

Review: Corporate Power in Global Agrifood Governance

Jennifer Clapp and Doris Fuchs (Eds.)

Reviewed by Troy Vettese

St Andrews University, UK

Clapp, Jennifer and Fuchs, Doris. (Eds.). *Corporate Power in Global Agrifood Governance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 308pp. ISBN 9780262012751. US \$24, paperback.

William Sewell argued capitalism's essence is not wage labour, but rather the commoditization of *everything*. Farming, civilization's seminal profession, has long remained partially outside of the global market; the story of its integration within the past two decades by transnational corporations (TNCs) lies at the heart of *Corporate Power in Global Agrifood Governance*. This insightful essay collection, based on a 2006 academic conference, is required reading for anyone interested in food production or international institutions, as well as those who depend on a corporation for their next meal.

Editors Jennifer Clapp and Doris Fuchs successfully shepherd their fellow contributors with clear goals and principles. Their purpose was to unify two literatures (corporate influence on global governance with corporate food production) to nuance the hitherto simplistic assumption that economic power translates into political clout. This reveals how TNCs use political power to influence the global food system's structure. Fuchs and Clapp delineate a "three dimensional" (p. 11) conception of power: discursive (how debates are shaped), instrumentalist (financial, organizational, and human resources), and structural (limiting range of choices available to political actors). This schema provides coherence to the ten essays. Topics include grocery retailers' power, food certification and regulation, food aid, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and international property rights. Perspectives vary from national, regional, and global levels, revealing the interactions between them. There is, however, a disappointing lack of non-English sources considering the survey's international scope.

Over the last fifteen years, a global private food system has largely replaced a national public one, a process detrimental to small farmers and duped consumers. Previously, agricultural research was largely publically-funded and its results freely available, but now TNCs dominate and attempt to enforce patents, denying farmers control over seeds. Although public food regulations exist (such as the Food and Agriculture Organization's Codex Alimentarius), large food retailers have devised their own standards, which rarely are as effective as appearances suggest. Nonetheless, private regulations compliance is often too expensive for small-holders. Ironically, requirements for organic certification sometimes neglect local knowledge and conditions, causing greater environmental harm. Advertising obscures these costs and allows TNCs to pose as champions of food safety and sustainability to gain the trust of countless consumers.

These essays are predicated on a subtle understanding of globalization. Instead of a Hobbesian contest between civil society, states, and TNCs, different political actors work together to achieve shared goals. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) help certify small-holders as organic (sparing TNCs the cost) while others provide farmers with GMO seeds. U.S. food aid is distorted to benefit American shipping and agricultural firms, rather than world's starving masses. TNCs operate in an international system, upheld by states and individuals that emphasize economic interests over social ones.

The subtlety which makes the book's portrayal of globalization compelling is largely absent when corporations are the subject. The authors assume TNCs are an undifferentiated bloc with pernicious interests. Robert Falkner stands out by positing "neo-pluralism" (p. 231) divides TNCs, providing space for action by civil society. Scepticism of corporate claims to "sustainability" abounds, but readers cannot find a definition for the slippery term in this volume. The authors unanimously, though *sotto voce*, criticize the current global food system that privileges TNCs over consumers and producers without considering any benefits. The authors' solution is a conversion from private to public governance.

After reading *Corporate Power in Global Agrifood Governance* with Sewell's injunction in mind, it is difficult not to be pessimistic that such a transition could occur. Attempts to outrun capitalism, such as organic farming, are ultimately surrounded, subsumed and replaced by corporate *Doppelgänger*. Organics, a former vanguard of "alternative agriculture," is now a cash-cow for TNCs the world over.

Troy Vettese, M.St. <troy.vettese@gmail.com> Postgraduate student, History Department, St Andrews University, Fife Park Apartment 27 Room 6 Strathkinness High Road St Andrews Fife KY16 9UE United Kingdom.

Electronic Green Journal, Issue 32, Fall 2011, ISSN:1076-7975