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Hébert, Karen and Diana Mincyte (2014) “[Self-Reliance Beyond Neoliberalism: Rethinking Autonomy at the Edges of Empire](#).” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 32(2): 206–222. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d6312>

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Self-Reliance beyond Neoliberalism: Rethinking Autonomy at the Edges of Empire

Karen Hébert and Diana Mincyte

Abstract

Across scholarly and popular accounts, self-reliance is often interpreted as either the embodiment of individual entrepreneurialism, as celebrated by neoliberal designs, or the basis for communitarian localism, increasingly imagined as central to environmental and social sustainability. In both cases, self-reliance is framed as an antidote to the failures of larger state institutions or market economies. This article offers a different framework for understanding self-reliance by linking insights drawn from agrarian studies to current debates on alternative economies. Through an examination of the social worlds of semi-subsistence producers in peripheral zones in the global North, we show how everyday forms of self-reliance are mutually constituted with states and markets, particularly through interactions with labor institutions and hybrid property regimes linking individual and collective interests. We draw on empirical data from two ethnographic case studies connected by a shared colonial history and continuing local mythologies of frontier self-sufficiency: salmon fisheries in rural Alaska in the U.S., and agro-food economies in socialist and post-socialist Lithuania. In each site, we find that although local expressions of self-reliance diverge in critical respects from neoliberal visions, these forms of everyday autonomy are nevertheless enlisted to promote market liberalization, ultimately threatening the very conditions that have long sustained semi-subsistence producers' self-reliance in the first place.

Keywords: self-reliance, neoliberalism, autonomy, sustainability, subsistence, Alaska, Lithuania

Introduction

In 2007, a resident of Brooklyn, New York, put trends of locavorism to the test by subsisting for a month entirely from food grown and reared in his brand-new backyard farm, subsequently popularizing his struggles in print (Howard, 2010). So, too, a PhD in political philosophy traded in his post-doc for motorcycle repair work and urged others to follow suit (Crawford, 2009), penning an instant bestseller that argues “for a brand of hands-on self-reliance” (Garner, 2009). Widely publicized efforts like these reveal not merely the groundswell of popular media coverage that has accompanied emergent expressions of self-reliance. They also point to how self-reliance is increasingly seen as a path toward a more sustainable future in the context of growing concerns over the economy, environment, and social well-being. Anchored in ideas of independence, self-sufficiency, and, in some cases, survivalism, self-reliance undergirds numerous initiatives currently being formulated by those across the political spectrum.

The rising prominence of such projects has inspired an expanding body of social commentary and scholarly analysis in turn. Whether these accounts interpret self-reliance as a mechanism for instituting neoliberal designs or a means of building alternative communities through decentralized, grassroots action, diverse approaches tend to portray self-reliance as the answer to a problem generated by a more rigid and imperious order: a stultifying state, a ravaging global market, or both.

In this article, we seek to move beyond the understanding of self-reliance in terms of state and market failures. Rather, we examine the formation of actually existing expressions of self-reliance, making a case for the crucial relevance of the study of often poor, small-scale, semi-subsistence producers for analyses of contemporary movements

animated by notions of self-reliance. These producers, whose practices can be interpreted as constituting a different mode of self-reliance, are conspicuously absent in the current public and scholarly debates surrounding sovereignty, political agency, and sufficiency. We argue that a focus on livelihoods at the margins of global markets sheds light on critical dynamics that are often overlooked in accounts focused on the novelty of recent movements inspired by ideas of autonomy: that is, the tight relationship of many enduring forms of self-reliance to state and market institutions.

Through a comparative historical analysis of peripheral zones in the global North, we detail the means by which longstanding realizations of self-reliance have taken shape through rural producers' complex, tenuous, and continued negotiations with local actors, regional bureaucracies, and vast commodity chains. Scholarship in agrarian and peasant studies has long explored how the autonomy of small-scale, semi-subsistence producers is both exercised through and constrained by state institutions and global economic systems. Building on this work, we highlight the mutual constituency of self-reliance economies and these state and market formations to challenge assumed ideas about autonomy and autarky, focusing in particular on the role of collective labor institutions and individual-communal property regimes.

Our argument draws on two empirical cases, both frontier economies at the edges of empire historically and into the present: salmon fisheries in rural Alaska and agricultural economies in Lithuania. In each case, we draw upon material obtained through ongoing ethnographic research and archival work conducted by each of us in our respective field sites over the past decade. Separated by eleven time zones, the two regions nevertheless share a history of belonging to the same sovereign, the Russian

Empire, constituting its easternmost and westernmost frontiers from 1795 to 1867.

During this period, the peripheral spaces half a world apart were gradually incorporated into increasingly globalizing markets and sweeping modernizing projects, while continuing to serve as significant natural (in Alaska's case) and agricultural (in Lithuania) resources for the Russian state.

Beyond their common history, the two cases also share a strong attachment to narratives of self-sufficiency and self-reliance (Hébert, 2008; Mincyte, 2009a). This reflects not merely a similar valorization of visions of autonomy, but the prevalence and historical continuity of semi-subsistence economies in each locale. Both the commercial salmon industry, in Alaska, and the export-oriented agricultural sector, in Lithuania, have long drawn upon skills and labor simultaneously employed in household provisioning for purposes of industrial production. To this day, households and entire rural communities are sustained in each place through livelihood strategies that knit together participation in the cash economy with engagement in other more local, informal, and extra-market exchanges, including the pursuit of subsistence activities. Given the marginality of both Alaska and Lithuania for much of their histories, the survival of rural residents often depended on their ability to adjust to, slip away from, and take advantage of the shifting presence and demands of state and market. More recently, local provisioning practices are taking on new significance in each case as producers seek to shore up struggling rural economies by making and marketing foodstuffs newly celebrated as artisanal fare to more affluent urban consumers (Hébert, 2010; Aistara, forthcoming).

