

The chain of exploitation: intersectional inequalities, capital accumulation, and resistance in Burkina Faso's cotton sector

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This paper examines how intersectional inequalities can facilitate the extraction of surplus value from agriculture. Through an ethnographic case study of the Burkina Faso cotton sector, I describe a 'chain of exploitation' wherein actors pass economic pressures on to less-powerful actors. People resist their own exploitation, yet justify exploiting others through discourses about intersectional inequalities – overlapping axes of social difference including class, gender, rural/urban status, and education level. I thus argue that intersectional social inequalities – exacerbated by economic pressures – can: 1) justify and thus facilitate the transfer of exploitation, and 2) fragment resistance efforts.

Keywords: agrarian question, intersectionality, surplus value, commodity chains, peasant essentialism, gender

Introduction

It was late afternoon, and I was picking cotton with Rosalie in a remote cotton field. Rosalie was complaining about women's lack of power. She said, "We get married, and then our husband decides everything. My husband hasn't come to the fields in two days... He just leaves us women here to work for free." She sighed, moving her bag of cotton down the row. "The men oppress us. They don't listen to us. If I was young again, I would not marry a farmer."

[Another day] I attended a meeting between male cotton farmers and their extension agent... One older farmer got up to talk. He said, "Since we've been growing cotton, we've seen nothing but suffering... We have to sell our cows to pay off our credit. Debts are growing every year. Your prices go up every year... It is like the cotton company is drinking our blood."

This paper addresses the agrarian question, or the classic Marxist concern for how capitalism takes 'hold of agriculture' (Banaji 1980). Specifically, this paper examines the role of intersectional inequalities in facilitating the extraction of surplus value from agriculture. Prior scholarship on the 'accumulation' problematic of the agrarian question has focused on political-economic mechanisms of exploitation such as state taxation, price policies, labor commodification, and outright dispossession (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009; Bernstein 2010). However, fewer scholars have explored the cultural and subjective components of how actors make sense of their participation in processes of exploitation. This paper addresses this gap

through a case study of cotton production in Burkina Faso, West Africa's leading cotton producer.

Burkinabè cotton offers a case of surplus value extraction in agriculture, with the Burkinabè state, international banks, agribusinesses, and textile companies making profits from rural farmers' cotton production and purchases of inputs (Bassett 2008, 2014), while cotton farmers themselves make very little money (Gray, Dowd-Urbe, and Kaminski 2018; Luna 2018b). In a classic Marxist definition, when profits are made off the labor of others, exploitation exists (Bernstein 2010). Drawing on Blaikie and Brookfield's (1987) concept of 'chains of explanation,' I describe the 'chain of exploitation' from cotton company managers to extension agents to male farmers to rural women. At each level, actors face political-economic pressures, such as debt and pressure to increase cotton production. In order to maintain their own social positions, actors often pass this squeeze on to others.

This paper focuses on how the flow of this squeeze channels through (and often exacerbates) social inequalities based on intersecting categories such as class, rural/urban status, education level, and gender. Using an intersectional lens, I demonstrate that relations of exploitation between 'fragmenting classes' (Bernstein 2010) are not solely determined by class or gender, but by multiple overlapping social attributes that determine power relations between actors (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Collins and Bilge 2016). I argue that actors draw on discourses and performances of intersectional inequality to justify or even render invisible their own role in processes of exploitation. My findings also indicate that intersectional inequalities have consequences for the politics of resistance in that they fragment resistance efforts and may prevent unified resistance to exploitation.

What remains of agrarian questions?

Since the late 1800s, scholars have wrestled with the agrarian question, probing agriculture's relationship with capitalism. This literature has focused on three primary questions: 1) How is agriculture implicated in capital *accumulation*? 2) How is agricultural *production* transformed by capitalism? and, 3) How do these processes of change intersect with the *politics* of class resistance? (Bernstein 2006; Byres 1996; Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009). However, scholars have debated the continued relevance of these questions. Some proclaim the 'death of the peasantry' (Hobsbawm 1994; Kearney 1996), while Bernstein (2006) argues that the agrarian question of capital is dead – that global capital no longer depends on agriculture to accumulate surplus value.

However, others have argued that agrarian questions of capital remain relevant, particularly given the emergence of what McMichael (2005) calls the 'corporate food regime,' driven by neoliberalism, agribusiness consolidation, and global commodity chains (Goodman and Watts 1997; Watts 2009; Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009; Daviron and Gibbon 2002). Many of these chains are organized around 'contract' production, where farmers (as petty commodity producers) are not necessarily dispossessed of their means of production, nor directly working for a wage, yet they increasingly resemble 'labor' in terms of their relationship to capital accumulation (Little and Watts 1994; Oya 2012). There are thus important – and ongoing – agrarian questions regarding changing configurations of accumulation, production, and politics.

In the 'accumulation' problematic of how capital extracts surplus value from agriculture, scholars have proposed a range of mechanisms. This includes the commodification of labor – whether through land loss or processes of rural class fragmentation (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009). Other mechanisms of surplus extraction include usurious debt/credit arrangements or various forms of rent-seeking tenancy relations (Gerber 2014), and extra-economic coercions such as states requiring forced labor or taxing rural populations (Bates 1981; Mamdani 1987;

Preobrazhensky 1965). Finally, prices can extract surplus value, such as when the state sets agricultural prices high enough to encourage farming, but low enough to capture surplus value (Preobrazhensky 1965; Bassett 2014). World-systems theorists also emphasize the role of prices, particularly via unequal exchange between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ states and declining terms of trade between agricultural and non-agricultural goods (Wallerstein 2004; Gibbon and Ponte 2005).

Social differentiation and intersectional inequalities

Securing surplus value often entails multiple mechanisms, and – particularly in contract farming and commodity chains – a long chain of actors who participate in translating production pressures onto less powerful actors. In other words, accumulation hinges on social relationships of exploitation between groups. The specifics of these relations have preoccupied scholars of agrarian change for decades, including in the African context (e.g. Bernstein 2004; O’Laughlin 2016; Berry 1993; Carney and Watts 1990). Yet scholars continue to call for a better understanding of how the ‘internal dynamics of social differentiation’ (Oya 2012) contribute to, hinder, or shape processes of capital accumulation, rural transformation, and resistance (O’Laughlin 2016).

