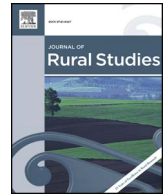


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Reassembling nature and culture: Resourceful farming in Araponga, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the emergence of a regenerative, agroecological mode of agriculture following the on-going process of experimentation and learning by a settlement of landless people and farm workers. It examines how they engaged anew with ‘nature’ and generated resourceful farming practices as a result of a threefold process of cultural re-appreciation, a re-grounding in local natural resources and a political-economic re-positioning towards prevailing regimes in policies, markets and technologies. We argue that the construction of resourceful farming culminates around: finding and forging productive alignments with non-human nature such as weeds, trees and mycorrhizal fungi, viewing the contribution of non-human nature not only in terms of their value as a commodity, but as adding value in many different ways and building a socio-material resource base and an institutional setting that allows farmers to farm more autonomously.

1. Introduction

It has been widely argued amongst scholars that de-agrarianisation and agricultural degradation result from the commodification of land and labour, and the simplification and rationalisation of agriculture, which breaks the metabolic relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in agriculture. In the literature, this is referred to as the ‘metabolic rift’ (Marx, 1973; Foster, 1999; Wittman, 2009) and has been taken as a defining feature of the *capitlocene*, the era in which extraction of nature has and is irreversibly destroying the planet on a geological timescale (Moore, 2017). It is argued that the metabolic rift can only be repaired through transformations of the larger state economy and that (agroecological) alternatives function as a form of capitalism “from below” that only works well in ecosystems rich of natural resources. Such alternatives, it has been further argued, will not be able to produce enough to “feed the world” and require a large amount of labour because they are devoid of external knowledge, technology and inputs which disables farmers to make a decent living and drive the younger generation away from agriculture (Jansen, 2015; Bernstein, 2014).

These arguments carry problematic assumptions about the relation between human ‘culture’ and non-human ‘nature’ in farming. First of all, non-human nature is taken as either décor that can be ignored or as a resource that can be technically controlled and fixed by its “natural” characteristics. Such a view ignores the non-human labour force upon which agriculture rests, such as mycorrhizal fungi and soil organic matter, making it de facto invisible, often with overexploitation and degradation as a result (Tsing, 2015; Martinez-Alier, 2002). Ignoring the agency of non-humans next to those of humans disregards the productive potential of human and non-humans alignments in different

time-space constellations. Second, the valuable contribution of non-humans in farming is reduced to the “objectified” exchange value or price of the commodities produced. In doing this, farming is reduced to the transformation of markets based inputs, with commodities such as seeds and fertilizers, into other commodities. This leaves farming being embedded in and determined by the logic of commodity markets (van der Ploeg, 2010; Schneider and McMichael, 2010). This view obscures non-market transactions and the versatile benefits farming may bring to the agro-ecosystem, the livelihoods of farmers and their communities and society as a whole (Martinez-Alier, 2002; McMichael, 2013). And third, it disqualifies the culture of farming, and more in particular a peasant style of farming (Van der Ploeg, 2013), as a being pre-capitalist, outdated, inefficient and inherently inert. Thus ignoring the inspirational, creative and innovative power of culture in general, as in arts, and the art of farming in particular. Culture refers to shared ideas, notions, norms and values shaping the social (inter)actions of humans, as well as an interaction with non-humans in a meaningful way. It includes an appreciation of these interactions and what are seen as good farming practices in aligning culture and nature, and how by mediation of farming techniques cultural and natural processes get assembled into and are co-evolving as part of an agro-ecosystem.

In this article we present a detailed account of how ‘nature–culture’ alignments are reworked and how culture, nature and technology are re-assembled in a settlement of previously landless people and farm workers in Araponga, Brazil. How they, in becoming farmers, developed resourceful, place-specific farm practices, seen as key to a peasant mode of farming (Van der Ploeg, 2013, 2017). Earlier this has been presented as a case of repeasantisation and – in view of their return to the land and quest for land – also a case of reagrarianisation (Van den

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Berg et al., 2016). In an evolving process of collaborative experimentation and learning-by-doing the farming community developed the space and the capacity to reshape ‘nature – culture’ interactions and develop more resourceful, agroecological farming practices – notably, in an area where the natural resources had been degenerated because of commodity-based, agro-industrial farming practices. Their shift towards and commitment to agroecological, regenerative farming practices was given crucial support by change agents and agencies, complemented by new institutional arrangements and effective institutional reform (Van den Berg et al., 2016). In this article we continue to argue how this process of re-alignment and re-assembling can be analysed as an evolving, threefold process of a *re-appreciation* of farming and good farming practices, a *re-grounding* of farming in the available natural resources with the intention to enrich their resource base, that however has to be complemented by a *re-positioning* towards prevailing markets, policies and innovation systems to create a more supportive institutional embedding to their resourceful, regenerative farming practices.

In section two of the article we will first frame the development of resourceful, regenerative farming as re-assembling nature and culture, arguing that we cannot think of them as entities on its own, they are co-constructed and co-evolve, intermediated by farming techniques. Next the methodology is briefly explained in section 3. Section four of the article provides a detailed account for the Araponga case, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

2. Resourceful farming: re-assembling ‘nature–culture’ in a threefold process

If we want to understand how ‘nature–culture’ alignments are re-worked in developing resourceful farming practices, we first of all need to go beyond the dichotomy of ‘nature’ versus ‘culture’ in which both are conceptualised as two separate, bounded entities or ‘orders’, e.g. as an ecosystem and a social system, that exist on their own each with its own distinct dynamics (Ingold, 1993; Jasanoff, 2004). We must also move away from linear explanations of nature as determined by culture (Haraway, 1991; Norgaard, 1994).

