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WORLD TRADE, FARM POLICY AND AGRIBUSINESS ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ROLE OF REFLEXIVE MODERNIZATION IN CONSTRUCTING A DEMOCRATIC FOOD SYSTEM*

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ABSTRACT

The future of farm policy in the United States will be influenced by trends in economic and political globalization, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), due to the obligation of member nation-states to make domestic policies conform to international trade agreements. Commentators have noted that the WTO has been structured to favor transnational agribusiness at the expense of small farmers, food consumers, and the natural environment. However, the WTO contains contradictions that might be exploited by alternative agriculture advocates to influence Congressional interpretations of the trade agreement. This essay uses reflexive modernization theory to highlight efforts by alternative agriculture groups in the U.S. to lay bare the contradictions and advocate for agribusiness accountability, environmental protection and food sovereignty. We seek to answer whether WTO negotiations and potential farm subsidy restrictions might provide an opportunity for reforming the U.S. farm bill.

The end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st has exposed two opposing forces in the world's food system. According to Gil Gillespie, the current president of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society (AFHVS), "One tendency is toward high technology, global sourcing, and disconnecting from nature, with profit being a key motivation. The other tendency is toward emphasizing natural processes and local sourcing, with building 'community' and serving human needs being key motivations" (Gillespie 2009; see also Morgan, Marsden, and Murdoch 2008). An article in *Science* on the subject of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development called the conflicting perspectives "dueling visions for a hungry world" (Stokstad 2008:1474).

The Missouri School has long recognized the dueling visions for producing food. More significantly, it has documented the social actors behind the competing

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visions. It has exposed the role of powerful transnational agribusinesses in propping up the high technology, globally sourced, and ecologically destructive vision. It has also focused attention on the efforts of small farmers, religious organizations, food activists, and other advocacy groups to construct a vision and strategy for devising an alternative agrifood system.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) has served as a focal point for debates over these dueling visions since it was established in 1994. Much of the scholarship on the WTO and agriculture has emphasized how it privileges the interests of agribusiness over the interests of alternative agriculture groups. We do not disagree with this perspective. However, in this paper, we consider the proposition that the WTO contains structural contradictions that might be exploited by alternative agriculture groups to promote a more socially and ecologically sustainable vision for the agrifood system.

The theory of reflexive modernization focuses attention on the need for social movements to be politically aware and effectively mobilized to exploit such structural contradictions. We consider whether alternative agriculture groups in the U.S. are becoming reflexively modern in their approach to domestic farm policy formation. In respect to the agrifood system, contradictions become evident when, for example, governments calling for free markets maintain large farm supports for domestic producers. Such contradictions are aggravated when these policies harm environmental integrity and compromise rural community viability.

After briefly describing the WTO and potential exploitable contradictions within it, we discuss the theory of reflexive modernization. We then analyze the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative's[1] (AAI) efforts to influence U.S. agrifood system policies through the periodic farm bill. Focusing on the AAI in this study is appropriate because it emerged in response to both the U.S. farm bill and world trade talks, and it represents a host of civil society groups seeking to hold agribusiness corporations accountable for the socially and ecologically destructive agrifood system in which the world is embedded. We examine insights from the AAI's open network in North America and other regions of the world to determine if reflexive modernization is evident in their discussions on promoting a sustainable and equitable agrifood system.

[1]AAI network partners altered the name in January 2009 to "Agribusiness Action Initiatives" in response to the awkward use of the term "accountability" in regions outside North America; "Action Initiatives" also more accurately conveys the host of working group activities among AAI partners.

THE WTO AND CORPORATE POWER

The WTO is part of an era, beginning near the end of the Second World War with the Bretton Woods Agreement, which initiated efforts to standardize international monetary and marketing policies to facilitate international trade. Transnational corporations prefer to avoid variations in standards, tariffs, and labor and environmental regulations from one nation to the next because these create uncertainty and high transaction costs. Business and government leaders who support the WTO often refer to their efforts to smooth out discrepancies in international markets as "leveling the playing field" (McMichael 2000a:126).

