Observations on Some Theories of Current Agrarian Change

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This article deals with the main theoretical approaches to the agrarian question in Globalising Food: Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring edited by D Goodman and M J Watts. I argue that the approach proposed by the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), although offering valuable insights, is problematic. The tradition of (agrarian) political economy, however, is still a rich source that can accommodate the concerns of ANT in particular, and postmodernism in general, as is the case with several articles in this volume. Class, in this effort, should remain a category of central importance. I conclude by noting the relevance and the absence from this volume of household level analysis as well as an analysis of food security.


Introduction

The ‘agrarian question’ occupied a central position on the research agenda of the social sciences over a period of well over a decade beginning with the late 1960s. The ‘question’, as it was perceived to be then, was the relation of the peasantry to capital. A wealth of literature flourished from a debate, which, inter alia, was most crucially about whether mechanisms within peasant households ensured the latter’s survival in face of encroaching capital, or whether the polarization of the peasantry into classes was inevitable. The debate has been rich not only in terms of its theoretical and empirical depth but also in its scope, covering analyses of historical and contemporary cases ranging from the peripheral political economies to those of advanced capitalist social formations. Among the most significant reasons behind the concern over the ‘agrarian question’ was the crucial and unforeseen (by orthodox Marxism) role played by the peasant masses in the Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions and the widespread presence of peasant agitations in the third world.

In the course of the 1980s, the agrarian question lost its central position in the academic agenda. I believe that one of the most important determinants of this ‘marginalization’ was the global resurgence of the neo-liberal agenda. The latter affected drastic changes in the political economic contexts of agrarian structures via, for instance, the implementation of structural adjustment programmes. This, of course, by itself transformed the conditions of existence and the definition of any agrarian question. But an equally important and, perhaps, more sinister consequence of neo-liberalism has been on the intellectual plane. Heterodox analyses, especially those of marxist persuasion, once again faced pressure, institutionally as well as existentially, particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of the existing socialisms. In
this sense, the retreat from the ‘agrarian question’ and that of heterodox analyses took place simultaneously.

In this era of marginalization, the ‘food question’ has been one of the more active areas of research within political economy (Friedmann, 1982, 1989, 1993; McMichael, 1995; Bernstein et al. 1990). One of the main reasons for this concern has been the contradictory consequences of global restructuring in the 1980s. A number of countries in the third world have experienced declining food security as a result of structural adjustment policies promoting export production. This decline has not been experienced merely at the national level but also differentially among social strata, as neoliberal policies skewed the distribution of income in different parts of the world. If the food question remained on the agenda of agrarian studies, that was in part due to its political potency of enhancing as well as undermining the legitimacy of state power. Perhaps, it is precisely this political potential of the food question that renders it fertile ground for the rejuvenation of the agrarian question. And, it is precisely such political import that renders food an important focus of analysis that links global economic, political and cultural processes with local ones.

Globalising Food: Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring, edited by David Goodman and Michael J. Watts, perhaps heralds a change of tide in agrarian studies that attempts to redefine (the) agrarian question(s) in the contemporary global context. The book comprises articles and commentaries on the transformations of agrarian political economies across countries in the post-World War II era. The range of conceptual issues covered is very broad; so is that of the theoretical perspectives deployed. It is thus very difficult to give a brief description of what this collection is about; nevertheless there are unifying themes that permeate the body of work.

It is argued throughout, directly or indirectly, that capitalism, and by extension globalization is a ‘many-headed beast’ which has developed not in any unilinear fashion but, rather, has exhibited multiple, local trajectories. In other words, capitalist transformation is uneven. If the manifestations of globalization have been many, that is in part because globalization comprises economic, political and cultural processes that mutually constitute (shape and impact on) one another. Another unifying theme in the collection is the nature of this mutual constitution. The collection, on the whole, questions orthodox accounts of the determination of subjectivity. Just as the trajectories of globalization have been many, so have been the forms of subjectivity. Some authors argue further that forms of subjectivity are not merely given by one’s position in the economy (the definition of which is broadened) but that forms of subjectivity, in turn, affect the economy as well as other processes. In that sense, globalization is also a politically contested arena. Finally, there is the overarching concern about the political implications of these fundamental theoretical questions, which not only raise the question of state/civil society relations but, deriving from the notion of plurality of subjectivities, touches on the nature and future of coalition building.