These similarities are noteworthy precisely because of the more obvious contrasts that set apart Alaska, the so-called 'last frontier' of bootstrapping U.S. capitalism, from

the socialist republic and post-socialist state of Lithuania. Whereas Alaska has been steadily incorporated into the U.S. polity since its purchase from Russia in 1867 and statehood in 1959, and is now the site of a comparatively strong state, Lithuania bounced from the weak Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to iron-fisted domination by Imperial and Soviet Russia, to an independent nation state and a disorganized post-socialist state in the late twentieth century, before it found itself incorporated into the more powerful regime of the European Union in 2004. Given these major differences, our two cases are complementary, exposing how self-reliance works in the context of both historical continuity and discontinuity, capitalism and its socialist and post-socialist counterparts.

By juxtaposing the practice of self-reliance in these two cases, this article aims to examine the ways in which self-reliance has been produced through intimate interactions with labor institutions, global markets, and the state, even as it is more commonly understood as a pushback against these. The section to follow further details the theoretical basis for our argument. We then provide overviews of the historical and social constitution of self-reliance in each locale, highlighting the significance of work practices that defy pat classifications like individual and collective. We go on to consider how these semi-subsistence economies are enlisted in the service of new market niches in each site. The article closes by reflecting on how geopolitical frontiers have been refashioned into economic frontiers with even higher-stakes opportunities for making it or losing it all.

Rethinking Self-Reliance

As numerous scholars have noted, the political-economic philosophy theorized as neoliberalism makes much of self-reliance, in which individual entrepreneurialism supports a regime marked by unfettered free markets, free trade, and strong private property rights (see Harvey 2005, page 2). Central to the arguments of politically conservative commentators today, this neoliberal doctrine echoes longstanding national imaginaries in the U.S. that date back to the writings of Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson, which celebrate rugged individualism, freedom of choice, and personal responsibility.

At the same time, there is a growing popular and scholarly literature that interprets self-reliance in an alternative vein, as a form of communitarian autonomy in opposition to neoliberal designs. Here, too, self-reliance carries the promise of political change. For example, a number of scholars have underscored the significance of reinvigorated provisioning practices outside mainstream market channels for furthering more sustainable forms of consumption, interpreting activities like freecycling, repair and reuse networks, freeganism, and other do-it-yourself (DIY) endeavors as expressions of political participation, ecological citizenship, and ethics (DeLind, 2002; Seyfang, 2006). Similarly, literature in the new economics argues that a movement away from wage labor to various forms of self-provisioning and extra-market exchange heralds improvements to economic justice and community quality of life (Schor, 2010; White and Williams, 2012). The influential work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) takes the proliferation of community-centered economies to be expressions of ‘diverse economies’ that cannot and should not be described as capitalism.

Yet others have expressed more skepticism about the radical potential of such self-reliance pursuits. Scholars including Julie Guthman (2004) and Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman (2005) ask whether the popular embrace of apparent alternatives to dominant industrial practices, such as certain forms of locavorism, organic agriculture, or urban self-provisioning schemes, might further entrench capitalist logics. Other analysts consider the extent to which recent trends celebrating labor-intensive provisioning—for example, handcrafts or scratch cooking—may reanimate historical structures of inequality, particularly those rooted in class and gender (Laudan, 2001; Deutsch, 2011). Many of these critical assessments draw on a larger body of work that questions popular assumptions about locality and community, pointing out that these often rest on untenable and romantic views of a bounded, homogeneous sphere of unconflicted common interest (see Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Creed, 2006; Joseph, 2002).

A growing number of scholars and scholar-activists have shifted the terms of such debates by approaching various grassroots mobilizations through the lens of anarchism, in which self-reliance is characterized through satellite notions of mutual aid, non-commodified labor, decentralization, and equality (Chatterton, 2000; Springer, 2012; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). Critical of lifestyle-based politics and conventional forms of activism, anarchist scholars draw a stark distinction between their visions of autonomy and those of other self-provisioning projects (Holloway, 2010; Chatterton, 2006). Writing about craftism and its transformatory agendas, Kristen Williams (2011) articulates this point forcefully by stating that “the type of ‘do-it-yourself’ ethos advocated by big-box home improvement stores like Lowe’s or Home Depot” is radically different from the anarchist philosophy that underscores political commitment and ‘self-conscious’ forms of

organization (page 306). In highlighting the strategic location of these spaces as interruptions in capitalist economies, scholars have defined their projects in spatial, temporal, and political terms, such as ‘alter-’ or ‘autonomous’ geographies (Koopman, 2011; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), ‘nowtopias’ (Carlsson and Manning, 2010), ‘egalitarian political spaces’ (Swygendouw, 2011), and ‘radical democracy’ (Heynen, 2010).

Despite the nuanced conceptualizations of autonomy across this growing body of literature, however, the self-reliance practices and semi-subsistence economies of small-scale producers such as those we have encountered in Alaska and Lithuania do not fit comfortably within projects of sustainability or anarchism as they are currently articulated, even if the people involved in them are apparently living ideas of autonomy, self-governance, and self-sufficiency. In both popular and scholarly debates, there seems to be a categorical difference between, say, radical DIY self-provisioning activities such as raising backyards chickens by urban homesteaders in the U.S. and the less visible semi-subsistence farms operated by poverty-driven rural and urban producers such as new immigrants. While some efforts to understand the innovations of the present consider self-reliance cross-culturally and trans-historically—drawing inspiration from the early anarcho-communist theorist Peter Kropotkin, for instance, or referencing the work of contemporary scholars such as James C. Scott and David Graeber—few are in especially close conversation with scholarship in peasant and agrarian studies and related fields (for an exception, see the work of Simon Springer). This seems regrettable insofar as the literature has dealt centrally with autonomy, sovereignty, and self-provisioning in the context of the globalization of markets, commodification of labor and resources, and

changing state infrastructures, all issues that have immediate bearing on self-reliance experiments today.

