

Introduction to the special symposium: reflecting on twenty years of the food regimes approach in agri-food studies

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Background to the symposium

Twenty years ago, Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael published a highly original, influential and—subsequently—controversial article: ‘Agriculture and the state system: the rise and fall of national agricultures, 1870 to the present’ (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). Over the following years, both Friedmann and McMichael, along with other collaborators, further developed their insights, challenging agri-food scholars with a new way of framing agri-food power relations as well as providing an approach for agricultural research and policy analysis that moved food from the periphery to the centre of wider theories about society and interpretations of the history of capitalism.

Through the early 1990s, their argument and its significance—described more fully below—gave rise to numerous attempts to both validate and extend their theory and position before a strong critique of the food regimes approach in the mid-90s dented the ambitions of food-regime scholars to some degree (Goodman and Watts 1994). Until the mid-2000s, the food regimes approach was a typically muted current of thought in agricultural political economy, before a resurgence of interest in its value coalesced around a set of panels at the 2007 joint meetings of the AFHVS and the ASFS in Victoria, Canada.

One of the editors of this Symposium proposed that the food regimes progenitors join a panel of other agri-food scholars to debate the contemporary relevance and productivity of the food regimes perspective. Back-to-back panels on ‘Updating Food Regime Analysis for the 21st Century’ drew a large and engaged audience. Presentations were provided by Farshad Araghi and Philip McMichael from the US; David Burch, Geoffrey Lawrence, and Jane Dixon from Australia; Hugh Campbell from NZ; and Harriet Friedmann from Canada. (In this issue, Le Heron and Lewis’s commentary explores the preponderance of contributors from the Antipodes and/or ‘settler states’.) The papers included critical reflections on the original contributions of food regime analysis combined with new formulations that included questions concerning value and ecological relations, cultural politics, nutritional knowledge and dimensions, and the transformation of corporate and institutional power relationships in an era of neo-liberal globalization and financialization.

On the strength of the response to these panels, which indicated renewed interest in food regimes analysis, the presenters decided to develop a symposium for *Agriculture and Human Values* to mark the 20th anniversary of the key Friedmann and McMichael (1989) article. The purpose of this Symposium is to rework the papers from the Victoria sessions (along with a contribution by Bill Pritchard and commentary by Richard Le Heron and Nick Lewis) with the following goals in mind: (1) to situate food regime analysis as a significant contribution to understanding capitalist modernity—including its changing forms of accumulation, power relationships, value relations and institutional organization on a world scale; (2) to emphasize therefore the centrality of food relations (such as global divisions of labor, nutritional and dietary regimens, and differentiated consumption patterns) to understanding the ordering and

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cultural politics of the modern world; (3) to open up an engagement with ecological dynamics as a perspective on both the distribution of unsustainable practices and on the recent politicization of ecology (ethical consumption, sustainable development, multi-functionality, and green capitalism); (4) to examine new dynamics of financialisation and corporate reorganization as a significant influence on the transformation of the transnational food industry (equity companies and retailers, corporate integration and/or conglomeration, new investment frontiers in biotechnology and agrofuels); (5) to analyse the nexus between the emerging field of global public health nutrition and food relations; and (6) to assess the role and impact of the green, food sovereignty, slow food, public health and food safety movements on the institutional and ideological dimensions of corporate food strategies.

All of these new dynamics represent new sites of engagement and elaboration of the food regimes approach. Such new approaches are enabled partly through a significant loosening of the theoretical context within which agriculture political economy is theorized. It is only possible, therefore, to understand the significance of these new perspectives by understanding food regimes as a key historical and theoretical pivot that moved debates in rural sociology from a rather narrow, structural and orthodox political economy of agriculture to a more contingent, historically contextual understanding of the many configurations (geographical *and* historical) of agri-food capitalisms. To understand this pivotal moment, and the degree to which it both conditions new food regime approaches and is, inevitably, superseded by them, it is necessary first to review some key debates in rural sociology in the late-1970s and 1980s.

