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New food regime geographies: Scale, state, labor

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ABSTRACT

Food regime analysis is a prominent approach to the role of food and agriculture in global capitalism. Yet recent advancement within the approach has not received as much attention as it deserves outside of specialized circles of agrarian research. Food regime scholarship has over the last few years taken several steps to move away from its previous prevalent emphasis on macro-scale phenomena to make it more applicable to empirical research on agricultural development. This article reviews recent scholarship in food regime analysis to bring out central aspects of such advancement. In particular, this review discusses three key aspects of recent food regime scholarship: First, I find an increased problematizing of spatiality and scale with calls for downscaling the food regime approach. Second, I find a rising centrality of theorizing and analyzing the state. Third, despite these advancements, an important gap remains in sustained attention to questions of labor. I call for further scrutiny of labor in order to bring food regime analysis forwards.

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1. Introduction

Food regime analysis, a prominent approach to studying food and agriculture in view of global capitalism, has recently been intensely debated among scholars of agrarian change, especially in the pages of *Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Journal of Agrarian Change*.¹ Henry Bernstein, one of the leading scholars involved in these debates, holds that 'it is impossible, or at least fruitless, to consider agrarian change in the world today without engaging with the issues and ideas generated by food regime analysis over the last 25 years' (Bernstein, 2016, p. 637). Nevertheless, the food regime approach has been relatively less recognized in broader scholarship on agricultural development and agro-food systems. Part of the reason may be found in the rather rigid Regulation School inspired approach found in early food regime writings, with a predominant focus on macro-scale phenomena that may have seemed unwelcome to more empirically oriented researchers (see Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; Goodman & Watts, 1994). These early contributions, however, are by now 30 years old, and much has happened to food regime analysis over this period of time. This article reviews what has been a reinvigorated and rapidly proliferating stream of recent work within food regime analysis, aiming at explaining developments within the scholarship over the last few years. While the

most well-known aspect of recent food regime writings remains debate around the 'third' or 'corporate' food regime, this article seeks to bring out other important recent developments that have largely eluded existing overviews (the latter are also, it needs mentioning, somewhat dated in view of the rapid proliferation of recent publications reviewed below) (see Bernstein, 2016; Magnan, 2012).

In particular, I will focus on three aspects of recent food regime scholarship that may contribute to the broader relevance of the approach to scholarship on agricultural development: First, the move towards problematizing the spatiality of the food regime approach, including by scrutinizing the earlier 'global' or world-scale emphasis in food regime analysis and the concomitant need for downscaling the approach to account for novel geographies and real-world empirical cases. Second, as soon as the 'global' fixation has been supplanted by a multiscalar analytical lens, the role of the state and relatedly hegemony in the contemporary conjuncture has come to assume central importance to ongoing debates. Third, while these advancements are salutary to making food regime analysis more fecund to empirical research on agricultural development, recent scholarship has pointed to a surprising neglect of labor within the approach. I will argue that, to the extent that food regime analysis seeks to make sense of contemporary agricultural development, it needs more sustained attention to labor. Labor, I will suggest, can be brought into ongoing conversations surrounding food regime analysis by integrating it within emerging multiscalar frameworks. Before discussing these three aspects of recent scholarship, I start by laying out a brief description of the food regime approach as such.

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¹ In 2016, *Journal of Peasant Studies* hosted a comprehensive debate section featuring Henry Bernstein (2016), Philip McMichael (2016) and Harriet Friedmann (2016).

2. The food regime approach

First introduced in the late 1980s by Friedmann and McMichael (1989), food regime analysis offers a systemic and ambitious approach to studying 'food's contribution to capital accumulation' (McMichael, 2013a, p. 41). Aiming for a world-systemic perspective on agro-food, food regime analysis explores 'how systems for the production, distribution and consumption of food are integrated in a manner that both reflects and supports global cycles of capital accumulation', as Trent (Brown, 2020, p. 1) has usefully phrased it. Food regime analysis relates changes in world agriculture to the evolution of the state system, the international division of labor, trade patterns, the powerful institutions that regulate and govern these flows of food commodities, and how this interacts with social movements and contestation (Magnan, 2012). All of this happens in and through nature; food regimes organize not only people but also environments (Tilzey, 2018). A food regime, then, is the specific crystallization of these dynamics into a world-systemic pattern of accumulation. Relative stability has – particularly in earlier formulations of food regime analysis – been defining, such as in Friedmann's (1993, pp. 30–31) view of a food regime as 'the rule-governed structure of production and consumption on a world scale'. But this should not be seen as a rigid or stable form but rather a process that is contradictory, fraught with tensions (McMichael, 2009, 2013a).

