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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Power and inequality in global value chains: Advancing the research agenda

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## Abstract

Power is a central, but largely undertheorized, concept for scholars of global value chains (GVCs). In this introduction to a special issue on power and inequality in GVCs, the authors summarize the key insights from the articles gathered here and explain how the collection advances our understanding of the types and forms of power operating in GVCs and their effect on different dimensions of inequality.

KEYWORDS
Power, inequality, global value chains, governance

## INTRODUCTION

Global networks are a key feature of contemporary capitalism. For more than four decades, scholars have developed analytical frameworks to capture the operation and effects of spatially dispersed but functionally interconnected production processes, from the commodity chain concept originating in world-systems theory to the global value chain (GVC) and global production network (GPN) approaches. Interest in these frameworks extend beyond the academy. Policymakers, industry actors and activists have also mobilized these frameworks, as they, too, seek to understand the organizational, geographic and technological dimensions of globalization (Mayer & Gereffi, 2019). The scope of the GVC literature has grown well beyond the manufacturing and agro-food industries that were the focus of much early research. As the contributions to this special issue suggest, scholars are fruitfully applying the GVC lens both to basic commodities (see Tups & Dannenberg, 2023 on the fertilizer chain) and to digital labour platforms (see Howson et al., 2023).

Yet even as the empirical breadth of the GVC literature expands, its central theoretical occupations are largely unchanged. The primary question motivating most GVC researchers is and has long been how complex and fragmented production networks are governed, and with what effects for the many 'stakeholders' implicated in such networks, including firms, workers, farmers, governments and civil society organizations. As a corollary, scholars ask about the degree to which participation in GVCs facilitates positive outcomes, such as firm competitiveness, employment generation, and improved working conditions, or is instead associated with negative effects such as immiserating growth, environmental degradation and increased inequality. In short, the triadic relationship between power, governance and inequality remains the core concern driving the GVC research agenda forward.

In our collection, we advance this research agenda largely via an analytical focus of how different types of power shape governance, and with what results in terms of different forms of inequality. Several of the articles examine the sources or forms of power that shape GVC governance, while others show that the exercise of power is not confined to the traditional lead firms that dominate much of the GVC literature. By examining the types of power relevant to specific GVCs, and how these types operate, the special issue deepens our understanding of how globalization affects inequality. The incorporation of developing countries into GVCs is credited with contributing to a decline in between-country inequality. At the same time, GVC dynamics are identified as a key factor contributing to the growth of within-country inequality and a decline in labour's share of total income. Careful conceptualizations of both power and inequality are thus necessary to understand the mechanisms by which GVCs shape distributional outcomes among firms, between capital and (gendered) labour and across the (ever-changing) North-South divide (Barrientos, 2019; Milberg & Winkler, 2013; Quentin & Campling, 2018). Next, we briefly summarize the evolution and status of the literature regarding how power shapes governance in GVC analysis and with what kinds of inequality outcomes—before spending the rest of this brief introduction explaining how the articles in the special issue individually and collectively advance the research agenda in this field.

## ARTICULATING POWER, GOVERNANCE AND INEQUALITY

GVCs refer to coordinated networks that link economic actors, typically across firm boundaries and geographical space, to an interconnected production process. The concept of governance captures the core GVC insight that production networks do not arise spontaneously as a sequence of spontaneous market exchanges, but rather require explicit coordination. Gereffi first defined governance as 'the authority and *power relationships* that determine how financial, material and human resources are allocated and flow within a chain' (Gereffi 1994, p. 97; emphasis added). This formulation did not distinguish between governance and power but rather treated the former as the expression of the latter. The original governance typology was based on Gereffi's observation that industries varied in terms of which kind of firm had the power to determine the allocation of resources along the chain, with the key distinction being that between manufacturers (producer-driven chains) and retailers (buyer-driven chains). The very terminology of chains as 'driven' underscores the notion that governance is fundamentally about the economic power of lead firms to define who accesses the chain, on what terms and for what returns (Gibbon et al., 2008).

