

Brexit and the politics of food and agriculture: in search a post-productivist food future?

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Abstract

Almost uniquely, the case of food and agriculture appears to stand out in the Brexit debate where there appears to be something close to a national (elite) consensus on the desirability of leaving the EU's regulatory orbit, specifically that governing the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), so as to reclaim and re-design the UK food regime from scratch. On closer inspection, however, it is easy to detect a tension between the competing logics of using Brexit as an opportunity to position the UK as a 'world-leader' in sustainable farming, animal welfare and environmental stewardship versus using it to pursue a radical free trade agenda and further a 'cheap food' policy under the guise of 'Global Britain'. In this paper, we assess these two themes according to their competing logics and their mutual (in-) compatibility. Put another way, is it possible for the UK, in a post-Brexit setting, to be both a bastion of (state-led) sustainable farming and environmental stewardship, *and* a bastion of unfettered free trade? In answering this question, we aim to shed light on the logical inconsistencies within and between these two themes, but also, to delve deeper into the changing politics and political economy of agriculture: simply put, what does the discursive politics of the Brexit debate tell us about the contemporary distribution of political and economic power with respect to food and agricultural policy?

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Introduction

Prior to and since the June 2016 referendum, the discursive politics of Brexit has been defined by two recurrent (and seemingly contradictory) themes: first, the theme of Brexit as ‘taking back control’ for those voters ‘left behind’ by the twin forces of globalisation and multiculturalism; and second, the theme of ‘Global Britain’ - that is, Brexit as an opportunity for the UK to reclaim its historical role as a champion of global free trade, unencumbered by the EU’s supposedly inward looking, protectionist leanings. In the case examined in this paper - food and agriculture - these themes can be mapped onto the respective positions of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Department for International Trade (DIT) respectively. While the DEFRA position, championed by leading Brexiteer and Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, has highlighted the UK as a ‘world-leader’ in sustainable farming, animal welfare and environmental stewardship, DIT, led by another long-standing Brexiteer, Trade Secretary Liam Fox, has emphasised more the UK’s role as a champion of global free trade and Brexit as an opportunity for Britain to extricate itself from EU ‘protectionism’ in order to strike trade deals with the world’s more ‘dynamic’ ‘free-trading’ countries, notably, the US, Australia, Brazil, China, India and so on.

In this paper, we assess these two themes according to their competing logics and their mutual (in-)compatibility. Put another way, is it possible for the UK, in a post-Brexit setting, to be both a bastion of (state-led) sustainable farming and environmental stewardship, *and* a bastion of unfettered free trade? In answering this question, we aim to shed light on the logical inconsistencies within and between these two themes, but also, to delve deeper into the changing politics and political economy of agriculture: simply put, what does the discursive politics of the Brexit debate tell us about the contemporary distribution of political and economic power with respect to food and agricultural policy? Historically, agriculture has been characterised in Political Science and International Studies according to its ‘sticky’ character, marked by interest group lobbying, regulatory capture, productivism and protectionism (Patterson 1997; Skogstad 1998; Clapp 2006; Thies 2007; Otero et al., 2013). More recently, however, this ‘productivist’ policy regime is said to have given way to so-called ‘buyer-driven’ value chains, in which political and economic power has moved upwards from producers (i.e. farmers) to branded retailers and major supermarkets (Gereffi 1994; Marsden et al. 2000). This power shift has, in turn, given rise to wider regulatory shifts from public to private

rulemaking and enforcement (Henson & Reardon 2005; Hatanaka, Bain & Busch 2005; Henson & Humphrey 2010).

In the paper, then, we seek to understand and evaluate both the discursive and material foundations of UK food politics in the post-referendum context. In the next section, we begin by situating the UK within the global food system, noting the aforementioned power and regulatory shifts; we then go on to examine the policy discourses of DIT and DEFRA respectively, with specific attention to their competing logics and their mutually compatibility or otherwise. In the penultimate section, we assess these two prospectuses through the prism of the proposed UK-US free trade agreement; a final, concluding section summarises our key arguments and points to areas for further research.

The UK in the global food system

By most measures, the UK constitutes one of the world's most food-secure countries (House of Commons 2014; Economist Intelligence Unit 2016). Despite this, the period since the global food crisis of 2007-8 has witnessed a plethora of government commissioned reports and policy initiatives framed in terms of food security and resilience (Defra, 2010; 2018; Foresight 2011; House of Commons 2014; 2015-2017, House of Commons, 2018). As Kirwan and Maye (2013) note, while the UK policy discourse surrounding food security has, since the early 2000s, been increasingly couched in terms of environmental sustainability, responses are firmly rooted in neoliberal framings, wherein food security is interpreted as a 'supply-side' problem to be addressed through a combination of sustainable intensification, trade liberalisation and better risk management.