Given the diffuse nature of this book, the assessment which follows is necessarily selective and no doubt reflects the priorities of the reviewer. The discussion here focuses more on the theoretical approaches adopted in the volume and is more informed by economics, sociology and cultural studies, rather than by economic geography which figures prominently in the contributions. The following section is a summary of the book and is then followed by two sections comprising my commentary. In the final section I point to some areas of concern which, despite their relevance and importance, have been marginalized in this collection.
'Globalising Food: Agrarian Questions & Global Restructuring': A Summary

The book comprises six sections organized around a theme or a set of themes each containing two (exceptionally three) articles followed by a commentary. The first section of the volume is entitled 'Institutions, embeddedness and agrarian trajectories'. The articles in this section in part explore the dynamics of local agrarian transformation in the process of rural industrialization (Hart and Chari) and early process of modernization (Wilkinson). Hart's (1997:56-78) analysis focuses on the differential trajectories of 'dispossession, industrialization and local politics' in two towns in northwestern KwaZulu, Natal. Chari (1997:79-105) traces the agrarian historical roots over the last quarter century of an industrial boom town in Tamil Nadu State in India. Wilkinson's (1997:35-55) analysis is a reflection on alternative development strategies in southern Brazil, taking on the arguments about the competitiveness and efficiency of family farms. Hart, critical of both the industrial structuring literature, for being inadequate for understanding agrarian transformations, and of the new institutional economics which abstract from practices of power, and Chari derive their main theoretical inspirations from the tradition of classical agrarian political economy. In both papers, but in particular in Hart's, there is an explicit attempt to situate politics in the broad context of social transformation. Hart's analysis reveals that the multiplicity of trajectories taken by industrial decentralization is not explicable merely in terms of patterns of investment but must also simultaneously take into account the nature of political struggles. Chari, on the other hand, traces the historical roots of both farmers' and labour movements in the Coimbatore district to the particular cultural setting of the area. Here, of greatest significance were the social constructions of caste which, among other things were translated into political movements that were at once mass and class based.

Some of these themes flow into the articles that make up the second section of the book entitled 'Restructuring, industry and regional dynamics'. Raynold's (1997:119-132) analysis, in important ways, is reminiscent of Hart's, revolving around the theme of multiple capitalist trajectories. Her concrete study is the recent restructuring efforts by two multinationals, Dole Food Corporation and Chiquita Brand International in the agro-food sector of the Dominican Republic. She finds that firms deploy a diversity of strategies to sustain profitability in the face of changes brought about by the neoliberal agenda such as GATT and NAFTA – and in the political climate ruling in the aftermath of these changes (for instance, US perceptions of European trade after the country's entry into the Lomé Convention). A very important aspect of the current wave of restructuring, she argues, is the casualisation of the labour force. This creates a 'flexibility' made possible by increasing reliance on the most vulnerable sectors on the population. Page (1997:133-157), too, discovers how agro-industrial structuring, more specifically vertical integration, has followed divergent paths in pork production in the midwestern and southern United States. Both analysts argue the centrality of politics in the process of restructuring. Page, claims that the family-farm based agrarian ideology is a realm of strong resistance that competing firms need to take heed of. Raynold's analysis, makes the theoretical point that restructuring is a politically contested arena the outcome of which is uncertain – although it is difficult to see a substantiation of this point in the main body of her analysis other than around the axes of state policy. Both analysts criticize the industrial structuring literature, without rejecting it altogether, arguing that the latter has a lot to learn from the agrarian political economy literature.
The third section, entitled ‘Globalisation, value and regulation in the commodity system’ explores the implications of changing power in global commodity chains. For Marsden (1997:169-191), three concepts, those of quality, regulation and consumption operate crucially in defining the ‘distinctiveness of recent agrarian developments’. Based on case studies from Europe, the Caribbean and the Sao Francisco River Valley in Northeastern Brazil, he problematises the notion of the ‘marginalization of agriculture’ by arguing that the accumulation process in agriculture in general and in food in particular has become more distinct where the post-farm parts of the food networks are becoming more important in the construction of value. He also uncovers the uneven character of the shifting foci of power in food networks. As the spheres of consumption (via considerations of quality, health and safety of food) and retailing (partly by dictating these considerations in the production of foods) play an increasingly important role in the determination of value, the southern producers of food are increasingly becoming disintegrated from their national agrarian systems as a result of catering to these dictates from the North as well as from within the sharpened social polarization in the South. Marsden examines his concerns within the theoretical framework of food networks inspired by Foucault’s analysis of ‘networks of power’.

