

GLOBALISING FOOD

Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring

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COMMENTARY ON PART IV

Fields of dreams, or the best game in town

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While representing two very intriguing studies of agricultural change under the spur of social conflict, the chapters by Miriam Wells and by Philip Lowe and Neil Ward raise similar problems of method and meta-theory in the social sciences. I shall therefore begin with a brief account of the philosophical basis of the poststructuralist shift that they represent, both in its strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, the two chapters manifest rather different political commitments and theoretical stances behind the poststructuralist veil, which I shall take up subsequently. Lastly, the piece by Wells speaks volumes about matters of concern in our shared bailiwick of California, which I can address with some confidence about both local knowledge and the global significance of the events.

PHILOSOPHICAL FIELDS FOREVER

The authors use poststructuralist method to good effect in order to render the analysis of agrarian change more open, subtle and specific, and even dialectical. But one can justly ask whether such methodological florescence obviates the need for any theoretical commitment at all, that is to say, the need for any weighting of social forces and analytical models with systematic logic or causal process. Too many contemporary thinkers imagine that by laying out the terrain of inquiry more clearly and mapping the twists, turns, and branches of the pathways of knowledge, one creates a more complex landscape of learning more appropriate to the 'messiness' of the real world, as it were. Sara Berry (1993) among the agrarian theorists comes to mind. Yet I fear that this is not enough, and that the overgrown gardens of poststructuralist thought are just as often warrens of unrelated concepts, populated with the ruins of perfectly good theories.

Let's examine what hides behind the bushes in Lowe and Ward's approach. They cite Bruno Latour (1993) and John Law (1994) as their philosophical oracles to the effect that the social world is 'complex and messy', and attempts to impose an order on it are a modernist delusion. One must hive from an 'ostensive' view of society as the cause of people's actions

and cleave to a 'performative' vision in which society is made (constructed) by human action. This is all well and good, except that in the hands of Lowe and Ward (as so many poststructuralists) it allows them to gambol merrily on without any clear notion of social structure at all. They confuse, it seems to me, the documentation of process and struggle at the micro level with the need to discover whether there has been any systematic outcome. The danger is that after reading their chapter one has no more idea of whether there is a new agrarian regime (or whether any such thing could even exist) than one had at the beginning; equally, it is difficult to discern what the macro politics of pollution is all about (or why it's so important at this time), why agriculture is caught in a vice, and so forth. Indeed, Lowe and Ward appear to have retreated from the well-tended garden of agrarian theory altogether and into the bourgeois briar-patch of methodological individualism. One can see the negation of social science at work in the percentage of methodological arm-waving versus theory-building and presentation of evidence.

Wells' chapter takes a different tack, and she has a brilliant book, *Strawberry Fields* (1996), to back it up. The latter is destined to be one of the classics of agrarian studies. Its standing makes me loath to criticise, and everything I say must be read with that initial sense of wonder at a beautiful piece of scholarship. It takes a messy and complex bit of world agriculture and makes sense out of it in a remarkably convincing way, and does so by retaining a good deal of classical Marxian and agrarian theory while opening up the theoretical system to more determinations, more agency, more politics, and a great deal of fresh air. Now she, too, cites Latour approvingly but to quite different effect, taking the view that one must walk a fine line between the performative and the ostensive characterisations of society in order to capture the *reciprocal* determinants of structure and agency. She then proceeds to unpack very carefully the mutual constitution of economics and politics, labour and capital, the local and the global, the migratory and the resident, sector and economy, law and political economy, and so forth.