Scholars counter that far from leveling the playing field, the WTO is a mechanism utilized by transnational agribusinesses and supportive policy makers to foster an agrifood system characterized by high technology, global sourcing, ecological destruction, and profit maximization (McMichael 2000a, 2000b, 2008; Watts and Goodman 1997). Specific policy changes, such as national deregulation and international trade liberalization, have served to enhance the political and economic power of transnational agribusinesses to promote their agenda through such international trade agreements.

An example of national deregulation is evident in the U.S. government's decision to relax enforcement of antimonopoly legislation in the early 1980s. Such policy changes greatly facilitated the consolidation and concentration of agribusinesses (Heffernan and Constance 1994). Heffernan (2000) and others (Glenna 2003; McMichael 2008) have argued that large agribusinesses have gained monopolistic and oligopolistic economic control of markets at various links in the value chains, enabling them to extract profits at the expense of raw material producers. McMichael (2000a:126) states that the resulting political and economic power led to "agribusiness imperialism," whereby nations adopt "free trade rhetoric [which] thereby justifies the use of institutional means to extend markets for agribusiness at the expense of small farmers across the world." This enhanced power is often exercised through efforts to promote deregulation and trade liberalization on the global scale through the WTO.

These assessments of the rationale behind the WTO and the privileging of large agribusiness at the expense of small farmers and consumers are insightful and important. However, there is a tendency to overlook some contradictions within the WTO and the opportunities such contradictions provide for efforts to create an alternative system. Narlikar (2006) has described how WTO trade negotiators have used the concept of "fairness," but notes that the way the concept is defined depends upon those doing the negotiations and the forums in which they are negotiating. A

similar observation can be made regarding how international trade agreements are converted into domestic policy. Because of the U.S. negotiating trade agreements that may limit domestic options, the U.S. Congress has a great deal of flexibility in interpreting and implementing trade agreements. As a result, a concept like "fairness" remains vague or glibly used until constituent groups rally to shape the way Congressional representatives interpret and implement fairness into policies. Kingdon (1995: 165) uses the term "policy window" to refer to a brief "opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems." An equally contentious concept is "food sovereignty", emanating from a sense of fairness among its proponents, and expanding to include the complexities of social responsibility, corporate accountability and democratic participation in respect to a country's agrifood system.

A key contradiction in the WTO, specifically in its Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), is the claim to reduce trade-distorting subsidies while conceding to keep some subsidies in place, as long as the rationale for those subsidies is revised (Murphy 2005). The WTO's AoA categorizes subsidies into three "boxes." The most acceptable "Green Box" includes fixed payments to producers for environmental programs, if the payments are "decoupled" from current production levels. The "Amber Box" includes domestic subsidies that governments have agreed to reduce over time. The "Blue Box" contains subsidies that can be increased without limit, if payments are linked to production-limiting programs (Thompson 2005).

U.S. Farm Policy and Agribusiness Influence

Despite the shift in emphasis from domestic to international economic issues, international trade agreements such as the WTO must still pass through a nation's legislative body. When international trade agreements are negotiated by the U.S. Administration and ratified by the Senate, the U.S. Congress is then obligated to make domestic farm policy conform. Yet, Congress has flexibility in interpreting and implementing trade agreement specifications into domestic policy, though the WTO may limit options. How domestic farm policy is reframed to conform to the WTO's AoA is a point of contestation that may enable alternative agriculture groups a point of entry. Policymakers in Europe and the U.S. have argued that farm subsidies are needed to protect small farmers, but more than half of EU support goes to 1% of producers and 70% of subsidies in the U.S. go to 10% of producers (World Development Report 2008). A USDA study has indicated that fewer large farmers now account for a larger share of agricultural commodity production, and

hence, receive a larger portion of subsidy payments (MacDonald, Hoppe, and Banker 2005).

