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Uneven development, commodity chains and the agrarian question

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Abstract
There has been a long overdue revival of interest recently amongst economic and development geographers in questions of geographical uneven development. On the one hand, this can be seen as a reaction to the positive emphasis during the 1990s on the inclusion of firms, workers and regions in global value chains and production networks. On the other hand, there has been a growing awareness of the continuing importance of agriculture and the question of agrarian change, not least after the development industry had rediscovered smallholders and peasants as targets of market-driven policy interventions. It is at the conjuncture of these developments that this virtual issue is situated, tracing these debates in *Progress in Human Geography* from the late 1970s until today. The 13 articles selected for this virtual issue illustrate that the journal provided an intellectual home to key contributions to this debate. This introduction provides an overview of key themes emerging from the articles and highlights their main scholarly contributions.

Keywords
agrarian change, disarticulations, global commodity chains, markets, uneven development

I Introduction

PiHG published the first 'progress report' on the question of development as the 1970s drew to a close (Brookfield, 1978). This was a critical moment in time. It had become increasingly clear that the Ricardian international division of labour between 'southern' primary commodity producers and 'northern' advanced industrialized countries was losing its self-evident character. A number of developing countries in Asia and Latin America had established themselves as locations for industrial production, a spatial rearrangement that German sociologists Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs and Otto Kreye (1977) had labelled the 'New International Division of Labour' (NIDL). Carried away by the growth rates of these newly industrializing countries, the authors of the so-called 'Brandt Report', a key development text at that time, even saw Brazil's economy at eye level with the West German one by the year 2000 (Independent Commission on International Development Issues, 1980: 38). The authors of the Brandt Report clearly regarded this as a highly selective process, pointing out that lower income countries continued to suffer from low agricultural output and food production that did not match population growth. This was particularly true for African countries. 'The expansion of food production and agricultural

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employment in the low-income countries is crucial', concluded the authors, at the same time maintaining that the 'agricultural problem' was a question of time: 'Historical evidence shows that the absolute number of people dependent on rural employment declines only in the later stages of development' (1980: 37).

This historical conjuncture was the context in which Barbara and John Harriss wrote a stimulating set of four progress reports on 'Development Studies' (Harriss and Harriss, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982), setting the tone for the subsequent debate in the journal about 'Third World' industrialization and the simultaneous push for 'massive investments in small farmerist agriculture [and] wide-spread liberalization of trade' (Harriss and Harriss, 1981: 572). Almost four decades later the great modernizing promises associated with industrialization are still largely unfulfilled and for a large number of countries in the Global South the development industry has given the integration into primary commodity markets renewed emphasis. This is the setting in which I chose to place this virtual issue, selecting 13 original articles and 'progress reports' that, in one way or the other, speak to the continuing importance of 'agriculture' in the Global South. In what follows I use these contributions to reconstruct a number of interrelated scholarly debates in this journal that have brought together questions of agrarian change, uneven geographical development and global commodity networks during the last 40 years.

II Development through industrialization?

The emerging NIDL posed serious challenges for critical development scholars, causing heated debates about the role of capitalism as an engine for development. In their third progress report John and Barbara Harriss **(Harriss and Harris, 1981)** engaged with this debate on the example of a heretical book published in 1980 by Bill Warren. Titled *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism*, Warren's book took issue with Lenin's theory of imperialism, insisting on a more positive representation of capitalism as a productive and progressive force (Warren, 1980). 'Warren seeks to demonstrate', argued Harriss and Harriss (1981: 575), 'that colonialism has advanced the capitalist development of the Third World and that this in turn has brought about great improvements in material welfare'. Warren's controversial claim was that this insight – capitalism as an instrument of social progress in pre-capitalist societies – 'was erased from Marxism', providing a 'perfect mythology for Third World nationalists' (1981: 575).

Harriss and Harriss criticized the so-called 'Warren thesis' both for its lack of empirical substance and because of its mobilization of 'Western capitalist industrialization' as a universal frame. However, they found value in the core argument, namely his scepticism of nationalist and populist ideologies in the postcolonial world of that time and of radical demands for auto-centric national development. For the authors of the report this debate posed serious questions about the role of the state in postcolonial societies and class formation. '[I]s the major contradiction that of the anti-imperialist struggle', the authors conclude, 'or has it shifted to an internal battle in which the bourgeoisie is the principal enemy?' (p. 576).

