Food security: issues and trends in international politics
A central role of political authorities – whether tribes, chieftaincies or states – since the beginnings of settled agriculture has been the government of land and the redistribution of surpluses derived from food production. Land and territory are bound up with the nature of states, and how we understand the relationship between politics and security. Whether it is the relationship between rural and urban authorities, the policing and securing of borders and boundaries, the organisation of development initiatives at home and abroad, or more contemporary discourses of food security, land remains inescapably central to politics. Political philosophers from Hobbes to Locke, and Nietzsche to Foucault (Kuehls, 1996) have reflected upon the relationship between mankind and the soil, and the ways in which societies organise the circulation of food supplies and agricultural labour can tell us a great deal about the nature of those societies.

Land is an especially sensitive and important political issue in many African societies, where my research has mostly been focussed. The ‘willing buyer, willing seller’ approach to land reform in post-apartheid South Africa has been a source of deep frustration and resentment for many in a country where rural poverty remains endemic. At the end of apartheid in 1994, almost 90% of the land was owned by whites, who constituted only 10% of the population. Less than 7% of the land has been redistributed so far, and the ANC government has pushed back their target of redistributing one third of the land from 2014 to 2025.¹ In Zimbabwe, by way of contrast, Robert Mugabe’s land seizures have widely been seen as a racially motivated attack on white farmers, resulting in the collapse of Zimbabwean agriculture and widespread food insecurity. However, recent large-scale research led by Ian Scoones from the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University has suggested that, whilst this land reform programme contained many obvious abuses and flaws, it has not been the unmitigated failure commonly reported in the press and some academic circles (Scoones et al., 2010). In particular, this research claims that, in the area studied, no more than 5% of the land went to political associates, while much went to small scale farmers and the rural poor who have often been able to make a surplus and invest it back into the land. Whilst the production of some crops has crashed, others like small grains and edible beans have increased, and widespread food insecurity is not directly or solely linked to the farm invasions. The rural economy in Zimbabwe, they argue, has not collapsed, but the worldwide media and political furor that has accompanied the Zimbabwean story – fuelled by the undeniable abuses perpetrated by the Mugabe regime – demonstrates the continuing political saliency of land in Africa (Winter, 2010).

This political saliency is also borne out by the recent attention to large scale ‘land grabs’ in Africa. Large tracts of land are being acquired for agricultural production of food to be sent to the Gulf States, for biofuels for European and North American markets, for mineral exploration and exploitation, as well as for conservation (Allen, 2010; Friends of the Earth Europe, 2010). The control and usage of land is inescapably political and always has been. Western perceptions of ‘marginal land’, ‘degraded land’, and ‘unproductive land’ have been used to justify colonial expropriation, capital accumulation and foreign intervention, both before and since John Locke declared, looking at the North American continent, that “land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste” (quoted by Kuehls, 1996: xii).

In contrast to this perpetual political concern with the government of land, populations and soils, more recent discourses of food security are often dated from World War II and the post-war reconstruction of Europe (McDonald, 2010: p.12). The food price spike of 2007-08 and the consequent eruption of protests in over sixty countries, together with increasing concerns over climate change, population growth and energy security, have rekindled political interest in food security (Dupont and Thirlwell, 2009; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010).

In January 2011, Sir John Beddington, Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK government, launched a new Foresight report on the Future of Food and Farming, and warned of “a perfect storm” of a growing population, climate change and diminishing resources for food production (Ghosh, 2011). This report concluded that “the global food system between now and 2050 will face enormous challenges, as great as any that it has confronted in the past”, driven by population increases, changes in consumption and demand, the shifting international architecture of food governance, climate change, increased competition for other key resources such as water, energy and land, and the changing values of consumers (Foresight, 2011: p.13-16). With nearly one billion people still living in chronic hunger, and global agriculture contributing between 12-30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, it is clear that the global food system is not working (Foresight, 2011: p.9 and 28; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). These concerns reflect the central issues addressed by recent research on food security in international politics, which have been largely organised around the themes of hunger and malnutrition, global environmental changes, and food safety and diseases (McDonald, 2010).

