INTRODUCTION: GREENING THE COUNTRYSIDE?
CHANGING FRAMEWORKS OF EU AGRICULTURAL POLICY

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In response to wide-ranging criticism of agricultural policy, especially within Western industrialized countries, new frameworks of justification are emerging and new hybrid policy fields have been established to tackle some of the ‘externalities’ of agricultural support. However, institutional frameworks are proving slower to change, partly because this would require coordinated action across different levels of governance. Nevertheless, previously marginalized environmental concerns have successfully gained entrance to agricultural policy networks, while the intersection of trade liberalization and rural diversification have undermined the dominance of the productivist mindset in government. This gives rise to a plurality of policy actors and actions which defy the conventional categories of analysis of agricultural policy, calling for changing frameworks on the polity of agriculture too.

CHANGING FRAMEWORKS FOR AGRICULTURAL POLICY

Traditional agricultural policy in Western industrialized countries has increasingly been subject to public critique and political pressure. It is blamed for causing environmental destruction in the countryside; for failing to halt the social and economic decline of many rural areas; for being indifferent to the suffering of farm animals; and for allowing new sources of risk to jeopardize the food chain. In many countries, a wider range of activists – including, variously, consumers, tax payers, environmentalists, rural community and animal welfare activists – has gained ground in framing public debate, thus challenging the basic objectives of agricultural policy.

The critique has not been restricted to domestic politics. Similar concerns have been expressed in international fora. A combination of transnational NGOs, international agencies, and developing countries’ representatives, have indicted the rich countries’ agricultural policies – through the way they undermine the livelihoods of rural producers in the Third World – as one of the chief obstacles to fighting global poverty. Because of the spillover of agriculture policy – its inputs, its budgetary costs, its wastes, its surpluses – into other realms, previously separate policy and public interest agendas have had to make connections to agricultural production and trade policy. What was once a very closed and technical policy field has been opened up to wider scrutiny (Greer 2005).

Before the 1980s, when public criticism of intensive farming practices began to emerge, there was a broad consensus around the objectives of agricultural policy. Part of the general post-war settlement in Western industrialized countries had been the acknowledgement of agriculture as a key national economic sector and, consequently, a political commitment to supporting production. The assumption that agriculture provides an indispensable national good – food security – that is threatened by market failure, especially volatile markets and ruinous prices in years of good harvest, dominated policy justification.

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Through a mixture of price protection for farm commodities and public investment in agricultural research, development and extension, farmers were encouraged, indeed impelled, to increase their output through boosting productivity – an outlook referred to as productivism. The expansion of domestic food production was seen to be an important public objective. It was also a means to raise agricultural incomes, which was generally accepted as the other key objective of agricultural policy.

With these objectives undisputed, agriculture was a self-contained, highly technical, policy field that was largely insulated from public debate. Its organization was sectoral, compartmentalized, inward-looking and dominated by producer interests, in forms variously characterized as clientelistic or corporatist or closed policy communities (Smith 1992). Such policy communities are considered highly resistant to change, since both interest groups and government benefit from stable membership and goal consensus. Moreover, underpinning what has been variously termed the ‘developmental or state-assisted paradigm’ (Coleman and Grant 1998, p. 636), or the ‘dependent agriculture paradigm’ (Moyer and Josling 2002) was an ideology of ‘agricultural exceptionalism’ which gave a distinct and privileged status to farm policy (Cox et al. 1988; Grant 1995; Skogstad 1998; Daugbjerg and Swinbank 2006). Farmers’ identities also were systematically constituted around the notion of production and a productivist use of the countryside (Ward 1993; Lowe et al. 1993).

Almost inevitably, forces of change have been external ones, and they have arisen largely in reaction to the adverse impacts trade barriers and intensive production have had on other policy fields. Thus the farm budgetary crises and agricultural trade wars of the 1980s provoked efforts to place limits on farm spending and domestic protectionism. Likewise, the growing evidence of sharp declines in rural biodiversity and the recognition of agriculture as the principal source of diffuse water pollution led conservationists and water authorities respectively to press for measures such as controls over agri-chemicals and protection for natural habitats and water sources from agricultural intensification (Lowe et al. 1986; European Environmental Agency 2007, pp. 296–8).

These developments reflect changing realities for many members of rural communities and urban consumers in industrialized countries. The majority of people who live and work in rural areas are no longer engaged in agriculture, and they, as well as well-to-do and mobile urban residents, look upon the countryside as a pleasant and vital environment and not simply as a place for food production. Likewise, as consumers have prospered, they have become much more discerning and judgemental about the quality and wholesomeness of their food and the treatment of animals and nature in its production. As a consequence, the ethics of intensive farming have been called into question, and the discourses of commodity productivism challenged by those of ‘slow food’, organic, welfare-friendly and food chain localization.

