

# The long hangover from the second food regime: a world-historical interpretation of the collapse of the WTO Doha Round

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**Abstract** A benchmark question in contemporary food regimes scholarship is how to theorize agriculture's incorporation into the WTO. For the most part, it has been theorized as an institutional mechanism that facilitates the ushering in of a new, so-called 'third food regime', in which food–society relations are governed by the overarching politics of the market. The collapse of the Doha Round negotiations in July 2008 makes it possible, for the first time, to offer a conclusive assessment as to whether this is the case. Using a broadly conceived world-historical framework, this article contends that the WTO is more appropriately theorized as a carryover from the politics of the crisis of the second food regime, rather than representing any putative successor. The Doha Round's collapse in Geneva in July 2008 should put an end to speculation of a WTO-led transformation of global food politics towards unfettered market rule; the supposed basis for a neo-liberalized 'third food regime'. Consequently, it is through analysis of the factors that framed the Doha Round's collapse, rather than in the WTO itself, that provide insights into the defining elements of a new global politics of food.

**Keywords** Food regimes theory · WTO · Doha Round · Agri-food theory

## Introduction

From 21st to 28th July, 2008, trade negotiators from across the world met in Geneva under the auspices of the WTO

Trade Negotiations Committee. Their meeting had the stated objective of concluding the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations; already the longest multilateral trading round in the history of the GATT/WTO era, and with an ambit more extensive and exhaustive than any one previous. After a week of negotiations, however, negotiators left Geneva empty-handed. The Doha Round had collapsed, and this failure seemed to augur finality to landmark reform of the global trade system through multilateral means.

The demise of the talks was quickly followed by a veritable avalanche of platitudinous media releases and interviews, in which each country's negotiating team blamed some other party for allegedly endangering the future of the world's economy. Yet surprisingly, if these media releases and interviews were to be believed, the collapse of the Doha Round changed precisely nothing. In the immediate sense, global financial markets did not move at all in response to the Geneva announcements. Trade ministers didn't fall on their swords, and multinational corporations didn't announce shifts to their international operations. In terms of longer term implications, interpretations of the collapse in talks were equally muddled. Past experience of modelling multilateral trade flows throws up results which are discordant and contradictory,<sup>1</sup> with even the most optimistic models positing relatively small net economic gains when measured at a global scale (Freeman

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<sup>1</sup> Whalley (2000, pp. 1, 2) writes: 'If as a developing country negotiator, one wanted to draw upon the model results [from the Uruguay Round] to support or help frame a negotiating position for the next round, seemingly there is support for almost anything one wanted to argue. The gains to developing nations could be large or small; agriculture could be the most important issue, or it could be services. Impacts on individual countries could be positive or negative, large or small'.

2004; Pritchard 2005, pp. 2–4). Whereas widely cited (upper-bound) estimates suggest that successful conclusion of the Doha Round agricultural commitments would have helped boost world annual economic activity by the order of US\$200–US\$300 billion some 10 years into the future (Nair et al. 2006, p. 14), such an estimate must be put in the wider perspective of the size of the world economy. Since global GDP was estimated to be US\$54,347 billion at the time of the Doha Round's collapse, the totality of WTO agricultural reforms would represent a maximum, highly disputable, gain of <0.5% of world economic activity, at some point a decade hence. For all the media spin about the vital international economic importance of progressing WTO-led trade reform, the economic significance of the Doha Round's collapse didn't amount to a hill of beans, either in the immediate or long term.

What should be made of the Doha Round's collapse, then? For researchers and analysts one-step removed from the WTO negotiating maelstrom, the meaning and consequences of the multilateral system are devilishly difficult to grasp. Negotiations are framed around legal and economic technicalities that are complex and dense. The terminology of the system can be daunting; concepts like 'green boxes', 'amber boxes', 'modalities' and 'red lines' punctuate the WTO's narrative existence. Positions and tactics of individual countries are difficult to follow, with negotiators' public utterances frequently acting as a decoy to other agendas played out in 'green room' closed sessions. In turn, this analytical impenetrability of the WTO tends to breed stylised and simplified understandings of what the system stands for, and how it impacts upon economies and societies. With the detail of negotiations convoluted and occluded, media coverage and public debate is reduced into a series of ideological battle lines based around support or opposition to the liberalisation of international markets.

It is understandable that debate on the WTO has progressed in this form, but ultimately these arguments do disservice to a fuller and more comprehensively rigorous critique of the institution. In this paper, I seek to provide such a critique. For the sake of focus, the discussion here is limited to WTO's agendas in agriculture. Whilst recent WTO negotiations have expanded to include a huge range of sectoral interests—including issues such as intellectual property, services and product standards that were previously outside the ambit of this regime—for the past two decades the issue of agricultural trade has provided the central policy dilemma within the multilateral system. As elaborated below, agricultural trade issues provided both the formative impulse for events that created the WTO, and the ultimate barrier that saw the Doha Round's demise.

