

Article

Myths of Globalisation: private regulation and farm worker livelihoods on Western Cape farms

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Introduction

The winds of change, proponents of market-driven restructuring tell us, are coming to the South African winelands (Spies 2000). After centuries mired in feudal backwardness, racist paternalism and the stultifying protection provided by Afrikaner Nationalist governments, the wine industry needs to modernise. Farmers will no longer be able to produce tons of heavy-yielding, low quality wine grapes in a market regulated by the KWV quota system. In response to new opportunities and pressures, a new breed of producer is coming to the fore: modern, focused on lucrative overseas markets, concerned with quality, businesslike and enlightened. Hectares of Chenin Blanc ('Stein') and Cinsaut ('Hermitage') are being pulled out – and along with them, the repressive and reactionary forms of labour management that wine farms inherited from the past. Modern management methods are being pioneered. Labour codes are proliferating: farms are now Ethical Trade compliant, Fair Trade labelled, Agri-Wescape Code of Conduct adopters, ISO 14000, ISO 9002 and SA8000 certified. Farm workers are being given shares and options in their business, and grin gratefully on rainbow-hued etiquettes with names straight out of a presidential speech – 'New Beginnings', 'Winds of Change' and 'African Legend'. After hundreds of years in the shadow of the slave bell, there's a new catchword: empowerment.

And why not? It's win-win all the way. For farm workers, conditions improve: their rights are respected, their tenure is secure, and they own a share in the land. For the farmer it is good business. Not only does that label set at ease the mind of those consumers who may have heard harsh things

about life on South African wine farms. In addition, progressive wine farmers have come to see that treating workers well serves their own interests too. In today's competitive international agricultural commodity markets, harsh laws apply. Productivity and quality are crucial – and the repressive approach of the past, which kept workers tied to the farm by miring them in debt and alcoholism, simply does not make sense anymore. Disempowered and resentful workers cannot be motivated or productive. Improving workers' conditions is required not only by law but also by simple capitalist good sense. Complying with internationally accepted labour standards and 'empowering' workers is an essential part of building a modern agricultural industry, where farmers are entrepreneurs and workers productive and satisfied (eg Vink and Karaan 2001, Steyne and Westgarth-Taylor 2001, cited below).

This is how, as current development-speak has it, globalisation 'works for the poor' (DFID 2000): by opening sectors long kept in isolation from international markets, by allowing these markets to punish laggards and reward risk-takers, by enabling ideas tested in the world of business to sweep aside the outmoded practices of those who see farming merely as a 'way of life'. And large overseas corporations, by insisting on tough quality, safety and human rights standards from suppliers, are ensuring that the aims of economic growth and social equity can be reconciled.

If only worker activists had thought of this before. Far from being the problem, capitalist growth provides the solutions. Businesses with vision have learned to see beyond the short-term, and realise that capitalism needs to regulate itself. As companies have seen that they need to ensure that their futures are sustainable, the financial bottom line has been supplemented by new criteria – ethical, social and environmental. The cannibals, as one corporate responsibility guru rather gruesomely puts it, are learning to use forks (Elkington 1997). Companies are learning that behaving ethically is integral to success, and that they need to use ethical, social, environmental and other forms of accounting, auditing and reporting as ways to secure their own long-term futures – along with those of unborn generations (Zadek et al 1997). And the best way forward for ensuring social justice is to join forces with these tendencies: to ensure that the codes of conduct are monitored and applied, and that businesses make progress towards compliance.

Does it sound too good to be true? This, or something very like it, is one interpretation of what is happening in the South African wine sector. The

underlying assumptions are widely held and provide much of the framework for discussion and debate about social relations on the commercial farmlands of the Western Cape, not only in wine but in much of intensive agriculture. These assumptions are that the problem with labour and social relations in the Western Cape is the persistence of the practices of the past into the present, that equitable transformation requires a process of modernisation, that change essentially has to be forced on wine farms from outside, and that economic growth and market competition in themselves are reliable driving forces for realistically achievable equitable change – particularly when operating in tandem with the enforcement of minimum labour and social standards from above by governments and transnational corporations.

This article questions these assumptions. It voices our discomfort with the popularity of the idea that opening up South African agriculture to something called 'globalisation' will facilitate equitable social change in the export-oriented commercial farmlands. In particular, we question the influence of these ideas in the development of arguments about private sector re-regulation. We argue that these proposals are flawed by (1) a naïve and inadequate understanding of the nature and implications of global agro-food restructuring; and (2) an underestimation of the complex and dynamic nature of change on the farmed landscapes of the Western Cape. Rather than the 'culture of compliance' mooted by proponents of private sector re-regulation, the prospects of adequate and sustainable livelihoods for farm workers are better served by policies rooted in a better understanding of the *social* dynamics of change on the farm – and by a broader politics of contestation.

After briefly sketching key questions raised by the proliferation of private regulatory schemes, we survey some of the key tenets of the 'modernisation' paradigm in the transformation of labour and social relations. This is followed, firstly, by an account of the most important features of international agrofood restructuring, and a discussion of the relationship between these shifts and the rise of private regulatory schemes, and then by a brief discussion of the complexities of on-farm change. We end with a discussion of some of the options and challenges opened by the age of 'globalisation'.

