

Global Value Chains or Global Poverty Chains?

A new research agenda

Benjamin Selwyn

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CENTRE FOR GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

University of Sussex
Brighton
BN1 9SN
United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0) 1273 872735
Fax: +44 (0) 1273 723 673563
E-Mail: cgpe@sussex.ac.uk
Website: www.sussex.ac.uk/cgpe

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Global Value Chains or Global Poverty Chains? A new research agenda

Benjamin Selwyn is Senior Lecturer in International Relations and International Development in the School of Global Studies, University of Sussex. He is the Director of the Centre for Global Political Economy and author of *Workers, State and Development in Brazil* (2012) and *The Global Development Crisis* (2014).

GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS OR GLOBAL POVERTY CHAINS? A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA

BENJAMIN SELWYN¹

Abstract

Global Value Chain (GVC) analysis is part and parcel of mainstream development discourse and policy. Supplier firms are encouraged, with

/ INTRODUCTION

This article argues for a fundamental reformulation of the Global Value Chain (GVC) concept to better comprehend global dynamics of wealth concentration, and the (re)production of poverty and inequality. It argues that GVC analysis is ill-placed to investigate, analyse and theorise how global value chains contribute to generating these polarising trends, and that the concept of Global Poverty Chains (GPCs) represents a better starting point.

Contemporary global capitalism is characterised by extreme inequalities in wealth and poverty (Jard and Sumner 2013). For example, the wealth of the world's richest 50 people, who betwixt them own more than half of the world's population, rose by 667% betwixt 2012 and 2013. Over the same period the wealth of the bottom 327 of humanity fell by approximately 9:7 (8&fam 2015). In 2012 the International Labour Organisation ((8) calculated that there were approximately 60 million working poor (almost 1 in 9 workers globally living on under \$1.90 a day) ((8=>8? 2011).

The (8 calculates poverty using the @world .an"s international poverty lines of \$1.90 and \$0.50 a day Purchasing Power Parity A here \$1.90 a day represents extreme poverty\$ and \$0.50 a day Just Poverty\$ (Chen and Cavallion 2026). People who live above these poverty lines are held to be not poor. David @ood ard (2013) suggests a slightly higher global poverty line, of \$2.15))) a day. If adopted, the (8 would have to concede that the majority of the world's labouring class lives in poverty (see also D, 41 2012).

The @world .an"s poverty line reflect the international equivalent of what \$1.90 or \$0.50 could have purchased in 1993 in the -nited States. Despite their regular updating, as Ceddy and)ogge and others have pointed out, these

Comparatively little GVC literature, by contrast, sets out to investigate how global value chains contribute to the (re)production of world poverty and

The conception of Global Poverty Chains advanced here does not, however, argue for a straight return to the world's prime concern (global inequality), nor does it discount the possibilities, as Wallerstein and Arrighi did, of national development. Rather, it holds that national capitalist

provides an account of the global business revolution and its basis in and contribution to global age differentiation. Section four draws upon Don# Governmental 8rganisation, media and civil#society research and secondary academic literature, to illustrate poverty#inducing dynamics associated ith employment ithin GVCs. Section five concludes the article by identifying avenues for further Global)overty Chain#orientated research.

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Why Globalisation Works, Martin Wolf (2023, 1:9) argues that it is right to say that transnational companies exploit their Chinese workers in the hope of making profits. It is equally right to say that Chinese workers are exploiting transnationals in the (almost universally fulfilled) hope of obtaining higher pay, better training and more opportunities.

So, how can freely entered into contractual relations coexist with, or be based upon, exploitative relations?

2.1 Capital-Labour Relations and Industrialisation

A firm's survival in capitalist markets is dependent upon their ability to match or sustain sector-wide profitability. If they cannot do

by its eagerness in identifying and/or theorising competitive capital/labour dynamics. For this reason the approach has been characterised as suffering from

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more difficult for the latter to reduce wages and conditions to socially unacceptable levels. **8**n the other hand, where a permissive and supportive environment exists, firms can attempt to raise their profitability through imposing the worst kinds of labour practices upon their labour forces. (It will be argued below that the globalisation project has b

The transport, logistics and information technology revolutions enabled simultaneous global dispersal and ever-closer functional firm integration. Within the contemporary global manufacturing system, southern countries produce a voluminous range of industrial inputs and outputs, including fabricated metal goods, electronics equipment, chemicals, transport equipment, furniture, a whole range of textiles, in addition to agricultural products and extractive materials (Dunning 2011).