One of the most enduring themes in the field of agrarian studies has been the debate on the liberalization of global markets and the place that small-scale producers play in them. From Harriet Friedmann's (1978a; 1978b) early research on short commodity chains to Anna Tsing's (2009) investigation of self-exploitation by Matsutake mushroom pickers cross the Pacific rim, scholars have highlighted the ways in which self-reliance practices have been constituted in direct conversation with, and often as an outcome of, larger state and economic projects. For instance, Scott's (2009) analysis of decentralized rebel communities living in mountainous regions of Southeast Asia shows how the political autonomy of the mountain communities was produced in symbiosis with valley states and their economies, even if these exchanges were often fraught with conflict (2009, page 26).

Michael Dove (2011) comes to similar conclusions in his examination of how smallholders in Borneo have historically shifted practices to alternatively connect with and disengage from commodity markets controlled by extra-local actors. Given the composite logics of smallholders' 'dual economy', which is tuned to both subsistence provision and market production, the role of Bornean smallholders in broader markets provides yet another example of "how local society uses global ties to stay local" (Dove 2011, page 256).

Building on such approaches, the empirical cases we detail in the sections to follow complicate the picture of self-reliance as an innovative political philosophy grounded in radical autonomy by bringing the scholarship on alternative economic spaces

into closer conversation with the literature in peasant and agrarian studies. In line with the arguments advanced by Scott (2009) and Dove (2011), we show how the resistance embodied in self-reliance projects has arisen alongside and in direct relationship with the reproduction of state institutions and global markets. But our analysis also points to work and property relations as particularly potent sites where such mutuality is performed. We argue that mixed labor and ownership regimes have been central for practicing self-reliance in resource-producing peripheries, where producers negotiate their place in local societies and global economies through daily tasks. Our analysis highlights how these actually existing self-reliance projects, which we think of as the Other self-reliance, differ from the recent popular movements whose autarkic narratives of self-sufficiency tend to assume the absence or rejection of state and market institutions.

Semi-Subsistence on Two Frontiers

Alaska is almost synonymous with the frontier in North America. As such, an ideology centering on self-reliance continues to shape Alaskans' politics and self-understanding, even though the livelihoods of the vast majority of state residents depend on state and federal government payouts along with royalties from oil extraction (Haycox, 2002). Still, some of the Alaska's oldest resource industries, particularly commercial fishing, have developed in close connection with rural household provisioning. In the case of the salmon sector, this forms the basis for composite economies in which the self-reliance accomplished through subsistence activity is closely connected with participation in commercial industries, and vice versa.

This is especially evident in the southwest Alaskan region of Bristol Bay, which is home to the world's largest populations of wild sockeye salmon and a major salmon industry. The Bristol Bay commercial salmon fleet is made up of small-scale, independent owner-operators, a sizeable number of whom live year-round in the rural region, where most people identify as Alaska Native. Household labor in Bristol Bay is often divided between commercial fishing, other forms of wage labor, and extensive participation in the hunting, fishing, and gathering activities that are known in Alaska as 'subsistence.' Cash earnings are channeled into equipment and supplies for subsistence activities, for example, when salmon are 'put up' during the summer for future consumption in the region's many family smokehouses and drying racks.

The forebears of Bristol Bay's Alaska Native residents were sustained by salmon for millennia before the arrival of commercial salmon packers in the late nineteenth century. But since that time—and especially since World War II, when labor shortages led to increasing Native participation in the industry—work in the salmon industry has been closely linked with the practices that have long enabled households to live off the land in western Alaska. The industry's rise across coastal Alaska did not lead to the dissolution of aboriginal residents' subsistence systems, even in the face of growing conflicts over resource access and other disruptions (Arnold, 2008). Because commercial salmon fishing in western Alaska is a seasonal activity that relies on skills employed in subsistence pursuits, it forms the basis for a 'mixed economy' joining commercial and subsistence production (Wolfe, 1984; Langdon, 1991), similar to the 'dual economy' described by Dove (2011). Instead of being opposed, studies suggest, certain forms of market activity and subsistence practice often facilitate one another in rural Alaska, given

that most subsistence activities have come to depend on purchased commodities like guns, snowmobiles, and fuel (National Research Council, 1999).

While the salmon industry has underpinned the mixed economy in many Alaska regions for generations, it has not provided an especially stable foundation in recent decades. In the early 1990s, industry earnings spiraled downward in the face of plummeting salmon prices in many major markets, most often attributed to the influx of cheaper farmed salmon produced overseas (Knapp et al., 2007). (Salmon farming has been illegal in Alaska since the late 1980s.) Producers responded by debating fishery restructuring plans and reorienting their work to target more lucrative market niches that promise price premiums for wild salmon harvested in a sustainable and socially responsible fashion (Hébert 2010). Through such designs, the conditions that have long characterized self-sufficiency in rural Alaska are increasingly seized upon for profit-making projects, even as they introduce a variety of new challenges to rural producers' longtime self-reliance strategies.

As in Alaska, in Lithuania's countryside, self-reliance has been woven into food procurement and agricultural labor practices, while also serving as the source of social power in the villages (Klumbyte, 2006; Harboe Knudsen, 2011). Reaching back to the nineteenth century, national imaginaries envisioned the independent farmer (*ūkininkas*, Lith.) as the moral center of the nation and the guarantor of its survival, celebrating this figure in literature, visual culture, and popular accounts, as well as in political proclamations (Rindzeviciute, 2002; Schwartz, 2007). Since that time, a good farmer in Lithuania conjures up an image of a resourceful steward, hard worker, and independent

manager. Although rural inhabitants were often suspicious of nationalist ideals that put them on a pedestal while stripping them of actual political agency, the ideals of self-sustenance, perseverance, and autonomy have been key in valuing oneself and others (Dunn, 2004).

