Mobilising the Commodity Chain Concept in the Politics of Food and Farming

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Abstract:

Focusing on the concept of ‘commodity chains’ within the food industry, this paper analyses the term’s widespread and variable usage in both academic and policy-orientated work. Despite recent criticisms, the concept has retained its popular appeal alongside competing metaphors such as networks, circuits and assemblages. Examining the concept in more detail demonstrates a range of diverse and inconsistent definitions such that ‘commodity chains’ are in danger of becoming, in Andrew Sayer’s terminology, a chaotic conception. The paper pursues Sayer’s suggestion of making such conceptions the object of academic study where the proliferation of diverse uses may throw light on the political interests of those who mobilise the term in different ways. The argument is illustrated with case-studies from the UK Government’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Countryside Agency (a statutory body) and Sustain (a campaigning group). The analysis draws on secondary sources and on interviews with representatives of these agencies. The paper concludes that the different mobilisations of the concept by these agencies provide valuable insights into the politics of food and farming in contemporary Britain. Specifically, we argue that the concept objectifies social relations, fore-grounding certain (technical and economic) features and back-grounding other (social and environmental) issues. [201 words]

Keywords: commodity chains; food and farming; Britain
Commodity chains and chaotic conceptions

There has been an explosion of interest in food across the social sciences in recent years. One result has been the creative coming together of scholars from different disciplinary and sub-disciplinary traditions. The field of agro-food studies, for example, has involved geographers and sociologists working in critical political economy in Europe, North America and elsewhere (Bonanno et al., 1994; Goodman & Watts, 1997). At the same time, interest in food consumption has brought together political economists, political scientists and sociologists to study the politics, sociology and spatiality of food consumption (Fine & Leopold, 1993; Marsden et al., 2000) as well as spawning new cultural geographies of food (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Valentine, 1999; Freidberg, 2003). In recent years, attention in ‘western’ rural sociology has focused on rethinking and integrating food production and consumption perspectives (Goodman, 2002; Goodman & DuPuis, 2002; Lockie, 2002), and there has been increasing interest in ‘alternative’ food initiatives both in Europe (Renting et al., 2003) and North America (Allen et al., 2003) and in ‘localising’ food systems (Winter, 2003a, 2003b; Hinrichs, 2003). These burgeoning literatures are replete with metaphors for capturing the interconnections between different elements of the food production and consumption systems. Prominent among them is the idea of the ‘food commodity chain’. Twenty years ago, Lang and Wiggins wrote:

The dynamics of the food system … cast doubt upon the value of describing the catering and food distribution sectors as service industries. It is more valuable to see them as links in a chain which goes from production to consumption. In doing so, it is possible to highlight how capital intervenes at as many points as possible between production and consumption in order to maximise opportunities for profit and control (1985, p.53).

Lang and Wiggins were writing at a time when the commodity systems approach was being increasingly adopted in social science analyses of the dynamics of change in agriculture and the food industry internationally (Friedland et al., 1981; Friedland, 1984). This form of analysis took the food commodity as the starting point, and traced production from the inputs to agriculture, through the farm production process to food processors, distributors, retailers and consumers. In so doing, it marked a break with previous approaches which had tended to focus on individual sectors (such as agriculture or food processing) as the objects of analysis.
Ideas about food systems, chains and webs have been joined (and often challenged) by new terminologies around food networks (Arce & Marsden, 1993), agro-food networks (Goodman & Watts, 1997) and alternative food networks (Goodman, 2004). The recent rate of scholarly output can make it difficult to give shape to the emerging debates and conceptual fault-lines. Nevertheless, we might identify the following four trends. *First* is the increasing interest in issues of consumption, where what Goodman (2002, p.271) terms the “filière-commodity systems-agroindustrial approach of the 1980s” has been drawn upon and developed to accommodate a greater interest in consumption, most notably through concepts such as ‘systems of provision’ (Fine & Leopold, 1993; Fine, 1994). A *second* and related trend is a ‘cultural turn’ associated with increasing interest in the production and consumption of meanings and narratives around food, nicely captured by Susanne Freidberg’s point that, especially in the global North, “most food is sold with a story” (2003, p.4). *Third* has been a new set of concerns around notions of ‘quality’, particularly associated with the development of alternative agro-food networks, the rise of quality assurance schemes, and strategies to valorise local and regional food products (see Murdoch et al., 2000; Goodman, 2004). *Fourth*, and relatively separate from these other developments in sociology and geography, the notion of supply chain management in business and management studies has become an important influence on analytical approaches to economic development within the food industry (see, for example, Bourlakis & Weightman, 2004).

A prominent feature within these conceptual trends is the notion of the food commodity chain. While the terminology may vary, the basic precepts of a commodity chain analysis have been remarkably persistent. Calls for re-conceptualisation associated with the turns to consumption, culture and quality tend to represent a refinement of the commodity chain perspective, rather than a radical departure. We share this perspective on the continued relevance of commodity chain analysis, though we seek to develop a more nuanced approach in this paper, focusing on the different ways in which the concept has been mobilised in recent academic debate and food policy circles.
This paper draws on the preliminary findings of a research project on commodity chains within the British food industry. The context for the research includes the recent ‘food and farming crises’ associated with BSE and Foot and Mouth Disease, debates about the safety of GM foods and the on-going pressures in British agriculture, including the process of reforming the Common Agricultural Policy. Our paper is also informed by recent concerns about the nature of competition in British food retailing, with the Competition Commission (2000) reaching ambivalent conclusions in its inquiry into the monopolistic power of British supermarkets. Recent food politics in Britain have also been characterised by increasingly adversarial relations between different parts of the industry, most notably between farmers, processors and retailers. The paper focuses on commodity chains within Britain, but this is not to deny that commodity chains frequently extend well beyond national boundaries (see, for example, Cook & Harrison, 2003; Hughes & Reimer, 2004).

We focus on ‘commodity chains’ not because this is a new concept – it is not – but because the concept has proved a popular and persistent way of making sense of the food industry. While other terms have been developed in the academic literature – see Jackson (2002) for a review – the commodity chain concept has continued to be widely used, being mobilised in different ways by different agencies and from a variety of sometimes conflicting perspectives. In this paper, we consider whether the concept’s flexibility is one of its strengths or whether the proliferation of diverse uses diminishes its analytical value.

