

# Globalization of Food and Labor Challenges for Sociology

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## **Abstract**

Sociology has the stimulating mission of providing critical analyses about the societies. This article aims at contributing to the debate about food globalization and the theoretical/methodological challenges presented in analyses thereof. It focus on the impact of such process upon production, distribution and consumption of goods, and particularly upon work and workers in specific empirical contexts.

**Keywords:** Globalization. Agriculture. Worlds of labor. Worlds of consumption. Labor mobility.

## Introduction

Sociology, which evolved over critical times of change, still keeps its goal of understanding the current worlds and offering ways to transform them, deep changes contribute to increase “the global character of the relationships affecting these various domains of human practice” (Lash; Urry, 1994, p. 279), and new paradoxes prevail over the “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1965). In this context, the scope of the discipline is expanded and this is why *Sociologies in Dialogue* seeks to open up to exchanges between fields of knowledge that are found both within and around the domains of the discipline, to address the urgent issues of contemporary societies.

Inequalities persist and multiply along the divide between the North and the South as underlined by Galeano, when referring to the position of Latin America in this broad process: “The division of labor among nations is that some specialize in winning and others in losing... Latin America is the region of open veins” (Galeano, 1973, p. 11). In view of its specificities, Social Sciences – and by extension Sociology – must renew themselves to provide useful and necessary information about the world, to be used by all, for better or for worse, as suggested by Pierre Bourdieu:

*Quant aux sciences sociales, on pourrait imaginer que n'étant pas en mesure de fournir des produits directement utiles, c'est-à-dire immédiatement commercialisables, elles sont moins exposées aux sollicitations. En fait, les spécialistes de ces sciences, et en particulier les sociologues, sont l'objet d'une trèsgrande sollicitude, soit positive, et solvante très payante, matériellement et symboliquement, pour ceux qui prennent le parti de servir la vision dominante..., soit négative, et malveillante, parfois destructrice, pour ceux qui, en faisant tout simplement leur métier, contribuent à dévoiler un peu de la vérité du monde social. (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 7)*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world requires perspectives and analytical tools commensurate with the grandeur and

breadth of the phenomenon that characterizes it – globalization. In this article, I will focus on changes resulting from the globalization of food and its impacts on production, distribution and consumption of goods and, particularly on labor and workers<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Globalization of Agriculture and Food**

The subject of globalization has absorbed the academic agendas since the last decade of the twentieth century as both a problem and a motto for Social Sciences (Sassen, 2007). The changes brought about by new information technologies, the way these changes have shaped circulation of capital, goods, information and people, and the obstacles and possibilities that emerge out of the *information society* (Castells, 1996) stand out among the approaches that emphasize: the power of capital and its ability to reorganize the systems of production and labor in compliance with markets; strengthening of transnational corporations; weakening of the nation State; reorganization of the political and social life (Bonanno et al., 1994) – all justified by the practices and discourses of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). Globalization “is a process in motion – it encounters obstacles, undergoes interruptions, but tends to generalize and deepen”, as warned by Ianni (1992, p. 24). Vicious and virtuous aspects of this process are evident, as Bauman (1998) claims when debating the human consequences of globalization. This global power is currently relativized, and the global-local overlaps can be seen in expressions like *Glocalization* and others that indicate the variability of this phenomenon (Ritzer, 2004; Long, 1996) and the heterogeneity that characterizes it (Appadurai, 1997). Thus, the analyses tend to focus

<sup>1</sup> The analyses provided here draw on researches conducted by the author in the São Francisco Valley, Northeastern Brazil, which produces grapes and mangoes (funded by CNPq), in Patagonia, Argentina (funded by CONICET), as well as on participation in other international research teams: Migration, Agricultural Global Chains and Rural Development - a Comparative Analysis between Spain, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, funded by Fundación Carolina (Cánovas, 2014); and collaboration with members of the RC40 of ISA- International Sociological Association; GT45 group of CLACSO and the Group on Globalization of Agriculture of CNPq.

on the diversity of forms and norms involved in social relations (Castells, 1997); and are reflected in the identity processes of our times (Agier, 2011).

According to Sassen (2007, p. 12), these aspects of reality produce a stimulating agenda for Sociology.

Today's global – formations are diverse both as social forms and as normative orders... For social scientists the research agenda consists largely of exploring this diversity, to capture the differences rather than only show the parallels. Capturing the specificity and variability of global formations makes for richer and more complex research findings.