U.S. farm policy has long privileged large farmers and agribusinesses. In their examination of the New Deal era of the 1930s, Gilbert and Howe (1991) describe how three classes of farmers—sharecroppers and farm laborers; family farmers and small landowners; and capitalist farmers and plantation owners—competed to shape farm policies to suit their own unique interests. Each class of farmers scored some policy victories in the forms of production controls, long-term agricultural planning, and rural social reform. However, these constituent groups were not able to maintain these policy victories for long. After the Second World War, U.S. agricultural legislation focused primarily on management of production. This shift in focus guaranteed that commodity and soil conservation programs would eventually favor larger and higher output capitalist farmers over laborers, sharecroppers, and small farmers (Gilbert and Howe 1991). The combination of price supports and supply management functioned as the essential outline of federal farm policy through the rest of the twentieth century (Effland 2000).

Though postwar farm policy favored large farmers, policy changes since the mid-1980s have favored the agribusinesses that process the agricultural commodities produced by those large farmers. Glenna's (2003) analysis of the "farm crisis" of the mid-1980s offers insights into the policy dynamics that enabled this structural shift in favor of larger farmers. He points out that, although there was much talk about a "farm crisis" in the mid-1980s and the need to help farmers, the actual definition of farmers began to change. Agricultural commodity processing companies began to describe farmers as "raw material suppliers," and emphasized the need to maintain cheap and abundant raw materials to maintain international market share. The distribution of subsidy payments, therefore, may be better described as subsidizing agribusinesses' raw material supply than subsidizing small farmers.

The point we want to emphasize is that U.S. agricultural policy is sustaining the globally sourced, ecologically destructive, corporate dominated vision for the agrifood system. Therefore, the WTO's challenge to that system may create an opportunity. Alternative agriculture groups could exploit the WTO's color boxes in the AoA to make the case for redistributing subsidy payments to smaller, more environmentally friendly farmers that produce for local consumption. Some farm advocacy groups may continue to support the existing subsidy system, because small farmers still receive some, albeit meager, benefits. The question, then, is whether the AAI, which includes farm advocacy groups, has developed a critical

stance toward the existing agrifood system and recognizes the potential to use the WTO to undermine it.

Reflexive Modernization and Alternative Agriculture

Social movement theorists have debated whether social movements emerge and succeed because of the state's structural weakness (opportunity structure) or because of clearly defined collective interests and effective mobilization strategies (resource mobilization). Kurzman (1996) and McAdam (1982) contend that we need a combination of the two if we are to understand social movements. Reflexive modernization is a useful concept because it provides a proscription for emerging social movements that takes seriously the importance of opportunity structures and resource mobilization. Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1995) argue that structural Marxists' flaw is to claim that a new modernity will emerge from the existing social order without collective political awareness and mobilization. By incorporating political awareness into the theory, reflexive modernization provides a way of exploring the reflexivity of a budding social movement: Are groups aware of both the opportunity structure and their need for collective preparedness to exploit that opportunity structure?

Reflexive modernization studies have been conducted on environmental, identity, and resistance to technology movements (e.g., Beck 1995; Beck et al. 1995; Giddens 1994). What has received less attention is the role of reflexive modernization in the alternative agriculture movement in the U.S. (Bonanno 1998).

DATA: AAI CASE STUDY

One of us works for an alternative agricultural policy organization that sponsors and participates in the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative. This allowed ready access to strategy documents and planning sessions that a host of alternative agricultural policy advocates prepared for farm bill hearings and WTO ministerial meetings. We analyze their reports and actions to determine whether the advocates are using the potential agreements of the WTO to frame their approach to the agricultural policy debate. Small farm and alternative agriculture advocates, farmland conservationists and environmentalists, labor unions, food consumer groups, and other citizens interested in diverting power away from agribusinesses and industrial farm interests may also find that the WTO could offer them opportunities. Creative people and groups who are aware of the U.S. Farm Bill policy process could probably use the WTO as leverage.