In approaching this issue, we have been guided by Andrew Sayer’s distinction between rational abstractions and chaotic conceptions. According to Sayer, chaotic conceptions arbitrarily divide the indivisible and/or lump together the unrelated and inessential (1992, p.138). While such conceptions are frequently used in everyday

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life, they become problematic when any explanatory weight is placed upon them. It would be easy to demonstrate that, in their diverse contemporary usage, commodity chains frequently lump together the unrelated and inessential and are deployed in multiple, often conflicting, ways. Our aim in this paper is somewhat different and is inspired by Sayer’s argument that abstractions – whether good or bad, rational or chaotic – can also become useful objects of study in their own right. By examining the way that similar terms have been mobilised by different interest groups, with very different political and economic objectives, we strive to make sense of the ‘chaos’ surrounding current conflicting uses of the term. We start with a genealogy of the concept, demonstrating its shifting meanings and flexible usage in the social sciences.

**A genealogy of ‘commodity chains’**

The commodity chain concept has a relatively long history and has been used in relation to a wide range of industries and commodities – see Dicken (1998) for a review. Leslie and Reimer (1999) identify three distinct strands of work concerning global commodity chains, systems of provision, and commodity circuits. However, their genealogy extends back little further than the 1990s. Taking a longer historical perspective, we suggest that the current usage of the commodity chain idea in agro-food studies and in economic geography more widely can be traced back to two sources in the 1970s. These sources are distinct, although they are sometimes wrongly conflated, and were developed for quite different purposes. The *first* is Wallerstein’s (1974) world systems theory, further developed by Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986, 1994). Here a commodity chain is understood as “a network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity” (1986, p.159). Hopkins and Wallerstein looked at ships and wheat flour in order to address the question of “whether or not there are substantial historical/empirical grounds for the claim that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries world-economic forces were organising production over a growing proportion of the ‘world’ delimited by the scope of their operations” (p.158) – in other words, “whether and to what extent a capitalist world-economy was an organising force and structural reality” (p.159) during these centuries. In 1994, they expressed their research agenda as: “To depict the changes in the form of the commodity chains and … to see whether and to what extent the structures of [specific component production processes] change in accord
with the cyclical rhythms of the world-economy” (1994, p.20). This perspective is set within a tradition of seeing economic development and international economic change as influenced by the expansion and contraction of long-wave cycles.

With heightened interest in processes of economic globalisation in the 1990s, Hopkins and Wallerstein’s work was taken up by political economists interested in tracing the development of global commodity chains. An edited collection in 1994 helped establish global commodity chain (GCC) analysis as a relatively coherent paradigm (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994; see also Raikes et al., 2000). Here it was argued that “in today’s global factory, the production of a single commodity often spans many countries, with each nation performing tasks in which it has a cost advantage” (Gereffi et al., 1994, p.1). The GCC approach was developed to promote “a nuanced analysis of world-economic spatial inequalities in terms of differential access to markets and resources” (p.2). Gereffi and Korzeniewicz (1994) drew a distinction between producer-led chains, such as automobiles and computers, and buyer-led chains, such as clothing, toys and trainers (see also Dicken, 1998, pp.7-10). The analytical paradigm that GCCs embody, it was argued, “is a network-centred and historical approach that probes above and below the level of the nation state to better analyse structure and change in the world-economy” (p.2). Such GCC studies have looked at tourism (Clancy, 1998), cocaine (Wilson & Zambrano, 1994), footwear (Schmitz, 1999) and electronics (Kenny & Florida, 1994).

A second source of the commodity chain concept can be traced back to some of the earliest work in the 1970s on the so-called ‘new political economy’ of food and agriculture, including Friedland et al.’s landmark study of capital, labour and technology in the US lettuce industry: *Manufacturing green gold* (1981). Friedland’s work was aimed at two main fields of inquiry: the sociology of agriculture and the comparative analysis of production systems. It set out to build an explanatory model of technological change in agriculture, examining the exploitation of agricultural workers and demonstrating how farm labourers had become victims of technological change. The analysis extended beyond the farm into a wider exploration of corporate power and agricultural production systems.
In parallel with the rise of the GCC approach, Friedland et al.’s ‘commodity systems approach’ was taken up and developed by those wanting to trace the internationalisation and globalisation of food chains during the 1980s and 1990s (see Sanderson, 1986; Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; Heffernan & Constance, 1994). It has since provided the conceptual starting point for a large number of studies on the development of the ‘international food system’ (see, for example, Bonnano et al., 1994; Goodman & Watts, 1997 for reviews). It is worth noting that Friedland et al.’s key work (1981) make no reference to Wallerstein, and vice-versa. These are distinctly different traditions in their conceptual drivers, objects of study and modes of analysis.

Commodity chains have also become an important object of analysis in research on the food industry and food marketing in economics, business and management studies. This is particularly because of the spread of the term ‘supply chain management’, first used in the early 1980s (Oliver & Weber, 1982) to describe the management of flows of materials across organisational boundaries. The development of thinking on supply chain management has been informed by systems theory (developed in biology and physics), transactions cost economics (within institutional economics), game theory (in economics, management and social psychology) and industrial network theories (in economics and economic geography). The supply chain management literature mushroomed in the 1990s to the extent that it has come to be described as a discipline in itself (see Giannakis et al., 2004). Central to this literature has been the study of the synthesis of business and resource networks, the opportunities for (and barriers to) developing synergies between actors in supply chains, and the synchronisation of activities and operations across supply chains. Within what might be characterised as ‘food business studies’ (agricultural and food economics, food marketing etc.), supply chain management has become a key orientating perspective (Bourlakis & Bourlakis, 2004).

Recent engagements with the commodity chains literature in human geography and sociology have produced new concepts of food networks, systems of provision and commodity circuits. Arce and Marsden (1993, p.296) complained that “the application of a systems approach effectively suppresses the significance of contextualised human agency” and argued that we must “disentangle the notion of the
increasing interconnectivity of firms and people ... from the deterministic and functional assumptions this may all too easily suggest” (p.309). They advance the concept of food networks as a way of showing how actors shape and are shaped by the political, cultural and social environment, and use the example of the international trade in bananas to highlight the importance of including non-human intermediaries as well as human relationships within commodity chains.

