Resisting Globalization
Women Organic Farmers and Local Food Systems

BY MARTHA MCMAHON

Les systèmes agroalimentaires mondialisés sont construits comme une exigence du marché qui devient un impératif moral dans un monde sous-alimenté, et « perdre » quelques petites fermes et des fermes familiales, c'est le prix à payer pour en finir avec la faim dans le monde. Quant à elle, l'auteure croit que l'agriculture mondialisée n'aide pas les pays pauvres à se développer et à s'en sortir, alors que personne ne s'inquiète des petites fermes qui disparaissent. L'auteure s'inspire de l'expérience des agricultrices et des femmes membres de projets communautaires agricoles, pour démontrer qu'elles sont tout à fait capables de bâtir un nouveau système alimentaire, local, écologique et alternatif.

When we think about farming, many of us think about green fields and fresh produce. It is disturbing to learn that the institutionalization of new globalized agri-food systems through World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regimes means that agriculture and food production has less to do with growing food or feeding people and more to do with power and the restructuring of capitalism. And when they think of a farmer, most Canadians probably see a man (wearing a feed cap) driving a tractor across a Prairie landscape. In contrast, in the South, Oxfam points out, women make up the majority of small farmers, producing between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of the food in the third world (www.futureharvest.org/people/women/shtml). It should not be surprising to learn, therefore, that despite the image of North American farmers as male, women farmers and women members of community supported agriculture (CSA) projects (Cone Abbott and Myhre) are central in building new local, ecological, alternative food systems. Nor should it surprise us to learn that internationally, those most hurt by globalized new food systems are women,[1] especially women small farmers.[2] The significance of gender in understanding globalizing agri-food systems, however, is more complicated than the question of whether those most affected are men or women.

Back From the Sheep Barn

I come in from the sheep barn. The sheep are due to lamb within a few days. Making tea and preparing the list of organic seed potatoes for spring planting, I listen to CBC. "Now we can get on with feeding a hungry planet," a spokesperson for the salmon farm industry here in BC announces as she welcomes the BC Liberal government's lifting of the moratorium on salmon farming. "Feeding the planet," I mentally note, catching how food provisioning is represented as a global and competitive project. I hear her voice as both culturally masculine and feminine, rationally efficient yet caring. She (and the industry she speaks for) will "feed the world."

The local women organic farmers I have been interviewing here and in Ireland self-consciously represent themselves as feeding their communities. Are they simply small minded?

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Thinking of Food as Relationship and Resisting Commodification

Talking with women small-scale organic farmers on Vancouver Island and in the South West of Ireland has led me to attend deeply to their ideas about farming as being about feeding community and building relationships. On the one hand, focusing on the local and selling at farmers markets and through CSA projects looks like a sensible economic response to agri-business for small-scale farmers. It is ironic that small farmers near urban centres can use the (farmers') market to evade the corporate dominated "free-market." Direct sales of local organic produce can return up to 80 cents of each food dollar to the farmer. Conventional farmers often get less than five cents of each food dollar spent in a supermarket. Culturally, "doing community" is women's work, and women are overrepresented among very small farmers. It is not surprising that they often focus on local markets.

Cone Abbott and Myhre point out, however, that the kind of locally oriented farming typical of the women organic farmers I talked to in British Columbia and Ireland is more radical than it seems. It represents a form of cultural resistance as well as economic resistance. It disrupts the disembeddedness and fragmentations of modernity (Giddens) and late capitalism. Food, especially organic food, produced for and sold through local farmers markets and CSA projects has the potential for re-embedding people in time and place by linking them to particu-

lar farmers whom they know, and through them to specific pieces of land, the ecology of place and the seasons. It is a form of resistance to the commodification of life and farming under capitalism. Commodification, as Bove points out, destroys the "culture" in agriculture as well as the environment.

If we look at farming though an ecological feminist lens, resisting the commodification of farming and food requires that we think about food as the embodiment of relationships rather than simply as something we eat. A potato isn't just a potato, it carries in it, and into us when we eat it, a host of social relationships such as those with the people who grow, harvest, or trade the potato and also with Nature, not in the abstract but with particular non-human others, things, and individual places. When we partake in food, we consume relationships. In refusing food, for example, Counihan explains, anorexic young women are refusing patriarchal relationships. Food embodies the relationships that organize and produce it, be they relations of inequality, or as in the movie *Like Water for Chocolate*, love.

Mauss's and Sahlin's anthropological work on non-capitalist societies shows how food exchanges build and strengthen social relationships and reduce social distance. Food in capitalist societies, on the other hand, Coulihan explains, is a commodity whose exchange creates distance and differentiation. Drawing on Sahlin's concept of "negative reciprocity," she emphasizes that people are separated and placed in antagonistic positions towards each other through capitalist food exchanges. Food becomes a vehicle of power (Coulihan).

