

Geopolitics, Food, and Agriculture

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The Geopolitics of Food and Agriculture is a new paper about a huge topic, which Marc Bellemare says he wanted to write about because agricultural economists have long had a blind spot about one point of a vibrant agricultural sector being that it enables you to ensure your food security during times of conflict. That may be more important than whether subsidies are in a narrow sense efficient. I began by asking Marc Bellemare what prompted the paper.

Marc: For me, where this came from was the fact that, you know, every so often you get ag economists in a room and then they all start kind of bemoaning the fact that we are subsidising this small, small sector of the economy and why are we doing that? And those farmers are so rich and they're getting all those resources for, you know, basically just existing. You know, politicians realise that. And while it's true that there is, there's a political economy phenomenon there, where you have a lot of small rural areas that are disproportionately represented in elected assemblies and legislatures, there's also kind of like a very real sense that it's important to have a food and agricultural sector if you want to feed yourself, instead of having to rely on unreliable trade partners, instead of having your kind of, your food imports, you know, kind of in a stranglehold because you somehow, you know, antagonised someone else. And we are seeing that now. Believe me, Jeremy, when we started talking about this piece, we had no idea what the world would look like right this minute.

Jeremy: Yeah, it certainly is timely. But let's go back to, if you want, one shock ago. Did the Russian invasion of Ukraine, was that really what set this in motion, Bernhard?

Bernhard: Yeah. So I think when Marc and I started talking about this when I was in Minnesota, that was in 2022, and I remember when I went to start my job at Purdue in 2023, I sometimes follow the European news in media, and I was watching this talk show in

Germany, where they were talking about getting rid of a diesel subsidy in agriculture, which is kind of a point in case because we know that diesel subsidies are bad from an efficiency perspective, from an environmental perspective. But at the same time, there was this war raging in Europe and energy prices were going through the roof. And if we know one thing about subsidies, is that they make things artificially cheaper, which at this point I felt was an argument that nobody was making in this case. And I felt like this elephant in the room was not being addressed. And nobody was saying, hey, there's something to be said about having cheap and ample food supplies in situations like this.

Jeremy: But it's kind of interesting. I mean, food has been used as a weapon, you say in the paper, from sort of the time of the Hebrew Bible, you'd think that it would have an impact on policy. So why hasn't it?

Marc: Well, I think it did have an impact on policy. So in the real world where actual people live, you know, it has had an impact on policy. We see food used as a weapon of war, civil war or inter-state conflict very often. It's just that I think what's been going on in economics is that very often we have kind of this textbook model where we kind of look at something like, say, farm subsidies, and we say, you know, we describe it and we describe it with the tools that we have. And we write down a model and we say, look, look, this is inefficient. Look at the deadweight loss triangle.

And eventually what ends up happening is that you start mistaking the symbol for the thing symbolised. You have kind of a model and you're like, look, this is an entire description of reality, which it's not, right. We start our classes by telling students, all models are wrong. Some are useful. But in the process, we kind of tend to ... We have blinders on once we have those models and we just tend to focus on that stuff and say, look, it's inefficient. Why are we transferring those resources to this small group of people?

And I think what's happening in the adjacent discipline that we're kind of looking at here, which is political science, I don't think they're terribly interested in food and agriculture, to be honest. People who do international relations, comparative politics, might, every once in a while kind of, you know, think about food and agriculture. But it's not a big thing because ... I remember describing what we felt like doing in

this piece to a colleague in political science who's editor of a leading journal in political science, and he said, well, tell me something I don't already know. This might be of interest to econ journals, but not for political scientists who all know this. And so I think, you know, in terms of real policy, people care. And we see this, given the amount of resources and money that are devoted to food and agriculture. But in academia, there's kind of this, I don't know, there's this blind spot, if not a, you know, an actual snub of what's going on.

Jeremy: Okay. So, I mean, we've talked before about food riots and conflict. And there's this real problem between urban consumers and rural producers. And you've talked about subsidies to farmers, you've talked about there are other modalities for keeping prices down for consumers. But in the end, isn't one group or the other going to lose out in pursuit of food security? Either you're going to have food that's too cheap for farmers to produce, so you have to keep subsidising, or that's too expensive for consumers to buy. So you're going to have to somehow find a way, either they go hungry or you've got to deal with that. How do you balance — I mean, that's politics — how do you balance the call from the two different parties?

Bernhard: Yeah, that's a really, really good question. The paper, of course, cannot answer this right away. But I think that is what we're supposed to do now. And we do have, luckily, already a lot of literature that integrates or that asks these questions from many different perspectives. But what we need to do now is to integrate this geopolitical dimension. And there's a lot of opportunities in that as well.

Speaking also from an environmental perspective, a food system that is sustainable at this point has to be not only sustainable for producers, consumers and the environment, but it also has to be an asset. It can't be a liability. So there's all these intersections and these things that need to come together, which of course, it's not easy. It sounds daunting. But there's also a lot of opportunities to create win win win situations on all of these dimensions. Yeah. But this is something that we need to start doing now.

Jeremy: What advice do you have? Well, first of all, is there any kind of measure these days of food security? Not in terms of whether people have access to safe, nutritious food that they want at a price they can afford, but more in terms of a country-wide food security

index? Is it possible to say these countries are more food secure than others?

