

Food regimes and their transformation¹

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Food regimes are really historical concepts that divide the world into particular stages of relative stability that are full of contradictions but nonetheless have a certain set of relationships that are predictable to all of the significant actors. And those are followed by periods of prolonged crisis, which are actually as long as the stable periods themselves. So food regimes themselves last about 25 years, the crises also last about 25 years and it's these crises, because I think we're in one now, and we talk about transformation, it's these crises that I want to focus on and what goes on inside a crisis.

Definitions

First though let me define a food regime. It consists of a particular pattern of specialisation and trade in the world economy, a particular system of power including which government, which state, is dominant or hegemonic, particular kinds of farming systems and crops, which are leading the change and the dynamism of the system and modes of consumption. And these are organised by class. So I can call those class diets, which then change as food becomes more and more of a commodity or sometimes less of a commodity for different categories of people.

These transitions then happen over equally long periods of time, about 25 years, and consist of two strands we can call them. One are attempts to restore the old order. When things aren't working, various actors, especially powerful actors, but really everyone tries to make changes that will help the system work as it did before, when things aren't predictable any more that used to be. So there are efforts to restore the old structures but also new issues, new relationships, new social groups, new movements arise in these periods that create the possibilities for many kinds of combinations into something new, which could be a new food regime.

So let me go over what the main food regimes have been.

Settler colonial food regime develops

The first food regime I'm going to talk about began about 1870 when the first price setting market in a basic food was created, and that was the world wheat market. I call that regime the settler colonial food regime. It consisted of a world wheat market. Wheat became the leading crop in this regime. It created specialised export zones, which we now consider natural, but they were not even areas that produced wheat at all at that time. The ones we consider natural now are the plains of the United States and Canada, of Argentina, southern Brazil, of

¹ Minor corrections, eg removing repetitions, hesitations, correcting mis-spoken words in the audio and [adding clarifications], have been made to this transcript.

Australia, New Zealand those are the main ones now. The other ones that grew up in the same period but are lost to our historical memory, but were major exporters and competitors at the time, were Siberia, the Danube basin, western India (Punjab) and all of these were created as specialised wheat producing zones, specialised wheat export zones, by a combination of factors.

One was the building of railways which involved often displacing indigenous peoples, settler wars that had been happening in each of these regions, both the ones that declined and the ones that stabilized. And they did that by building the railways and then bringing into those newly organised territories, settlers who were a new kind of farmer that had never existed in the world before. They weren't peasant farmers. They were family farmers for the most part, because they needed family labour to be able to survive in these harsh unorganised conditions, but they were different in that they were completely specialised and completely dependent on selling crops in world markets. In other words they were completely dependent on the railroads that brought them there and were part of the organising of the land.

These projects were, it's important to say, colonial projects that way, the settler colonial regime. So there were two kinds of colonies in that time. This is following Giovanni Arrighi's distinction. Colonies of rule are the ones we think about most often. So India, for instance, is a colony of rule where Britain organised that the government for its own interests, but all of the people whose lives and work were reorganised remained there. The colonies of settlement actually displaced indigenous people and replaced them with Europeans, European immigrants.

Now the impetus for this was complex, but the most important thing to understand is that there was a process, especially in England, of pushing people off the land, er, that been going on for quite a long time and that was creating a working class for industry and mining. But a working-class much too big and much too obstreperous for comfort. And so the ability to use the settler colonies to solve this problem was very brilliant. It involved two things at one time. It reduced the numbers of people who were in distress, who were stealing because they were hungry, who were in general unable to be able to get work and live a life that was stable and get enough food in the societies. So it was a stabilising force. It also sent them to places where they could produce food and send it back - in other words create a world market.

