

# **Neo-liberalism, neo-mercantilism and multifunctionality: contested political discourses in a European post-Fordist rural transition**

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## **Introduction**

It is now widely accepted that globalisation in agriculture has been in the ascendant since the 1980s, driven forward by a neo-liberal agenda that seeks to dismantle the welfare components of established 'national' policies and to 'deregulate to re-regulate' in order to establish a new 'post-Fordist' accumulation dynamic. Nevertheless, the nature of 'post-Fordism' has been the subject of intense debate, with more 'structuralist' readings apparently ranged against more 'localist' and 'actor-centred' interpretations. The way in which 'localist' and 'actor-centred' readings are set against putatively 'agent-less' political economy approaches appears unfortunately to establish a false dichotomy which forecloses discussion of potential resolution of this conceptual division through reference to the role of class, political action and state mediation in framing and driving forward the restructuring process.

The roots of this conceptual division can be traced to a long-standing conflation of political economy with structuralism within rural geography which began in the early 1990s. At this time commentators like Whatmore (1994) and Whatmore and Thorne (1997) began to question the alleged tendency of regulationist concepts such as food regime theory (see Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Bonanno et al., 1994; McMichael, 1994) to impose an accumulationist 'categorical imperative' on the restructuring of production and the consumption of food. These authors went on to point to the 'hyper-structuralist' and totalising nature of the accounts being offered by some food regime theorists and the tendency to erase agency and reify the economic sphere. As Marsden et al (1993, p.20) argued "current notions (of agricultural restructuring) emerging as they have largely from a political economy perspective, tend to retain an excessive economism and set of 'top down' structuralist assumptions about the nature of change". The result, according to critics, is a portrayal that is agent-less in process and unitary in its predicted consequences. While researchers such as Ward and Almas (1997) responded by seeking to anchor food regime theory in specific geographical settings, others eschewed structure altogether in order to 'follow' actors through the construction of actor networks (see Murdoch, 1995; 1998). The result has been a polarisation of academic opinion between those who emphasise social action in local and national spaces and those who retain allegiance to the structuralist explanations offered by food regime theory. The former, at least in its more anti-structuralist modes, has tended to abandon many of the assumptions of regulationist theory, placing emphasis instead on the role of social agency and contingency in driving forward the restructuring process (see for example, Goodman and Watts, 1994; Marsden and Arce, 1995; Whatmore, 1995). While this has been useful in emphasising the ways in which actor strategies related to agriculture and food are instantiated in, and through, space and locality, it has arguably downplayed the continuing dominance of capital accumulation and commodity relations in providing the structural parameters for action (Drummond and Marsden, 1999). It has also erected a false dichotomy between the putatively 'real' world of local actors and the abstract and theoretical one of global food regimes, neglecting in particular the

role of political action and policymaking at the level of the state and the possibility that the interests of capital, whether operating nationally and internationally, are advanced as much by means of structured action as those interests anchored in particular locales. Hence, while Marsden, et al (1993), for example, acknowledge the importance of power relations in their exploration of rural restructuring, their use of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a methodological tool to illuminate these means that these often appear suspended in local contexts, animated only by the immediate concerns of positional competition and the defence of property rights. While Marsden (2003, p.142) recognises that “we need to give more attention to the combination of local *and* non-local processes which impact together on rural areas” this enterprise is hampered, we believe, both by a continuing tendency to conceptualise the non-local as ‘structural force’ and the local as ‘structure-less’ agency. The heavy empiricism of ANT, for example, insists that actors’ identities and interests are not pre-given but come to be defined as they weave, and are woven, into particular networks. Unfortunately, this stance precludes any analysis as to why actors come into certain relations, nor does it tell us anything about the differential material and discursive power that they bring to these relations (Bieler and Morton, 2001b). Power relations may well change in ‘translation’ but they are structured by a given distribution of authoritative and allocative resources and this given distribution and the struggle to retain or gain a greater share can tell us much about why actors come together as they do.

Advocates of a food regime perspective, for their part, have perhaps failed adequately to respond to their critics, preferring to focus on the structural imperatives of capital accumulation which apparently bring about the replacement of one food regime by another. In so doing they imply rather than explicate the dynamic processes of political contestation, interest group power-play and discursive framings which are among the main formative influences at work here. Instead, we are typically presented with a highly periodised analysis of the evolution of international food regimes in accordance with ‘capitalist development’, as if this latter follows a single, unitary and monolithic trajectory. While authors such as Friedman and McMichael (1989) make some effort to identify class and class fractional actors in their analysis, there appears to be inadequate formal recognition generally of the need to theorise the way agency is being realised through political action and the deployment of different discursive practices. This makes it perhaps predictable that food regime theory should increasingly be equated with a deterministic type of structuralism, unspecific in its discussion of social causality and unsatisfactory in its treatment of agency. Thus, whilst Lowe et al. (1994, p.9) have described food regime theory as “useful as a heuristic framework...ordering broad geographical and historical experiences and...directing research to critical periods”, Drummond and Marsden suggest that there are “aspects of transformation [in which] it fails to deliver in explanatory terms” (1999, p.69) including the spatially uneven nature of development and the “mechanisms and contingencies of corporate power” (1999, p.70). In explicating the latter and concomitant processes of contestation, we endorse the comments of Murdoch et al. when they suggest that (2003, p.17) “[I]n order to understand ...trajectories of development, and the nature of struggles between different social groups and interests, the role of social agency must be central to any academic analysis... [T]he inquiry must link local action to broader patterns of change...”