Through participant observation in strategy sessions and collection of policy documents, we have assembled a narrative of the policy debates and strategies for influencing policy makers. We have analyzed this data with an eye toward the recognition that agricultural subsidies favor larger farms and agribusinesses. More important, we have highlighted references to the WTO as a mechanism that can be used to argue for restructuring those agricultural subsidies in farm bill policy debates.

AAI, Reflexive Modernization, and the WTO

The AAI began in 2001 as an open and continuous forum for sharing research, advocacy ideas, and public education strategies to address the impact of transnational agrifood corporations on the livelihoods and food security of farmers, workers, and communities around the world. Sponsored by the Center of Concern (based in Washington, D.C.) and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (based in Des Moines, Iowa), the Initiative is managed by a Secretariat comprising the sponsors and a full-time global coordinator. A global advisory committee and regional facilitators based in and representing North America, Europe, South America, Asia and Africa serve as steerers in the strategy formation and research efforts of the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative. Except the AAI global coordinator, the others are self-employed or affiliated with organizations in their region or home country.

During the first few years of AAI, regional and global forums in North America and Europe were held to bring together activists, academic researchers and food system experts to identify new approaches for agrifood corporate accountability. The AAI has since developed a web-based resource and clearinghouse[2] to provide information on agribusiness oligopoly power, not only in the U.S. and North America, but extensive research coming out of Europe and, as contacts spread, research from South America, Asia, and Africa. Proceeding from AAI's initial efforts to identify the stakeholder groups most affected by corporate concentration and engage them in discussion about common approaches to the problem, AAI is now engaged in facilitating the formation of cross-constituency working groups to collaborate on specific action initiatives.

[2] Users of the AAI Clearinghouse website include researchers, activists, and social justice advocates who seek more information about the impact of corporate oligopoly power on the food system and forms of response and resistance. See www.agribusinessaccountability.org for access to the Clearinghouse.

Noting that AAI followed upon U.S. civil society efforts during the 2002 Farm Bill, which sought reforms in the entrenched policies of agricultural commodity production is important. The leading organizations included the National Family Farm Coalition and the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (now part of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition), which were also founding members of AAI. With environmental, labor, food and consumer groups, these cross-constituency partners sought a reduction in commodity payments and a greater emphasis on conservation, rural development, renewable energy and more nutritious food assistance programs. AAI's core initiators believe this constellation of civil society actors could also be organized to confront powerful agribusiness corporations. AAI found its theoretical and foundational basis in a National Farmers union-commissioned report, "Consolidation in the Food and Agriculture System," prepared by Heffernan, Hendrickson & Gronski (1999). Given that agrifood corporations held market power throughout the food system effectively creating "food chain clusters" on a transnational stage, civil society groups would also need to coordinate along the agrifood chain and collaborate in resistance to powerful corporations across borders.

Also at this time, the third WTO ministerial taking place in November 1999 in Seattle provided the opportunity to build farm, labor, and environmental group contacts. This led to direct involvement by subsequent AAI network partners to parallel meetings of civil society groups at WTO ministerial meetings in Cancun in 2003 and Hong Kong in 2005. Thus, the mass protest in Seattle had a constructive element to the extent that it elevated the perspective of the international interconnectedness of alternative farm groups.

Two significant supporters of the AAI include Action Aid International and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, both with substantial global networks and being active in monitoring and evaluating U.S. and world trade agricultural policies. In their analysis, the promotion of trade liberalization, particularly as structured in the current WTO's AoA, ignored basic elements of the global agriculture economy, specifically the concentration of market power by transnational corporations (Eagleton 2004; Murphy 2002). Both Murphy and Eagleton drew from the "Heffernan Study" (see Heffernan et al. 1999) and the analysis of the Missouri School regarding the global agrifood system. They argued that the AoA, despite its emphasis on reducing subsidies and allowing greater market access, will not successfully move member states toward the underlying development goals articulated during the Doha Round of the WTO until it addresses market power and the question of monopoly power.