In the years of intense collectivization, 1948-1951, self-reliance gained new urgency because of mounting threats of famine, but also because Stalinist surveillance methods worked to instill fear and terror across the region, severing social bonds and forcing one to trust none, not even immediate family members. Examining the place of the individual in socialist society, historians have pointed to the dynamic tensions surrounding models of socialist personhood where, on the one hand, the collective was supposed to take precedence over individual needs, while, on the other, exceptional individual workers were mythologized as superhuman figures such as potato-field heroines or tractor-operator heroes (e.g. Bridger, 2001). Commenting on the contradictions of life and work under socialism, Anna Paretskaya (2010) and Martha Lampland (1995), among others, have suggested that the emphasis on individual achievement promoted by this particular brand of party-state politics ushered in paradoxical consequences of atomized, self-actualizing individualism and commodified labor.

More recently, as the rocky transition from socialism to capitalism in the 1990s led to sweeping privatization and the divestment of the welfare state, many rural inhabitants found themselves struggling to meet their basic needs, losing access to such assumed modern infrastructure as electricity, fertilizers, and agricultural machinery. Collective agriculture disappeared and small-scale farmers turned to semi-subsistence as

a method for weathering economic hardships. It is in this context that many spoke about being ‘their own government’, presenting carefully crafted narratives of dignity, character, and survival without alluding to the total deprivation and humiliation many experienced (Creed, 1995; Dunn, 2004, Mincyte, 2009b).

Today, as the European Union is pouring funding into the redevelopment of rural economies, timeworn narratives of entrepreneurship have once again resurfaced. These are evident in conversations around village dinner tables as well as in the national press, where smallholders are told to take matters into their own hands, or get out. While many are engaged in mixed economies where they sell the surplus from household provision to industrial processors or directly to consumers, it is commonly argued that semi-subsistence agriculture has no future in today’s Lithuania and that smallholder farmers must reinvent themselves as artisanal entrepreneurs. To what extent these efforts are realistic remains to be seen, yet it is already clear that in the face mounting economic pressures many semi-subsistence farmers have been forced to fold their operations and become dependent on meager welfare checks.

The two cases introduced here demonstrate how the semi-subsistence livelihoods that formed on the geographic frontiers of imperial Russia have become more recently the site of new economic and political frontiers. Before we turn to these present-day challenges, which reflect numerous parallels in Lithuania and Alaska, the following section offers a fuller account of the composite nature of self-reliance in each locale and its historical and social constitution.

Labor Arrangements and Mixed Economies in the Twentieth Century

At first glance, the Lithuanian farmer who declares herself ‘her own government’, or the Alaskan ‘independent fisherman’ who chafes at government regulation would seem to be staking out a living at the autonomous fringes of existing orders. However, a retrospective look at rural livelihoods in these two resource hinterlands over the course of the twentieth century reveals modes of self-reliance that rely on the weaving together of collective and private labors and property regimes in each locale, often in close connection with larger institutions working in concert with state and market designs.

Independence and Collective Work in Alaska

Most fishers in Bristol Bay today describe the appeal of their livelihoods in terms of self-reliance: being one’s own boss, setting one’s own schedule, and working in nature without a supervisor standing over one’s shoulder. Such sentiments are recorded across countless studies of commercial fishing. Yet even the briefest survey of the history and practice of the salmon industry in southwest Alaska reveals that the rough-and-tumble independence associated with commercial fishing on the last frontier has long been entwined with various forms of collective work. Moreover, the apparently timeless institution of the independent fisherman making his own living from the sea is actually a relatively recent historical development in Alaska.

For much of the commercial salmon fishery’s history, the powerful packing companies that began industrial production on Alaskan shores in the late 1800s controlled minute aspects of fishing practice. In Bristol Bay, canning cartels based on the U.S. West Coast shipped up most of the workers and supplies needed for production each summer, including the fishers themselves, who remained dependent on the canneries in nearly all

respects. It was only through years of struggle, often pursued through fishermen's unions, that Alaska Native and non-Native fishers alike gained the status of 'independent fishermen', as described locally—proprietors in possession of their own boats and gear. Because salmon packers supplied the sailboats used for commercial fishing until the 1950s and manipulated regulations to make it economically unviable for fishers to use their own equipment, there were few independent fishermen in Bristol Bay before this time. In the words of one Bristol Bay fisherman who reflected on this period: "In them days we were employees, that's all we were, employees. The cannery owned the boats, they owned the nets, *they owned the men!*" (Romie and Davis, 1995, emphasis in original).

The coordinated political action that made for fishers' shift from employees to independent proprietors was rooted in bonds forged through common work, despite everyday routines that pitted individual vessels and ethnic groups against one another. For example, cannery sailboats were operated by two men, referred to as fishing partners, who were known colloquially as the captain and the puller (VanStone, 1967, page 64). Despite the delineation of roles, sources from interviews to archival documents indicate that both partners experienced a fair amount of joint work, similar treatment, and comparable pay, at least in the early years of the industry. Amid fierce competition, this mutual work allowed for the formation and elaboration of fragile solidarities.

These solidarities and the ethos of egalitarianism they fostered inspired the growth of organized labor in Bristol Bay during the first half of the twentieth century, even as fishing interests continued to be bitterly divided in the face of ongoing inequalities. Battles between Alaska residents and non-residents for control of the fishermen's union

ultimately led to its split in 1950, which reflected broader fissures in the U.S. labor movement at the time (McCullough, 2001). Ironically, this occurred right around the same time that fishers' coordinated efforts met with success in overturning regulatory hurdles to independent ownership of boats and gear. It was not long after, in 1954, that the fishing unions were disbanded altogether, when, during an anti-labor climate, they were deemed in violation of anti-trust law (Arnold, 2008, page 153). In subsequent decades, the fleet of independent fishers was represented by two different associations, which both negotiated salmon prices in the Bay until unsuccessful strikes led to the de facto end of fishers' collective bargaining in the early 1990s.

