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GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Rethinking agriculture through product-specific commodity chains

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The global agri-food landscape is undergoing a profound and uneven transformation. The converging crises of recent years – from the COVID-19 pandemic to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and from rising protectionism to escalating climate shocks – have laid bare the vulnerabilities of the hyperglobalization era. Disruptions in production and logistics, amplified by extreme weather events, have exposed the fragility of food supply systems across the world. At the same time, the post-2016 resurgence of protectionist politics, exemplified by the Trump administration's trade wars and a broader turn toward economic nationalism, has accelerated the fragmentation of global markets. Concepts such as "decoupling" and "friend-shoring" have entered the mainstream vocabulary of global capitalism, marking a new phase in which states and corporations seek to reconfigure supply chains along political, regional, and security lines. Agriculture and food, though often sidelined in these debates, are central to this reconfiguration: as sources of livelihood, instruments of sovereignty, and terrains of ecological and political contestation. Recent supply crises and rapidly rising food prices have underscored the extent to which food systems are entangled with broader economic and geopolitical shifts. The growing frequency of cold snaps, heavy rainfall and sudden floods, unseasonal frosts, and prolonged droughts further demonstrates how environmental volatility and global market uncertainty now converge in shaping agricultural production.

This special issue situates these global shifts within Turkey's changing agrarian landscape. We take a product-specific commodity chain perspective as our analytical entry point, examining how particular commodities – cheese, avocado, hazelnuts, sweet cherries, and farmed fish – mediate the intersections of local ecologies, historical transformations, labor relations, and global markets. Our wager is that a single-commodity focus enables a finer-grained understanding of agrarian change, foregrounding how value, expertise, and power are organized through the material and social specificities of products themselves. By tracing the trajectories of distinct commodities, we illuminate how processes of inclusion and exclusion, and empowerment and dispossession are enacted in contemporary food systems.

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This approach also responds to significant gaps in the scholarship on agrarian issues in Turkey. While a rich body of literature addresses major crops such as cotton, tea, and tobacco, far less attention has been devoted to commodities that lie outside dominant export and subsidy frameworks yet reveal crucial dynamics of technological innovation, gendered labor, environmental transformation, and market differentiation. By turning our analytical gaze toward such commodities and beginning with the central questions of the commodity chain perspective, this issue brings diverse theoretical fields including political economy, rural sociology, political ecology, and science and technology studies (STS) into conversation. Our goal is not only to document change but also to rethink how the commodity chains of these products are intertwined with broader regimes of knowledge, governance, technoscience, and ecology. Producer organizations, cooperatives, and local and transnational farmers' movements are central to this analysis because they can build collective capacities to contest, redirect, or withdraw from commodity chains.

Turkey offers a particularly revealing case for such an inquiry. Historically characterized by a strong developmentalist state and a tradition of agrarian protectionism, the country's agricultural sector has been restructured since the 1980s under neoliberal reforms, global trade agreements, and the growing penetration of agribusiness. Yet these transformations have proceeded unevenly across commodities, regions, and social groups. Dairy farmers and cheesemakers in the northeast, hazelnut growers and seasonal migrant workers along the Black Sea coast, avocado and cherry producers in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions, and Turkish aquaculture enterprises operating across the Mediterranean and West Africa have each faced distinct constellations of opportunity and constraint. By focusing on commodity-specific pathways, we can better understand how Turkey's agrarian economy has been reorganized through shifting articulations among global markets, state institutions, labor regimes, and local ecologies.

Commodity chains, disarticulation, and agricultural materiality

Over the past several decades, the organization of global food systems has been transformed by the consolidation of neoliberal policy frameworks, the liberalization of agricultural trade, and the ascendancy of global value chains (GVCs) as a dominant mode of economic coordination. These shifts have reconfigured the spatial and institutional architectures of agri-food production through discontinuous and partial processes of industrialization, giving rise to fragmented and uneven patterns of capitalist development. Agricultural restructuring has never been uniform; rather, it has occurred through local histories, cultural meanings, labor relations, and ecological processes that mediate how global imperatives are realized in practice.