It was a particularly important solution for Britain because it did sacrifice its landed classes to do this and it replaced capitalist farming using wage labour on a large scale, which was also, paradoxically, ecological farming - it was not using machines - replaced it with family labour that was entirely specialised and dependent on exports and was willing and needing to embrace machinery as soon as it could come available because there was a shortage of labour. The idea was these new states of the United States expanding west, Canada, Australia all of these governments that were expanding into these territories by building railways bringing European settlers to farm, creating income for the country by exporting this wheat, that settler colonies were double solution to the numbers

of poor and perhaps dangerous people in Britain and to the [Britain's] need to bring in imports. It also created a kind of farming that relied on the natural fertility of soils that had never been farmed, but had been used by indigenous peoples in much less intensive ways managed, on very large scales, but with farming very much are a minor part of the ways that the ecological system was used. It replaced all that with farmers who were able to draw on the fertility of the soil to send wheat back to England and to the rest of Europe.

The legacy of that was a new class of family farmers in all these major export regions who were going to be the most vulnerable to collapses or changes in the world market and the growth of wheat and meat diets in Europe for the poor. So this satisfied the people remaining back in Europe. It allowed diets and standards of living to increase and improve in England and in other parts of Europe. And it allowed the expansion and settlement of, by displacing indigenous people in the areas of new settlement.

Interrupted by war, ended by economic collapse

Now that went on until 1914, when World War I interrupted the trade. Of course the exports, and the boats being exported, were an important part of the conduct of the war itself. So the countries in Europe that were fighting each other, and fighting in the colonies as well, were also fighting each other in terms of interrupting food supply. This became an important part of the story. And it meant that when the war was over world prices went up again but only for a short time because very quickly in the middle of the 1920s there was a collapse of the world wheat market, which was just a few years in advance of the financial crisis that led the whole world into a financial and economic depression that lasted until World War II. And it was only after World War II that a new regime was stabilised. In other words there was a transition that lasted from 1914 (the beginning of World War I) until 1945 (the end of World War II), in which nothing that had worked in the old food regime worked any more.

So the collapse of the world wheat market was the crucial sign of transition. The question then becomes what happened? There was a second crisis that was coexisting with this, which was an ecological crisis. In North America it was known as the Dust Bowl. The soil that had been ploughed for the first time, and cultivated without ecological farming systems, without renewal of the soil, without fertiliser, had started to give out and it started to erode and to simply blow away. And there were mass movements of farmers out of these ecological zones only one or two generations after they arrived.

The result, all over the world, was that after opening to a world wheat market in the first food regime, national governments took control of their food systems again. And that meant taking control also of what we now know as agricultural policies. National agricultural policies, which were designed to make sure that each country had its own food supply. A little piece of this on the side is that all of this colonies of rule, all of the colonies of Africa, Asia for the most part, were organised in such a way that certain areas, plantations, produced the export crops that were wanted by the colonial powers but for the most part most of the

population was expected to feed the colony. So their agriculture wasn't helped but it wasn't stopped either, and except for the plantation and mine areas, most of the land was left as it was. So the world still allowed the majority of people to remain peasants.

So what happened then?. Okay what happened during this period. There were efforts to move forward creating national agriculture. The ones who suffered the most in this crisis were the farmers who'd been created in the last food regime. These specialised wheat export farmers. After World War II, there were plans in place by the victorious powers, particularly the United States and England, to organise trade internationally within a certain framework that was based on the averages of exports and imports from the old regime to try to stabilise it and to organise it through something called the World Food Board. This was a plan that was generated that would have made the Food and Agriculture Organisation a very powerful institution and each government was expecting to plan its own agriculture within that framework of international multilateral organisations. However, there was a meeting in Washington in 1947 in which both of the leading powers, the US as the rising power, the UK as the declining power, agreed not to do it after all. They decided they would not do it. Why not?

The United States as the dominant power had a coalition in government that included farmers who were the ones most desperately affected by the crisis of the food regime and who were interested in having a particular kind of national regulation, which was invented in the United States for the first time, which became the mechanism for reconstructing a new food regime without anyone being explicit about it - anyone naming what it was.

