Food and Power in Caribbean Food Complexes: What's the Beef?

Introduction

This paper reports on PhD research that seeks to investigate power relations across Caribbean ‘food complexes’ – with a focus on the twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). In general, political economy approaches to the study of food and agriculture in the Caribbean tend to lean towards hyper-structuralist, economistic and production-orientated perspectives, with conventional notions of ‘food security’ being the prevailing lens within which challenges are framed. This research, however, attempts to move beyond this traditional approach by utilizing insights from critical political economy and post-structuralism in order to shed new light onto old debates. It does this firstly, by extending the focus of research from production, to include distribution and consumption and secondly by looking beyond traditional notions of power as in the hands of ‘the state’ and ‘the market’ to explore the processes and practices of power and ‘how’ power operates through ideas, interests and institutions. It also brings in the ‘domestic’ by bringing analysis down to the local and national level through an empirical focus on several different ‘food complexes’ in T&T. Furthermore, it draws on and adapts Friedmann and McMichael’s (1989) concepts of ‘food regimes’ and ‘food complexes’ to situate the construction of the complexes globally and historically and provide a framework for analysing the social, political and cultural dimensions that shape relations from food production to consumption in the Caribbean.

T&T presents a particularly interesting case study for the study of food and power. As an ex-sugar colony whose economy is now primarily based on the oil and gas sector, T&T is structurally linked into the interconnected global systems of food, feed and fuel in unique ways. Empirically, this research focuses on three distinct food complexes in order provide a focus for the investigation of abstract power relations, and to compare and contrast the operation of power across each area: the
fish and seafood complex; the greens and organics complex; and the beef and dairy complex. However, for the purposes of this paper we focus in on one of the complexes (the beef/dairy). The paper begins by introducing T&T and the historical and contemporary tensions that exist between the energy sector and food and agriculture. It then introduces some of the key theoretical tools that this research draws upon and adapts. The paper then drills down into the beef and dairy complex and explores some preliminary findings regarding the analysis of the construction of the complex and emerging power relations.

**T&T - Tension between Agriculture, Food and Oil**

T&T is a twin-island nation that is situated at the bottom of the chain of islands that make up the Caribbean archipelago and lies 7 miles off the coast of Venezuela. The area that T&T covers (1,981 sq mi) is roughly half the size of Jamaica and one twentieth of the size of Cuba. Tobago is the smaller of the two islands (116 sq mi) and is closer to Grenada and St Lucia in size. The population of T&T is around 1.3 million, with roughly 60,000 of those residing in Tobago. The ethnic makeup of the country reflects its colonial history of slavery and conquest. The two largest ethnic groups descend from African slaves and Indian indentured labourers, both making up roughly 35 percent of the population. The percentage of the population that is defined as ‘mixed’ is however growing and is currently around 22 percent. The remaining 8 percent of the population is composed of a mix of indigenous Amerindians, whites, Chinese, Syrian, Lebanese and Portuguese. Reflecting disparate plantation histories, Tobago has a much higher proportion (85 percent) of Afro-Trinbagonians. Historically, T&T’s economy was focused on agriculture rooted in a colonial history of sugar and slavery. Today, however, Trinidad’s economy is dominated by the energy sector and Tobago’s economy is dominated by Tourism. As perhaps the most industrialised nation in the Caribbean T&T enjoys a comparatively high GDP of US$24.63 billion and GDP per capita of US$18,528 (IMF, 2012). However, income inequality is high.
T&T is therefore often described as a dual economy, or as having Dutch Disease. The deepening dependency on the exploitation of oil and gas has suppressed the diversification of other sectors of the economy, and in particular agriculture. When energy production goes up, domestic food production goes down and food import bills rise. In 2012, the energy sector contributed around 44 percent to GDP, the
services sector 50 percent, manufacturing 6 percent, and agriculture only 0.4 percent and sugar 0.1 percent (GRTT 2012). The energy sector accounts for about 80 percent of exports. Over half of the natural gas imported by the United States comes from T&T. Furthermore; T&T is the world’s leading exporter of ammonia and methanol. In fact, about a quarter of the nitrogen fertilizer used by American farmers comes from T&T’s 10 ammonia plants (Philpott 2014). Therefore, T&T’s gas rigs are vital to the production both food and animal feed, adding a new dimension to the question ‘where does our food come from?’ (Ibid) In 2010, T&T imported 80 percent of its food (about half of this comes from the US). This is a significant increase from 52 percent in 2000, with T&T’s bill doubling from US$312 million in 2006 to US$624 million in 2010 (IICA, 2010). It is not uncommon to hear that Government Ministers or technical advisors have uttered phrases such as “we have oil and gas which we can sell so we can buy our food” or “why do we need fish when we have oil?” (Newsday 2007; Broad and Cavanagh 2014). However, whilst the country currently has stable oil and LNG supplies, it has been predicted that without further discoveries LNG could run out by 2020 and oil by 2025.

