

Niek Koning

Food Security, Agricultural Policies and Economic Growth: Long-term Dynamics in the Past, Present and Future

London/New York, Routledge, 2017, 276 pp.

This is a relatively small book (274 pages) when one considers that it covers the development of agriculture from the early modern period to the present day with even an excursion to the near future and discusses agricultural production and policies all over the world. Although most of the book is about the past, it is not a history book. It is an example of applied (economic) history. The author uses the historical perspective to plead for international governance of agriculture. He wants to bring home the point that something special has occurred with what he calls the fossil biomass revolution. This revolution led to market failure in the agricultural sector, and that therefore the only right reaction to this transformation are forms of agricultural policy.

The book is well structured. It contains nine chapters. In chapter one the main argument and issues are introduced. A ficti-

tious dialogue between Marx and Malthus presents the two main classical scholars and their opinions that have influenced the author. Chapter two demonstrates that Malthus has become the dominant inspiration. Hunger has been humanity's fate for a long time, so is his message, until its dependence on living biomass production was replaced by a dependence on fossil biomass revolution with the Industrial Revolution. In other words: the author follows here the argument made by Tony Wrigley in his many publications (1988, 2016) and enters a theme that agricultural historians also know from Peter Moser (2013; Auderset & Moser 2016). In chapter three the author describes the pre-fossil era. This chapter fulfils several functions in his reasoning. It tells us that agriculture was the main economic sector and how it developed in this period. It demonstrates its Malthusian limits and the regular returning

scarcity crises, informs us that larger farms are the source of innovation, and that the regular economic downswings caused all kinds of social and societal upheaval, as could happen again in our own time.

Chapter four is called “The big change» and is in many respects the book’s central chapter. The dynamics that had ruled the agricultural economy changed by *the fossil biomass revolution*. Instead of regular periods of scarcity a rather continuous period of global food abundance started, caused by an expansion of the agricultural frontier into sparsely populated areas, a new leap in agricultural intensification, the adoption of motor power in farming and a massive increase in the supply of biomass for non-food products, all based on the utilization of fossil fuels. This new situation led to a huge population increase and to modern economic growth. For agriculture this revolution implied a shift of agricultural workers to other sectors and paradoxically, if compared with other economic sectors, the rise of small independent producers. These self-employed farmers, however, could only succeed thanks to supportive government policies and self-organization. The author explains these supportive government policies by the existence of a large middle class of farmers and tradesmen in Western countries, developed from the Middle Ages onward, and by the fact that these countries were free to make their own policies.

In chapter five Koning widens his lens and looks at the development after the fossil biomass revolution of other countries than the Western ones. Here he elaborates on his spatial and temporal concepts. Next

to farmer societies he uses the concepts *landlord societies* and *horticultural societies*. The landlord societies are societies where large landowners lorded over a rightless mass of rural workers, and where oligarchic states were more directly subservient to this elite. Prime examples are Eastern Europe and Latin America. Horticultural societies are characterised by non-intensive production systems and their economy is structured around kin rather than class, and they differ therefore strongly from the property-based stratification and bureaucratic states that have evolved in farmer and landlord societies. Horticultural societies can be found in Africa. China and, partly, India he counts as farmer societies. As for time, he introduces the socialist-imperialist period and the welfare-state period. The socialist-imperialist period should remind the reader that many countries could not decide themselves what kind of agricultural policy they preferred, while in the welfare-state period the intervention by governments became accepted policy almost everywhere. He uses these spatial and temporal distinctions mainly to explain why not all societies during most of the times followed the agricultural policies of farmer societies.

In chapter six, seven and eight Koning continues his chronological story of agricultural policy and agricultural economics. In chapter six he discusses the emerging problems for the welfare state like the erosion of farmer autonomy by the growing influence of the agro-industry and the displacement of small farms; the failure of global trade (Western countries still pro-

tected their own crops, but were not supportive of stabilizing the prices of products they imported); and environmental and health issues (the focus had mostly been on productivity rise and not on other aspects like animal welfare and landscape). In chapter seven he tells the story of the neo-liberal answer to these problems. Here he has included a wonderful digression on how agricultural economics was overtaken by economists who believed in the market as a solution for everything –this part alone makes this book compulsory reading. The neo-liberal push back of government intervention in favour of the market did not have a huge effect on agriculture in the Western countries (because of the small size of agriculture and because they could allow themselves to support the farmers income), but was disastrous for sub-Saharan Africa where it aggravated the rural crisis and the decay of the socio-political fabric of its societies.