Our aim in this paper is to chart a course through this opposition of agency versus structure-centred accounts of agricultural restructuring by examining it as an essentially political project. We begin by presenting notionally ‘structuralist’ forces as the product of political agency, in this way avoiding the need to pose exogenous structural forces against local agency. We provide a series of explanations for the contemporary shift towards what is best characterised as a neo-liberal, post-Fordist agricultural policy regime in Europe, albeit one that remains emergent and highly contested. Competing policy discourses, understood as discursive practices which are deployed to enrol or repel other actors into particular interpretive framings of causation, problems and solutions, are key to understanding how different groups in this process promote their interests, given the prevailing social mode of regulation. Having identified neo-liberalism as one such framing, we go on to assess the extent to which it can be said to be the dominant policy discourse within European and international public policy circles by focussing on recent agricultural policy change in the European Union (EU) and the degree to which neo-liberalism has been contested as a set of rules and embodied practices for capital accumulation. While it is argued that the principal class protagonists driving policy change are closely aligned to neo-liberal interests, those resisting change appear to espouse a well defined and institutionally embedded form of what we call here ‘neo-mercantilism’. An additional, but still largely subordinate alternative discourse, is offered by those promoting a social income support and agrarian/environmentalist justification for continued state assistance to a ‘multifunctional’ agriculture. Tension between these fractions is bringing about a complex and spatially uneven pattern of policy change and agricultural restructuring within the EU which is difficult to capture through unilinear deployment of food regime concepts without specification of agency and causality. Rather, we see a dualistic policy strategy emerging which is premised on the assumption that so-called post-productivist consumption spaces and policy strategies can co-exist alongside ‘market’ productivism (see Tilzey, 2000; Potter and Tilzey, 2002).

### **Agricultural restructuring as a political project**

The starting point for our analysis is the idea drawn down from regulation theory and international political economy that the social organisation of capitalist production generates opposition and conflict, not only between those who exercise control over the means of production but within the capitalist class itself (van de Pijl, 1984; 1998; Cox, 1987; Boyer and Saillard, 2002; van Apeldoorn, 2002). Indeed, conflict within the capitalist class is endemic to the extent that competition is an essential driver of capital accumulation. Thus an analysis of the concrete struggles between ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ and between different fractions of the capitalist class, is key to any understanding of the process of accumulation and resistance to it under advanced capitalism (Jessop, 2002a; 2002b). (Within the agriculture sector, for example, we can identify a broad differentiation of interest between ‘productive’ and ‘non-productive’ capital and, within the former, a further differentiation between ‘peasant’/‘small’, ‘middle’ and ‘large’ farm constituency interests.) Class is a useful bridging concept in this analysis since it incorporates both structure and agency. On the one hand, it allows us to identify the fractional interests that are implied by, and are constitutive of, capitalist relations of production. On the other, it draws our attention to the strategies, deployments and practices which agents themselves resort to in defending

or advancing their interests within the political process (Cox, 1987; Rupert, 2000; Bieler and Morton, 2001a; van Apeldoorn, 2002). Such a 'constructivist' historical materialism draws on Bhaskar's 'transformational model' in which he relates the structure which defines positions to the practice of those occupying these positions (Bhaskar, 1979). Whilst practice and position are internally related, it is only under certain conditions that class structure generates class agency since the latter is premised on conscious action by agents in virtue of the class positions that they occupy. In other words, the notion of class agency always presupposes a certain degree of class consciousness (Bieler and Morton, 2001b; van Apeldoorn, 2002). The realisation of class agency is thus always a political process. Critically, however, capitalists find it difficult to articulate a common position in relation to regulatory disputes, the inevitable fragmentation or 'fracturing' of interests leading to a diversity of strategies and articulations. As van der Pijl (1989, p11) argues "the capitalist class at most acts through class fractions, groups unified around a common economic and social function in the process of capital accumulation and sharing particular ideological propensities organically related to those functions".

One way of understanding these 'ideological propensities' is in terms of discourses and their deployment to open, structure and foreclose debate about alternative regulatory strategies. Discourse analysis is now well established as a standard analytical tool in the policy sciences following a growth of interest in the role of ideas, social framings and mental paradigms within the policymaking process (see Hall, 1993; Sabatier, 1998; Coleman, 1998). As Hall (1993, p279) puts it "policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing". This description captures well the way in which policy discourses are influential, not simply in setting objectives but also in fashioning the historical constructions of understanding which typically frame the terms of policy debate over long periods. Commentators like Coleman (1998) rightly caution against an 'idealist' view which sees ideas determining the values and norms enshrined in a particular paradigm independent of debate, contestation and struggle in state and civil society. However, these authors rarely go on to explicate what the causal sources of these struggles might be. Following the political economy perspective outlined above, we propose an understanding of discourses as the means through which fractional class interests and alliances compete for hegemony within the polity. The political battle between competing interests can thus be seen to be waged through discourse and the selective deployment of myths and symbols that may achieve internal coherence in the form of narratives. Following Gramsci (1971), we can see that the state, in its efforts at social regulation, attempts to balance these competing discourses but tendentially favours those with the greatest socio-political power and thus best able to achieve hegemonic influence for those ideas which defend and extend their position and influence.

