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Migrants in the World Food System: Introduction

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> Material life, consisting of very old routines, inheritances and successes, is there at the root of everything (Braudel, 1967, p. xii).
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> 'The nomads had been the followers of flocks and herds…
> The harvesters had been the men of homes.
> But ours is a land of nomad harvesters…
> Men of no root, no ground, no house, no rest;
> They follow the ripening, gather the ripeness,
> Rest never, ripen never,
> Move and pause and move on' (Welch, 1956).

Migrant Agricultural Labor and Abstraction in the World Food System

Food is sustenance. It is the basis of material life. Because we must submit regularly to our common corporeal need for nourishment, the majority of humans that have ever walked the earth have been food laborers in one form or another. As food laborers, we have been intimately involved in the production of food. For most of human history, we have had a direct, relatively unmediated relationship with food production: we have known the sources of our food and we have been aware of the repercussions of our methods of food production. In short, we have had relatively direct knowledge of the social relations of our food.

Today, out of material necessity, we all still eat, but proportionally fewer of us work as food laborers. Ten thousand years after the Neolithic revolution, approximately 40% of the world's population is still employed in agriculture, but agricultural employment now varies widely across the world: from 80% of the population in Ethiopia, to only 1.5% of the population in the United States (World Bank, 2011). On the whole, 60% of the world's population (4.2 billion people) has been freed from work as food labor, and thus, freed from knowledge of the social relations of the food that serves as the basis of our material lives.

The decline in agricultural labor is associated with the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, a transition commonly referred to as 'development'. Above all else, development is a process of abstraction, of a growing disconnection between food producers and food consumers. This has been a long-term, historical process; it is not a new condition. Food surpluses produced by settled agriculture

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first released some of the populations from food labor, and separated producers from consumers, nearly ten thousand years ago. But the scale and depth of this condition changed dramatically with the incorporation of agriculture into the capitalist mode of production.

Driven by the imperative to accumulate capital, capitalist agriculture substituted capital for labor on an ever-larger scale, reducing the absolute number of agricultural laborers while further distancing producers from consumers. Over many cycles of accumulation and consolidation, agricultural production has become increasingly concentrated among a handful of agro-industrial firms. Today, we have what can only be called a world food system, one organized largely by transnational agro-industrial firms that control food production from gene to shelf, source inputs from the lowest cost places worldwide, and market food globally to a growing class of world consumers (McMichael, 2005).

Within the capitalist world food system, the rift between food producers and food consumers has widened into a gulf, further obscuring the social relations of food. Today, more people are more distanced from food production than ever before and, at the same time, agricultural labor is less visible than ever before. This is not a mere coincidence. It is instead an expression of capitalist agriculture in the world food system, which has rendered agricultural laborers less visible both by reducing their absolute numbers, as a proportion of the world population, but also by concealing them under layers of abstraction in the world food system, in the longer and more complex agri-food commodity chains that span thousands of miles, and in the disembodied food products that line supermarket shelves with no traces of the labor contained in them or of the social relations that conspired to bring them to consumers. Today, 'food from nowhere' predominates (Bove and Dufour, 2001, p. 55); food produced by people without names in spaces without places; food symbolic of a growing separation of the world's population from the social relations through which the sustenance of material life is produced.

Yet agricultural labor remains vital in the world food system. Despite attempts to overcome all limits, both natural and social, capitalist agriculture ultimately still relies on labor. The strawberries must still be harvested. The lettuce must still be packed. The cattle must still be slaughtered. All of this must be done at the lowest possible cost in order to further capital accumulation, which often means that, in a context of agricultural labor scarcity in the more developed countries today, agricultural labor must be imported. Migrants must do the work. The evidence supporting the importance of migrant agricultural labor in the capitalist world food system is in the lengths firms have gone to procure it in the more developed countries. In the face of widespread opposition to immigration among resident populations, and in the midst of a massive economic recession, firms continue to lobby for the authorization of larger immigration flows in the U.S. (Hanson, 2009) and the EU (Awad, 2009). Capitalist agro-industrial enterprises have become structurally dependent on labor migration.

If agricultural laborers have been rendered less visible by capitalist agriculture in the world food system, migrant agricultural laborers are the least visible. These are the food laborers that often work in the most precarious and insecure forms of employment in the world food system, moving not just with the seasons but with the rhythms of capital accumulation, hired and dismissed as necessary. Yet this is the preferred form of labor in the world food system. This is the labor on which the rift between production and consumption in the world food system ultimately rests.