Although the declining levels of agriculture in T&T can be linked to the expansion of the energy sector, disinterest and neglect of agriculture is also part of the islands’ colonial legacy. For hundreds of years, agricultural relations in the Caribbean have been structured towards international market integration, mass production of monoculture crops for export and profit, and reliance on the importation of food (Weis 2007). The colonial plantation economy existed only to produce high value mono-crops for export to metropolitan markets to the neglect of domestic production. Colonial conquest and settlement virtually eradicated indigenous populations and the subsistence agriculture that they practiced, and since then levels of domestic production have remained low. It has been argued that the focus on agriculture for export led to the

divorce of agriculture from nourishment, as the notion of food value was lost to the reality of market in international trade...
Crops such as sugar, tobacco and coffee were selected, not on the basis of how well they fed people, but for their high price value (Ahmed and Afroz 1996, 8).

Despite agriculture’s negligible and falling contribution to GDP, it is an important source of livelihood, support, sustenance and nutrition for many. Most agricultural holdings are large estates or small family farms of less than ten hectares (96 percent). With an abundant supply of cheap energy, T&T is also home to a relatively successful food and beverage-processing sector, contributing 52 percent towards manufacturing GDP in 2009. The beverage sector is dominated by both local (Solo and Angostura) and global (Nestlé and Coca Cola) brands. The country is also almost self-sufficient in poultry and pork. T&T also has one of the largest and most ‘modern’ food retail and service sectors in the Caribbean with an abundance of KFCs, Subways and McDonald’s and also popular local chains (Wilson 2013). The four largest supermarkets chains account for just under half of food sales, whilst smaller groceries account for 23 percent and municipal and street markets around 15 percent of all retail sales. A relatively high proportion of fresh foods - such as fruit and vegetables, meat and fish – is sold in the markets (Best and Placide 2006).

Utilising Critical Approaches to the Study of Food and Power in the Caribbean

Critical theoretical approaches to the study of food are often described as falling into one of two camps – the political economy or the cultural. In general, political economy approaches to the study of food and agriculture have their roots in the Marxist tradition of analysing the changing social relations of capitalist production, and therefore lean towards a production-orientated and materialist perspective. By contrast, the so-called cultural ‘turn’ has its roots in post-modern and post-structuralist insights into the symbolic, cultural and discursive nature of food relations, and tends to lean towards a more consumption-orientated perspective (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). Traditionally, the study of political economy (both mainstream and critical) has focused on the formal realm of politics (the state and
the government) and the economy (the market), and conceptualized power as in the hands of the actors that are seen to traditionally dominate these arenas, such as the nation state and corporations. However, increasingly this conceptualisation of political economy is contested. Feminist and post-structuralist scholars have critiqued the focus on large and powerful actors and called for inclusion of more human dimensions of social and economic life, and previously neglected sites, processes and actors (Ferguson 2011). As Peterson (2010) argues, structuralist, Marxist and world systems orientated theories, in their focus on macro core-periphery relations and economic class hierarchies, tend to marginalise identity, social reproduction and sociocultural transformations.

