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The Pasteurization of Lithuania: The Politics of Subsistence and Sustainability in Post-Industrial Europe

This project examines how small-scale, semi-subsistence farming fits into sustainability politics in the European Union (EU). By focusing on semi-subsistence farming in the new EU member states, I ask: why is the kind of subsistence agriculture that is practiced at the margins of global economy irrelevant for our discussions about sustainable agriculture and sustainable food consumption? What does the fact that subsistence agriculture in the Third World has no place in the framework of sustainable development say about the assumptions and contradictions implicit in First World definitions of sustainability? What are the conceptual connections between subsistence and sustainability? More broadly, this study seeks to elaborate how sustainability politics intersects with global inequalities that are reproduced not only along the North-South axis, but also through local economic systems that separate those actors who are plugged into the global consumption-production networks and those outside of it.

The empirical part of this project is built on a case study of the informal dairy economy in postsocialist Lithuania. Unable to sell milk to large-scale producers in the mid-1990s, Lithuania's small-scale farmers began delivering and selling raw milk directly to consumers, the urbanites. Today, most of the inhabitants of older and poorer districts in Lithuanian cities rarely buy milk in stores; they rely on their farmers' deliveries. For the small-scale farmers with one to four cows, the existing network enables them to sell their surplus milk and earn much needed supplemental incomes. Keeping in mind that the small-scale, semi-subsistence farms in Lithuania have a limited ecological impact on the environment and that they help diversify diets of the poorest urban populations by delivering local dairy produced without chemicals or hormones, it is remarkable that the EU's sustainable agro-food politics, which supports small-scale farming, organic food production, and local food chains, fail to incorporate local subsistence and semi-subsistence farmers and consumers into the official structures of agro-food economies.

Using participant observations, structured and semi-structured interviews with over 80 interlocutors, archival data and official documents collected over the period of four years, this project focuses on farmer-consumer relations and the organization of subsistence practices to explore how the informal dairy economy operates in the current political, social and economic contexts that favor industrial agriculture and the globalization of agro-food systems. By examining how women farmers move between the city and countryside, this project explores how informal food networks enable these farmers to build unique public spaces in ghettoizing urban districts where the inhabitants convene for milk deliveries, as well as bio-diverse rural landscapes that emerge through semi-subsistence agriculture.

More specifically, my research reveals fundamental contradictions within dominant definitions of sustainability. I argue that the sustainable agriculture and environmental regulations simultaneously push towards modernization, industrialization and mechanization of local production and pull towards post-productivist economies, consumer societies, risk management regimes, and nature conservationism. As a result of these competing developmental agendas, local social and gender inequalities have been exacerbated leading to the reproduction of "developing

societies models”—growing populations of poor rural workers without land, work or social status, and an industrialized agricultural landscape with only patches of protected wilderness. This research links the reproduction of poverty and social inequalities with the emergence of risk society institutions and contemporary environmental politics. In so doing, it contributes to the debates about growing contestations over land-use, environmental justice, and labor issues from a global perspective.