About five years after the Harrisses had engaged with the 'Warren thesis', Stuart Corbridge continued the debate in a brilliant *PiHG* article on 'Capitalism, Industrialization and Development' **(Corbridge, 1986)**. For him, Warren's provocation had to be seen in the context of the stalemate between mainstream and heterodox economic theory concerning (industrial) capitalism's developmental potential. While development scholars at that time all considered industrialization as the key to economic growth, they differed sharply regarding the right mix of policies with which to achieve this. Corbridge argued that the far-reaching geopolitical

and geoeconomic changes in the wake of the Second World War had resulted in an ambivalent repositioning on the left and the right. On the one hand, a new 'centre-right economics' emerged that at least partly relaxed the dogma of comparative advantage theory. In the context of rising US hegemony and the decolonization movement, more optimistic ideas emerged that emphasized the modernizing force of industrialization, even if some protagonists maintained the Ricardian frame insofar as only giving the South a role in low-level industrial activities (p. 49). 'The left', on the other hand, moved in the opposite direction. Having long staunchly rejected comparative advantage theory and advanced a world in which decolonization would almost automatically usher in industrialization and development, this was now seen as naïve by critics such as Andre Gunder Frank. Against this, Frank and others mobilized neo-Marxist theories of imperialism and underdevelopment, advancing their radical position according to which the industrialization of the Third World is incompatible with capitalism. This pitted them against more pragmatist 'centre-left' schools, in particular Latin American economic structuralism (*cepalismo*), that advocated state-directed import-substitution as the way forward (p. 50).

For Corbridge it was against these radical arguments that Warren tabled his equally one-sided provocation based on the recognition that barriers to development originate not only from 'external' relations between centre and periphery but also from internal contradictions in the periphery, for instance the neglect of agriculture and the urban bias (pp. 54–6). Corbridge's argument was not a full endorsement of Warren. He took issue with Warren's obsession with capitalism as a potentially progressive force, with his uncritical Eurocentric celebration of a particular development model, and of imperialism and colonialism as being conducive for expanding its reach, arguing that the text lacks any attempt at a moral critique. But Corbridge clearly saw a need for moving beyond the impasse besetting the left at that time. On the one hand, this concerned the acknowledgement that capitalism can have positive effects alongside negative ones and that it makes sense to be open to both the external dynamics of the capitalist world system and the 'relations of production and their conditions of existence that are characteristics of particular countries and development sectors' (p. 64). On the other hand, there were empirical reasons. Global capitalism did not stand still and had already started to create new realities that the methodological nationalist debate between those who solely focus on internal and those who exclusively blame external contradictions was unable to come to terms with. He directed geographers' attention to the realities of the NIDL, arguing that this perspective mediates between the one-sided arguments of the likes of Frank and those of Warren (p. 58; see also Bradbury, 1985; Perrons, 1981). His point was that selective industrialization had been occurring in the 'Third World', without this necessarily meaning that industrialization is 'developmental' (Corbridge, 1986: 48). This had important implications for a realm of social and economic life that was largely neglected in these debates: agriculture.

III The agrarian question, modes of production and industrial capitalism

The agreement across otherwise disparate scholarly perspectives on the desirability, at least in principle, of the industrialization of the 'Third World' rested on the similarly unanimous representation of agriculture as backward and an obstacle for development. A case in point is Latin American economic structuralism whose proponents pushed for import substitution industrialization and problematized the rigidity of agricultural supply and the oversupply of agricultural labour (Figueroa, 1993: 287–8). The obvious solution was classical agrarian

change: increase agricultural output by increasing agricultural productivity and/or developing new farmland areas, and the absorption of excess labour in industry (p. 289).

In their progress report Barbara and John Harriss (1981: 574) briefly touched upon this argument, commenting on international investments into agricultural research in order to 'upgrade peasant agriculture'. The existence of a modernizing agricultural sector became a defining feature of a region's development potential. And it was the absence of rural progress that in turn justified the pathologization of whole regions as failures. Nowhere has this narrative been applied more forcefully than in the case of 'Africa'. Although dominating representations until today, the dystopian imagination of Africa as a continent in crisis was particularly strong during the lost decade of the 1980s. This was the context in which **Michael Watts (1989)** published a *PiHG* review essay on the agrarian question in Africa, taking aim at the widespread view that blamed a backward agricultural sector for the absence of economic growth and societal development. Poverty was explained with the persistence of 'millions of peasant households [. . .] in the face of world capitalism', generating a kind of African exceptionalism at a time of increasing heterogeneity within the Global South more generally (pp. 1, 12). Watts elaborated two distinct ways in which the agrarian crisis was explained. On the one hand were mainstream economic ideas about the peasant as being 'poor-but-rational', that is, the neoclassical argument that the need to make ends meet almost forces one to behave rationally (p. 11; see also Schultz, 1979). Responsibility for the failure to tap this potential and to increase agrarian productivity was mainly laid at the doorstep of the (African) state 'as the antithesis of a smooth functioning market' and as being one-sidedly biased towards urban interests. On the other hand were those on the left who pointed at the position of poor peasants as 'petty commodity producers' only being competitive by way of Kautskian self-exploitation (pp. 7, 24). 'In both theoretical traditions', Watts (p. 7) concludes, 'agricultural crisis signifies stagnation, either as marginalized subsistence producers or through stable, self-reproducing patterns of exploitation via the world market'.

