The Political Economy of Food Systems and Food Democracy

7 billion people, almost 1 billion are hungry - less than average 2400 Kcal / day
One child out of three is stunted, with fewer opportunities for full physical and mental development : 186 million children below 5 years of age
Malnutrition explains 35% of deaths of children below 5 years of age, 3.1 million children die each year from malnutrition
This is not a technical question, it is a political question -
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Economies of scale, large mechanised monocultures

Low wages and low farmgate prices, compensated by public subsidies

Cheap energy and no cost internalization

The « low cost » food economy

Environmental impacts: GHG emissions, erosion of genetic diversity, soil and water pollution

Social impacts: ‘bigness’ and economies of scale rewarded, depopulation of rural areas, weak bargaining position of food industry workers

Public health: ‘cheap calories’ as a substitute for social policies; obesity and related NCDs
WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO REFORM?

Three interdependencies: systemic, chain-wide, and multiscale
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Socio-technical
- Infrastructure: storage, processing, communications
- Technologies: suited to agronomic choices prioritizing monocultures and mechanisation

Socio-political
- Veto power of powerful actors
- « Feeding the world » narratives and attractiveness of export-led agriculture
- Measures of success
- « Garbage can » logic of political decision-making
- Unwillingness of the elites to make healthy foods affordable by reducing inequalities

Socio-economic
- Economies of scale
- Distorted subsidies and lack of full accounting of externalities

Socio-cultural
- Consumers’ choices shaped by advertising and prices
- Loss of food culture and cooking skills
- Time poverty, single-parent families

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Determinants of Obesity: conceptual framework and scientific evidence.
(adapted from Juan Angel Rivera Dommarco, Otilia Perichart Perera, Jessica Moreno Saracho)

According to USDA, the estimated annual medical cost of obesity in the U.S. was $147 billion in 2008 U.S. dollars; the medical costs for people who are obese were $1,429 higher than those of normal weight. The American Diabetes Association released new research on March 6, 2013 estimating the total costs of diagnosed diabetes have risen to $245 billion in 2012 from $174 billion in 2007, a 41 percent increase over a five year period (taking into account losses of labor productivity (20 billion), absenteeism (5 billion) and reduced life expectancy or reduced QALYs (quality adjusted life years) (cost of inability to work due to diabetes-related disability: 20 billion) .
UNLOCKING FOOD SYSTEMS?

Politics as a driver of change
Green capitalism
Sociodiversity and alternative food networks
Politics: an easy prey for capture by interest groups

Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens

Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page

Each of four theoretical traditions in the study of American politics—which can be characterized as theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy, Economic-Elite Domination, and two types of interest-group pluralism, Majoritarian Pluralism and Biased Pluralism—offers different predictions about which sets of actors have how much influence over public policy: average citizens; economic elites; and organized interest groups, mass-based or business-oriented. A great deal of empirical research speaks to the policy influence of one or another set of actors, but until recently it has not been possible to test these contrasting theoretical predictions against each other within a single statistical model. We report on an effort to do so, using a unique data set that includes measures of the key variables for 1,779 policy issues. Multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence. The results provide substantial support for theories of Economic-Elite Domination and for theories of Biased Pluralism, but not for theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy or Majoritarian Pluralism.

Source: Gilens & Page, Perspectives on Politics, 12(3) (Sept. 2014): 564-581
Politics: an easy prey for capture by interest groups

Average Citizens' Preferences

Predicted probability of adoption

Percent favoring proposed policy change

Percent of cases (grey columns)

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The theory of self-determination
(R. Ryan and E. Deci, 2000)

Intrinsic motivations: convictions, values
Extrinsic motivations: penalties, rewards, injunctions

• Autonomy
• Competence
• Relatedness

Fosters
• Volition
• Motivation
• Engagement

• Enhanced performance
• Persistence
• Creativity

Experience of

Result in

What is striking? 1° Don’t address the structural causes, 2° Relies on CBA but does not ask about social acceptability nor about political feasibility, and 3° are interventions largely “external” (influencing behavior from outside) rather than aimed at changing motivations “intrinsically”
PATHWAYS FOR FOOD SYSTEMS REFORM

Politics as a driver of change
Green capitalism
Sociodiversity and alternative food networks
Hybrid solutions
Does CSR pay?