In contexts such as Turkey, where agriculture was historically coordinated through state-led planning and protectionist regimes, the retreat of centralized agricultural policies and rural development programs has created a new institutional terrain. As comprehensive state coordination has weakened, regulation and accumulation have increasingly taken shape through commodity-specific frameworks, including crop-based subsidies, certification schemes, and geographically bounded incentive programs. The result is a differentiated agricultural landscape in

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which producers are incorporated into global circuits of capital in highly uneven ways. The notion of a coherent "national agricultural sector" consequently becomes less analytically useful, as governance is increasingly articulated through fragmented, product-oriented arrangements.

To make sense of these transformations, this special issue approaches commodity chains as socially and historically embedded structures in which flows of materials are inseparable from the relations of power, labor, knowledge, and governance that shape – and are shaped by – them. Rather than viewing GVCs as linear sequences of transactions, our analytical framework begins with the disarticulation approach (Bair and Werner 2011), which emphasizes the uneven and selective ways in which people, places, and products are linked to or excluded from commodity chains. This perspective moves beyond the economistic assumptions of mainstream commodity chain analysis and foregrounds the fragmented geographies and contested politics of agri-food restructuring.

The concept of embeddedness, frequently invoked in the literature on alternative agri-food networks (Murdoch 2000; Sonnino 2007), has been instrumental in drawing attention to the sociocultural and ecological dimensions of food production. However, as Moragues-Faus and Sonnino (2012) point out, a normative opposition between embedded "local-good" and disembedded "global-bad" food systems risks obscuring the complex institutional configurations and power relations that underpin the production, circulation, and regulation of food. By contrast, the disarticulation approach illuminates the selective and fragmented ways in which people, territories, and crops are connected to – or disconnected from – global circuits. It directs analytical attention to the uneven geographies of power, dependency, and resistance that emerge when agricultural production is reorganized around specific commodities.

This issue also takes up Talbot's (2009) call for greater methodological rigor in chain analysis, particularly through the careful delineation of units of analysis and typologies of governance. By disaggregating commodity chains into their constituent segments – on-farm production, processing, marketing, distribution, and consumption – we are better equipped to identify the loci of power, modalities of coordination, and dynamics of value capture at each juncture. Governance in agri-food chains is rarely unitary; rather, it is characterized by hybrid and overlapping structures involving states, transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations, certification bodies, and producer organizations. While Gereffi's (1994) classical distinction between buyer-driven and producer-driven chains remains analytically useful, Gereffi et al's (2005) work on network governance provides a richer framework for analyzing complex interactions among diverse actors. Yet we are also committed to articulate such institutional analyses with the biological and ecological characteristics of agricultural production that further complicate governance and value creation.

The agro-exceptionalist perspective (Guthman 2009) recognizes the centrality of nature, as both constraint and enabling agent, in shaping the organization of food systems. Seasonality, perishability, land-based cultivation practices, and the metabolic properties of food all place limits on standardization and industrialization, while simultaneously creating opportunities for rent generation, alternative food networks, and place-based labels or territorial branding. Agricultural materiality is

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not a passive backdrop to social processes but an active force in their constitution. As Goodman (2001) argued, ontology matters. Drawing on actor–network theory and feminist STS, scholars such as Paxson (2008), Faier (2011), and Lien (2015) have demonstrated that food production involves the lively agencies of microbes, animals, plants, and technologies that co-produce the qualities and identities of food. More recent agri-food technoscience scholarship, including work associated with the Science and Technology Studies Food and Agriculture Network (STSFAN), further examines how knowledge, materiality, and governance intersect in the making of contested food futures (Burch et al. 2023). Research on crop biodiversity and monocultures likewise shows how plant varieties, scientific classifications, regulatory devices, and multispecies relations enter directly into capitalist accumulation and agrarian politics (Hartigan 2017; Hetherington 2020). The result is a relational ontology of agriculture that recognizes the co-constitution of human and nonhuman actors in the making of value, quality, and taste.