Thus, while agriculture policy was once a textbook example of an entrenched policy community with an overt ideological commitment to productivist objectives, alternative paradigms framing agricultural policy are now apparent. They find expression in the changing ideologies of farming unions (Estrada 1995) as well as in the outlook of governments and politicians. Since the 1980s, the market liberal or ‘competitive agriculture paradigm’ (Moyer and Josling 2002, p. 33ff.) has come to the fore in the USA and has found echoes in the European Union as well. However, there has also been the strong assertion of a distinctive ‘European model of agriculture’ (Cardwell 2004) which is usually identified with the ‘multifunctional agriculture paradigm’ (Coleman 1998; Van Huylenbroeck and Durand 2003). At the beginning of the 21st century a new ‘globalized
production paradigm’ (Coleman et al. 2004, pp. 98–110) could also be discerned, with a focus on harmonization and competition issues.

However, just as concerns over climate change and increased global demand for primary commodities have seen the recent re-emergence of food security as a core policy concern, so the extent to which farming in practice has moved beyond productivism is a matter of much contention (Wilson 2007). The evidence of change at an institutional level is also ambivalent (Daugbjerg 1999; Moyer and Josling 2002). Some instruments associated with over-production, such as import controls, surplus buying, state trade and export aids, have largely been replaced by direct aids to farmers (Moyer and Josling 2002). However, frameworks of policy formation and implementation, such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), remain largely intact, little altered by shifting priorities. Yet, at the EU level, the creation of bodies such as the European Food Standards Authority and national equivalents does show a commitment by governments to food safety and consumer representation, as opposed to self-regulation by the farming industry.

Meanwhile, institutions focused on trade, health, and the environment, have targeted the agricultural sector from outside and it is conceivable that they may trigger considerable change. In the past 10–15 years, in response to such external pressures, various hybrid policy fields have emerged: for example, agri-environment policy at the intersection between agricultural and environmental policy; rural development policy, at the intersection with spatial and regional policy; food policy, at the intersection with consumer and health policy; farm animal welfare policy, at the intersection with humanitarian concerns. Through the growth of these hybrid policy fields, the objectives of agricultural policy have become both complex and blurred.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

One of the difficulties confronting any major shift in priorities is that change across different sectors also necessitates coordinated action across different levels of governance. As rural areas come to be valued less for their food-producing role and more as places to live and work and for the environmental functions that they perform, then there is a shift in the locus for policy intervention and governance (OECD 2006). This is often portrayed, within an EU context, as being from a sectoral to a territorial orientation and from a European to a national and local focus. While that may crudely characterize a set of axes (rather than a definite trajectory) of reform of agricultural policy, it does not capture the complexity of the spatial and subsidiarity dimensions involved; these are illustrated diagrammatically in figure 1.

Regarding agricultural trade policy, the European and international dimensions predominate. Here the EU remains the competent authority: charged with ensuring an open, competitive market for food within Europe; preventing unfair competition between member states; safeguarding the interests of consumers, animal welfare, and developing countries in food trade; and attending to Europe’s food security. Regarding territorial policies, however, the focus shifts towards the national and local levels. For a great deal of rural environmental policy, there is shared competence between the national and European levels, reflecting the fact that nature and environmental processes transcend national boundaries. The EU thus sets broad frameworks identifying common objectives but member states essentially decide how they are to pursue them. Given that nearly half the land surface of the European Union is farmed, it is inevitable that agriculture is an
FIGURE 1  The spatial and subsidiarity dimensions of agricultural, agri-environmental and rural development policy

When it comes to rural socio-economic development, the focus shifts again, largely to the sub-national level. Rural disadvantage – say, in the inadequacy of labour markets, local services or infrastructure – is experienced at regional and local levels. The EU dimension here is essentially a broad backstop concern for social and economic cohesion – that is, to ensure that lagging regions and marginalized social groups are not further disadvantaged by, but benefit from, European integration. Across much of rural Europe, however, local administrative, business and voluntary structures are fragile or ill-developed, something which constrains the scope for realizing territorially-oriented measures and objectives (Terluin and Post 2002; OECD 2006). A major preoccupation of rural policy therefore is with the building of local capacity for rural development (Ray 2000).

The trajectory from a sectoral to a territorial orientation is therefore one which requires the articulation of local and regional tendencies and forces with centralized structures, procedures and institutions; while it also pitches rural and environmental concerns and interests against dominant farming-centric perspectives. There has been and continues to be an over-emphasis on the role of agriculture in rural development, which the CAP has perpetuated, with damaging consequences in terms of the over-intensification of agriculture (and resultant damage to the rural environment), economic over-dependence of rural areas on agriculture, and ill-adapted rural economies. Rural economic development is both constrained by the weakness in the institutional capacity and social capital of rural areas – that top-down production policies have effected – and hampered by the conservative forces that argue for the maintenance of the status quo with respect to the CAP (Shucksmith et al. 2005).

