



Towards a Gramscian food regime analysis of India's agrarian crisis: Counter-movements, petrofarming and Cheap Nature

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ABSTRACT

This article develops an initial framework for a Gramscian and political ecological food regime analysis of India's ongoing agrarian crisis. Criticizing readings of Polanyi in food regime analysis in light of Gramscian perspectives, I seek to contest food regime analysis's approach to counter-movements. I suggest, further, that close attention to the Indian case of 'actually existing crises' helps us avoid some of the capital-centric limitations in food regime literature. Working towards an incipient understanding of the absence of a sustained smallholder counter-movement at the current conjuncture in India, I argue for locating our investigation at the intersection of crises of accumulation and of legitimation. I analyze India's decentralized form of petrofarming as a socioecological cycle of accumulation that is presently facing a condition of exhaustion of Cheap Nature. Drawing on Gramscian perspectives, I argue that an analytics that foregrounds the dynamics of class forces in the integral state can help us rethinking the possibilities for resistance to the contemporary food regime more broadly.

1. Introduction

Crisis seems to be everywhere. 'Crisis', writes Janet Roitman, 'is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today' (Roitman, 2014, 3). Such is the case also for one of the most influential approaches to the spatiotemporal study of food and agriculture in global capitalism, namely food regime analysis. Here, historically emergent international food regimes are perceived to evolve around periods of stability and periods of crisis centered on cycles of capital accumulation in combination with the formation and crumbling of legitimizing rules and relationships (e.g. Friedmann, 2005, Friedmann and McMichael, 1989, Magnan, 2012, McMichael, 2013). In an organicist metaphor, it is through crises that food regimes die while giving birth to new regimes. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of social movements in triggering and resolving crises. In Philip McMichael's prominent writings, a global peasant counter-movement uniting for food sovereignty is seen as the response to the contemporary, third 'corporate food regime' that brings rising dispossession, disturbance and destruction for smallholders and environments worldwide (e.g. McMichael, 2009b, 2013). These deleterious sides of the contemporary food regime are perceived as amounting to a global agrarian crisis: 'capital's food regime has generalized an agrarian crisis of massive proportions, registered now in a growing movement to stabilize the countryside, protect the planet, and advance food sovereignty' (McMichael, 2013, 19). The Polanyian counter-movement, in McMichael's rendering, is showing the way forward – even beyond the contemporary food regime – to a more just

future.

Following such a view of food regime dynamics, we should expect sizeable counter-movements, rallying for their right to smallholding farming, gathering forces in places where agrarian crisis takes its toll. India is one such place. In fact it is a striking one. Since the early 1990s the country has registered a situation of deteriorating livelihoods for smallholders – epitomized in the globally prominent spates of farmers' suicides often described as 'epidemic' – which presently routinely is seen as an agrarian crisis. Yet in India counter-movements are equally striking in their absence. No major farmers' movements are presently shaking the earth with their cries for justice. For example, a recent review of counter-movements in the country shows that, although neoliberal capitalist restructuring has brought increasing social dislocations causing the mushrooming of new, often dispersed counter-movements, these have not been *of and for smallholder farmers* in anything akin to McMichael's peasant resurgence (Sahoo, 2017). The counter-movements that India does house in the neoliberal period are mostly urban middle-class based forms of 'law-struggles' (Harriss, 2011; Sundar, 2011). Why is it so? And how can we make sense of this in a food regime perspective?

This article aims to provide the groundwork for a distinct food regime analysis of India's agrarian crisis. Central here is an effort at incorporating the role of social movements in the agrarian crisis and its effects. I do so by developing a framework for a food regime analysis that is Gramsci (1971) and political ecological (Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen, 2017; Loftus, 2013; Mann, 2009). Such conceptualization is

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not altogether novel, as its traces are found latent in food regime literature. Elaborating such a framework provides us, I suggest, with useful tools for studying food regime crises and counter-movements elsewhere.

Although the reinterpretation and synthesizing of existing empirical material comprises an important and necessary first step, the present contribution is not merely an exercise of ‘old wine in new bottles’. A Gramscian food regime analysis – taken as an ‘analytical device’ (McMichael, 2009b, 148) – of the agrarian crisis enables an understanding of what, following Marx, we can call the ‘rich totality of many determinations and relations’ (Marx, 1973, 41).¹ At the core of what makes a food regime work are relations between capital and labor as mediated by states in the world-system but, importantly, also ‘the distillation of political struggles among contending social groups’ (McMichael, 2013, 11). Capital, labor, states, class struggle: all converge – tension-fraught and contradictory – in the food regime. Moreover, as Jason Moore forcefully contends, all of these relations are *socioecological* – bundled in and through the web of life – necessitating that we ‘focus our attention on the concrete dialectics of the messily bundled, interpenetrating, and interdependent relations of human and extra-human natures’ (Moore, 2015, 35). At the core of what makes a food regime *stop working* – the formation of crisis – we thus likewise find bundles of socioecological relations. These comprise two mutually constitutive tendencies: accumulation crisis and legitimation crisis.

