The neoliberalization of agriculture, resistance, and resilience

Jamey Essex

In January 2010, a powerful earthquake devastated Haiti, killing thousands, causing widespread damage, and prompting an influx of emergency aid. This disaster highlighted the extensive and extreme poverty that has made Haiti the poorest country in the western hemisphere, with food insecurity, limited access to clean water, and lack of basic services and infrastructure marking daily life for millions of Haitians. Former US presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush quickly launched an international relief agency for those affected by the quake, the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund, though this monumental effort to direct short-term humanitarian relief and long-term development aid to Haiti prompted Clinton to issue a somewhat surprising apology.

In the 1990s, Clinton had helped secure production and export subsidies for American rice farmers in his home state of Arkansas, and led efforts to get Haiti’s government to liberalize its rice markets. With liberalization, the Haitian government slashed protective tariffs originally designed to support poor Haitian farmers from 50 to 3 per cent under the conditions of an IMF structural adjustment programme (SAP). Clinton told a Haitian reporter that, in retrospect, this was a ‘devil’s bargain’, and that he had ‘to live every day with the consequences of the lost capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people’ (O’Connor 2013: n.p.). These consequences, of course, have fallen much harder on Haitian rice farmers and consumers directly affected by the economic volatility and flood of cheap subsidized rice from the USA that followed. The example of Haitian rice, especially the rapid decline of farmers’ ability to provide for themselves under conditions of unevenly liberalized world markets for agricultural commodities, is just one of thousands of similar cases that demonstrate the impact of neoliberalization on agrofood systems. So how best to understand the complicated, contested, and often locally specific processes and outcomes of neoliberalization for the systems on which we all rely for food?

In the most general terms, we can state unequivocally that neoliberalism has profoundly altered agricultural practices and systems since the late 1970s. From the production of food and fibre in innumerable diffuse sites around the world to the highly uneven and, as the Haiti case demonstrates, unequal systems of trade, speculation, and consumption through which the world’s population feeds and clothes itself, agriculture has proved a vital but highly contentious arena of neoliberalization. This chapter covers the process of neoliberalization in relation to agriculture by emphasizing how neoliberalism has shaped the metabolic relations and processes...
of agroecological production, and attempted to bend these to the needs of speculative global capital. Particularly important is what is known as food regime analysis for understanding global agriculture, and how this has informed critical assessments of neoliberalism and its impact on agrofood systems. The food regime approach stems from regulation theory, and concentrates on global systems and historic shifts in the regulation of capitalism by states and other social and political forces. In doing so, it provides insight into the development of a global corporate-dominated and market-oriented neoliberal system of agricultural production, trade, and consumption. Critics contend, however, that this approach also can limit our ability to understand the varied and often haphazard nature of agroecological adaptation and crisis under neoliberalism, as well as the diverse forms of compromise, resistance, and resilience that have developed among agrarian movements and alternative forms of agriculture.

Highlighting the theoretical and practical diversity in contemporary assessments of neoliberalism, especially the limits of neoliberal agriculture, requires us to understand agriculture as an integrated agroecological system. Agriculture constitutes a form of metabolic interaction between human society and the physical environment, shaped by scientific and technological achievements and profound manipulation of plant and animal resources, but nonetheless bound by the genetic, ecological, and social limits of those resources and how they are used. Identifying, understanding, and working within these limits, rather than blindly ignoring or attempting to overcome them through quick-fix technological solutions and unsustainable political and economic arrangements, means rigorously assessing the viability, resilience, and robustness of non-neoliberal systems. This includes the wide variety of alternative and resistance movements that have emerged over the last several decades in response to neoliberalization.

The remainder of this chapter examines the food regime approach, including its main arguments and shortcomings, before turning to questions of agroecological resilience. Neoliberalism provides a spatially and socially uneven basis for local–global connection that has increasingly clear agroecological limits under conditions of widespread poverty, inequality, and perhaps irreversible climate change. I examine some examples of non- and anti-neoliberal forms of agriculture to conclude with an assessment of the possibilities for alternatives to current inequities in relation to food and agriculture.

