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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD

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Introduction: Valuing Different Perspectives on Power in the Food System^{*†}

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and Jody Harris⁴

Abstract In this introductory article, we highlight debates that emerged in the IDS–IPES–Food workshop on the political economy of food as a way of introducing the articles that follow. In exploring how different groups view power in food systems, we conceptualise a ‘mainstream’ narrative emerging from embedded agricultural and economic thinkers and practitioners, and contrast this with a multiplicity of reactions to and critiques of that narrative. In aiming to understand power in the food system, we recognise that there are many different disciplinary, epistemological, and ideological entry points into the study of power, and that seeking a single approach will likely limit the insights that different disciplines and research orientations can bring to the study of food systems. We argue that we must first better understand power at its different levels, forms, and spaces, and then use this understanding in order to transform food systems via equitable processes which work towards the interests of all.

Keywords: food systems, political economy, food sovereignty, agroecology, power, food security.

1 Why we must understand power to transform food systems

Power in the food system is a slippery concept that changes depending on one’s vantage point. The CEO of a major retail chain in the global North might claim that consumers hold the real power in a system that operates from ‘fork to field’, driving the choices that savvy business people must make in order to stay in the retail game. A poor woman in Haiti left with no choice but to feed her children mud-cakes to fill their bellies might perceive that power is held primarily by those who distribute food aid after disasters. An activist advocating for greater food sovereignty might say that power is held mostly (or most problematically) by large corporations encroaching on the rights of communities around the world through land-grabs, water-grabs, and forced adoption of technology or quality standards that place farmers at a major disadvantage.

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This issue of the *IDS Bulletin* examines different perspectives on power in the food system, and the web of actors, relationships, activities, and institutions that play a major role in shaping them: in other words, the political economy of food systems. In this introduction, we highlight some of the debates that emerged in a workshop on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', held in Brighton, UK in June 2018 and co-organised by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

There are many different disciplinary, epistemological, and ideological entry points to the study of power. The aspect that holds these various perspectives together is the understanding that power is critical, including power *over* others and power *to* meet the goals of a household, organisation, or community, as well as the more subtle forms and spaces of power in food systems investigated in the workshop and in this *IDS Bulletin*. Different understandings of both political economy and power can enrich each other: seeking a single approach will likely limit the insights that different disciplines and research orientations can bring to the study of food systems.

IDS and IPES-Food are interested not only in the current state of food systems, but also in their capacity to improve the inadequacies seen in most modern food systems and to move towards greater sustainability – as measured through outcomes including more democratic participation in decision-making, more equity in wellbeing, greater environmental resilience, and better nutrition and health for all. Each of these outcomes will require redistributing power among food system actors. An analysis of food systems must therefore include power as an aspect of political economy, in order to understand how power relations develop over time and affect different food system actors. In particular, we are interested in the effects on those who are relatively powerless due to ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, or other reasons for marginalisation, who predictably cannot realise their rights to access sufficient quantities of healthy food nor to participate in decision-making about the food system. The transformation that is envisioned here may be instigated by a wide variety of actors, but always involves a shift in power relations away from dominant actors who reinforce the embedded inequities and lock-ins that keep current unsatisfactory systems in place.

To understand the drivers of transformation and to investigate solutions to these embedded inequities, a reflexive approach that includes recognising the power of the analyst must also be part of political economy analysis. Transdisciplinarity becomes even more crucial in this context. The goals of transformation must be identified and articulated, and the value of different pathways towards those goals must rest on evidence produced by scientists and actors beyond the scientific community. The perspectives of these other actors are vital, as they include the people who will need to implement these actions. Although we do not pretend to give an overview of political economy as

a field nor an exhaustive analysis of all political economy approaches to food systems, we present different perspectives that emerged during our workshop and the various paradigms that influence them.

