



Economies, ethics and emotions: Farmer distress within the moral economy of agribusiness



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ABSTRACT

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In the international literature farmer stress, mental illness and suicide are linked to economic conditions affecting farm viability that have emerged in relation to the neoliberal transformation, corporatization and globalization of agribusiness juxtaposed with climate change and concerns over environmental sustainability and periodic agricultural crises. Research and scholarship in this area has largely been framed through mental health frameworks informed by positivist and 'psy' discourses that marginalize ethical, political and emotional dynamics that shape farmer distress. At the margins of this dominant discursive framework however, interdisciplinary scholarship is emerging that problematizes farmer distress and suicide. This paper extends and contributes to this body of scholarship through insights derived from critical consideration of the operation of a moral economy in relation to farmer distress. It draws on elements of Andrew Sayer's work, which poses intersections between moral economy, political economy and wellbeing, to analyse empirical data from interviews with Australian wine grape growers experiencing distress. The paper demonstrates that in this case study, emotional distress arises from ethical breaches within social and economic relations between farmers, corporations and the State. In doing so, it brings the ethical and emotional dimensions of economic activity to the fore and thus calls for the problematization of social and political responses to farmer distress and suicide prevention.

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1. Introduction

In the international literature farmer stress, mental illness and suicides are socially constructed by dominant discourses as a crisis besetting agricultural communities, largely as a result of economic consequences following drought and climate change (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Berry et al., 2011; Guiney, 2012; Hanigan et al., 2012; Hart et al., 2011; Sartore et al., 2008), agricultural disasters (e.g. Gregoire, 2002; Mort et al., 2005; Peck et al., 2002) and transition to global, neoliberalised economies (e.g. Madare, 2012; Mitra and Shroff, 2007; Mohanakumar and Sharma, 2006; Münster, 2012). This discursive framework connects structural conditions with farm men by establishing linear connections between economy, financial stress, mental illness and suicide. Within this framework a psychosocial problematization dominates with an emphasis on stress and depression, help-seeking behaviour and social conditions that contribute to poor mental health such as lack

of service provision in rural areas, social isolation and social change (Alston, 2007; Berry et al., 2011; Gregoire, 2002; Guiney, 2012; Judd et al., 2006; Meyer and Lobao, 2003; Monk, 2000; Staniford et al., 2009).

In terms of understanding farmer suicide, the positivist mental health literature, arising from the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, renders suicide an event with antecedents, variables correlated with risk and gendered methods of self-harm (Guiney, 2012; Page and Fragar, 2002). Identifying the risk factors for farmer suicide constitutes a 'surface' to understanding suicide but one that is fragmented, reductive and circumscribed. As Price and Evans (2005: 45) argue, the 'psy' disciplines 'tend to focus on the dramatic outcomes of processes of stress in the form of suicide rather than the dynamics of social processes themselves which form the underlying causes of stress'. Since 'suicidal behaviour does not begin with the "precipitating factor" and end with the "suicidal act", but extends deep into individual and collective pasts and futures' (Staples and Widger, 2012: 199), what is needed is examination of the social and subjective dynamics that underlie the surface features. Such an approach, we suggest, would cast insight into the emotional experiences and subjective processes that potentially render life unlivable.

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The approach taken in this article does not directly focus on suicide and so this article does not seek to illuminate the subjective experiences of those who are suicidal. Rather, it aims to contribute to understanding how ethical, political and emotional dynamics generate distress and thus render suicide a possibility. Following Price and Evans (2009), we adopt the term 'distress' as a useful construct to open up critical space in which to think about the subjective experiences of farmers as shaped by discourse and one that offers deliberate ambiguity in order to explore dimensions of human emotional suffering. This approach enables distress to be contextualized and understood as 'bound up with the actualities of a farming way of life' (Price and Evans, 2009: 4). For instance, recent interdisciplinary scholarship has critically explored some of the complex ways in which farmer distress is enmeshed with gendered identities within patriarchal family farming (Price and Evans, 2005, 2009), the political economy and delimited agency (Bryant and Garnham, 2013) and cultures of farming masculinity in relation to pride and shame (Bryant and Garnham, 2014; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). This work is significant because it opens up new frameworks from which to generate social and political responses to alleviate distress and prevent suicide. The concept of distress also allows us to bring emotional experience to the fore, which is important since 'emotional relations tend to be regarded as something apart from the economic and/or something that is essentially private, and does not substantially infuse the public/policy sphere' (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7). The connection posited between economics and farmer stress suggests that exploring the emotional dynamics of economic activity would yield significant insights for understanding farmer distress. Much of the rural studies literature on farmer mental health and suicide however, has contributed to the marginalization of emotions through reified discourses of stoicism and resilience emerging from rural cultures of masculinity. However, as Ramirez-Ferrero (2005) and Bryant and Garnham (2014) have shown, emotions of pride and shame are bound up with subjective perceptions of self-worth and masculine farmer identity and deeply implicated in understanding farmer distress and the possibility of suicide.