This theoretical synthesis combining political economy, political ecology, and STS forms the analytical backbone of this special issue. It allows us to investigate agricultural commodities not only as objects of trade but also as sites of negotiation where material, technical, ecological, and cultural practices intersect. Each commodity has its own ecology of production, constellation of actors, and mode of governance, making it an entry point for studying the multiplicity and fragmentation of contemporary capitalism.

Uneven agrarian transformations: contributions to the special issue

As global agro-industrial logics increasingly permeate Turkey's rural landscapes through retail consolidation, contract farming, and technocratic certification regimes, local actors are compelled to align with new demands, renegotiate their practices, or risk marginalization and withdrawal from agrarian livelihoods. At the same time, a growing array of countermovements has sought to re-embed food systems in alternative spaces and forms of value creation, social trust, solidarity, and collective action. Cooperative experiments, local food activism, municipal procurement programs, seed-exchange networks, alternative certification schemes, and community-supported agriculture groups reveal that disarticulation is not only a process of exclusion but also a potential source of reconfiguration. As actors withdraw or are displaced from dominant circuits, they may forge new forms of collective action and alternative systems of value.

These transformations play out differently across commodities. In the dairy sector, standardized hygiene regulations and quality certification systems have favored large industrial producers, often at the expense of small-scale and artisanal cheesemakers. Traditional producers whose practices are embedded in specific ecologies and social relations have had to adapt to technocratic regimes or seek alternative market niches through geographical indications and Slow Food Presidia. In the horticultural sector, crops such as avocados and sweet cherries have emerged as symbols of upward mobility and export success, yet their expansion raises questions about ecological sustainability, water use, labor conditions, and smallholder autonomy. In hazelnut production, Turkey's strong position in global markets rests on persistent inequalities affecting both growers and seasonal migrant workers. In fisheries and aquaculture,

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rapid industrial growth has generated environmental degradation and conflict over marine resources, exposing tensions between capitalist expansion and ecological limits across national borders.

Taken together, these cases show how market integration, state regulation, and ecological conditions interact to shape the everyday practices of agricultural actors. They also demonstrate that market integration and disarticulation are neither singular events nor opposite endpoints. Rather, they are recursive processes through which products, places, and people may be incorporated into one chain while being marginalized within another, and through which new forms of dependence can coexist with agency, collective organization, and alternative valuation. Turkey's agrarian transformations are therefore best understood not as a single, coherent trajectory but as uneven and fragmented patterns of capitalist development across regions and commodities. These patterns emerge through heterogeneous and contested processes of production and accumulation, in which global and local forces continually reshape one another through the articulation, disarticulation, and re-articulation of commodity chains.

The five research articles develop this argument through distinct product-specific lenses. Nil Alt's "Cultivating consent: frontier-making and the politics of smallholder subordination in western Turkey's sweet cherry frontier" traces the disarticulation of villages in Şehzadeler, Manisa, from tobacco commodity chains and their subsequent re-articulation with global sweet cherry networks. By examining how a vertically integrated company coordinates fragmented smallholders through contingent forms of contract farming, Alt shows that the making of an export-oriented commodity frontier depends not only on economic incorporation but also on cultural and political practices that cultivate consent while turning smallholders into *de facto* laborers on their own land.

In "Domesticating a superfood: research, extension, and farmer agency in Turkey's avocado boom," Baran Karsak challenges accounts that attribute emerging superfood geographies primarily to global demand. Tracing a century of public agricultural research and extension in southern Turkey, he demonstrates how state institutions created the material conditions for avocado cultivation, while extension agents promoted risk-taking and export-oriented practices. Farmers nevertheless continue to favor locally popular, cold-hardy cultivars and the domestic market, revealing both their agency and a persistent disjuncture between the state's export vision and producers' ecological and economic realities.

