

## **The New Frontier of Resistance in Global Agri-Food**

Mini-Conference to be Held at the 2016 XIV IRSA World Congress of Rural Sociology  
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The objective of this short white paper is to offer thoughts on the theme of the mini-conference and to stress items that could be of relevance in the preparation of the conference presentations, the discussion in Toronto, and possible ensuing publications. As indicated by the original call for papers, the mini-conference consists of the presentations of works that analyze the theme of “resistance in global agri-food” and, in particular, logics, forms, and actors that characterize the current opposition to the corporate neoliberal agri-food regime. It is our hope that through the paper presentations and related discussions we can generate a coherent, informed and updated analysis of resistance in agri-food.

In the sociological tradition, the development of resistance is often associated not only with the opposition to undesirable authority but also with the extent to which dominant actors are able to legitimize their power, control subordinate groups, and secure their support. Resistance movements oppose a developmental trajectory and the capacity of incumbents to shape trajectory through barriers to entry and control of public resources and fora including markets, public subsidies, law, courts, media, and culture. In this sense, hegemony – maintaining dominance by undermining debate and social selection processes – is generally what is contested, even if the contest appears to be focused on material manifestations of social relations such as environmental degradation, vulnerability of farm labor, and public health problems. In this tradition, the concept of critique is employed to assess the limits of dominant ideologies and practices. A core function of critique is to unmask domination and legitimation, highlight internal contradictions, and create space for alternative concepts, discourses, and models to emerge and to gain traction. The classical Kantian notion of the “critique of reason” is utilized to assess the power of ideological formulations that find legitimacy in the claimed validity of their “rational” accounts. For Kant, it is paramount to explore the extent to which reason can explain reality. Simultaneously, Marx’s “critique” of political economy is directed at revealing the falsity of the claims of the “neutrality” of the free market and the fairness of its exchange mechanisms. The economy is political (i.e., class constructed and based), Marx contends, and the free exchange that supposedly characterizes the functioning of the market is based on processes of violent expropriation, exploitation and domination.

In critiques of mature capitalism, the ability of individuals to satisfy their needs through affluent consumption is presented as controlled by the power of monopoly capital, state bureaucracy, and ideological constructs that give the illusion of freedom while constraining behavior and reinforcing structural controls. “Artificial negativity” as explained by Critical Theory allows us to see ethical or intentional consumption (e.g., Fair Trade, Organic, eco-certified, local) as a problematic response to the problem we confront and an incomplete stance for resistance. Artificial negativity draws our attention to the illusion of freedom and also a false

sense of the significance of behaviors and discourses that oppose dominant forces. This resistance is illusory and manipulated by the powers that be. While 20<sup>th</sup> Century analyses stressed the controlling power of state bureaucracy in ‘the totally administered society,’ corporate appropriation and reinterpretation of historically progressive concepts such as justice, ethics, responsibility and regulation define contemporary arrangements. Similarly, theoretical formulations based on the Post-structuralist views of Michel Foucault identify individuality, market competition and responsabilization (i.e., regarding consumer choice, rather than politics, as engine for structural reform) as dimensions that, while appearing to be emancipatory, contribute to the strengthening of the power of the neoliberal regime.

According to proponents of neoliberal theory, such as F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, freedom is based on the ability of individuals to make unconstrained decisions. They contend that any form of control of the actions of individuals, from state regulation and planning to the power exercised by existing institutions (e.g., community, family, tradition, etc.), is a violation of, and impediment to, freedom. In particular, they contend that collective decision making processes, even those based on the will of the majority and democratically structured states, curtail individual freedom.

The centrality of individuality is supported by other theories that do not necessarily follow the tenets of Neoliberalism. Dwelling on the limiting power of institutions, theories of “reflexivity” stress the emancipatory dimension of the freedom of the individuals that allows emancipation from constraining conditions such as tradition, duty but also corporatism. Equating this push for the affirmation of individuality with the completion of the modern revolution, they contend that it is only now that the “modern” promise of freeing the individual from pre-capitalist limits is finally reaching realization. For these theories, the augmenting of individuality is a liberating force that find its power in the ability of the reflexive and responsible individual to make choices that once were unavailable due to the existence of established social arrangements. But the practical potential to escape from history and the implications of ‘total’ freedom defined in this manner are, of course, open to question.

