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Supply Chains and the Human Condition

Anna Tsing

This article theorizes supply chain capitalism as a model for understanding both the continent-crossing scale and the constitutive diversity of contemporary global capitalism. In contrast with theories of growing capitalist homogeneity, the analysis points to the structural role of difference in the mobilization of capital, labor, and resources. Here labor mobilization in supply chains is the focus, as it depends on the performance of gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and citizenship status. The article uses the concept of figuration to show how difference is mobilized within supply chains, and to point to the importance of tropes of management, consumption, and entrepreneurship in workers' understandings of supply chain labor. These tropes make supply chains possible by bringing together self-exploitation and superexploitation. Diversity is thus structurally central to global capitalism, and not decoration on a common core.

Key Words: Supply Chains, Cultural Diversity, Global Capitalism, Figuration of Labor, Exploitation

Nike products are manufactured in factories owned and operated by other companies. Out-sourcing, as it is commonly called, is pervasive in our industry. Nike's supply chain includes more than 660,000 contract manufacturing workers in more than 900 factories in more than 50 countries, including the United States. The workers are predominantly women, ages 19–25. The geographic dispersion is driven by many factors including pricing, quality, factory capacity, and quota allocation. . . . With such cultural, societal and economic diversity, our supply chain is not only large, but complex and ever-changing, making compliance standards and assurance, as suggested by our Code of Conduct, and precise progress measurement extremely difficult.

—Nike Web site

This essay argues that an analysis of supply chain capitalism is necessary to understand the dilemmas of the human condition today. Supply chain capitalism here refers to commodity chains based on subcontracting, outsourcing, and allied arrangements in which the autonomy of component enterprises is legally established even as the enterprises are disciplined within the chain as a whole. Such supply chains link ostensibly independent entrepreneurs, making it possible for commodity

processes to span the globe. Labor, nature, and capital are mobilized in fragmented but linked economic niches; thus, supply chain capitalism focuses our attention on questions of *diversity* within structures of power. Supply chains require us to think beyond the problems of economic, political, and ecological standardization, which have dominated the critical social science literature. Questions raised by supply chains are the key to deliberations on wealth and justice in these times.

Supply chain capitalism has been touted as key to new regimes of profitability. As one consultancy firm explains, “‘If’ is no longer the question. Today the undisputed answer—the path to enhanced efficiency, reduced costs, more robust feature sets—is outsourcing. Shifting work to third parties, often on different continents, is now a given for most organizations” (The Outsourcing Institute 2007). As big corporations shrug off their less profitable sectors, supply chain capitalism has become pervasive. Supply chains offer some of the most vivid images of our times: telephone operators assisting customers from across the globe; “traditional” indigenous farmers growing specialty crops for wealthy metropolitan consumers; Chinese millionaires reaping the profits of Wal-Mart contracts; sweatshop workers toiling in locked rooms while brand-name buyers disavow responsibility. Sectors once known for their histories of union militancy—U.S. garment manufacturing, coal mining in West Virginia—have come to depend on subcontracted labor (see West Virginia Mine Power n.d.). The great corporations once known for their all-inclusive production (for example, General Motors) now outsource most of their parts. Governments have scrambled to follow suit, subcontracting everything from social benefits to war—and even torture.

Supply chains are not new; they extend back in various forms as far as trade itself. What is new is the hype and sense of possibility that supply chains offer to the current generation of entrepreneurs. This excitement creates its own effects, including the cascading rush toward outsourcing that has characterized the last two decades. This rush toward outsourcing, in turn, relies on new technologies that make it simple to communicate at a distance and send commodities with reliable speed. It depends on new financial arrangements that make it easy to move money around and on new regimes of property that guarantee global profits. It is pressured by stockholder expectations for short-term corporate returns. It uses the enhanced mobility of labor and the economic and political vulnerabilities created by recent forms of imperialism and histories of global war. It sponsors new forms of “creative” accounting and the auditing of “immaterial” value. I call the subcontracting possibilities that elicit this new phenomenon of excitement “supply chain capitalism” while reserving other terms, such as “commodity chains,” for the longer history of manufacture and trade.¹

1. A robust scholarly literature in sociology and geography has brought questions about supply chains to life. One line of scholarship, “global commodity chain analysis,” derives originally from world systems theory; the seminal text is Gereffi and Koreniewicz (1994). Questions of chain governance are usefully examined here. More recently, Gereffi and his collaborators have entered into dialogue with international business scholars in an examination of “value chains” (see Gereffi et al. 2001; for an insightful review of this literature, see Bair 2005). Geographers

Supply chains are not the only contemporary form of global capitalism. Giant corporations expand across the globe. Franchises continue to multiply. Finance calls attention to itself. Thinking through supply chain capitalism, however, is particularly useful in addressing two important sets of questions. First, how can we imagine the “bigness” of global capitalism (that is, both its generality and its scale) without abandoning attention to its heterogeneity? Supply chains offer a model for thinking simultaneously about global integration, on the one hand, and the formation of diverse niches, on the other. Supply chains stimulate *both* global standardization *and* growing gaps between rich and poor, across lines of color and culture, and between North and South. Supply chains refocus critical analysis of diversity in relation to local and global capitalist developments. Second, how do the new organizational styles and subjectivities crafted for capitalist elites travel to more humble workplaces? Most every commentator who describes new forms of global integration speaks of styles and subjectivities, whether “flexible,” “knowing,” “networked,” “immaterial,” “biosocial,” “postindustrial,” “postmodern,” or “neoliberal.”² Yet such descriptions disappear in discussions of global economic diversity, where talk turns to exploitation and expropriation. An analysis of supply chain capitalism, I will show, brings together these two kinds of issues. They are intertwined in new figurations of labor power that emerge from supply chain niches and links. Supply chains don’t merely use preexisting diversity; they also revitalize and create niche segregation through advising economic performance. Understanding supply chain diversity, I argue, requires attention to niche-segregating performances; such attention, in turn, should advise our analysis of the *global* in global capitalism.

Supply chains are not necessarily more diverse than other capitalist forms. However, because they link up dissimilar firms, supply chain capitalists worry about diversity, and their self-consciousness is what makes it easy to show that diversity forms a part of the *structure* of capitalism rather than an inessential appendage. This essay examines two of the ways in which diversity structures supply chain capitalism. First, diversity forms a necessary part of its scale-making practices; the linking of diverse firms makes supply chains big. Second, diversity conditions the responses of both capital and labor to the problems of cutting labor costs and disciplining the workforce. Here, I am not just concerned with supply chain governance, which is the subject of most scholarly and activist analysis. Although incredibly important, chain governance is not enough to grasp the role of diversity. Top-of-the-chain firms work hard to regulate the forms of diversity of their suppliers, but supply chains are harder to control than corporations or state bureaucracies; in a time of neoliberal globalization, they are often formed in legal gray zones and within the constant flux of boom-and-bust opportunities. Supply chain diversity needs to be understood in

have been more attentive to the role of culture in commodity chains, particularly as it shapes marketing and consumption (see Hughes and Reimer 2004). Bernstein and Campling (2006a,b) usefully review both these literatures from a political economy perspective. Supply chains have also attracted attention from activists and pundits. Perhaps the most prominent supply chain booster is Friedman (2005). An introduction to activist commentary can be found in Oxfam (2004).

2. One useful introduction to new styles and rhetorics of capitalism is Thrift (2005).

relation to contingency, experimentation, negotiation, and unstable commitments.³ Furthermore, the exclusions and hierarchies that discipline the workforce emerge as much from *outside* the chain as from internal governance standards.⁴ No firm has to personally invent patriarchy, colonialism, war, racism, or imprisonment, yet each of these is privileged in supply chain labor mobilization. Despite the latest techniques in supply chain management, the diversity of supply chains cannot be fully disciplined from inside the chain. This makes supply chains unpredictable—and intriguing as frames for understanding capitalism.

The first part of this essay takes up the problem of “bigness.” Too many theories require homogeneity to appreciate the bigness of capitalism. As a result, theorists continue nineteenth-century habits in which abstractions about class formation erase the importance of colonialism, patriarchy, and social and cultural diversity. Supply chains, I argue, can give us a different image of bigness. In order to make this argument, I turn attention to the figuration of labor and capital, as this draws us into particular historical situations for understanding both generality and scale.