Watts continued by taking issue with the reductionist representation of economic activities in Africa as organized around kinship or familial ties, as deeply embedded socially and culturally, and the concomitant understanding of 'western capitalism' as rational and individualist. And he decentred this dualist construction that pits large-scale against small-scale production units, and state against market, by reminding us that 'the history of capitalism [in Europe] *is* the history of state patronage and corruption' (1989: 25; author's emphasis), rejecting a unilinear view of capitalism. Such a perspective complicates the classical understanding of agrarian change according to which pre-capitalist arrangements in agriculture disappear under the imprint of industrialization and proletarianization.

Against this Watts pointed to the intricate complexities and contradictions of social life, the social agency of populations and conflicts over agrarian resources in rural Africa. Although echoing Warren's preoccupation with 'internal' conditions, he was adamant not to deny the brutal realities of imperialism and international capitalism (1989: 4, 10). According to Watts, peasants are neither transitional nor residual, but are entangled with and constitutive for capitalism in multiple ways, for instance as part of the so-called informal economy, as craft producers or waged labour. This echoes Kautsky's preoccupation with diversity and the 'anormal' as something 'unilinear models of capitalism cannot explain' (pp. 11, 13, 29), connecting Watt's intervention with the debate around 'modes of production' and 'articulation' of the 1970s.

Considered as an 'often (unnecessarily) difficult literature' by Harriss and Harriss (1981:

577), the modes of production debate pitted production-focused structuralist Marxists against radical dependency scholars. The former stressed the contradictory combination of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production and the need for capital to produce its own provisional outside (see, for instance, Laclau, 1979). Proponents of the latter camp, for instance, Andre Gunder Frank or Immanuel Wallerstein, put emphasis on market exchange at the global level of a single capitalist world system (see Foster-Carter, 1978; Kahn, 2001, for an overview). Structuralist Marxists – despite their differences – shared an interest in the diversity of modes of production and the question of how the capitalist mode became dominant at particular moments in time and in particular places in relation with non-capitalist ones. *Dependistas* rejected any notion of articulation, assuming a unitary all-encompassing capitalist mode of production that has no outside (Cardoso, 1975: 4; Foster-Carter, 1978). Just as did Watts, Harriss and Harriss (1981: 576) took issue with the abstract theorization of both camps, commenting positively on a shift towards detailed historical analyses at the turn of the decade. Their progress report may thus be seen as being indicative of the general discomfort with structuralist reasoning in human geography and beyond at that time (see Thrift, 1983) and as a plea to take more seriously the idea that human beings are not only the product but also the producers of their social world (Harriss and Harriss, 1981: 577).

This debate around capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production had a lot to do with the fact that the industrialization of the 'Third World' was a geographically highly selective and uneven affair, concentrating only in particular countries, or better sub-regions of these countries, and bypassing large parts of the South altogether. And truncated industrialization went hand-in-hand with a 'stubborn' persistence of subsistence production, peasantry and smallholder agriculture in wide parts of the 'Third World'. For development scholars of different stripes this was testimony to an incomplete capitalist transformation of agriculture, failing to produce both the food and the 'free' proletarian labour needed for industrialization, urbanization and national development.

