Agrifood Inequalities: Globalization and localization

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ABSTRACT The current agrifood system is in crisis. At the core of this crisis is a constellation of escalating inequalities. Patricia Allen and Alice Brooke Wilson ask how are social movements and innovations in the alternative agrifood movements in the United States addressing these inequalities? They examine the development of local food systems in the US, in terms of the local food movement’s engagement with the issue of inequality.

KEYWORDS agriculture; environment; poverty United States; local food movements; US farm policy

The global agrifood system has entered an amplified phase of ecological, social, and economic crisis. Everywhere, there are horror stories of hungry children, melting glaciers, financial ruin, oceanic dead zones, endangered species, dry wells, and crop failures that spell calamity for the global ecosystem and the humans who depend on it. This crisis has been building for decades, and for those closest to the edge, these problems are searingly familiar, particularly in the world of food. Children rioting in Haiti have been hungry before. Farmers in India have suffered drought before. Food crisis is not new. What is new is the depth and pace of the crisis and that it is finally affecting middle-class Americans in an everyday form as food prices rise, farms disappear, and every grocery store looks the same. These conditions and experiences – different as they are in geography and urgency – have been laid at the feet of a common enemy: globalization.

Globalization of the agrifood system is, of course, longstanding; it has been centuries in the making. What is new about today’s globalization is the accelerating inequalities that it has produced and the degree to which it is the result of conscious public policy-making. That is, American agricultural policy set the stage for and wrote the script of the agrifood globalization that is creating global misery and devastation. This globalization of the agrifood system has inspired a wide range of global counter-movements, such as the Food Sovereignty movement, the Fair Trade movement, the Slow Food movement, and the US local food movement. In this article we focus primarily on the latter after first discussing the role of American agricultural Policy in fostering globalization.

Agricultural neo-liberalization and globalization

A major (but not only) spur to the current global food crisis is the explosion in biofuel production and consumption engineered by the Bush Administration and a bi-partisan
consensus in Congress. In 2008, fully one-third of
the US maize crop (the world's largest by far) will
be diverted into ethanol production – double the
level of three years before. If the US government
holds to its biofuel mandates, that proportion will
rise steadily over the next decade. This sudden
and unprecedented switch in grain use has
caused grain prices to surge in just three
years, causing price inflation not seen domesti-
cally or globally in a generation (http://www.
reuters.com/article/marketsNews/idINN24299787
20080724?rpc = 44&sp = true, accessed 27 July
2008).

The spike in food prices arrives amid a weaken-
ing US economy, with increasing layoffs, falling
real wages, record-high gasoline prices, and an
ever-deepening mortgage crisis that falls heaviest
on lower-middle class homeowners. Ecologically,
the increase in grain has led to an upswing in syn-
thetic fertilizer and herbicide use, contributing to
record-size dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico. It
has also led farmers in the Corn Belt to bring mil-
ions of acres of environmentally sensitive land
into intensive production. Together, this intensifi-
cation and expansion of industrial agriculture
promises to accelerate the rate of soil erosion in
the US. Before the biofuel boom, the US heartland
was already losing topsoil at the rate of 1 percent
per year (Montgomery, 2007). Meanwhile, height-
tened grain prices have squeezed the profit mar-
gins of the few companies that dominate US meat
production, pressuring them to cut costs by
further intensifying their already-environmen-
tally devastating domestic concentrated animal
feeding operations (CAFOs) and inspiring them to
search for new markets for their goods in Asia.