Food regimes

Over the last two-plus decades, food regime analysis has become one of the dominant paradigms in research on the international political economy of agriculture and food, and thus on the process of neoliberalization in global agrofood systems. This approach provides a heuristic framework for examining shifts in national and global regulation of agriculture and food, looking especially at relations of production and trade, and serving as ‘a key to unlock not only structured moments and transitions in the history of capitalist food relations, but also the history of capitalism itself” (McMichael 2009b: 281). Using the food regime concept, scholars have examined changes in agriculture and food systems as a window on much deeper and more extensive processes of capitalist development and crisis. Building from regulation theory, which itself focuses on stability and periodic crises in the history of capitalist development, food regime analysis defines a ‘regime’ as a stable system of economic, social, and political regulation and norms that allows for steady (or at least predictable) capital accumulation. In doing so, the internal dynamics of the regime displace or temporarily resolve capitalism’s class antagonisms through formal and informal institutional arrangements, most notably by and within the nation-state but also increasingly by and within local and transnational institutions and governance (Aglietta 1979; Peck 2000; Jessop 2013). As capitalism is a volatile and contradictory system of social,
economic, and political organization, and so requires some form of political and regulatory management to avoid or mitigate the social and economic impacts of market fluctuations and crashes, identifying periods and frameworks of stability and crisis allows us to map out regulatory structures and practices across time and space. No regime can fully or permanently displace or resolve the capitalist law of value’s contradictions, however, and regimes experience crisis and failure until they are replaced by a new regime.

Food regime theorists position food and agriculture as a key component in the wider development of capitalist circuits of finance, trade, and industrial development. Looking primarily at changes in the international state system, changing modes and practices of business regulation, technological changes linking agriculture to other economic sectors, the industrialization of agricultural production itself, and the national state’s changing role in mediating political and economic processes, scholars generally identify three main food regimes in the contemporary history of industrial capitalist development. These are known by different names, but, following primarily from Friedmann (2005), can be identified as the settler-colonial food regime (roughly 1870 to the 1930s), the mercantile–industrial food regime (from the immediate post-World War II period through the mid-1970s), and the neoliberal–corporate regime (from the early 1980s onward). Between each are periods of crisis and transition, in which existing practices and institutions meet the limits of their capacity to regulate agriculture in line with broader systems of capitalist accumulation, political legitimacy, and social reproduction.

The food regime concept has sparked considerable debate among critical researchers since first articulated by Friedmann and McMichael (1989). One of the most contentious points centres on the current neoliberal–corporate regime’s stability, and whether it is even a ‘regime’ at all, or rather an extended period of crisis and reorganization (Araghi 2003; Burch and Lawrence 2009; Campbell and Dixon 2009; McMichael 2009b; Pritchard 2009). The settler–colonial regime was defined by the extension of European settlement and colonialism to new areas of the globe (especially the hinterlands of North America, Australia, and parts of the global South), the development of national commodities markets, and a competitive liberal international trading system, especially for cotton, grains, and other staple crops. Following three decades of crisis marked by two world wars and the Great Depression, the post-World War II mercantile–industrial regime built from an intensification and industrialization of agricultural production methods (including in the global South via the Green Revolution, discussed below), the development of mass markets and standardization for many food commodities, and the creation of specialized agrofood complexes around grains and oilseeds, livestock, and processed foods. Underlying these regimes were, respectively, the hegemony of imperial Britain and the postwar USA, which helped construct international regulatory systems based on market forces. Currency and trade rules based on British and then American economic strengths and interests provided a framework for these regimes.

