

A Cultural Journey to the Agro-Food Crisis: Policy Discourses in the EU

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Abstract The agro-food domain in Europe is characterized by the appearance of recurrent unwanted surprises. These events, although causing obvious physical consequences, in essence depart from the expectations of the society. We argue that this unstable situation is best understood as an identity crisis of agriculture rather than as a contingent crisis of a specific economic sector. Thus the present agro-food crisis is in fact a crisis of identity. This is clearly reflected by the cohabitation within the agro-food policy domain of different, often contradictory, policy discourses, namely: free tradism, multifunctionality, and agroecology. All of them try to impose their particular visions. All of them struggle to issue the policy measures they conceive as appropriate.

Keywords Policy discourse · CAP · Free tradism · Multifunctionality · Agroecology

Introduction

It is widely accepted that the agro-food system faces recurrent crises in Europe, which take diverse appearances and cause distinct responses in the EU governance. It is frequently assumed that the attendant solutions need to draw attention to issues such as rural employment, food safety, farm productivity, environmental awareness, world

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food markets, and so on, which are often regarded as lying at the heart of the EU dominant policy themes. However, when looking closer to the increasing complexity of the EU agro-food policy domain, from a cultural analytical perspective, a different picture than usual emerges. The current EU agro-food policy arena is featured as being persistently shaken by unwanted negative effects, otherwise thought of as “imaginable surprises” (Schneider 1998). That is, events that are not truly unanticipated then depart from the expectations of a given community. Understanding this situation solely as a contingent crisis of an economic sector becomes an oversimplification. We argue that what is in crisis is neither agriculture nor rural areas as a whole, but the role society wants agriculture and rural areas to play.

The present agro-food crisis is thus a crisis of identity. This is clearly reflected by the cohabitation within the agro-food policy domain of different views and practices that try to impose their particular visions of the agro-food system, which fight for issuing the policy measures they judge as convenient in each particular case. The existence of this set of policy stances strongly determines both the way problems related to the agro-food domain are framed and also the reactions to them, giving way to a growing spiral of discrepancies and contradictions between policy practices and the actions needed to deal appropriately with the new emerging threats. This identity crisis, we argue, lies at the very core of the present unstable situation of the agro-food domain in Europe, which is characterized by the recurrence of unwanted surprises and the implementation of diverse, often contradictory, policy measures. We argue that the production and reproduction within the agro-food policy domain of intertwined and often conflicting policy views exacerbates the contemporary crisis.

In order to shed light on the rising complexity and recurrent appearances of unwanted effects in the agro-food domain, we are interested in exploring the diverse viewpoints and practices that coexist within the agro-food policy arena in Europe. Thus, in this paper we have conducted an analysis of policy discourses. We have thoroughly examined publicly expressed thoughts published in academic and popular publications, and also official statements and documents emerging from civil society, with regard to the way the current unwanted effects in the agro-food domain have been explained and dealt within the EU. A review of research literature on discourse analysis has also been undertaken. Discourse analysis is recognized as an appropriate methodology to deal with socially complex and fast-changing environments, as it is the case at present of the agro-food domain in Europe. In particular, three main policy discourses have been identified: free tradism, multifunctionality, and agroecology. It is argued as the main source of discrepancies among them the different strategies employed to cope with unwanted surprises. The first two discourses are prone to generate “spaces of prescription” in detriment to “spaces of negotiation,” while the third emphasizes spaces of negotiation dismissing the generation of spaces of prescription.

The Agro-Food Crises Within the EU

The agro-food domain is becoming increasingly interlinked and complex. It is characterized by a new array of critical processes related to rapid social,

