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WORK RELATIONS
AND FORMS OF PRODUCTION
IN NEW ZEALAND AGRICULTURE

Greg Blunden

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WORK RELATIONS AND FORMS OF PRODUCTION

IN NEW ZEALAND AGRICULTURE

ABSTRACT

This thesis contributes to the debates over the conceptualisation of enterprises involved in agriculture, the industrialisation of agriculture and the reproduction and subsumption of family farms. In making this contribution, a framework is developed for the examination of work relations and forms of production in apple orcharding and dairy farming in New Zealand. It is argued that many of the intense debates in the literature result from the research perspectives which are used - principally Marxist perspectives. While sympathetic to Marxist theory, a realist perspective is adopted to lessen these problems. Middle-order theory is developed to fill the gap between high political economy and the concrete world of agricultural production. The theory suggested here is tangible in the world of experience.

Three themes, all of which are undervalued in the literature, guide the theoretical discussions - work relations, the biophysical basis of agricultural production and the concept of different forms of production. Flexibility is the concept used to integrate these themes. In the first stage of theoretical development and integration, two types of conceptually different workers are theorised: wage workers and self-employed workers have different motivations for work and different flexibilities in doing their work. From this basis, a functional typology of work relations in agriculture is developed, which differentiates all workers and enterprises. In the second stage, the flexibility of workers is matched with the labour demands of hypothetical production systems which are based to differing extents on biophysical resources. Some of these production systems are able to be controlled and consequently made more amenable to wage labour than are others. The third theme argues that two conceptually different forms of production exist - simple commodity production and capitalist production. The generalised exchange relations of capitalism are held to be a necessary condition for the emergence of simple commodity production. The power of these conceptualisations is tested by extending the concept of simple commodity production to include sharecropping. It is argued that non-ownership of the farm is the only criteria by which sharecroppers can be excluded from being classified as simple commodity producers, and this is less important than the ownership of the share contract.
Apple orcharding and dairy farming in New Zealand are the focus of the empirical part of this research. First, the production system for each industry is established in relation to their dependence on biophysical systems. Then secondary data, and the information from postal questionnaires and interviews with key informants are used to examine the social relations of production in core regions of production, and in regions where each industry has expanded substantially during the 1980 to 1994 period.

The production system for apples features two distinct demands for labour which are related to the biophysical inputs. One is a relatively small, permanent work force which must be flexible to attend to the capricious nature of the biophysical resource, and the other is relatively large, lumpy demands for labour, especially at the harvest. These lumpy demands for labour can be met only by accessing external labour markets. The forms of production in the apple industry are distinguishable as either simple commodity producers or capitalist producers. The family enterprises are categorised as simple commodity producers, despite, in some cases, a relatively low contribution of labour by family workers to the enterprise. The three large, fully-capitalist apple producers have reduced their exposure to apples, an indication that the prospects for regular sustainable profits by capitalist producers from apple production are not sufficient.

The milk production system is characterised by a demand for high levels of permanent numerical flexibility and high contributions of family labour. Its pastoral basis imposes limits on the scale of individual farms, and these farms are ideally suited to family-based enterprises - simple commodity producers. Sharemilking is an integral part of the industry. Despite the lack of farm ownership, these sharecroppers can be classified as simple commodity producers. That the large-scale capitalist dairy farmers use mostly 50/50 sharemilkers to operate the majority of their farms supports the contention that sharemilking is the most efficient way for capitalist farmers to organise production.

The apple industry is more amenable to the capitalist form of production than pastoral dairy farming because of the higher seasonal demands for labour external to the family, the lower levels of labour flexibility required by the production system and the limits of scale which are part of pastoral dairy farming do not exist in apple orcharding. Yet simple commodity producers are likely to persist in apple orcharding because of their inherent characteristics as a form of production. While capitalist producers must make a certain profit to maintain their presence in any industry, the motivation of simple commodity producers revolves around the duality of household and enterprise, and its reproduction

Key words: Work relations, Flexibility, Biophysical conditions of production, Simple commodity production, Capitalist production, Sharecropping, Sharemilking, Subsumption, Apple orcharding, Dairy farming, New Zealand.
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My ability to complete this program of research required a stable and supportive structure of family, friends and colleagues. I'm not sure how Gay managed to cope but she did, and we now have three children instead of the two we had at the beginning of this degree. Is there a correlation between degrees and children? Thanks to everyone in the Department of Geography who has inspired me, given assistance or just been there. As is becoming a much-valued habit, Peter Harwood arrived late on the scene to make possible a completion by my self-imposed deadline. Thanks also to Willie and Duncan.

I dedicate this thesis to Adrian Bradly.
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