Figuration is also central to the second part of my argument, which turns to the mobilization of labor. Supply chains thrive because capitalists want to avoid high labor costs. Two strategies have allowed firms to distance themselves from workers’ victories of the past: first, outsourcing labor; and second, corporate cultures in which work is resignified outside earlier labor struggles. In the mixing and mating of these two strategies, nonwork tropes—particularly tropes of management, consumption, and entrepreneurship—become key features in defining supply chain labor. Here, the new styles attributed to capitalism become entangled with the experiences of workers. Chain drivers control some but not all of this subjectification. I argue that workers learn to perform within these tropes, and particularly to express markers of their difference to show their agility and efficiency as contractors. Such performances entrench the niche structure of the economy, reaffirming the profitability of supply chain capitalism. Yet perhaps, too, other possibilities can be glimpsed through these performances.

Thinking Big

Why have the most powerful theories of capitalism ignored gender, race, national status, and other forms of diversity? Diversity is considered particularistic, and “big” theory strives for generalization. The challenge, then, is to show the bigness of diversity.

One way of considering this problem is to contrast what one might call masculinist and feminist representations of capitalism today. Most of the best-known radical male critics of post-cold war capitalism work to find a singular structure that might form

3. My approach to studying supply chains draws from my previous work on the “friction” of global process (Tsing 2004).

4. I owe this insight to Susanne Freidberg’s insightful study (2004). Freidberg explains the differences between two supply chains in relation to national and colonial histories, which, in turn, condition chain governance.

the basis of resistance or revolution, despite the lack of inspiring socialist alternatives. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004) are perhaps the most articulate and Utopian advocates for a “common” cause, and thus a singular set of structural principles, through which to confront what they call Empire: that is, the nexus connecting capitalism and governmentality. In contrast, feminist critics have argued that the most important feature of contemporary capitalism is its “intersectionality”: that is, the diversity through which women and men of varied class niches and racial, ethnic, national, sexual, and religious positions negotiate power and inequality. For J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006), this is a matter of articulations between capitalist and noncapitalist sectors; like Hardt and Negri, Gibson-Graham look for the emergence of Utopian postcapitalist possibilities, but for them the call for the common, the singularity of capitalism, is the problem, not the solution. Alternatively, as for many feminist ethnographers, intersectionality creates diversity *within* capitalism, as labor-capital relations are contingently configured by colonial and postcolonial histories.⁵ Capitalism here incorporates contingencies without forming a single, homogenous structure; indeed, that is the genius of its spread.

It is possible to argue for the political appeal of each approach, and it is important to appreciate their common difference from less critical cultural approaches in which the multiplicity of “capitalisms” offers readers a safe home in at least one of many potential formulations.⁶ Both masculinist and feminist critical analyses are concerned with the global expansion of structures of property and the linked creation of poverty and wealth that capitalism entails. Yet the standoff between them has been frustrating for most readers, particularly since the dialogue has been mainly one-sided. Male radicals imagine the self-evident advantages of a singular portrayal of capitalism; feminist critics feel slighted that the men find feminist work so “particularistic” that they don’t bother to read it. The challenge for those who take feminist critique seriously is to present the case for an analysis of intersections in a way that seems “big enough” to nonfeminist readers. But how should we think about bigness? What features other than homogeneity allow us to think of something as “big”?

Narratives of capitalism gain their purchase through convincing protagonists—that is, exemplary figures through which we come to understand capital and labor. This is not just true for radical theorists. Businessmen, policy makers, voters, trade unions, and activists also use concrete figurations to imagine which projects might succeed. Supply chain capitalism is useful for critical analysis because it offers a figuration of both size and generality in which economic and cultural diversity plays a constitutive role. But critical analysis makes sense of this figuration because of its power for a

5. See, for example, Lisa Rofel’s analysis (1999) of how labor in the Chinese silk industry formed around the shifting political challenges of the twentieth century. Similarly, Aihwa Ong (1987) shows how labor-capital relations in Malaysia were formed through the categories of British colonial history, including the “Malay peasant women” who became cheap transnational labor in the late twentieth century.

6. In some versions, cultural values shape diverse capitalisms rather than, as argued here, capitalism using and shaping diversity. See, for example, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993). (I owe this insight and citation to Nils Bubandt.)

much more general audience. The bigness of capitalism is an imaginative project for all its participants, and figures are the elements that bring the field to life.⁷

Who are the protagonists in historical narratives about capitalism? Nineteenth-century Manchester industrialization formed the context for one potent figuration in the collaboration of Marx and Engels. Not every oppressed person at that time was a wage laborer—and, of those who were, few were involved in the technologically advanced and well-organized factories of English industry. Manchester industrial workers, however, proved good to think with. English factories showed Marx and Engels the potential of a future in which human ingenuity controlled nature through technology, unleashing vast forces of production. Moreover, the self-conscious pride of the English working class made the combination of huge new sources of wealth and appalling exploitation seem untenable. The daily struggles of the Manchester industrial worker allowed critics to glimpse a future of radical change: the proletarian revolution. He—and it was a *he*—guided Marx's and Engels' thinking in charting the constraints and possibilities of capitalism. He facilitated the formation of a political Left focused on the problems and revolutionary potential of the working class.

In hindsight, we can see how the gendered, racial, and national character of the Manchester industrial workforce helped Marx and Engels imagine labor as a universal, progressive category—thus supporting a science of capitalist transformation.⁸ It was the privilege of the English working class to expect the assets of New World slavery, embedded in cheap commodities such as sugar, to advance their prospects.⁹ As working men, too, they could be represented as the driving force of progress, sharing dreams of betterment with their employers.¹⁰ The race, gender, and national privileges they shared with their employers made their struggles over wages and working conditions appear unmarked by these principles of difference and exclusion. Thinking through them, class relations could be imagined as abstract, transcendent of the person-making characteristics of particular times and places, and thus, substantially gender-, race-, and nationally neutral. These white male industrial workers became figurative protagonists of a social movement that, through the progressive generalities they seemed to embody, moved far beyond Manchester. At the same time, however, the characteristic blind spots of Left struggle have drawn

7. I owe my understanding of figuration to conversations with Donna Haraway. See her discussion in Haraway (2007).

8. Roderick Ferguson articulates the issue nicely in arguing that the challenge for queer of color analysis is to account “for the ways in which Marx’s critique of capitalist property relations is haunted by silences that make racial, gender, and sexual ideologies and discourses . . . suitable for universal ideals” (2004, 5). Ferguson argues that, for Marx, the figure of the prostitute represented the antithesis of the worker as protagonist; heteronormativity was thus built into Marx’s understanding of class formation.

9. Sidney Mintz argues that the English working class came into a sense of its rights through consolidating its access to slave-produced sugar as a working-class food. Although Mintz (1986) suggests this point, he made it much clearer in a presentation at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1994.

10. Joan Scott (1991, 773–97) argues that our understandings of English class formation would be quite different if women were part of the story. Her reading of E. P. Thompson’s classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966) shows his reliance on male protagonists of the class story, which, she argues, has also shaped class-based narratives more generally.

from this conflation, accomplished through an exemplary figure, of labor as abstraction and the race, gender, and national specificity of labor.

The decline of white male unions in the late twentieth century was a final blow to the continuing effectiveness of this exemplary figure. It is clear that other figurations of labor are needed to tell effective stories about contemporary capitalism. What kinds of figures emerge from supply chain capitalism? While it is possible to find recognizably generic figures of oppression and struggle, supply chains also team with politically ambiguous, liminal figures, caught within the contradictions between *varied* forms of hierarchy and exclusion. I suggest that we pay attention to these figures, rather than rejecting them as flawed protagonists. They can help us imagine forms of globally interconnected diversity: a capitalism that is big yet unpredictably heterogeneous. To show how they aid the critical imagination, I turn first to historically shifting forms of “bigness” in which labor figures participate, the better to appreciate the specificity of supply chain bigness.

Figurations of the capital-labor relationship often use imagery from successful firms. Few analysts of capitalism would describe the global structure of capital with the characteristics of an individual firm, but successful firms do influence the organization of capital by shaping what counts as “big.” Successful firms become models for capitalists, stimulating corporate trends, business literatures, state policies, and transnational regulatory environments. They guide our ability to imagine the size, spread, and generality of capitalism. Because successful firms are ephemeral, such figures can also guide us to appreciate historical changes in imagining bigness. A history of firms that have inspired enthusiasm in understanding generality and scale is not, however, an evolutionary scale. Figures inspire but do not determine practice. Indeed, one advantage of thinking through figures is that their lack of descriptive fit can allow us to consider the limitations of our own critical analyses.