2 How do different groups view food systems power?

2.1 Conceptualising a mainstream

For alternative perspectives to exist, there must be a recognised mainstream for them to rebut. In food systems research and practice, the mainstream consists of a broad group of economic and agricultural development thinkers, food security scholars, donor agencies, and private foundations who have shaped food system policymaking in governmental and intergovernmental (United Nations) spaces for at least the past 60 years. Although dominant visions have taken on the need to protect environmental quality and gender equity to varying degrees, we would argue that what unites this diverse group of actors is adherence to a predominately ‘productionist’ perspective that stresses the need to significantly increase food production and calorie availability through agricultural production efficiencies, large new capital investments, and new technologies usually focused on staple grain crops and oil seeds (see, for example, World Bank 2007; FAO 2009; Beddington 2010; and other examples in Tomlinson 2013).

Innovations based within this perspective – including hybrid seeds, large-scale irrigation projects, and subsidies for synthetic fertiliser – had marked success in increasing yields in some regions during the ‘Green Revolution’, and members of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa hope to replicate this success in Africa.⁵ ‘Sustainable intensification’ and ‘climate-smart agriculture’ are popular terms in this mainstream, implying increasing productivity and adapting to climate change without further degrading natural resources (e.g. Conway 1999; Pretty, Toulmin and Williams 2011; Rockström *et al.* 2017). As they relate to nutrition, dominant perspectives tend to give primacy to strategies that provide additional nutrients to a growing global population through increased food production or through supplementation or fortification processes rather than by substantive changes in how poor people and producers access and direct their own food systems. Considering both food production and consumption, the focus has been on the role of technology and efficient resource management to meet food system needs; that is, food and nutrition are technical rather than social or political issues (Scott-Smith, forthcoming) – or, as Olivier De Schutter (this *IDS Bulletin*) argues – this perspective relies overly on Earth systems and physiological/behavioural conceptions, often grounded in quantitative science, in many cases ignorant of long histories of social and political thought in other traditions.

A result of this technocratic focus has been the downplaying of power relations in mainstream research and policy, obscuring or ignoring the root causes of food system inequities through the chronic disempowerment of poor and marginalised people – both politically and in their access to resources, services, and the wealth of the state.

Such approaches 'portray systems without actors; they see food chains without power; and they take the institutional framework as given, rather than as constructed and as the result of particular path dependencies or conflicts' (De Schutter, this *IDS Bulletin*). Much work based in the mainstream has taken poverty (and more recently gender disparities) as independent variables in analysis, rather than as structural factors underpinning major power imbalances and their intermediary outcomes (e.g. colonialism, discrimination, and lack of accountability of governments to their people) (Harris and Nisbett 2018).

The mainstream includes a spectrum of views on economic development and trade, including at one extreme, belief in unfettered free trade, the primacy of the market, and the rules of supply and demand to distribute value along the supply chain. Less extreme views include various market-oriented practices, including voluntary corporate social responsibility schemes and quality standards systems such as organic certification. While such schemes are often initially developed by proponents of sustainability and equity, they have more recently been studied for their risk of co-optation by corporate interests or for how they may unwittingly perpetuate 'distancing' between producers and consumers (Blay-Palmer 2008; Chernev and Blair 2015; de Colle, Henriques and Sarasvathy 2014; Howard 2016). In other words, market-based strategies are being criticised for failing to spark essential shifts in business practices necessary to provide real equity across the value chain and fundamentally re-orientate themselves away from high-capitalist forms of natural/bio-resource extraction.

Because of the failure of mainstream research and policy to grapple with power inequities in the food system, the power of dominant food system actors is often reinforced or overlooked. Put into practice, this lack of scrutiny has led to the largely unchallenged increase in private sector funding to reshape food systems – through public–private partnerships, or corporate social responsibility mechanisms – in response to reductions in public funding for food and agriculture. Such privatisation of agricultural research and interventions has negative consequences for farmers and the public (Anderson 2019) and has combined with broader political trends towards subsidy regimes aligned with the interests of large agribusiness (De Schutter, this *IDS Bulletin*). Fundamentally then, mainstream approaches rarely engage in an explicit critique of the socio-political systems within which food systems exist. Without this critique, current food system trajectories continue to rely on minor tweaks to existing practices and policies that only improve singular outcomes. Lacking ambition, these changes fail to affect the more fundamental power relations that reproduce existing systems and will not engender the kind of transformation advanced by IPES-Food and IDS.

