

Global Poverty Chains Reconsidered Through an Analysis of Epistemic Violence and the Limits of Marxist Reductionism

Dorothy Bamfo, 3rd Year Essay

BA Politics, Philosophy and Economics

Abstract

Globalisation is widely understood as the interconnection of world economies, cultures, and populations through trade, technology, and investment. Yet it remains a deeply contested and analytically imprecise concept, one that often obscures more than it reveals. Its value lies less in describing a concrete phenomenon than in exposing how that phenomenon is framed.

Two dominant framings define this contestation. Global Value Chains (GVCs) present globalisation as efficiency-enhancing and development-enabling, emphasising flattened hierarchies, technology transfer, and horizontal collaboration across firms. Global Poverty Chains (GPCs), by contrast, offer a critical counter-narrative. Rather than fostering development, GVCs exploit workers in the Global South through low wages, excessive hours, and poor conditions in service of multinational profit. This paper intervenes in that debate by arguing that both framings, despite their opposition, enact epistemic violence, each deploying ideology to foreclose alternative ways of knowing.

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies . . . to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it . . . to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies. (Orwell 1977, ch. 3, ch. 9)

Chapter 1: Introduction

This essay argues that, reframing Global Value Chains (GVCs) as Global Poverty Chains (GPCs) offers a more ethically grounded understanding of global production by exposing how production networks conceal exploitation beneath narratives of profit maximisation, efficiency, and collective advancement. However, despite its virtues, the GPC framework carries significant limitations rooted in Marxist reductionism, therefore failing to grasp how race, gender, and culture operate as autonomous structuring forces of global production. Notably, both frameworks reproduce what Selwyn (2018), borrowing from Orwell, calls ‘doublethink’, which is the simultaneous knowing and not knowing that cloaks relations of domination in emancipatory language. Where Selwyn (2018) deploys ‘doublethink’ to indict GVC discourse, this essay turns that charge against him. I argue that the GPC framework that he defends only reproduces the very epistemic violence it claims to correct.

My argument is threefold. First, I contend that the GVC framework achieves salience through convergence between policy, academic, and corporate discourse. This enacts epistemic violence by privileging productivity metrics while rendering workers’ lived realities of subordination invisible. Second, I contend that the GPC framework’s Marxist and Marxist Feminist foundations represent a

necessary and significant advancement beyond the epistemic limitations of the GVC framework. By exposing super-exploitation and grounding moral accountability in demands for structural redress rather than self-interested benevolence disguised as development, the GPC directly corrects the epistemic violence that the GVC framework produces. In doing so, it restores the analytical legitimacy to the lived experiences of workers it had rendered invisible. Third, however, I demonstrate that this correction is incomplete. Despite these critical interventions, the GPC framework's Marxist reductionism instrumentalises race, gender, and culture as functional mechanisms of class exploitation. This subordinates these dimensions to class relations and thereby reproduces epistemic violence in a different form. By failing to conceptualise the intersecting systems through which workers experience compounded domination, the framework ultimately undermines its own moral imperative, replicating the very hierarchies of erasure and marginalisation it claims to challenge.

Prescription Disguised as Description Through Global Value Chains

The Discursive Convergence of Corporate, Academic and Institutional Power

The rise of GVC as the dominant framework in policy, academic, and corporate discourse does more than describe how global production operates; it actively prescribes which realities are valued, elevating efficiency while simultaneously rendering exploitation and poverty as normal or invisible. This prescriptive function gains intellectual authority from claims such as Sachs' assertion that 'sweatshops are the first rung on the ladder out of extreme poverty' (Sachs 2005, p. 11). Sachs recasts sweatshops as benevolent agents of economic progress for Global South workers, and as a necessary transitional stage to prosperity despite their exploitative conditions. In doing so, this narrative masks the structural power asymmetries between the Global North and South such as multinational corporate dominance, weak labour protections, and unequal bargaining power that

fundamentally govern value capture.

