

Transition processes in the USA

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Introduction

The dominant socio-technical regime for existing agrifood system in the U.S. is successful in terms of generating profits for the food system. Its large scale, tendency to monocultures, centralization and vertical integration has allowed it to externalize costs and concentrate profits and control.

Yet a variety of social movements challenge the dominant socio-technical agrifood regime. In 2008, they are somewhat uneasily coalescing around the Good Food Movement. Social movements depend on framing processes, resource mobilization, and opportunity processes (Benford and Snow, 2000), which allow the emergence and success of a variety of Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) that work together in a variety of ways. By analyzing transitions processes in the U.S. in terms of the social movements that are engaged in the transition, the dynamic nature of those processes can best be understood. New social movement theories can inform this analysis (Habermas, 1981; Melucci, 1980; Touraine, 1981; Offe, 1985; Bernstein, 2005). New social movements organizations are in contrast to the subject of social movement analysis prior to 1968: class struggle.

New social movements, often based on identity that transcended economic interests, provide most of the social movement organizations (SMOs) that are part of the Good Food movement, which is attempting to change the socio-technical regime and transition to agrifood systems that are green, healthy, fair, affordable and local.

The U.S. Context

Existing socio-technical regime.

Wiskerke et al. (2004) lay out the notion of a socio-technical regime that support existing agrifood systems and the need for niches to emerge. This paper uses those two ideas from a social movement perspective to understand the process of transition to a more sustainable agri-food system in the United States. Federal policies reinforce the current socio-technical regime in the United States. These include such perverse incentives Direct payments to farmers through commodity programs that encourage monoculture.

- Direct payments per bushel for program commodities
- Countercyclical payments for program commodities
- Credit and deficiency payment for program commodities (grains, oilseeds, cotton)

- Disaster assistance. Skees (1999) found that government risk reduction strategies encouraged monoculture, as it is no longer to diversity crops to reduce environmental risks. He shows that disaster assistance and subsidized crop insurance have influenced land-use patterns by encouraging more plantings at the extensive margin . Skees suggests it is possible that crop insurance and disaster assistance may be offsetting the environmental gains achieved through the Conservation Reserve Program. Wu (1999) found that crop insurance for corn in Nebraska caused a shift in production from hay and pasture to corn. This shift resulted in increased erosion and chemical use at the extensive and intensive margin.

Disaster Assistance Programs include

- Emergency conservation program
- Emergency loan assistance
- Emergency haying and grazing
- Florida hurricane disaster assistance
- Livestock indemnity program
- Noninsured crops disaster assistance program
- Tree assistance program
- 2004 Non-fat dry milk livestock feed assistance

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The U.S. Federal government does devote funds to conservation programs, which include

- Conservation Reserve Program Payments
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- Ground and Surface Water Conservation
- Wetland Reserve Program
- Wildlife Habitat Incentive Programs
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program Grassland Reserve Program
- Biomass Research and Development
- Conservation Stewardship Program (2008 Farm Bill) (previously Conservation Security Program in the 2002 Farm Bill)

Yet even conservation programs can have negative environmental impacts, as the government cost-shares on converting grass land to row crops through terracing. In the best of the past five years, direct positive incentives have been less than 20% of direct payments.

Further, there are a large number of indirect USDA programs that subsidize export of agricultural surplus and the use of feed grains for bio-fuels. Further, a number of other Federal agencies support agricultural exports through such mechanisms as

- Soft credit programs for importing US commodities.
- Subsidies for transportation in US flag shipping vessels
- Subsidies for barge transportation on navigable US rivers
- All that is necessary to maintain as many rivers as possible as navigable for grain-hauling barges

Of course, producing all that grain requires a great deal of petroleum products, from fuel for machinery and transportation to pumping irrigation water, to petrochemical inputs, such as nitrogen fertilizer. Even though research at the University of Nebraska shows that you can raise the same number of pounds of beef per acre on grass as on the corn grown on that land, the socio-technical system is set up for grain fed beef, from the height of the chains that carry the carcasses through the slaughter plants to the rapid depreciation allowances that allow farmers to write off machinery purchases in three years, and thus encouraging them to constantly buy new and bigger farm machinery to produce more corn.

Important difference from Europe in terms of emerging social movements and regime change.

Although sustainable agriculture groups work hard to influence Federal policies to put more money into programs that might support an agricultural transition, Federal programs that support the transition are minimal. There are four new mandatory programs in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, which replaced the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002: Specialty Crops, Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, Organic Agriculture and Biomass Research and Development. Several of these new sources of funding might be used for the agricultural transition, although only one grant in the first round of Specialty Crop funding, to The Ohio State University for \$1,113,214 to study Social Networking, Market and Commercialization Infrastructure for Midwestern Fruit and Vegetable Crops in Local Food Systems is transition oriented. The other mandatory programs are still in the design phase, and delayed because of the Continuing Resolution that makes it impossible to fund the newly authorized programs, even if mandatory. The Federal Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension program (SARE) was established in response to farmer pressure to help the transition, yet a minority of the research funded takes a systems approach.