The AoA rules of the WTO are designed to address national policies that distort global markets for agriculture, namely to curb subsidy use by the U.S., E.U., and Japan and to remove trade barriers among the myriad of developing nations. What the rules did not adequately address, according to AAI partners, is market power by the handful of large agribusinesses, the true beneficiaries of cheap crop commodities. "To put it in simple terms, many believe there are only two things wrong with the AoA: the lack of political will to implement the agreement and the disproportionate capacity of rich countries to create exceptions to the rules for themselves. Both observations reflect abuses of power by developed countries and must be addressed" (Murphy 2002: 2).

This perspective reflects an emerging reflexive modernization. It indicates that AAI recognizes flaws in the subsidy system and that the WTO may provide an opportunity for them to challenge the subsidies. Simultaneously, AAI recognizes that the collective definition of the opportunity structure has not yet been defined in a way that would enable the AAI to exploit it. The AAI's critical political-economic view of the global agrifood system reveals a perspective that much of the academic econometric modeling, as well as the rhetoric surrounding different negotiating positions taken by national delegations, missed essential aspects of the agricultural sector in most countries. Murphy (2002) further stressed that it is not just a problem of continued subsidies and supports within industrialized nations, but the structural result of an agricultural sector dominated by transnational agribusiness firms. "The level playing field promoted by trade liberalizers will have to include some kind of handicap to ensure that transnational agribusiness pay the real costs for the grain they process, ship and sell" (Murphy 2002:12).

AAI's Opponent: The Counter Discourse of the Elite Punditry

Among trade negotiators in the U.S. and EU, it is a rhetorical refrain that farmers in developing countries have much to gain from agricultural trade liberalization. These claims have been dutifully proclaimed by the news media over the past decade. During the WTO ministerial meetings from 1996-2005, major media in the United States often portrayed trade liberalization, and the WTO negotiations in particular, as necessary for global economic progress. They assume that trade liberalization is good for consumers because the theory of comparative advantage predicts lower prices without necessarily compromising quality. They also assume that it is good for developing countries, because wealthier countries have more tax revenues to invest in trade-distorting subsidies, which gives them an unfair advantage. Developing nations are also seeking access to U.S. and EU

markets for their products. Some call this the "trade, not aid" solution to a developing nation's economic growth.

Leading up to and following the WTO negotiations in Hong Kong in December 2005, major newspapers in the U.S. expressed disapproval that the United States, Japan, and the European Union refuse to eliminate protections on agricultural goods and textiles (see LAT 2005; NYT 2005; WP 2005). As a *New York Times* editorial (NYT 2005:A12) stated, "The very same club of rich countries who go around the world hectoring the poor to open up their markets to free trade put up roadblocks when those countries ask the rich to dismantle their own barriers to free trade in agriculture."

There is some accuracy in the accusations of hypocrisy and potential benefits for developing countries. When trade negotiations began after the Second World War, the industrialized member nations excluded agricultural policies from consideration because many nations assumed that national security was interconnected with a nation's capacity to produce its own food. When agricultural policies were finally included in the GATT and WTO negotiations, the industrialized countries often did so in a way that would enable them to sell their surplus commodities in developing countries, which subsequently undermined commodity prices for small farmers in those countries (McMichael 2000a).

However, AAI recognizes that mainstream newspapers are misleading themselves and their readers when they assert that developing countries would benefit significantly if only wealthy country politicians were willing to stop subsidizing their powerful agricultural constituents. Among some who assess such claims and inform the AAI discourse, there is clear evidence that the promise of agricultural trade liberalization is overstated, while the costs to small-scale farmers in developing countries are often high (Wise 2008). Wise used World Bank data and analyses, United Nations trade data, and other economic modeling carried out to inform the current round of WTO negotiations to show that rich countries are the main beneficiaries of agricultural trade liberalization, since they use the policies to gain markets in both the global North and South. Only a few developing countries (e.g., Argentina and Brazil) can compete effectively in these global markets. For small-scale farmers in most developing countries, they suffer the negative effects of rising imports as tariffs and farm supports are removed. Furthermore, the international benefits of eliminating crop subsidies in the U.S. may have been overstated. Studies have shown that subsidy reductions for cotton and rice may raise global prices, for example, but reductions would minimally affect corn (Ray, De La Torre Ugarte, and Tiller 2003). Any potential benefits that