Background: equitable change and adequate livelihoods in the Western Cape

The general social background to the problems of wine farm and other workers in the Western Cape is well known (Rayner 1986, Scully 1990, Du

Toit 1995, Hamman 1996, Ewert and Hamman 1997 and 1999, Kritzinger and Vorster 1995 and 1999, Sunde and Kleinbooi 1997). The significant social wealth generated by wine and fruit production in the Western Cape has not been adequately shared with the black¹ men and women who have played such a key role in its creation. Livelihoods are inadequate in material terms – 30 per cent to 40 per cent of the rural population of the Western Cape live in poverty – and within the power structures of farms, towns and the province as a whole, farm workers are marginalised, excluded, and subject to highly unequal and racialised power relations.

This poses a serious challenge for the sector. The legitimacy of the industry as such depends on its ability to support the social fabric of rural life. Equitable change needs to ensure that livelihoods are adequate and stable. It also needs to provide farm workers and members of farm worker communities with a real share in power, so that their voices are heard when decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods are made. And poor people need a greater share in ownership. Can the imposition of 'ethical' standards by private corporations help make this difference?

Private regulation

One of the most important trends in agrofood value chains in recent years has been not only the attempt to *deregulate* and liberalise international trade in agro-commodities, but also the proliferation of new forms of *re-regulation* – usually in response to the concerns of consumers in the wealthy post-industrial nations (Marsden 1997, Seyfang 1999). Some of this has happened at government level, for example the deliberations of the Codex Alimentarius, but there has also been a marked increase in the number of private regulatory schemes (Seyfang 1999, Blowfield 1999, Hilowitz 1997).

At the core of this proliferation is the rise of a complex new politics of consumption, partly the result of the development of a consumer sector with high levels of disposable income and good access to media, and partly through campaigning by NGOs and pressure groups from both the 'South' and the 'North'. Consumer concern has centred not only around long established issues like food safety but also included questions of environmental degradation, pollution and poverty. Initially, retailers and transnational corporations (TNCs) responded by the development of codes of conduct and 'ethical' labels not backed by any real in-company change – but these are increasingly making way for the development of much more sophisticated complex, free-standing and harmonised regulatory schemes.

These may be based on consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. They are often closely linked to international and governmental regulatory codes and are sometimes backed by independent monitoring, auditing and certification schemes. In the agro-food and fibres sector they are increasingly focused on highly integrated processes of 'farm to fork' chain management and documentation. Examples are the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points system for food safety (HACCP), the Euro-retailer Fresh Produce Working Group's protocol on Good Agricultural Practices (EUREPGAP), the Forest Stewardship Council's scheme for the certification of sustainably managed forest products and, in the UK, the Ethical Trading Initiative's Base Code on Worker Welfare (Blowfield 1999, EUREP 1999, ETI 1999, Zadek et al 1997).

What is the significance of these tendencies? Do they offer a genuine chance to balance the interests of multinational corporations and the landless poor, or are they simply examples of corporate whitewash? Are they genuinely in the interests of the poor in the developing world? Or are they protectionism by another name, creating yet more barriers to trade on playing fields already slanted in favour of EU and US farmers and manufacturers?

According to some of the proponents of codes, the latter does not have to be the case. There is scope for ways of defining codes of conduct that will allow – nay, enhance – economic growth in the developing world. This is because respecting international labour standards simply makes sense in the modern business world. Thus the chair of the Wine Pilot of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) in the UK has argued that the ETI can help encourage the development of 'modern industrial relations based on the respect of the independence of the social partners':

... the present conditions of the global wine market require South Africa to compete on quality as a key element of productivity, not quantity. Where quality is a... key determinant in competitiveness, the realization of the potential human resources in a company is indispensable. That requires respect for the rights and potential of all employees... The aim ... is a world-class industry with a world-class workforce in which all benefit and in which material improvement for workers can be sustained. (Steyn and Westgarth-Taylor 2001)

Similarly, a major study concludes that the costs of compliance with such regulation in the supply chain can best be met 'if companies genuinely embrace the spirit of the ETI code, they will benefit in terms of higher labour productivity and more efficient management' (Collinson 2001).

Modernising South African agriculture

'World class industries', 'the high road', quality, competitiveness – stirring stuff, but can it be made to work in practice? Is a reconciliation possible between the aims of local economic growth, the need for social equity and the desire of multinationals to launder their supply chains? Will productivity gains really offset cost increases? That is in part an empirical question. But it is also important to become conceptually a bit more self-conscious. The arguments quoted here gain their currency within the context of a broader debate about the nature of change on commercial farms. Before we deal in more detail with the empirical questions, it is necessary to look at some of the assumptions underlying these debates.

Central to these debates is the notion of *modernisation*. It has provided a continuous thread in progressive accounts of slavery, paternalism and repressive labour approaches on the farmlands at least since the early decades of the twentieth century, when WM Macmillan formulated his arguments on the nature of race relations, the agrarian question and labour relations in the South African countryside (Macmillan 1919, 1927). In Macmillan's account, farm workers' problems (and those of people of colour more generally in South Africa) were rooted in the persistence into the twentieth century of the traditional mindsets of the South African frontier of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The struggle for freedom was a matter of the contest between two sets of values: the one backward-looking, authoritarian, paternalist and tradition minded; the other progressive, modern and forward looking. And in this clash, the forces of progress were represented by capitalism: as Macmillan's hero, Dr Philip, himself had believed, the solution to what was known in his day as the 'Hottentots' problems must lie in the application of 'the most modern principles of political economy' and the giving of a 'healthy stimulus to the industry of the colony' by the creation of a free market in labour (Ross 1989:146-7).

