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Globalization, Food Quality and Labor: The Case of Grape Production in North-Eastern Brazil

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[Paper first received, 1 May 2011; in final form, 30 December 2011]

Abstract. This article investigates the consequences of the production of table grapes for export to corporate supermarkets in the global North on labor in a region of the Brazilian North-east. This production is destined to meet the growing demand for year-round food marketed as quality food. Quality food is required by supermarket chains to increase competitiveness and is guaranteed through third-party certification programs. Despite claims that certification not only maintains product quality but also safeguards the use of labor, the study demonstrates that the global production of quality grapes engenders negative consequences for workers. Laborers work longer for less pay, perform more sophisticated tasks, are employed mostly through temporary contracts, and experience new and more advanced forms of control. Additionally, the article illustrates the ways in which other salient actors, such as global food retailers, brokers and firms, operate in regard to labor and quality grape production. It is concluded that, despite various claims about the objectives of certification programs, the actual use of the certification processes at the local level does not translate immediately into better labor relations in the global South.

Introduction

The effect that globalization has on social relations has been one of the most frequently studied topics in recent sociological scholarship (e.g. Harvey, 1989, 2006; Dicken, 1998; Robinson, 2004; Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2011). In particular, concepts such as hypermobility of capital – the enhanced velocity with which various forms of capital (i.e. financial, productive, commercial) move about the globe – and global sourcing – the corporate search of convenient factors and conditions of production – have been employed to illustrate new and often more exploitative social relations (Harvey, 2005; Sassen, 2007; Reich, 2008). These concepts have also been employed in the study of agriculture and food to analyze the manner in which the existence and working of agri-food commodity chains link distant actors in consumption and

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production networks (e.g. Bonanno et al., 1994; Heffernan and Constance, 1994; Heffernan, 2000; Moreira, 2001, 2004; McMichael, 2002; Prichard and Burch, 2003; Busch and Bain, 2004; Friedland, 2004; Marsden and Murdoch, 2006; Burch and Lawrence, 2007).

Pertinent literature has further shown the importance of consumption as a form of resistance to corporate power and the manner through which the demand for 'quality' food has been employed to develop alternative and more democratic food networks (Humphery, 1998; Lockie, 2002; Marsden, 2003; Busch and Bain, 2004; Burch and Lawrence, 2005, 2007; Bonanno and Constance, 2008; Wright and Middendorf, 2008; Bonanno, 2010). Also documented are on-going corporate efforts to capture this demand and transform it into an instrument to enhance the power of global supermarket chains (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Gereffi et al., 2001; Marsden, 2003; Burch and Lawrence, 2005; Bonanno and Constance, 2008; Hendrickson et al., 2008). It has been shown that corporate retailers employ the notion of 'quality food items' to enhance their competitiveness in, and control of, increasingly concentrated mainstream markets (Moreira, 2001; Marsden, 2003; Busch and Bain, 2004; Burch and Lawrence, 2005, 2007; Konefal et al., 2005; Seyfang, 2006; Lawrence and Burch, 2007; Wright and Middendorf, 2008; Bain, 2010a; Bain and Hatanaka, 2010). Despite the wealth of research on the demand for quality food, relatively less attention has been paid to the intersection of corporate production, global mass consumption of quality food items, and labor. In particular, only limited emphasis has been placed on the ways in which the production of corporate quality food affects the use of labor. This article addresses this gap by illustrating the consequences of quality fruit production in a region of the global South on wage-labor. Specifically, the article investigates the consequences of the production of table grapes for export to corporate supermarkets in the global North on labor in a region of the Brazilian North-east. Attention is paid to the use of third-party certification programs (TPCPs) as mechanisms to define quality and instruments employed by relevant actors to shape the use of local labor.

The article opens with a review of pertinent literature. Key arguments on the outcomes of globalization of agri-food on food production and consumption and labor are reviewed along with salient contributions on third-party certification. The central segment of the article is occupied by the illustration of the case-study. The development and characteristics of grape production for export in the San Francisco Valley in North-eastern Brazil are illustrated. This segment also reviews the methodology employed in the study. The concluding part links the findings to relevant literature.

Globalization and Agri-food Production, Consumption and Third-party Certification

In recent years, the topic of globalization has received significant scientific attention in the social sciences in general (e.g. Cavanagh and Mander, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Flanagan, 2006; Harvey, 2006; Sassen, 2007) and in the sociology of agriculture and food in particular (e.g. Bonanno et al., 1994; McMichael, 1994; Prichard and Burch, 2003; Bonanno and Constance, 2008; Wright and Middendorf, 2008). One of the common traits of this literature is the emphasis on the processes of the compression of space and acceleration of time and their effects on production and consumption (Harvey, 1989, 2000, 2006; Dicken, 1998; Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2011). The compression of space refers to the reorganization of production and consumption based