In chapter eight he analyses our present time and wonders how we will react to the failure of neoliberal policies. Koning reproaches the agricultural economists and policy makers that they do not understand the lessons from chapter four. The fossil biomass revolution had released the link between local agriculture and food prices. This led to market failure in this sector. Since that time the food prices were dictated by the world market and thus mostly by global abundance. Therefore local agriculture was not an interesting sector to invest in or to stimulate its modernization. The consequences of this are that price swings will be large and may therefore have

a disruptive effect on normal social life unless governments intervene as they did in Western societies since the end of the nineteenth century.

In his final chapter Koning presents his policy recommendations. His general solution is government intervention directed to pro-poor growth and poverty combat; to better infrastructure; to safeguard the croplands; to stabilize prices of biomass and to support farmer incomes; and to support research for innovations. His more specific solution is government intervention in agriculture in Africa in order to modernize African agriculture as a necessary step for its transition to modern economic growth and with it a decrease of its population growth. The decrease of its population growth would diminish the worldwide increase for the demand of food, and together with modern economic growth it would provide the Africans themselves an opportunity to shape their lives at home. Koning addresses also the question how likely it will be that his recommendations will be followed –this return to the policies of the welfare state period. He argues it will depend chiefly on the two main other farmer societies besides the West: India and China; and on the universalistic ethic in the West.

As said, this is a well-structured book with an interesting argument. Koning addresses two main contemporary issues: how to feed a world population of more than 10 billion in 2050 and how to develop Africa into a modern economy. For him these two questions are interconnected by the same answer: supporting agriculture by govern-

ment policies. How does he want to convince his neo-liberal colleagues? By telling them that since the nineteenth century there is a market failure in this sector caused by something completely new: the fossil biomass revolution. Therefore the market cannot solve the problems in this sector by itself. This is the book's greatest contribution. It demonstrates that the use of history per se may not provide better answers or should be studied because of the lessons history teaches us, but because the knowledge and understanding of historical processes provide a better diagnosis of our contemporary situation and therefore may help finding better solutions for the issues we have to manage.

I have no real problems with Konings general historical analysis. My main remark in this regard is that Koning is little precise in the dating of developments. He refers seldom to specific dates, or, for that matter, to specific events. In fact, his analysis throughout the book is rather abstract. He provides an economic macro-analysis. The limits of this macro-analysis become clear in his concluding chapter where he tries to answer the question: what next? Then he becomes aware that he not only needs macro answers like China and India could lead the way, but also needs more insight in micro level questions and in questions on agency. How did all these things happen? How do they interact? It is one thing to assess that structurally large farmers had an advantage in the living biomass society and small farmers in the fossil biomass society, but it is another to explain how that functioned in reality. What was

the role of agro-business: how did it influence agricultural policies? Or what about his claim that Western societies were farmer societies and therefore supportive of agricultural policies directed to small independent farmers?

Thus it is not strange that for a historian chapter five is the weakest of his book, although it is essential for his framework. In just forty pages he wants to explain agricultural policies in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, Indonesia, China, Soviet Union, Latin America and sub-Sahara Africa. He situates them in his model and does not have the space to analyse the interplay between structural developments and history. This weakness adds to the Eurocentric approach that Konings book evokes. The history of the Western agricultural policies is treated as the reference-history.

Apart from his main distinction in time: the fossil biomass revolution, he does not spend a lot of space to explain his other concepts like farmer societies, landlord and horticultural societies nor on concepts that he uses quite a lot and that are important for his analysis: stronger and weaker societies. The first distinction (the one between societies) is reminiscent of Barrington Moore (1966), who tries to explain the development of democracy, fascism and communism by connecting it with commercial farmers, dominating landlords and peasant uprisings. His second one (strong and weak societies) evokes Immanuel Wallersteins world-system's theory (1974). I do understand why he does not refer to these books and writers –as said, he did not want to write a history book. But when he would

have done it and had spent more space on other writers like for example Charles Tilly (1995, 1998) and Theda Skocpoll (1995), who worked on collective action and state formation, he would not just have made claims about the link between farmer societies and agricultural policy or about the link with civil society, but the state and the civil society would have remained less of black boxes which impedes him in his final chapter to say something about history in the making.