IV Diverse rural economies

Undoubtedly due to the nationalist euphoria in a postcolonial setting, the debate summarized above neglected both the constraints of the capitalist world system and the fact that the agrarian transition was also anything but complete in the metropolitan core. The latter insight was spelt out in the article by **Iain Wallace (1985)** on the geography of agribusiness. Against the classical Marxian position that views market-oriented agricultural producers as a 'transitory survival of precapitalist relations', Wallace pointed to the incomplete penetration of agriculture by 'technologically rational capitalism'. He explained this persistence with the peculiarities of agricultural production, such as the risks associated with nature and the difficulty to control the labour process, and the existence of contractual arrangements with non-farm businesses that leave the agricultural producer nominally independent but place severe constraints on his or her ability to make decisions (p. 500). A similar argument was put forward in the article by **Moran et al. (1993)**. Rehearsing the agrarian change debate of the 1970s and 1980s, the authors echoed Harriss and Harriss (1980, 1981) and Watts (1986) in their emphasis on the need to connect what are often very abstract theorizations with developments on the ground. Their particular emphasis was on the 'persistence of family farming in the face of the continuing penetration of capitalist farming into land-based industry' (Moran et al., 1993: 22). A key aspect of the text is the recognition of the incomplete capitalist transformation of family farming, pointing to a diversity of ways in which families secure their rural livelihoods.

These include a variety of labour arrangements based on reciprocity and non-monetary exchange, or the mobilization of non-commodified family labour. 'It is the partial penetration of the production process by capital and the features of family farming that this determines which distinguish family farming from capitalist farming', Moran et al. concluded, 'not purely whether or not labour is commodified' (1993: 26).

Under such conditions of 'pluriactivity' (1993: 29) it neither makes sense to see 'peasants' and family farmers as capitalist commodity producers through and through, nor to describe them as independent producers in a specific peasant economy on its own. As Harriss and Harriss (1980: 580) had already observed, it is the particular articulation of small producers with capitalism that explains 'their persistence and in many cases the reproduction of their acute poverty'. What may also be termed in more contemporary ways as diverse economies of peasant farming accordingly calls for 'a more holistic view of labour' (Moran et al., 1993: 28). In his article on Africa, Watts made precisely this step, referring to 'balkanized work regimes' as a result of the variegated impact of commodity production on labour organization. This crucially concerned struggles around the internalization of the labour process within the peasant household that threatened the autonomy of household labour and various forms of resistance against 'external' actors such as landlords or the state along the line developed by James Scott (Watts, 1989: 16–8; see also Scott, 1985). It is to a large extent because of this that Corbridge (1990: 397) singled out Watts' essay as an example for scholarly work that is sensitive to the 'differential spatial impress associated with the penetration of market relations into the periphery' in the first progress report of his trio on development studies.

This debate continued to have its presence in *PiHG* as the 1990s moved on. A key contribution again came from **Michael Watts (1996)** in the third of a trio of progress reports on 'development'. Subtitled 'Kautsky redux', Watts identified another 'Kautskian' moment a century after Karl Kautsky had put the agrarian question on the agenda of socialist and communist thinking. Kautsky's analysis rested on the paradox that agriculture and the rural appeared to increase in political importance at a time when its overall economic weight was shrinking. Kautsky explained the persistence of small family farms with their capacity to survive through self-exploitation and the fact that the agroindustrial complex could make good use of a noncapitalist farm sector (1996: 231–2). Writing at a time when market fundamentalism and free trade enthusiasm had reached a high point globally with the replacement of GATT by the World Trade Organization and regionally with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the EU single market, Watts focused on the contested neoliberal restructuring of agriculture in the Global South. Continuing to diminish in quantitative importance economically, the fate of 'traditional' agriculture and rural communities became a focal point for anti-globalization debates and social movements. In the South, Watts connected the new agrarian question with flexible accumulation in agroindustry, pointing to the specific situation in postsocialist Europe where radical market reforms led to dramatic changes in the countryside. Here, a de-proletarianization process was identified, as struggling state co-operatives and farms were privatized and agricultural workers had little alternative than 'reverting' to petty family farming ('Kautsky in reverse'; pp. 237–9).

Watts put these restructuring processes into the wider context of an emerging 'global division of labour' within the agrofood system. In the wake of this change agricultural commodity production was increasingly organized via the same far-flung production networks and systems as industry (1996: 240). For many producers in the Global South this meant a

specialization in high-value foods (in particular fresh fruits and vegetables) and a declining importance of traditional export commodities such as coffee, tea, sugar, etc. In the context of NAFTA, for instance, this meant that Mexican farmers increasingly supplied the US and Canada with fresh vegetables and fruits while having to live with increasing imports of US corn.

