

# Geographies of food: agro-food geographies – farming, food and politics

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## I Introduction

This paper examines two sets of reconnections in rural geography, as set out in my previous review (Winter, 2003a). The first is farming and food and the second food and politics. There is, of course, considerable overlap between the two. The reconnection of farming and food has been driven, to a considerable extent, by politics. At a macro level, the politics of globalization and trade liberalization continue to expose farmers to new market realities and force them to confront directly food-chain issues from which they were protected by earlier protectionist policies. Thus a further exploration of issues of farming and the food chain, in the context of trade liberalization, provides the first main element in this review. At a local and regional political level, the farming and food agenda has been influenced by certain countervailing trends, constructed by some as political reaction to globalization. The resistance to globalization and mass food markets by farmers, consumers and/or subnational political actors has taken many forms, from reasserting the value of local and regional branded food products in high-value local markets in the prosperous north to the defence of local agricultures evident in both fair trade and participatory rural development discourses. Research on these topics is examined in the section on alternative food networks. Together these amount to a politicization of food, in the sense that food politics has become a mainstream political, and indeed an ethical (Busch, 2003), issue in a great many contrasting political contexts around the globe. In the final section of this review, I focus briefly on just one example, the highly controversial issue of the genetic modification of agricultural crops.

## II Trade liberalization, farming and the food chain

New Zealand in the mid-1980s was one of the first of the developed countries to liberalize its agriculture, and as a result has provided an important test bed for policies

now being rolled out through the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Europe and in processes of deregulation elsewhere. There has been a significant number of studies of the impact of agricultural reregulation on its farming population and an important recent contribution in this genre is by Johnsen (2003). The paper is an important one because it seeks to expose what Johnsen sees as a convergence of positive deregulation narratives offered by the Federated Farmers New Zealand, much of academia and government itself. To claim, as many have, that New Zealand farmers emerged unscathed from deregulation is, of course, an argument of considerable significance to the political and ideological disputes surrounding the World Trade Organization (WTO), CAP reform and market liberalization generally. It is to assert not only that farmers should engage more closely with the market but that by so doing they will benefit. What Johnsen's own detailed work and her coverage of other studies shows, not surprisingly given the amorality of market mechanisms, is that there have been significant long-lasting social and psychological impacts of deregulation linked to declining farm income. 'Perceptions regarding the severity and longevity of these outcomes however differ between researchers espousing pro neo-liberal rhetoric and formulating their conclusions from national aggregate statistics on the one hand and, on the other, those who have explored the experiences of individual farm households' (p. 131). Johnsen's work challenges, in particular, the 'efficiency' rhetoric of neoliberal analysis in which the farmers who suffer through deregulation do so because of inherent business inefficiency and ineptitude. On the contrary, she points to a much more complex set of factors associated with business success or failure including levels of indebtedness, household division of labour, lifecycle stage, personal attributes and contextual factors such as local biophysical, economic and cultural conditions. Johnsen perhaps neglects the changes in the neoliberal project over time as explained by Le Heron (2003), in particular the emergence of what Le Heron calls the 'partnering ethos' in the late 1990s.

Mather and Greenberg (2003) offer a similarly trenchant critique of neoclassical interpretations of liberalization, this time in the context of the restructuring of South African citrus exports following deregulation (see also Mather, 1999). They point to a number of studies of deregulation which enthuse about the increased foreign direct investment into agriculture and the food chain resulting in shifting patterns of production, output mix and new entrants to the farm and food sector, as well as some casualties, such as labour, in contracting commodity areas and the reduction in the number of 'inefficient' producers (van Zyl *et al.*, 2001). However, in contrast to Johnsen's critique, which is based on the appropriate conceptualization of economic behaviour involving a sociological understanding of the farm household, Mather and Greenberg (2003) attack the way in which markets and the state have been theorized, drawing on regulation and embeddedness theories to characterize 'actual (as opposed to abstract) markets' (p. 395). From this theoretical base they are able empirically to explore the way in which individual producers, cooperatives, the labour force and supply-chain actors have responded to liberalization. As in New Zealand, they find that aggregate national statistics hide more subtle variations. For example, while cooperative packhouses seem to have declined in the citrus sector, with market power shifting to privately owned large citrus enterprises, maize cooperatives appear to have been more successful. Such differences 'suggest the need to disaggregate the impact of liberalization on South Africa's most

important agro-commodities' (p. 411). The themes of difference and disaggregation, in the face of globalizing tendencies, are also pursued in an examination of the contrasting manufacturing and marketing practices of two Jamaican food companies by Cook and Harrison (2003), whose case studies show how '(formerly) colonized people, communities and businesses have been able to capitalize on fissures and counter-logics within global capitalism', concluding that 'capitalism is not a monolithic cultural/economic system but is, rather, multiple, fragmented, dynamic, locally diverse/hybrid and peppered with creative possibilities for achieving the (theoretically) unexpected' (pp. 312–13).