on social relations that unfold over a space that is physically greater but socially smaller than in the past (Bonanno and Constance, 2008). For instance, large global food retailers in Europe control farm practices in Latin America with greater effectiveness and without direct intervention or ownership (Marsden et al., 1996; Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2011). Simultaneously, consumers in the affluent North can count on the availability of food items in a manner that transcends traditional seasonal and/or socio-geographic limitations (Marsden, 2003; Wright and Middendorf, 2008). The acceleration of time refers to the speeding up of the social time necessary for the production and consumption of commodities. Barriers to the faster reproduction and circulation of commodities have been significantly reduced through a variety of practices at the technological, political, economic and social levels. For instance, fruits and vegetables are grown using genetically improved varieties that develop faster, are pest resistant and much less susceptible to production delays caused by weather conditions. They are packed directly in the field in containers that maintain their 'freshness' and extend their commercial lives. Finally, they are shipped to points of consumption benefiting from fewer trade restrictions and faster carriers than in the past (Bonanno and Constance, 2008).

The consequences of the creation of global networks of production and consumption associated with globalization have been interpreted in a variety of ways. Globalization advocates view them as beneficial to society. Some of the most sophisticated of these analyses recognize that global social relations entail some undesirable social and economic consequences, yet this is an acceptable price that society should be willing to pay in order to enjoy the much greater benefits that they generate (Friedman, 2000, 2006; Kitching, 2001). Critics, however, identify globalization as one of the most efficient tools to control labor, advance the class project of ruling elites, and role back many of the gains obtained by subordinate classes in previous decades (Dicken, 1998; Sklair, 2001; Robinson, 2004; Harvey, 2005, 2006; Sassen, 2007).

The negative effects of globalization on labor have been stressed by some of the works in the sociology of agri-food. Heffernan and his associates (Heffernan and Constance, 1994; Heffernan, 2000; Hendrickson et al., 2008) demonstrated the ability of transnational corporations not only to diminish the power of agri-food workers but also to effectively control them through capital mobility. Corporations' ability to relocate plants and/or threaten relocation has been a formidable tool to obtain concessions from labor and local communities. Similarly, Friedland contends that the corporate strategy to establish global agri-food commodity chains has enhanced control over labor (Friedland, 1994, 2004). Studying the same geographical area discussed in this article, Collins (1993, 2000) points out that the creation of global networks for the production and consumption of fruits and vegetables increases the exploitation of labor. Her work documents the increase in exploitative forms of labor relations based on labor flexibility, the use of weaker segments of the labor force (women and children) and subcontracting. She indicates that firms use weaker and flexible segments of the labor force when their primary objective is to reduce costs. In situations when quality and timing of production are more relevant, subcontracting emerges as the preferred strategy.¹

The diminished power of labor under globalization has been employed to argue that resistance has been shifted to the consumption level. Research indicates that reflexive consumers searching for quality food products can be effective progressive actors (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Humphery, 1998; DuPuis, 2000; Lockie, 2009). Combining the quest for quality with the importance of the local, consumers have

been instrumental in opening up new democratic spaces, such as civic agriculture, organic and/or natural production and farmers markets (Collins, 2000; Goodman, 2000; Reynolds, 2000; Lyson, 2004; Hinrichs et al., 2004). It has been recognized, however, that global corporate retailers employed food quality as a tool to further their interests (Busch and Bain, 2004; Burch and Lawrence, 2005, 2007; Bain, 2010a; Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2011). The literature has demonstrated the growing power of global corporate retailers and their ability to affect production and consumption networks. A number of authors have pointed out that by shifting emphasis to quality and desirability, corporate retailers control distant production processes and labor in unprecedented ways (Marsden and Arce, 1995; Marsden, 2003; Morgan et al., 2006; Busch and Bain, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Burch and Lawrence, 2007; Campbell and Le Heron, 2007; Campbell and Dixon, 2009). As competition shifted away from price and became centered increasingly on convenience and product differentiation, corporate supermarkets began to attract consumers by emphasizing the quality and uniqueness of their food products (Busch and Bain, 2004; Burch and Lawrence, 2005, 2007; Bain, 2010a; Bain and Hatanaka, 2010).

Corporate retailers' use of third-party certification programs has been a fundamental instrument in their attempt to co-opt progressive consumers' demand. In particular, they employed TPCPs to demonstrate the quality of fresh fruits and vegetables sold in their stores (Konefal et al., 2005; Lockie et al., 2006; Marsden and Murdoch, 2006; Bain, 2010a, 2010b; Bain and Hatanaka, 2010). TPCPs call for the verification that good production practices are employed in the production and delivery of food items. However, they also call for the establishment of standards in an array of related spheres such the environment, health, safety, and use of labor (Busch and Bain, 2004; Konefal et al., 2005; Bain, 2010a, 2010b; Bain and Hatanaka, 2010).

