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Global – and local - commodity circuits

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the growing literature on what are variously called global supply chains, global value chains, global production networks and global commodity circuits, and how they contribute to the social organisation and operation of the global economy and an understanding of globalisation itself. It considers global relationships in the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of goods and services and how the material infrastructures and relationships that support the circulation of commodities have been made visible in times of crisis. The chapter considers the global-local interconnections of three commodities: flip-flops, tomatoes and fish. It presents original research in the circulation of fish and seafood with a focus on the pivotal figure of the fish merchant at Billingsgate, London's long-established wholesale fish market. The ordinary transactions and market work which generate and sustain the commodity circuit at Billingsgate reveal it as fragile and contingent too. The work of maintaining the commodity chain is shown to be an ongoing practical accomplishment based on human bonds and human-fish entanglements.

Keywords

Fish, Flip-flips, Global inequality chains, Global production networks, Global supply chains, Global value chains, Tomatoes

Introduction

Global supply chains have attracted growing interest in social science and popular literatures in recent years, including accounts that focus on global social justice, through stories of trainers, shirts, tea and fish. They also gained an unlikely prominence in public debate in the UK from early 2020 in the context of the ongoing impact of Brexit (the exit of the UK from the European Union) and the global COVID-19 pandemic. New forms of governance and regulation in imports and exports as a result of Brexit and changes in consumption practices and increases in production costs arising from the global coronavirus pandemic led to a lack of HGV drivers and a shortage of fuel, interruptions in energy supply from empty shelves in supermarkets, and news stories of queues of container ships at global ports. A lack of basic (and luxury) goods for importing countries for some populations (largely in the global north) also meant impoverished livelihoods in producing countries (largely in the global south) (Palpacuer and Smith, 2021).

Interruptions in the supply of both goods and services and shortages of commodities and/or components or the labour required to finalise them for sale highlight the complexities of global 'chains' or commodity circuits that easily go unnoticed when operating smoothly. They reveal complex configurations of politics and power across time and space and the inherent vulnerabilities of dominant just-in-time systems of provisioning – not least in access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the UK at the start of the coronavirus pandemic when low stock levels and a surge in demand world-wide led to heightened risks for individual health care workers (Bailey and Pierides 2021). Recent problems in supply in the UK and elsewhere are part and parcel of the issue of the coordination of socio-economic life. The literature into global commodity or global value chains or circuits seeks to explore and explain the social organisation and operation of the global economy. The study of the trajectories of specific commodities – from cocoa to care – and the processes that bring them into being or transform them into goods and services for distribution, exchange and consumption in different parts of the world contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon of globalisation itself.

Research into the circulation of commodities is a multidisciplinary effort including from sociology, economics, anthropology, geography, political economy, international relations, management studies, and more. This chapter – from a sociological starting point – takes fish and seafood as a 'sounding' to examine how commodity circuits operate. Notwithstanding the sub-title of the section of the book in which this chapter is situated – 'global economic flows' – the analysis decentres the economy (Knowles, 2014, 2015; Pettinger, 2019) and seeks to recognise the varied embodied, mobile, material and interactional practices that make for the movement and manipulation of fish. Ahead of this discussion, I consider some of the key terminology and perspectives through which the movement of commodities, associated labour and social relations are cast. The chapter then discusses key studies and areas of research which illuminate the social relations of globalisation and the perspectives which social sciences bring to them, drawing on examples of flipflops (Knowles, 2014) and tomatoes (Barndt, 2007; Harvey et al, 2002; Heuts and Mol, 2014). The final part focuses on fish and seafood (Lyon, 2016, 2020) through a discussion of communication, mobility, temporality, materiality, vitality and the production of value in local and global circuits.