Social Movement Organizations, as well as major research institutions and agro-industries pressure through their congressional representatives for research, environmental incentives, and support for equal access to good food.

- The U.S. does not perceive land scarcity – instead, enough money can buy any piece of land.

- The neo-liberal regime has accelerated accumulation by the private sector and had the public sector absorb the risk. The Supreme Court has reframed eminent domain from public good to private good.
- Growth is a sacred word: growth – being anti-growth is being anti-American. Thus environmentalist must be “smart-growth”, rather than for conservation and enough. Teddy Roosevelt was the first to link conservation with development, rather than valuing nature in its own right.
- American agriculture and many of the populist social movements (which can be viewed as old social movements) is supply driven. Thus the push has been for growing more of what is already produced, with better prices and more uses for those few commodity crops.

Good Food Social Movement Organizations and their mobilization of Capitals

Natural Capital

Several SMOs promote a Good Food agenda to improve natural capital (**green**). The environmental movement, While the environmental movement has a long history in the U.S., it became effective fighting centralized industrial pollution and focused primarily on command and control government regulation.

Cultural capital

Much of the stress on **local** comes from SMO organizations around community-based economies. Anti-globalization SMO embrace the notion of local agrifood systems as alternatives to global concentration.

Human capital

A shift systemic shift in the way food is grown and distributed requires risky shifts and high up-front transaction costs, which are seen as insurmountable by many producers. Thus, in many parts of the country, the innovators in the movement are younger, and often not “from there” and not necessarily of an agricultural background. The sustainable agriculture movement stresses producer capacity building, including peer to peer learning, which is embodied in the USDA/CSREE/SARE program.

The anti-obesity movement has begun to look at environmental causes of the health problems associated with overweight, particularly in terms of what is available and the negative impacts of corn sweeteners and dense calories. This group, which includes some from the public health community, stresses **healthy** as a key characteristic of Good Food.

Social capital

Local food SMOs are based on social capital that builds the networks that link producers and consumers through such institutions as Community Supported Agriculture, Community Gardens, Farm to School programs, and Farmers Markets. These groups

establish mutual trust, cut transaction costs, and work together to be sure that Good Food is available in places that were previously food deserts, including isolated rural areas and inner cities.

The Good Food movement, while stressing local production, is very different from the back to the land movement of the 1960s. Then, people opted out of the system through self-sufficiency, providing for themselves in defiance of the system. There was bonding social capital through the establishment of communes, but the larger system was greatly distrusted. Good Food SMOs stress bridging social capital by bringing together unlike groups and building reciprocal relationships around an integrated food system.

Political capital

The anti-globalization forces seek to change the standards, rules and regulations and their enforcement. Focusing on **fair**, they see well integrated alternative value chains and certification as a mechanism to bring about a change in the socio-technical regime.

The community-based economies SMOs have combined with sustainable agriculture and environmental SMOs to mobilize state and local governments to provide appropriate setting for the emergence of Good Food institutions. New systems of governance are emerging as local and regional food councils implement the norms around Good Food through small but critical policy changes.

Financial capital

Food security SMO organizations, which stem from social movement SMOs, stress **affordable** as a key characteristic of Good Food. .

Populist elements in the sustainable agriculture movement stress **fair** as part of Good Food. Their notion of fair is that farmers get a price for their product that is over and above the costs of production to yield a reasonable profit. On the other hand, some of the social justice SMO, particularly those supporting and composed of farm workers and food processors, stresses **fair** in terms of the wages paid to workers throughout the food system

Built capital

The built capital in the dominant agricultural system is focused on technology allows fewer people to raise more stuff. That stuff may earn less but it doesn't matter if you have a lot of it. While in the 20th century, that technology was mechanical, in the 21st century it is genetic. Anti-globalization, sustainable agriculture and environmental SMOs and environmental SMOs work to shift the emphasis from linear technical fixes to systemic changes based on integrated **local** systems and **affordable** agrifood technologies that remain in the public domain.

Conclusions

Different Good Food SMOs mobilize different capitals in order to achieve their vision. The dominant socio-technical regime is held in place by political capital, which engages professional lobbyists, and frame the current regime in terms of the myth of feeding the world and the hyperbole of saving the family farm.

The different emphases of the different SMOs does not always mean that they speak with one voice. But by mobilizing all seven capitals (Flora and Flora, 2008), a balance is maintained so that new scientific principles and engineering practices can evolve that contribute to a healthy ecosystem, economic security, and social inclusion.

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