

Monday, 18.05.2026; 4:15 - 5:45 pm CEST

Benjamin Selwyn, University of Sussex, UK

Global Value Chains or Capitalist Value Chains? Connecting Worker Exploitation, Environmental Destruction and Geopolitical Conflict

Abstract:

Is it true that Global Value Chains (GVCs) 'boost incomes, create better jobs, and reduce poverty', as commonly claimed? In this lecture Professor Benjamin Selwyn will discuss his new book, co-authored with Christin Bernhold, which challenges this mainstream view by introducing the concept of Capitalist Value Chains (CVCs).

Benjamin Selwyn will discuss how CVCs generate highly exploitative jobs, create new forms of poverty, stunt human development, damage the environment and are part and parcel of geopolitical conflict. He shows how the 'upgrading as development' narrative – the core of mainstream GVC research and policy – represents a fallacy of composition. Rather than waiting for the promised benefits of 'upgrading,' he highlights how workers' collective action, within specific historical and geographic contexts, can improve pay and conditions. The talk invites us to imagine a world beyond these capitalist relations of exploitation and nature destruction.

Short bio:

Benjamin Selwyn is Professor of International Development and International Relations at the University of Sussex, UK. His research sits at the intersection of international political economy, development studies, political ecology, and economic sociology, with a focus on how global economies are organised and governed, and how alternative development pathways can advance social justice, ecological sustainability, and democratic economic life.

A central strand of his work analyses global value chains and global production networks, examining how contemporary production systems generate persistent labour inequalities and environmental destruction, including what he conceptualises as systemic ecocide. His recent research engages critically with debates on digitalisation, decarbonisation, and the "twin transition," showing how technological and green transitions can intensify socio-ecological pressures while also identifying pathways for transformative change.

He is the author of four monographs: *Capitalist Value Chains: Labour Exploitation, Nature Destruction, Geopolitics* (Oxford University Press, 2025, co-authored with Christin Bernhold); *The Struggle for Development* (Polity, 2017); *The Global Development Crisis* (Polity, 2014); and *Workers, State and Development in Brazil* (Manchester University Press, 2012). He is also co-editor of *Class Dynamics of Development* (Routledge, 2017).