Some of his concerns are shared by Boyd and Watts (1997:192-225) in their analysis of the post-World War II US broiler industry although the latter is conceived in a theoretical framework much more in the tradition of agrarian political economy. The genesis of a flexible agro-industrial production complex in the US south, they argue, shows that this so-called flexibility rests more on insecurity and lack of trust than on stability and cooperation between the farms that produce the chickens and the contracting firms. Furthermore such flexibility, although the basis of the tremendous postwar growth of the industry, has not addressed the chronic problem of overproduction. For Boyd and Watts, as for Marsden, the concept of ‘quality’ is crucial in understanding the transformations of the industry and is as much a matter of the ‘political power’ of the integrating firms as it is of the capacity to ‘design’ healthy chicken products. Finally, in these works the spatial implications of the restructuring of capitalism are of significance to understanding the dynamics of the particular agro-food industry in question.

The theoretical differences in this section become more pronounced in the next one entitled ‘Discourse and class, networks and accumulation’. Lowe and Ward (1997:256-272), analyze recent developments in the study of farm pollution in Britain, using ‘actor-network theory’ – developed from the pioneering work of Latour – which is heavily influenced by poststructuralist discourse analysis and which takes a critical stance against what is termed ‘ostensive’ definitions of society and social change, where everything is explained, it is claimed, by structures. They focus on the historical and discursive conditions of existence of the problem of farm pollution, how it came perceived to be an issue in the first place and how different actors, the farmers and the ‘field-level bureaucrats’ in this discourse, have different constructions of it. The implications of these differences are significant in that they translate themselves into a ‘moral economy’ out of which the farmers develop different forms of resistance.

In perhaps one of the most interesting pieces in the volume, Wells (1997:235-255), also investigates different social constructions of restructuring through sharecropping in the contemporary Californian strawberry industry. In contrast to Lowe and Ward, however, she employs class analysis to great effect, to show how the restructuring of
the industry from wage labour to sharecropping (and finally back to wage labour) was, in part, dictated by the nature of class relations. She, too, is inspired by the insights of discourse analysis in understanding the different perceptions of the sharecropping relation by the parties involved but, for her, these differences are rooted in the class positions of the sharecroppers and the growers and, to a degree, in relations of ethnicity. The ramifications of such differential understandings of the same system are important in that they resulted in an important legal battle regarding the status of the sharecroppers (that is, whether they were independent contractors or employees) which led to the eventual demise of the system. In terms of the theoretical framework used, Wells is in the same company as Hart, Chari, Boyd and Watts and, to a degree, Gouveia, but, her explicit reference to class (about the absence of which Winson (1997:324-332) warns us in a commentary) distances her work from these, and all others in this collection.