The framework for this paper's critique of the WTO is provided by the world-historical perspective of international political economy and, more specifically, food

regime theory. In this, the current paper provides a distinctive alternative to much of the existing body of argument about this institution. The seminal 1989 paper by Harriet Friedmann and Phil McMichael which introduced this concept made the simple but compelling argument that the global politics of food was an artefact of international economic relations. Looking back over the previous century, Friedmann and McMichael identified particular periods of time when a hegemonic economic power underwrote a specific system of agri-food production and trade. They labelled these periods *food regimes*. Writing at the end of the 1980s, they proposed that the contemporary turmoil in agricultural and food systems was brought on by the collapse of one food regime (the so-called *second food regime*, see below) and a set of incoherent national responses to the resolution of this set of problems. Through the application of the food regimes approach to the specific question of the Doha Round's collapse, this paper aims to demonstrate the utility of this approach within the broader field of inquiry into the WTO. I contend that an understanding of the WTO's role in the world economy—especially as it relates to agriculture—is enhanced by a food regimes perspective. The unique advantage of this approach is the way it positions the institution within the broader historical frames of the global politics of food.

Of critical importance to the subject matter of this paper, the seminal articulation of the food regimes concept was developed precisely at the time when agriculture was being incorporated into the mainstream multilateral trading system. The Bretton Woods institutions developed to regulate global economics and security after the Second World War explicitly excluded agriculture from their coverage. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), established in 1947, had minimal real relevance for agricultural trade. Several agriculture-related 'add-on' Agreements existed during the GATT period (1947–1994), but these were limited in thematic scope and signatory coverage, had fixed duration, and no real powers of enforcement (Capling 2001). By the end of the 1980s, the goal of developing a powerful institutional framework to regulate the rules of trade for world agriculture had become a cause célèbre within international trade diplomacy.

For Friedmann and McMichael, and indeed, some later analysts adopting the food regimes framework (inter alia, Le Heron 1993), a central problematic was whether the incorporation of agriculture into the multilateral trading system would orchestrate a new stabilised food regime that would resolve the turmoil of the 1980s. Almost 20 years on, with the collapse of the Doha Round, it becomes possible for the first time to offer a conclusive answer to this question. As I elaborate in the following sections of this paper, the intractability of agricultural trade negotiations witnessed in the Doha Round points to the institutional

inability of WTO-led multilateralism to construct a new, stabilised, food regime. The theatrics of blame and recrimination that followed the failure of talks in Geneva in July 2008 need to be understood as the last burning embers of an ill-fated 20-year project to use the WTO as a means of resolving the crisis of the collapse of the second food regime.

#### Food regime theory and the politics of agriculture in the 1980s

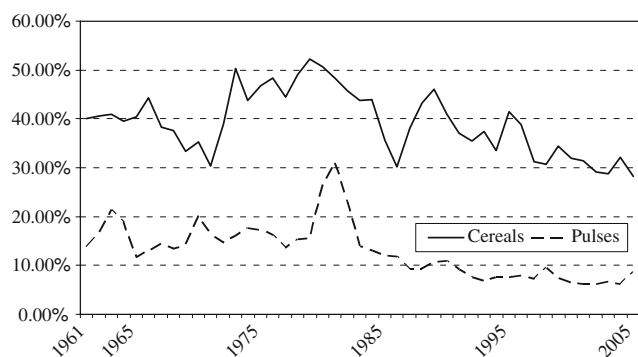
To give substance to the argument above, my starting point is to explain the concept of food regimes, with particular reference to the politics of agriculture at the time of the concept's initial articulation. As numerous previous analysts have recounted, the food regime concept brought together insights from regulation theory and world-systems theory, and applied these to the politics of food (Araghi 2003; Fold and Pritchard 2005; Friedmann 1993, 1994; Le Heron 1993; Le Heron and Roche 1995; McMichael 1994, 1998, 1999; Pritchard 1998). From world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974) came the insight that the global economy could be interpreted as having system-wide logic, based around the capabilities, agendas and reach of world-powers. For world-system theorists, thus, any analysis of the global economy needs to be periodicized. The global economy is not an abstract entity but an explicit artefact of the historical conditions and circumstances that enable capitalist accumulation to progress in specific forms. From regulation theory came the insight that economic conditions are stabilized when a regime of accumulation coalesces with a supportive mode of regulation (Jessop 1995).

Melding together these broad conceptual frameworks, Friedmann and McMichael (1989) argued that a period of British-led colonial hegemony provided the basis for the so-called *first food regime* (circa 1870–1914). The hallmark political economy of the first food regime was the expansion of agriculture into Colonial and New World domains. The abolition of 'Corn Laws' in 1846 paved the way for an international division of labour in food to develop, with Britain's rapidly urbanising population being fed increasingly by food imports from the Colonies and the Americas. During this period, the gold standard stabilised monetary exchange, establishing the financial infrastructure that allowed trade to take place (McMichael 1999). Financial and political havoc during the period 1914–1945 thwarted the emergence of any new food regime, however with the end of the Second World War, US political hegemony and the anchoring role of the Bretton Woods institutions prefigured the emergence of a *second food regime*. Unlike the first food regime, the post-1945 food regime was established around the ability of the US to subsidize and export large agricultural surpluses, thereby

maintaining harmony within domestic farm constituencies and furthering diplomatic aims abroad. The Marshall Plan and subsequent food aid legislation created sizeable external markets for US agriculture, and in the process, entrenched food import dependency among many newly decolonized nations. Thus, the transformation from the first to the second food regimes expressed not only a change from British to US hegemony, but shift from free trade to managed trade (McMichael 2005, p. 270).

