

Introduction to symposium—charting fault lines in US agrifood systems: what can we contribute?

Jill Harrison · Steven A. Wolf

Accepted: 10 December 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008

Sustaining unsustainability in agrifood systems

Rural sociologists, other researchers, and agrifood activists have made significant contributions to illuminating many fundamental social and ecological contradictions in the contemporary conventional agrifood system. Yet, conventional agriculture and food systems appear to persist and to develop in problematic directions, apparently unabated by economic, environmental and social challenges. These continuities have important implications for critical projects aimed at building alternative agrifood systems, as well as projects focused on risk management and refinement of dominant structures.

For example, fossil fuel availability has long been identified as an Achilles' heel of conventional agriculture, and yet we now observe high input monocultural production expanding rapidly in spite of—and in response to—energy supply constraints. The erosion of state engagement in the regulation of agricultural technology and food safety may have been tempered by processes of re-regulation (including certification and commercial standards), yet the proliferation of market-based governance mechanisms would seem to depoliticize an important class of social problems and arguably absolve the state of its responsibilities to ensure public welfare and social justice. Although constraints on labor supply and criticism regarding the status of immigrant farmworkers may be relaxed through (elusive) immigration reform, this potential is deeply constrained both by inaction

in the federal policy arena and a resurgence of xenophobic policies in some localities. The Land Grant University and public sector research and extension have been in a decades-long protracted 'crisis' linked to a need to more clearly connect public expenditures with public purposes, yet the mode of public sector engagement in agrifood innovation systems has not been fundamentally altered.

In light of the resilience of contemporary conventional agrifood systems (i.e., capacity to absorb shocks, internalize challenges, and retain core characteristics), we are motivated to ask what we regard as a set of fundamental questions. Are there limits to the conventional model of agrifood provision and consumption? At what point and through what processes will the resilience of agrifood systems be exhausted? Alternatively, how are conventional agrifood structures and problematic social relations maintained, and their resilience sustained? As Buttel posed the question, "What are the forces and processes that enable the social and ecological reproduction of the unsustainability of agriculture?" (2006, 218). Lastly, we want to raise the possibility that the continuity we ascribe to the system is mythical, and we have potentially failed to recognize transformations—what systems thinkers would call a "new equilibrium."

In invoking the concepts of resilience, tipping points, non-linearities (i.e., discontinuities), and multiple equilibria, we join many other contemporary analysts engaged in analysis of systems (and risk being tarred as followers-on).¹

J. Harrison
Department of Rural Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

S. A. Wolf (✉)
Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University,
124 Fernow Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA
e-mail: saw44@cornell.edu

¹ For those interested in detailed treatment of these ideas and their origin, we can recommend Gunderson and Holling's (2002) *Panarchy*, or the pages of Ecology and Society (<http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/index.php>). For those interested in application of a set of closely related ideas to policy, we recommend Repetto's (2006) *Punctuated Equilibrium and the Dynamics of U.S. Environmental Policy*.

In our view, critical agrifood research has focused largely on diagnosing the faults of agrifood systems and on promoting alternatives, but systemic capacity to respond to problems and internal contradictions has not been an explicit object of study. Resilience derives from multiple structures, where some function as adaptive mechanisms (i.e., capacity to produce new knowledge and learn) and others produce and diffuse ignorance and disinterest (i.e., capacity to forget and to fail to recognize selected signals). Material and cognitive mechanisms that undermine alternatives and discredit critiques of dominant structures effectively sustain the unsustainable and reinforce resilience (see Blüdhorn and Welsh 2007, as well as several authors in this special segment).

The special segment

To address these questions, the Sociology of Agriculture and Food Research Interest Group (SAFRIG) within the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) organized a mini-conference as part of the RSS 2007 Annual Meeting in Santa Clara, California. The mini-conference, “Charting Fault Lines in Agriculture and Food Systems: What Can We Contribute?” was designed to generate discussion of agrifood system crises, sources of resilience, and opportunities for research and action. A concerted effort was made to reflect on the sociology of agriculture and food systems and to assess (and perhaps extend and refocus) our engagement. Conversation in the sessions was based on ‘thought papers’ circulated by each presenter in advance of the meetings. The papers in this special segment of *Agriculture and Human Values* are revised versions of these conference papers, and each has benefited from two rounds of critical review.

The papers pivot around the common theme of ‘fault lines,’ a term which we use to refer to crises, incoherences, or contradictions within the conventional agrifood system, alternative food systems, agrifood advocacy, the policy arena, or academia. For us, fault lines are sites of injustice and potential social and/or technical rupture, and, simultaneously, are sites where actors make investments in production and maintenance of coherence. We identify our traditional strength in examining the former, and we see an exciting intellectual and practical opportunity in the latter.

In terms of the general outline of papers in this special segment, each author specifies an agrifood problem, identifies factors that impart resilience or might undermine resilience, and outlines a programmatic vision for future work. By programmatic vision, we mean a relevant program of work, including research questions and recommendations for changes in academic or activist practice. As expected and appropriate, articles in the

collection interpret this general theme in a variety of ways, and the scope of the issues addressed is quite broad. Several of the authors interrogate the environmental and public health implications of specific socio-technical incoherences (Holt, Mariola, Stuart, Worosz et al.), and others use such concern as a springboard for proposing integrated, synthetic reforms (Mulvaney). Several authors address the contemporary scope for high-profile technical and policy developments, paying careful attention to the historical and institutional context of innovation in agrifood systems (Busch, Burmeister, Wolf). Finally, several authors focus their attention squarely on the academy, targeting the ethical commitments of agrofood advocacy and scholarship (Allen, Harrison) and reflecting on specific impediments to linking research to progressive reforms (Constance, Friedland, Hinrichs).

