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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD

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Reflections on IPES-Food: Can Power Analysis Change the World?*

Desmond McNeill¹

Abstract The major way in which IPES-Food seeks to achieve change is by preparing and widely disseminating reports on different aspects of the global food system, which are rigorous in both empirical and analytical terms. These reports are heavily critical of the productionist approach, demonstrating its negative impacts on the environment and human wellbeing. They use a political economy lens to analyse how powerful actors promote both this approach and the narrative that supports it. The five major reports so far published build on the work of the first, where a number of ‘lock-ins’ are identified, such as path dependency, export orientation, and the expectation of cheap food – as well as the fundamental ‘concentration of power’. IPES-Food is well placed to have political impact; and there is room for the power analysis to be made still more comprehensive and theoretically rigorous, while ensuring that the reports are still widely read and cited.

Keywords: IPES-Food, food system, productionist approach, political economy, power, narrative, health, environment, multinational corporations.

1 Introduction

The ambition of IPES-Food (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems) is to use ‘knowledge for change’: to challenge a global food system which is not only inequitable but also damaging to health and the environment.² In our publications, we have sought to do this largely by analysing the exercise of power.³ The purpose of this brief article is to examine the work to date, and more specifically the five major reports that have been produced, to assess their potential for convincing an influential, but not necessarily academic, audience of the need for change.

The major focus of criticism in these reports has been the ‘productionist’ approach (Lang and Barling 2013) that promotes

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large-scale farming and places emphasis on increasing productivity through, for example, greater use of fertilisers and pesticides. Much of the material in the reports is devoted to drawing causal links between this approach and its negative impacts on the environment and human wellbeing. These are crucial arguments, but I will in this article focus primarily on how IPES-Food uses a political economy perspective to analyse the power dynamics that maintain this situation.⁴ Here, I find it helpful to distinguish between the 'productionist' approach itself – applied especially by big business – and the 'discourse' or 'mindset' (De Schutter 2017) that underpins it.

While IPES-Food does not adopt a Marxian approach,⁵ it is notable that – like Marx – we do seek to question a dominant discourse that seems obvious, self-evidently correct. Marx sought to challenge the idea that profit as the return on capital was a somehow 'natural' phenomenon – not subject to question.⁶ In much the same way, in the realm of food and agriculture, the 'productionist approach' is widely regarded as self-evidently correct. Many people today are starving and the world population is continuing to grow rapidly; ergo, all our efforts must be put into maximising production, using all forms of modern technology available. It has proved hard to challenge such an apparently compelling narrative.

In another respect, however, our work is rather different from that of Marx, whose analysis was of the whole capitalist system, and the fundamental structural relationship between capital and labour. Although we emphasise the significance of the market, our reports are not so much concerned with deep structures but rather with numerous complex relationships between many different actors, and processes. To analyse the intersection of the capitalist system with the food system is a very challenging task. This raises a question which I believe has proved very relevant for IPES-Food: how comprehensive, and how complex, should our analysis be if our reports are to be accessible to a wide readership rather than a very specialised group.

In this brief article, I will address these questions, based on the reports so far produced. I suggest, in line with my introductory remarks, that what is especially notable is that they emphasise the dominant role played by big business in applying the productionist approach, and on the role of big business and others in promoting the productionist narrative. I conclude that we can and should further develop our power analysis of the food system, but that the level of ambition with regard to comprehensiveness and theoretical sophistication should be tempered by the need for our reports to continue to be widely read, and utilised.

2 Political economy in IPES-Food reports

Within the broad field of political economy, IPES-Food does not explicitly adopt a specific approach. The reports, to varying extents, include in their analysis actors, interests, and sources of power. And they focus on different levels: the global, the national, the local.

In summary, it is fair to say that an eclectic approach is favoured, combining perspectives from both ends of a theoretical spectrum within the discipline of political science that ranges from realism to constructivism.⁷ The former emphasises the role of actors and agency (and is well suited to studying the role of big business in promoting a productionist food system). The latter is more associated with structures, and with discourse, and is more suited to analysing the power of the narrative.

