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Neoliberal natures on the farm: Farmer autonomy and cooperation in comparative perspective



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ABSTRACT

The struggle over autonomy in farming is emblematic of the philosophical and practical tensions inherent in solving multi-scalar environmental issues. We explore the multiplicities of autonomy through comparative case studies of agricultural cooperation in England, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Brazil, which allow consideration of the implications of a range of approaches to managing farmed environments under different variations of neoliberalism. The original data emerge from separate projects examining aspects of cooperative autonomy in relation to the effects of the neoliberalisation of nature in agriculture. The comparative examination of autonomy and cooperation across distinct agri-food contexts highlights diversity in the social, ecological and economic outcomes of alternative forms of agri-environmental governance. This analysis provides a sobering corrective to both the over-romanticization of cooperation across global peasant movements and the over-romanticization of the individual entrepreneur in agro-industrial and family farming sectors. Our examination highlights the need for greater attention to the relationships between actors at and across different scales (the farm level, organizations and communities, the state, and industry) to understand how, in contrasting contexts of neoliberalisation, alternative conceptions of autonomy serve to mediate particular interventions and their material environmental consequences. A focus on actual autonomy, via the peasant principle and territorial cooperatives, creates an opening in theoretical and political dialogue to bridge concerns about farmers, livelihoods, and environmental outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Neoliberalism – in all of its variety – complicates the relationship between the individual and the collective. While mythological as a unified thing or concept, the very plasticity of neoliberalism makes certain things real – it has significant consequences not just on the person (Stock and Forney, forthcoming), but on the planet (Heynen et al., 2007). Where other work explores the development of a bio- or eco-economy in which the rural and the farmed

environments play a vital role in sustainable development (Kitchen and Marsden, 2011), this special issue focuses on the neoliberalisation of rural environments and nature. Farmers (and other rural actors) have been characterized as either legitimators or resisters of neoliberalism (Borras, 2010; Desmarais, 2007; Schneider and Niederle, 2010). Deeply embedded in both natural landscapes and neoliberal policies, farmers make daily choices regarding the management of property, land, and water - choices that are negotiated (Burton, 2014).

In much western agrarian thought, autonomy is a key trait or tool of identification central to both farmers themselves and neoliberalism, in general. Typically, a neoliberal agenda equates autonomy with individual entrepreneurship and rational behaviour (Emery, 2010; McElwee, 2008). Alternatively, the idea of re-peasantisation, popularized by van der Ploeg (2008), hinges on the exercise of “autonomy at higher levels of aggregation” or cooperative/collective autonomy, as resistance to Empire, code for the

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universalizing tendencies inherent in neoliberalisation. The enactment and practice of autonomy is a complex relationship involving context, culture, situatedness and experience (Schneider and Niederle, 2010).

A form of individual autonomy predicated on entrepreneurialism and neoliberal understandings of value equates good farm outcomes as equivalent to the maximization of profit regardless of context. Here, cooperative efforts are often organized either by industry or the state. As McMichael (2012) points out, though, van der Ploeg's version of autonomy helps to shift the epistemic and material understanding of *value*. Thus, the practices of peasants and family farmers, often aligned in farmer-led cooperatives, are posed as potentially regenerative via resistance to those same neoliberal values. Those that pursue and utilize autonomy as a tool of resistance are involved in an "open struggle" whereby individuals choose to cooperate in pursuit of both social and environmental goals. We call this actual autonomy. Examples include regional cooperatives and place-based initiatives that not only trade on quality, but are also invested in maintaining such natural quality (Campbell et al., 2009).

How are environmental outcomes on farms affected by the kind of collective engagement that farmers engage in and how does autonomy (in various guises) serve to mediate this relationship? Building on the ideal type of territorial cooperatives described by van der Ploeg (2008: 182–185), we use the distinction between *neoliberal* autonomy and *actual* autonomy to compare case study examples from England, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Brazil. This comparison offers insight into the variety and diversity of cooperative efforts and their impact on environmental outcomes in rural landscapes. We propose, based on the case studies presented here, that, in contrast to neoliberal forms of autonomy, *actual* autonomy (and how it affects behaviours) is more likely (but by no means certain) to deliver environmental goods and prevent environmental bads. Our aim is to provide a more nuanced analysis in response to what we often see as an over-romanticization of cooperation in characterizations of regional and global peasant movements, and a parallel over-romanticization of the individual entrepreneur in the agro-industrial and family farming sector. We argue that this examination highlights the need for greater attention to the micro/macro relationships between actors at and across different scales (the farm level, organizations and communities, the state, and industry) involving autonomy in neoliberal farming environments. A focus on actual autonomy, via van der Ploeg's focus on the peasant principle and territorial cooperatives, creates an opening in theoretical and political dialogue to bridge concerns about farmers, livelihood, and environmental outcomes without resorting to typical dichotomies between North and South, peasant versus family versus other kinds of farmers and other unhelpful distinctions.

