

INTRODUCTION¹

In Britain, international migrants have very recently become the major workforce in the labour-intensive tasks of harvesting, packing and primary processing of relatively high value products such as fresh fruit, vegetables, salads and ornamental shrubs and flowers (Frances, Barrientos and Rogaly, 2005). This paper explores the causes of the dramatic increase since the 1990s in the employment of migrant workers in this sub-sector. It locates this major change in a general pattern of intensification in agricultural production driven by an ongoing process of concentration in retailer power, and in the greater availability of migrant workers, shaped in part by state initiatives to manage immigration. However, within this narrative of change at the national scale, the paper also finds continuing diversity in agricultural work-place regimes.

The roles of the state, of market relations (along the supply chain), and of local social and spatial relations in shaping work-place regimes across sectors have together been conceptualised as social regulation by Peck (1996). Social regulation has also been used specifically for the analysis of change in the agriculture and food sector.² Regulation is seen as being practiced at different scales and by a range of actors, including the local and national levels of the state, and private business interests. As Flynn and Marsden argue, “at a conceptual and empirical level, we can begin

¹ I am grateful to Bridget Anderson, Martin Ruhs and Sarah Spencer for permission to draw on data from our collaborative study ‘Changing Status, Changing Lives? The Socioeconomic Impact of EU Enlargement on Low-Wage Migrant Labour in the UK’ (see www.compas.ox.ac.uk/changingstatus); to Stephanie

agriculture.⁶ In this paper, I draw on some of the conceptual advances made by these studies to raise questions about changing work-place regimes in British agriculture. I make use in particular of the extensions by Guthman (2004) and Henderson (1998) of Mann's theory regarding the natural obstacles to agrarian capitalism. These shed light on the processes by which value is captured by capital outside as well as within agricultural wage labour processes. Even in a climate of global concentration in the grocery retail sector, this is of particular importance in Britain, where concentration of supermarket power has been greater than in other northern countries (Flynn, Marsden and Ward, 1994:93; Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch, 2006; Vorley 2003).⁷ This article represents a first attempt to analyse the connection in Britain between retail concentration and work-place intensification through the employment of foreign nationals.

CAPITALISM IN HORTICULTURAL SUPPLY CHAINS

How capital reproduces itself and accumulates in agriculture and horticulture is in part a matter of definition. For Mann (1990), the defining feature of *capitalist* labour relations is the use of hired wage labour.⁸ It is the surplus value of this labour which accrues to capital. Mann deploys this concept of capitalism to explain the obstacles facing capitalist investment in agricultural production and thus why 'family farms', not based on the use of wage labour, persist. Mann's theory, an extension of Mann and Dickinson (1978), is undergirded by Marx's notion of the nonidentity of production time and labour time in agriculture,

which encompasses the whole set of labour arrangements⁹ made, largely by employers, with varying degrees of negotiation with labour contractors and workforces, and in response to wider labour market, legal and commercial conditions. These arrangements include decisions about whom to employ with regard to nationality, immigration status, gender, age and skills. From the perspective of employers, particular kinds of worker may be considered suitable because of their acquiescence to (or compliance with) tasks set and working norms, their degree of willingness to commit to a pre-determined programme of work (or alternatively to come to work without pre-set end times), and the ease of disposing of them when they are no longer needed. The arrangements also involve decisions over whether workers are employed by a labour contractor (gangmaster), or directly by the grower, the conditions of work and divisions of labour between roles and between work-sites and how much room for manoeuvre exists in practice for workers to move between them; the amount, form and basis for remuneration (piece rate or time rate, weekly or daily, cash or electronic); accommodation and transport arrangements where relevant; hours and days of work for each worker and the degree of control the worker, labour contractor and grower have over them; methods of supervision and quality control; informal and formal relations between individual workers, groups of workers, labour contractors and the grower.

I focus on three aspects of changing work-place regimes in contemporary British agriculture, which may be expected to indicate intensification: the employment of international migrant workers, the 'return of the gangmaster' (Brass, op cit), and the use of piece rates.¹⁰ All three can be interpreted as nontechnical innovations in labour control of the kind identified by Guthman, that use vulnerability to ensure compliance in the labour force. Evidence which follows does indeed suggest that all three are indicators of intensification. However, as we shall see, care is required in interpreting this because of the diversity of interests involved.