Freely acting individuals, neoliberal theorists contend, liberated from the burden of tradition and institutions, create a just, fair, and efficient society. Justice, fairness and efficiency are generated through competition that results in the rewarding of meritorious individuals and the application of discipline to poor performers. This situation stands in sharp contrast to collectively made decisions about what constitutes just, fair and productive. While inspired by the democratic ideal of the rule of the majority and the participation of the minority, they contend that bureaucratic decision processes are flawed by information deficits and they are also frequently shaped by powerful special interest groups that, ultimately, control the economy and the state. Competition, conversely, allows individuals to assume full responsibility for their actions. Individuals are free to decide how to act and to select these actions based on their knowledge of their requirements (costs) and consequences (benefits). As these benefits and consequences are realized, the composition of society and markets will continually reflect the best possible allocation of human, natural and economic resources and distribution of social rewards. In this context, individuals are empowered to act and, simultaneously, are called to become responsible for their actions. Denying any positive role of the state unless directed at the creation of more markets, stressing the undesirable effects of the redistribution of resources and the de-commodification of goods and services, and emphasizing personal responsibility over the concept of social safety net, neoliberals view responsabilization as a tool to achieve emancipation from the overbearing, inept, and captured “nanny state.” As individuals take control of their

actions and move away from obeying state mandates, not only do they break away from following improbable “all knowing” state leaders and plans, but their responsible behavior becomes one of the primary conditions for the ongoing creation of a better society. Contending that freely acting individuals permit the best possible outcome of socioeconomic and ecological interaction, they argue that alternatives to “free market capitalism” fail on both normative (i.e., justice) and technical grounds (i.e., allocative and dynamic efficiency).

These arguments against state intervention and planning, expert judgment, democratic decision making processes, the collective satisfaction of social needs, and the idea that markets generate socially undesirable consequences and crises legitimated neoliberalism made it a theory “hard to oppose.” Yet, in society in general, and in agri-food in particular, the growth of corporate neoliberal arrangements has been opposed not only through the production of sharp, sustained critiques but, more importantly, through a variety of initiatives. The industrialization of farming after WWII produced a counter-movement in the 1970s fueled by both an ecological and a social critique. The resonance of these critiques can be found in contemporary programs, but rural economy and ecology, most specifically the fate of the family farm and concerns about long term productive capacity of farmland, have largely been eclipsed with concerns that grow out of consumption. Some of these initiatives take the form of consumer and/or community-based “alternative agri-food.” These initiatives include not only programs that resist the industrialization of food production and consumption such as organic farming, biological farming and slow food, but also proposals that establish different forms of production and distribution such as civic agriculture and farmers markets. Based on the actions of responsible, free, and reflexive individuals and market exchange, these initiatives have received a great deal of attention and are heralded as successful ways to oppose corporate dominated transnational agri-food networks. Simultaneously, the fact that these programs center on consumer behavior and are market oriented has allowed critics to maintain that they are based on the same ideological traits that characterize Neoliberalism. Additionally, critics have questioned their anti-corporate effectiveness. Not only has the expansion of corporate agri-food not been altered, but many of the key features of these initiatives have been appropriated by the corporate entities targeted by opponents. Finally, critics indicate that these programs limit participation of members of the lower classes and, because of their local nature, hamper broader participation. The fact that they do not transcend market relations and the search for profit (commodification) allows, at best, a “benign” form of small scale capitalism that remains vulnerable to corporate co-optation, capital concentration and market contradictions including exploitation of land and labor (wage, family, and self). By failing to address the political economic foundations of the regime they contest, alternatives focused on ‘voting with one’s wallet’ address the symptoms and not the cause. In terms of resistance projects, we view such approaches as substantially self-limiting.

Other initiatives offer opposition to corporate neoliberal agri-food through proposals that de-commodify agri-food and present it as a “right.” The collective project of “Vía Campesina” is exemplary of this form of resistance. Vía Campesina advocates small scale and/or peasant farming as a form of agricultural production that is ecologically and socially sustainable. The establishment of food sovereignty, or the capacity of those involved in food production, distribution and consumption to control these processes, is regarded as a moral imperative and a key strategic objective. Offering a powerful alternative discourse, the identification of food production and consumption as rights stands in sharp contrast to the Neoliberal proposal that sees food as a commodity and production as managed through market competition. Simultaneously,

however, the project of championing small holders has been criticized for its limited ability to deliver a sustainable and just food system that is inclusive and global. It is not yet clear that agroecological production techniques and direct reliance on local systems of production can consistently address the food needs of the large and growing world population composed of members of the lower classes, non-farmers, and urban dwellers. Critics argue that failures to advance an intensive model of exploitation of land will result in reductions of biodiversity. Additionally, the pre-capitalist nature of peasant farming casts doubt on its applicability in advanced capitalist contexts. Paraphrasing, we might say, ‘Once they have seen Paris, you can’t keep them down on the farm.’