The retail giant Wal-Mart was the world’s biggest company in 2002 and is possibly the highest-profile supply chain driver today. Wal-Mart’s “low-price, low-wage ascent” has been seen as a “triumph of post-industrial economy” (Belsie 2002). Sociologist Nelson Lichtenstein (2006) argues that Wal-Mart shows us “the face of 21st century capitalism.” I follow Lichtenstein, but add my own interpretations in proposing three corporate images that have shaped the making of the global scale by inspiring boosters, participants, and critics to imagine the bigness of capitalism.

One: General Motors inspired big thinking about capitalism in the middle of the twentieth century. Bigness was American manufacturers taking on the world. Bigness was Fordism on the factory floor and the efficiencies of economies of scale. Bigness was unions and management working together for emergent universal standards of capital and labor. Big thinking of this sort inspired political as well as economic visions. The so-called rationalizations of development and modernization in the Third World were all about learning to think big in just this way, to move from the small-scale petty commerce of imagined “tradition” to the large-scale manufacturing behemoths of U.S.-inspired “modernity.” The bigness of production facilities was itself a sign of progress.

This notion of bigness was not limited to capitalist promoters. Much of the critical study of capitalism in the 1970s and early 1980s used the GM model of bigness to think

through corporate globalization. The relations between corporations and society were understood in relation to *expansion* in the sense of a particular political economy growing bigger and bigger. The dream of the Left was “one big union.” This allowed the Left to revitalize forms of Marxism in which the figure of the Manchester industrial worker inspired abstract and universal thinking.

One feature of the mid-twentieth-century dream of standardized production was the institutional and ideological separation of the “economy” from forms of communal identity and difference—“culture.” The economy would be transcendent and forward-looking; culture would refer to particularistic communal forms imagined as having less and less relevance in the modern world. Culture would look backward to “noneconomic” forms; the economy could look forward to increasing uniformity and abstraction. This segregation made sense only within the possibilities for bigness offered by firms like General Motors, which promised to institutionalize corporate structure, management, labor, and consumption at a global scale.

Two: By the 1990s, commentators were more likely to consider McDonald’s their model of the bigness of global capitalism. McDonald’s aims to replace local eateries everywhere with its own distinctive menu; the BigMac would be the transnational standard of consumption.¹¹ Franchise arrangements were imagined as the structural frame for a global homogenization of economic concepts, rules, and procedures. This is rule by rule itself: governmentality. Franchises allow local enactments of globalization, uniting the world in singular but multiply practiced objectives. Socialist models of class solidarity were not to survive in this model of global bigness. But certain kinds of consumer diversity might be protected even within global consolidation.¹² This global-but-multiple McDonald’s proved good to think with in imagining world dilemmas.

The “franchise” model of expressive diversity within global accord became influential in many kinds of politics at the turn of the century, from human rights universals to free-market negotiations. It informed social theory, producing exemplary protagonists such as Aihwa Ong’s “flexible citizens” (1999) and Hardt and Negri’s “immaterial labor” (2000, 2004). Despite the focus on networks and deterritorialization, we still know capital and labor through their singular logics. Yet the franchise model draws our attention to the diversity of *consumers*, who have differentiated identities and demands. While focused on state legacies more than capitalism, the literature on neoliberal subjectivities began here, with analysis of the regulation of identity practices (for example, see Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996). This approach continues to be useful in the analysis of supply chains, but it must be stretched away from the franchise model, in which the most important question continues to be the standardization of governmentality. Diversity here can only be a franchise, an exception that proves the rule. Supply chains, in contrast, reopen the question of contingent articulations.¹³

11. The Big Mac Index was devised by *The Economist* to measure purchasing power transnationally. See *The Economist* (n.d.).

12. For a discussion of this issue, see Watson (1997).

13. This approach has a long legacy and many scholarly debts, which I have not dwelled upon here. If I can’t place this literature in a historical scheme about “bigness,” however, perhaps it is because it is rarely accepted as “big.”

Three: In just the last few years, Wal-Mart has become a model for thinking about the bigness of global capitalism. Wal-Mart is a food and general merchandise retail chain that has prospered through two basic strategies: first, cutting labor costs; and, second, dictating conditions to the suppliers of its products. Together these have allowed the low prices and high volumes that are the signatures of Wal-Mart sales. Retail giants around the world have hurried to think big through the Wal-Mart model before they lose their market shares.

Critics have turned, too, to the nightmares of the Wal-Mart model, producing an ever increasing stock of Wal-Mart-based imagery for understanding the reach of capital.¹⁴ This imagery, which stresses the overwhelming power of Wal-Mart, is both good and bad for my analytic purposes. It usefully reminds us that supply chains do not produce autonomous national capitalisms or economic cultures; Wal-Mart sponsors an often cruel hierarchy. Not all supply chains are as hierarchical as Wal-Mart's, and it would be a mistake to imagine the whole world controlled by Wal-Mart-like arrangements. But even in this most hierarchical situation, there are clear demarcations between what Wal-Mart wants to control (e.g., prices, marketing, logistics) and what Wal-Mart does not want to control (e.g., labor arrangements, environmental practices, subcontractors' investment strategies). Furthermore, this segregation is kept in place by Wal-Mart's commitment to distinctive corporate cultures; as a "community," Wal-Mart is responsible only for its own people and resources. It is these two elements—the segregation of what to control and what not to control, and its justification by a logic of corporate cultures—that I find useful in understanding the uses of diversity in global capitalism.

Wal-Mart is proud of the fact that it bullies its suppliers into submission. It demands full control of certain features of the supply chain, especially those involving prices and marketing arrangements. Misha Petrovic's and Gary Hamilton's account of how Wal-Mart instituted Voluntary Interindustry Commerce Standards (VICS) is a telling description of Wal-Mart's style in exacting compliance in these areas.

Despite its name, VICS demanded somewhat less than voluntary compliance with its suggested standards, the first of which was the general adoption of the UPC throughout the supply chain. The first marketing message that retailers sent to their supplies about the UPC requirement was, in the words of the chief information officer of Wal-Mart Bob Martin, "pretty positive." It had the familiar picture of a bar code, accompanied by a message: "The fastest route between the two points is the straight line." The fine print read: "Universal Product Codes are required for all items BEFORE ORDERS WILL BE WRITTEN." "When companies did not comply," Martin continued, "a little bit stronger message, more than a marketing campaign but still polite, was needed." Using the same picture and the fine-print statement, the main message now simply asserted: "If you don't draw the line, we do." (Petrovic and Hamilton 2006, 117–8)

Compliance is both voluntary and required. Such practices remind us that supply chains weave complex corporate dependencies into the fabric of their commitments

14. Lichtenstein's (2006) edited collection is a useful introduction to this burgeoning literature.

to the independence of firms. Wal-Mart goes beyond exploiting market inequalities; it reshapes the possibilities of trade. “Wal-Mart often requires suppliers to open their books and submit to a rigorous cost analysis,” Misha Petrovic and Gary Hamilton write (132). “Wal-Mart’s ability to make markets—to define the shopping environment, the assortment of merchandise, and the ‘everyday low price’ for its customers, and to specify the rules of conduct and standards of performance for thousands of its global suppliers—is the most profound of all Wal-Mart effects” (108).

Wal-Mart hierarchies depend on a standardization of contractual commitments, commodity labeling practices, and auditing procedures. However, they do not require a standardization of corporate labor practices.¹⁵ Wal-Mart executives have crafted a self-consciously particularistic niche of corporate labor practices, which, they claim, accounts for Wal-Mart’s success. Suppliers lie outside this corporate culture and are responsible for their own corporate labor practices. From the inside of the Wal-Mart “family,” the supply chain appears a set of linked but varied cultural niches, with Wal-Mart’s dominance guaranteed, in part, by the value of its cultural difference.

We might follow Wal-Mart’s own understanding of bigness to consider how the diversity of firms within a supply chain is both a participant in building global hierarchies *and* an unstable and potentially threatening source of diversity within those hierarchies. One way to explore this terrain is through figural performances of labor, in which diversity is embraced to create a position in the supply chain. Some of these performances are mandated by management, and I turn first to one of these; others, however, enter the supply chain obliquely, used but not created by capital. Many fall somewhere in between. In the following section, I sample some of each.