One of the notable features of subsequent 'progressive' accounts of farm labour relations in South Africa has been the unreflective way in which this analytic framework has been taken over. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, liberal commentators on 'farm labour problems' tended to focus on the 'dependent mindsets' of black farm servants or workers and the traditional and backward-looking mentality of paternalist masters. From this viewpoint, farm workers themselves were all but absent as protagonists. They were seen essentially as victims, trapped not only by the laws of

apartheid and the racist and feudal attitudes of white farmers, but also by their own passivity. Any hope for change was held to come from outside, and to be dependent on the intensification and acceleration of capitalist progress and economic growth (eg Hobart Houghton 1964, Roberts 1959:119). Time and again, these hopes have proved to be ill-founded but despite disappointments, these underlying assumptions have not shifted. In the 1980s and 1990s, their legacy was still being felt – now by way of discussions about change and transformation in the wine and fruit industries that pivoted on the important argument that Western Cape horticulture's dependence on cheap and rightless labour has involved a trade-off with productivity and efficiency. Transcending the inequitable labour relations of the past, it was increasingly argued, simply made business sense. Du Toit (1995) and Hamman and Ewert (1997 and 1999) stressed the complexity and the persistence of the cultural frameworks that informed farming. Others simply reiterated that the best hopes for farm labour lay in the introduction of changes that would intensify competition. Merle Lipton argued that restructuring South African agriculture along these lines would unleash socio-economic forces that would encourage the development of 'businesslike relationships' that could gradually erode the quasi-feudal, master-servant relationships that persist on many farms (Lipton 1993:373,383). In policy circles this has translated into the widespread assumption that what is required is the 'normalisation' of agricultural labour relations, which has almost universally been taken to require the end in practice of the 'dop' system (illegal since 1962) and tied housing, and extension into the rural areas of the institutions and practices of industrial – style labour relations and of neoliberal economics.

Partly as a result of these underlying assumptions, and partly in reaction to the way market regulation was used to benefit white farmers and exclude black people, a broad-based 'deregulation consensus' emerged on South African agriculture – even among sociologists and commentators on the left. This is one key to the unusual path of South African agricultural restructuring, where a sweeping process of *deregulation* in agricultural producer markets has co-existed with a significant *increase* in labour market and social regulation. Attempts to transform the social and power relations of labour on Western Cape farms have relied on the extension to the rural areas of the formal rights enjoyed by urban workers; the extension to farms of industrial-style trade unionism, and lastly, the removal of the 'policy distortions' (National Department of Agriculture 1998:2ff) that

protected farmers from market competition and encouraged the adoption of 'socially inefficient' approaches to labour that undermined the livelihood generation potential of agriculture (see also World Bank 1993).

There were obvious tensions here. The aims of rural labour law reformers concerned to protect rural workers were not the same as those of economists who did not see much wrong with the massive use of cheap labour where it was in plentiful supply. But these differences were subsumed by that underlying shared belief in the need for rural 'modernisation'. Labour law reform was intended to take agricultural labour relations out of the nineteenth century, while deregulation would remove the 'policy distortions' that had encouraged 'overmechanisation' and caused underemployment in the past. And by exposing the South African agricultural sector to the rigours of competition, deregulation was widely expected to shake out uncompetitive, 'backward' farmers and make way for entry into this sector of the 'businesslike attitudes' and modern agricultural practices that could help transform oppressive racial power relations. At times it was recognised that this would result in the shedding of labour – but this was often seen as 'inevitable' and a trade-off for better conditions for the workers that remained.

The trade-off, alas, has proved to be quite expensive. Instead of showing improvement, conditions for workers in commercial agriculture in South Africa are worsening. The underlying contradictions in the dream of modernising rural social relations cannot be avoided. Currency devaluation and the opening of markets can bring growth opportunities to export oriented agriculture. But commercial agriculture cannot without risk be expected to guarantee, by itself, more equitable social outcomes – better livelihoods for workers, more employment equity, the redistribution of land in ways that redresses the racial imbalance inherited from the past – under macro-economic conditions that also expose it to more global competition, pressure on margins and risk to producers.

But what about private sector re-regulation? If competition increases the pressure on farmers and workers alike, can private sector regulation not ensure that they stick at least to minimum rules? Can't the concerns of consumers overseas be used as a lever to ensure that the market pressurises farmers in the direction of compliance with minimum standards?

Certainly they can. The question is how they should be used. In the subsequent sections of this paper we will argue that *current* approaches to labour standard monitoring are not enough to resolve these problems. The

first set of reasons relates to the relationship of private regulatory schemes to the broader processes of 'globalisation'. The second relates to the role played by laws and standards in the transformation of social relations on Western Cape farms.

Agro-food restructuring in the time of 'globalisation'

Our focus is on a set of specific sorts of change that give the world of agro-food production and trade after 1990 its peculiar and novel characteristics rather than the often mystificatory way in which the concept of globalisation is used by its proponents and apologists (the increasing levels of trade and communication, the spread of information technology, rapid communication and ease of travel (see eg Verhofstad 2001). Central to these changes are the thoroughly political processes whereby the contexts and frameworks of agricultural production and international trade are structured and restructured (McMichael 1996, 1998, Friedmann 1982, 1991, 1993). These are not homogeneous, do not march in lockstep with one another, obey nobody's 'grand master plan', and are not inevitable. But, taken together, they create a new landscape of international corporate power, enabling certain social actors and marginalising others, opening up some opportunities and closing other doors.

