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Conclusion: Negotiating the Dynamics of Global Complexity

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The original call for papers for the ‘Trading Morsels’ conference asked authors to address the social and environmental consequences of the globalization of agriculture by focusing on an important traded commodity and a major geographical link in that commodity’s trade. During the course of the conference itself, and in subsequent discussions, we learned that the globalization of agriculture is a complicated story that does not always or easily lend itself to a commodity chain approach. Perhaps this is not surprising. Social systems are almost always more complicated than our models suggest. The important question is whether the complexity matters. And in this case we believe not only that the complexity matters but that it is the defining characteristic and most policy relevant feature of the global food trade.

The complex ways in which commodities move around the globe, the drop-off points, the hands that plant, harvest, buy, touch, and transform each commodity, and the profits skimmed and value extracted along the way, have provided rich sites for empirical study, puzzles for social and political theorists, and challenges for global, national, and regional policymakers. The richness of the sites, the puzzles, and the challenges become most apparent when global or international institutions have attempted to control one aspect of a global system, for example commodity trade and WTO agreements, only to be buffeted or resisted by elements of a separate, similarly global system, e.g., transnational civil society efforts to advocate on behalf of the environment or workers’ rights. Other challenges and puzzles emerge when local institutions attempt to manage the production or consumption of internationally traded commodities only to be stunned by the response from other parts of the globe or subverted by actors or institutions within their own locality. Thus, a picture of complexity and local dynamics emerges along two dimensions—the extent of *interactions between different global exchange systems* of money, things, people, and ideas and the *varied institutional landscape within localities* that influence and are shaped by varied connections to different global systems.

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Complexity is an idea taken for granted in ecology, but rare in social science. This special issue offers an opportunity to bring some compelling examples of complexity to light for social scientists to grapple with and consider. The challenge of this approach from a policy or advocacy perspective is that it is very hard to articulate without overwhelming lawmakers or consumers. But the papers in this special issue suggest that the costs of simply dispensing with the details may prove incalculable.

Several lessons can be distilled from this collection. First, we make a methodological point regarding research on global food markets. In order to make sense of the global food system we must first recognize its complicated and dynamic nature. We suggest that intersecting webs offer a more useful metaphor than parallel chains in this regard. We next argue that within a complexity approach, mediating institutions circumscribe not only the size and shape of these webs but the local consequences of their growth and development. Local institutions mediate the ways in which their communities and stakeholders are incorporated into global webs of production and trade. Inclusive and effective institutions can buffer social, economic, and environmental shocks; less inclusive or ineffective institutions leave community members to fend for themselves in an increasingly integrated and volatile international system. Finally, we argue that both the shape and consequences of the global food web have been influenced by the emergence of transnational standards for global food production and trade in the late twentieth century. Local social and environmental outcomes are in many ways products of the intersection of transnational standards and local institutions. And by understanding their interaction we can gain valuable insights into the possibilities for encouraging sustainability—not to mention pressure points at which to do so. We argue that neither international standards nor inclusive institutions alone can guarantee sustainability. Both are in all likelihood necessary.

Although our original request for papers asked authors to address a traded commodity and a place, we did not propose the prioritization of either. As a result, certain studies in this special issue start with or focus on a place and identify the often profound impacts of the place's insertion into a global market. Examples of this approach are Carney's study of rice cultivation in The Gambia and Moseley's study of South African wineries. Other papers take the structure of the world market for a particular commodity as their starting points and subsequently work from the global to the local. These include Linton's work on specialty coffee, Dolan's case of Fair Trade tea, and Curran and Cooke's study of cassava markets. We learn slightly different things from research grounded in place and research grounded in commodity markets but their various lessons are, as we shall see, complementary and not simply compatible.

Studies that take places as their starting points have the advantage of being able to articulate the richness of how global connections interact with and change particular localities. However, the dynamics of extralocal activity that impinge upon those places—the full range of pressures and their sources—are not always clear when the focus is limited to the place itself. On the other hand, studies that focus on commodities facilitate mapping out a system, often leading to a fuller understanding of the complexity inherent in the system. But they can also lose sight of particular places and consequences as the dynamic webs of the world market shift exports or production away from those localities. Once a place is neither a

source nor destination for a commodity, it is no longer in the picture of a commodity-centered account. This approach risks missing intense local impacts, whether positive or negative.