One debate about social differentiation centers on the very categories of ‘capital’ and ‘peasant.’ Here again, Bernstein (2006) has been a key figure, critiquing the anachronistic category of peasant, and arguing instead for ‘fragmenting classes of labor.’ A huge literature has pushed back against peasant essentialism over the years, demonstrating the deep divisions within ‘peasant’ communities (Bernstein and Byres 2001; Brass 2000; Agarwal 2014; Bernstein 2014). Furthermore, O’Laughlin urges scholars to examine differences beyond those ‘*within* the peasantry’ (2016, 406). Many actors (not just petty commodity producers) may occupy

contradictory positions between capital and labor, simultaneously exploited and exploiting (Bernstein 2010; Mamdani 1987).

In parallel, feminist scholars opened up the ‘black box’ of the household, pointing out deep gender divides in rural communities (Agarwal 1994; Carney and Watts 1990; Hart 1992; Razavi 2009). In some cases, women’s resistance has even undermined capital accumulation (Carney 1988; Mackintosh 1989). Many scholars have also paid attention to intersections of class and gender (Carr 2008; Park, White, and Julia 2015; Nightingale 2011), and recognize the importance of other axes of difference (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996; Bernstein 2010). Mollett (2017), however, contends that these intersections remain under-theorized.

To this end, this paper draws more explicitly on the concept of ‘intersectionality’ – that is, material and symbolic inequalities that are formed along multiple axes of difference (Collins and Bilge 2016; Crenshaw 1991) such as race, ethnicity, nation, class, gender, age, or sexuality. Intersectionality emphasizes that social position or power is contingent on overlapping social attributes, or interwoven axes of power (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). With this focus on power relations, an intersectional perspective can inform analyses of oppression and exploitation that are often approached through political economy (Clark, Auerbach, and Xuan Zhang 2018; de los Reyes 2017). A key insight of intersectionality is that attributes can change meaning when in different combinations, and that many attributes are not static, but must be performed or embodied – like the concept of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) or performing class (Bourdieu 1984). This idea of performative difference has been engaged by some agrarian scholars analyzing how practices of social distinction shape production decisions (Gidwani 2008; Li 2014; Luna 2018a).

However, few scholars have explicitly examined how people draw on or contest these axes of social difference in making sense of their own participation in processes of exploitation. This question is particularly relevant for global commodity chains, which depend on a long chain of actors translating production pressures onto less powerful actors. Certainly, peoples' participation often results from coercion or limited choices. However, limited choice does not reveal how people justify and/or resist their participation in an exploitative system. In this paper, I use an intersectional lens to examine the complex discourses of difference I heard within the Burkinabè cotton sector. Actors in a wide range of social positions protest what they view as their own exploitation, while engaging in behavior that others perceive to be exploitative. I show that they justify passing on production pressures to less-powerful people by drawing on discourses about intersectional social differences.

Methodology and field methods

Studying 'chains'

One famous method for studying 'chains' of relationships comes from political ecology. Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) introduced the concept of 'chains of explanation' for making progressively broader explanatory arguments that draw together multiple spatial and historical scales of analysis. They sought to understand land degradation by looking at how various relationships of power shape farm manager decision-making. My approach draws on this method by paying attention to how power relations between actors in different settings connect together in a chain of exploitative relationships.

In studying a 'chain of exploitation,' I also engage with commodity chain research. Bair (2005) distinguishes between the roots of commodity chain research in world-systems theory and two contemporary offshoots: Global Commodity Chains, and the more business-oriented Global

Value Chains. These latter frameworks tend to focus on inter-firm networks, governance structures, and national and supra-national scales of analysis. My own approach focuses on how one end of a commodity chain ‘touches down’ (Challies 2008), and how people make sense of and justify their position and behavior within this chain. Despite this different focus, I aim to contribute to world-systems theory’s interest in ‘how commodity chains structure and reproduce a stratified and hierarchical world-system’ (Bair 2005, 156).

Yet in aligning with world-systems theory, I do not dismiss the many critiques of ‘hierarchical chain’ approaches, which reflect post-structural pushback against political economy more broadly. Models of hierarchical chains have been critiqued for being overly structural, totalizing, linear, reproducing modernist epistemologies, and failing to allow for fluidity, agency, and multiplicity (Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Hughes and Reimer 2004). Nonetheless, I describe a ‘chain of exploitation’ because it reflects what emerged *inductively* from my data. That said, my focus on intersectionality should signal to readers my recognition of multiple axes of power and complex linkages operating within and between the primary hierarchies I depict.

Field methods

This study is based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in Burkina Faso, conducted during 2016. I draw on extensive field notes and around 100 interviews conducted with government officials related to the cotton sector (7 interviews), employees of the state cotton company SOFITEX (15), research scientists (7), agribusiness employees (5), cotton union employees (5), male farmers of varying wealth and farm size (43), and rural women of varying age and status (24). Interviews were semi-formal, and conducted in either French or Dioula, both languages that I spoke fluently before fieldwork began. About half of my fieldwork and

interviews were done with the accompaniment of Burkinabè research assistants, and data were coded inductively.

In addition to interviews, I attended cotton-sector conferences and public events, and spent one month conducting participant observation with SOFITEX, riding along in their pick-up trucks to meetings with farmers in the Houndé region during the annual “Forum” meetings. I observed extensive informal conversations between SOFITEX employees as we ate meals together and fixed flat tires on the side of the road. I spent time with dozens of SOFITEX employees from all levels, including the highest-level managers (directors stationed out of Bobo-Dioulasso), regional and zone managers, and technical employees. Later, I followed along with individual SOFITEX extension agents (*‘Agents Techniques du Coton,’* or ATCs) for meetings with farmers and outings to farmers’ fields. My formal interviews (15 total) included a mix of high-level managers in Bobo-Dioulasso, mid-level managers, and ATCs. Given that I interacted with many more SOFITEX employees outside of the interview context, I feel confident that my findings represent – with some exceptions – widespread patterns in SOFITEX. Finally, I spent five months conducting participant observation in the contiguous towns of Kongolekan and Dougoumato in the Houndé region (roughly 3500 residents, mostly Bwa ethnicity). These towns featured large numbers of cotton farmers, diverse farm size and equipment levels, rapid social differentiation, extensive and recent uptake of agricultural technologies, and widespread concerns about cotton debt.