Oil price shocks and stalled GATT trade talks produced another systemic crisis in the 1970s, and the second food regime came to an end. Since the late 1970s, many states have adopted neoliberalism as a preferred platform for agricultural and food regulation as part of economic restructuring and agricultural policy reform. This has profoundly transformed scalar and geographical relations, producing both intermittent crises and new forms of global capital accumulation in the agrofood sector based on financial speculation in food commodities markets, land grabbing in the global South, and deep but uneven liberalization of agricultural production and trade. Food regime theorists trying to make sense of the neoliberal–corporate regime thus emphasize neoliberalism as an ideology that focuses on market dynamics and the state’s role as facilitator of global economic connection. Neoliberalism is, at the same time, a set of practices
Table 44.1 Food regimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>First food regime (colonial–settler)</th>
<th>Second food regime (mercantile–industrial)</th>
<th>Third food regime (neoliberal–corporate)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1870s to 1930s</td>
<td>Late 1940s to mid-1970s</td>
<td>Early 1980s to present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political economy</td>
<td>Expansion of industrial capitalism; imperial rivalry and colonial domination of global production and flows; extension of agriculture and white settlement in ‘neo-Europes’</td>
<td>State regulation of markets and capital; dominance of industrial capital; Keynesian Fordist, communist centrally planned, and ‘Third World’ developmentalist variants</td>
<td>Self-regulating markets (monetarism) with an overriding emphasis on international trade; hierarchical international state system with multiple poles of power; recurrent debt crises; dominance of finance capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy mechanisms</td>
<td>Colonial domination in much of global South; cheap land policies in neo-Europes; relative free trade; British pound backed by gold standard</td>
<td>Import substitution and land reform in global South; public investment in infrastructure, energy, and industrial upgrading; US dollar backed by gold standard and Bretton Woods institutions</td>
<td>Export-led growth; privatization and fiscal discipline; competitive specialization; trade liberalization through reduction of tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International agricultural trade</td>
<td>Development of international markets for major grain commodities, colonial control of South–North trade</td>
<td>Limited under GATT rules, European Common Agricultural Policy, and other protectionist national policies; massive exports of US food commodities through aid programmes</td>
<td>Liberalization under WTO rules and regulation; small farmers incorporated into global economy; intense competition amid expansion of global food trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the national state</td>
<td>Encourage trade and expansion of capitalist production and agriculture; provide cheap land and suppress or remove indigenous peoples; minimal regulation</td>
<td>Promote and protect national industries and agriculture; western-style political and economic modernization; advance trade and development within bipolar Cold War system; national food self-sufficiency</td>
<td>Facilitate trade and internationalization strategies and agro-export specialization; guarantee property rights; provide political stability and social order; manage and contain debt crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological conditions</td>
<td>Elimination of biodiversity and native species in expansion of agriculture; industrialization to expand yields; soil degradation and invention of synthetic fertilizers</td>
<td>Expansion of chemical-intensive industrial agriculture through intensification in global North and Green Revolution in global South; widespread ecological simplification through monoculture</td>
<td>Widespread intensification of agricultural and livestock production; development and expansion of GMOs; concerns over climate change and impacts on established patterns of agricultural production</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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supporting forms of capitalist regulation favouring corporate interests and the integration of agricultural and food markets into speculative systems of finance and investment.

The result is an unevenly neoliberalized system of food and fibre production, trade, and consumption based on an expansion of corporate power along the entire commodity chain from farm to plate. Intensifying global ties are managed increasingly by and through financial systems, subordinating social and ecological goals within agrofood systems, such as food security and environmental stewardship, to the economic objective of maximizing profits. An important emphasis of food regime analysis is institutional change forged through crisis and crisis management. In this respect, neoliberalism’s advance has proceeded through crises that force restructuring in how the nation-state manages agricultural systems and economies, especially in the global South. This has been supported by the expansion of international rules and regulations regarding trade, intellectual property, food safety, and other aspects of agrofood systems. Neoliberalism has also, however, faced challenges from peasant and consumer movements, the development of localized and fair trade food systems, and growing awareness of industrial agriculture’s ties to climate change. We must ask, then, to what extent are the institutions, rules, and relations of the neoliberal–corporate food regime stable enough to ensure continued capital accumulation in the agrofood sector without undermining the long-term viability of agricultural systems, and how are we to understand the organization and limits of corporate and state power under this regime?

The World Trade Organization (WTO), for example, brought agriculture under the umbrella of global trade rules in a comprehensive way for the first time when it began operations in 1995. This advanced a broad-based institutional push for trade liberalization in agriculture, instigating deep changes in how states could support small farmers and pursue goals like national food self-sufficiency, while also strengthening the conditions under which transnational corporations could expand control over commodity chains and intellectual property, including seeds (Shiva 2000; Kloppenburg 2004; Clapp and Fuchs 2009). Using food regime analysis, we can focus on the global and national institutional arrangements that govern the production, trade, and consumption of food under neoliberalism, how these have developed historically, and what tensions and contradictions shape them going forward. McMichael (2009a, 2010, 2012) and Friedmann (2005, 2013) have most recently used this form of analysis to examine: the role of corporate power and processes of land grabbing and agrofuel development; how neoliberal forms of regulation and market pressures erode localized and peasant forms of agriculture; the uneasy adoption of environmental standards and ‘greenwashing’ in the capitalist food system under rubrics of sustainability; and the development of anti-neoliberal social movements based on peasant rights and food sovereignty.

