

Review Essay

Commodity Studies and Commodity Fetishism II: ‘Profits with Principles’?

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Geographies of Commodity Chains, by Alex Hughes and Suzanne Reimer (eds). London and New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. x+276. £80 (hb). ISBN 0-415-33910-3

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Cross-continental Food Chains, by Niels Fold and Bill Pritchard (eds). London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. xvi+260. £75 (hb). ISBN 0-415-33793-3

Contributors: Niels Fold; Bill Pritchard; William H. Friedland; David Barling and Tim Lang; Richard Le Heron; Yolanda Massieu and Michelle Chauvet; Jane Dixon and Christina Jamieson; Stewart Lockie; Jorg Gertel; Sietze Vellema; Alex Hughes; Monica Bendini and Norma Steimberger; David Burch; Charles Mather and Bridget Kenny; Jeffrey Neilson; Robert Fagan.

The Coffee Paradox: Global Markets, Commodity Trade and the Elusive Promise of Development, by Benoit Daviron and Stefano Ponte. London: Zed Books, in association with the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), 2005. Pp. xxiv+295. £55.00 (hb); £16.95 (pb). ISBN 1-84277-456-5 (hb) and 1-84277-457-3 (pb)

The two edited collections and the monograph reviewed here provide the means to consider an extended range of commodities, locations, commodity/value chains, and issues of theory and method in political economy, beyond those presented by Gibbon and Ponte (2005) that we considered in the first part of this essay. Our discussion here touches on issues concerning how ‘global’ global commodity/value chains are; the symbolic attributes of

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commodities and commodity fetishism; the politics of consumption (or simply politics of selling and buying); the strengths and weaknesses of the economic sociology of commodity/value chains; and how the 'slices' extracted from larger organisms in studies of particular commodities may be reinserted, as it were, as part of the understanding of contemporary capitalism and of issues of development in the economies of the 'South'.

Keywords: agricultural exports, coffee, commodity chains, commodity fetishism, economic development, food, globalization, politics of consumption

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. (Marx 1867/1976, 163)

'IMMENSE COLLECTIONS OF (FOOD) COMMODITIES'

The books reviewed here extend the range of case studies, and also the analytical concerns and approach, of Gibbon and Ponte (2005) in various ways. Before introducing them, we cite a useful distinction made by Benoit Daviron and Stefano Ponte at the beginning of their monograph, between a 'global value chain for x' and 'x value chains', that is: "'global value chain for coffee' . . . is used to analyse general features in relation to the movement of coffee from production to consumption' while "'coffee value chains" . . . (is) used when a specific strand of the global value chain for coffee is examined (either at the production or consumption ends, or both) . . . such as the Uganda-to-Italy chain for Robusta coffee, of the Tanzania-to-US chain for mild specialty Arabica coffee' (note 1, p. xxiv). This distinction is central to the exposition and analysis of Gibbon and Ponte (2005) without being stated as clearly or explicitly there; it also has implications for issues of what constitutes a global value chain, as distinct from particular international commodity/value chains which may or may not correspond to specific strands of a given global commodity/value chain.

The contributions to the two edited collections (numbers 10 and 12 in the series Routledge Studies in Human Geography) provide further case studies of some of the commodities considered by Gibbon and Ponte (2005), notably cocoa, coffee, and fresh fruit and vegetables (FFVs), and case studies of other agricultural commodities such as bananas, wheat, dairy products and, of special note, meat (chicken, pork, beef) from production to its sale as fast food. In addition, Hughes and Reimer's 'geographies of consumption' includes studies of clothing and furniture. The geographical scope of the case studies also allows some useful amplifications of, and comparisons with, the focus of Gibbon and Ponte on African exports, through instances of domestic markets in Africa (Egypt and South Africa), and especially with regard to commodity chains in the Pacific Basin (Southeast and East Asia, Australia and New Zealand) – the zone of the world economy so central to discussions of contemporary globalization. There are also several case studies of Latin America, and of representations and

practices of (global) consumption in its longest established centres in Europe, including Britain, and North America. The monograph by Daviron and Ponte focuses on the global value chain for coffee, with ample and detailed explorations of some of the specific 'strands' or differentiated coffee value chains it subsumes.

Of most interest and importance are the analytical approaches and results of this cornucopia of commodity studies, the questions posed by different frameworks and concerns, and the kinds of answers generated by their investigation. Here we suggest a spectrum of approaches from what might be broadly considered and recognized as political economy through various forms of 'economic sociology' (loosely designated to include 'Actor Network Theory', ANT, and models of information networks and their dynamics) to the more definitely culturalist. Crude as this approximate characterization is, it immediately becomes more complex once it is acknowledged that issues about culture and representation, say, or about forms of regulation and the politics of consumption, can be posed and pursued by *any* of these approaches or their specific variants, if in very different ways (see Fine 2002). Such endeavours, of course, are hardly symmetrical or innocent in their intellectual and ideological purposes, means and effects, and indeed inhabit a terrain sometimes marked by highly polemical noise on one hand or strategic silence on the other, as we argued in the case of Gibbon and Ponte (Bernstein and Campling 2006).

Of the texts reviewed here, the collection edited by Hughes and Reimer represents the culturalist end of the spectrum, although its first section contains three essays on 'Commodity chains, networks and filières' (and its contributions mostly concern commodities produced in the 'South' and consumed in the 'North'). Thereafter it is organized around the themes of 'Commodity chains and cultural connections', 'Commodities, representations and the politics of the producer-consumer relation', and 'Ethical commodity chains and the politics of consumption'. A number of its contributions lead with 'theoretical' sections directed against the 'economism' and 'reductionism' of much commodity chain analysis ('vertical' approaches that 'privilege' production over consumption) and present 'alternative' frameworks. The space devoted to these preoccupations unfortunately distracts from fuller accounts of the empirical stories these contributions aim (or claim) to tell.

The collection edited by Fold and Pritchard has stronger affinities with political economy, and especially the approach exemplified by the notion of international, then global, 'food regimes' associated with Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael.¹ The editors provide a useful overview of patterns of international trade in food, and organize the contributions to the book in four sections titled 'Mapping the terminologies, concepts and directions for the analysis of cross-continental food chains', 'The local impacts of cross-continental food chains', 'Lead firms and the organization of cross-continental food chains' and 'Multi-scalar

¹ Which, however, they do not provide references for; see, for example, Friedmann (1993, 2004); Friedmann and McMichael (1989); McMichael and Myhre (1991).

politics and the restructuring of cross-continental food chains'. Edited collections are typically a mixed bag, and Fold and Pritchard contains some weak as well as strong contributions.

After the cautious explorations and judgements of *Trading Down* (Gibbon and Ponte 2005), and the density and even austerity of its text, the highlighting of 'politics', and how it is done, is striking. The politics of representation and consumption in Hughes and Reimer connects, albeit in more culturalist (and often flashy) style, with the fairly brief consideration by Gibbon and Ponte of 'domestic' and 'civic' conventions and their dynamics. The contributions to Fold and Pritchard connect more with the politics of the heavyweight actors in commodity/value chain governance: corporations, governments and international regulatory bodies.

The monograph by Daviron and Ponte, as we would expect, applies the approach advocated by Gibbon and Ponte: a complementary synthesis of Global Value Chain (GVC) analysis, with its economic and institutional focus on the governance of value chains (and all that entails), and Convention Theory (CT) concerned with the 'normative' dimensions of quality, standards, tastes and (consumer) preferences, and how they shape markets. Daviron and Ponte is an attractive text. It is well-organized, clearly written, and with many figures and tables that summarize and present a great deal of material (statistical, historical, thematic) in an accessible manner. All this enhances its utility for teaching, in addition to its contribution to the literature on coffee in particular and commodity/value chains more generally.

Chapter 1 introduces governance and quality issues with some historical context, including a summary of debates about trade (commodity exports) and development, especially from the 1950s onwards. Chapter 2 looks at 'the historical construction of coffee as a commodity', comprising sketches of coffee trade flows and transformations, forms of production, and of the organization of trade, retail sales and consumption, while chapter 3 completes the historical context with a focus on the International Coffee Agreement (ICA, 1969–1989) and what happened after its demise and other measures of deregulation, both within countries (illustrated by East Africa) and internationally. Chapter 4 examines the material and symbolic production of coffee quality, the former concentrated on producer countries and the latter on differentiated markets for coffee in consumer countries, and chapter 5 considers and assesses a range of 'sustainable' coffee initiatives. The next (chapter 6) has two distinct parts: a survey of value distribution along coffee chains in recent times, followed by 'theoretical approaches' (principally drawn from CT) to 'solving the commodity problem'. The latter derives from the paradox of the book's title: a 'coffee boom' in consuming countries, the so-called 'latte revolution' manifested in the growth of sales (and presumably profits) in consuming countries and a 'coffee crisis' in producing countries: 'the international price for green coffee in the early 2000s was at its lowest level for more than a century' in real terms (p. 113). The key to this 'paradox' is not simply the effect of demand and supply on prices along the chain but that producer countries export coffee as a commodity

defined by its material attributes or qualities, while the economic ‘value’ added to the ‘product’ at the point of sale and consumption downstream mostly derives from its ‘symbolic’ attributes (e.g. roasters’ quality claims, brands and packaging) and ‘in-service’ attributes (‘ambiance’ in independent cafés or coffee-shop chains – the ‘Starbucks phenomenon’). A final chapter 7 offers ‘an eclectic menu of possible solutions’ to the commodity problem thus formulated.

The discussion that follows is organized around several themes or clusters of themes concerning meanings and mechanisms of globalization, commodity fetishism and the politics of consumption/consumption of politics, to borrow from Guthman 2004.² We conclude by considering some questions of theory and method arising from ‘commodity studies’.

WHAT MAKES COMMODITY/VALUE CHAINS ‘GLOBAL’?

The answer to this question is elusive, perhaps unsurprisingly so given the controversies that rage around the term ‘globalization’ and the novelties attributed to, or denied, the processes and effects it is held to signify. The conditions of a satisfactory answer would include the ability to specify, first, what distinguishes today’s ‘global’ from yesterday’s ‘international’ (what has changed, and why), and, second, what distinguishes today’s ‘global’ from today’s (merely) ‘international’ in a shared, if hardly uniform, world of capitalism. The most explicit effort to grapple with this question is by Gibbon and Ponte. They argue for ‘a partial rehabilitation of the notion of economic globalization’ (in the face of globalization sceptics and ‘death by a thousand qualifications’) through a focus on ‘a specific and interlinked group of subtrends within *world merchandise trade* as well as on complementary trends in *world retail trade*’ (2005, pp. 2–3, emphases added, and chapter 2), which they seek to relate to tendencies to ‘financialization’ and what they call ‘the doctrine of shareholder value’ (chapter 1).

