

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Trading down: Africa, Value Chains, and the Global Economy by Peter Gibbon and Stefano Ponte

Review by: Barry Riddell

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babwe is no excuse for not noticing obvious data that contradict his assertions made in a book published in 2005.

Zerbe likens the biotechnology potential to what happened in the Green Revolution. His rendering of the Green Revolution is grossly at variance with the facts and is largely without supporting citations. There are so many major errors of fact about both agricultural biotechnology and the Green Revolution in this small book that I cannot even begin to cover them. Consequently, I will post a list of some of his most egregious errors of fact on my Web page ([www.uh.edu/~trdegreg](http://www.uh.edu/~trdegreg)) following the publication of this review.

In many ways, I hate to be so critical of Zerbe since he has done an enormous amount of research in a diverse number of areas. Unfortunately, for too many critical topics such as biotechnology and the entire exposition on the Green Revolution, he relies on non-peer-reviewed literature written by ideological soulmates which are factually in error on virtually every point. Where Zerbe lacks facts, he simply fills in his own based upon an ideological framework that tells him what they should be and not what they are.

Thomas R. DeGregori  
University of Houston  
Houston, Texas

**Peter Gibbon and Stefano Ponte. *Trading Down: Africa, Value Chains, and the Global Economy*.** Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005. 272 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$21.95. Paper.

*Trading Down* is a revolutionary text about agriculture in Africa. Based on the concept of the “Global Value Chain” (GVC), it moves the Africanist researcher away from the traditional center of attention—country studies—and focuses instead on certain key crops and their international trade. The perspective shifts from the world of GATT and Produce Marketing Boards to the post-1994 scenario of the WTO and contemporary production and exchange in a neoliberal and globalized world, with retail trade becoming increasingly international. In Africa, in this new world, there are both winners and losers.

The title arises from the disintegration of African trade in most of its primary exports (cotton is the exception) as the continent is excluded, marginalized, and made vulnerable. The book’s investigation is based on the solid ground of empirical research on agro-food products and labor-intensive manufacturing (citrus, coffee, cocoa, cotton, fresh vegetables, and clothing). The information arises from the Danish Institute for International Studies and its Globalization and Economic Restructuring in Africa research program. The authors recount in great detail how the world’s economy and trade regimes have been altered through the opera-

tion of GVCs, and how Northern demands have evolved. The book discusses the increasing dominance of buyer-driven chains, and the fact that African products are located “downstream” as peripheral, second-tier suppliers in a weak and distant location in the supply network.

The book opens with a thirty-three-page chapter entitled “The Age of Global Capitalism” in which Africa is mentioned only as an afterthought, a slight that is jarring to the reader. But the lesson of the first half of the book is that the African continent is but a minor actor. This marginality is underlined in the following chapter on international trade and the WTO. As the authors write, “Many of the new WTO rules make the growth of trade and exports from the continent more rather than less difficult” (35). The chapter is complex, and recounts economic and geopolitical details from both data and literature; we read of TRIPs, TRIMs, GATS, and Preferential Trade Agreements (poor Africa is rendered even poorer in this legalistic world). Then the conceptual framework of Global Value Chain analysis is invoked to examine the movement of trade between suppliers and final buyers.

Africa enters the scene at about the midway point, marking its marginality in a system in which the major actors are the Northern firms. Indeed, this story is complex and ever-changing; the details can seem confusing to the reader. But the same is true for the real world in which Africa trades—it too is complex! The driving force of trade in these chains (increasingly buyer-driven) resides in the links between these lead firms and their first-tier suppliers. African producers are mainly in the more distant second tier, and they face many entry barriers in the forms of economies of scale, cost advantage, and product differentiation.

The use of Global Value Chain as an analytic tool at first seems to add complexity to a simple supply regime. However, it provides a global contextualizing (with its vast and recent literature) of African trade, and it illustrates how “upstream” most of Africa’s second-tier suppliers are. *Trading Down* will not make for a quick and easy read; it is replete with detail, generalizations, and exceptions, and it leaves the next steps unresolved: the effects upon African states and their peasantries, the results of genetic modification, and the effects of the recent round of “debt forgiveness” and their associated plans (PRSPs). However, it serves its purpose in leading us to this research frontier and showing that the path is winding and forever uphill.

Barry Riddell  
Queen’s University  
Kingston, Ontario