That careful treatment of her subject, fresh strawberry production in California's central coast and the recrudescence of 'sharecropping' there, means that she takes agrarian scholarship forward in some very specific ways while retaining some hoary – but still germane – concepts such as the commodity sector, the physical imperatives of agriculture, class, segmented labour markets, and the like. What she adds is a strong emphasis on the *local* in the face of globalising theory, of politics over the grinding logic of economics, of moral discourse over economic calculation, and of worker agency over totalising capitalist control. I can hardly disagree with these at one level, since they are eminently valuable counterpoints to much one-sided thinking, from jejune journalists to armchair academics. Nonetheless, it must be said that a mere statement of general philosophical purposes, however couched in dialectics, network theory, poststructuralism, and the like, never solves any real analytic problem; it only prepares the way. There

is still the hard work of weighing the evidence and weighting the categories, of making theoretical simplifications (abstractions) that illuminate, and of keeping the logic straight (however messy and complex and dialectical it may be). Therefore, Miriam Wells' solutions to her problem – and to others to which we might apply her reasoning – are by no means beyond reproach. I will address these in the concluding section.

TECHNICS AND AGRARIAN CIVILISATION

Technology and the labour of transforming nature according to principles independent of all social relations are an essential part of the arguments of both Wells and Lowe and Ward. In Wells' case, she hives to the now long-standing view within agrarian studies that nature matters, from which follows the ideas of sectoral specificity (agriculture is distinctive by virtue of the way it must wrestle with a fractious nature) and of resistance of agriculture (and industry) to the pure logic of capital (agriculture is not transformed in a linear and uniform way into a field of play for big corporations, big machinery, and big operations) (Goodman *et al.* 1987, Mann 1990). I learned this lesson early in my career from the rural sociologists and geographers such as Bill Friedland (McLennan and Walker 1980) and transferred it back to industrial geography, where it was still news to many (Storper and Walker 1983, 1989). I notice with some amusement that sectoral studies and commodity chains are now hot ideas in development studies (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994, Evans 1995).

Behind this conviction in the importance of sectoral specificity, however, Wells maintains a radical vision of the significance of politics and social relations of production in the unfolding of industrial history, whether urban or agrarian. Her starting point is as a 1960s New Leftist in California, whose allegiance to the United Farm Workers went hand in hand with struggles against imperialism, racism, and capitalism. I wonder what Lowe and Ward's personal history or allegiances might be, since I see in their essay a quite different set of political commitments.

The extreme methodological position of Lowe and Ward is commensurate with a more liberal political stance. It is liberal by virtue of its refusal to commit to any positionality (which is true of all relativist postmodern stands). It reminds me of Simon Schama's (1995) towering monument to environmental disbelief, *Landscape and Memory*, the purpose of which is to convince us that environmentalist commitments of the present are just so much flotsam riding on the to-and-fro of history's tides. In Lowe and Ward's cast, this is achieved through the relativising effect of the move to moral discourse as the primary object of inquiry. This is not to say that the shift in social views about farming and nature the authors point to, from an agrarian ideology of the farmer as Husbandman of Mother Nature to an environmentalist ideology of farmer as Nature-Wrecker, is unimportant. But the reasons

for the shift and the social struggles behind it are not elucidated, so one is left feeling that all such morals are relative, rather than that the environmentalists have a damned good point. I suspect that the authors are probably environmentalists themselves but they are so caught up in the epistemological stratagems of Law, Latour and Co. that they forget their own commitments. Elsewhere they invoke Lewis Mumford, perhaps the greatest spokesman for the baneful effects of modern technology (e.g. Mumford 1934), and write at length on 'the ethos of productivism'. The key line is this: 'In effect, modern technology has driven a wedge between the farmer's interest in production and traditional agrarian stewardship . . .'. This is a very common environmentalist view, and one I share, in part, because I was an environmentalist before I ever read Marx. I am quite convinced that technology *is* a relatively independent force for social change (and there's good reason to think Marx thought so, too) (Walker 1985, 1988). Similarly, nuclear waste will kill you whether it's produced by capitalists or socialists, as Chernobyl proved to any remaining doubters.