For the purposes of our argument, four trends are particularly important:

- most evidently, there is the *restructuring of the regulatory frameworks of international trade and agricultural production*, for example by the agreements concluded under GATT and the WTO, but also through the promulgation of new forms of private regulation. While these reduce the ability of particular governments to intervene decisively to protect their own agricultural sectors or markets, they also entail the creation of new frameworks of 'global governmentality' – regulatory regimes that operate within a wide range of spatially distributed, transnational commodity chains and systems (Goodman and Watts 1997, Marsden 1997, Friedmann 1993). These take diverse forms: involving, variously, the creation of conditionalities and monitoring systems around issues like quality, consumer safety, production practices, and environmental issues etc. Alongside this diversity there is a significant degree of convergence in approaches to the re-regulation of transnational commodity systems, particularly in the development of a complex, heterogeneous but adaptable set of tools – what one of us has elsewhere called a 'globalizing technology of ethics' (Du Toit 2001b). These regulatory regimes create

new forms of social agency, new opportunities for engagement and contestation, and new forms of power. But these are unevenly distributed. Not only are they centred in the North and largely controlled by multinational corporations, but they also tend to privilege the interventions of narrow groups of certified and accredited experts and other members of the managerial classes (see eg Crawford Cousins 2000);

- this is closely linked to the second important trend, which is the *increasing level of concentration and integration within commodity systems*. The increasing domination of both fresh food and wine markets by large retailers in Europe and the USA is well documented (Burch and Goss 1999, Barrientos et al 1999). So are the concomitant pressures towards concentration and integration among agro-supply companies in general lower down in the commodity chain (Pritchard 2000). In South African fruit production, the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of large operators in the EU and UK markets, coupled with the simultaneous deregulation and fragmentation of producer power in South Africa has contributed heavily towards a reduction in prices and pressure on margins. This has fuelled the rapid consolidation of processing and logistic operations after the dizzying proliferation of independent operators after regulation. Wine is not immune from these trends: here, too, supermarkets are at the controlling end of increasingly buyer-led supply chains which themselves have been consolidating nationally and internationally for some time. There are indications (eg the formation of wine and spirits giant Distell, which owns three-quarters of the brandy market, makes more than 40 per cent of the wine in South Africa, and owns 16 of the country's top 20 'HP' wine brands) that these trends are set to intensify (Ramsay, Son and Parker 2002);
- the third obvious and important trend is the increasing tendency for both corporate power and value to be locked up not in the capacity for material production, but in '*intangibles*' – intellectual property rights, brands and other forms of symbolically mediated relationship. Though these phenomena have been around for decades, they are becoming more and more significant. Some food companies – Nestlé is a good example – have followed the trend set by companies like Nike in 'divestment of the world of things' (Klein 2000:4), undertaking management of 700 brand names registered in 67 countries 'with a diligence that is akin to the management of the company's key production

facilities' (Pritchard 2000:16). As Pritchard points out, this trend and the move towards high degrees of concentration are closely linked. The discounting environment created by the dominance of large retailers makes consumer loyalty to 'leading brands' a first line of defence in protecting market share. In addition, it is the pivotal role of firm-specific resources and capabilities, patents and trademarks, organisational systems, proprietary bodies of knowledge and technique and other intangible assets that allow the development of strategic advantage based on corporate mobility, and complex networks of inter- and intra-corporate control across national boundaries (Pritchard 2000). Traditionally, mass brands have not dominated the premium wine market, but the rise of the supermarket wine seller – and of Australia as a major quality wine exporter – means the ability to build brands that embody not only adequate quality but can also deliver quality and volume – will become more and more important to success in South Africa's export wine markets.

- finally, there is the increasing centrality of *new corporate ideologies of consumption and governance*. This does not only refer to the explicit valorisation of consumption and 'consumer culture', but also by the increasing encapsulation of the state by corporate agendas (for a popular account, see Hertz 2001) and the hegemony, both in government and in civil society, of discourses of control and management that have developed in the corporate sector. Increasingly, change, conflict, transformation and contestation are being conceptualised in terms of metanarratives and discourses (of 'stakeholders', 'empowerment', 'excellence', 'clients', 'rights' and 'entitlements') that work to contain processes of decision-making within the institutional structures and modes of procedure of management and corporate governmentality. Key to these processes is their increasing ability to depoliticise and blunt the conflictual edge of thoroughly political issues and to incorporate 'ethical' and 'moral' projects into modes of operation and strategising that privilege technical judgement.

Countervailing tendencies exist, and none of these shifts are the result of the planning or agendas of any one group of actors. They cannot be reduced to, or understood simply in terms of, the agendas of global agrofood capitalism. Rather, they constitute terrains of contestation and engagement, opportunities for negotiation and struggle between different groups of social actors (Goodman and Watts 1994). These shifts have

created important opportunities for some producers in agro-commodities by facilitating the development of niche markets where significant amounts of added value can be realised. At the same time, they have led to African agro-commodity chains becoming more exclusionary (Gibbon 2001). The future is challenging both for the wine industry, which has to break out of a stagnant local market at the very moment that entry into international fine wine markets becomes harder (Spies 2000), and for fruit, where access to relationships with the large supermarkets that can consistently take the required volumes of fruit is subject to ever tighter conditions and standards (NAMC 2000, McKenna 2000).

Here, South African experience echoes and mirrors that of neoliberal restructuring in other agricultures, where restructuring has produced a 'sociology of instability' on the farmed landscape (Campbell and Lawrence 2000). The era of 'globalisation' heralds not the dawning of a new era of progress, development and 'empowerment' in which the market efficiently allocates resources, but rather the intensification of dynamics of inequality and global-local instability (Peck and Tickell 1994).

