Contesting neoliberal globalism: A comment on ‘Re-evaluating food systems and food security: A global perspective’

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Geoff Lawrence has used a broad brush to paint an image of the global food system, consisting of three main subsystems: traditional, modernizing, and industrialized. Each of these systems corresponds to its prevalence in the less developed, middle-income, and advanced capitalist countries, respectively. Since the 1980s, however, the industrialized food production system has been going global, a movement that accelerated in the 1990s. Such globalization has enhanced the articulations among the three food systems, becoming a threat for both the traditional and modernizing systems. The main forces impelling the generalization of industrialized food production are neoliberal globalization and financialization. Lawrence makes a compelling case about the determining role of these forces and how they have placed the multinational agribusiness corporations, supermarkets and financiers as the main beneficiaries of global food production.

From the start, Lawrence acknowledges the usefulness of the food regime perspective proposed by Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael in the 1980s, which has become a standard way of analysing the global food system, even though there are some internal disagreements on emphasis. Yet he does not attempt to link the food regime and food systems concepts, although he explicitly acknowledges the need to do so. The former is more of a historical perspective while the latter is a tool for cross-sectional analysis. The rest of this commentary will thus focus on this point: how can we relate food regime and food systems and, more importantly, how can neoliberal globalism be contested even against its overwhelming structural force? What we have here is a complex set of various levels of abstraction and scales of analysis. Unless we can clarify what are the key actors
at each level, the discussion will be staged at the most abstract level and highest scale, where dominant structural forces seem strongest – and unassailable.

Neoliberal globalism has been expressed in concrete practices and state policies, but it is also the ideology that drives this development model. Geoffrey Lawrence closes his article by calling sociologists to see neoliberal globalization and financialization as indeterminate, contradictory and contested, but then adds that these processes are ‘hegemonic’. While I largely agree with Lawrence’s outlook, I will introduce some nuance regarding the notion of hegemony. For Antonio Gramsci, the main contrast he established in discussing ruling class supremacy was between hegemony as consent and domination as coercion or the use of state force. Hegemony resides in civil society while domination is located in the realm of the state or political society. I will argue that, particularly since the 2007–8 global food-price crisis and the financial crisis, neoliberal globalization is more contested than hegemonic: it no longer enjoys the consent of large masses of people. Thus, the fact that there are vigorous national and supra-national level social movements against neoliberal globalism and its food regime indicates that this is not a hegemonic model; it is a dominant one. If it continues to evolve it is because the economic forces impelling it are strong indeed and have the force of neoregulation enabling them. But bottom-up contestation is bearing some fruit. I will zoom into a couple of examples from Mexico and Guatemala to highlight this point: it’s not that neoliberal globalization can be done away with once and for all, but it is being decimated by alternative models of production, some of which build on traditional food systems.

Between 2000 and 2005 Mexico contributed more people to international migration than even China or India, countries with populations over ten times larger in size. Mexican peasants, who were producing not only their subsistence but also the main basic grains and cereals for regional and national markets, were bankrupted by competition with heavily subsidized US farmers. Cereals contribute upwards of 40% of food caloric intake in Mexico, compared to about 20% for Canada and the United States, and the nation has become dependent on its imports. Conversely, the more capitalized Mexican farmers heavily increased their exports of fruits and vegetables to the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) partners, making them more expensive in the domestic market. Superficially, this pattern conformed to the ‘comparative advantages’ paradigm for liberalized trade, and NAFTA partners became ‘mutually dependent’. Yet, in the United States and Canada, the consumption of fruits and vegetables, together, make up less than 4% of their total caloric intake. What we have had in the NAFTA region, then, is an ‘uneven and combined dependency’ and Mexico has become more food insecure.

When the global food-price inflation crisis emerged at the end of 2007, Mexican consumers were hit hard, starting with a 30% rise in the price of tortillas. Tortillas are the main vehicle for consuming maize, Mexico’s main staple food. Food inflation levels were four to five times larger than those in its northern neighbours by 2011. Food-import dependency played a role here, but also the fact that food expenditures make up a large part of household budgets in Mexico. The share of food expenditures in Mexican household budgets ranged from 15% for the richest income quintile to 49% for the poorest quintile in 2012.

In Guatemala, a bottom-up alliance of peasants and environmentalists has contested aspects of neoregulation (policies that implement neoliberal globalism): it has been able
to resist the adoption of transgenic corn, given the great biodiversity of maize residing within its borders. Similarly, the Mexican anti-transgenic corn network has mobilized the symbolism around maize. It has garnered so much international media coverage and transnational non-governmental organization involvement because it is the first case of ‘genetic pollution’ in a crop’s centre of biological origin.

Initially, however, neoregulation moved right along in Mexico and transgenic corn was deployed for pilot testing as of early 2013. But social struggles were successful in having a judge impose a moratorium on further use of transgenic corn a few months later. This was a gruelling struggle that involved a tremendous legal fight against agribusiness multinationals and the federal government. The scale of this fight included 17 courts: one federal tribunal, one appellate tribunal, three writ tribunals, one administrative commission, ten collegiate tribunals, and one first hearing by the Supreme Court. The movement believes that this has been a civilizational struggle. Peasants and indigenous peoples see in maize their own origin, their life and survival, so they claim their right to freely reproduce it. Similarly, other citizens of diverse political orientations see in maize their basic staple and a commitment to preserve it for future generations. Analysis of the state thus cannot be confined to the study states as units of analysis in the interstate relations of the food regime. It must include intrastate relations, the analysis of civil society and social movements as key components of the state in an expanded sense. It is essential to disaggregate its action and contestation at the national and subnational levels, as states promote (or not) the industrialized food system.

In sum, whether to analyse the food regime at a world scale or food systems at the domestic level, states continue to be central agencies in the deployment of neoregulation and policies that enhance neoliberalism—or in contesting it. Whether agreeing to participate (or not) in supra-state agreements or developing national legislation, states have been the key actors implementing neoregulation. States are also the key point of struggle to counter neoliberal globalism, as illustrated in the above examples, even if international solidarity is also a factor. How far such contestation must go before we transcend neoliberal globalism is presently unknowable, or indeterminate, as Lawrence suggests. But subordinate groups and classes must believe that the dominant food regime is subject to contestation, and win at least partial victories, to continue the long-term struggle for an agroecological, sustainable food system.

**Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Notes**