By the mid-1980s, however, it was apparent that the political economy of the second food regime was in disarray. Fundamental to these developments was a set of transformations to the global economic geography of food production and consumption that challenged US agri-global hegemony. On the one hand, the advent of green revolution technologies in many developing countries displaced a reliance on US food-aid imports. India's place in the global food economy is symptomatic of these transformations. During the (first food regime) period of British rule, India (mainly Punjab) was a significant exporter of grains back to the Colonial motherland (Friedmann 2005). By the (second food regime period of the) 1960s–1970s, however, India had become massively reliant on US grain imports; its demand absorbed up to 25% of the entire annual US wheat crop during some years in the early 1970s (Mujumdar 2006, p. 21). The advent of green revolution agri-technologies from the mid-1970s onwards, however, saw this level of import dependence decline, and by the 1990s, India had become a significant net exporter of grains. (Though, of course, this alone did not resolve problems of hunger and food insecurity amongst large proportions of the country's population.) On the other hand, US dominance in world food markets was challenged by the rise of Western Europe as a massive food exporter. Through the financial benefits associated with the Common Agricultural Policy, European Union members were able to export large amounts of subsidized food across the world. The contribution of these two effects caused the US share of world food markets to go into decline. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the US share of world cereal and pulse exports peaked in the early 1980s; thenceforward, it has been in sustained decline. Cereals and pulses (the latter, mainly soybeans) were the central elements to what Friedmann (1994) labelled the 'durable food complex' of the second food regime.

The reverberations of such changes caused the global food system to list towards increasing instability and inequity. The expansion of subsidized European food exports on world markets instigated counter-responses from the Republican Administrations of Reagan and Bush (Sr), by way of expanded farm programs. Most infamously, the US Export Enhancement Program (EEP), established in 1985, provided US exporters of wheat and other grains



**Fig. 1** US cereals and pulses exports as a percentage of world total exports. *Source:* FAOSTATS. <http://faostats.fao.org>. Accessed 13 September, 2008. *Note:* In FAOSTATS database, ‘cereals’ corresponds to ‘Cereals+’ (item code 2077); ‘pulses’ correspond to ‘pulses+’ (item code 1954)

with direct cash bonuses to assist their efforts in out-competing European exports for sales into third (mainly developing country) markets. Yet as the size of US farm subsidies grew, their seeming capacities to meet domestic objectives appeared to become evermore distant. Industry rationalisation and technological change made the plight of the US family farmer more dire during the 1980s, despite record levels of subsidy assistance from successive US administrations. As rural researchers at the time were making clear, the US Farm Bill system was operating as a machine which funnelled financial rewards to large-scale producers and downstream processors, rather than serving the interests of farm families (Browne 1988; Krebs 1991). From the perspective of developing countries, the tit-for-tat trans-Atlantic agricultural trade war undermined producers’ abilities to compete on export and domestic markets, aggravating rural hardship and food insecurity.

This environment provided the context for international trade negotiators to seek to incorporate agriculture into a global rules-based trading system. In search of a mechanism to resolve the escalation of agricultural subsidies, in September 1986 global trade negotiators formed a consensus to commence a new round of multilateral talks of the GATT that would have the specific purpose of addressing the role of agriculture in world trade (Capling 2001, pp. 97–104). The formative meeting to pursue this objective occurred in the resort town of Punta del Este, Uruguay; a location which gave rise to the eponymous Uruguay Round of the GATT.

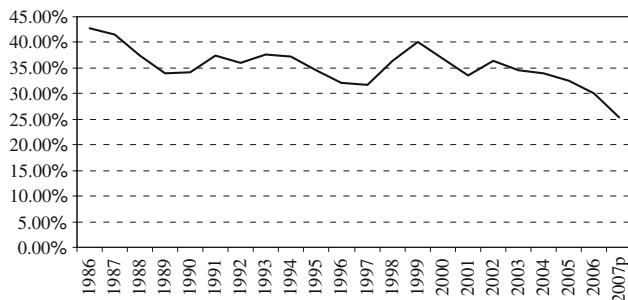
The Uruguay Round of negotiations lasted until December 1993, and it is impossible to de-contextualize these real-world political economy events from the contemporaneous development of food regime theory. The food regime concept provided a narrative framework that brought much-heralded perspective to these complex reformulations of the global politics of food. Accordingly,