A great deal of the research that has been carried out on food and agriculture in the Caribbean fall into the traditional camp of being overly production-orientated and economistic. Moreover, much of this research is policy focused or is of a technical nature. This research aims to move beyond the traditional economistic and production-focused analyses of food and agriculture in Caribbean political economy. It is hoped that this research will move beyond and contribute to this literature with deep analysis of power relations between actors, interests, institutions and ideologies. Key research questions are: what is the nature of the politics of food production, distribution, and consumption in the Caribbean? How is power mobilised and dispersed in the Caribbean food system? And how are the politics of food socially and politically constructed and enacted amongst different actors?

The research builds on ‘food regime’ theory in order to situate analysis within globalized and historical political and economic contexts. Secondly, it utilises a concept of ‘food complexes’ in an attempt to empirically situate abstract processes and practices of power relations across time, place and space, and to locate these relations in everyday actions. Finally, it proposes an extended understanding of ‘political economy’ that attends to the social and political construction of reality, and is inclusive of cultural and discursive relations that falls outside of the traditional sphere of ‘political economy’ with a focus on the domestic local and cultural context.
'Food regime theory' is one of the most influential approaches to the study of agrarian change in the world economy (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). The broadly macro Marxist historical approach theorises the changing international relations of food production and consumption, and the role of agriculture in the rise of the global capitalist economy. The authors distinguish three periods or ‘food regimes’ of the capitalist transformation of agriculture: colonialism (1870-1930s), decolonisation (1950s), and agricultural liberalisation (late 1980s-). Friedmann (1993, 30–31) defines the basic notion of a food regime as ‘a rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale’. The ‘rules’ can be both explicit and implicit. She argues that the structuring of the world capitalist economy is not necessarily the direct consequence of interests, but rather more of a distillation of political struggles. In this conceptualisation, Friedmann is therefore levering some room for both the possibility and futility of agency. Furthermore, the ‘structure’ reflects the changing balance of power between states, business, farmers and capital (McMichael 2009, 143). The way in which food regime theory delineates these historical epochs is through specifying ‘patterns of circulation of food in the world economy’ and prioritising ‘which forms of capital accumulation in agriculture constitute global power arrangements as expressed through patterns of circulation of food’ (McMichael 2009, 140). The theoretical tools of food regime analysis therefore enable the analysis of power relations across spatial and geopolitical boundaries, whilst providing historical parameters and positing food as the starting point for analysis.

This research utilises both the theoretical framing of ‘food regimes’ and Friedmann and McMichael’s concept of a ‘food complex’, which they utilise to trace change and transition across these regimes. The term is used to denote complexes surrounding both individual foods (such as wheat) and groups of foods (such as durable foods or livestock). Each complex is defined as:
[A] chain (or web) of production and consumption relations, linking farmers and farm workers to consuming individuals, households and communities. Within each web are private and state institutions which buy, sell, provide inputs, process, transport, distribute and finance each link. Each complex includes many class, gender and cultural relations, within a specific (changing) international division of labour (Friedmann 1992, 371).

As noted earlier, this research focuses on three complexes - the fish/seafood, beef/dairy, and greens/organics. It utilises the idea of focusing on groups of food and the actors and relations that surround them - food complexes – as a way to anchor abstract and complex processes and practices, and to connect actors, ideas, interests and institutions.

**The Emergence of Beef and Dairy in T&T**

This next section draws upon Friedmann and McMichael’s ‘food regimes’, but adapts them in order to map changes in the T&T beef and dairy sector in relation to global changes. The main reconceptualizations are orientating analysis from the periphery (T&T) rather than from the metropole (Britain), and also adding a precursor period to include colonial settlement and the abolition of slavery (See Table 1 below).