The texts reviewed here contain case studies of a range of commodity chains ascending from domestic to world trade/markets. Watts’ 2004 essay considers hog and chicken production primarily for the US domestic market, as does Guthman’s 2004 on organic fruit and vegetable production in California, while Morris and Young 2004 write about foods, most importantly meat, sourced from Britain and Ireland for sale in UK supermarkets. On a different tack, Mather and Kenny 2005 consider *foreign direct investment* by agro-food corporations from Italy (the subsequently scandal-ridden Parmalat) and France (Danone) in South Africa’s domestic market for dairy products. All these essays, centred on (very different) domestic commodity chains and their markets, have points of interest for the consideration of ‘global’ chains. The chicken industry in the USA

² For the sake of convenience, and so as not to list all the contributions to the two edited volumes in the references at the end of this review, those items designated ‘2004’ are in the Hughes and Reimer collection, those designated ‘2005’ in the collection edited by Fold and Pritchard.

pioneered many of the techniques of industrialized 'product differentiation' which later spread to other commodities and countries, and chicken is now one of the best examples of a truly global(ized) food commodity chain, both of which we amplify below.

Beyond these instances, most of the case studies in the two edited collections address locationally 'specific strands' (in Daviron and Ponte's term) of international commodity chains rather than exploring or elucidating their 'global' character, if indeed they have one. They include Coulson 2004 on exports of cut flowers from Ecuador; Raghuram 2004 on outsourcing of niche market garments from Britain to India; Barrett et al. 2004 on highly specialized/contracted FFV exports from Kenya and The Gambia, and Hughes 2004 on cut flowers from Kenya, both to UK supermarkets; Vellema 2005 on the contract farming of asparagus in the southern Philippines, and Neilson 2005 on coffee cultivation in Sulawesi, Indonesia, both for Japanese markets; while Fagan 2005 and, more briefly Lockie 2005, consider how banana exports from the Philippines to Australia are blocked by Australian protectionism. Three contributions focus on imports: Gertel 2005 on Egypt's import dependence on US wheat and its effects; also on grain, Massieu and Chauvet 2005 show how the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol affords Mexico little protection from US transgenic (GM) maize within the framework of NAFTA; while Dixon and Jamieson 2005 tell a more exotic story of chicken imports and consumption in the Cook Islands, influenced by both tourism and the fast food preferences acquired by migrant Cook Islanders in their Pacific Ocean diasporas. Le Heron 2005 describes changes in regulatory institutions and practices in New Zealand's export agriculture in the course of its liberalization (ostensible 'de-regulation').

Again in terms of *foreign investment*, Bendini and Steimberger 2005 examine the activities of another big Italian agro-food company (Bocchi) in Argentina in direct production and other (contract) sourcing of fruit and vegetables for Italian supermarkets. Bocchi also runs its own farms in Europe and other Latin American countries, and developed its operations in Argentina through mergers and acquisitions, a prominent strategy in the centralization of contemporary capital (as emphasized by Gibbon and Ponte, with special reference to retail corporations). Mergers and acquisitions also feature in two of the best essays from a political economy perspective, those by Burch 2005 on poultry production in Thailand, on which more below, and Pritchard 2005 on the 'Pacific Basin beef complex' with its Chinese, Japanese and Australian capitals, production and processing sites, markets and international trade.

The 'Pacific Basin beef complex' is one example of the next step up, as it were: what might be considered quasi- or semi-globalized commodity chains/systems, in the case of beef the Pacific Basin and Atlantic-European systems with their own 'geo-economics' of which disease barriers, trade agreements and transport costs are important elements (Pritchard 2005). Another example is world trade in bananas, historically divided between the (US) dollar banana nexus centred on the US market, sourced principally from Central and South America, and the 'ACP banana system' that links former colonies in the Caribbean

and Africa with European markets (Raynolds 2003).³ A third example, from preliminary research by one of the authors (Liam Campling), identifies three major 'systems' for tuna: the 'East Asian system' mostly focuses on the Japanese market for *sashimi* (raw seafood); the EU-centred system for canned tuna includes sites of production in former African colonies; and the US-centred system for canned tuna includes South American and South Pacific sites of production. It is worth noting that Southeast Asian canneries (and their systems of sourcing) dominate the supply of *both* the principal markets for canned tuna (as well as other markets), with the largest firms based in Thailand.⁴

What then might be fully ('truly') global commodity chains for particular agricultural and horticultural products? And what might be their 'general features' (Daviron and Ponte, cited above)? William Friedland, a veteran analyst of 'commodity systems' and pioneer of a California 'school' or lineage of food commodity studies (centred on the US domestic market) contends that 'Only a few agri-food commodities possess truly globalized processes of market exchange', of which wheat is one (Friedland 2005, 26). He further suggests that

As a general rule, the more globalized agri-food segments are near-consumer activities (supermarket retailing and distribution), some parts of food processing and certain agri-input sectors (farm machinery and agri-chemicals, for instance). Other components in these systems (notably farming) tend more commonly to be organized at regional, national or local scales . . . What these differences demonstrate is the uneven development of agriculture. (2005, 26)⁵

Friedland thus argues from a well-established tradition of explaining the peculiarities of farming in capitalism by its ecological conditions (and constraints). This connects with the first of two main aspects of the issue of how, and how much, agricultural commodity chains are 'globalized', which centres on the diverse range of *sources* (sites of production) of any particular commodity, and the extent to which these sources are *substitutable* – in short, a focus on the geographical coordinates of globalization. The physical or material attributes

³ The 'banana war' between the USA and EU was the first major trade dispute brought to the WTO after it was established in 1995. The American government, on behalf of the 'big three' US banana trading companies (Chiquita Brands, Dole, Del Monte), filed a complaint against EU quotas for banana imports from ACP (Lomé Convention) countries. In 2001 the WTO brokered a new arrangement whereby the EU would phase out quotas and replace them with tariffs (Fagan 2005, 208, 209).

⁴ On the rise of agri-business based in Thailand as an important example of transnational 'Southern' capital see Burch 2005, Goss (2002) and Goss et al. (2000).

⁵ Friedland reminds his readers of the concern with the biological conditions of farming and their effects for its uneven capitalization in the Marxist lineage of the agrarian question, and especially the work of Kautsky. He also quotes Trotsky on 'uneven and combined development' (2005, 26–7), perhaps the only reference to Trotsky in contemporary commodity studies! The 'California school' of agrarian studies is notable for its engagement with Marxism, and the only other authors reviewed here who refer to Marxist ideas in an informed way are indeed 'Californians', namely Watts and Guthman whose contributions to Hughes and Reimer stand out for their analytical quality.

of agricultural commodities usually imply limits on substitutability, although the engineering of cultivars (now including their genetic modification, GM) production technologies, labour processes and/or processing technologies continue to relax those limits. In the geographical sense of global sourcing, substitutability is often manifested in the 'opening' of new production areas (or rehabilitation of historic ones) within the constraints imposed by ecology (and available technology). This is exemplified by the recent introduction of significant new sites of export coffee production in Vietnam, which now rivals Colombia as the world's second biggest producer after Brazil, while Brazil itself 'promoted the "rebirth" of coffee cultivation, with new expansion based on a mechanized and input-intensive model of cultivation and harvesting' – so-called 'technification' in new growing regions (Daviron and Ponte, pp. 57–9). Historically cocoa, used in chocolate manufacture, has seen a sequence of growth and (relative) decline of different tropical production areas in Brazil, West Africa and Southeast Asia, partly following the social and environmental dynamics of cultivation in 'frontier' forest zones (Fold 2005), while Fold 2005 also notes that recently 'cocoa-bean supplies have become increasingly regionalized' (p. 225).

The second, more potent, aspect of the issue is social and hinges on the 'global reach' of certain corporations, or kinds of capital, in strongly buyer-driven commodity chains – whether processors or retailers – and how they integrate the processing and sales of an agricultural commodity sourced from many sites of production, as well as seeking to play off against each other, or substitute, different sites of production, according to circumstances. There is, of course, a close link here to the problematic of commodity/value chain governance, and the effects for producers of the strategies of upstream corporations, including questions central to the globalization debate (and predating it) about the 'nationality' of economic agents and spaces, on which we commented before (Bernstein and Campling 2006). As Burch 2005 puts it, quoting a report in 2003 by the US Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service: 'what does it mean when it is stated that "Japan will source more of its poultry imports from China as opposed to Thailand", if the same company, operating in both China and Thailand, is the supplier in both instances?' (p. 166).

This example is of special interest for several reasons. First, the company in question is the Cahroen Pokphand (CP) Group, the largest agro-industrial company in Asia and 'unique' in both the scope of its operations across Southeast and East Asia (and also in India, Turkey and the USA) and its *vertical integration* from animal feeds through poultry production to fast food outlets. Second, by 2003 Thailand was the seventh largest producer, and fourth largest exporter, of poultry in the world. Third, while the USA remains the largest producer and exporter of poultry, its share of world trade has been giving way to the encroachment of countries like China and Thailand (subject to the vagaries of avian 'flu and their effects) and, once more, Brazil. In short, there is a major shift in global sourcing of poultry from 'North' to 'South', with Brazil, Thailand and China together doubling their share of world trade from 23 per cent in 1995 to 46 per cent in 2003 (and with major new export production facilities mooted for

India and the Philippines). This expansion includes direct overseas investment in production facilities, and mergers and acquisitions, by the US corporate 'big three': Tyson Foods, Perdue Farms and Goldkist.

Poultry production is a special case as it is not land based in the extensive sense that most cultivation is, and is organized in enclosed spaces with standardized inputs – factory farming with a vengeance. As Watts 2004 asks: 'Does the biology of the commodity (chicken) make a damn bit of difference?' to where it is produced (p. 41). For other agricultural and horticultural commodities, it does make a difference, of course, which means that the strategies and activities of lead firms – whether international traders, processors and/or retailers according to commodity chain – in shaping the sourcing of materials, if typically in less direct or 'hands on' ways, is all the more salient and relevant to the question 'what makes commodity/value chains "global"?' Several other points from the global chain for poultry, however, are of wider significance despite the peculiar mobility of chicken production. One concerns possible connections between exports and internal market demand for some commodities in some producer countries. In the case of tropical commodities like the African exports featured in Gibbon and Ponte (2005), cocoa and chocolate products (Fold 2005), and coffee (with the exceptions of Brazil and Ethiopia), there is no significant domestic market to compete with or – more significantly in terms of economic development? – to complement export trade. This is not so with other (export) food commodities in countries in the 'South' with dynamic domestic markets and effective demand propelled by population size and growth, levels of urbanization and/or rising incomes for some, accompanied by shifting styles of consumption, for example, the expansion of supermarkets or fast food outlets (e.g. parts of Latin America, Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Middle East, if hardly sub-Saharan Africa). Second, a major finding about lead firms in buyer-driven chains on which Gibbon and Ponte (2005) focus – above all 'Northern' supermarkets – was the predominant tendency to outsource many activities (that add less value), especially to big first-tier suppliers. The case of the CP group based in Thailand is a useful reminder that in some circumstances high levels of vertical integration may be a crucial element of corporate strategies.

