16.7: Land Dispossession and the Traditional Peasant

The examples from the United States were about waged work, but most of the jobs in the food sector are unwaged. People who farm, fish, herd, hunt or forage for food are effectively self-employed: they sell some of what they get for money and keep the rest to eat. As far as farming goes, there are an estimated 570 million agricultural plots in the world, the vast majority of which are small-scale family farms (Lowder et al. 2014). Whether these rural livelihoods will disappear as farming becomes mechanised and people migrate to cities is much debated (see Weis 2007 and Collier 2008). Either way, it is evident that the transition from small-scale peasant agriculture to large-scale industrial agriculture can be extremely violent. This can be seen in a case from Cambodia.

In 2006, large areas of land were granted by the Cambodian government to private holders to transform into sugar plantations so they could export this ‘cash crop’ to the European Union. However, the plan ignored the fact that many people already lived on the land and didn’t want to be evicted. But the protestations of the existing tenants fell on deaf ears. In part this was because they did not have legal title to the land as a previous government, the Khmer Rouge, had banned private property and burned land records. Things got worse still. Financial compensation and alternative land that the current government was meant to provide was either inadequate or not forthcoming. When people resisted, force was used to remove them. Buildings were burned, land was bulldozed and animals shot. Over 1,700 families lost their land (see Herre and Feodoroff 2014). Responding to these events, community groups and human rights organisations formed the Clean Sugar Campaign. Given that the Cambodian government was itself involved in the land sale, the campaign’s search for justice took on an international dimension. First of all they tried to pressure the investing companies by filing complaints with the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. Then they turned their attention to the rules and relationships incentivising sugar export. They pressurised the European Union to suspend the free trade access it gave to Cambodia, began legal proceedings against Tate & Lyle in the UK for importing illegally produced sugar, and publicly shamed the project’s financial backers, Deutsche Bank and ANZ Bank, to make them withdraw their money. This can be described as a form of ‘boomerang activism’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998) – working through institutions in other countries meant that the campaign first left Cambodia but then came back.
In the course of their activism, campaigners did not just point out the breaches of law involved in the ‘land grabs’ but also made a political argument about why this way of producing food should be opposed. This turned on the fact that it was not just people’s livelihoods that were being threatened but also their identity. The land that was lost was used not only to grow rice and collect water but also to worship ancestral graves. It was their home as well as their workplace. This is a common experience of people displaced by commercial agriculture – they are not just victims of dispossession but see their very way of life destroyed. The position of the traditional peasant adopted in the campaign thus gave it a broader resonance in global civil society. For example, the charity Oxfam has used the plight of the Cambodian peasants as an example of the dangers facing rural dwellers the world over, and has lobbied companies like Coca-Cola to make sure they source ingredients like sugar in a responsible fashion. However, there is still a long way to go for full restoration or compensation for the land loss, and unfortunately much of the damage has already been done.