The **Lucy Jarosz (1996)** article, published in the same year, complements Watts, sharing the view of an emerging new 'complex division of labour' that entailed a 'complementary specialization in high value "nontraditional" exports from the South and low-value cereals exports from the North' (p. 44). Jarosz put emphasis on labour relations in an increasingly fragmented agricultural production system. She argued that the debates within rural development studies at that time mainly engaged with the intricate interrelations between 'local-level labour processes and rural restructuring' and 'global processes of agroindustrial development' (p. 41). Jarosz's focus was on the polarization of working conditions in agriculture in this context. On the one hand was a decline in importance of what is often referred to as 'standard employment', exemplified by a continuous reduction of permanent, full-time formal employment and increasing self-employment. On the other hand, Jarosz depicted an informalization and a casualization of labour coupled with a wider diversity of livelihoods (pluriactivity). Increases in inequality, productivity and overproduction that resulted from this sat uneasily with 'the existence of hunger and extreme poverty among farmworkers' (pp. 42, 45). But Jarosz was adamant that inequality is not simply a question of whether one owns the means of production or not. She argued for the inclusion of registers of social difference such as gender, race or ethnicity in addition to class when analysing identity formation and subjectivation in rural contexts (pp. 41–2). Doing so, she concluded with Goodman and Watts, would provide room 'for diversity and differentiation within and between agrarian transitions' (Goodman and Watts, 1994: 5 cited in Jarosz, 1996: 44).

The article by **Jonathan Rigg (1998)** added a more directly 'southern' focus to Jarosz's account and complemented Watts' more general argument with a particular focus on the experiences in Southeast Asia. His article rests on two main arguments: first, that agrarian transitions cannot be understood independent of what is considered as 'non-agrarian'; second, that such an approach has to avoid stylized representations of rural areas as somehow standing still, as being comprised of 'isolated, inward-looking, self-sufficient and agriculturally based communities' (p. 497). Instead, Rigg stressed the increasing interdependency of agriculture and industry and the blurring of rural and urban, all connected to a growing diversity of livelihoods. Confronted with what he termed 'de-riceification', that is, the replacement of rice with either other crops or nonfarm activities (p. 502), Rigg's tone was a more optimistic one, stressing the opportunities arising from the increasing role of nonfarm activities. He observed that concrete arrangements differed from earlier ones. While nonagricultural activities largely continued to be based in and around the village in the past, the 'search for diversity' increasingly took 'rural people out of farming and beyond the village' (p. 505). Nonfarming activities were found to play a range of roles for rural households. This started with the possibility of reducing the dependence on farming by additionally working in the factory and increasing income. Another benefit concerned an empowerment of female household members who gain independence through nonfarm work and may start to contest patriarchal family hierarchies. This contrasts with positions that mechanically represent diverse rural economies narrowly in a narrative of loss of rural livelihoods (Rigg, 1998: 502–6).

V Making markets work for the (rural) poor

While academic scholars continued to struggle with the agrarian question, the development industry had already created new realities, effectively rediscovering the small farmer as the target of development interventions. The article by **Anthony Bebbington (2004)** is a readable engagement with this shift. Bebbington wrote his article at the conjuncture of two closely interrelated processes. On the one hand, there was increasing scepticism towards the state and the market as classical institutional realms. Both demands for market radicalism as well as for intensified government intervention, as epitomized by the so-called 'Easterly-Sachs debate' (Easterly, 2006; Sachs, 2005), were found wanting. Against this, development scholars and practitioners advocated apparently less ambitious, micro-level and small-scale approaches that chimed well with the ostensibly more humane capitalism informing policies at the time of roll-out neoliberalism, Third Way politics and libertarian paternalism in the Global South and the Global North. In this context, Bebbington critically commented on the mobilization of NGOs as panacea for development and regarded the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals with their emphasis on poverty reduction as being illustrative of this shift (2004: 730). Agriculture and rural regions, he argued, were at the heart of the debate at the beginning of the 2000s. While local, small farm agriculture continued to be regarded as economically nonviable in the wider context of capitalist development, NGOs now advocated interventions that should enable rural producers to be better integrated into global agricultural markets and value chains (p. 739). A good example for this has been the formulation of the 'Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P)' script and the mobilization of 'Value Chain Development' by development agencies and NGOs (see Berndt, 2015; Werner et al., 2014).