To return to the earlier questions: first, what distinguishes today's 'global' from yesterday's 'international'? This is relatively easier to answer in some instances, especially when a properly theorized historical framework (periodization) is available, as Daviron and Ponte (chapters 2 and 3) provide for world trade in coffee and the restructuring of its value chain, partly building on an essay by Daviron (2002) published in this *Journal*. The key to answering the question, we suggest, is the forms of organization of farming, agribusiness and retail capital and how they create, structure, fit into and modify commodity chain governance (a matter of power) which also entails the emergence, functioning, interactions and mutations of different institutions of regulation, whether private (commodity quality standards), governmental (e.g. food hygiene standards) or inter-governmental (in the arena of international trade: commodity agreements, GATT, now the WTO). The second question of what distinguishes today's 'global' from today's

(merely) 'international' is less straightforward and generates less satisfactory answers, not least given current temptations and tendencies to simply re-label the 'international' as the 'global'. However, investigating this question with regard to particular commodities in the world of today's capitalism requires consideration of the kinds of factors and issues outlined for plausible historical transitions, as it were, from 'the international' to the 'global'.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT: ENTER COMMODITY FETISHISM

The first part of this review essay noted the impact on commodity studies of the 'cultural turn' in social theory, typically code for some or other variant of post-modernism. We also suggested that today's immense and variegated 'collections of commodities' are a source of endless titillation to some post-modernists for whom personal consumption is the key to social existence and the creation of self in advanced capitalism. This is different from other ways of recognizing the significance of the cultural, and its role in consumption (and production too), as Gibbon and Ponte and Daviron and Ponte do in their attempts to marry GVC with convention theory, and as Ben Fine does, in a very different manner, in his ambitious Marxist exploration of *The World of Consumption*, subtitled *The Material and the Cultural Revisited* (2002).⁶

A collection on *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* edited by Appadurai (1986) was key to introducing the notion of commodity fetishism to the then emergent culturalist wing of commodity studies. Through this route 'commodity fetishism' makes its appearance in a number of the contributions to Hughes and Reimer, where it becomes part of the post-modernist *mélange* typified, at its worst, by that peculiar mixture of intellectual promiscuity, conceptual inflation and shallowness draped in the vocabulary of 'identity', 'meaning', the 'performative' play and potency of shopping (as definitive social practice), representations of the body, and the like.⁷ The most egregious example is the essay by Cook, Crang and Thorpe 2004 on 'Tropics of

⁶ Fine's book is a considerably rewritten version of his earlier work with Ellen Leopold (1993), extending and updating a remarkably wide critical survey of literature on consumption. Fine et al. (1996) focuses on food commodities, and applies the 'systems of provision' (sop) approach introduced in Fine and Leopold to case studies of meat, dairy and sugar products in the UK. It also includes a discussion of 'the class content of food' (chapter 11). See further notes 7, 17 and 22 below.

⁷ The strong interest in 'the body' in contemporary social and cultural theory connects with the point we made earlier about the focus on commodities of personal consumption (Bernstein and Campling 2006), and especially those, we can add, that have an intimate connection with the body and perhaps partly for that reason – given the narcissism of cultures of consumption in bourgeois societies today – with fashion too, for example, what is ingested as food and drink (Guthman 2004, 234), worn as garments and footwear, and applied to the body as cleansers and cosmetics. The last is apotheosized in the retail chain The Body Shop, from its name to its claims for 'ethical' sourcing and the high profile of its founder, Anita Roddick, as an icon of 'green' capitalism and 'profits with principles' – or of retail capital *tout court* ('ethical' sells)? With all the important and interesting issues that attach to cultures of the body, they are quickly devalued by the practices of post-modernist academic writing. For example, there is no reason for Gertel 2005 to put 'inscribed bodies' in the title

consumption: “getting with the fetish” of “exotic” fruit?” which explores the fetishism of how ‘exotic’ (tropical) fruit is represented and marketed in the ‘North’, with a ‘critique’ of the fetish seen simply as a ‘veil’ that conceals an underlying reality of exploitation and the contention that such ‘veils’ are subject to ‘mundane rupture and recombination in the everyday lives of consumers and business personnel . . . and to *strategic* rupture and recombination in the work of NGOs, activists, educationalists and other culture workers’ (p. 174).

This is a strategic essay, an attempt to . . . contribute to a wider political/academic project . . . Our prime purpose is to . . . unpack and re-work representations of ‘ethnic’, ‘exotic’ places, people and products, and to develop hybrid, multicultural geographical imaginations which might be (re-)attached to commodities: imaginations which might add extra dimensions to their consumption. (2004, 174)

This aim is pursued by three sketches (by each of the three co-authors?), with little plausible connection between them, on representations of tropical fruit in the contemporary UK retail trade press, in European colonial discourse (‘the fruits of Heaven and Hell’), and in the extravagant wardrobe of Carmen Miranda, the Hollywood-based Brazilian film star of the 1940s.⁸ They conclude this last sketch by quoting an article about Carmen Miranda in New York’s *Village Voice* magazine: ‘identity and difference, the central problems of (her) life, have become the central problems of our politics . . . Perhaps camp, the refined art of being serious about the frivolous and frivolous about the serious, is just the finesse we need’ (p. 187) – while, presumably, at the same time consuming tropical fruit with more imagination.

What did Marx mean by commodity fetishism? There is not much frivolity on offer here, albeit often irony at the expense of the bourgeoisie and its conceptions of its own virtue. The brief section on ‘The fetishism of the commodity and its secret’ comes at the end of chapter 1 of *Capital* Vol. 1, a highly abstract theoretical exposition of ‘The Commodity’ in which Marx establishes the basis of use-value and exchange-value, the ‘simple’ (‘isolated’, ‘accidental’), ‘total’ (‘expanded’), and general forms of value, and the money form.

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s

of his piece on food (in)security, poverty and US wheat imports in Egypt, while Coulson 2004 treats ‘bodies’ as simply a synonym for people (so do some old British vernaculars, but for different reasons). Another index of intellectual shallowness (beyond the evident ignorance of anything Marx wrote) – and the most striking in this context? – is the lack of any reference in the contributions to Hughes and Reimer to the work of Jean Baudrillard (e.g. 1996), surely the most powerful post-modernist theorist of consumption, whose ambitions included ‘de-fetishizing’ Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism. By way of contrast, Fine (2002) has a critical discussion of Baudrillard, as of Appadurai and almost everyone across the social sciences who has sought to theorize consumption.
⁸ Carmen Miranda also makes an appearance in Soluri’s altogether more deft, informative and readable historical essay on the culture of banana consumption in the USA (2003), which is not cited by Cook et al.

own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects *the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour* as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers . . . this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the *peculiar social character of the labour* that produces them. (Marx 1867/1976, 164–5, emphases added)

In short, Marx's formulation of commodity fetishism is very general, positing a structural feature of the capitalist mode of production *and how it appears* to those for whom generalized commodity production is an essential condition of their social existence.⁹ In its structural aspect 'the fetishism of the commodity' *objectively* conceals the social relations of production of capitalism, including those of its unique form of exploitation (the appropriation of surplus value) and of its social divisions of labour and markets. In its ideational, or ideological, aspect it further makes the social appear 'natural' (that is, the process of reification) to those who inhabit the world(s) of capitalism, including those intellectual/ideological specialists charged with explaining, and justifying, its functioning, economists for example (especially of the 'vulgar' variety).

Of the authors in Hughes and Reimer, it is only Guthman (see note 4 above) who demonstrates an appreciation of what Marx meant by fetishism of the commodity: 'the *necessary* masking of the social relations under which commodities are produced from which capitalist commodity production gains much of its legitimacy' (2004, 234, emphasis added). She then deploys this understanding in an examination of the politics of consumption, the focus of our next section. Here we simply note the issue of whether Marx's encompassing, and highly abstract, discussion of commodity fetishism can translate readily – or at all – into the empirical investigation of 'signs' like food labels, and the accuracy or otherwise of the information they may offer consumers. This is not to devalue the potential utility of the latter on which some of the contributors to Hughes and Reimer, as well as Daviron and Ponte, have informative things to say. It would be problematic, however, if such investigation was guided by any notion, explicit or implicit, that to the extent that adequate information about the social and/or environmental conditions of production of any particular commodity is available to consumers, then to that extent the fetishism of the commodity is reduced. This seems to be the implication of Cook et al. (above), for whom 'the fetish' attaches to the particular commodity, or more precisely to its representations, rather than as an effect – and a necessary effect, as Guthman points out – of capitalist social relations.

The counterpoint to the din of Cook et al.'s manifesto to 'get with the fetish' is the reticence of Gibbon and Ponte, who also choose to use Guthman's definition of commodity fetishism quoted above (from an earlier essay, Guthman 2002) in

⁹ The analysis of forms of appearance generated by capitalist social relations permeates the theoretical discussion of *Capital*, of course, another example being Marx's discussion of the wage form.

one small part of their review of applications of CT in the Anglophone literature (2005, 175 and note 7, 222). This is replicated and amplified in Daviron and Ponte's discussion of quality conventions, and especially 'producer–consumer connectivity' (pp. 225–9; see further below), where they record their disagreement with 'an orthodox Marxist interpretation' of commodity fetishism which 'would be linked to a notion of value as an inherent property of commodities – fixed by the labour power invested in them. If this were the case, by definition all conventions would be fetishistic, since they would mediate the act of exchange'.¹⁰ Marx would no doubt agree with the broad thrust of this, if insisting on a more accurate recognition that his purpose was *not* to specify the 'inherent' properties of commodities but, by examining this apparently 'extremely obvious, trivial thing' through the logic of theoretical abstraction, to identify the social relations on which commodity economy/capitalism is constructed. This does not mean, though, that Marx would dismiss investigation of the representations of commodities – most broadly put, their cultural aspects – including how such representations enter their journeys from field or factory to final consumption, or shape the calculations of capital (with respect to exchange value) and the choices of consumers (with respect to use value).¹¹ For Daviron and Ponte the labour theory of value has to be sacrificed in favour of CT and its recognition that 'there are no essential referents lying behind the languages and norms of quality evaluation', which they see as a 'more nuanced' analytical point of departure (p. 228). This is not the place to pursue this epistemological difference (and claim), although we consider some of its implications below.¹²

THE POLITICS OF SELLING AND BUYING

The politics of consumption is a hot topic today, for which many claims are made. For example, the 'act of consumption is increasingly invested with strong political overtones' (Crewe 2004, 197), and consumption practices have the potential 'to reconfigure power relations along the commodity chain' (Reimer and Leslie 2004, 251). So, what is the politics of consumption in the world of contemporary capitalism, especially in its 'North' where so much global purchasing power is concentrated? Concerning food, much of the current interest centres on the qualities that agri-business manufacturers/processors and big retail corporations claim for the food commodities they sell, and the extent to which those claims are deemed to be driven by, and to meet, the demands and desires

¹⁰ A key difficulty here stems from radically different notions and uses of the term 'value', a difficulty compounded by temptations to pun on those differences. Daviron and Ponte mostly use 'value' in the sense of value-added, as in mainstream economics, but also to refer to 'value' in a CT sense, that is, as established in notions of quality. Punning on these two distinct meanings of 'value' is somewhat heavy-handed in the title of their chapter 6: 'Value chains or values changed?'

