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Farms, food regimes, and the power of small stories

Hugh Campbell¹

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Central to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's thinking is the distinction between monologue and dialogue.¹ Monologue is surely the eternal trap of the authors of books—writing narratives that make sense mainly to ourselves. For this reason, I am immensely grateful to Ronan Le Velly for his generosity in organising this symposium about *Farming Inside Invisible Worlds*, along with a similar healthy dose of appreciation to both Annemarie Mol and Philip McMichael for producing such thoughtful reflections on my book. I am really delighted to have the chance to open up some dialogue about the book. I am also grateful this first conversation is starting from such generous appraisals of my narrative about farming in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As the format of this symposium demands a high level of brevity, I will forgo responding to the reviewers' positive observations about the book, except to say that I am delighted to find that all of the reviewers see the book as doing at least two things: providing an accessible historical narrative about some important—yet previously invisible—farm history in one of Britain's imperial outposts, and opening up interesting possibilities for how we think about and conduct scholarship in farming worlds. More importantly, for a dialogic engagement, they hint towards connections to other insights and bodies of theory that I did not immediately see or address. These are good questions, not so much about errors and errant claims, but about the potential for new openings and opportunities for furthering theoretical discussions in agrifood scholarship.

For Annemarie Mol, there is a clear hint towards multiplicity and the generative capacity of farms—and even stories about farms—to reveal many different things and make real many different worlds. What she modestly neglects to mention is how this entire approach in *Farming Inside Invisible Worlds* operates in direct imitation of her classic work *The Body Multiple* (Mol, 2002). The first chapter of my book, in all good faith, could have been titled *The Farm Multiple* and in doing so would

¹ An idea that is elegantly explored within mainstream social scientific theorising by Michael Bell (e.g., see Bell and Gardiner 1998).

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have signalled its theoretical debts even more clearly! The ontological effects of the assembling of diseases/bodies and the assembling of farms/frontiers might seem like odd companions in a single narrative, but her work on ontology changed the way that I think about the invisible power of farms.²

For Ronan Le Velly, one key dialogue (among others) is clearly signposted: if bringing more-than-human agencies and ANT approaches into political-economic narratives increases our capacity to recognise nuance and formation and historical specificity, do they then close off our capacity to tell bigger stories about capitalism, conflict and world-historical change? In the contest between assemblages of modernist and alternative agriculture, can ANT alone explain the macro tensions and politics of which one succeeds and which one fails? Philip McMichael hints towards the same question: how do we scale up from the colonial and modernist farm to find some wider pattern or shape to power and change at a global level?

My choice in situating this story almost entirely behind the boundaries of one British colony clearly left these kinds of questions unanswered, particularly, how could this narrative about the making of modernist farms at colonial frontiers then expand its reach outwards to engage with the wider shape and powers of global modernist/capitalist farming through the subsequent 150 years?

McMichael's review provides some of the answers that I was not bold enough to suggest. I am not an expert on the Green Revolution, and no one can characterise the current assembling of monstrous powers and capacities in the contemporary industrial/financial food regime with quite the depth and breadth of Philip McMichael. His response reminds me of one of my favourite books—James C Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (Scott, 1998)—which narrates the powerful elaboration of, among many other things, the specifically modernist character of the disastrous industrial farming systems that became central to the Green Revolution. McMichael fills in the historical lineage of these kinds of modernist farms and extends both Scott's and my own theorisation into a much broader historical and spatial terrain. He describes how the modernist farm travelled outwards from the colonies and the American Mid-West to play an important role in colonising, segmenting, dividing, annihilating, and converting much of the rest of the world into wider regimes of networks and relations that elaborated both old and new constellations of capital: including a particular kind of farm-shaped capital. If I was only prepared to hint in my book at the various pathways rolling forward in history from the colonies, McMichael and Scott both elaborate just how many dire and important consequences accrued globally as the twentieth century progressed and how many other things became possible because of a particular kind of farm.

