



Managing collective symbolic capital through agro-food labelling: Strategies of local communities facing neoliberalism in Spain



Alfredo Macías Vázquez ^a, Pablo Alonso González ^{b, c, *}

^a Department of Economy, University of León, León, Spain

^b Archaeology Division, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom

^c Institute of Heritage Sciences, CSIC, Spain

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the strategic relevance for communities of properly managing collective symbolic capital under a neoliberal context, focusing on the impact of neoliberal policies in the capacity of communities to control the appropriation of value of their agro-food productions. The current economic crisis in Spain increases the pressure on the social and economic reproduction of the lower classes within local communities, and threatens the virtuous balance between the management of common resources and the collective symbolic capital associated with them. Entrepreneurial and institutional logic favors the capturing of collective symbolic capital by local bourgeoisies and transnational companies, while depleting the local common resources that had been exploited sustainably by local communities for centuries. The case study of the cultivation of clams in Carril, Spain, illustrates this process, while the conclusions from previous research on other Spanish agro-food systems are presented to provide a comparative analysis and potential development alternatives based on different strategies for the management of collective symbolic capital.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the human usage of common natural resources as a form of sustaining the reproduction of social life has become increasingly frequent. Scholars on this subject have paid special attention to forms of collective action that underpin the sustainable exploitation of common goods such as forests, fisheries and local agricultural productions (Agrawal et al., 2013). Such studies have mainly focused on how collective actions have dealt with the changes and challenges posed by endogenous and exogenous threats to material production, and on how these processes have affected social exclusion patterns, the depletion of common material resources, and the relationship between common resources, collective action, and identity (Mosimane et al., 2012; Ostrom, 1990). Less attention has been devoted to the relationship between rural communities' collective action and their collective symbolic capital.

In the current context, material productive processes are as important as the global assemblages that co-opt, capture and expropriate the collective symbolic capital held by and socially constructed around communities (De Angelis, 2007). Therefore, it is fundamental to understand the interconnection between the symbolic capital generated around rural communities and their localized knowledge and productive practices and to relate it with the global flows of value and exchange. In this paper, we explore the interrelationship between value and power, addressing the struggles between different actors to achieve control over the stocks of collective symbolic capital that can be converted into capital and profit. How do peasant communities address the growing need to manage the symbolic capital linked with their differential socio-territorial niches in post-industrial capitalism? What happens to communities that do not employ denominations of origin to protect their highly localized quality agro-food productions? Can communities use designations of origin to rearticulate the relations between value and power in ways that allow them to improve their position in the global value chains?

This paper discusses the tension that exists between the capacity of communities to increase control over value chains by localizing production, or to lose it in the face of exogenous

* Corresponding author. Division of Archaeology, Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3DZ, United Kingdom.

E-mail addresses: amacv@unileon.es (A. Macías Vázquez), pa332@cam.ac.uk (P. Alonso González).

pressures exacerbated by neoliberal policies. By providing an analysis of three agro-food productions with different management structures through a similar theoretical framework, it contributes to understanding of entrepreneurial and institutional logics. In relation to this, it analyses the role of different actors involved in agro-food production and distribution with the aim of improving the economic strategies of local communities in relation with the appropriation of collective symbolic capital. It argues that the management of collective symbolic capital is an area of tension in the relationship between communities and neoliberal policies, which can lead to increased local empowerment and agency or to the shattering of community and the deterioration of both material resources and collective symbolic capital. The specific character of Spain adds a further layer of complexity to this situation because neoliberal policies have often intermingled with modernist development strategies set out by a highly corporative and corrupt state (Alonso Gonzalez and Macías Vázquez, 2014). Moreover, the economic and institutional crisis that has been hitting Spain since 2009 has deepened the problems of local communities and producers who have lost support from the public administration as well as national and proximity markets with short distribution circuits. Certain exogenous economic actors profit from this situation by establishing connections with international markets and by displacing local communities' productions. To face this challenge, communities have attempted to develop different strategies to modulate the friction between collective symbolic capital and material production. However, local peasant communities tend to focus on the management of the material resource and disregard the management of collective symbolic capital. Both institutions and economic actors outside the community promote and profit from this situation, because it allows them to better control the distribution of value. How can this situation be improved?