¹¹ The logic of Marx's method is that 'social relations have to be identified before there can be an understanding of how they are represented and what is represented' (Fine 2002, 73 and *passim*).

¹² Note the statement by Gibbon and Ponte (2005, 87), quoted in Bernstein and Campling (2006), that they seek to 'fine-tune', rather than discard, the concept of capitalism 'by adding *underlying* components to its description' (our emphasis).

of consumers. This is a terrain full of potential confusions. To chart some pathways across it, first we can distinguish issues concerning (i) food safety, associated with regulation of a prophylactic kind; (ii) the aesthetics of food – matters of flavour, taste, or distinction (in the term applied by Bourdieu 1984), in some cases linked to the ‘organic’ (and combined with ideas of a healthy lifestyle); (iii) ‘fair trade’, committed to the ‘developmental’ objective of increasing returns to producers; (iv) ‘ethical trade’ initiatives that set standards for labour conditions, and which sometimes also encompass environmentally friendly codes and practices; finally then (v) the ‘environmental’, associated with the protection of biodiversity and ecological sustainability. Each of these broad categories generates plenty of intrinsic complexities, even at a descriptive level, which are compounded in attempts to combine any two or more of them to advance towards a kind of maximal harmony or good faith in the practices of purchase and consumption: what foods should I buy that are good for me, good for farmers and good for nature?¹³

This question, and the notions that inform it, signals issues in (‘Northern’) consumption that encompass and link, however unevenly, the strategies and practices of retail corporations, including initiatives in private regulation concerning standards; public regulation, especially concerning hygiene and health; the purposes and activities of a wide range of campaigning groups; and consumers’ individual choices about healthy eating, (good) taste (bound up with meaning, distinction, identity, and so on), and increasingly what are now called ‘ethical lifestyles’ – choices which enable consumers to express their ‘values’. All of this features in different ways and to different degrees in the (‘Northern’ thence globalized) mass media, in current academic research, and in the agit-prop activities of campaigning organizations and ‘social movements’. Broadly speaking, health and taste concerns centre on food farming in both ‘North’ (not least industrialized meat production) and ‘South’ (e.g. organic coffee). The concerns with ‘fair’ and ‘ethical’ trade centre on export commodities from the ‘South’. The concern with the ‘environmental’ again addresses both ‘North’ and ‘South’, although the more dramatic examples that attract most attention tend to be tropical, for example, the destruction of rain forests for logging and/or extending the frontiers of cultivation (oil palm and coffee plantations in Southeast Asia) and beef production (ranching in the Brazilian Amazon). An interesting trope in the literature on the politics of consumption, with an echo of Marx’s view of commodity fetishism, is the notion (signalled above) of ‘re-connecting’ consumers and producers through improved information about the provenance of food commodities – social, environmental and/or geographical – and their journeys from field (or factory) to retail sale and the diner’s plate or cup.

Various aspects of the ramified meanings of, and debates about, the politics of consumption are indicated and discussed in the work reviewed here. Barling and Lang 2005 consider the ‘governance of international food standards’ and its tensions with special reference to the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA)

¹³ Most typically ‘good for *small* farmers’.

and the role of the *Codex Alimentarius* established by the FAO and the WHO in 1963. They observe first that, given the massive concentration in food retailing and the extent of buyer-drivenness in global supply chains, action on international standards is typically the effect of food industry initiatives, with governments following behind. Second, the BSE crisis in the British beef industry was a key factor in spurring the politics of statutory regulation in Europe with effects for the quality standards applied to food commodities imported from the 'South' which, in turn, tend to raise costs and hence entry barriers. In their essay, the 'South' is represented by Africa, 85 per cent of whose food exports (by value) go to EU markets, while Fagan 2005 provides a neat example of how the authority of the WTO agreement on phytosanitary (plant health) measures has been invoked by the Australian government on behalf of its well-protected (and well-connected) banana growers to prevent competition from (cheaper) banana imports from the Philippines.¹⁴

Other contributions concerned with the politics of consumption focus on the quality initiatives of large-scale retail capital, signalled by Barling and Lang 2005. Morris and Young 2004 outline different types of quality assurance schemes adopted by UK supermarkets, and also farm industry organizations, with special reference to beef in the wake of the BSE crisis, a clear example of the concern with health standards. Crewe 2004 and Hughes 2004 and 2005 critically discuss aspects of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) initiated in the UK in 1998 by 'a forum of retailers, NGOs, trade unions and other bodies . . . to establish a framework for ensuring that companies adopt appropriate codes of conduct setting out minimum labour standards for their overseas suppliers' (du Toit 2002, 359). Crewe considers its impact on the sourcing of garments for the UK fashion retail market, while Hughes 2004 assesses the auditing of labour conditions in Kenyan farms producing cut flowers for export, and Hughes 2005 traces the evolution of implementation mechanisms under the ETI for African FFV (fresh fruit and vegetable) exports to UK supermarkets: from retailer-led social auditing of own-label suppliers through third-party monitoring (by private audit companies) to risk assessment and supplier self-evaluation.

Hughes 2005 also draws a sharp distinction between initiatives like ETI, led by corporate capital, and 'fair trade' centred on 'developmental objectives of empowering producers through "alternative" supply chains' (pp. 141–2), and Daviron and Ponte characterize 'fair trade' as 'based on a trading relationship . . . that has both market-based and ethical elements and aims to be sustainable in the long run' (p. 164). Fair trade is probably the most widespread example of a 'civic' convention at work in commodity chains sourced from the 'South', and the only one fully centred on enhancing returns to producers. None of the contributors to the two edited collections reviewed here provides a case

¹⁴ The application of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and other WTO measures to the legality of national food standards, and their effects for trade policies, is a strongly contested area. In this instance the Philippines complained to the WTO that Australia was in breach of the SPS rules; as this review essay was being completed (February 2006) the WTO ruled against European prohibitions on imports of genetically modified foods from the USA.

study of 'fair trade', but there is a detailed and informative discussion by Daviron and Ponte of coffee, probably the principal commodity – followed by tea and cocoa/chocolate – to which 'fair trade' initiatives have been applied. They note that duly certified fair trade coffee producers receive a much higher proportion of the consumer price of coffee than other growers today.¹⁵ This is evident in the proportions of fair trade coffee in the global market in 2000 by volume and value: 0.2–0.3 per cent and 0.8 per cent respectively (p. 176). As these figures show, fair trade coffee is only a tiny proportion of total coffee traded globally. One caveat to the success story of fair trade coffee, among others noted by Daviron and Ponte, is that its provisions do not cover the conditions of workers on coffee estates (p. 192).

A common feature of all the accounts mentioned so far is their scepticism about the achievements of the various measures introduced to establish, sustain or elevate 'ethical' standards of consumption. This is especially notable in the contributions of a more culturalist inclination when they confront the realities of 'civic' conventions engineered by big food industry and retail capital, and when they are informed by some measure of empirical probing into how 'ethical' initiatives are implemented, and their impact – or otherwise – on consumers, rather than indulging in the opportunities for discursive play (and distraction) provided by the public relations department (or consultant) of the self-proclaimed 'responsible retailer' (Hughes 2004, 142). Thus Morris and Young 2004 conclude that there is 'consumer confusion about the meaning of quality associated with fresh meat products' (p. 96), and that 'it is questionable whether attempts to re-image agro-food production in QAS achieve a reconnection of producers and consumers' (p. 98): reasonable if unsurprising conclusions that do not need the tiresome treatment of discourse(s) by which they are smothered. Crewe 2004 is clear that ethical trade should be about challenging oppressive labour conditions and concludes that ETI 'auditing systems are, for the moment at least, failing to end labour abuses' (p. 209). Hughes 2004, informed by some of her own auditing of ETI auditors' visits to Kenyan flower farms, concludes that ETI is principally driven by retail capital and that the implementation of codes of practice in the Kenyan flower industry does not do much for its workers – more reasonable if unsurprising findings that stand without Hughes' enthusiasm for 'virtualism', a form of economy that has absorbed and replaced 'capitalism' apparently.¹⁶ In similar vein, Hughes 2005 suggests that ETI implementation methods 'are frequently shaped as much by capitalism's imperatives as they are by a desire to improve labour conditions at sites of production' (p. 142). Finally, Reimer and Leslie's 160 interviews concerning consumption practices in the 'home furnishings sector' in the UK and Canada yield the insight that 'some consumers choose

¹⁵ And a proportion roughly in line with the average for all coffee producers under the former regulatory structure of the ICA (p. 219).

¹⁶ For an altogether better account of ETI in practice see the characteristically nuanced analysis by du Toit (2002) of 'globalizing ethics' in his case study of 'social technologies of private regulation' in the South African wine industry, an application of ETI supported by the UK's aid ministry, the Department for International Development.

to detach themselves from these concerns [about labour practices, materials, and environmental effects, HB and LC] to focus upon seemingly more straightforward issues such as price' (p. 256)!

Daviron and Ponte's overview of 'Agents of change? The politics of consumption and the role of retailers' (pp. 237–42) acknowledges the inconclusiveness of evidence about the impact that consumer knowledge (and 'ethics'), and the efforts of campaigning NGOs, has on retailers. Their scepticism – from the viewpoint of benefits to producers – about many aspects of, and innovations in, quality conventions, and the role of consumers in them, is informed by their extensive knowledge of the global value chain for coffee and gains additional edge from their use of ideas advanced by Guthman (2002, and see below) and Freidberg (2003). In a verbatim reprise of Gibbon and Ponte (p. 187), Daviron and Ponte observe that the '*latte* revolution' has reconsolidated 'the compromise between industrial and market quality conventions' (p. 222), which links to the success of lead firms (roasters/branders) in 'mainstreaming' the kinds of quality attributes pioneered by specialty coffee firms in the USA (for example, organic, shade-grown and connoisseur coffees), while outsourcing trouble shooting through certification and auditing – a form of 'low-cost conscience clearing' (p. 257), as they nicely put it. 'The imitation strategies of larger mainstream players place a strain on the financial viability of smaller players' so that 'the underlying structure of the industry is being reasserted' (pp. 161, 162), while new market-based private and public/private quality initiatives (detailed on pp. 193–8) 'do not address the power relations among actors in the coffee value chain, since they are often built upon them' (p. 198).