Nonetheless, it is quite another thing to move from this recognition of technical determination to a historical vision of 'industrial society (and its associated modernist project)'. This is the sort of postmodern stance that is actually a reversion to modernisation theory of the 1950s (Kumar 1978). It is one thing to speak of the ethos (and practice) of productivism, which infected communist societies as well as capitalist, but another to fail to mention the influence of capitalism on the English farmers who have become so wholeheartedly producers instead of stewards of the land. To blame this on postwar technology alone, as the authors do, without any prior history or contemporary influence of capitalist relations of competition, exploitation, accumulation and dualist thinking, is an oversight that Mumford himself would denounce in thunderous terms.

Presenting environmentalism in the guise of the 'field-level bureaucrat' is another depoliticising move than takes us beyond Weber and into the arms of contemporary American political science. Again, this is not to deny the insight that field officers play a significant role in regulation as moral imperative and practical restraint (I argued this myself for years when teaching courses on pollution regulation; see Walker *et al.* 1979). But Lowe and Ward leave it at that, as if the modern British state were the sum total of its low-level officials. No neo-Weberian of any standing would countenance such a view if the topic were economic development or social welfare policy (e.g. Skocpol 1979, Johnson 1982); nor would any contemporary Marxist (e.g. Anderson 1987, Hobsbawm 1990); why should environmental policy be an exception?

HOEING THE MARXIAN ROW

Wells is remarkably orthodox in her labourist, even Marxist, views of agrarian political economy. But she is also quite unorthodox in her appreciation of geography, morality, and the law, and the agency of the weak against overwhelming top-down forces. I am very much in sympathy with Wells' insistence on local, temporal, and sectoral diversions from (and reversals of) the global logic of capitalism, and their roots in politics, culture, history, and agency. Nonetheless, I am still going to suggest some ways in which she has given insufficient attention to the larger story at several geographic and historical levels, ways that confirm more than deny the cogency of a sufficiently geographical yet orthodox political economy.

California agriculture and the logic of capital

Wells' strawberry story points up the importance of paying attention to local circumstance, but she is so focused on the narrative of labour struggles and on the micro geography of the Central Coast region that the chance to drive home a greater lesson of the local and the global is foregone. That is, the significance of California agriculture as an accumulation of wildly successful segments in strawberries, grapes, raisins, cotton, lettuce, and so forth, and extraordinarily productive regions such as the Imperial Valley, Fresno County, and the Salinas Valley, is not merely that it is different, but that its difference carries a punch felt well beyond the state's boundaries, and far around the world. Wells provides a good thumbnail sketch of California agriculture in her book (Wells 1996: 19–27) as a backdrop to the amazing postwar expansion of fresh strawberry production, but still leaves the impression that strawberries are more the exception than the rule in the most dynamic agricultural region on earth. Indeed, her stress on local climate and soil in the Central Coast, while valid in part, makes California's blessing seem to be more natural than social. Yet the most important distinction the region has is not its relatively unusual Mediterranean climate, but its exceptional degree of capitalist domination of field agriculture.

California agriculture has been thoroughly capitalist for a century and a half, as Carey McWilliams pointed out long ago in *Factories in the Fields* (1939). No need here for capitalism to gradually squeeze out the family farm or edge into fields from its strongholds in industry and finance (though it did that, too). The land was bought up in seven-league parcels by San Francisco capitalists (made rich by the gold rush and nineteenth-century expansion) and immediately converted to wheat and cattle ranches. Small farms made some inroads in the early irrigation period, but were shouldered aside by larger operators once again after 1900 (Liebman 1983). Long before migration began from Guanajuato and Oaxaca, Chinese gang labourers were

contracted to build levees, plant fruit trees, and cultivate speciality crops (Chan 1986). Long before the era of fresh strawberries, California agribusiness was aggressively creating a national (and even international) market for fresh citrus, canned fruit, and white asparagus, then shunting aside southern cotton growers (many of them true sharecroppers), midwestern canners, eastern peach farms and hen-houses, and even Turkish raisin shippers (Walker 1996a).