**Figure II: Utilising Food Regimes in T&T**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Regime Period</th>
<th>Food Regime Characteristics</th>
<th>T&amp;T History</th>
<th>T&amp;T’s Beef and Dairy Complex</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-1870</td>
<td>- Colonisation, Settlement, and Slavery</td>
<td>- First Spanish settlement (1530) - Spanish Cedula of population (1783) - Trinidad ceded to Britain (from Spanish) (1797) - Tobago ceded to Britain (from French) (1802)</td>
<td>- Introduction of cattle to T&amp;T by Spanish settlers - Population influx of French islanders, slaves, and cattle - Food shortages - Importation of staples (including salted beef and dairy)</td>
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<td>1492-1870</td>
<td><em>Key products: sugarcane</em></td>
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<td>First Food Regime</td>
<td>Culmination of Colonialism</td>
<td>Rise of Nation States</td>
<td>British Crown Colony Government appointed to T&amp;T (1880)</td>
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<td>(1870-1930s)</td>
<td>Key products: Grain and meat</td>
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<td>(1950s-1980s)</td>
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| Third Food Regime | Agricultural liberalisation | Disintegration of state regulation | Structural Adjustment (1980s) | 1988 IMF loan | Nestlé introduces Tetra Pack Technology | Increased interest in 'local' and 'fresh' | Emergence of new small-cottage processors - Dolce Valle Dairy |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| (late 1980’s)      | Key products - fresh, organic, reconstituted |                        |                                                        |               |                                        |                                                                                     |                                                                                 |                          |

Source: First two columns adapted from McMichael (2009) and Le Heron (1992), last two columns and the top row are the author’s own

For now, for the purposes of preliminary analysis, we will call this preceding period the ‘antecedent food regime’. Therefore, for the study of T&T, the antecedent food regime (1530-1880) begins with first Spanish governor being granted to settle in T&T and ends with the establishment of the Crown Colony Government by the British. It was most likely the Spanish who first introduced cattle to the islands of T&T. Since early colonial times, animals and cattle have played an important role in the development of colonial territories and to the cultivation of crops. However, despite this, their importance has often been overlooked due to the preoccupation with plants, such as sugarcane (Pemberton 2010). Up until the 1780s, cattle were mainly used for draught purposes rather than livestock. This is partly because up until then the population of both islands was relatively low, but also due to the
planter mentality of focusing on agriculture for export and profit - 'his economic programme was to grow sugar and nothing but sugar' (Williams 1961). Therefore, meat and food staples were often in short supply and imported (Meredith 1988).

However, in 1783 the Spanish Cedula of Population encouraged the immigration of French islanders (who would later make up a large proportion of the French Creole or white planter class), along with their slaves, and the importation of extra cattle and various livestock. This caused both the population and the demand for food on the islands to swell. By the end of the eighteenth century, around a thousand cattle grazed on the savannahs of Trinidad. However, a beef industry never successfully flourished and the price of beef remained high (Meredith 1988). In 1797, T&T was ceded to the British by the Spanish Governor and was largely governed from the metropole until 1880 - 'a Crown Colony in which the British government retained complete control' (Williams 1964, 72). However, despite this many food supplies were still in short supply. For example, in 1798, there were calls to raise and fix by the law the quantity imported slave rations of salted beef, salted beef, salted pork and salted fish (Williams 1964). These imports generally came from North America and Ireland, and it is likely that it included the importation of hard cheese, butter and corned beef. In 1834 slavery was abolished, leading to the emergence of a peasant class and the migration of freed slaves to urban areas, thereby dramatically altering the ethnic, socio-cultural and agricultural landscape of the islands. This alteration was further deepened in 1845 with the introduction of indentured Indian labourers to work on the sugarcane plantations in place of the slaves.