Ethical sourcing

Can private regulation in the forms of codes of conduct help improve conditions for workers and help ensure that livelihoods generated within commercial agriculture are adequate and stable? The answer very much depends on how codes of conduct are designed, whose conduct they regulate and how they are enforced. In some contexts, the development of criteria and conditions form part of a broader process whereby inequitable international trade relations and economic power relations are addressed. This is the case, at least in theory, for Fair Trade, although some recent analysis highlights the existence of serious problems in the ability of Fair Trade to deliver on its promises of empowerment (Schreck 2001).

The problems are much more serious, however, in the case of 'ethical sourcing' codes. Here, the development of social codes potentially serve only to strengthen the tendencies for exclusion of developing agricultures from the value chain. This, for example, is a real danger in the case of the UK-based Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), whose base code focuses attention entirely on *producer* conduct, thus allowing its corporate members to sidestep questions about their *own* complicity in the creation of conditions that encourage worker exploitation in the first place.

This creates a danger that it could end up serving very narrow interests. For 'Northern' retailers, one of the chief attractions of membership is that

it confers an immediate 'ethics effect', buying insurance against bad public relations arising from exposures in the media, without requiring them significantly to reform their own practices and strategies that contribute to the 'race to the bottom' in producer prices and labour standards. The 'Southern' producers that can comply with the codes benefit from the creation of a two-tier supplier sector in which they are protected from less well-resourced competitors.

A key issue here is who will pay for improvements, and how much. As research on the costs of compliance to the ETI base code in the South African wine industry shows, these costs are likely to be highly variable, and differ from enterprise to enterprise. There are some areas – harassment and abuse, health and safety, freedom of association – where compliance will not involve very large direct or sustained increases in cost. But the areas of compliance that can make a significant difference to workers' livelihoods and quality of life – the payment of minimum wages and the upgrading of housing – will lead to the incurring of significant costs in the supply chain, costs that retailers will be unwilling either to carry themselves or to pass on to consumers (Collinson 2001).

From this perspective, ethical auditing of product sourcing seems to be not the exception to a trend but potentially part of its intensification. Not only are inequitable North–South power relations in agro-food networks not addressed, they are likely to be exacerbated. The development of social codes could well serve only to *strengthen* the tendencies toward the exclusion of developing agricultures from the value chain and the increasing concentration of power in the hands of Northern retailers. The barriers and thresholds that have to be crossed in order to gain access to premium markets in the EU and the USA become slightly higher – and so do the obstacles for entry into high value agriculture by marginalised farmers in poor countries. There exists a real possibility that the long-term consequences for economic growth and rural development can be negative.

The ETI, to its credit, has stressed the importance of avoiding exclusionary effects and ensuring 'pro-poor' economic growth, and some within it have argued strongly that retailers need to be willing to share the cost of investment in labour capacities (Steyne and Westgarth-Taylor 2001) – but there are few real grounds for believing that it will succeed in this by way of its present strategies. The ETI is a 'learning initiative', a voluntary alliance of private corporations, NGOs and trade unions. In this alliance, the corporations hold most of the trumps. They will not learn 'lessons' that

do not suit their broader agendas, much less integrate them into their broader sourcing practices. And the useful thing, for retailers, about the 'ethics effect' is that it is to some extent independent of the impact actually experienced on the ground. In this way it is not unlike the famous 'placebo effect' in medicine. While workers can only benefit if ethical sourcing is very carefully managed and implemented, TNCs can experience the public relations advantages immediately – and simply by virtue of participating.

Change on the ground

It may be argued that these objections are beside the point. They may concern critics of globalisation on the left, but they are irrelevant if private regulation by transnational corporations and retailers and the enforcement of labour codes can make real improvements on the ground.

Answering this question requires us to examine more closely the nature of changes occurring in export-oriented agriculture in the Western Cape wine sector and beyond. Such a close look highlights that the dynamics of change are much more complex and elusive than the model of sweeping aside paternalist labour relations and replacing them with modern practices might lead us to believe. More specifically, policymakers and scholars have tended to underestimate the implications of the social embeddedness of commercial agriculture – the extent to which its economic institutions and workings have been intricately interwoven with social identity, culture, gender, race and politics.

This insight involves an important theoretical point. It is a mistake to attempt to analyse or interpret decisions about farming style and strategy simply in terms of what its economic logic, where this is understood as the purely 'technical' and 'rational' maximisation of narrowly quantifiable economic gains. In a very real sense, the production and sale of wine grapes (or any other crop) has never been an exhaustive definition of what wine farming (or any other kind) has all been 'about' in the rural Western Cape. Commercial farming in the Western Cape took shape as an activity engaged in by a very specific cultural and social class, for whom farming was part of a much broader and encompassing 'way of life' with its own values and conceptions of the good. Making a successful living was always important – but it was intimately tangled up with a range of other culturally defined assets that could not simply be reduced to an economic calculation.

To see this reality as a 'policy distortion' is to misread it, for it is to assume that there could be such a thing as a way of farming that is

'undistorted', and where farming decisions are simply determined by a purely technical calculation about the optimal combination of factors. Such farms only exist in computer models and in the minds of theorists. As Jan D'Ouwe van der Ploeg (1990, 1993) has argued, any technical farming decision is necessarily influenced by a cultural and ideological framework involving underlying assumptions about the 'good' or 'purpose' of farming - and any such ideological or cultural framework can therefore also be the basis for 'rational' and technically defensible decision making about farming strategies.