Academic discourse on GVC cannot reach salience independently as its dominance depends on convergence with institutional knowledge-production and corporate material interests. Together, they establish the authoritative standards by which global development is largely measured and understood. Given that '90% of US exports and imports flow through a US TNC (Transnational Corporation), with roughly 50% of US trade flows occurring between affiliates of the same TNC', TNCs possess both the structural power over international trade as well as the discursive influence in shaping how these relationships are understood (Dicken 2011, pp. 20-21).

Objectivity is resented as an Ideological Tool

International organisations such as the World Bank wield comparable discursive authority, reinforcing this framing by producing metrics to define what good development and legitimate labour relations should look like. However, these metrics ignore and misrepresent workers' lived conditions. The International Poverty Line (IPL), a monetary threshold that locates which individuals are classified as living in poverty, exemplifies this because it purports to offer a universal and objective measure of deprivation that can guide development policy and assess progress out of poverty. However, as Selwyn reveals, though appearing objective, the IPL is in effect 'arbitrary, in that it does not actually calculate workers' survival needs' (Selwyn 2018, p. 74). Sweatshop workers earning above the IPL threshold are classified as non-poor despite struggling to meet basic needs and being 'forced to undertake undignified work and unhealthy amounts of overtime and live in squalid conditions' (ibid.). This demonstrates how, through a mutually reinforcing relationship

between international institutions, academic, and corporate discourse, poverty is reduced to a necessary transitional stage and a statistically rare phenomenon, therefore normalising exploitation while denying its scale.

Epistemic Violence of GVC Framework

Subjugated Knowledges and the Exclusion of Workers' Lived Experience

The epistemic violence of the GVC framework becomes apparent when poverty is understood not as a technical threshold but as a political and moral reality grounded in lived experience. Bolwig et al. (2010, p. 179) challenge its technically framed reduction with their normative reframing of poverty as 'a political and moral, not an analytical term' wherein 'assessments of the poverty impact of value-chain restructuring and governance should be alive to the whole range of meaning and concerns that animate both policy jargon and popular discourse about poverty'. By systematically excluding workers' lived experiences of deprivation and suffering from what counts as legitimate knowledge, epistemic violence is inflicted. This exclusion takes on greater theoretical weight when understood through what Foucault terms 'subjugated knowledges', which is when 'a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition' (Foucault 1980, p. 82). Ultimately, the testimonies of sweatshop workers regarding indignity, exhaustion, and squalor are rendered inadmissible because they fall outside the technical vocabulary of poverty lines and value-chain efficiency. As a result, their experiential knowledge is subordinated to the 'analytical' authority of institutional metrics that validate the very conditions workers endure.

Fricker (2007, p. 163) illuminates this danger further by highlighting that ‘when there is a dissonance between received understanding of your own intimated sense of a given experience, it tends to knock your faith in your own ability to make sense of the world’. This reveals that the GVC framework not only operates by excluding workers’ knowledge from policy discourse, but also by undermining workers’ confidence in their own experiential understanding, consequently eroding their capacity to articulate and contest the conditions of their own exploitation.

Global Poverty Chains: A Marxist Corrective

Super-Exploitation and the Structural Roots of Poverty

Addressing this epistemic violence requires the GPC framework, which offers both clarity about value extraction and moral accountability to workers’ experiences as a virtue of its Marxist foundations, thus being morally significant. Reframing GVCs as GPCs repositions workers as the central analytical category, shifting focus from efficiency metrics to livelihood struggles. This is shown through Selwyn’s analysis of how the GPC framework ‘reformulates principal concepts associated with the (GVC) approach - of value added, rent and chain governance - and challenges (its) core assumption... that workers’ low wages are a function of their employment from low productivity industries’ (Selwyn 2018, pg. 71). Crucially, it identifies that poverty is not a temporary developmental lag but a structural condition of capitalist value creation in the global production networks. This then enables surplus extraction in the Global North while reproducing deprivation in the Global South. Drawing on Marx’s labour theory of value, Selwyn (2018) reveals how the GPC framework demonstrates that firms systematically

maximise profitability through immiseration and super-exploitation. This deliberately suppresses wages below workers' survival needs. Where the GVC framework rendered sweatshop workers statistically non-poor through inadequate metrics, the GPC framework reveals that these same workers are systematically super-exploited to combat the epistemic violence of their marginalised realities.