While food regime analysis thus remains pivotal for understanding the steady but incomplete neoliberalization of agrofood systems, it nonetheless faces significant critiques and limitations. Focused on formal institutional arrangements at the national and global scales, on a particular form of class-based analysis, and on moments of crisis, research using the food regime concept can tend to neglect other forms of social difference and collaboration. In turn, it often underplays continuities, limits, and variability in how neoliberalism has developed in practice. It continues to struggle with identifying the historical and geographical contours of food regimes, and, in particular, with appropriately classifying the contemporary neoliberal moment in the development of capitalist (and non- or anti-capitalist) forms of agriculture. Many researchers therefore favour looking not at relatively rigid systems of institutions and rules that govern capitalist food production and trade, but rather at the highly differentiated and extensive networks of interrelated actors that make up agroecological networks. This includes not only human actors like farmers, officials, business elites, and consumers, but also non-human elements such as...
as the plants, animals, texts, and concepts that animate these networks (Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Goodman 1999).

Other agrofood researchers emphasize local embeddedness and the role of place in agrofood systems, as the insistence on a global-scale view misses much of the geographic and ecological diversity on which food’s cultural and social significance are built, and on which food production depends (Winter 2003; Bowen 2011). Guthman (2008) and Pudup (2008) are, in a slightly different vein, critical of the often deeply romanticized views of community and participation that drive many food localization movements and, they argue, reproduce neoliberal subjectivities. They call for much closer attention to the ‘micropolitics’ of food activism than what food regime analysis can provide, to highlight the importance of social identity in how neoliberalization operates at the local scale and through ostensibly alternative forms of agriculture. For understanding neoliberalism as a force in reshaping agrofood systems, however, food regime analysis remains indispensible. Building on these critiques without losing insights on corporate power, institutional restructuring, and global connections food regime analysis offers can allow us to see the diverse and often hybrid forms of neoliberalism that develop with the social, political, economic, and ecological complexity of agrofood systems. Understanding this through the lens of agroecology can, likewise, assist us in identifying the limits of, and viable alternatives to, neoliberalism as an ideology, a set of practices and policies, and a mode of social, economic, ecological, and political regulation.

**Agroecology and neoliberalism**

Food regime analysis provides a broad historical narrative of agriculture’s place in the development of capitalism, globalization, and neoliberalism, but says little about the details of agriculture’s ecological contexts and impacts. A more directly agroecological perspective can help correct for this and build ecological insight into the critical political economy perspectives already outlined. Agroecology is the study and management of ‘energy flows, species interactions, and material cycling’ that takes into account ‘the impact of human activity on processes at continental and global scales… [to] address a complex, dynamic, and increasingly uncertain context of multiple, interacting drivers of land-use change’ (Tomic et al. 2011:195). Emphasizing agriculture’s position as part of broader ecological systems prevents a common but untenable abstraction that places humans and human society outside of these systems and their operation. It helps us conceptualize the use of environmental resources and systems like water, soil, genes, and climate in agriculture as a form of metabolism, the irreversible transformation of ecological systems and resources for human needs. In practical terms, and linking the global and continental scale to the local scale, the functional landscape, and the farm unit, agroecology positions agriculture, and sites of agricultural production and consumption, as a closed loop of energy and materials. This is in contrast to a perspective that treats agriculture, and more concretely, sites of agricultural production, merely as throughput points for increasingly globalized capital circulating in a neoliberalized context of open trade, market imperatives, and economic externalities (Weis 2007). Finally, it points to the potential limits of agricultural production and consumption as fundamentally intertwined with and based in ecological and social dynamics.

Speculative and predatory forms of neoliberal agriculture, built on liberalized trade, the interests and institutions of finance capital, and the reconfiguration of political, social, and ecological systems to narrow economic ends are unsustainable in the long run, especially to the extent that they undermine the conditions of food production and social reproduction. This does not mean, however, that there is one singular form of neoliberal agriculture in the current world-historical moment of capitalist globalization and crisis. Instead, there is a highly
differentiated set of interlocking systems shaped strongly by neoliberal principles and frameworks, with dynamic agroecological conditions and limits that therefore also map closely onto neoliberalism’s social, economic, and political contradictions and limits. While I have highlighted some of these above in discussing food regime analysis and associated critiques, this section provides context for understanding them in ecological terms. I examine neoliberalized agriculture in relation to food security and climate change, from the post–World War II Green Revolution to the most recent ‘global food crisis’, before addressing how oppositional movements have articulated non- and anti-neoliberal forms of agriculture.