A key issue here is what we mean by 'state' and 'polity' within a post-Fordist context characterised increasingly by systems of 'multi-level' governance. Our referent here remains the *locus classicus* of the nation-state and it comprises a principal focus in this paper because the 'state' appears to remain the primary site within which class and class fractional interests are contested and where key regulatory decisions are enacted. The state, thus understood, appears to remain the broadest arena within which politico-economic interests may be contested and therefore the one in which

state legitimacy, and by extension the legitimacy of capitalism, is upheld or challenged. Indeed, it would seem that it is precisely because the state at national level is struggling to sustain legitimacy in its efforts to pursue neo-liberalism that it is seeking to engage in what Sheingate (2000) terms 'venue change'. Venue change occurs both upwards to the international level (for example, the WTO) or downwards to the local/regional level. Both venues represent regulatory sites where opportunities for contestation are more restricted than at the nation-state level. Thus the WTO represents a site where globalising corporations, via their sponsoring states, can attempt to implant global regulatory structures for neo-liberal accumulation relatively insulated from the need to secure political legitimacy attendant on policy-making at the state level. Likewise, functions deemed appropriate to the local level are increasingly devolved downwards. Whilst devolution does entail a degree of regional empowerment it is generally framed very much within the neo-liberal paradigm, predicated on acceptance of programmes, techniques and procedures that underwrite market rule and global competition (Herbert-Cheshire, 2003). The new discourse of governance is thus infused with the ideas of community and empowerment (Lawrence, 2004) whilst simultaneously effacing contestation and power differentials at this level via the selective incorporation of some stakeholders and the exclusion of others. Also effaced from such putative empowerment is the continuing dependency of the local on state regulatory power to police the parameters defining and enabling neo-liberal accumulation. Our contention is that ANT constitutes a reification in theory of these newly emergent networks and partnerships in post-Fordist governance, effacing, like its empirical objects of study, pre-given and reproduced power differentials in the 'community'. It also elevates the 'local' to status as the primary site of 'agency', occluding agency at higher regulatory levels arguably of greater political significance. Overall, localistic and actor-centred accounts tend to occlude local power differentials and contestation, downplay the continuing role of the state as key regulatory nexus, and construe the non-local as structural force. The latter is thereby removed from the ambit of theoretical concern. In re-framing these putatively structural forces as political agency, we wish to focus on national and international regulatory levels as the key sites within which such political agency is both instantiated and contested.

Understood in terms of political agency, in which the state and supranational fora act as key regulatory sites, the contemporary struggle to achieve international reform of agricultural support is essentially about the drive to establish, resist or in some way modify neo-liberalism as the dominant policy discourse. According to a number of authors (see, for instance, Cox, 1987; Gill, 1990; Overbeek, 1990; Overbeek and van der Pijl, 1993; van der Pijl, 1998), neo-liberalism is a political project designed to restore capitalist class hegemony by freeing the market from the shackles of the state and disembedding the market. As Bonanno (2000, p309) puts it, "neo-liberal theories (in their most unadorned form) point to the ineffective and inefficient performance of the state and call for a system based on market orientated mechanisms. In their accounts, economic and social matters should be addressed through voluntary association in the context of an unrestricted free market society". As Jessop (2002b, p467) says, part of this project is to promote new discourses, subjectivities and ways of representing the world which establish the legitimacy of the market economy, the disciplinary state and the enterprise culture. "The origins of this discourse are hard to identify, rooted as they are in a complex reaction against Keynesian demand management and its associated state interventionist models of governance (McCarthy

and Prudham, 2004). With the transition to post-Fordism in regulatory terms, neo-liberal ideas have been strongly promoted by the interests of financial capital, anxious to gain world market share at a time when money capital is increasingly abstracted from the concrete production process and its material, social and economic requirements. Polanyi (1957, p132) observes that, in ideal-type terms, while the ideological outlook of productive capital has been geared to the idea of social protection and state assistance, that of money capital “aims at the establishment of a self-regulating market ...using laissez-faire and free trade as its methods”. Galvanised by the threat to the interests of corporate capital implied by a continuation of the Fordist/Keynesian social mode of regulation, neo-liberalism has consequently emerged as a powerful source of ideas and justifications for the deregulation of the state. These ideas and justifications arise from the two principal features that characterise the restructuring process associated with the crisis of Fordism. Firstly, this crisis has generated an international ‘restructuring race’ that has revolved around competing strategies of accumulation, bringing many transnational corporations into global competition with one another (Stopford and Strange, 1991; Ruigrok and van Tulder, 1995; Jessop, 2002a). Secondly, restructuring has generated, and continues to generate, pressures for a reconfiguration of social forces in all industrialised countries involving changes in the balance of power between interest groups and classes to the detriment of those holding hegemonic positions in the policy communities of Fordism.