Friedmann and McMichael's first food regime (1870-1930) is characterized by the export of tropical crops to Europe, and the importation of staple foods (such as grains, livestock, meats and fish) from the settler colonies of North America to Europe and colonies, such as T&T. In this regime, the structural power centre of the global economy was the British Empire. Although, as we have just seen, it could be argued that this process began much earlier for T&T. Nonetheless, the appointment of the Crown Colony Government - which shifted a significant amount of legislative
power from Britain to local administrators - in 1880 dramatically changed the shape of colonial rule in T&T. Therefore, it was at this time of increased domestic governance that the colonial administration became interested in the diversification of the agricultural economy. One of the first schemes to intervene in the domestic production and supply of beef and milk was the introduction of the first Government Stock Farm in 1979, which aimed to improve the breeding stock, to increase the sanitary quality of milk, and to lower the price of milk (Metivier 1973). Prior to the introduction of a government stock farm and veterinary services, planters had resisted attempts to diversify away from crops and 'agricultural decision making was viewed as the exclusive domain of the individual plantation owners’ (Pemberton 2010, 168). As the first agricultural division to be given formal public administrative structures and with a focus on animals that tended to be owned by the upper classes - horses and cows - this change helped to both maintain elitist class structures in the agricultural economy and extend some control over them (Pemberton 2010). It also suggests that the colonial administration had started to become interested in bringing food until their control. With these developments and the expansion of demand in the local economy, this period also saw the formation of cattle ranches on abandoned plantations, particularly in Tobago (Cassa, 2004). By the 1920s, it became increasingly common for estates to keep their own dairy herd, and even oil companies began to establish dairy herds to provide milk for their employees. It could be argued, therefore, that 'milk' had begun to acquire new meanings and valuing as important for healthy workers and populations - and perhaps even the beginnings of a 'modern diet' (Atkins 2010).

Friedmann and McMichael’s second food regime (1950s-1970s) is characterized by the re-routing of surplus foods (particularly grains, meats and durable foods) from North America to post-colonial states, via food aid, and the adoption of agro-industrialisation by developing states as part of the broader ‘development project’ (McMichael 2009). In T&T, as a newly independent state, this drive for agro-industrialisation corresponded with a drive for self-sufficiency and the development of domestic agriculture. Up until the 1950s, livestock and crop farming in T&T
remained fairly integrated, however, with tractors replacing animal power in the 1950s, feed began to be imported, and monoculture, technology driven farming was promoted (Neckles n.d.). Post-independence in 1962, the establishment of livestock and dairy sectors in T&T were earmarked as important landmarks of agricultural development. In 1967, the T&T government, with the help of a World Bank loan, implemented the State Lands Development Project (SLDP). This included the establishment of domestic dairy, pig and fish processing sectors, and the further development of tree crops and vegetable farming. In terms of the dairy sector, this included the establishment of 200 small dairy farms, leased by the state, each with 20 acres land, 20 cows and a house. The government, therefore, essentially created 'dairy farmers' with many having little or no experience of farming prior to the project. With this the government also set up local milk collection services and deliveries of animal feeds and inputs. In the early days, producers and the industry were therefore heavily supported by the state.

Along with the setting up production, a ready market for milk was provided with the establishment of Nestlé as the central milk processor (IICA 1997). To this end, in 1962 Nestlé opened a large milk processing plant in Northern Trinidad. Nestlé remains the main stakeholder in the dairy-processing sector to this day. However, despite this drive for increased self-sufficiency in livestock and dairy, the development of these industries relied wholly on the importation of animal feed and inputs. The livestock and dairy sector thereby became inextricably linked into global supply chains and global agribusiness. Therefore, as characterised by Friedmann and McMichael's second food regime, in this period T&T's livestock and dairy sectors deepened their forward and backward linkages into the global economy. Furthermore, despite the increase in milk production as a result of these policies, domestic milk production in T&T has always fallen short of domestic demand. This can partly be seen to be down to production constraints, but also a complex set of power relations between farmers, processors and the T&T government.
The *third food regime* (1980s onwards) posited by McMichael and Friedmann is characterised the deepening of agro-industrial processes, the incorporation of new regions (such as Brazil and China producing livestock and biofuel), and the differentiation of fresh and organic supply chains for more privileged consumers (McMichael 2009). This phase is also characterised by agricultural liberalisation and the development of counter-movements. The impact of trade liberalisation and the global deregulation on Caribbean dairy and beef has been the erosion of these industries through the increased importation of cheaper products that are subsidised at the country of origin (CTA 2012).