technological, and environmental change that pose new threats to large populations both within and outside the EU. Such processes are not only limited to the application of new technologies, such as the introduction of genetically modified crops to agriculture and human health; but also to the increasing power of supermarkets over consumers and farmers, the growing urbanization of fertile soils, or the prominent World Trade Organization liberalizing agenda based on the assumption that no energy or ecological limits exist to a global agro-food system. All those who do not participate in the global agro-food chain are bound to be suffering the displacement of farmland and farmers to the margins of production spaces. More than 25% of the European farmland has deteriorated since 1945 (Worldwatch Institute 1997). Modern agriculture has become one of the most polluting and water- and land-consuming among all human activities. Alarming declines, a 46% drop since 1970, have been shown in UK's bird populations that depend on farmland (RSPB 2002). Moreover, during mid 1990s, food regulation was suddenly and dramatically politicized and episodes of food scare have been taking place one after another since then: from those critical events, which started in 1995 in England as a consequence of the outbreak of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy in cattle and its possible link to Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease in humans; to the outbreaks of the extremely severe bird flu virus—the H5N1 strain—which not only has caused the largest outbreaks in poultry on record but also is associated with illness and death in humans mainly in Asia since 1997. Up to now, nearly 300 human cases have been laboratory confirmed and more than half of these people have died (WHO 2007). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) estimations (WHO 2005), between 2 million people and 7.4 million people could die in the next few decades as a result of the next pandemic derived from the bird flu.

These agro-food contentious issues have triggered different political reactions within the EU, remarkable are the accomplishment of further revisions to the common agricultural policy (the most significant recent one being the 2003 mid-term review, which endorsed the decoupling of agricultural subsidies from production and that these payments are subject to cross-compliance conditions as to environmental, food safety, and animal welfare standards) and the transition towards a common rural policy, more aware of the pernicious effects of productivist agriculture on the environment, the small farmers, and the rural areas in general. However, the EU is still mainly promoting the business as usual agro-food model, based on maintaining a large number of subsidies, implementing technological fixes, and without any apparent need to develop any substantial differentiated social learning approach to fully reframe the recurrent agro-food difficulties. All this is reflected in the policy arena with the existing confusion over the food and agriculture policy goals, as shown, for instance, by the cohabitation within the common agricultural policy (CAP) of the first and second pillars. While, on the one side, there are policy measures devoted to increase the competitiveness of agricultural holdings in the world market through stimulating the agricultural production by means of the common market organizations. On the other side, there are policy measures concerned with encouraging bottom-up rural development strategies and functions of agriculture other than the food-producing one, with

policy measures such as the agri-environmental schemes, the support for agriculture in Less Favoured Areas support schemes or the LEADER+ Initiative to encourage the implementation of strategies of endogenous development in rural areas. This confusion that exists in the sector is also highlighted by the Countryside Agency of England (2004) when asserts that “During the late 1990s it became clear that the lack of a consistent and comprehensive government definition of rural areas hindered aspects of rural policy making.”

The multiple viewpoints that try to signify the current changes occurring in the agro-food sector, together with confusion over policy goals, point at, as claimed by Marsden (1999), the need for far more than the rigidly fragmented forms of knowledge, which have mainly characterized the agricultural policy research in the second half of the twentieth century, to understand the economic, social, and environmental aspects that constitute the contemporary agro-food system. This is why we think it is relevant to explore the different ways of understanding and behaving in the EU agro-food domain, that is, the diverse coexisting policy discourses.

The Cultural Analysis of Policy Discourses

The cross-disciplinary research of discourse studies emerged in the 1960s within linguistics, literary studies, and anthropology. It soon spread over other fields of research in the humanities and social sciences. Current literature on discourse analysis is vast (cf. van Dijk 1985; Jaworski and Coupland 1999; Wetherell et al. 2001). In the last decades, in the fields of environmental and rural sociologies (cf. Buttel 1996; Goodman 1999; and Marsden 2000), interesting discussions occurred between social constructivists and ecological realists. A wide range of approaches can be distinguished among scholars, which we will use to explore the different approaches existing in the literature to deal with policy discourses in the food and agriculture policy domain. We have distinguished four main theoretical approaches: a world-as-discourse approach, a world-through-discourse approach, a world-and-discourse approach and, finally, a world-or-discourse approach.¹

