

## **Bill Winders: The politics of food supply: U.S. agricultural policy in the world economy**

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In *The Politics of Food Supply*, Winders employs a Polanyian conceptual frame that focuses on the double movement of regulation and liberalization combined with a food regimes perspective to investigate the dynamics that influenced the trajectory and structure of US agricultural policy. His agenda is to get beyond the “received view” of US agricultural policy that focuses on partisan politics (mostly urban/rural or producer/consumer) and a unified farm bloc to illuminate how class fractions in agriculture and US agriculture’s place in the global economy have been neglected variables in explaining the trends in agricultural policy. He strives to get beyond the “what” to the “why” and “how” to better understand why specific policies were created and supported or opposed during certain times. His perspective is political economy grounded on the three pillars of class, state, and market. His method is historical sociology, employing archival records, especially of senate, house, and USDA hearings, as evidence to support his thesis. His writing method is to present the received view, declare it inadequate for a full understanding, then dig deeper based on the changing class, state, market nexus over time.

To make his point, he focuses on the topic of production controls, as well as price/income supports, and later, export subsidies. His research investigates the class fractions surrounding the cotton, wheat, and corn commodities, and their associated organizations (American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, National Cotton Council, National Corn Growers Association, National Association of Wheat Growers) and the changing political

access to fractions of the state as they maneuver to shape agricultural policy. He focuses his attention on the FAIR Act of 1996 whereby the production controls were eliminated but income supports were continued, thereby allowing the US to continue to compete with the EU in subsidized export markets and to diffuse the US diet around the world.

Winders discovers that for much of the history of US agricultural policy it was the unified South, aligned with wheat producers in the West, protecting their cotton (and wheat) interests that dominated policies. But as both the regional and global contexts shifted, the South lost out to the Midwest as corn, with the help of the American Farm Bureau Federation, became the new hegemon in US agricultural policy. At the regional level, in response to federal regulations related to production controls and income supports, Southern planters reorganized their operations by eliminating the organizational form based on sharecroppers and tenants, switching to hired labor. As an unintended consequence, these actions resulted in a mass migration of Black Americans to the cities in both the North and South, which facilitated the growth of the civil rights movement and the erosion of the power that Southern planters held over regional politics. At the global level, corn was able to compete successfully in global markets while cotton and wheat required federal subsidies to survive. In the longer term, corn’s contribution to US exports favored its rise to dominance in the agricultural policy setting.

The strengths of the book far outweigh any shortcomings. Winders’ nuanced combination of the political economy framework with historical methods reveals the contested character of the policy process and the factors that allowed certain agricultural class fractions to advance and defend their agendas over time. The book is a good example of an improved Polanyian approach that benefits

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from archival digging. I especially enjoyed the focus on the South and its changing influence over time.

Regarding some shortcomings, the title is bland compared to the stories revealed in the text. A title that captured corn as the new hegemon in US agricultural policy would have resonated with recent efforts in the popular press. I also found the footnote referencing system awkward; I kept looking back to see who was cited or if it was a note instead of a citation. One of Winders' central tenets is that the received view variables are inadequate for adequate understanding of the trajectories of US agricultural policy. He then introduces his three pillars (class, state, and market) as more useful independent variables. While his historical method is inimical to positivist interpretations, I would have liked to see a specific explanation of the relative value of "old" versus "new" variables in explaining the changes in US agricultural policies. Winders casts the old variables as inadequate, but just how useful are they?

Finally, I would have liked to see Winders more directly address the question, "To whose advantage was the continued overproduction?" The topic of who benefitted most when price/income supports were decoupled from acreage reduction in 1996 is a key political economy issue. He hints at the answer towards the end of the book when he reports

the rise of the corn/feed/livestock complex, i.e. the integrators, as the most powerful players. He notes the growing power of agribusiness but this aspect is underdeveloped. In my view, this lack of direct engagement with agribusiness contributes to a "soft" conclusion. Indeed, my conclusion from reading the book is that the integrators are the new planters, using the same kinds of sharecropping arrangements employed in the South in the past. Another conclusion is that the research reveals how agricultural class fractions learn to farm the government, a practice that continues today.

In *The Politics of Food Supply* Winders makes a significant contribution to the sociology of agrifood studies. Established academics and graduate students in the areas of historical sociology and the sociology of the agrifood system will find this book an engaging read as well as a valuable example of critical agrifood research.

### Author Biography

**Douglas H. Constance** PhD, is Professor of Sociology at Sam Houston State University. His research focuses on the community impacts of the globalization of the agrifood system and alternative agrifood initiatives.