developing countries might see from access to industrial markets would depend upon how the markets are structured, and transnational agribusinesses often have disproportionate influence on structuring markets (McMichael 2008).

Contradictions in the Discourse of the Elite Punditry

TIME Magazine ran a lengthy article opining that the 2008 farm bill would be better for small farmers and the environment if it were forced to accommodate the WTO's restrictions (Grunwald 2007). AAI working group members made a similar argument during the 2008 Farm Bill process to shift subsidies out of commodity production and to provide greater support for conservation and rural development programs. Or in the parlance of the WTO negotiations, to shift to the Green and Blue boxes of acceptable national supports. Such redirection in support payments would be a direct challenge to the current U.S. farm system, since it would reduce the predominant emphasis on the production of cheap raw materials for agribusiness.

These experiences in convening international trade and agriculture system experts at regional forums convinced AAI network members that successful efforts to reform national policies would require solid, credible academic research on the structure of the food industry, the relevant market share data for the largest companies, and reliable socioeconomic analysis of the impacts of this structure. An AAI steering committee member from the Canadian National Farmers Union created a web-based matrix to house and show the data on which companies controlled segments of the food system in different parts of the world (see www.marketsharematrix.org). Further analysis on how this led to concentrated sectors in the agrifood industry structure is proving crucial to the unveiling of market and price distortions, labor rights violations, environmental degradation, and other outcomes injurious to producers and consumers alike.

An important theme for AAI global partners was to emphasize the "corporate power plank" in the food sovereignty platform. Most civil society efforts on justice in developing countries began to use the “food sovereignty” paradigm as the basis for their advocacy demands. Food sovereignty refers to the right to produce food on one's own territory, namely the claimed right of people to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems in contrast to having food largely subject to international market forces (see http://viacampesina.org/main_en/). AAI has interacted with *Via Campesina* affiliates for several years. They share the perspective that corporate control is the most important impediment to adoption of the food sovereignty agenda and should be identified as such in advocacy efforts.

With North American strategy, U.S. partner groups began to see that increased public and media attention to the problems of corporate power in the food system was needed. This in turn would create pressure on the U.S. Congress to seriously consider reforms in the traditional patterns of the Farm Bill. AAI working groups developed plans to raise the concern of industry influence on health and safety regulations, agricultural trade, food aid, and subsidy policies. Oxfam America substantially contributed to this new outlook on the global food system, not only through their own analysis and "Fairness in the Fields" campaigns (Oxfam 2006), but provided financial support to AAI for such advocacy efforts.

A key success for AAI in the U.S. was to document the political influence of agrifood companies and their capacity to shape agricultural investment and trade policy. AAI launched a working group on "revolving door" appointments of industry executives to regulatory and policy roles at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The outcome, generating media attention, was the release of "USDA, Inc.: How Agribusiness has Hijacked Regulatory Policy at the U.S. Department of Agriculture" (Mattera 2004). The report lays out case studies of five decisions made at the highest levels of the Agriculture Department that appear to favor the immediate interests of the food industry over the legitimate concerns of producers, consumers and the environment. The outcome of this report was expansion into a broader reform movement (www.revolvingdoor.info) to limit corporate influence across the U.S. federal government.