To explore this question, first, this paper provides an analysis of the relationship between the production of value, collective action and the increasing rentier character of contemporary capitalism. The second section explains the methodology. Third, the paper illustrates and discusses these issues in light of the case study of an agro-food production without denomination of origin in Carril, establishing a comparative analysis with the cases of the denominations of origin of *Sierra Mágina* and *Rías Baixas*. The conclusions summarize the main findings and the lessons learnt.

2. Collective action, collective symbolic capital, and rent strategies

This work discusses how locally-based labels can serve to counter neoliberalization processes (Barham, 2003). The focus is placed on the questions that Guthman considers a pending challenge of academic debate, namely the “scant attention throughout this literature to the actual mechanisms that might capture and/or retain value”, to exploring “how value is captured” and examining “where value actually comes in the first place” (2007). Therefore, it is fundamental to address the relationship between the material common resource (shellfish, olive oil or wine), and the symbolic capital associated with it. In the post-industrial economy, certain differential practices, experiences and productions allow for the activation, enhancement or invention of places through a “process of meaning-creation which is carried out in the networks and flows that connect various physical places and draws forth their recognized and sustainable differences of identity. In other words, it is an exercise of differentiation, rather an exercise in identification” (Rullani, 2009: 244).

These processes of differentiation allow for the creation and accumulation of collective symbolic capital that can potentially

increase the value obtained from material productive processes. However, the increasingly rentier character of contemporary capitalist elites usually leads to the appropriation of collective symbolic capital produced by local communities. While exogenous actors have a higher understanding of symbolic forms of capital and a better position within the global networks of value and power, local communities are more often concerned with material production and immediate profit. Ultimately, this situation can lead to the disempowering of local communities because of their decreased capacity to appropriate rents from their productions, the blurring of their collective identity and, in some occasions, the exhaustion of their common material resources, while local bourgeoisies and transnational companies benefit the most.

Most studies on collective action and common resource management have focused on issues of governance of material features and resources (Van Laerhoven and Ostrom, 2007). Common goods are usually thought of as material entities bounded in space, including water, land, forests or fisheries. Our case study does not deal with these “given commons” (Alonso Gonzalez, 2014), but rather addresses resources which are common as the result of human action. Carril has a hybrid status because shellfish can be conceived as a common given resource, but the techniques and knowledge required for their cultivation are the result of human action. Some recent scholarship has started to consider the significance of collective identity in the long-term sustainability of forms of governance of material commons (Araral, 2009). These works highlight the dynamic governance structures and strategies of self-organization that enable communities to transform their collective identities according to the changing realities of the common resources (Mosimane et al., 2012).

Less attention has been paid to the relationship between common material resources and collective symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Harvey, 2002; Lockie, 2001; Pratt, 2007). Collective symbolic capital is a form of social capital that acquires a symbolic character through social forms of cognition and recognition, that is, it “exists and grows only in intersubjective reflection and can be recognized only there ... in the “eyes of the others”” (Siisjainen, 2003: 196–197). To underscore the differences between groups, social capital has to be transformed into symbolic differences that enable social actors to create different gradients of recognition and distinction. The difficulty in analyzing and managing symbolic capital is that it is an ideological process that “cannot be institutionalized, objectified or incorporated into the habitus” (Siisjainen, 2003: 196–197). Thus, although symbolic capital can be translated into other tangible forms of capital, this process requires knowledge, skills and power positions to do so. Therefore, communities, their practices, knowledge, products or a combination of them can be perceived by other groups as distinct, different and “other”, a difference could be potentially transformed into other forms of capital.

Collective symbolic capital is created in the tension between the local realities and the exogenous perception of these local realities by others. However, communities are neither static nor homogeneous, but are subjected to processes of production of the locality and to the neoliberal imperative to generate new identities in post-industrial society. Various authors have shown how local identities are increasingly mediated by reflexive processes of consumption and production that incorporate aesthetic values in the creation of commodities (Alonso Gonzalez, 2014; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009). Notwithstanding this, the differential local forms of organization and the production of material goods rest on forms of relationality that can be hardly imitable: implicit, informal and practical knowledge, craftsmanship, networks of contacts, cooperation and information, or gift exchanges, among other things. Indeed, discourses on collective action underscoring ideas of

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