For the agro-food sector, the transition from Fordism has meant a challenge to the ‘political’ productivism (Tilzey, 2000) which has framed state intervention in the sector since the Second World War. Under a Fordist mode of regulation, state assistance to the agricultural sector has been presented as part of the larger social contract between capital and labour which saw state intervention as a necessary prerequisite for economic development. As Le Heron (1993) and others have pointed out, the state assistance paradigm that has informed government support to farmers in the EU and the US for the past 40 years (see further discussion of the European case below) is deeply rooted in some rather strong assumptions about ‘the farm problem’ and a specific social construction of the economic vulnerability of small farmers to unfettered market forces. The result has been the creation of an ‘agricultural welfare state’ (Sheingate, 2000), intimately related to the wider, but nationally focused, framing of policy within the macroeconomic context of Atlantic Fordism (van der Pijl, 1998). By bringing about the concentration, industrialisation and globalisation of agricultural production, restructuring has arguably created a disjuncture between empirical reality and rhetorical policy justification and driven a wedge between the interests of productive and financial capital in a newly defined agro-food industry. While the remnants of the traditional family-farming constituency continue, with varying degrees of success, to defend state assistance in one form or another, the non-productive fractions of agro-food capital such as processors, distributors and retailers that have emerged as key players in the last twenty years, have become strong supporters of agricultural market liberalisation and the accelerated dismantling of state support (Cafruny, 1989; Hart, 1997; McMichael, 2000; Josling, 2002). Such capital fractions have in one sense broken loose of state ties and now seek to construct a minimalist ‘Lockean’<sup>1</sup> pattern of domestic and international governance, the latter

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<sup>1</sup> This Lockean pattern formalises a civil and capitalist society from which the state has withdrawn, having ‘regulated’ for the institutions necessary to enable its ‘liberal’ retreat from the sphere of accumulation. The Lockean pattern thus involves a ‘minimal’ state in which capital accumulation,

centred on the disciplines and procedures of the WTO. This pattern has been intimately linked to the dissolution of nationally centred Fordism and the construction of a globalising post-Fordist regime of accumulation. This, and the growing involvement of transnational agro-food companies in setting the agenda of trade negotiations, has its basis in the changing strategic orientations of agro-food capital. Firstly, the processing sector now has a strong incentive to seek out low cost supplies in world markets in order to remain competitive with firms located in countries in which prices are lower. As a consequence, continued pressure from food processors to allow a secular fall in raw material prices to world market levels has been an evident trend (Josling, 2002). Secondly, the tendency for international food companies to search for low cost supplies has been reinforced by pressure from those firms with existing operational bases in a number of countries (McMichael, 2000). For the latter, including those in the distribution and retailing sectors, international trade increasingly assumes the form of intra-firm trade. As a consequence, any restriction on the movement of food items within the firm is viewed as unnecessarily onerous (Hart, 1997; Josling, 2000). This is particularly true of the large retail firms since, unlike agri-food processing companies, they are not tied to production sites at all (Burch and Goss, 1999). These fractions of agro-food capital have therefore come increasingly to favour market-liberal retrenchment in agricultural policy since the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> In most industrialised countries such pressures on the Fordist agricultural consensus have since the 1980s contributed to an emergent post-Fordist policy configuration.

### **The European transition to a neo-liberal post-Fordist regime**

Within Western Europe, the neo-liberal agenda has met especially strong resistance from a complex array of interests and actor groupings. The continued transition to what we characterise as a neo-liberal post-Fordist regime thus continues to be heavily contested. Commentators such as Bieler and Morton (2001a) and van Apeldoorn (2002) have linked the emergence of neo-liberalism as a generic European policy project with the ‘relaunch’ of the EU integration process in the late 1980s, itself a reaction to the crises of Fordism and Keynesian-welfarism which swept through the economies of western Europe in the 1970s and early 1980s (Overbeek and van der Pijl, 1993; Rhodes and van Apeldoorn, 1997). Throughout the 1980s, divisions

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predicated on assumptions of the ‘self-regulating’ market, is to be undertaken in civil society between ‘disembedded’ individuals, with the state intervening only as guarantor of these formal social relations. In the Hobbesian pattern, by contrast, the state has preeminence as the institution managing the ongoing development of capitalism (and its social contradictions). Thus, as Gramsci noted (1971, p.262), the interventionist (Hobbesian) state “is connected on the one hand with tendencies supporting protection and economic nationalism, and on the other with the attempt to force a particular state personnel ... to take on ‘protection’ of the working classes against the excesses of capitalism.” The Hobbesian state thus has a strong proclivity towards the needs of productive capital and towards the principle of ‘social protection’, the second dimension of Polanyi’s ‘double movement’.

<sup>2</sup> Corporate agro-food exporters and the larger and more competitive members of the farming community, however, demonstrate an ambivalent attitude towards neo-liberal retrenchment. For these actors and particularly for corporate agro-food exporters, while the decoupling of Fordist price support is important in establishing a ‘world market price’ the retention of neo-mercantilist instruments such as export subsidies *sensu lato* may be seen as a desirable weapon in retaining competitive advantage in this world market and keeping open markets, particularly in the South (see McMichael, 2002). The degree of proclivity towards neo-mercantilism on the part of corporate agro-exporters depends crucially, however, on the extent to which the corporations in question are transnationalised.