The dissolution of organized labor in the fishery has arisen alongside the fleet's transformation into a group in which belonging is established through individual property ownership in boats and, since the early 1970s, commercial fishing permits rather than the mutual labor of fishing (Hébert, 2008; Reedy-Mashner, 2010). Given the centrality of private property and ideas of entrepreneurialism to present-day identities of independence, Alaska salmon fishers would seem quintessential neoliberal agents. Yet, scholars note, insofar as commercial fishers typically continue to depend on major processors to grant them a 'market' for their catch, they remain akin to wage workers in key respects (Arnold, 2008, page 153).

Nevertheless, even in the context of an ethos that celebrates autonomy and entrepreneurial self-understanding, egalitarianism also remains a powerful orienting ideal in the fishery today, however riddled with nostalgia and romanticism. Captains still speak of fishing partners, though earlier financial and status equalizers between them and their crew no longer exist; and many bemoan a change in the fleet from a supposed 'band of

brothers' into a more 'dog-eat-dog' fishery. Their accounts of changing livelihoods record tensions involving work that is at once both competitive and cooperative, private and shared, as has been observed in other commercial fishing contexts (cf. Sider, 1986).

The historical constitution of salmon industry self-reliance further shows how rural residents have long negotiated relationships with market actors and institutions, which in western Alaska became a part of everyday life as early as the 1700s with the Russian fur trade. Yet because smallholders' involvement in the commercial fishery was often aligned with and even determined in part by concerns stemming from subsistence economies, their imbrication in market orders has always been partial and negotiated, much as Dove (2011) argues for upland cultivators in Borneo. In the case of rural Alaskan fishing economies, anthropologists observe, cash has proved "'penetrated and converted' rather than penetrating and converting" (Wenzel in Langdon, 1991, page 288). As this suggests, self-reliance in coastal Alaska is facilitated through market activities, if never wholly determined by them.

Self-Reliance between Collective and Individual in Lithuania

In contrast to popular historical imaginaries of collectivized agriculture where peasants are forced to live, work, and die collectively, socialist farming relied heavily on autonomy, domestic economy, private labor, individual knowledge, and physical strength. During the first years of socialism in Russia in the early 1920s, the Soviet state recognized peasant subsistence and survival skills as potential sources of food for the growing urban population and, in the 1930s, instituted subsidiary farming as an auxiliary agrarian economy. Although the Communist party distrusted the peasantry as potential

supporters of private property, each collective farm household was entitled to 0.8 acres of land (1.48 in Soviet Baltic States), which could be deemed as semi-private or ‘individual’ (Hedlund, 1989, pages 14-25). On this land, socialist peasants were allowed to grow everything they needed for their subsistence, except for the types of grain that were grown on collective farms fields as to prevent stealing. In addition to arable land, socialist peasants were also issued about 2.5 acres of pasture for their livestock. In their settlements, each peasant was allowed to keep a sizable number of farm animals, including, for example, a couple of cows and unlimited poultry (Wadekin, 1973; Shmelev, 1971; Mincyte, 2009b). In exchange for the permission to farm on personal plots, the Soviet state requisitioned meat, eggs, and milk from each household.

Unlike work on collectivized farms, which was organized through brigades and performed under the supervision of administrators, subsidiary farms relied on the mobilization of labor through kinship and friendship networks. The old, the young, the sick, the disabled, women, men, and children—all worked on the subsidiary farms when needed. Even disabled elderly persons often found ways to contribute to these efforts, performing such tasks as feeding the chickens, providing childcare, or, in the case of one blind person, harvesting root vegetables, which called for him to kneel down and follow the rows of plants by digging into the soil with his hands. Not surprisingly, given such attention and care, these farms were extraordinarily productive. Occupying only 12.8% of total agricultural land in Soviet Lithuania in 1958, the subsidiary sector delivered as much as 73% of meat, 69.5% of milk, and 95% of eggs of total outputs (*Twenty Years of Soviet Government in Lithuania*, 1960, pages 143–47, 180–82, 192, 194; see also Mincyte 2009b).

Yet it would be wrong to regard these farms as autonomous zones disconnected from the rest of the socialist industry, as their productivity relied not only on labor, but also on the fertilizers, fodder, draw animals, and, later, tractors that came from collective and state farms. In most cases, villagers were allowed to take their animals to forage in publicly owned forests or other remote areas, but it was not unusual for them to secretly take advantage of these resources without asking the administration for permission. Justifying their actions as a moral compensation for their personal losses during collectivization, desperate villagers often took what they could.

From the perspective of the state, especially in the late socialist period of the 1970s and 1980s, subsidiary farms were increasingly seen not as a separate economic domain, but as an integral part of the Soviet agro-industrial complex. In overcoming ideological tensions surrounding the dependence of the socialist state on semi-private labor and individual creativity, the generation of Soviet rural scholars working in the 1960s and 1970s articulated a peculiar developmental vision in which individual peasants and their farms served as a conduit to building a better socialist society in the countryside and a stronger agricultural sector. One of the most illuminating justifications included the reasoning that subsidiary farms were not private, but rather ‘personal’ property. In this view, subsidiary farms served diverse social, economic, and psychological functions, and materialized the right to employment for social groups that were not employed in the public sector, such as pensioners, housewives, children, and the disabled. The educational aspect of farming on subsidiary farms was also celebrated in these official accounts, as younger generations were thought to be acquiring valuable agricultural knowledge and personal characteristics (Kalinkin et al., 1980, page 5; Shmelev, 1986, page 8; Ostrovskii,

1988, page 17). Paradoxically, by accepting the mutual constituency of the work on collective and subsidiary farms in the socialist rural economy, the socialist state transformed itself from the ideological advocate of collectivism to a state ruled by the ‘cult of individualism’ (Paretskaya, 2010). This in turn suggests that everyday forms of self-reliance were themselves deeply implicated in building the socialist economy, feeding industrialization, and reproducing the Soviet state.