In California, the logic of industrial capital has had full sway in agriculture, with the kinds of results Marx or Lenin would have predicted: singularly large landholdings, massive investment in water systems, rapid mechanisation wherever possible, harnessing of science, mass proletarianisation, and a choke-hold on the government in its domain. This by no means denies the refractive nature of agriculture either as a peculiar industry or an arena rich with alternative (and fiercely defended) social relations of ownership. Indeed, California's 'exceptionalism' on this score, until very recently, provides an essential counterpoint to the mainstream of agrarian history and theory. Nevertheless, it also shows quite boldly how the logic of capital, once embedded in a social production system, drives it relentlessly forward, revolutionising all methods it can lay hands on and melting everything solid in its path. And that capitalist, industrial model is spreading wildly around the globe today, partly through the competitive force of places like California and partly through mimesis, by force of example, as more and more places replicate Californian methods.

All this makes the local more than a curiosity worthy of specialised attention by researchers. It is more even than a huge anomaly for regulation theory and its universalising about Fordism and post-Fordism, whether industrial or agrarian (California was never Fordist in any of its leading sectors – see Walker 1996a). Even more, the local can be a potential hothouse of innovation, competition and transformation that can burst upon an unsuspecting world at any time, as New England's machinists did at the Crystal Palace, Japanese car-makers did in the 1970s, and Taiwanese integrated circuit companies are doing in the 1990s (Hsu 1997). That is the 'truly revolutionary road' (i.e. bottom-up) to globalisation for any locality.

The macro politics of class struggle

I cannot agree more with Wells' distrust of the conservative rhetoric of mechanical globalisation, in which the global economy is said to force nations, classes, and individuals into predetermined reactions. She restores the political to pride of place among causal factors in a sophisticated model of agrarian political economy, and makes a convincing case for the impact of labour organising and legal contests in making and breaking the 'sharecropper' regime in strawberries. The argument is straightforward enough: the United Farm Workers (UFW) made great strides in organising Cali-

fornia field and harvest workers after the Bracero immigration programme was ended via political protest. They raised wages and worker militancy, threatening owner control at the place of production. Growers responded by redefining employment from direct wage work to indirect labour contracting, utilising the same labour force and the same methods of production, but leaving the workers freer to recruit and manage their collective labour.

Wells goes into considerable detail about the micro politics of production, differentiating among three subsets of growers and workers in separate sections of the Central Coast region. While I enthusiastically support such attention to the revealing micro geographies of labour markets and production systems (Walker 1996b), in this instance Wells might have attended more to the larger scales of class struggle and less to the small ones. In part, I do not find the fine divisions she draws carry that much explanatory weight, despite her best efforts. While she distinguishes three production subregions, she can only find two sharecropping systems, with one covering 90 per cent of output. A simplified unitary model would still get us a long way with less trouble (while, admittedly, shortchanging the North Monterey Hills zone).

More important, farm labour struggles in strawberries, while unique in some respects, have been not far out of synch with California, the US in general, and even world class politics over the last thirty years (indeed, they were most out of touch during the New Deal era of the previous thirty years, thanks to the exemption of farm labour from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935). The UFW's ascent was part of a larger political upheaval of the 1960s, and in fact played a leading role in that historical moment. Its strength peaked with the last gasp of American liberalism in the 1970s, particularly Jerry Brown's smashing victory in the governor's race of 1974, in repudiation of Ronald Reagan's preceding regime, and passage of the state Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1976. Conversely, the farmworkers, rapidly diminishing power in the 1980s corresponds very well to state and national trends in the weakening of organised labour and erosion of real wages. Brown's liberalism came under heavy assault (as did President Carter's), by 1978, and both caved in quickly to the pressures from the New Right (Walker 1995).

For all the local particularity and even leading role of California politics in national affairs, we have to acknowledge that the tidal wash of class politics and the massive defeat of the working class by the bourgeoisie in the 1980s was in some sense a global phenomenon. Moreover, it correlates rather well with global economic trends after 1973, including falling rates of profit, inflation, increased international competition, financial globalisation, and greater cyclical fluctuations (which, while uneven, were surprisingly general) (Webber and Rigby 1996). While one did not unilaterally cause the other, the economic troubles almost certainly rendered the political attack on

labour both compelling and hard to resist, and the joint result has been a very clear trajectory for real wages and job security, both heading south rapidly.