Our first Thematic Report 1 (June 2016) was entitled *From Uniformity to Diversity: A Paradigm Shift from Industrial Agriculture to Diversified Agroecological Systems* (IPES-Food 2016). To judge by its reception, this was an extremely clear and compelling document. I will not attempt a summary, but rather concentrate on the power component of the argument. The report identifies eight ‘lock-ins’ of industrial agriculture, summarised graphically in Figure 12 of the report (*ibid*: 45).⁸

The lock-ins are as follows: path dependency, export orientation, the expectation of cheap food, compartmentalised thinking, short-term thinking, ‘feed the world’ narratives, measures of success, and concentration of power.

A subsequent diagram (Figure 13) (*ibid*: 59) ‘Power imbalances in food systems’ has the subtitle ‘framing the questions and providing the solutions’. This reveals the extent to which IPES-Food power analysis is focused on business and the productionist narrative (as confirmed in the subsequent reports discussed below). The diagram does specify several different actors (processors, traders, and retailers; policymakers; input agribusiness; large-scale farmers; small-scale farmers) and it includes some sources of power other than discursive (e.g. subsidies to farmers, and purchases by them). But the text that precedes Figure 13 refers primarily to discursive power (including the power to influence policy); and the focus is almost entirely on agribusiness.

Input agribusinesses are able to take centre-stage in **framing the problems** [all emphases in the original] (e.g. underlining the global productivity challenge) *and* **providing the solutions** (e.g. new ranges of input-responsive crops and breeds), thus securing demand for their products, while ensuring that power and influence continue to flow their way.

Lobbying policymakers to ensure favourable policy frameworks is another channel used to exert power...

...This power can also be brought to bear by **leveraging influence to secure research focuses** – and findings – that are favourable...

Another important channel for bringing this influence to bear is by **co-opting the alternatives**... A prominent variant of food security narratives now insists that we need conventional *and* organic agriculture in order to feed the world (IPES-Food 2016: 58).

Subsequent reports adopt, and to varying extents supplement, this analysis. While the first report is concerned almost solely with the global level, two of the others refer to national and local levels also.

Thematic Report 2 (October 2017) is entitled *Unravelling the Food–Health Nexus: Addressing Practices, Political Economy, and Power Relations to Build Healthier Food Systems* (IPES-Food 2017a). Here again, it is the power of the productionist narrative that is primarily emphasised:

Power – to achieve visibility, to shape knowledge, to frame narratives, and to influence policy – is at the heart of the food–health nexus, and will therefore be central to this analysis (*ibid.*: 10).

The bulk of this report, and also the one that follows, is concerned with tracing causal links to show what problems arise and how these can be traced back to industrial agriculture. These so-called 'channels of impact' are:

- **Occupational hazards:** people get sick because they work under unhealthy conditions.
- **Environmental contamination:** people get sick because of contaminants in the water, soil, or air.
- **Contaminated, unsafe and altered foods:** people get sick because specific foods they eat are unsafe for consumption.
- **Unhealthy dietary patterns:** people get sick because they have unhealthy diets.
- **Food insecurity:** people get sick because they cannot access adequate, acceptable food at all times (*ibid.*: 12).

As the report notes, such analysis can never be fully comprehensive:

Given their complexity, it is impossible, at any one time, to fully describe global food systems to identify all the pathways that have consequences for health – not least because many of the pathways are indirect, with factors outside food systems also playing an important role (*ibid.*: 13).

After analysing the negative effects of industrial agriculture, the report then turns to the issue of power; again focusing especially on the narrative.

Power – to achieve visibility, to frame narratives, to set the terms of debate, and to influence policy – is at the heart of this nexus. Indeed, as the industrial model is further entrenched, a narrow group of actors is able to exercise ever-greater control over data provision and scientific research priorities, as well as continuing to shape the narratives and solutions (*ibid.*: 77).

