A new form of global capitalism is spreading across the earth: supply chains in which design, production, distribution, and marketing extend across continents (think Wal-Mart and Nike). This lecture describes supply-chain capitalism as it emerges askew to 20th-century projects of modernization and development. But unlike the economic and ecological standardization of these projects, supply-chain capitalism mobilizes capital, resources, and labor through their diversity; it revitalizes diversity for the pursuit of profits. The results range from new opportunities to sweatshops.

This lecture will show why we should be thinking about supply chains to understand the nexus of inequality and cultural diversity that characterizes our times. Special attention should be paid to the importance of cultural distinctions in the making of new models for workers’ identities. Ironically, global capital requires those who work for justice to engage more deeply in local cultural worlds.

Anna Tsing is professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz and the author of numerous award-winning books and articles.