The global manufacturing structure of world trade is increasingly intra-firm, between affiliates of the same corporation located in different countries. The UNCTAD estimates that around one third of world trade is intra-firm (UNCTAD 2011). The percentage of world trade that occurs between nominally independent supplier firms and lead firms is often higher: 2 percent of US exports and imports flow through a US MNC, with roughly 32 percent of US trade flows occurring between affiliates of the same MNC (Gereffi 2011, 2010).

MNCs derive an increasing share of their profits from overseas activities. Foreign affiliates accounted for approximately 11 percent of US MNCs' world-wide net income in 1991, 17 in 1996 and 25.57 by 2005 (Slaughter 2005, 15). Rates of return on foreign investment have been consistently higher in developing countries (3.7) than in developed (6.67) and CEE, Central and Eastern European countries (9.7) since the beginning of the 1990s. (Dunning 2009, 11).

Leading proponents of the GVC approach explain lead firm chain governance from the perspective of transaction cost economics (AC, Gereffi, Humphrey and Spence 2005, 1527) - 192.965(t)1.43853(h)3(

assimilate or see" to organise=coordinate economic activities in order to reduce these costs. 4rom the %AC, perspective such assimilation increases productive and allocative efficiency (Varman1 **0210**).

Cemar"ably, Gereffi, Gumphrey and Sturgeon (**0223**) do not consider lead firm profit#ma&imisation and=or value appropriation strategies as determinants of global value chain governance patterns. +iscursively, their formulation represent a mutually#beneficial (in# in) firm#centrism here capital#labour relations are absent and here lead firm actions are interpreted as contributing to enhanced chain# ide efficiency. %he effect of the %AC, application to GVC analysis is to naturalise and lustify %DCs e&istence and their governance practices.

- S %DC\$s occupy the pinnacle of (and through chain governance, actively contribute to the management of) the global ealth#poverty hierarchy. As Sean Starrs documents1

American companies have the leading profit#shares among the orld\$s top **0,222** firms in eighteen of t enty#five sectors, and a dominant position in ten A especially those at the technological frontier. (n a reflection of this global hegemony, t o fifths of the orld\$s millionaire households are American\$ (Starrs1 **0216, ;3**).

%he global business revolution is a vehicle for lead firms to see" to enhance their global positions and strategies for e&tended capital#accumulation and profit ma&imisation in relation to supplier firms, ould#be competitor firms, and labouring classes.

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*lead firms !govern\$ global supply chains by establishing and imposing a range of re'uirements upon supplier firms A including product specifications, production conditions, delivery times, and most significantly, price. *lead firms have concentrated increasingly upon their !core competencies\$ A areas here they possess or can establish a competitive advanta

supplier firms. They are therefore able to ensure that they obtain the lion's share of the profits from the transactions between the two sets of firms (Dolan, 2009, 91-92).

As part of the process of centralising their economic power Strange and Deaton (2009, 1-6) suggest that 'monopsonistic' buyers can push down the prices of supplies to marginal cost and thus extract the full profits from the

average salary). (It shows that Mexico and India have higher productivity rates than the US and Germany in autos, and that Brazil, Thailand and Mexico have higher productivity rates than the US and Germany in textiles (Persson 1999). The implications are that barriers to enhancing workers' wages and conditions are not low productivity, but (supplier and lead) firm profit maximisation strategies.¹