Forms of labor, divisions of labor and capitalist development

At the core of Wells' story is the regional shift from wage labour to 'sharecropping' in the strawberry fields. This reversion from wage labour to a putatively pre-capitalist form of labour is a curiosity which she seeks to explain in terms of class struggle, law, and ideology. In the book, she makes clear that this is not a peasant-landlord relation, but a sophisticated type of capital-labour relation which ought properly to be called 'share labour' (Wells 1996: 302). Growers converted their workers into labour contractors in response to UFW organising. While this peculiar form of labour contract is, legally and ideologically, distinctive and not reducible to standard employment practices in the United States, Wells may be making too much of it. After all, even the judge in the *Real* case thought it was a cover for wage labour. It certainly does not justify her retreat from Marx and Lenin, as if capitalist time had been wholly reversed, rather than hiring practices shifted between possible alternatives. Nor is this sort of internal labour subcontracting system unprecedented under capitalism, as illustrated by steel and other craft worker contracts before Taylorism (Brody 1960). Indeed, California agriculture has regularly utilised labour contractors to organise gang labour in the fields and harvests, a form that has come back with a vengeance throughout the state (Villarejo and Runsten 1993). Worse yet, Wells retreats altogether at one point from Marx's notion of the centrality of wage labour in the capitalist transformation of the modern world, to join Wallerstein's World System theorists in seeing money capital as the central actor in the global economy, making use of all kinds of labour, willy-nilly, as suits its needs. Without getting lost in that larger debate, which has merit on both sides, California agriculture, in my view, has been revolutionary precisely because it has been capitalist and based on wage labour, not family or slave labour.

Another surprise for Wells is that California agriculture, particularly the fruit and vegetable segments, is so labour intensive (currently employing something like half a million workers, more than electronics, entertainment, or aerospace in the state and over half of all hired labour in US agriculture). This is surprising for all leftists who have grasped one horn of the Marxian theory of accumulation, the drive towards mechanisation and automation, but failed to grasp the other horn, the accumulation of the proletariat (cf. Marx [1863] 1967, Chapters 20-22). There is no mystery to the reappearance of human labour in the industrial machinery once one is attentive to the way capitalism repeatedly throws up new divisions of labour, including new sectors, new work places, and new jobs. This is sometimes understood in the context of internationalisation of manufacturing, where the global

working class is bigger than ever, despite cries of the 'end of work' (Watts and Boal 1995), but is quite amazing to (white) intellectuals when it shows up inside the belly of the American beast. Wells misunderstands this as simply a local or sectoral deviation from the norm rather than as a theoretical necessity of the capitalist system; that is, she scores the wrong point against orthodoxy.

Finally, the labour recruitment system of California agriculture is largely an immigrant one, utilising familial and village networks to siphon north workers from Mexico. Wells does a good job of comprehending the political dimensions of such a labour market (in terms of immigration policy and labour law), but does little with the micro dynamics of household and village structures, despite a considerable literature on Mexican migration (e.g. Massey *et al.* 1987) and the insistence of feminist scholars that the patriarchal deployment of family labour and internal struggles of women over divisions of labour, surpluses, and property are every bit as political as US labour law (e.g. Carney 1986, Scheper-Hughes 1992).¹

Moral economy and capitalist ideologies

Wells (like Lowe and Ward) calls upon the concept of 'moral discourse' for some important analytical work. In the strawberry struggles, a key role is played by the ideology of 'free contract' under the sharecropping system. Many workers buy into the view that they are thereby rendered more independent, able to manage their own labour, and likely to gain access to farm property themselves. This is not entirely a fiction, but they are also more exposed to risk and more overworked (self-exploitation), and few, if any, escape their class station to buy their own farms. In any event, when a group of sharecroppers sues the grower corporation over its heavy-handed control of production, they are unable to make legal headway until their attorney persuades them to sue under the laws protecting wage workers. Surprisingly, they win the case and lead growers to abandon the strategy of sharecropping.