This message about the limits to globalization is also the central argument of a monograph on the global tomato-processing industry: 'processes of global agri-food restructuring are heterogeneous and fragmented, bounded in multiple ways by the separations of geography, culture, capital and knowledge' (Pritchard and Burch, 2003: 95). The theme is picked up too by Wilson and Rigg (2003) arguing that 'post-Fordist modes of production may take a very different trajectory in some Southern countries or those making the transition to the market (e.g., China) to that indicated by Northern-based models' (p. 699).

If the papers referred to so far emphasize the importance of local and regional difference in the context of globalization, Phillips and Ilcan (2003), by contrast, claim that much agro-food research has underplayed global possibilities: 'accounts that identify the nation-state as the primary regulating mechanism of the agro-food system during the post-war years do so at the risk of underestimating the significance of the global governance mechanisms at play during this period and their role in delimiting rural spaces for nation-state governance' (p. 434). Phillips and Ilcan seek to remedy this perceived deficiency through an examination of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). They argue that the FAO's attempts to achieve global food security led to a 're-imagination of food and modern agriculture' (p. 447) as global trade networks and markets. Their conclusions are important and cautionary to all those whose critique of the neoliberal policy agenda might, explicitly or otherwise, lead them to neglect a rigorous analysis of global forces: 'while analyzing local-global commodity chains and examining nation-based attempts to harness domestic food systems are essential for any understanding of the changing international agro-food system, our study indicates that analysts should be equally aware of the other contours of power that work to constitute and re-constitute the governable global subjects tied to those changes. In making this argument, we are pressing for more focused analytical attention to those public global organizations with tentacles of disciplinary power beyond the market that have recalibrated the world in ways that have impinged upon and may continue to inform current agro-food systems' (pp. 447–48).

### III Alternative food networks

The blossoming of research on alternative food networks continues with both significant empirical and conceptual developments. Whatmore *et al.* (2003) identify three common features of alternative food networks (AFNs). First, they seek to 'redistribute value through the network against the logic of bulk commodity production'; secondly, they 'reconvene "trust" between food producers and consumers'; thirdly, they 'articulate new forms of political association and market governance'

(Whatmore *et al.*, 2003: 389). However, these commonalities should not detract from their multifaceted empirical manifestation. In short, there are many contrasting ways in which value may be redistributed, trust reconvened, and political association and governance reconstituted.

An important attempt to unravel the empirical complexity of AFNs has been provided by Weatherell *et al.* (2003) who seek to integrate production and consumption perspectives through an investigation of consumers' disposition towards local foods. Through detailed focus-group analysis of consumers and an interview survey of consumers in northern England they throw considerable fresh light on the range of factors influencing food choice (moral and health concerns, image and convenience, origin, price and intrinsic food qualities). They emphasize the complexity of food choice and seek to draw geographers away from any simplistic association of local food with particular notions of agro-ecology (see also Winter, 2003b), or indeed with novel or shorter supply chains (many of those interviewed sourced 'local' food in supermarkets). Thus Weatherell *et al.* (2003) suggest that theories of alternative food systems need to incorporate the wider dimension of food, drawing from the literature on the sociology of food, 'to gain deeper insights into how the outputs of alternative food systems integrate into the dietary and culinary repertoires of populations' (p. 242). Further indications of how that integration might take place are provided by Holm (2003) who, in a discussion of functional foods, 'described as foods that are modified so that they deliver health benefits beyond providing typical nutrients' (p. 533), refers to the important symbolic meanings of food. Holm's research on the extent to which the public-health discourse advocating appropriate nutrition complies or conflicts with the cultural norms and symbolic meanings of food and meals could well be extended to a consideration of the interface between the sociology/anthropology of food and the range of products coming through AFNs.

Deepening our conceptual and empirical understanding of the 'local' aspect of AFNs, Tregear (2003) considers the links between food and territory in the UK with a fivefold classification of products tied in some way to territorial definitions including such categories as 'appropriations' and 'reinventions'. By so doing, she points to a diversity of meanings attached to the territory/product connection. Consequently, she suggests that conventions that regulate production and labelling by geographic origin (such as Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) deriving from France and Italy do not necessarily transfer well to different contexts and that both academic and policy preoccupation with narrowly defined territorial issues has not been helpful. Instead, there is need for research which investigates how 'typical products represent a mixture of tradition and innovation, physicality and symbolism, mechanization and craftsmanship, endogeneity and exogeneity, myths and realities . . . (and) the processes by which different mixes of properties emerge in different contexts' (p. 104). It is, of course, the case that such understanding is crucial to successfully progressing socioeconomic development programmes.