Lacunae in agrifood studies

The mini-conference and the process of editing this special segment have given the two of us an opportunity to reflect on strengths and weaknesses in contemporary agrifood scholarship and the specific contribution represented by this collection of papers. While we are quite modest about our individual abilities to usefully situate and interpret these papers in the context of the highly diffuse field of agrifood studies, recent deaths of some leading lights (Buttel, Murdoch, and Lyson), the inevitable rise and fall of intellectual currents, and the shifting currency of specific social problems, suggest a need to take stock. In the interest of working toward a shared platform for research and action, we identify four themes that emerged from our mini-conference.

First, it is becoming clear that the boom in research and activism on food politics over the past decade needs to be grounded in the earlier developments in political economy. In the terms used by Doug Constance (this issue), the time is ripe for ‘the food question’ to more seriously revisit ‘the agrarian question,’ particularly the latter’s explicit engagement with issues of power and class and the associated implications for exploitation, farm structure, and landscape-scale ecology. Although several papers in this issue clearly illustrate the need for such interrogations (Allen, Harrison), much more work remains to be done within agrifood studies to more carefully link these two valuable bodies of research.

Second, somewhere in the important shift from ‘sociology of agriculture’ to ‘agrifood studies,’ sociological research on production agriculture became marginalized. Many papers in this issue directly confront some of the most pressing social and environmental issues in conventional, production agriculture (Harrison, Holt, Mulvaney, Stuart, Wolf, Worosz et al., Mariola). It is, however, our impression that such research is somewhat of an anomaly

with the increased attention in recent years to consumption on the one hand, and political economy of agribusiness on the other. We do not call for the abandonment of alternative agriculture or a turn away from off-farm actors in agrifood systems, but rather for more sociological attention to mainstream agricultural production.

Third, we are troubled by the neoliberal ‘turn’ away from the state and toward market-based solutions to agrifood system problems, and more specifically by the way in which the focus of inquiry in our field mirrors this tendency. In our assessment, our competence to evaluate and speak authoritatively about policy and policy making is quite weak and should be strengthened. This is particularly evident today, as recent federal Farm Bill debates once again illustrate the role of the state in cementing unsustainabilities and inequities within the agrifood system. There is a pressing need to understand the role of state actors in relation to questions of policy, regulation, trade, energy, environment, labor, research, education, and infrastructure. Several papers in this issue highlight the need to focus academic attention back onto the state (Burmeister, Holt, and Worosz et al.). We should be clear that engaging ‘the state’ should not be limited to the nation-state, but must in fact be a multi-scaled effort ranging from global commodity chains to field-level processes.

Lastly, analysis of innovation dynamics and prospects for linking agrifood research to progressive outcomes highlights problems and opportunities. Contrary to dominant traditions in agrifood scholarship related to questions of knowledge generation and technical change, authors’ treatments of knowledge generation in this collection of papers are not anchored in interrogation of the state. While in no way rejecting political economy, we identify strong interest in self-criticism and a search for new modes of engagement in research and action. Authors variously emphasize collective action (Friedland, Wolf), interdisciplinarity and public engagement (Hinrichs), and integrated assessment of innovation dynamics (Busch). There would seem to be scope for a new formulation of questions related to institutional analysis of knowledge production and technological change in agrifood studies.

Acknowledgements

One of this collection’s primary strengths is the wide range of experience and backgrounds of the authors; contributors

hail from a wide range of locations across North America and include graduate students, junior faculty, and prominent scholars in the field. As with any collection of this sort, obvious deficiencies exist. For example, several important topics (e.g., water resources, biofuels) are notably absent. Additionally, there is a considerable lack of international coverage, evidence of a gap with which the field of Rural Sociology currently struggles.

We perceive these and other academic fault lines as opportunities to strengthen the field of agrifood studies. In particular, we see considerable opportunity for linking Midwest and California agrifood research traditions, drawing more fully on agrifood research from the global south, expanding agrifood research to include global-scale analyses, and drawing more young people into the field. This year, 2008, marks the 30th anniversary of SAFRIG, an anniversary that indicates to us the depth of the academic tradition and that also justifies our effort to take stock. SAFRIG, RSS, and, more generally, agrifood studies are active intellectual communities that can be strengthened through critical reflection. We hope that this special collection of thought papers provokes reflection and innovation.

We would like to thank John Green, Mary Hendrickson, Phil Howard, and Elizabeth Ransom for their participation on the mini-conference organizing committee, Leland Glenna, Michael Gerlter and JoAnn Jaffe for their intellectual engagement, the members of SAFRIG who debated these issues at the 2007 RSS Conference, David Goodman, Brian Gareau and all others who served as reviewers, and Renee Hoffman (Development Sociology, Cornell University) for her administrative assistance. Special thanks to Harvey James, editor of *Agriculture and Human Values*, for his part in this collective effort.

References

- Blühdorn, I., and I. Welsh. 2007. Eco-politics beyond the paradigm of sustainability. *Environmental Politics* 16 (2): 185–205.
- Buttel, F. 2006. Sustaining the unsustainable: Agro-food systems and environment in the modern world. In *Handbook of rural studies*, ed. P. Cloke, T. Marsden, and P. Mooney, 213–229. London, UK: Edgar Elgar.
- Gunderson L.H., and C.S. Holling, eds. 2002. *Panarchy: Understanding transformations in human and natural systems*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Repetto R., ed. 2006. *Punctuated equilibrium and the dynamics of U.S. Environmental Policy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.