Though the studies here combine elements of inquiry into both places and commodities, the collection does not systematically address specific webs and the nodes they connect. However, it does provide the beginnings of a model for future research. The task we envision for the future—systematic investigation of webs, rather than chains, and the places they draw in or push out over time—is demanding, perhaps impossible, for an individual scholar. The approach of thinking about webs and nodes—the global and local simultaneously—while demanding, is also promising. This is especially the case as ideas of complexity from the natural sciences are introduced into social science theorizing.

A global complexity approach pushes us beyond existing global commodity chain theorizing, which, for the most part focuses on the contractual arrangements between firms, whether producing or buying agents. Instead, global complexity urges attention to how agents are interconnected to other institutions and networks at times unrelated to the commodity of interest. These interconnections may be powerful and serve to influence the power within a global commodity chain, but may also influence the formation of new chains. For example, Curran and Cooke's cassava example demonstrates how an existing network of Chinese trading companies from Southeast Asia to Europe facilitated the movement of simply processed cassava from Thailand to Europe for animal feed, surprising and overwhelming the European market, especially since the original sourcing countries were supposed to be Brazil and Indonesia. Then, when threatened with European market closure, this same network of traders developed new market niches, increased the processing capacity in Thailand and developed an entirely different commodity network for cassava-derived starch, which has many different strands (from food additives to Styrofoam) and now stretches around the globe. The nimbleness of the traders, their institutional capacity to ignore governing constraints, and their repositioning as key agents and brokers provide examples of the sorts of iterative dynamics that generate an entirely new, complex trade network as identified by Urry (2003).

Schrank's example of export diversification in the Caribbean Basin provides a no less apposite example. He traces the growth of nontraditional agricultural and industrial exports from the Dominican Republic, in particular, to the protection of domestically grown sugar and corn sweetener in the United States, and thus demonstrates the limits to a commodity-based approach. Cold War foreign policy considerations play a critical part in Schrank's story. By protecting US sugar and sweetener producers from foreign competition, he argues, the US put Caribbean social and political stability at risk—and thus found itself forced to compensate the latter region with aid and trade incentives designed to stimulate the growth of alternative sources of employment and foreign exchange.

A commodity chain analysis can obscure this dynamic. The concept of webs rather than chains may help mitigate this limitation. The challenge of thinking about webs involves accepting nonlinearity in global commodity markets as well as the noneconomic bases of economic behavior. This certainly compels examination of sourcing streams coming from

different places and heading to a variety of final destinations. However, it also involves thinking about the wide variety of actors and institutions that tug on strands in the web and anchor the points of connection or nodes. Commodity chain analyses often consider the various ways in which actors along a chain try to add value in order to enhance their rent-generating capacity. Imagining the system as a web allows us to envision a more dynamic picture of many mediating institutions tugging at, weighing down, or strengthening particular parts of the web, and how this might in turn affect other parts.

A central theme of this special issue is that governing systems organize access to power and resources within a global food web. Any effort to intervene has ripple effects throughout a global web that may impose unequal burdens or concentrate resources in fewer places. Even efforts to ‘do good’ via Fair Trade, proactive legislation, or corporate social responsibility may have unintended, negative social and environmental consequences for those with the least power. This argument is not new, but it has never been systematically and simultaneously examined across multiple, globally traded food commodities. Based on our interpretation, two important variables emerge from this collection of studies—inclusive mediating institutions and extra-industry transnational standards.

Key mediating institutions include communities, nongovernmental organizations, government agents, and brokers, and they can effectively buffer or negotiate the complexity inherent in the global food system. Their importance has grown in response to complex global trade regimes and they offer insights into the governance of complexity, but they do not serve to simplify global trade systems. Indeed, the global food web is not static but dynamic, making the negotiation of complexity even more challenging. For example, the variety of extra-industry transnational standards and certification programs for commodity production that have arisen in recent decades has yielded an entirely new set of rules. Some of these are burdensome for producers and others provide opportunities for creating specialty niche brands. We begin with a discussion of mediating institutions and then discuss extra-industry transnational standards.