In the Western Cape, these underlying frameworks have been very much caught up with the values of mastery and whiteness. In its simplest form this is articulated as a fiercely held insistence upon the value of the farmer's autonomy and independence, and his (it is usually 'his') right to have a final say in all decisions affecting the future of the farm. Commonly this exists alongside a strong identification with the land as the terrain of the identity of the farmer and his family - an identification in terms of which the farmer's dignity and independence is closely linked with his indisputable authority over the land and all those who work on it. Generations of colonial settlement, slavery and racial domination have knitted these concepts deeply into the social construction of white and black identities. To be a white farmer has been, for at least three hundred years, to be a 'master', defined not only by the ownership of a farm but also by the relationships of deference and authority that exist between farm owner and farm servant. This relationship has not been simply exploitative. Authority and power are almost always bound up with dreams of benevolence, and at the very least the intention to nurture and protect those who are subject to power. The notion of themselves as benevolent employers with a responsibility towards a grateful and appreciative population of on-farm servants has therefore been an important part of the self-conception of farmers in the Western Cape. But ultimately it has been a hierarchical relationship, marginalising and silencing the voices of those by whose labour the wealth of the sector has been generated.

There is very little in this broad framework that can simply be dismissed as 'backward', 'irrational' or 'inefficient'. It describes the moral framework of both 'progressive' and 'repressive' farming styles. Neither does it help to conceptualise farming styles in terms of the differences between traditional set-ups where farming is still conceptualised 'as a way of life' and those where it is recognised to be a 'business'. In our own fieldwork, it has been

our experience that the assertion that farming is 'not a business' is often made by farmers who are thoroughly businesslike in their approach. Similarly even 'modern', commercially oriented farmers are often still motivated and influenced by the values of mastery, independence and identification with the family farm that are held to be characteristic of traditional farms. Above all, the insistence on the sovereignty and centrality of the 'master' – the idea that the purpose of farming is the benefit of the farmer and his family, that the enjoyment of the farm as an asset is their right to the exclusion of all others, and that their right to the labour and loyalty of workers and services is linked to their largesse and generosity as benevolent landowners – is easily 'transported' into modernity. There is nothing about these ideas that is incompatible with 'businesslike attitudes' or with economic progress. They are not anachronistic forms of 'racism', necessarily linked to inefficient management practices. Rather, they are powerful and seductive ideologies about society and farming – not easily relinquished, and eminently adaptable to new socio-economic conditions.

PLAAS's research into the local-level, day to day workings of labour management and farmer strategy in Western Cape horticulture (Du Toit 2000) certainly seems to indicate that things are a lot more complicated than is allowed by the supposed overlap between the requirements of competitiveness and what can be achieved through an investment in worker empowerment. There is no simple or direct link between an investment in worker empowerment or compliance with minimum conditions on the one hand and the ability to compete in productivity and quality on the other. More than one path to competitiveness is almost always available: while there are socially responsible, worker-friendly and 'empowering' approaches, there are other approaches that are equally valid in 'bottom line' terms that involve harsh exploitation and a minimum of social investment – and which involve substantially lower risks and costs for farm management. Thus the rationalisation of farm management and the re-negotiation of paternalism can go in a variety of different directions. Some farms – a small minority – have taken the 'progressive' direction, and have invested in better conditions, better pay, decent housing, shares and participatory management. But many have not. Instead of switching over to more 'enlightened' and 'empowering' models of employment, farmers have tended to act to reduce these threats and secure their control, principally through the systematic attrition of permanent and regular employment (Kritzinger and Vorster 1999, Simbi and Aliber 2000, Du Toit and Ally 2001).

This should not be a surprise. While South Africa's agricultural restructuring policies may not have appeared contradictory from the viewpoint of the 'modernisation' paradigm, some very real contradictions were experienced at farm level. Coming at exactly the same time as the increasing overproduction in world markets started to bite, and as retailer power in key US and EU markets started to consolidate, deregulation severely hampered the ability of the wine and fruit industries to develop a coherent strategy for market access, and encouraged a race to the bottom in product prices during the mid to late 1990s. The resultant squeeze on farmers' profit margins coincided with far-reaching levels of government intervention into areas of farm management that have been considered sacrosanct and exempt from state interference for almost as long as white people have farmed in Southern Africa. Cold calculations about the implications of the bottom line clearly play a large role in legitimating often difficult employment decisions.

The consequences are starting to become clear. Official statistics indicate an overall reduction of 20 per cent in regular farm employment since the late 1980s (Simbi and Aliber 2000). In a recent survey of 77 farms in six key horticultural districts conducted for CRLS by PLAAS (Du Toit and Ally 2001), respondents surveyed indicated a real and systematic trend away from permanent farm employment. Almost 60 per cent of farms in the sample had reduced the size of the permanent labour force in the last three years, and on almost half the farms (47 per cent), management indicated plans to reduce permanent labour in future. For the most part, jobs were not being replaced by machines, but by casual labour, with strong shifts towards the use of labour contractors and casual workers, and a distinct trend towards the use of heavily exploited women workers. In addition, significant numbers of white farmers are walking away from the 'social responsibility' functions they have traditionally been held to have in terms of paternalist ideology. Key here is the large-scale withdrawal from the provision of housing to farm workers. Some 57 per cent of farmers reported having at least one empty house on the farm, with this figure reaching 83 per cent in some districts. On almost half of these farms, there were three or more houses standing empty. Less than a quarter of respondents indicated that they planned to continue renovating existing housing stock, and almost a third of farmers were considering abandoning the traditional housing function altogether.