Terminology: chains, networks and circuits

Global commodity circuits account for a large share of world trade in the twenty-first century in which firms and regions across different parts of the world are linked in transnational geographies of production. However, this flexible production is a 'factory without walls' (Tsing, 2009 in Pettinger, 2019: 42) where distance and complex subcontracting mean that low pay and poor working conditions, including modern slavery, in some parts of the chain, network or circuit is not visible elsewhere – and enable lead firms to deny responsibility of knowledge of the suffering of workers and communities (Pettinger, 2019: 43). These same workers are vulnerable to the vagaries of consumption

practices and the preferences of lead firms who can easily excise subcontractors from their trading networks.

Variously formulated as global supply chains, global value chains, global commodity chains, and global production networks, these conceptualisations vary according to their focus on interfirm relations, politics, power relations between firms, workers, governments and activists, and/or embeddedness in social, institutional and regulatory contexts. World Systems Theory in the 1970s sought to show the geography and politics of interconnectedness across nation states and corporations and the new international divisions of labour that came about through huge technological and organisational changes and the liberalisation of trade and finance at a global scale in the 1970s and 1980s (see Ponte et al, 2019; Kano et al, 2020). Development scholars in the 1990s further highlighted vast disparities in political and economic power and the unequal distribution of surplus between 'core', 'semi-periphery' and 'periphery' (terms used in the literature at the time) (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Lee, 2010).

The new literature on global commodity and value chains then became a 'popular and powerful means of more precisely interrogating the specific organizational and logistical frameworks and relationships by which globalizing processes in different industry sectors occurred over time and space' (Argent, 2016: 806). However, there are problems with the conceptualisation of these forms of interconnectedness in terms of supply, value or commodity chains as they depict the circulation of commodities along stable pathways established by 'lead firms', flowing smoothly and seamlessly in space – or in a 'more-or-less flat ontological plane' in which political, environmental and social consequences are neglected (Argent, 2016: 806). Whilst the notion of circuits is an explicit attempt to depart from this assumed linearity, it cannot easily shake off all its implications. The early global commodity chain approach was criticised for emphasis on organisational linkages at the expense of attention to the human actors involved in the production and movement of commodities (Lee, 2010), and the social relationships and trajectories that constitute them. The current crises in supply reveal faltering, hold-ups, disruptions and the ongoing live and practical creation of 'routes' to move materials around the world. In this section, I draw attention to some key perspectives and associated terminology from new economy sociology, cultural economy, valuation studies, and feminist global value chain analysis (including for services) to better grasp the contested understandings of global commodity chains or circuits.

The so-called new economic sociology that emerged in the Anglo-American academy in the 1980s recognised the economy as infused with social relationships arguing that key economic processes should be subject to sociological analysis. Karl Polanyi's concept of 'embeddedness' is central here, emphasising the economic as enmeshed in social contexts, and networks, trust, interactions, information, and cultural practices have become key

aspects of sociological research into economic processes (Granovetter, 1985). However, they risk contextualising the economic rather than analysing central economic processes. Polanyi's (1957) 'instituted economic processes' suggests that there are historically different ways of instituting the economic and that the boundary between economic, social, legal, political and cultural processes varies in time and space (Harvey et al, 2002: 11). For Harvey et al (2002), this leads to a recognition of interdependencies across four interrelated processes: production, distribution, exchange and crucially, consumption. This approach sidesteps the danger of losing sight of specifically economic processes and recognises how work activities at different points in the processes are interconnected, mutually shaping one another, especially production and consumption (Glucksmann, 2009). This approach has been developed in research on recycling, call-centres, ready-made food, the cultivation of tomatoes, mobile phone technologies and much more.