Tipping Points to Policy Reform

As suggested at the beginning of this essay, alternative agriculture interest groups need to be aware of ways they can influence Congressional policymakers who interpret and comply with WTO agricultural agreements. The ongoing debate around implementation and ongoing appropriations of the 2008 Farm Bill in a period of federal deficits is also changing the context of how Congress will approach agricultural policy. To be heard on Capitol Hill, local and state-based organizations may want to consider cross-constituency collaborative strategies for influencing policy debates and decisions. Significant influence is certain to be exerted by commodity organizations and conventional farm organizations that represent commercial farm operations receiving most of the agricultural subsidies. Smaller, more local and diverse farm advocacy groups have remarkably less lobbying power. To move from current reality to a future that embodies a vision of a socially just and sustainable farm and food system, the challenge is to identify the discrete policy

levers that not only address key problems directly, but can have more extensive, transformative effects.

These policy options must be realistically assessed as to practicality and public viability. These options must also be focused on critical "tipping points" within the system, so that the relative weak position of local farm and food groups can still move agricultural policy in a new direction. A way to accomplish that shifting of public debate may be to articulate the arguments in a way that accommodate WTO outcomes. AAI partners who are also members of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (http://sustainableagriculture.net/) continue federal policy advocacy efforts through Coalition staff based in Washington, D.C. The Bush Administration opened the door to limiting farm commodity payments, but the previous Congress would not budge. According to reports from the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the new Administration is likely to consider payment limits at some point (SAC 2008). The Coalition also monitors activities on Capitol Hill and provides alerts when legislation related to the Farm Bill occurs, such as reforms to limit commodity payments.

In the U.S. South, these policy reform opportunities are finding civic levels of support; a notable example of an advocacy group is the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and its array of local and national partners (www.ssawg.org/organizations.html). Their mission is to empower and inspire farmers, individuals, and communities in the South to create an agricultural system that is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, and humane. With other regional sustainable agriculture regional groups (Midwest, Northeast, California and West), these once localized groups are expanding their networks to create tipping points in farm and food policies at the federal level. This was attempted during the 2008 Farm Bill efforts through the Farm and Food Policy Project (see http://www.farmandfoodproject.org/), but limited in affecting commodity reform by its own assessment.

DISCUSSION

We recognize that the emergence of opportunity structures may have ironic outcomes. The 1996 Farm Bill was nicknamed the "Freedom to Farm Act" because policy makers claimed it was designed to get government out of agriculture (Schertz and Doering 1999). Far from leading to a reduction of subsidies, U.S. government expenditures in agricultural subsidies to large farm commodity producers have risen dramatically since the passage of the 1996 Farm Bill. During

the decade of 1995-2005, the U.S. government spent $164.7 billion in agricultural subsidies (EWG 2006).

The 2002 Farm Bill ("Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002") again addressed a comprehensive set of issues related to agriculture, ecology, energy, trade and nutrition. This farm bill directed approximately $16.5 billion per year toward farm commodity payments. Various attempts by Congress were made to shift money away from these commodity subsidies to conservation measures (notably the Conservation Security Program), but in the end the House of Representatives held to business as usual—despite a new period of budget deficits. In contrast to high commodity prices just a few years earlier, stagnant prices for farm products continued through the turn of the decade and Congress was afraid to tinker with reforms in the 2002 farm bill. The odd combination of free market principles and flawed farm policy was bringing together diverse advocates for change. Equally troubling to many were the high profit margins for large agribusiness corporations, casting significant doubt about the legitimacy of subsidizing farm production.

The 2008 Farm Bill ("Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008") is a continuation of the 2002 Farm Bill and consequently a disappointment to many seeking policy reforms. The bill maintained the long history of agricultural subsidies, even as it as opened new ground in respect to renewable energy, conservation, nutrition, and rural development programs. So while some advocates saw a glimmer of reforms to come, many felt their criticisms of U.S. farm policy and subsidies fell on closed Congressional ears. Their arguments for reform did not resonate, despite evidence that (1) subsidies create perversion of world commodities markets and (2) subsidies end up in the pockets of wealthy conglomerates, not struggling family farmers (EWG 2006).