This agenda reveals the remarkable change occurred in the labor market, as explains Otero (2011) when stating that the neoliberal model of capital accumulation changed Fordism's primary focus "on national states, to accumulation in the world economy at large", stressing that in this economy labor supply has globalized, thus contributing to the devaluation of the labor factor. Castillo (2010) supports this view when analyzing the complexity of changes in social relations within the worlds of labor, and suggests interpreting them beyond the local and regional contexts, expanding the focus of analysis to the world.

The globalization of fresh products is a sophisticated process. Technological innovations, quality standards and other specifications defined by potential consumers contributed to the inclusion of exotic types in the sphere of imports and exports. Flowers, for instance, reappear in new markets: "In newly adapted forms, of the long established flower culture of South China where it emerged from one of the most systems of intensive horticulture in the world" (Goody, 1994, p. 413). According to this author, the capture of species and new forms of nature and labor exploitation contributed to make flowers objects of global consumption; although this is not a great novelty, the significant changes in the way of producing, packaging and distributing flowers, fruits and vegetables are

noteworthy, as the technological apparatus used has become unique and certification processes like *GlobalGap* – previously known as *EurepGap* (Van der Grijp, Marsden; Cavalcanti, 2005) – are mandatory to assure the quality of these goods. “A certified good represents a case in which the object crossing the border is one of the sites of enforcement: the emblematic case is a certified agricultural product”, Sassen affirms (2007, p. 217).

Friedland (1994) leads a research group devoted to understanding globalization processes and the networks of stakeholders involved; this research field has strengthened since the 1990s (McMichael, 1994; Bonanno et al., 1994; Goodman; Watts, 1997; Marsden; Murdoch, 2006) seeking to address some of the questions formulated by Buttel et al (1990) and settled down in the sociological agenda (Buttel; McMichael, 2005; Bendini; Cavalcanti, Lara Flores, 2006). Bendini et al. (2003) and Lara (1998) examine the strategies used by global chains and their impacts on times of production, routine and control over workers. These processes are not inseparable from broader processes that are established in the *worlds of labor*, as analyzed by Hobsbawn (2000) and Ramalho (2013).

The origin and the particular history of regions and products that distinguish goods in the markets and assign them value contrast with the lack of concern regarding the standardization of labor and origin of workers (Lee, 1998) who provide manpower to make such goods attractive and desirable in supermarkets and shopping malls around the world. As discussed before, the labor market has expanded and has become flexible. The mobilities of capital and labor serve different purposes<sup>2</sup> (Bendini, et al., 2012; Benênciã; Aparício, 2014; Bonanno; Cavalcanti, 2014; 2011; Menezes; Godói, 2011; Valdés et al., 2014), but the paths of workers and their reproduction strategies depend on both these markets and the quality of those goods.

<sup>2</sup> Migrant workers employed in locations far from their home communities and in vulnerable situations.

## On Markets and Worlds of Things

The market plays an important role in the analysis of social relations in the new worlds of production and consumption. The strengthening of Economic Sociology (Granovetter; Swedberg, 1992) in the current century is an indication of such concern.

The market is a fertile ground for the emergence of other goods, as highlighted by Polanyi in 1957, when discussing the enormous variety and endless possibilities of creating new goods. Something totally in tune with the current globalization context:

Market trade is the third typical form of trading... the range of tradable –the commodities– is practically unlimited and the organization of market trade follows the lines traced out by the supply-demand-price mechanism. The market mechanisms shows its immense range of application by being adaptable to the handling not only of goods, but of every element of trade itself-storage, transportation, risk, credit, payments, etc. – through the forming of special markets for freight, insurance, short-term credit, capital, warehouse space, banking facilities, and so on. (Polanyi, 1992, p. 45)

Yet, as should be more clearly realized, than it sometimes has been in the past, the market cannot be superseded as a general frame of reference unless the social sciences succeed in developing a wider frame of reference in which the market itself is referable. (Polanyi, [1957] 1992, p. 50)

A new edition of *The World of Goods* (Douglas; Isherwood, 1979), twenty years after the first one, underlines the relevance of such theme. The power of the global chains increases in the infinite capacity of expanding the world of goods, as denoted in the study of conventions (Wilkinson, 2008).