The mercantile industrial food regime

I call this the mercantile industrial food regime. It lasted from 1947, when the decision not to organise the World Food Board was taken, to 1973, when there was what was called the first World Food Crisis when prices shot up and all of the old patterns ceased to be predictable. The national policies of the United States involved supporting farmers not in the way that had been done a little bit in the UK, which is if you don't like the incomes of farmers are getting you simply pay them the difference at the end of the year. That was not considered acceptable. Instead, the United States set up programmes in which it bought products. Complicated ways of calling them loans and setting what prices were desirable, target prices, but basically it bought commodities - wheat, cotton, corn (maize) - and then added other ones later in order to keep the price up. In order to do this, it needed to introduce import controls because otherwise everyone in the world would send all of their products to the United States, which was paying higher than market prices.

This meant that the trade liberalisation that was the general rule and the general goal of international economic negotiations from then on excluded agriculture. There was an exception made for agriculture from the beginning. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which was supposed to be temporary, became permanent because other agreements were not decided on at the same time. And

Article 11 of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade said all of the negotiations that will go on from now on to try to liberalise trade will not apply to agriculture. In every country, certainly in the United States, there were also exceptions made to domestic legislation - for example minimum wages. Always agricultural labour was excepted. There were usually exceptions or special programmes made for migration or immigration to take care of agriculture. That's the domestic side.

What it meant was that every country was encouraged to develop its own programmes and most of those programmes also took the form of supporting farmers by national governments. And that was the way the system was supposed to work. It is hard to remember that now because we've been taking that system apart in the next crisis but that is what was constructed at that time.

Internationally, the United States was holding a lot of surpluses and the more surpluses it bought the more the gap grew between what was the market price which was being pressed down and what the United States government was paying - the Commodity Credit Corporation was paying - for this grain. So the idea was to get rid of it. And the way to get rid of it was to invent an entirely new institution, which was called "aid," in the current system. Governments and people had helped each other in various ways but what was called *aid* worked through the monetary system at the time. It began with the Marshall plan in Europe in which food, feed and fertilizer² was almost half - 40% - of what was given to Europe and Japan to help them reconstruct their economies after World War II. But to help them reconstruct in a very particular way, and for a limited period of time. So this was the basis of converting a lot of European agriculture into the system that was already dominant in the United States. This is how the international division of labour in the farming and food system changed in tandem through international power. And new commodities started coming up, meat in particular.

But then food aid was changed to shift to the former colonies of Europe - which were now becoming independent - through particular legislation, Public Law 480, food aid - "Food for Peace" - in the United States, in which huge transfers of grain were sent to countries that were trying to industrialise and didn't really mind if their farmers were negatively affected by huge imports of doubly subsidised grain. They were doubly subsidised cause they were subsidised inside the United States and then they were subsidised in the export. All of which seemed to work for everyone.

That is why it was a food regime. It worked for the United States. It worked for other countries to organise their own agricultural systems both domestically and for export. And it worked for the governments receiving these huge aid shipments because it allowed them to feed populations of the cities, to help them develop an industry, a working class and, a stabilised food distribution system and also to help them build states often. So they could distribute food as part of building up their national states in a postcolonial situation. But no one again

² Replaces word farming in audio

tried to do anything directly to the peasants. Most people were still farming in the old ways in these countries they were just put under a lot of pressure because they couldn't sell to these growing urban markets. They couldn't compete with the doubly subsidised grain that was coming in.

The grain under public law 480, the grain shipments at their peak, in the 1960s, were again almost half of world shipments of grain. So even though they were counted as trade at the time, they put huge pressure on the grain that was traded. So the push for this, if we take it all back, was the farmers created in the first food regime needed to find new markets. They became politically important in the dominant country of the second food regime, the United States, because of the particular form of agricultural policy that involved collecting large amounts of government-held grain, They were used as food aid and that restructured the entire world. It encouraged many parts of the world to shift to wheat diets. It encouraged the farming system to separate between animal/livestock and grain, to create intensive livestock production and to create specialised fields of grain devoted specifically to feeding animals, particularly maize and then coming on later in a more complicated way soya beans. Which of course was an Asian crop, were brought into the United States only in the crisis of the 1920s and 30s.

