analysis was directly tied to my desire to provide a more open-ended and multi-vocal account of development process (Collins, 2003). The International Labor Organization has called the global apparel industry a "true one-world employer" in the sense that workers in different parts of the world compete to perform the same operations for the same firms and that companies can scan the global landscape in search of the kind of workers that please them. As an anthropologist by training, I wanted to bring an ethnographer's eye to the experience of workers positioned differently within this global labor market and to the question of what unites and divides them.

Given this question, I faced a problem: how do you study a global industry? Anthropologists are trained to go to a particular place and get to know it very well, but how do you do that with a phenomenon that does not happen in a single place, but is scattered around the globe?



1 that geographers say occurs, not in a “space of place,” but a “space of
 2 flow.” How do you study all of its different manifestations and what
 3 feminists would call its “situated perspectives” and integrate them into a
 4 coherent story?

5 In order to resolve this problem, I combined commodity chain analysis
 6 with multi-sited ethnographic investigation along the commodity chain. In
 7 the first, more standard part of the analysis, I read the trade press and the
 8 economics journals to figure out the structure of the apparel industry and
 9 the competitive pressures it faces. This kind of analysis helped me to trace
 10 the economic linkages that join Wall Street and Madison Avenue, the fac-
 11 tories that make clothing, the stores that sell them and the consumers that
 12 buy them. It allowed me to develop an understanding of the global regu-
 13 latory environment and the way in which the interests of corporations
 14 transcended, and frequently contradicted, the interests of national govern-
 15 ments.

16 In the ethnographic part of the research, my goal was to put names and
 17 faces on actors throughout the commodity chain, from the offices of Liz
 18 Claiborne in New Jersey to a factory floor in Aguascalientes, Mexico. I
 19 wanted to be able to say something about the decisions and actions, strug-
 20 gles and negotiations that took place in a large number of specific places
 21 where people live and work. As George Marcus (1995) has pointed out, the
 22 goal of this kind of multi-sited ethnographic investigation is not to provide a
 23 holistic representation of a global industry, but to collect a set of partial or
 24 situated perspectives relating to the phenomenon in question, juxtaposing
 25 views and experiences that have traditionally been kept apart. To quote
 26 Jennifer Mendez “what emerges is a picture, not of a global village, but of a
 27 transnational political terrain, rife with conflict and competition” (forth-
 28 coming). Then, for the researcher, analysis consists of positing a logical
 29 connection among the sites, developing an argument about their relation-
 30 ships to one another. This seemed to me to be a good way to construct a
 31 study of a global industry like apparel.

32 In many ways, the second part of this approach seems similar to what
 33 actor network theory theorists have been calling for, since it explores the
 34 way that actors in networks create social relationships and social meaning.
 35 But it locates these networks and interactions in a broader framework,
 36 situating them within the political economy of the commodity chain and
 37 reading their meaning within the political terrain of that location. So this
 38 approach names and specifies concrete acts as Latour, Busch and Jussa-
 39 urge. But it also examines the policies and procedures that make a given
 40 apparel firm more than the sum of its individual employees, as well as the

1 competitive climate of the industry, the laws and rules that govern its labor
and trading practices, and the way in which the industry is driven by trends
3 like retail consolidation and the imperative to demonstrate a continually
rising share price.

CONCLUSION

I began by suggesting that the growing popularity of commodity chain
11 analysis was fueled by the development critiques of the 1980s, and the desire
to find ways of working that continued to address issues of political and
13 economic change while taking these critiques seriously. I have pointed to
examples of work that used a commodity chain approach to produce ac-
15 counts of change that were less deterministic, less economistic and less im-
bued with western bias than many neoclassical or Marxist accounts of
17 development process. I believe that these examples demonstrate the poten-
tial for situated, contingent accounts of global political economy that are
19 historically specific, sensitive to culture and meaning, and attentive to sub-
altern perspectives.




21 These accounts are likely to be more fragmentary in their exposition,
more tentative in their conclusions, and more aware of gaps and fissures
23 than their predecessors. But they are not all at the micro-sociological level.
As Akhil Gupta has said, "the post-modern critique of meta-narratives has
25 too often been extended to any explanation that seeks to account for global
phenomena such as capitalism, confusing closure with scale." He continues,
27 while "some scholars have argued that a turn to 'local' events and individual
life narratives is a way to evade totalizing explanations... 'local' phenom-
29 ena... are... no less susceptible to totalizing, unsituated and teleological rep-
resentations than global ones" and "there is no reason that non-teleological
31 explanations about capitalism cannot be advanced (2000, p. 12).

But are commodity chain analyses innocent of theory? Are these accounts
33 purely empirical, drawing on the metaphor of the commodity chain simply
as a device to organize the collection of data? I think that this is not, and
35 cannot be the case. Each of the research projects I have described had strong
theoretical motivations. In fact, in all of the cases that I cited, researchers
37 were influenced by more than one paradigm. Friedland strategically com-
bined labor process theory with more standard versions of industrial so-
39 ciology; Gereffi drew together world systems theory with institutionalist
economics. The regulationist perspective that Friedmann and McMichael

used to craft their concept of the food regimes was already an amalgam or integration of several different theoretical approaches.

As a method, commodity chain analysis appears able to accommodate a variety of different theoretical agendas, but it cannot stand alone. No method or approach is innocent of theory, and commodity chains are no exception. Rather, I would argue that it is a richly promiscuous approach that helps to concretize and situate a broad range of theoretical perspectives, and that doing so makes them skeptical of determinisms, more sensitive to culture, and more aware that the processes we label “development” are experienced, understood and valued differently from locations along the commodity chain.

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