The theoretical tensions which we have noted between the work of Wells, on the one hand, and Ward and Lowe, on the other, manifest themselves once again in the next section, entitled ‘Transnational capital and local responses’. Whatmore and Thorne (1997:287-304) derive their primary theoretical inspiration from the work of Latour (1986, 1993) and Law (1986, 1991, 1994) in their analysis of the Cafédirect consortium, created by the UK fair trade NGOs in collaboration with a coffee-exporting farmer co-operative in Chiclayo in northern Peru. In their analysis, the Cafédirect experience is conceived as an ‘alternative mode of ordering of connectivity’ where the narratives that are woven are of partnership, cooperation and fairness, seeking to empower the disenfranchised whether human or non-human. The authors take aim at what they call the ‘hyperstructuralism’ of the orthodox versions of globalization analysis. The latter, they claim, is not only economic but also nullifies human agency and has a very limited, if any, notion of space. By arguing for an alternative conceptualization of global networks that are at once collective, hybrid, situated and partial they attempt to rethink and widen the theoretical spaces opened up by political economy. Theirs is, along with work such as Ward and Lowe’s, an attempt to ‘liberate’ us at once theoretically and politically from the oppressive dictates of ‘structures’. Gouveia (1997:305-323) doubtless does not disagree with this noble aim but, nevertheless, does question the theoretical implications of actor-network analysis. Her analysis of the recent restructuring of the Venezuelan agro-food sector according to the imperatives of neoliberalism points to the theoretical necessity of keeping structures, global and local, as important analytical tools. She believes that the recent objections raised against political economy in actor-network theory in particular (but postmodernism in general) are overstated and are in danger of doing away with any notion of social pattern at all. Such omission, among other things, seriously risks neglect of the political by overstating the power of individuals (actors). She ends her analysis by pointing to the contemporary relevance of ‘structuralist’ analysis offered by some of the important thinkers of modernity, especially Marx.

In the final section of the volume, called ‘Nature, sustainability and the agrarian question’ the focus of both articles is the politics of sustainable development. Redclift (1997:333-343) surveys the existing discourses on sustainability and finds them lacking in crucial aspects. He argues that these discourses ignore the question of how societies arrive at sustainability – which also embodies the question of transformation of consciousness about sustainability. As for the matter of how societies arrive at ways of valuing environmental gains and losses, he asserts that the answer mostly given by economists is to establish how much people would be willing to pay for them. For Redclift, this approach, typical of orthodox economic analysis, ignores the
issue of whether or not the valuation criteria reflect real societal preferences. In his search for theoretical foundations for an alternative politics of sustainability, he draws inspiration from the work of Beck, in particular *Risk Society* (1992). However, although he finds Beck’s work breaking new ground through the concept of ‘incomplete rationality’ of modern industrial society, he finds it inadequate in answering some of the questions it poses in the first place. His analysis ends on an open-ended but optimistic note that, despite their heterogeneity, sustainability movements overlap in their fundamental concern for an end to alienation and for empowerment. The same concerns, he notes, that were at the heart of Marx’s writings over a century and a half ago. Buttel (1997:344-365), like Redclift, asks the question of how we can transform existing social movements into (an) effective political force(s) starting with an historical analysis of the international farm crisis. He argues that we are witnessing the increasing exposure of farms and agri-business to ‘naked global forces’. His gloomy perception of the future as a continuation of what there is now is tempered solely by his observation that it is only the social movements that can counteract the iron logic of the waves of global restructuring. Drawing up a typology of current sustainability movements, he, too, reveals their diversity. Although such diversity is not undesirable, in and of itself, his optimism is perhaps more tempered than Redclift’s; thus he notes how the same diversity of sustainability movements can make effective mobilization difficult – especially as the concerns of these movements are often far removed from the everyday concerns of people.

The summary above indicates, as I mentioned at the outset, that the collection covers a very broad range of issues from a variety of different theoretical perspectives. The following commentary therefore is by necessity selective.

**Globalization and the Actor-Network Theory: A Critique**

As we approach the end of the century the influence of poststructuralism/postmodernism can be felt in all social sciences, including economics, where the resistance of the orthodox has been very strong. The volume edited by Goodman and Watts testifies to this influence. The essays here, almost without exception, challenge what they perceive to be orthodoxies including traditional marxism. They do this, implicitly or explicitly, by criticizing reductionism, decentering totalities and subjectivities. The articles in the collection use or assume non-reductionist views of globalization by bringing in its political, cultural and biological aspects as equally important dimensions for consideration, both theoretically and politically. This decoupling of economy and globalization (or, more broadly capitalism) opens up the theoretical space for imagining multiple trajectories of globalization. Such a critical stand is taken further by some authors than by others through an explicit rejection of any telos in the developmental trajectories of capitalism. Not only are the paths of globalization multiple, they are also indeterminate and that indeterminacy is best understood in terms of the complex manner in which the economic, cultural and political aspects of globalization constitute (rather than interact with) one another. And if there is indeterminacy (and multiplicity) to this constitution, that is, in part, because each and every aspect of society is constantly contested by a plurality of subjects.