[this section is incomplete]

A notable feature of the UK's regulatory environment - which is also present to greater or lesser degrees in comparable cases - is the shift in political and economic power along the supply chain from agricultural production policy to, first, food manufacturers and then, later, food retailers (Marsden *et al.*, 2000). As discussed above, food retailers now occupy a position at the apex of the food system where they are able to use their near monopsony position to control and coordinate the

entire supply chain. Yet the role of retailers in the food system is not just an expression of economic dominance. As Marsden *et al.* (2000) argue, the power shift has gone hand-in-hand with a regulatory shift from public to private rule-making and enforcement. Retailers thus now have a dual role in the UK food system: on the one hand, they are responsible for the social provision of food in sense of meeting consumer demand for low prices; on the other hand, they are also responsible for upholding consumer-based rights in areas such as responsible sourcing and food safety.

The discursive politics of Brexit

In a now infamous article from March 2017, the *Times* newspaper reported that ministers were planning to build what was described by Whitehall officials at the time as ‘Empire 2.0’ through rekindling the UK’s historical ties with the Commonwealth, once outside of the EU. As critics were quick to point out, the focus here appeared to be mainly of the white settler societies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, alongside India and South Africa, rather than the (black) African commonwealth, and the plan was soon revealed to be both half-baked and impractical (see Murray-Evans 2016). Nevertheless, the report provided an early glimpse into the government’s emergent thinking, which coalesced around the idea of ‘Global Britain’. This idea was first used by former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, while he was Mayor of London, and subsequently became a regular refrain for government ministers, including Prime Minister Theresa May herself. Indeed, the prime minister used it in her ‘Mansion House’ speech from January 2017, which set out the UK’s negotiating objectives and ‘red lines’ for the upcoming withdrawal negotiations with the EU. The British people, the prime minister declared, ‘voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world....I want us to be a truly Global Britain – the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too. A country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike’.

The theme of the referendum result as an invitation for the UK to reclaim its historical role a unilateral global power and advocate for free trade was echoed in policy pronouncements and speeches of other government ministers, especially Trade Secretary Liam Fox. In a speech from February 2018, for instance, Fox stated that ‘from across the world, the keenness to deepen trade

and investment ties with this country and once again hear us champion the case for free trade, is palpable'.¹ Pointedly, Fox claimed this demand was coming from outside the EU, which in any case, he suggested, was responsible for a dwindling share of the UK's external trade. 'The thriving economies of south and east Asia and, increasingly, Africa,' he said, 'are, and will become, even more important as their newfound prosperity drives demand for the goods and services of the developed countries prepared to interact with their markets. The key summative point is that, in the eyes of pro-Brexit government ministers like Liam Fox, these emerging markets were equated with 'free trade' while the EU was 'inward looking' and 'protectionist'. As the Legatum Institute, a pro-Brexit think tank headed at the time by Shanker Singham who later went on to lead the (Thatcherite) Institute for Economic Affairs, put it:

Historically, the British system of free trade made Britain, Europe and the world richer. The EU system that has replaced it—of protectionism and harmonised regulation—has constrained economic growth for Britain and the world. There is now a brief opportunity for Britain to restore her freedom to trade, liberalising the global trading system itself.

Free trade for the poor: the discursive politics of food and the 'citizen-consumer'

Although the economic assumptions underpinning these pronouncements are easy to dismiss, the more interesting political question with which we are concerned with here is their internal *political* logic: that is, how could 'Global Britain' possibly be the answer to a process apparently driven by the disaffection of predominantly working class voters who felt abandoned by the political class and 'left behind' by the twin processes of globalisation and multiculturalism? In this section of the paper, we aim to show that a major reason that food has figured prominently in the Brexit debate is that it provides a hook on which policy actors appeal strategically to the underlying economic interests of working class voters - that is, free trade as the route to 'cheap food'. In this respect, the discursive politics of Brexit bears strong parallels with two other seismic episodes in British political history: the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the Tariff Reform debate between 1903-6. Like Brexit, both of these prior episodes are noted for the ways in which they divided the ruling Conservative Party between their nationalist-protectionist and metropolitan-liberal wings, ultimately leading to a