In her 2002 progress report on 'Geography and Development', **Gillian Hart (2002)** made similar connections. She pointed to a somewhat softer sociological side of the emerging post-Washington consensus (in addition to continuing hard economism) that mobilized a seemingly 'gentler capitalism' with the help of Granovetterian notions of social embeddedness and terms such as trust, participation or civil society (2002: 815). Pointing at the coexistence of a rapidly commodified agriculture and 'the re-emergence of sharecropping and other supposedly "recapitalist" institutions' in countries such as India (p. 814), her demand was to acknowledge these divergences, but not to lose sight of their interconnectedness, a demand that she also directed at proponents of 'alternative modernities' whom she criticized for their uncritical romanticizing and celebratory tone (p. 814). At the end of the day, what was at stake for Hart and others was a hidden entrepreneurial and responsibilizing agenda veiled by invocations of 'community' and social embeddedness, an 'interpellation' of subjects reminiscent of Foucault's observation of individuals as 'entrepreneurs of themselves'. However, Hart was also adamant that the subjects produced by this kind of governmentality are capable of resisting the new development script (pp. 92–3).

Almost a decade later, **Richard Ballard (2013)** used the second of his trio of reports on 'Geographies of Development' to reflect on the policy shift identified by Hart and Bebbington. Using the example of cash transfers, Ballard diagnosed a tendency towards the individual rural subject that takes responsibility for its own development in the wider context of the Third Way, the post-Washington consensus and post-neoliberalism (p. 813). However, there were new developments that warranted critical attention for Ballard. This concerned above all the triumphal march of experimental and behavioural economics and the application of these insights to the realm of development policy. Shifting the attention from market failure to the

failing market subject, Ballard (p. 815) criticized these policies for further commodifying the (rural) poor, thereby increasing their dependence on the market (see also Berndt, 2015; Berndt and Boeckler, 2017). However, he also saw progressive potential given that these policies represent an 'opening for the implementation of life-sustaining distributional mechanisms' (Ballard, 2013: 815). As related work by Jamie Peck and Nick Theodore (2015) has shown, the question of the regressive or progressive character of such policies is ultimately an empirical one.

All in all, these *PiHG* contributions are illustrative of the focus on rural poverty reduction by the development industry. Although multinational organizations, development agencies and NGOs continue to follow a variety of contradictory policy rationales (Mawdsley, 2017), a sizeable part of the industry's attention continues to be given to attempts to motivate peasants and small farmers to take up 'modern' agricultural practices. While the particular means with which this is to be achieved may have changed, the mandate still is to 'arm impoverished peasants with the hardware of western agronomy', as Watts put it in his article (1989: 6). It is as important as it was in the 1980s therefore to acknowledge that we will continue to be confronted with agrarian questions that cannot be answered by directing critical attention to development programs and policies alone. It is because of this that there has been a rekindled interest in geographically uneven development in recent years, implying a shift from a critique of 'big D' to theorizing 'small d' development, as Hart put it so well in the first of her trio of progress reports (Hart, 2001: 650). As she emphasized in her 2016 PiHG lecture at the AAGs in San Francisco, this should be done in a spirit that recognizes the potentially productive debate between Marxian political economy and postcolonialism/poststructuralism. In so doing, she argues, we can avoid leaping over the differences that are constitutive of capitalist development and the eurocentrism that explicitly or implicitly besets many contributions to the debate (Hart, 2016: 12; see also Gidwani, 2008; Glassman, 2011; Wainwright, 2008). A fruitful concept with which to achieve this is 'articulation'. I close this introduction to the virtual issue by returning to this term and commenting on its recent revival and the echo of this debate in *PiHG*.

VI Critical commodity chain studies and the dis/articulation approach

The discussion so far illustrates that at a certain level developments in the agrifood sector did not differ all too much from the transformation in manufacturing. In both realms the classical Ricardian international division of labour and the imagination of a world neatly divided between developed North and underdeveloped/developing South gave way to a more complex, fragmented picture. Both in the scholarly and the wider public debate a dominant perspective saw this transformation as an outcome of globalization and neoliberal market-thinking. The emerging global division of labour in agriculture and beyond did also inform earlier contributions selected for this virtual issue. However, the debate was always a nuanced one. The Corbridge (1986) article, for instance, criticized the stalemate between methodologically nationalist productionist and one-sidedly world market-oriented theories of that time. Following Jenkins, Corbridge instead argued for a more balanced approach, taking seriously the 'unity of production, distribution and exchange' (Jenkins, 1984 cited in Corbridge, 1986: 63). In similar ways Watts (1989) stressed the geographical reorganization of market relations and the restructuring of agricultural production, pointing to the intersection of global commodity markets with new flexible forms of accumulation such as contract production. Writing his 1996 article at a time when the

Gerrefian global commodity chain had already become a popular concept with which to analyse the global division of labour not only in agriculture, Watts took note of the 'ascendancy of "private global regulation"'. However, he cautioned against one-sided representations that depicted an all-encompassing globalization process connected with a parallel retreat of the (nation-)state, concluding sceptically that this did not suggest 'the emergence of global commodity chains in agriculture along the lines argued by Gereffi' (p. 235). Against this Watts demanded we pay better attention to the question of value and 'how value is imbued within commodities – and fought over and contested – at various sites along the commodity circuit' (p. 240). This echoed his reference in the 1989 article to the intrinsically unstable nature of what he referred to as 'regimes of disarticulated accumulation' in agriculture (p. 11).

