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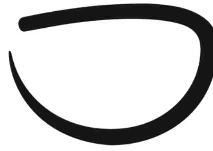
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# Paradigm change and power in the world food system—Synthesis paper

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The articles by Friedmann, Koç, and Wise draw out overarching issues in the world food system; issues that resurface throughout this special issue of *Canadian Food Studies*. They offer complementary views where the dominant model, upon which transnational policies are created, ignores pressing concerns in the food system related to the distribution of food, human health, and the environment. In this contribution, I will use the concept of transnational policy paradigms to illustrate the key tension between the status quo of food policy and emerging alternatives. Focusing on this tension raises two important questions. First, what is the relationship between the dominant model of food policy (which shapes how we identify problems and solutions) and "less travelled" models that frame problems and solutions in a different way? Second, what are the obstacles blocking a paradigm shift? In order to answer these questions, the concept of "policy paradigm" will be unpacked, followed by an assessment of the long-emerging contest between the dominant productionist-neoliberal and alternative agroecological paradigms.

## Paradigms and production

The concept of a "paradigm" refers to scientific communities, shared commitments/values, and the creation of common frameworks among them based on a shared framework for addressing a problem (Kuhn, 1970). Importantly, an implication of this is that paradigms are partly social in

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nature; they depend on communities. Thus, not only can two (competing) paradigms exist at once (typically among different communities, often with distinct members), but dominant paradigms are sticky because they are upheld by communities with shared goals and accepted truths. They have vested interest that may prove resilient to challenges. The decline of a dominant paradigm is explained not just by evidence that points to issues or weaknesses with its underlying assumptions or values, and practices it has engendered. Key community members that have formed around the pursuit of the agenda of the dominant paradigm must also be convinced of the relative merit and viability of alternatives (and their competing prioritization of values), including at various levels of the government, interest groups, within academic disciplines, and among policy activists. This process of negotiation is not linear, and the spectrum of implicated interests is diverse.

This view of paradigmatic thinking is also used in the realm of policy-making, and is referred to as policy paradigms (Hall, 1993) or even transnational policy paradigms (Babb, 2013). In the context of *change* in policy paradigms, three types of changes have been introduced, with relevance to the discussion of paradigm change in food policy. These are: 1) first order changes, meaning small changes in the settings/levels of policy instruments currently in use; 2) second order changes that alter policy techniques, but with the same goals in mind; and 3) third order changes that result in a shift in the goals desired of policy (Baker, 2013; Hall, 1993). A paradigm shift occurs when all three types of changes occur, resulting in a radical change in goals, which is accompanied by the introduction of different policy techniques and measures supporting those goals (Hall, 1993). Typically, academic discussion of policy paradigms has focused on the realm of economic policy, but as Friedmann and Wise each indicate, the direction of food policy at the global and transnational scale is highly related to the direction of economic policy as it is manifest in international institutions.

Within food and agriculture policy, the dominant paradigm coming out of the 1990s (but continuing a post-WWII trend) is a combination of productionism and neoliberalism (Lang & Heasman, 2004). Productionism has, at its heart, a focus on increasing the amount of food available, along with capital-intensive inputs to support "industrial high-input monoculture farming" (see Friedmann, Wise; also Lang & Heasman, 2004). As Friedmann indicates, this overarching policy goal favours the type of knowledge produced by orthodox agronomists, who are embedded in the larger economic policy paradigm of the Washington Consensus based on a neoliberal economic order. The broad types of economic policy techniques that the Washington Consensus emphasizes are generally oriented toward changing the role of the state to supporting the functioning of markets as opposed to intervention in markets, while also reducing barriers to trade and investment (Babb, 2013). Dominant policy paradigm goals in food and economics reinforce one another, and in the context of food, focus on limiting government role in agriculture, increasing production through technological fixes, and increasing reliance on traded food—or at least the "abandonment of national food security as a policy goal" (Chang, 2010, p. 6).