Since the fall of Berlin Wall, a similar reliance on domestic labor, individual resourcefulness, and self-provisioning skills continues to be woven into state building processes across a variety of socialist and post-socialist contexts. For example, having lost support from its socialist allies in the late 1980s, the Cuban government called on its citizens in cities to produce their own food and developed a network of urban agriculture institutions (Premat, 2012). During the early years of post-socialist transformations spanning Europe and Asia, people turned to self-provisioning *en masse* as the reliable source of sustenance, a process that enabled the weak states to maintain their legitimacy and survive shock therapies imposed on their economies.

As the above examples from both Lithuania and Alaska suggest, self-reliance practices and identities have been co-produced with changing labor politics and property regimes for many years. In Alaska, shifting configurations of organized labor, teamwork on the fishing grounds, and the ambivalent place of changing property forms in the salmon fishery reveal a more complex and historically contingent brand of independence than is often imagined in what is typically depicted as the last bastion of individual freedom and rugged autonomy in North America. In Soviet Lithuania, where the physical sustenance of household members depended on their ability to provide for themselves,

collective work on state farms was performed in concert with kinship-based work alliances on personal subsidiary farms, enabling the socialist state to access and use private labor in building its power. In each case, narratives of self-reliance were interwoven with visions of cooperation, comradeship, and teamwork. In the following section we move to the twenty-first century to show how neoliberal discourses that place self-reliance at the center their ideological repertoire intersect with locally existing expressions of self-reliance.

Self-Reliance in Volatile Economies: Carving out Niches, Reproducing Neoliberalism

Although geographically removed from global economic and political centers, inhabitants in the Northern margins have witnessed dramatic transformations in recent decades in their environments, economies, and geopolitical orders. This section uncovers how self-reliance was reimagined and sold in Alaska and Lithuania during years marked by extreme economic volatility brought about by the deepening liberalization of economies. We show how in both cases certain local entrepreneurs managed to mobilize self-reliance as a marketing tool amid changing economic times. This introduces a similar paradox in each locale, whereby neoliberal ideas come to be embraced by some of the people who have suffered the most as a result of market liberalization.

Reimagining Profits and Identities in Alaska's Salmon Sector

The family-run salmon processing business that Grace Crandall began in the mid-2000s opened to considerable local attention and excitement. Like many other Bristol

Bay commercial fishing families, the Crandalls struggled economically when salmon prices began to fall in the early 1990s. By the early 2000s, one of the few bright spots in what was then a beleaguered industry was the potential for Alaskan producers to promote the uniqueness of their work and artisanal traditions in higher-margin market niches for specialty foodstuffs. There was great enthusiasm in Bristol Bay at the time about fostering entrepreneurial ventures to target these markets, since this was widely viewed as a more palatable path to industry recovery than controversial measures to consolidate the fishing fleet. Yet the Crandalls were among only a handful of local residents to turn their entrepreneurial dreams into any sort of reality. The brand-new processing facility they built onto the back of their home featured high-tech equipment, which helped them sail through numerous food safety inspections. Although the business had yet to turn a profit given its high start-up costs, it had won a few contracts to supply gourmet retailers on the East Coast of the U.S. and seemed poised for success.

As a result, Grace was considered the ‘star student’ of a local program that provided training and technical assistance to commercial fishers who were developing new business ventures. State-sponsored initiatives during this period funded numerous workshops in which industry experts explained to Grace and other rural producers hoping to ‘self-market’ their fish that wild Alaska salmon was well positioned for sale to affluent consumers seeking healthful, environmentally friendly, and socially responsible fare. In contrast to salmon pumped with antibiotics and artificial colorants in feedlot-style fish farms run by seafood conglomerates, as the experts described the pitch, Alaska salmon was caught in pristine waters by Native Americans and independent fishing families living off the land and running their own small commercial operations, from a robust

wild fishery widely regarded as sustainably managed. The self-reliance that the Crandalls and other families had long cultivated was thus suddenly a selling point for their salmon.

While these entrepreneurial ventures beckoned with promise, the experiences of Grace and other self-marketers in Bristol Bay reveal rather mixed results. Stories shared at the workshops and beyond speak to the many hurdles small-scale producers experienced in everyday practice. One rural resident who sought to capitalize on her existing trade in homemade smoked fish reported that, although her family had been selling their salmon for over fifty years, she had not been able to figure out a way to make their informal business legal. In her estimation, it seemed impossible to square the preparation techniques practiced among the region's Yup'ik Eskimo residents with what she and others bemoaned as the 'alphabet soup' of federal food safety regulations. As she explained to a group of Bristol Bay fishers, "what is allowed legally is not what we do," since "smoking salmon the old way" uses a lower cooking temperature than food safety standards permit.

Indeed, with the exception of a star student or two, most would-be Bristol Bay entrepreneurs had frequent run-ins with health inspectors. These small-scale processors shoulder much of the burden of food safety monitoring and compliance, since processing regulations in the U.S. and elsewhere have shifted much work from government agents onto producers themselves (see Dunn, 2004). Grace, for example, had to keep extensive records and documentation in order to stay in business. New entrepreneurial opportunities thus came with a suite of challenging demands, and a novel set of omnipresent risks. Even producers like Grace—those who managed to meld their 'homepack' techniques to industrial equipment, distant consumers' tastes, and stringent food safety standards—did

not see easy profits. In fact, the Crandalls' business had barely gotten off the ground when a family crisis and dwindling funds forced the suspension of operations in the late 2000s. With most family members and monies tied up in the entrepreneurial endeavor, the business model promoted by state agents was particularly vulnerable to breakdown.