The food regime literature portrays a sequence of global food regimes from the late 19th century onwards. While conceived as sequential, food regimes do not succeed each other linearly but in multi-layered patterns. As McMichael (2013a, p. 6) puts it: 'While each regime has its institutional profile, it is the case that elements of former regimes carry over into successor regimes, in reformulated fashion'. In terms of periodization, food regimes center on cycles of capital accumulation in combination with the formation and crumbling of legitimizing rules and relationships (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; Friedmann, 2005; Magnan, 2012; McMichael, 2013a). This sequence is described in detail in recent overviews (Bernstein, 2016; Magnan, 2012), and will only be recounted briefly here. We find that the most common periodization sees a first food regime – centered on the British Empire – existing between 1870 and 1914. The first food regime involved the colonial organization of food commodities from the periphery to the center. This was linked to the restructuring of colonial agricultures around a world market price, first in wheat. Following the breakdown of the first food regime in world-systemic disorder, there was a transition period leading to the emergence of a post-WWII second food regime – centered on the United States – where national agricultural policies were strong, while food aid involved the massive flow of US food surpluses to developing countries, agriculture was industrialized worldwide with the green revolution and powerful agro-food corporations emerged. The second food regime then fell apart in the midst of the early 1970s global food and oil crisis (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; Friedmann, 1993)².

While these two first food regimes are relatively well-established in the literature, the third food regime, ostensibly arising in the late 1980s and lasting to this day, is highly disputed. The most prolific – and controversial – conceptualization comes from McMichael, who claims that we are living in a 'corporate food regime' from the 1980s onwards where corporate capital subordinates states, consumers and producers to an extent never seen before in world history (McMichael, 2005, 2009, 2013a). Indeed, the current conjuncture is described as one where world agricul-

ture is being increasingly usurped by finance and corporate capital – particularly in the form of transnational agribusiness corporations – through integration in 'global value chains' and export-orientation (Burch & Lawrence, 2009; Friedmann, 2005; McMichael, 2013a, 2013b; Weis, 2007). In the corporate food regime, McMichael argues, there is an ongoing 'broad dispossession of smallholders' (McMichael, 2013a, p. 45) generative of transnational social movements such as La Vía Campesina confronting the global food regime. McMichael's take on the corporate food regime has, meanwhile, been intensively criticized by Bernstein (2016) for tending towards 'binaries' of a monolithic regime posed against an undifferentiated and possibly romanticized vision of the 'peasantry', obstructing our understanding of actually existing agrarian change.

Whereas Bernstein by far refutes the corporate food regime either as a reality or as an analytical angle on world agriculture, there are also competing conceptualizations, such as the idea of an emergent but not consolidated 'corporate-environmental food regime' (Friedmann, 2005), a 'neoliberal food regime' (Otero, 2012, 2018; Pechlaner & Otero, 2008, 2010) or a 'financialised food regime' (Burch & Lawrence, 2009). Still other scholars disagree, arguing that, while the diagnosis of our present agro-food conjuncture as dominated by corporate capital and neoliberalism may be correct, we are not in fact in a consolidated food regime at present but, instead, in a period of transition, fluctuation and instability (Belesky & Lawrence, 2019; Friedmann, 2009; Pritchard, 2009; Winders, Heslin, Ross, Weksler, & Berry, 2016). The lack of consensus and discrepancies in assessments found in these strands of recent work is so strong, in sum, that one of the latest contributions to the literature holds that 'the contours of the contemporary food regime remain undefined' (Werner, 2021, p. 1).