Like all ethnographic fieldwork, my data were shaped by my social position. As a woman, I gained easier access to women’s stories and perspectives, and potentially easier access to SOFITEX, where I may have been seen as less threatening. Being American, rather than French, may have reduced the colonial baggage actors ascribed to me. However, my status as an

educated white woman meant that rural people often assumed I was wealthy and a potential source of a development '*projet*.' This may have resulted in exaggerated stories of hardship. Nonetheless, given my language fluency in Dioula, the thoughtful input from my research assistants, and my extended time in my research sites, I believe I obtained a relatively accurate insight into peoples' interpretations of their social world, albeit one shaped by my own interests. Finally, although this paper describes behaviors of exploitation and sometimes harsh discourses of difference, I have great respect and understanding for the many people I came to know in the Burkinabè cotton sector, who face limited and difficult choices.

Case background: the Burkina Faso cotton sector

West African cotton has long been a source for capital accumulation, dating back to colonial-era efforts to force cotton production (Cordell, Gregory, and Piché 1996; Isaacman and Roberts 1995). Although colonial cotton schemes were often contested, cotton production was still achieved via taxation and state force (Isaacman and Roberts 1995). After colonialism, European countries continued to profit from African cotton. In Burkina Faso, after the establishment of a state-run cotton company (SOFITEX) in 1979, the French Company for the Development of Textiles retained at least a one-third share until 2004. At this time, the sector 'liberalized' under pressure from the World Bank, and SOFITEX split into three cotton companies (Dowd-Uribe 2014a). After recapitalizing in 2012, the Burkinabè state now holds a 90% share in SOFITEX, which still controls 80% of Burkina Faso's cotton production in the southwest region (Dowd-Uribe 2014b). SOFITEX production remains vertically organized and monopolistic, supplying inputs and credit to cotton grower groups (GPCs) and picking up and ginning the harvested cotton, 98% of which gets exported as raw fiber (Sylla 2017). This is a lot of cotton: Burkina Faso is currently West Africa's top cotton producer, producing 683,000 tons of cotton in the

2016-2017 season. This constitutes Burkina Faso's leading agricultural export and the state's most important source of foreign currency after gold (International Monetary Fund 2017).

In addition to helping finance the Burkinabè state, surplus value from the cotton sector flows to international banks and agribusinesses (Bassett 2008). According to SOFITEX, agribusinesses such as Cargill, Louis Dreyfus Commodities, and Reinhart purchase the majority of Burkina's raw cotton fiber (215,500 tons in 2015), while other companies purchase the seed grain to make oil and livestock feed – products which are often *sold back* to cotton farmers. Furthermore, banks and agribusinesses profit from farmers' purchases: in 2016, SOFITEX purchased around US\$300 million in credit from regional and international banks, while farmers purchased roughly \$85 million of fertilizer, \$28 million of insecticides, and another substantial sum of herbicides.¹ These purchases provide profits for firms such as Arysta Life Science (France), Dow/DuPont (U.S.), Louis Dreyfus Company (Netherlands), Monsanto/Bayer (U.S./Germany), Savana (France), ALM (France), BASF (U.S.), Toguna Agro-Industries (Mali), and Groupe DTE (China).

While creating profits for others, farmers themselves struggle to make ends meet. Based on SOFITEX data from 2016, nearly one third of all producer groups (GPCs) are in 'external' debt – where the entire GPC owes money to SOFITEX. Of individual farmers in active farming groups, 18% fell into debt in 2015, and another 12% of farmers did not receive their full income because their revenue covered other farmers' debt (Luna 2018b). In a longitudinal study of 31 GPCs in the Tuy Province, Gray, Dowd-Uribe, and Kaminski (2018, 12) find that of small (<1.5 hectares) and medium sized farmers (1.5-4.9 hectares), which make up roughly 80% of farmers, 'more than 47% of small cotton farmers and 41% of medium cotton farmers have incurred debt

¹ The credit number comes from SOFITEX. The other numbers are calculated based on 2016 input costs with roughly 700,00 hectares in production. SOFITEX requires farmers to purchase insecticides and fertilizer.

during the 2004–2010 period.’ Furthermore, these pictures of debt, however grim, only take into account a small portion of farmers’ actual costs – those that are purchased through SOFITEX. Farmer incomes are *much* lower if one takes into account costs for labor, oxen, farm equipment, and transportation (Luna 2018b). Finally, while male cotton farmers clearly struggle to capture the surplus value produced by their labor, their wives fare even worse, as they provide an enormous share of cotton labor yet receive little to no economic benefit.

Thus, cotton sales and input purchases both capture profits – surplus value produced by the labor of Burkinabè men and women and their soil. This paper focuses on how people near the bottom make sense of and contest their participation in this chain, with many people resisting their own exploitation while justifying their role in exploiting others. I show how people draw on intersections of class, education, rural/urban status, and gender in this process. Of course, the meanings of these social attributes represent a particular moment in history in Burkina Faso, and like most power arrangements, are fluid and changing (Berry 1993). Further, I focus on these attributes because they emerged as particularly important during my analysis. There are other exploitative relationships based on intersectional difference that I do not elaborate here, including: age, migrant status, ethnicity, and religion. For example, younger men often feel exploited by their fathers/uncles/older brothers, and many resist by migrating to the Ivory Coast or Burkina Faso’s burgeoning gold mines. Migrant farm workers of varying ethnicities are also present in small numbers, often working for extremely low pay. I heard Bwa farmers justify this situation using tropes of ethnic difference. Additionally, some actors draw on religious differences to frame (often non-Christian) farmers as ‘backward.’ These examples should illustrate that this paper presents a selective slice of a complex world of intersectional differences.

The chain of exploitation

In this section, I flesh out four links in the chain of exploitation: 1) SOFITEX managers (wealthy, highly educated, urban men) 2) SOFITEX extension agents, or ‘ATCs’ (middle class, educated, urban/rural men), 3) rural male farmers (mixed class and education levels), and 4) rural women (mostly poor, mixed education levels). I show how the first three groups of people transfer economic pressures down the chain, securing the production of cotton, appropriating surplus value, and contributing to widening class inequalities. In the second section, I demonstrate that the bottom three groups (ATCs, male farmers, and women) recognize and resist their economic exploitation. In the third section, the core of the paper, I explore how the top three groups (SOFITEX managers, ATCs, and male farmers) draw distinctions between themselves and others through performances of intersectional difference, and justify inequalities or ignore exploitation through discourses about those intersectional differences.