Pinar Ertör-Akyazi, Irmak Ertör, and İrem Çifçi's "Big fish eat little fish: expanding commodity frontiers of farmed sea bass and sea bream in Turkey and West Africa" follows the transnational chain assembled by Turkey's vertically integrated aquaculture firms: from fish-feed production based on small pelagic fish caught in West African waters to sea bass and sea bream cultivation in Turkey and distribution in European markets. Their analysis shows how state subsidies, certification, geopolitical expansion, low labor costs, and the appropriation of "cheap nature" have enabled the industry's rapid growth while displacing its socioecological costs onto coastal communities and marine ecologies in Turkey and West Africa.

In "Articulation and disarticulation of Kars cheeses within dairy commodity chains," M. Fatih Tatari and Derya Nizam reconstruct the historical trajectories of Kars Kaşarı and Boğatepe Gravyeri and examine their recent re-articulation through

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geographical indication and Slow Food labels. They conceptualize re-articulation not as a simple reversal of exclusion but as a transformative socioecological process grounded in collective action and in negotiations between tradition and standardization, and between solidarity and market rationalization. The material properties of the cheeses, pastures, and artisanal tools are integral to these negotiations and to the new conventions of quality through which Kars's historical disadvantages have been reconfigured and its cheeses have re-entered national markets.

The article by Deniz Yükseker, H. Deniz Sert, Osman Şahin, and Hüseyin Yener Erköse examines Turkey's position in the global hazelnut value chain through the intertwined experiences of growers and seasonal migrant workers in three Black Sea provinces. It argues that neither Turkey's deep integration into global confectionery chains nor company-led social responsibility programs have produced meaningful economic or social upgrading: farmers remain exposed to low productivity, climatic vulnerability, and the power of intermediaries and multinational buyers, while hazelnut cultivation is sustained by institutional arrangements that reproduce migrant workers' cheap and precarious labor. The case thus reveals labor exploitation not as a secondary consequence of an otherwise successful export chain but as one of its constitutive conditions.

The issue's interview and review essay extend the product-specific approach beyond the five articles. In "Tea, ethnography, and social change: a conversation with Chris Hann," Zafer Yenal revisits Hann's *Tea and the Domestication of the Turkish State* (1990), an influential single-commodity study of state formation, rural modernization, and everyday life in Rize. The conversation reflects on changing state–society relations, political and religious transformations, regional differentiation, and the continuing analytical value – and limits – of using one commodity to illuminate broader sociopolitical change.

Finally, Canan Uçar Özkul's review essay, "Rethinking critical agrarian studies on Turkey through a more-than-human lens," brings four recent books – Caterina Scaramelli's *How to Make a Wetland*, Erdem Evren's *Bulldozer Capitalism*, Zozan Pehlivan's *The Political Ecology of Violence*, and Duygu Kaşdoğan, Ekin Kurtiç, and Mehmet Ekinci's edited collection *Material Politics in Turkey* – into conversation with critical agrarian studies. Organized around materiality, infrastructure, scientific knowledge, and violence, the essay asks how more-than-human approaches can reformulate agrarian questions rather than merely add nonhuman actors to established analyses.

Conclusion

By focusing on cheese, avocados, hazelnuts, sweet cherries, and farmed fish, the contributions collectively underscore the importance of product-specific analysis for understanding contemporary agrarian change. No commodity simply carries a predetermined global logic into a local setting. Each is made through historically specific relations among state institutions, corporations, producers, workers, scientific experts, technologies, organisms, and environments. These relations determine not only how value is captured but also which forms of knowledge count,

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whose labor remains invisible, which ecological costs can be displaced, and what kinds of collective action become possible.

This special issue therefore invites scholars to understand commodity chains not as linear sequences of production and exchange but as relational formations shaped by institutions, technologies, ecologies, labor relations, social practices, meanings, and symbols. It is through these heterogeneous relations that value is generated, contested, and exchanged. Bringing disarticulation, agro-exceptionalism, and differentiated forms of governance into conversation, we seek to contribute to the critical agrarian studies attentive to the particularities of place, the specificities of products, and the complexities of power. Such an approach does not fragment analysis into isolated commodity stories. Rather, it uses the differences among commodities to reveal the uneven forms through which capitalism itself is assembled, sustained, and challenged.

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