

INTRODUCTION

Alessandro Bonanno

This special issue of the *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* is devoted to Globalization, a theme that has been one of the major research foci of the members of Sociology of Agriculture and Food Research Committee. This international group of scholars has certainly been among the first world wide to systematically undertake research on globalization and disseminate its results through an abundance of publications and conferences. Obviously, the international nature of the group favored this outcome. But it would be erroneous to consider this “biographical” explanation the primary reason for this group’s attention to the study of globalization. A more pertinent explanation is to be found in the evolution of the analysis of the agro-food sector carried out by RC-40 members over the past three decades.

While it is possible to maintain that “Sociology of Agriculture” has been an area of investigation for more than a century¹, the “contemporary” international Sociology of Agriculture emerged in the 1970s. This growth was generated by a number of events including the rapid industrialization of agriculture and, at the epistemological level, the inadequacy with which dominant rural sociological approaches analyzed agriculture. During the 1970s and across world regions, a number of sociologists reformulated the study of agriculture and linked it to the evolution of “global” phenomena such as flows of capital across world regions, capital accumulation patterns, the international division of labor, and the relationship between socio-economic growth and underdevelopment. One of the important results of this intellectual effort was the development of a network of scholars who -- in the pre-internet era -- succeeded in establishing an intense and informed debate on the trajectories of agriculture in mature capitalism.

At the organizational level, many of these sociologists cooperated to establish a formal group that eventually would become the Research Committee of Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC-40). The birth place of RC-40 was the International Sociological Association (ISA) IXth World Congress of Sociology that was held in Uppsala, Sweden in 1978. At that meeting an “Ad Hoc” interest group was formed within the ISA. That international organization required that groups of scholars sharing substantive interests constituted themselves into “Ad Hoc” groups first. After demonstrating sustained scientific activities, such as the organization of conference and publications, “Ad Hoc” groups were elevated to the status of “Working Groups.” Finally through the continuous growth of activities and membership, “Working Groups” could achieve the status of “Research Committees.”

While the term globalization was not yet been used, the attention of the members of this group was immediately directed to the world level social relations that characterized agricultural production and labor use. Also, it was during the years immediately following this start that the addition of the theme of “food” was theorized and eventually formalized. In 1986 the group’s name changed to “Sociology of Agriculture and Food.” Agriculture and food commodity production, it was argued, generates commodities (food items) through processes that while connected to the local, often transcend it and become global in scope. The study of the production and consumption of agricultural commodities (commodity analysis), the theorization of world food-regimes, the critique of the development of agricultural science, and the analysis of relationship between the state and multinational capital actors became central areas of investigation of this group between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s.

By the late-1980 (i.e, 1988), the group has evolved from the original “Ad Hoc Group” to its current status of ISA Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food or RC-40. Substantively, the analysis was clearly centered on the exhaustion of post-World War Two socio-economic equilibria and the emergence of new patterns of production and consumption. Contextualized in the debate on the transition away from Fordism, the themes proposed by RC-40 members probed central issues that later constituted some of the core items of the globalization debate. Central among these themes was the effort to document the evolution of large agro-food corporations. This “corporate watch” opened up a fresh process of documentation of the global concentration and centralization of agricultural and food production and stimulated a rich debate on the characteristics and evolution of transnational corporations (TNCs). In 1988, the first RC-40 sponsored mini-conference on the role and growth of TNCs was held in Bologna, Italy in conjunction with the World Congress of Rural Sociology. In that and subsequent scientific meetings the group probed new issues such as the institutional changes brought about by globalization. In this context, the central effort was to study the evolution of the nation-state and the emergence of transnational forms of the state. This analysis pivoted on the substantive concern that the evolution of globalization could represent a limit to popular participation in decision making processes and

ultimately to the existence of actual democracy. The issue of the implications of globalization on democracy remained a key area of investigation for most of the 1990s.

The decade of the 1990s witnessed a qualitative growth of the Research Committee featuring a diversification in the use of theoretical approaches to the study of agriculture and food. Constructionist and actor-network approaches were now commonly used along with the more traditional structuralist and critical theory analyses in the study of contemporary agriculture and food. While this diversification finds its roots in the group's original theoretical diversity, new analytical stimuli provided by broader post-modern turns generated fresh and positive contributions to the debate among group members and between the group and the larger scientific community.

Substantively, the 1990s were primarily characterized by a sustained effort to research and theorize the general features of the globalization of agriculture and food. A host of conferences, mini-conferences, and publications on this theme characterized RC-40 members' work during the decade. By the late 1990s and certainly during the first few years of the new Century, the primary scientific attention of the group shifted away from globalization. Yet globalization remains a highly debated issue and a theme that requires periodical revision. Because of this overall importance and place in the history of RC-40, the idea of revisiting globalization of agriculture and food in a special issue of the *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* appeared more than appropriate.

Among the protagonists of the history of RC-40 highlighted above are the contributors to this special issue. And it is because of this long involvement with RC-40 and their equally long involvement in the study of globalization of agriculture and food that I asked Bill Friedland, Manuel Moreira and Salette Cavalcanti to answer three general questions about globalization:

- 1) What are the major features of globalization?
- 2) Who are its major actors?
- 3) What is the outlook for the future?