SOFITEX management

The Burkinabè state faces pressure from international lenders and donors to repay debts and increase economic growth. This pressure translates to SOFITEX, where managers at all levels (from director offices in Bobo-Dioulasso to regional managers, zone managers, and sub-zone ‘cotton coordinators’) are tasked with ‘figuring out how to increase cotton production.’ Each level of management receives a production target for their geographic area, and managers pressure those lower in the hierarchy to meet their respective targets. Managers are awarded promotions and job security for meeting (or exceeding) production goals and ensuring that farmers repay debt. SOFITEX ensures debt repayment through the organization of rural male

farmers² into groups of cotton producers (GPCs), wherein farmers are responsible for the debt of *all farmers* in their GPC. SOFITEX incentivizes increased cotton production by offering corn fertilizer on credit – but only to farmers growing more than three hectares of cotton, and by creating various structural advantages for larger farmers (see below). ATCs are often the ones tasked with carrying out these policies.

ATCs

ATCs serve as the direct link between SOFITEX and farmers. One ATC is usually tasked with multiple villages, making up several hundred to over a thousand cotton farmers. Like SOFITEX managers, their primary job requirement is to meet their production quota and to ensure farmer debt repayment. Additionally, ATCs must monitor farmers' fields and collect enormous quantities of statistics, tasks they admit they cannot fulfill. Yet if the ATCs fail to meet quotas or supply the requested statistics, they may face 'sanctions' – a transfer to a less desirable region or being passed over for a promotion.

In response to this pressure, ATCs press farmers to increase production. Primarily, they do this by focusing their attention on larger-scale, wealthier farmers. They give these farmers on-time access to inputs, timely field visits, and early pick-ups of harvested cotton. In contrast, ATCs deliberately restrict inputs for poorer, smaller-scale, or indebted farmers. They may delay delivery of inputs until they verify these farmers have planted, although they sometimes fail to visit a farmer's fields altogether. Part of this preference is a direct order from SOFITEX managers. As one top SOFITEX manager described to me:

I identify those who do 80% of my production, and I give them 80% of my time and my resources. If I improve my strategy with them, my total production increases. But the others, I don't ignore them, but I only give them the minimum. When passing, I say, hello, how are things

² West African cotton sectors have been organized as a 'male' activity since colonial administrators first organized cotton as a cash crop activity (Gray and Moseley 2008).

going? Keep up the good work, and then I continue. But the other (the high-producer), he's my VIP client.

ATCs follow this approach. Although 'giving the minimum' may sound benign, it often translates to major difficulties for poorer farmers. For example, delayed inputs may cause farmers to purchase inputs in the market, or to pay additional money for transporting inputs from SOFITEX. Delayed inputs can significantly reduce farmers' yields, and can also delay planting, increasing exposure to pest infestation or late-season rainfall shortages. Delayed pick-ups reduce the harvested cotton's weight due to drying, and expose harvested cotton to risks of rain or fire. All of these disadvantages – which are caused by SOFITEX policy – contribute to widening inequalities between farmers.

Male farmers

In addition, SOFITEX efforts to ensure debt repayment via shared responsibility for debt create widespread intra- and inter-family tensions. At one extreme, I heard stories of knife fights, drunken brawls, and theft; more common were stories of social stigma, brothers splitting up their farms, and out-migration. Some farmers are quite aware that they bear the social consequences of SOFITEX's policy to ensure debt repayment: 'SOFITEX has figured out a way that they don't lose...And they leave us in the village to fight with each other. They don't give a damn. Even if we are going to kill each other they won't step in.' In response to these conflicts, some GPCs have officially split into two, often based on larger farmers splitting away from poorer farmers who are more often indebted (Gray, Dowd-Uribe, and Kaminski 2018).

This differentiation actually helps ensure cotton production and surplus appropriation for SOFITEX. Wealthier farmers profit from poorer farmers in various ways. First, they illicitly purchase poor farmers' fertilizer for lower-than market costs when poor farmers must sell inputs to meet basic needs (also see Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013). Second, mechanized farmers charge

high rates for using their tractors to till fields and shuck corn, which indebted farmers pay for if they have sold their oxen to repay debts. This enables wealthier farmers to pay off their tractor loans. Third, wealthier farmers benefit from poorer farmers' labor at crucial times during the growing season in exchange for lending farm implements or food. Finally, GPCs enforce collective labor days where all farmers must help load all other farmers' cotton into the transport containers. This arrangement disproportionately benefits larger-scale cotton farmers, who receive far more 'free' labor than they give. Thus, farmer differentiation – exacerbated by SOFITEX and ATC practices to ensure cotton production and debt repayment – results in the extraction of greater surplus from poorer farmers.

Rural women

All male farmers, however, are under pressure to increase production to repay debts. They often transfer this pressure onto their wives. Farmers of all sizes explained to me that cotton production is not profitable with wage labor rather than family labor. In other words, cotton is *only* profitable to men because of the underpaid labor of women. Cotton is a labor-intensive crop (particularly at harvest), and men control most household labor. Among Bwa farmers, women labor on the household fields (they do not have separate fields), and men control the harvest and resulting income. Most men and women told me that women's fieldwork has increased since the expansion of cash crop cotton. Further, as cotton fields expand, many men seek multiple wives as a source of labor. Men ask their wives to live on-site in the fields during the farming season, planting, weeding, applying fertilizer, and then harvesting for months on end. Meanwhile, many men commute on their motorcycles, sometimes showing up in the fields after morning coffee with male friends and perhaps a round of horse betting. At the end of the year, men give their wives from two to six sacks of corn to feed her and her children for the year,

and a variable amount of money. According to my interviews, some women receive up to the equivalent of US\$90 (for nearly eight months of labor), but most seem to receive much less than that, and still others receive nothing.

Recognizing and resisting exploitation

Having demonstrated that economic pressures are transferred down this chain from upper-class, urban, educated men all the way to poor rural women, I now show that actors in the bottom portion of this chain both recognize and resist their economic exploitation. ATCs feel exploited by SOFITEX, farmers feel exploited by ATCs and SOFITEX, and women feel exploited by men. Each group, in turn, engages in various forms of resistance: efforts to claim more of the surplus value they produce for themselves.