much initial food regime scholarship was animated by the prospect that the Uruguay Round would cause agriculture to become subject to an internationally-binding set of rules that would progressively eliminate nations’ capacities to subsidise their rural economies, and thus bring into being a new food regime. Not coincidentally, a small group of researchers from New Zealand led the charge in seeking to answer this question (Le Heron 1993; Le Heron and Roche 1995; Campbell and Coombes 1999). New Zealand’s agricultural sector was thoroughly liberalized from the mid-1980s, making it a kind of test-case for what an incipient global agricultural system might look like. Reflecting on these issues in his book *Globalized Agriculture: Political Choice*, Le Heron (1993) argued that the advancement of Uruguay Round objectives would lead inexorably to the de-nationalization of food systems, as circuits of capital in agri-food production, exchange and reproduction become beholden to footloose global corporations and financial institutions. The effect would be a volatile global food system as economic actors responded to short-term, global market signals, with the regulatory apparatus of the state unable to intervene because of the disciplines of the ‘new constitutionalism’ (Gill 2003) of the GATT (soon to be WTO) order.

#### Establishment of the WTO

The Uruguay Round negotiations were concluded in late 1993, with the final body of Agreements then ratified by trade ministers from 124 countries in April 1994, at Marrakech, Morocco. This paved the way for the WTO to come into being, on 1 January, 1995. One of the core Agreements ratified in Marrakech was the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), which prescribed a series of ceilings and timetables that circumscribed the extent to which signatory governments could provide protective assistance to agriculture. Because the AoA was a component Agreement within the WTO’s mandate, signatory governments were obligated to comply with its requirements, lest they risk retaliatory sanctions from other WTO members. In short, when national governments signed onto the WTO, they relinquished their powers to unilaterally set their own food and agricultural policies.

But what did this mean in practice? The basic elements of the AoA were forged in 1992 between US and EU negotiating parties at the so-called Blair House accord. Essentially, the agreement that came out of those negotiations represented a modest set of obligations that secured the continuation of the basic thrust of US and EU farm policies into the WTO era. Although the AoA prescribed a set of mandatory reductions in overall levels of farm assistance, these were benchmarked against 1986–1988, which represented a high water mark of Northern



**Fig. 2** Agricultural support payments in the OECD, 1986–2007. *Source:* OECD (2008: Table 2.1). *Note:* The chart measures the Producer Support Estimate (PSE), as a share of total value of production at farm-gate. US dollar equivalents

agricultural subsidies. Consequently, mandated reductions were attained with relative ease by the Americans and Europeans: no Government in either North America or Western Europe has ever lost office during the WTO era from the domestic political pain caused by implementing WTO agricultural mandates.

Hence, whereas initial prognostications hinted that the incorporation of agriculture into the rules of multilateral trade would radically liberalize the world food system (the New Zealand model emulated on a global scale), the initial years of the AoA's life reflected a quite different reality. On the one hand, the agreement sanctioned the extensive agricultural protectionism of Northern countries. In 1986–1988, OECD countries provided farmers with support equivalent to 40.43% of the value of farm gate production.<sup>2</sup> More than a decade later, in 1999, the level of farm assistance was virtually unchanged, at 40.07% (Fig. 2). Yet at the same time, the story for many developing countries differed starkly. Although the AoA allowed developing countries to reduce their levels of agricultural protection by a lesser magnitude than developed countries, the reality was that these countries generally entered the WTO system ill-prepared for such an eventuality, and the task of meeting WTO mandates frequently came with significant domestic political costs. It was often the case that developing countries had to restructure at short notice an extensive bureaucratic apparatus that had been set up for the goals of assisting food security and rural livelihoods. Reform imperatives were aided and abetted by conditionality requirements that often were part-and-parcel of loan refinancing from international financial institutions. In a latter-day *mea culpa*, WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy acknowledged in 2008: 'I also do admit that the

commitments taken on by WTO Members at the end of the Uruguay Round may have been burdensome for some developing countries' (Lamy 2008). Thus, during the first 5 years following the Uruguay Round's conclusion, the main effect of bringing agriculture into the WTO was not to reform global agriculture in line with market rationalities, but to aggravate already-existing uneven opportunities in the world food system. The combination of forced regulatory restructuring within the agricultural sectors of developing countries, and the maintenance of subsidy programs in most of the OECD, entrenched world food power in the hands of elite Northern interests. Contradicting the pronouncement of WTO advocates that the incorporation of agriculture into the WTO would foster liberalization of markets to the advantage of Southern exporters, in actual fact the share of developing countries in world agricultural exports during this period fell; from 46% in 1986 to 42% in 1997 (Private Sector Agricultural Trade Task Force 2002, p. 2).