I asked them to answer these questions employing their past empirical research and to write essay-style articles. The idea was to allow individuals with a long standing involvement in the study of globalization to have a forum in which to present innovative and interesting reflection on the globalization of agriculture and food that could further stimulate the debate within RC-40 and between this group and the sociological community. Earlier versions of these articles were presented at an RC-40 sponsored mini-seminar held in Austin Texas in June of 2003. These original papers underwent a peer-review process and were revised accordingly.

Bill Friedland is one of the founding fathers of RC-40 and one of its past Presidents. He is known world wide for pioneering "commodity analysis," a scientific technique that revolutionized agriculture and food studies. Employing his commodity analysis approach, in his article "Agrifood Globalization and Commodity Chains," Friedland answers the above-mentioned three general questions by probing two interrelated issues: the degree of globalization of agrifood commodity chains, and their economic concentration. He contends that one of the major features of globalization is its unevenness. This characteristic refers to the diverging levels of global integration of segments of individual commodity chains. Accordingly, agriculture and food, Friedland maintains, features a few mostly globalized commodity chains while others remain regional, national or even local. Additionally, he contends that globalization contributed to economic concentration, however even this process remains uneven. Through the emergence of TNCs, the transnationalization of food production has been accompanied by the limited ability to enforce anti-concentration measures. Anti-concentration measures were established and enforced at the nation-state level with relative success in the past. But given the fact that global regulation remains somewhat problematic, regulation at the global level is weaker than at the national level. While cautioning us of the acceleration of concentration under globalization, Friedland concludes that the "national level" provides important anti-globalization weapons. The continuous importance of the nation-state and national-cultures are among these weapons.

In his article, Manuel Belo Moreira, the current President of RC-40, argues that the contemporary process of globalization is different from previous forms of global socio-economic relations for at least two reasons. First, changes occurring at the financial level have generated important changes in the relationships between the state and capital and between capital and labor. Second, this new situation mandates the emergence of new global strategies. Moreira further stresses that TNCs are the principal actors of the current globalization process. Additionally, he explores this condition and the possible future trends through the analysis of two scenarios: a

backlash against globalization and an acceleration of current trends. In this context, he argues that globalization is a highly complex phenomenon, and that agriculture and food is characterized by both high and low levels of global integration of production system. This analysis allows him to conclude that it is important to pay attention to this complexity as the rhetoric and ideology of globalization often do not coincide with the actual characteristics of this phenomenon.

Salete Cavalcanti provides the third contribution to this special issue. She argues that globalization is a multifaceted phenomenon involving a number of important actors and processes. In this context, she recognizes the important role played by transnational corporations and the state and identifies in the nation-state an entity that will continue to retain a significant position under globalization. The core of her contribution, however, is centered on the complex relationship between consumers and producers and the processes associated with it. In particular, she explores the issue of quality as it pertains to agro-food commodities. Cavalcanti identifies in the consumer movement's demand for better quality food products one of the positive aspects of globalization. However, she also problematizes this theme by uncovering the complex set of consequences that this apparently positive stance implies. In effect, Cavalcanti argues, that the demand for better food quality has been translated into a negotiated process leading to the creation of standards and procedures that frame it. In this context, some actors are empowered while others suffer disproportionate consequences. This is the case of producers in developing regions -- such as those of the San Francisco valley in Brazil that Cavalcanti uses as a case study -- who face growing inequality and control. Conversely, corporate retailers emerge as extremely powerful actors who, while responding to consumers' preferences, dictate the terms of locally based production.

Finally, in my contribution I also argue that TNCs are the most important actors of globalization and that their contradictory relationship with the state represents one of this era's most significant aspects. The majority of my article, however, investigates the issue of the future of globalization. I contend that because globalization is a contradictory process, it creates conditions for the democratization of contemporary society. Dwelling on the relationship between TNCs and the state, I argue that the state is called to support and legitimize corporate actions in a context in which TNCs tend to by-pass state demands and consequently limit its ability to assist transnational firms. This situation opens up a crisis of legitimation in which the state is called to justify actions that it cannot fully control and regulate. Accordingly, the state is one of the possible spaces for emancipatory action. I also explore the issue of possible emancipatory actors under globalization. I argue that the globalization project represent a dominant class' attack against gains obtained by subordinate groups and the higher levels of substantive democracy that accompanied them under Fordism. Because globalization marks the defeat of the historical left, the most relevant challenge to TNCs and their political representatives comes presently from new social movements, such as the environmental and consumer movements. I maintain that new social movements are the emancipatory actors in the global era. I conclude by arguing that in spite of the resistance of new social movements, TNCs remain firmly in control of contemporary society, a situation that makes the attainment of more democratic conditions a contested terrain.

¹ Arguably the roots of contemporary debates in the Sociology of Agriculture and Food can be found in classical works that discussed the evolution of agriculture in the transition from feudalism to capitalism and under capitalism. Marx's analysis of "primate accumulation" in volume one of *Capital*, Karl Kautsky's "The Agrarian Question" Max Weber's "Capitalism and Rural Society in Germany," Alexander Chayanov's "Theory of Peasant Economy and Lenin's "Theory of the Agrarian Question" are all cases in point.