As the 1990s drew to a close, geographers increasingly moved away from the kind of one-sided debates on globalization and neoliberalization that Corbridge and Watts criticized. The 2000s saw a consolidation of these views. In her 2000 RGS-IBG *PiHG* lecture, for instance, Doreen Massey (2001) outlined her vision of a (human) geography that is able to confront both one-sidedly aggressive globalism and defensive localism. And Jamie Peck repeatedly reminded us of the variability of really existing neoliberalism in a number of single- and co-authored pieces in the journal (Peck, 2004, 2008; Peck and Theodore, 2007). The Hart (2002) progress report did the same in the context of development and agrarian change. Subtitled 'Development/s beyond Neoliberalism', she pointed to the limits of economism and market fundamentalism, critically commenting on attempts by 'enlightened' mainstream economists such as Joseph Stiglitz to come to terms with the ambivalent coexistence of the commodification of agriculture and the 're-emergence of sharecropping and other supposedly "precapitalist" institutions' in the Global South (p. 815). Hart's recommendation was to return to agrarian studies and the concept of articulation. However, the reference was Stuart Hall's reformulation during the 1980s that brought together both meanings of the concept: in the sense of connecting two parts and in the discursive sense of uttering, expressing. For Hall an articulation accordingly was 'the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements'. But, as with the production of any meaning, there is no inevitability to this connection: 'It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time' (Grossberg and Hall, 1986: 53). Although criticizing Hall's silence on gender, for Hart this reformulation of the articulation concept laid the foundations

> . . . for non-reductionist understandings of race, ethnicity and other dimensions of difference – including gender – firmly situated within material practices and inextricably linked with class processes in particular geographical and historical conjunctures. (Hart, 2002: 818)

In so doing, Hart concluded in her article, Hall contributed to a revitalization of agrarian studies beyond overtly structuralist versions of the modes of production debate, providing hope that the non-capitalist side can have a life of its own and may be capable of winning out, without falling into the other extreme of 'positing endlessly open possibilities and alternatives' (p. 819).

The **Wilson and Rigg (2003)** article connected nicely with Hart's argument, taking issue with the stubbornly persistent stylized treatment of agrarian change in wide parts of the scholarly literature. Commenting on debates around a perceived 'deagrarianization' in the Global South and identifying parallels with similar one-sided discussions of what was referred to as 'post-productivism' in the North, the authors drew on selected examples to do justice to the variegated experiences in the South. For them these examples were indicative for the existence of multiple paths of rural change that cannot

easily be reduced to familiar unilinear representations of the agrarian question (p. 684). In many ways echoing the earlier articles by Watts, Corbridge and Wallace, Wilson and Rigg advocated a more nuanced approach that does justice to 'local histories and particularities' (p. 687) and the possibility of 'multiple, not single, paths of agrarian transition' (p. 696). At a time when trade liberalization and structural adjustment policies had given the push towards high value agricultural commodities further impetus and when rural households were increasingly articulated with global value chains, the authors put the question of the peasant, and of agriculture more generally, on the agenda (see also Hughes, 2006).

Hart's other two progress reports provide further theoretical reflections. In her final report she drew on the work of Karl Polanyi and his notion of the double movement, that is, his insistence that the self-regulating market is an impossible project because its damaging implications necessarily give rise to societal interventions (Hart, 2004). For Hart, Polanyi provides a particularly helpful entry point to the multilayered crises produced by the triumphal march of market fundamentalism since the 1970s, allowing a better grasp of the productive potential of these tensions in a Global South context.

It is difficult to see in the light of these observations how one could expect industrial capitalism to solve the 'agrarian problem' in the South. It has been the merit of the modes of production debate to remind us that capitalism constantly produces its outside, thriving on the peculiar combination of exploitation and expropriation that the ambivalent articulation of capitalist and non-capitalist practices allows. And the agrarian question is still far from answered today. A good example is the critical reflection of agrarian change and 'development' in India, for instance, in the seminal contributions by Vinaj Gidwani (2008) or Kalyan Sanyal (2007). A recently published special issue of *Antipode* on 'Critical Agrarian Studies' is further testimony of the continuing need to answer these questions (see Edelman and Wolford, 2017).

