

Globalising Food: Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring

edited by David Goodman and Michael J. Watts
Routledge, London and New York, 1997, 383 pages,
ISBN 0-415-16252-1 (hbk)/ 0-415-16253 (pbk)

In *Globalising Food*, Goodman and Watts present a fascinating collection of essays that deal with the changing character of agriculture and the food industry in the light of recent re-organisations of the global economy. More specifically, as the editors make clear in their introductory chapter, the aim is to think through the ways in which agrarian questions posed by writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (particularly those outlined by Karl Kautsky) have some resonance in contemporary worlds of food production. As such, the book seeks to address concerns of the changing relationship between rural locales of production and the increasingly globalised markets they serve, the impact of developments in technology upon agriculture and agro-industry and the changing face of class and politics in agricultural regions. This parallel drawn between the shape of today's agro-food systems and the dilemmas faced by those at the end of the nineteenth century lends a very sharp analytical edge to the collection as a whole, even though the theme is drawn upon unevenly by the various contributors. The book is very effectively structured by the editors into six sections, each containing two or three chapters that speak primarily to a particular strand of contemporary agrarian questions, and each rounding off with a brief commentary by authors who both critique these chapters and broaden the discussion into wider conceptual concerns and research agendas. Outlining, first, the substantive concerns of the book, the collection begins with three essays on 'Institutions, embeddedness and agrarian trajectories'. These explore alternative trajectories of the organisation of milk production in southern Brazil (Wilkinson), different paths of rural industrialisation in South Africa (Hart), and the dynamics behind the growth of the knitwear industry in Tiripur, India (Chari). The focus here is mainly upon the active role played by particular farms and organisations in pathways of agricultural and rural development in different contexts. The second section takes up the theme of 'Restructuring, industry, and regional dynamics'. As is noted by the commentator on this section, FitzSimmons, the two chapters evaluate the fortunes of different kinds of region as a result of global restructuring; the first looking at the supra-national region of the Caribbean, and the second providing a remarkable analysis of the sub-national region of Iowa, USA, in light of the restructuring of pork production. While these first two parts of the collection are organised to focus on slightly different categorical concerns, the overlap between them is evident, hence drawing out the interlinkages between institutions and regions in processes of agrarian restructuring. In Part III, the terrain of geographical focus shifts to the creation of value in systems of food production which provide for increasingly globalised markets. Taking the varied case studies of Brazil, the Caribbean and the UK, Marsden demonstrates how quality, value and safety are socially, technically and politically constructed. Boyd and Watts then use the following chapter to examine the practices of just-in-time production systems in the American chicken industry since the Second World War, drawing particularly on the analytical resonance with Kautsky's agrarian question and establishing the centrality of power to the construction of quality in this industry. Part IV provocatively presents two very different approaches to, and case studies of, power and regulation in the food system. Wells adopts traditional theories of agrarian political economy to make sense of conflict in the strawberry producing regions of California. In contrast, Ward and Lowe use methods of actor-network theory to study the use of bureaucratic organisational practices in the regulation of pollution discharged by dairy farms in the UK. The fifth section of the collection also embodies conceptual contrasts between the two chapters, concerned this time with 'Transnational capital and local responses'. While Gouveia asserts the importance of relating the complexities of agency back to large-scale structures in the assessment of the impact of globalisation and restructuring on Venezuelan production systems, Whatmore and Thorne maintain an emphasis on the role of agency itself in simply lengthening networks in the context of fairly traded coffee. The final part of the book rounds off the collection by focusing on 'Nature, sustainability and the agrarian question', with Redclift thinking through the contrasting ways in which different schools of thought deal with concerns of sustainability, and Buttel looking at the agency of social movements in the forging of agro-food systems and agricultural sustainability in the US. Neatly bringing the discussion back round to the focal point of Part I, the commentary on Part VI by Le Heron and Roche highlights the centrality of particular institutions in the construction of sustainable agriculture. The six parts of the book work well as coherent themes, which often interlock with one another in productive ways. Added to this, the commentaries also make for interesting reading, provoking the reader to think more broadly about the

implications of the specific case studies. All commentaries provide constructive criticism of the themes emerging from these case studies, while some debate at length their political implications (see, for example, the eloquent commentary by Walker).

It is, as ever, impossible, and in any case undesirable, to represent the substantive nuances and intricacies of each individual chapter in this book. Certainly worth spotlighting, though, are some key conceptual and methodological themes, which mark the main debates over approaches to agrarian questions in the collection. Chapters by Hart, Reynolds and Page, as well as commentaries by Long and FitzSimmons, highlight the inadequacy of theories imported from the industrial restructuring literature in capturing the specificities of agrarian life. However, while Reynolds, for example, promotes some kind of synthesis of traditional approaches in agrarian political economy with theories of industrial restructuring, Hart makes clear her preference for the former approach alone. FitzSimmons also expresses reservations regarding theoretical synthesis. Another conceptual debate emerging in the pages of the collection pitches totalising theories of globalisation and restructuring against more complexity-based theories (in particular, those emanating from actor-network theory). This debate sees the former, in some guise or other, being heralded as ever-important by Wells, Walker and Gouveia, while Wilkinson, Long, Ward and Lowe and Whatmore and Thorne, in particular, demonstrate the merits of actor-network theory as both concept and method. Some of these uses of actor-network theory complement the suggestions made by Chari (and others) in stressing the pivotal role played by the 'uniqueness of place' and cultural specificity in structuring particular kinds of agrarian change. Where disagreement between authors is most evident concerns the need to link such geographical specificities with the formation of broader epochal shifts in restructuring and some kind of essentialised, macro-scale categories of capital and class. In my view, these theoretical tensions, which creatively tie the essays together, form one of the most intriguing strands of the book. They remind me very much of a postgraduate training session I had been involved in a couple of years ago in Scotland, in which we were all attempting to delineate some of the key theoretical trends in the discipline of geography since the 1960s. Someone asked what had happened to the structurationist projects of the 1980s and, after some musing, another person suggested that perhaps most geographers are still implicitly structurationists, at least in some way. This book, containing chapters that debate the relationship between structures and agency in various agrarian contexts, would appear to support this suggestion. Presenting rich empirical accounts of so many different geographical regions, and extending theoretical debate in the ways outlined briefly above, this is a wonderful edited collection, which will undoubtedly prove invaluable to researchers working in the areas of critical geography, political economy and international development.

Dr Alex Hughes Department of Geography University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

If you would like to respond to this review, please contact Andy Cumbers.

The EGRG strongly holds to an inclusive view of reviews and positively encourages debates which reflect the complex ways in which texts are read.