Re-embedding the food economy in food politics: confronting the biocapitalist food regime

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Food is Big Business

Yearly 7,5 trillion US $ (ETC Group 2011)

>>> already topping the energy market

Meet the new Life Industries:

big Agri, big Pharma, big Energy,
big Chem, and the Mightiest Military!
Food Business is members-only
Profile of the Food Boys' Club

Food & Agriculture a highly concentrated market

4 companies account for 75%-90% of global grain trade.

10 companies are responsible for over 40% of the global retail market.

5 companies share 68% of the world's agrochemical market.

3 companies control almost 50% of the proprietary seeds market.

(Source: Oxford Farming Conference, 2012)
In 2011, the average 4-firm concentration ratio exceeded the threshold for the definition of a cartel (50%) in all food-related industries except fertilisers.

(ETC Group 2013; EU Agricultural Markets brief 2015)
Food chain clusters

the example of ConAgra Foods

agrochemicals → seeds → livestock feed → cattle → slaughterhouses → processing meat → broiling meat

one of the largest millers in the USA trades its own grain processes and retails food...
Power laws in the food business

**DISTRIBUTION OF POWER in Agriculture**

- **89%** of top 150 agribusiness corporations are located in just **20** countries, 43 of which in the USA.

- **20** countries account for **78%** of global exports and **70%** of global imports in 2010.

(Source: Oxford Farming Conference, 2012)
There is broad agreement on the diagnosis (De Schutter, 2014)
Agriculture is BOTH the source and the solution of major challenges humans are facing

- **LOST** 75% of agro-biodiversity
- **LOST** 1 billion hectares of forest
- **70%** of global water use
- **> 25%** of GHG emissions
- **925m people** undernourished
- ** Majority** of the world’s poorest live in rural areas
- **Improvement in rural conditions is 2x as effective in reducing poverty**
- **Productivity per unit is higher in small diversified farms than in conventional farming**
- **Proper management of plants and soil can reduce global warming**
- **Current food production is more than enough to feed the world**

Sources: Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Altieri, 2009; World Bank data, 2010; FAO, 2004; IAASTD, 2009
70% to 80% of our food (and seed) still comes from small farms
Something has to give

less energy, less water, less pollution, less inequity, less discrimination, more nutrients, more justice,...
(So why are we not seeing much improvement?)
Because agriculture lies at the core of capitalism

(And capitalism is being held together with sticky tape and self-reinforcing optimism
(Varoufakis et al. 2012))
Nature as commodity
Man as Master of Nature

A check list from Genesis. I,28.

- Be fruitful, and multiply,
- and replenish the earth,
- and subdue it:
- and have dominion over the fish of the sea,
- and over the fowl of the air,
- and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.
Agriculture was fundamental to the industrial revolutions
It is fundamental now in an oligopolised capitalism.
Farmers have lost almost two thirds of their share in the price (and half of their share—7.9%—goes to agri-business)

The era of bio-capitalism

Or

How to penetrate a “recalcitrant” sector
The bio-capitalist formula

Free trade*

Permissive laws for corporations

Restrictive laws for everyone else

Intellectual Property Rights regimes

Captive markets and continued profit
* Free trade?

After growing the industry through protectionism, interventionism, generous subsidies, and a large public sector...
Kicking away the ladder

Become rich first, free trade comes later
In the 1960s, countries of the Global South had *yearly trade surpluses in food of US$ 7 billion*.

In the 2000s, after four decades of development this has been transformed into a *food deficit of US$ 11 billion a year* (Holt-Giménez and Peabody 2008)
What's really traded in agriculture is information (Garcia 2006)

The bio-capitalists have become “monopoly owners of knowledge” (Shiva 2001)
How to confront bio-capitalism?
Exposé the inherent errors
Repoliticise economics
Reclaim the commons
In 1944, Karl Polanyi exposed the myth of a free, self-regulating market system

“laissez-faire was planned; planning was not”
He hypothesises a “**double movement**” of disembedding and re-embedding economics in society and politics
What is really disembodied?
Even though capitalism is eminently political, it has been insulated from democracy.
Rights-based approaches to repoliticising and redemocratising food

"the world’s food systems (must) be radically and democratically redesigned to ensure the human right to adequate food and freedom from hunger” (De Schutter 2014)
Food Sovereignty

"Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations."

~ Nyeleni Declaration
February 2007
To confront the **transnational capitalist class** we must confront the cultural hegemony that ensures it not only manufactures surplus, but also **consent** (Sklair 2001)
McMichael and Friedmann (2009) invite us to use **Food Regime analysis** to help identify "moments of hegemony in the global order" as well as "moments of transition", and the "various social forces involved in constructing and reconstructing food regimes"
Capitalism keeps absorbing its enemies
>> sustainability, climate change, organic farming

and marginalising the recalcitrant ones
>> food sovereignty, agro-ecology, commons, degrowth
!! Caveats

The barriers to any food democracy project
..come up whenever we are seriously cutting into the profit margin of the bio-capitalists

absolute NO NO: any form of autonomy for consumers and small producers