The report identifies five ‘leverage points’, where action might be initiated to remedy the situation. The first three relate to promoting alternative ways of thinking: encouraging food systems thinking; reasserting scientific integrity and research as a public good; bringing the alternatives to light. The fourth is more directly aimed at policy: adopting the precautionary principle. The fifth – building integrated food policies under participatory governance – is more explicitly ‘political’, insofar as it emphasises the potential role of less powerful actors.

Thematic Report 3 (October 2017): *Too Big to Feed: Exploring the Impacts of Mega-Mergers, Consolidation and Concentration of Power in the Agri-Food Sector* (IPES-Food 2017b) takes up the issue briefly described in Thematic Report 1. It begins with well-documented evidence of the huge degree of market concentration across the whole of agribusiness before turning to the question ‘Why do these pose risk to the development of sustainable food systems?’ Thus, as with the previous report, it presents a lengthy and detailed causal analysis linking a phenomenon – in this case consolidation and concentration – with its negative impacts. These are nine in number: redistributing costs and squeezing farm income; reducing farmer autonomy in a context of ‘mutually-reinforcing consolidation’; narrowing the scope of innovation: defensive and derivative R&D; hollowing out corporate commitments to sustainability; controlling information through a data-driven revolution; centralising environmental risks and eroding resilience; allowing labour abuses and fraud to slip through the cracks; and shifting policies and practices away from the public interest.

Thus, in this report again, the dominant narrative is in focus. Indeed, as consolidation intensifies, data-driven and high-tech solutions are being promoted as the only pathways to sustainability, generating the same types of solutions at the expense of alternatives. And again, the key actors are giant firms in the agri-business sector, though one additional and important actor emerges from the analysis of financialisation, namely passive investors.

The two other reports issued so far are case studies. These give the opportunity to move the analysis below the global level.

Case Studies 1 (June 2017): *What Makes Urban Food Policy Happen? Insights from Five Case Studies* (IPES-Food 2017c) is concerned specifically with issues of food governance, at the level of the city. This is particularly interesting because here, at least by comparison with the international and national levels, institutions whose task it is to promote the public good have a relatively wide range of instruments at their disposal – if they are willing, and politically able, to use them.⁹

The case studies show how, in particular circumstances, it has been possible to overcome the forces either of inertia or of actual resistance by self-interested parties. The stories are very varied, but in several cases, change is attributed largely to the actions of a single person or

small group. Political commitment, backed by funding, is crucial. The state, or in this case local authorities, can apparently act effectively to counter the power of business; in fact, local firms can be allies in bringing about change.

In Case Studies 2 (October 2018), *Breaking Away from Industrial Food and Farming Systems – Seven Case Studies of Agroecological Transition*:

The cases cover a variety of scales (single farmer, community level, regional and national) and geographical locations (Europe, North America, Central America, Africa, Asia)... [as well as a range of entry points]... (income diversification, climate adaptation, rural development), with a range of actors taking the lead in different cases (international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), producer organizations, research bodies, governments) (IPES-Food 2018: 9).

The report adopts

[a] view of food systems as an interconnected whole... [referring]... not only to market transactions and connections between different points in the food chain (e.g. agriculture and food retail), but also to a broader web of institutional and regulatory frameworks, and the prevailing conditions in which science and knowledge are generated (*ibid.*: 8).

The report documents how, in spite of substantial barriers to change, farmers, researchers, consumers, NGOs, and many other food system actors have found ways to drive transitions in food and farming systems. Thus, in addition to analysing different levels, this report introduces some less powerful actors that nevertheless have shown an ability to counter the dominance of big business.

3 Discussion

I will end by briefly reflecting on the power analysis of IPES-Food as found in these five reports. Relating to the elements of the 'eclectic' approach outlined above, I shall ask: how much do these reports tell us about the actors, their interests, and their sources of power – in promoting a productionist approach and its associated narrative? And at what levels?