A decade after the concept of governance was introduced, Gereffi et al. (2005) proposed a new approach, which sought to advance beyond the producer-driven and buyer-driven categories. The original typology was regarded both as overly narrow (in the sense that it failed to capture the variation in GVC governance that exists across global industries) and fundamentally descriptive (in the sense that it did not offer an explanation for the observed distinction between governance types). In contrast, these authors proposed that the nature of inter-firm linkages in GVCs could be explained by three variables: the complexity of information that needs to be exchanged between firms, the codifiability of that information and the capabilities resident in the supply base relative to the requirements of the transaction (Gereffi et al., 2005). The model yielded five forms of governance (market, modular, relational, captive and hierarchy) depending on the value of these variables. Governance types assumed a connection between power and governance (with the categorical distinction resting on whether it was yielded by producers or buyers). This new formulation understood power as a variable dimension of governance, arguing that as one moved from market towards hierarchy, the power of a lead firm—that is, degree of explicit coordination that it can exercise—increases. This shifted the conception of how lead firms deploy power from 'driving' to inter-firm 'linking' (Gibbon et al., 2008).

Gereffi et al.'s (2005) governance framework did not theorize power per se. As Dallas et al. (2019) observed, while power was a central concern for such GVC scholars, the concept itself remained underdeveloped. Implicitly, studies of GVC governance had been concerned with only one type of power: the bargaining power of lead firms over suppliers. Dallas (2014) argued that other forms of power operate beyond these dyadic lenses, that some forms are less directly transmitted by, or originating from, particular actors, and that these are also important for understanding how GVCs operate. Specifically, they differentiated two main dimensions of power: 'transmission mechanisms' (direct or diffuse) and 'arena of actors' (dyadic or collective). When combined in a two-by-two matrix, these dimensions yield four types of power in GVCs: bargaining power (direct and dyadic), institutional power (direct and collective), demonstrative power (diffuse and dyadic) and constitutive power (diffuse and collective). This expanded typology of power (and its relation to inequality) is reflected in Dallas et al.'s broader definition of GVC governance as 'the actions, institutions and norms that shape the conditions for inclusion, exclusion and mode of participation in a value chain, which in turn determine the terms and location of value addition, distribution and capture' (2019, p. 667).

Discussions on inequality have been equally rich in the GVC literature. As Lang et al. (2023) chronicle in this special issue, much research has been concerned with how to mitigate North-South inequalities and particularly with the (unequal) distribution of value added along GVCs and related struggles (Macdonald, 2014; Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). The spectrum of these debates ranges from catching up trajectories for Global South actors who participate in GVCs (Taglioni & Winkler, 2016), to observations of adverse incorporation (Phillips, 2011), the role of intangibles and rents in shaping inequalities (Durand & Milberg, 2020, Kaplinsky, 2005) and arguments that GVCs themselves are constitutive of global inequalities (Bair & Werner, 2011; Quentin & Campling, 2018; Selwyn, 2019; Suwandi, 2019; Werner, 2019). While the factors that shape the distribution of income, value-added and risk in GVCs continue to be the important foci of inequality, other mechanisms are also becoming the focus of attention, such as the unequal distribution of hidden environmental and social costs in GVC operations (LeBaron & Lister, 2021), or lead firms' green capital accumulation and appropriation (Ponte, 2019). For this reason, Lang et al. (2023; along with Phillips, 2017) call for the unpacking of different dimensions of inequality in GVCs and the related mechanisms of power that shape them.

## ADVANCING THE DEBATE: INSIGHTS FROM THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The seven articles in this special issue all grapple centrally with how to understand the nature, sources and/or effects of power in GVCs and/or the relationship between power and inequality. Some authors focus on a particular type of power, including bargaining (Bair and Mahutga; Staricco; Howson et al.), constitutive (Dallas and Shiu) and institutional power ( Roberts and Tran). Other authors explore the interactions between the four types of power in Dallas et al.'s typology (Lang et al.; Tups and Danneberg). In so doing, several of the articles highlight dynamics that complicate existing typologies of lead firms in global industries (Howson et al.; Tups and Danneberg. Five articles (Howson et al.; Lang et al.; Roberts and Tran; Staricco; Tups and Dannenberg) identify how different types of power exacerbate inequality, while three (Dallas and Shiu; Lang et al.; Roberts and Tran) also describe situations in which specific kinds of power operate to mitigate inequality. Though all articles engage with the relationship between power and inequality, we first discuss four articles that grapple primarily with the conceptualization of power in GVCs before turning to three articles that more centrally address inequality.

