Theorizing Commodity Chains

Interdisciplinary Approaches on Commonalities and Differences of Value Chains in Space and Time
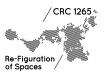
Conference by Project "Knowledge and Goods" (A03) of
Collaborative Research Centre "Re-Figuration of Spaces" (CRC 1265)

Date & Time	Thursday – Friday, 19. – 20.06.2025
Organizers:	Lara Espeter, Nina Baur & Elmar Kulke
Venue	Technische Universität Berlin Institute of Sociology Fraunhoferstr. 33-36 10587 Berlin, Germany Room No. FH 804/05 https://maps.app.goo.gl/wBgFrDSm6kmREqKf6
Registration	Participation is free, and both CRC and non-CRC members are invited to participate in the discussion. In order to make reservations, we kindly ask to register **by 08.06.2025** and indicate, if you are coming to the meals or not: https://terminplaner6.dfn.de/de/p/bb33a82d1d80695dfc865277384619d6-1038619
Meals	All meals are self-pay, that is everybody pays their meal themselves.
Accommodation	We kindly ask everyone to arrange your own travel and accommodation.

Conference Theme

Chains have been studied by scholars from diverse disciplines (such as geography, sociology, anthropology, historical sciences and ancient studies) and with diverse theoretical approaches (such as Global Commodity Chains, Global Value Chains, Global Production Networks, World Systems Analysis, Economics of Convention and Political Economy). When reviewing the state of research, one can generally say that a lot is known about how external shocks and crises may cause changes in commodity chains and what social, economic and environmental effects commodity chains do have on different localities. However, the chain itself remains a theoretical blind spot for several reasons:
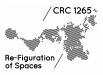
1. Commodity chains not only link production, sales and consumption, but also need to tackle the task of transferring goods from one context to the other. Typically, academic debates within a discipline are divided in **hardly integrated sub-discourses**, each of which focusses on one of these contexts. For example, in economic sociology, debates on economic nationalism, varieties of capitalism or regional innovation systems focus on contexts of production. Consumption is typically addressed by cultural sociological approaches. Likewise, in economic geography, research either focusses in production or consumption.

2. Consumption, production and sales typically take place at specific places in specific territories and thus are also dominated by the logics of place and territory. In contrast, it is the intrinsic nature of commodity chains to transit places and territories and follow a logic of routes. While analysts of commodity chains are typically well aware of this issue, if one examines their research practice, they, too, relapse into territorial thinking – so the actual challenge is **theorizing the route**.

3. Commodity chains can only be understood by embedding them in **space and time**. However, academic debates tend to focus on only one of these aspects. For example, economic geography tends to focus on space and the spatial structure of commodity chains. In contrast economic sociology has dealt intensively with time and how crises and external shocks, innovations, paths or future imaginaries influence commodity chains.

4. Even within specific disciplines, different theories within different sub-discourses focus on **different properties of chains**. Although there have been attempts in recent years to integrate these debates, this has been neither done systematically nor is the theoretical integration finished. It is especially difficult to do **comparisons across chains**.

Against this backdrop, the conference invites scholars from different disciplines (such as geography, sociology, business studies, political science, historical sciences and ancient studies) and theoretical backgrounds who have worked on contrasting commodity chains (such as fruit and vegetables, fish and meat, wine, coffee, flowers, medical substances, illegal drugs, shoes and garments, cars, rubber and other industrial products, money, energy, slaves, waste or logistics) in very different historical periods (ranging from ancient studies to the present) and world regions to theorize commodity chains. Each contributor is invited to **use their own empirical case studies in order to reflect upon the following issues**:

- **Theory:** From which disciplinary perspective are the chains theorized? Which theoretical approach is used to theorize commodity chains? How is the analysis of commodity chains and this theory embedded in the overall disciplinary discourse? Where are blind spots both in theory and in typical empirical data?

- **Product:** What product is traded in which historical period? Which of the characteristics of the commodity (e.g. durability, storability, divisibility, volume, weight) traded are important for the chain? Has the product changed in nature over time (e.g. moving from wool to textile to garment production) and how is this important for the chain?