3. Spatiality and multiscalarity

In these unruly times, institutions of global governance – such as the World Trade Organization – that some time ago appeared key to the rise of corporate capital have not assumed the expected hegemonic position (Pritchard, 2009). Crucial to our purposes, the present unruliness and disorder in agro-food arrangements involves a renewed focus on *spatiality* to explain the novel coordinates of global agro-food orders. Departing from the earlier notion of food regime spatiality along a rather neat North/South axis, this has led to various takes on the more complex spatiality of the contemporary global political economy that is structuring food regime dynamics³. Recent work on global agricultural development shows the WTO as a heterogeneous field of contestation facilitating 'rising powers' such as China and India to push forwards their own domestic interests from within (Hopewell, 2016). The emergence of 'BRICS' countries has also contributed to recent rethinking of the global food regime as, at the very least, composed of intensifying 'multipolarity' or 'polycentricity' where nodes of power are increasingly dispersed across new spatialities in the global political economy, with hegemony a contested and largely unfulfilled ambition (Cousins, Borrás, Sauer, & Ye, 2018; Jakobsen & Hansen, 2020; McKay, Hall, & Liu, 2016; McMichael, 2013a).

Such multipolarity brings McMichael to speculate about the prefiguration of a 'new' food regime departing from the third as evidenced in patterns of change in China (McMichael, 2020). Among these contributions, Belesky and Lawrence (2019) take Chinese agribusiness as related to state capitalism and neomercantilism, arguing for the recognition of differentiation within an

² For an alternative periodisation from a sympathetic perspective, see Araghi (2003). Yet another alternative periodisation – much less sympathetic of the prevailing version – is found in Tilzey (2018).

³ As McMichael puts it in retrospect, [t]he "food regime" concept was a product of its time: of declining national regulation and rising "globalisation" (McMichael, 2013a, p. 1).

increasingly multipolar food regime, where states and capital may form constellations that do not fit very well into the designator 'neoliberal'. This attention to spatial variations in capitalism has also led another recent contribution to look at the emergence of BRICs countries and their implications for food regime reordering in terms of 'varieties of capitalism' driving the contemporary food regime in the direction of polycentricity (Escher, 2021).

Food regime analysis was 'global' in scope from the beginning. Theoretically, at the outset in the late 1980s, it 'combined two strands of macro-sociological theory' (Magnan, 2012, p. 3), namely French regulation school theory and world-systems theory. The approach grew out of a recognition that food and agriculture had been accorded a relatively marginal position in 'world systems and other approaches to history of global capital and shifts in inter-state power' as well as in broader studies of class power in global capitalism (Friedmann, Daviron, & Allaire, 2016). It is only in recent years, however, that this global orientation has been given sustained attention striving to rework the food regime approach. Attention to scale has been largely triggered by criticism of food regime analysis for being overly macro oriented, relying on what Gerardo Otero has called a 'broad brush' that 'remains at the level of the world economy' (Otero, 2012, p. 283), limiting the level of precision and empirical depth to be found in many (or most) of its extant studies. This arguably relates to a tendency in food regime writings to locate key concepts at a level of generality that is 'too vague and abstract' (Otero, Pechlaner, & Gürçan, 2013, p. 271). The macro-orientation, critics point out, 'confines us to looking at "capital" as a whole, in general, without properly disaggregating different fractions of capital, including possible contradictions between them' (Otero & Lapegna, 2016, p. 4; see also Tilzey, 2019). This all calls for, argues Otero, "a food regime analysis with suitable theoretical mediations about class structures and states; methodological sophistication with units of analysis below the world-system, including world regions and nation states; and political sensitivity toward the subordinate classes as a whole, not merely the peasantry" (Otero, 2016, p. 303).

In his elaborate critique of food regime analysis, Bernstein (2016) suggests that a fruitful way to deal with these challenges can be found in paying more sustained attention to multiple determinations with distinct loci – 'internal to the countryside, internal to "national" economies and "external" emanating from the world economy' (see also Bernstein, 2016, p. 642; see also Bernstein 2015). Specifically, Bernstein argues that the food regime approach so far has leaned too heavily towards the third locus of determination, thus constraining the ability to incorporate elements of varied temporal and spatial scope.

