

From nation-building to neoliberalism: agriculture, change and the social imaginary in Australia

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Through a brief analysis of Australia's recent economic and agricultural history this paper looks to uncover a changing social imaginary and proposes the usefulness of an in-depth study to highlight this change. Emphasis is upon the varied and uneven consequences of neoliberalisation and the proposed case study is presented as an explicitly situated example of these localised effects. The context of this study is a post-WWII soldier-settler community centred upon agricultural production in a young capitalist economy transitioning from an imaginary marked by nation-building and deep support for protected and supported agricultural production, through a deepening neoliberal agenda to one characterised by deregulation, global commodity markets and productivist techniques. Two aspects are important. The first is a consideration of neoliberalism understood as a political ideology and the ways in which this informs economic policy and land use, particularly with regard to agricultural production, in a globalising world economy. The second involves an examination of how the change this has engendered influences the lived experiences of individuals impacted by this mode of social and economic organisation. Central to these self-concepts and interpretations of change is the socially and politically endorsed criteria of worth as informed by the dominant social imaginary.

Neoliberalism, globalisation and agricultural production

It is important to establish a definition of neoliberalism and globalisation within this field of enquiry. Brenner and Theodore (2002:350) usefully identify the fundamental tenet of neoliberalism as "a belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development". This belief serves as an orienting axiom within multiple sites of expression. As indicated by Larner (2000), neoliberalism is a complex phenomenon that extends beyond debates about economics and state intervention. She identifies neoliberalism as operating at the levels of policy framework, ideology and governmentality, and as such neoliberalism represents a complex new form of political-economic governance based on the extension of market relationships. This complexity is similarly identified by Springer (2012) in his taxonomy of neoliberalism as an ideological, hegemonic project; a policy and program; a state form; and as a form of governmentality. These theorisations

of neoliberalism sit among many and point to the multifarious ways in which neoliberalism is both understood and realised. Additionally, there are conceptualisations of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) that emphasise the process-dependent nature of advanced capitalist initiatives. This processual understanding of neoliberalism is defined by Peck and Tickell (2002) as 'neoliberalisation', and further identified by Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) as being systemically uneven or 'variegated' due to the uneven institutional and geo-historical landscapes upon which cumulative impacts of the process of neoliberalisation are felt. For Brenner (2014), neoliberalism is understood as an ongoing and contextually specific process in that it emerges in and through collisions, in specific ways and forms, with inherited regimes and landscapes that had in some way previously protected people from waves of commodification, thus an "ongoing transformation of inherited regulatory formations at all spatial scales" (Brenner et al 2010:183). The increasing dominance of neoliberalism as an ideology informing policy formation around agricultural production is of particular significance when considered as a catalyst of change to existing regulatory and policy frameworks.

There are similar theoretical debates over the meaning and nature of globalisation. Fundamentally it is understood as the "deepening and widening of capitalist social relations" (Larner & Le Heron 2002:755) through an extension and acceleration of multi-dimensional processes that "create, multiply, stretch and intensify worldwide social and economic interdependence and exchanges" (Steger in Woods 2010:266). For Brenner (1999), this doesn't just involve an accelerated circulation of commodities, people, money and capital through a progressively global space, but also involves a related "production, reconfiguration and transformation of territorial organisation at once on urban-regional, national and supra-national scales" (1999:435). Globalisation thus represents a multi-dimensional and multi-scalar set of processes with complex effects, but in the context of this project the focus will be necessarily narrowed. With particular regard for the rural context, Woods (2010) usefully identifies three broad trends of globalisation processes, namely 'economic globalisation', 'globalisation of mobility' and 'cultural globalisation'. For the purposes of this project it is useful to focus on those globalisation processes related to that of economic globalisation, identified by Woods (2010:268) as encompassing the liberalisation of international trade and the promotion of a global marketplace, the development of global commodity and value chains, and the concentration and consolidation of transnational corporations and alliances, amongst others. As a study of a community organised around and through agricultural production, the arena in which globalisation processes are encountered in the context of this project is that of agri-food production and distribution. Given this context, it is useful to consider Bonanno and Cavalcanti's (2014) use of the term 'neoliberal globalisation' as a way of capturing the way in which globalisation brought about the reorganisation of production and consumption of agricultural products with the emergence of global networks, whilst neoliberalism simultaneously provided the theoretical and political tools that legitimised and facilitated the reduced intervention of the state along with the accompanying reregulation of production that privileged corporate interests. The significance of neoliberal globalisation to this project lies in its role as the catalyst for changes in the organisation of agricultural production in Australia.