- **Structure of the Commodity Chain:** For this product, is there one typical chain or are there different types of chains? What are their commonalities and differences? How long are the chains, that is: Of how many stages do chains typically consist (e.g. production, packaging, processing, refueling, sales, consumption)?

All follow-up questions should be reflected on **specific commodities**. If possible and feasible, speakers are invited to compare their commodity with other commodities or compare different subtypes of the commodity. Speakers are invited to reflect upon the following **properties of the commodity chain for these products**. Due to the nature of the debate sketched above, **we assume that everybody will have blind spots – in this case, the idea is to make it explicit that this is a blind spot** (either because of lack
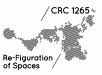
of data or due to a theoretical blind spot) in order to jointly identify open questions for future research and discuss which approaches could be most fruitfully linked for which types of questions. So please ponder about the following points and **focus on those aspects which you can say something about** (for your specific type of commodity chain):

- **Spatial Properties of the Commodity Chain**: How are the chains for this product organized in space? Where do they originate, where do they end, which stages do they pass where? What happens in the in-between stages (just refueling for further transport, packaging, refinement)?

- **Organizational Properties of the Commodity Chain**: What is the organizational structure of the chain? For example, is there one Multinational Company (MNC) or are there many different small companies or even individuals? How are the power structures between these organizational actors? What are the critical points where the product changes from one actor to another? If a company has integrated several stages of the chain (e.g. production, packaging and processing), (how) does it make a difference for the structure of the commodity chain, if all these stages are located at the same location or are distributed across space?

- **Governance of the Commodity Chain**: Political actors (such as national states, macro-territorial regimes or transnational organizations) might regulate the chain, either by setting physical and institutional boundaries or by regulating trade across these boundaries or even forbidding a product (e.g. drugs). What is known about these regulations? In which cases do actors circumvent these national boundaries? How does this effect both the geographical and organizational structure of the chain?

- **Knowledge Transfer along the Commodity Chain:** What (type of) knowledge is necessary to up-keep the circulation of goods along the chain? How is this knowledge transferred (e.g., by persons such as travelers or labor migrants; by technology such as books, mail or the internet)? How does this influence the power structure of the chain and the structure of the chain?

- **Communication Infrastructure for the Commodity Chain:** Likewise, what infrastructure is needed for knowledge transfer and communication along the chain? How is this linked to specific technologies, and how is this infrastructure organized spatially (e.g. how does material digital infrastructure influence digital communication flows)? How does this influence the power structure of the chain and the structure of the chain?

- **Transport Infrastructure for the Commodity Chain**: In order to transport goods along the chain, commodity chains depend on a complex material infrastructure, such as transport routes (e.g. waterways, roads) and nodes (e.g. ports, airports) where these routes are linked but also where services are provided for the actors transporting goods. What are the properties of this infrastructure for the specific good? How have they changed over times, e.g. due to technical innovations and infrastructure politics?

- **Interconnections between Commodity Chains**: How is the specific commodity chain interconnected with other chains and how does this influence the structure of the chain? Specifically, four types of interconnections could be addressed: Interconnections between Commodity Chains; Interconnections between Commodity Chains and the Context of Consumption; Interconnections between Commodity Chains and the Context of Production; Interconnections between Commodity Chains and the Context of Processing and Sales.

Preliminary Program

Thursday, 19.06.2025, 09.00 – 18.30, FH 804/05: Conference Day 1

09.00		Registration and Coffee
09.30	**Lara Espeter, Nina Baur & Elmar Kulke** (CRC 1265)	Welcome and Introduction

10.00 – 11.00	**Session 1:**	**Agricultural Commodity Chains (1)**

	Elmar Kulke (Geography, CRC 1265)	**Commodity Chains for Apples and other Fresh Fruit and Vegetables. An Analysis from the Perspective of Global Value Chains Analysis**
	Ernst Langthaler (Economic History, Linz University, Austria)	**Teleconnected Soy: Global Commodity Chains and Regional Commodity Frontiers in the Long Twentieth Century**
11.00		Break

