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Book review: gendered commodity chains: seeing women's work and households in global production

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Book Review, *Contemporary Sociology*

Wilma A Dunaway (ed.) *Gendered Commodity Chains: Seeing Women's Work and Households in Global Production*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2014, xxi + 285pp, ISBN 978-0-8047-8908-0

One of the veritable highlights in this superb collection of essays on gendered commodity chains, and perhaps partly because it draws on the historically seminal work on commodity chains by Immanuel Wallerstein (who is also responsible for the Foreword), is that it makes liberal reference to pioneer scholars in the fields of women's paid and unpaid work such as Lourdes Benería, Diane Elson, Ruth Pearson, Veronika Bennholdt-Thompson and Maria Mies. These writers broke critical new analytical ground in the 1970s and 1980s in emphasising the ways in which 'production' and 'reproduction' were profoundly interlinked with one another. To re-visit their perspectives on the myriad forms of female labour which contribute to the accumulation of capital makes for a volume which does serious – and justifiably due – service to feminist theorising and knowledge over nearly 50 years. Yet while avoiding the all too common fetishisation to cite 'just published' papers, the collective contributions to Dunaway's *Gendered Commodity Chains*, also provide an impressively up-to-the-minute conceptual and empirical mapping of the various ways in which contemporary global capitalism profits from the externalisation of so many of its costs to women and their households, and especially the poorest on the periphery of the international economy. Here we have an effective 'potted history' of reflections on the 'value-added' of female labour which make for eminently rich-pickings research and teaching-wise.

This is a volume, with two main aims. The first is to promote awareness of the manifold contributions of women beyond 'formal employment' to the global economy. The second is to delineate the diverse material and non-material impacts on women and their households of economic globalisation. While being an edited volume, the book as a whole carries a hard-hitting and cogent argument relevant to the many incarnations of female exploitation, and any scholar interested in gender and neoliberalism in the 21st century should ignore it at their peril.

In the six main parts of the book, which cover, respectively: 'Feminist Critiques and Advances of Commodity Chain Analysis', 'Conceptualising Semi-proletarianised Households and Workers in Commodity Chains', 'Women's Labour and Threats to Social Reproduction and Commodity Chains', 'Integration of

Indigenous and Peasant Households into Global Commodity Chains', 'Transnational Labourers as Commodities in Global Chains', and 'Conceptualising Social Reproduction and Worker Resistance in Commodity Chains', we are presented with a diverse range of geographical examples which draw from the 'periphery', 'semi-periphery' and 'core' of the world economic system, including Nicaragua, the Philippines, Chile, Turkey, the former Soviet Union, Canada and the USA. We are also privy to a very wide range of economic and employment sectors including nursing, sex work, export manufacturing, fishing and globalised agriculture. Also impressive is the fact that the contributors were selected on the basis of having at least ten years of field experience, and hail from a remarkably widespread array of disciplinary provenances.

In Wilma Dunaway's informative yet concise editorial introduction, the historical and contemporary context for the discussion in the volume is set out very clearly, both in terms of the rising supply of female labour to global production systems, especially from the 1970s onwards, as well as the origins of 'commodity chain analysis' as established by Terence Hopkins' and Immanuel Wallerstein's early, Fernand Braudel-inspired work on world systems, in which the issue of gender was marked as extremely significant. Yet despite burgeoning feminist scholarship in the 1970s which emphasised how the internationalisation of capitalist production to the Global South was informalising and marginalising female labour, Dunaway points out that this was largely ignored in mainstream accounts, with women and households conspicuous by their absence, and to the great detriment of understanding the parameters of accumulation. To this end, Dunaway calls for disruption of the 'false analytic divide' between production and reproduction, to the need to bring households into commodity chain analysis, to the importance of scrutinising the links between the informal economy and commodity chains, and to consider women's inequitable labour portfolio in global production.

While all chapters in the volume speak to the same basic theme, highlights from Dunaway include not only her comprehensive introduction, but also her dedicated chapter on the analytical importance of the household as a 'portal' for recognising how the unpaid labour mainly performed by women therein, is crucial to capital's extraction of surplus, which is further underlined by Don Clelland's discussion of 'dark-value-extraction chains'.

Additional theoretical weight is provided by Jane Collins' chapter on 'A Feminist Approach to Overcoming the Closed Boxes of the Commodity Chain', while major substance to the underlying exploitation of women and gendered labour

within households is delineated, inter alia, by Caren Bain in her analysis of the paradoxes and exclusions around women workers in fresh fruit agriculture in Chile, and by Marina Prieto-Carron in relation to women workers (and unemployed women) in Nicaragua. Perhaps the most illuminating and original chapter of the book, however, is that by Nicola Yeates on Global Nursing Care Chains, which not only introduces some vital new empirical detail on the diasporic movement of nurses from South to North, and within these regions, but which also grapples with some of the conceptual hiatuses around gendered 'care chains' and gendered 'commodity chains'

Gendered Commodity Chains brings (back) gender into political economy in a major way. It reminds us of the fundamental importance of the materialities of female labour, and while how gender intersects with class, socio-economic positioning, ethnicity, migrant status and so on makes issues and arguments difficult to generalise, these should not be sidelined at the expense of how the poorest households in the poorest countries of the world, bear the brunt of capital accumulation in an increasingly globalised world. This is a 'must-read' not only for academics, but also for policymakers and practitioners in the field of development, and gender and development. If there was ever a case for 'mainstreaming' gender and households into development analysis and policy, this volume does this more persuasively than legions of publications on 'gender and development' over the past few decades in which meta-narratives have been somewhat eclipsed by post-modernist fears about over-generalisation.

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