These processes served to perpetuate turmoil and inequality in the world food system. The geographical manifestation of these transformations was to encourage an inter-hemispheric 'switch' in global agri-food exchange. Backed by subsidies and mandatory lowering of tariff levels in many developing country markets, Northern developed country producers enhanced their export position in lower-value commodity crops, livestock and dairy. Thus, an increasing number of people in developing and transitional economies became consumers of staple foods produced in the affluent North. As explored by McMichael (2000a), specifically with respect to East Asia, these developments created an 'import complex', in which national food security objectives were reframed in terms of market access requirements. Ability to buy imports began to supplant the ability to feed one's population from domestic sources, as the basis for ensuring food security. Although national regulatory formations (such as statutory marketing boards, single buying desks and export monopolies) retained pivotal clout across many developing country jurisdictions, the combination of Northern agribusiness interests and the neoliberal sentiments of international financial institutions pushed hard for their deregulation. These trajectories of agri-food transformation led to the situation where high-value export agriculture took on increasingly critical importance within developing countries' national economic planning. Across the developing world, land and resources were re-zoned or commandeered for integrated, export-oriented agri-food investments, in sectors such as fresh fruit and vegetables (Humphrey 2006), aquaculture (especially shrimp) and floriculture. Thus, whereas citizens of the global South were increasingly fed on US-grown maize, European wheat or Antipodean milk powder, consumers in the affluent North filled their shopping trolleys with an increasing array of air-freighted foods originating from the global South.

<sup>2</sup> Data quoted here are Producer Support Estimates (PSE). This is defined by the OECD as being an indicator of the annual monetary value of gross transfers from consumers and taxpayers to support agricultural producers, measured at farm gate level, arising from policy measures, regardless of their nature, objectives or impacts on farm production or income.

## The Seattle watershed

By 1999, five years after the conclusion of the Uruguay Round, a view had developed amongst major Northern countries that the time was ripe for a new Round of trade negotiations. This view, in turn, was underpinned by two basic assumptions. First, there was strength of conviction within policy elites that the post-Cold War period had produced ‘the end of history’ (to borrow Fukuyama’s phrase), inasmuch as there was now untrammelled acceptance of the merits of market liberalization. Second, there was an assumption that although the WTO operated on the basis of ‘consensus’, the natural order of protocol was that the large Northern powers would strike agreement, and the rest of the WTO membership would fall in line. The mettle of both these assumptions was to be tested sorely when trade ministers met to commence the negotiations, at Seattle in November 1999.

On many fronts, the Seattle meeting provides a clear line of division in the short history of the WTO. NGO opposition to the Seattle agenda brought the organization squarely into the public eye for the first time. The theatre of dissent in downtown Seattle set the stage for protest actions that would be emulated in subsequent meetings, and which boosted the overall profile of global civil society (Buttel 2003; Pieterse 2000; Williams 2004). After Seattle, the issue of how the WTO should relate to civil society became an issue of great concern to the organization.<sup>3</sup>

Events *inside* the meeting at Seattle, however, provided the most substantive change to the WTO’s operations. The European and US delegations proposed insubstantial reforms to their levels of agricultural protectionism, yet sought a widening of the WTO liberalization agenda into the services industries and investment. This latter agenda was intended to place pressure on developing countries to liberalize the trade and investment climate facing multinational corporations in the fields of banking, business services, retailing and government procurement. Several years earlier, the European and US delegations had introduced this agenda into the WTO at a meeting in Singapore, hence their popular description as the ‘Singapore issues’.

Developing country delegations rejected this negotiating framework, and abandoned the talks. Although there were some distinctions between their positions, the common

<sup>3</sup> Manifest in divergent ways. Firstly, the WTO chose its meeting sites henceforth with an acute eye to security and isolation. This presented itself most tellingly when the agenda for the aborted Seattle meeting was reconvened at Doha, in the Persian Gulf; arguably one of the most hostile environments in the world insofar as mobilizing protest is concerned. Secondly, the WTO strategically reached out to the NGO community after Seattle, hosting many conferences and workshops with NGOs with the view to ‘work through’ various issues. In a broader sense, too, of course, the explicit focus of the Doha Round on development sought to placate NGO complaints.

perception among developing countries was that cuts to Northern agricultural protectionism should take priority over any widening of the WTO agenda. For the first time in the history of the GATT/WTO, countries from outside the global North took the defining step of seeking to shape the terms of the negotiating agenda. Emotions amongst many developing country delegates ran high, as last minute deals were attempted to be struck with minimal input from the developing world. A member of the Zimbabwe delegation told the media: ‘If it keeps going like this, we’ll have to join the protesters outside... The manner in which the meeting is being conducted is unsatisfactory... to call it manipulative would not be too harsh’ (Allard 1999, p. 11). And as the Argentine Foreign Minister described the position: ‘How can developing countries be invited to take part in globalization when they are not allowed access to international markets to place their products?’ (BBC 2000).

Seen through the world-historical prism of food regimes analysis, the period from the inception of the Uruguay Round in 1986 until the Seattle meeting of 1999 represents a global politics of food in which elite northern interests strategized to create and use the WTO as a tool to preserve their own subsidy regimes, while at the same time enforcing liberalization on the rest of the world. In 1998, McMichael perceptively observed that the system maintained a political order in which ‘comparative access to subsidies’, as opposed to comparative advantage, provided the chief weapon for agri-export market penetration (McMichael 1998, p. 97). Just after the collapse of the Seattle talks, he further commented that the world-historical context of the WTO rested in:

the attempt to implement market rule globally in order to facilitate corporate access to markets and raw materials, and investor and speculator access to financial markets, and to recalibrate the ideology of development as a global project. The WTO is a tool of the counter-mobilization by transnational capital against social protections. (McMichael 2000b, p. 473)