According to the radical social constructivist stance (cf. Evernden 1993; Eder 1996; Bluhdorn 1997; Latour 2004) of the world-as-discourse approach, both nature and reality are mental constructs. The notion of “nature” is ontologically contested. Secondly, the mild social constructivism (cf. Litfin 1994; Hajer 1995; Dryzek 1997; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Richardson 2000) of the world-through-discourse approach considers that, despite the existence of a biophysical reality out there, this is only accessible to humans through social constructions. Therefore, both nature and society are social constructs. Third, the world-and-discourse approach is characterized by a critical realist standpoint (cf. Dunlap and Catton 1994; Halfacree 1995; Hannigan 1995; Frouws 1998; Barry and Proops 1999; Proops 2001; Murphy 2002; Martínez-Alier 2002), which conceives nature as the testing ground for social

¹ The distinction was made by Ulf Hedetoft (personal communication, March 25, 2003). However, we added a fourth approach to the threefold original version.

constructions. Thus, while nature is understood as an entity independent from social constructions, knowledge is seen as socially constructed on account of culture and power. Finally, the strong realist standpoint (cf. Benton 1989; Faber and O'Connor 1989; O'Connor 1994) of the world-or-discourse approach gives priority to biophysical structures over beliefs and behaviors. The existence of discourses is dismissed, and it is restricted to the sole consideration of the role of science in legitimizing the existence of environmental and agricultural problems.

In general, concerning the cognition processes, the realists assume that through experience it is possible to discover the meanings and patterns that already exist in the world. In realist eyes, discourse becomes any form of communication. Discourse is seen as a mere communicative exchange. Thus, discourse analysis holds mainly a descriptive role. Consensus on policy matters thus becomes possible by means of exchanging and comparing objective findings, that is, facts. As a contrast, social constructivists often argue that the way an issue is conceived determines the way it is addressed. Meaning is not a private experience, but the product of a shared system of signification. Social constructivists see discourses as ways of talking, which both create and are created by ways of thinking. The linked ways of talking and thinking constitute ideologies and serve to circulate power in society (Johnstone 2002). Here discourse analysis holds mainly a prescriptive role. Apparently it may seem that social constructivists do not deal with real problems, but solely with the dynamics of problematization. Policy problems, then, are not conceived as straightforward consequences of objectifiable facts, but as social constructs in discourse. Therefore, understanding policies as consequences of socially constructed discourses implies assuming the non-appropriateness of simply understanding policies either as answers to single problems, but as problems bound to be constructed in multiple modes along the way of the policy making process.²

We believe that, in the current fast-changing times, a transition from realist to social constructivist accounts may further shed some light on the current discrepancies in the agro-food policy domain. While ecological realism takes agriculture as the uncontested context for political debates and conflicts, social constructivism aims at explaining the multiplicity of meanings and regulations ascribed to agriculture. We will regard agriculture not as an essential entity, but as a range of phenomena that people experience and construct in different ways. The agricultural sector is not regarded as one single space, but as a multiplicity of social spaces, each of them having its own logic, its own preferred institutions, as well as its own network of actors. The agro-food policy domain is thus conceived as a battlefield where several clusters of discourses struggle to impose their views, to define the policy problems and to design the policy measures. We argue that the agro-food policies are consequence of this hostile dynamics among several policy discourses. The policy making is thus seen as a historical process of emergence and extinction of political concepts and practices.

² For an overview of how the term of discourse has been used in policy analysis, see Bacchi (2000).

The Discourse of Free Tradism

Free tradism is a particularly influential and longstanding discourse within the European agro-food domain. The foundations of this policy discourse may be dated back to the second half of the eighteenth century, when the beginnings of industrialization was shaking several European areas, particularly England and France. In connection with these changes, a new cultural movement arose, which tried to explain the novel social order emerging, namely the Enlightenment. Adam Smith, well known as the father of economics, was the first one in launching the notion that by specializing in specific productions rather than producing everything for the purpose of vast self-sufficiency, each nation would profit from free trade. Trade protection was thus seen as damaging the economy of the country implementing it. Adam Smith was also very much concerned with the huge amount of “useless and harmful” regulations implemented by governments. Accordingly, he devoted himself to halting whatever that could have restrained the free movement of labor, land, and capital. He demanded giving free play to the “natural economic forces” and claimed for minimal governmental intervention. These are still the core principles of the discourse of free tradism. However, it was one of the immediate followers of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, who expressed the non-interventionist tenets of free trade more expediently by deploying the “theory of comparative advantage.”