Nevertheless, postmodernism covers a very broad range of theoretical positions. What unifies it is more what it is critical of, rather than what it positively stands for. There are theoretical positions within poststructuralism which are united on epistemological grounds but incompatible on political grounds. This volume carries
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within it the theoretical tensions that postmodernism embodies and nowhere are they clearer than between the pieces written within the framework of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) – inspired by the work of Bruno Latour and John Law – and those written more within the agrarian political economy tradition. ANT as a distinct approach to power and a rejection of positivist epistemology, is used by Lowe and Ward, Whatmore and Thorne, and by Long in a commentary in this volume. As its use is justified as an alternative approach to the study of agro-food systems and globalization it merits a closer look.

ANT is founded on a crucial distinction between what is termed the *ostensive* and the *performative* definitions of society. Latour (1986) draws out a typology of these definitions based on their fundamental principles. Ostensive definitions of society start from the belief that, although in practice it may be difficult, it is possible to discover properties that make up life in society. Social actors are actors in society and their activity is limited or constrained by the larger society. The second point has implications for the production of knowledge at large and for social sciences in particular. In ostensive definitions of society, Latour claims, actors are useful *informants*, but since they are only part of a society, they never see the ‘whole picture’. Therefore, with the appropriate methodology social scientists can find out about the beliefs, opinions and behaviour of actors. The production of (social) science, then, is the process of putting the pieces together in order to arrive at the ‘whole picture’ (Latour, 1986: 272).

In what is termed the *performative* definitions of society, it is in principle impossible to list of properties that define a society although in practice it may be possible to do so. Actors define, in practice, what society is, the whole of it and its parts, ‘both for themselves and for others.’ There is no necessity about whether an actor knows more or less than others. What is constantly being contested is that ‘whole picture’ defined in practice by the actors. Therefore, social scientists raise the same questions as any other actors, but find different ways of enforcing their own definitions (Ibid., 273). So, according to the performative definitions of society, society is not a given but is an outcome of the actors’ constant efforts to define it. What is also distinctive about the performative definition is the levelling of discourses that is characteristic of postmodern thought.

As is clear from Latour’s typology, performative definitions of society rest on the postmodern ‘levelling of discourses’ where it is neither possible, nor necessary, to distinguish between ‘better or worse’ (or ‘superior or inferior’) forms of knowledge. Rather than such ‘privileging’, the comparison of knowledge in performative definitions is made on the basis of differences (and, by extension, of the political implications of such differences). Such rejection of positivist epistemology has implications for research. As Lowe and Ward state, the comforting distinction in ostensive definitions between the social scientist’s ‘correct’ or ‘complete’ and the actor’s (the ‘observed’) ‘mistaken’ or ‘incomplete’ notions give way to finding out how society’s different attributes are settled in practice (Ibid., 270).

What inspires the article by Lowe and Ward in their work is more the epistemological stand of ANT. In their field work on the issue of farm pollution they put into practice the anti-positivist epistemology of this theory and thus treat the different agents, the farmers and the ‘field-level bureaucrats’ as participants who have different, not mistaken or correct, notions of a situation. In fact, what is at stake here is exactly what ‘the situation’ is according to the different perceptions of the ‘actants’. It is precisely this belief in the *discursive formation* of reality that induces them to discuss ‘the
problem’ from the point of view of the bureaucrats, as well as that of the farmers. And, the differences of perception, the different knowledges of a situation are acted out in the daily lives of the participants. This is how they explain the moral economy of the farmers, their ‘everyday forms of resistance’ where the former attempt at rendering real what they believe to be the situation. In short a situation never is, it always is becoming as it is always a process of contestation.

The paper by Whatmore and Thorne develops the analysis of the Cafédirect experience mentioned above around the concept of (global) network. Networks, unlike systems, they claim, rely on people, machines (things) and codes (narratives). They are collective, that is their durability and length are conditioned by the ‘capacities and practices’ of the actants. They are hybrid; they combine people, other living and inanimate things. They are situated; they inhabit particular ‘sites and nodes’ and, following from this last characteristic, they are partial, in that they ‘embrace’ rather than cover surfaces, even when they are global (Goodman and Watts, 1997:301-302). The authors then develop a narrative of the Cafédirect experience through the conceptual entry point of networks.