As Raikes et al. (2000) point out, farm-based global commodity chains are subject to far more complicated institutional arrangements, which go beyond the typical purview of global commodity chain approaches. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that there are multiple institutions operating in all of these studies. Here we focus on a variety of institutions that effectively mediate relationships of production and marketing. They are completely absent in some of these cases (Carney). In others, mediating institutions include government agencies (Aparicio et al., Dolan), middlemen (Aparicio et al., Curran & Cooke, Dolan), NGOs (Bacon et al., Dolan, Lewis & Runsten, Linton, Morrissey, Moseley), growers’ or fishers’ associations (Lebel, Morrissey), and community organizations (Lebel, Morrissey). They are effective because they know how to ‘work the web,’ nimbly moving or transforming products and reacting quickly to changes in the web’s institutional and market landscape. The most effective mediating institutions are not necessarily comprised of the most powerful actors in a commodity chain, but they are ones who are knowledgeable enough to know how to work the system of rules or ignore them to develop alternative niches.

However, as this collection illustrates, not all mediating institutions are accessible to all producers. This is either because the institutions are not responsible to growers or because they are exclusive. In some cases, effective mediating institutions are inaccessible or not susceptible to being influenced by producers and thus not accountable to their interests or welfare. Examples of these are cassava middlemen (Curran & Cooke), the Kenyan tea auction (Dolan), the relatively weak Fruit Laborers' Union and the paucity of institutions to help growers comply with Eurep-GAP standards in Entre Ríos (Aparicio et al.), shrimp farming Village B (Lebel et al.), and the white farmer in Ruitersvlei (Moseley). Other mediating institutions are explicitly inclusive and these include Northwest salmon and albacore tuna fishers' associations (Morrissey), the Citrus Packers' Union and public institutions assisting Tucumán's lemon growers (Aparicio et al.), the village governance group in Villages A and D (Lebel et al.), and most of the Fair Trade coffee cooperatives and wineries. And, in other cases, there are no mediating institutions for growers to engage with in order to then gain access or influence global markets (e.g., Carney). For these cases, the consequences for localities are profoundly negative. Gambian rice farmers who have lost access to their traditional seed varieties cannot successfully market the rice they are currently growing because inputs are too expensive. In other cases, the degree of mediating institutions' inclusivity or exclusivity has resulted in more equivocal local outcomes. Generally speaking, though, greater exclusivity of mediating institutions appears to increase the vulnerabilities of growers. For farmers in Northeast Thailand, cassava prices are lower as a result of the shift in commodity web from the protected European market to the global market and the upgraded processing facilities of middlemen. Farm incomes from cassava have declined dramatically and their land quality has deteriorated significantly, making it difficult to shift to alternative productive land uses. For Kenyan tea growers, the tea auction effectively limits their direct access to the benefits of Fair Trade tea price premiums and communities receive development projects that are not their top priorities. Thus, each farmer bears the burden of meeting Fair Trade standards, but does not control the use of the social premium. For villagers living in some communities in Thailand, when large shrimp growers dominate the village governance of irrigation control and land use, they ignore local needs and are impervious to external influences by other key agents. The consequences for communities are saline intrusion into rice fields and contaminated drinking wells. In the case of the Ruitersvlei vineyard in South Africa, a white farmer who was unwilling to share power was able to exploit a government land-reform initiative to his own benefit, with no gains accruing to the workers.

When mediating institutions are inclusive, producers tend to benefit more from collective capacities to negotiate the global web. Inclusivity in these cases means not only producer access, but promising collaborations between producers, government, private industry, and NGOs. Linton illustrates two successful partnerships between differently oriented international NGOs and smallholder coffee farmers in El Salvador and Tanzania, both of which involved *intensive producer collaboration*. In a similar vein, Dietsch and Philpott, in their piece about shade coffee farming (which de facto involves producers), argue for more collaboration between academics, including natural scientists, and various activists who are trying to make the coffee industry sustainable. Morrissey's and Moseley's accounts of making Pacific Northwest fisheries sustainable and black empowerment in the South