between those fractions of capital integrated into global production networks and thus espousing an essentially Lockean vision of the relationship between the state and the market and those still orientated towards home markets and thus holding fast to a Hobbesian conception, resulted in the emergence of a peculiarly European ‘embedded neo-liberal’ model of economic governance (van Apeldoorn 2001; 2002). It is neo-liberal to the extent that it emphasises the primacy of global markets and the need to accept the peripatetic nature of transnational capital; it is embedded to the extent that it sets limits to laissez-faire through selective market protection and support, social welfare legislation, labour standards and a concern to preserve social consensus. As Gill (2001) and van Apeldoorn (2001; 2002) comment, while these latter arrangements speak to the concerns of both neo-mercantilism and social democracy, the impression is one of subordination to an overriding neo-liberal project, in which international competitiveness and growing world market share are the primary goals of European socio-economic governance. Under the new *doxa* of ‘competitiveness’, the EU pursues neo-liberal policies of budgetary rectitude, financial deregulation and labour market ‘flexibilisation’ (Rhodes and van Apeldoorn, 1997; Hay and Rosamund, 2002; Jessop, 2002a; 2002b).

The ability of politically entrenched farm interest groups to sustain, at least in part, what amounts to a protectionist agricultural welfare state in the face of these developments has been much commented on (see Coleman et al., 1996; Keeler, 1996; Skogstad, 1998; Daugbjerg, 1999; Sheingate, 2001). Sheingate (2000, p241) echoes others when he comments that “conditions in agriculture change, the numbers of farmers steadily declines, but attempts to map out a future direction for policy confront an institutional environment that (continues to) privilege the status quo”. While the WTO negotiations created a frame in which neo-liberal interests could advance, a deeper understanding of formative influences is therefore required in order to explain why a neo-liberal agenda for reform began so strongly to emerge in the 1980s. Many of these derive from the restructuring of agriculture and the emergence of an agro-food industry composed of processors, distributors and retailers increasingly aligned to the interests of the more globalising fractions of capital. While these ‘non-productive’ fractions of agro-capital may not exhibit all the characteristics of vertically integrated, transnational sectors such as electronics, clothing or automobile production (Goodman, 1997), they are now sufficiently disembedded from national/regional contexts and geared to the supply of world markets to be described as global in outlook and orientation (Josling, 2002). This has eroded the coherence of the agricultural policy community, challenging corporatist models of policy governance and introducing new discourses into the agricultural policy debate which emphasise international competitiveness and improved overseas market access (McMichael, 2000). At the same time, structural change within agriculture has opened up a division between the interests of larger, more capitalised businesses able to respond to the demands of processors and distributors and those labour intensive family-run holdings, many of them dependent on state assistance and the ability to find other non-agricultural sources of income in order to be able to continue farming. Fordist productivism integrated and subordinated producers to agro-food interests, both as buyers of inputs and providers of materials for food manufacturing. This formalisation of upstream and downstream relations enhanced the position of agro-food capital and led to a weaker set of identities between the interests of larger, restructured farms and those left on the margin of the process (Cafruny, 1989; Ingersent and Rayner, 2000; Hennis, 2001; 2002).

Thus, the neo-liberal case for CAP reform came to be most strongly associated with, and articulated by, the interests of agro-food fractions of capital throughout the 1990s. Typically, these interests, represented through grouping such as the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT), the Confederation of Food and Drink Industries of the EU (CIAA) and the Food and Drink Federation (FDF)<sup>3</sup>, oppose state support as an interference in the world market and, in the common parlance of neo-liberalism, seek freedom ‘to compete globally’, gaining access to new markets for exports and new regions from which to source inputs. Thus the CIAA, for example, has indicated that “[t]he primary objective of competitiveness within the context of stronger competition on the internal market as well as third countries calls for a progressively more market-oriented CAP... It is also essential that ... agriculture be capable of satisfying requirements with regard to productivity and competitiveness in the production of agricultural raw materials, with a view to responding to industry supply needs at prices that allow being competitive on an international and internal scale.” (CIAA, 2002) Similarly the ERT, a very influential force in the European neo-liberalisation process since the late 1980s, stressed strongly in its 1991 report *Reshaping Europe* the need for an open world economy, declaring that “the objectives of the Uruguay Round are vital to world prosperity” (ERT, 1991, p.52). In this context the report also remarks that industry no longer wishes “to be held hostage to the interests of European agriculture” (ibid.). These sentiments have been echoed by the FDF, stating that “[i]ncreased trade liberalisation is key to the future competitiveness of the UK food and drink manufacturing industry: as a major exporter, it is essential that the UK food and drink manufacturing industry can continue to compete for both existing and new markets opening up outside Europe. At the same time, manufacturers must be able to continue to import necessary raw materials from third countries without impediment ...” (FDF, 2003). Amongst agricultural producers meanwhile, the large farm constituency has demonstrated increased neo-liberal inclinations, a trend reflected at European level in the establishment of the European Landowners’ Organisation in the mid-1990s to represent this new orientation of interest.<sup>4</sup>

Resistance to this agenda has come from a variety of sources, however, and we would identify the two competing discourses of neo-mercantilism and multifunctionality as most important in giving voice and expression to this opposition. The concept of multifunctionality has its roots in a social welfare justification for state assistance which dates from the earliest years of the CAP (Tilzey, 2003). It is however as a

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<sup>3</sup> ERT membership is confined to the CEOs of the largest corporations headquartered in Europe. Amongst this membership are the CEOs of agro-alimentary corporations such as Nestle, Unilever, Danone and Carlsberg. Membership of the CIAA includes Cargill Europe, Coca-Cola Europe, Danone, Heineken, Heinz, Interbrew, Kellogg Europe, Kraft Foods, Nestle, Pepsico, Procter and Gamble and Unilever. Membership of FDF includes Cadbury Schweppes, Cargill plc, Coca-Cola, Danone Waters, Heinz, Kellogg, Kraft Foods, Nestle UK, Northern Foods plc, Rank Hovis MacDougall, Unilever and United Biscuits.