The main sources of data for this paper are case histories. Faced with the daunting prospect of accounting for diversity between regions,

commodities and types and sizes of grower businesses in processes of agricultural restructuring, Marsden, Whatmore and Munton (1987) called for the use of case histories in order to be able to account for multiple causes of change and to *suggest* prevailing patterns. While they cannot be *representative*, the depth involved in case histories is particularly insightful for the understanding of processes. The case histories referred to in what follows are based on face-to-face interviews carried out in 2004 with thirteen businesses in British agricultural/ horticultural production and one involved in first-stage processing. I spent two days on-site with the latter company and with three grower businesses (involved respectively in the supply of salad onions, strawberries and hardy shrubs), interviewing five directors, seven managers, five labour contractors and thirty-six workers. This approach meant that it was possible to take account of workers' orien8(sic.00i8 Twmempl7as.)6(T.5) (icldflabour peespectivrs

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⁹ See Rogaly (1996).

¹⁰ This paper is primarily about waged labor in labor-intensive worksites and it does not analyse the gender division of labor within grower households, nor the important role of 'unpaid' work (in spite of the warnings of Marsden et al, 1987, op cit, fn 1).

As this paper suggests, with respect to agriculture such an agenda should not be concerned with the practices of growers and labour contractors alone, but also with the companies that buy their products. The case histories drawn on here are suggestive of the importance of relations between different branches of capital in driving the intensification of work-place regimes. They are deliberately taken from a range of businesses that have (so far) survived in the cut-throat world of retail supply of fresh fruit, vegetables, salads and ornamentals in contemporary Britain.

INTENSIFICATION OF BRITISH AGRICULTURAL WORK-PLACE REGIMES

Switching to foreign nationals in the work-force

'A large number of those employed by the undersellers are foreigners and youths, who are obliged to accept almost any wages they can obtain' (Marx 1867 (1976): 690-1)

International migrant workers in British agriculture long predate the arrival of corporate retailers. Employers regarded them as "indispensable", for example, in the middle of the nineteenth century (Collins, 1976: 55). Demand varied according to crop and region, and between years.¹² It "was most exceptional, in, for example, the Fens (where the tongues were once described as being as many as the 'builders of Babel') and the Kent hop-fields, which polarised the labour markets over whole regions and attracted every manner and nationality of itinerant worker" (ibid: 43). Seasonal migration by Irish workers was particularly common (Johnson, 1967).¹³

¹² The employment of women and child workers was common, the breakdown of the workforce by age and sex being time and place specific (contrast, for example, the "travelling bands of [harvest] workmen" in central England with the "women and girl harvesters" in the Scottish highlands (Collins, op cit: 45 and 47)). Whole families from south-east London were hired for hop-picking in Kent up until the 1960s (Grieco, 1996). Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in the last decades of the twentieth century, and prior to the acceleration in employment of foreign nationals (men and women), the seasonal casual workforce involved in fruit, vegetable and flower harvesting was predominantly made up of women (and children) (see also Brass, op cit: 321).

¹³ Moreover, it is not only in contemporary British agriculture that employers complain about the attitude

Since the 1990s, there has been a general increase in the employment of foreign nationals across economic sectors in Britain (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer, op cit: 6). However, a recent comparison of employers' use of migrant labour in five sectors found that the structure of demand in agriculture had particular characteristics (Dench, Hurstfield, Hill and Akroyd, 2006)¹⁴. Firstly, the preference for migrant workers was much stronger in agriculture, secondly, only in agriculture did employers unequivocally see migrant workers as "crucial" to their businesses, and thirdly agricultural employers were the most hostile to the phasing out of temporary migration schemes under the British government's new points-based system (ibid: 34, 35 and 70).¹⁵

Our case histories suggest that, while there has been a decline in the availability of long term residents, including British nationals, and an increase in migrant workers willing to work in the sector, the main reason for this structure of demand lies in the relations between growers and retailers. The buyer-driven structure of the horticultural supply chain has enabled retailers to appropriate ever greater value from agricultural producers.¹⁶ This has meant declining margins available for growers on each unit of output. Many producers of fresh fruit and vegetables have gone out of business, as evidenced by the shrinking and increasingly concentrated structure of the fresh fruit and vegetable sectors (Key Note 2004). Others have sought what they saw as the only viable way forward: to supply greater volumes, through intensifying production and becoming involved in the packing and primary processing not only of their own products, but also of imports.¹⁷

and application of fellow nationals in their employment (for a US example, see Martin, 1988, op cit:5)

¹⁴ The other sectors studied by Dench et al were construction; administration, business and management; finance and accountancy; and hotels and catering.