As these details suggest, the forms of self-reliance that successfully enabled Grace to pool family labor and resources to launch her processing business were actually jeopardized by the very mode of neoliberal market engagement that celebrated and promoted them. While the Crandalls' financial investment in their family business enabled it to sail through inspections, the economic insecurity this introduced soon undermined the ongoing viability of the operation. Even still, Grace looks back on the years she ran the business as the most exciting of her life. She remains optimistic that she can recoup at least some of her investments by reselling the equipment she purchased. And she is hopeful about the distant future prospect of developing a community salmon processing center, since the financial burdens of processing enterprises seem too great to bear for any single household. Despite the disappointments experienced by Grace and many other rural producers in Bristol Bay, the efforts of Alaska salmon producers to target more lucrative market segments, improve product quality, and promote wild salmon do appear to have played some role in facilitating the salmon industry's inroads into higher-paying markets and recovered profitability (Knapp, 2013). Nevertheless, these gains are always more tenuous in rural regions like Bristol Bay, where industry reinvention demands ongoing readjustments to ever-changing production norms and an often-uncertain linking up of longstanding self-reliance strategies with new kinds of market pursuits.

Post-socialist Reconfigurations: Property, Dispossession, and the Politics of Making It

At the same time as producers in Bristol Bay struggled to reinvent their salmon shops into artisanal enterprises, business-minded dairy farmers in Lithuania were carving out numerous niches in milk markets, ranging from selling milk illegally along the street curbs in ghettoizing districts, to establishing raw milk vending machine networks, to delivering organic milk and artisanal cheeses to high-end farmers markets.

When the Russian economic crisis of 1998 shut the doors to dairy imports to Russia, pushing milk prices into a free-fall across Eastern Europe, small-scale, semi-subsistence producers in Lithuania felt the pinch. For them, milk sales had constituted the most reliable source of cash income, and the precipitous drop in milk prices threatened not only their ability to pay for basic needs such as electricity, veterinary services, or books for their children, but in some cases even their physical survival. It is in this context that many farmers began looking for alternatives to sell their milk, effectively circumventing the large processors who had set up networks of milk collection stations across the country. Those whose farms were near urban centers started driving into the cities and delivering milk directly to consumers, many of whom, too, were barely scraping by. By the early 2000s, these milk delivery schemes had spread across the country, and farmers selling milk from the trunks of their cars, along with cheese, sour cream, herbs, and seasonal vegetables, were integrated into food supply chains in post-socialist Lithuania (Harboe Knudsen, 2011; Mincyte, 2009a; for Albania see Nicholson, 2003).

These networks were important in that they allowed producers like Rasa Stankevičienė to secure income and build a sense of autonomy and safety in increasingly competitive business environments. Rasa owned just over 17 acres of land and four cows, which she milked by hand. Beginning in 2002, she drove to the city every day except Sunday to deliver milk, following two different routes with five pre-agreed delivery sites on each. At the delivery sites, she relied on consumers to come out from their homes and pick up the milk in their own containers. Using family networks and acquaintances from her previous job at a factory, she cultivated these sales networks over the course of several years and knew the back-stories for almost all of her best customers. Her days were punctuated by hard physical labor on the farm and artfully coordinated social and economic interactions in the city. She found this to be a rewarding enterprise, but she also felt pressure because she lacked help. Her husband held a job in the city and rarely lent her a hand with the cows, and her teenage son, unsurprisingly, was preoccupied with friends and school. In their household, the semi-subsistence farm operated as an extension of the domestic space that was under the purview of a woman, reproducing gendered economies in which women were expected to take on the least desirable and most minimally paid jobs.

Yet, the most disconcerting aspect of Rasa's carefully built economic niche was not the sacrifices she was making at home, but the fact that her deliveries were criminalized by the state. She had to be careful when delivering milk as to not get stopped by the police, who had set up traps on the roads and in the city for catching illegal vendors. Harmonized with EU requirements, Lithuania's food production and safety regulations allow direct food sales, but selling raw milk in urban areas is illegal

unless all transactions take place in pre-approved places (such as farmers markets), milk is delivered in refrigerated vehicles, and both producers and sellers are registered. While Rasa kept veterinary passports for all of her cows and met all the ‘good agricultural practice’ requirements, complying with the direct sales requirements was unrealistic for her, as she lacked the capital, resources, and time needed to meet them. Like the ‘alphabet soup’ of regulations in Alaska, Lithuania’s food safety regulations are burdensome for smallholder producers who cannot afford the administrative staff to keep extensive records and execute expensive tests. Despite her entrepreneurial aspirations to expand both her farm and delivery networks, the realities of European agrarian politics pushed her outside of the formal economy, into the gray zones raided by the police and condemned by political elites.

In other dairy networks in Lithuania, the situation was different in that many producers found ways to mobilize capital, state support, and personal connections, especially when they developed artisanal products catering to the growing class of well-heeled urban gourmands. For these producers, personal stories of self-reliance became the primary vehicles to make claims about the authenticity, quality, and trustworthiness of their products, even if they relied heavily on the state infrastructures and European funding for support. This was the case for a small cheese-making cooperative in the Ukmergė district, where several farmers joined forces to produce innovative cow and sheep milk cheeses. They built their enterprise on their extensive experiences of living and working abroad, their knowledge and skills in writing successful grant applications and business plans, and personal connections to artisanal producers in France and Italy, who taught them special techniques and supplied them with microbial cultures for

making rennet-based cheeses in Lithuania. Continuing to keep small herds and restricting their production to small batches, they succeeded in establishing themselves as respected cheesemakers and self-reliant local producers who were valued by consumers ready to pay top price for quality products. As one of these producers tells his customers at the farmers market, he works hard every day to bring ‘European quality’ products to Lithuania, despite the red tape and fierce competition from the dairy industry.