ATCs

The ATCs I observed grumble constantly about the difficulty of their jobs and the fact that they are poorly paid and disrespected by what they call the ‘hierarchy’ (managers) at SOFITEX. ATCs feel that their jobs are essential for SOFITEX and yet they are not rewarded. Said one ATC: ‘We are everything for Sofitex. Everything. We do everything. We are in the field, with muddy boots,’ yet he felt that this (rural and dirty) work was not appreciated or financially rewarded by SOFITEX. Another ATC explained what he saw as the inequalities within SOFITEX: ‘People think everyone at SOFITEX makes a lot of money. But it’s not true. For everyone below (the higher-level managers), it’s misery. They are well paid. The rest of us aren’t.’

In response to this feeling of exploitation, ATCs engage in various forms of resistance. For years, some ATCs have been organizing clandestine meetings to discuss unionizing in order to negotiate better pay and promotions. In 2015, ATCs went on strike, removing their phone SIM

cards for ten days during a crucial time of the cotton season – to force SOFITEX managers to have to get out of their offices, spend money on gas, and come find them rather than calling them at any hour of the day to make ‘their impossible demands.’ Most ATCs feel that the strike achieved very little. Nonetheless, many plan to continue organizing.

Male farmers

While ATCs feel exploited, so too do farmers. As the farmer in the introduction exclaimed, they see SOFITEX as ‘drinking their blood.’ Many farmers contest the inequalities between themselves and SOFITEX employees. They accuse ATCs of corruption and indifference. Poorer farmers in particular feel that their incomes are jeopardized by ATC and SOFITEX behavior, but most farmers feel exploited in this system³. For example, one poorer farmer told me:

All the profit and advantage goes to SOFITEX. Don’t you see them, with their fat cars? And here we are with nothing, we don’t even have nice bicycles. We suffer here, and we work hard at farming for them. And if they make money, they don’t even give us a little, and we are left with debt.

Another farmer portrayed SOFITEX as ‘tying’ them into the chain as manual labor. The Dioula word ‘*juru*’ means both debt and rope: ‘They oppress us farmers... We’re not cotton farmers. We are SOFITEX’s labor... They have a *juru* in our noses.’ He then gestured to indicate a ring through his nose and a rope, like an ox. This farmer referenced both the contractual ties of debt and the degraded position of a draft ox to indicate his view of SOFITEX’s exploitation of farmers. In sum, farmers, just like ATCs, feel that although their labor is the backbone of the cotton sector, they see few of the benefits.

³ Nonetheless, farmers stick with cotton for a few reasons: because SOFITEX is the only source of agricultural credit, to get state-subsidized fertilizer for worn-out soils, for a rotational crop with corn, and because there are few other cash crop options.

In response to these feelings of exploitation, some farmers have engaged in active resistance. In the early 2010s, some regions boycotted cotton and even burned and uprooted cotton fields in protest of high input costs and low cotton prices (Kam 2011; Bassett 2014). In 2015 and 2016, farmers have threatened boycotts and organized protests in response to corruption charges against the cotton producers' union (the UNPCB) and its leaders (Bancé 2015). In my fieldwork, I observed what might be considered 'everyday' forms of resistance (Scott 2008). Many farmers refuse to attend meetings or ignore SOFITEX recommendations; some buy inputs outside of SOFITEX, and some divert or sell inputs and lie to ATCs about their production. Some farmers have left cotton production, and a few have joined groups⁴ that seek to change SOFITEX policy. However, farmer resistance efforts are limited by their own splintering along lines of social difference, which I will explore in the following section.

Rural women

While ATCs and male farmers feel exploited, so too do women, as Rosalie's comments in the introduction illustrate. Many women want a larger share of the family income. Some women told me that 'women here are treated as little more than draft oxen,' echoing the male farmer's belief that SOFITEX has a 'rope through their noses' as if the men were oxen. One young woman said she was unlikely to ever marry because she had a job, and no man would want her if she didn't provide field labor. Yet despite women's frustrations, they have few options. Some explain that if they leave, their husband will keep the children and treat them poorly – so they stay 'for their kids.' Others explain that they simply have no other livelihood

⁴ Such as the *Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse en Burkina Faso* (ODJ), and the *Syndicat National des Travailleurs de l'Agro-Pastoral* (SYNTAP).

options, particularly given that women's access to land in Burkina Faso is mediated through relationships with men (Kevane and Gray 1999).

Many women stay with their husbands, but engage in subtle forms of resistance. Some women told me they became Christian 'to have a day of rest' once a week, and because Christianity promotes monogamy and choice in marriage. Some women engage in activities to claim a greater share of farm output: they secretly 'steal' corn during the harvest, explaining that 'their husbands are never there anyway.' They store the corn with friends or maternal family members, and then draw on this corn when their 'official' allocation of corn runs out. A smaller number of women engage in more active protest. Men refer to these troublesome women as '*muruti musow*' – 'rebel' or 'protesting' women. Some refuse to work until their husbands pay them, some do contract field labor for other farmers, saying that contract work – even if poorly paid – is still superior to being an 'unpaid wife.' Some widows and women who have left their husbands farm on a rocky hillside, the only land that men allow them to farm. They eke out a living with very few inputs and only their own labor. Some of these women told me they are so poor it is barely worth it. Nonetheless, a few have banded together for labor pools, and a small number of these women, mostly widows who also sell alcohol or engage in commerce, have managed to become moderately wealthy by village standards.

Justifying inequalities: performances and discourses of intersectional difference

I have thus far mapped out a 'chain of exploitation,' in which actors recognize and resist their own exploitation yet simultaneously transfer economic pressures onto other actors. In this section, I explore how SOFITEX managers, ATCs, and male farmers make sense of their role in reproducing exploitation. I argue that they draw distinctions between themselves and others

through performances of intersectional difference, and justify inequalities or ignore their own role in exploitation through discourses about those intersectional differences.