The emergence 'cultural economy' perspectives have further challenged the separation of production and consumption and the economic from the socio-cultural and material as part of a 'pragmatic turn' in the study of markets and economic processes more generally (Muniesa et al, 2007). Associated with the work of Michel Callon and colleagues, cultural economy draws on Actor Network Theory (ANT), Science and Technology Studies (STS) and the notion of 'assemblage' and contributes to a sociology of valuation. The 'performativity' of markets including the role of economic theory and expertise as scripts for how markets happen flip assumptions about the determinism of the economic. Instead, attention is given to the role of 'market devices' – pricing models, merchandising tools, signs and displays - which make economic calculation possible. Practices of calculation and valuation - the processes through which people differentiate between goods and assign value - include 'qualification' and 'singularisation' in which 'the gradual definition of the properties of the product' emerges, 'shaped in such a way that it can enter the consumer's world', or become 'entangled' within it. This is a 'living world' of 'commodities in motion' (Bridge and Smith, 2003: 266). If commodity chains or circuits are articulations through which value is produced, value does not reside in the commodity itself but in the relationships between commodities, producers, sellers and consumers and the social practices through which these relationships take shape. This implies attention to the specific valuation practices and processes through which commodities are produced and rendered as valuable – as in the case of Heuts and Mol's (2014) 'good tomato' which I discuss in the following section. Following Arjun Apparadui, grasping value involves tracing the 'social life of things' and 'the conditions under which economic objects circulate in different *regimes of value* in space and time' (1986: 4, emphasis in original).

A further critique of existing global commodity chains literature is its inadequate attention to relations of gender and ethnicity, including the impact of consumption practices in the global north on different forms of work and income generation for women in particular in the global south. Wilma Dunaway's edited collection, *Gendered Commodity Chains* (2014)

highlights the role of households in global production processes. The rise of global retail in particular has transformed relations of production, distribution and sale, drawing more women into global value chains both as workers and consumers. Stephanie Barrientos' *Gender and Work in Global Value Chains* (2019) shows how women in low-income countries have been involved as workers producing goods they previously made in the home, resulting in the commercialisation of their activity. Drawing on feminist political economy and labour studies, Barrientos proposes what she calls 'Global (re)Production Networks' to grasp the impact of global retail value chains on the feminisation of labour, recognising the articulation between commercial production and social reproduction and the gendered identities that are constituted through these processes. In addition, McCarthy et al (2021) explicitly argue that the significance of masculinity in global value chains has not been well understood with implications for governance. And Campling and Quentin (2021) propose the 'global inequality chain' to draw attention the private accumulation of wealth for firms in these chains such that workers are deprived of value and states lose their redistributive capacity.

The current supply chain crisis is as much as about labour as goods and about services as well as manufacturing as shortages of HGV drivers and workers in health and social care expose. Arlie Hochschild's concept of 'Global Care Chains' has been used to analyse the interconnectedness of cross-national care work, and to recognise 'a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring' (Hochschild 2000, 131). This involves predominantly women in the global south leaving their own households – often including their children – to deliver care to homes in the global north, with implications for the delivery of care in the migrants' countries of origin and for the lived experience of transnational families. The title of Rhacel Salazar Parreñas' book (2015) about Filipina women who care for members of middle-class families in Europe and the USA and who send remittances to their own parents to care for their children captures the international division of reproductive labour this rests on – they are in effect *Servants of Globalisation*.

Key studies: from flip-flops to tomatoes

Specific commodities in motion have often been the starting point for research into global and local commodity circuits, including bananas, cocoa, coffee, shirts and trainers. In this section, I select two 'objects' or 'probes' - flip-flops and tomatoes – and consider the different intellectual approaches they use to explore the complexities of the global circulation of commodities.

The sub-title of Caroline Knowles' (2014) book, *Flip-Flop, A journey through globalisation's backroads*, brilliantly captures both the quiet and conspicuous ways in which global commodity production and globalisation itself take shape and place. Through her focus on a single object – the flip-flop – she tells a tale of movement and connection across geography