Such conclusions are sharpened when Daviron and Ponte draw on the work of Guthman and Freidberg which takes seriously Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and attempts to apply it (albeit subject to the qualifications suggested earlier). Freidberg (2003) in fact suggests 'a double fetishism' in which 'the masking of social relations of production combine(s) with the commoditization of the knowledge about the commodity itself' (Daviron and Ponte, pp. 225, 227): 'To some extent counter-intuitively, transparency may also suffer when information on commodity production and circulation is embedded in standardized and externally verified labels and certifications. The label then becomes a cheap substitute for intimate knowledge of the commodity and of producers' (p. 229).

Guthman's 2004 excellent essay provides the most pointed consideration of the politics of consumption among the authors considered here. She examines 'organically grown' as 'the most highly evolved of all eco-labels' with special reference to fruit and vegetable sectors in California, and the evolution of certification, labelling and marketing of 'organics' in the USA more generally. She concludes, in broadly similar fashion to Daviron and Ponte on the mainstreaming of specialty coffee attributes by lead firms, that 'organic' production in California has been rapidly subjected to processes of concentration, and appropriated by the oligopolistic structure of agri-business capital in ways that mystify, or further fetishize, claims to superior taste, good health and ecological sustainability associated with 'organically grown'. Alone among the work reviewed here, Guthman

draws on (rather than merely referencing) the materialist analysis of consumption by Ben Fine and his co-workers.¹⁷ For example:

if consumption involves consuming ideas, images and symbolic meanings . . . there is a 'complex and shifting relationship between the two aspects of the use value of a commodity – its physical content and its interpretations'. (Fine and Leopold 1994, 26) Historically this gap between the commodity's (physical) use value and its imputed use value has been 'filled' by an 'aesthetic illusion' (Fine and Leopold 1994): brand name. The material purpose of the aesthetic illusion is to widen the gap between realizable prices and costs of production (including a 'normal' rate of profit), that is, to create rent. (p. 236)¹⁸

This passage illustrates Guthman's intent to integrate the analysis of representations of commodities – their cultural or symbolic life, as it were – with a materialist understanding of their social relations of production and consumption. The most important expression of Guthman's analytical vision in this immediate context, however, is her clear statement of the limits to the politics of consumption as understood by most of the authors reviewed here:

While labels are the necessary ingredients to set so-called ethical commodities apart, by doing so labels allow civil protest and public choice to be conflated with consumption choice and profit-making. Moreover, by giving centrality to the commodity as vehicle of social change, they resurrect the fetishism of commodities in a back door way. (p. 235)

This is what she means by the politics of consumption becoming the consumption of politics, the bonus of enjoying a lifestyle that is ethical as well as hedonistic with both achieved simultaneously through the act of buying: the Californian (middle-class) dream? The politics of consumption as 'Voting with your dollar' (Daviron and Ponte, p. 242) resonates the ideological grip of a neo-liberal world view on everyday social existence.¹⁹ This most individualized (and self-regarding) take on the politics of consumption is Cook et al.'s notion of the imaginative consumer and 'camp' as providing 'just the finesse we need' in politics – 'getting with the fetish' indeed. It also applies to other discussions, if in

¹⁷ See note 6 above. Fine and Leopold's use of the notion of the 'aesthetic illusion', cited by Guthman in the passage that follows, derives from a critical reading of Haug (1986); see further Fine and Leopold (1993, 24–9, 29–30) and Fine (2002, 88–97).

¹⁸ Note that Guthman's reference to Fine and Leopold (1994) should be Fine and Leopold (1993). Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2001) on the fetishism of the brand and what lies behind it (e.g. sweatshop production) is an emblematic popular text of the anti-globalization movement.

¹⁹ As Guthman (p. 237) suggests in relation to the market for (higher priced) 'organic' foods: 'the ability to purchase relative freedom from risk . . . provides an exemplary case of neo-liberal regulation'. The full-blooded neo-liberal version of 'voting with your dollar' extends to Milton Friedman's advocacy of 'voting' with your (publicly funded) voucher in your choice of (privately supplied) education or health services. Friedman's proposal was the spur to Albert Hirschman's (1972) classic anatomization of the intrinsically anti-democratic nature of market-derived constructions of the superiority, in both efficiency and morality, of the exercise of individual(ized) 'choice', which is central to the discourse of New Labour's current ambitions to 'reform' public services in the UK.

less flamboyant vein, that harbour conceptions of the politics of consumption as personal choice, for example, Murdoch and Miele's 2004 tedious essay contrasting fast food as exemplified by McDonald's and Italy's 'Slow Food' movement, with its conclusion that 'the success of each network in mobilizing complex relays of heterogeneous entities . . . indicates that both are able to coexist in the food sector' (p. 116) – meaning, we guess, that some consumers like fast food, some like 'slow food', and both 'are able to coexist' as they do 'coexist'.²⁰

Following Guthman's reasoning, there is little here that would be recognized in other contexts as 'political' in any meaningful sense, that is to say, involving collective action to challenge or defend, transform or conserve, existing structures and practices of social inequality in both their material and symbolic (ideological) aspects. The most evident exception provides an interesting case of perhaps the oldest form of 'the politics of consumption' as collective action, namely the consumer boycott, in Mather and Rowcroft's 2004 incisive account of the effective campaign of the Dutch anti-apartheid movement BOA to boycott purchases of South African fruit in the Netherlands.

Otherwise there are few glimpses of the 'political' in the politics of consumption reviewed here, beyond notions of 'ethical lifestyle' and more or less attention to securing its key material condition: that 'ethical' commodities, reliably certified and labelled, are available – in supermarket or local 'farmers' market', through mail order or on-line shopping – for the ethical consumer (in the 'North') to buy. The means of satisfying that condition tend to be treated in an institutional rather than political fashion, despite (sometimes gestural) references to NGOs and 'social movements', with a focus on private regulation initiatives in chain governance, the role of governments (including aid agencies in some instances), and multilateral bodies that bear on international trade, and especially exports from the 'South', like the World Bank and above all the WTO. The relations, forms and practices – including the politics – of farming for export in the 'South' are almost wholly absent, apart from some consideration of the strategies (and machinations) of transnational agri-business capitals, and brief glimpses of what goes on in sites of production at the far upstream end of the commodity chains considered. Those glimpses are found only in the Fold and Pritchard collection – notably Vellema on the social complexity of contract farming of asparagus in the southern Philippines, and Neilson on struggles by farmers' organizations in Sulawesi to get control of the geographical branding of their coffee which fetches high premia in the Japanese market – and in Daviron and Ponte, who observe *en passant* that the requirement that fair trade certification is available only to smallholder organizations, including cooperatives, is more likely to involve and benefit better-off farmers (pp. 188–9), a rare acknowledgement of the differentiation of petty commodity producers in the literature reviewed here.

²⁰ Contributing to the tedium is the syndrome we noted earlier of long and windy 'theoretical' sections which distract from the contexts and content of the empirical stories; in Murdoch and Miele's essay the ratio of the former (including convention theory) to the latter is about 60:40.

At the beginning of their book Daviron and Ponte say that their main aim is 'to use the case study of coffee to recast the development problem for countries relying on commodity exports' (p. xx) rather than to 'focus on producer livelihoods' (p. xix), although both are encompassed by their question: 'what are the upgrading opportunities for developing countries and for small producers within these?' (p. xx). A key finding is that 'small farmers are being marginalized' by the current dynamics of the global value chain for coffee (p. 265), and at the end of the book they highlight the future of smallholders in 'the relationship between commodity trade and development' (p. 272). Theirs is the only full study of a global commodity chain among the work covered in this essay and the only one to advance ('eclectic') recommendations in its final chapter. There Daviron and Ponte express their belief (hope?) that 'win-win strategies are possible' if requiring 'considerable dialogue, trust-building and cooperation' (p. 264), and propose an 'alternative agenda', summarized under the headings of regulatory, hybrid and commercial approaches (p. 270). The first rejects a return to the 'golden age' of the ICA as unrealistic in this period of neo-liberal hegemony, and includes ways of using WTO rules and 'partial' (national) re-regulation to strengthen the influence of, and returns to, producer countries. The second suggests a variety of ways of improving quality ('sustainability') certification systems and procedures, entailing some quite detailed issues with special reference to indications of geographical origin (IGOs) and their benefits to producers. The third addresses aspects of the politics of consumption outlined above, and – rather than pursue the prospect of 'ethical' consumption – emphasizes mobilizing consumer hedonism and aspirations to connoisseurship, on the analogy of the recent expansion of (non-traditional) 'Northern' markets for (good) wines. This is to be achieved by 'consumer education on quality' including organization of coffee tastings and 'the involvement of coffee experts, restaurateurs and celebrity chefs' (p. 270).

The other main prong of their category of 'commercial approaches' relaxes their otherwise refreshing scepticism by taking up the trope of 'connectivity' in a populist manner: 'for consumer–producer connectivity to mean anything for smallholder farmers and farm workers in developing countries it has to be based on two-way transparency' that involves 'radical change in the functioning of trade networks, in consumption patterns and in the valuation of quality content' (pp. 257–8).²¹ As the 'value-added that can be captured at the farm gate in improving material quality is limited', because at that point coffee remains a commodity, 'Producers need to *sell* the symbolic quality attributes of coffee as well – territory, a story, ideas, and the exotic' (p. 265, emphasis added) – in effect 'getting with the fetish?' – which can be achieved in part by agro-tourism (on the lines of bio- and eco-tourism).

The analytical weight of Daviron and Ponte's account of where power lies in the global value chain for coffee, and their well-informed scepticism, restricts their 'alternative approach' to a very narrow room for (policy) manoeuvre indeed, which

²¹ Daviron and Ponte apparently use the terms 'producer–consumer connectivity' and 'consumer–producer connectivity' interchangeably.

they are then tempted to talk up as much as possible. And surely it is suggestive that some of their key ideas for a more ‘transparent’ and effective two-way ‘consumer–producer connectivity’ come under the heading of ‘commercial approaches’? They are consistent in their recognition that claims for certain qualities of commodities, involving the construction of standards, are judged by the inimitable and irreducible test of the market: does it sell? This is why we propose that the ‘politics of consumption’ could be usefully replaced by the more straightforward term of the title of this section: the politics of selling and buying.