When talking of globalization, it is important to distinguish corporate-driven globalization from above from globalization from below (Carroll), such as the loose webs of alliances and affinity groups connected in struggles for social justice and environment. The point is not to propose a new universalizing model that sees all trade as bad, or only local food as good, or that creates some exclusionary notion of community, but to understand food as the embodiment of relationships. Food can build life-sustaining and justice-enhancing relationships, as well as unjust ones. There are, for example, global networks of support for local food systems that express commitment to distant others, and a variety of models of fair trade relationships.

"Feeding the World": A Universalizing and Masculinist Project that Leaves People Hungry?

The UN estimates that 800,000,000 people go to bed hungry every night and that even in the U.S., 200,000 households experience hunger. Yet there is more food produced every year than the world's population could consume. People are hungry, it seems, because they lack access. They don't have money to buy food or access to land on which to grow it. (Moore Lappé, Collins and Rosset).

For feminist scholars like Vandana Shiva and others (Barndt; Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Mies), modern globalized agriculture is a classed, raced, and gendered project that produces inequality, hunger, and environmental degradation. Governments, international organizations, policy makers and transnational corporations, in contrast, typically represent modern agriculture as a universal and moral project of "feeding the world."[3]

In this latter representation, the inequitable gendered, raced, or classed nature of globalized food production and trade in agricultural products is largely invisible. Furthermore, we are told, local small-scale farming is far too inefficient, and cannot produce enough food for a growing world population. Concentration, specialization, and reaping the advantages of comparative advantage and economies of scale through international trade, we are assured, is far more efficient.

A globalized agri-food systems is thus constructed as a market imperative that becomes a moral imperative in a world of hungry people: "We must feed the world." "Losing" small farmers and family farms is the price to be paid, we are reminded, for ending world hunger and feeding the world. Like concerns about bioethics, concern about vanishing small farms is falsely dismissed as romantic and nostalgic, a luxury the Third World cannot afford.[4] In practice, however, globalized agriculture does not help poor countries develop and escape poverty. A recent UN report on the world's 48 poorest countries reveals that as they opened their economies to international trade, poverty actually deepened (UNCTAD). Indeed, in the period when Kenyan food exports almost doubled, domestic consumption of fruit per person actually declined (FAO Food Balance Sheet Database).

Janine Brodie explains that the discourse about global restructuring is invariably cased in gender-neutral terms, but it is usually women, both in first and third world countries, that are carrying the burden of economic restructuring. What is not said is that small-scale farmers are often women farmers, and that in the globalizing gaze of international trade regimes their food production counts for less, or is not counted at all (Waring) because it is produced for family, community, or a local market rather than for the export trade. On the one hand, small-scale women farmers, urban farmers, and other peasant farmers help feed their families and communities while global food regimes which claim to be able to feed the world leave millions hungry.

But like so much of women's work, much of women's agriculture is rendered invisible or devalued. On the other hand, an industrialized, globalized food system, liberalized international trade in agricultural products, and the benefits of biotechnology are offered as the efficient and moral alternative to peasant and subsistence farming in which women play such a central role. However, the work Miguel Altieri, Peter Rosset and Lori Ann Thrupp suggests that it is probably only small-scale, localized

agroecology that can end hunger in the developing world.

More and more, agriculture is framed as a masculinist (and white) moral project of "feeding the world"—a moral project that is ideologically in the service of international trade. What is also not said is that corporate concentration of agriculture has increased with globalized agri-food systems which control nearly all aspects of American agriculture and much of the world's (Mittal and Kawaii). For example, the share of the four largest pork packer corporations in the U.S. increased from 44 to 57 per cent between 1992 and 1999 and they now control 62 per cent of the market, while Cargill and Continental control almost two-thirds of the grain trade in the world. Agri-food giants promote a model of agriculture that is driving third world peasants off the land ((Mittal and Kawaii). Canadian, like U.S. farmers, are enlisted (perhaps I should say, conscripted) in the service of this project and annually warned that they must produce more or perish (Boyens; Qualman).

Many western governments now talk two mutually incompatible discourses on food and farming. They say they are committed to sustainable food and farming systems, but they are also committed to globalization. The dis-local-izations of their economic policies undermine their environmental commitments.

A recent British study shows that the distance food is transported by road has increased over 50 per cent in the last 20 years and food systems are now a major contributor to global climate change as well as other forms of environmental degradation (Jones). Especially disturbing are animal welfare issues. Live animals are transported greater and greater distances. Between 1989 and 1999 there was a 90 per cent increase in road freight of food and agricultural products between the UK and Europe. Indeed, the food system now accounts for 40 per cent of all UK road freight. Every calorie of iceberg lettuce flown in from California uses up 127 calories of fuel energy.