While the United States' agro-food system is seen by many as encapsulating global and undifferentiated market principles, there is a growing body of north American AFN research. For example, Starr *et al.* (2003) investigated the purchasing policies of restaurants in Colorado. They point to a preference for quality over price but find that local markets and shorter food chains are, so far, poorly developed. Marketing solutions and market research are proposed. Allen *et al.* (2003) employ a considerably more sophisticated approach in their examination of AFNs

in California. They seek to unravel the extent to which particular initiatives are either 'oppositional' or merely 'alternative'. In other words, what is the potential for initiatives to challenge and change the mainstream agro-food system? They examine the potential of various alternative agro-food initiatives (AFIs) through the concepts of 'alternative and oppositional' social movements and 'militant particularism and global ambition' developed respectively by Raymond Williams (1977) and David Harvey (1996). Their conclusion is a powerful one and highly relevant to the way in which the 'social' leg of sustainability has been neglected elsewhere: 'we are concerned that alternative AFIs . . . through their silence about social relationships in production, inadvertently assume or represent that rural communities and family farmers embody social justice, rather than requiring that they do so. Only a symmetrical attention to the embedding in food commodities of social and ecological relations of production **and** consumption can fully support the transformative goals of environmental sustainability, economic viability, and social justice to which so many in this movement aspire' (p. 74).

#### **IV The politicization of food: the GM case**

Not surprisingly, given the public controversy surrounding the issue, the debate over genetic modification of crops and food products is beginning to receive significant coverage within social science, although only a minority, as yet, is specifically geographical. Nor, in contrast to the AFN debate, has there yet emerged a common crossdisciplinary engagement with methodological and conceptual issues that are specific to GMs. A community of social science scholarship around GMs has yet to emerge. Thus, at present, we find a range of relatively isolated positions and perspectives with most publications rooted in a particular disciplinary approach. So, for example, within political science, Toke and Marsh (2003) use the GM debate to explore the utility of a dialectical model of policy networks. This latest manifestation of the policy networks approach, developed by Marsh and Smith (2000), uses an analysis of the interaction between agents and structure, network and context and network and outcomes to understand and explain policy change. Notwithstanding the primacy accorded to utilizing and testing a particular methodological approach, the paper contains a rich analysis of how the GM debate has been conducted in the UK and, in particular, the status and role of a wide range of actors. Rural geographers might argue with some of the judgements, for example that the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBEC) is 'little more than an institutionalized issue network' (p. 238) with, therefore, little significance for the development of GM policy. Nonetheless, the paper provides far and away the best available account of the political architecture of the GM debate. A useful, but tantalizingly brief, account of the politics of GM in New Zealand is contained in a paper by Le Heron (2003) which overviews the work of the NZ Royal Commission on Genetic Modification.

Myhr and Traavik (2003) approach the GM issue in order to explore issues of risk governance and the precautionary principle. Their account places far greater attention on GM science than does that of Toke and Marsh. They take conflicts of interest as given and focus their attention on how risk assessment should be developed so that GM is regulated in a way that will be justifiable from a precautionary and ethical point of view and includes alternative scientific perspectives and lay involvement.

Neither Toke and Marsh nor Myhr and Traavik engage with the rich possibilities offered by the GM debate for engaging with the 'cultural turn'. By contrast, Rushbrook (2002) examines the debate through the lens of cultural theory as developed by Michael Thompson and others drawing on the work of Mary Douglas (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). Through interviews with actors in the debate she is able to develop a sense of how cultural conceptualizations of nature influence positions adopted on GMs. Sarah Whatmore (2002) uses GM food as a case study in her seminal account of hybrid geographies, showing how GM foods attest to 'the relational configuration of the social and the material, subjects and objects, in which the "dead matter" of things refashioned through rDNA technologies transgress their objectivity, harbouring other possibilities than the designs of those who fabricate them, and reminding us that we too are candidates for objectification' (pp. 144–45).

Both the public debate and academic discourses surrounding the GM issue have tended to focus on crop genetics. It is worth just noting that in the medium to long term the animal genomics debate is likely to be every bit as sensitive, and interesting to researchers, as the debate on crops. While questions over ecological and environmental impact are not so pressing, ethical and food safety issues (Davis, 2003; MacNaughton, 2001), if anything, are even more challenging for animal genomics than for GM crops. A wider interest in animals in Geography is now well established (for example, Jones, 2003; Philo and Wilbert, 2000) and animals are now coming to the fore in agro-food studies (Buller and Morris, 2003; Tovey, 2003).

## V Conclusions

Reviewing the coverage of reconnections of farming and food, and of food and politics, has shown a rich literature both within human geography and in social science more generally. What is also revealed is a wide range of approaches and, arguably, the need for further methodological and conceptual reconnections, within academia, to match the substantive and thematic reconnections reviewed here.

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