The quality of goods concerns current producers, consumers and service providers. Object of worship, valued in rituals – like a Kula (Malinowski, 1976) resignified in the present times – quality works

to distinguish objects, people and social groups (Douglas; Isherwood, 1979; Hobsbawn, Ranger, 1983). Things have *social life*. In a thought-provoking analysis, Appadurai (1999) delivers a fine interpretation of the complex continuousness or transience of goods; the power and deposition of implied powers. However, the value of things set against the value of individuals. The quality required for handling goods contrasts with the frequent disqualification and devaluation of the extraordinary tasks performed by workers (Lee, 1998; Bonanno; Cavalcanti, 2012). The producers of quality goods aimed at the North work as in the past, with minor differences, but with no less power. Referring to Latin America in this inexorable process, Galeano (1973) states:

Everything, from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European-or later United States – capital, and as such has accumulated in distant centers of power. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources... To each area has been assigned a function, always for the benefit of the foreign metropolis of the moment, and the endless chain of the dependence has been endlessly extended. (Galeano, 1973, p. 12)

Food empires (Ploeg, 2008) determined the forms and conditions of use of land, water and labor, but the needs of the native populations of regions around the globe that specialize in the production of quality goods remain out of their interests (Bonanno et al., 1994; Rainelli, 2007).

The speed of flows (Castells, 1996) determines the types of relationships between producers, workers, distributors and consumers, but it is the power of consumers, the *citizens of the world* (Canclini, 2001), that is stressed along the chain. Goodman (2011) and Appadurai (1999) propose to add consumption to the studies of globalization: *I suggest that we treat demand, hence consumption, as an aspect of overall political economy of societies* (Appadurai, 1999, p. 29).

The agro-industrial complexes and the global chains in which they participate are powerful groups in the production and distribution of food products. Carrefour, Walmart and Tesco, among others, are examples<sup>3</sup>. The dominance of these companies over the production processes is clear, whereas workers of different origins are recruited to carry out the necessary tasks for the construction and commercialization of goods.

### **On Quality of Work and Vulnerability of Workers**

The new social division of labor, encompassing regions and nations, has become an expression of the specific way the restructuring of production occurs and, by extension, of the profile of most of current institutions that contributed to the transformation of consumption, lifestyles and the daily lives of many (Featherstone, 1995). However, in the attempt to bring together worlds, regions and populations by means of the supposedly free exchange of goods and services, the globalization process tends to exclude many others from its circles; depending on the nature of the clashes, territories and individuals also suffer from that effect (Cavalcanti, 2014). By situating the paradoxes of globalization, scholars gradually problematize the actual effects of its promises. Long, Roberts (2005) reflect on the serious social and environmental impact of the use by transnational groups of lands that belong to traditional populations of the Brazilian Amazon.

The São Francisco Valley region, in the Northeastern Brazil, has become well-known for supplying grapes and mangoes to northern markets (Europe and the United States); the Argentinean Patagonia also, for supplying pears and apples; Chile for supplying grapes; and Mexico for a variety of vegetables. All these regions have received government support for restructuring production processes and for compliance with

<sup>3</sup> Various regions of the planet became producers of exotic goods to be sold in world markets, and received state contributions to the processes of productive restructuring and compliance with quality standards and certification required by the markets.



quality and certification standards required by the markets. For the sake of quality standards, a contingent of workers was formed, and those are put in motion according to the working times set by the market times and to the requirements of global chains. Subject to precarious employment relationships, they perform, as temporary workers enrolled in vulnerable situations, the complex tasks of quality construction of such goods (bunches of grapes, apples, pears, flowers) and are subject to excessive working hours, according to the implied gender dimensions (Bonanno; Cavalcanti, 2012; Silva, 2012; Valdés et al., 2014; Cánovas, 2014).

These processes acquire local character in disputes that occur among the various segments of capital and labor. The unequal relationships between stakeholders lead to disturbing developments in response to the physical and symbolic violence represented by the control of mind and body to which workers are exposed (Bonanno; Cavalcanti, 2014) in situations of weak bonds (Murmis, 2003) and precarious relationships (Silva, 1999). Men and, specially, women have been selected as suitable workforce for the production of quality to world markets.