The Australian context

Australia's early post-European-settlement economic history was characterised by export-driven economic growth based on the production of wool in the 1830s, the discovery of rich gold deposits in the 1850s, and the deep involvement of colonial government investment in infrastructure (Kenwood 1995:2-3) thus Australia, as a colony, was "founded within and was an integral part of the world economy *from the very beginning*" (original emphasis, Lloyd 2003:404). Following the supply-side theory of economic development whereby newly settled regions focus on the production of staples for export to the home country (Innis in Altman 2003, 232), Australia's

relatively small population base and abundance of productive land and other natural resources deeply conditioned the emergence and sustained prominence of agricultural production as an integral part of the economy. This view of economic development, in which both the trade relation with the colonial power and the nature of the staple being produced patterns not just the economic but also the social and political organisation of the developing country (Innis in McNally 1981), can be seen to help explain Australia's early economic growth and expansion as well as the enduring ideal of agriculture as important to Australia's identity. Debates over land settlement practises characterised the mid- to late-1800s and were often based upon ideals of a yeomanry social class and agrarian lifestyles, with many Land Acts passed during this period "ostensibly to produce the desired cultural landscapes and social class" (Powell 1998:17). Australia's early agricultural sector was increasingly characterised by a large number of small, independent businesses (usually the family farm) dispersed over vast geographical areas (Brown & Longworth 1995:132) and up until the early 1900s formed the dominant industry in Australia. The peaceful transition to Federation in 1901 had important implications for the pursuit of economic development (Jackson 1998:10), indeed had, as one of its key objectives, the creation of a common market (Kenwood 1995:1). In the years before World War I in an economy characterised by its reliance on exports, agricultural production diversified away from wool into the production of other agricultural commodities, with further rural diversification attempted after the War via the first soldier settlement and Empire settlement schemes (Kenwood 1995:6). The support for government intervention in the economy, particularly with regard to protectionist policies in the agricultural sector, was pervasive and "superimposed on an economy in which there was already heavy federal and state government involvement in the fields of transport and communications, foreign borrowing and immigration" (Kenwood 1995:228). The disruption of the Great Depression, along with the perceived need for expansion in other industries, saw a change in focus away from the rural sector in the inter-war years (Kenwood 1995:7). However Australia's early economic development and resulting structure can be seen to be deeply affected by its relation to Britain. The dependency theory of economic development posits Australia as a semi-peripheral country to the dominant core country of Britain, whereby dependency on the core country "does not preclude development in Australia, but constrains it and ensures that it is directed by the interests of the centre countries" (Cochrane in Bryan 1991:292). This idea of a developed but dependent economy explains Australia's lack of a strong manufacturing base and the focus on producing and trading staple commodities, whereby dependence on Britain conditioned the rate and type of development in Australia (Lawrence 1987:105). Until World War II the main inflow of capital had been loans to federal and State governments and public agencies (Wheelwright 1971:30) and government intervention in the economy was pervasive (Kenwood 1995:228). Thus early political agendas centred upon development of staple commodity production and significant public investment as drivers of growth and nation-building.