In both works, the authors use ANT to construct an alternative conceptualization of globalization. The alternative is considered to be a more empowering one in face of what they deem to be the ostensive (orthodox) definitions of globalization. Conceptualizing globalization as networks opens up the space to consider theoretically the coexistence of multiple forms of networks of different ‘length and durability.’ Within this coexistence, multinationals are but one kind of a multitude of networks that have the capacity for global reach. Such theoretical recognition is a mere beginning to considering alternative forms of political struggle. If the world is not made up of surfaces ‘filled-in’ with the invading force of capital then, perhaps, we are more (or other) than its mere ‘victims’. As Long notes in his commentary on the pieces by Hart and Chari, [...] there are no given or a priori sets of driving forces (Ibid., 109) The anatomy of Cafédirect attempts at producing this ‘liberating’ effect.

Let us remember, however, that this effect is theoretically possible only if one accepts anti-positivist epistemology. As I mentioned earlier, one of the key insights of poststructuralism/postmodernism is the discursive formation of reality, that is to say that what reality is, is in part determined by the particular discourse being used. In fact, the epistemological concerns of the works written within the ANT framework are shared by the majority of authors contributing to this volume. However, despite this agreement on anti-positivist epistemology, many of the other accounts in fact produce rather different conceptualizations of globalization and agro-food systems. This difference has to do, I believe, with the particular conceptual entry points that are used. These entry points, in most essays are those of agrarian political economy to which I will return shortly.

The recognition of the importance of epistemology in the ANT analyses of globalization and agro-food systems is commendable indeed, for theoretical as well as political reasons. Nevertheless, there are questions that need to be raised against this framework. One question is about the notion of network. If there is a multiplicity of networks, the differences of which are given by their durability, then the first question that comes to mind is what the determinants of these are? The Peruvian producers in the Cafédirect network and top executives in Dole Food Corporation are all actants in their respective networks, but surely are so with, among other things, very different powers. If there is a difference in power, would not class be an
important determinant of difference? Gender and ethnicity likewise can effect these differences. It is not only individuals who are actors. Groups, the identity of which can be determined by class, gender and ethnicity, too, can be actors in networks. What needs to be pointed out, contrary to what the ANT argues, is that the categories of political economy are not by necessity ostensive categories. All these categories can be looked at as (in part) discursively constituted categories which, like every concept, are being constantly contested by actors. If this point is not conceded, then what is left of the ANT is a sophisticated variant of empiricism, where social scientists look at a constantly changing reality to find the concepts of relevance. It follows from this that if ANT does not take into account the constitution of actors, then it has to concede to methodological individualism – as is rightly noted by Walker in his commentary (1997:273-284).

Furthermore, just as society is constantly being made by actors, so actors are constantly being made by society. Political economy is still a rich theoretical source for understanding the (changing) nature of this constitution. Some of the theoretical insights of ANT can be accommodated, I believe, by the tradition of political economy and this is precisely the project of some of the other authors such as Wells, Hart, Chari, Boyd and Watts and, to a degree, Marsden.

**Political Economy and the Agrarian Question: A Defence**

That the paths of capitalist development are many is no longer a novel idea in the realm of political economy. What determines such diversity are, in part, the cultural processes which, broadly defined, are processes of construction of meaning, and political processes. In this respect, by questioning the logic of capital developing in any linear way, and invading all available surfaces, the articles in this volume draw up a picture of capital’s uneven development. Page, in his analysis of hog production in Iowa, points to the different forms of industrialization in different stages of the commodity chain from production on the farm to meat retailing. Raynolds, likewise, notes the different forms of structuring pursued by two international agro-food complexes Dole and Chiquita, in the Caribbean. Hart, in her study of two South African towns, and Wells, in the case of the restructuring of the Californian strawberry industry, trace the historical development of different local trajectories. Their historical analyses, along with Chari’s account of rural industrialization in Tirupur in India, are exemplary in the way in which they synthesize the key concepts of political economy in agrarian studies with the insights of postmodernism.