COMMODITY STUDIES AND CAPITALISM: SOME ISSUES OF THEORY AND METHOD

Some of the central theoretical and methodological challenges in the investigation and analysis of contemporary capitalism include, first, the intrinsic (and growing?) diversity or variation of its social forms, and the extent to which connections across that diversity can be usefully captured and explained by notions like that of uneven and combined development. Second, this points to issues of the systemic qualities and dynamics of capitalism today, within which the anarchy of individual capitals and their strategies of accumulation are always contingent on particular conditions – of markets, competition, technical change, and not least the trajectories and outcomes of class and other social/political struggle – which are constantly changing, often as unintended effects of successful, or unsuccessful, accumulation strategies. Third, one of the most severe challenges to theory and method able to inform, and be informed by, empirical research, is to grasp the connections between the systemic qualities, and contradictions, of the present phase of capitalism and the diversity and variation of its social forms, always contingent outcomes and constant flux (in often unanticipated ways, and about which reliable prediction is extremely rare).²² Finally, these broadly sketched challenges require engagement with ideas and arguments about globalization, not to pronounce on their validity but to follow the intent expressed in one of Gibbon’s earlier essays on global commodity chains: ‘my argument is aimed less at “saving the concept” of economic globalisation, which I do not consider to be a particularly interesting project, and more at bringing discussion back to the issues of the nature of present-day capitalism’ (Gibbon 2001, 22).

To conclude this review essay, we consider ways in which contributions to the broad field of ‘commodity studies’ reviewed here bear on the theoretical and methodological agenda indicated. Given that commodity studies ‘has no common purpose, object of analysis, theoretical framework or methodological approach’ (Bernstein and Campling 2006, 240), our discussion is necessarily highly

²² The severity of this challenge is illustrated in Fine in the space or gap between, on one hand, the abstraction (and power) of his discussion of the theoretical basis for a materialist commodity studies (chapters 3 and 4) and, on the other hand, his reiteration of the concept of ‘systems of provision’ or sop (chapters 5 and 6) as ‘a unity of economic and social processes which vary significantly from one commodity to another’ and entails a ‘multiplicity of factors’ (2002, 82, 87). He later characterizes ‘the global commodity chain approach . . . (as) a partial and simpler version of the sop approach’ (p. 121).

selective. To briefly reiterate our negative observations, in order to dispense with them and move on, much of the culturalist contribution to commodity studies – which tends to fix most on the symbolism of commodities and their consumption – adds little value. Its objection to ‘privileging’ certain kinds of social relations (and powers), to the extent that it is capable of recognizing them, is manifested in lists of ‘factors’, what Marx called ‘chaotic wholes’, that do not encourage serious analysis, including of the cultural. Reimer and Leslie 2004 describe the home furnishings sector as ‘characterized by multi-stranded webs of interaction between people, resources (trees, minerals, plants), chemicals, technologies and habitats’ (p. 251). Cook et al. 2004 assert that any commodity presents ‘a bundle of social, cultural, political, economic, biological, technological, geographical, historical and other relations’ (p. 174). And? How might we start to unravel and order those relations so as investigate and explain them, rather than simply relish listing them?²³

As noted earlier, all this is justified as the rejection of ‘privileging’ any element of a ‘whole’ and of ‘reductionism’, for example, ‘reductionist distinctions of Northern consumers and Southern producers’ (Hughes and Reimer 2004, 7), and celebrating ‘agency’ as well as representation (the symbol, the fetish) in a world of ‘complex webs of interdependence’ and ‘multi-stranded connection’ (Hughes and Reimer 2004, 4, 6). At the same time Hughes and Reimer, citing Leslie and Reimer (1999), note ‘concerns about the failure of a circuits of culture approach both to locate institutional power and to stress the forces responsible for exploitation at sites of production’, and that ‘the notion of an endless circuit . . . “may involve the loss of an important political stance: the foregrounding of exploitation”’ (2004, 5, 6) – without, however, any indication of whose concerns they are, what they mean by ‘exploitation’, why it is confined to sites of production, why it is important politically, and how power and exploitation might be addressed. The nightmare scenario lurking in much of the culturalist literature is the prospect of deconstruction without end, as it were. Mather and Rowcroft 2004 observe that most culturalist work on advertising ‘presents a static analysis of how a set of promotional material is used to “re-enchant” a commodity ranging from a piece of clothing to an island in the Pacific’ (p. 158). We fear that should Daviron and Ponte’s proposal take off, that coffee producers ‘sell the symbolic quality attributes of coffee as well – territory, a story, ideas, and the exotic’, its principal outcome could be a further rash of post-modernist doctoral research deconstructing the imagery of place.

It is with relief, then, that we turn to aspects of the literature reviewed here that are more relevant to a political economy of commodity chains, and how that, in turn, might contribute to the broader agenda of ‘issues of the nature of present-day capitalism’. First, much of the material in the Fold and Pritchard collection and in Daviron and Ponte (as well as parts of Gibbon and Ponte) illustrates the ‘normal’ tendencies of processes of capitalist accumulation, both

²³ Ironically one of the points of departure of Baudrillard (1996) is the impossibility (or ‘dream’) of adequate lists, catalogues, inventories, and so on, of commodities and their attributes.

generally and in the conditions of contemporary 'globalization'. These include the concentration and centralization of capital; the drive to standardization in both production and circulation (marketing) of commodities; the role of vertical integration and economies of scale; the intensity of competition (not least in conditions of oligopoly); and how all these dynamics enter the calculations – and miscalculations – of corporate capital.

The tendency to concentration of capital in food processing and/or retailing is exemplified by the global value chain for coffee, and by case studies of FFV exports (Kenya, Argentina) and different branches and locations of the meat industry (the USA, Thailand, Australia); while the tendency to centralization of capital is illustrated by the diverse portfolios of giant agro-food corporations (and the relative ease with which they acquire and shed particular companies and activities), the trend of corporate mergers and acquisitions, and those vast agglomerations of money capital which invest, often in highly speculative fashion, in the futures markets for apparently 'simple' and 'trivial' commodities.

The drive to standardization in both production and circulation (marketing) of commodities is especially significant in relation to the claims of post-Fordist models about the flourishing of niche markets, and the 'customization' of personal consumption held to drive it or at least accompany it. One of the pioneering instances of the rapid expansion of product differentiation along wholly industrial lines was led by Tyson Foods in the US chicken market from the 1970s, to the point today when Tyson has thousands of chicken products, sold principally through supermarkets (mostly frozen products) and fast food outlets. This entailed massive changes in the engineering (and scale) of chicken production, including (dis)assembly-line slaughter and dismemberment, as well as in marketing, detailed by Striffler (2005). Moreover, as Mr Tyson himself stated in 1979, anticipating the later distinction between 'commodity' and 'product' and the associated shift from 'commodity chain' to 'value chain' in the academic literature (Bernstein and Campling 2006, 241): 'We are moving away from being a commodity company toward being a marketing company with specialized products using the Tyson brand' (Striffler 2005, 22). In the case of coffee, Daviron and Ponte note that 'the differences between industrial and market conventions may be decreasing with improved prospects for *standardization within a large number of differentiated product lines*' (p. 224; emphasis added), and they also describe the *standardization of consumption* exemplified by 'the Starbucks phenomenon': a 'homogenized retail experience with a consistent but not exceptionally good product' (p. 79).²⁴

The degrees and forms of vertical integration in (different) commodity chains present a mixed picture, the result of the different conditions that affect those

²⁴ It is the more startling then to be told by Daviron and Ponte (p. 78) that the success of Starbucks hinges on its ability to 'decommoditize' coffee. Of course, by this they mean its success in adding value through symbolic and 'in-service' attributes; alternatively one may view this 'phenomenon' through the perspective of Guthman (above) as adding another type of fetishism to the commodity. In other respects, the Starbucks chain, which had over 7500 coffee shops (of which 1500 were outside the USA) by 2004, deploys 'fairly mainstream corporate strategies' that include opening 'outlets in neighbourhoods with traditional cafés to drive them out of business' (pp. 78, 79).

chains and the markets for consumption goods they supply, including how the costs and benefits of different forms of chain coordination, of outsourcing and the like, are calculated by lead firms. Daviron and Ponte note that 'concentration in the roaster market has reached a level even higher than for international traders' (p. 93) and explain why the big coffee roasters have little interest in vertical integration (with international traders) 'in current market conditions' of oversupply and as long as they can rely on supplier-managed inventory (SMI) systems (pp. 93–5).²⁵ On the other hand, in the only contribution to the two edited collections that addresses global sourcing patterns and dynamics, Fold 2005 suggests that, since the mid-1990s, lead firms in cocoa/chocolate have increasingly involved themselves in matters of sourcing (including through promoting NGO initiatives aimed at small cocoa farmers) in the context of stagnating or declining producer prices and potential medium-term supply constraints. Light is shed on vertical integration in meat chains by Burch 2005 and Pritchard 2005. Burch presents the contrasting fortunes in the Thai poultry industry of the CP Group (above) and the Grampian Country Food Group (GCFG), Britain's largest unlisted agri-food company, which acquired a large Thai poultry company principally for export production. CP in part protects its profitability through strongly vertically integrated activities from feed production to its own-brand fast food outlets, while GCFG remains subject to the intense pressure on price margins exerted by competition to supply (UK) supermarkets and fast food chains. Pritchard's account of a period of intense competition in Australia's beef-packing industry in the 1990s, in part driven by (exaggerated) expectations of Japanese demand, notes vertical integration, combined with 'transnationality', as a strategic source of competitive advantage for international companies like Nippon and AMH/Con Agra. This relieved them of the pressures of turning a significant profit on their investments in acquiring Australian beef-packing plants, as long as those investments contributed to profits further downstream in their vertically integrated operations.

Beyond these kinds of specific instances, there is a larger question here of whether 'coordination' by lead firms in strongly buyer-driven commodity chains amounts, in effect, to a form of indirect or 'hands off' vertical integration. The types and degrees of concentration of economic power downstream in such chains, characteristic of so much global food trade today, and the effects they have on upstream locations of supply, and producers, is a key issue in considering commodity trade and development, to which we turn shortly.