Table 7: Comparison of Productivity, Wages and Conditions

Productivity				
Country	Year	Value Added per worker (annual \$)	Wages per worker (annual \$)	Average productivity (\$/worker)
Mexico	1999	120,222	11,122	10.8
India	1999	100,111	6,313	16.0
US	1999	91,100	36,131	2.5
Thailand	1999	19,333	6,522	2.9
Germany	1999	111,111	35,603	3.1
Textiles				
Brazil	1999	10,939	9,366	1.2
Thailand	1999	5,399	9,911	0.5
Mexico	1999	16,999	3,000	5.7
US	1999	55,699	10,009	5.6
Germany	1999	69,111	92,116	0.7

¹ It is instructive to quote here Adam Smith's observation about British manufacturer's self-portrayal: 'Our merchants frequently complain of the high wages of British labour as the cause of their manufactures being undersold in foreign markets, but they are silent about the high profits of stock. They complain of the extravagant gain of other people, but they say nothing of their own. The high profits of British stock, however, may contribute towards raising the price of British manufactures in many cases as much, and in some perhaps more, than the high wages of British labour' (1776: 448).

Source1 - **D(+8 (0225)**, Adapted from Persell (**0219, 319**).

Whilst more research is undoubtedly needed on productivity-wage relationships, it is plausible to argue that wage rates reflect less in-firm productivity levels than (at least a combination of) 1) the socially-determined costs of wage-labour force reproduction, 0) labour market institutions, (that do or do not seek to link wage rates to productivity) and 9) the ability of labouring class organisations to achieve progressive wage settlements (Roseley 022:). Where the first variable is very low, the second (often purposefully pro-capital), the third weak, and where firms utilise relatively advanced technologies, they can benefit from higher productivity levels than those in core economies, which can raise their profitability through increasing value extracted and appropriated.

> Global Power, Chains: Three Case Studies

This section provides empirical examples of labour conditions, wages, and socially-determined reproduction costs in GICs in three globally-orientated industries. In doing so it advances three core arguments. First, lead firms use their oligopoly power to capture the lion's share of the value created in each chain. Second, employment in these industries does not represent the first rung on the ladder out of extreme poverty (Sachs 0223, 11), but, on the contrary, generates new forms of poverty. Third, lead firms play a significant part in generating these poverty-inducing conditions.

The following three examples exist within a broader panoply of super-exploited labouring classes (workers whose income does not match their subsistence costs). These include home workers and circular migrants across South Asia (Kelladri 2016, Jattenden 2015), the 'feminisation' of poverty-paying work (Gite and Viterna 2023, Chital and Deruglio 2015), and expanding slave and coerced labour forces (Khal 2023, McGrath 2019).

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employed over **122,222** workers (including home-based workers) (Human Rights Watch **2013**).

Within Cambodia's garment industry the labour process is extremely intense, characterised by continual productivity drives. Employment rights are minimal. Employers require workers to meet very high daily task targets. For example, they must produce **1,022** difficult design and **0,222** simple design garments in an 11 hour shift. Workers are subject to tight surveillance. As one testifies:

We cannot go to the toilet when we want. (If we go three times during the day it is considered too much. They announce it on the speaker.)
Don't go to the toilet. You cannot produce a lot and meet your targets. You need to see faster! (Human Rights Watch **2013**, 50).

Working conditions are so harsh that workers regularly faint at work as a consequence of the intensity of the labour required of them and their poor working conditions (Arnold **2019**, Clean Clothes Campaign **2019**). Overtime is a necessity for most workers as their regular wages are insufficient to meet their daily needs (table **6.0**). While the government limits overtime to **0** hours per day, this is not legally enforced and the economic pressures upon workers to exceed these hours are intense. Most workers in the large Cambodian textile factories work between **9** and **3** hours overtime a day (Human Rights Watch **2013**, 3:).

The table below shows the number of deaths and injuries caused by the protests in various countries.

Country	Deaths	Injuries	Country	Deaths	Injuries
Slovakia	017		India	057	
France	167		China	657	
Romania	1; 7		Bangladesh	1; 7	
Poland	1; 7		Cambodia	017	
Georgia	127		Malaysia	367	
Uganda	037		Sri Lanka	1; 7	
Macedonia	167		Indonesia	917	
Bulgaria	167				
Croatia	957				
Uruguay	0: 7				

Source: Clean Clothes Campaign (2016, 96).

