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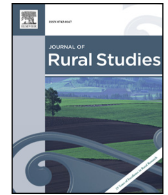

Understanding food disasters and food traumas in the global food system: A conceptual framework

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1. Introduction

Rapid rise in global food prices in recent years, precipitated by a myriad of economic and political factors, while largely ignored in the western media, has led to escalating price shocks, rising hunger, and growing discontent throughout the developing world. This global food crisis that began with the "Tortilla Riots" in Mexico in 2007, led to ever-increasing and continuous episodes of food riots that has spread to countries as geographically diverse as Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Morocco, and Yemen (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010; Bello and Baviera, 2010). Described as the new face of hunger, these pervasive crises have also generated greater attention to the relationship between the current food systems and the global agricultural production process (Altieri et al., 2012; Hinrichs, 2013; Carolan, 2012). As the current food crisis unfolded, researchers examined how socio-historic development of global food regimes, rise in mono-oriented agricultural policies, declining local and regional rights, and rising influence of global governance mechanisms facilitated the ongoing food crisis (McMichael, 2009a,b; Friedmann, 2009). Together, these scholarly contributions have significantly advanced our collective understanding of the various causes and potential consequences of the global food system.

Several scholarly studies have explored how periodic crises in global food supply has led to social instability resulting in the creation of new food regimes. One prominent scholarly tradition, food regime theory proposes a historical view of agricultural production (McMichael, 1992; Friedman and McMichael, 1989). Each food regime, it argues, emerges from the "moments of crisis" in which food injustices and crises are revealed and become potential pivots for transformation. As these "moments or crisis" impact the established norms of the food systems and produce food risks, new production relations emerge and establish themselves. These transitions offer important insights about historical changes in food systems in the post-feudal social order, regulatory shifts in food governance structures, role of geopolitical conflicts over natural resources in food availability, and socio-economic impact of post-WWII food aid policies (McMichael, 1996; Campbell, 2009).

The recent food riots, however, present several new concerns in our current food regime and presents fresh opportunities for reexamining global food production systems. Unlike the earlier food regimes that were largely defined by several critical moments of crisis that led to great changes, the current food structures, despite underlying contradictions and tensions, are characterized by stages in which food relations are very stable, intractable, and enduring. This is evident in recent food disasters that produced significant trauma for vulnerable communities without manifesting "moments of crisis" that may bring about systemic dismantling of food systems. For example, rise in food deserts in the rural United States, devastating droughts in India leading to farmer suicides, and sustained food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates how food "crises" around the world are increasingly localized and enduring challenges with little incentive for large-scale dismantling of the current food system.

These examples illustrate the fragmented nature of the global food production system that have caused, what Ulrich Beck calls, a "crisis of controllability" (Beck, 2009a, b: 15). This crisis is not always clearly visible in our current, largely stable food system.[1] A stable food system refers to the general stability of the food production system while masking ongoing tensions resulting from fluctuating food prices, regulatory failures in food safety standards, and growing hunger and deprivation around the world. To address the "crisis of controllability," food activists need to ensure a gradual reorientation of our food consumption, policy, and production habits. Ulrich Beck refers to this call for a reorientation in food debates, as a "call for a new beginning," a veritable recasting and refiguring of our food consumption-production system (Beck, 2009b: 4).

The notion of a stable food system is not a novel concept. Food scholars have studied the notion of stability within the food systems and its implications for historical analyses of food regimes (McMichael, 2009a, b; Burch and Lawrence, 2009; Campbell, 2009; Pritchard et al., 2016). For example, Friedman (2005) defines a food regime as "a period of 'relatively stable sets of relationships', with 'unstable periods in between shaped by political contests over a new way forward'". In other words, all food regimes have largely stable phases of capital

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[1] A stable food system does not refer to lack of food crisis. In fact, there are numerous examples of how food riots around the world, as well as persistent lack of food access and starvation challenge the idea of stability. Stable food system here refers to the lack of large-scale transformation of the current food regime resulting from a moment of crises.

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accumulation with its own set of regulations and rules that are followed by crises and calls for change. These "moments of crises" or periods of instability may result from political changes or global upheavals and lead to the emergence of a new regime with its own set of rules and regulations. Our purpose in the paper is to explore whether there aren't any potential transformative moments in our food system that may challenge the stability of our food system. We propose that these transformative moments are largely masked or diffused in nature, even though the crises in food system remains potent leading to the "crisis of controllability". We apply Beck's notion of risk to examine how such masking can be studied and how in turn this may impact our understanding of the current food system.

Our framework begins with the assertion that while previous food systems have experienced pivotal moments of crises leading to transformative changes to food regimes (as FRT suggests), the current food system is largely stable in nature despite inherent and underlying contradictions. However, we do not argue that the risks posed to the system are not enough to destabilize it. In fact, we believe that the current contradictions are insidious in nature and no less challenging. However, why these contradictions has not led to systemic changes in the current food regime is less clear. We propose a conceptual framework we call "food disaster-food trauma framework (hereafter FD-FT) in order to understand how food deprivations and risk perceptions emerge against the backdrop of stable food regimes. The proposed framework applies Ulrich Beck's risk thesis to argue that conceptualizing "food as risk" allows us to transcend various manifestations of food systems and examine food crises as a collective crises. We further draw upon critical sociology perspective on cultural trauma to link food disasters to localized experiences of food trauma. By linking food disasters with food traumas we hope to explore how economic uncertainties and growing inequities are manifested in food deprivation in local communities and identify possible pathways to a critical theoretical approach to food regimes and food risks.