Food regime scholars increasingly recognize these concerns, leading to arguments for downscaling to the scale of regions, nation-states, sub-national or even local scales (Brown, 2020; Jakobsen, 2018, 2019; McMichael, p. 96, 2013a; Otero et al., 2013). There is an emerging, yet still limited, body of publications that take regional, national or, to some degree, local scales as their focus. Included in this literature are inter alia studies of the transformation of the Spanish livestock system in the second and third food regime (Ríos-Núñez & Coq-Huelva, 2015); the dynamics of accumulation in the colonial food regime in the Philippines (Camba, 2019); as well as cases exploring the contemporary food regime through corporate agricultural expansion in the deserts of Egypt (Dixon, 2014); transgenic soybeans in Argentina (Torrado, 2016); and oil palm expansion in Guatemala (Pietiläinen & Otero, 2019). Departing from formulations that imply that the 'global' is where food regime analysis primarily operates, we find McMichael (2013a, p. 108) arguing that the approach, taken as a method of analysis, 'can be deployed in a variety of ways to illuminate local, national, regional and global processes'. Yet, it may still be the case, as Otero (2016) argues, that the acknowledgment of

regional scales has only been utilized to a limited extent in actual analyses, at least in key scholars such as McMichael and Friedmann's writings. For example, while the corporate food regime is perceived as revolving around struggles such as the Via Campesina, the relevance of social struggles to food regime dynamics are located almost exclusively at the global level. Struggles at other scales are thereby largely effaced (Otero, 2016).

While formulations such as the above may seem to imply a relatively atheoretical take on scale, we also find recent contributions to food regime scholarship that go further in scrutinizing scale conceptually. In a recent contribution to these debates, Rioux (2018) argues for a renewed focus on scale and spatiotemporality, scrutinising the 'relative scalar fixity of the food regime concept'. He emphasizes the limitations in food regime literature ensuing from its close to exclusive focus on the international scale:

While the influence of the world-systems perspective informs the food regime concept's ability to problematise the international dimension of social change, too strong an emphasis on the same dimension has tended to conceal the importance of sub-national processes as key to the effective deployment and stabilisation of agri-food orders (Rioux, 2018, p. 715).

In another recent contribution focusing on food regime 'regionalization' and scale in the context of East Asia, Wang argues that 'any analysis of food regimes should incorporate the global, regional, national, sub-national, local and so forth as different spaces through which the reach of food regimes is territorialized, regulated and contested' (Wang, 2018, p. 6). Going further than some of the contributions above, Wang suggests that we think of such 'regionalization' in terms of geographer Johan Allen's notion of 'spatial topology' to understand 'the power of food regimes across space' (Ibid.). Similarly, Lapegna and Perelmuter (2020) have pointed to an abiding 'methodological nationalism' within much food regime scholarship and argue instead for opening up for regional variation within nation states, involving variegated and multiscale forms of spaces, actors and overall food regime dynamics.

This latter critique points to the importance of avoiding reified notions of nation-states, yet it does not say much about the concept of the state as such, which I return to below. However, I also think it is warranted to say that these recent contributions on the role of spatiality to the constitution of food regimes only takes us part of the way. Granted that we need to downscale and account for variegation and multiple spatial loci and scales, the difficult question remains as to how, theoretically and methodologically, we are to approach the interrelations between these. This, again, opens for vexing issues of the complex interaction between actually existing agrarian change, state power, inter-state relations and global restructuring. There is, I suggest, scope for expanding such conceptualization in food regime scholarship, something that could be done in dialogue with geographical scholarship that scrutinizes the 'structuring conditions' that produce 'spatial diversity' in global capitalism (Bieler & Morton, 2018, p. 99). Or, relatedly, the notion of 'variegated capitalism' could be mobilized in order to move beyond 'economic-geographical difference, in favour of a more expansive concern with the combined and uneven development of "always embedded" capitalism, and the polymorphic interdependence of its constitutive regimes' (Peck & Theodore, 2007, p. 733). To further such theorizing of the interrelated key spaces where food regime formation and contestation unfolds, we need to look more carefully at the concept of the state.