The irony, of course, is that many migrant agricultural laborers were once farmers themselves. However, rounds of consolidation and concentration in agriculture, encouraged by agricultural trade policies that remove public support for agriculture in less-developed countries, have made migration more viable than farming as a livelihood strategy. Ten thousand years since the Neolithic revolution made settled harvesters out of nomads, the settled harvesters of less-developed countries are becoming nomads. These nomads, however, no longer follow the flocks and herds, but instead trail the movement of capital, responding to the incessant demand for flexible agricultural labor in the world food system; farmers converted to migrant agricultural labor, working in the service of capital accumulation by transnational agri-food corporations, rendered more invisible, and more vulnerable, by the system they serve to reproduce. This is the condition that confronts us today.

Migrant Agricultural Labor in the Scholarly Literature

Unfortunately, the abstracted, concealed nature of migrant agricultural labor in the world food system is mirrored in the recent scholarly literature. The topic seems to be mainly of historical interest: of the Bracero Era in the United States or guest worker programs in mid-twentieth century Western Europe. Extended recent treatments of migrant agricultural labor in the world food system are notably scant, notwithstanding a few notable exceptions (Griffith, 2007; Striffer, 2007; Barndt, 2008; Mize and Swords, 2010). More broadly, the neglect of migrant agricultural labor has coincided with a broader shift in the study of migration away from political-economic and historical-structural investigations of the processes that motivate, sustain, and constrain migration (e.g. Castles and Kosack, 1973; Portes and Walton, 1981; Cohen, 1987; Sassen, 1988).

Today, these (now classical) approaches are often eschewed in favor of more descriptive studies of migrant narratives, which are valuable in their own right to the extent that they de-commodify, or humanize migrants, rendering migrants and the migration experience less invisible in the world food system. But the gains from this approach often come at the expense of diminishing, or even ignoring, empirical regularities among cases that might reveal broader, structural processes: patterns of social relations that endure in the world food system. And yet, these structural processes are critical because they serve as the context for the stories that migrants tell, but more importantly, because they ultimately conceal the role of migrant agricultural labor in the world food system.

The work of uncovering structural processes requires comparison: comparison across places and comparison across times. By teasing out similarities among differences across cases and over time, comparative approaches are capable of building systematic understandings of structural processes and, in doing so, promise to 'break us out of the unending regress of disputed stories of human experiences used for gain by some groups over others' (Teune, 2010, p. 194). Thus, comparative investigations of structural processes ultimately can support the development of appropriate responses to the exploitation of migrants in the world food system. Yet comparative research is remarkably absent from the scholarly literature on agricultural labor migration.

Reviving the Study of Agricultural Labor Migration in the World Food System

This special issue attempts to reinvigorate the study of agricultural labor migration by presenting a series of articles that might serve as the basis for future comparative research. The articles in this collection were selected from submissions to a general call for proposals. Each paper went through a double-blind peer review process by at least two external reviewers. All of the articles focus on the Global North, where the separation of food production and consumption is most pronounced and, thus, where migrant agricultural labor is most crucial. Yet each of the papers considers a different dimension of agricultural labor migration in the world food system, ranging from temporary labor migration policy and labor recruitment practices to the construction of alternative food systems that are more inclusive of immigrants. Together, the papers provide many potential entry points into future comparative studies of agricultural migrant labor in the world food system.

The articles by Preibisch and Mannon et al. demonstrate that, although agricultural labor migration may ultimately respond to the rhythms of capital accumulation, the state continues to play a crucial role in the world food system. Preibisch examines recent changes to Canada's temporary migration programs, focusing especially on the implications of these changes for the position of labor vis-à-vis capital. Drawing on interviews of migrants, civil servants, employers, and industry representatives, Preibisch provides a detailed analysis of a concerted shift in the management and recruitment of temporary migrant labor from state to market-based institutions. This shift has further deepened the insecurity and vulnerability of migrants by, above all else, expanding the global pool of labor from which Canadian employers can draw. By making available a broader, more diverse, supply of immigration sources, the state, in concert with market institutions, has exacerbated competition within the agricultural labor market, restructuring the employment relation by making vulnerable, cheapened forms of labor more readily available, while providing new means of disciplining and controlling migrant agricultural labor.

