



European transitions towards a corporate–environmental food regime: Agroecological incorporation or contestation?



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ABSTRACT

The ‘food regime’ concept helps to analyse potential transitions beyond the agro–industrial regime which has been globally dominant since the 1970s. As its multiple crises generate alternative production methods and products, some have been incorporated into a nascent ‘corporate–environmental food regime’. This nascent regime is illustrated here by two agendas prominent in Europe – ‘bioeconomy’ (Life Sciences) and ‘sustainable intensification’ (neoproduktivism). As a significant difference, the prevalent ‘bioeconomy’ agenda marginalises agroecological practices, while ‘sustainable intensification’ selectively incorporates such practices within a broader toolkit including biotech.

Regardless of that difference, both agendas reinforce a neoliberal productivist narrative: namely, more resource–efficient methods are necessary for increasing production to fulfill the greater market demand for food, feed, fuel, etc. In this way, the capital–accumulation driver is reified as ‘market demand’ arising exogenously from the food production system – which thereby accommodates societal needs. By contrast, the agroecology narrative diagnoses the problem as profit–driven agro–industrial monoculture systems making farmers dependent on external inputs, undermining their knowledge, and distancing consumers from agri–producers. Through such a narrative, new alliances have elaborated a different future linking farmers’ knowledge–exchange, agroecology, food sovereignty, citizens’ initiatives, public knowledge about food production, etc. Civil society organisations have facilitated such linkages among researchers, scientists and social movements.

In those ways, contending narratives justify different trajectories for an agro–food transition. Each links different innovation paradigms of technique, quality and knowledge. These differences often remain implicit amidst broad terms such as bioeconomy, sustainable intensification, agroecology, etc. Making the divergences explicit can help contest transitions towards a corporate–environmental food regime, while also counterposing agroecological alternatives.

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1. Introduction

The ‘food regime’ concept helps to analyse potential transitions beyond the corporate regime which has been globally dominant since the 1970s. Such analyses link several issues, in particular: how it has undergone multiple crises in the past decade; how these generate regime variations; how some constitute a nascent ‘corporate–environmental regime’ through various ‘greening’ strategies; and how new opportunities arise to destabilise corporate power (Friedmann, 2003; McMichael, 2009a, 2009b, 2014; Weis, 2010; see Section 1.1 below).

Prospects for alternatives have focused on peasant movements

in the global South, where political alliances link agroecology with food sovereignty. Academic fora have analysed farmers’ roles in resisting and/or accommodating expansion of the dominant food regime, e.g. its global markets, productivity models, scientific knowledge, technological innovation, etc. In question are the prospects of agroecological methods relying on farmers’ traditional knowledge and locally available inputs, while also raising productivity to become more economically competitive. Likewise the necessary knowledge, skills and institutional resources for agroecological alternatives to prevail (Bernstein, 2014; Jansen, 2015; McMichael, 2014).

Those issues have become salient in Europe. There agroecological practices have gained a broad interest, beyond farmers using certified–organic methods. But academic and activist literature has hardly analysed the consequent tensions over agroecological roles,

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especially the relation between knowledge and corporate power – the focus here.

A historic turning point was Europe's fierce controversy over agbiotech. In the mid-1990s the EU policy framework on 'economic competitiveness' was deploying GM products for a neoliberal agenda, further industrialising European agriculture for global commodity exports, while also facilitating proprietary forms of bio-knowledge. By the late 1990s this agenda had provoked a strong opposition campaign linking environmental, consumer and farmer organisations (Schweiger, 2001). Their campaign was joined by Left, Green and other politicians. Together these forces blocked or deterred a European market for GM products (Levidow and Carr, 2010; Schurman and Munro, 2010).

The anti-GM opposition encompassed many local authorities, some governments and the EU's Assembly of European Regions. The widespread 'GM-free' slogan became a territorial brand for 'quality' agriculture, which was promoted by new alliances amongst farmers, NGOs, citizens' groups, scientists, etc. Specialty-food labels helped to remunerate farmers for environmentally sustainable cultivation methods. These agrarian-based development strategies elaborated alternatives to agro-industrial methods (Levidow and Boschert, 2008). Meanwhile the European agro-industry lobby and its state allies elaborated a 'bioeconomy' agenda, partly to bypass the political-commercial blockages of agbiotech. Thus earlier struggles set the stage for further conflicts over the agro-food regime.