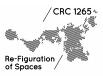|		
11.30 – 12.30	**Session 2:**	**Agricultural Commodity Chains (2)**

	Gerhard Rainer (Human Geography, Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany)	**Commodity Chains for Wine. An Analysis from the Perspective of Economic Geography**
	Dorothee Wierling (Contemporary History, Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, Germany)	**Coffee Importers and Roasters: The Reversal of Traditional Hierarchies in the Course of the Twentieth Century**
12.30	Lunch (Self-Pay)	

14.30 – 15.30	**Session 3:**	**Commodity Chains for Animal Products**

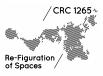|		
	Christin Bernhold (Geography, Hamburg University, Germany)	**Commodity Chains for Meat. An Analysis from the Perspective of Political Economy**
	Steven Robins (Sociology and Social Anthropology Stellenbosch University, South Africa)	**Tracking the Commodity Chains of Wool: Historical and Contemporary Trajectories of Merino Sheep Farming in the Northern and Eastern Cape Provinces of South Africa**
15.30		Break

16.00 – 17.00	**Session 4:**	**Commodity Chains for Drugs and Medicine**

	Christine Fertig (Social History, Münster University, Germany)	**Medicinal Substances from around the World. Import and Knowledge Transfer of Global Drugs (17th–19th Century)**
	Meropi Tzanetakis (Criminology, Vieann/Manchester, Austria/UK)	**Commodity Chains for Illegal Drugs. An Analysis from the Perspective of Political Science**
17.00		Break

17.30 – 18.30	**Session 5:**	**Commodity Chains for Clothing**

	Andrea Komlosy (Social and Economic History, Vienna University, Austria)	**Commodity Chains for Textiles. An Analysis from the Perspective of Social and Economic History**
	Lotte Thomsen (International Political Economy, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark)	**Global Production Networks for Clothing and Jewellery: Comparing Governance and Impacts**

19.00	Dinner (Self-Pay)

Friday, 20.06.2025, 09.00 – 18.00, FH 804/05: Conference Day 2

09.00		Coffee
09.30 – 10.30	**Session 6:**	**Commodity Chains for Supporting Goods (1)**

	Bianka Nessel (Pre- and Early Historical Archaeology, Mainz University, Germany)	**Commodity Chains for Ingots. An Analysis from the Perspective of Archeology**
	Peter Dannenberg (Economic Geography, University of Cologne)	**Lead Firms from the Supplying End. The role of Fertilizercompanies in Agrifood Chains on the Example of Yara in Tanzania**
10.30		Break

11.00 – 12.00	**Session 7:**	**Commodity Chains for Supporting Goods (2)**

	Gudalupe Moreno (Sociology, Frankfurt University, Germany)	**Payment Networks as Value Chains: Digitalization, Power, and Financial Inclusion in the Global South**

	Beatriz Bustos Gallardo (Geography, Universidad de Chile, Chile)	**Commodity Chains for Energy. An Analysis from the Perspective of Environmental Geography**
12.00	Lunch (Self-Pay)	

14.00 – 15.00	**Session 8:**	**Commodity Chains for Logistics**

	Florian Butollo (Sociology, Frankfurt University, Germany)	**Resilience in Logistics Supply Chains as Means to Maintain Complex Globalized Commodity Chains**
	Philip Verfürth (Geography, Osnabrück University, Germany)	**Driving Towards Change? A Geographical Perspective on Commodity Chains for Road Freight Logistics**
15.00		Break

15.30 – 16.30	**Session 9:**	**Commodifying People & Nature**

	Sebastian Jobs (History, FU Berlin, Germany)	**A Fragile Commodity Chain: Navigating the Slave Episteme in Colonial America**
	Jakkrit Sangkhamanee (Anthropology, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand)	**The Fishy Anthropocene: Exploring the Entangled Routes of Food Capitalism, Ecological Disruption, and Scientific Experimentation**
16.30		Break

17.00 – 18.00	**Session 10:**	**Wrap-Up**

	Nina Baur (CRC 1265) & **Elmar Kulke** (CRC 1265)	Final Discussion & Wrap-Up
18.00	End of Conference	