At around the same time, Fine and Leopold developed the concept of systems of provision, described by Leslie and Reimer (1999, p.405) as “perhaps the most comprehensive elaboration of production-consumption relations”. Their particular interest in bringing together analyses of production and consumption led Fine and Leopold to reject what they characterise as the conventional horizontal approach to consumption, where what are taken to be common features of consumption are applied across economy or society as a whole. Instead, they argue for a vertical approach which sees different commodities, or groups of commodities, as “distinctly structured by the chain or system of provision that unites a particular pattern of production with a particular pattern of consumption” (1993, p.4). Fine (1994) has gone on to consider the significance of food’s organic properties, arguing that this renders food systems of provision distinctive from those of other types of commodities. Nevertheless, different systems of provision can be identified for different types of food commodities. However, his systems of provision framework was criticised from within agro-food studies, not least for its over-simplified separation of the biological and the social (Murdoch, 1994).

Dissatisfaction with the explanatory purchase of the ‘commodity chain’ concept has prompted an interest in commodity circuits. This was borne out of a concern, particularly amongst human geographers, that the concept of a chain is too linear, too mechanistic and too focused on the simple metric of length as opposed to other issues such as complexity, transparency or regulation. Circuits have no beginning and no end, it is argued, and analysis should recognise that origins are always constructed. The commodity circuits concept has been used to examine the ways that geographical knowledges of commodity systems are shaped and reshaped (see, for example, Cook & Crang, 1996) but has raised concerns about a “virtually endless ‘circuit of consumption’” (Jackson & Thrift, 1995, p.205). In their review of different
conceptualisations of the commodity chain, Leslie and Reimer conclude that the idea of systems of provision could be blended with insights from commodity circuits in a synthetic study of circulations, conceptualised as “interconnected flows not only of materials, but also of knowledges and discourses”. They argued that a systems of provision approach “need not rest on a reification and fixing of connections into a unidirectional chain. Rather commodity chain analysis can (and should) be employed to consider the complex and shifting power dynamics between sites” (1999, p.416).

For all the recent criticism, much of it favouring more complex ideas of circuits, networks and assemblages, commodity chains have retained their popularity. This is, in part, because of the political ‘edge’ they appear to offer in the critical analysis of contemporary production systems. Indeed, over the past few years, and since the development of these critiques, commodity chains have continued to be examined for countless products in a wide variety of industries from Nike trainers to cut flowers, from diamonds to domestic furniture (Goldman & Papson, 1998; Hughes, 2000; Hartwick, 1998; Reimer & Leslie, 2004). The concept has also retained its popularity within policy circles where recent crises have encouraged a renewed interest in re-connecting actors along the chain from production to consumption.

Our objective in this paper is not to undertake a commodity chain analysis. Rather, our focus is on the concept of commodity chains and the way it is mobilised in different ways by different agencies and interest groups. Instead of debating whether one concept is superior to another in purely academic terms, favouring ‘chains’ over ‘circuits’ (or vice versa), we wish to bring the power of Sayer’s (1992) analysis to bear on the usage of the ‘commodity chain’ concept in contemporary policy circles. Rather than dismissing commodity chains as a purely ‘chaotic conception’, therefore, we wish to make the various uses of the term our object of analysis. Understanding

2 The concept of assemblages is part of the language of actor-network theory (ANT), an approach which challenges conventional distinctions between nature, culture and technology. In its radical re-appraisal of the links between human and non-human ‘actants’, ANT focuses on the socio-technical assemblages through which networks of association are elaborated and made durable (cf. Murdoch, 1997a, 1997b; Thrift, 1996).

3 See, for example, the debate about ‘food miles’ in the work of Tim Lang and others (Raven et al., 1995; Paxton, 1994; Hird, 1999).
the diverse ways in which the term is deployed has the potential, we argue, to shed new light on the politics of food and farming.

As is now well-established (cf. Barling & Lang, 2003a), the British food industry has been politicised as a result of a series of recent developments, from the globalisation of production systems to the outbreak of BSE (Lang, 2004). As a result, various actors within the food system have expressed an interest in ‘reconnecting’ consumers and producers via some conception of the food commodity chain, even if they approach the issue from very different perspectives. Indeed, ‘reconnection’ has become a buzzword in policy debates about the future of food and farming in Britain (see Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming, 2002; Winter, 2003a).

The 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease was an important stimulus to these new efforts at reconnection. In the aftermath of the crisis, which cost an estimated £8 billion to the UK economy and severely disrupted the nation’s farming and tourism industries, the Government established three inquiries (Ward et al., 2004). One of these was the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (known as the Curry Commission). The Commission was chaired by Sir Don Curry, a livestock farmer and former Chair of the Meat and Livestock Commission. Other members of the Commission were drawn from the food industry, consumer groups and environmental organisations. The Commission’s Report envisaged a future in which “Consumers are health-conscious and take a keen interest in what they eat. They know where it has come from. They know how it was produced” (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002, p.10). The Report has been a key influence on the organisation of food and farming policy since its publication, heavily informing the Government’s subsequent White Paper, the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA, 2002).

Different agencies and interest groups responded to these policy initiatives in different ways. A common feature in many responses was the mobilisation of the ‘commodity chain’ idea. Examples include organisations as different in orientation as the Food Chain Group (set up as a joint initiative by DEFRA and the Institute of Grocery Distribution), the Countryside Agency (a statutory body responsible for landscape
protection and rural development) and Sustain (an environmental campaigning group). The diversity of groups who were able to mobilise the commodity chain idea could be taken as evidence that the concept has lost its analytical value, becoming a ‘chaotic concept’ in Sayer’s (1992) terms. Here, however, we pursue a different line of enquiry, taking the different mobilisations of the concept as our object of analysis and investigating what they reveal about the politics of food and farming in contemporary Britain. We will demonstrate that the use of the ‘commodity chain’ concept is at least as diverse in policy circles as it is in recent academic debate. In the analysis that follows we ask: how could the concept be mobilised by such contrasting groups? What issues are fore-grounded or back-grounded by different uses of the term and with what implications? The next section of the paper draws on published information and interview material which allows us to probe beneath the ‘public face’ of our three case-study agencies.

