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Brigitte H. Bechtold
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Tangled Routes: Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail

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This book provides an accessible and insightful analysis of the impact of trade liberalization on the environment and on the lives of workers by tracing the route of the tomato from its planting to the supermarket checkout line. The book's eight chapters lay out an easy to follow globalization story, which begins with the contrast between the indigenous Mexican tomatl and the corporate tomato in the first chapter and is followed by chapters that focus on the McDonald's phenomenon, on the life of agricultural workers at Empaque Santa Rosa (a large Mexican tomato grower), on truckers and transnational migrants, on the sale of the finished product and the life of cashiers at Canadian supermarkets, and on some hopeful signs for the future.

To explain the emergence of contemporary corporate agriculture, Barndt relies on Antonio Gramsci's theory of historical dialectics, formulated in his political writings of the 1920s, which conceptualizes decisive moments (or human revolutions) in which political, economic, ideological, and other situations combine and create the synergy that makes for the emergence of new human practices. She visualizes and elaborates on five such moments in the past five centuries, which she classifies as the scientific moment and colonialism; the industrial moment and capitalism; the chemical moment and economic development; the genetic moment and neoliberalism; and the cybernetics moment and globalization (33). Each of these five moments build on the previous one(s), and all are still present today, since "neoliberalism and globalization build on histories of colonialism, evolutions of capitalism, and reframings of development" (48).

Barndt develops a coherent description of the journey of the corporate tomato across space and time (chap. 1) by means of global commodity chain analysis,¹ augmented with formal gender analysis including ecofeminism, cultural studies, oral interviews with the workers, her own activist experience, and popular education projects in which she has been involved. Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, expanded by Leah Cohen (1997) and applied to the division of labor along the tomato trail, which distances both producers and consumers from the actual tomato, explains the alienation of indigenous workers and their disconnectedness not only from the production process but from the land itself. What emerges from this combination of theory, methodological frames, and multiple collaborations is a layered narrative that is accessible at different levels of competency in the globalization field.

The central chapters of *Tangled Routes* (mainly 3, 4, and 6) are devoted to detailed case studies of both industries and workers at three crucial nodes on the tomato trail: the chains of McDonald's and Loblaws (a retail chain in Canada) and the Mexican tomato grower and exporter Empaque Santa Rosa. These three major case studies are analyzed by the

1. The global commodity chain was developed by W. Friedland (1984) and used by Gereffi, Korzeniewicz, and Korzeniewicz (1994) to foster understanding of capitalist strategy that reorganizes production and consumption in dense networks of enterprises that cross national boundaries.

dual perspectives of “globalization from above” and “globalization from below.” Globalization from above retraces the tomato trail starting and moving backwards from its final destination: consumption. Readers are most familiar with this end, which coincides with the northern part of the tomato trail that runs from South to North through the three NAFTA countries (82–83) and is epitomized by consumer-driven food chains such as Loblaws and the fast-food giant McDonald’s. Globalization from below presents the perspective of women workers in the NAFTA member countries. Their views and experiences, identified through detailed interviews with the workers, broaden the critique of globalization and McDonaldization that has been popularized by George Ritzer (2000), which Barndt critiques as being both gender blind and ethnocentric (92) by focusing on issues of gender and ethnic diversity and equity. Barndt’s fieldwork painstakingly details the gendered division of labor that characterizes both the “maquilization” of tomato production in Mexico (segmented skills, strict division of labor, low wages, obstruction of unions) and the McDonaldization in the North (control, efficiency, standardization, profitability).

The stories of young women workers included in the book foster understanding while at the same time forming a basis for critique of the seduction the global food system holds for youth as both consumers and workers and its power in altering consumption and eating practices. Food credits offered by McDonald’s to its workers, in combination with long working hours, low hourly pay, and work schedules that do not allow for family members to sit together for a meal, quickly turn vegetarians into regular consumers of the hamburger. The hamburger is the pinnacle of the North’s reliance on the natural resources of the South since the beef industry has contributed to rain forest destruction in Latin America, wheat production to support the requirements for the hamburger buns has helped displace staple corn in the same areas, and the tomato topping the burger has furthered introduction of monoculture, drainage of wetlands, and depletion of water supplies (83).

Each of the central chapters of the book ends with organizing efforts and alternative consumer practices, and “cracks in consent” are woven into the stories of women workers on the tomato trail. The book’s ending chapter (chap. 8) provides a summary of types of resistance to globalization. Collective action by the workers on the tomato trail is limited since only one of the three types of workplaces—production, transportation, final sale to consumers—is presently unionized (231). Rather, collective action has taken the form of efforts by human rights and environmental groups, international networks and coalitions, local/global education projects including Deborah Barndt’s own traveling photo display, and transnational activism. De-McDonaldization of food production and consumption, however, ultimately would require the systematic taking hold of alternative foodscapes at the grassroots level, and there is little evidence of this happening.

For the readers of the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, a major advantage of reading *Tangled Routes* lies in Deborah Barndt’s effective combination of academic scholarship and activism to portray the effect of globalization in one particular agribusiness. In addition to reliance on her education module on marketing analysis designed for grade-school students, she acknowledges input from a great variety of “collaborators,” who include her friends, her teenage son (a participant observer for research at McDonald’s), student researchers, multidisciplinary academics, community organizations, workers, and managers, all of whom add to the dimensions of the narrative and make it more accessible

to students and the general public.² The narrative is further enriched by the incorporation of a large collection of photographs taken by the author over a period of several years, which are integrated with the profiles of the workers whose oral histories form an integral part of the work.³ A second advantage is that the book fills the intellectual space between the highly scholarly discourses in the rapidly expanding field of globalization, on one hand, and the often ethnocentric and gender-biased accounts of some of the literature that is easily accessible to the general reader, on the other. For all these reasons, the book makes for useful and already popular assignment in courses in the fields of internationalization, globalization, sustainable development, and gender studies.

Brigitte H. Bechtold
*Department of Sociology and
 Anthropology
 Central Michigan University
 137 Anspach Hall
 Mt. Pleasant, MI 488589
 E-mail: becht1bh@cmich.edu*

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The Power of the Machine: Global Inequalities of Economy, Technology, and Environment

Alf Hornborg; Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001, 273 pp.

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While the administration of George W. Bush is dragged, kicking and screaming, to the point of recognizing, at least rhetorically, the reality of climate change and natural resource depletion, the wider sense of urgency surrounding the ecological state of our planet continues to outstrip the pace of acknowledgment of our leaders. The devastating hurricanes that lashed Louisiana and Florida in 2005 served as a short, sharp shock for Bush, whose

2. The same methodology of combining academics and activists as collaborators was also applied in the anthology edited by Barndt (1999) on women workers in the NAFTA food chain.

3. These photographs have also been mounted in public exhibits in Toronto (1997) as well as in Windsor, Ontario and Ottawa (2000) and “help transform the research into processes of popular education and mobilization” (77).