This discussion on U.S. farm bills is relevant for this paper because it highlights how talk about the WTO favoring large farms and agribusiness is redundant. The point here is that in an agrifood system dominated by large agribusiness, outcomes may not be consistent with the rhetoric of the opportunity structures. However, one reason that the opportunity may not have been exploited in the past is that the alternative agriculture advocacy groups have not recognized the opportunity and they have not been organized adequately to exploit it.

Alternative agriculture groups that comprise the AAI now seem to recognize the opportunity and the need for collective political awareness and effective mobilization. From the perspective of small farmers, alternative agriculture supporters, and environmental protection advocates, there is little in the U.S. farm

policy that is worthy of preservation. There is at least a nascent recognition that the imminent restructuring of U.S. farm policy to conform to WTO restrictions might provide a new opportunity for reforming U.S. farm policy.

The connection between fairer agricultural subsidies and broader environmental and socioeconomic benefits is important because it indicates a point of contention for the alternative agriculture movement in the U.S. Ironically, if alternative agriculture organizations were to press policymakers to make domestic farm policies conform to the "free trade" rhetoric, they might actually make domestic farm policy fairer. This is where the WTO agricultural policies become important. The vigorous, even violent, protests against globalization and neoliberalism at the WTO ministerial meetings since the third meeting in Seattle (November 1999) indicate that many labor, farmer, environmental, consumer and social justice organizations agree. However, the focus on civil society resistance to the WTO can overlook the creative and strategic aspects of the activists' involvement in serious discussions with government officials and parallel meetings during WTO ministerial gatherings. The basis of their discussions was not to stop trade *per se*, but to mitigate the shortcomings of free trade upon labor conditions and environmental effects while advocating for a transparent, accountable, and "fair trade" global system (McMichael 2000b).

CONCLUSION

The WTO's challenge to the existing agricultural subsidy program represents a potential opportunity structure for the alternative agriculture movement. The question we have explored is whether the alternative agriculture movement is reflexively modern to the extent that they recognize the structured opportunity and whether they are collectively mobilizing to exploit it. Our analysis suggests that AAI partners do recognize an opportunity structure. Simultaneously, they recognize the immense power of their opponents. The ability to overcome that power through collective mobilization to exploit the opportunity remains an open question.

Reflexive modernization indicates the need for citizen groups to realize that citizen groups can exploit contradictions in international trade policies, such as the glaring ones in the WTO when liberalizing markets for transnational corporations while lessening the ability of governments and citizens to manage their agrifood systems. Whereas transnational agribusiness expected to utilize the WTO to its own advantage, contradictions within the WTO are currently being used by citizens to raise public concerns and promote small-scale agriculture that is more

favorable for local development and environmental protection. Given the power of a few private corporations in the agrifood system, a more comprehensive public review process is required that increases public consultation on major issues. Alternative agriculture groups seek permanent places on decision making bodies within the state and working partnerships between governments, business, and community organizations. The key for AAI and similar activities by other alternative agriculture groups in the U.S. is to focus on the WTO as an opportunity rather than dismiss it as a neoliberal *fait accompli.*

If the WTO eventually requires a reduction in the current level of spending under the U.S. Farm Bill, then policy makers will need to respond by shifting funding from trade-distorting production subsidies into "Green Box" programs that are permissible under WTO rules. Such programs are shaping up to be direct supports to family farms, rural enterprise development, environmental conservation and nutritionally healthy communities. The "tipping point" argument for a reformed farm and food policy does not grow out of a particular economic philosophy, or an argument for or against trade, and certainly not political affiliation. It begins with the recognition that agricultural trade mainly benefits those agribusiness corporations able to capture inordinate market share throughout the agrifood chain of inputs, processing and distribution. It culminates with the realization that policies need to be reformed if broad public benefits are to be distributed to rural America. Those who promote sustainable agriculture and viable rural communities can use the current policy context to create a setting for agriculture as if people and place mattered.

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