2. Neoliberalism, autonomy and the farmed environment

We know that neoliberalism (in its variety) affects the environment by transforming human relationships to it through commodification (Castree, 2010: 1731; Heynen et al., 2007); we also know that farmers in many parts of the world expressly value their individual and professional freedom, often referred to as 'autonomy' or independence (Emery, in press; Gasson, 1973; Mooney, 1988; Stock and Forney, forthcoming; van der Ploeg, 2008). Can we get a sense of how these two realities are related by comparing farmers' autonomy at higher levels of aggregation? Is all cooperation good for the farmer or the farm - not just as a business, but an ecological place and system? The aggregation of farmers' autonomy as a cooperative response to neoliberalism runs the gamut. Cooperation can be interpreted as the pursuit of profit

sponsored by the state or industry through market boards or cooperatives like New Zealand's Fonterra milk cooperative (what we later characterize as neoliberal autonomy). The concept of autonomy is also prominent in language used by members of the global peasant movement La Vía Campesina. Here, discourse engages with a concern over (actual) autonomy in resistance to neoliberalism. To that end, we extend the theme of this special issue from neoliberalism and rural nature to a more specific discussion of how cooperation and autonomy can mediate environmental outcomes on the farm.

Neoliberal policies have penetrated rural governance, with significant implications for the material transformation of rural landscapes. While the relationship between neoliberalism and environmental degradation is not strictly linear, across many global landscapes the rise of the industrial revolution, mature capitalism, and more recently processes of neoliberalisation, have negatively impacted nature through species extinction, biodiversity loss, climate change, and soil erosion. In this paper, by focussing on tensions over autonomy, we follow the approach of Dibden et al. (2009: 301) to examine neoliberalisation through the mechanisms by which macro and micro scale processes intersect within agri-food contexts (see also Wolf and Bonnano, 2014).

In examining neoliberal processes and the farmed environment there is an important distinction to be made between the impact of neoliberalisation *on* the environment and the neoliberalisation *of* the environment. The former recognizes the unintended or indirect environmental consequences of neoliberalisation, whereas in the latter 'the environment' is brought into the neoliberal frame of reckoning through its commoditization and marketization. The neoliberalisation *of* the environment can be taken to represent efforts to rectify the market failures that impact *on* the environment.

At the policy level, state-supported agri-environmental schemes (AES) and the more recent market-based approach to payments for eco-system services⁴ (PES) are among the most common mechanisms to address negative externalities associated with farming. AES pay farmers to maintain, enhance or create environmental 'goods' and 'services'. With the government acting on behalf of society to redress failures of the market, these schemes provide a mechanism for the transaction of environmental goods and services between the farmer and the government (Mettepenningen et al., 2009). Whilst not fully representing free market exchange through the supply and demand of environmental commodities, these schemes do divide and price the environment into transactional components (e.g. payments per tree planted, per ha of wetland maintained, per metre of hedgerow maintained). There is considerable international effort, however, to further advance the use of market instruments through commodifying and trading environmental goods and services.

While PES schemes are market instruments generally initiated and/or managed by government agencies, voluntary sustainable food system initiatives such as organic and fair-trade labelling also reflect neoliberal values of individual choice, entrepreneurialism, valuation, devolution and self-improvement (Guthman, 2007, 2008a,b), but with more deliberate involvement from consumers. As such, farmer choices to reduce pesticide use, engage in habitat-friendly agricultural practices, and to practice soil conservation shift from autonomous ideological commitments related to environmental conservation to strategic engagement in niche market competition to reach consumers who 'vote with their fork'. This strategic shift is often mediated through cooperative enterprises

⁴ PES is a term used to describe a range of government and private sector initiatives which include the components and processes of ecosystems as commodities, rather than considering them as externalities (Wynne-Jones, 2014).

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