There was one seemingly obvious theoretical framework—particularly given my own prior writing—that I could have used to provide some of the webbing and

² I was also intrigued that she clearly saw one farm in my own family narrative—Heather's Homestead/Marotahei—as being just a bit more interesting than the others. I agree and have subsequently had the chance to collaboratively join my distant cousin William Kainana Cuthers (also a descendant of that farm) in writing an extended account of that farm and family informed by both Pakeha and Maori descent (Campbell & Cuthers, 2021).

historical connections that might have linked this particular story from Aotearoa New Zealand more directly to wider global dynamics. While never explicit, it is an implicit question that I sense in the reviews of both Le Velly and McMichael in this symposium: why did not you position this book more explicitly in terms of your past work on Food Regime Theory (FRT)?

It is a fair question that takes us into important theoretical terrain particularly around dynamics that occur at both the origins and the destinations of our modernist food world. The FRT³ approach has been hugely significant as an influence on my own work for many decades, and my first contact with FRT changed the direction of my early scholarship away from a rather doctrinaire application of agrarian political economy and towards a more historically and geographically contextualised set of engagements with the multiple dimensions and aspects of what constituted a food regime at any particular point in time and space.⁴ If assemblage thinking began to become more influential in my work over the last decade it was partly because assemblages and food regimes inhabit a similar kind of analytical space.⁵ Working with one made the other more accessible and comprehensible as an analytic framework.

But while most of the enthusiasm and energy in FRT has been directed (quite rightly) at the contemporary texture, reach and limits of food regime power, I was also drawn in the opposite direction. For me, questions of historical origins were just as compelling as questions of contemporary destinations. When reading Friedmann and McMichael's celebrated original formulation, I was interested in the first imperial food regime rather than the last. This made sense for a scholar based in Aotearoa New Zealand where the idea of an 'imperial food regime' provided a really useful analytical framing for characterising a particularly crucial set of dynamics during colonisation. But once that long and enduring regime finally collapsed after 1973, Aotearoa New Zealand and its food and farming worlds headed into something much more diverse, fractured, networked, and less 'food regime like'.⁶ FRT always seemed to be more useful for understanding the origins of the colony rather than an entirely suitable way to categorise its destinations.

Seen in this light, *Farming Inside Invisible Worlds* might be justifiably characterised as a thinly disguised examination of the territorialising and de-territorialising of the imperial food regime in Aotearoa New Zealand. But there were important reasons why in looking into this particular historical space, I chose to concentrate on

³ The breakout work in the FRT genre is Friedmann and McMichael (1989). A useful reflection on that breakout and why it wrought such a transformation on older approaches to the agrarian political economy can be found in a recent interview with Harriet Friedmann (Friedmann et al., 2016).

⁴ As Le Heron and Lewis (2009: 346) characterised it, food regime theory surpassed earlier, more doctrinaire, theorisation in agrarian political economy, partly because it became "an umbrella for theoretical and empirical activity." The turn towards empirical re-engagement at the scale of food regimes opened up multiple lines of evidence, enquiry and relationality. It became a vector for recognising more-than-human agencies in shaping food worlds (an idea then expanded upon in Le Heron et al. (2016)).

⁵ Without ever being mistaken as identical—an argument made in detail by Le Heron and Lewis (2009)—and expanded in Carolan (2013) and Dwiartama et al. (2016).