Mobilisations of the ‘commodity chain’ concept

(a) The Food Chain Group and Food Chain Centre

In 1999 the Government established the Food Chain Group, which included senior representatives from the food and farming industries. The Group issued a report, Working together for the food chain (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food [MAFF], 1999), arguing the need to increase understanding among the different players in the chain and between the industry and consumers. From the industry’s perspective a food chain approach was useful in improving understanding of the cost-structures at each stage of the chain and in order to help producers improve production and marketing systems. From the consumer’s perspective, the Group argued, a food chain approach was useful for improving understanding of the economic and environmental realities of food production and marketing, in communicating and reducing risk, and in promoting understanding of technological developments and their implications. For the Government, the food chain approach appealed to the idea of ‘joined up government’.

4 The Group’s membership was Joanne Denney of the Institute for Grocery Distribution, Richard Macdonald of the National Farmers’ Union, Michael Mackenzie of the Food and Drink Federation, Nigel Matthews of the British Retail Consortium, and Neil Thornton and Kate Timms of MAFF.
The initiative came at a time of Government emphasis on improving the competitiveness of the UK’s food and farming industry in a liberalising international economy, an imperative that many might think is not easy to reconcile with the public demand for food safety and quality or wider issues of environmental sustainability (Barling & Lang, 1993b). It mirrored the industry’s emphasis on driving down costs and meeting the needs of retailers, manufacturers and caterers, and could also be read as an attempt to ameliorate the increasingly adversarial relationships between farmers, retailers and consumers along the food commodity chain. British farmers were feeling squeezed by pressures emanating from opposite ends of the chain and confrontation was rife. The Minister (Nick Brown) introduced the report by explaining:

One of my first concerns on becoming Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was to try to lower the temperature, and raise the standard, of debate about the food chain. It seemed to me that arguments setting one part of the food chain against another would get us nowhere. The whole industry needed to recognise its common interest and work together in the interest of the consumer and the wider economy (MAFF, 1999, p.3).

Farming incomes had dropped dramatically during the late 1990s and new regulations, particularly in the aftermath of the BSE crisis, were imposing additional regulatory costs on farming businesses. The Food Chain Group concluded that “there are unprecedented tensions at and between all levels of the chain” which were damaging the commercial climate (MAFF, 1999, p.5).

During the 1990s, direct action farming groups provided a new voice for farmers who were disillusioned with the NFU. There were protests against the growing power of conglomerates and supermarkets that were held to be squeezing prices at the farm-gate. Consumer organisations also questioned the power of supermarkets, culminating in the Competition Commission (2000) report on the supermarkets’ monopolistic powers. The Food Chain Group emphasised the need for greater understanding across the industry:

Each part of the food chain must make clear to the others what it requires of them through an ongoing, constructive dialogue. Each needs to understand the competitive pressures faced by others, the constraints they are working under and the impact decisions or
actions in one part of the chain can have on another (MAFF 1999, p.7).

The *Working together* report argued that the drive for lower prices among food processors and retailers might encourage sourcing from overseas, damaging the UK supply base and the British countryside. The Food Chain Group launched a *Walk the Food Chain* project whose objective was to allow leaders of industry, farmers and politicians to learn more about the competitive pressures that the industry as a whole was under.

The Curry Commission gave greater impetus to the work of the Food Chain Group by recommending the establishment of a permanent Food Chain Centre, which began work in May 2002.\(^5\) The Commission argued:

> A modern food supply chain is a remarkable feat of logistics. Not only does it move large quantities of goods across the country and the world, but it does so often at tightly controlled temperatures in hygienic conditions. But the chain is not always as efficient as it could be. It is too long in some sectors, particularly red meat. It is sometimes poorly integrated … Removing unnecessary costs could bring benefits for everyone in the chain (p.31).

The Centre is facilitated by the Institute of Grocery Distribution (the IGD), is part-funded by Government and has a Steering Board that includes consumer representatives, manufacturers, retailers and caterers, as well as farming interests.\(^6\) It has developed a number of supply chain analyses, starting in the red meat and fresh produce sectors, to identify potential efficiency savings, advocating rigorous systems of benchmarking and the development of best practice reports and recommendations.

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\(^5\) Details of the Food Chain Centre can be found at: [http://www.foodchaincentre.com](http://www.foodchaincentre.com)

\(^6\) The Food Chain Centre is chaired by Deirdre Hutton who also chairs the National Consumer Council. The Steering Group includes: Andy Lebrecht (a senior DEFRA civil servant), Clive Beddall (editor of *The Grocer* magazine), Colin Smith (a commercial director at Tesco’s), David Birrell (Birds Eye Walls), David Langmead (from the food processing and packaging industry), David Richardson (a farmer and agricultural columnist), Deirdre Hutton (chair of the National Consumer Council), Freida Stack (a consumer affairs consultant), Helen Browning (an organic farmer), Ian Crawford (Director of Buying and Marketing for the UK’s second largest delivered foodservice distributor, 3663), Joanne Denney-Finch (Chief Executive of IGD), Mark Tinsley (an arable farmer), Mike Goulthurpe (Co-Op), Peter Barr (Meat and Livestock Commission), Richard Macdonald (NFU), Rob Knight (an IGD Board Member) and Tim Bennett (a farmer and NFU representative).
Given the industry-focused remit of the IGD, the relation between IGD and the Food Chain Centre is significant. Formed over 100 years ago to provide training and education for small grocers and retailers, the IGD today is a research, education and information provider for the UK and international food and grocery business. Although the IGD is not a lobbying organisation, it represents the interests of the food industry (promoting ideas about competitiveness, sustainability and best practice) and accords with more quasi-corporatist models of private interest regulation identified by Marsden et al. (2000). The Centre’s emphasis is on making the UK food chain competitive, innovative and responsive to consumer needs, and works on mapping and measuring different supply chains to remove waste through enhanced efficiency (see, for example, Food Chain Centre, 2003). The Centre defines the causes of waste as inaccurate information, over- and under-production, product defects and downgrades, and bad data resulting from administrative errors.