So the farmers were the push for this, but then through these mercantile relations, these non free trade relations, these highly state-organised relations there grew up the agri-food industries. These are a variety of kinds. They are the ones that supported the industrialisation of farming - chemical industries for fertiliser and pesticides; the food industries that became the main buyers from farmers that produced what I call durable foods - another part of this regime, highly processed foods. So that farmers changed from being the people on the land who sold food to people who ate it, to becoming the point in the middle of giant corporations, who became buyers of inputs (instead of farmers' recycling their own inputs on the farm), and became sellers of raw materials to the food industry (instead of selling final products to consumers).

So the legacy of all this was the industrialisation of agriculture, the mass consumption of industrial food and of meat - changing diets - and agri-food corporations that were born within this system, grew within this system, but then felt constrained by this system. So when this system went into crisis they were the new social category, the new group, that became important in the next period.

Into crisis in 1973, and still there?

So this food regime then when into crisis in 1973. It's a long story. It had to do with the fact that this food regime was contained within the Cold War trading blocs. Because the Cold War was not only about the military it was also about economics - that the two blocks only traded internally. But there were problems and contradictions within that which led to a giant grain deal happening in 1973 [between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R] and food prices tripled.

So in all of this period [before 1973], food prices had been kept very low, meat prices were going down, standards of living defined by eating more meat, more wheat, more processed food. All of that was going up. Then suddenly in 1973 the prices tripled. And the price of meat in particular went up and nothing became predictable any more - about how you could trade, what would happen if you did this or that - you being corporations, you being consumers, you being farmers. Who would anyone sell to, buy from, what would the prices be? So this stable situation disappeared. Prices did go up again for a variety of reasons but then they went down again and, in effect, from a food regime perspective, the system never stabilised again. Because it is not about high prices or low prices, it's about stability or instability. It's about predictability or unpredictability. It became unpredictable in 1973 and it's remained so.

So, from this point of view, we have, arguably, been in a crisis ever since 1973, which is longer than 25 years. Now, some people say there's been a stabilised food regime around corporate power, and possibly that's so. It depends how you interpret it. My own interpretation, because I'm focusing on transformation, is that two trajectories began to evolve in the 1980s and the 1990s. First, coming out of a period of intense national regulation, which the US-centred mercantile industrial food regime had been, there was the project that was carried by the World Trade Organisation, and the negotiations leading up to it, to bring agriculture into trade rules, to liberalise agricultural trade. And the main force behind this were the corporations that had grown up in the old food regime and felt constrained by it. So this involved a deepening and widening of industrial agriculture, including, now to the global South. So all the peasantries that had been more or less neglected, pressed, unfairly competed with, whatever was going on, but still left there, left on the land, were now directly engaged with new processes in a transition to something else.

We don't know quite what yet. It involves a deepening and widening of industrial agriculture throughout the global South and very much, what Farshad Araghi has called, a global enclosure of the world's peasantries - that is sometimes a direct seizure of land, sometimes pressure on the peasantry so intense that massive migrations of people from the countryside going to what started to become global cities. Often going very far distances not just to their own countries. So this involved a variety of efforts to go back to make the old system work better, particularly for the corporations, the food corporations, the food input corporations, and it involved also new social movements that have arisen in this period and the brought issues into the food system that had not been part of any food regime before.

Discovery: Production is not enough for health or sustainability

Coming out of the crisis of World War I, the depression, World War II, there was a general belief that if farmers produced enough food everything would be fine. There was not worry about the ecosystem, there was not a worry about health. The problem of health was people being hungry and not having enough food, so if farmers could be supported to produce enough food that would solve the problem. And food was thought of in very simple ways. It was thought that

calories, which is mainly grain, and proteins, which was mainly meat or dairy, livestock products, and those were the main products that were subsidised coming out of the first and second food regime. No one worried too much about people getting fruits and vegetables. Those were always produced by small farmers even in the north, even in the United States, even in Canada, even in Britain, still in France, all around the cities. But then what happened was during this food regime the cities grew. And they grew and took over the farmland. A lot of fruits and vegetables started to become difficult to sell in cities, or for farmers to grow, or to grow profitably, in the lands near the cities. Small animals the same – chickens, eggs and so on, cheese on a small scale.