¹ Speech 'Britain's Trading Future' delivered in London, on February 28th 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britains-trading-future>

formal reputree of the party in the first case and landslide electoral defeat in the second. But for our purposes, the most significant point of comparison between the Corn Laws, Tariff Reform and Brexit is they not only centred on international trade, but also, on food more specifically. As the historian Frank Trentmann (2008) describes it in his magisterial work, *Free Trade Nation*, in both the Corn Laws and Tariff Reform debates, the humble ‘cheap loaf’ became a potent symbol for the merits of free trade. In both cases, advocates of free trade appealed to working class voters as ‘citizen-consumers’. In an election poster from 1905, for instance, the strapline read: ‘we plead for the women and children, which will you have? Free trade or protection?’ The two choices were represented in the poster as two loaves of bread, a large ‘free trade’ loaf and a considerably smaller ‘protection’ loaf. In other words, the humble loaf was designed to cut through the technical details of trade and comparative advantage to appeal directly to working class voters as ‘citizen-consumers’. In short, trade protection was a tax on consumption and therefore a tax on the incomes of the poor.

In the present setting, the idea of a ‘brexit dividend’ in the form of cheap food has been promoted, not just by Liam Fox’s trade department but other prominent brexiteers such as Jacob Rees Mogg, alongside right-wing think tanks and lobby groups like the Economists for Brexit, Brexit Central, Legatum, IEA and the Adam Smith Institute. The Legatum Institute, as an example, puts it like this:

Taking the right decisions now will allow the UK to embrace the world as an independently trading sovereign state; the wrong decisions in the name of short-term stability will render the UK a rule-taker, bypassed in trade negotiations. From *the low-income consumer who pays unnecessarily high food bills because of tariffs*; to the developing world producer whose products these tariffs prevent from entering our market; to the innovative entrepreneur who cannot sell their product because technical standards have been set by incumbents, often abroad: the opportunity to restore our trading independence represents an opportunity to turn poverty into prosperity for all (emphasis added).

Other voices, such as Tim Wetherspoon, chairman of the Wetherspoons pub chain, MP Jacob Rees Mogg and John Longworth, the former head of the British Chambers of Commerce and director of the Leave Means Leave lobby group, have constantly reiterated the same message: that ‘brexit means cheaper food’.²

² <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/no-deal-brexiteer-food-prices-sam-lowe-jacob-rees-mogg-tim-martin/>

The high road to Brexit: DEFRA and the future of British farming

Although few Brexiteers state this explicitly (though see Bottle et al. 2018), the clear implication of the ‘cheap food’ policy, if implemented, is that it would have hugely disruptive effects on British farming, which currently meet around half of the country’s food needs. As noted by Environment Secretary Michael Gove, British farming is noted, not primarily for its international competitiveness but for its high standards and commitments to animal welfare. Pointedly, speeches and pronouncements from Gove that have accompanied his department’s two flagship initiatives - the Agricultural Bill and the 25 Year Environment Plan - make very little mention of ‘cheap food’. Indeed, quite the reverse. In a speech to the National Farmers Union (NFU) in November 2018, the Environment Secretary spoke positively of increasingly public scrutiny of the circumstances in which food is produced and the need to make healthy food choices. ‘This scrutiny’, Gove said, ‘only strengthens the hand of British farmers. A demand for higher standards, for more sustainable production, for high standards in animal welfare and more nutritious choices can only mean a demand for more high quality British produce rather than the alternative’.³ Although Gove did not go on to elaborate on what the ‘alternative’ referred to precisely, we can infer he meant cheaper imported food, presumably produced to lower standards and with less concern for animal welfare or the environment.

And, though Michael Gove is very critical of the operation of the CAP, it is notable that his main grievances concern its ‘bureaucratic’ nature rather than because it stymies free trade. To once again quote from his address to the NFU:

A majority of farmers voted for Brexit - as did I - and I can understand all too well why farmers did. The inflexible operation of the Common Agricultural Policy - the three crop rule, the requirement to apply for support by fixed dates after wrestling with the most convoluted bureaucracy, the requirement for mapping and re-mapping which treats honest farmers with grotesque insensitivity, the rigidity with which rules on field

³ Speech delivered by Michael Gove's speech to National Farmers Union - November 26 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-speech-on-uk-climate-change-projections>

margins and hedge cutting have been applied - all these and so much more need to be reformed fundamentally.

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The differences in emphasis between DIT and DEFRA with respect to food and farming are seen most starkly in their contrasting attitudes towards the prospects of a 'no deal' Brexit. While Liam Fox has said on numerous occasions that he favours no deal, if Theresa May's negotiated deal cannot get parliamentary approval, Gove has been far less enthusiastic. Indeed, from the following passage it would be easy to forget that, prior to the referendum, Gove was one of the leading lights of the pro-Brexit campaign, or even that he still supports Brexit at all:

Tariffs are not the only problem we would face. All products of animal origin entering the EU would face SPS checks. The EU's current position is that 100% of imports would need to be checked. And, in order to be checked every import would need to go through a border inspection post. A huge proportion of our food exports to the EU currently go through Calais. As I speak there are no Border Inspection Posts at Calais. None.