These crises ripple across the globe, falling
hardest on global-South nations like Haiti that
have dismantled their domestic food-production
networks under pressure from the International
Monetary Fund and other ‘Washington Consen-
sus’ institutions (Mitchell, 2008). Shifts in agricul-
ture, culminating in massive US industrial
commodity farming and the global replication of
this model, have disrupted traditional agricultural
systems throughout the world (Friedmann and
McNair, 2008). This industrial farming model, ex-
plicitly supported by billions of US dollars in farm
subsidies and research, was instrumental in the
spread and consolidation of neo-liberal globaliza-
tion over the past 30 years – despite neo-liberal-
ism's stated goal of getting the government out of
markets. This is a textbook case of Harvey's 'para-
dox of intense state interventions and government
by elites and “experts” in a world where the state
is supposed not to be interventionist’ (Harvey,
the state has been used to support and subsidize
agribusiness interests, including the allocation of
resources, technical assistance, and management
of labour supply. Research investment in technol-
ogy, for example, has steadily increased productiv-
ity on US farms, leading to the core problem of
overproduction in the agrifood system.

US agricultural policy has been a driving force
in agrifood globalization since at least the 1970s,
with the shift from supply to demand manage-
ment. While many consider the seeds of neo-
liberalism to have been sown during the
Reagan administration, the groundwork for neo-
liberalism predates Reagan by a full decade. In
the early 1970s, Richard Nixon's agriculture
secretary Earl Butz – who had served on the
board of Ralston-Purina and other agribusiness
corporations before joining the Nixon Admini-
stration – scrapped the progressive New Deal-
era supply-management mechanisms he had
inherited and replaced them with a policy de-
dsigned to maximize production. Since that time,
US farm policy has focused on (a) subsidizing US
grain farmers when prices fall below the cost of
production; and (b) seeking uses for the resulting
grain surplus, including through opening foreign
markets to subsidized US grain (Ray et al., 2003,
www.agpolicy.org). The subsidy system was de-
dsigned to maximize production and thus lower
the cost of inputs for the increasingly large conglom erates that dominated food processing,
allowing them to maintain profitability while
churning out low-priced industrial meat, dairy,
and processed foods, resulting in the so-called US
‘cheap food policy’ (Busch, 2005). Meanwhile,
the food-processing and agribusiness industries
consolidated dramatically (Hendrickson and
Heffernan, 2007) – with the approval of the federal
government since the Reagan era. This has
included ultraliberal readings of antitrust code using the resulting pricing power to squeeze farmers and workers while holding down the retail price of food (Lynn, 2006).

Globalization and the production of inequality

These globalized changes in agrifood systems have accelerated pre-existing inequalities. The existing level of inequality is staggering. According to the UNDP, the world's richest 50 people have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million people, and 40 percent of the world's people receive only 5 percent of global income (Martens, 2005). What is even more remarkable is that, despite (or because of) advances in science, technology, and international cooperation, the level of global inequality has increased for fully 80 percent of the world's people. More and more people are going hungry, and every year that hunger continues at present levels, it costs five million children their lives (FAO, 2006). Now that food prices are skyrocketing, this number will follow pace.

In the US, economic inequality has been on the rise since the 1970s, and many Americans experience food insecurity. According to the most recently available figures, in 2006, 10.9 percent of American households (35.5 million people) were already food insecure, meaning at times they did not have enough money for food (Nord et al., 2007). Among the food insecure, there are deeper inequalities in that food insecurity is disproportionately experienced by low-income households that are headed by women, include children, and/or are of colour. Indeed, the food crisis will hit women the hardest due to their central roles in feeding and farming, and their relative lack of resources. Throughout the world women bear responsibility for their family's nutrition, but they are poorer, own less property, do more work, hold less power, are less educated, and suffer more hunger than men (Allen and Sachs, 2007).

Throughout the world, agricultural workers suffer some of the lowest wages and most difficult working conditions. Farm workers in the world's richest agrifood system live in poverty, endure difficult and dangerous working conditions, and lack housing and health care (NCFH, 2002). In the US, the poverty-level wages of farm workers are declining, and, in most states, farm workers do not have the right to collective bargaining or overtime. Farming in the US is also highly racialized – nearly all hired farm workers are people of colour. In addition, non-Whites operate only about 2 percent of farms although they comprise nearly a quarter of the population. Property ownership is another form of inequality; only 5 percent of American landowners own 80 percent of the land.