A freer trading regime advocates the removal of all impediments to the free movement of goods and services, although it is not so clear what this means in practice when it comes to liberalizing the movements of people. In 1849, *The Economist*, still today one of the most influential actors advocating for free tradism, provided the following persuasive explanation of how a free market economy works:

The self-interest of each merchant and trader leads to establish throughout all the ramified and vast transactions of commerce, a system of order such as no Government, however enlightened or strong, could ever conceive or ever enforce. Examined in detail, or looked at in total under the most general aspect, all the great branches of human industry are found replete with order, which growing from the selfish exertions of individuals, provides the whole. Experience has proved that this order is inevitably deranged when it is forcibly interfered with by the state (Elliott 1991, p. 3).

The role of governments, according to this discourse, should remain to keep some basic social order and to intervene in extraordinary circumstances when market fails. However, from a social constructivism point of view, the market seems to “fail” more often. Particularly usual are the situations when market failures occur as a consequence of the availability of imperfect information or due to the non-divisibility of many of the agro-food goods and services.

According to the free-tradist view, development is the most appropriate way to enhance human welfare. Development is in essence understood as meaning economic growth. Higher and higher productions, it is thought, frees humanity from natural fetters, such as famines, natural disasters, overpopulation, scarcity of

resources, and so on. It also stimulates human creativity. Only trade and innovation can stop scarcity and provide society with a perpetual economic growth, that is, sustainability. This implies the conversion of traditional agrarian economies into modern industrial ones. Development is here conceived as a linear progress from scarcity to abundance, from nature to civilization, from tradition to modernity, which promises “control over nature through science, material abundance through superior technology, and effective government through rational social organization. Modernity also promise[s] peace and justice through a higher individual morality and superior collective culture to which all, free of material want, [will] ascend” (Norgaard 1994, p. 1).

Two main waves of agricultural modernization may be identified, namely: the Green Revolution of the 1960s, and the recent Biotechnology Revolution. According to the advocates of this discourse, despite the enormous progress guaranteed to the agro-food sector by these two periods of innovation, the common agricultural policy (CAP) mostly continues with its interventionist tenets. Although CAP price intervention costs and subsidies have decreased in recent times, European consumers still pay between 80 and 100% extra costs for their agricultural goods over free-market prices (Wickman 2001, p. 14). It is also argued that not only is the CAP detrimental to consumers, but it is seriously damaging the economies of impoverished countries, by generating an oversupply of agricultural products, dumping the surplus on these countries and putting these farmers out of business. According to the Human Development Report (2003), in 2000 the average dairy cow in the EU received \$913 in subsidies, compared with an average of \$8 received in Sub-Saharan Africa from EU as annual aid per person. This is an example of the kind of distortions of the market prices that, in the opinion of the proponents of the discourse of free tradism, triggers that the production and trade based on them will certainly be inefficient.

The Discourse of Multifunctionality

The début of multifunctionality as a policy discourse took place in one of the most prominent results of the UN-sponsored 1992 Rio Earth Summit, namely the comprehensive program of action called Agenda 21. There, for the first time, the need for considering the multifunctional character of agriculture as a political aim towards sustainable development is claimed (United Nations 1992, Chap. 14). In 1996, the multifunctional nature of agriculture was for the first time advocated in Europe and began to be part of the EU political agenda. It was in the rural development conference “Rural Europe—Future Perspectives,” organized in Cork, where the foundations of the future EU rural policy were established. The multifunctional nature of agriculture should be enhanced given that: “European citizens pay growing attention to the quality of life in general, and to questions of quality, health, safety, personal development and leisure in particular, and that rural areas are in a unique position to respond to these interests” (ECRD 1996). Some few years later, the discourse of multifunctionality reemerged vigorously in the political agenda, as it was used by the European Commission in the 2003 mid-term review of

the CAP as a strategy to avoid re-nationalisation and to further develop an EU Rural Policy.