¹⁵ See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/command-points-based-migration?view=Binary> accessed 21st July 2006.

¹⁶ Competition Commission (2000), Lawrence (2004).

¹⁷ Still others switched *into* horticulture, combining intensification with valorisation. As one former cereals grower put it, "we have intensified our business to try and retain financial viability" and ac780761T6.65 Ts(cJ65s02884ww)-

'Quality' has been at least as important as volume and price in the governance of retailer-supplier relations.¹⁸

intensification had lead that company from using commuters (British nationals) to foreign nationals employed under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS)²⁰:

“There is a two way street...I am happy to be a [supplier to the supermarkets] and it's what has given us opportunity. I get people trying to force you to go down. Anyway, so the driver is certainly the quality of work and we were finding it difficult to source good regular labour”. This company changed its work-place regime, including the switch to foreign nationals because “we are talking about wanting people to work for us from March to the end of November, whereas prior to that we had gangs in to do work but they would be much shorter duration....The way we used to work, if it was wet they didn't come. We are a different game now. We've got certain customers everyday. Weather isn't an issue.”

“I think the other thing was there was a throw back to the miners' strike.....there were lots of areas certainly around Sheffield where a lot of people were screaming out for work at that time, and this is why we got a lot of people out of those areas at that particular time....[But] these people used to come at half past eight and go about half past two or three o'clock which was a very short day, and in terms of what we're doing now we need a longer working day”

(Director, East Midlands grower, April 2004)

Growers of other crops in other regions also made direct connections between the specifications made by the large retailers, and the nationality of workers that worked at their site. This sweetcorn grower in the south-east also made reference to the specific relation between nature and agricultural production (echoing Mann, op cit):

“We wouldn't have dared grow unless we could have solved the labour problem. If we couldn't get the labour, we would have stopped instantaneously because we cannot compete [as employers] with baggage handlers at Gatwick, no way. I mean [in] our discipline we need to work on Sundays; people need to be at work

together so they all start at the same time; you can't run a gang of four or five if two are missing and that's what happens with the Brits. They go on the piss on a Saturday night and you wouldn't see them on a Sunday. Absolutely hopeless.....You see our business has nearly all been supermarket business and delivering what you say you are going to do on time in the right this that and the other is absolutely essential. Without that you wouldn't be asked to do anything for them...you need dead reliable people. I mean agriculture is very unforgiving. You can't stop the clock.”

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²⁰ A scheme providing temporary six-month work permits to non-European Union nationals currently registered as students outside the UK specifically for work in the agricultural sector.

employed outside the terms of their immigration status. It is much riskier for such workers to try to seek redress (Anderson and Rogaly, 2005).

A second important source of vulnerability for foreign nationals is lack of information. They may in fact have the right to work, to move jobs and to be employed in any sector but may not know that they do (Pontes, 2005). Lack of information is connected to the length of stay in the country and, in Britain, to English language skills. Indeed both these factors can in themselves operate to reduce vulnerability, as, through longer periods of residence, international migrants are likely to become more aware of their rights, the rules of the game, and commonly accepted ways of bending them (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer, op cit). English language skills have made it possible for international migrant workers to negotiate better within particular work-places:

“it makes a big difference if you can speak English. If you talk with English people they will be happy. They will say morning and bye. You get better jobs. My boyfriend understands English - it is another thing to speak it [as I do]. He gets better jobs because of me. Some people have to work outside in the rain. At the break they are shivering. It's not a pleasure. But me and my boyfriend have been under cover in the rain.”

contractors derives in part from agriculture's particular relation with nature. The mismatch between production time and labour time in labour intensive crop production make it economically unviable for a constant number of workers to be hired around the year. From a grower's perspective, using labour contractors provides a means of adjusting numbers so that workers are available when required yet are not being paid when there is insufficient work. Moreover, labour contractors may be able to

The new law made it an offence to use labour provided by an unlicensed gangmaster. So gangmasters increasingly had to show they were not cutting corners, for example on wage payments or non-wage benefits such as holiday pay, nor charging excess fees for transport, or exorbitant rents on accommodation. Gangmaster businesses were squeezed from another direction by growers facing ever tighter margins. Growers resisted paying a higher percentage fee per worker,²⁷ while gangmasters saw that compliance with the new Gangmaster (Licensing) Act would cause their costs to rise.

