Society for the Anthropology of Work

Book Review: Cultivating Knowledge

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***Cultivating Knowledge: Biotechnology, Sustainability, and the Human Cost of Cotton Capitalism in India*, by Andrew Flachs (2019). Tucson: University of Arizona Press.**

Cultivating Knowledge: Biotechnology, Sustainability, and the Human Cost of Cotton Capitalism in India uses cotton as a window through which to view global economic and agrarian change. Examining the experiences of small-scale farmers from nine villages in the south-central Indian state of Telangana, the anthropologist Andrew Flachs raises important questions for the anthropology of work, including how farming knowledge is both cultivated and lost, how development programs and global markets structure farmers' livelihood decisions, and how different methods of cotton farming relate to rural well-being and sustainability.

In *Cultivating Knowledge*, Flachs uses qualitative methods of participant-observation and interviewing as well as quantitative methods such as ethnobotanical counts, household surveys, and field mapping to investigate how farmers experience a cotton market undergoing profound changes, centered either on the use of genetically modified (GM) seeds or the practices of organic agriculture. The fieldwork underpinning this book follows a decade of neoliberal policy in India that has increased the economic vulnerability of small farmers. Indeed, many of the villagers involved in the study recount tragic stories about the suicides of their fellow farmers—often by ingesting pesticides—in the face of financial ruin. While not focusing on suicide specifically, Flachs makes the point that such acts should be viewed within the “larger vulnerabilities of neoliberal rural life in India: the economic need to purchase more inputs and produce more profits to satisfy creditors in a transforming web of rural relationships” (p. 26). To document such developments, Flachs takes a reflexive approach, frequently placing himself within the text and explaining how issues of identity affected the data collection process. For instance, he notes that most interviews took place with male heads of household, who were not only the primary purchasers of seeds but were also those most comfortable talking with him.

Flachs's dual conceptual interests, in rural well-being and the political economy of small-scale farming, mean that the book takes a broadly comparative approach. It examines how farmers experience and conceptualize “living well” under the constraints of GMO-based farming or organic production, where both methods are touted by Indian authorities as potential solutions to the deep and ongoing agrarian crisis. In this way, *Cultivating Knowledge* poses a series of comparative questions relevant to political ecology and the applied anthropology of work and development, including: Which of these systems is more sustainable? How is rural well-being viewed

locally, and what type of farming system best supports it? What kinds of subjectivities does each type of farming labor create? How are everyday farming decisions made?

Chapter 4 focuses on farmers who grow GM crops and, more specifically, their strategies of seed choice and pesticide use. As users of the so-called intellectual property of corporations such as Monsanto, they are beholden to an array of constantly changing seed varieties, so numerous that they cannot rely on their experiential knowledge as to which are most effective. Local hierarchies play an important role in these decisions as farmers come to rely on the advice of larger landowners, who interact with GM seed vendors and access knowledge about the latest seed varieties and chemicals on the market. Flachs argues that farmer choices are structured by the overall political economy of global cotton markets, yet many of the ethnographic descriptions he provides also demonstrate the power of local cultural expectations of crop care and mutual obligation, as conveyed by a farmer named Malothu:

“You should always seek to produce more than your neighbors. If they spray four times, you have to spray five. That way, you’ll always have the best yield.” It does not matter what the pest populations are [Flachs explains], because Malothu wants to be seen spraying and caretaking. If he does not spray, he may be accused of creating a safe haven for predatory insects (pp. 95–96).

Here, GM farmers must balance local expectations of community behavior and a neoliberal market that individualizes risk if a crop fails.

Organic farmers, described in Chapter 5, enjoy a higher level of security. If their crops fail, they know that they will still be given seeds and supplies by the development agencies with which they work. Likewise, through these programs administered by these agencies, the profits of the group are returned to the community in the form of school support and other projects. Organic farmers, “rather than [careening] from seed to seed, anxiously chasing rumors of high yields . . . consider only two seeds and receive explicit instructions about how to manage them. Organic agriculture takes the gambling work out of farm work” (p. 134). These contrasting observations of the two groups of farmers address longstanding questions in the field of economic anthropology related to risk and vulnerability. Based on Flachs’s careful analysis, we might conclude that organic farming is better than its GM counterpart. After all, organic programs seem to follow what Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (2002: 22–23) would refer to as a strong grid pattern of social and economic organization, in which more restrictive rules structuring production and distribution may produce smaller individual yields yet generate greater group wealth.

Flachs is careful to point out that both GM agriculture and its organic counterpart hide systemic issues of risk and poverty. One way in which these realities are hidden reveals itself in the narratives of development success outlined in Chapter 6. Some organic farmers, referred to as “show farmers” (p. 50), are selected to present the new methods they have learned to foreign visitors and potential donors, thus acting out a development transformation story. These performances of development are multilayered. One example, in particular, demonstrates the complex global relationships between farmers and donors that these performances involve. Flachs describes an instance in which a visiting U.S. investor asked program staff about the cost of a chicken coop he was touring on an organic farm. The cost reported was far above what was typical for such a structure, yet the staff, aware of the inflation, relayed what the farmers had told them. Flachs notes:

Everyone involved recognized the narrative of crisis and charity, and rather than accept it uncritically, used it to their advantage: the foreign retailers used the story to help brand their textiles; Prakruti [an organic agriculture company] staged this tour to satisfy the buyers and provide a legible example of the rippling benefits of organic, fair-trade cotton; farmers and regional Prakruti coordinators worked together to stretch that money as far as possible and subsidize agricultural work for the next season so that farmers would not have to take on more debt (p. 126).

Ethnographic examples like this one reveal how careful anthropological analysis can shed light on the complicated social relationships and power differentials among the many actors within global development and commodity networks.

Overall, there is little that I find problematic in *Cultivating Cotton*, except that the book is not so much a study of the political ecology of cotton itself—Flachs seems to liken the perspective it takes to Sidney Mintz’s (1985) landmark study on sugar or Anna Tsing’s (2015) commodity chain analysis of the Matsutake mushroom—as a richly ethnographic depiction of cotton farming practices in India. Flachs’s research findings highlight the complexity of global commodity networks as well as farmers’ personal ideologies of work, well-being, and success. At the same time, the book makes an applied contribution by addressing comparative questions that anthropologists are often hesitant to approach, at the risk of offering imperfect solutions. In this light, *Cultivating Cotton* is a must-read for those researching agricultural development projects or small-scale independent farming. Moreover, the book would be an excellent addition to a course on political ecology, the anthropology of work, or agricultural

labor more generally. It provides a useful case study of the ways that systems of neoliberal capitalism reproduce themselves via nebulous global market demands that create unending cycles of risk and debt.

Author Bio

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