African wine industry respectively illustrate promising collaboration between states, private industry, and NGOs. Fishers of Pacific salmon and troll-caught albacore worked together with environmental groups and chefs to mitigate a crisis in their industries, but they did so against the backdrop of the Endangered Species Act. In South Africa, the government's Black Economic Empowerment policies provided incentives that sparked the development of a growing 'ethical' niche within the country's wine industry. Fair Trade NGOs have played a role in certifying wineries and expanding their markets. This suggests that success has to do with collaboration as opposed to coercion. Recognizing producers' interest and expertise—rather than imposing standards over their heads—is a key factor in reconciling sometimes-competing sustainability goals and global market forces.

Besides inclusive mediating institutions, a second variable emerges from this collection—extra-industry transnational standards. The arrival of new transnational standards for commodity production during the 1990s coincided with the shift from the Global Agreements on Tariffs and Trade and the adoption of the World Trade Organization. Most of this collection is about commodities that have seen dramatic shifts in trade patterns as a result of the change from globally managed interstate trade agreements to the more comprehensive WTO. Whereas GATT took the 'special and differential treatment' of developing countries, including their continued reliance on tariffs, for granted, the WTO presumes that eventually unfettered trade is for the best, although some tariffs may be necessary to help overcome existing inequities or level the economic playing field, at least in the short run (Monbiot, 2000).

The road from Uruguay to Geneva took nine years and, despite the heralded shift from the GATT to the WTO regime, was immensely difficult. Thus, proliferating alongside the emergence of the WTO were numerous regional and bilateral trade agreements to address immediate realities of global exchange and alongside these a growing number of bilateral disputes mediated through the WTO. Although the WTO makes trade transactions more transparent, what has emerged is a complex 'spaghetti bowl' of trade relations.

Before going forward, a few comments on the historical roots of food trade agreements are in order. As we noted in our introductory essay, more food is being traded across international borders than ever before. In large measure, the greater movement of food commodities results from the significant dismantling of national food security regimes in place throughout the GATT era (Thomson & Cowan, 2000). These regimes partly reflected producer interests, but also health and safety concerns. With the establishment of the WTO and the dismantling of so-called protectionist trade barriers, the concerns about food and safety became a more important tool and justification for managing cross-border food trade.

Phytosanitary standards and certification systems spread in the 1990s as an innovative policy tool in response to diminishing presence of other forms of food trade protection. One example of this was the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) Agreement, through which the European Union sought to impose controls on products coming into its market. These measures included requirements for tracing the movement of all food commodities from farm to table, conforming to pesticide management best practices, and controlling exposure to hazards. From these standards, a new set of measures

was developed to observe farm and shipping practices that were then codified in Eurep-GAP (Good Agricultural Practices). These tools had profound consequences in two realms. As noted by several of the authors in this collection, the new standards imposed large burdens on producers in the global south. The infrastructure needed to conform to and document compliance was enormous. In a second realm, the application of innovative policy tools such as Eurep-GAP coincided with the success of several civil society-based food security campaigns in the United States, namely dolphin-safe tuna and pesticide-free grapes. The success of these alternative policy tools continues to inform movements that address consumer concerns, including health, environment, and fair labor practices. Organic and Fair Trade certifications, which gained huge momentum in the 1990s, most directly address, in turn, environmental concerns and fair labor practices in a global economy.

Not everyone is convinced that standards-based tools actually achieve the results they intend in the agricultural sector (on organic standards, see Guthman, 2004). One of the primary concerns is that the standards impose undue burdens on small producers and may lead to the unintended consequence of vertical integration, contract farming, and the loss of successful, small independent farms (Dolan & Humphrey 2000, 2004, as well as Lebel in this issue). Based on the collection of studies in this special issue, we suggest a nuanced understanding that incorporates the interaction of institutions and standards. In Table 1 we offer a heuristic vehicle for understanding these interactions and how they may play out in terms of sustainability for workers and the environment in a complex global system.