### Unpacking power in GVCs

The special issue substantially advances the analysis of power in GVCs. Most of the articles directly engage with Dallas et al.'s (2019) framework (hereafter DPS), some of them complementarily and others critically. As noted above, several articles focus on a particular type of power, elaborating how it operates in a particular industry. In contrast, Tups and

Dannenberg (along with Lang et al.) deploy all four types of power identified by DPS, offering fluid narratives of how they overlap and combine.

Tups and Dannenberg focus on YARA, a Norwegian chemical fertilizer firm, whose governance of the fertilizer value chain increasingly relies on a strategy of acquiring intangible assets. In an analysis that resonates with recent work on the entanglements of GVCs and global wealth chains (see Bair et al., 2023; Seabrooke & Wigan, 2022), they show how YARA uses intangible assets to elevate fertilizer from a bulk commodity to a differentiated product. This is achieved by forging public–private partnerships and links with government agencies (institutional power), establishing demonstration farm plots in smallholder communities (demonstrative power) and normalizing synthetic fertilizer practices as reflective of 'modern' farming (constitutive power). The intangible assets that underlie YARA's ability to transform itself from a commodity input supplier to a knowledge-intensive lead firm is increasing the company's bargaining power in ways that suggest the 'gradual monopolization of the fertilizer market' (Tups & Danenberg, 2023, p. 15). The implications are worrisome for farmers in Tanzania (Tups and Dannberg's empirical focus) and elsewhere in the Global South—as they may find themselves squeezed between powerful global buyers of agricultural outputs on the one hand, and a powerful global supplier of agricultural inputs on the other.

In Tups and Dannenberg's analysis, institutional, constitutive and demonstrative power operate in ways that increase YARA's bargaining power. A different picture emerges from Dallas and Shiu's study of the telecommunications value chain. They focus on DPS's concept of 'constitutive' power, arguably the most understudied of the four types, given its abstractness and difficulty in studying empirically, especially with quantitative data. Dallas and Shiu argue that there are two ideal-type variants of constitutive power—fractured and encompassing—which vary in the degree to which actors are self-aware of their own social construction by norms, values and conventions. Indeed, in addition to applying this new framework to existing research on constitutive power, such as governmentality (Gibbon & Ponte, 2008; Raj-Reichert, 2013) and hegemony (Alford, 2020; Bair & Palpacuer, 2015; Levy, 2008), they develop a third type of constitutive power (legitimacy) and utilize a comprehensive dataset of telecommunications standards to study this phenomenon quantitatively. Focusing on an organization called 3GPP that is tasked with setting global mobile telecommunications standards, Dallas and Shiu show that lead firms must cultivate legitimacy by persuading peer firms to agree to their preferred standards. These authors argue that the standard setting process—partially structured by procedures and rules (institutional power) but ultimately driven by legitimacy—*constrains* the power of industry leaders in ways that pushed the industry towards a socially better outcome. The constitutive power operating within 3GPP created more balance between 'large incumbents, would-be challengers and small firms' than would be expected by a narrower focus on the dyadic bargaining power of dominant companies. Thus, while Tups and Dannenberg find that, in the fertilizer chain, different types of power layered in ways that increased lead firm power, Dallas and Shiu demonstrate that a different kind of layering can also attenuate it.

