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From post-productionism to reflexive governance: Contested transitions in securing more sustainable food futures

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A B S T R A C T

The paper critically assesses the more turbulent period in agri-food since 2007–8 by applying a transitions perspective to a range of empirical data collected from key private and public stakeholders in the UK during that period. It argues that increased volatility and a series of interdependent landscape pressures on the dominant agri-food regime are profoundly affecting the former more stable regulatory period of post-productionism and retailer-led, private-interest governance, which emerged from the 1980s. We now witness a more stark contestation between this dominant regime and a proliferation of socio-technical niches. To resolve these contestations, and to create a more sustainable platform for transitions to occur, it is argued that it will be necessary to create policy spaces for more place-based forms of reflexive governance. There is some evidence of this occurring amidst a less coherent and more contested set of multi-level regulatory conditions.

1. Introduction: from post-productionism to sustainable intensification

From the mid-1980s the UK saw a continuing fall in the price that consumers paid for food (Appleby et al., 2003). For governments that had struggled with inflation throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this was a welcome development, and a relieving legitimation of the particular public-private model of corporate retailer-led governance that had been constructed during the 1980s and 1990s. During this period the UK, as with other parts of Western Europe, were blessed with what can be called the 'post-productionist compromise'; whereby environmental protection, amenity pressures, as well as food production demands on agricultural land, could be assuaged by increasingly cheap imports of both temperate and exotic foodstuffs from outside the EU. Environmental and social externalities could be exported and distanced, whilst ever expanding domestic food choices (offered by thriving corporate retailers), continual falls in household food bills, and ever more protection of the countryside instilled a satisfying (and politically legitimating) culture of plenty and pastoralism over much of rural UK. The experience of food scarcity seemed a thing of the war-time past, or of distant and more turbulent lands.

Whilst it would be incorrect to assert that the principles of post-productionism are no longer of contemporary value, it is the contention of this paper that, as the second decade of the 21st century emerges, we are witnessing a much more volatile and contested regulatory system which is seriously challenging this earlier period of post-productionism. In short, as I will explain more fully below, this spatially bounded (EU and national) system of regulation has become buffeted by significantly new and (importantly) interdependent 'landscape pressures' which are seriously testing both the dominant regime of public and private retail-led systems of agri-food regulation. Moreover, my thesis is that these pressures and their contested outcomes will also have profound consequences for the degree that we witness either partial or more overall systemic change in the regulation of the UK food system. Indeed this period of instability – a period when a new and more pervasive variant of bio-economic productivism emerges (summed up in the oxymoron 'sustainable intensification') – will provide both constraints but also significant opportunities for many rural regions to progress 'into a new era'.

So far most commentaries on the recent volatilities have focused upon the descriptive and aggregated factors which led to their unfortunate confluence in 2007–8. The 'canary in the mine' warning came when 'cheap food' came to an end in 2008 with sharp increases in staple foodstuffs. After some retreat in food prices, by January 2011, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation price index had risen to231[1]; 8 percent above the previous peak in June 2008 on an index that, until six years ago, had

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[1] FAO press release on 3 February 2011 on food price index for January 2011 available at: http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/FoodPricesIndex/en/.

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never breached 100. In the same month, food price inflation in the UK reached 4.6 percent[2], and yet another report pointed to a looming ('perfect storm') global food crisis, calling for urgent action by policy makers who 'should not lose sight of major failings in the food system that exist today.'[3]

This paper will argue on the basis of empirical study and analysis undertaken since 2008[4] that the dominant public-privately regulated food system is beset by vulnerabilities and lacks the resilience and organisational capacity to overcome the series of landscape pressures that it now faces. These may be expressed as a series of price volatilities, but they are underlain by a set of far more profound and emerging resource deficiencies and food security concerns, often labelled: 'peak oil, food, water, soils,' and obesity, malnutrition, farmer survival or food deserts. The paper thus critically explores the more underlying nature of these vulnerabilities and their impact on concepts of regulation and governance of the global, carbon dependent, agro-food system, and its expression in the UK in particular. It does so by reference to empirical data generated by scenarios of different food futures employed in our research work with Chatham House[5].

Whilst we may argue that the dominant socio-technical regime what I now call *the bio-economic paradigm* is reaching its limits in dealing with these new landscape pressures, it is important to recognise that this does not stop it still vibrantly attempting to overcome them (Marsden, 2010). In fact, as I will expand upon below, the current period (post 2008) is beset by a major contestation of scientific, economic, technological and political paradigms, the bio-economic and the ecological economic paradigms. In the second part of the paper it is argued that it will be important, in order to make both the system and spatialised transitions to more diverse and spatially embedded sustainable and secure food systems, to adopt a more *reflexive governance approach* at different multi-level governance scales. Whilst there is some evidence of this occurring, such governance models have to contend with 'business as usual' logics associated with more 'locked in' paradigms associated with 'first-order' governance.