In Table 1, the four cells show different potential combinations of institutional regimes and standards for sustainability. Starting in the bottom right-hand corner, with no inclusionary institutions and no standards for sustainability, we expect to see little to no real possibility for sustainability. This is illustrated with the Thai cassava study (Curran & Cooke). In that case, there is a very effective and nimble institution—the Chinese middlemen and entrepreneurs—but they are by no means inclusionary. Though they work with the Thai government or the Northeastern farmers opportunistically, they are not responsible to either group. For the farmers, this means that they benefit when the market is strong, but that they cannot count on the middlemen to advocate for their concerns. This case also shows the lack of standards for sustainability. There are no organized civil society groups campaigning for something like ‘Soil Friendly’ cassava certification. And reforestation efforts in Northeastern Thailand have been largely focused on monoculture eucalyptus groves, from which the ecological benefits are not clear. The lack of standards and the lack of inclusionary institutions give little hope for sustainability either for cassava growers and the land they cultivate. In the case of rice policies in The Gambia (Carney), the dismantling of the agriculture-focused, parastatal Gambian Cooperative Union by IMF structural adjustment policies, the removal of agricultural experts from rural areas, and the lack of support from international donors for milling facilities meant that there were really no mediating institutions—inclusive or not—in the rural areas after the mid-1980s. Combining this with a lack of any standards for environmental or livelihood sustainability has meant the harsh conditions for the rural Gambian population as well as deforestation for extensification of subsistence crops and loss of soil fertility from canalization of riparian wetlands. Finally, the Ruitersvlei vineyard in South Africa (Moseley) shows a case in which what should be an inclusionary institution—a BEE cooperative farm—never has the chance

to coalesce due to the legacy of an older exclusionary institution: Apartheid. That particular farm also lacks Fair Trade standards that could be used to leverage more sustainable livelihoods and enable workers with important environmental knowledge (e.g., preventing soil erosion) to act on that knowledge. Again, the lack of effective inclusionary institutions and standards undermines both social and environmental sustainability.

In the bottom left-hand side of the table, the ‘latent sustainability’ cell includes cases in which inclusionary institutions were already in place but were not ‘activated’ until the advent of standards encouraged their redeployment or reconfiguration. Often these sustainability standards are transnational or originate outside the local area. Several of the shrimp-farming villages discussed by Lebel and his colleagues exemplify this situation; local government involvement and weekly gatherings at the Mosque were key to mitigating the damage caused by shrimp farming. Linton’s description of the Tanzanian coffee farmers in particular is also a good example of latent sustainability. With help from the business-oriented NGO, strong cooperative societies of coffee farmers—an inclusive institution—gained leverage from their collective bargaining power. But the real progress toward social and environmental sustainability came after the groups sought out Fair Trade certification. While this appears to be largely a business decision, conforming to this transnational standard points toward real sustainability gains that were not available through the local institution alone. The situation for Nicaraguan coffee farmers (Bacon et al.) appears to be similar. Their coffee cooperatives have a fairly long history, but the ones activated by the need to conform to Fair Trade standards appear to be doing slightly better in terms of livelihoods and social sustainability. Finally, the worker-owned vineyards of Bouwland & Gelukshoop (Moseley) show latent sustainability. Though both are effective cooperatives—strong inclusionary institutions—neither has yet tapped into the benefits of the transnational standards of Fair Trade. While Fair Trade certification may not change practices on these vineyards radically, the price premiums from officially conforming to this standard might be enough to sustain these cooperatives. These cases suggest that careful encouragement of participation by existing *inclusionary* institutions might result in better outcomes when new standards for sustainability are introduced, particularly when they are transnational standards.

The upper right-hand cell, ‘limited sustainability’ includes situations in which transnational standards have been imposed but mediating institutions are either exclusive or unavailable. Aparicio et al. show a benefit to workers that came, in part, from a shift in EU regulation of citrus imports from Argentina (from a trade barrier system to a complex but flexible tariff system and tighter phytosanitary controls), in combination with a set of norms developed by European supermarkets to reflect customers’ concerns about the quality of imported produce. Changes growers made in order to comply with the new rules also improved working conditions and created incentives to employ more experienced and responsible (and thus better-paid) workers. Beyond the caveats of export experience and infrastructure noted by Aparicio and her colleagues, the lack of strong inclusive institutions limits the gains for workers and their livelihoods. The limited strength of the unions and the concentration in ownership in Entre Ríos hint that stronger inclusionary institutions might provide more gains for the workers. In Village B, where shrimp farmers dominated the TAO council, the

