Food Regime Theory and Food Sovereignty: Marx or Polanyi?

Tilzey, M.

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Author: Mark Tilzey, Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University, UK mark.tilzey@coventry.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper proposes to examine the issue of sovereignty in its relation to capitalism and the state in order to throw further light on what we might mean by food sovereignty. It does this by means of a critique of Food Regime theory as presented particularly by McMichael (2013). The purpose in undertaking this critique is to point up a number of salient deficiencies in the theory, particularly as presented latterly by McMichael in terms of his 'corporate food regime', that appear to show the influence of Polanyi. It does this in order to suggest modifications to the food regime approach, and to the theory of capitalism and the state that lies behind this, through which, in drawing on 'political' and neo-

Gramscian Marxian approaches, we might then better address the issue of sovereignty, and food sovereignty in particular.

Introduction

Food Regime Theory (FRT) represents an attempt to ground understanding of the organization of food production, distribution, and consumption on a world scale in political economy – in other words, to understand how capitalism and the modern state ('modern sovereignty') generate and structure this organization. As defined by Friedmann and McMichael (1989), the co-originators of the theory, FRT describes three global food regimes: the First (1870s-1930s); the Second (1950s-1970s); and the Third (from 1980s-present) described as the 'corporate food regime' by McMichael (2013) and as the 'corporate-environmental regime' by Friedmann (2005).

Food Sovereignty (FS) exists as a counter-movement(s) in specific relation to the dynamics of the food regime in its neoliberal form, commonly in opposition to neoliberalism's legitimating discourse of food security. Globally, this counter-movement is perhaps best represented by the peasants' and small farmers' organization La Via Campesina (LVC). FS has been described by LVC as 'the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets…' More radically perhaps, FS has also been defined as the need to 'ensure that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. FS implies *new social relations* free of oppression and

inequality, between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes, and generations' (Nyeleni Declaration 2007).

In this paper, we suggest, however, that FS is characterized not by one, singular, positionality, but rather by two distinct positionalities. These we may denote, following Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011), as the 'Progressives' and the 'Radicals'. The 'progressive' or 'populist' positionality appears to be based on a Polanyian and Chayanovian ontology of an undifferentiated 'peasant way', in which 'civil society' is unitarily opposed to the 'corporate food regime' (McMichael 2013) or to 'empire' (van der Ploeg 2008, 2013). Here, FS is to be achieved largely through the localization and 'embedding' of markets, together with the adoption of ecological practices in farming. This positionality, we argue, is espoused mainly by peasant entrepreneurs (the upper peasantry), smaller capitalist farmers, and domestic agri-business, located differentially in the global North. It is a positionality that also underpins the research and advocacy of the majority of scholar/activists in FS, again located differentially in the global North. In this, the way in which FRT has been conceptualized, particularly in its incarnation as the 'corporate food regime', appears to have exerted some influence on this unitary definition of FS in which there appears to be a conflation of 'embedded markets' with 'anti-capitalism'. We may term this an 'alter-hegemonic' position.

The 'radical' positionality, by contrast, appears to be informed by a more Marxian-based ontology, with the analysis of class, the state, and imperialism at its heart. It sees FS as entailing profound social relational transformation away from the capital-labour relation and towards common 'ownership' of the means of production, in which ecologically based farming is directed to producing use values for all, rather than profit. It is a positionality that seems to accord with the political advocacy

of middle and lower peasantries, proletarians, and indigenous peoples, located differentially in the global South. It is also espoused by scholar/activists well-known for their work in Marxian agrarian studies and beyond, but who also recognize the need for agroecologically-based food production as part of wider transformation to post-capitalist social relations. Such scholars include Samir Amin, Claudio Katz, Sam Moyo, and Utsa Patnaik. We may term this a 'counter-hegemonic' position.