At present, the discourse of multifunctionality is widely spread throughout the agro-food policy domain in Europe. Examples of policy measures well informed by this discourse are the efforts to enhance the viability of marginal rural areas in Norway through the promotion of multifunctional agriculture; more specifically within the EU, the remarkable development of organic agriculture in Austria and Germany as a way to value the multiplicity of functions carried out by the agricultural activity; and also in the utilization of the ideal of the existence of a “European model of agriculture” to emphasize the multifunctional character of the European agriculture and its relevance in guaranteeing the viability of the countryside and the production of quality products. The proponents of this discourse highlight the outdated character of those that promote conventional, productivist, “monofunctional” agriculture, and blame them for only paying attention to revenues. However, since prices only reflect “monofunctional” agriculture, there is the need for governmental intervention to support farmers, to address this market failure, to protect them from the liberalization of agricultural markets, and to value the alternative functions undertaken by the agricultural activity. This does not mean subsidizing and protecting agriculture blindly, claim the advocates of this discourse, but enhancing the role of agriculture as provider of crucial goods and services. As the former Commissioner Fischler said, “They are not subsidies, after all, but payment for services which Europe’s farmers have so far provided free of charge” (Fischler 1998, p. 1).

Multifunctional agriculture is seen as the appropriate way towards a sustainable development of the agro-food sector. It is conceived as “maximising the net benefits of economic development, subject to maintaining the services and quality of natural resources over time” (Pearce and Turner 1990, p. 24). In so doing, natural capital stock should be kept constant over time. For this, governmental intervention is strongly required by the advocates of the discourse of multifunctionality, since the market by itself has proved to be incompetent in valuing the multifunctional nature of agriculture in a convenient way.

A crucial feature of this discourse is that it argues that through the appreciation of multifunctionality, the expansion of the productive capacity of the agro-food sector is feasible while at the same time as the preservation of the natural and social capital. This acceptance of the capacity of optimizing different dimensions at the same time is central in this discourse. It is also observed in the notion of sustainable development. This challenge is usually interpreted as a need for better knowledge and more control. For this, expanded data collection, planning, and bureaucratic organization is required. In view of this, multifunctionality seems to be the counterpart of eco-efficiency in the agro-food sector. This is clearly shown in the following quote where Martínez-Alier (2002, p. 14) defines eco-efficiency as “the sustainable management or ‘wise use’ of natural resources and with the control of pollution not only in industrial contexts but also in agriculture, fisheries and forestry.” Thus, the wise management of a multifunctional conception of agriculture might be seen as an (agro-)ecological modernization.

The advocates of the discourse of multifunctionality understand the recurrent emergence of unwanted effects in the agro-food domain as a consequence of a certain disregard of modern institutions (namely, market, government, and science). However, they still believe that the existing political, economic, and social institutions can internalize the care for a multifunctional agriculture. It is possible to develop an ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible agro-food sector through the wise management of agricultural resources and the accurate adjustment of institutions. The promotion of organic production, fair trade, animal welfare, and food safety turn out to be leading policy practices in this direction.

The Discourse of Agroecology

The origins of the discourse of agroecology³ must be traced back to: the works of the brothers Eugene and Howard Odum (1967), in the 1950s and 1960s, as to the huge amount of energy subsidies that lie at the foundations of the USA modern agriculture that makes it a very unstable system (Glen Modison 1997); also in the works of Pimentel (Pimentel et al. 1973), in the 1970s, showing the high energy efficiency of traditional agricultural systems in comparison with modern agriculture; the classical movements of agriculture,⁴ which between the 1920s and 1970s claimed the appropriateness of organic fertilization in the detriment of the agrochemical dependence of modern agriculture; the emergence of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s, with the publishing of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962) as a cornerstone, which denounced that chemical pesticides and their by-products were damaging insect and bird populations beyond agriculture and proved that the effects of their accumulation through the food chain were unpredictable; and, finally, the increasing awareness among consumers of food-borne health hazards.