While corporate retailers stress that TPCPs guarantee the quality and safety of food, the assumed positive results of their application do not always materialize (Busch and Bain, 2004; Konefal et al., 2005, 2007; Bain and Busch, 2006; Bain, 2010b; Bain and Hatanaka, 2010; Hatanaka, 2010a). Studies indicate that retailers' expanded role in the implementation of TPCPs often hampers rather than promotes democratic governance; TPCPs use of scientific and technical measures hides political agendas that favour corporate actors; and certification penalizes weaker social groups (i.e. Hatanaka, 2006, 2010a, 2010b; Bain, 2010b; Bain and Hatanaka, 2010; Konefal and Busch, 2010).² To be sure, these and other works also indicate the contested nature of TPCPs. Corporate retailers' gains from, and control of, TPCPs are not necessarily as strong as often assumed while local actors' empowerment and more transparency in production processes may indeed occur (Campbell and Le Heron, 2007; Bonanno and Constance, 2008; Bain, 2010a; Hatanaka, 2010a).

The impact of TPCPs on labor has been addressed only by a handful of studies. It has been observed that small and medium farmers and wage laborers have suffered negative consequences from the implementation of TPCPs (Hatanaka et al., 2005; Bain, 2010b; Hatanaka, 2010b). In the case of small and medium farmers, participation in TPCPs allows these producers access to affluent markets, but it also requires that they pay for the service. Inability to pay translates often into exclusion from these affluent markets and economic marginalization (Bain, 2010b; Hatanaka, 2010b).

As far as wage-labor is concerned, it has been argued that the implementation of TPCPs forces growers to search for strategies to reduce costs. This situation, in turn, translates into labor exploitation (Bain, 2010b; Selwyn, 2010). As retailers pressure

growers to pay for certification, the latter compensate for the additional expenses by lowering labor costs. There has been a reduction of permanent positions and the concomitant increase in temporary workers (Bain, 2010b). Temporary workers are hired only during periods of high labor demand and released for the rest of the year. They tend to be paid less, work longer hours, offer less political resistance, and their employment does not require the payment of social benefits (Bain, 2010b; Selwyn, 2010). Additionally, cost-cutting strategies involve subcontracting (see Bain, 2010b). Growers subcontract farm tasks to third-party agencies. As these agencies supply workers, they also become responsible for certification requirements relieving growers from these responsibilities (Bain, 2010b). Due to the often informal status of subcontractors, regulation is rarely followed (Bain, 2010b; Selwyn, 2010). Labor unions resist these exploitative strategies and have been active in denouncing the frequent law violations involved in subcontracting and the use of temporary labor (Bain, 2010b; Selwyn, 2010). The case presented in this study addresses the above-mentioned literature by exploring the consequences that global supermarkets' required third-party certification of table grape production has on wage labor.

The Case

Methodology

This article employs a case-study methodology. Data were collected through unobtrusive observations, in-depth interviews with key actors, and consultation of existing documents. Key actors include permanent and temporary wage-workers, managers of corporate farms, producers (farmers) who operate their own farms, production co-operatives and union representatives. Interviews and observations were carried out throughout 2008 and during the first three months of 2009. Additional pertinent information was collected during site visits conducted in previous years. Interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed employing the qualitative method of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; More et al., 2009). The analysis of the text permitted the development of analytical categories that were employed to interpret the data. These categories were validated through the techniques of saturation and negative cases (Charmaz, 2006). Interviews were conducted in Portuguese and the direct quotes that appear below were translated into English for this article. The central theoretical concept of food quality has been operationalized in terms of the implementation of the requirements associated with the GLOBALG.A.P. certification process (GLOBALGAP, 2009).

Brief History and Characteristics of the Region

The region studied is the San Francisco Valley in the interior of the North-eastern portion of Brazil. Known locally with the name of Sertão, this region lies around the cities of Petrolina and Juazeiro. It is a semi-arid region historically associated with drought, poverty and immigration. To stimulate socio-economic development, in the 1960s the Brazilian government invested to channel the waters of the San Francisco river for the production of hydro-electric energy and land irrigation projects. Conceived in term of a two-phase developmental scheme, the land irrigation project was designed to create farms for the production of fruits and vegetables. In the first phase, this production was destined to supply domestic agro-industries. In the sec-

ond, it was mostly directed for export to more affluent markets in the global North. Implemented in the 1980s, this second phase coincided with the growth of global agri-food networks (Cavalcanti, 1999).

In the late 1960s, about 70 000 hectares of irrigated land were used for production as new farms were established. By 2007, about 100 000 hectares of irrigated land were employed in the production of primarily mangoes and grapes,³ but also coconuts and bananas (Valexport, 2007). The farms that were created varied in size and type of ownership/control (see Table 1 for a summary view). The largest amount of land is currently controlled by a small group of large farms. In the case of grape production, large farms constitute 5.7% of all farms and occupy 46% of the cultivated land. These farms are controlled by a combination of domestic but mostly international commercial corporations. Global supermarket chains, such as Carrefour, Tesco and Wall-Mart – that operates through its Brazilian subsidiary Bom Preço – are present through direct ownership of farms along with some Brazilian companies that also invested in the purchase of large operations.