Buying organic is not necessarily the ecological alternative. One shopping basket of 26 imported organic products in the UK could have travelled 241,000 kms and released as much CO_2 into the atmosphere as an average four-bedroom household does in cooking meals for eight months. Many countries seem to simply be "swapping" food. In 1997, the UK imported 126 million litres of milk and exported 270 million litres. Whereas a typical UK family of four emits 4.2 tons of CO_2 from their house annually, and 4.4 tons from their car, they emit eight tons from the production, processing, packaging, and distribution of food they eat (Sustain: the Alliance for Better Food and Farming).

As the issues of social inequality and environmental degradation associated with globalized agri-food systems become more visible, local food systems look more attractive. Several local and city councils in the UK, for example, have launched Local Food Links projects. Local food systems are being seen as ways of regenerating rural and inner city economies, strengthening community, improving community health, protecting ecological biodiversity and ground water quality, and so on. For similar reasons, the mayor of Mexico City recently announced U.S.$17.1 million in grants to small urban and peri-urban farmers because they could no longer compete with globalized agricultural markets and thus the social, ecological, and food security benefits small farmers provide Mexico City were threatened. Typically, women are over-represented among urban farmers (IFOAM Agpolicy List).

Gendering Agriculture and Disrupting Conventional Identities

This paper draws on women organic farmers' experience and ideas. But it is a paper about the gendered natures of agriculture and food systems rather than primarily a paper about women farmers. Rather than use essentialized notions of women or women farmers, I want to argue that we can understand food systems as gendered. And these gendering lines, I suggest, can cross cut biologically and socially sexed bodies to disrupt the exclusions of class and economic power. I am using gender in a non-essentialist sense here to refer to social process that organizes meaning and produces a variety of exclusions and inclusions and functions to distribute power and privilege. Marshall, drawing on Patricia Williams, points out that the analytic category of gender is useful for some purposes, but needs to be fractured for other, and, I argue, ambiguously reconfigured for others.

On the one hand, empirically, small-scale farmers and urban farmers are very often women, especially in the third world, but also among organic farmers here locally in BC. On the other hand, small farmers, whether male or female, are culturally and politically "feminized" in discourse and economic regimes that construct them as powerless, unproductive, dependent, locally embedded, and parochial (reminiscent of depictions of women's bond of family), inefficient, and non-rational in their commitments to the local and traditional and in their failure to modernize or participate in agri-business (McMahon 2002). It is important, as Marshall points out, not to take gender as synonymous with women. As Other to the universal (masculine, white, classed) economic agent of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank discourses, the economic man of neoliberal economics (McMahon 1997), small farmers, male and female, are feminized. They are Other to economic man. Just as sex ideologically naturalizes gender, so the "natural law" of the market and economic efficiency naturalizes the gendering of small farmers as female-like. Not tough enough for the competitive real world.

Although feminism often sees gender as a way of distributing power and benefits according to marked bodies, we can extend the idea of marked embodiment to bodies embedded in local space, such as peasant bodies,

indigenous and tribal people's bodies, and associated embedding ties to land and place as a form of "marking"—an attributed gendered identity that is not a self-identity. Small-scale male farmers do not, after all, think of themselves as women, though they may experience economic restructuring in similar ways to many women.

The gendered discourses and representations of farmers and globalizing agri-food systems may be ideologically constructed, but the consequences are material. Gendered identities are linked in systematic ways to institutionalized forms of power. The women farmers' experiences I draw upon in writing this paper are used to disrupt hegemonic stories about food, farming, and "feeding the world," rather than to represent women farmers or "women's ways" of farming. For this moment and this purpose, small-scale women farmers are the Other that exposes the oppressive face of the Master Narratives told about globalizing agriculture, food, hunger, and the environment.

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[1]Some of the impact of women working in paid employment in agri-food export industries can be found in Barndt and Barrientos, Bee, Matear and Vogel.

[2]Martin Khor of the Third World World Network, speaking on behalf of the NGO Major Group to the UN General assembly at the opening of the Multistakeholder Dialogue session at the 2nd preparatory commission (PrepCom 11) for the Johannesburg Summit Rio+10 later this year. Khor is stressing to his audience that the deterioration on both environment and development fronts over the last ten years can be largely blamed on the "ascent of globalization," as policy, practice,e and law.

[3]A recent web posting from Development Alternatives with Women for New Era, (DAWN) explains how biotechnological developments in agriculture such as the "terminator" technology that renders seed infertile, and, it argues, will make farmers dependent on seed companies, is justified in the name of mythical food shortages.

[4] For a discussion of bioethics see Shiva.

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