Linking with issues of concentration and vertical integration, albeit not in any uniform way, are those of economies of scale. Economies of scale feature in Gibbon and Ponte, with reference to both the concentration of processor and retail capital in buyer-driven commodity chains *and* to exploiting the (very limited) opportunities available to upstream firms in the poor countries of

²⁵ They point out that key shifts in the coordination of the global value chain for coffee since the end of the ICA include the fact that (smaller) coffee stocks now held in consumer countries, where the big roasters are located, have replaced the (larger) stocks previously held in producer countries.

sub-Saharan Africa. The economies of scale necessary to competition in food processing and retailing are well illustrated by Daviron and Ponte with respect to coffee, and in some of the case studies in the two edited collections. Here we note only a few instances of economies of scale in farming and key branches of export horticulture (leaving aside the massive scale of production and processing in various branches of meat production). The export boom in cut flowers from Kenya to the Netherlands, the UK and Germany, is mostly supplied by three large farms, two of which each employ over 5000 workers (Hughes 2004, 220). Daviron and Ponte report that the high-quality coffee brand in Italy, Illy, sources most of its coffee from estates (p. 151), and that the demand for some 'sustainable' coffees like shade-grown coffee tends to favour estate production (p. 193). Right at the end of their book, they suggest that today we 'may be witnessing the re-emergence, in a different guise, of the plantation model that characterized (tropical) commodity production and trade between the fifteenth century and the second part of the nineteenth century' (p. 272; and see their chapter 2). This somewhat echoes Bendini and Steimberger 2005 who assert that the investments and operations of Bocchi in Argentina represent 'a new manifestation of the classic Latin American plantation agro-economy' (p. 164).²⁶

The intense competition and tendencies to oligopoly in 'saturated' markets for food commodities, and other items of personal consumption, underlie the kinds of processes and mechanisms of capital accumulation outlined, and are discussed most systematically in Gibbon and Ponte of the work reviewed here. Some branches of the agri-food industry are low profit operations with high degrees of risk and uncertainty, for example, beef processing (Pritchard 2005), and the margins of big capitals in other branches of production and processing can also be squeezed by the economic power concentrated downstream in corporate retailing, as Burch observes in the case of GCFG (above), and Mather and Kenny 2005 show in explaining the troubled ventures of Parmalat and Danone into the South African dairy market.

With all the general tendencies of capitalist economy that he anticipated so accurately, Marx would no doubt be startled by many features of capitalism today and not least those associated with the levels and styles of consumption that the commodity studies literature (in all its widely varying manifestations) focuses on; for example, the fact that for most of the last 60 years coffee has been the most valuable internationally traded commodity after oil (Daviron and Ponte, p. 50).²⁷ At their most productive, studies of commodity chains have amplified understanding of how specific markets are structured and organized, and why and how they change. Integrally connected with this, they also contribute to

²⁶ And also 'the social subordination of agricultural workers and contract farmers' (p. 164) – an unfortunate if typical populist bracketing of two distinct class categories. We can reasonably infer that the 450 or so 'small and medium farm enterprises' contracted to supply fruit to Bocchi (p. 162) are capitalist farms.

²⁷ The illustrative material in *Capital* on wages and the reproduction of labour power concentrates on the prices of wage goods as the most basic of the necessities of life. Of course, the conditions of much factory work and of poor residential areas in today's 'South' would look much more familiar to Marx.

knowledge of how certain types of contemporary capital operate, namely those involved in the sourcing, processing and sale of personal consumption goods, particularly foods in the present context, in the places and markets where purchasing power for those commodities is concentrated. This extends the analysis of competition that Marx centred on production to the sphere of commodity circulation, where his analysis of how competitiveness enters the distribution of total surplus value between capitals helps to integrate some of the key findings of research into commodity chains. Moreover, the conceptualization of chains and their governance introduces a new element in the sense that competition – and all that typically goes with it: tendencies to concentration, economies of scale and standardization, technical change, and so on – proceeds not only ‘horizontally’ between capitals in the same branch of production, but ‘vertically’ through the relations between capitals located at different points (‘nodes’) in the journeys of commodities from production through circulation to consumption. Those sequences or journeys are also shaped by a variety of changing institutional frameworks and rules of regulation – private and public (and their combinations), industry-specific and generic, national and international (notably now the WTO) – which are explored and explained with evident benefit in some of the commodity chain literature.

At the same time, what most commodity/value chain analysis focuses on above all is *relations between capitals*. This marks one of the key limitations of the kind of economic sociology that Daviron and Ponte apply in their account of the global value chain for coffee, as we also suggested in our discussion of Gibbon and Ponte (Bernstein and Campling 2006) – and limitations intrinsic to the theory and method of their approach rather than simply omissions, as it is always and obviously impossible to cover every facet of an object of study and its context. The reasons why certain issues are framed and investigated in certain ways, and their effects, is the more significant and interesting question. Our assessment of Gibbon and Ponte pointed to two kinds of problems. The first stems from their view of capitalism as a series of relations and exchanges between various entities: ‘firms’ or enterprises across the entire range from global food processing and retail corporations to smallholder farms, all of which are sellers and buyers of different commodities, with consumers as the final buyers.²⁸ The second concerns the problems and prospects of development in the ‘South’, whether the mostly very poor countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Gibbon and Ponte) or the much broader spectrum of coffee producing countries (Daviron and Ponte).

The first kind of problem permeates Daviron and Ponte, and is manifested in some (symptomatic) tensions. One instance of this, from the desire to construct an economic sociology that marries GVC analysis with CT, is the following pair

²⁸ Although the term ‘capitalism’ disappears altogether from Daviron and Ponte, having featured so centrally in the argument of Gibbon and Ponte, whose first chapter, we recall, is titled ‘the age of global capitalism’. The most common commodity purchased across this range of ‘firms’, including by many ‘smallholders’ producing export crops, is labour power, which hardly features in (food) commodity studies other than making an occasional appearance in the form of wage costs or as the intended beneficiary of ‘ethical trade’ proposals.

of observations: ‘the history of agricultural markets suggests . . . (that) standards are created to allow the existence of market transactions’ (p. xix), and conventions are ‘not linked directly to specific social interests’ (p. 32). How might ‘market transactions’ and ‘specific social interests’ be linked indirectly, then? Is it not the case that many social processes and institutions are ‘not linked directly to specific social interests’? Rather, exploring their ‘functions’ in mediating specific interests (and conflicts between them), and their effects for the interests of classes and other social categories constituted by relations of exploitation, oppression and inequality, is a typical challenge to social analysis. The underlying thrust of the second observation quoted, we suspect, again connects with what we termed the strategic silences in Gibbon and Ponte: while GVC analysis in the Daviron/Gibbon/Ponte version emphasizes relations of power – between capitals (or ‘firms’), within chain governance, between ‘North’ and ‘South’ – this is systematically, if tacitly, detached from structures and dynamics of class inequality and social inequality more broadly.

A second instance is the danger of turning this kind of economic sociology into a means of merely ‘sociologizing’ (mainstream) economics. Again here are two observations from Daviron and Ponte on the issue of *price*. First, ‘Prices at different nodes of a value chain are not exclusively determined by the volumes of demand and supply. They are also determined by oligopolistic behaviour, the ownership of stocks, and the actions of investment funds in futures markets’ (p. 256), and, second, ‘final prices and value are determined by the consumer’s evaluation of the quality attributes of a good’ (note 1, p. 242). The first observation points towards actors in the heavyweight division of contemporary capitalism, but how does the second differ from the view of conventional economics that prices are given by the utility maximizing behaviour of consumers, as manifested in their choices of what to buy?²⁹ This also seems to go against the grain of Gibbon and Ponte’s argument for a return to Gereffi’s original formulation of commodity chain drivenness, rather than his later turn to ‘sociologizing’ economics (in our term) by reformulating chain governance around transaction cost issues (Bernstein and Campling 2006, and references therein).

Some problems of the conceptualization of development issues in value chain analysis were discussed in the first part of this review essay, and are further exemplified, and compounded in some respects, by Daviron and Ponte. One reason for selecting the global value chain for coffee to explore the ‘commodity problem’ is that ‘a number of low-income countries, even those with a low share of the global export market, rely on coffee for a high proportion of their export earnings’ (p. 50; see also p. 100). In light of this, it is immediately striking that,

²⁹ If choices subject to imperfect knowledge and other difficulties, which is echoed in Daviron and Ponte’s gloss on ‘the competences and capabilities of consumers (in particular, the ability of [*sic*] measuring some material attributes and appreciating/interpreting symbols and their meanings)’ (note 1, p. 242). Happily, Cook et al. (above) and others in the post-modernist wing of commodity studies are on hand to provide help with appreciating and interpreting the meanings of symbols (and fetishes) to enhance the consumption experience. Fine (2002, chapter 7) provides a typically incisive, indeed ruthless, demolition of neo-classical economics on the subject of consumption.

with all the information they have collected, analysed, and present so clearly (in their 49 tables, figures and boxes), Daviron and Ponte offer no systematic data on coffee revenues as a *proportion* of total export earnings of producer countries. Is the reason for this that the biggest producers are *not* low-income countries at all, like Brazil and Colombia, while Vietnam displays rates (and forms) of economic growth that far outstrip the performance of other low-income countries that also export coffee, notably those of East Africa (which feature a great deal in *The Coffee Paradox*)? In short, the analytical logic in conducting a study of the global value chain for a particular commodity, in order to illuminate issues of commodity exports in development, is very different from using studies of 'specific strands' of global commodity/value chains to assess the development prospects of a particular *region* (or country), as Gibbon and Ponte do ('Africa, value chains and the global economy').

A first and pervasive type of substantive asymmetry in issues of development – conveyed by Gibbon and Ponte, Daviron and Ponte, and the contributions to Fold and Pritchard – stems from the vastly unequal power relations along commodity chains that link production in the 'South' and consumption in the 'North', and the brute fact that lead firms in those chains have options about where and how they source their materials while producers have extremely limited, if any, options about how, and to whom, they sell their export commodities. A further type of asymmetry, that is analytical and subverts coherence, concerns the vast differences between the economies of producer countries – say, Brazil and Kenya, Vietnam and Ethiopia, or, for that matter, India and Tanzania – hence the differences that fluctuations and reverses (or upturns) in their earnings for any particular primary commodity export make to their economic development in terms of employment and incomes, say, or inter-sectoral linkages, or accumulation more broadly (Bernstein and Campling 2006, 258).³⁰ Of the various elements necessary to considering structural issues of the development of national economies that we listed in the first part of this review essay (p. 260), and drawing on the wider range of commodities and countries/regions presented in the two edited collections and in Daviron and Ponte, we would emphasize in particular the formation of *domestic markets* for the products of agriculture as well as industry, to paraphrase Lenin (1899/1972), and the need to examine the links between export production and domestic markets.³¹ As Sassoon (2005, 147) succinctly put

³⁰ Daviron and Ponte remark in an endnote to their Preface that Vietnam's economic 'success story' was not mainly based on coffee, which accounted for 10 per cent of total export earnings and 30 per cent of agricultural export earnings in 1995, subsequently reduced – with only minor fluctuations in the volume of coffee exports – to 2 per cent and 10 per cent respectively 'in the early 2000s' (note 2, p. xxiv).