During a process that has strengthened in the last decade of the twentieth century, the routine of these workers was gradually transformed, along with contradictions between global proposals and the local benefits. Harvey analyzes this aspect of the matter: “analysis also points up exploitative contradictions within the neoliberal and neoconservative agendas. The widening gap between rhetoric (for the benefit of all) and realization (the benefit of a small ruling class) is now all too visible” (Harvey, 2005, p. 203). The uncertainty of employment and housing tends to increase the pilgrimage of individuals through regions and nations globally, thus contributing to the continuous reconfiguration of rural areas and city ghettos (Sassen, 2003). It is not possible to ignore the interdependence of these various processes (Bonanno; Cavalcanti, 2011). Specialization gave way to super-flexibility of places, regions and persons. Precariousness of labor relations, which is common in

rural areas, is fostered in the new production spaces by the work of individuals displaced from several areas, especially because of adverse effects of other development projects (Bourdieu, 1999), and is evident in the weak worker representation: *one evident condition of agri-food in the 21st century is the diminished role of trade unions* (Cavalcanti; Bonanno, 2014, p. 270)<sup>4</sup>.

Controls are aimed at avoiding risk and ensuring trust (Giddens, 2002) among the parties involved in global flows; those are combined with the need for acknowledgment of the merchandise and also validation of processes inherent to the transport and movement of the goods. Labels are created and certification standards are established to express the legitimacy of the sources and institutions involved. There are many examples – some of them, such as Macintosh and McDonald's, ensure their presence among globalized and globalizing parties by means of language, food habits and life styles. For its method, McDonald's was chosen by Ritzer (2004) to discuss how the *McDonaldization* expands as a model, from the main centers where new forms of management, processes and controls of work are created, to reach the most different social spaces throughout the world. Ritzer (2004, p. 1-23) clearly summarizes the formula found by McDonald's to become the number one in this process: "consumers, workers and managers, efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control" are elements that build up its ability of transversally bringing together, for the quality of their promises, territories and nations; the Mac Burger is exemplary in this case, being only one among the elements that contributed to the globalization of the *Global Yellow Arch*. By attracting consumers to their distribution centers and creating spaces for fast food, McDonald provided the company with the benefit of reduced labor costs, thus contributing to increase productivity levels, although by means of imposing perverse forms of

<sup>4</sup> The exploitation of workers through temporary forms of employment and continuing inspections at workplaces has been observed in various empirical situations.

domination<sup>5</sup>. In this way, *McDonaldization* reinvents itself beyond its country (Ritzer, 2004) and in rural areas.

### **Final Thoughts: Regarding the new research agenda**

The current horticultural workers of America are exposed to a frantic routine of work; the new rules of production and multiple activities make their life more dependent on external demands. Transnational comparative researches are still needed in order to detect, in these processes, the double exploitation of nature and labor, and the various dimensions of inequalities – of class, gender and ethnicity, as suggested by Hirata (2002).

The concept of social division of labor, basic to explain inequalities and the persistent power relations between nations (and that enlightened the writings of Sociology and its classics) can be better understood in the present stage of globalization, in which the precariousness prevails against the alleged flexibility of labor relations. The imbalance between the emphasis on quality of goods and the lowering of the quality of work, as evidenced around the world, reveals the naturalization of perverse labor relations (Cánovas, 2012; Bourdieu, 1999).

The inclusion of regions of the so-called southern countries as producers of quality goods for global markets, and the assortment of goods exported, justified by the need to increase currency, have not very often guaranteed better working conditions for their populations –rather the contrary. The problematic relationship of inequality is observed in critical situations of exclusion of indigenous peoples and peasants in general, by threats and confiscation of occupied lands, reducing existing work opportunities. The constant inspection of work, the forms of manpower enrollment, and the wide range of home places given the mobility of workers (Silva, 1999) contribute to the persistent precariousness of labor relations (Bonanno; Cavalcanti,

<sup>5</sup> McDonald's and Wal-Mart are companies operating in the food industry and food distribution that are often mentioned as being contract-breaching and exploitative in relation to their employees.

2014). “Globalization has not contributed to the improvement of the labor markets, as they are still precarious and occasional”, says Cánovas (2014, p.15).

The kind of globalization that feeds on the mobility and vulnerability of these people proposes new questions to Sociology. In this case, there seems to be a reunion with issues related to place and belonging and ties between the individuals, new and old, practices and cultures that make these spaces and territories a world between worlds. A society has been generated, which is dependent on efficiency and quality and, accordingly, subject to the action of other participants in global chains, stronger or weaker. The agenda is broad and continues to challenge the *sociological imagination*.

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