This was the period in which the supermarkets and retail, which had grown - supermarkets are grown up in the 1950s and 60s with the growth of cities, the growth of cars, the growth of domestic appliances: you need a fridge to shop every week at the supermarket. You need the supermarket to have, other stores to have, refrigeration and big parking lots to make all that possible - that had been growing up. But the supermarkets were not the dominant force in the system. They started to claim power in the 1990s. And then they started to make a move internationally, to organise the new product, of what might be a new food regime or might not, which is fresh fruits and vegetables and the other product that had been taken for granted before, which is fish, shrimp and so on. So that started happening and then we started noticing that there were health problems. There were health problems that came out of eating processed foods that started to be noticed. It took a long time for that to be agreed but now it is generally agreed and we talk about diabetes and obesity as problems but that's only a feature of the last 10 years really, that it's generally agreed.

So there is a health problem about the way that food was produced in the old regime and the lack of foods, fresh fruits and vegetables mostly, that somehow disappeared without anyone noticing it but became a profit opportunity for the supermarkets, particularly to move into the former peasant areas of the global South. So if Kenya, Kenyan farmers, could be encouraged to produce one type of green beans to a particular specification to enter into a supply chain that was organised, financially and physically, with cold, with refrigeration, and proper shipment and tracking and so on, by European supermarkets or if Latin American food could be brought into the United States, then that would bring these, that would bring a new centre of profit, really, into the food system and allow the supermarkets to become the more dominant power, which they did. That's only one of the ways that they did. There's quite a lot of literature on finance, on real estate and a whole variety of other mechanisms that changed that supported this growth of supermarket power.

Reorganising the world, diets and supply chains

From the food regime perspective, it began reorganising the world. It began reorganising diets in two ways, at least. One is that diets became more unequal. Fresh fruits and vegetables, which had been available in local ways to even poor people for a long time, suddenly became expensive. So they became part of a shifting of diets into rich and poor diets, really. And the processed food, which is

still highly subsidised, became much cheaper. So MacDonald's for the poor and various kinds of shrimp and whatever for privileged people. And all of these began to be brought through reorganised or newly organised filieres or supply chains across the world. Aquaculture became important. So the reorganisation of agro-ecosystems in the global South, both to produce for large consumption of privileged consumers, mostly in the North, but also privileged classes growing up in the global South, became really an important part of transforming diets and transforming farming systems.

The second important social movement that grew up during this period was the environmental movement. And this is, this started earlier to introduce new possibilities for crisis into the old system but also new possibilities for transformation. So the big problems of industrial agriculture started to be noticed. They had been warned about as early as 1962, I think, when Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* and that was about pesticides and the danger to wildlife or what we now call biological diversity. But really the environmental movement moved into industry - acid rain and a variety of other issues became the focus of international environmental politics, and for a surprisingly long time environmental movements ignored the role of agriculture. This began to change with some of the international assessments - first of climate change, then the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, then the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development. It became clear that the way that we farm, farming systems, were an important part of a variety of environmental crises and that they have to be central to the solution. That especially if we need to get off carbon and the fossil fuel dependency of the industrial farming system--- that it is plants that take solar energy from the sun and transform it and make it available to animals, to humans and to the continuation of life and society as we know it.

So these two movements health and environment became crucial and not easily integrated into the old way of doing things. So in my view these still remain unanswered and we are in a possible situation where there are two trajectories on offer both of which focus on solving the health problems of the food system and the environmental problems of the food system. The deeper issues that will determine which of these trajectories, or which combination of trajectories, will settle into the future have to do with really the long history of humanity. How human societies form, how we use the land, how we organise our work to produce what we need including food, how people move, societies move and reform over long distances. And that leads us to think about what is the meaning of agriculture in a world that for the first time in human history has become overwhelming urban?