The article recently published by **Siobhan McGrath (2017)** reviews the rekindled interest in uneven capitalist development and 'modes of production' with reference to the emerging 'dis/articulation' approach. Motivated by a desire for a revival of critical commodity chain studies in the wake of continuous mainstreaming under the auspices of global value chain analysis (see Werner, 2016; Ouma, 2015), disarticulation is a concept popularized by Jennifer Bair and Marion Werner (2011, 2013) with the aim to attempt a critical excavation of the legacy of early world-systems theory and to counter the inclusive bias of GVC analysis not only with 'an empirical focus on disinvestment and other forms of disconnection', but to 'locate the analysis of the globalization of production – or more widely, of capital – within critical theorizations of globalization and development' (McGrath, 2017: 9). For McGrath it is the key contribution of work in the disarticulation tradition to acknowledge 'that while some may benefit from opportunities to participate in market relations, others may suffer as a result of the expansion of capitalist relations' (p. 9). Taking up Hall's reformulation of the articulation concept, the contributions to the disarticulation approach mainly focus on agricultural commodities or extractive resources (see, for instance, the special issues in *Environment and Planning A* in 2011 and 2013) and examine the co-constitutive character of the boundaries between the economic and the non-economic, between capitalist and non-capitalist, connecting dis/articulation to a reformulated understanding of spatial boundaries as a double play of bordering and debordering processes (McGrath, 2017: 12; see also Berndt and Boeckler, 2011).

VII Conclusion

The articles selected for this virtual issue illustrate that *PiHG* has provided a fruitful setting

for urgent debates at the disciplinary crossroads of economic, agricultural and development geographies. From early on, authors have grappled with the role of agrarian livelihoods in a context of seemingly accelerating capitalist globalization. The agrarian question stubbornly refused to go away during the last 40 years or so, even if both questions and answers did not necessarily remain the same. This posed particularly strong challenges for critical scholars. Still harbouring hopes for industrial capitalism to finally do away with feudal agrarian social structures in the 1970s and partly also the 1980s, both the highly selective and incomplete industrialization of the 'Third World' as well as the persistence of peasant and family farming were difficult to come to terms with. This provided the ground for the intensive debates around the role of imperialism, national elites, modes of production, etc., that read overtly abstract and almost esoteric today. But as the contributions selected for this virtual issue demonstrate, *PiHG* hosted a wealth of more cautious and less dogmatic voices that added a much-needed dose of scepticism to some of the grander claims advanced in the debate. These voices were at the heart of my discussion in Sections II and III in this introduction. Pleading for empirically-grounded and context-sensitive research, these articles foreshadowed the growing recognition during the 1990s that it is not the question whether particular practices are capitalist or not, or indeed market or nonmarket, that matters. Or, to put it with Hart (2004: 97): 'From this perspective sorting out capitalist from non-capitalist elements . . . become[s] far less interesting than the question of how multiple forces come together in practice to produce particular dynamics or trajectories, as well as possible alternatives'. The *PiHG* articles discussed in Section IV are therefore also representative of the wider shift in the scholarly literature of that time towards an acknowledgement of economic entities as 'diverse' and as emerging at the crossroads of often conflicting valuations and rationalities (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2008).

The scholarly recognition of complexity and diversity notwithstanding, however, mainstream development economists and development practitioners had increasingly moved in the opposite direction, applying their reformulated ideas of market exchange in a context of a seemingly more humane capitalism and 'roll-out neoliberalism'. Echoing similar developments elsewhere and being indicative of the importance of thinking beyond South–North divides, the stress was increasingly on micro-level interventions with the help of the experimental and behavioural tools and devices discussed in Section V. It is possible to interpret these developments as a reaction against the 'confusion' and 'lost certainties' of the late 1990s and 2000s, resulting in attempts to reframe and re-inscribe market borders in the name of inclusive agricultural value chains and the entrepreneurial rural subject. The subsequent revitalization of 'critical commodity chain studies' with the help of a postcolonial and poststructural rereading of the modes of production debate is an almost logical countermovement to these 'reactionary' positions. There is a pressing need to continue to engage with economization and marketization processes when dealing with uneven development, agrarian change and commodity chains. I am sure that *PiHG* will continue to play an influential role in these debates.

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