Gendered Labour in the Public Sphere

The GPC mobilises a Marxist-Feminist analysis of global production to also reveal how gender operates as a mechanism through which labour exploitation is intensified. Women workers face compounded disadvantages driven by two interconnected mechanisms that ultimately serve capitalist accumulation. The first is through the public sphere where social norms channel women into informal and unremunerated productive work that sustains global production without offering pay, security, or recognition. A study of a farmed fish supply chain in Bangladesh illustrates this exploitative pattern as researchers 'found that women (were) prevented from accessing and participating in paid productive work' given that 'the gendered division of labour restricts women's activities to hidden and unremunerated tasks such as feeding, pond management, fertilisation and fish preparation' (LeBaron and Gore 2019, p. 1099). This reveals how global production subordinates women through the strategic invisibilisation of their essential labour, rendering their work simultaneously indispensable to supply chains yet unintelligible within economic frameworks.

Social Reproduction and the Private Subsidy to Global Capital

The second mechanism operates in the private sphere where women are exploited through social reproduction, which represents ‘the activities associated with the maintenance and reproduction of people’s lives on a daily and intergenerational basis’ (Ferguson et al. 2016, p. 4). This unpaid work, including childcare and household maintenance, ‘effectively provides a subsidy to production’ by reproducing and maintaining the labour force without compensation from capital (Kidder and Raworth 2004, p. 13). The GPC framework emphasises how this ‘largely unremunerated work classified as ‘family labour’ compounds their vulnerability to exploitation in paid work’ (LeBaron and Gore 2019, p. 1112). This gendered transfer of value enables both corporate profit accumulation and development strategies that rely on precarious, feminised employment. Ultimately, this reinforces the GPC framework’s moral significance by demonstrating that global production depends largely on the super-exploitation of women’s labour and, by making this dependency analytically visible, it directly counters the GVC framework’s epistemic violence through restoring legitimacy to the very forms of labour and suffering that institutional metrics systemically exclude from recognised knowledge.

From Benevolence to Accountability Through Reframing Moral Responsibility

Having exposed the structural mechanisms of gendered exploitation, the GPC framework deploys normative analysis to redefine what constitutes moral responsibility in global production. Where the GVC framework positions exploitation as a (somewhat) regrettable but necessary stage of development, framing ethical action as a charitable assistance to lift workers through market

integration, the GPC establishes moral grounds rooted in accountability and redress. Tronto (1993) explains that this normative shift is exemplified through ecofeminist care ethics, which positions humans within webs of interdependent relationships with each other and the natural world. Rather than treating workers as abstract economic units progressing along development ladders, this relational ontology demands recognition of the concrete harms inflicted through super-exploitation. As Marx observed of capitalism, now deeply entrenched in the structure of GVCs, ‘in its blind unrestrainable passion, its were-wolf hunger for surplus-labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working-day. It usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body’ (Marx 1990, pp. 375-376). The dual exploitation of women, invisible within GVC metrics yet foundational to global production, exemplifies this usurpation as broken bodies, exhausted lives, and displaced communities are not unfortunate externalities but direct consequences of value extraction. By framing exploitation as structural violence rather than developmental necessity, the GPC transforms the ethical question from ‘how can the Global North help the poor?’ to ‘how must those who benefit from exploitation be held accountable?’ This reframing repudiates Sachs’ patronising metaphor of sweatshops as developmental ladders and instead establishes that justice demands dismantling power structures (multinational corporate dominance, asymmetric trade relations, Global North policies). Moral responsibility thus shifts from benevolent actors offering assistance to powerful actors whose material interests depend on sustained exploitation.