Without doubt, ideas of justice and the legal system were critical to the way the class struggle played out in the Central Coast. Nonetheless, one cannot stretch the argument too far. This is a perfect example of the power of bourgeois ideology of property and contract, which, as Marx said, 'is a very Eden of the innate rights of man' ([1863] 1967 p. 176). Workers accede to that ideology quite readily, as one might expect in a capitalist society (or, perhaps, because of characteristically peasant backgrounds). But when they try to extend their interests as petit bourgeois operators, the company and the courts quickly slap them down. Only then must they face their still overwhelmingly proletarian status – persuaded by a lawyer who is a labour advocate within the US labour law system and very likely a product of the radical sixties herself.

Adding the factor of legal discourse and ideals of justice makes the study

richer but does not decisively shift the terms of causality in a complex and messy world from political economy (materialism) to consciousness (idealism). Ideology, another term redolent with classical Marxism, remains quite serviceable. And while 'discourse' can easily serve in its place, it comes loaded with freight of its own, as the leading term in the anti-Marxist doctrines of the poststructuralists and postmodernists, one which fully intends to invert the terms of analysis from political economy to cultural-literary studies. The chapter by Lowe and Ward flirts with this very danger.

I am not opposed to cultural studies and the recognition of the power of symbolism, representation, ideation and the whole edifice of human thought and imagination. Indeed, in my view political economy always had to work against the grain of imagined worlds of the mind in order to have any purchase at all. The wonder of materialist explanation for me has always been that it explained so much *in spite of* the presumption that such rude facts as prices, wages, and economic calculation seem so vulgar and trifling to most well-off Americans and almost any creative intellectual. So I am well aware that there is no single 'ruling ideology' that structures all thought. Here, too, geography, history, agency, and the openness of human affairs render reductionist formulae useless.

It is then somewhat surprising that Wells never ventures much outside the context of US labour law in exploring the effects of ideology and culture on the strawberry workers. She observes that the ones in the marginal area of the Monterey Hills are more 'Mexican' in their sense of deference and lower wage expectations, but she takes that insight no farther. One would like to see, first of all, a greater understanding of what Mexican national culture is and how it substantially intrudes on US society through mass immigration (cf. Eagleton 1991, Sanchez 1993, Johns 1997). Likewise, one would hope for a geographer's sense of the variation within Mexico, by state, city, and country; north and south; mestizo and indio; and how that, too, infiltrates the United States. Can we assume that the Mexicans employed in the Monterey Hills come from the same background as those in the Pajaro Valley? Finally, one would like Wells to signal some appreciation that Mexican culture can be as much a source of strength as a weakness in labour organising. After all, the first farm labour union in the history of California, formed in Oxnard in 1903, was a coalition of Mexican and Japanese farmworkers, and the fiercest field labour struggles of the 1930s were led by Mexicans and Filipinos (Camarillo 1984). Mexican born and mostly illegal immigrants have also been the backbone of several key industrial organising victories in California in the last five years, most famously Justice for Janitors. And in the period since the publication of *Strawberry Fields*, the Mexican workers of the Monterey Hills have risen up and joined the UFW. This is quite unexpected in Wells' terms.²

In short, Miriam Wells has given us a great deal to chew on, Philip Lowe and Neil Ward have posed questions for which they seem to provide few

answers. In any case the analytic task before us in agrarian studies is rendered no easier by excessive philosophising or references to the latest intellectual wave from Paris breaking upon our shores. Agrarian studies as a field has a noble history and a lot of solid insights to build on. The same can still be said of Marxism, despite the end of communist history. We have nothing to lose but our commodity chains.

NOTES

- 1 Thanks to Sarvar Kothavala for making this point to me.
- 2 Thanks once more to Sarvar Kothavala for bringing this to my attention.

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PART V

TRANSNATIONAL CAPITAL AND LOCAL RESPONSE