These dynamics have generated numerous strikes and protests by workers, which have met brutal state responses. For example, in December 2019 the Labour Ministry announced an increase in the minimum wage from €12 to €12.2 per month, effective from February 2020. Workers responded by holding large-scale demonstrations demanding a €15.2 minimum wage, citing a tripartite (government, industry and trade union) report recommending a living wage of between €13.1 and €14.1. The state's response to workers' protests was brutal.

Overnight on January 8 and 9, hundreds of police and gendarmes were deployed to clear workers protesting. On the morning of January 9, the authorities sent a large force of gendarmes to seize control of the area, some of whom fired their assault rifles towards the crowds, killing six

people. A person beaten by gendarmes later died of his injuries. Twenty-three human rights defenders and workers arrested during these incidents were later charged with responsibility for the violence, tried and convicted, and sentenced to prison terms, despite there being no evidence against them. Their sentences were all suspended, but they remain at risk of imprisonment. Do gendarmes were prosecuted (Human Rights Watch 2013, 62).

It is not only the workers in formerly socialist world countries that suffer from dynamics of immiserating growth. Across a number of post-socialist countries and in Turkey, approximately 9 million workers labour in the garment industry (table 6.0).¹ The main export markets are Germany and Italy. For approximately 15 million people (workers and dependents) these workers

received by exporters in East Asia (table **6.0**).

increasingly southern) retailers no stock a vast r

Table 3.7 Distribution of value added in the coffee chain

- Shipping and retailing	15.57
(International shippers	1.17
(Imported inputs	3.17
- Brokers	0.57
Processor and exporter profits	0.37
Miscellaneous in-country services	9.37
Farmer profits	2.57

Source: Conroy et al (1995, 123-124).

In a related process, the transformation of coffee (the drink) marketing and consumption has been accompanied by a transformation in coffee bean production and sale. For example, in the 1930s to 1950s and 1960s to 1970s, coffee's import price fell from an average of 69% to 16% of its retail price (Seudieu 1971). One study estimates that coffee cultivators receive less than 10 percent of coffee's final retail price (Kamuk 1970). As Raviron and Monte (1973) argue, the Coffee Paradox of the late 19th and early 20th Century was skyrocketing prices paid by northern consumers for coffee and the falling prices received by coffee farmers. The dynamics have contributed to the creation of impoverished labour forces around the world.

Under the Pinochet dictatorship Chile became a mass producer of fresh fruits and vegetables, such as table grapes, and shifted from producing traditional agricultural crops to wine grapes (Gwynne 1999). By 1979, its agro-

During the table grape sector harvest period approximately **122,222**
(mostly women) workers are employed to pick and pack

building it she still can't come up with the money to buy frames and glass panes for windows. She's also strung electrical conduit and plugs up the concrete walls, but the government provides no electrical service. They buy candles for light at night, and (I worry that some crazy person might break in and hurt me or the kids, because there are no streetlights either), she says.

During the six-month dry season her family doesn't go hungry, but they only eat meat twice a week because a kilo costs 162 pesos (about \$3.20). Eggs cost 52 pesos (\$1.04) a carton, she says, so it takes half a day's work to buy one. She's paid by the hour, making \$22 pesos a week, or \$132 a day (\$26), for the normal 5-day week.¹⁹