One of the key challenges for neoliberal agriculture is to ensure food security amid competitive global market dynamics and the uncertainty of climate change. Historically, food security has been articulated at a variety of scales and connected to innumerable other social, political, and economic objectives, but at its root has generally meant that everyone has enough to eat on a daily basis. The term itself is highly contested, linked to debates on basic human rights, the appropriate role of state support and intervention for farmers and consumers, and the productive capacity of agricultural technology and practices. Under the rubric of national development in the four decades following World War II (i.e. the mercantile–industrial food regime, as discussed above), the governments of many newly independent states in what was then called the Third World made national food self-sufficiency a cornerstone of economic development. Political leaders and development experts posited that agricultural modernization would rapidly increase food production and provide a sound footing for urbanization and industrialization.

Food security was reckoned primarily at the national level and as part of national aspirations for modernization. This, in turn, meant the development and fine-tuning of measures designed to calculate food security and hunger at finer scales, such as the individual and the household, as well as the identification by western elites of ‘world hunger’ as a serious problem for global political and economic stability (Vernon 2007; Cullather 2010; Jarosz 2014).

Mainstream approaches to food security emphasized both food availability, which decision-makers, development practitioners, and elites in both the global North and South generally understood as a product of technological capacity and agricultural productivity, and political mobilization, which, in turn, was linked to the Cold War context and bitter struggles over postcolonial independence and development. Many states in Latin America and South and Southeast Asia adopted Green Revolution techniques from the 1950s onward to achieve national food security and development goals. This required taking on massive debt from international creditors and large influxes of foreign aid to modernize agricultural practices and infrastructure, especially for irrigation and the production of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Through these Green Revolution techniques, developing countries sought to catch up to the industrial agricultural model of the USA, and they borrowed heavily to do so, in both financial and ecological terms. While this did increase agricultural productivity, it facilitated a virtual revolution in the countryside. The Green Revolution eradicated peasant forms of food production and land management and displaced millions of poor farmers in favour of more productive agriculture dependent on chemical inputs, foreign debt, massive infrastructural investment, and international markets (Weis 2007; Latham 2011).

Thus, while the Green Revolution improved food security in many states, with notable successes in India, Mexico, and the Philippines (but largely bypassing sub-Saharan Africa), this was measured by national-scale statistics that masked inequalities at the subnational level, and failed to fully account for the ecological costs of intensified agricultural production methods. Seeking to maintain income to pay for expensive chemical inputs and farm machinery, farmers often took on heavy household debts and used soil and water resources more intensively but not always more efficiently. With widespread economic stagnation lingering throughout the 1970s
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and the ideological and political shift towards neoliberalism in the USA and Western Europe, debt crises hit developing country economies and farmers especially hard. This undermined and erased food security gains achieved through expanded, industrialized production, while debt servicing requirements and loan conditionalities forced many countries to open their national agricultural sectors to global market integration and competition. Ecological impacts that had begun to develop well before neoliberalism’s emergence became more noticeable and severe as many states in the global South underwent neoliberalization through IMF and World Bank-backed SAPs, removing protections for small farmers and encouraging further market integration (Friedmann 2005).

In agroecological terms, peasant and smallholder forms of agriculture and land management continued to decline as monoculture production expanded and many farmers turned to industrial, and often imported, fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides to augment or repair nutrient cycles and increase yields. Several states adopted agro-export strategies, with agricultural policy facilitating specialized production in high-value farm products targeted for export, though many states continued to specialize in low-value raw commodity exports, such as cocoa or coffee beans, and faced poor terms of trade and low farm incomes (Weis 2007). With deepening neoliberalization, policy-makers and development experts increasingly posited food security as a function of purchasing power and market connection. Similar processes drove agroecological change in the global North, where industrial agriculture was already well entrenched by the end of World War II in the USA, and in Western Europe after the war. Farm debt, intensification, and ecological simplification led to soil exhaustion and an ever-mounting reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and, finally, the development and widespread adoption of genetically modified seeds since the early 1990s in attempts to maintain yields and farm incomes.