Medium farms occupy about 24% of all cultivated land and account for almost 15% of all farms. They are owned by local exporting firms controlled by Brazilian professionals with a variety of backgrounds, such as lawyers, physicians, teachers, agronomist, retailers, and others. Most have been in agricultural production for generations while others only recently redirected their investments from other economic sectors. Small farmers or colonos operate about 80% of all farms and 30% of cultivated land. Differing from large and medium farms, they rely significantly on family labor but also employ wage workers for about 40% of all labor output (Correia and Marinozzi, 1999). There are varying estimates of the number of wage laborers employed in grape production in the area with consensus placing this number at about 20 000 in the mid-1990s (Bloch, 1996, p. 49). Due to the economic crisis of the late 2000s, it has not grown as rapidly in recent years (Cavalcanti et al., 2011). While some wage-workers come from the metropolitan areas of Petrolina and Juazeiro, a much greater number are migrants who come from adjacent states and poorer and less unionized areas. The recruitment of migrant labor has been employed by firms to count on a more docile labor force (Cavalcanti et al., 2011). Small producers sell their products to co-operatives and/or firms creating a hierarchy in the production process led by brokers. Brokers establish deals with supermarket chairs and exporting firms and co-operatives.

In the late 1960s, the irrigated land was first employed to grow tomatoes and onions. The rapid success of these crops gave impetus to the further expansion of cultivated land and production. However, the decades that followed saw a number of 'growth and bust' cycles that severely limited the original enthusiasm of local producers (Cavalcanti, 1999). The introduction of mangos but above all table grapes

Table 1. Structural characteristics of table grape farms in the San Francisco Valley.

Size of Farms in Hectares	% Number of Farms	% of Land Used	Type of labor used	Ownership
More than 50	5.7	46	wage-labor	mostly global corporate and some domestic corporate
10 – 49.9	15.0	24	wage-labor	domestic investors (export firms)
Less than 10	79.3	30	family and wage-labor	colonos (local farmers)

Source: Elaboration on secondary data.

in the late 1980s provided renewed momentum to production and allowed the development of a steady flow of commodities toward supermarket chains in the global North.

Currently, the San Francisco Valley is the primary fruit producing region in Brazil. The production of fruits has steadily grown over the last two decades and accounts for about 40% of all agricultural exports of the country (Fachinello et al., 2011). As far as the production of grapes is concerned, it has grown from less than one million metric tons to over 1.5 million between 2000 and 2010 representing 18% of all fruits produced and 13% of all fruits exported. Additionally, the land cultivated and the value of the crop exported increased by 39% and 200% respectively during the same period (Fachinello et al., 2011). The development of counter-seasonal contracts contributed to the growth of demand and employment. In the San Francisco Valley, the demand for labor is consistent and represents a source of jobs for workers. As it will be illustrated below, this demand, however, is accompanied by changes in the use of labor that temper some of the gains associated with job availability.

The growth of the sector involves the presence of new actors. Among these new actors trade brokers play a significant role. Born as middlemen between producers and global supermarket chains, brokers quickly assumed the concomitant roles of informal guarantors of the 'quality' required by retailers and enforcers of new production practices at the local level. They brought to the local producers the norms and conditions of production stemming from global retailers' industrial plans. They also are the agents that establish the business contracts through which producers are able to sell their grapes. Brokers are the gate-keepers that allow production to be channeled to global supermarket chains.

Producers learned quickly that they had to follow brokers' instructions and requirements if they wished to have their crops included in global production networks. Producers began to feel the subordination to brokers and their organizational power. Currently, while producers constantly refer to the 'open market', there is an understanding that brokers are the actors who make this abstract market a reality. More specifically, it is through the role performed by the brokers that the conditions and required tasks of production are defined for producers.

Brokers also ask growers to pay for certification and they comply with this request. A medium-size grower comments:

'They [brokers] go everywhere and can get you everywhere. You need to stay with them and do as they say even when they ask you to pay for certification. We don't know to whom they deal with and how. But they make it possible to sell... if you want to sell in this world market, you need to stay with them. They maintain a good relation with producers.'

Simultaneously, while brokers are instrumental in the enforcement of quality requirements, they shield global retailers from direct interaction with local actors. This is relevant in the process of control of local labor relations as supermarket chains – the primary actors responsible for the establishment of contracts and certification – are not seen by producers and workers alike as those in control of the overall production process. Local producers and workers view brokers as the primary force in the organization of production. Ultimately, brokers provide a social buffer between supermarket chains and producers that depersonalizes production requirements and makes them abstract and disconnected from their sources. Brokers, therefore, contribute to the reification (Lukács, 1968) of the production process whereby the

social relations that engendered it are largely invisible to those who work in the fields. As clearly illustrated by classical sociological theory, the reified understanding of social relations is one of the primary tools for the control and subordination of labor. A grower states:

‘Everything [in the production process] is well organized in advance by brokers. Tasks are given to each producer and nobody knows why we need to do it nor what the others are asked to do or did. We are told of the ships, the trucks, the containers, the boxes, etc., that we need to use in production. Then we have to pay attention to everything from the schedule of ships, to the freight prices, the port services, and who are the transportation carriers for our containers. We need to make sure that all the required production steps are followed. We are told all this ahead of time, one or two months before the shipment has to go out.’