These forces of change and conservatism cut across and are beginning to undermine a set of state-orientated national interests that, in the past, demarcated the boundaries for reform of the CAP. The political and economic importance of agriculture varies considerably across Europe. National governments have tended to line up in one of two
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camps – favouring either economic liberalization or protection of agricultural market supports. This in turn depends up whether or not their essential national interest in agriculture is seen as that of a key export sector or as an important domestic sector that helps maintain rural areas, and whether or not they are net financial beneficiaries or funders of the CAP (Lowe et al. 2000; Thurston 2002).

While the impasse between these different national interests has largely left efforts at major reform of the CAP in stalemate, they have been partly accommodated by allowing greater scope for national flexibility and variability in the operation of the CAP (Lowe et al. 2002). So far, though, the relentless decline in the economic importance of agriculture has not dislodged its political hegemony. However, the diversifying functions of rural areas and shifts in consumer concerns are decisively reshaping the terms of the debate from below. At the same time, a broader range of interests beyond agricultural ministries, farming unions and the European Commission’s Agricultural Directorate, are taking an interest in the reform of agricultural policy because of its impact on a wide sweep of policy areas, including the EU’s budget and finance, external and trade relations, EU enlargement, public health, and the environment. The ten new EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe bring their own set of imperatives to the table, including improved levels of support for their farming sectors, investment and modernization, the development of food processing and marketing, support for rural development and a fair share of the CAP budget (IEEP 2005).

PLURALIZING POLITICAL ACTION AND ACTORS

As the perspectives on agricultural policy are becoming more and more incommensurable, the emerging plurality challenges conventional social science approaches to agriculture. Mainstream research has long explained agricultural policy in terms of the pursuit of sectional interests, and the concept of political arenas behind these approaches has been highly policy-oriented. However, just as governments are no longer able or even willing to contain political action on agriculture within the conventional policy domain, it is also more difficult for analysts to characterize the widening spectrum of that action in terms of interest politics (Greer 2005). When political action is channelled through other kind of actors, such as non-governmental organizations, or is constituted by individuals interpreting their personal choices as political acts, and when political action is based, for example, on ethics or morality, then approaches are called for that can encompass the complexity, inconsistency and incalculability of concrete political action (Vihinen 2001; Feindt 2010).

Changing frameworks therefore fundamentally concern also the polity – the setting in which agricultural policy takes place. The new groups of competent actors that question the former closed policy communities are one manifestation of the way the polity is transformed. Another indication has to do with political modernization, or new governance, that is gaining ground (Walker 2006). These concepts refer to the changing roles of the state, markets and civil society. In particular, traditional political actors such as parties and ministries are expected to lose power to other kinds of political actors. In addition, new governance refers to a change from centralized to decentralized policy-making and from command and control to contextual steering, which imply both more participative policy-making and channelling more decisions via market mechanisms.
One sphere in which such ideas are being strongly expressed and tested is in the agri-food sector – particularly in response to demands for a consumer-driven (rather than production-driven) food chain (Lowe et al. 2008).

In the case of the European Union, polity change also embraces the transformed structure and powers of the EU as a political unit. Agricultural policy is to an increasing extent connected to other common policies and to the prioritized political projects of the Union. Pressure to define EU agricultural policy in decreasingly sectoral but increasingly territorial terms is growing, and its contribution to the economic and social cohesion of the Union is one of the emerging political issues. On the other hand, those parts of the CAP based on a sectoral approach are much better buffered against budgetary pressures. At the same time, CAP reforms themselves have been enhanced by shifts in public opinion in some member states in the aftermath of severe farming-and-food crises and under pressure from the multilateral trade arena. They have had the effect of strengthening member states’ discretion in policy implementation, suggesting that, while the role of the state is undoubtedly changing, it is not necessarily becoming any less significant (Kassim et al. 2000). Attention to these complex polity changes, in turn, brings agricultural policy research closer to studies on European integration, international relations and multi-level political systems.