Thus, the 1986–1999 period represented a re-elaboration of the conditions that led to the breakdown of the second food regime. Key Northern interests demonstrated no substantive desire to alter the paradigms in which their domestic food policies were framed. Yet in the collapse of the Seattle meeting, the seeds were sown for important transformations to these global food politics. McMichael foreshadowed these currents in 2000, by commenting that: ‘The problem is that the WTO, being authored by states, is also accountable to them, or at least their competitive relations’ (2000b, p. 473). The chaos of the Seattle meeting underlined these contradictions in the WTO’s institutional role in global food politics. On one hand, the GATT/WTO since 1986 had been lionized as the only body with

sufficient institutional clout to resolve the turmoil and inequity of agricultural trade, brought about by the trans-Atlantic agricultural subsidies. Yet on the other hand, the institution was party itself to these interests; the WTO AoA sanctioned these subsidies and, of course, the EU and US were both influential members who had a major role in defining the organization's direction. This conflict was underwritten by the fact that compared to many other international bodies, the WTO has remained a member-driven organization in which a relatively small secretariat acts as a functionary to its sovereign membership (Barnett and Finemore 1999). The contradictory role of the WTO being both a forum for pushing trade liberalization; and a forum belonging to its members and their interests, emerged to become the defining issue in attempts to reform global agriculture in the years after Seattle.

### Post-Seattle meanderings

Developing countries left the Seattle meeting with the moral high-ground, but disillusioned about their future participation in the WTO. In Seattle's wake, therefore, it became obvious that the continuation of the system depended upon a refashioned negotiating agenda that was alert to developing countries' concerns. In late 2001, almost 2 years after the Seattle meeting, these aspirations were invoked in the launch of what the WTO labelled the *Doha Development Round*; the second word in the title giving a nod to the WTO's stated desire to prioritize the interests of developing country members.

From the start, however, the Doha Round was constructed on shaky foundations. Because the global North maintained its ambition to widen the scope of international economic liberalization into the 'Singapore issue' areas, any progress in the Round became dependent upon the extent of cuts to their levels of agricultural protection. Caught astride domestic political desires to maintain support to farm constituencies, yet at the same time keen to illustrate their agricultural policy reform credentials, the first few years of the Doha Round saw the EU and US restructure and re-badge their agricultural policies in 'WTO-friendly' ways. For its part, the EU undertook a substantial restructuring of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which sought to transfer farm programs into 'green box' categories. The key innovation here was to accelerate the deployment of the concept of multifunctionality as a 'European model of agriculture'. The notion of multifunctionality invokes the view that food and farming express positive externalities in the form of such things as agrarian heritage, rural development, landscape preservation, and so on, and that these represent legitimate reasons for government assistance. As Potter (2006, p. 192) has argued, it encapsulates 'a particular construction of the relationship between agriculture, environment and rural

society, is rooted deep in European culture and politics', yet only in the 2000s cohered as a discrete political project. In the post-Seattle climate of global trade, Europe's articulation of the concept of multifunctionality led to a rapid redirecting of agricultural support into so-called 'Pillar II' (green box, WTO-friendly multifunctionality) programs. The effect of this was that in 2002, the EU announced a reviewed Common Agricultural Policy that forecasted a substantial increase in total agricultural payments (from €37.7 billion in 2001 to €41.8 billion in 2006), but which at the same time enabled EU trade negotiators to argue that they were reducing and reforming their farm programs (Commission of the European Communities 2002, p. 34). The US never formally embraced the concept of multifunctionality, but comparably undertook an extensive transference of funds into 'green box' programs. Like the situation in Europe, the first major programmatic initiative after Seattle (the 2004 *Freedom to Farm* legislation) witnessed an overall increase in budgetary support to the farm sector, but in ways that maintained the veneer of WTO compliance.

These moves did not appease developing country interests or their NGO supporters. In 2002, the aid agency Oxfam launched its 'Make Trade Fair' campaign with a strident assault on agricultural subsidies in the global North (Oxfam 2002). Other NGOs, notably Focus on the Global South and Via Campesina, took an alternate line of attack, mobilizing to 'get agriculture out of the WTO' (Rosset 2006). NGOs and developing countries looked towards the first Ministerial meeting of the Doha Round, scheduled to be held at Cancun, Mexico, in mid-2003, as the time and place to extract meaningful concessions from the global North. The will of developing countries was steeled by a series of pre-meeting discussions between trade ministers from Brazil, India and South Africa, which led to a coordinated strategy by developing countries for the Cancun conference. For their parts, EU and US trade negotiators in the first half of 2003 were unable to reach consensus on a substantive reforms to their agricultural policies, although at the 11th hour a mild agreement was attained.