4. States and hegemony

Scholars have recently criticized food regime analysis for its relative neglect, or under-conceptualization, of the state, despite the

obvious centrality the state has been given in the overall food regime framework focused on the state system (Jakobsen, 2019; Pritchard, Dixon, Hull, & Choithani, 2016; Werner, 2021). Critics have pointed out that the view of the 'corporate' food regime relies heavily on notions of deregulation and privatization seen as ushering in a period where states recede in importance. While McMichael (2013a, pp. 44–45) concedes that 'the WTO itself is by no means hegemonic', he sees it as instrumental in consolidating neoliberal principles on world agriculture and thus 'suggests a corporate hegemony insofar as neoliberal doctrine, in elevating "markets" over "states", transforms the latter into explicit servants of the former'. States, in this view, take a subordinate role as they 'accommodate transnational capital' (McMichael, 2010, p. 612). To the contrary, critics hold, the 'neoliberal' food regime is indeed marked by continuing importance of state action through forms of 'neoregulation' that enable shifts towards market-oriented rule that favors transnational corporations (2010; Otero, 2012; Pechlaner & Otero, 2008). Neoregulation 'encompasses the state's trade policies, including those regarding agricultural trade, and other policies to entice corporations to invest and expand' (Pietilainen & Otero, 2019 p.4). In a book-length contribution to this strand of work, Otero (2018) discusses the way state-enforced measures of neoregulation have been key to the global spread of what he terms 'the neoliberal diet'. By no means presuming that states recede in importance, Otero reveals their centrality to the operation of the 'neoliberal food regime' through specific interventions in the economy serving biotechnology and agribusiness interests. Pointing back to the discussion above of the renewed emphasis on the complexities of spatiality in food regime writings, Otero's concept of neoregulation thus allows us to pinpoint the state as a key nexus where food regimes are institutionalized within specific geographical-historical circumstances.

In another contribution that looks at examples from India and South Africa, Pritchard et al. (2016) argue somewhat differently for incorporating contemporary state interventions in the realm of right-to-food in terms of a dialectical move between 'stepping back and moving in'. Such a dialectic, Pritchard et al. argue, is a more fitting analysis of the current conjuncture than McMichael's (2013) view of the state as subjugated to corporate capital. Drawing further on the example of India, Jakobsen (2019) criticizes Pritchard et al. for seemingly taking progressive state action as ipso facto evidence of countering neoliberalism, whereas more processual theories of neoliberalization reveal such state action as intrinsic to the compromises involved in struggles over hegemony. These sort of seemingly paradoxical articulations of state regulation are also elaborated upon by Werner (2021) who argues for the concept of 'uneven regulatory development' in dialogue with critical geographical theories of neoliberalization exploring the blending of 'neoliberal' and seemingly 'extraneoliberal' regulations. In dialogue with Otero's notion of neoregulation, Werner holds that '[t]his blending is inclusive of, but distinct from neoregulation, which presumes that the main role of the state in the global South is to facilitate corporate governance and a world-market price for agriculture' (Werner, 2021, p. 5). As a form of 'institutional heterogeneity', these analytics open for a multifaceted theoretical approach to state action in food regime analysis where regulations can take more or less neoliberal forms – even differentiated based on specific crops' significance in national agro-food systems – based on interactions with supranational ('global') pressures and interests, intra-state dynamics and relations between states and civil society contestations (Werner, 2021).

Taking state action as central to the formation of hegemony, Jakobsen (2019) and Werner (2021) also draw on perspectives in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci (1971) stressing the processual and incomplete nature of hegemonies. As Perry Anderson (2017, p. 107) recently argues, notions of hegemony have tended to be