1.1. *From food regimes to "food from somewhere": reviewing the literature*

Food Regime theory first appeared in an article by Friedmann & McMichael in *Sociologia Ruralis* in 1989. In this article, the authors propose a food-based historical understanding of capitalism thereby linking the historical trajectories of capitalism and modern agriculture (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). Principally, food regime theory argued that stability in global economic growth over the past century rests on two key sets of food relationships; a first regime comprising colonial food relations, and a second regime based on post-WWII food and aid policies in the West (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Campbell, 2009). Both emerged from *vital crises* fueled by global economic and market shifts that fundamentally transformed agricultural production. The underlying contradictions propelled by the food relations in these two stages produced a third regime with two overlapping features - a globalized food governance system that masked food relations, and a resistance discourse that sought to localize food production.

Friedmann and McMichael (1989) describe the first food regime as a product of the late nineteenth century colonialism and nation-state liberalism. Facilitated by the rise of the settler states in the western hemisphere, the first food regime was strengthened by the integration of land development, expansion of immigrant policies, and development of technology. As competition for work flooded immigrants into the former settler states of the U.S. Australia, and Canada, the abundance of land, coupled with a budding reliance on mechanized farming practices, created a cheap surplus of grains, which in turn flooded the European markets (Friedmann, 1993a, b). According to Eric Hobsbawm, the early nineteenth century remained largely provincial in its relationship to local agriculture production and required "an extraordinary economic conjecture … to produce a real cataclysm in an agrarian society purely by economic means" (Hobsbawm, 1962: 198).

The rapid mechanization of traditional agriculture was not lost upon sociologists of that time. Marx discussed the widespread impact of this rift in his preface to the Russia Edition of the *Communist Manifesto*:

> "European immigration fitted North America for a gigantic agricultural production, whose competition is shaking the very foundation of European landed property … step by step the small and middle landownership of the farmers, the basis of the whole political constitution, is succumbing to the competition of giant farms" (Marx, 1977: 583).

Similarly, Weber noted that the ingenuity of American farmers ran contra to high food prices and limited land ownership in Europe. Weber remarked that "[i]t is now not possible to gain a possible fortune by agriculture in Europe" (Gerth and Mills, 1952: 366). Polanyi described these shifts in agricultural practices as largely predicated upon the abandonment of market protectionism for the "creation of a self-regulating market" (Polanyi, 1957: 3). The dramatic changes initiated during the first food regime fundamentally altered economic production patterns as agrarian communities were replaced by rapid industrialization and introduced a new class of workers into a once exclusive global market place.

If the first food regime was brought about by a tenuous relationship between settler countries and European imports, the crisis point for the second food regime was the ushering in of a transnational agro-food system. Emerging in the post-World War II decades, the second food regime was born out of U.S. domestic agriculture programs, exportation of foreign food aid, and the industrialization of farming (Bell and Johnson, 1996). The second food regime emerged in response to a rapid rise in transnational economic relations that transformed the agro-food complex into an "intensive meat complex" (McMichael, 1992). The industrialization process also led to the production of "durable foods" and accelerated the U.S. agricultural exports to global markets followed by an intense period of global food crises and rising prices in the cold war years.

Beginning in the 1970s, what had been perceived as the *surplus* regime (1947–1972) of cheap, U.S agriculture exports was shocked by a rapid increase in global food prices. The aftermath of the 1970s "food crisis", along with increases in oil prices, proved particularly devastating for the economies of the developing world. Friedmann described developing nations of this time as being caught in "a pair of scissors," as increased dependency on imported foodstuff and declining rates of export revenue created havoc on the economic development of these countries (Friedmann, 1993a). McMichael notes that the collapse of the Britton Wood system, along with global instability, led to an agro-food restructuring of our current food system. The aftershock of this regime were thus felt globally and led to a new direction in food production in the third food regime.

The third food regime is best understood as emerging from a crisis of a food relationship that operates by limiting the role of localized economic production systems. This was facilitated by growing corporatization of food relations and the establishment of the WTO in 1995 that created global governance structures based on standardized regulations, transnational oversight, and weak national and regional regulatory interventions (Campbell, 2009: 2–3). McMichael called this the third regime or "Food from Nowhere" and viewed this stage as indicative of a separation of agricultural practices from our modern lifeworld (McMichael, 2009a, b). In other words, a "Food from Nowhere" regime is the replacement of domestic crops with exported foodstuffs. The result being a flooding of markets in the global south with subsided global north commodities and the production of specialty crops, as a condition of debt replacement, throughout the developing world (McMichael, 2009a, b).

Yet, the resulting crisis from the invisible relations of the "Food from Nowhere" has also led to resistance movements demanding sustainable alternatives, often referred to as "Food from Somewhere". The rise of this movement is evident in particular in the growing politicization of food, the increased mainstream popularity of food system

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