<sup>4</sup> Allied to this position is a distinctive neo-liberal discourse in relation to multifunctionality, typically assuming the form of a ‘countryside’ narrative (Lowe et al., 2003) in which nature and landscape are primary pre-occupations and are essentially dichotomised from the production of agricultural commodities. Nature is thus alienated from production and agriculture is required only contingently for the delivery of such goods by token of its joint production characteristics. Public subvention for these essentially ‘environmental’ functions is rationalised on the basis of public goods arguments and consequently assumes the form of a ‘non-trade concern’.

counter-narrative to the neo-liberal vision for European agriculture that this discourse has gained momentum in recent times, promoted by a broad alliance of farmer and environmental groupings (see, for example, CPE, 2001; Solagral, 2002; AbL, 2003). Advocates of a multifunctional agriculture position their case firmly within what Reiger (1977) has called 'the moral economy of the European Community' (sic) by regarding the activity of farming as one of the defining conditions of rural space, the purpose of state assistance being to create the conditions under which family farming and rural society can flourish. Agricultural liberalisation, and the withdrawal of state support which this would entail, is seen as deeply antipathetic to these objectives, threatening the existence of large numbers of small and marginal family-run holdings and fashioning a countryside geared to mass production. In this largely agrarian interpretation, in which the economic, social and environmental functions of sustainable agricultural production are emphasised in equal measure, agricultural multifunctionality suggests that food production and environmental protection can be combined, informing an approach to policy design "which is premised on agricultural systems having co-evolved with the environment over substantial periods of time to the extent that there is often a close relationship between the valued characteristics of the environment and certain attributes of agricultural systems" (Hodge, 2000, p260). This 'strong' version of multifunctionality, in which it is argued that sustainability requires both a reconfiguration of (market) social relations and support for public goods, is perhaps most clearly articulated by farmers' groups such as the Coordination Paysanne Europeenne (CPE). In this way the CPE has asserted that "[f]arm incomes have to come primarily from the sale of farm products" whilst "EAGGF should be directed to support farms which [inter alia] respect stricter environmental standards to preserve biodiversity" (CPE, 2001, p.3). This representation has been linked to the defence of an exceptionalist 'European Model of Agriculture' within the WTO, special by virtue of the close linkage between farming and the output of a range of jointly produced multifunctions and its vulnerability to policy retrenchment. This emphasis on European 'exceptionalism', however, is perhaps less a feature of 'strong' multifunctionality (emphasising as it does international solidarity amongst the family farming constituency) than of 'weaker' versions associated particularly with the 'Europrotectionism' of neo-mercantilism.

Advocates of neo-mercantilism in agricultural policy, by contrast, start from an essentially productivist conception of the farmer's vocation, regarding the function of the state being to safeguard and underwrite productive capacity and export potential. Whilst the corporate agro-food exporters and the more world market competitive sections of the farming community are not unambiguously neo-liberal in advocacy, it is among the more capitalised but less competitive middle farm constituency that resistance to neo-liberal retrenchment has been most pronounced. The latter are particularly wary of full agricultural liberalisation and the loss of export subsidies and Community preference which this implies. This constituency deploys essentially neo-mercantilist arguments to defend the continuation of state support, traditionally in the form of price support and export subsidies but now, under pressure from neo-liberal reform, increasingly in the form of compensatory blue or green box payments. A neo-mercantilist justification for commodity support and export subsidies has thus been part of the CAP debate for some time, but especially since the early 1980s, a position that has reflected advocacy particularly by France and its principal farmers' organisation FNSEA (Sheingate, 2000; 2001; Coleman and Chiasson, 2002). At the European level, such neo-mercantilist interests have been best represented by the

Comite des Organisations Professionnelles Agricoles (COPA)<sup>5</sup>. In line with its neo-mercantilist stance, COPA has characteristically voiced opposition to further CAP reform, to the loss of price support and to the decoupling of blue box payments from production, and to a further reduction in export subsidies. By the same token the organisation supports the retention of Community preference and embraces higher production standards to legitimate protectionism. Thus, COPA, in a policy statement issued at the time of the opening of the Doha Round, argues that “COPA cannot accept any undermining of EU price and market support through weakening in Community preference.” (COPA, 2000, p.3). It goes on in a subsequent policy statement outlining its priorities for the trade negotiations to assert that “[t]he overall result of the current agricultural negotiations must enable EU multifunctional (sic) agriculture to maintain its position on the domestic market through the provision of secure and stable supplies of ... food and non-food products based on sustainable production (sic) methods and to continue a dynamic export policy which will ensure EU farmers’ and co-operatives’ competitive position on the world market. Price and market support must remain an essential element of the CAP accompanied by adequate and effective external protection so that producers and their co-operatives are able to provide the high quality standards and environmentally friendly production (sic) demanded by European society while maintaining a reasonable income.” (COPA, 2001).