SOFITEX managers are, by and large, highly educated men (many of them have PhDs and masters degrees from abroad) who live in urban areas and have generous incomes by local standards. Most of them own private cars and live in nice urban houses. ATCs, in turn, are mostly middle-aged men with high school diplomas, from mixed rural and urban backgrounds. Most of them own shiny new Yamaha motorcycles. Male farmers are highly differentiated in terms of wealth and education levels, while most women are rural, poor, and uneducated. This section demonstrates how these actors engage in performative practices and employ discourses of difference based on combinations of wealth, education, urban/rural status, and gender to make sense of and justify their role in reproducing exploitation and widening inequalities. Rather than including wealth as its own section, I weave it throughout. Furthermore, I have included a section on the intersection of education and urban/rural status, which manifests in discourses about ‘modern’ versus ‘traditional’ outlooks and behaviors.

Western education

In the Burkinabè cultural context (where the literacy rate is around 30%), ‘education’ – meaning formal schooling and the ability to speak French – is often used as a wedge of social difference (disturbingly similar to the arguments of Fanon 1952). SOFITEX managers and ATCs often engage in performances that display their education, such as speaking French and using technical language during meetings with farmers. SOFITEX managers often (though not always) speak French, and ask ATCs to translate to Dioula for the farmers. Thus, the ATCs – who straddle the

urban/rural status divide and have less education and wealth than the managers – are literally tasked with translating between the ‘Western’ language (which represents education) and the ‘African’ language (which tends to represent illiteracy). Some farmers are nervous about speaking during these meetings if they don’t speak French, based on the feeling that they are disregarded because of their lack of education. As one farmer explained to me: ‘SOFITEX doesn’t consider/respect the farmers... They are the ones who know the papers (they are educated), and the farmers aren’t in the offices, so when we speak they reject what we have to say.’

This widespread belief among farmers appears justified. For example, at a meeting with farmers (during the annual Forum series at the beginning of the farm season), several farmers stood up and began telling SOFITEX that they were being exploited, that inputs were too expensive and the cotton price was too low. They began to point at the shiny SOFITEX SUVs as evidence of their exploitation. In response, a wealthy, high-level manager from Bobo-Dioulasso scolded the farmers for criticizing SOFITEX’s fancy cars, and then told them:

I have gone to school and achieved a high level of schooling... Those who work in offices, God put them there. ... Each of us has our own role, and we should focus on our own place and doing our job well... We in offices have difficulties that you don’t understand... Be happy with your own position and stop desiring what other people have.

This SOFITEX manager instructs farmers to ignore the stark economic inequalities between farmers and managers, drawing on his educational status (his ‘high level of schooling’) to justify his unequal share of the wealth produced by cotton production. In another example, a mid-level SOFITEX manager told me in an informal conversation that only educated, rational-minded farmers are able to adopt innovations and thus go from being poor to being rich, thus framing farmers’ lack of education as the explanation for their poverty.

Many farmers, however, contest their portrayal as illiterate or uninformed. They tell stories about how ATCs' 'office knowledge' backfires when they actually have to farm. They tell jokes about ATCs: the French pronunciation of ATC 'ah – tay – say' sounds identical to the Dioula expression, '*A te se*' which means, 'He doesn't have the ability.' Many farmers joke, 'ATC, *a te se*,' contesting the supposed superiority of book knowledge and education. Yet, despite these contestations, educational status often operates as a wedge between farmers. Uneducated farmers can face social stigma as well as the potential for economic exploitation.

Observe the following incident from a GPC's 'fertilizer distribution' day:

A young man, probably 25... He said he wanted help writing down his inputs into his notebook, so that he had a record... The group secretary (who had been speaking to me in French) looked at the notebook, and scoffed. He opened it up, and said, 'This isn't for writing in. This is a technical book, for planning your production...' He berated the farmer for being stupid. He turned the pages and read off sentences in slow French, as if to show off that he could read. ... The farmer was clearly embarrassed... he walked off and stood nearby, like a dog with his tail between his legs. (The secretary did not help him write down his inputs.)

This incident also indicates how education, like urban status (below), is performative, achieved through speaking French and displaying technical knowledge. It can also be an axis of economic differentiation: farmers who cannot write to keep track of their costs are not only made fun of, they are at a serious disadvantage regarding corruption or cheating at various levels of the cotton chain. As one farmer put it, 'When SOFITEX or the Union comes, they can say whatever they want, they can lie, because they know the papers (meaning they can read), and we do not.' At the GPC level, I observed uneducated farmers pressing thumbprints to contracts they had not read. Additionally, farmers who cannot read rarely serve in GPC leadership groups, positions that can be a source of power and potential advantage. Western education – and its performance – can thus act as a wedge between farmers, though other axes of status (primarily wealth) can outweigh a lack of education.

Urban/rural status

Urban status is difficult to treat separately from other attributes such as education, speaking French, or wealth. Still, it is a key axis of difference that SOFITEX employees (both managers and ATCs) draw upon to differentiate themselves from farmers. In the Burkinabè context, ‘urbanity,’ is associated with wealth, technology, and connotations of cleanliness. SOFITEX managers perform their urban status through their clothes (suits and dress shoes), along with multiple smartphones and/or a tablet. They make shows of being uncomfortable and complaining while ‘*en brousse*’ (‘the bush’), wiping sweat from their faces with tissues, wiping dust from their shoes, and expressing disgust with the dirtiness of conditions and food preparation. They complain about the ‘suffering’ involved in having to visit rural areas, and gladly accept the per diems (extra pay) that SOFITEX pays them for rural outings – apparently as compensation for the difficulty of leaving the city. These performances mark rural residents as different, as inferior.

ATCs straddle the urban/rural divide, in that they live in rural settings for most of the year but visit urban areas (their ‘true’ homes) as often as they can. ATCs feel pressured to remain in their rural posts at all times (claiming that their blue Yamaha motorcycles are surveilled in the cities), and point out that whereas SOFITEX managers receive extra pay for outings to rural sites, ATCs are not compensated for their continual presence in rural areas. ATCs argue that SOFITEX managers look at them differently because of their rurality. One ATC explained that employees ‘in all other departments’ at SOFITEX receive promotions, but not extension agents. He said: ‘Sometimes when you go to the offices, those in the offices can look at you as if you are a peasant. As if it's not you who are the central player in the team. That's the problem.’ He felt that SOFITEX managers justified their poor treatment of ATCs by associating them with the lower status of ‘rural peasant.’ Nonetheless, ATCs simultaneously engage in their own

performances of urbanness. ATC often dress in a casual urban style, wearing clothing like jeans and loafers or tracksuits, and listening to music on their smartphones with white ('Apple') headphones. These are markers of a poorer urbanity than that of SOFITEX managers, yet still differentiate ATCs from most rural farmers.