It is in this context that the re-commencement of the Returned Soldier Settlement Scheme after World War II was begun, the policy under which the community being studied was established. This scheme was designed "to encourage agricultural development" (State Records NSW) and in addition to the provision of land selection and a 'reasonable living allowance' provided by the Commonwealth for the first year of occupation, involved the provision of advances by the States for working capital, making improvements, and purchasing plant and stock, with repayments and interest waived for the first year of occupation of the land except for working capital which was payable immediately (Closer Settlement and Returned Soldiers' Settlement Branch). The persistence of the family-farm form that this in part represents is an important and enduring characteristic of Australian agriculture. As identified by Lawrence (1987:104), small-scale family farming had been entrenched in the colony from its earliest development, based as it was upon an availability of land that excluded a landlord class (unlike many European societies) and because it

was unattractive to traditional capital penetration due to time-delays inherent in the production process, the need to move capital to the materials which imposed particular costs, and the relative independence of the family farm unit due its flexibility and competitiveness. The enduring belief in small scale production and the idea that small holdings would develop the countryside and stimulate wider economic growth was the basis of the Closer Settlement schemes, including those for returned servicemen, however proved to be insufficient for many farmers, particularly post World War I (Malcom et al 1996:58). This demonstrates the pervasiveness of the belief in small scale farming and its support at a governmental level, particularly as a driver of regional development and nation-building, the politically and socially validated agenda of the time.

The post-World War II years represented a period of relative growth and prosperity. Alongside relatively buoyant farm prices (Lawrence 1987:42), agricultural productivity increased with improvements in mechanisation and new techniques in production (Kenwood 1995:45), in a period marked by productivism and industrialism and strong state protection and organisation (Argent 2011:13). There was significant public investment in rural infrastructure that improved transport and technical innovation and the balance of payments crisis in 1950/51, combined with record wool prices, saw agriculture play a dominant role in the economy (Malcolm et al 1996:59). This justified continued substantial financial assistance to farmers (Kenwood 1995:45), with support taking the form of regulations to protect farmers from competition, subsidies on inputs and outputs, price schemes to raise farmer returns, and special tax concessions and credit arrangements (Malcolm et al 1996:59). Thus the prevalent policy environment was one of deep support for agricultural production and small scale units of production and represented a particular approach to growth.

There were important turning points from the 1970s on. The mineral boom of the 1960s and early 1970s reduced the country's dependence on agricultural exports for foreign exchange income and a program of rural reconstruction, aimed at rationalising the agricultural sector, was begun (Kenwood 1996:8). The disintegration of the preferential trading partnership with Britain when it entered the European Common Market in 1973 (Kenwood 1995:13) was a further blow to agricultural exports in a world economy characterised by falling demand, rising unemployment and spiralling levels of public and private debt (Firster in Tonts 2000:53). According to Pritchard (2005a:2), from the 1970s to the 1990s the Australian nation-state underwent a "process of 'agricultural liberalisation' which sought to construct a mode of 'neo-liberal agriculture'", representing a fundamental change to the governance of agriculture. The rural adjustment schemes sought to consolidate debt and assist with farm build-up and farm improvement through subsidised lending, along with financial assistance for farmers who chose to leave the land (Kenwood 1996:55), critically underpinned by a message of 'get big or get out' (Malcom et al 1996:59; Lawrence 1987:89). Moving from traditional policies based on economic protectionism and the welfare state, Australia's set of neo-liberal policies pursued through this period included the deregulation of banking and finance sectors, the floating of the Australian dollar, a reduction in the level of protection for Australian industries, the reduction of business and income tax, and the privatisation of goods and services (Tonts 2000:53). The impact on farming and agriculture was manifold, with changes fostered by these neoliberal settings resulting in significant negative social and environmental outcomes (Lawrence et al 2013:37). As such, the "business of farming is in a state of almost continuous change", needing to respond to increasing capitalisation and the pressure to achieve economies of scale and efficiencies usually by way of farm amalgamation and a reduction in labour, thus a fundamental (and painful) economic restructuring that has challenged traditional social values (Haslam McKenzie 2000:74). Underpinned by neoliberal and monetarist tendencies, the Australian government's management of global trading relationships and the ways in which its aggressive free-trade stance transformed the organisation of farm commodity marketing arrangements can be seen as an example of