Structural limits to sustainable development through CSR
1. Financialization of the economy
2. Incentives / reward schemes for CEOs
3. Global competition as an “iron cage”
PATHWAYS FOR FOOD SYSTEMS REFORM

- Politics as a driver of change
- Green capitalism
- Sociodiversity and alternative food networks
- Hybrid solutions
Combining advocacy and social innovations: sociodiversity in the service of sustainable food systems

- Community-supported agriculture
- Short food chains
- Urban agriculture
- Collective vegetable gardens
- Social groceries
- Transition initiatives
- Lebensmittelretter
- Incredible edibles

The limits of the “multi-level perspective”

1. Ambiguity about “landscape” (ex globalization of food chains, emergence of sustainable development concerns, link between food and energy markets…)
2. “The” food regime – result of co-evolution, leading to a stable equilibrium, and coopting innovations
3. The predominant role of the State and the market in regime change: a limited role for empowerment and for role-shifting
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Social innovations in the service of sustainable food systems
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Garden location

Canal

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Social innovations in the service of sustainable food systems
The challenges facing social innovations

1. The trilemma: collapse, co-optation, or marginalization
2. The recycling by the neoliberal State
3. The divisions within the food movement: tactical divisions & different rallying points

Frank Geels (Manchester), Johan Schot (Sussex)
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The ‘multi-level perspective’: co-evolution of the components of the dominant regime


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Two modes of cooptation of social innovations: (1) McClintock claims (Shifting the burden on the communities, justifying a retreat from the State; Discourse about entrepreneurialism and self-help) The importance of voluntary / unpaid work: self-exploitation) (2) “exit” as a substitute to “voice” (Hirschman 1970: Exit, Voice and Loyalty) (see eg food aid by charities: convenient way for food retailers to get rid of waste without questioning overproduction (TEFAP Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program 1983, permanent since 1990: Emergency Food Assistance Program; or supermarkets not challenged to improve since unhappy consumers will switch to other channels of distribution) AND the risk of plutocracy
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The importance of voluntary / unpaid work: self-exploitation) (2) “exit” as a substitute to “voice” (Hirschman 1970: Exit, Voice and Loyalty) (see eg food aid by charities: convenient way for food retailers to get rid of waste without questioning overproduction; or supermarkets not challenged to improve since unhappy consumers will switch to other channels of distribution)
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**Food Sovereignty**
- Relocalization
- Solidarity with small-scale producers
- International alliances

**Right to Food**
- Accountability
- From charity-based to rights-based entitlements
- Independent monitoring

**Agroecology**
- Diversified farming systems
- Ecological logic not to be sacrificed to economic logic

**Food Justice**
- Ethnic disparities

**Food democracy – reclaiming control**

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Civil rights organisations
Human rights groups

Right to Food
Accountability
From charity-based to rights-based entitlements
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Food Justice
Ethnic disparities

Food democracy – reclaiming control

Consumers’ organisations

Development NGOs

Agroecology
Diversified farming systems
Ecological logic not to be sacrificed to economic logic

Environmental NGOs
Public health practitioners
Politicians concerned with growing costs of healthcare

Unions of farmworkers
Anti-hunger groups
Food banks

http://mnfoodcharter.com/about/history/
FIVE OPPORTUNITIES

1. The multifaceted nature of the crisis and the emergence of new alliances
2. The new forms of food activism
3. The awakening of cities
4. The rise of food policies
5. The institutionalization of food democracy
A National Food Strategy for Sweden – more jobs and sustainable growth throughout the country

Towards a Food Policy

A People’s Food Policy
Transforming our food system

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Two changes vs Hirschman’s framework: (1) VOICE here includes switching from one product to another within the mainstream food system, which AH would call ‘exit’ (the basic loyalty is to the system, because one is “loyal” to the retailer or to the brand or simply sees no alternative; (2) three ways to move beyond passivity, including reclaiming control of food systems through food democracy, indeed food movements see the political system is captured / unresponsive, they see the political economy of food systems as a problem deserving attention in its own right.
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