Despite their unclear origins, instructions are accepted. They are also rarely questioned even when they make little sense to those in the fields. Rule acceptance is so strong that it becomes a challenge but also a source of pride when requirements are met. Another producer says:

‘A group of 35 people came to view our products. They were German, Dutch, and Japanese buyers and visited some of the local farms. They come at the end of the harvest to present awards to those who met the requirements. We could do it and do it well.’

Corporate Quality Food and Labor

Some of the most relevant consequences of global retailers’ requirements for the production of certified quality food are changes in the use of labor. Salient among these are: production time, working time, labor remuneration, employment conditions, and labor control.⁴ In the following pages an analysis of the manner in which these processes are affected by the demand for certified quality food is presented.

Production Time

That the time employed in the production of agricultural commodities is socially constructed is not a new finding. In their classical analyses, both Marx and Weber, among others, point out the socially constructed nature of work. Marx, for instance, discusses at length the manner in which changes in productivity shorten the socially necessary time for the reproduction of labor. Identifying this process as the relative exploitation of labor, he contends that the introduction of technical innovations makes the time necessary to produce a given amount of value shorter than in the past (Marx, 1977, pp. 533–565). Furthermore, and speaking of farm labor, he distinguishes between ‘working time’ and ‘production time’ (Marx, 1992, pp. 316–325). Working time is defined as the time in which labor transform factors of production into commodities. Production time, conversely, refers to the ‘entire time... of the production process’ (Marx, 1992, p. 316) and includes times in which factors of production are idle due to some barriers such as snow covered fields in the winter. The time necessary to generate a commodity ‘can be often shortened to a greater or less extent by the artificial shortening of the production time’ (Marx, 1992, p. 317). For Weber the acceleration of production time is associated with the rationalization of society (Weber, 1968, pp. 164–166). He contends that the use of formal rationality

in the organization of social institutions and relations along with the development of advanced systems of production, such as mechanization but also rational book-keeping, created the conditions for a constant acceleration of work and production tasks (Weber, 1968, pp. 337–154). Affected by cultural traits, this acceleration of production time is a constant feature of modern society (Weber, 1968). In more recent times, students of agriculture have also stressed the particular nature of capitalist farm production. In their now classical article, Mann and Dickinson (1978) employ Marx's theory to discuss the natural barriers to capitalist production that allow the persistence of family farms in contemporary agriculture. However, these and other structuralist accounts of the organization of farm production (see also the coeval work of Mottura and Pugliese, 1975, 1980), fail to stress the social construction of agricultural production as they underscore its immanent component. For Mann and Dickinson the existence of natural barriers to agricultural production is a permanent dimension. For Marx, conversely, agricultural production under capitalism is constantly accelerated and based on the class nature of its organization.

Current practices of agricultural production have exceeded many of the expectations of classical sociologists and this is certainly the case of global agri-food networks. To follow Marx, the 'natural' conditions for grape production in the San Francisco Valley would not entail any difference between working time and production time as grapes can be grown year-round. However, the presence of powerful actors constructs the 'times' in which production is 'possible' in the Valley. Global retailers' request for a year-round steady supply of grapes and competition from actors in other world locations (primarily California and Chile) contribute to the social construction of counter-seasonal markets and local market 'windows'. These are the times in which there is an adequate demand for local production. And these are also the times in which production ought to be ready to be shipped to consumption centers.

Currently in the San Francisco Valley, these socially constructed windows coincide with two eight-week periods in May–June and November–December. These periods are the outcomes of a dynamic interaction process in which producers actively attempt to extend these windows and/or create new ones. They delay and/or reschedule harvest times but are virtually impotent against corporations' global sourcing. As a result, these constructed windows are now accepted by producers and workers alike. One producer states:

'We can and wish to produce for additional periods during the year. But it has been very difficult, almost impossible, for us to sell grapes in other periods of the year. We learned when it is convenient for us to produce... this is the way it is... We need to take advantage of the available times to export and must increase productivity and reduce costs. This year, we can't make mistakes; we must send good grapes to the market at the right time and export as much as we can.'

Working Time

The production tasks carried out by hired workers increased. Certification requirements used by GLOBALG.A.P. mandate new rules designed to establish the quality of the fruits. Producers execute these rules by assigning new tasks to workers. Accordingly, these rules translate into adding a number of facets to the production

process that increased hired laborers' work-load. They cover the preparation of the fields, preharvest, harvest and post-harvest activities, including pruning, sorting, packaging, and shipping, but also require some expertise in management, accountability and traceability of the product. In essence, workers are now asked to perform multiple tasks generating a process of reskilling of labor. Moreover, laborers are now required to demonstrate that they can perform these various components of the job if they wish to be hired. A hired laborer indicates:

'I need to make sure that all my tasks are done well. I need to pick the grapes, but also prune off those parts of the bunch that don't look good. I need to place them in the box. If I pick seedless grapes I need to place them in the plastic bags. These are the bags that are shipped out.'