Koç provides the example of Turkish policies under the dominant paradigm. In this case, policies reduced the level of price control, changed to tools targeting unit subsidies (which favour farmers operating at larger scales), and supported input subsidies for fertilizers. This is not to say that all nations implement policies that solely fit this dominant paradigm, either in its links to reduction of state support, or in its promotion of industrial scale chemical or biological monoculture. It is well known that many countries (particularly major industrialized agricultural producers) continue to provide subsidy support, though this is typically targeted at industrial production. Other countries such as Brazil, Cuba, and Ecuador have, at least in part, adopted alternative policy paradigms, discussed below. However, at the level of the dominant institutions of global governance, the dominant paradigm prevails. As Chang (2010, p. 4) indicates, this direction of agricultural policy is the "new conventional wisdom."

Despite the widespread entrenchment of the dominant paradigm, which has ideological complements to wider economic policy thinking, repeated anomalies are found. Both the food price and financial crisis seemingly opened a window for introducing alternative policy goals and techniques. Further, there is increasing institutional space for discussing these alternatives. Are we in a time of paradigmatic crisis (Kuhn, 1970)? What then, is the path to developing and implementing an alternative policy paradigm? What are the obstacles?

## Emergence of the new and stickiness of the old

Despite the adoption of the dominant paradigm both among industrialized states as well as in many international institutions, it is not universal. As is widely recognized, paradigms can co-exist (Hall, 1993; Kuhn, 1970). The calls for a shift in the framework through which issues in the food system are understood has natural parallels with the types of accumulating anomalies seen within the dominant food system (Hall, 1993; Lang & Heasman, 2004). In particular, the framework through which productionism and neoliberalism identify policy goals and techniques does not easily account for issues of distribution and equity, nutrition and health, and the place of humans and agriculture within larger ecological systems. The primary framework being offered as an alternative is ecological agriculture, which takes several forms.

In terms of distribution, the key puzzle that arises in the world food system is that more food is produced than needed. Yet food shortages exist in some places and chronic hunger in others. Given that small producers still make up the majority of food production (and the majority of the hungry) in many developing countries, there is a mismatch between the attempt to increase food imports and the livelihood needs of many small farmers. Distribution itself is linked to key health issues. While enough food exists, hunger continues to occur in some regions alongside an acceleration of obesity in others. Further, where hunger seems to be in decline as a result of productionist policies, issues of nutrition arise, as described by Koç. Finally, health is not only related to human health, but to the health of the larger ecology of which humans are one part. The use of chemicals in supporting monoculture production, the dominance of specific crop

types and related biodiversity loss, are all aspects of the concerns that arise out of the application of productionist agriculture.

Of course, each of these "anomalies" that arise from the model are met with "articulations and *ad hoc* modifications [to the paradigm] in order to eliminate any apparent conflict" (Kuhn 1970, p. 78). For example, the need for rural-urban transition and shift to wage employment, complemented by agricultural industrialization, as a solution to hunger and access in agriculturally based developing countries; individual lifestyle choice arguments regarding nutritional issues; or biotechnology for preventing the known harm of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, while also increasing production (but ignoring patent issues, direction of research in relation to on-the-ground issues faced by small farmers, and the relationships of biotechnology to larger ecological and economic systems).

At the same time that the dominant paradigm seeks fixes to address these anomalies, agroecological approaches provide a potential alternative paradigm. Friedmann in particular points to the concept of landscapes as a crucial element in shaping the goals of an agroecology paradigm. The initial reorientation is one that reduces the importance given to agronomy's focus on profit maximization, and increases the importance of ecology's focus on interconnection between and across scales. In addition, there is a strong push towards cooperation between formal scientists, policy scientists, and farmers (Friedmann, this issue; Wise, this issue). In terms of policy techniques, Wise states most explicitly that in order to support small-scale farming, the focus must be on, "farmer access to decent land, public research and extension, credit, marketing support, measures to stabilize prices at remunerative levels, and import protection where necessary." This argument follows Chang (2010) who notes that implementing changes in techniques does not always mean developing brand new policy tools. Indeed, we can look to history to find options. In this case, the options presented require states to change the way they intervene in agricultural markets, in both the global North and South. For her part, Friedmann looks for deeper changes in policy techniques, shifting from enclosures to the "institutionaliz[ation of] commons as formal legal systems."