As Moore (2010) argues, the transition from the Green Revolution to neoliberalization can be understood as the search for a return to profitability for global capitalism through the integration of agriculture into global financial networks and debt. Moore (2010: 231) states that, as the Green Revolution’s productivity enhancements dissolved into insurmountable debt for farmers and governments, neoliberalism offered ‘an extractive strategy that discouraged long-term investments by states and capitals, and encouraged socio-ecological “asset stripping” of every sort’, extending ‘a cheap food regime without a corresponding agricultural revolution’. Genetic engineering has failed to maintain steady productivity gains or yield growth in agriculture, while financial integration and asset stripping has undermined the ecological and social conditions that underlie complex agrofood systems. Though this can be identified as a global trend under the rubric of a single global food regime, these processes have taken different forms in different places.

With the rapid liberalization of agrofood sectors in the 1990s and 2000s, these processes continued but also began to encounter staunch resistance from peasant movements, consumer groups, and environmental activists. Finding common cause, critics saw in the neoliberalization of agriculture the undermining of land rights, the expanding power of corporate actors, and the unchecked destruction of environmental resources. In short, neoliberal forms of agriculture are self-destructive, even ‘pathological,’ precisely because of their ecological, and thus social, unsustainability (Friedmann 2005). Productivist accounts that laud agricultural modernization and market integration emphasize productivity gains, but, Weis (2013: 101) argues, downplay ‘the undervalued costs of energy (both in situ and in moving things over space) and ensuing emissions and pollution loads’, and ignore ‘the far-reaching simplification of environments’ associated with industrial agriculture and the global sourcing of food that marks the neoliberal–corporate regime. Weis demonstrates how industrial agriculture, including the high-volume production of meat through extended livestock and animal feed commodity chains, exacerbates...
the ‘metabolic rift’ that Marx identified as a crucial component of capitalist agriculture in the mid-nineteenth century. The increasing subjugation of environmental systems and objectives to capitalist value production leads to unsustainable forms of nutrient cycling and soil management that exhaust productivity but open agriculture and ecological systems to new rounds of capitalist appropriation and accumulation (Foster 2000; Moore 2011). Neoliberalism drives the further development of this metabolic rift, but builds local–global connections and integrates agriculture into capitalist circuits of value in new ways.

Neoliberal reforms and approaches, however, constantly run up against the ecological variability and specificity that also shape agricultural systems. As in past instances of severe disruption to the environmental conditions supporting agriculture, some agroecological systems have proved more resilient than others to change. In ecological terms, resilience refers to a particular system’s stability and adaptability in the face of internal and external changes. Scholars examining natural disasters and climate change have expanded the concept of resilience to include social systems and factors, and considerations of uncertainty and risk, knowledge, and land-use practices (Berardi et al. 2011). The neoliberal–corporate food regime must therefore be assessed in terms of its resilience to shocks and changes that are often initiated or exacerbated by neoliberal policies and practices. Food security and climate change are urgent considerations for the future of neoliberal agriculture, especially in the wake of spiking food prices and a ‘global food crisis’ that erupted alongside energy and financial crises beginning in 2008 (Jarosz 2009; Sommerville et al. 2014). Can neoliberal approaches to land management, agricultural policy, and trade ensure food security, given the highly volatile and corporate-dominated global markets on which consumers and farmers both rely? Can they adequately provide incentives and resources for adapting to changing and unpredictable climate patterns? Can they be expected to mitigate or reverse climate change while also expanding oil-dependent monoculture and industrial livestock production, two major contributors to climate change?

It is now widely recognized that ecological pressures, both localized pressures linked to specific forms of degradation and pollution and global shifts resulting from anthropogenic climate change, have potentially profound impacts on agricultural production. Simple expansion of food production through conventional means is neither adequate nor sustainable. As the UN Environment Programme noted in its own examination of the global food crisis, ‘agriculture remains the largest driver of genetic erosion, species loss and conversion of natural habitats’, undermining the ecosystem services and agroecological cycles that provide the conditions for humanity’s food and fibre production (Nelleman et al. 2009: 65). Neoliberal forms of agriculture have therefore proved to be decidedly not resilient. Policy-makers, fearful of economic and political crises becoming generalized, work to contain these both geographically and socially through inequitable disciplinary mechanisms linked to debt, poverty, and environmental degradation.