the impact of globalisation on Australian agriculture (Argent 2011:17). Although it has been challenged by some commentators (see Weller & O'Neill 2014), there is strong agreement that these processes can be attributed to an increasingly neoliberal agenda in Australia (see for example Pritchard 2005a, 2005b; Lawrence et al 2013). Whilst cautious of positing neoliberalism as a monolithic explanatory force, Argent (2014) acknowledges the influence of neoliberal thought upon Australian agricultural and farm policy and strategy. Following Lawrence (1987) and his problematisation of the neo-classical economic orthodoxy responsible for such 'reforms' as the deregulation of agricultural markets and the dismantlement of centralised marketing authorities, Tonts, Argent and Plummer (2012:296) call for studies of the "actual processes of change" across longer temporal scales, a call to which this project responds.

Changes in the social imaginary

The community being researched has been deeply marked by the economic and social restructuring brought about by neoliberal and globalising trends and their impact on agricultural production in rural Australia. Whilst having been established under a very different organising logic and orientation to definitions of growth and development, the community being studied sits at the nexus of economic and social outcomes of policy change. In this sense this project seeks to integrate an account "of the shifts in macro and meso contexts associated with neoliberalism with an examination of the impact those shifts had on what is conceived, perceived and experienced at the individual level" (Lefebvre in Hall & Lamont 2013:3). Central to this examination is a consideration of the ways in which the move toward neoliberal discourses has changed the elementary values associated with social life, as it is against these changing standards that individuals measure and understand their position and value, thus deeply affecting these conceptions, perceptions and experiences. This echoes Larner and Walters' (2004:507) examination of globalisation as both situated and embodied, where globalisation is understood as a new "way of imaging human life... through very specific imaginaries, processes and practices". Hall and Lamont (2013:4) apply this understanding of a collective imaginary to neoliberalism (incorporating globalisation) by exploring the ways in which such an imaginary provides "overarching narratives that tell people what their society is about, what its past embodies and its future portends, who belongs to it, and what types of behaviour merit social respect". Whilst not having the space here to give full weight to his theory, the idea of a social imaginary is importantly developed by Castoriadis (1987) in his exploration of social imaginary significations. Similarly, Weber's (2000 [1905]) account of the rationality and 'spirit' of capitalism points to the deeper organising logics and systems of value that underpin economic systems and accompanying modes of social relations. Most important here is a recognition of the normative dimension of the neoliberal imaginary, and the ways in which neoliberalism "inspired changes in the dominant scripts of personhood toward ones more focused on a person's individuality and productivity" (Greenhouse in Hall & Lamont 2013:5), in a privileging of market criteria for assessing worth (Hall & Lamont 2013:18). In this context, where economic identity is at the forefront of social identity, position and status, it can be seen how "thinking economic identities – worker, consumer, entrepreneur" are socially constructed (Larner & Le Heron 2002:756) and of central importance to ideas of self-identity and meaning. This is at the centre of this project, as changing conceptions of worth and value at a macro level deeply affect how individuals understand and interpret their lived experience. Within a deepening neoliberal imaginary, socio-economic status, intertwined with moral status, "became more central to the matrix through which individuals conceived their self-worth" (Hall & Lamont 2013:5). This study presents a particularly useful window upon the ways in which changes in societal definitions of worth and value, expressed at a policy level, impact upon individuals' sense of purpose and value by exploring the ways in which these individual's identity and experience was influenced through their positionality with regard to political priorities. Initially bound to an identity and status as ex-servicemen turned farmers and nation-builders, this study looks to

uncover the ways in which this shifted and changed through a deep recalibration of values to those associated with market performance, productivity and competitiveness.

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