The intellectual context: the new rural sociology

In the 1970s, rural sociology became energised by the re-discovery of classic Kautskian Marxism (Buttel et al. 1990). The resulting upsurge of critical Marxist-inspired thinking in the ensuing decade became termed the ‘New Rural Sociology’, a critique that engaged powerfully with rural society as a production space characterised by the capitalist transformation of agriculture.

The key debate (delineated by key texts such as Buttel and Newby 1980; Buttel et al. 1990) questioned whether family farms would eventually be ‘subsumed’ into capitalist production forms or, alternatively, if they could survive into the long term due to a flexible production structure—thereby representing an alternative to industrial relations of production. The sense of a crisis in Western agriculture lent weight to this debate, indicating the potential persistence, or restructured form, of rural society.

However, 10 years of rediscovering capitalism in agriculture provoked such a raft of critics that Marsden could pointedly describe the new field as suffering from a ‘hangover from an overdose of classical agrarian theory’ (Marsden 1989, p. 313). While the New Rural Sociology effectively created analytical power around the dissection of capitalist relations in agriculture, two dynamics were observed to be particularly problematic for the continued theoretical elaboration of this approach. First, there was awareness that a *point of production* focus generated its own limitations by excluding wider realms of food dynamics such as supply chains and consumption. These limitations were superseded both from within the New Rural Sociology—through the exploration of relations between on-farm and off-farm capital—and through engagement between the ‘new rural geography’ and wider emergent currents in critical theories of global political economy. As a result, a new field of research emerged—agri-food studies—with a specific focus on food production–food consumption linkages. The second key dynamic involved scrutiny of earlier variants of the New Rural Sociology: exemplified in particular by the broad suite of ‘subsumptionist’ arguments which suggested *linear trajectories* of rural change.

While the celebrated debate over family farm survival versus farm subsumption was initially framed at the point of production, its more articulate contributors (from whom the food regimes authors would soon emerge) suggested that farm survival was indeed possible and that, more importantly, some regions were historically successfully resisting the seemingly inevitable trajectory towards the pure capitalist mode—Marx’s factories in the fields—due to particular configurations of family farming (see Friedmann 1978).

From Marsden’s theoretical hangover, therefore, it appeared that the subsumption/survival debate could spawn new directions for the New Rural Sociology. Specifically, the configuration of agricultural capitalism took a significant step away from the path dependency of industrialization, and moved on towards recognizing greater historical and spatial contingency.

Food regimes theory

Emerging from this debate, Harriet Friedmann used her background on the global wheat complex and its influence on the Midwest to look towards a more historically informed approach to analysing farming change, along with the broader shift towards understanding both production and consumption relations in food production. Joining Friedmann in this project was Philip McMichael, who drew upon a deep familiarity with a global political

economy approach, grounded in the traditions of world systems theory. The two theoretical devices underpinning this collaboration were, firstly, a body of theory around political regimes (for an extended discussion of the regime approach see Friedmann's commentary in this issue), and, secondly, the emerging school of French Regulation Theory (often referred to as the regulationist approach) which provided a less determined and more historically and spatially contingent analysis of particular epochs of capitalist stability and crisis (see Aglietta 1979; Lipietz 1987; Jessop 1990). Much of the focus of regulationist work was directed towards modes of control that succeeded in stabilising periods of capitalist growth; with the most commonly discussed epochs being mid-20th century Fordism, a subsequent period of crisis and instability, and the purported emergence of post-Fordism.

In 1989, Friedmann and McMichael articulated the 'food regime' as a historically significant cluster of global-scale food relationships that contributed to stabilizing and underwriting a period of growth in global capitalism. A food regime comprised of a series of key relationships, often enshrined in rule-making and enforcing institutions (including imperial/national policy, trade policy, institutional forms of land-use/farming, company regulation, commodity complexes, labour relations, consumption relations in the industrial core). Following a regulationist interpretation of capitalist history, these relationships coalesced to form a stable pattern of accumulation (historical conjuncture) over a period of time, before then destabilising and moving into disjuncture and crisis.