In broader terms, as evoked in the stories that Lithuanian cheesemakers share at farmers markets and Alaska salmon producers weave into their sales pitches, self-reliance has been a recurrent theme in the daily work practices and life experiences of rural Alaskans and Lithuanians for generations. Yet emergent forms of entrepreneurship and ‘self-marketing’ are transforming producers’ relationships with everyday practices of self-sufficiency. On the one hand, the new self-reliance narratives that appear on the labels of foods produced by smallholders reaffirm the value of these practices. On the other hand, they typically demand changes to the practices themselves. In order to cater to the presumed tastes of distant consumers, conform to state regulatory regimes, and keep up with fast-changing market norms, producers are drawn into relations that are hardly the picture of independence or autonomy, and may actually undermine longstanding forms of self-sustenance. This is particularly evident in the divergent life stories of the entrepreneurs we have encountered in our field sites, where the ‘truly’ self-reliant producers often fail to make it, while those who are able to capitalize on social and economic connections are far more likely to succeed, revealing the disjuncture manifest in neoliberal politics between celebratory narratives of self-reliance and the significant dependency of elites on social networks and the state.

Conclusions

The evidence assembled here from Alaska and Lithuania sheds light on how everyday forms of self-reliance on the margins of the global North are composed historically and operate in the present. In both sites, we find that the features of smallholder sustenance that are now celebrated in new market niches as timeless expressions of rural authenticity, untainted by industrial society, are the result of long histories of engagement with state and market regimes, and intensive political struggles over rights to nature. The ‘independent fisherman’ and the ‘self-made farmer’ have not always inhabited Alaska salmon fisheries and Lithuanian agrarian landscapes. Our examination has shown how these identities and the self-reliance practices associated with them have taken shape over decades and even centuries, co-evolving with changing labor relations, property regimes, and other institutional arrangements. In Alaska, definitions of autonomy shifted with transformations in property relations as fishers emerged as independent proprietors. In Lithuania, self-reliance under Stalin generated an arsenal of entrepreneurial tactics later put to use in post-socialist contexts, even though both periods are best defined in terms of scarcity. Paradoxically, while working under the surveillance of Stalin’s *apparatchiks*, the Soviet peasants were integrated into the Soviet state, while the European regime has pushed them to the margins of the formal economy. Such observations lead us to conclude that self-reliance must be understood as a dynamic process rather than a stable condition, differently realized in varied contexts and at particular historical moments. This in turn suggests the need for a more careful attention to the specificity of expressions of self-reliance.

Relying on the agrarian and peasant studies approaches that emphasize how producer livelihoods are influenced by political-economic processes and state infrastructures, we draw attention to a range of dynamics that contribute to building self-reliance, including formal and informal labor institutions, shared work in spaces of production, and hybrid property relations. This confirms that independence and autonomy do not emerge in an entirely endogenous, isolated, or autarkic fashion. Rather, they are forged in the context of social institutions. These include labor unions in Alaska and kinship-based networks of work mobilization in Lithuania, as well as other social frameworks that influence everyday work practices, which involve teamwork and collaboration in both locales. Further, each site records the presence of shifting ownership regimes that provide the groundwork for semi-subsistence producers' practices of self-sufficiency. Whereas literature focused on the recent rise of DIY movements directs analytic focus to forms of resourcefulness that emerge in the absence of larger social institutions, our comparative historical study demonstrates how mixed property regimes that allow for some combination of private, domestic, public, and collective forms of ownership have been key in the making of identities and practices of self-reliant entrepreneurs across time and place.

Based on our findings, we also contend that while the self-sustenance practiced on the Northern margins is far from untouched by state or market designs, it represents a powerful expression of independence and autonomy nonetheless. We suggest that it is precisely such forms of actually existing self-reliance that tend to be overlooked in recent popular renderings and scholarly accounts alike. In public debates, politically polarized treatments lead to reductive and incomplete pictures of actual practice. In policy circles

and some academic realms, proponents of neoliberalism offer readings that naturalize culturally and historically specific forms of self-reliance, taking them instead for essential expressions of the human spirit. In contrast, stemming perhaps from an urgency to challenge neoliberal doctrine and its effects, other scholarly examinations risk disregarding the existence and radical potential of this Other self-reliance altogether. In this article, we argue that the experience of those on the resource-extracting margins represents a crucial perspective that might more closely inform the expanding body of scholarship on these topics.

Lastly, our research emphasizes how self-reliance is harnessed by broader political-economic projects, including not only those pursued by the socialist state, which successfully extracted domestic labor and local knowledge for building its industrial base, but also by much more fluid forms of neoliberalism. In both Alaska and Lithuania, the neoliberal moment has seen the expansion of ideologies of individual freedom, narratives that celebrate autonomy and individual expression at the same time they obscure their dependence on self-exploitation and atomism and their role in undermining political mobilization and large-scale social movements. Such ideologically driven narratives of self-reliance often have little to do with actual practices of self-provisioning, as the life stories of the producers we encountered in our research indicate. In light of emergent global market and geopolitical shifts that are yet again transforming livelihoods on the edges of empire, we conclude that attending to self-reliance in places of semi-subsistence has become only more pressing.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Laura Sayre, Guntra Aistara, Julie Kim, Susan C. Rogers, Matthew Hoffman, Deborah Cowen, David Krause, Kendall Barbery, and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. We are also deeply grateful to all the participants in our studies for their generosity in sharing their life stories and experiences with us.

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