



Food security and the justification of productivism in New Zealand

Christopher Rosin

Centre for Sustainability: Agriculture, Food, Energy, Environment, University of Otago, New Zealand

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Food security
Productivism
Ideology
Utopia
Greenhouse gas mitigation

The spike in food commodity prices in 2007–2008 is frequently represented as a crisis for the global food system. Interpreted as a failure to achieve the utopian imperative to feed the world, the crisis can potentially expose the distortions inherent to the productivist ideology framing the existing system. As a result, it can act as a shock that promotes alternative—and more sustainable—conceptualisations of best practice. This article utilises Paul Ricoeur's (1986) examination of ideology and utopia to demonstrate the likely limited impact of the commodity price shock on existing production practises in the New Zealand pastoral farming sectors. Specific focus is placed on the integrative function of ideology, which contributes to the capacity for ideologies to maintain a social order despite the persistence of malicious aspects. The New Zealand case demonstrates both the negotiated functioning of a productivist ideology as well as the tendency for farmers to reference the logics of that ideology to contest policies designed to regulate agricultural greenhouse gas emissions. Rather than encouraging a reassessment of productivist ideologies, the food crisis appears to reinforce defence of more intensive agriculture despite growing concerns over environmental degradation. This suggests that any dismantling of the distortions in the productivist ideology initiated by the food crisis will not necessarily impact the integrative functions of that ideology. The article concludes that, rather than a shock, the achievement of a more sustainable and just global food system is dependent on a food utopia that promotes qualities as well as quantity.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The rapid rise of food commodity prices to record levels during the period 2007–2008 (and again in 2011) is frequently represented as a crisis for the global food system. Not only did the higher prices result in a recalculation of the number of chronically hungry by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to a staggering 1 billion (FAO, 2010); but the popular protests that they engendered served to remind global society of the potential for hunger to disrupt political and economic normalcy (FAO, 2009). Such consequences laid bare the utopian imperative to 'feed the world' as expressed in the World Food Summit declaration of 1996 (<http://www.fao.org/wfs/begin/zquit/cquit-e.htm>), a goal which rapid increases in global production through the latter decades of the 20th Century had seemingly placed well within reach. As would be expected, the crisis elicited numerous calls for change in a global food system that appeared perfectly capable of meeting the current demand for food, yet failed to do so equitably or sustainably (for example, Holt-Giménez, 2009; Magdoff and Tokar, 2009; Blay-Palmer, 2010; Godfray et al., 2010; Van der Ploeg, 2010; Rosin et al., 2012a). In these terms, the crisis was seen as the moment

at which the insufficiency of and contradictions within the existing food system become so blatantly obvious as to induce change in the business-as-usual that perpetuated its failures.

The implication that crisis might engender necessary steps to the reconfiguration of the global food system raised the relevance of the spiking commodity prices within existing theorisations in agri-food systems research. Whether a crisis caused by contradictions to capitalist accumulation or that of a tipping point in social-ecological theory, such events are essential elements of many broader-scale explanations of change and persistence in the agri-food system, with food regime theory (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989) providing an excellent example. On this basis, for example, McMichael (2009) has proposed that the response of social movements to the food crisis was evidence of contradictions in the current regime and that their actions, at the interstices and margins, may contribute to a reformulation of the food system. In the case of the global food crisis, the issue raised is whether the crisis was appropriately represented as such or does an existing ideology of global food security persist that is largely resistant or capable of adapting to the challenge of high commodity prices.

Despite the apparent shock of the food crisis in 2008 and the resulting challenge to the legitimacy of existing food system structures, relationships and processes, many practices associated

E-mail addresses: chris.rosin@otago.ac.nz, chris.rosin@stonebow.otago.ac.nz.

with inequality and distortion in food production and supply persist. Thus, while recognising the potential for the food crisis to act as a shock, it is also necessary to acknowledge the resilience of the existing ideological structures underlying the operation of the current global food system. Much as crisis or shock occupies an important explanatory position in agri-food systems research, the pernicious nature of ideology (alternatively neoliberal capitalist or productivist) in adoption of more sustainable agricultural practice is commonly identified in the literature (see [Buttel, 2001](#) for a review). Among the most relevant aspects of this ideology is the subjugation of the product—that is, food—to a quantifiable commodity. In this manner, the solution to feeding a growing global population is encompassed within the simplicity of accounting whereby the increase in demand for food is satisfied by means of a comparable increase in supply. In this process, food loses much of its moral quality and power, becoming in [MacIntyre's \(1981\)](#) terms solely an external good as it is exchanged within the system.¹ The resulting emphasis on the necessity of increased production has subsequently been incorporated within a discourse of productivism that is reinforced, especially in developed economies, by political and economic contexts which reward those who produce more while often disregarding the social and environmental implications of such production ([Lowe et al., 1993](#); [Potter and Tilzey, 2005](#); [Burton and Wilson, 2006](#)). To the extent that the focus of the global response to the food crisis remains on achieving further gains in production, the shock of the food crisis stands to alter little in the existing food system. As a result, global food security is likely to become increasingly exposed to the implications of environmental degradation and social inequality that threaten its continued resilience in the face of continued population growth.