A key element in attempting to sustain the legitimacy of neo-mercantilism within an increasingly neo-liberal policy environment has been through the advocacy of agricultural multifunctionality, allegedly embodied in an exceptionalist ‘European model of agriculture’. Thus COPA has sought to appropriate multifunctionality discourse to neo-mercantilist ends through invocation of agricultural exceptionalism. In this way it has argued that “[t]he agri-food sector should never be treated in the same way as other economic sectors [because] agriculture differs from other economic sectors in several critical ways” (COPA, 2001). These arguments are laudable and sound enough in themselves of course. Their invocation by an organisation that supports key elements of the ‘competition CAP’ (Sheingate, 2000) is surely somewhat disingenuous, however. As the embodiment of the ‘competition CAP’ neo-mercantilism has been heavily implicated in the severe erosion of both the environmental and social dimensions agricultural multifunctionality (see for example Tilzey, 2000). The CPE has identified the contradictions inherent in the neo-mercantilist position when stating that “the EU, which defends the ‘multifunctionality’ of agriculture, nevertheless embraces policies which favour the industrialisation of production, with its many negative effects, and accelerates the disappearance of many multifunctional family farms. The EU will not be able to defend this concept credibly in the WTO negotiations except by changing its policy and its direct (export subsidies) and indirect (decoupling price/income) dumping practices” (CPE, 2001). This criticism clearly points an accusatory finger at the neo-mercantilist appropriation of agricultural multifunctionality.

### **European neo-liberal restructuring and ‘roll-out’**

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<sup>5</sup> Membership includes the Deutscher Bauernverband (DBV), Federation Nationale des Syndicats d’Exploitants Agricoles (FNSEA), National Farmers’ Union (NFU), and the Irish Farmers’ Association

The struggle to accommodate these opposing narratives, and the interests which stand behind them, means that the European policy stance combines neo-liberalism with a continued commitment to state assistance in various forms. This sets the frame for the regulation of an increasingly polarised agricultural industry, comprising both productivist and post-productivist sectors, and one which is moving simultaneously along trajectories that are integrating some operators more closely within agro-industry and taking others further away. In terms of continuing CAP reform, the expectation of most commentators would be for a continued retrenchment of pillar 1 support and a reduction in the level of export subsidies in line with the EU's WTO obligations. The effect will be to increase the world market exposure of Europe's farmers over the long term, possibly to an accelerated degree in the wake of any eventual conclusion of the Doha round (Ingersent and Rayner, 1999; Swinbank, 1999; Tangermann, 2003). A structural consequence will be the continued expansion of the 'productivist' arm of the industry and its integration within the larger circuits of an agro-food network. Corporate food interests will consolidate their influence over the production process, putting downward pressure on price margins and shifting economic rents away from the farm and the local level (Marsden, 1998; Goodman, 2004), while family farms marginalised in this process will be increasingly dependent on Pillar 2 subvention or enjoined to become more market oriented through production of 'alternative' products for the reflexive consumer. The result is likely to be an enhanced duality in rural space between a dominant market productivism and a subaltern and marginalised post-productivism, the whole subordinate to a neo-liberal discourse of market competitiveness. As Tilzey (2000, p.289) has noted "[u]nder this neo-liberal ('market' productivist) scenario, global comparative advantages are likely to be realised, or at least attempted, throughout much of the arable belt ... with production directed towards the continued supply of mass food markets. A continuation of the current configuration of intensive, agro-chemical production is therefore likely under this scenario... We can therefore anticipate in these circumstances a perpetuation of productivism, driven this time however by market imperatives rather than by the overtly political objectives of the CAP". Such arable areas are emerging as the heartlands of neo-liberal advocacy amongst the farming constituency. Here multifunctionality is literally consigned to the margins of production, its discursive character as a 'non-trade concern' the corollary of this spatial distantiating. In the uplands and other marginal regions of Europe, by contrast, "global comparative advantages in a liberalised market are unlikely to be realised" and, in the absence of 'flanking measures', "structural changes will involve farm abandonment and amalgamation." (ibid., p.289). It seems clear therefore that mitigatory measures will be required in such areas to reduce the level of socio-economic and environmental dislocation likely to flow from unbridled market liberalisation. These areas are typically home to the small and peasant farm constituencies, articulating a vision of 'green' agrarianism embodied in the discourse of 'strong' multifunctionality. In the mixed farming belt between the arable zone and the uplands, a neo-liberal scenario is likely to entail the sale of smaller farms and their absorption into larger units (Potter et al., 1999; Tilzey, 2000), as the latter strive to attain competitive scale economies and the former fall by the wayside under the weight of incurred debt and inability to finance further capitalisation. Whilst these trends of social (and environmental) dislocation have been evident under a regime of 'political' productivism, it is a pattern likely to intensify with market liberalisation. In this zone we typically encounter a middle farm constituency which has sought, and been encouraged, to capitalise enterprises but one which remains crucially dependent

on the state assistance model to sustain economic solvency. Neo-mercantilism has its material basis in this productive context where the evident threat to agrarian livelihoods posed by market retrenchment has been countered by defensive appropriation of multifunctionality and re-articulation of agricultural exceptionalism.