Who, according to these reports, are the powerful actors? Clearly, the most dominant are big firms; primarily agribusiness, but also supermarkets and large-scale retailers. A few others are briefly noted: two international organisations (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the European Union (EU)), some individual countries (e.g. the USA, Brazil), and city authorities (e.g. in Toronto). Organised labour is referred to, but only to note their relative weakness in contrast to agribusiness. There is rather little mention of the many other actors that could be included in a more comprehensive account – such as foundations, NGOs, and civil society, bilateral donors, international research bodies, thinktanks, the media, and so forth.

What are the interests of the dominant actors? On the rare occasions these are explicitly referred to, they are identified as economic, and more specifically, profit.

As to the sources of power, these too – in the case of big business – are primarily stated as economic. Their ability to frame the questions and provide the solutions is based on their market power, as also their economic power to lobby, and to finance research. Regulatory power is briefly mentioned, in relation to the state, and reference is made to reforming the scope of anti-trust rules and expanding global regulatory oversight.

One may conclude that there are ways in which the power analysis could be extended. To do so with regard to power over the narrative, and even associated policymaking, might not be too challenging a task. This could begin by extending the analysis to include a wider range of actors. In the process, other types of interest would no doubt emerge, although these will in many cases be variants of economic interests; for example, for some international organisations, their primary interest is survival in the face of near bankruptcy. And other forms of power may also prove significant: for example, the moral authority of some NGOs, the disruptive powers of civil society, or the authority of the state to enact and enforce legislation.

But could, and should, our analysis be still more comprehensive – examining in greater detail not only power over the narrative but also power over the productionist based system? I suggest that there are two ways in which the degree of complexity in our reports has so far been kept in check. One is by separating, as far as possible, what I have called the ‘causal’ analysis (of the links between industrial agriculture and its deleterious effects) from the power analysis. This, I suggest, is both valid and necessary. The second is by, to some extent, distinguishing (at least implicitly) between power over the narrative and power over the productionist-based system, and focusing very largely on the former.

A greater challenge would be to seek a more comprehensive analysis of the food system, from global to local, that incorporates the power dimension in all its various manifestations. Here – as I indicated at the outset – we would need to consider our audience. There are already many, quite complex, studies of the food system in what might be called ‘apolitical’ terms; and academics have developed highly sophisticated theories and terminologies relating to the analysis of power. In seeking to draw on both of these sources, it will be necessary to sacrifice a good deal of comprehensiveness and theoretical sophistication if our ambition of using ‘knowledge for change’ is to be successfully achieved.

Notes

- * Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
- 1 Desmond McNeill, Former Director at the Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM), University of Oslo, Norway, and current member of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food).
 - 2 IPES-Food also has the ambition of adopting a transdisciplinary approach, implying that 'knowledge' is not to be limited to 'expert knowledge'. I will not, however, have the space to discuss the implications of this here.
 - 3 While we share a common purpose, the members of IPES-Food are varied regarding their backgrounds, motivations, and perspectives. I will therefore be cautious in making broad assertions about what 'we' in IPES-Food believe, and base my claims as far as possible on IPES-Food documents.
 - 4 'IPES-Food employs a holistic food systems lens and focuses on the political economy of food systems, i.e. the differential power of actors to influence priority-setting and decision-making': see www.ipes-food.org/about/.
 - 5 Some of its members may, however, favour the Marxian-inspired theory of food regimes.
 - 6 Marx, however, asserted that this notion was promoted by economists, whom he described as the 'hired prizefighters' of capitalists (Marx 1954: 25).
 - 7 My own preferred approach (Bøås and McNeill 2004), which draws in part on neo-Gramscian writers such as Robert Cox, is also eclectic. It is somewhat similar to that of John Gaventa (2006), although he does not include 'forms of power' in his famous 'power cube'.
 - 8 For reasons of space I cannot reproduce the figures here, but all these reports can of course be found on the IPES-Food website.
 - 9 As an anonymous reviewer rightly notes, a political economy approach should be able to untangle the vague 'political will' terminology.

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