We suggest that the debate between McMichael (2014, 2016) and Bernstein (2014, 2016) captures key, although not all, elements of these differing positionalities. McMichael, for his part, is emblematic of the 'progressive', 'populist' positionality, with his portrayal of the 'corporate food regime' and generalized resistance to it, seeming to fit very much into the mould of the Polanyian 'double-movement' binary. Bernstein, in his deployment of a class-based analytical frame and his criticism of the populist elision of class difference, conforms more to the 'radical' positionality of FS. He differs from the latter, however, in his dismissal of FS in its dependence on agroecological principles, these being seen as incapable of generating the surpluses required to feed a still-growing, and increasingly urban, global population. In this he appears to cleave to a rather old-school productivism and progressivism that takes insufficient account of the biophysical planetary constraints to which humanity must conform in constructing any future beyond capitalism.

We argue, in this paper, that the 'progressive' and 'populist' position affords an inadequate understanding of the nature and dynamics of capitalism, its relation to the state, and of resistances to it. Because of such limited understanding, one related to the class positionality of its principal proponents and its reliance on a Polanyian/Chayanovian ontology, it adopts

primarily a reformist, rather than a revolutionary[1], stance in its advocacy of FS. For the 'radicals', by contrast, it the critique market dependence (Wood 2001), the capital-labour relation, and private property in land that forms the basis of their advocacy of FS as a communal and cooperative alternative to capitalism.[2]

In this paper, we examine the thinking of McMichael, particularly, as an exemplar of a more populist approach to FS. We suggest that McMichael deploys a more Polanyian (and Chayanovian) than Marxian understanding of capitalism, food regimes, and their resistances or alternatives, eliding key areas of contention within agrarian classes and their relations with the state. We assert that this populist advocacy of the 'peasant way' maps onto the positionality of the 'progressives' in the FS movement. We then explore what we argue are the analytical

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[1] Revolutionary in the sense of requiring *structural* change in the social relations that define capitalism as a mode of domination.

[2] Many in the FS movement, and in LVC particularly, would of course deny the existence, or at least the importance, of these differences. And in this, of course, they are adopting a populist, if understandably strategic, stance. In this regard, it is true to say, of course, that 'objective' class position and 'subjective' class positionality may not necessarily coincide. And It is truer still given the increasingly all-pervasive ('economic', 'socio-cultural', and 'ecological') contradictions of capitalism, the impacts of which seem to transcend class and find expression in the 'new social movements' (Foweraker 1995). This means that there is now greater potential for 'unification' of disparate classes under a common banner, such as FS, given that the 'enemy' – commonly described as 'corporate capital' – is now apparently so all encompassing. This is evidently the case with the 'peasant way' and 'food sovereignty' on its now widened definition (see below). This widened definition represents the 'master frame' (see Rice 2012, Claeys 2015) to which all adherents of the 'peasant way' and FS can subscribe.

While such a 'master frame' may be an important and valid basis for social movement coherence and mobilization up to a certain point, the more so when the 'enemy' appears to be so pervasive, it nonetheless elides crucial differences in class position amongst and between followers of the 'peasant way'. These differences are likely to come to the surface, however, as social movement strategy moves forward from an oppositional stance towards the proactive formulation of more detailed policy proposals. The elision of class difference, whilst understandable and perhaps strategically necessary to a degree, nonetheless has the effect of perpetuating a 'master frame' as simplistic binary, both overemphasizing the monolithic character of the 'opposition' and evacuating the immanent bases of dissention amongst 'allies'. To adopt an uncritical stance in relation to this binary of the 'peasant way' and FS versus 'corporate capital' (the 'double-movement') is invoke a Polanyian narrative (see below), effectively denying, as Polanyi (1957) did, the essence of capitalism as an exploitative class relation.

merits of a more Marxian-based approach[3] and suggest that this then maps onto the 'radical' fraction of the FS movement.

In the final section, we explore what a 'radical' vision of FS might entail and suggest that this needs to be part of a broader and structural transformation of social relations towards what we provisionally term 'livelihood sovereignty'.