Friedmann and McMichael (1989) aligned this concept of food regimes with both the regulationist interest in the post-WWII/Fordist mode of regulation (following Aglietta 1979), and their earlier common interest in the imperial food economy enabled by the Transport Revolution of the 19th century (a period that Aglietta described as the regime of 'extensive accumulation'). The terminology 'first food regime' (imperial) and 'second food regime' (post-World War II/Fordist) became important organising devices for the New Rural Sociology to explain trading linkages and a global division of labour around food production and consumption.

Contrary to Goodman and Watt's (1994) interpretation of their work, we would argue that Friedmann and McMichael's (1989) use of the regulationist approach—which looked for periods of institutional stability followed by periods of crisis and recomposition—held open the latent potential to create a non-linear narrative of capitalist food history and politics. The transition from the first to second regimes (via the Great Depression) involved a crisis in which nearly all the key relationships in the first food regime were inverted, subverted or restructured. Empires became nation-states, free trade gave way to protected

agriculture, farming moved from colony to industrial heartland, and frontier expansion gave way to intensive, subsidized, 'food security'-driven farming intensification in the industrial core countries. Simultaneously, industry reconfigured its relationship with agriculture, food deficits became food surpluses, new aid-based food politics altered global alliances, and Fordist consumption patterns placed a 'chicken in every pot'. In summary, the second food regime was not a linear continuation of a set of agri-food relations for which path dependency had been laid down in the first food regime; rather, it constituted a completely different set of economic and social relationships.

While subsequent debate quickly moved to pose questions over the putative existence of a post-Fordist (third) food regime (see Pritchard 1996; Le Heron and Roche 1995; Dixon 2002), here the important point is that the New Rural Sociology had finally moved away from its roots within the structural Marxist analysis of rural society and started openly integrating global food relationships within its activities. Further, the food regimes approach placed food relationships at the very centre of the cluster of relations comprising historically stable formations of capitalist development.

The combination of Friedland's Commodity Systems Approach (1984) and food regimes theory provided a terminology that informed what Buttel (1996) and McMichael (1994) described as agri-food theory. This ambitious research agenda, that emerged through the 1990s, posited that agri-food systems were compelling in a number of ways: as a better means of understanding the internal dynamics of agriculture within commodity sectors; as exemplars of wider institutional forms and global food linkages (such as contracting, cooperatives and North/South food relationships); as comprising potentially propulsive commodities conforming to, and reforming, global food systems (such as organic or GM foods), and thereby revealing empirically the composition and de-composition of new food regimes.

Concurrently, during the mid-1990s agri-food analysis became a site of considerable debate calling into question the venture of positing middle-level political economy at all (see Goodman and Watts 1994, 1997). From this point, divergent paths emerged between the continuing political economy and regulationist-inspired agri-food approach and what have been termed the social constructivist and food networks approaches that embraced more post-structuralist methods of engagement with global food phenomena.

We contend that the Goodman and Watts (1994) critique substantially misunderstood the latent potential of the food regimes approach—and thus also missed the central reasons why food regimes have re-appeared in agri-food scholarship. It was not, as claimed, simply a grand narrative approach to capitalism. Rather, it was a position that

moved beyond linear transitions within agriculture under capitalism, thus also moving away from the pedagogical culture of despair circulating in the early 1990s. It was a powerful attempt to break out of the kind of negative dynamics identified by Gibson-Graham (1996), who referenced a wide cluster of issues in political economy demonstrating a pervasive theoretical culture of pessimism and helplessness as the broader structural forces of capitalism seemed unassailable. In the study of agriculture and food in the 1990s, food regimes theory became an essential ally in helping to move agricultural and food politics beyond a narrative of capitalist-induced doom. Put simply, food regimes articulated historical contingencies and patterns that convincingly demonstrated the existence of a colonial and post-colonial moment; a pre- and post-Cold War configuration; both crisis and reconstruction. In particular, the dramatic food relationship transformations around the Great Depression and, subsequently, post-WWII conditions showed that *the system can change*—that is, the key structuring relationships at the heart of a food regime can be reset, inverted or emerge in totally new forms. While the second food regime has unarguably rendered as many injustices as the first, it equally unarguably generated sufficient countervailing forces to reinforce the possibility that the politics of contemporary food regimes and the transitions between them are still contingent, contested and politically open to multiple potential outcomes.