I argue that the close study of agrarian crisis in India opens for questioning some of the fundamental theoretical tenets and assumptions in food regime analysis. As I will proceed to elaborate, recent criticism of food regime analysis has questioned the role ascribed by McMichael to the global food sovereignty counter-movement. Whereas Bernstein’s (2016) penetrating reading criticizes McMichael’s reliance on Chayanovian organicist understandings of the ‘peasantry’, I seek to take the discussion in another direction by focusing on the role readings of Polanyi have in food regime theory. The empirical case of India’s agrarian crisis helps us see some limitations to the prevailing Polanyi-derived focus on relations between the market and society – smallholders, in this case – as a counter-hegemonic force. While eminently fruitful in many contexts, this analytic disregards Gramsci’s complementary focus on relations between the state and society, taking the latter to be intrinsic to the formation of capitalist hegemony in an expanded notion of the state (Burawoy, 2003). Drawing on Gramsci, I thus argue that India’s agrarian crisis constitutes a conjuncture where both accumulation crisis and legitimation crisis are present but where their co-presence does not, in fact, lead to counter-movements as in McMichael’s scheme; this is exactly because of how class forces in society have been instrumental in consolidating capitalist hegemony in India’s integral state. The agribusiness versus smallholder binary (Bernstein, 2016) that is embedded in McMichael’s scheme should therefore be treated with caution. Whereas food regime analysis tends to attend to processes of accumulation ‘from above’, the case of India’s actually existing crisis thus shows the need to attend also to class specific processes of accumulation ‘from below’. Put differently, we need to take heed of the co-production of accumulation cycles and class dynamics.

In light of this, I seek to problematize the theory of resistance embedded in food regime analysis. If we take the agrarian crisis to constitute an ‘organic crisis’ in Gramsci’s (1971) sense, I propose caution in taking on board the food regime approach’s Polanyian idea of a necessary double movement (Polanyi, 2001, 1944). Organic crisis, in Gramsci, entails that ‘the structures and practices that constitute and reproduce a hegemonic order fall into chronic and visible disrepair, creating a new terrain of political and cultural contention, and the possibility (but only the possibility) of social transformation’ (Carroll,

2010, 170–171). A Gramscian food regime analysis that takes heed of constellations and trajectories of class forces and state-society relations reveals the fragility of such possibility. Likewise, a Gramscian analysis of the consolidation of hegemonic projects needs to emphasize their fragile and contested nature. While I focus on the politics of consent, Gramscian analytics necessarily incorporate its articulation with coercion. It is clear that the Indian state is capable of heavy coercion unleashed upon movements perceived by the state as threatening, such as in the case of the Maoists in parts of India (see e.g. Das, 2017; Sundar, 2016) – or, under Narendra Modi recently, parts of civil society (Sinha, 2017). The near absence of coercive methods in the case of smallholders can thus be seen as a sign, precisely, of the near absence as well of sustained counter-movements.

In developing this framework I seek to address another shortcoming in food regime analysis: Despite the crucial theoretical importance ascribed to crisis, the literature has largely refrained from taking head-on ‘actually existing crises’. To the extent that actually existing crises have been invoked, it has primarily been in the context of the ‘world food crises’ of 1972–3 (Friedmann, 1993) and 2007–8 (Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; McMichael, 2009a,c). Agrarian crisis, which figures centrally in McMichael’s most recent formulations of the ‘fundamental contradiction’ of the corporate food regime (McMichael, 2013, 60), has been largely left empirically undescribed. India’s ongoing agrarian crisis – of world-historical proportions – is an appropriate place to go for downscaling food regime analysis to the level of actually existing crises. This also enables us to surpass some of the limitations found in the literature’s tendency to operate with highly abstract schemes of phases and dynamics that border on the generic (cf. Bernstein, 2016). Grounding food regime analysis in particular spatiotemporal settings ‘demands a detailed mapping of *specific* powers and structures’, as Roseberry (2002, 77) puts it. This can serve as an entry to contributing to the ongoing work of downscaling food regime analysis more broadly, aiming for

a food regime analysis with suitable theoretical mediations about class structures and states; methodological sophistication with units of analysis below the world-system, including world regions and nation states; and political sensitivity towards the subordinate classes as a whole, not merely the peasantry’.

Otero (2016, 303)

This is an important task in a context where food regime analysis so far has operated at the level of the world economy with a ‘broad brush’ (Otero, 2012, 283), inviting historical-geographical elaboration through detailed case studies (McMichael, 2013, 96; Otero, 2012; Otero et al. 2013). The case of India has hardly figured in such an analytical project. And the few existing studies do not go very far in systematically ‘bridging the gap’ between India and food regime analysis.²

The article is structured as follows. The first section revisits the interrelations between food regimes, crisis and social movements, elaborating my take on a Gramscian and political ecological food regime framework. The next section proceeds to drive home the proposition that India’s agrarian crisis *indeed is a food regime crisis*. It does so by tracing the trajectory of the agrarian crisis ‘as a process and relation’ (Araghi, 2009, 142) through the ‘long’ Green Revolution (Patel, 2013) – arising at the height of the second food regime – as a cycle of accumulation that has now reached its socio-ecological limit in the context of neoliberal capitalist restructuring of the state’s relationship to agriculture, despite attempted ‘fixes’. This is to say that I analyze the agrarian crisis as a crisis of India’s particular, decentralized form of agrarian capitalism – what we can call ‘petrofarming’ (Walker, 2004).

² Existing studies that engage food regime analysis with reference to India are limited to India being used as an example in broader analyses (Patel, 2013; Pritchard et al., 2016), as passing reference (Lerche, 2013), as background/context (Gupta, 1998) or by ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ in dismissing food regime analysis (Frödin, 2013).

¹ Food regime analysis, as McMichael recapitulates it, was and remains founded on the study of ‘the multiple determinations in the food commodity’ (McMichael, 2016, 655).

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