The history of agrifood globalization is a history of escalating inequalities between regions and among people within regions. How are agrifood-related social movements addressing these inequalities?

Social movements and globalized inequalities

Throughout the world, people are working both in opposition to the forces of the industrialized, globalized agrifood system, and in the development of alternatives, such as organic agriculture, farmer networks, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and local food initiatives. Though they have a common analysis of the problem of globalization and its vectors of multinational corporations, the goals of the various anti-globalization movements, such as the food sovereignty movement, the Slow Food movement, and various other movements to 'relocalize' food are different, most notably in how they address inequality.

In the US, interest in alternatives to the industrialized, globalized agrifood system is accelerating. For example, sales of organic food are growing by 20 percent a year, and certified organic crop acreage in the US showed a four-fold increase from 1992 to 2005 (ERS, 2008). Community supported agriculture has also caught on. There were only 50 CSAs in 1990; today there are over 1,500, according to the local-food mapping website Local Harvest (http://www.localharvest.org/descriptions.jsp, accessed 28 July 2008). And, the focus on 'local' and 'slow' food has exploded over the last five years, with
cover stories in every major national newspaper and magazine, often in the wake of the increasingly frequent outbreaks of food poisoning from food of distant provenance.

The most explicitly anti-globalization agrifood movements in the US are constituted by Slow Food USA and Buy Local food campaigns. While these groups are champions of local farmers and closer connections between farmers and consumers, they do not address deep agrifood inequalities or the policies that created them. Slow Food USA, for example, does cite fair food as a value, and its website declares a belief in fair compensation for workers and universal access to ‘good and clean’ food. However, the activities of Slow Food USA are centred on the consumption and celebration of ‘good’ food through, for example, food festivals, tastings, and convivias, nearly all of which require money and a certain class position for participation. The Buy Local food campaigns in the US depart from historical political consumerism efforts such as Buy Union and Buy Black in that they do not deal with inequality (Hinrichs and Allen, 2008). In fact, some of the initiatives promoted by these campaigns may inadvertently support inequality by supporting traditional American agrarian structures.

As it is currently constituted, it appears that food systems localization represents an unwitting triumph of neo-liberal logic (i.e., relocating the food system depends on individual consumer ‘choice’) where it is least expected (i.e., in resistance to globalization). That is, in many ways it represents an example of Massey’s (1994, 2004) concern about localism, by valorizing ‘reactionary’ individual consumption practices that do not challenge neo-liberal assumptions. Local food movements tend to move to solutions without an analysis of cause, thus potentially landing them in the position of reinscribing or advancing privilege even though this is not their intention. The construction and endowments of localities must be placed in historical context, beginning with the understanding that many localities have been enriched – and thus have won the privilege of expending effort to relocalize – through the impoverishment of others. In addition, a danger of focusing on the local is that it engenders a kind of insular thinking, thereby constricting rather than opening the field of ‘political engagement and action’ (Harvey, 1996: 353). That is, if the scope of local food movements is only their own region, they will not (cannot) apprehend the scope or depth of inequalities wrought by globalization fuelled through agrifood policies, and therefore cannot participate in solving them.

In general, class and inequality have been invisible in the alternative agrifood movement in the US (Allen, 2004; Philpott, 2005). In contrast, efforts in the Global South directly address inequality. For example, networks such as La Via Campesina and Campesino to Campesino have established the concept of ‘food sovereignty’, the right of all peoples to ‘safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food’ as well as access to sufficient land to produce it. At its core, the food sovereignty concept challenges one of the key precepts of globalized capitalism: that all products, including food, are best regulated by market forces. Instead, the food sovereignty movement declares that in any given area, food should be used for nutrition first, and trade if and only if nutritional needs are met.