In this article, I will examine the role of a productivist ideology as a means for New Zealand pastoral farmers to contest efforts to promote more sustainable production of meat, milk and wool through the mitigation of greenhouse gases (specifically methane). In this case, the food crisis provides additional discursive weight to arguments for the persistence of an existing orientation towards food as a quantity and associated practices that disregard the environmental externalities of production. The point of the exercise is not, however, to expose New Zealand farmers as inherently insensitive in their regard for the environmental impacts of management practice. Rather, I intend to explore the conditions in which a putative utopian goal—that is, feeding the world—becomes a foundational justification for an ideology that perpetuates a given set of production or social relations by establishing sufficient social legitimacy to countermand moral engagement with an equally utopian imperative to acknowledge the environmental impacts of that production. In order to develop this argument, I first examine the concepts of ideology and utopia. This examination utilises Paul Ricoeur's (1986) theorisation of the threefold function of ideology (involving integration in addition to distortion and legitimisation) as well as the interplay between the concepts of ideology and utopia in social praxis. Subsequently, I produce a brief narrative of New Zealand's agricultural history to highlight the development and ossification of a productivist ideology in that country's pastoral sector. Finally, I demonstrate how—when its legitimacy is contested on the basis of its environmental impact—that ideology is reinforced by the shock of the food crisis and a refortified imperative to feed the world. I conclude by arguing for the necessity of a reconceptualisation of the utopia of global food security that is inherently more resilient in reattaching moral qualities to food throughout the agri-food system.

¹ See [Sayer \(2003\)](#) for further development of the concepts of internal and external goods as these relate to commoditization.

2. The integrative function of ideology

As a philosophical concept, ideology is the subject of extended debate (for example, [Eagleton, 1994a](#)). It has also become an established analytical frame in social science, albeit often in somewhat truncated and narrower form. The common usage of ideology developed by Marx and subsequent Marxist theories ([Eagleton, 1994b](#)) is a familiar element in the agri-food literature ([Buttel, 2001](#)). Within this approach, the concept encompasses the social rationalisation of the structures which underlie particular social forms and, thus, acts as the basis for false consciousness among weaker classes—a function that [Ricoeur \(1986\)](#) refers to as distortion. As a result, the concept of ideology has become a powerful tool for exposing the unequal power relationships in the global food system ([McMichael, 2009](#); [Moore, 2010](#)).

Paul Ricoeur offers an insightful and challenging intervention to the understanding of the concepts of ideology and utopia in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986). The book is the transcription of lectures from a course examining the development and application of the concepts in philosophical debate. Fundamental to this intervention is his argument that neither concept need assume purely pejorative implications. In his presentation, ideology is presented as a combination of three understandings of the concept—the Marxist, the Weberian and the culturalist, as represented in the work of Clifford Geertz ([Chiapello, 2003](#)). Each understanding views ideology as the underlying means to maintain a specific ordering of social interaction. They differ, however, in the functions engaged to ensure this.

[Ricoeur \(1986\)](#) first traces the concept of ideology from its use by Karl Marx. He notes in Marx's later writings that ideology is increasingly represented as an untruth that is to be exposed through the scientific application of Marx's social theory. Thus, the function of ideology is the distortion of social relations. Ricoeur then demonstrates the extent to which this perspective is reinforced in the works of such authors as Althusser. He summarises his assessment of Marxist applications of ideology as follows:

We recognised that at this stage the concept of ideology was systematic distortion, and we saw that in order to approach this first concept, we had to take into account a concept of interest—class interest—apply an attitude of suspicion, and proceed to a causal dismantlement of these distortions. ([Ricoeur, 1986:254](#))

Ricoeur acknowledges the capacity of this approach to highlight the influence of power differentials on social interaction; he argues, however, that it offers limited means (that of civil upheaval) for contesting ideologies that no longer serve to support a just society.

Reference to the distorting function of ideology is common to agri-food literature, examining the influence of capitalist logics on the persistence of the family farm ([Friedmann, 1978](#)), the structure of food commodity chains ([Friedland, 1984](#)), the concentration and intensification of the organic food sector in California ([Guthman, 2004](#)) and as a feature of productivism more specifically ([Ward, 1993](#)). In the latter case, the distortion is caused by a technological treadmill which encouraged the intensification of production despite questionable social or environmental benefits. The treadmill did, however, benefit capitalist interests in the development of chemical pest control, hybrid and genetic crop improvements and the mechanisation of production. From the perspective of such analyses, the less powerful actors in the food system (most commonly the smaller scale producers) exhibit passive responses to the structural forces of a capitalist economy. As Ricoeur suggests, the approach involves employing a perspective of suspicion and focuses on the dismantling of distortion as the principal solution to the ills of the food system.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/92514>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/92514>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)