'Modern' versus 'traditional' – the intersection of urbanity and education

SOFITEX managers, ATCs, and some wealthier farmers often draw on discourses of difference that appear to be based on *the intersection* of rurality and a lack of Western education. This intersection appears in discussions of 'peasantness,' 'traditional' mentalities or comportment (seen as irrational, superstitious, or occult), or the idea that farmers are 'uncivilized.' In contrast, wealthier, educated urbanites (and even some wealthier farmers) draw on discourses of being modern, 'evolved,' or 'civilized' – an amalgam of colonial and development discourses which carry important racial connotations that I do not explore here (see Luna 2018a).

For example, observe the following lunch with SOFITEX employees at a rural restaurant following a meeting with farmers:

A major theme of the meal was making fun of villagers and farmers. They mocked the restaurant – for not having enough chairs, for having broken chairs, for not having cold beer... One guy said, "*What is this, did they come out of the forest, or what?*" Another said, "Oh villagers," and made the tsk noise that indicates disapproval. They even made fun of the construction of the building... They went back over questions that farmers had asked. One man said, "*Peasants don't know anything.*" Another, "*They are illiterate, what can you expect?*" They talked about how they did not know how to spray pesticides properly. One guy said, "They go out, *naked*, no shirt, shorts, bare feet."

In this scene, farmers/peasants are disparaged for a combination of rurality and lack of education – rolled together in the discourse of uncivilized 'savages' (this word is also used) who just came out of the forest.

SOFITEX managers and ATCs often draw on this discourse to justify the inequalities between themselves and farmers, thus disguising their own role in passing on exploitation

farmers. They argue that farmers often cause their own poverty due to their own bad practices and poor management. This has been a recurring theme in Burkina Faso's cotton sector, as evidenced in the 'pesticide crisis' of the late 1990s, when SOFITEX blamed ineffective pesticides on farmer behavior (Dowd-Uribe 2014b) and in recent debates over Bt cotton's short fiber length, when Monsanto sought to blame farmer behavior (author interviews). My argument here is that this blaming is not constrained to specific crises, but is used more broadly to justify farmers' unequal share of wealth in the cotton sector, and to ignore the role of SOFITEX policy and practice in producing that inequality. Despite the fact that large numbers of farmers struggle with debt, and apparently in willful ignorance of a defunct (indebted) SOFITEX-employee GPC, SOFITEX managers and ATCs frame farmers as struggling with debt not because of structural factors but because of their 'peasant' mentalities and behavior.

For example, when I asked SOFITEX managers and ATCs why farmers fall into debt, and why poor farmers struggle, I often heard responses such as:

It's the mentality of the peasants. If we are working the same soils, and me, I can gain 1.5 tons, maybe more, why can't you do that too? (Mid-level manager)

This region used to be a big cotton-producing area, but now it isn't. It's full of indebted farmers... because of their comportment. It's the comportment of some farmers that causes them to fall, to be in this situation (debt). It's not because he is manual, or well equipped, it's his comportment. (ATC)

There are wealthy and poor farmers, and I can say that little farmers can become big, that depends on them...It's their '*engagement*' (work ethic). It's their '*volonté*' (will/determination). The small farmers don't face any barriers; they just don't have the right mentality. (ATC)

In another example, I was in a SOFITEX office with some mid-level managers. A group of farmers entered, wearing tattered work clothes. They looked like children coming into the principal's office: nervous, obedient, stuttering. Apparently their GPC was indebted, and they were trying to repay their debts. One manager asked when they planned on planting, and the farmers said soon. The manager joked to another manager in French, "Depending on the

schedule of the moon.” The farmers simply looked at the floor. These kinds of comments – framing farmer behavior as irrational and based in occult traditions – were common among SOFITEX staff. In this case, they shaped the managers’ view of the farmers’ competency, and their interpretation of what had caused the farmers’ debt. Furthermore, some SOFITEX managers frame ATCs in a similar way – as lazy, rural, and less educated. As one mid-level manager explained: ‘It’s not a question of means, or of needing more ATCs. It’s that they don’t have the *willingness*.’

Farmers, I should point out, vehemently contest this narrative and the way it is used to justify inequalities. For example, one farmer challenged what he saw as the relationship between inequality and SOFITEX’s justifying narratives:

I am 40 years old, and I have nothing. And I grow cotton every year! But can a person start working for SOFITEX and work for a single year without getting a motorcycle? Does that happen? No! ... (But the wealthy SOFITEX employees) sit down each year to tell us that we haven’t worked well, we didn’t follow the proper protocols, that’s why we don’t have any profits. But it’s false!

In a similar example, I observed a tense exchange between a poorer farmer and an ATC in the beginning of the farming season, during which the farmer was yelling at the ATC about not receiving his inputs. The farmer said that the proper time to put inputs in had passed, and later SOFITEX would tell them that it was their fault and their bad farming practices that caused them to have low yields, but in reality it was SOFITEX’s fault for not giving them their inputs on time. The ATC just shrugged and didn’t respond. Many farmers thus contest these narratives of ‘peasant behavior,’ pointing out instead the structural policies and practices that contribute to their poverty.

However, some wealthier farmers also employ discourses of ‘modernity’ and ‘being more evolved’ to justify rising inequalities between farmers, including the splitting of GPCs. For example, one farmer (who was in the poorer half of a split GPC) explained that ‘The farmers

who can fill containers, they were insulting the other farmers, saying they were not working as hard, that they were not as evolved and were left behind.’ This conflict led to the GPC officially splitting into two. What is notable here is the discourse of ‘being more evolved’ that wealthier male farmers used to justify rising inequalities in the village. In another example, a highly educated farmer explained to me that, ‘There are some people, you wonder if they even want to get out of poverty. ... They don’t do calculations, they just *do* (i.e. without thinking rationally).’ Thus, some farmers – like SOFITEX employees – also draw on narratives of ‘modern’ versus ‘traditional’ mindsets to justify why some farmers are poorer than others.

