



Review of Philip McMichael's *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*



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Philip McMichael. 2013. *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*. Halifax: Fernwood Press. xii + 196 pages, ISBN 978-1-55266-575-6 Paper (\$18.95).

In *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions*, Philip McMichael compiles much of his career's work around what he calls the "food regime project." This has been primarily a theoretical and interpretative enterprise geared to situating and understanding food and agriculture in the capitalist world economy since the nineteenth century. Along with work developed by and with Harriet Friedmann, the food regime approach outlined in McMichael's book has been highly influential since the late 1980s in interpreting the dynamics of food and agriculture in the world economy. McMichael's book offers a useful collection of his own work, discusses other elaborations of the food regime perspective, including the different tack taken by Friedmann, and endorses the food-sovereignty program advocated by Via Campesina, a major global social movement that advocates agroecology to mitigate climate change. In what follows, I first provide a brief summary of the food regime perspective and the three historical regimes that have been identified and characterized since 1870. I then offer a critical but appreciative review of McMichael's book along with a number of suggestions for theoretical refinement.

The task of food regime analysis is primarily to situate "the rise and decline of national agricultures within the geopolitical history of capitalism" (1). McMichael continues: "It was not simply about food, but about the politics of food relations." Citing from his article with Friedmann, he says that the concept was meant to link "international relations of food production and consumption to forms of accumulation broadly distinguishing periods of capitalist transformation since 1870" (1). Ultimately, argues McMichael, "the question concerns what is the stabilizing

condition of a regime: trade, currency, or agri-food production relations and their realization through trade?” (15).

The first food regime, dominated by the British Empire, was meant to produce cheap food by extending the agricultural frontier to its colonies. This would enable Britain to focus on manufacturing for the world. The second food regime started after a transitional period between the first and second world wars of the twentieth century, this time dominated by the United States. Rather than extensive, the U.S.-dominated food regime was intensive: it was predicated on new agricultural technologies that would eventually be identified with the Green Revolution, including hybrid seeds, mechanization, petro-chemical fertilizers and pesticides, monocropping, etc., and publicly-funded agriculture research to help articulate it to industry. Its crisis started in the late 1970s. McMichael terms the third food regime “corporate” because there was a shift from national agricultures to corporate management of the market in the interest of financial capital.

Methodological Problems: Levels of Abstraction, Units of Analysis and Causality

McMichael does a fine job of summing up the evolving conceptualization of the “food regime project.” When addressing some of its critics, McMichael’s discussion is gauged at a very high level of abstraction, as he speaks primarily of “capital” in general and focuses on the world-system as the chief unit of analysis. This focus has been both the strength and the weakness of the food regime perspective, as developed by McMichael. One welcome aspect of his discussion, however, is that he posits the food regime analysis as open to scrutiny and extension by other scholars, which several of us have done.

One of the chief features in McMichael’s theorizing is trying to identify a single “principle” that rules each food regime: empire, state, and market, respectively. Corresponding features of capital accumulation in each food regime are: extensive (1st), intensive (2nd), and financial (3rd). In an inductive, empiricist turn, however, McMichael extrapolates what Vía Campesina has done since its founding in the mid-1990s and raises its proposed food sovereignty project and agroecological practices into the emerging principle of a post-corporate food regime.

Vía Campesina has become a significant peasant movement, which acts on a global scale, but advocates for the realization of food sovereignty on a national level. Many scholars have endorsed this movement, and the fact is that its constituent organizations are predicated on acting upon their domestic states, not merely on the global sphere (Otero et al. 2013; Gürcan 2014). Yet, McMichael disqualifies a class-based national approach (81) because he presumes that the only valid or effective sphere for political action is the global. I have critiqued this transnational-globalist position in favor of an internationalist nationalism elsewhere (Otero 2011). My reasoning is that, whereas the world economy is indeed global, politics continues to be fundamentally local

(i.e., national and subnational). It is from this bottom-up location that significant transformation can take place, not only because this is where local working classes and peasant ecologies are actually situated, but also because “capital” (its owners, that is) has already colonized the global sphere (Otero 2004). Privileging the global as the sphere of struggle is tantamount not only to accepting capital’s terms of engagement; it is a choice that will almost certainly end in defeat.