According to the proponents of this discourse, the influence of environmentalism, the consciousness of energy shortage since the 1973 oil crisis, the awareness of the Green Revolution failures, the new threats posed by the genetically modified crops, jointly with the recent food crises, clearly show the lack of capacity of modern science and institutions to cope with the challenges the agro-food domain faces nowadays. A need for scientific disciplines and institutions more open to the present agro-food challenges is strongly requested. Agroecology thus first emerged as a transdisciplinary field of research in sustainable farming systems (Altieri 1998). However, because of the obvious social implications of the changes undergoing the agro-food domain, well beyond the scientific domain, agroecology soon turned also into a social movement to promote sound strategies of rural development. Hence, as

³ The Russian agronomist Basil Bensin (1938) described agroecology as the “basic science of soil conservation.” According to him, agroecology seeks to undertake agricultural practices based on the environment and the particular farm culture of the given region. He traced back the term agroecology back to 1928 in the Czechoslovak Botanical Society.

⁴ The most relevant have been in the 1920s, the biodynamic agriculture of Steiner; in the 1940s, the natural agriculture of Fukuoka and the organic agriculture of Howard; and in the 1970s, the permaculture of Mollison and the biological agriculture of Claude Aubert.

stated by Guzmán et al. (2000), agroecology has become not only a set of agronomical techniques, but also a program of social transformation in the interest of an environmentally sound, economically viable, and socially just agro-food domain. The holistic dimension of agroecology is clearly illustrated by Via Campesina. It is an international assembly movement that coordinates peasant organizations of small and middle-class producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America, and Europe, to struggle against the big business and agricultural barons, backed up by the policy agenda of the World Trade Organization and the CAP. Their main motto is food sovereignty. They claim the right of all peoples to set their own food and agriculture policy, in opposition to the current globalization of neoliberal policies, which triggers privatization of natural resources and patenting of knowledge, undermining thus the diversity, both cultural and natural—that is, a food and agriculture policy made according to the specificities of each cultural framework and human needs. The transformative agenda proposed by the proponents of the agroecology discourse works to enhance diversification, so as to prevent the agro-food domain from suffering from new surprises, which implies acknowledging the importance of empowering the local (van Ploeg and Long 1994).

The advocates of this discourse suggest the need to slow down, to allow the local to assimilate what comes from outside, as the influential Italian eco-gastronomic movement Slow Food maintains:

We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our home and forces us to eat Fast Foods... In the name of productivity, Fast Life has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscaped... Our defence should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavours and savours of regional cooking (Mitchell 2000, p. 19).

In line with the endogenous rural development policy advocated by the proponents of the agroecology discourse, the success of the LEADER+ European Commission Initiative should be highlighted. Despite its small budget, the LEADER+ initiative has played a remarkable role in introducing not only bottom-up approaches in the EU policy making, but also in establishing the foundations of the current EU rural policy. This success was not disregarded by policy makers. In fact, at present it constitutes one of the policy axes of the EU rural development policy.

Discrepancies Among the Agro-Food Policy Discourses

Mass agricultural land degradation, biodiversity losses, water pollution, growing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, the proliferation of epizootic diseases and plagues, diet related diseases and pandemic threats are but only a few examples of the current situation of crisis in the agro-food domain. The evolution of these unwanted effects is not external to the system of governance or to the way dominant

policy discourses define them and also deals with them, but are embedded within them.

The agro-food crisis taking place in Europe is conceived as the result of the changing and often contradictory roles attributed to agriculture nowadays in society. This is clearly shown by the production and reproduction of diverse policy discourses, which not only make it more complicated to deal adequately with the newly arising unwanted effects, but also the very consideration of what is and what is not a policy problem is differently, and often contradictory, considered. In fact, as shown in the previous sections, three main policy discourses has been identified in the agro-food policy domain in Europe, namely: free tradism, multifunctionality and agroecology. The number of contradictions and discrepancies between the policy practices supported and suggested by them are numerous and relevant (see Table 1).