Wal-Mart can lead us because it self-consciously turns away from notions of labor that might be claimed by labor organizers. In what follows, I argue that this is an important feature of supply chain capitalism: Firms try hard to disavow the legacy of struggle for better wages and working conditions. It should be obvious that one reason for this is to increase the rate of exploitation. However, where firms succeed, it is often not by coercion alone. Supply chains tap and vitalize performances of so-called noneconomic features of identity. Labor is both recruited and motivated by these performances. On the one hand, workers become complicit with their own exploitation. On the other hand, they express hopes and desires that exceed the disciplinary apparatus of the firms they serve. In the next section, I will show how this politically ambiguous situation is at the heart of dilemmas of diversity within supply chain capitalism.

There is both social anger and hope in this trajectory of analysis: diversity is both the source of low wages, and, potentially, the source of creative alternatives. The situation of labor is further complicated by the fact that performances of identity are by their nature particularistic, drawing oppositions and lines of exclusion with others who might otherwise have similar class interests. Someone’s solution may be another person’s problem. It would be consoling to go back to an easier-to-think-with model of universal solidarity. But, as I have been trying to argue, it’s no use going back to

15. The limitations of this essay do not allow me to develop the question of the environmental irresponsibility of supply chains. However, I take this up elsewhere (Tsing forthcoming a).

that abstract worker; hardly anyone will be moved. Politically, we cannot avoid the pitfalls of diversity, and we might as well listen to what it has to tell us.

New Figures of Labor

It is difficult to discuss the diversity within supply chain capitalism without returning to the exclusion of “culture” from the “economy,” mentioned above. In the meaning I prefer for the term “culture,” all economic forms are produced with the diverse materials of culture. Furthermore, all class formation depends on “noneconomic” arrangements of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, age, and citizenship status (see Roediger 1999; Ong 1987; Rofel 1999). All investment strategies deploy cultural dreams (Yanagisako 2002; Ho forthcoming). Yet the institutionalization of ideas about “the economy” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries worked hard to disavow these elements, considered part of culture. Ideas about abstraction required that particularistic “culture” could only be an add-on to economic generalizations to which cultural differences were irrelevant. This institutional apparatus for imagining the economy is still very much in place. However, thinking through supply chains offers an opening to reconsider the relationship between culture and economy. Supply chains *depend* on those very factors banished from the economic; this is what makes them profitable. Supply chains draw upon and vitalize class niches and investment strategies formed through the vicissitudes of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, age, and citizenship status. We cannot ignore these so-called “cultural” factors in considering the mobilization of labor.¹⁶

Discussions of culture and capitalism are easily confused by the multiple meanings of culture, and there is no reason for me to go very far down that path here. Instead, consider exploitation. For the purposes of my argument, let me define “super-exploitation” as exploitation that depends on so-called noneconomic factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, age, and citizenship status. Superexploitation is exploitation greater than might be expected from general economic principles; the use of these so-called noneconomic factors to determine the rate of exploitation would be one conceivable use of the term. My use of this term does not require worker abjection, but it points to the inability of workers to negotiate the wage in the manner imagined in much of both Marxist and neo-classical economics: that is, as abstract “labor,” without the obstacles of these “cultural” factors. In the definition I use here, all exploitation is probably superexploitation. This does not render the term meaningless: it continues to focus our attention on these so-called noneconomic factors in class formation. Supply chain capitalism, I argue, encourages conflation between superexploitation, in this sense, and self-exploitation. Workers establish their economic performance through performances of the very factors that establish their superexploitation: gender, race, ethnicity, and so forth. At first this formula sounds strange, but it is a familiar feature of independent

16. This is also true for the mobilization of capital, but that is not my topic here.

contracting. A day laborer must perform brawn and availability; a prostitute must perform sexual charm. These performances bring them contracts *and* make it difficult for them to negotiate the wage outside niches for gender, sexuality, and race. Supply chain capitalism brings this mechanism into its basic structure through chains of independent contracting. Diversity, with all its promise and perils, enters the structure of supply chain capitalism through this mechanism.

In what follows, I show how new figures of labor contribute to the blurring between superexploitation and self-exploitation at the heart of supply chain capitalism. I begin with Wal-Mart's "servant leader," a creation of management in two senses: corporate officials promoted the figure, and the figure depicts workers as managers. This is the kind of figure that erases the legacy of labor struggles and encourages both self- and superexploitation. I then leave Wal-Mart to explore figures outside the management discourse of powerful chain-makers and at the other end of the chain hierarchy. In the apparel industry, I trace the discouraging demise of earlier labor victories in the rise of subcontracted sweatshops. The challenges of labor organizing here have everything to do with the gender, ethnic, and national niches encouraged by apparel supply chains. Furthermore, in a political climate without much union success, many sweatshop workers, and their families, see themselves most hopefully not as labor but as oppositional consumers or potentially rich entrepreneurs. My last two figures are shoppers and neoliberal investors—but as worker identities. These are figures full of contradiction. In their confections of self- and superexploitation, they make supply chain capitalism possible. At the same time, they bring so much excess baggage into conventional class categories that . . . well, another world is possible. The figures I present are not a systematic or exhaustive list of categories; they show the disturbing and promising possibilities of thinking with supply chain capitalism.

When Is an Employee Not a Worker?

I follow Wal-Mart here mainly because historian Bethany Moreton has done an extensive study of its innovative figure of labor, the "servant leader." Moreton explains that Wal-Mart came to this figure from several distinct sources. First, the company grew up in the Ozarks, where campaigns against chain stores in the 1920s and 1930s had made the effeminate "clerk" the negative icon of labor. Wal-Mart learned to endorse local cultural rhetorics in which employee status would never be enough. Second, although Wal-Mart was not originally a self-consciously Christian business, it came to claim the Christian orientations of many of its workers. The example of Christ as a "servant leader" modeled the figure of the store manager, allowing men to take on service jobs without becoming "clerks." The manager, in turn, adopted the largely female "associates"—that is, retail workers—as "family" members, enrolling their Christian family values in the cause of corporate sales. Wal-Mart workers thus became "producers of a new sort, service providers whose professional goal was not their self-realization but that of their customers and clients" (Moreton 2006, 98). The in-house newsletter quotes an employee who explains the system as follows:

Besides needing money, I have other reasons I love working for you. You see, I come from a factory background, which meant work came first, before family, church or anything else. Also you were treated as a person hired just to do a job. They did not care about you as a person at all. That is the reason I like Wal-Mart. I can keep God first in my life because Wal-Mart lets me work around church services. If there is a special function that my children are involved in I can work my schedule around that also. (113)

Christian service informed Wal-Mart's design of workplaces where women work on short and irregular hours for less than subsistence wages. If work need not "come first," neither should wages and working conditions. Christian service also formed the model for Wal-Mart's preferred image of globalization. In 1985, Wal-Mart began sponsoring a group of Central American students to study business at Christian colleges in the U.S. South, training them to return home with what Moreton describes as "the specific business culture of the Christian service sector" (387). In 1991, the company began negotiations to open a store in Mexico, imagining it as an extension of their U.S. Christian family. (Moreton argues that U.S. congressional debates about the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] in 1993 were significantly shaped by imagery of Wal-Mart in Mexico, which overtook imagery of worker oppression by showing a nation of familiar family shoppers.) In contrast, Moreton explains, Asian suppliers never entered in-house discussions of corporate culture: "For hourly employees in Bentonville, indeed, [direct importing from Asia beginning in the 1970s] amounted to little more than a sharp spike in the mail they addressed to Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines" (412–3). Suppliers were outside the corporate family.¹⁷

Wal-Mart's self-representations as building a cultural niche that contrasted with secular, Northern, and industrial hegemonies made it simple to imagine other niches, elsewhere, that might constitute the supply chain without replicating Wal-Mart culture. Wal-Mart does not represent its corporate culture as universally generalizable; it is proud of the regional and religious roots of its specificity. Wal-Mart's supply chain is not expected to share this corporate culture, but only to adhere to Wal-Mart's exacting specifications. Indeed, because Wal-Mart claims to represent consumer interests, it can cast its pressure on suppliers as a feature of its cultural orientation to consumers, with whom, Wal-Mart claims, it shares priorities. The suppliers, with their own cultural priorities, might not understand. Driving down prices can be portrayed as a moral commitment within a world of alternative corporate cultures.