Squaring the Brexit circle - food policy discourse and the UK-US free trade agreement

So far, we have charted some of the ways in which food and agriculture have figured in the discursive politics of Brexit. In doing so, we have pointed to a marked incongruity between the Fox-DIT 'cheap food' prospectus versus the Gove-DEFRA 'high standards-sustainable agriculture' prospectus. In this penultimate section of the paper, we briefly consider the debate in which these two contenting positions are arguably most diametrically opposed: namely, the prospect of a free trade agreement between the UK and the US, and with it the prospect of some form of agricultural liberalisation. The idea of a free trade agreement with the US has long been considered the 'jewel in the crown' of the UK's post-EU trade possibilities for Brexiters and, before them, Thatcherite conservatives. Equally, for the US, the UK market is seen as a key prize, especially for the farm lobby grown used to EU recalcitrance to agricultural liberalisation, symbolised by its hostility to American GMO, hormone-treated beef and chlorinated chicken. When the USTR reported its negotiating objectives for the UK FTA to Congress in March 2019, they stated that the US was

⁴ *Ibid.*

seeking ‘comprehensive market access for US agricultural goods in the UK’ and that it was looking to remove ‘unwarranted barriers’ related to sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS) in the farm industry. The release of these objectives coincided with a series of interviews by US Ambassador to the UK, Woody Johnson, who described the EU as ‘museum of agriculture’ and US’s own production methods as the ‘future of farming’. In an op-ed article for the *Daily Telegraph*, he wrote, ‘it would be a genuine missed opportunity to buy into the idea that the EU’s traditionalist approach to agriculture is Britain’s only option for a quality and efficient agriculture sector moving forward’.

This idea seemed to chime somewhat with the noises coming from Liam Fox’s department. In September 2018, the *Business Insider* reported that plans were afoot in DIT to take advantage of arcane parliamentary procedures (so-called ‘Henry VIII’ powers) to insert language into the Trade Bill to re-write UK food standards so as to facilitate a trade deal with US. Although Fox was quick to deny the story, taking to Twitter to state ‘there will be no lowering of UK food standards’, critics detected a sleight of hand, since Fox has earlier been heard to remark that US food standards were not ‘lower’ than those of the EU, just ‘different’ (see *Independent* 27 July 2017). Michael Gove, meanwhile, told the NFU that ‘we will not lower our standards in pursuit of trade deals, and that we will use all the tools at our disposal to make sure the standards are protected and you are not left at a competitive disadvantage.’

Conclusion

At this stage, the prospect of a comprehensive UK-US free trade agreement seems remote, given the parlous of the Brexit negotiations; plus, even in the circumstances of such an agreement, a carve out for agriculture cannot be ruled out. Indeed, a good indication of this came recently when the government announced its tariff schedules in the event of a ‘no deal’ Brexit. Although the DIT were reported to have proposed a blanket zero MFN tariff - i.e. applicable to *all* countries belonging to the WTO - the actual published rates were far less dramatic, especially for agricultural goods like lamb, pork and poultry, which experienced little or no change at all from the EU’s existing rates of duty (UK Trade Policy Observatory 2019). This would appear to show the residual power of the farming lobby and the ‘productivist’ policy network; but it may also reflect the trade preferences of

major British retailers where high standards have become a cornerstone of their brand differentiation and recognition strategies. Yet it is easy to overstate the degree of continuity. Even though the Government's Agricultural Bill speaks positively of 'public money for public goods', there is, as yet, no guarantee that subsidies will be maintained, or at what level, once the CAP transition period ends in 2022. Furthermore, it is striking just how little the Agricultural Bill mentions 'food' and 'food production' in comparison to 'land management' and 'sustainability'. It is thus tempting to see DEFRA's positioning under Michael Gove, especially given his cultivation of the support of prominent environmental NGOs, as more concerned with rural communities and land management than food policy per se. Elsewhere, both Gove and other senior DEFRA officials have rejected the idea of food itself as a 'public good' to be supported with 'public money', which, they suggest, is the job of the market. On this reading, the contending positions of DIT and DEFRA detailed in this paper may not, in the long run, be as incompatible as they sound - and a post-productivist food regime may not, after all, be that unlikely in the near future.

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