Four important things need to be pointed out about these shifts:

- firstly, they are not easily reversible. They are part of a renegotiation, mostly on farmers' terms, of some of the most fundamental aspects of paternalist relationships as they have been inherited from slavery and re-invented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The processes of casualisation and externalisation that took place in the late 1990s are unlikely to be much ameliorated or turned around by the benefits accruing to export-oriented agriculture as a result of the post September 11 devaluation in the Rand;
- secondly, *they are disastrous for farm workers themselves*. Though agricultural economists and farmers may find that the labour market has become more efficient, these sectoral gains come at a significant social cost. The move to off-farm housing does involve some level of freedom from the domination of the paternalist employer, but it usually means the loss of the opportunity to benefit from the significant social wage paid by farmers in the form of housing and the provision of other services. This contribution, while coming with significant strings attached, has not been insignificant. While some farm workers have been able to benefit from schemes initiated under the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme, many of them experience conditions living in informal settlements in peri-urban areas and in small rural towns as harsh or harsher than they ever did on farms. Though they are no longer live under the shadow of an often authoritarian 'master' they are delivered to new forms of risk and instability. The very features of the off-farm and contract labour market that farmers find so attractive also undermine the sustainability and stability of the livelihoods that can still be gained in the sector. Competition over cost between contractors and temporary work teams means that farm worker incomes are heavily squeezed, and workers also pay a heavy price for labour market flexibility as incomes become more uncertain and unplanable (Du Toit and Ally 2001);
- thirdly, *these shifts are not at all incompatible either with modern, enlightened attitudes or with the 'culture of compliance' proposed by private regulators*. Current proposals for minimum wages for farm workers will do little to improve daily rates, and nothing at all to protect workers from the risk and uncertainty that is the underside of 'flexibility'. There is very little in either the Eurepgap code's social chapter or the Ethical Trading Initiative's Base Code that would allow one to find fault with the heavily outsourced operations that are increasingly being seen

in the Western Cape wine and fruit sectors. Certainly the ETI's Code provides that 'regular employment shall be provided', but the existing fine print stipulates merely that labour-only subcontracting arrangements should not be used to avoid obligations arising out of labour and social security laws. It is very hard to see how this stipulation could in practice be used to address the most important problem experienced by temporary farm workers, which is the inadequacy and instability of their livelihoods. The fundamental reasons for this failure of regulation are simple. They are rooted, firstly, in the Code's focus on *employment* practices in a situation where the most important causes of problems lie not with employment relationships as such but the underlying relations of *production* within which they must be conducted. Secondly, as stated above, they lie in its focus on ethical *sourcing* rather than the ethical questions raised by the larger design and structure of agro-food networks;

- fourthly, there is no hidden hand in the market that will prevent the negative consequences of labour flexibility. The trends described here can be easily reconciled with the requirements of medium and even long-term competitiveness. There may be sectors, such as the quality end of the clothing sector, where international experience seems to indicate that quality and consistency require at least some investment in the creation of stable and integrated relationships between workers and employers (Gibbon 2001), but in agriculture conditions do seem to be different. The wine sector has not reached nearly the end of its capacity to mechanise, and there are no quality reasons why it should not continue doing so. And while important considerations of quality do apply in the fruit sector, that does not preclude the heavy outsourcing of labour. Field research has highlighted some of the disastrous consequences of badly designed or badly managed piece rate system, but the main lessons to be learned from that is that there is significant scope for *well-designed* and *well-managed* piece rate systems (Du Toit 2000) – all of which would still be heavily exploitative. In the long run, the move towards outsourcing, externalisation and casualisation is sure to undermine the skill base of Western Cape horticulture, but as long as employers are careful to hold on to a small core of well trained and skilled permanent workers, those consequences are unlikely to play out in a way that would allow 'the market' to reward those who have not gone the outsourcing route.

Thus far our argument has been that there is no simple way in which the processes of globalisation, modernisation or private sector re-regulation in

South African agriculture can be said to make possible the empowerment of farm workers or to encourage equitable social change. What all these optimistic accounts tend to disregard is the deeply entrenched and highly dynamic nature of social power relations and conflicts in the making of decisions and the allocation of resources in a sector that is usually construed as economic. The hope that either economic growth or top-down regulation can resolve the problems created by exploitative and racist social relations by regularising or normalising them is illusory. One of the reasons why modernisation as such is an inappropriate paradigm for equitable change is that there is nothing pre-modern about the exploitative relations that are to be found in the rural Western Cape. They are the result of more than 150 years of more or less uninterrupted capitalist modernisation (Ross 1986). The 'businesslike' approach to farm labour relations that competitiveness on global markets would bring to the farms is all too easily reconciled with labour management strategies that are still harshly exploitative – not the authoritarian and paternalist forms of exploitation of the past, but the outsourced, right-sized and casualised exploitation of the post-industrial age.

Contesting global agro-food regulation

So far so good, but what are the alternatives? Does this mean that re-regulation should not be supported, or that economic growth and competitiveness are somehow not to be sought? Certainly not. Rural livelihoods on the commercial farmlands cannot rely entirely on export-oriented agriculture, but a macro-economic and institutional environment that can ensure competitiveness *and* address imbalances in trade relations can make a difference. And regulation of some sort or another will continue to play a major role in defining the chances for equitable social relations in export-oriented agriculture. The question is just what paths will be taken towards competitiveness, and that we should focus more closely on *who* regulates, and how, to what purpose, and informed by what agenda. Private regulation can play a role here, but only as part of a broader process of *social* regulation, and only if institutions are created that can ensure that international sourcing codes are nationally mediated and transparently applied.