and social and material worlds. Her mobile ethnography is both theoretically and empirically rich, offering a ground-up account of the challenges of navigation and the instability of connections, contra the idealised notion of 'flow' in the globalisation and mobilities literatures (Knowles, 2014: 7). Knowles critiques global commodity chain analysis for being blind to place, the variety of ways in which disparate places are connected and the relationship between production, distribution and landscape (Knowles, 2014: 6). She takes issue with how the lives of those involved in production are presented either as abstract labourers or solely as workers, disconnected from the broader contexts and relations in which they live. Instead, from oil extracted in Kuwait converted to petrochemicals in South Korea, she follows the small, white, pellets that are transformed into flip-flops in rural-turned-industrial villages in China. They move through the port a second time as the flip-flops head onto world markets (Knowles, 2014: 62), landing in Djibouti then to Ethiopia when official and unofficial routes are entwined. She traces three trails here – to exchange at the huge outdoor Mercato; through the journeys of local people, always walking; and as discarded flip-flops make their way to a huge landfill site. Her study is a 'micro-macro patchwork' (Knowles, 2014: 6) which shows how thinking in terms of 'trails' and 'journeys' makes it possible to recognise the multiplicity of routes involved in the production, use and disposal of flip-flops and how 'they are animated by the topographies they cross, by the feet, flesh and lives, living in particular, local, connected worlds' (Knowles, 2014: 6).

My second set of examples is concerned with the global trails and interconnections of another good: the tomato. In *Exploring the Tomato* (2002), Mark Harvey, Steve Quilley and Huw Benyon consider the tomato as both an object – tracked from seed to supermarket shelf - and a probe – to offer new perspectives on change and variation in contemporary capitalism. They are critical of object biographies which are too narrowly focussed, failing to capture the linkages and contexts that exceed them. Instead, 'it is necessary to step outside single and linear analysis': for instance, to appreciate the tomato and its production into ketchup, it is essential to consider the hamburger in the US diet especially (2002: 10-11). The ketchup bottle is understood as a socio-economic institution, crucial to the tomato's existence in its current forms. They develop Polanyi's concept of 'instituted economic processes' and take issue with the production and consumption of tomatoes as a purely economic process (of technology, transport, firm market share, profit etc) 'as if the economic tomato was *autonomous* from the social, cultural, biological or legal tomato' without regard to in a law, custom, national cuisine, biology or ecology (Harvey, 2007: 168).

Deborah Barndt's (2007) *Tangled Routes Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail* traces the journey of the tomato from its cultivation in Mexico to its purchase at the supermarket check-out and consumption in fast-food restaurants in Canada. Combining scholarship and activism, the book takes stock of the current 'moment' of globalisation and other critical moments that gave rise to it, notably colonialism, to consider the impact of the liberalisation of trade on workers in agriculture, transport and supermarkets. It is a story of a border-crossing commodity which is a vehicle to explore the economic, ecological,

gendered, political, and cultural process of globalisation, again going beyond a narrow focus on linear and vertical supply chains.

Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol (2014) offer a different take, using the tomato to explore the activity of valuing tomatoes. They analyse tensions between and within registers of money, handling, time, nature and sensual appeal which 'push and pull' in different directions, especially between monetary and sensory valuing. The 'good enough' tomato emerges as the commodity which can tolerate handling, refrigeration and transport and survive well enough to be exchanged. They show how valuing tomatoes is neither wholly about judgement nor formal classification schemes but relies on knowledge and practices of care and attention (pruning, watering, protection) which just might enhance the qualities of the tomato for their inevitable destruction/consumption.

The commodity circuit for fish: views from a wholesale market

I now turn to a consideration of fish and seafood as a 'sounding' to explore the circulation of these 'intimate commodities' on a global and local scale (Winson, 1994). The global fish trade is in trouble. The industry is dominated by huge trawlers with access, via quotas, to the largest share of the world's fish. The resultant diminishing stocks have made life harder for poor coastal communities at the extractive end of commodity chains (Fabinyi et al, 2018: 89). Governance to promote traceability and environmental sustainability, such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), focuses on ecological and financial value (Wijen and Chiroleu-Assouline, 2019). Whilst there are interventions to foster socially responsible seafood, for instance, Seafish's Responsible Fishing Vessel Standard (RFVS) in the UK, which challenge poor and exploitative working conditions to capture and process fish for sale, notably in the global south, these are often hampered in practice by weak legislative contexts and voluntary certification.