These new requirements further mandate additional training. However, training turns out to be specific to the firm, not remunerated, and almost invariably unrelated with higher wages. Contrary to established arguments that associate reskilling with better economic labor conditions and overall labor strength (e.g. Attewell, 1987; Reich, 2008), reskilling in fruit production is marked by increased labor exploitation. Training is performed informally relying on the knowledge and skills of more experienced workers. Because each firm must conform to contractual specifications, workers are instructed to a new set of rules that often differ from the ones that they learned and applied in the past. A trainer (older worker) explains:

'New workers will learn what is required and how things work here. They will know that this is a different place and, therefore, there are different rules. Then they will ask questions and we will give them a comprehensive explanation, then they have to work and follow the rules.'

This situation is highly consistent with the now classical Marxian analysis of labor reskilling proposed by Harry Braverman (1974). For Braverman, specialization is one of the instruments through which workers are controlled in contemporary capitalism. As labor performs more specific tasks, the ability of supervisors to control workers increases along with workers' productivity. These are conditions that characterize grape production in this area.

Labor Remuneration

Neither the trainers nor the trainees are paid during the time they teach and learn the required procedures. These are requirements that are passed on to hired labor as necessary conditions to obtain work and to trainers as a necessary condition to keep their jobs. Firm and co-operative managers as well as farm owners who employ hired labor explain that they have to follow this practice in an effort to meet the brokers' requests and keep costs down. A local producer states: 'cutting labor cost is what firms and family farmers must do to compete effectively'.

According to local union representatives, overabundant and poorly paid workers are available in the region. As a union representative explained and field observations and interviews with workers confirmed, a great number of the hired laborers employed in the area are immigrants from rural areas in adjacent states. This is the result of an effort by local producers to keep wage cost down. Producers prefer not to hire workers from Petrolina and Juazeiro as they tend to be union members accustomed to higher wages and better working conditions. Additionally, efforts

have been carried out to replace permanent workers with temporary laborers. The reduction of permanent workers is an effective cost cutting strategy as firms are not required to pay fringe benefits to temporary workers.

A union representative explains:

'This past December [2008] a large numbers of workers applied for unemployment benefits. [These are reserved only to those who have been employed for more than five continuous months.] There was a great reduction of the numbers of permanent contracts. The [name omitted] firm, for instance, usually employs 2,200 temporary workers and 1,100 permanent workers. The number of permanent workers was reduced to 400. But, the quantity exported went up from 70 000 [metric] tons in 2007 to 80 000 tons in 2008.'

Also according to local union representatives that were interviewed, the Federal Government has been more concerned with shielding exporting firms from the economic crisis than assisting workers. As a result firms' managers have used the crisis as an excuse to get more assistance from the government, impose lower wages and cut employment.

Arguably the most noticeable change from past labor relations is the diffusion of remuneration based on piece work. Hired laborers are now paid by the number of bunches that they pick and/or the boxes of grapes that they pack rather than receiving hourly wages. Given the increased amount of tasks to be performed by each worker, this practice increases the work load without increasing the pay. A grower explains:

'Every worker has to accomplish their task of picking and packing 700 bunches of grapes a day. If they can do more, they would get some additional remuneration. It is in the neighborhood of 2 or 3 reals⁵ per day.'

Yet, this is such a small amount that workers are discouraged from taking additional work despite the need for employment in a unfavorable labor market.

A local union representative indicates:

'During pruning in a regular working day, a male worker trims about 80 vines and receives from 10 to 50 cents per extra plant. Others won't even get that. However, those workers do not show interest in additional work as they find that the extra pay is too small and it doesn't change their lives.'

A worker adds:

'We have to piece work 700 bunches a day. However, as the shape of a bunch varies, so does the work to be performed. In some cases, it takes longer to finish a bunch. But the pay is the same unless we pick more bunches.'

In the case of seedless grapes, for instance, a longer work time is required yet remuneration remains the same.

A female worker explains:

'Seedless grapes are smaller and more fragile. They are not very easy to pick as the bunches break and we need put them in plastic bags. It takes more work.'

Firms have been able to convince workers to accept this new work load by arguing that seedless grapes have a shorter growing season and that new and time saving technology is available. It is assumed that less work is required.

A producer explains:

‘Seedless grapes have a short cycle. From the first trimming of the vines to harvest, it takes 100 days, whereas for the others it takes 120 days. At the beginning we thought that seedless grapes would require less work because of the shorter cycle. But as this is a feeble and fine fruit, harvesting is time consuming and it is not good for making up a bunch... In the case of other varieties, the fruit is harder and not so difficult to pick and have a good bunch. However, nowadays we use of a new technique of pruning that really cuts the amount of work needed.’