Hart’s historical analysis of decentralization in two South African towns and their adjacent townships, Ladysmith-Ezathweni and Newcastle-Madadeni, focuses on what she names ‘divergent local trajectories.’ There are many similarities between the two towns in terms of the reasons for their establishment (colonial-military outposts), the economic characteristics of their surrounding areas (African freeholding and white-owned farms) and of their inhabitants (Africans dispossessed through waves of evictions in the 1960s and the mid-1980s). Yet, despite such similarities, the histories of dispossession and industrialization have been constituted very differently in these two localities. These differences, for her, display themselves most clearly in patterns of political struggle, ranging from the histories of resistance to dispossession to the contemporary struggles and resistance to the current industrial structuring taking place in both places. Hart argues that a key arena of contestation in these divergent trajectories has been local government and the relation of local bureaucrats and politicians to different branches of capital (Ibid., 68).
Wells, like Hart, relies on the significance of local factors in explaining the different forms of restructuring in strawberry production in California. Sharecropping was adopted by strawberry growers in California in the aftermath of union mobilization during the civil rights movement. With the adoption of the sharecropping system, the capital-labour relation was restructured as the recruitment of labour was now undertaken by sharecroppers, former wage labourers. The cultural perception of sharecropping by the sharecroppers as a step in the ladder leading to independent farming sustained the system. What ultimately lead to the demise of sharecropping in California was the contestation and negotiation of this perception by different actors including the Californian legal system (hence the state) and the growers.

Hart moves her study more along the lines of histories of primitive accumulation, the different trajectories of social differentiation along class (as well as racial) lines in the two South African townships, whereas Wells’s work is a study of the class dynamics of sharecropping in Californian strawberry production. The concepts of (primitive) accumulation, class differentiation and class relations are central in these three analyses. However, they all challenge and extend the framework of agrarian political economy by proposing, in essence, a non-reductionist class analysis. The notion of class is non-reductionist, in the sense that class is not reduced to an economic process, but is conceptualised in terms of the cultural and political conditions that play equally important parts in its constitution. I believe it is exactly this kind of class analysis that, as well as enriching the debate on the agrarian question can also take on the theoretical challenges of the ANT specifically. Here are a few suggestions inspired by a group of theoretical positions based on a particular reading of Marx (Endnote 1).

Class can be defined as the processes of surplus labour appropriation and distribution. These processes are overdetermined by a multitude of cultural, political and other economic processes. Class therefore cannot be reduced to a single process (Resnick and Wolff, 1987). This non-reductionism is connected to another one that postulates that class is one of many processes that constitute society; neither the only one, nor the most important one. One answer to ANT’s fears of ostensive definitions can be found in the (over)determination of class; if we define cultural processes, as processes of meaning attribution, then class is, in part, discursively constituted. To translate this into ANT terminology, class can be defined performatively. It is that contestation, the differential understandings of class by the sharecroppers, the growers and the state that culminates in the famous Real vs. Driscoll Strawberry Associates Inc. We can use the concept of class as our theoretical point of entry into the agrarian question and allow for different perceptions of this process. But these differences still need to be explained and in our search for such explanations, class can still be one of the determinants (Endnote 2).

One other theoretical possibility that emerges from the framework I have outlined very briefly is that of the multitude of class processes on the social landscape. This possibility furthers the challenge to the vision of a capitalist world economy, even if capitalism is conceptualized as a multi-headed beast. If, as in the imagination of ANT analysis, capitalist class processes embrace rather than fill in surfaces, why can we not think of the existence and future of non-capitalist class processes? (Endnote 3). A fertile arena that can reveal such class diversity is, I believe, the notion of ‘flexibility’. For example both Raynolds and Boyd and Watts in their study of the genesis of the ‘just-in-time’ in the post-World War II US broiler industry, notice the emergence of a flexible labour force, a docile, cheap and casual labour force relying on the more vulnerable parts of the population marginalised by gender and/or by ethnicity. Isn’t
it possible to deconstruct this notion of flexibility that encompasses anything from contract farming to casual daily labour in terms of different class arrangements? Finally, couldn’t the revelation of such diversity be a liberating one against the gloomy visions drawn by the more orthodox versions of globalization?