formulated *either* in terms of international power relations or in terms of power relations between classes. McMichael (2013a, 2013b) holds that the food regime concept comprises a notion of hegemony that conjoins these two. Yet, as is arguably the case with Arrighi (2010) whose pioneering conjoined notion of hegemony along these lines has been an enduring influence on food regime scholars (Friedmann et al., 2016), McMichael's hegemony is oriented towards the world-system, leaving the construction of hegemony among class forces internal to states relatively underexplored (Anderson, 2017, p. 115; Brown, 2020, p. 6, p. 6). This is, however, countered in recent contributions that draw further on Gramscian state theory (Brown, 2020; Jakobsen, 2018; Lapegna & Perelmuter, 2020). Brown (2020) argues that food regime analysis has tended to be overly focused on resistance, neglecting deeper analysis of the dynamics that generate acquiescence with, or consent to, food regimes; in other words, the formation of hegemony. This, Brown emphasizes, is to no small degree precisely about the relations between capital, states and societies, with the intricate class dynamics this involves. Meanwhile, Tilzey (2019) offers a more critical take on the state and class relations in food regime analysis where he revisits Friedmann and McMichael's seminal early work. While curiously largely leaving out discussion of the recent reinvigorated work in food regime analysis, Tilzey criticizes the founding texts for lacking a relational view of the state, which Tilzey suggests we can locate in the Marxist state-theoretical work of Nicos Poulantzas (1978). The suggested perspective from Poulantzas bears close resemblance, I would add, to the recent 'Gramscian turn' that I have identified in other recent food regime writings.⁴

5. Labor

States and capital do not, however, organize the production, exchange and consumption of agro-food commodities except by way of organizing labor. To proceed with the multiscalar conceptualization of food regime geographies, labor is the next necessary step; the same goes for an approach that seeks to speak to patterns of agricultural development in an increasingly urbanized and increasingly wage-labor based world. Moreover, the increased centrality of labor in agro-food systems is likely to be compounded over the coming decades by escalating levels of labor migration including climate migration – phenomena that, as recent agrarian scholarship attests, are entangled with core concerns in food regime analysis such as dispossession, land consolidation as well as agribusiness expansion (Borras, Franco, & Nam, 2020; Kelley, Peluso, Carlson, & Affif, 2020). Yet, there is a curious shortage of engagement with labor in the existing food regime literature. That labor has been given little analytical attention in food regime analysis was recently pointed out by McMichael in a lengthy list of 'more analytical dimensions to include in the repertoire' (McMichael, 2016, p. 650). Labor should not, however, be seen merely as an analytical dimension; rather, if food regime analysis is, as I have shown above, crucially about the organization of global cycles of capital accumulation, then labor is certainly key to the entire apparatus. Indeed, it makes little sense to think about capital as such without labor.

The lack of sustained engagement with labor has also been highlighted in a few other recent publications. In his review of McMichael's influential 2013 book, Otero (2016) argues that there is a tendency in food regime analysis to perceive capital as something that is held by agribusiness, and not as a social relation, con-

⁴ This resemblance is probably to be expected if we take into consideration the close line of continuity between the two thinkers, where Poulantzas' conception of the state arguably 'shadows Gramsci's definition of the integral state' (Bieler & Morton, 2018, p. 124).

sequently downplaying workers and work. Oliver Pye (2019) also emphasizes this surprising disconnect from labor, stressing that food regime scholarship has tended to neglect the agrarian proletariat, focusing close to exclusively on farmers, smallholders and, especially, the so-called peasantry. Based on extensive fieldwork in Indonesian palm oil plantations, Pye argues that the rapidly growing palm oil proletariat needs to be recognized to the operations of the global food regime as well as the potential for working class emancipatory struggle against the food regime. Labor, I would add, is not only central due to the exploitation of wage labor on farms and plantations, but also by exploitation and appropriation of unpaid work. Drawing on Jason Moore (2015), unpaid work may even encompass that of non-human nature, something that is acknowledged in Camba's (2019) exploration of the historical geography of the colonial food regime in the Philippines.