In the field, nevertheless, the story is told the other way around. A worker explains it clearly:

‘Picking seedless grapes requires a lot more work... and the new pruning requirements add lot more work also.’

Employment Conditions

Certification of food quality involves terms that prescribe not only the safeguarding of acceptable conditions of labor use but also the prevention of overt labor exploitation (GLOBALGAP, 2009).⁶ However, these terms are understood and carried out according to their formal meaning. Substantively, the situation in the fields is quite different. Firm managers and producers have used the certification process as an instrument to ‘to cut the cost of labor’, as a union representative indicated. They have coupled it with the ‘need’ to address the global economic crisis to create a legitimization strategy that has been used to restructure employment. The words of a firm manager capture this posture:

‘The crisis is severe. We need to do whatever we can to stay competitive... we need to receive more support from the government... we even burned and buried some crops to keep prices high... [because of this crisis] we are forced to cut down costs and this means to review labor cost. We need to reduce the volume of production, employment, and rework contracts to limit the number of permanent jobs in favor of temporary employment.’

Another manager says:

‘In any agribusiness, those who produce in a lean manner are the only ones who survive.’

A co-operative manager maintains:

‘We serve the most exigent markets in England and the United States... since we started the co-operative the aim has been to cut costs... and to focus on quality certification.’

Labor unions have documented the labor cost saving strategies used by firms and the lack of support that labor receives from the Brazilian government. According to unions the government has been concerned with supporting firms and paid only lip-service to the interests of workers. A union representative explains:

'The Ministry of Labor does not pay attention to the impact of the crisis on workers... they create measures to protect firms and don't do much to [protect] employment, wages, and benefit for workers... Firms are using the crisis and certification to get better financial deals and reduce labor costs.'

To be sure, the Brazilian government has expressed concerns about the economic situation. It remains committed to implement measures to assist firms. But it has also stressed that any economic recovery should not come at the expenses of workers. In effect, the economic recovery should enhance employment and improve labor conditions. A representative of the Brazilian Ministry of Labor speaking to a local audience stated:

'Measures to assist fruit production should create new opportunities for labor and create new jobs. The idea is to help firms in order to create employment. Jobs should not be eliminated.'

Despite these pronouncements, however, the overall lack of government presence in the region and the relative weakness of unions leave firms in control of the labor market. As indicated above, contracts have been restructured to favor temporary employment and workers have been fired.

A female laborer says:

'Recently, I had a five month contract to work for a firm, and I expected to be hired on a permanent basis... Previously I had worked for six years for another firm. Now I have a contract for only one month.'

A union representative adds:

'Firms fire permanent workers. This is where they can cut costs as quickly as possible. They said that the crisis has created employment instability in the region. The situation of labor does not show much of a sign of improvement.'

Another union official explains:

'In this area we have contracts from May to June and from November to December. Also harvest contracts from June to October do not give workers the right to have unemployment benefits. Workers will usually have six idle months, no wages, no benefits.'

Labor Control

Local firms use the process of certification to enhance control over workers. Because certification requires the formal verification of the appropriate execution of labor tasks, workers are subjected to a greater degree of scrutiny than in the past. This scrutiny centers on the processes of 'labor acknowledgment' and 'direction of labor activities'. As far as labor acknowledgment is concerned, under certification rules, the execution of assigned labor tasks is considered accomplished only when formally recognized (acknowledged) by supervisors. While forms of field supervision existed in the past, workers' supervision associated with certification is different at, at least, two levels. First, supervisors' power to evaluate workers' performances is reinforced and legitimized by the specific set of formal rules that are dictated by the certification process. Second and because of the above, workers feel disempowered

when interacting with supervisors. Supervisors are armed with a list of required tasks/levels of performance and review workers' activities accordingly. Commonly known as 'being on the checklist',⁷ workers' labor becomes formally recognized only if it appears on the list compiled by supervisors. 'You need to be on the checklist', a worker commented. Performed work tasks become as such in so much as they are recorded on the appropriate list. A worker explains:

'We are doing our job everyday and we have to harvest a set number of bunches. Later, the field supervisor arrives to record the results. She does it. While I know how much I worked, I'm not sure how much I have actually worked until she records the number of bunches I harvested and packed. She tells us.'

Legitimized by the necessity to meet certification requirements, workers are now given more and increasingly specific directions on how to execute their labor tasks. To make sure that these directions are followed, workers remain under close watch during the entire day. This is a situation that stands in sharp contrast with previous local labor practices. In the past, workers were left relatively free to use their experience and accumulated knowledge to complete a task as they were only moderately supervised. As indicated above, there is a clear sense that 'workers will learn what is required and how things work here'. Workers need to learn the new and more stringent procedures associated with grape production. The knowledge that they accumulated in the past – even in recent experiences with other firms – must be set aside.