Pertinent debates stress the “retreat of the state” as one of the primary features of the neoliberal revolution. The implementation of de-regulation and a significant reduction of state intervention, it is argued, paved the way for the marketization of society and the expansion of corporate power. Defining current conditions in terms of “state versus corporations”, opponents of corporate neoliberalization propose a return to greater state intervention and control of the economy and society. They call for the implementation of measures such as enhanced regulation of production and distribution of goods and services, stricter state regulation of the environment and labor relations, and a renegotiation of transnational agreements and organizations such as NAFTA, MERCOSUR and the EU. This neo-Fordist posture proposes opposition to Neoliberalism through the revival of progressive roles played by the state under Fordism. While recognizing the progressive dimension of Fordism, critics not only stress the issues associated with the unresolved contradictions of a Fordist style state action, but also underscore the fact that the state has been instrumental in the implementation of Neoliberalism. They point out that the “state versus corporations” is, ultimately, a false dichotomy as the state has been neoliberalized and it is a primary factor in the implementation and maintenance of neoliberal governance. In this light, the challenge of structural reform is understood as a normative realignment of state resources and state authority. To the extent that agrifood resistance movements do not engage the state, limited progress can be expected.

The development of these alternative forms of agri-food production and consumption has been accompanied by the intensification of labor exploitation worldwide. Agri-Food is increasingly based on the use of cheap and vulnerable labor whose conditions have worsened in recent decades. A very large, global reserve army of labor is made available through transcontinental migration and the growth of transnational production networks. These processes allow corporations to compress wages and control opposition through market mechanisms. However, immigration schemes and existing anti-immigration discourses also permit the control of labor through intimidation and political means. The crisis of unions and political parties that historically supported the working class has further contributed to the political and economic weakness of labor. Importantly, discussions on resistance rarely address the issues of labor and labor/immigration policy and their potential for opposition and change. These conditions create the paradoxical situation in which greater labor exploitation is accompanied by limited analytical focus on labor and organized labor resistance.

The persistence and intensification of the exploitation of agrifood workers is paralleled by stresses placed on ecosystems. As summarized by Goodman, Sorj, and Wilkinson, the industrialization of agriculture was premised on ‘appropriation and substitution’, and the tendency to replace production inputs provided by nature and communities with commercial goods and services has deepened in the corporate agrifood regime. Genetically modified seeds that are inscribed with weed management regimens and intellectual property controls offer a

potent example. The dominant mode of technological development continues to be one that seeks to smooth ecological variability and increasingly approach the comprehensively controlled ideal of the factory. The neoliberal agri-food regime seems to accept degradation of on-farm (e.g., soil quality, pest resistance) and off-farm degradation (e.g., hypoxia of the Gulf of Mexico), as responses to well documented problems are meek. Technological optimism, capacity to source land and food globally, and high discount rates present a situation in which ecological costs and risks can be denied and/or treated as inconsequential. With respect to the role of the state in addressing public goods and public bads linked to environment, it is noteworthy to recognize that one of the largest environmental conservation programs in USA is structured such that roughly half of all spending subsidizes manure management by concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). The state and citizens seem satisfied to allow the corporate agri-food regime to externalize the ecological costs of production.

Reflecting on the capacity of the neoliberal agrifood regime to persist and to grow in the face of unjust treatment of labor, ecological degradation of on- and off-farm ecosystems, negative public health outcomes, and other contradictions invites attention to ‘system boundaries.’ Attention to the criteria of evaluation of performance and legitimacy is critical for understanding how industrial agrifood is able to maintain professional, popular, and public sector support. The food sovereignty movement and the re-localization/re-embedding movement attempt to integrate non-agricultural and non-/productivist considerations into the calculus regarding what kind of agrifood system we have and what kind we should strive for. Additionally, the planning horizon of alternative models are quite different from that of corporate agri-food, and this explains something about capacity of the neoliberal regime to maintain legitimacy in the face of argumentation and evidence. Inability to re-define the criteria structuring analysis and to re-scope the debate can be understood as a significant weakness of critiques and resistance movements. The locavore movement and its cousins attempt to out-compete the corporate agrifood model on its own terms. We believe more attention should be devoted to alternative accountings and the constraints to institutionalization of new modes of evaluation.

In this context, it is our hope that the mini-conference could foster discussion and the sharing of ideas and proposals about the current characteristics, positive contributions, and future developments but also limits of resistance in agri-food. Also important would be to discuss counter moves carried out by dominant groups as well as salient actions performed at the state and civil society levels. Ideally, papers should provide theoretically and/or empirically based contributions that include a “critique” of current resistance. As indicated above, critique should be understood in terms of the exploration of “how far” each of these proposals/episodes of resistance can go in terms of opposing corporate neoliberal agri-food. All papers presented at the mini-conference will be considered for inclusion in an edited book to be published by a major academic press. Additionally, selected papers will be included in a special issue (or special issues) of the official journal of RC-40: *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*. In both cases, we hope to generate coherent bodies of contributions. Accordingly, it is likely that each of the participants would be asked to revise his/her paper to include/expand parts that contain a critique of current resistance initiatives as well as other pertinent dimensions.