Thus, if the “food regime” is a form of historical method to which other dimensions may be added, as McMichael usefully proposes (108), then one must decide what are the relative causal dimensions, scales and units of analysis. We need to develop a systematic ordering of concepts in which a conscious decision is made as to what are the core dynamic dimensions of the food regime, what are the causal directions and interactions between which entities, and how does change happen. Short of this, we are left with an abstract theoreticism on the functioning of capital in general in the world-system at large. Or we are left with inductive empiricism to derive what, for instance, is the emerging “principle” in the midst of a crisis of the neoliberal or corporate food regime, although it may be developing on the margins of capitalism itself. McMichael’s treatment of crisis and restructuring does both: abstracted theoreticism drawing on multiple sources of ecological and peasant-studies thinking, and inductive empiricism drawing on social movements proposing the food sovereignty project based on a new peasantry.

Much of the implicitly or explicitly causal language that McMichael uses is inaccurate when discussing crisis and restructuring of the food regime. For instance, starting with the grand theoretical statement that the “patterning of food regimes is represented, phenomenally, as a succession of regulatory structures organizing the relations of production and circulation of food,” he then asserts: “Such regulatory structures represent episodes of [capital] accumulation dynamics *governed* by patterns of expansion and crisis (109, emphasis added). How do expansion and crises *govern* regulatory structures? Are they not the product of class struggles by specific classes or class fractions that manage to impose certain types of regulation that favor their historical interests? If so, what classes or class fractions are these?”

With these abstractions and the empirical truism that there is an ecological crisis turning into catastrophe, McMichael proceeds to analyze the accumulation crisis that started in 2007-2008 through the food regime lens. He offers many good insights and interesting empirical quotations from various sources, but some are gauged at such a general level that they make me wonder about their usefulness or reliability. For instance, there is the calculated food calorie inflation of 20 percent since the 1960s per “average global citizen” (111-112): how do we determine the extent to which this caloric food inflation represents mostly increased empty-calorie consumption by the masses or primarily increased nutritional content (e.g., fruits and vegetables) for the upper-income

groups? And how is such caloric inflation allocated among countries in the world economy? A class-diets perspective would come in handy here (Otero et al. 2015).

Then, for more ad hoc data, we learn that a third of the world market was closed to food exports in the midst of the 2008 crisis (112). But how does this figure square with the “fact” that only a mere 10 percent of the world’s agricultural production is traded (157)? These contrasting data clash with other dramatic figures cited by McMichael, which highlight the extent of food dependency in developing countries: By the mid-1990s, fully 80 percent of foreign exchange in “low-income food deficit countries went to food imports” (55-56); food bills in food-dependent countries grew by 20 percent from 1990 to 1999; and, by the mid-2000s, fully 70 percent of countries in the “global South” were net food importers (55-56). If only 10 percent of world food is traded, does food dependency in developing countries affect primarily the poor? The rich? Both? McMichael’s heavy use of ad hoc data from a variety of sources, including “grey sources,” leads me to suggest that he could use more systematic and rigorous empirical research, not to mention some theoretical mediations to connect his data and conclusions.

Theoretical Problems: Neoliberalism, Peasant Populism, and Marx’s Capital

My main disagreement with McMichael relates to his conceptual portrayal of the third food regime, which is conceptually flawed in several respects. To start with, he names it “corporate” because in the shift from national agricultures to corporate domination of the market, he argues, the shift was done in the interest of financial capital. Ironically, though, rather than corporations per se, McMichael points to neoliberalism (implemented by states via neo-regulation) as the third food regime’s core. If this is so, why does he not employ this term “neoliberal food regime” more often in his analysis (indeed, he uses it only once in the book, on page 77)? Citing other authors, McMichael states: “A savage regime, neoliberalism is premised on redistribution, rather than production, of wealth” (45). Neoliberal globalization, he claims, reverses the order of the second food regime: “States now serve markets” (47). We have discussed our disagreements with McMichael’s naming and characterization of the third food regime elsewhere (Pechlaner and Otero 2010; Otero 2012; Otero et al. 2013).