17. Some suppliers have worked hard to emulate Wal-Mart culture. Bianco tells the story of the revitalization of the Rubbermaid Company after its humbling by Wal-Mart in the 1990s. After Rubbermaid was acquired by Newell Co., "The design of Newell Rubbermaid's office in Bentonville was guided by the principle that imitation is not just the highest form of flattery but also of customer service ... The first floor contains what the company bills as 'an exact replica of a Wal-Mart store' ... On a wall upstairs hangs a photograph of Sam Walton, alongside his 'Rules for Building a Business.' Said Steven Scheyer, who runs Newell's Wal-Mart Division: 'We live and breathe with these guys'" (2006, 185). Bianco explains that Wal-Mart's biggest suppliers all open offices in northwest Arkansas to be close to Wal-Mart. These eager suppliers contest Wal-Mart's family boundaries.

This formulation depends on Wal-Mart's favored figure of labor power, the servant leader. The servant leader is not a conventional "economic" figure; it brings the contours of gender, race, region, nation, and religion into labor subjectification. The servant leader is a self-conscious commentary on gender, putting patriarchal family values to work for the corporation. Sociologist Ellen Rosen (2006) shows how employees are coached and shamed into accepting these narratives or, alternatively, told to move on. For women employees working for less than the cost of basic self-maintenance, the work would be untenable without coaching and shaming.¹⁸ The importance of self-consciously parochial gender discrimination in Wal-Mart's labor subjectification policies should make it possible for critics to consider how such particularistic niches play a role in all supply chains. Gender discrimination is not just an add-on to universal problems of labor; gender discrimination *makes labor possible* in the Wal-Mart model.

Moreton's analysis offers striking testimony to the importance of new non- and even antilabor figures in corporate trajectories. But this raises new questions about labor from the other side of the negotiation table: What happened to union stories of exemplary labor heroes? Rather than stay with the mainly nonunionized Wal-Mart, I turn to the apparel industry, a key site of twentieth-century union victories. The literature on labor conditions in the apparel industry tells a striking story about the refiguration of labor away from union drives toward gender-, ethnic-, and nation-based subcontracting performances. Two developments engage me here: first, the return of sweated labor as a normative feature of supply chains; and, second, the triumph of shopping as a frame for identity even among the oppositionally self-conscious poor.

What Happened to Union Standards?

In his book *Slaves to Fashion*, sociologist Robert J. S. Ross (2001) argues that something rather dramatic has happened to the garment industry in the past twenty-five years.¹⁹ The bad news is particularly disheartening, he argues, because the victories of early-twentieth-century labor struggles in this sector were so important in raising labor standards more generally. In the United States, an alliance of reformers, immigrants, and labor was inspired by garment worker struggles; with the New Deal, their ideas about working conditions, hours, and unions gained ascendancy. These became a powerful model of modernity and decency around the world. "By the end of World War II," he writes, "sweatshop abuse in the [U.S.] apparel industry was becoming a memory of the past" (Ross 2001, 85). Since the 1980s, however, sweatshops have come back with a vengeance.

18. Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) account of her time working for Wal-Mart is eloquent testimony to the inadequacy of the wage.

19. Critical scholarship on the apparel industry is very rich; I follow Ross here because he tells the story in relation to the change from union victories to sweated labor. Other sources I found particularly useful include Rosen (2001), who explains the changing regulatory environment for apparel, and Collins (2003), who compares two apparel commodity chains.

Ross's definition of sweatshops focuses on their multiple violations of labor laws, so he is referring here to enterprises willing to work at the borders of legality. These sweatshops are made possible by manufacturers' contracts with small entrepreneurs willing to cut corners and sacrifice labor. He quotes one contractor: "Now you tell me, how can I pay someone 'union scale' or even the minimum wage, when I'm only getting \$4 per blouse? With overhead and everything else, I may be able to pay the ladies \$1.20 per blouse, but that's tops. There's nothing on paper. I get it in cash" (134).

Ross notes that many of these small entrepreneurs are immigrants with not much in the way of capital. They may recruit other immigrants—often, but not always, from their own immigrant stream. Some employees are undocumented immigrants or women without permission to work outside the home; they accept low wages because they have few alternatives. Ross shows that immigrants are not "responsible" for sweatshops but merely responding to their limited opportunities. Few other U.S. entrepreneurs or employees are willing to accept the risks and poor conditions.

Immigrant entrepreneurs bring performances of ethnic niche specificity into the chain. Ross does not elaborate on the interplay between manufacturers' expectations and subcontractor performances, but this issue is taken up in relation to global outsourcing in Jane Collins's *Threads*.²⁰ Collins interviewed U.S. corporate managers who told her they brought their assembly plants abroad to match the superior sewing skills of women in the global South. These skills, the managers told her, are learned at home, not on the job. "This paradoxical framing of skill makes women's 'disadvantages' in the labor market at least a temporary advantage," she explains (2003, 176). Management's orientation requires workers to perform the conditions of their superexploitation: new workers are expected to already know their jobs *because* they are women. Furthermore, Collins explains, the rate of exploitation can be increased through this same logic. "In the cruelest of ironies, gender ideologies permit managers to use the insufficiency of the maquiladora wage against women workers. Factory owners have pointed to the fact that household members pool their incomes to argue that women's earnings in the maquiladora are only 'supplemental'" (170).²¹

Subcontracting helps garment manufacturers cut costs; it also relieves top-of-the-chain manufacturers of all responsibility for labor. Ross cites excerpts from California's "Adam's contract," the standard form of agreement between manufacturer and contractor. The law offers a vivid model for many subcontracting-type practices, including extraordinary rendition, proxy wars, and other world-making practices of our times.²² For example,

20. Collins also explores these issues in the United States, where the apparel industry is the largest employer of women and minority workers (2003, 8).

21. Collins (2003, 116) documents further ironies of superexploitation in the practice of multiple layers of subcontracting—for example, when urban Chinese factories subcontract to village women. Here the rhetoric and performance of women's "supplemental income" are even more important to cost-cutting.

22. Collins (2003, 162) explains how a 1999 California law, intended to make manufacturers pay wages if their contractors did not, was gutted by legislative redefinitions of responsibility.

> 5. Contractor acknowledges that it is an independent contractor and not an employee of MANUFACTURER . . .

> 9. In the event that contractor is found in violation of any City, County, State, or Federal law, contractor agrees to indemnify, hold harmless and defend MANUFACTURER from any liability that may be imposed on MANUFACTURER as a result of such violation . . .

> 14. Contactor agrees to indemnify, hold harmless and defend MANUFACTURER from any liability that may be imposed on MANUFACTURER arising out of any claim made by an employee of contractor against the MANUFACTURER. (Ross 2001, 129)

This fiction of contractor independence is important in forming both domestic and international supply chains. Even the most “socially conscious” firms are able to claim that, despite their best efforts, they are unable to force compliance with their own high ethical standards. It is worth returning to reread the statement by the athletic shoe giant, Nike, with which I opened this essay, which offers a vivid image of supply chain capitalism.

Nike never produced athletic shoes. Company founders began as distributors of Japanese-made shoes. The additions that made for success were the invention of the “swoosh” logo, advertising endorsements from well-known African American athletes, and a transfer to cheaper Asian locations for contracting production. Nike’s vice president for Asia-Pacific once explained, “We don’t know the first thing about manufacturing. We are marketers and designers” (Korzeniewicz 1994, 252). Nike thus models another influential model for supply chain rents: selling the brand.

In 1996, protests targeted Nike for allowing children to produce its products. In response, Nike took up the cause of corporate social responsibility.²³ Nike formulated a corporate code of conduct; it also joined an effort to start an independent monitoring organization, the Fair Labor Association. The process originally included citizen and labor groups as well as corporate representatives. Ross (2001, 160–8) describes the breakdown of communication as corporate drafts insisted on the independence of their contractors, bound by their own national laws and cultural standards, while labor demanded attention to universal human rights. The resulting organization joins other “voluntary” efforts to set corporate ethical standards. Such efforts add to the play of the visible and the hidden, building new parameters for niche-making. Successful niches in the supply chain will work with or around monitors to subjectify superexploited labor. Journalist Isabel Hilton spoke with monitors in China, where visits are prearranged with management and workers are coached on proper replies.²⁴ She describes a document known as a “cheat-sheet,” which found its way from a Chinese Wal-Mart supplier to an NGO in 2004.