Can these ideas inform a new dominant policy paradigm? Is it possible to shift to different assumptions guiding transnational policy paradigms? Will elements of the existing paradigm be retained? Will elements of new (and in some cases, old) ways of thinking be taken in? Importantly, the authors each recognize the social and political nature of the changes that may be necessary to make the wider adoption of such a paradigm possible. The actors in each community supporting these competing frameworks are not idle.

## Moving forward: Power and alternatives

It is clear that there is a contest between these paradigms. The authors indicate that this is playing out at the level of transnational and global policy (with engagement and impact on-the-ground). While the World Bank (2007) World Development Report 2008 laid out the dominant

framework based in productionism and neoliberalism, along with the problems it identifies and the policy responses that emerge from it, the IAASTD (McIntyre, Herren, Wakhungu, & Watson, 2008) report develops an agroecological framework with a rather different set of policy responses to observed problems (Clapp, 2009; Wise & Murphy, 2012). There is a clear tension between World Bank and IAASTD. For example, the World Bank (2007, p. 4) indicates that "[c]ountries follow evolutionary paths that can move them from [agriculture-based transforming into urbanized countries]…". This perspective paints a linear model where high input productionist agriculture is inevitable. In contrast, the IAASTD report, while acknowledging the need for increased output, at the outset asks a different set of questions, such as how to "reduce hunger and poverty, improve rural livelihoods, and facilitate equitable environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable development" (McIntyre et al., 2008, p. 3).

The juxtaposition of these reports is even more important as it helps to describe the political space in which these two dialogues are operating among their authors and institutional affiliations (Clapp, 2009). The manifestation of such disagreements is also found among nation states, as seen in the differing signatories to each report. Despite being endorsed by 58 countries, three of the top industrialized agricultural producers (Australia, Canada, United States) refused to endorse the IAASTD report. A similar battle is taking place at the World Trade Organization, as the Doha Round once again collapses over disagreements on related issues. However, despite voices opposing the dominant paradigm, decisions based on its goals and values abound. In 2004, Lang and Heasmann indicated that we were "on the cusp" of a transition. In the wake of the food price (as well as financial) crisis, there is an opening for the goals and values of agroecological movements to move from a marginal paradigm to normal policy, presenting a very different set of policy practices.

Proponents of the dominant paradigm are attempting to deepen its hold on the food system. As the authors in this section note, the land grab represents a further entrenchment of the dominant paradigm, as enclosure threatens to remove small-scale farmers to be replaced with capital-intensive monoculture, often for global markets. More generally, the Washington Consensus, along with global financial regulation, remains largely unchanged despite legitimacy challenges (Baker, 2012; Best, 2012; Chang, 2010).

Why is the dominant paradigm not fading more rapidly, especially after successive public crises? The accumulation of anomalies is not enough to create a paradigm shift. Nor is the existence of alternative paradigms, even with their strengthening support. There are enormous vested interests (and some short-term successes) in the dominant paradigm. There are discursive contests taking place in building and translating alternative visions for the future of agricultural policy and production (see Friedmann, this issue). As Koç indicates, it is crucial to pay close attention to the politics of food, and further, the politics of food policy. It is thus of the utmost importance to explore the multiple power structures upholding the dominant paradigm, which serve to continue and promote the current trajectory of policy (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009). Uncovering the power dynamics must take place in tandem with the continuation of developing both the theoretical and practical basis of alternative food systems as well as the policy

techniques that support them. The remaining sections of this volume do exactly this. They provide much more detail on power and process in the dominant paradigm, theoretical advances contributing alternative paradigm creation, issue areas of contestation, and on-the-ground practices of alternatives.

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