For the European context, this paper asks: What roles are played by agroecological practices in elaborating and/or resisting a nascent corporate-environmental regime? How do those roles relate to forms of agro-food innovation, quality, their knowledge-basis and policy frameworks? What tensions arise around agroecological roles? To answer those questions, this paper analyses two policy initiatives: the 'bioeconomy' agenda promoting Life Sciences since approximately 2005; and the 'sustainable intensification' agenda since approximately 2008.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 surveys analytical concepts: food-regime theory, especially a nascent corporate-environmental regime with various transitional trajectories; and agro-food innovation paradigms informing R&D agendas, likewise along divergent trajectories. Moves towards a corporate-environmental food regime are manifest in dual agendas for a bioeconomy and for sustainable intensification; their discourse shares a productivist imperative reifying global agro-food markets as an external objective force that must be accommodated.

Those dual agendas are analysed in the two empirical sections. Section 2 examines contending agendas for a European bioeconomy, featuring Life Sciences versus agroecology. Those agendas advocate different policy frameworks to transform agriculture and society (summarised in Table 1). Section 3 examines a broader neoproductivist agenda, widely articulated as 'sustainable intensification'. Its toolkit encompasses various biotechnological, agroecological and other methods to increase yield, while also lowering the burdens on land and natural resources. By incorporating some agroecological techniques, this agenda has provoked a sharper agroecological alternative. Section 4 returns to the above questions about tensions between agroecological practices and two policy agendas.

Terminological note: There are many geopolitical differences and ambiguities in using (or not) the term 'agroecology'. In the global South 'agroecology' has been adopted as a political agenda, explicitly dissociated from organic food as an elite market sector. In Europe, by contrast, the organic sector is seen as central for elaborating agroecological methods which have wider relevance. Yet the terminology has paradoxical patterns there. On the one hand, the terms 'agroecological' (or even 'agroecology') can narrow the

meaning to a scientific discipline, e.g. for branding an organisation's mission (e.g. INRA, 2010). On the other hand, agroecological practices and agendas are often not explicitly called such (e.g. Chiffolleau and Desclaux, 2006; Solibam, 2013). For terminological clarity, therefore: The general term 'agroecological practices' will denote ecological science or principles being applied to agriculture, regardless of the actors' discourse or agenda. The term 'agroecology' will denote wider transformative aims through and for such practices (cf. Wezel et al., 2009).

1.1. Research methods and sources

The paper draws on the author's 2008–2010 primary research on contending accounts of a European bioeconomy. This analysed policy and stakeholder documents for bioeconomy visions, in order to identify convergent and divergent agendas. The documentary analysis was a basis for interviewing over 25 EU-level organisational representatives and other experts. Key questions were: How does a bioeconomy change the role of agriculture? How does it relate to farmers' knowledge? Alongside technoscientific innovation, what else must change in order to develop a European bioeconomy? (see Acknowledgements section). Since 2010 the author has participated in the Expert Core Group of Technology Platform Organics, which drafted texts intervening in EU research agendas.

The earlier research was extended by a literature review on sustainable intensification – e.g. how this can be theorised as neoproductivism, and how this agenda relates to agroecological practices. The analysis benefited from attendance at several events. In particular, the author served as an NGO representative at an EU-wide consultative body, whose discussions manifest tensions around sustainable intensification; attendance became an opportunity for participant-observation (EIP-Agri, 2013; see sub-section below on Agri-innovation). For the contribution of public conferences, see the Acknowledgements section.

2. Food-regime transitions via agri-innovation paradigms

This section elaborates two main concepts: a dominant food regime in transition towards a corporate-environmental regime with variations and alternatives; and agri-food innovation paradigms which inform them.

2.1. Transition towards a corporate-environmental regime: plural trajectories

Within political economy, a food regime has been understood as a 'rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale' (Friedmann, 2003: 30–1). Focusing on capital's global value relations, the regime concept helps to analyse the relations within which food is produced, and thus through which capital accumulation is produced and reproduced. This concept has stimulated theoretical debate on historical contradictions which generate crisis, transformation and transition (McMichael, 2009a).

The post-WWII period has been theorised as a 'mercantile' regime protecting national food production systems. When this underwent a crisis in the 1970s, its successor 'corporate' regime was a market-driven system. Here agro-industrial methods maximise single-crop yields and generate surpluses, which gain subsidy for global export, in turn undermining less-intensive methods and productive capacities elsewhere. In this dominant regime, 'agro-food corporations are the major agents attempting to regulate agrofood conditions, that is, to organize stable conditions of production and consumption which allow them to plan investment, sourcing of agricultural raw materials, and marketing' (Friedmann, 2003: 52).

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