Regularly, managers issue directives to standardize and codify behavior in the field. A worker recalls that, recently, women were asked to 'stop talking' with another one when 'picking grapes'. While talking – along with singing – has been a long-established practice as workers harvest, now it is deemed an 'activity that would distract laborers from performing their work tasks well' as a manager put it. That workers have been asked to limit verbal exchanges on the job is not a new requirement. It has been employed to increase productivity but also to limit resistance to management and political mobilization (Yates, 1994; Le Blanc, 1999). Yet it constitutes a new and disliked dimension in the relatively 'non-rationalized' social context of the Brazilian grape fields.

A worker says:

'We come from different towns and neighborhoods... we cannot get to know each other well during breaks or lunch. These are short and we are under pressure to go back to work and complete the assignments.'

Conclusions

This case-study can be employed to make four concluding points in regard to pertinent literature. First, the study shows that certification requirements generate production processes in which laborers work longer for less pay, perform more sophisticated tasks, are employed mostly through temporary contracts, and experience new and more advanced forms of control. Despite progressive claims associated with certification and certification agencies, the production of quality grapes is not by itself a vehicle that leads to the betterment of the conditions of labor. This case, therefore, supports the arguments of those segments of the literature that point out that

certification requirements do not translate into more equitable and just social relations and promote democracy. There is a gap between the stated objectives of quality certification programs and the actual conditions of labor. Furthermore, current literature suggests that certification empowers local actors and that this power may limit that of corporate retailers. This case-study, however, shows that certification does not alter established power hierarchies. Local firms and producers actively use certification to gain power over labor but remain subordinate to corporate retailers and brokers.

Second, the case confirms arguments that stress that transnational corporate retailers are powerful actors that control local production. This case-study, however, adds to the literature by demonstrating that corporate retailers maintain control without a noticeable local presence. They remain politically 'invisible' to workers and unions. Workers remain unaware that transnational retailers are the actors who are responsible for production requirements, working and production times, and the required labor qualifications. These are viewed as existing conditions that need to be met by workers to keep their jobs. Similarly, unions have directed their claims consistently against local firms and brokers and the Brazilian government. This is a posture that reproduces traditional patterns of local unions' action and does not question the global arrangements that characterize current agri-food production.

Third, the invisibility of transnational retailers is accompanied by the visible presence of brokers. In the fields, brokers make sure that certification conditions are met while payments for certification are provided by producers. Additionally, brokers are viewed as the actors that also establish the quantity of production as they negotiate export contracts with producers. Production requirements are enforced by firm managers who instruct and control labor on the needed production tasks. Brokers can also count on the support of government authorities who express concerns for the consequences of the economic crisis but identify in enhanced competitiveness and specialized 'niche' production the desired anti-crisis moves. Producers and unions have not been able to challenge brokers' clout. Brokers' power to affect the production process rests largely on their quasi-monopoly of production information. They control information on the requirements, timing, and quantity of shipments. They further control information on available contracts and clients. They bring this knowledge to fruition as they set up contracts with producers and demand the respect of certification requirements. Aided by the complexity of these requirements, the scope of commercial operations, and the virtually unchallenged manner in which these requirements are accepted, they emerged as dominant actors at the local level.

Finally, the case demonstrates that firm managers and producers employ certification as a discourse to enhance their control and exploitation of labor. The discourse that dominates local labor relations centers on the argument that employment can be obtained and maintained only in the event that workers comply with certification requirements. In this context, certification is presented as an essential condition for the generation of employment, the establishment of viable anti-crisis strategies and access to markets.

In essence, the message that emerges from this study is that global networks of quality food production continue to be class based and firmly controlled by corporate actors. To paraphrase David Harvey, certification remains part of the restoration of class power associated with globalization. While claims about the emancipatory dimension of certification are made explicit, they remain just hopes that clash with the harsh reality of the conditions of workers in the fields.

Notes

1. Collins's work is important as she investigates fruit and vegetable production in the San Francisco Valley. Her analysis, however, precedes the development of TPCPs and does not focus on wage-labor. These are the primary foci of this article.
2. For an excellent summary of the debate on third-party certification see the special issue of the *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 25(3), 2010.
3. The analysis presented in this article refers to table grape production only. The producers and workers interviewed for this research worked primarily in table grape production.
4. These are key analytical categories that emerged from the grounded theory analysis employed in the study. There are a variety of additional categories that are also relevant such as gender (i.e. female workers are displaced in favor of male workers), immigration (i.e. immigrant laborers are controlled through political and bureaucratic processes) and community (i.e. local communities experiences a number of important changes). However, and for heuristic purposes, the article focuses exclusively on the above mentioned categories.
5. One US dollar is approximately 1.8 Brazilian reais.
6. GLOBALG.A.P. requires 'a responsible approach to worker health and safety' and 'responsibility regarding socially related issues'. While the use of labor must conform only to existing domestic legislation, the exploitation of labor is considered one of the primary conditions to be prevented.
7. Check-list is the term used by GLOBALG.A.P. to refer to items to be included in the certification process. The English word 'check-list' is used in the everyday Portuguese used by workers.

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