The article by Mannon et al. extends the analysis of temporary labor programs to the case of strawberry production in Southern Spain. The context is different, but there are striking parallels with Preibisch's study of Canada. Here again, employers are in constant need of migrant agricultural labor, and again, immigration policy is crucial for organizing a sufficient supply of this type of labor. However, Mannon et al. probe the gendered construction of temporary migrant agricultural labor policies. Today, at least 95% of temporary agricultural migrant laborers in Huelva Province, the study site, are estimated to be women. But the type of women has changed over the last 10 years. Mannon et al. trace a gradual transition in employer preferences from relatively young, unmarried, childless women to older, married women with children, who are believed to be more likely to return to the country of origin at the end of the labor contract, a marker of the 'success' of a temporary labor program. In this regard, the 'Huelva model' is widely viewed as an exemplar. Yet through interviews and field observations, Mannon et al. detail how this model has also been successful in using gender, and motherhood in particular, to construct the specific form of labor necessary for agricultural production in the world food system: a form of labor made flexible, disposable, vulnerable, and insecure. In this respect, the Huelva model is also 'a flexible labor strategy par excellence'.

The next two articles shift attention to the United States, and specifically to the case of Hispanic immigration. Hispanic immigration in the United States has become more geographically diverse over the past 30 years, spreading out from tra-

ditional areas of settlement in California, Illinois, Texas, New York, and Florida into 'new destination' states (Zuniga and Hernandez-Leon, 2005) that have not had much historical experience of immigration. These two articles examine two such new destination states: North Carolina and Iowa.

Based on over 25 years of research on agricultural migrant labor in Eastern North Carolina, Griffith takes up the question of how labor recruitment practices affect immigrant settlement patterns in destination communities. Specifically, this paper explores the relationships between the seasonality of work, industry recruitment strategies, and the forms of settlement patterns among immigrants in the food sector. Griffith examines three branches of the food sector prominent in Eastern North Carolina, each of which is vertically integrated and each of which has become more dependent on immigrant labor. The comparison illustrates how variations in the seasonality of work and in industry recruitment patterns intersect in various ways to pattern the likelihood of long-term immigrant settlement, generating a continuum of immigrant settlement patterns along which different branches of the food industry can be placed. The study refines our understanding of the consequences that labor procurement strategies of agri-food firms have on destination communities.

Griffith concludes with a brief discussion of how, out of Hispanic immigrant settlement, the seeds of a more localized, community-based food system have emerged, as entrepreneurial immigrants have developed new food enterprises oriented toward serving the local population. Migrant agricultural laborers are not only food producers, of course; they are also food consumers. Embedded within this emerging local food system is an implicit critique of the political economy of the world food system, one grounded in an alternative moral economy of food. Griffith thus captures a key tension illustrative of the role of migrant agricultural labor in the broader world food system: 'Ironically, in North Carolina, the labor that immigrant workers seek to replenish with nutritious food is directed, more often than not, toward producing food that enriches agribusiness.'

The final article by Flora et al. delves more deeply into the question of how localized food systems might be constructed to be more inclusive of immigrants. Their article reports findings from a leading-edge program that includes applied projects in two communities in rural Iowa: a community garden, and a training program for beginning farmers. Among their findings, the projects revealed differences along racial-ethnic lines in the underlying motivations for participation that closely parallel broader tensions in alternative agriculture movements: between the goal of sustenance in the community food security and social justice faction; and the goals of environmental sustainability and local economic vitality in the sustainable agriculture faction (Allen, 2004). Flora et al.'s article is a reminder that construction of an alternative food system will be messy, that it will require navigation of myriad challenges of race, ethnicity, and class. Yet it is necessary work, and their project provides important insights into how alternatives to the world food system might be organized.

In doing so, Flora et al. provide a glimpse into not only the challenges but also the promises of an alternative food system: one that might be more inclusive of, and thus more beneficial for, the migrants who have thus far worked to build a much less socially just food system; one that may reduce the rift between food producers and food consumers; one that makes the social relations of food more visible again, reconnecting us to the 'very old routines' of material life that are 'there at the root of everything' (Braudel, 1967, p. xii).

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