³¹ It is worth recalling Lenin's emphasis that in the development of capitalism the expansion of the domestic (or 'home') market includes the commoditization of 'peasant' agriculture, through which formerly self-produced (or otherwise locally produced) means of production and consumption increasingly have to be purchased as commodities; similarly proletarianization entails the purchase of means of consumption, hence expansion of the market for wage goods. Unfortunately, the pieces by Gertel on wheat imports, agrarian structure, food (in)security and poverty in Egypt, and by Lockie on export agriculture, food (in)security and poverty in the Philippines (as well as Australian protectionism), are among the weaker contributions to Fold and Pritchard.

it in his review of de Grazia (2005): 'In the production and diffusion of goods, culture is not unimportant, but having a large domestic market is decisive'.

This provides a key indicator of difference between the pairs of countries listed, which does not mean that commodity exports (or any other branch of activity and accumulation) in those countries are not subject to the more or less direct, more or less potent, effects of global capitalism nor that commodity/value chain analysis does not have much to contribute to investigating and understanding those effects and what generates them. It does suggest, however, that any adequate assessment of the place of commodity trade in development, and of the globalizing forces of capital and markets that shape it, requires a central focus on the relations between commodity trade, the size and composition of domestic markets (including income distribution), and how they are supplied. It is perhaps paradoxical that while this focus might be added to, and supplement, the argument of Gibbon and Ponte about sub-Saharan Africa, it is displaced by Daviron and Ponte's approach to the global value chain of a single commodity, and what it can tell us about issues of commodity trade and development for producer countries supplying that chain. Of course, adverse trends in the producer prices of export crops, as in the case of coffee, depress the incomes and welfare of those who grow them (Daviron and Ponte, p. 272). However, while smallholder farmers of those crops may be more numerous in some relatively larger, richer and/or more diverse economies in 'the South' (say, India, Brazil, Vietnam), their experiences of hardship (or temporary good fortune) are not registered to the same degree in total foreign exchange earnings, in GDP or patterns and rates of accumulation and growth, as they are in (very) poor countries like those of sub-Saharan Africa.

Three final points about the realities of primary commodity export trade as an 'engine' of development: first, can Daviron and Ponte's recommendations for measures to provide longer-term stability and security to smallholder farmers of coffee (and other export crops) benefit more than a tiny minority of farmers given the recurrent fluctuations of international trade in (and prices of) tropical commodities in modern history, and their powerful impact on particular zones of tropical export production? Second, contemporary globalization accentuates the tendencies to 'anarchy' – to the short-term and its attendant instabilities, inherent in capitalism – with respect to the fortunes of individual capitals on one hand, and on the other hand, and most severely, to the sources of livelihood, income levels and standards of living, of classes of labour in both 'South' and 'North' (an intensification of the 'fragmentation of labour', Bernstein 2004, 204–5). Third, overproduction of particular tropical export crops is enhanced as a systemic effect (whether intended or not) of structural adjustment programmes and the World Bank's constructions of 'comparative advantage', as well as of the strategies of lead firms in buyer-driven chains for those commodities.³² It seems most unlikely, then, that the economic and income 'sustainability' of the vast

³² For example, 'Organic coffee premiums have fallen dramatically over the last 20 years even as quality has increased, mainly because supply has grown' (Daviron and Ponte, p. 173).

majority of smallholder producers of tropical export crops could be effectively protected as an exception to the force of such tendencies.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we return to the metaphor of studies of *filières* or commodity chains as cutting particular 'slices' from larger economic organisms (quoted in Bernstein and Campling 2006, 262). Some of the work reviewed here shows how illuminating this operation can be, even though we have mostly limited our consideration to food commodities, a key item in studies of commodities for personal consumption, which also includes items of labour-intensive manufacturing, like clothing and footwear, and those that involve substantially greater transformations of materials in capital-intensive engineering and assembly industries like 'white' and electronic goods and automobiles. We have noted some of the gains of commodity chain analysis for political economy, not least in appreciating the scale and sophistication of typically intense competition in the *circulation of commodities* as a key dynamic of today's capitalism wherever sufficient purchasing power is present or anticipated.³³ Indeed, with respect to food commodities, concentration of capital and scale of operation are much greater in sourcing, processing and sales (via increasingly internationalized retail corporations) than in their production, with the possible exception of some branches of the meat industry. Moreover, it is 'agri-business' and retail capital that drives the addition of ever more symbolic (immaterial) 'value' to commodities for personal consumption, as an effect of its pursuit of profits in strongly competitive, and usually soon 'saturated', markets.

The scope for social and spatial analysis of these processes is extended by the literature considered in the second part of this review essay, beyond the focus of Gibbon and Ponte (discussed in the first part) on how export commodity production channelled through global value chains affects the development prospects of a particular region, which is also the poorest in the world economy. We have suggested how the analysis of commodity chains originating in domestic markets can throw light on the formation and functioning of global commodity chains. Probably the most striking example in the sphere of production and processing is the poultry industry, whose technologies as well as dominant capitals are increasingly 'globalized'. In the sphere of circulation, the most widespread example is the internationalization or globalization of retail capital in the form of the US, UK, French and other European supermarket giants, whose activities not long ago were confined to the domestic markets where they pioneered their strategies of accumulation and built up their corporate power. Gibbon and Ponte emphasize the significance of this recent trend in terms of the buyer-drivenness of global value chains that absorb African agricultural (and clothing) exports, but

³³ Purchasing power that for workers (and much of the middle class) in the 'North' is underwritten by tendencies to longer hours of work and the accumulation of personal debt, also driven by the increasing privatization or commoditization of health care, education and pensions.

other parts of the 'South', unlike Africa, have rapidly growing domestic markets of interest to global retailers, notably Southeast and East Asia which are also generating transnational agri-business corporations of real economic significance.

The challenge, then, is how to reinsert the 'slices' identified by commodity studies – whether defined by, and to varying degrees combining, particular commodities, regions, forms of capital, corporate organization and strategy, systems of regulation, and so on – in the larger entities from which they are extracted. The issues this raises, we have suggested, help to identify some of the limitations of the kind of economic sociology deployed by Gibbon, Daviron and Ponte, notably how they conceptualize ('global') capitalism and try to assimilate convention theory to this purpose, while we are able to appreciate and learn from the strengths of their empirical studies and analysis of particular dynamics and aspects of contemporary capitalism, especially in the sphere of circulation and its effects upstream for production. The analytical surgery of reconnecting 'slice' and whole also helps identify some of the tensions and lacunae of a GVC approach to economic development, which we illustrated with respect to the problem of the 'nationality' of capital in the first part of this review, and here with respect to Daviron and Ponte's work on coffee where the 'commodity problem' reduces to the returns to (especially small) coffee farmers independently of the vastly different economies, paths of capitalist development and economic performance, of the countries those farmers inhabit.

What light does the commodity studies literature reviewed here shed on arguably the two most potent 'issues of the nature of present-day capitalism', namely the effects of its dominant tendencies for the condition and prospects of classes of labour around the world, and its environmental sustainability in face of the plunder of natural resources, and disposal of waste, associated with the types and levels of consumption it drives, at least by a (growing) minority of the world's population? It is frequently remarked that labour is generally neglected in commodity studies, in favour of sometimes immensely detailed studies of corporate strategies and techniques, of the features of particular markets, and of the cultural dimensions of particular commodities and their consumption. What material there is on labour in commodity studies – and there is virtually none in the works reviewed here – tends to be assimilated to two perspectives. One derives from a longstanding tradition that focuses on types of labour regimes peculiar to, or especially concentrated in, farming (now including industrialized production of meat), characterized by casualization, poor conditions of work and wage levels, and in many instances forms of oppression specific to migrant workers in ethnically fragmented labour markets, *and* which retains its salience to agriculture in the 'North' as well as 'South'. Watts 2004 remarks of the US broiler *filière* that 'Nineteenth-century work conditions meet up with twenty-first century science' (p. 51), work conditions that confront a primarily Hispanic labour force in poultry in the USA (see Striffler 2005, chapters 5–7) and in the slaughter houses and packing plants of its beef industry (Schlosser 2002, chapter 8), as well as in leading branches of California's agriculture (Walker 2004). The other perspective tends to assimilate material on labour in commodity chains to current

concerns with the effects of globalization for patterns of employment, in manufacturing as in agriculture.³⁴

At a more abstract level, the fetishism of commodities that masks the social relations of their production is linked by Guthman 2004 to the view that capitalist commodity production equally conceals 'society-nature relations . . . especially in the case of land-based biological production such as agriculture' (p. 234).³⁵ There are more glimpses of the environmental effects of particular technologies of production, processing and circulation of food commodities, in the work reviewed here, than there are of the condition of labour. Watts 2004 considers aspects of the science applied to industrialized poultry production, and its environmental effects, which Burch 2005 also comments on. Massieu and Chauvet 2005 provide a case study of genetically modified US maize vs biodiversity in Mexico, while GM technology is one item in Le Heron's 2005 abbreviated survey of the liberalization of export agriculture in New Zealand, and concern for biodiversity informs the interest in, and certification of, shade-grown coffee, contrasted with 'sun' or 'technified' coffee and its ecological consequences (Daviron and Ponte, pp. 177–8).³⁶

We finish with our own two-fold hope: on one hand, that future work on commodity chains will contribute more on the social relations of production, including the condition(s) of labour, and on the environmental processes and effects of (global) food production; on the other hand, that the inherited traditions of materialist political economy, and their adepts, will adopt a more open attitude towards what they can learn from the best work in commodity studies.

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³⁴ For example, du Toit (2002); Barrientos and Kritzinger (2004); Jenkins (2005); Kaplinsky (2005); Bair and Peters (2006). We commented on Gibbon and Ponte's brief observations on employment in the Mauritian garment industry (and its subsequent off-shore investments) in the first part of this review. They also note (pp. 69–70) that since the inception of NAFTA, while jobs in the clothing industry in Mexico increased more than threefold over five years (to 762,000 in 1998), this was more than offset by the loss of employment in agriculture, presumably due, in significant measure, to agricultural imports from the USA.

³⁵ In an echo of O'Connor's formulation of two contradictions of capitalism between capital and labour and between capital and nature, and the crises they generate; see O'Connor (1998, Part II and especially chapter 11).

³⁶ Daviron and Ponte report that a large company engaged in 'sun coffee' production in East Africa finds it more profitable to plant new land to coffee every five to seven years, abandoning existing plantings exhausted by deforestation and the depletion of soil nutrients (p. 178).

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