An essential component of the success of neoliberal discourse has been the consent it has created around the ideological conflation of market experiences with the experience of capitalism. Such consent can be undermined by revealing the diversity of capitalisms as this volume does. Perhaps, we should also take on this challenge by also revealing the multiplicity of class forms, capitalist as well as non-capitalist.

**Concluding Remarks**

This volume edited by Goodman and Watts covers a wide range of issues covered from a variety of perspectives. It is a very welcome contribution to the literature on the analysis of agro-food structuring where the existing theoretical frameworks are challenged and extended. The theoretical tensions in the book are fruitful for rethinking the agrarian question and studying the contemporary analyses of agrarian dynamics. Although I am critical of the Actor-Network Theory, in particular, as a representative of postmodern thinking, it does offer theoretical challenges to existing analyses, including those within the political economy tradition. Several papers in this volume show us how the tradition of political economy can be enriched by taking on board the insights of postmodernism. One wishes to see more such analysis. It is important to conceptualize, as we do in these works, the multiplicity of agrarian transitions without jeopardizing the crucial analytical category of class.

Almost without exception, the contributions to this volume indicate the relevance and, in fact, the centrality of the nation-state in understanding agrarian questions. Here, I will not challenge the idea that neoliberal restructurings have undermined the political capacity of nation-states. The issue remains that neoliberal experiences have been made possible by a proliferation of state discourses legitimizing such experiences. Recognition of this alone renders the state as an important object of analysis and a very important arena of political contestation, especially in view of the diversity present in the contemporary social movements analyzed by Buttell and Redclift in this collection. This diversity can be enabling as well as undermining. At times the current waves of restructuring have been carried out under repressive state regimes such as in Turkey and Egypt. Under such antidemocratic circumstances the politics of coalition building become all the more important and problematic.

Despite the contribution of this volume to the debate on agrarian questions, I am left with several questions upon reading it. The book’s subtitle is ‘Agrarian questions and global restructuring.’ As have been noted, a large part of the volume is dedicated to works written from the agrarian political economy perspective. An important part of the agrarian question, historically, has been the relation of the peasantry to capitalist development. What I find largely missing from this volume is the class analysis of rural households – which is telling, given the overall theoretical commitment of the editors.

There are several reasons as to why this is still a relevant line of analysis. First, in the introduction to the book the editors acknowledge the relevance of Kautsky’s analysis in the context of contemporary globalization and restructuring of agro-food systems. Kautsky’s analysis relied crucially on the survival dynamics of the family farm in face
of encroaching capitalism. This, in turn is also a reminder of the contemporary relevance of Chayanov’s analysis. Second, it is acknowledged by a variety of contributors such as Marsden and the editors themselves that the contemporary restructuring of agro-food systems depend on the differentiation between the economies of the North and the South, as well as social differentiation within the rural landscape and the society at large. The rise of the fresh fruit-vegetable complex in parts of the third world can be explained, in part, by changing middle class tastes. In countries, such as Mexico a significant aspect of this rural transformation has been the increasing marginalization of a very large number of rural producers, such as those producers specializing in traditional food crops of maize and beans. We need to be warned against an exclusive focus of analysis on agro-food industries at the expense of the marginalised rural populations.

I would like to end this review by pointing to another ‘absence’ in this volume. The editors themselves note that although presently the rate of growth of food production outstrips population growth, a crucial characteristic of contemporary agrarian reality is increasing food insecurity. If the nature of restructuring of agro-food systems largely defines the variety of agrarian questions, then the seeming paradox of growing food insecurity deserves more emphasis in a volume such as this than its contributors have given it.

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Endnotes

1. The reference here is to the work of the group around the journal Rethinking Marxism which worked on combining marxist class analysis with an anti-positivist epistemology.

2. Marsden’s analysis, too, is an example of discursive constitution of another category of political economy. His work relies heavily on the contestation of the category of ‘value’ by different localities and how this contestation plays itself out in the production of the commodity in food networks.

3. For a critique of the globalization discourses along these lines see Kayatekin and Ruccio (1998) and Gibson-Graham (1996).

References


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