
Thematic Section

My Own Boss? Strategies of Resistance and Accommodation of Rural Producers to Neoliberal Governance

Introduction

Birgit Müller *Laboratoire de l'anthropologie des institutions et organisations sociales (EHESS), France*

At the turn of the 21st century the control over the production and distribution of food is shifting from the state and national actors to the international system and multinational corporations. Governments in the North and South are disengaging from regulating agriculture to the advantage of farmers. A handful of multinational corporations control the market for agricultural inputs and the commercialization of bulk and processed foods (Müller 2008:77-81). Intellectual property rights over seeds promise tremendous profits for those who can impose them on the millions of farmers buying high-yielding or transgenic varieties. International laws¹ and private contracts progressively tighten seed regulations and close the loopholes that allowed farmers to reseed their own harvest.

Agricultural land has become an item of intense speculation with corporations from industrial nations buying access to millions of hectares of fertile farmland in developing countries in order to secure control over food and bio-fuel (Borger 2008). Developing countries at the same time are called on to redefine their concept of food self-sufficiency. Instead of making it a priority that countries should grow their own food, international development institutions advise them to open their borders for free trade in agricultural commodities and tell them that “countries that have been most successful in reducing hunger and extreme poverty have relied on trade in agricultural products, either exports or imports or both, as an essential element of their development strategy” (FAO 2005:vii). Countries are told to stop subsidizing and protecting agricultural production (FAO 2005:80), use their “comparative advantage” by growing crops for export and adopt the latest agricultural technology to order to increase productivity. The neoliberal doctrine that identifies the farmer as an independent entrepreneur encourages the state to withdraw support and to delegate concern for the poorest of the rural producers to international governance.

The traditional dependency of agricultural producers on the land, which had to be cared for in order to remain fertile and produce crops over the years, has been supplanted by an increasing dependency on chemical inputs and agricultural machinery. With the Green Revolution, promoted by international institutions and Western charitable foundations to reach the remotest corners of the globe, even small scale farming has come to rely on fertilizers, pesticides, and commercial high yield varieties and the credits needed to buy them when cash is short. The ecological consequences of the adoption of high-yield input-dependent varieties include soil depletion, reduced biodiversity, the disappearance of locally-adapted lower-yield varieties, fresh water scarcity and a total reliance on fossil fuels used in machinery and for the production of chemicals.

These developments have not been simply imposed from the top down but have been accepted and encouraged by the producers themselves and only a minority resists them. Have rural producers thus lost what James Scott described historically as the “moral economy” of the peasant based on a “subsistence ethic” (Scott 1976:31) that gives absolute priority both to holding the means of subsistence in ones own hands and to organizing production and social and ecological relations in such a way as to provide for maximum security?

More than 20 years ago Pat Mooney (1988) wrote an analysis entitled “My own boss?,” looking at the motives that incited U.S. farmers to adopt an industrialized model of farming that drove them ever deeper into debt. At the time he wrote that rural producers seemed to be cut up into two persons: an autonomous producer taking his own decisions about the labour process and investments and a dependent producer servicing bankers, landlords and processors who exert domination over the production process from a distance. In this thematic section we want to take up his question about the possibilities and limits of agency of agricultural producers and extend it to agricultural producers in different parts of the world who have been submitted to an accelerated process of de-collectivization, industrialization and liberalization of agricultural markets. The common thread that runs through these articles is the question of to what extent farmers can behave strategically with respect to agro-chemical corporations, grain companies, NGOs, consultants and the state. Or, to what extent they are obliged to move tactically in a political, economic and natural environment they cannot control, attempting to use the occasions offered to them. If we define strategy the way de Certeau (1990:xlvi) does, as the possibility to calculate relationships of power from a vantage point that belongs to a sub-

ject with a will of his or her own, how are small producers and also high-tech farmers preserving the farm as this place of their own and protecting it from external mechanisms of control? What is the relationship between local strategies of resistance and accommodation of agricultural producers and supra-local processes and discursive practices through which their local life-worlds are being encompassed, marginalized and disempowered (Hornborg 2001:243)?

All the contributors to this section asked this question, though we phrased it in different ways using different analytical concepts: Susan Walsh uses the concept of “resilience” to describe the survival strategies of Bolivian potato farmers; Mary Richardson speaks of “recovering agency” through organic farming in Quebec; and, Liesl Gambold talks of “risk management strategies” of post-socialist Russian agricultural producers. To preserve or build up collective structures seems to be key to maintaining the possibility of strategic action for the farmers who would otherwise become individualized “entrepreneurs,” competing among themselves for resources such as land, water or market access, and dependent on external entities such as corporations, NGOs and development agencies. The role of the state is an ambivalent one, mediating and regulating, to some extent, the unequal exchange relationships between rural producers and city dwellers by guaranteeing and setting the frame for market access or exclusion. In our findings, we all point to this complex relationship with the socialist, neoliberal or reformist state, which is now increasingly modified through the influence of international agencies and NGOs.