2. Transitions towards sustainability

Recently we have argued that meeting the type of challenges outlined above will involve major transformational change, which is likely to involve a re-balancing of the productive capacity of the food system along more ecological, social and environmental lines (Marsden et al., 2010). This will be no easy task for the UK since, on the one hand, it will be necessary to increase capacity and yields while, on the other, there will be considerable pressures to reduce inputs and maintain more extensive systems of farming. Although in 2009, in the last throws of the Labour government a new national UK food strategy was published,[6] in general food is not an area in which the government has intervened on a policy level in market activity and it now again (under a coalition government) continues to exhibit little appetite for the task of proactively shaping change in the UK food system. Indeed, increasingly since the new coalition government of 2010, it is relying upon the established corporate, retailer-led regulatory system to assuage consumer concerns and drive food policy. Perhaps for this reason, many commentators suggest incremental, technology-driven adaptive, change[7] rather than more innovative or systemic re-structuring. This espouses the bio-economic paradigm of agri-food development; one which puts faith in the development of new bio-science techniques of increasing food productivity at the same time as reducing exposure to environmental vulnerabilities (associated with droughts, pesticide and fertiliser use, see Horlings and Marsden, 2011). Away from the dominant, intensive, bio-based model there are, however, many examples of radical systemic and structural change (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). These occupy a multiplicity of lower level niches and have yet to demonstrate their scalability to a level at which they are seen as true competitors. An understanding of the nature of these more diverse pathways, through transitions theory, may be facilitated to some degree by the scenarios of food futures explained later in this paper. First, it is necessary to outline the nature of transitions themselves (see Fig. 1).

Transitions may be viewed temporally[8] as periods in which opportunity for change opens up within a system (i.e. a socio-technical regime made up of dominant economic, industrial, political and scientific rules and assumptions) to produce something disconnected to earlier supporting structures, as the dominant system struggles to respond to surrounding (landscape) pressures. The rules, values and assumptions of the old system become increasingly incongruent with new sets of expectations (from below) and the more uncontrollable landscape pressures (from above) (see Fig. 1). Within a multi-level perspective, the *meso level* will be occupied by particular systems made up of 'semi-coherent' socio-technical regimes (a mix of practices, regulations, networks, technologies etc).[9] In the case of food, actors in the supply chain, and others engaging with that supply chain, constitute a socio-technical group that act together to bring stability to that regime[10]. There may then be others, at a micro-level, lying outside this regime, occupying niches, pulling against the mainstream and seeking a radical departure from it. Scientific, social and governance innovation in these niches may be crucial for regime change (Kemp et al., 2001), but the mainstream may simply absorb and marginalise the niches and their values (constructed marginalisation). Indeed, we can propose, especially in a new context when productionism is again to the fore, that the dominant regime, as well as its bio-economic scientific community, has managed to construct a marginal role for these niche players while maintaining the dominant frameworks even in the new contexts of severe landscape pressure (see Fig. 1).

However, what may make a more profound difference in terms of their influence on these power relations is the very intensity and uncertainty of macro level, landscape pressures. These too are borne out of socio-technical factors, but may be exogenous to the regime; consisting of, for example, the realisation and potential destabilisation of macro-environmental and economic resource depletion and competition (say between food and bio-fuels), climate change and food security riots and export bans.

[2] Press release dated 9 February 2011 disclosing results of BRC/Nielsen shop price index for January 2011 available at: http://www.brc.org.uk/brc_news_detail.asp%3fid=1889&kCat=&kData=1.

[3] Foresight *The Future of Food and Farming* (2011) The Government Office for Science, London.

[4] Ambler-Edwards, S., Bailey, K., Kiff, A., Lang, T., Lee, R., Marsden, T., Simon, D., Tibbs, H. (2009) *Food Futures*: *Rethinking UK Strategy*, Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), London.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (2010) *Food 2030*: *How we get there* London: DEFRA.

[7] See for example the call for sustainable intensification in: The Royal Society. (2009) *Reaping the benefits*: *Science and the Sustainable Intensification of Global Agriculture*. London: The Royal Society.

[8] Although I will later argue that it is also important to think spatially when considering transitions.

[9] Geels, F.W. 'Technological transitions as evolutionary reconfiguration processes: a multi-level perspective and a case study' (2002) 31 Research Policy 1257–1274; and Rip, A., Kemp, R. 1998. 'Technological Change. in Rayner, S., Malone, E.L *Human Choice and Climate Change*. 327–399, (1998) Columbus, Ohio: Batelle Press.

[10] Geels op. cit.