2.2 Reactions and critiques

Political economy as understood by sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists stems from different traditions and reactions to these mainstream approaches. In his presentation at the IPES-Food and

IDS workshop and in his article included here, Desmond McNeill (this *IDS Bulletin*) points out that these different approaches can be – at least in international relations – linked to two key traditions: realism and constructivism. The former adopts an agent-based rational choice framework (more in line with the mainstream economic approaches outlined above), while the latter takes on a structural Marxist view (more prominent in academia but outside of mainstream economics). These in turn reflect broader theoretical debates on structure and agency in many social and political disciplines. The constructivist- and Marxist-influenced approaches have dedicated more time to exploring the various actors; interests (e.g. profit, security, wellbeing, solidarity, and so forth); sources of power (e.g. economic resources, legal mandate, discursive power); and scales (e.g. local, national, global) involved in shaping structural or system dynamics.

It is through these approaches that scholars have dealt most explicitly with power in the food system over the last century – enabling both micro-studies of power in particular policy settings (see, for example, Harris, this *IDS Bulletin*; O'Brien and Nisbett, this *IDS Bulletin*) or the ability to step back and consider the power dynamics responsible for broader structural change. An important example of the latter is the concept of food regimes, understood as massive upheavals in agricultural and food production in relation to the development of global capitalism to explain who holds power and how they exert it. Introduced by Friedmann and McMichael (1989), two major cyclical transitions were defined: a first food regime (1870–1914) describes the period of British hegemony in the world economy, and a second (1945–73) identifies the period of US dominance in the post-war economy. Since the early 1970s, many have postulated the emergence of a third 'corporate food regime', including McMichael (2005), although some also propose the growth of an ecological or 'green' food regime (Campbell 2009). Gliessman, Friedmann and Howard further explore the history of agroecology and changing food paradigms in this *IDS Bulletin*.

In the past, sociological and political science approaches have tended to emphasise social drivers of change, often to the exclusion of ecological drivers. Newer works, however, have incorporated major ecological drivers such as climate change and natural resource scarcity into their analyses. Some of the most dynamic developments in this regard have been in the field of political ecology, which combines social theory with an interest in ecological systems to question dominant representations of the environment, ecological systems, and human/nature interaction – in opposition to the 'apolitical perspective and depoliticizing effects of mainstream environmental and developmental research and practice' (Le Billon 2001: 563). This has been important, for example, in understanding and countering dominant framings of socioecological crises such as famine which underplay the way in which power differentials can work both to create such crises and then to obscure or misrepresent them as outcomes of 'natural' and 'inevitable' forces. Such work in political ecology joins earlier, 'biopolitical' approaches

influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, which, alongside (and influencing/and influenced by) feminist literature, consider the way in which power operates through attempts to categorise and control the body and its functions, as well as the representation of people's bodies.

These modes of analysis have been important in questioning dominant representations or public health interventions on obesity (e.g. Guthman and Dupuis 2006) as yet further ways of maintaining societal control over the bodies of women, the poor, or simply the mass population in the service of capital accumulation. More recently, a 'post-humanist' turn in many social sciences, influenced in part by science and technology studies (STS), feminist literature, and the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, has gone further in questioning the human or social bias of much of the social and political sciences. These perspectives stress the fact that natural forces or materials can affect other systemic elements without always being mediated by conscious human agency (Coole and Frost 2010). Such approaches suggest exciting new directions for the future study of power in the food system grounded in an ontology that recognises ecological and material agency (Nisbett 2019).

Another stream of work within political economy approaches to food has been transformative food system theories. Such works have attempted to integrate an understanding of the socio-political and ecological root causes of current trends and thus seek pathways to the transformation of food systems. These theories have tended to consider the actions of governments and civil society more than marketplace drivers, with particular emphasis on the role of governance. Indeed, food system transitions scholars draw heavily on governance literature to better understand the different 'constellations of actors' that can create and encourage sustainable food systems and the policies that support them (Duncan 2015: 340).