Finally, historians will want to compare his book with the classic book on agricultural policy by Michael Tracy (1989) and the relatively new one by Giovanni Federico (2005). Koning differs in two main aspects from these books. One is his emphasis on the centrality of living biomass (which puts him more in the corner of John McNeill's *Something new under the sun*, 2000), the other is his emphasis on agriculture as a basis for modern economic growth –which becomes in the end his Africa development story. Tracy and Federico are more just focussed on the development of productivity and the growth of agricultural production. Federico does discuss in his concluding chapter the role of agriculture in economic growth, but in this regard Koning is in his book much more concrete with his focus on Africa. In the end the most important difference between Tracy and Federico and Koning is that the first two are more adverse from government intervention, while Koning, based on his long term historical perspective, identifies supporting government policies for agriculture as essential for feeding the

world as well as for preventing a catastrophe in Africa.

Anton Schuurman

orcid.org/0000-0003-1155-3770

Wageningen University

DOI 10.26882/histagrar.076r08s

REFERENCES

- AUDERSET, J. & MOSER, P. (2016). Mechanisation and Motorisation: Natural Resources, Knowledge, Politics and Technology in 19th- and 20th-Century Agriculture. In C. MARTIN, J. PAN-MONTOJO & P. BRASSLEY (Eds.), *Agriculture in capitalist Europe, 1945-1960. From Food Shortages to Food Surpluses* (pp. 145-164). London/New York: Routledge.
- FEDERICO, G. (2005). *Feeding the World: An Economic History of World Agriculture, 1800-2000*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- MCNEILL, J. R. (2000). *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. New York: W.W.Norton.
- MOORE, B. (1966). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- MOSER P. (2013). Zugriff auf die Lithosphäre: Gestaltungspotentiale unterschiedlicher Energiegrundlagen in der agrarisch-industriellen Wissensgesellschaft. *Traverse, Zeitschrift für Geschichte* (3), 37-48.
- SKOCPOL, T. (1995). *Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- TILLY, CH. (1995). *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- TILLY, CH. (1998). *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- TRACY, M. (1989). *Government and Agriculture in Western Europe, 1880-1988*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- WALLERSTEIN, I. (1974). *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press.
- WRIGLEY, E. A. (1988). *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WRIGLEY, E. A. (2016). *The Path to Sustained Growth: England's Transition from an Organic Economy to an Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Monica Ferrari, Gianpiero Fumi and Matteo Morandi (Eds.)

Formare alle professioni: I saperi della cascina

Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2016, 272 pp.

This volume, edited by Monica Ferrari, Gianpiero Fumi and Matteo Morandi, is part of a series supervised by Egle Becchi on the history of education and bears the title, common to all books in the series, *Formare alle professioni* (“educating professionals») beside the subtitle *I saperi della cascina* (“knowledge of the Lombard farm”). This series, consisting so far of 7 volumes on specific professions and one introductory volume entitled *Pedagogical history of professions*, is very tightly knit and covers the history of a great number of professional spheres, from the highest officials of the state to army officers, the medical professions, and finally the professions related to farming. It inscribes itself in a flourishing literature on the history of professions, akin to the work of Maria Malatesta and others (see especially Malatesta, 2011). This literature follows a somewhat standard scheme, describing how a specific group of workers separated itself from a number of workers

with competing specializations and knowledge, how it organized itself or was organized by the state, how it got official recognition and how it established educational standards and criteria for the recruitment of new professionals.

All the individual volumes in the series have been preceded by workshops held at the Collegio Ghisleri in Pavia, and this one is no exception, originating from a seminar held in May 2015. As it is often the case, the chapters that result from conference papers are quite short and they are grouped into three parts of unequal length with an additional section of comments by Egle Becchi and Monica Ferrari. The volume deals first with the evolution of professions connected with agricultural activities, then with the intermediation of knowledge in rural areas, and finally with the study and preservation of the material documents of the agricultural civilizations. It covers approximately three centuries of rural development, from the seventeenth century to