The Centre’s mobilisation of the commodity chain concept is a largely technical one, emphasising ‘efficiency’ and ‘integration’ along the chain and the identification of best practice within the industry. Its aim is to support the most efficient UK food chain. Its methods include the use of supply chain audits (undertaken on their behalf by the Centre for Food Chain Research at Imperial College). Their technical orientation to food chain logistics is based on the latest business and managerial innovations in food supply chain management (Bourlakis & Weightman, 2004). In this sense, the chain is conceived as a device for interrogating the movement of goods along the chain in order to identify surplus and reduce waste. The Centre’s argument

7 The Red Meat Industry Forum has a number of initiatives in common with the Food Chain Centre, focused on improving the operational efficiency of the chain from farm to end-user, taking costs out of the production and processing sectors and communicating consumer needs to producers (see: http://www.mlc.org.uk/forum ). Their aim is to cut costs and eliminate waste. Examples include inaccurate forecasts of consumer demand, over- or under-production, excess stocks and inefficient transportation.

8 In September 2003, the Food Chain Centre and the Red Meat Industries Forum claimed to have identified the potential for 10% cost savings in the red meat sector by proposing a range of measures including reducing product variability, better management of carcass balance, streamlined administration, reduced handling and movement, and improved staff productivity (Food Chain Centre press release, 16 September 2003). In June 2004, a further study identified the potential for 20% cost savings in the pork sausage supply chain (press release, 8 June 2004).
is about uniting elements within the chain, including elements that might otherwise be seen as in opposition to each other. Although the food chain concept provides a vehicle for drawing together and analysing the seemingly disparate processes of a complete supply chain, the industry focus of the Centre and IGD precludes a more expansive notion of what might be included within the chain. Their understanding does not, for instance, include the wider costs of animal welfare, social, environmental or health issues emphasised by some other groups (such as Sustain, see below). Such costs are regarded as externalities that are beyond their control. The Centre is driven by the industry’s imperatives of increasing profit by making efficiency gains.

Economic imperatives and an emphasis on technocratic control are clearly apparent in the way the Director of the Food Chain Centre talks about IGD’s developing interest in this area. Their first initiative concerned packaging and the reduction of waste as this was felt to be an area where all elements of the chain could work together. In our interview with the Centre’s Director, Jon Woolven talked about bringing his previous experience of managing the aluminium production chain to bear on the analysis of the food chain when he joined IGD in 1994:

There are quite a lot of parallels between aluminium and food products. They are both about primary production from the land and they both go through a series of processes to convert it into a consumer product, often about disassembly rather than a lot of engineering industries which are about assembly. So if you take the meat industry, for example, it’s about breaking down an animal into smaller parts (Tape 1, Side A).

The Centre’s typical approach is to take a particular product and follow it back through the chain to the farmer. So, for example:

We’re looking at a pork chop and we’ll map out that pork chop and we’ll look at the retail outlets of that pork chop and we’ll go back to

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9 Jon Woolven (Director of the Food Chain Centre, IGD), interviewed by Peter Jackson and Polly Russell on 13 November 2003: “We’re looking for what the Japanese call muda in the chain… It doesn’t translate exactly into English but it’s a very broad concept of waste, so it’s any activity that takes place that doesn’t have to and so is adding cost without adding value to the consumer” (Tape 2, Side A).
the processor and the abattoir and then you get to a pig and it gets divided into different parts (Tape 2, Side B).

Jon Woolven describes the Centre’s main interest as being to improve food producers’ profitability:

Our primary focus in doing all this is food producers … we’re trying to assist food producers to be as profitable as they can and to be as linked in with the chain as possible so they can spot opportunities. So our biggest focus is farming and then secondly the first-stage processors like dairies, abattoirs, packers and so on. So when we look at chains, we’re really looking from the farm … recognising that there can be stages ahead of that, quite significant ones, but we don’t really start from there (Tape 2, Side A).

Talking about the choice of ‘chains’ over other metaphors such as ‘network’ or ‘circuit’, Jon Woolven argued that:

It’s pragmatism really because a chain is a nice simple metaphor, because a chain is easier to visualise than a network… It’s not simple or linear but … ultimately we are working end to end for consumers. There are many ways that these people are inter-linked and what someone does up here affects someone down there (Tape 2 Side A).

He spoke about improving the ‘plumbing’ of the food industry via the adoption of management systems such as Efficient Consumer Response (ECR) (Tape 1, Side B). He described how the Food Chain Centre was modelled on the way that Sainsbury’s and Unilever work together and extending this to other parts of the industry. The Centre’s emphasis is on improving the flow of information along the chain, ensuring that consumer research is made accessible to farmers, and undertaking various benchmarking exercises. Adopting a mechanistic analogy (‘gearing up’ the food chain ‘machine’), he concluded:

There are a huge number of opportunities for win-win. It’s not that difficult to line the whole chain up and to see opportunities, to see the whole chain, to work more efficiently, meet the needs of the end consumer better and there’s got to be scope for everyone to benefit

While others would contest the claims of ECR to pass on to producers what consumers want to know, our objective here is to draw attention to its place within the Centre’s technocratic rhetoric.
from that. I mean that’s just the basic business equation of understand what the customer wants, provide it as cheaply as possible, and you will be rewarded for it and the whole chain is in effect one machine that should be geared up to doing that and the better it can do that the more the rewards there are to do that along the chain and usually it’s not that difficult to find ways to achieve that (Tape 1, Side B, emphasis added).