This paper contributes to and extends interdisciplinary scholarship on farmer distress through critical exploration of emotions relating to economic activity based on empirical data generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with farmers experiencing distress. Previous scholarship has drawn attention to ways in which neoliberal transformation of the political economy of agriculture impacts on farmers and can be a basis for distress (Bryant and Garnham, 2013; Madare, 2012; Mohanakumar and Sharma, 2006; Price and Evans, 2009; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). Drawing on the work of Andrew Sayer (2000, 2001; 2005; 2007) we argue that within the structures of the political economy of agribusiness, a moral economy operates that impacts upon farmer wellbeing. The notion of a moral economy is useful for drawing attention to the ways in which economic processes are embedded within normative social and cultural aspects of the 'lifeworld' (Sayer, 2001). Such an approach enables examination of social and economic (in)justice at the level of interactions between corporations and households (Sayer, 2000, 2001). This paper synthesizes empirical data, theory and literature on economics, ethics and emotions to argue that there are ethical and emotional contours to understanding farmer distress that are situated within a moral economy involving social and economic relations between farmers, corporations and the State. Using a case study we show that farmer distress can arise from ethical injustice within a moral economy. A moral economy approach therefore shifts the focus of economic pressure away from individual farmers and onto the social and economic relations in which their businesses are enmeshed. Alternative forms of social and political response to farmer distress

and suicide, beyond individual mental health interventions and State directives to 'get bigger or get out' and 'just walk off the land', are thus provided with a framework from which to emerge.

2. Moral and political economies, ethics and emotions in agribusiness

There is a broad literature on moral economy, business ethics, corporate social responsibility and ethical trade in relation to agriculture. However, this literature largely takes up concerns with class relations in developing countries, developing countries within the context of international trade liberalization, animal welfare, environmental sustainability, food safety and farming practices in relation to technology. An exception is the work of Iyer (2009: 429) who suggests that the phenomenon of farmer suicides 'pose a challenge to our moral imagination and demand a deeper understanding of the extent, nature and justification for corporate social responsibility'. He argues for State and corporate responsibility in relation to the 'social contract' held with Indian cotton farmers in the context of neoliberal reform and multinational corporatization of agricultural supplies. Whilst the notion of a 'social contract' is complex and contested, it generally refers to tacitly understood social responsibilities as a basis for ethical conduct. This paper takes up a similar focus on ethics in the context of social and economic relations between farmers, corporations and the State within agribusiness. It specifically draws on a case study of family farming within a corporatized economic system and neoliberal political economy through interviews with primary producers of wine grapes in the Riverland region of Australia.

As with other nation states that have undergone neoliberal reform of the political economy and globalization of trade in agriculture, Australia has experienced a shift in the social contract between State and farmers whereby traditional constructions of farming as providing the sustenance of the nation have been largely supplanted with discourses of competition within a global marketplace of production and consumption (Lockie et al., 2006). Through this transformation, farming is no longer constituted as a separate field of economic activity but a 'node within an organized and well-articulated agri-food supply chain' (Pritchard et al., 2007: 80). Neoliberal reform of agriculture has entailed the abolishment of many State funded subsidies and other forms of welfarist policies and practices and the implementation of State facilitation for corporate investment (Overton and Murray, 2012). In the wine industry, like many others, the commercial interaction between primary producers (wine grape growers) and processing corporations (wineries) have been 'deregulated' through the removal of statutory marketing legislation and minimum pricing to open the industry up to a 'free market' (Pritchard et al., 2007). However, to reduce the risks of trading on a free market for both growers and wineries, the wine industry has adopted practices of contract farming (Fraser, 2005). Contracts are used in the management of supply chains both to coordinate transfer of produce and introduce mechanisms for quality control. However, whilst the practice of contract farming is intended to maintain a balance of power, under this arrangement the significant risks of farming are borne by primary producers whilst processors are advantaged through the capacity to source from different locations for competitive prices and not having to commit capital investment into farmland ownership (Pritchard et al., 2007). In addition, the practice of negotiating individual contracts between growers and wineries decentralizes and diminishes the power of growers by replacing collective agreements. Within neoliberal economic discourse, contract farming is often constituted in terms of economic transactions between rational self-interested parties. Commercial relations between primary producers and processing companies however, also entail

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