The re-emergence of the food regimes approach

Several years ago, Friedmann (2005) and McMichael (2005) independently returned to food regimes analyses, revealing how the concept of the ‘food regime’ has evolved. Unsurprisingly, the initial, primarily structural, conception ‘has been refined over time with historical prompting—both from intellectual debates and from the transformation of the global food economy itself’ (McMichael 2009, p. 144). While McMichael remains a key exponent of using the food regime as ‘a lens’ or an ‘optic’ onto historical conjunctures, Friedmann’s recent work instead examines the transitional processes that underpin crises in stable food relations. However, while new actors and emphases have appeared in their analyses, the methodological approach remains constant: that of value relations, with its key tools of charting and explaining how key events unfold historically with a focus on different manifestations and relationships of power, whether it be at the global or mid-range level. Here, contemporary food regime scholars owe a debt to Araghi (2003). In his critique of the food regimes approach, he reminded researchers of the centrality of the labour history

of value: that behind the ordering and reordering processes are populations selling their labour power for food, and that with commoditization, food forges an ideological relation between classes and nations. While Araghi did not articulate this argument in terms of a cultural politics, his approach informs much now written under the food regimes umbrella.

The dynamism in food and social relations cannot be overstated when it comes to understanding food politics over the last two decades. The rest of this symposium is devoted to examining how a food regimes approach can uncover the unexpected and contrasting spaces created by a more complex and mid-level understanding of key agri-food concerns such as: consumption dynamics (for instance the emerging power of food retailers); the politics of alternative systems (such as commercialized organic food); the politics of science in food relations; new forms of governance, particularly in relation to neo-liberalism; and, importantly, the dynamics of the natural and social ecologies crucial to food relationships. All the following contributions address some of these elaborations of the original food regime concept.

The panelists at the Victoria conference in 2007 proposed that the food regime framework (a composite of its theoretical underpinnings, its conceptual tools and historical approach, and successive waves of empirical findings) can make explicit the bases for intuitive understandings of the importance of agri-food relations. In this Symposium the framework is deployed to illuminate issues on all scales from local to global: linking, for instance, retailer strategies with new financial instruments (Burch and Lawrence); the nutrition concerns of consumer-citizens and the related machinations of nutritional science and metrology (Dixon); the continuity between past and present transitions in regulatory architecture of world agricultural trade (Pritchard); the dynamic linkage between biofuels, agro-fuels and cooking fuels (McMichael); the potentials and contradictions of green capitalism in dynamic linkage to social-ecological resilience in food relations (Campbell); the relationship between hegemony and social ecologies (Friedmann); and the potential linkages between radical new methodological projects in post-structuralist thinking and old currents of agricultural political economy (Le Heron and Lewis). The two commentaries, in their contrasting approaches, reveal how useful the food regime idea is for bringing together diverse perspectives and dynamics. While each commentary comes from a very different theoretical position, both find food regimes to be a useful site for analysis and knowledge creation about global food relations and politics thus displaying a sense of rapprochement between the previously bitterly divided worlds of poststructuralist thinking and agrarian political economy. In these new sites of engagement and constitutive

relations within the food regimes approach, this Symposium is able to uncover new pivots and levers, new sites of politics and contingency that might flip, invert or reset global food relations in unforeseen ways. In combination, the Symposium contributors resoundingly argue that there is no path dependency or linear inevitability in the unfolding history of food, agriculture and food politics.

Agriculture and Human Values provides an ideal venue for this renewal of food regime analysis, because the journal encourages papers that situate their analyses within global political economy and embodied histories and cultures. We believe that readers will find it useful to reflect not only on the contribution of food regimes in the past, but also on present approaches for directing research agendas towards the larger social, political and economic issues illuminated by the food regimes approach to agriculture and human values.

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