While globalization has affected ordinary Americans for decades, it has never hit as broadly or as close to home. For example, the policy push to open overseas markets put US workers into competition with lower-paid workers in the Global South, with the result that real US wages have fallen (Pollin, 2003), primarily affecting low-wage workers. Today, though, globalization is affecting all Americans on a daily basis through the lens and experience of food. Americans are used to cheap food. From the early days of neo-liberalism until the recent ethanol boom, US food expenditures as a share of disposable personal income dropped steadily (USDA, 2006). Now, food prices are increasing for everyday foods like bread; and many Americans are experiencing food rationing for the first time in their lives. Now that the agrifood crisis is hitting closer to home, will Americans join their global brothers and sisters in the struggle against inequality?
Liberatory localism?

The tendencies to elitist and paradoxical orientations and outcomes in the US alternative agrifood movement are not intentional. In fact, many of the participants explicitly support social justice, even though it goes against the grain of American individualism (Allen and Hinrichs, 2007). And, nearly every sustainable agriculture organization now lists social justice as one of its goals, a significant change over the years. The local food movement can become a liberatory movement in two key ways.

First, the local food movement, by de-industrializing the table through self-transformation and ethical food practices, has the potential to be an immediate ‘here and now’ way to build a different world and resist neo-liberalization. Gibson-Graham (2006) and Gibson-Graham and Cameron (2007) point to the development of community projects that eschew private ownership relations and the appropriation of surplus value by non-producers. For example, one of the newest food trends are ‘pay what you can’ restaurants based on the idea that everyone deserves good food, but not everyone can afford to pay the same price (Farnsworth, 2008). The USA Domestic Fair Trade Working Group has launched an effort, now piloted in several states, to bring fair trade practices to the US by working to create a third party-certified standard that would represent social justice criteria, including a living wage. The ethics of consumption and the connection between food and embodiment makes food a pivotal point for challenging and charting pathways to alternative critical engagement.

Second, beyond the value of actual practices, there is the value of discursive and cognitive change and engagement. Because our relationship with food is one of the ‘closest-in’, consumption provides a place, a site of unmapped possibilities present within every situation, with immanent transformative potential to cultivate new subjectivities and the cultural alternatives to neo-liberal hegemony. The local food movement can build strong communities that join with other communities to challenge Polanyi’s (1944) ‘fictitious’ commodification of humans and nature. In the organic market, for example, the importance of its growth lies primarily in the opening it provides for the conscious ‘de-fetishization’ of food, and for enjoining people to think critically about the food system (Allen and Kovach, 2000). If neo-liberal capitalism rests firmly on the industrialization of agriculture and the commodification of food, then the project of highlighting the transformative political potential in the daily decisions people make about food – that is, denaturalizing industrial food – becomes central to opening up alternatives to neo-liberalism.

While food-system localization advocates must be challenged to analyze the implications of the widespread, uncritical embrace of the idea of place in a landscape of massive historical inequality, place also has liberatory sensibilities. A sense of place can develop a consciousness of linkages and a positive integration of the global and local, building a ‘global sense of the local, a global sense of place’ (Massey, 1994: 156). Applying this understanding of place as a process and locality as a set of relations has the potential to expand the local food movement’s attention to inequality. Rather than a localization based on romantic essentialism or one that reads local as good and global as bad, local food movements can partner with other regions to address inequality and the policies that create and foster it.

The United Nations’ Human Development Report cites unfair policies as the cause of the increases in global inequality. Even the World Bank is advocating changes in unfair international trade policies. Koc (1994) suggests that ‘globalization’ become a term for the knowledge that we share the same world, which requires responsible and caring relationships among members of the world community. If we take this approach, we can join together to end inequality and environmental destruction both through community-scale entrepreneurial efforts and through changing public policy. If we do not, we end up where we are today, with Wal-Mart as the world’s largest purveyor of ‘local’ food. Changes in American agrifood
policies and citizen engagement with everyday food choices are key to reversing the trend of increasing inequalities both between and within nations.

References

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