The realities of climate change and the persistence of widespread food insecurity thus help identify the limits of neoliberal agriculture, defined by its lack of resilience and susceptibility to multiple, simultaneous forms of crisis. Many development practitioners, policy-makers, and farmers have sought a technological fix for neoliberalism’s agroecological limits in a ‘second Green Revolution’. Yet long-term adaptation to and of neoliberalized agriculture is difficult to impossible as unresolvable and compounding stresses intensify and expand throughout systems of social reproduction and agroecological management, and adaptation strategies based on new technologies remain unaffordable for most. Almås and Campbell (2012: 4–5) therefore identify the current threats and shocks to agricultural resilience as threefold: ‘the Global Food Crisis of 2008 (and beyond); Climate Change (and related issues around energy and biofuels); and the emergence of “neo-productivist” claims for agriculture seeking to re-establish productivism as the central policy rational for agriculture.’ All present fundamental challenges to the logic,
sustainability, and resilience of neoliberalism as the basis for agricultural policy and land-use management, and highlight the ecological and social necessity of alternatives to further neoliberalization.

Conclusion: from alternatives to resistance

The geographic variability of agroecological systems and practices on which agriculture depends produces wide variation in how neoliberalization has proceeded, even if we can still point to broader and more general patterns, as identified and critiqued by food regime analysis. This variability sometimes has been co-opted into hybrid and divergent forms of neoliberalism and neoliberal agriculture (see also Collard et al. 2016), but can also highlight and strengthen the resilience of localized systems. Alternative anti- and non-neoliberal forms of agriculture that build from agroecological resilience must be thought of as adaptations as well, existing in broader contexts and systems, and forming points of resistance to further neoliberalization. These adaptations can help us chart possible futures that move beyond and overcome the inequities of neoliberal models and practices. Numerous movements and groups have built forms of food production and distribution not dominated by neoliberalism, often in response or challenge to neoliberal policies, practices, and institutions. These often begin from principles and practices of agroecologically sound land-use planning and management, political rights to land and livelihoods, and regulatory models that adapt concepts of sovereignty and security to community and human needs.

Alternative food systems are now commonplace, and include globally extensive fair trade movements (Fridell 2013; Burnett 2014), localized forms of urban agriculture and community gardening (Pudup 2008), and movements seeking economic and social rights for migrant farm workers and fast food workers (Walter 2013). All aim to challenge or reverse aspects of the current neoliberal–corporate regime. Perhaps the most widespread and powerful of these alternatives, however, is the food sovereignty movement. Originating in the political activism of rural and peasant communities across the global South, food sovereignty has, since the mid-1990s, become a widely used, if contested and often ambiguous, concept expressing and enacting rights, community, and agrofood regulation in ways designed to counter neoliberal emphases on global market dependence and technological solutions (Hopma and Woods 2014; Jarosz 2014). The global peasant rights social movement group La Vía Campesina has articulated the concept of food sovereignty most directly, defining it as the collective right of peoples to determine their own food and agriculture policy. Food sovereignty repurposes the concept of national sovereignty in order to claim rights to land, knowledge, culture, and decision-making capacities for rural communities under pressure from decades of neoliberalism, especially through agricultural trade liberalization (Desmarais 2007). The call for food sovereignty, particularly the right to localized forms of land management and food production not subject to the dictates of neoliberalized regulatory systems of production and trade, has become an oppositional platform for not only peasants and small farmers in the global South, but also consumers, family farmers, and even urban agriculture movements in the global North. While these groups continue to struggle over the definition and enactment of food sovereignty, it has nonetheless provided a clear alternative to neoliberalism and placed socially expansive and ecologically centred agriculture at the heart of new forms of local–global connection. The future of these movements, and of neoliberalism, depends on multiple social and ecological factors, but, without more resilient forms of agricultural production and more just systems of food distribution and consumption, the crisis tendency of neoliberal agriculture is unlikely to find a socially or environmentally sustainable resolution.
Note

1 It should be noted that the authors cited here do not necessarily employ food regime analysis, but draw widely on political economy and political ecology approaches and concepts.

References

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