Analysis of seafood commodity chains has often focussed on financial value, assuming linear, vertical connections from fishers to consumers (Fabinyi et al, 2018). In this section, I focus on the interconnections between supply and exchange in a more restricted span. This allows me to take a 'node' along/across the supply chain and delve into the ordinary transactions and market work which generate and sustain the commodity circuit, and reveals it as fragile and contingent too (Neyland et al, 2018). To do this, I revisit my research on Billingsgate (Lyon, 2016, 2020), London's long-established wholesale fish market and ask: What does the circulation of commodities look like from the perspective of the fish merchant – and the fish?

Billingsgate is an interesting site to study, not because it accounts for a large volume of current trade, most of which passes through supermarkets and their direct suppliers, but because it exposes some of the articulations in the circulation of commodities and the social relationships and forms of coordination they rest on. The market operates in a single 'hall' where samples of fish are on display for those who buy in person with orders coming in by

telephone to the stands or their associated office spaces. The fish merchants who operate at the market occupy a pivotal position in the fish trade. They have a direct relationship to (some) fishers and to agents buying on their behalf at markets where fish are landed or seafood sold – and they have close connections to buyers in the catering or retail trades. This gives them a view upstream and downstream and insights into the relationships between consumer practices, taste, loyalty and trust, conditions at sea, value and the shape and movement of the fish itself.

The case of a specialist merchant in pelagic fish – oily fish such as herring and mackerel – both fresh and smoked, illuminates trading customs and cultures. As soon as we start discussing his purchasing decisions, David Knowles talks about being 'in the hands of what happens retail wise'. Whilst Tuesday, the first day of the trading week – his temporal reference point - is always busy, Wednesday is 'tricky', a 'difficult day to assess': 'I'm ordering fish for the next day', he explains, 'before they've [fishmongers] even opened their shop on the Tuesday'. He bases his decisions on judgements about availability and price – and what customers will accept - as well as quality, and intuition arising from his long experience in the game: 'What we're ordering for the next day depends on how we feel the demand is going to be', a 'feel' accrued through talk – to customers, suppliers, and others involved in the business. Sales are not isolated events on single days: preparation 'culminates' in one sale as anticipation generates the next. What happens if the weather turns people don't come out to buy? he and his colleagues ponder. He has a tactic for this – on Wednesdays, he encourages regular customers 'from further afield' to come to the market with the offer of more attention and the possibility of a discount - and some other tricks up his sleeve as a practised salesman. Nevertheless, the challenge of spatio-temporal coordination is considerable (see Bestor, 2001).

There is no stable and certain supply chain in the fish business. Indeed, as Caroline Knowles (2014) discusses, the depiction of smooth flows in theorisations of globalisation lacks empirical grounding. The reputation of David's business, established by his father decades earlier, is for the 'best available at that time' where neither quality nor price are consistent. If the 'weather is wild', remarks David and there's a fraction of the anticipated supply, there is a different kind of work to do. This becomes clear when we talk about 'substitution' or 'worthwhile alternatives' as he puts it: 'It's up to us to get our salesmen's coat on and say, but we have got such and such, which are superb quality and are a sensible alternative', he explains. He animates the buyer such that a new 'attachment' can be formed, and the buyer can 'take on' the good into their own world. I listen to his account of how he works as I try to understand the relevance of the specific properties or qualities of fish.