T&T’s economy grew between 1973 and 1982 due to high oil prices. However, falling oil prices resulted in T&T introducing structural reform and liberalisation in 1988. This was deepened in the 1990s with the implementation the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture when more restrictions to trade were removed and levels of tariff protection reduced, including the reduction of import surcharges on various different beef and milk products (WTO 1998). For example, the rate of import duty on bovine meat was reduced to 15 percent, whilst duty on powdered milk was cut to 5 percent. With local supply falling far short of local demand, these cheap imports both fill the supply gap and further erode the capacity of local producers to compete. Dairy farmers currently produce only 5 percent of the milk consumed in T&T (Clyne 2013). A figure that has been in continual decline (although the current government claims that there have been increases in the last two years - others in the industry are skeptical). This causes tension between producers and the government, in terms of the extent to which the government supports the sectors and extent to which they implement measures to protect local markets. It also causes tension between producers and processors, most notably, the ’Big Bad Nestlé ‘ who enjoys the benefits of being situated in a Free Trade Zone (FTZ) and also receives a milk subsidy from the government. These tensions have continued to deepened over the last decade as input costs have been rising and Nestlé has declined to raise the price it pays farmers per litre of milk since 2000.
The price paid by the consumer for milk is also a politically sensitive issue with milk being as one of the key items in the governments basket of food security commodities. This sensitivity is heightened by the perception that milk, and powdered milk in particular, ass a drink for the poor and vulnerable in society. As one government industry official commented:

Poor people are going to drink powdered milk. Milk is the food for the most vulnerable in our society, it is the food for babies, small children, expectant mothers, sick people, old people (Interviewee, 2014)

The association of milk with the needy also taps into the different values placed on beef and milk in T&T. With powdered, and now UHT milk, being traditionally aimed at the poor, the newly emerging focus on 'local' and 'fresh' dairy products can be seen to be targeted at the more privileged consumer. A good example is the recently created 'Dolce Valle' locally made cheese that is sold at the weekly 'Upmarket' targeted at the more cosmopolitan consumer in the countries capital city. The class differentiation also extends to beef, with the sale of prime cuts of South American and USDA beef often aimed at the more privileged consumer. However, paradoxically, the locally bred Buffalypso meat that is widely considered to be superior meat is currently sold as local beef by local butchers and at municipal markets. It could be argued that this attends to a higher valuing of 'foreign' over 'local' (Wilson 2013). Finally, the incorporation of new regions into T&T's beef and dairy complex evidenced by the recent surpassing of the USA as the key supplier of beef to T&T but Uruguay. Furthermore, whilst historically nearly two thirds of T&T’s imported powdered milk comes from Ireland (add ref), New Zealand and Brazil have recently come close in second and third place.

**Preliminary Conclusions on Power Relations in the T&T Beef and Dairy Complex**
Comparing the development of T&T’s beef and dairy complex with Friedmann with McMichael’s food regime theory reveals both instances of convergence and also divergence, and suggests some instances for the transfer of power relations. It is evident that T&T’s beef and dairy complex has become increasingly linked into the global economy through both forward and backward linkages, with almost all producers and processors reliant on the importation of animal feed, breeding stock and equipment. Both during the era of the colonial administration as well as after independence, it is apparent that the development of livestock and dairy industries has taken on political significance. In the early days of Crown Colony Government, the supply of cheap and sanitary milk was seen as important to the maintenance of the colony, whilst in the independence era the development of commercial domestic livestock and dairy sectors were seen as critical to the successful implementation of the 'development project'.

Domestic contextual factors - notably history and geography - have also decisively shaped the complexes. For example, unlike broader global trends, the production of beef and dairy in T&T has generally remained at the smallholder level. Moreover, in contrast to the situation in European and North American countries, the state has also remained a central and influential actor in the beef and dairy industry, even going as far as entering into a public-private partnership with Nestle to import new breeding stock. The government can therefore be seen to be supporting processors more than farmers themselves. Interestingly, whilst analyses of European and North American food markets have shown supermarkets to be central power locators in food systems (Burch and Lawrence 2007), preliminary findings would suggest that this is not the case in T&T. Instead, supermarket spokespersons are often included in the list of dissenting voices on government policies related to food supply. The state in T&T therefore remains central whilst the producers, and small producers, remain on the periphery.
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