As these extracts illustrate, the Food Chain Centre acted on behalf of Government to try to re-connect the disparate elements along the chain, to improve the industry’s efficiency and to reduce the potential for conflict between producers and consumers. Its logic is primarily technocratic, fore-grounding economic efficiency and paying less attention to environmental and social issues such as animal welfare or human nutrition.11

(b) The Countryside Agency’s ‘Eat the View’ Scheme

Our second example is the Countryside Agency’s ‘Eat the View’ scheme, a five-year programme, initiated in 2000, involving a range of partners across the eight English regions.12 The Countryside Agency has a much broader remit than the IGD, concerned with landscape, access and recreation in the English countryside. Their mobilisation of the ‘commodity chain’ concept reflects these diverse objectives, with the ambitious aim of encouraging the public to make the connection between farming, food and countryside recreation. The Agency’s Chairman, Ewen Cameron, accepts that it is a “huge challenge” to ensure that competitive food production, environmental protection and the enhancement of the countryside go hand in hand (Countryside Agency 2002, p.5). The key to meeting that challenge is the Agency’s emphasis on promoting sustainable local products through the ‘Eat the View’ scheme. Though they make less explicit use of the commodity chain concept than our other case studies, the Agency’s rhetoric is full of references to links and connections:

11 When asked about the costs of poor nutrition in affecting the health of future generations, Jon Woolven replied, after a long pause: “Well, I suppose obesity and health are one of the most difficult examples of an externality in that if people do over-eat it can cause costs to the health service that are not reflected in the price [of food]… The problem is that the diet consists of a huge number of different products in combination with a lifestyle that people live that leads to the overall equation of their size and fitness or whatever … and it’s difficult to break down responsibility to one area’ (Tape 2, Side B).

12 The Countryside Agency is a statutory body, established by Government in 1999 and funded by DEFRA with an annual budget of around £100m.
Our decisions as consumers can have a big influence on the way land is managed, because the character of the landscape and the quality of the environment are directly linked to the way the land is used to produce food and other goods. Sustainable land management systems can provide quality products whilst maintaining environmental quality and the diversity of the countryside. Products processed and marketed locally can provide improved income and employment opportunities, help to strengthen the links between land managers and the local community, and reduce the unnecessary transportation of food and other goods (emphasis added), http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Landscape/ETV/What/index.asp (accessed: 1 July 2005).

The same source quotes the Prime Minister as charging the Countryside Agency with the role of assisting consumers “to understand the connections between the food they buy and the countryside they value” (ibid., emphasis added).

‘Eat the View’ represents a concerted attempt to address a wide range of issues including the globalisation of agricultural production, animal welfare, food safety, the nutritional value of food, environmental degradation and the decline of wildlife. Acknowledging the growth of supermarkets and the growing trend towards convenience and processed foods, ‘Eat the View’ sets out to reconnect the consumer in order to meet a range of environmental, social and economic objectives. It does so through the promotion of local produce, coordinated by the Farm Retail Association, a national organisation of farmers who sell direct to the public. By providing a market for local and regional produce, the Countryside Agency aims to support more sustainable forms of agricultural production and to reduce the energy costs of transporting goods over long distances. The Agency’s emphasis is much less technocratic and much less focused on economic efficiency than is the case with the Food Chain Group and Food Chain Centre. In this case, the emphasis is on the countryside as a farmed landscape and on the impetus to reduce ‘food miles’ as a way of securing “the countryside we treasure”.

The development of the ‘Eat the View’ project is framed by the recent crises that have affected British agriculture, from BSE to Food and Mouth Disease, and by a set of institutional changes to food and rural policy since 1997. One solution proffered by a network of groups and agencies, including the Countryside Agency, has been to move away from a sectoral (agricultural) approach towards a more territorial (or integrated) approach to developing rural areas. The Countryside Agency has been in the vanguard of promoting a new ‘Integrated Rural Development’ agenda (Countryside Agency, 2003) that embeds initiatives to assist farmers within wider efforts to protect and enhance rural environmental (and cultural) distinctiveness and stimulate local socio-economic development. It is through locally-tailored Integrated Rural Development programmes and schemes, the Agency argues, that the diversity and distinctiveness of local rural areas can best be preserved and developed as an economic asset. Across Europe, this approach has been embodied in local LEADER rural development projects and in some schemes funded under the Rural Development Regulation, the new so-called ‘second pillar’ to the Common Agricultural Policy (Lowe et al., 2002).

The ‘Eat the View’ initiative was further developed following the Curry Commission’s report on The Future of Food and Farming (2002). As we have seen, a central theme of the report was ‘reconnection’: the reconnection of farmers with their markets; the reconnection of the food chain and the countryside; and the reconnection of consumers with what they eat and how it is produced. The report’s recommendations reinforce a (national and international) food chain-orientated perspective on the development of the agricultural sector, although there is also some recognition of the potential for the development of ‘local food’. In their submission to the Commission, the Countryside Agency asserted the need to help farmers capture more of the value contained in the food chain. The growing length of food chains meant that farmers were sharing a larger proportion of their profits with manufacturers, distributors and retailers. While their emphasis was on reducing the length of the chain, the Agency also recognised that the increasing complexity of the food chain created difficulties in moving a greater proportion of its value back within the farm gate.
The ‘Eat the View’ scheme supports a range of activities, including consumer and social research, marketing assistance, and innovation in local and regional food initiatives. The Agency has also promoted the establishment of local farmers’ markets through its support of the National Association of Farmers’ Markets which currently has a membership of over 200 different markets (Countryside Agency 2002, p.26). The scheme is underpinned by a notion of ethical consumerism linked to ideas of ‘responsible rural development’. By mobilising the forces of ethical consumerism, the scheme supports the Agency’s vision of the countryside whereby ‘quality countryside’ becomes a type of marketing brand for ‘locality foods’.

In this case, then, the Countryside Agency is using a looser definition of the commodity chain concept than the more narrowly economic and technocratic definition of the Food Chain Centre. It does so in order to encompass its very diverse objectives and to fore-ground the connections between (local) food supply and the (local) farmed landscape. Despite these wider interests, there is still a rather technocratic emphasis on reducing the length of food chains, exemplified in the Agency’s insistence that “any initiative that shortens supply chains and increases the availability of a varied local supply of sustainably produced food and drink for the public needs to be encouraged” (http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LivingLandscapes/eat-the-view/index.asp, accessed 28 June 2004, emphasis added). Their emphasis on the single linear metric of distance can clearly be challenged, as has been done by those who argue for the greater transparency and regulation of supply chains as well as emphasising the need for shorter chains. Through its emphasis on the inter-connecting forces that produce and reproduce the farmed landscape, the Agency’s conception of the ‘chain’ clearly does include a wider array of social and environmental dimensions than is the case with the Food Chain Centre. In our third case study the envelope is widened even further.