The three discourses show that different sets of actors behave and understand differently the agro-food policy domain depending on their specific worldviews and interests. According to the discourse of free tradism, the role of the market is crucial. This institution is the one that should be extended to cope with unwanted novelties, in order to internalize the externalities. For the advocates of the discourse

Table 1 Characteristics of the free tradism, multifunctionality, and agroecology policy discourses

Discourses	Main concepts	Worldview	Conception of nature	Principle of social organization	Strategy to cope with surprises
Free tradism	Free trade Neoliberalism Free market Economic growth Modern agriculture	Chrematistics	Robust	Market	Internalization of externalities
Multifunctionality	Multifunctionality Sustainable development Ecological modernization Ecological agriculture Food safety Fair trade	Governmentality	Depending on experts	Management	Adjusting institutions
Agroecology	Agroecology Sustainability Food sovereignty Agrarian reform Farmers' rights Ecological debt Solidary economy	Ecosystemic	Fragile	Diversity	Precautionary principle

of multifunctionality the way to cope with unexpected effects is to accurately adjust the institutions to organize the new information more consistently to the new circumstances arising. This is usually carried out by means of following, what Foucault (1978) called a governmentality view. It refers to the ability of governments to implement “wise” managements through turning the citizens and the new events into administrative data. The proponents of the discourse of agroecology understand diversity, both cultural and natural, as the most precious value to be preserved to cope with unwanted novelties. The precautionary principle is the main rule governing the decision-making dynamics in the view of the rationality of agroecology when dealing with new challenges. The different worldviews held by the three policy discourses is well illustrated, for instance, in the diverse conceptions on the role of nature. Thus, whereas free tradism sees nature as a robust entity capable of sustaining human activities endlessly; and multifunctionality conceives nature as a source of goods and services, which if properly managed can satiate human desires; agroecology understands nature as something fragile that should be carefully treated since human beings depend upon it entirely.

The three discourses show crucial discrepancies as to how to deal with unwanted surprises. Whereas some suggest the generation of “spaces of prescription,” that is, the development of more control over actors (e.g., internalization of externalities, adjusting institutions); others prefer the opening up “spaces of negotiation” (Murdoch 1998) to enhance the autonomy of stakeholders (e.g., precautionary principle, bottom-up approaches to create new rural development strategies). The advocates of the discourse of agroecology usually argue for the extension of spaces of negotiation. For instance, in the debate on genetically modified crops, this means the rejection of the “principle of substantial equivalence,”⁵ which is seen as an arbitrary and permissive attitude to facilitate the rapid commercialization of novel foods. Although this implies an important increase in the time required to commercialize new products, this is a situation that is not always desirable. On the contrary, proponents of the discourses of free tradism and multifunctionality mostly tend to endorse policy-making processes that imply the generation of spaces of prescription. This means in the case of multifunctionality discourse, as regards the controversy about the food-borne health hazards, the development of new quality standards that all food products must meet. Although, this has also triggered new unwanted effects due to the hyper-hygienic food standards, which not only guarantee the quality of the food products, but also have illegalized many ancient food traditions, such as the home-made raw-milk cheeses. In the discourse of free tradism, concerning the debate about how to cope with the avian flu plague, their advocates fully trust that the market will find the most appropriate solution. However, it led to a situation, as reported by Financial Times (2007), in which Indonesia, despite being the country with more cases of avian flu in humans, stopped sending samples of the virus to the World Health Organization once the Government had signed an agreement with and USA vaccine company to develop

⁵ This principle argues that since most of the attributes of genetically engineered food are similar to those of non-genetically engineered counterparts, it is the case that genetically modified food is substantially equivalent to its non-genetically counterpart, as regards the features that are relevant to consumers.

its own commercial rights. Although implementing efficient and sound answers to unwanted novelties, policy-making strategies based on expanding spaces of prescription are prone to generate new uncertainties due to their lack of flexibility and capacity of improvization, and also they tend to underestimate what is at stake due to its lack of public participation. On the other hand, policy-making strategies based on broadening spaces of negotiation, although having at their disposal more information and enjoying greater social acceptance, are also more prone to suffer from urgent problems due to their minor capacity to generate quick responses.

Conclusion

A set of imaginable surprises jeopardize the productive and reproductive capacity of the agro-food systems by generating biophysical tensions, which in fact stem from underlying identity tensions. The role of agriculture within the European society is being rethought, as shown in the struggle within the EU agro-food policy domain among free-tradist, multifunctional, and agroecological discourses. The cohabitation of such different, often contradictory, policy discourses points at the need for encouraging communication and spaces of consensus among these discourses not only to best prevent the recurrent arising of unwanted surprises, but also to stop exacerbating the crisis.

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