23. Stade (forthcoming) offers a useful analysis of these events; see also Locke (2002).

24. Hilton’s article describes the history of worker discipline in China in the past forty years, examining the continuities and shifts in political culture that have allowed subcontracting to be so profitable—and so deadly. She writes, “There is no sign of the rush to China slowing. China continues to grow, but at a human and environmental cost that is probably unsustainable” (2005, 53).

It showed that workers would be paid fifty yuan each if they memorized the answers to questions that the inspectors were likely to ask them. The correct answer, for instance, to the question “How long is the working week?” was “Five days.” The correct number of days worked in a month was twenty-two; overtime was not forced and was paid at the correct rate . . . There were fire drills, and they were not made to pay for their own ID cards or uniforms. If all this were true, what need would there have been for the workers to memorize the answers? (Hilton 2005, 47)

Without a court system that respects workers’ rights, Hilton argues, workers who protest their conditions have little chance to effect reforms.

It is up to manufacturers, too, to orient their consumers away from antisweatshop campaigns. This is made simpler by histories in which social justice itself can be commodified.

Shopping for Justice?

Antisweatshop campaigns have had considerable success in using images of super-exploited labor heroines, particularly in mobilizing consumers. If this essay gives short shrift to such efforts, it is only because others have documented them at length (for example, see Klein 2000). Few, however, have noted the ironic effects of these campaigns’ assertion that consumers can be the leading force of oppositional politics in these times: the poor as well as the rich can get behind this sentiment. Workers and their families and neighbors may find themselves identifying as consumers in their struggles for dignity. This effect owes a great deal to the success of the advertising industry in commodifying dissent (see Frank and Weiland 1997).

By the end of the twentieth century, the advertising industry had gained such influence that it became impossible to think of any feature of society, including politics, without advertising. An advertising-mediated politics has blurred the lines between corporations and their customers as consumers enroll corporate identities in their struggles, and, conversely, corporations enroll consumers in spreading their interests and images. The ability of corporations to survive and thrive in the midst of antisweatshop campaigns rests largely on their skill in keeping consumers on their side. It is not enough for them to protest that supply chain contractors are independent; top-of-the-chain corporations also promote their products as in themselves producing justice.

The commodification of African American dissent has been a key element in corporate strategies to enroll even the poorest and most disadvantaged consumers in their image games. Anthropologist Paulla Ebron’s (2008) research offers key clues to this history. U.S. cultural politics inspired African American reformers in the mid-twentieth century to focus on issues of representation, including in advertising. They demanded that advertising show more black people—and they won. By the end of the century, images of African Americans were pervasive in U.S. advertising, and they arguably represented the single greatest asset to U.S. advertising abroad. This extraordinary success drew from the rich performance and image culture developed in black struggle—as well as the respect with which black struggle was regarded in

many other parts of the world. Drawing tropes and themes from anticolonial campaigns around the world, African Americans added a distinctive performance style that made even everyday resistance seem cool. This rebellious “attitude” made good advertising. Clothing, accessories, alcohol, music, and whole ways of life could be sold through it. Young people around the world have been attracted to its appeal to oppositional consciousness as well as its openings to other moments of rebellion or cultural pride. The “bad” Black young man has been particularly charismatic. Ebron points out that transatlantic “bad” captures divergent genealogies as it spreads; African hip-hop artists draw from their own political agendas even as they imitate American style. Yet even in going their own way, they learn that style itself is a political agenda. Black American style has been a contagious medium to configure politics.

Anthropologist Mark Anderson (2005) brings this story to the problem of sweatshops.²⁵ Why is it, Anderson asks, that U.S. rapper Puff Daddy poses with a black power salute on his Web site, but refuses to apologize for his Sean Jean line of Honduran jeans made under sweatshop conditions? He asks the subjects of his ethnographic fieldwork, Honduran Garifuna, who identify as black. Although some of his young male informants have relatives who work in sweatshops, they focus on the problem of shopping. It’s hard to buy those high-fashion jeans in Honduras; they are forced to ask for them from relatives in New York, they complain. The struggle for these young men, Anderson realizes, is for respect within Honduras’s racial hierarchy; here, what they call the “black American”—a cluster of consumer goods and mediated styles—is their biggest ally. To dress “black American” is to simultaneously show off the oppositional disposition of black rebellion and the power of the United States. They are proud that they dress better than their mestizo compatriots even as they fight for other forms of respect.

Anderson asks one of his Garifuna friends why he likes to watch “ghetto action films” from the United States. His friend explains, “There, the most important thing is that the people that want to extend racism against us, the [*mestizos*], aren’t worth anything there. Because there, eh, a lot of guys go around real quiet, they don’t mess around because they know that there the blacks have a lot of power” (2005, 10). Wearing “black American” style offers the same promise of respect.

Nike products came to Garifuna attention in the 1980s with commercials that linked Nike shoes and African American sports stars as well as masculine prowess and “inner city authenticity” more generally. Anderson writes, “Among Garifuna in Honduras, the Nike swoosh circulated as a polyphonic icon of youth resistance, racial blackness, economic status and corporate power” (17). He continues:

Most interestingly, the swoosh became detached from the particular commodities it labels and appeared all over the place; painted on the sides of taxis, on the rocks by the river, on the side of houses, on the backboard of a basketball hoop. A few Garifuna inscribed it on their very bodies, tattooing the swoosh on their arms or shaving it on the back of their heads. When

25. A version of the paper forms a chapter in Anderson’s forthcoming book, *Blackness and indigeneity: Garifuna and the politics of race and culture in Honduras*.

I asked individuals why they mark their bodies with the Nike symbol they either gave vague responses such as “*se llega la marca*” (the brand is hot) or laughed and never answered the question. Their friends occasionally chided them for lacking the “real” product or becoming a “live advertisement.” Nevertheless, the sign acquired an obvious, if opaque, importance, perhaps because it distilled in such a compact manner the complex relations between blackness and “America,” between transnational corporations and consumer practices. (16)

These young Garifuna men are not wealthy consumers. They see their adherence to black American consumption as a strategy to get themselves out of poverty. They know the women who work at maquiladoras, but they do not organize boycotts on these women’s behalf. Their struggles for respect as black men take precedence.

Garifuna men are the kind of figures of contradiction that may be necessary to understand the global economy. They show us how varied struggles for justice may displace each other. Supply chains are only possible because of the conflicts of interest and identity that segregate race, gender, and national status niches. Rather than sweeping these differences under the rug, we need to begin our negotiations for justice here.

Nonwork Livelihoods

Nike style is an ingredient in gender and race performances that give young Garifuna men their sense of a competitive edge. If they reproduce niche economies, it is by imagining themselves first and foremost as black men in struggle—that is, as privileged consumers. Their identity as black consumers brings my discussion to the more general question of how performances of gender and race shape the supplier end of supply chain capitalism. Such performances take place inside as well as outside the workplace—in part through the importance of tropes of consumption for workers.

Uma Kothari (2007) studied apparel industry workers in Mauritius at a moment when the industry began to leave the island in search of cheaper labor. Laid-off apparel workers quickly migrated to the market, where their history of assembly work was transformed into an expertise in fashion in the many stalls that sold clothes and accessories to both local residents and tourists. They became particular experts in the knockoffs of name-brand products through which Mauritius locals could participate in metropolitan fashion trends. What is surprising in this story for those of us more used to sweatshop images is the local interpretation of apparel assembly work as a guide to fashion consciousness. Workers already imagined themselves in tropes of consumption and entrepreneurship, and this facilitated their move to local fashion markets.²⁶ Lisa Rofel (personal communication) tells similar stories of women

26. Kothari (2007) presented this material in a keynote presentation at the Conference on Poverty and Capitalism in Manchester. See also Kothari and Laurie (2005) and Edinsor and Kothari (2006).

garment workers in China, who sustain their factory work by imagining that it will make it possible for them to open fashion boutiques in the future.²⁷ Dreams of entrepreneurship and consumption shape worker subjectivities—and the meaning of “work.”