The gangmasters interviewed explained the pressures experienced by their businesses. All had once been gang workers themselves, and some still worked alongside the people they employed. Deep was the largest, supplying up to 400 workers per day to do field-based harvesting and first stage processing as well as 40-45 workers for the packhouse at the salad onion grower site in the West Midlands. This grower, turnover £7.2m in 2002-03, relied on Deep alone, a Birmingham-based British citizen of south Asian heritage.

Deep expressed frustration with the rates he received both for field and packhouse work. He was paid £4.90 per worker per hour for packhouse work. The workers received £4.50²⁸. This was corroborated in interviews with two workers. The grower paid for fieldwork at a set price per box of salad onions harvested and prepared. According to Deep, although he used to make his money in the field rather than the packhouse, the rate paid per box for each grade of product had declined year on year (see next sub-section on piece-rates). He was concerned that the company would ask him to go down further on his unit price which he claimed he simply would not do. "The most important things is the price. I am not going to work for £15 to £20 per day."

Kevin, a white British gangmaster providing labour to an east of England ornamentals company (turnover £6.5m in 2003-04), had inherited the business from his father twelve years earlier. The gang had shrunk from twenty-four to eight core members. Kevin said he made his margins from holiday pay and appeared especially anxious about his business coming under official scrutiny. "When the new legislation comes in and gangmasters are investigated a bit more, that will be it, finished...I pay two weeks

holiday pay when I ought to pay four." Another source of pressure is the customer, the ornamentals company, which has refused to raise the overhead paid to Kevin from twenty-eight to thirty-three per cent. "I told him [the director] that both our fathers were now in the ground and that your father had been happy to pay my father thirty-three per cent...I will stop business if overheads don't go up." Kevin explained that the director also objected to the high turnover of the non-core workers in the gang, which was a strategy by Kevin to avoid reaching the minimum threshold for employer's National Insurance contributions. The director told us he wanted "gangs to deliver regular, reliable people who come in daily." But he was also aware that the employer's national insurance contributions may represent the gangmaster's margin. "You know and I know that the gangmaster can't do everything correctly on twenty-eight per cent, if he is paying holiday pay etc."

Simon's gang too, which was made up of women and men commuting daily from a former mining area in Yorkshire to work at an East Midlands fruit handling and brassica floretting company, had

²⁷ For another specific instance of this see Dench et al (op cit: 63).

²⁸ Equivalent to the then National Minimum Wage rate for adults.

way he treated us. His father was a director of [names grower]. I was a single parent living in [a nearby village]. We [the gang workers] had a meeting in a shed and then asked [the ornamentals grower] whether we'd be guaranteed work [if we formed our own gang]. It was February 13th 1991 or 1992."

(Helen, gangmaster, August 2004)

For Helen it was key that she and Alice worked alongside workers in their gang, although this had the downside that workers knew they could get their way. For example, if they kept nagging "can we have a fag break?" they would get it. The core group had known each other for a long time.

The case histories, albeit based on a very limited sample, suggest that growers were moving away from continuing reliance on relatively small gangmasters that are either locally based or committed to supplying a particular grower, to larger-scale gangmasters, operating at the regional or even national level, making their profits either from undetected illegal practices, a higher volume of trade, accommodation provision or a combination of these. This is suggestive of a move away from exploitation of workers via personalised relations with labour contractors and margins made from dodging employment law, to the provision of workers by larger gangs, and more anonymised relations between employee

another guy on piece work [at the same rate] getting 18 pence a pound, making [£10 an hour, from Lithuania or Estonia or wherever”

(owner-cultivator of strawberries, West Midlands, May 2004)