(c) Sustain’s ‘Sustainable Food Chains’ Project

‘Sustainable Food Chains’ is one of a number of projects and campaigns run by Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming. Sustain is a campaigning

13 Other current campaigns include the Food Poverty project (working to improve access to healthy diets for people on low incomes), the Grab 5! project (encouraging children
organisation that advocates food and agricultural policies that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, and who aim to improve the working and living environment, promote equity and enrich society and culture. Given these very broad aims, it may at first seem surprising that they are willing to mobilise the ‘commodity chain’ idea to advance their interests, given that the term is more readily associated with business and corporate interests. But there is evidence to suggest that Sustain deploys this strategy knowingly, broadening the terms in which commodity chain analysis is usually undertaken. By including a range of costs that are normally excluded from commodity chain analysis, Sustain are able to demonstrate the economic logic of their case rather than merely asserting the often-unacknowledged social and environmental costs of contemporary food and farming practices.

Sustain was formed in 1999 by merging The National Food Alliance and the alliance for Sustainable Agriculture, Food and Environment (SAFE), both of which had been established for over 10 years. It represents over 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local levels and is overseen by a Council of Trustees, drawn from its membership organisations and chaired by Professor Tim Lang, a prominent campaigner on food policy. As might be expected, Sustain’s conception of the food commodity chain encompasses the wider social and ecological costs of food production, including energy, transportation, pollution, packaging, biodiversity and human nutrition. Sustain have drawn attention to the lack of traceability in food provision and the declining sense of trust that consumers have in the food system. They also point to the crisis in British agriculture, with farmers squeezed by overseas competition and the growing power of the supermarkets. Sustain have sought to champion the small family farm against larger corporate interests because, it is argued, they are more likely to pursue sustainable production practices. Their proposals for change highlight ‘pick your own’ initiatives, box schemes, farm shops and farmers’ markets. Sustain helped establish Food Links UK in 2002, a network of organisations active in supporting the local food sector, and lobbied the Food Standards Agency on its production of a report on local foods in 2003.

to eat more fruit and vegetables) and the Urban Agriculture project (promoting the benefits of growing your own food). For further details, see http://www.sustainweb.org .
The Sustainable Food Chain Project aims to address Sustain’s wide-ranging agenda by undertaking research and practical projects, providing information and networks for exchange, policy advocacy and public campaigns. It is financially supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, an independent grant-making foundation involved in education, environment and social development. The current themes being developed under the Sustainable Food Chains project include Food Miles, Local Food Economies, and Public Procurement.

As an umbrella organisation bringing together a wide range of campaigning groups, Sustain faces internal contradictions between those who represent different interests including farming, environmental concerns, consumers, public health, social justice, development and animal welfare. Contradictions have emerged, for example, in Sustain’s support for Fair Trade, some of whose products, such as sugar, chocolate and alcoholic drinks, raise concerns about public health. Building trust among these diverse organisations has been crucial to Sustain’s success as a movement that is now firmly part of the political landscape. According to the Sustain’s Chair:

> I think there’s a movement going on... I think the BSE crisis, the Foot and Mouth crisis, the food scandals of the late seventies and throughout the eighties, culminating in the nineties, will go down as a period of great interest. (C821/124/11, F15640, side A).

Lang argues that the food industry has become increasingly obsessed with the consumer largely for reasons of commercial self-interest:

> The market is literally saturated. [The food industry is] more concerned about internal competition within the supply chain, the dynamics within, between and up and down the sectors of the food supply chain, squeezing each other, eating, nibbling off each other, pouncing, killing each other. That dynamic is much more important than serving the consumer (C821/124/03, F14937, side B).

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14 Professor Lang (Chair of Sustain) was interviewed by Polly Russell over four meetings between 22 January and 21 June 2004. Quotations are identified by their British Library’s accession numbers and form part of the National Life Story Collection’s Food: From Source to Salespoint archive. The full interviews are closed to the public for 30 years but these specific extracts are used with Professor Lang’s permission.
As Chair of Sustain, Lang is proud that the concept of ‘food miles’ which he coined has become part of the language. He accepts that the term is probably more useful in everyday language than as a proper environmental indicator. But he is also quick to defend the popular or cultural dimensions of the term:

I think ‘food miles’ taps into the area of culture and food which interests me greatly… I think what people think about food is a very, very, very important area and is becoming something the advertisers know is important. But the radicals, the critics, have not thought about culture in the same way. They’ve tended to be either environmental, or about animals, or about farming as a sector, or about public health issues, all of which can be objectively looked at. Well, culture can be objectively looked at, you can ask people what they think and you can … get useful indicators and hard evidence and data out. And ‘food miles’ was all part of that for me (C821/124/10, F15639, side A).

Sustain emphasise that the lengthening of the food chain is only possible because of the availability of cheap oil and cheap labour. These issues feature prominently in their publications: *The Food Miles Report* (Paxton, 1994), *Food Miles: still on the road to ruin?* (Hird, 1999) and *Eating oil: food supply in a changing climate* (Jones, 2001). In these reports, the food chain and the associated concept of food miles are used to set the crisis of British agriculture in a global context, with the emphasis on sustainability at all geographic scales. The *Eating oil* report, for example, argues that many of the social, environmental and health problems associated with the food industry can be traced back to the industry’s dependence on petroleum. This includes the transport and pollution costs associated with lengthening food miles, the wastage associated with excess food packaging, and the growing reliance of consumers on out-of-town shopping, accessed most frequently by private car. Sustain argue that the apparent gains in economic efficiency within the food industry have been achieved at the cost of environmental efficiency and animal welfare.