While some critical scholars focus primarily on the consequences of abuses of power by dominant actors in the food system (Howard 2016; Patel 2012; Clapp 2016; Fuchs, Kalfagianni and Arentsen 2009), others consider the transformative role governance – particularly collaborative and co-governance schemes at various levels – can play to spark food system transformation (Andrée *et al.* 2019; Mount 2012; Barling and Duncan 2015; Candel 2014). In this vein, a majority of political economy scholars assume that higher levels of participation by non-governmental actors – namely civil society organisations, social movements, and certain private sector actors working alongside government institutions – are necessary to ensure the transition towards sustainable food systems. Further than this, Hossain and Scott-Villiers (this *IDS Bulletin*) identify mechanisms through which the purchasing and protest power of low-income consumers and citizens have shaped food systems after food price crises.

In seeking to further address power disparities in food systems, a number of scholars have also turned to the study of alternative food

systems for their opposition to conventional corporate-led, industrialised food systems. In particular, alternative food system research considers how these systems may redress power imbalances by giving democratic control back to marginalised food system actors by re(building) relationships of proximity and trust between them (Sonnino and Marsden 2006; DuPuis 2006; Lyson 2004; Hinrichs 2003). Bringing more nuance to these debates, a number of critical food system scholars have also more recently questioned the degree to which alternative food systems truly lead to transformative change by exploring how these systems may instead unwittingly reproduce systems of economic exploitation and lack of political accountability.

More specifically, critical political economy scholars are considering the ways in which dominant food systems continue to co-opt alternatives (e.g. by normalising paradigms which value the individualisation of responsibility) and how the state plays an active role in maintaining dominant paradigms (Levkoe 2011; Tarasuk 2001; Allen *et al.* 2003; Guthman 2008; Connelly, Markey and Roseland 2011). Many alternative food systems operate either within urban settings or at the rural–urban interface, and scholars have examined their ability to redress marginalisation and inequity (Reynolds and Cohen 2016). Closer to home, Emily O’Brien describes how a food system lens has been successfully applied to strategising around food system inequities in developing a citywide food strategy, as part of the work of the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (O’Brien and Nisbett, this *IDS Bulletin*).

Social justice scholars also have more recently entered debates on the political economy of food systems, calling for greater acknowledgement of issues relating to inequality, race, and gender in achieving food system sustainability (Allen 2008; Guthman, Morris and Allen 2006; Hinrichs 2000; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Mooney and Hunt 2009; Cadieux and Slocum 2015). These thinkers encourage the use of a social justice lens to better understand the social and political actions, discourses, and structures that shape and perpetuate food poverty and inequality, and how to identify possible solutions to these challenges (Schanbacher 2017). Social justice thinkers also frequently encourage participatory and transdisciplinary research methods to democratise and create greater inclusivity in the collection and analysis of data (e.g. university–community partnerships, participatory action research). They promote greater cooperation between the scientific community and social actors, not only to identify the current challenges food systems face, but also the potential opportunities for food system transformation, and the priorities and values on which these should be based (IPES-Food 2015).

Finally, even what constitutes knowledge and evidence can be interrogated. Picking up on the topic of a previous IPES-Food report on the food–health nexus, Rocha and Harris (this *IDS Bulletin*) focus in particular on the political economy of knowledge and evidence in this area. Using an example of food policy in Mexico on sugar-sweetened beverages, the authors describe the ideas of evidence-based policy and

its limitations, and comment on power and the political economy of knowledge in this contested field.

This very brief overview of different perspectives on political economy approaches highlights some key perspectives that might be applied in understanding power and politics in food systems work and has drawn from the articles that follow, which are drawn in turn from a stimulating two days of discussion at the IDS–IPES-Food workshop. The articles begin with an introduction to political economy approaches before moving on to articles focusing on four key themes that have been the subject of IPES-Food reports and a larger body of work by both IPES-Food and IDS scholars and activists. Two case studies – Zambia and the city of Brighton and Hove (UK) – then help situate applications of power analyses or structural approaches to food and nutrition at national and local levels. A final set of articles (Anderson and Leach; Duncan *et al.*, both this *IDS Bulletin*) then consider some of the ongoing questions that emerged from the workshop and which will form the agenda for future work and methodological questions around understanding power in the food system. These questions remain; some will be addressed by articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, and others will require more reflective and empirical work going forward.

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.
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- 4 Jody Harris, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 5 See <https://agra.org>.

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