council ignored complaints from other villagers about pollution in drainage canals and other impacts. The case of Kenyan tea exports (Dolan) shows another variation of limited sustainability. Here, Fairtrade-certified tea plantations have signed onto the transnational standard, but the imposition of a historically rooted and exclusive mediating institution—the Mombasa Auction—limits the potential benefits of the standard. The disruptive effect of this institution means that the tea growers' cooperatives as inclusionary institutions are not entirely effective: They have no control over the premiums they gain by conforming to the standard. These cases suggest that only limited sustainability can be achieved in the absence of effective and inclusionary institutions.

The studies in the top left cell show the most hopeful signs of sustainability both for livelihoods and for local environments. These studies feature situations in which both standards for sustainability and effective and inclusive institutions combine. The citrus industry in Tucumán (Aparicio et al.) is a good example, as is the successful, collaborative management of Pacific Northwest salmon and albacore fisheries (Morrissey). The Fair Trade, worker-owned wineries (Moseley) show fairly new, but also very hopeful, signs of sustainability. The cooperatives, supported by government BEE grants, have the capacity to organize their members to conform to the Fair Trade standards, gain the premiums from the certification, and distribute those premiums. These are particularly hopeful cases because the inclusive institutions are relatively new and their formation was largely a result of progressive government policy, raising the possibility that with adjustments for local particularity, strong inclusive institutions can form in other places. The coffee cooperatives in Tanzania, El Salvador (Linton), and Nicaragua (Bacon et al.), after the adoption of Fair Trade standards, also show this combination of standards and inclusive mediating institutions and gains for sustainability.

There are limits to this table. The cells are simplifications of incredibly complex situations as we know from the first part of this paper, leading to a slightly artificial categorization of places in the studies. However, as a heuristic device, it does allow us to pick apart some salient features of these cases.

Missing from our table is an emergent and important set of actors that use their credentials to establish standards of sustainability. In particular, these are the scientists who have developed the basis for the Marine Stewardship Council's certification system (see Goldburg or Morrissey in this issue) or those who identify organic standards or ecologically friendly products (see Dietsch and Philpott in this issue). The role of scientists, particularly ecological scientists has not been systematically examined, but we observe their presence not in traditional governance institutions, but in civil society or retail market efforts to link producers, consumers, and regulatory institutions.

There are particularly important limits to the 'sustainability' cell. Again, the complexity approach reminds us that the whole system is dynamic and all actors have only limited knowledge of the whole structure, always leaving open the possibility of major perturbations. With looming and unpredictable perturbations, what may seem sustainable at a particular point in time from a particular place is bound to last only so long. Our approach to and idea of sustainability must embrace both the dynamic nature of global connections

and the particularity of places that mark our world. For example, Lewis and Runsten point out that insertion in Fair Trade markets does not necessarily guarantee sufficient monetary returns to make coffee farming sustainable. And Bacon and his colleagues show that, for Nicaraguan coffee farming families, food insecurity persists among *all* small-scale producers—whether or not they are selling their coffee via Fair Trade channels. However, this collection gives reason to hope for more forward-thinking relationships among state or regional governments, NGOs, the private sector, brokers or middlemen, and, importantly, all the people who produce food to negotiate more sustainably the dynamics of global complexity.

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Table 1

Combinations of institutional regimes and standards for sustainability

Sustainability standards	Inclusionary institutions	
	Yes	No
Yes	<i>Sustainability</i> Aparicio et al. (Tucumán) Lebel et al. (Village A, and Village D post-TAO involvement) Morrissey Moseley (FT wineries) Linton—after FT Bacon—after FT	<i>Limited sustainability</i> Aparicio et al. (Entre Ríos) Lebel et al. (Village B) Dolan
No	<i>Latent sustainability</i> Lebel et al. (Village D, pre-TAO involvement) Linton—before FT Bacon—before FT Moseley (Bouwland & Gelukshoop)	<i>No sustainability</i> Curran and Cooke Carney Moseley (Ruitersvlei)