Polanyi and Marx

First, however, we wish to pinpoint some of the key differences between Polanyi and Marx, before identifying some of the apparent influences of the former on McMichael's conceptualization of the 'corporate food regime' and how this, in turn, appears to have shaped the FS debate.

In analyzing capitalism from the perspective of exploitation, Marx emphasized its essential class-bound character as the key to understanding its constitution and dynamics, with the ultimate intention of illuminating how the exploited (including 'voiceless' nature) could ultimately overthrow the exploiters. Polanyi rejected Marx's labour theory of value, a theory that underpinned the latter's class analysis of capitalism. This enabled Polanyi to construct an image of society as an organic whole, one that, in its attempts to protect itself from the market, could politically overcome any systematic form of exploitation. He understood exploitation not only as resulting from unequal exchange (underpayment of commodified goods and services – a non-Marxian interpretation) but perhaps more importantly as arising from society's inability sufficiently to regulate or modify the effect of the 'market' under capitalism. In this way, exploitation could, for Polanyi, be eliminated by re-

[3] Our influences here derive from Political Marxism (Brenner 1985, Wood 2001), Neo-Gramscian IPE (Bieler and Morton 2001) and Regulation Theory (Boyer and Saillard 2002).

embedding the market within supposedly non-market institutions.

By conceptually and ontologically separating the two spheres of ‘polity’ and ‘economy’, and thereby assuming that the ‘economy’ had its own distinct laws, Polanyi was able to view ‘society’ (polity), through his notion of the ‘double movement’, as potentially in opposition to the ‘economy’ under capitalism. However, it is precisely this split between the exploitation of labour (in production) founded on the conferral of absolute property rights and the commodification of labour power, on the one hand, and the removal of ‘extra-economic’ authority (the ‘political’) to a separate institutional sphere, on the other, that generates under capitalism the dichotomy between ‘civil society’ and the ‘state’. This constitutes what is historically unique about the form of exploitation within this mode of domination - the (apparent) lack of ‘extra-economic’ coercion as a means to extract surplus from producers (Wood 1995).

Given Polanyi’s failure to identify the exploitation of labour (and nature) that Marx saw as the quintessential substance of commodification, it is unsurprising that Polanyi appears to have a rather imprecise idea of what ‘de-commodification’, socialism, and by extension anti-capitalism, might entail. His ambiguous conception of labour under ‘embedded’ markets makes it unclear whether he advocated an end to the capital-labour relation, as implied by Marx’s vision of socialism, or whether he invoked its mere regulation by supposedly ‘non-market’ actors such as the state. Polanyi, therefore, has a rather vague definition of socialism because he lacks an overarching theory of capitalism and of potential transitions beyond it. This stands in contrast to Marx’s clear identification of the ‘classes of labour’ (including class fractions of the peasantry) as agents of socialist transformation grounded in

their struggles against, and potentially beyond, capitalist exploitation.

Polanyi (and Chayanov), Food Regime Theory, and the (Undifferentiated) 'Peasant Way' in the Definition of 'Progressive' Food Sovereignty

In this section we examine the work of McMichael (2013, 2016) and suggest that, through the influence of theorists such as Polanyi and Chayanov (1966) particularly, this exemplar of populism has had a significant impact on how the 'progressive' fraction of FS understands capitalism/neoliberalism, the state, food regimes, and the nature of FS as resistance. The purpose in undertaking this critique is to point up a number of, what appear to be, salient deficiencies in the theory of McMichael, deficiencies that derive in considerable degree, although not exclusively, from shortcomings in the work of his intellectual progenitors, particularly Polanyi.