THE SYMPOSIUM

This symposium aims at filling a gap in policy analysis. It places agricultural policy in the context of wider policy linkages, conflicts and connections. The contributions assess how and to what extent the framework of agricultural policy has actually changed to reflect acknowledged policy interdependencies; institutional and legal frameworks; changes in the composition and character of interest groups; patterns of influence and power; and economic changes. As far as agriculture policy is concerned, comparatively little can be found about those issues in the current literature. Political scientists pay scant attention to this policy field, while agricultural researchers usually address very specific technical issues. Although some issues, such as biotechnology, have attracted wide academic attention, those debates have rarely been used to illuminate a broader perspective on agricultural policy. Hence, it is the intention of this symposium to address the widening agenda of agricultural policy research by bringing together and making use of scholars with different scientific backgrounds and theoretical concerns.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The two papers that follow, explore how the boundaries of the agricultural policy arena in the European multi-level system are contested. Peter H. Feindt analyses the shift of CAP frameworks as a decades-long process driven by both policy pressures and institutional change. Focusing on environmental policy integration in the CAP, he identifies a succession of policy shifts since as early as 1973. Alterations in the wider institutional framework gave non-agricultural concerns more weight and triggered policy learning by key CAP actors who had to moderate the external repercussions of their policies. However, the sectoral and multi-level decision-making structure in the EU ensured that the institutional isolation of the CAP arena remained robust enough such that environmental policy integration became viable only as it appeared to provide solutions to problems of paramount interest to the agricultural community (budget, trade, income).
The paper from Christilla Roederer-Rynning and Carsten Daugbjerg explores the dynamics underpinning the making of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) that threatened to cut deeply into the agriculture policy community’s territory. It argues that power struggles between the three key EU institutions, rather than processes of policy learning, determined the shape of the EFSA. The dispersed locus of authority in the EU’s multi-levelled and polycentric governance system helped to weaken the design of a new institution that could have emerged as a bulwark of consumer interests in the agriculture arena.

The two papers that follow provide contrasting examples of the changing politics of agriculture at the national level. The paper from Katy Wilkinson, Philip Lowe and Andrew Donaldson examines the resistance of agricultural policy communities to change: even at times of extreme crisis such as an epidemic of an exotic farm animal disease. Using a policy community/issue network model of pressure group interaction, the paper shows that the UK government’s response to the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) crisis demonstrates continuity with prior crises. While scientific expertise became politicized and the crisis opened a policy window for new actors and frames, the legacy of previous policy choices conditioned the crisis response to a far greater degree than contemporaneous pressure group action.

Anders Branth Pedersen’s contribution provides an excellent example of how agricultural and environmental networks interact in environmental planning processes. He compares a 1960 planning decision to regulate Denmark’s largest river with a 1987 decision that led to the river’s restoration. In both instances, a connection to wider policy agendas was established through the creation of ‘policy images’ by the competing networks and through lining up the controversy with a broader cleavage in the national party system. Only a shift both in public ideas about nature and agriculture and in the distribution of power among political parties explains the complete reversal of the older policy.

The final two papers address the increasing complexity of policy design and implementation. The paper from Bas Breman, Hilkka Vihinen, Marja-Liisa Tapio-Biström and Teresa Pinto Correia illustrates the tensions between agriculture and rural policies. While both are reframed through wider EU cohesion and environmental policy goals, and justified as tackling marginalization processes at the periphery of Europe, actual agriculture and rural dynamics are often dissociated. Taking Finland and Portugal as examples, the authors develop a typology of regions that conceptually disentangles rural and agricultural marginalization. In both countries, European financial support mechanisms strongly influence land use in some areas and create ‘artificial’ dynamics of the agricultural sector in others that conceal more structural socio-economical problems at a regional level. With future CAP support decreasing, the fragile rural dynamics in such areas might collapse. Thus the authors plead for a broad rural and a diversified territorial policy approach.

Taking a long-term perspective, Fernando Collantes claims that Spanish mountain policy failed because of insufficient policy design. While social legitimization rested on rural development and small farmers, mountain policy was made instrumental to productivist agriculture modernization policies, with larger farms the main beneficiaries. The policy process was dominated by farm interests; inaccurate perceptions among policy-makers about the importance of agriculture for mountainous regions were never questioned or corrected; and, later on, EC guidelines were used to shield Spanish mountain policies against rising criticism. While the benefits of the compensatory policy were confined to a small and decreasing share of the mountain population, the social trajectory has been increasingly shaped by global economic developments.
Taken together, the contributions to this symposium provide detailed insights into processes of agriculture policy change under conditions of multi-level governance and increasing inter-policy linkages. They explore both long-term perspectives (Collantes; Feindt; Pedersen; Vihinen et al.) and short-term change (Roederer-Rynning and Daugbjerg; Wilkinson, Lowe and Donaldson). Two papers each address the European, national and regional level. Two papers each focus on the linkages between agriculture policy and environmental, food safety and rural concerns. It appears that while agriculture policy is reframed to take environmental and food safety issues into account and broaden coalitions, links between agricultural interests and more general rural interests have become weaker.

All the contributions to the symposium suggest that innovative policies are confronted with a rather inflexible policy system. While new actors might enter the stage following either institutional reform, shifting public concerns or power shifts, policy legacies and entrenched interests remain influential. And in the polycentric European political system, key players are reluctant to challenge delicately balanced distributions of power and interests. At the same time, rapidly changing spatial relations and economic dynamics that emerge from processes of globalization and liberalization raise important questions for the future about more efficient, democratic and encompassing modes of governance for agriculture, food, and rural areas.

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