Cancun, then, collapsed in a pattern familiar to Seattle. Set amidst a cacophony of NGO protests, European and US negotiators demanded that developing countries address 'Singapore issue' concerns prior to substantive reforms to agriculture. Developing countries rejected this ordering of the negotiations, and walked out. Two-and-a-half years then elapsed before the next Ministerial meeting of the Doha Round, scheduled for Hong Kong in December 2005. Desperate to ensure the meeting did not collapse, the WTO authored an insipid communiqué that did little more than maintain the status quo and timetable further discussions during the first half of 2006. These failed to reach conclusion and in July 2006, WTO Director-General Lamy announced a

suspension of the Doha Round. Two more years of on-again, off-again negotiations then ensued, before a final series of meetings was scheduled for Geneva, in July 2008. The negotiating stances different parties took into this meeting largely replicated positions adopted in earlier meetings, except that the US offered to make deep cuts to its trade-distorting agricultural subsidies on condition that the WTO safeguard mechanism was substantially diluted. Currently, the WTO Agreement on Safeguard accords rights to countries to impose protective tariffs on industries when imports surge by over 15% in a three-month period. The US wanted the threshold for rights to impose safeguard tariffs raised to 40%, but as India's Minister for Commerce (and chief WTO negotiator) Kamal Nath commented, by the time an industry had to respond to an import surge of such magnitude, it would be too late to take reparative action: 'I made it very clear in these talks that I am willing to negotiate commerce. I am not willing to negotiate livelihood security' (Nerve India 2008). Moreover, in any case, India and its allies at the talks had suspicions that the US offer to cut agricultural subsidies subsequent to this concession was hollow; the impending expiration of President Bush's 'fast-track' negotiating authority meant that any deal would have to be ratified piecemeal by Congress, a notoriously unreliable mechanism to pursue agricultural reform. On this impasse, the Doha Round collapsed.

### **A food regime perspective on the Doha Round collapse**

Notwithstanding the events in Geneva in July 2008, the WTO remains highly relevant to the global economy. WTO membership continued to grow throughout the tumult of the Doha Round, with the accession of China (2001), Taiwan (2002), Saudi Arabia (2005), Viet Nam (2007), Ukraine (2008), and a host of smaller member states. At the time of writing, the only major economies still outside its universe are the Russian Federation, Belarus, Iran, Iraq and Libya; and all of these are currently applying for accession. (And it remains a fact that no country has ever withdrawn from the organization). WTO dispute-settlement panels are hearing and adjudicating an increasing number of complaints, the broad effects of which are to instil market liberal disciplines across significant swathes of the global economy (Pritchard 2005). Moreover, during the past decade the organization has exercised strategic influence in seeking to make trade policy issues central within the broader debate on global development, through research it has sponsored on the role of trade in poverty alleviation, and via its operation of programs such 'Aid for Trade', which have the purpose of building up the trade-related capabilities of developing countries.

Nevertheless, with the Doha Round's collapse the WTO's palpable influence over the future shape of the global food system has been diminished. Recent events demonstrate that multilateral trade negotiations are no longer captive of a small cadre of countries in the global North. As developing country negotiators from Seattle onwards have asserted, further concessions will not be made without substantial reforms to northern agricultural subsidies. The resulting impasse from this clash of perspectives indicates that the WTO is not merely an organizational vehicle designed to serve the interests of globally powerful sovereign states. Yet at the same time, neither can the WTO be characterized as a supra-national entity with independent agency to implement free market agriculture. Successive WTO Directors-General have taken the view that the organization should have higher aspirations to act as the coordinating entity for the implementation of global market reform in agriculture. Yet as the failure of the Doha Round demonstrates, this view has not prevailed amongst the organization's membership.

From a food regime perspective, the clear message here relates to hegemonic contestation within the global food system. As Friedmann and McMichael seminally assert, a food regime represents a stabilized set of relations between the establishment and evolution of nation states on the one hand, and the international political economy of food on the other. The stability of the first and second food regimes depended on a hegemonic power (Britain and the US, respectively) which underwrote global financial stability (through the gold standard and the US dollar-Bretton Woods arrangements, respectively). The incapacity of the WTO to act as an institution that brings into being a new food regime reflects tensions over global power in the food system. Both the global North and the global South are willing the exertion of influence over the WTO, and neither is unequivocally prevailing. This absence of a hegemon leaves the WTO rudderless.

Negotiating praxis within the WTO aggravates these conditions. The newfound political and economic aspirations of emerging economies provided a challenge for which the institutional architecture of the WTO was ill-prepared. Historically, the GATT/WTO system owed its origins to the agendas of a small number of Western democracies, and power arrangements within the organization were slow to devolve as membership expanded.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The system of multilateral trade rules enshrined by the WTO can be traced ultimately to the Atlantic Charter, the 1941 agreement established by Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt aiming to structure these two countries' relations in the context of the Second World War. Principle Four of the Charter specified that the two countries would 'endeavour, with due respect for their existing obligations, to further the enjoyment by all States, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access, on equal terms, to the trade and to the



This history is significant because although the WTO was created to be a rules-based organization, nevertheless it inherited the cultural legacy of the GATT. That legacy involved a negotiating framework based around reciprocity ('you make me an offer and I'll honour that obligation with a counter-offer'), and assumptions of decision-making by consensus. These echoes of the world of polite diplomacy, however, lay in stark contrast to the harsh realities of the final years of the Doha Round's life, where WTO membership had fractured into competing groups with opposing world views on how the Doha Round's agenda (or 'modalities') should be structured. As the Round progressed, countries had to weave their positions around an increasingly complex maze of negotiating blocs. This environment mitigated the possibility for substantive reforms being reached. When chaos didn't rule, intractability and side-deals (outside the ambit of the organization)<sup>5</sup> did.