McMichael revisits the agrarian question, which was a major theoretical and political debate at the turn of the twentieth century among European Marxists. In short, he claims that the classical debate was “capital-centric” and what we need in the twenty-first century is a peasant-ecology focus around the food sovereignty project (see chapter 4). For McMichael, it’s no longer simply an agrarian but an ecological question geared to repair the metabolic rift between human beings and nature. The “metabolic rift” is just one of very many conceptual phrases that McMichael fails to properly define upon first use. Instead, he cites a phrase from Karl Marx quoted

by another author that merely states the problem but is far from a definition. The short glossary contained in the book does not mitigate this problem. Ultimately, McMichael shifts the agrarian question from a question of capital (in which labor should be but is not included—more on this below), and asserts a populist, peasantist project, as if this were not itself a class project.

As if the whole problem were merely a theoretical-analytical one, McMichael proposes to reframe the agrarian question as a food question. This move would supposedly allow us to transcend “the food regime’s abstract market calculus”—again hypostatizing both food regime and market. McMichael then goes on to formulate a series of proposals such as enhancing the practical (use) values of peasant agriculture, essentializing (137) and universalizing (145) peasants in the process. He suggests that “food sovereignty” is the emerging principle in the post-corporate food regime. McMichael posits the food sovereignty “project” as the countermovement to capital’s corporate food regime, which includes a wide range of practices “that incorporate, recover and develop value orientations supporting positive social and ecological relations of reproduction, in contradistinction to the under-reproducing tendencies of capitalism” (156).

Much of McMichael’s discussion of repeasantization seems to imply that it’s all a matter of how peasants are “viewed” by theorists (145-147) or their organic intellectuals (not his term): whether peasants are seen as backward and inefficient, or as stewards of the land capable of feeding the world in an ecologically sustainable way. In fact, much of the peasantry that does continue to exist, including Van der Ploeg’s new peasantry, do so either thanks to European subsidies or tenacious resistance in view of harsher realities in the rest of the economy. So, yes, the *differentia specifica* of peasantries is their ability to intensify labor, or what Alexander Chayanov called “self-exploitation.” But there are physical limits to this and, short of also idealizing poverty, enhancing peasant production requires social mobilization to bend state policies in their favor. How can such policies be promoted without an alliance with urban working classes, including those with middle-to-upper income concerned about food quality? How can we formulate such questions without a proper understanding of the state, also, as an entity traversed by class struggle and not merely a reflection, epiphenomenon, or an instrument of “capital”?

Make no mistake: capitalist farmers, particularly those in the United States, are also subsidized and this has been a chief factor decimating the peasantry worldwide. But the question about repeasantization is not merely analytical; it is chiefly political. Properly addressing it demands 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.

In formulating theoretical positions on the workings of the food regime, food sovereignty and climate, McMichael could have used less uncritical reliance on the language of his sources, a practice that often seems eclectic. He acknowledges that it may be problematic to draw on “conventional language” like “food sovereignty” and, especially I would say, “ecological capital.” These two concepts encapsulate the program proposed by McMichael, in tune with other agroecologist scholars and *Vía Campesina*. Let me reiterate that I sympathize with this program. But the way in which McMichael argues for it leaves a lot to be desired in theoretical and analytical rigor.

McMichael’s theoretical strategy to assert the sustainability of the food-sovereignty program is to start with a critique of what he calls “capital-centrism,” attributed to both classical discussions of the agrarian question and later developments of the food-regime perspective, including his own. The trouble with this phrasing is that McMichael refers to “capital” in relation to the owners of capital, not to capital as a social relation that includes the non-owners of capital, i.e., workers. As Karl Marx put it, capital “. . . is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things” (1977: 932). In fact, the whole process of capital accumulation is not merely about accumulating money or expanding profitability, but also extending the capital-labor relation. However much capitalism has changed in the era of neoliberal policies and prominence of finance capital, workers and their labor power continue to play a critical role in producing the conditions for profit making. Much new profiteering is also based on extractive activities like mining, land grabbing, and other forms of expropriation discussed by McMichael, but this profiteering amounts mostly to redistribution of existing social surplus value. Thus, placing the gaze primarily on the “analysts and captains of industry” while ignoring workers necessarily ends up in an incomplete look at the contradictions and dialectic of capitalism.

In sum, *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* offers a useful compilation of McMichael’s contributions to food regime analysis in a single text. It contains sharp and lucid insights into the functioning of food and agriculture on a world scale, as few scholars are capable of providing. Given the openness of the perspective espoused by McMichael, his insights promise to continue inspiring other researchers to elaborate the intricacies of food, health and climate relations in specific geopolitical locations.

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