By contrast, both Bair and Mahutga and Staricco suggest that GVC analysis would be better served by a simplified theoretical framework that focuses more centrally on bargaining power. Bair and Mahutga argue that what distinguishes GVC analysis (from, say, the broader literature on industrial organization) is its explanandum: how GVCs generate skew in value capture among participating firms. Their contribution centres on a simple but analytically powerful insight, which in their view underlies most extant analyses of governance: bargaining power asymmetries in GVCs are a function of the ratio of buyers to suppliers. When buying firms are met with many potential suppliers, buyers will capture a larger share of the value (and vice versa). Bair and Mahutga recognize that processes described by DPS as institutional, demonstrative and constitutive power frequently shape GVCs, but, for them, the key question is how these influences affect the skew in value capture. These authors develop an exchange theoretic model in which institutional (e.g. trade policy) and normative forces (e.g. diffusion of Corporate Social Responsibility conventions) affect value skew either by (a) altering the buyer-supplier ratio or (b) moderating the exercise of bargaining power by lead firms. This allows them to maintain a focus on bargaining power as the core mechanism driving distributive dynamics in GVCs, while also considering how factors external to the chain might shape value skew, either by directly changing the social-structural conditions of exchange (supplier/buyer ratio) or by creating an environment in which lead firms exercise forbearance in leveraging bargaining power.

Staricco makes a similar call to centre bargaining power within GVC analysis, though he draws inspiration not from exchange theory but rather from world-systems theory. Staricco focuses on the biodiesel value chain, specifically on the struggles of Argentine soy producers to navigate changing regulatory frameworks in the United States and the European Union. Trade policy figures prominently in Staricco's analysis, which documents how protectionist measures taken by importers prevented Argentina's soybean industry from capturing greater value even after a successful process of industrial upgrading. Yet rather than seeing the policy environment as a type of institutional power, Staricco sees it as a factor affecting the value of the resources controlled by GVC actors, and thus as a *source* of bargaining power. Consonant with Bair and Mahutga, he argues that the degree of competition faced by a GVC actor is the key dynamic underlying relative bargaining power. Staricco proposes the concept of a positional source of power, that 'results from analysing the particular place that a chain actor occupies in a field characterized by a given degree of competition, be it horizontally (vis-à-vis other actors who perform their same function) or vertically (vis-à-vis their suppliers and/or buyers' (p. 8).

These articles offer a contending view of power from the one on offer in DPS (2019). Put simply, DPS see power as syncretic and multidirectional, and they do not ex ante prioritize one over the others in determining governance and inequality. In the articles by Bair and Mahutga and Staricco, explicit priority is given to bargaining power; the other forms of power are seen as secondary and lacking direct causal impact on value capture. At stake is the underlying question of the relationship between actor and environment in GVC analysis. For example, Staricco argues that only GVC actors can wield power, and their actions and relations constitute bargaining power; other types of power constitute the context (the 'ground') and serve to empower the actors ('the figure'). In contrast, DPS (2019) consider the four types of power as 'interactive', 'layered' and 'combinatory', which blurs the boundaries between actor and environment such that many of the resources, capabilities and relations of firms are buttressed by, or acquire value from, their legal and normative environments. Thus, in contrast to Staricco's distinction between 'ground' and 'figure', DPS might prefer a tree-soil image in which the roots of the tree are so intertwined with the soil as to make it difficult to clearly distinguish between actor and environment. This, however, does not preclude identifying how, collectively, the four forms of power can shape governance over time, including how other forms of power interactively (re)shape bargaining power itself—as Ponte (2019) shows in his application of DPS to three GVCs in the agro-food sector.

## INTERROGATING INEQUALITIES IN (AND BEYOND) GVCs

Most efforts to understand power in GVCs are motivated by a desire to understand how global production networks affect inequality—be it inequality at the level of the workplace, the industry, the region, or the world-system. All the articles in this special issue are concerned, one way or another, with identifying amplifiers and softeners of various forms of inequality. Among the amplifiers of inequality, we find cloudwork platforms (Howson et al.), labour regulation in the Global South (Roberts and Tran), global input suppliers (Tups and Dannenberg), sustainability initiatives (Lang et al.) and import regulations (Staricco). Among the softeners of inequality, we find standard setting processes (Dallas and Shiu), labour regulation in the Global North (Roberts and Tran), supply chain labour agreements (Bair and Mahutga) and 'transformation' initiatives (Lang et al.).

