

Seeds, Soils, and Politics: Cultivating Citizenship and Growing Food

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During my unfortunately very short stay, I am working on a chapter of my current book on the global governance of agricultural practices. The protagonists of this book are farmers in two localized settings: grain farmers on the cereal plains of Saskatchewan in Canada and small-scale subsistence producers on the high plateau of Carazo in Nicaragua (and to some extent from villages around San Juan de Limay in the North of Nicaragua). Looking at these two settings simultaneously allows me to address a blind spot in global agricultural policies that disconnect family farmers in the North from family farmers in the South, presenting the situation of northern farmers as the model for the future. Both situations are today subject to the same global mechanisms of free trade. In addition to signing the Marrakech agreement founding the WTO, Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Nicaragua signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the United States. According to the statistics collected by the FAO in Canada, 331,000 people are active in agriculture—that is 2% of the population. Almost the same number is active in Nicaragua, where 15% of the population work in agriculture, which is 15% of the population. In Canada, each person active in agriculture works on average on 136 hectares; in Nicaragua on average on 5 hectares. If we compare the size of farms in Saskatchewan (850 hectares) and Carazo (3 hectares), the differences are even bigger.

The realities of family farmers in Saskatchewan appear in a different light if looked at through the lens of the Nicaraguan realities, and the situation of Nicaraguan farmers can be understood more clearly with the farming realities in Canada in mind. If we compare the policies promoted by international organizations and aimed at farmers in the North (destruction of marketing boards, dissolution of cooperatives, abolition of subsidies) with those aimed at farmers in the South (seed saving, reserve funds, promotion of farmers cooperatives), what does sustainability mean in both fields? How is the postulate of “free trade” sustained such that all farmers are equals in an open world market?

The challenge of this book is to make farmers appear as persons embedded in complex social structures and to show how their practices are linked to the global government of agriculture by multinational corporations and international organizations. As an experimental ideal for ethnographic theory and writing, Marcus and Fisher suggested “present[ing] rich views of the meaning systems of a delimited set of subjects, and also present[ing] the broader system of political economy that links them to other subjects, who are also portrayed in their own world.” This book not only presents “meanings,” but follows “practices” from the meeting rooms of international organizations to the field of the farmers and back again.

The chapter I am working on while I am at the RCC looks at the different ways in which farmers in Nicaragua prepare the soil for cultivation. By focusing on the soil, the chapter reflects on two role models for family farmers that circulate simultaneously in international policymaking and refer to contrary notions of time. The same landscape can be perceived in different ways depending on the temporal perspective (timescape): whether perception focuses on the geological formation of the soil, on the agricultural cycle, on the urgency of hunger, greed or debt. Which timescapes are involved when farmers contemplate their land?