At a time when a “post-peasant society” (Scott 1976: 165) seems definitely established as, for the first time in history, more people live in towns than in the countryside, demands and expectations on rural producers remain high. They are expected to feed the world, the country and themselves, preserve the environment, act as a motor for growth and pull themselves out of poverty. They are thus subject to numerous governmental and non-governmental influences and interventions that are ideologically, politically and economically motivated: the Harvard Golden Boys intervene in Russia on land privatizations; Monsanto and the World Bank incite the Nicaraguan government to distribute high yield varieties to rural producers; transnational corporations involved in the seed business lobby the U.S. government to facilitate the extraction of intellectual property rights over seeds; and, environmental NGOs promote organic agriculture in Canada and around the world.

In our analysis we demonstrate the dynamic nature of these relationships and the impact of institutional and

systemic changes on farmers. We all show how neoliberal and also socialist institutions promote agricultural practices, marketing behaviour, credit taking and certification in ways that often diminish the capacity of farmers for strategic action. This is also linked, as Susan Walsh and Mary Richardson have pointed out, to the kinds of knowledge that are valued and promoted and those that are neglected and devalued. Studying agricultural producers' response to neoliberal governance means demonstrating how ecological and social relationships are inextricably linked.

Development interventions in agricultural practices are often inspired by a deficit theory of social change as Susan Walsh shows in her analysis of national and international NGOs working with Bolivian potato farmers. Instead of acknowledging that these farmers had developed sophisticated agricultural and social practices and a wealth of different potato varieties that allowed them to survive in the harsh climatic conditions of the Andes, development organizations wanted to help them by making them adopt high-yielding input-dependent varieties that drove them quickly into a spiral of debt and dependency. Walsh remarks on the charity orientation of the members of these NGOs, which makes them blind to the fact that the complex social and environmental relations that the potato farmers had developed were part of their conditions for survival and not an obsolete remnant of the past.

No matter how constraining and contradictory development interventions on farming practices and marketing strategies may be, the capacity to evaluate and appreciate them on their own terms allows agricultural producers to demystify their intent as I show in my article on discourses and practices in a Nicaraguan village. I show that farmers interpreted the interventions of a succession of governments in their own moral terms of *favores* (favours), *ayuda* (help, support) and *robo* (theft, fraud). They evaluated to what extent the demands made on them by different governments were predictable and based on the principle of reciprocity, and whether they coincided with their own ethical principles. While valuing highly the ideal of autonomy, they felt compelled to seize the opportunities afforded them through development interventions even though many of them were in contradiction with their convictions and principles.

The mandate to become independent farmer entrepreneurs handed down from Western advisors via post-socialist governments meets resistance among agricultural producers who got used to working as a collective, as Liesl Gambold shows in her analysis of Russian de-collectivization. Effective social links in the community are

considered more important for strategies of survival than individual control over land and resources. In times of rapid social change and insecurity, the former members of the *kolkhoz* (collective farms) preferred to work together and to submit to the constraints of the rural community rather than to change identity and to fight alone as independent farmers.

The independence of rural producers reveals itself as quite relative even for high-tech farmers in Western countries that international institutions such as the FAO present as the model to follow (Dixon et al. 2001). In her article on large farmers in Mississippi—the majority of whom cultivate transgenic varieties of cotton, maize and soy—Gabriela Pechlaner shows how they are “sandwiched” between multinational corporations controlling their inputs and outputs. The use of biotechnology to achieve more control over various aspects of production and to increase cultivation area proved to be a double-edged sword, as multinational corporations extracted large royalties for the seeds and increasingly dictated production decisions formerly made by farmers. Thus, Pechlaner demonstrates how grower contracts and national and international laws on intellectual property rights over living organisms expropriated both farmers' control over their production and the proceeds of their work. Reseeding their harvest of transgenic crops became an illegal action and an act of resistance that brought the few farmers who dared to take this step into confrontation with the uncompromising power of multinational corporations.

To escape the power of corporations, to make their crops grow in tune with natural elements and to strive for more autonomy in decision making, farmers have turned to organic methods, thus eliminating, to a large extent, their dependence on industrial inputs. As Mary Richardson demonstrates in her article on organic farmers in Quebec, the official recognition that organic farming has received from governments and international agencies allows farmers, on the one hand, to mobilize subsidies and support but, on the other, undermines their potential for contestation. Moving from self-certification of organic production through associations of organic farmers to certification regulated by law takes away some of the autonomy that organic farmers so cherished and puts them in the realm of political and economic interests that are in contradiction with their own.

Birgit Müller, Laboratoire de l'anthropologie des institutions et organisations sociales LAIOS, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 54, bd. Raspail, 75006 Paris, France. E-mail: bmuller@msh-paris.fr.

Note

- 1 The TRIPS agreement and the UPOV convention are two examples.

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