We suggest that there are a number of difficulties with the theoretical frame that informs his depiction of food regimes and the capitalist-state system that lies behind them. These difficulties appear to have become more pronounced with McMichael's deployment of the concept of the 'corporate food regime'. These difficulties may be enumerated as follows:

First, McMichael presents a somewhat vague definition of capitalism, based heavily on World Systems Theory and its development through Arrighi (1994), identified as 'production for profit' in the sphere of circulation, rather than being defined as a specific class relation between capital and wage labour, with surplus value generated in the sphere of

production. This enables capitalism globally (rather than in England specifically) to be dated back some five hundred years (Friedmann 2016), leading to the conflation of the operation of merchant capital and feudal modes of surplus extraction associated with absolutist states, on the one hand, with the capitalist mode of production and the modern 'liberal democratic' state, on the other.

Second, McMichael presents an insufficiently developed theory of capitalism and its relation to the modern state, both in relation to the development of the discrete institutional sphere of the 'economy' and 'polity', and also in relation to the accumulation and legitimation functions of the state. The latter relates to an inadequate use of Regulation Theory, which, in his hands, appears to refer only to the Regime of Accumulation, not to the Mode of Regulation (Friedmann and McMichael 1989).

Third, he displays an inadequate use of class analysis, particularly in relation to inter-class contestation, and, consequently, a deficient theory of capital/state dynamics founded on class struggle and compromise. Friedmann (2005) takes her development of food regime theory a certain way in this direction through her notion of 'implicit rules' governing each regime, but this never appears to be fully worked out. This failing has much in common with Polanyi's reluctance to recognize the significance of class and class struggle.

Fourth, McMichael presents a 'structuralist' and quite monolithic treatment of capitalism, particularly in relation to the 'corporate food regime', largely neglecting both the continuing significance of different fractions of capital in contemporary dynamics and the enduring importance of the state in its territorial form, and, consequently, of imperialism.

This position is quite Polanyian in its orientation[4]. It also demonstrates confluence with the thinking of Hardt and Negri (2000) and of Robinson (2004 see below) in their assertions that the neoliberal world order has weakened the state in its relation to capital to the point of generating a powerful new actor in the world economy, the multinational corporation. In this way corporations are seen to be the instruments of a transnational capitalist class that now has no allegiance, nor is beholden to, the nation state (Veltmeyer and Petras 2014). Here imperialism as geopolitical project to benefit core states at the expense of the periphery is seen to be passé, such that, in the new 'empire', power has shifted from the state to the multinational corporation, or from the capitalist class within, and in control of, nation states at the centre of the system to an 'international capitalist class' (ibid.)[5].

Fifth, McMichael treats capitalism and its 'other' (the 'peasant way') as a somewhat simplistic binary comprising an undifferentiated capitalism versus an undifferentiated small farmer/peasant opposition. This again shows the particular influence of Polanyi in his use of the 'double-movement' concept, and of van der Ploeg (2008, 2013) in his populist and essentialist (non-class) view of the peasantry.

McMichael, in his treatment of the 'corporate food regime' as transcending the nation-state in the manner of Robinson (see Robinson 2004)[6], together with his advocacy of the 'peasant way' as undifferentiated resistance to trans-nationalized capital, appears, therefore, to owe a considerable debt to Polanyi's notion of the 'double movement'. This view of society

[4] This despite McMichael's (2016) frequent references to Marx in which he invokes the latter's theory of value but makes only gestural references to class and class struggle.

[5] The state's functions have indeed been 'de-nationalized' and 'de-statized' (Jessop 2002) under neoliberalism to make appear as if the state has been 'hollowed out'. But the state remains the key institutional and jurisdictional locus for the 're-regulation' of those functions in more 'market restraining' directions as neoliberalism enters crisis. This change from neoliberalism to post-neoliberalism expresses the shift from 'informal empire' to more 'formal empire'.

[6] Notwithstanding McMichael's critique of Robinson (McMichael 2001).

(civil society) as somehow united in its opposition to 'corporate capital', together with its thesis of re-embedding the market to 'tame' capitalism, has many parallels in the work of both McMichael and van der Ploeg.