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15 Lang is credited with the invention of the concept of ‘food miles’ in a report for the SAFE Alliance in 1994. The term’s currency is now such that its validity as an indicator of sustainable development was recently the subject of a 100-page report by DEFRA (July 2005). The report concluded that ‘food miles’ was not an adequate single measure of sustainability but that a suite of indicators should be developed as a way of assessing the adverse impacts of food transport. The report sought to measure a range of economic, environmental and social costs including CO₂ emissions, air quality, noise, congestion, accidents and infrastructure. Other costs, such as animal welfare and human nutrition, were accorded much briefer discussion.
Sustain’s proposed solutions to these problems emphasise local production, the introduction of environmental taxes (to force the industry to internalise the external costs of production) and other fiscal measures (such as subsidies for more sustainable food production systems). These solutions are characterised by Sustain as a move from linear to circular food chains (paralleling the academic debate about chains, circuits and networks), designed to minimise the throughput of energy and matter. They also advocate a reduction in the regional specialisation of agriculture as a further means of shortening the chain. Unlike the other case study agencies, Sustain have a much more expansive view of commodity chains, including social and environmental factors as well as economic costs, tracing the ‘food mile’ not just from farm to fork but beyond, including the economic and environmental costs of packaging and waste disposal.

**Conclusion**

Our three case studies demonstrate that the concept of food commodity chains has considerable currency in contemporary discussions of food policy. Government departments, statutory bodies and campaigning groups all utilise their own variants of the concept for their own political ends. This clearly demonstrates the flexibility of the term and some would take it as evidence that we are dealing with a ‘chaotic conception’. Other conclusions are possible, however, and following Sayer’s (1992) lead, we have sought to make the different mobilisations of the concept into the object of our analysis rather than seeing its diverse use as evidence of irredeemable chaos.

Our analysis demonstrates that there are parallels between different understandings of the commodity chain concept in contemporary policy circles and some of the arguments about commodity chains in the academic literature with which we began this paper. The Food Chain Group and Food Chain Centre take a fairly linear and strictly ‘economic’ view of commodity chains, mirroring the arguments of the Global Commodity Chains and food commodity systems literature. Similarly, the more holistic perspectives of the ‘Eat the View’ and ‘Sustainable Food Chains’ initiatives mirror recent academic debates about commodity circuits and networks, with an
emphasis on more sustainable modes of production and alternative forms of
distribution. There are also parallels in academic and policy circles regarding the
extent to which linear measures of distance or chain length (such as ‘food miles’) adequately capture the complexities of supply chain management and the extent to which other notions, such as transparency and regulation, need to be considered alongside the metric of distance.

We want to end by addressing the paradox of how such different agencies can mobilise the same (or very similar) term in pursuit of their very different political interests. We have demonstrated that the commodity chain concept is imbued with a technical aura that suits certain (technocratic) interests, such as improving the efficiency of British agriculture, but that it can also be appropriated for other purposes such as Sustain’s attempts to force the government and industry to face up to the ‘external’ (environmental and social) costs associated with the current food production system. Though, as we have demonstrated, the concept can be mobilised by a range of different agencies in support of different interests, the concept’s deployment always has the effect of fore-grounding certain issues and back-grounding others. So, for example, the Food Chain Centre uses the concept to highlight current inefficiencies in the food production system as a way of promoting greater cooperation along the chain, while the Countryside Agency have mobilised the concepts of chains, links and connections to try and convince the British public of the equation they seek to draw between the interests of farmers, local food producers and users of the countryside (through their emphasis on sustainable local products). Their promotion of local and regional foods is based on the assumption that production on this scale is likely to be more sustainable than more intensive forms of farming on larger scales. Their argument about reducing the length of supply chains implies that reducing ‘food miles’ is a desirable outcome in and of itself, rather than encompassing wider arguments and transparency, traceability or governance, irrespective of the length of the chain.

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16 For a detailed analysis of Alternative Food Networks, see the project led by Dr Moya Kneafsey at Coventry University on the Cultures of Consumption web-site:
http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk.
Rather than simply highlighting the chaotic and inconsistent usage of the ‘commodity chain’ concept in a range of different contexts, we have followed Sayer’s (1992) suggestion and made these different uses our object of enquiry. In so doing we have sought to make sense of the ‘chaos’ by examining how the same concept is mobilised in a variety of different ways in the service of different interests. We have shown that agencies such as DEFRA and the IGD resort to a kind of ‘technological fix’, driven by the logic of improving economic efficiency and reducing waste. Non-economic (social and environmental) concerns are largely excluded from their analysis and even the interests of consumers are side-lined except insofar as they impinge on the profitability of the food industry. Looked at as a political issue rather than as a narrowly technical one, DEFRA’s Food Chain initiative might be seen as trying to ‘heal the rifts’ that have arisen within the British food industry as a result of recent environmental/health crises, while IGD’s Food Chain Centre is seeking to unite the various elements along the chain that have previously been cast in opposition to each other. Both agencies are appealing to a common national interest against the threat of foreign competition. Meanwhile, the Countryside Agency’s ‘Eat the View’ project uses a rather under-stated version of the food chain concept to make a series of ambitious connections between farming and countryside recreation, arguing that support for local (and by implication more sustainable) forms of agricultural production will enhance the aesthetic appeal of the countryside (via appropriate management of the farmed landscape). Here, too, the flexibility of the commodity chain concept has been mobilised to reconcile what might otherwise appear to be rather incompatible interests. Finally, Sustain are mobilising the commodity chain concept through their insistence on reducing ‘food miles’, emphasising the connections between local initiatives (such as farmers’ markets and box schemes) and their wider agenda of promoting sustainable agriculture on a global scale.

We have argued that in order to understand how these different agencies mobilise the same or closely related concepts in often quite conflicting ways requires us to understand the current politicisation of the food industry and competing views of the consumer interest (Marsden et al., 2000). Within the food industry and among its critics, the commodity chain concept can be mobilised in support of quite conflicting agendas: to reduce tensions within the industry by calling for greater communication between the various links along the chain; to deflect pressures within the UK industry
by highlighting the need to remain competitive with food producers in other countries; to argue for more sustainable systems of production, reduced ‘food miles’ and support for local or regional produce; and to draw attention to the links between ‘local’ consumption and ‘global’ production systems.

While other terms, such as circuits, networks and assemblages, might have greater intellectual credibility and growing currency within the social sciences, ‘commodity chains’ remain a legitimate focus of academic enquiry not least because of their continued salience among such a wide range of state, corporate and non-governmental agencies. The many uses of the term may be chaotic in the sense that they lump together the unrelated and inessential but, as we have demonstrated in this paper, it is possible to make sense of the chaos by tracing the political contours of the term’s diverse uses.
References