The east Midlands salads grower also saw piece rates and the employment of international migrant workers as part of a package:

“I accept [piece work is] a very crude way of motivating people, but it works, and I don't see anything shameful about that....These people come here for economic reasons in the main, and not only that, they are going to fund their own education, or they are going to struggle very hard. Here, they have the opportunity to earn good money”

(April 2004)

Filip, the Polish worker who had returned to the ornamentals company after a five year gap, felt that the increase in foreign workers was connected to the availability of piece rates. “There is an increase in foreign workers mainly due to the money workers can make, and employers can make better money from them... Foreign workers, because of the piece rate, will work much faster as well”.³²

Taken as a whole, our interviews suggest that piece rates, long used for harvest work, have played an important part in the intensification of work-place regimes. Firstly, there is some evidence that they have been introduced for tasks previously paid at a time rate to speed up work and enhance labour control. Secondly, there is

rates...have gone down to make people work harder for their money.” Sabrina reported that in 2004, workers on piece rates only just made their day’s wages after a full day’s work. If they worked overtime, the rate did not change. “In my day I still worked well in the afternoon but didn’t kill myself...” Now workers “might not even make their wage.”

Piece rates can be used by employers to undercut statutory minimum wages (Gidwani, 2001). The translation of earnings from piece rates into less than the minimum wage was acknowledged as an effect (rather than an intention) by Richard, senior manager at a strawberry growing company in the south of England. However, work-place

think". He collected his wages from the

workers' labour market mobility, while the free movement components of European Union enlargement and the new status of accession country worker have, for some foreign nationals, enhanced their capacity to seek jobs across the economy (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer, op cit), and to seek redress in instances of employment abuse.

This begins to hint at some of the complexity involved in developing a national picture of agricultural employment relations involving migrant workers, especially in a period of rapid change. As Martin put it in relation to the U.S., "[a]griculture is a ...diverse employer...so there is a wide variety of employer-employee relationships" (Martin, 1988: op cit: 11). Class dynamics in agriculture are further complicated by the contradictory class position of many growers, that, facing one way, see value being appropriated by those who buy their produce, and, facing the other, seek ever more intensified work-place regimes to maximise the surplus value from their workforce. With regard to labour contractors, some "are honest brokers between growers and workers and many are not" (ibid: 130). An understanding of why certain kinds of production relations prevail under particular conditions "involves exposing the heterogeneity and fluidity of social and institutional forms of economic activity and assessing how space influences outcomes" (Marsden, Munton, Ward and Whatmore (op cit: 362).

Thus a first step for further research in Britain on the relationships I have explored in this paper, would be the development of studies of labour relations in the production of particular commodities. The turnover time of capital is not constant across agriculture, nor even across the horticultural subsector. At the most basic level, there are likely to be important differences between crops with a single short annual harvest, and those which are picked across many months, between work-place regimes involving field-work alone and those where packhouse and primary processing work also feature. Miriam Wells' study of the labour process involved in strawberry production in California is a model in this regard. Within her study of strawberry production, Wells meticulously differentiates between labour relations in four different valleys. Guthman's work is equally impressive for its spatial analysis of organic food production in California, though, unlike Wells, she did not systematically interview workers.³⁸ A new generation of British studies of

agricultural work-place regimes could also focus on localities and regions to try to explain differences associated with space, and on the significance of the scale of growers' businesses.

Alongside such studies, ethnographic work involving long term engagement and time spent alongside workers (both foreign and British nationals), and where possible growers and gangmasters too, is needed to elucidate migration histories, and the consequences of interaction between differently positioned individuals and groups of workers for worker solidarity and/ or further labour market segmentation. Future academic research could have an important role in undermining the commodity fetishism entailed in rendering working conditions in horticulture invisible and irrelevant to 'consumers'. It can also play its part in countering misrepresentations and over-generalisations of agricultural workers' positions either as an exploited and powerless class, or as free individuals following ever increasing opportunities for employment and upward mobility.³⁹

this reason that both he and Guthman reach rather undifferentiated conclusions about aspects of work-place regime, in Guthman's case regarding labor

³⁸ Nor, suprisingly, did Bauder in his recent analysis of the Canadian scheme for the temporary migration of Mexican agricultural workers (2006). It is most likely for

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