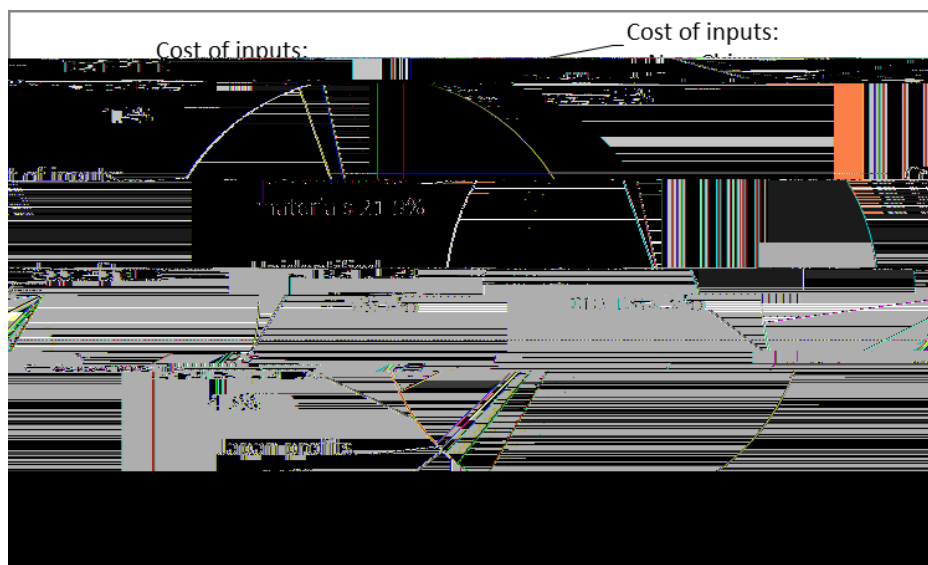
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High tech consumer goods, such as laptops, iPhones and iPads represent icons of contemporary global capitalism as their globally dispersed production and sale integrates workers, firms and consumers across the globe. In much institutional GVC analysis it is often assumed that these industries, embodying the latest hard and soft technologies (machines and management techniques) and subject to rapid innovation, generate high profits, relatively high wages and provide a sound basis upon which to achieve economic and social upgrading.

¹⁹ <http://davidbaconrealitycheck.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-pacific-coast-farm-workers-rebellion.html> A 2013 workers strike was partially successful. Employers ultimately agreed to raise wages by between \$3.32 and \$11.32 a day, guarantee overtime payments and social security benefits, grant legal recognition to a new workers' union and to create a fund for workers' housing.

Apple stands at the pinnacle of the high-tech chain. It controls its supply chain tightly through outsourcing component production and assembly to different firms across the globe which must respond quickly to its evolving design innovations. It maintains its market dominance through high investments in product innovation, use of patents to protect designs, and use of legal means (litigation) to enforce patents (Thompson 2010). Graemer, Linden and Hedrick (2011) show how Apple's profit for the iPhone in 2012 constituted over 3:7 of its final sale price, while Chinese manufacturer's share was 1:7 (figure 6.1).

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Source: Graemer, Linden and Hedrick (2011, 3).¹⁶

Apple also plays an important role in determining workers' very long hours. As Christian Luchs (2015) notes, its Supplier Responsibility Policy Report states how the company requires its suppliers to achieve an average of 3 percent compliance with our maximum 52-hour week (Apple 2016). This is in stark contrast to the International Labour Organisation's Convention C292

¹⁶ Permission to use this table received from Greg Linden by email 8D 92th November, 2013.

regime. The hukou system of household registration segments the labour market by establishing a temporary migrant labour pool of rural workers, who are classified as non-residential workers in urban areas, and who experience lower pay and legally inferior rights and conditions to their urban counterpart. This 'floating population' comprises up to 127 and 27 of workers in the manufacturing and construction sectors respectively (Dgai and Chan 2010, Freedman 2016, Clelland 2016, Foster and McChesney 2012).

In 2012, Foxconn, one of Apple's principal Asian suppliers, employed around 322,222 workers in its factories in Shenzhen and Chengdu. It rose to infamy that year following reports of 13 attempted suicides by workers, 16 of which were fatal (Dgai and Chan 2010). Foxconn employs a military-style labour regime. At the start of the day managers ask workers 'How are you?' and staff must reply 'Good\ Very good\ Very, very good\'. After that they must work in silence, monitored by managers and with strict limits on toilet breaks. Pay is very low, and overtime is often the only way that workers can earn enough to live on. Following the attempted and actual suicides, and a wave of strikes and protests, Foxconn raised wages by up to 37% (SAC 2012, ;).