The Limits of the GPC Framework through Marxist Reductionism

The Erasure of Colonial Racialisation in the GPC

However, despite its critical intervention against the epistemic violence that subordinates workers' lived experiences in the GVC, the GPC framework remains epistemologically entangled in Marxist reductionism that instrumentalises race as a functional appendage of class exploitation. Robinson observes this tendency in Marxist analysis, demonstrating that 'the dialectic of proletarianization disciplined the working classes to the importance of distinctions... between ethnics and nationalities... and between races' (Robinson 1983, p. 42). This reveals how racial and ethnic divisions are not merely effects of class exploitation but constitute autonomous structuring forces with their own historical trajectories and material consequences.

By treating race primarily as a mechanism through which capitalist super-exploitation operates, the GPC framework obscures how racialisation itself structures global production independently of class relations. The geographical concentration of labour-intensive production in the Global South is not simply the result of capital seeking cheaper labour, but is premised on centuries of colonial racialisation that rendered non-white populations as simultaneously disposable and exploitable. This racial logic enables a distinct avenue of value extraction, through which Global North corporations and consumers accumulate wealth not only through paying lower wages, but also through the racialised devaluation of Global South workers' labour lives and environments. The GPC's embracement of race under class analysis is morally dangerous because it reproduces a form of epistemic violence even as it challenges the GVC's erasure of workers' experiences, rendering invisible how race operates in a way that is irreducible to labour exploitation alone.

Gender, Culture and the Reproduction of Western Epistemic Authority

The GPC framework similarly reduces gender and culture to functional mechanisms of

capitalist accumulation, failing to recognise how patriarchal relations and cultural hierarchies operate as independent systems of domination that shape, and are not only shaped by, global production networks. Even the Marxist-feminist foundations of the GPC framework cannot escape this reductionism, as they interpret women's experiences through predetermined Western analytical categories. Such categories include productive versus reproductive labour, surplus value extraction and social reproduction, which risk subordinating women's own epistemologies to theoretical authority. This operates through what Santos (2014, p. 302) describes as 'abyssal versions of totality and unity of knowledge', whereby Western-Marxist rationality privileges economic relations as the primary lens while rendering other forms of oppression as mere derivatives. When researchers categorise Bangladeshi women's fish farming activities as 'hidden and unremunerated' exploitation, they correctly identify the material extraction of unpaid labour (LeBaron and Gore 2019, p. 1099). However, the framework privileges Marxist-feminist categories of analysis over the women's own articulation of their work within family economies, religious frameworks, or cultural practices. While the exploitation is real, determining that these Western feminist categories represent the most legitimate or complete way to understand these women's experiences risks reproducing epistemic violence by subordinating alternative epistemologies through which the women themselves might name and resist their oppression. This reveals how the framework, despite its interventions, reproduces a parallel epistemic violence by determining what counts as 'real' exploitation, potentially dismissing workers' testimonies that do not conform to its theoretical predictions, thereby reinforcing moral danger.

Orientalism Beyond Class Logic

This instrumentalisation becomes further visible in how cultural norms are deployed to intensify extraction. The 'Docile Oriental Woman' discourse mobilises Orientalist assumptions about subservience and deference, rendering Asian women as inherently suited to subordinate positions in global production (Chakravarty 2007, p. 440). This draws on Said's (1979) analysis of Orientalism as a Western system of thought and power that constructs the 'Orient' as a stereotypical, exotic, and inferior 'Other' to define and elevate the West, serving colonial interests by creating a simplified image of Eastern peoples as backward and needing Western control. In agreement, Chakravaty (2007, p. 454) observes that 'one of the main reasons for the management preferring women is the lower probability of their being involved in trade union practices, on account of their 'docile characteristics'. This demonstrates how racialised and gendered constructions actively structure labour market segmentation beyond purely class-related logics. Therefore, the GPC framework is not morally perfect as it ultimately risks reproducing the very structure it critiques by subjugating workers' experiential knowledge to a different form of theoretical authority.