For a better understanding we have to move away from perceiving nature and culture as fixed relationships or as bounded entities towards an understanding of socio-material assemblages that encompass both natures and cultures and that are constituted by ideas, human and non-human agents, acknowledging that agency is distributed amongst both human and non-human agents (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Haraway, 1991; Anderson and MacFarlane, 2011; Woods, 2015).

Ordering results from temporary alignments of ideas, human and non-human agents (Law, 1994; Muller and Schurr, 2016) which may be local or from other localities (Tsing, 2000; Davies, 2012; MacFarlane, 2009). ‘Nature’ and ‘culture’ can thus only be distinguished analytically. ‘Nature’ can be reconsidered as all living and dead matter, a material dimension resulting from the alignment between human and non-human agents. ‘Culture’ refers to the shared ideas, notions, norms and values shaping the (inter)actions of human beings, resulting in patterns of shared ways of doing, thinking and feeling as cultural repertoires or styles of farming (Van der Ploeg, 2012). Nature-culture alignments are not politically neutral. They incorporate particular actively constructed values and views, which are embedded in particular power constellations that in turn can intervene in and impact on nature-culture alignments (Latour, 1983; Mol, 1999). Next to natural (or ecological) and cultural ordering processes, we thus acknowledge for the political-ecological dimension.

Agents may deliberately rework nature-culture interactions by intervening in socio-material assemblages and try to intermingle or re-order them. This may result in intended, unintended and even unforeseen outcomes that re-align agents or that lead them to disperse and reassemble in a new constellation (Davies, 2012; Muller and Schurr, 2016). To understand interventions we therefore have to think of a complex working whole in which nature and culture are seamlessly

interwoven (Roep, 2000).

Human interventions have been divided into those that seek to control nature and those that resemble notions of “living with” nature. The latter entails a more responsive and responsible relation to non-human nature (Hinchliffe, 2008; Pickering, 2008; Turnhout et al., 2013). Human interventions can enrich, maintain or degrade places. Roep et al. (2015) and Horlings (2016) maintain that an enrichment of places involves a well-coordinated, threefold process of cultural re-appreciation, of re-grounding in natural resources and a political-economic re-positioning towards prevailing regimes in policies, markets and technologies. Resourceful, regenerative farming can be conceptualised as an expression of such a threefold process.

Farming practices can be understood as deliberate interventions by human agents in an effort to coordinate a complex assemblage constituted by specific seeds, plants, animals, soil, fields, landscapes, buildings, machines, humans, farms, families, industries, consumers – but also shared ideas, norms, values and so on that according to the ability of the practitioners are aligned in specific and productive ways, resulting in time- and space-differentiated, place-specific, intended, unintended and even unforeseen outcomes (Tsing, 2000; Buller, 2013). This is what Van der Ploeg (2013, 2017) denotes as ‘the art of farming’.

Different farm assemblages can be seen to represent different values, depending on how the assemblage is constituted. One can think of two contrasting modes of agriculture. One mode extracts (valuable) resources from the place of production and transfers them to the place of consumption. This is associated with an agro-industrial mode of farming and has been heavily promoted under the Green Revolution. The transfer of resources and accumulation in the place of consumption provokes a degradation of resources and impoverishment in the place of production. The agroecological mode of farming counters this. It aims to enrich the resource base at the place of production, creating multiple values to the benefit of farmers, their families, their livelihoods, their community and the agroecosystem they operate in (McMichael, 2013; Turnhout et al., 2013). In short: enrich the place. The first mode is a commodity directed agriculture, also referred to as a capitalist or entrepreneurial mode of farming, and the contrasting second mode is commonly referred to as a peasant mode of farming (see Van der Ploeg in this special issue; McMichael, 2015).

Following this, one can imagine a shift from a commodity based mode of agriculture that is merely extracting value from a place, to a versatile mode of agriculture that add multiple values to a place, enriching the resource base and thus has the potential to counter the degeneration and depletion of resources and the consequent impoverishment of livelihoods, communities and places. The Araponga case provides a telling example of the emergence of a place-enriching, regenerative agriculture. This involves a well-coordinated, threefold process of re-appreciation, re-grounding and re-positioning: a re-appreciation of farming and the agroecosystem it operates in and a quest for farming practices that will generate a multiplicity of values for the place; a re-grounding of farming in the agroecosystem that aims to enrich the socio-material resource base, i.e. both natural and human resources; and a re-positioning towards prevailing regimes in policies, markets and technologies that promote and support a commodity-oriented, agro-industrial mode of farming. All include a transformation of power relations and a re-assembling to create the space and build the capacity to farm differently, re-working the complex whole of ordering processes.

3. Methodology

This paper draws from an ethnographic study carried out in the municipality of Araponga, in the Zona da Mata region in Brazil, which has been considered an exemplary case of agroecology (Cardoso and Mendes, 2015). It combines data derived from oral histories, farm observations and documented reports. The research draws on 25 interviews that enabled to reconstruct the process through which farms

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