Transformation towards Sustainable Agri-Food Systems: Tangled Confrontations between Global Hegemony and Alternative Initiatives

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1. Introduction

The current agri-food system, characterised by the pursuit of industrialisation and globalisation, has been commonly understood as problematic and has called for a shift towards sustainable systems. However, there is no consensus on how problems should be framed and defined; how, in which direction and by whom, sustainable transitions should be made. In the first place, there is no singular, universal and neutral understanding or explanation of basic concepts such as food security and sustainability, nor of how to diagnose and address malnutrition and climate change. Nevertheless, in the face of global food security and nutrition crises as well as climate and other environmental crises, discourses that depoliticise highly political issues into technical issues under the guise of innovation and management are ingeniously created and disseminated through various platforms, set up as if a global consensus is possible and exists. What actors, through which organisation or institution, create and disseminate these discourses to influence policy making? Without clarifying such discursive power structures and functions, it is not possible to look ahead towards alternative policies. Based on critical political economy and critical discourse analysis, this paper aims to clarify the depoliticisation of global agri-food governance and explore the possibilities of structural transformation.

2. Political Economy Approach

Section 2 discusses the characteristics and effectiveness of the political economy approach. Political economy attempts to capture the interaction between political and economic processes in society, particularly with a focus on structural power relations in the formation of social relations, social organisations, and social change. Neo-Gramscian theory, on which this paper relies, focuses on the mechanisms through which hegemonic actors create material, institutional and discursive power bases of influence and establish relations of control over civil society (Newell and Taylor, 2018). Hegemonic actors, such as global corporations, with an overwhelming material power base consolidate their institutional power to ensure the legitimacy of their exercise of influence, all while organising governance platforms involving multiple stakeholders. They then generate knowledge and social norms to support their legitimacy ideologically, an exercise in discursive power. By framing particular interests as if they were common societal interests, they manufacture consent in civil society and contribute to the formation and consolidation of the hegemony.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

Section 3 discusses the characteristics and effectiveness of the critical discourse analysis approach. Power is relational, rather than something substantial that can be attributed to institutions or possessed by organisations. The power structure of society can effectively be revealed by analysing the processes in which specific understandings and narratives of material and social phenomena as a discourse are created, disseminated, contested, adjusted and accepted through interactions between actors. The structuring action of discourse through the rhetoric that expresses and makes specific political-economic interests accepted as common interests of society, and the institutionalising action of discourse that reflects these interests in policies and institutional practices, are seen as a key element of hegemony. Hence, this is where the critical discourse analysis based on a discursive approach is expected to contribute.

4. Social Construction of Food Security and Sustainability Concepts

Section 4 argues that food security and sustainability concepts have been diversely defined, and the socially constructed nature of such definitions gives room for discursive politics to play its role. One way of defining food security consists of four dimensions: availability, access, utilisation, and stability. There are arguments, however, that,

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in order to address the social, economic, and environmental problems of the agri-food system, the concept needs to be updated to one that includes the additional two dimensions of "agency" and "sustainability" (Clapp *et al*., 2022). Agency refers to the individual and collective ability to recognise the structural problems of the agri-food system and the situation of themselves, and to participate in decision-making in the governance of agri-food systems as more active actors. Sustainability is itself highly polysemic and contentious and, like the food security concept, must be carefully defined and operationalised (Constance *et al*., 2018). It is generally defined by three pillars: social, economic, and environmental. However, according to Purvis *et al*. (2019), who traced the origins and evolution of the understanding of sustainability, it originally emerged as a critique of "economic growthism" from a social and environmental perspective, but has been neutralised and depoliticised under the new banner of "sustainable development" with a focus on economic aspects rather than social and multidimensional implications. By contrast, the sustainability concept can and should be salvaged and restated as a counter-discourse that pursues environmental soundness, social justice, economic welfare, and cultural diversity in an integrated and comprehensive manner, and thus also as a framing for structural transformation of the current hegemonic system that prevents its realisation.

5. Discourses over Agri-Food System Transformation and Global Governance

By using the Neo-Gramscian political economy approach, Section 5 analyses some mainstream discourses regarding global governance and the "transformation" of agri-food systems in response to the food security crisis, nutrition crisis and climate crisis, and uncovers some common ground by asking the following questions. First, how these crises are framed and diagnosed as problems and how such framings function as a discursive power. Second, what organisations and institutions are formed and function to create and disseminate discourses about such problems (diagnoses) and solutions (prescriptions) and to legitimise vested interests. Third, how hegemonic political-economic actors exist and perform with their material power bases that enable them to exercise such discursive and institutional powers. This section takes a special look at "multistakeholderism", which is criticised as a global governance model that structures and institutionalises mainstream discourses by depoliticising

these political issues and limits the possibility of counter-hegemonic struggles.