Here I return to my argument that the conditions of contracting through supply chains stimulate performances of niche difference that affirm supplier qualifications for the necessary superexploitation of the niche. Such performances take place particularly where work is coded as entrepreneurship. Suppliers learn to imagine themselves as risk takers rather than laborers. Their cultural characteristics—such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status, and religion—make it possible for them to succeed in mobilizing themselves or others like them as labor. Recall, for example, the ethnic entrepreneurs mentioned above as essential to apparel supply chains in the United States. They both recruit labor and motivate labor through appeals to ethnicity. They reconfirm the importance of ethnicity by linking ethnic performance to economic performance in the supply chain. In the process, they also blur the lines between self-exploitation and superexploitation. They push themselves to succeed through the very characteristics that define their usefulness to the supply chain. In this process, niche differences are confirmed and invigorated in new forms.²⁸

One striking place to examine this process is in the making of white male “independent contractors” in the United States. U.S. white men grow up dreaming of starting their own businesses as a key to the autonomy at the heart of their sense of race, gender, and national status. Supply chain capitalism has made use of this dream to tap the extraordinary efforts these men are willing to use to hold on to “independence.” Here is geographer Michael Watts’s description of chicken production in the United States.

Broilers are overwhelmingly produced by family farmers (“growers”) but this turns out to be a deceptive description. They are in fact raised from day-old chicks to 45-day (4.8 lbs live weight) broilers by farmers under contract to multi-billion dollar transnational integrators who own the chickens and feed. Non-unionized growers must borrow heavily in order to build the infrastructure necessary to meet rigid contractual requirements intended to insure “quality.” Conventional contract terms are such that integrators provide growers with chick or poult hatchlings and feed from integrator-owned hatcheries and feed mills, and veterinary services, medication, litter and field supervisors. Conversely, contract growers provide housing, equipment, labour, water and fuel. (2004, 46)

27. Lisa Rofel and Sylvia Yanagisako are studying ties between the Chinese and Italian silk industries.

28. Lyn Jeffrey’s (2001) study of multilevel marketing in China in the 1990s is illuminating in thinking about this issue. Multilevel marketing took off like wildfire in China at a moment when workers were learning to rethink their life trajectories with capitalist tropes. Participants were coached to imagine themselves as entrepreneurs. Performing entrepreneurship pushed them both to work harder and to recruit others. Those “others” were often family members; thus, entrepreneurial performances walked a fuzzy line between self- and superexploitation.

Watts describes the chicken farmer: “The average grower is a 48 year old white male who owns 103 acres of land, 3 poultry houses and raises 240,000 live birds under contract through six flocks per year; he owes over half of the value of the farm to the bank and works more than 2,631 hours per year” (46). We can imagine a relatively privileged citizen, a landowner and proud of it, perhaps protecting his farm from foreclosure. Yet, Watts reports, the growers’ average annual poultry income in 1999 was only \$15,000; furthermore, the required hours and investments for the contract are clearly exacting. Watts concludes: “Contract growers thus are not independent farmers at all. They are little more than ‘propertied labourers’: employees of corporate producers who also dominate the [chicken] processing industry” (47). Yet this “little more than” makes a big difference. It is hard not to imagine the cultural commitment of the grower to independent landholding and “a business of his own.” Contract farming flourishes in the imagined difference between being an employee and an entrepreneur. The contract farmer works for \$5.70/hour ($\$15,000/2,631$) even though he is a white man *because* he owns his own business. Self-exploitation is essential to the cost-cutting power of the supply chain.

The dream of becoming an independent businessman draws white male citizens—like Watts’s growers—into supply chain capitalism. One could call this a performance of gender, race, and national identity. In the process, self-exploitation becomes one variety of superexploitation: that is, labor dependent upon race, gender, and national characteristics. The equation of work and entrepreneurship holds this equation together. This equation is spelled out even more clearly in a *New York Times* report on the 2006 attempt of drivers for the shipping company FedEx to unionize. FedEx has avoided giving its drivers union privileges, as well as health insurance, sick days, retirement, and other employee benefits, by making all its drivers “independent businessmen.”

But Bob Williams, who led the unionization drive, says the model does not work for the drivers. Like many, he was lured to FedEx by advertisements that said “Be Your Own Boss” and talked of earning \$55,000 to \$70,000 a year.

After he began, Mr. Williams said, he felt like anything but his own boss. “They have complete control over my day,” Mr. Williams said. “I have to wear their uniform, buy their truck and use their logo. I have to buy insurance from them. I have to do the route they tell me to do and make the stops they tell me.”

Mr. Williams was also disappointed by the pay, the lack of health benefits and assignments to unfamiliar routes. He said he grossed a maximum of \$62,000 a year but netted only \$30,000, despite 60-hour weeks. Out of his gross, he had to pay for his truck, insurance and gas, and a company-supplied package scanner . . .

Last December, Mr. Williams hurt his back lifting a package. Eight days later, FedEx fired him, saying he had breached his contract by failing to find a replacement to handle his route while he was injured. (Greenhouse 2006)

The report on FedEx notes that this union struggle is particularly important in a climate in which “[o]ther prominent companies, including Microsoft, Verizon, and

Hewlett-Packard, have been entangled in major disputes over whether workers are contractors or employees.” Supply chains in each of these businesses require those who are willing to work long hours in order to hold on to their status as self-employed. Self-exploitation is driven by gender, race, and national performance standards.

The blurring between self- and superexploitation through performances of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality is important at the bottom as well as at the top of U.S. status hierarchies. My own recent research illustrates this through the study of a wild mushroom supply chain.²⁹ The North American matsutake is picked in forests in Canada and the northwestern United States for export to Japan. Japanese importers buy it mainly from Canadian exporters, who contract with, among others, bulkers in the United States, who buy from independent buyers, who in turn buy from independent pickers. There are many relationships of dependence along this chain, such as the fact that buyers generally have no money to buy except for that provided to them every night by their bulkers. But it is important to almost everyone along the chain that they be considered independent contractors rather than employees. As one bulker stressed to me, when he gives \$5,000 to a buyer, he has no legal protection on that money since the buyer is *not* an employee. Only the trust between independent businessmen holds them.

In this context, no one imagines him- or herself as working for anyone else. Indeed, I realized that at least in central Oregon, where I am conducting research, I never hear anyone call mushroom-related activities “work.” Sympathetic observers refer to the *work* of mushroom picking. The woman who owns a mushroom picker campground explains quite properly that “these people work so hard”: They are out in the woods from the first light of dawn, working despite snow and rain and low mushroom prices. Work is a good thing, not an insult. But it’s not the usual description of mushroom picking or buying, which instead portrays it as entrepreneurial “freedom.”

Matsutake are picked by a number of very different cultural communities. First, there are middle-aged white men cast loose: veterans of the Indochinese wars, ex-loggers thrown out by downsizing, and “traditionalists” hard-set against liberal hegemonies. For these pickers, mushroom picking is making it on one’s own—without the props of a corrupt and irritating society. The nineteenth-century California gold rush comes up repeatedly as metaphor: the mushrooms are “white gold.” The pickers are there to find a fortune on their own initiative. With care not to take this too literally, one might describe their niche as “nonwork” because most of them have rejected earlier histories of wage labor—because they hate the system, the government, taxes, regulations, and routine.

Most of the other pickers—by far the largest group today—are Southeast Asian refugees from Laos and Cambodia who arrived in the United States in the 1980s, often after several years of living in makeshift refugee camps in Thailand. With similar care, one might call this niche “nonwork” in the sense that many Southeast Asian pickers have lacked the cultural capital (language, education, employment histories, etc.) to

29. My research forms part of the Matsutake Worlds Research Group, in which Shiho Satsuka, Lieba Faier, Michael Hathaway, Tim Choy, and Miyako Inoue participate. Hjørleifur Jonsson, Lue Vang, and David Pheng have made important contributions to my fieldwork in Oregon.

find decent wage-labor jobs in the United States. Mushroom picking allows pickers to draw on Southeast Asian community-building skills; many pickers compare the mushroom camps to Laotian villages or, more ominously, Thai refugee camps. In describing mushroom picking, Southeast Asian pickers mention networks of sociability, political mobilization, leadership, hustling, and healing. Both white and Southeast Asian pickers speak of intertwined political and market-oriented “freedom” in foraging (Tsing forthcoming a).³⁰ Meanwhile, the pickers see this income as compatible with disability, unemployment, or other government compensation (for lack of “work”). Buyers joke that the pickers disappear at the first of the month to collect their checks.