Lang et al. aims to address the relationship between power and inequality most systematically, by linking DPS' different kinds of power to different forms of inequality in GVCs. Specifically, Lang et al. argue that GVC analysis should situate itself in relation to a distinction between (1) inequality *within* chains, (2) inequality *along* chains and (3) inequality *through* chains. The in/along/through differentiation distinguishes three loci in terms of where inequality is generated, namely inequality derived within GVCs (e.g. via competition between actors at a single node), that occurring along a linked chain (the classic preoccupation of GVC research, though often framed narrowly in terms of distribution of value added); or that which exists beyond the chain, given the wider socio-political and ecological systems in which the chain is embedded. Lang et al. apply this framework to the analysis of industrial fisheries in South Africa, with specific focus on the hake value chain. Observing the influence of DPS's four types of power on inequality within, along and through the value chain, they show how dominant actors combine different forms of power to largely reproduce deep-seated inequalities. As a result, the position of legacy actors is consolidated, despite expansive government efforts to promote the interests of Black-owned firms within the industry. But other articles also examine various forms of inequality as framed in Lang et al., explicitly or implicitly: Dallas and Shiu's analysis is relevant for inequality within the chain; Bair and Mahutga, Howson et al. and Tups and Dannenberg provide insights on inequality along the chain; Staricco covers both.

While most of the articles included in this collection unpack inequality dynamics in well-established value chains, Howson et al. examine digital labour platforms as a truly global value chain that offers unparalleled opportunities for labour arbitrage. They draw inspiration from both GVC and Marxist theory in analyzing the captive governance relations that underpin the extraction of unpaid labour in platform capitalism. Utilizing data from a survey of 699 cloudworkers in 74 countries, these authors detail the pervasiveness of wage theft for those who supply labour via platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk or Freelancer.com. They find that workers in the Global South are more likely to experience this phenomenon, but they often have little recourse, given rules and policies for platform users that skew in favor of those purchasing labour services. Moreover, as Howson et al. emphasize, client firms contracting work via platforms are not the only or even the main beneficiaries of this labour exploitation: When workers interact with these sites, they generate data, which become value-creating intangible assets for platform firms—thus, the authors' description of the platform model as a 'digital value network'. Howson et al. conclude that rather than creating a level playing field that liberates workers from local labour markets, platforms are increasing the rate of labour exploitation for workers in the Global South and deepening inequality.

Finally, Roberts and Tran's article examines the relationship between inequality and a particular dimension of institutional power: labour regulation. Specifically, their article weighs in on a debate that has occupied social scientists for decades: how has economic globalization affected inequality? Using panel data from 93 countries, Roberts and Tran examine the impact of GVC integration on national market (i.e. pre-tax and transfer) income inequality across both developed and developing countries. Their approach departs from a typical GVC analysis insofar as they are drawing implications about GVC participation for entire distributions of national income, which include individuals who are not directly employed in such chains. The authors find that GVC integration leads to more inequality, but while labour regulations amplify these effects in the Global South, they dampen them in the Global North. Roberts and Tran hypothesize that 'institutional power from national labour regulations may enhance the bargaining power of labour in the North through increasing collective resources while disempowering labour in the South through reinforcing labour market segmentation between formal and informal sectors' (2023, p. 1).

The seven articles comprising this special issue do not aim to definitely adjudicate ongoing debates in the GVC literature, both the ones that are discussed in these pages as well as the many more found throughout what is a large, vibrant and resolutely interdisciplinary GVC literature. Nevertheless, this collection offers one of the most sustained discussions about what we mean by power in GVCs, how (and what kinds of) power shape governance and with what effects for (what kinds of) inequality. These articles also raise broader questions for the research community to engage with, via empirical as well as theoretical inquiry—including how we define and measure the concepts we use to make sense of value chains and production networks, and how we understand the causal relationships among the phenomena we study.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors have provided the required Data Availability Statement, and if applicable, included functional and accurate links to said data therein.

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