Footnote 4 continued

raw materials of the world which are needed for their economic prosperity' (US Department of State 2008). This premise provided the foundational basis for negotiations immediately after the Second World War among eighteen countries to establish a multilateral agreement on trade (Capling 2001, pp. 13–15). Initially intended to provide a constitution for a proposed International Trade Organization (ITO), which would be a third leg of the post-war family of international institutions (the other two being the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund), these goals were abandoned in 1948 following objections from the US Congress. Subsequently, a more loosely-structured treaty arrangement (the GATT) came to provide the focus for multilateral trade initiatives for a period of almost 50 years (Buckman 2005, pp. 37–45; Sands 2005, pp. 99–101).

<sup>5</sup> The importance of the former rests with the way that bilateral and regional trade deals are reordering the economic geography of the global economy, with particular reference to food and agriculture. As the Doha Round became increasingly intractable, member states gave increased energy to the negotiation of strategically conceived Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) at bilateral and/or regional levels. Although countries remained nominally committed to the Doha Round, during the post-Seattle years there was tendency to side-step multilateralism in favour of 'side-deals'. This was particularly apparent in the US, where trade policy unilateralism became a preferred modus operandi of the Bush Administration. During the life of the Doha Round, the US settled PTAs with Chile, the countries of Central America, Australia, Singapore, Thailand and South Korea. The ramifications of these arrangements were to complicate the rules of trade at a global level. (In the language of trade economists, they were 'trade-diverting' rather than 'trade-creating'.) More importantly, however, they expressed a means through which larger and more powerful countries (such as the US) could pursue trade negotiations under their own terms, as opposed to the fraught circumstances of dealing simultaneously with the 153 members of the WTO. Emblematic of this, in the Australia–US Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA), US negotiators extracted significant market access concessions from Australia for American pharmaceuticals and media industries, whilst the Australian negotiating team made minimal impact in terms of improving Australian market access into US agriculture. As documented by Weiss et al. (2004), the AUSFTA mandated that Australian legislation relating to its national

## Conclusion: beyond the WTO

McMichael (2005, p. 281) observes that in the first and second food regimes, the regulation of food occurred within the framework of the nation-state. Reflecting the organizational logic of global capitalism, food regime theorists generally agree that any ultimate successor to the second food regime will arise in governance arrangements that transcend above and beyond the traditional domains of state sovereignty. In this light, the WTO has been conceived as potentially establishing a regulatory anchoring role for a new food regime. For, as McMichael (2005, p. 281) asserts: 'The WTO is not a state, rather a disembodied, and unrepresentative, executive'. The neoliberal ideology that drives the organization is an agenda to recompose national agricultures into global agriculture.

Yet as the collapse of the Doha Round signifies, the pursuit of this agenda has been complicated and compromised by the entity's very structure. Expectations in the years 2000–2001 that a new, comprehensive WTO agreement would swiftly enshrine a new global politics of agriculture have proven unmet. With the Global Financial Crisis engulfing the world economy from mid-2008 onwards, moreover, the rhetoric within the WTO leadership has changed from aggressive to defensive. With a rise in protectionist sentiments in response to economic crisis, it seems that 'holding the line' on trade rules and thus negating a repeat of the collapse in world trade (as infamously occurred during the 1930s Great Depression), would be success enough for the WTO.

Doha's demise pushes the WTO further into the background of the global politics of food. These trajectories are mirrored in the scholarly field of agrarian political economy, where recent years have witnessed a flurry of research into new forms of private food governance, and relatively little new commentary or analysis on the WTO. New contributions to food regime research by Friedmann and McMichael, too, have tended to position the WTO marginally within global agri-food political economy. Both scholars have focused on the articulation of social movements and the putative fragments of a corporate-environmental food regime (Friedmann 2005; McMichael 2005).

To summarize, then, WTO-led multilateralism during the Doha Round provided an inadequate institutional framework to accommodate the complex political economic machinations associated with a multi-polar world. Previous multilateral rounds, even including the Uruguay Round, were accomplished in the context of little purposeful intervention by developing countries. The intentionality of these

Footnote 5 continued

pharmaceutical scheme be rewritten to accord with US standards and requirements.

countries at Seattle and afterwards, however, changed the fabric of how negotiations took place, and rendered the WTO impotent. This history emphasizes how the WTO provided an arena for hegemonic contestation in the world food system, rather than alternately providing the institutional architecture to meld those tensions within a new political-economic food order. Thus, the WTO encapsulated but did not move beyond the crisis of the second food regime. The ultimate collapse of the Doha Round in Geneva in July 2008 provide the *fin de siècle* to attempts to use multilateral means to resolve global food inequities and inefficiencies.

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