Gender

Finally, most male farmers draw on gendered discourses to justify women’s largely unremunerated labor. Most male farmers view women’s role as to be ‘there to serve her husband,’ ‘to follow her husband,’ and to ‘do what her husband says.’ Men take women’s labor for granted to such an extent that in many interviews, when I inquired about labor, they didn’t count women until I specifically asked:

Me:	Who are all the people who work in your fields?
Respondent:	With me?
Me:	With you. Who do you farm with?
R:	Well, it’s me, me alone.
Me:	(Pause)... Any <i>musow</i> (women/wives)?
R:	And women.
Me:	One woman?
R:	Two women. So me and two women.

Men can spend hours complaining about how ‘SOFITEX exploits us,’ but whenever I suggested, ‘Well, but don’t you also benefit from your wives’ work?’ they rarely agreed with the comparison I was making, or they justified their behavior as necessary. Observe the following defense of gender roles in the interaction I had with male farmers drinking beer after the fertilizer distribution event I referenced above:

The men were complaining about their hard work. I jokingly said, 'but, you have it easy – your wives are working and you are drinking beer.' One farmer agreed, he said it was true. They asked me if I thought multiple wives were good. I said, well, no, because of my culture, I like only one wife, one husband. They said, here, they like four or five. They said, we have to for the fieldwork. How else will we plant all of our hectares?

In this example, and others, men justify the system as necessary – as if the economic pressures they face justify women's unending labor. On a rare occasion, a man admitted, 'Yes, women have it worse off, but what can we do? We are so poor to begin with. We're exploited. What choice do we have?' More commonly, men launched into narratives about 'a woman's place.' This is similar to the SOFITEX manager justifying his car ownership by appealing to the narrative that 'everyone has his place.'

Gender is one area in which many Burkinabè men strongly reject Western ideals, saying that Western men have given women too much power. They feel that some Burkinabè women are now demanding more rights because they are exposed to 'Western norms.' One self-identified 'rebel woman' explained to me: 'Women are protesting. We aren't agreeing anymore.' I asked why the change, and she said, 'Education. Education has opened our eyes. We are "awake" now. Before, we were in the dark, but now we see the light. We are evolved.' Men are thus aware that women's powerless position in society can shift with changing intersectional identities – that an educated woman is not the same as an uneducated one. Educational status thus offers men the potential for advancement when *they* have it, yet threatens men when women have it. Yet women also draw on the status of Western education (and its troubling associations with 'evolution') to explain differences between women (those who are 'in the dark' versus those who 'see the light'). While these new viewpoints may empower some women to engage in resistance, it also frames other, uneducated (or non-protesting) women as implicitly un-evolved, sowing seeds of differentiation between women.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how economic pressures flow through a chain of exploitation, where actors are pressured to increase cotton production, and transfer that squeeze to less-powerful actors. SOFITEX managers enforce policies to ensure farmer debt repayment and pressure ATCs to increase cotton production; ATCs push farmers to increase production by helping the largest farmers; wealthier farmers increase production by splitting away from poorer farmers and benefitting from poorer farmers' needs for cash and farm equipment; and all farmers increase production by relying on the labor of their wives.

How do intersectional differences matter in this chain? First, economic pressures appear to be channeled along lines of social difference – with urban, educated, wealthy men at the top. In fact, economic pressures appear to exacerbate inequalities, as in the case of fragmenting farmers. With actors splintering along myriad lines of difference, there is no easy boundary between exploiting 'capitalists' and exploited 'peasants.' By focusing on intersectionality, I show the importance of multiple and intersecting axes of difference – not just class and gender, but also attributes like education and rural/urban status in the social fragmentations that accompany exploitation. Second, I show how people employ discourses about intersectional differences to make sense of and justify reproducing exploitation. Most actors resist being exploited. Nonetheless, they justify their own behavior (transferring pressures to produce more cotton) by framing people 'below' them in the chain as different, based on a range of attributes. I thus argue that intersectional inequalities help facilitate the extraction of surplus value because they help enable actors' participation. Exploitation requires ideologies of legitimation. Beliefs about why some human beings are more valuable than others can secure consent – not necessarily to being exploited, but to engaging in exploitation – which, after all, is what is needed for surplus extraction via a long chain of actors.

In addition to beliefs about social differences, men frequently employ discourses about hard work and laziness – claiming that other men deserve their social inferiority because of an inability to work hard. The repetition of these discourses in different contexts exposes their constructed character: SOFITEX managers think ATCs are lazy, ATCs think farmers are lazy, and large farmers think their indebted neighbors are lazy. While there are undoubtedly some lazy people, these discourses reveal another thread in how actors justify exploitation. As one farmer told me,

We have this lie that poor people are poor because they are lazy. SOFITEX uses this a lot. They come and say that if a farmer falls into debt, it is only because he is lazy and doesn't work hard enough. And people have come to believe it. They blame each other. They don't see how they are being oppressed.

As other scholars have shown, these narratives – which echo narratives of racism, colonialism, meritocracy, and neoliberalism – often justify the spread of capitalism and disguise the inequalities it produces (Harvey 2005; Navarro 2007).

Finally, this paper sheds light on the 'politics' dimension of the agrarian question, and the question of resistance in the Burkinabè cotton sector. Dowd-Urbe (2014a, 2014b) has identified how the liberalization reforms of the late 1990s and 2000s blunted producer resistance by splintering producer groups into GPCs and by co-opting the cotton farmers' union (UNPCB). My findings suggest that in addition to these institutional barriers, social divisions between actors can also prevent unified resistance. Although I found substantial resistance at many levels of the chain, resistance was most often targeted at a proximate link. I found ATCs struggling against SOFITEX managers; male farmers struggling against SOFITEX and ATCs; and women struggling against men. This makes sense on a practical level, but raises the question of broader solidarity. As one older ex-cotton farmer said, 'Farmers no longer have a common voice...When people are united, they can fight a big battle. But when we are dispersed, we can't achieve much

anymore.’ Certainly some actors are aware of broader systems of exploitation. Yet some have a myopic vision, blaming the actors directly above them rather than broader forces of oppression or global capital extraction. This finding presents a sobering counterpoint to populist visions of a widespread ‘peasant’ revolt against capitalism (see also Bernstein 2014; Agarwal 2014). Nonetheless, the range and depth of economic resistance and cultural contestations I depicted in this paper indicates that there is fertile ground for broader resistance – yet this will require a synthetic effort: attention both to social divisions *and* to shared experiences of exploitation.

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