

Book reviews

Alessandro Bonanno and Lawrence Busch (ed)

Handbook of the International Political Economy of Agriculture and Food

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The past decades have witnessed significant changes in the global political and market environments that have affected agricultural and food sectors in many countries. The European Union has reformed its Common Agricultural Policy several times, thus changing the rules of the game for the EU Member States and also affecting world markets. Regional trade agreements (e.g. the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA) and preferential trade agreements (e.g. between the European Union and selected African countries) have become increasingly prevalent since the early 1990s. The Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations placed the needs and interests of developing countries at its heart. On the other end of the spectrum of events, supermarkets have become more involved in the food supply chain while labour relations and the lack of an agricultural labour force in developed countries gained importance. Last but not least, various voluntary and/or mandatory production standards imposed throughout the food supply chain have affected the agricultural and food sectors. It is reasonable to assume that the above events have had different impacts on agricultural and food sectors across countries.

Alessandro Bonanno and Lawrence Busch, distinguished sociologists and editors of this handbook, have done a great job of putting together a valuable collection of works of 31 contributors (mostly sociologists) from different countries of the world who specialise in topics and countries (regions) covered in this book. That said, as is generally the case with edited volumes, and in my personal opinion, some chapters are better-written than others. The introduction sets the stage, provides motivation, and summarises the most important results of the 17 chapters to follow. These chapters are divided into two parts.

The first part provides case studies for selected countries and regions (Southern Africa, New Zealand, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, North America, Japan, the European Union, and Spain) on various topics. The reader will, among other things, learn how the establishment of the WTO affected the dual system of large export-oriented farms and peasant agriculture in Southern Africa; how by dictating the conditions of production as well as the use of labour large supermarket chains have a strong influence on agri-food production in Brazil; or that despite the prevailing positive view of trade liberalization within the

NAFTA, the negative consequences of this regional trade agreement are increasingly evident in Mexico, especially among the poor.

The second part of the book is devoted to selected themes of the international political economy of agriculture and food: supermarkets, finance and food system, labour relations, alternative agriculture, animal welfare, agricultural research and development, and gender. It should be noted, however, that two of these themes (alternative agriculture and animal welfare) are not dealt with from a global perspective, but are country-specific (Italy and the European Union) and could, therefore, be included in the earlier part of the book.

Each of the chapters provides the reader with a country (regional) background that is very useful in understanding the inner workings of institutions and markets in various countries, as well as motivations behind the decisions of policy-makers. Clear figures and tables are effective in supporting authors' arguments. Readers who prefer a more descriptive and qualitative treatment of topics in political economy of agricultural and food sectors will enjoy this book as it is free of algebra and supply/demand (or similar) diagrams.

While I highly appreciate the topicality and the selection of the chapters covered in the this handbook, I feel two more would deserve to be included as well, especially because of their public attention in the recent years: the political economy of high grain and oilseed prices in relation to biofuel policies and the political economy of the production and use of products containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The public and academic attention to high agricultural commodity prices started with the 2007–2008 price boom and intensified with its reoccurrence in 2010–2011. The role of biofuels and biofuel policies in contributing to these price booms is still a frequent subject of academic discourse. The attitudes toward GMOs differ especially in the USA and the European Union. In fact, the topic has gained importance in the European Union recently with the 'opt-out clause' making it possible for EU Member States to prohibit the use of EU-approved GM crops.

In conclusion, by reading the edited volume by Bonanno and Busch on the *International Political Economy of Agriculture and Food* I learned a lot, which is the first test of quality of a publication I study. I think academics as well as policy makers will greatly benefit from reading it as well.

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