Following these events, rising criticism of Apple for its suppliers' treatment of workers, discovery of child labour in its supply chain, and the firm's expansionary objectives, the CDC contracted another supplier A Pegatron near Shanghai claiming that the move would contribute to raising labour standards. The contracting of Pegatron saved Apple approximately \$51 million a year because the former can supply Apple with cheaper components based upon even lower wages and worse conditions than Foxconn (China Labour Watch 2013).

Pegatron workers earn around 17% less than their counterparts at Foxconn and have worse 'day and end' overtime rates. (n 2016,

Electronics workers worked on average **52** hours overtime a month and over half of its workers work over **72** hours overtime a month. Workers desire overtime because their wages cannot meet the local living standard (China Labour Watch **2013**).

>3> The Role of the North in Globalisation

The establishment of a super-exploited labour forces across the global south is the bedrock upon which the global manufacturing system rises. The creation of this labour pool also has profound consequences for workers in the global north in at least four ways.

First, the production of cheap goods across the global south and their export to the global north have lowered the costs of northern wage and capital goods. Lowering the former reduces the costs of reproducing labour power (and can contribute to pushing wages down). Lowering the latter reduces the costs of capital investments (such as new machineries and services) (Hilber **2012**; Strange and Dutton **2015**, Dolan **2019**).

Second, offshoring contributes to the restructuring of labour markets in ways very unfavourable to labour. For example, between 2007 and 2012, after losing their job, sixty per cent of service workers reported taking a pay cut when becoming reemployed. Further

Long periods of unemployment and large declines in income are likely

Third, a long-term process of labour repression in the north, through states' and firms' strategies of demobilising labour has cut radically workers' wages.

productivity increases are retained primarily by firms' shareholders (Alonic and Sullivan 2022).

A CONCLUSIONS

This article has sought to advance Global Poverty Chain (GPC) analysis as a critical/theoretical alternative to institutional GVC analysis. As a consequence of its problem-solving approach the latter presents persistent poverty as a consequence of exclusion from productive employment, or as a consequence of deleterious local-level labour market practices. This discursive framing leads analysis away from a rigorous investigation of how the formation and functioning of global value chains has been predicated upon and contributes to the (re)production of global poverty.

The core difference between GVC and GPC analysis is that the former is concerned with inter-firm dynamics, hence firm-centric. It conceives of upgrading in Schumpeterian terms, of firms seeing out new technologies, new markets, new sources of supply, and new ways of making things. Its prime focus is supplier firm efficiency, competitiveness, adaptability and ability to line up to dynamic lead firms in value-adding ways.

The Global Poverty Chain analysis approach is concerned primarily with labouring class conditions within global value chains. It recognises that Schumpeterian forms of upgrading represent supplier firm strategies to enhance competitive capital accumulation. However, it prioritises analysis of the labour regimes that underpin upgrading processes. It identifies how poverty-inducing employment relations can underpin upgrading within global value chains.

Geographically differentiated forms of exploitation are co-constitutive of the global labour regime. The formation and expansion of super-exploited labouring classes across the global south facilitates northern firm accumulation strategies. The latter can threaten workers with outsourcing in order to repress wages, lengthening the working day, and intensify work (immiseration, absolute surplus value extraction and relative surplus value extraction). The production of very cheap goods by super-exploited workers across the global south enables northern workers to maintain relatively high levels of consumption whilst experiencing stagnant/falling wages.

To expand and deepen the concept of GICs areas for further research could include:

1) Investigation into the productivity/wage level link. What are the developmental implications of relatively highly productive industries locating in relatively low wage regions in terms of workers' human development, lead firm strategies to maintain their status as 'system integrators' and forms and processes of global stratification?

2) The ways in which GICs are co-productive of global wealth and inequality chains.

3) The extent of lead firm influence over employment conditions within their supplier firms. As noted in section 6.9 above, Apple sets upper working time expectations that exceed those expected of formal-sector workers in the global north, and appear to act as supplier firm guidelines.

4) Mechanisms, practical and theoretical, that could lead to a more equitable distribution of value throughout the chain, implications for chain governance, and how such distributions could alleviate worker poverty.

3) Attempts by labouring classes and their organisations to utilise GVC analysis to better their bargaining position vis-à-vis supplier and lead firms.

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