In another important contribution, Sebastian Rioux (2018) suggests a labor-centered approach to food regime analysis stressing that cheap labor has been foundational to all three food regimes, as he locates the first food regime within processes of agrarian change in mid-19th century Britain. Food regime analysis, writes Rioux – drawing on Araghi (2003) earlier theoretical intervention – centrally concerns how '[g]lobal value relations are key to understanding the uneven geographical development and integration of agrarian spaces of production as constitutive of both capital-expanded reproduction and global wage-labor' (Rioux, 2018, p. 715). Following this lead, we need to scrutinize how such 'integration of agrarian spaces' happens and, thus, the role of labor in channeling agricultural commodities into the globalized circuits of value and accumulation that define the food regime. In keeping with the thrust of recent food regime scholarship, as reviewed above, I suggest that the way forward needs to acknowledge multiscalarity. While a more comprehensive examination of what such an analytical pathway could look like is beyond the scope of the present article, I suggest that it needs to encompass at least the following analytical operations. First, global value chains consist, as Anna Tsing (2009) has argued, of diversity and do not lead to homogenization. Fittingly, Friedmann (2016) criticizes the notion of the corporate food regime for its monolithic tendencies, tending to rule out the role of specific commodities to shaping global patterns of accumulation, and the crucial nuanced questions about 'specific crops, regions and types of farmers' as well as the forms of states, Friedmann writes. The analysis of the organization of labor into global value relations needs to be cognizant of such commodity-specific dynamics across scales (see also Jakobsen, 2020). Such commodity-specificity should, moreover, not be viewed in isolation from its place in the broader technological system, recognizing the especially formative influence of agricultural biotechnology – with its key interest groups at different scales – to the shape and trajectory of the contemporary food regime, and the resultant shifts in cropping patterns towards transgenic crops (Pechlaner & Otero, 2008).

Second, diversity in labor also comes into play as it is organized in the form of variegated labor regimes. As White, Borras, Hall, Scoones, and Wolford (2012) argue in a somewhat earlier article that is only tangentially concerned with food regime analysis, global agrarian change can be studied using what they term a nested hierarchy of 'umbrella' concepts. Moving from the global food regime, through global commodity chains or, in Rioux's (and Araghi's) terms, value chains, we arrive at agrarian labor regimes, which have been defined by Bernstein as 'specific methods of mobilizing labor and organizing it in production, and their particular social, economic and political conditions' (Bernstein 1988, p. 31–2, quoted in White et al., 2012, p. 622). This is the sort of multiscalar analytical lens that may enable us to approach the labor involved in the global food regime in a nuanced way.

6. Conclusion

This article has reviewed key advancement within food regime analysis over the last few years. Insofar as Bernstein (2016) is right to say that scholars of agrarian change can ill afford to neglect the insights from food regime analysis, I have contributed to making more explicit what, more precisely, the most recent aspects of such insights amount to for broader scholarship concerned with agricultural development. This review has covered three key strands of discussion: First, I have explored the recent move towards problematizing the fixation with the 'global' scale within food regime analysis. This move has led to renewed calls for multiscalar analysis that is able to make sense of key new geographies, such as the emergence of increased multipolarity with the BRICS countries, as well as concern for exploring regional, national, subnational and local scales of analysis. Second, these calls for downscaling from the 'global' have also entailed greater scrutiny of the state, a key locus of agricultural regulation. Here, processual and relational approaches to the state and concomitant class dynamics have given rise to debates that throw light on neoliberalism as well as other key capitalist dynamics in the current conjuncture. Third, while these two strands of debate have moved food regime analysis significantly forwards in terms of opening the approach to empirical research, it still lacks a sustained emphasis on labor. Without greater scrutiny of labor, the procedures that organize agricultural commodities into global value relations and thus give shape to global accumulation patterns remain insufficiently understood. I ended the article with sketching out a few preliminary steps this sort of analytical interest in labor could take.

Finally, I would also like to suggest that a more systematic concern for labor in food regime analysis might also contribute to taking the scholarship beyond its prevalent focus on Via Campesina, food sovereignty and ostensibly 'peasant' resistance and social mobilization in response to the unjust ramifications of the contemporary food regime. Focusing on labor would make us more attentive to other forms of mobilization that unfold among the many and highly varied sectors of agricultural workers across the world in response to the specific ways the global food regime manifests in their lives. Conversely, it needs to be attentive to how labor arrangements fragment, undermine or dissolve the potential for mobilization among workers. The integration of crops, regions, farmers and workers 'in a manner that both reflects and supports global cycles of capital accumulation' (Brown, 2020) clearly contributes to the strength of capital, and the global production of value. Yet it also generates new vulnerabilities for capital, as workers may find themselves in the position to disrupt global chains. How these different potentials play out in the real world demands food regime analysis to pay close attention to local/global linkages across multiple scales. This is clearly, to borrow a phrase from Jun Borras (2020), an absurdly difficult but not impossible agenda.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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