A Return to Foucault

Knowledges suppressed by critical theoretical frameworks themselves are included in the category of Foucault's (1980) 'subjugated knowledges', in addition to those suppressed by corporate rhetoric and institutional measurements examined in chapter 3.1. When the GPC subordinates race, gender, and culture to class, it renders their distinct historical trajectories of colonial racialisation, patriarchal relations, and cultural hierarchies as analytically inadmissible, recognising each only insofar as they serve the logic of capitalist exploitation. As a result, the knowledge of workers at the intersection of race, gender, and culture is consigned to the margins of the GPC framework's own analytical hierarchy. For example, when the GPC interprets Bangladeshi women's

labour through the categories of social reproduction and surplus value extraction, it privileges Western Marxist-feminist epistemology over the women's own articulations of their work within cultural, religious, and familial frameworks. This is not 'doublethink' in the cynical sense, but in the structural sense that Orwell (1977) identified because the framework genuinely believes in its own emancipatory project while foreclosing the very knowledge that would destabilise its foundations. The epistemic violence of the GPC is therefore an expression of the limits of any single-axis theoretical framework that mistakes the comprehensiveness of its critique for the completeness of its knowledge.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that while the GPC framework represents a vital intervention against the GVC model's epistemic violence, through revealing super-exploitation and reframing moral responsibility from self-interested benevolence to structured accountability, it ultimately reproduces similar erasures through Marxist reductionism, thus reproducing Orwell's (1977) 'doublethink'. By instrumentalising dimensions of race, gender, and culture as functional mechanisms of capitalist accumulation, it cannot grasp how racialisation, patriarchy, and Orientalism operate as autonomous structuring forces with distinct historical trajectories. This means that the lived reality of a Bangladeshi Muslim woman experiencing compounded exploitation through class, gender, race, and culture remains epistemically invisible. Therefore, despite its critical interventions, the GPC framework cannot serve as a complete remedy to epistemic violence in global production analysis. By privileging Western Marxist rationality, it perpetuates the very erasure of workers' intersectional experiences that it seeks to challenge, revealing the limits of single-axis analytical frameworks in capturing the compounded realities of global production.

Bibliography

Bolwig, S., Ponte, S., Du Toit, A. et al. (2010) 'Integrating poverty and environmental concerns into value-chain analysis: a conceptual framework'. *Development Policy Review*, 28(2), pp. 173-194.

Chakravarty, D. (2007) 'Docile Oriental women and organised labour: a case study of the Indian garment manufacturing industry'. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 14(3), pp. 439-460.

Dicken, P. (2011) *Global Shift: Mapping the Changing Contours of the 21st Century*. 6th edn. London: The Guilford Press.

Ferguson, S., LeBaron, G., Dimitrakaki, A. and Farris, S. (2016) 'Introduction: special issue on social reproduction'. *Historical Materialism*, 24(2), pp. 1-13.

Foucault, M. (1980) 'Two lectures'. In: Gordon, C. (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 78-108.

Fricke, M. (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kidder, T. and Raworth, K. (2004) 'Good jobs and hidden costs: women workers documenting the price of precarious employment'. *Gender and Development*, 12(2), pp. 12-21.

LeBaron, G. and Gore, E. (2019) 'Gender and forced labour: understanding the links in global cocoa supply chains'. *Journal of Development Studies*, 56(6), pp. 1095-1117.

Marx, K. (1990) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Translated by B. Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.

Orwell, G. (1977) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin.

Robinson, C. J. (1983) 'The English working class as the mirror of production'. In: Kelley, R. D. G., Sojoyner, D. and Willoughby-Herard, T. (eds.) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. 3rd edn. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 29-44.

Sachs, J. (2005) *The End of Poverty: How We Can Make It Happen in Our Lifetime*. New York: Penguin Press.

Said, E. W. (1979) *Orientalism*. 1st Vintage Books edn. New York: Vintage Books.

Santos, B. de S. (2014) *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Selwyn, B. (2018) 'Poverty chains and global capitalism'. *Competition & Change*, 23(1), pp. 71-97.

Tronto, J. (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York: Routledge.