Defending spaces for 'post-productivism' within this scenario will therefore be difficult, notwithstanding the claims of neo-liberals concerning the environmental 'double dividend' and the prospect of an end to 'political productivism' that has proven so seductive to Northern member state environmental organisations (Tilzey, 2002). Policy support for multifunctionality within this scenario will increasingly assume a neo-liberal complexion, with tightly disciplined Pillar 2 budgets disbursed on a competitive and highly selective basis and specifically in return for public goods services rendered. Rural development assistance will facilitate less competitive farmers to diversify away from agriculture whilst, relatedly, transitional adjustment assistance will smooth the exit of marginal farm enterprises from the industry. This indeed is a description of the neo-liberal policy framework recommended in the Buckwell Report of 1997 (see CEC 1997 and, for summary, Ingersent and Rayner, 1999). The prospect of an expanded Pillar 2, whatever its shortcomings, nevertheless constitutes a vital legitimating 'flanking' measure for a neo-liberal strategy that in essence relates to securing expanded accumulation opportunities for the more globalised fractions of agro-food capital. In fact this neo-liberal strategy, flowing from the new-found hegemony of transnational capital in Europe and its influence within the EC, remains highly contested and its current embodiment as a compromise between competing interests reflects both this contestation and attempts to legitimate market-liberal retrenchment through the 'roll-out' of legitimating flanking measures (see for example Jessop, 2002b; Peck and Tickell, 2002). We can thus interpret the current configuration of the CAP as constituting an attempt to construct a new (neo-liberal) regime of accumulation in the agro-food sector whilst constructing a wider social (and environmental) mode of regulation both to legitimate (roll-out) this strategy and to placate opposing interest groups.

The latest round of CAP reform (the Mid-Term Review of Agenda 2000) indeed appears to instantiate a neo-liberal 'roll-out' strategy on the part of the EC, representing the simultaneous outcome of both contestation and compromise. The final agreement on the MTR eventually reached in June 2003 appears in this way to represent the outcome of considerable contestation principally between pro-reform (neo-liberal) and anti-reform (neo-mercantilist) fractions within the EU. Whilst the (albeit partial) decoupling of direct compensation payments constitutes a victory for neo-liberalism, the continuing presence of these supports, of a kind that confers entitlements on farmers for some time to come, embodies the enduring power of neo-mercantilism. These policy entitlements are now, however, more palatable from a WTO standpoint than before since they enable the EU to categorise the majority of its direct subvention as green box compatible, whilst simultaneously reducing its 'burden' within the blue box. The MTR agreement as such appears to constitute an attempt to 'balance' market-liberal retrenchment against resistance from (primarily French) neo-mercantilist interests, reaching a compromise in the form of 'disguised' production support qua decoupled blue box (now largely green box) payments. Agricultural MF is invoked in defence of such policy entitlements – an illegitimate invocation since these supports are but poorly 'recoupled' via 'cross-compliance' to environmental and social criteria of sustainability.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the ongoing process of CAP reform appears to be the product of a number of conflictual but also complementary pressures in a Fordist – post-Fordist conjuncture. These pressures arise from discrete although variously overlapping class and class fractional interest positions that the EC is attempting to reconcile in something approaching a coherent strategy as a new regime of accumulation and mode of social regulation. Thus, in the most recent CAP reform, pressures for further market-liberal retrenchment from both within and without the agriculture sector appear to be reflected in the move towards decoupling within CAP Pillar 1. Opposition to further reform from the neo-mercantilist and social protectionist constituencies appears to be embodied in the retention of comprehensive supports within Pillar 1, some remaining coupled to production. Environmental concerns are addressed at least in some measure via Pillar 2 disbursements (and weakly via cross-compliance provisions in Pillar 1), whilst the concerns of reflexive consumption receive consideration both through Pillar 2 and through enhanced, although not particularly exacting, standards of production. These then are contested, sometimes complementary pressures in a still emergent post-Fordism in which a stubbornly robust state assistance paradigm is nevertheless being progressively moulded to conform to the contours of an ascendant market-liberal paradigm. The result is an evolving compromise that we have termed ‘embedded neo-liberalism’. This ‘embedded neo-liberal’ post-Fordism is to be dominated by market productivism, and the size of Pillar 1 (in relation to the diminutive scale of Pillar 2) surely prefigures this intended dominance as liberalisation proceeds. This is not thoroughgoing market productivism, however. It is to be complemented by post-productivist enclaves functioning to supply regional markets and the middle class reflexive consumer, providing countryside consumption spaces for the urban populace (whilst conserving a residual biodiversity and landscape resource), and affording some measure of continuing support, now rationalised on socio-environmental grounds, to more marginal farmers and rural communities. The EC is, apparently, pursuing a dual, but internally consistent, policy of socio-environmental ‘exceptionalism’ (post-productivism) in relation to the rural ‘periphery’ and one of neo-liberal, market productivism in relation to its rural ‘core’. We have sought to explain why this should be understood as constituting a post-Fordist conjuncture. This conjuncture should not be interpreted, however, as a pre-ordained transition to a fully-fledged neo-liberal policy regime but rather as a contested political process whose outcome, for the ontological reasons outlined in this paper, remains an open question.

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