⁶ Hence, the broad move towards assemblage thinking rather than regime-thinking in recent scholarship in this area (see Le Heron et al. (2016)).

the farm rather than foregrounding the regime. Examining the farm always allowed the regime to be visible in the background but starting with the regime risked obscuring and constraining the way we can understand the various powers of farms. This shift in focus enabled me to delve into the assembling of the farm in ways that revealed the multiple powers and agencies at work. It also allowed me to more explicitly look at one crucially under-theorised interface: the colonising frontier.⁷ These farms and frontiers took shape in very specific places, and if I did not attach the label of the imperial food regime anywhere other than in a couple of footnotes, it was because I wanted to explore the assembling of the farm itself: the ontological effects of a new technical and bounded farm, the shifting contests of political and ecological frontiers, and the decolonising and anti-modernist politics emerging in this specific space rather than rolling inevitably outwards to the wider global sinews and networks of the regime and its subsequent historical manifestations. As Philip McMichael effortlessly demonstrated in his review: other people can do that job much better than I.

The turn towards colonial origins also allowed me to confront a second challenge: how to work within an assemblage approach to tell both specific, material, human, and more-than-human stories about the emergence of a British colonial farm world, but also to be able to link that to the ‘big stories’ that Ronan Le Velly is challenging us to tell. In *Farming Inside Invisible Worlds*, there is a big story, but it pivots around a subtle shift of theoretical focus. Agrifood scholarship—particularly in the Antipodes over the last three decades—has been highly productive and creative by using capitalism as its core theoretical focus, especially when looking back at the origins of Australian and New Zealand farming worlds.⁸ The Agrifood approach that I have contributed to as a scholar has fostered an important body of alternative and critical scholarship about agriculture and food systems. By using capitalism as its formational anchor, the Agrifood approach has provided numerous hugely necessary and critical alternatives to the kinds of sterile economic or scientific frameworks that are used by agricultural scientists, extensions, and economists to inform the orthodox framing (and enact a very particular set of ontologies) about what happens in worlds of agriculture and food.

But what happens if you shift your foundational framing from capitalism to colonisation?

My exploration in *Farming Inside Invisible Worlds* was directed towards elaborating what that shift would look like and what its consequences might be. As a result, the story of farm-driven colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand is a story that is saturated with human and more-than-human agencies and of fracturing and invisibilising ontological effects. It is a tale of rapid change, collaboration and then conquest, destabilisation and then near erasure of indigenous people, economies, and

⁷ Under-researched in the context of agrifood theorisation, rather than in the entire field of frontier histories—as demonstrated by the work of Patricia Limerick (2000), William Cronon (1983, 1991), and many other historians.

⁸ There are influential precedents for this kind of theoretical anchoring, including in classic works like Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History* (Wolf 1982).

ecosystems. There are familiar actors and institutions—land, labour, and capital—but each of these was enacted at key frontiers in Aotearoa New Zealand in ways that reveal the power of economic worlds, but also their formation and destabilisation by a range of human and nonhuman agencies. I think that the great modernist farm world that assembled at various political, geographic, and ecological frontiers in Aotearoa New Zealand does tell us a ‘big story’ about some very important questions: how we colonise, how we divide up the world inside and outside the boundaries of private properties, how farms become both capital and the makers of modern worlds, the role of the state and science, how political movements emerge to champion and/or resist these worlds, and the multiple ways that even hugely powerful assemblages like the modernist farming world of twentieth-century Aotearoa New Zealand are eventually deterritorialised and undermined, and alternatives start to appear.

It is this origin story that brings the theoretical insights of all three reviewers to bear at a single point. For Ronan Le Velly, what is the big story that makes small stories about farms relevant to our understanding of power, control, and transformation in rural worlds? For Philip McMichael, it is a question about what turns a farm into capital and how does a set of relations, materials, and effects at the colonial frontier create the seemingly solid capital on which food regimes rise. And for Annemarie Mol, it is an observation about how one seemingly mundane object—a farm and its descendants—can tell multiple stories and reveal multiple effects. All three provide different facets of the same core questions: what is a farm and what are its effects in shaping wider worlds?

My thanks again to Ronan Le Velly for initiating this dialogue. While I have only responded to a small portion of what the reviewers generated, it is an opportunity that I have not only greatly appreciated, it also allowed me to reflect on and understand my own work in new ways.

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