**Hunger and malnutrition.** In 2009, there were more than one billion chronically hungry people in the world, more than in any year since 1970 (McDonald, 2010: p.80). Yet this...
was not solely, or even primarily, due to a lack of food. One of the most important insights of social science research has been to show how spikes in hunger and famine do not necessarily correspond to actual food shortages, but rather reflect an inequitable distribution of food outputs and a lack of political, social and economic entitlements (Keen, 2008: p.101). The rising numbers of overweight and obese people in the developing as well as the developed world, together with increasing numbers of “dual burden households” containing both overweight and underweight members, can also be regarded as another product of highly uneven food distribution, both at global and local levels (Guthman, 2011; McDonald, 2010: p.85).

**Global environmental changes.** Agriculture is both a major driver of environmental changes – in the climate, soil, water and air – as well as being itself highly vulnerable to such changes. According to one forecast, Africa could lose 47% of its agricultural income by 2100 as a result of climate change (Toulmin, 2009: p.64). On the other hand, historians and social scientists have been concerned with the socio-economic and political causes of soil erosion and land degradation, much pre-dating the current focus on climate change. Countering neo-Malthusian assumptions about over-population, over-grazing and inappropriate traditional farming methods, revisionist research has emphasised how complex global and local political ecologies have combined to alter farmland in what are frequently non-linear trajectories (Adams, 2009: p.204; Leach and Mearns, 1996), as well as how agriculturally-induced environmental changes in the developed world are bound up with the intensification and industrialisation of farming.

**Food safety and disease.** New technologies and farming practices have been accompanied by increased concerns over food safety and disease, as well as bringing actual and potential benefits. Modern, intensive global food production and processing networks mean not only that far fewer people consume locally produced food than ever before in history, but also that the networks of food distribution themselves can act as vectors for the spread of disease or even potential terrorist attacks (McDonald, 2010: p.124). Whilst the attention of the press, policymakers and security experts tends to be easily swayed by fears of anthrax attacks or new epidemic diseases, an equal if not more pressing concern should be the continued deaths of over two million children per year from diarrhoeal illness caused by contaminated food and water. These preventable deaths are rarely discussed in terms of food and water security, but perhaps they should be.

Within these sub-fields of food security, most social science research aims to identify problems and promote solutions, whether in relation to the international institutional architecture for food aid (Clapp, 2005), or regarding the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change for farmers in East Africa (Toulmin, 2009). Other critical approaches, however, seek to ask more fundamental questions about the ways in which hunger and famine are perpetuated by a global economy which produces enough food to feed everyone, both now and into the foreseeable future (Keen, 2008: p.109; McDonald, 2010: p.88-9). Some critical voices contrast discourses of food security with discourses of agricultural development and empowerment (Adams, 2009), or even suggest that more locally rooted assertions
of “food sovereignty” or “food democracy” can act as forms of “micro-resistance” to neo-liberal globalisation (Ayres and Bosia, 2011).

These debates might seem esoteric and even rather academic to those struggling with the day-to-day challenges of providing sufficient safe food and water for their families, children and communities - or even national populations. However, short-term piecemeal solutions will do nothing to ameliorate the fundamental drivers of food insecurity, and may even be causing further damage (Dupont and Thirlwell, 2009: p.93). More research is needed on how the global governance of food and land is structured and shaped, and on the political economies of food production, processing and distribution that are driving the current dysfunctional system. These global structures provide a necessary context for understanding highly specific cases like land reform in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In addition to problem-solving approaches, we need big-picture, interconnected, critical research that tackles the broader questions of security, justice, power, development and democracy upon which the food we all consume depends. Whilst it may be true that we are what we eat, as Bryan McDonald points out, “our world is also shaped by the choices we make related to food and food systems” (McDonald, 2010: p.160).
References