But it is necessary to go further than this. Economic growth and social regulation make little sense if they are not pursued within the context of a democratic politics in South Africans that develops social, moral and ethical *challenges* to the way in which 'globalisation' is affecting livelihoods

on the land. In addition to engaging with government and the private sector, we need to find challenging and critical ways of engaging with these initiatives. According to some social theorists, this is where the real opportunities lie for making 'globalisation' work for the poor: not by waiting for the gains of economic growth to trickle down, but by using the terrains created by 'globalisation from above' for a new politics of 'globalisation from below' (eg Barndt 1999). If they are right, our attention should be on the way agrofood restructuring opens up new terrains of contestation and engagement – around rural and urban livelihoods, around land ownership, land use and democracy, and around power, knowledge and identity.

Rural struggles on the farmland will continue – but they might be more effective if they can do so in new ways. Here, it is necessary to think 'outside the box'. Land reform is one obvious stock response – but in the Western Cape under current conditions land reform will only help a small number of farm workers (eg De Klerk 1996). For this reason hopes are usually held to depend on prospect of a well-organised trade union that can help defend farm workers' rights and interests (eg Steyne and Westgarth-Taylor 2001). But farm worker representation is unlikely to be secured through the export to the farms of the Fordist models of trade union organisation developed in South Africa's urban-based factories. In order to deal effectively with the challenges posed to farm workers by current processes of restructuring, organisational strategy will have to broaden out in a number of ways:

- the focus of organisation needs to shift well beyond the ranks of permanent, full-time on-farm and mostly male workers. If prioritising core workers ever was appropriate in the past, it is certainly less and less appropriate now, at a time when labour intensive agriculture is shifting more and more to the use of off-farm, often African, and largely female workers. For many of these workers, some of the concerns that are central to permanent workers are simply irrelevant, while many new issues – problems around the stability of livelihoods, the regularity of employment and the gender-specific needs of women workers – are much more pivotal (Barrientos 2000). In addition, it will be impossible effectively to organise these workers if an artificial divide is made between their specifically farm-labour-related problems and all the other serious difficulties with rural service delivery and infrastructure provision that dwellers in rural informal settlements will experience. As

one of us has already repeatedly argued (Du Toit 2000, 2001a, 2001b), farm worker organisation, if it ever takes root on South Africa's farmed landscape, will much more closely resemble a broad based 'rural social movement' than a classical trade union;

- in addition to this *horizontal* expansion outside the immediate limits of the farm, any effective politics of contestation will also need to consider what we might call a *vertical* expansion, engaging with the full panoply of questions raised by agro-food restructuring *all the way up and down the commodity chain*. What will have to be challenged is not a narrow range of 'employer abuses' but the organisation of the agro-food system itself. Internationally, the outlines of this challenge are becoming increasingly clear. The politics of intellectual property rights in plant material, the development by TNCs of transgenetic organisms and GMOs (and the opportunistic exploitation by retailers of fears and perceptions about genetic modification), the negotiation of environmental rights and impacts on social development, the subjugation of national agricultures to the interests of US agro-imperialism, the privatisation of government regulatory institutions, the re-organisation and concentration of economic power in the value chain, the industrialisation of agriculture, the 'McDonaldisation' of food services, consumer deskilling – all these are emerging as fronts of engagement and contestation (Barndt 1999, Klein 2000, Bové 2001, Jaffe and Gertler 2001, Shiva 2001).

This has interesting implications in South Africa. Thus far, agrofood politics in South Africa has been fairly insulated from many of these initiatives, and has remained focused on a fairly narrow range of issues limited to workers' rights and land distribution. Such a restricted approach may have been workable in the past, but is not sustainable now. Debates around worker welfare, for one, can no longer proceed simply by remaining focused on the narrow ground of what happens within the farm gates, and in the confines of the relationship between employer and employee – those relationships cannot be understood, and cannot be addressed, without engaging also with the entire architecture of the regional, national and global relationships within which the farm as enterprise is situated. The same is true for land reform as a strategy for delivering social equity and addressing the needs of the landless poor. Debates around the merits and problems of the South African government's integrated land reform program (LRAD) cannot afford to ignore the implications of the developing international critique of industrialised agrofood systems. And local answers

will need to be developed – answers that go beyond the romanticism about local food systems that seem to characterise so many of the European and US contributions to the debate.

One of the most serious obstacles facing those concerned with farm worker empowerment in South Africa today is the fragmentation and lack of leadership in the sector. At present, there is no broadly accepted and workable vision of how commercial agriculture can contribute to the creation of livelihoods and rural development in South Africa. Yet, as events in Zimbabwe illustrate, the absence of such a vision is likely to have disastrous consequences. Those flung aside and discarded by the workings of the globalised agro-food system will not go away. If ordinary poor rural people do not have a stake in it, the system itself will collapse.

This is the one painful reality that is ignored by those who propose that globalisation is the answer to our problems. The intensification of competition and the further opening of markets does not on its own constitute a valid path for the delivery of social equity and stability. For a time, a weak Rand may buy export-oriented farms some reprieve – even as it hammers real incomes for the poor in markets where staple prices are increasingly set in dollars. But even if the global economy was not heading into recession, there would still be little hope that we could grow our way out of the legacy of apartheid on the farmed landscape of the Western Cape, or the rest of South Africa. Giving TNCs free rein to determine the conditions under which South Africans will labour and produce is unlikely to produce stable and sustainable livelihoods on anything like the scale on which they are needed. And those who will suffer the consequences will not be the holders of corporate power. It will be ordinary South Africans who pay.

Note

1. 'Black' here is used to denote all persons – 'African' and 'coloured' excluded by discourses of 'White' supremacy, apartheid and segregation.

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