The result is that McMichael's Polanyian approach to FRT and his understanding of what constitutes counter-hegemony in FS is compromised by:

- A failure to identify the essence of capitalism as the capital-labour relation founded on primitive accumulation and the continued separation of surplus value generators from their means of livelihood.[7] This, as we have seen, is founded in turn on 'modern sovereignty' as the conferral of absolute property rights on capitalists by the state accompanied by the institutional separation of the 'economy' and 'polity';
- A failure to appreciate fully the historical and continuing role of the state, as the state-capital nexus, in mitigating the resulting contradictions of this process of expropriation, and hence the survival of capitalism itself, through consumerism, nationalism, etc. As variegated capitalism, such modes of regulation blur boundaries between capitalist and non-capitalist classes;
- A further failure to appreciate that the ability to mitigate contradictions by means of the wider distribution amongst consumer classes of the 'benefits' of consumerism is still located overwhelmingly in the global North (despite China's efforts particularly to break into the ranks of the 'core' states), a phenomenon that under

[7] Primitive accumulation *qua* the complete separation of workers (proletarians) from the means of production seems more characteristic of the global North; in the global South, the *in*complete separation of workers (as semi-proletarians) is more characteristic. This difference in the nature of agrarian transition between North and South has much to do with imperial relations between the former and latter and is also related, in mediated fashion, to the prevalence of 'progressives' in the North and 'radicals' in the South.

neoliberalism has been secured increasingly via means of the 'new imperialism';

- A failure to appreciate that, despite power asymmetry between imperium and periphery, the role of the state is still determined by class struggle located within particular social formations (state-capital nexus), even though class forces may be implicated in transnational structures. Capital is not something that exists beyond the power of the state, but is rather represented by classes and fractions of classes within the very constitution of the state. This suggests that the coherence of the 'corporate food regime', for example, and coherence of opposition to it as FS, are likely to be rather less than the 'populists' and 'progressives' claim.

Appreciation of these dynamics and relations is to invoke a blend of 'political' Marxism, neo-Gramscian IPE, and Regulation Theory. This Marxian-based analysis suggests that global capitalism, its state form, and the so-called 'corporate food regime' are much less monolithic, and more fractured, than Polanyi or McMichael, through their binary of the 'self-regulating market' or 'corporate empire' versus 'society', would lead us to believe. The suggestion here is that these fracture lines are at their widest in the global South because, as a periphery for the core, it is here that the contradictions of accumulation are greatest and the legitimacy of the state is lowest. Consequently, it is in the South that the potential for transformations towards 'radical' FS futures is greatest.

In this we suggest that 'radical' FS, while apparently cognate with re-assertions of global Southern national sovereignty, such as has been associated with the so-called 'pink tide' in Latin America, for example, nevertheless appears to challenge the latter's association with 'modern sovereignty'. In calling for social relational change, food sovereignty appears to represent

a counter-hegemonic and post-developmental[8] positionality. This seems to imply the dissolution of the foundations of modern sovereignty, deconstructing the institutional separation between polity and economy, thwarting continued market dependence and labour/nature commodification through re-unification of producers with the agrarian means of production, and de-centring the state towards more communitarian modes of governance.

In attempting to secure this it would seem that state power must be won by subaltern classes and then used to transform relations of exploitation and domination without subordinating or subverting the autonomy and collective agency of these classes to the state – a 'dual powers' rather than an 'autonomist' approach. The suggestion then is that rather than focusing on building transnational civil society – the globalist implication of the populists and McMichael – the main priority for subaltern groups is to ground their struggles locally whilst promoting international solidarity – an internationalist nationalism.

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[8] Post-developmentalism should not be confused with post-materialism. Rather, it advocates development but with an overwhelming focus on the equal redistribution of existing wealth and resources in society, and with growth occurring only where this can be shown to be ecologically sustainable.

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