A fish is not just a fish. It is measured, judged and categorised. There are criteria for quality and categories based on size (see Apparadui, 1986: 14). Some properties matter more than others (see Apparadui's distinction between the 'singular' and 'homogenous' (1986: 16)). If

calculation at the market 'is distributed among human actors and material devices' (Callon and Muniesa, 2005: 1245), the fish itself operates as part of a 'collective calculative device', indicating quality (freshness, flavour and texture) and value. Fresh or not-long-dead fish is a 'lively commodity' of sorts (Collard and Dempsey, 2013 in Gillespie, 2021). As David comments, 'the fresh sprats come in and they're almost still jumping'. The speed at which its vitality dissipates varies by species, size, grade, and type determining the duration of its 'afterlife' and potential for value (Gillespie, 2021). The rhythm of the market itself also shapes value as the attraction of fish that have already been on the market one, two, or three days diminishes next to their newly-arrived gleaming counterparts. This 'liveliness' is both sustained by the fish merchants' labour and the infrastructure of the market – icing, chilling and packing – and supported by a narrative performance. Indeed, the fish merchants have a deep grasp of their situation in the market and recognise the active work they must do to accomplish their place in it. They do not simply occupy positions in a network or social structure but 'negotiate, contest, and enact the roles they think they are playing' (Wherry, 2012: 205). They make and remake the market through their actions – deals, explanations, normative positions about how to treat suppliers and buyers, long-term relationships and emotional connections.

At Billingsgate, trade happens 'pairwise', directly between fish merchant and customer. David's customers are 'highly skilled retailers' in their own right, buying prime fish for catering (hotels, restaurants and pubs) and retail (fishmongers). His business is built on long-term relationships, in which trust, loyalty and fairness are key and quality is his trading edge. Some customers also ask for lower quality produce, and he explains that he cannot supply this but 'if they want to go and buy something really cheap elsewhere, I've no objection'. I hear the explicit permission he gives in this remark so the customers' actions do not threaten their established trading relations. Economic sociologists have been criticised for paying insufficient attention to *how* social ties matter in trade. Viviana Zelizer (2012) argues that in all economic action people do 'relational work' as they 'engage in the process of differentiating meaningful social relations' through boundary-making and marking, and the distinctive understandings that operate in connection to those boundaries. David is clear about which sorts of economic transactions are appropriate or not. If a customer asks for something that he does not ordinarily supply but is of equivalent quality to the fish he does, he will source it for them. He is 'pally' with a salmon supplier – they have a reciprocal arrangement for just this occurrence. This is a widespread arrangement; there is even a period of internal market trading for 15 minutes before the market officially opens.

The 'performance' of fish on the market also shapes the process of its commodification upstream. David works with processors but mostly uses an 'agent' to buy for him at wholesale markets in Aberdeen, Peterhead, Grimsby or Brixham. Between them, 'we've taught the suppliers exactly what is required', he comments, 'educated' them about cuts, presentation and colouring (in the case of smoked fish) over 20 years or more. The work of

keeping the commodity chain in good shape is an ongoing practical accomplishment, based on human bonds and human-fish entanglements.

Conclusions

There are big challenges facing both the operation and understanding of global commodity circuits, including the destructive social and environmental impacts of the current organisation of supply chains globally. The study of these circuits is not straightforward given the complexity of connections and the variation in formal and informal practices and trajectories – as Carolyn Knowles' research makes clear. And social relationships and consequences continue to be concealed in the language of circuits, chains and commodities. They can however be made visible through approaches which critique, challenge and expose both practices and conceptualisations that disregard the fragility and instability of the circuits themselves and the lives and labour that bring them about. This kind of work requires intricate and innovative mobile and multi-site ethnographies whilst not getting altogether lost in in ethnographic specificity (Callon and Muniesa, 2005). Goldstein and Newell (2019) propose the combination of *in situ* (interviews, surveys and observation) and an *ex situ* (trade data, documentary analysis and mapping) and call for a research agenda which focusses on the operation of corporations and the development of a 'political-industrial ecology of supply chains' which can recognise environmental consequences in conjunction with their implications for justice, equity and welfare work. They also highlight the importance of collaborations between academics and NGOs to identify 'hotspots' and promote social responsibility. Similarly, with insights from activists and academics, Palpacuer and Smith (2020) carve a path towards 'responsible global value chains' and document the achievements and promise of collective community organisation and transnational alliances to transform global commodity circuits in more sustainable and equitable ways.

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