Multistakeholderism differs from multilateralism. The latter is an international coordination mechanism of consultation and decision-making by government representatives with legitimacy and accountability, while the former involves diverse stakeholders, ranging from business and industry associations, and professional groups, to civil society organisations, without clear criteria for eligibility or procedures for participation (Gleckman, 2018). Despite the appearance of multistakeholderism being horizontally organised, however, there is no guarantee that it is inclusive or democratic. Rather, the structural power disparities between stakeholders that actually exist tend to be blurred. In addition, under the guise of "reasonable solutions that all stakeholders can agree on and efficiently implement", the direction and means of resolving issues tend to be limited to technical and depoliticised approaches, while dissenting and minority opinions that demand more structural and systemic transformation are excluded from the outset.

Duncan (2016) argues that post-political characteristics that serve to avoid and erase difference and disagreement and push for global level forms of consensus are evident in multistakeholder food security governance. Post-political conditions are characterised by the rise of technocratic governance, consensus-driven decision making, and the increasingly embedded logic of neoliberalism, whereby leaving the politics and non-neutrality of governance structure and processes unquestioned. We need to build counter-hegemonic governance discourses, practices, and institutions to overcome this "post-political" situation.

6. Counter-Hegemonic Governance: Discourses, Practices, and Institutionalisation

Section 6 explores the possibilities, achievements and challenges of countervailing discourses and practices against global hegemonies. This will be done by showing examples of the idea and movement of food sovereignty and agroecology, as well as the reformed mechanism of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as an attempt at counter-hegemonic global governance. In addition, the emergence of city-region food systems and initiatives of local food policy councils will be introduced as an attempt at counter-hegemonic local governance.

Food sovereignty is presented as a concept to express, and a movement to practice, an alternative to the agro-

industrialisation model and neoliberal food security policies. It is reinforced by a number of UN declarations and guidelines, as well as international human rights legal frameworks. Agroecology, as a scientific discipline, agricultural practice, and socio-political movement, has developed into a global initiative, becoming a core component of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty and agroecology are counter-movements and counter-policy discourses that aim for a global networking of local agri-food initiatives. The role played by the CFS in attempting to institutionalise such counter-hegemonic discourses and practices is also important, although there is a growing drive to roll back and depoliticise the CFS governance mechanisms in recent years (Duncan and Claeys, 2018).

Growing and spreading citizen-led agri-food initiatives — constituting sustainable city-region food systems and facilitated by the initiatives of local food policy councils — can be considered as an attempt at the institutionalisation of counter-hegemonic alternatives on a local/regional scale. Local food policy in this context is for an integrated governance of health, environment, and society on the basis of the multifunctionality of food: with food being a core and starting point for the transition to a sustainable society. It involves a wide range of policy areas such as health and welfare, environment and urban planning, local economy and employment, poverty and social inclusion, education and community building, and relationships between these areas that have been overlooked in the conventional governance model, focused mainly on agricultural production. Hisano (2021) introduced some of these growing and networking trends of local food policy and practices in European cities. At the same time, it becomes evident that governance challenges are unavoidable even in those integrated food policy initiatives as they are shaped and implemented through formal/informal political processes, which are far from a post-political situation. Assuming social conflicts and power relations are ubiquitous, any alternative governance platforms should be built as a space for "agonistic democracy" (Mouffe, 2005) to recognise and make differences and disagreements visible rather than invisible or non-existent.

7. Conclusion

Finally, Section 7 concludes this paper with implications of critical agri-food policy research perspectives and the role of critical agri-food scholars. One of the most important missions of the critical social sciences is to use the perspectives and methods of their respective sub-disciplines to unveil the social structures that are taken for granted, the genealogy of the norms that support them, and the power relations that make them possible. Critical social sciences also use such perspectives and methods to clarify their conditions and processes of counter-hegemonic projects, and to contribute to opening a new horizon for systemic transformation and social change. As part of this, critical agri-food scholars should make it an important part of their missions to re-politicise agri-food policy research, which tends to be entangled in mainstream policy discourses and therefore depoliticised, and to reflectively question mainstream value assumptions that have been left unquestioned. Furthermore, it should also be part of critical agri-food studies to actively engage in the highly normative and political endeavour of transforming to a sustainable system, while staying close to agri-food communities and everyday actors who are at the forefront of the contradictions of and alternatives to the current system.

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