Mushroom harvesting is labor in any conceivable definition of the term, but mushroom workers do not place themselves within histories of “work.” The nonwork status of mushroom picking is a reminder of the specificities of the cultural history that allowed the twentieth-century labor movement to take “work” for granted as the locus of negotiation between labor and capital. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century labor struggles created the dignity of work as a sacrifice of time and effort in exchange for a wage. In the twenty-first century, an increasing number of laborers do not imagine their activities primarily through this history’s categories. Most commentators on this problem argue that less people are doing hard, physical labor; today, they say, the economy is run almost entirely by service and information. I see no evidence of the withering away of tiring, repetitive, or physical chores, although perhaps some have been moved farther away from privileged commentators. The issue is not that these chores have gone away. Instead, the challenge is that people doing these chores may not see themselves within familiar frameworks of labor.³¹

Consider the coastal town in Fujian Province described by Julie Chu (forthcoming). The most prestigious activity for young men is going abroad. Traveling is facilitated by a contract with the gods, who help young men overcome innumerable obstacles of money, visas, and so on. In places like New York, these young men slave at low-paid restaurant and warehouse jobs. However, from their perspective this is the fulfillment of a manly destiny and not just a matter of chores. Meanwhile, back home, their families wait for remittances. They say there is no work at home for men, and so everyone sits around and plays mahjong. Local life would fall apart except that they have hired peasant migrants from poorer interior villages to come take care of everything. These peasants, in turn, are on a quest to find their fortune as their relatives, too, wait at home for remittances. It seems that no one is working, but in

30. Elsewhere I discuss the importance of “freedom,” a concept that combines anticommunism and entrepreneurship, for both white and Southeast Asian pickers (Tsing forthcoming b).

31. After explaining the “nonwork” status of mushroom picking, it is awkward to explain the occurrence of a pickers’ strike in October 2004. The strike lasted two days, during which a significant portion of the pickers refused to gather mushrooms, instead parading with signs at the buying station. However, it seems never to have occurred to anyone that the strike would lead to labor negotiations. Who would represent labor and who would represent management? The success of the strike, according to everyone with whom I spoke, was measured by the number of newspaper reports that came out about it. This makes the strike more similar to the exposure of a scandal—one of the more effective tools against supply chain exploitation.

the process the town has somehow become a part of one of the most dynamic growth areas in China.

Where “work” as imagined by nineteenth- and twentieth-century labor movements is not a framework for people’s descriptions of their activities, it will be really hard to mobilize around familiar labor slogans or the notion of “solidarity” that they inspired. Another set of articulations is needed. These will probably have to stay close to cultural niches and the links between them.

Let me restate my argument. Supply chain capitalism makes use of diverse social-economic niches through which goods and services can be produced more cheaply. Such niches are reproduced in performances of cultural identity through which suppliers show their agility and efficiency. Such performances, in turn, are encouraged by new figures of labor and labor power in which making a living appears as management, consumption, or entrepreneurship. These figurations blur the lines between self-exploitation and superexploitation, not just for owner-operators but also for the workers recruited into supplier enterprises. Through such forms of exploitation, supply chain capitalism creates both great wealth and great poverty.

If supply chains use cultural diversity, does that mean that supply chain capitalism is in control of diversity at a global scale? Geographer Susanne Freidberg’s (2004) comparison of anglophone and francophone supply chains for French beans is helpful in explaining why not. She shows us the heterogeneity of supply chains, particularly in their use of cultural diversity. Freidberg’s supply chains link France and Burkina Faso, on the one hand, and Great Britain and Zambia, on the other. Despite their similar geographies and identical product, the chains are quite different. French chains fetishize difference, putting the work of translation in the hands of merchants; British chains require cultural similarity as a technique of “supply chain management.” Freidberg shows how these differences build on entangled histories of power and respond to the possibilities of postcolonial relations between metropolises in Europe and peripheries in Africa. National and colonial histories—rather than “economic” functional requirements—explain the divergent trajectories of the chains. Freidberg’s analysis allows us to consider the power of supply chain capitalism without attributing total control to it. Diversity is both “inside” and “outside” supply chain capitalism. It both makes supply chain capitalism work and, upon occasion, gets in its way.

It is in this light, indeed, that one can appreciate the pleasures together with the dangers of diversity. Because diversity is not entirely created by employers, it offers a wealth of resources, for better or worse, that workers use without considering the best interests of their employers. At their very best, supply chains can offer sites for self-expression that are unavailable in more conventional forms of livelihood. The mushroom pickers I am studying *want* to be foraging in the mountains. Here they can combine making a living and revitalizing ethnic and gender histories. Supply chains are not always evil. Furthermore, even in the most exploitative situations, nonwork identities are not only about labor discipline; they also open alternatives. James Hamm (2007) describes a man working in Mexico’s maquiladora industry whose dreams of becoming an independent furniture craftsman sustain his hopes for a better

future.³² Like J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006), Hamm imagines creative alternatives emerging from within the interstices between capitalist and noncapitalist spaces. Supply chain performances of niche specificity can make such alternatives more evident, as workers endorse projects of identity that move them beyond (as well as, of course, within) the limitations of their workplaces. There are possibilities for a more livable world here as well as perils. But neither of these can be addressed so long as Utopian thinkers and critical analysts ignore diversity within the structure of capitalism.

Into the Labyrinth

Niche-based capitalism is not omnipotent. Indeed, almost by definition, it is disorganized. Despite the paranoid exertions of top-of-the-chain firms such as Wal-Mart, no one can fully keep track of the activities of every firm on the chain. As Nike, quoted at the start of this essay, put it, “With such cultural, societal and economic diversity, our supply chain is not only large, but complex and ever-changing, making compliance standards and assurance, as suggested by our Code of Conduct, and precise progress measurement extremely difficult.”³³

Niche-based capitalism depends on firms that ply the edge of economic sustainability—and thus negotiate, too, the edge of legitimacy. It is necessarily rent by scandals. Supply chains that generate high profits depend on firms that break not just national laws but also every conceivable humanitarian and environmental standard. Some of them get caught and exposed. Such scandals do not destroy the system. However, they do present openings for criticism and oppositional mobilizations. Such openings will continue to be plentiful as long as supply chains are squeezed for maximum profits. Radical critics and activists should use them.

Using such openings is one way of staying politically close to supply chain hierarchies. This kind of political work requires careful attention to the specificities of particular labor-and-capital-making niches. But this specificity is not enough; our analysis must consider supply chain axes as well as the matrix of other connected and disconnected niches in which a particular niche is embedded.³⁴ The articulation across such different niches is important in creating misery—or decent livelihoods. I am not asking that political theorists and activists descend into the pointillism of one niche, one struggle. Instead, my goal is to turn attention to the full tapestry of gender, race, and national status through which supply chain exploitation becomes possible.

32. I owe this insight, and the citation, to Kenan Erçel. Hamm’s analysis concerns both the man and his wife, but his analysis of the wife, which refuses earlier feminist simplifications by abandoning the specificity of women’s issues, is less convincing.

33. I am grateful to Stade (forthcoming) for introducing me to Nike’s web site: <http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikebiz.jhtml;bsessionid=14BOXLC4W4QMACQCIPCF4YKAIZEMIZB?page=25&cat=businessmodel> (accessed 2 February 2006).

34. Bonacich and Wilson (2005) offer a nice example of thinking through the vulnerabilities of supply chains in their suggestion that the site to begin to organize Wal-Mart would be logistic workers, to whom Wal-Mart has brought sharply declining standards.

Political theory almost never looks at tapestries. It is proud of its monochrome landscapes, which somehow seem more “theoretical” for their oversimplifications. Reading them from the United States, it is difficult not to associate such theoretical aspirations with the simplifications of U.S. hegemony. U.S. Americans learn to see the world in simple colors. If U.S. Americans learn even one language other than English, they are unusual talents. We almost never notice more than one non-U.S. place at a given moment in history; it is enough for now, for example, to know that Iraq is out there, and every other place vanishes from the news. Yet in other parts of the world, it really isn’t unusual to know several different languages and to be rather knowledgeable about many countries. To ask for a more polyglot political theory should not be impossible.

Supply chain capitalism demands it.

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