Marc: Off the top of my head, I would say food import dependence is the measure you're thinking of. It's how dependent is a country on just importing food. At the same time, you have to realise that, and this is something that really gets lost in a lot of those conversations and which kind of surprises my students when I tell them, but 75% of the food in the world is consumed in the country where it's grown and processed. And so food is not as tradable as most people think it is. And so, you know, yes, some countries depend on food imports more than others, right? So Singapore depends on food imports more than, say, Canada does. But that would be the measure that I would use. I don't know if Bernhard has any other proxy, any other proxies in mind.

Bernhard: I do not have any other proxies, but I also would use it a little bit cautiously because food trade is not food trade. If you trade with friends and reliable political allies and partners that you can trust, food trade will make you more resilient and will be, you know ... You're going to be able to buffer if something goes bad in your own country. But you have to have diversified trade relationships and you need to put some thought into that. Not all food trade is bad. And also, if you focus on self-sufficiency, you're really only banking on one supply base. And if something happens to that, then you know you're in trouble as well. So trade can help. But it depends on how we trade.

Jeremy: I want to come back to self-sufficiency in a minute. But of course, the other thing is that as we've heard in the last couple of weeks, it isn't just food that you need in order to be self-sufficient, food secure. You need at the moment fertilisers, you need energy. Well, where does that figure into it?

Marc: Man, that is ... You know, we're really just focused on food and agriculture. We, we have kind of made a conscious or maybe unconscious decision to kind of say, we will start at the farm gate and somewhat leave everything that goes on before. So the inputs, as you describe them, into what goes into making food, this is something we could have kind of expanded on in that piece. But ... So we had we had a very targeted journal in mind. And, and it's now a revise and resubmit manuscript at that journal. And they tell you, you have the right to this many references and this many words in your piece,

which makes it really convenient when you want to respond to reviewers who are like, well, maybe you should do this other thing and that other thing that I really care about. And so we've made that decision not to kind of look at what goes on prior to the farm gate.

Jeremy: Okay, let's go back to food, to self-sufficiency. I mean, historically, being here in Italy, you know, autarchy, self-sufficiency, doesn't have a very good record, but people keep trying to do that. What are they missing out?

Bernhard: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. It's a very popular word and people like to use it and say, yeah, we're going to be food self-sufficient. We're going to produce everything at home. We're not going to be importing stuff. There's also, again, an environmental dimension to this, that consuming locally is environmentally more beneficial. But from a resilience perspective and from a food systems robustness perspective, you know, it will just ... If you think that you have to mitigate all these different risks, you're really just putting all your eggs in one basket. That's what it is.

And at the same time, even though food is growing all over the world, if right now you wanted to import, say, wheat, there's maybe 3 or 4 places in the world that will ship wheat to you, that have the infrastructure, that have the production capacity, that are shipping. And it's not that many more. So it's inherently concentrated. And I think that is the key to the situation is, is diversification instead of concentration, relying on multiple knots, which is going to come at the cost of efficiency. But here we are again, that we need to optimise this problem from many different dimensions, not only one.

Marc: And Jeremy, I really want to highlight one thing in what Bernhard just said, which is, you know, it's variance more than it's levels that matter. And the way he describes it is in the form of, it's an insurance problem. So going back to what I said, 75% of the food in the world is consumed where it's produced, and that, you know, you may have some marginal tweaks, no country will go from, you know, importing 10% of its food to importing 0% of its food. And so what matters I think really is like when you think about, okay, there's all these shocks that we're subject to, how about we mitigate those shocks by diversifying where we're sourcing those things from instead of getting everything from, say, Russia, everything from Canada,

everything from, you know, this one trading partner or this handful of trading partners. And that's something that I've worked on.

You may remember we've had those conversations early on, you described the first time we talked as being 2014. Even back then, I was worried about, you know, volatility versus levels. And that's where Bernhard takes his work, is in the direction of diversification versus sourcing from just a handful of trading partners. And that's another thing that I believe is getting lost in those debates. People tend to think about this in very simple terms, but it's much more nuanced than most people kind of put it.

Jeremy: So volatility in itself is not the problem, it's prices. And that is sort of again, there's two problems there. Because how much increase does it take to before you get civil unrest. Take the United States — food inflation. Why aren't people in the streets?

Marc: That's highly context dependent. And that's a question that I would get when I would go and present my paper on food riots was, well, why are we not seeing riots in Brooklyn? What you have to understand is that consumer demand depends on three things. Essentially, consumer demand for one thing, let's just say food, it depends on the price of food, on consumers' income and on the price of other stuff. And of course, we don't see riots in Brooklyn because incomes were really, really high. Right? And so if food is a very, very small part of your budget, a 1% increase in the price of food is not going to be felt very much. Even a 10% increase in the price of food is not going to be felt very much, because most of what we pay for in this country and in most of OECD countries when it comes to food, is not the food item itself. It's transportation. It's electricity for refrigeration, it's processing, it's all kinds. It's just kind of holding stock somewhere and having to pay rent for that place. And so, you know, it's very different if you look at places in, say, in most African capitals, where the price of food is much more tied to the price of the food items themselves. The proportion of the food dollar that is food itself is much higher in poorer countries than it is in high income countries.

Bernhard: I would like to add to that, though, that I think also maybe, maybe not right now, but I think we've seen this last year during the, two years ago now, during the election cycle, where food prices were an issue. And I think we've also seen this in other countries where high food prices are an issue and people are not on

the streets, but they kind of help extremist party or right wing parties to then kind of make that going on the streets case, you know, show the unrest of people more and more at the ballot than in the streets. Yet maybe that's like a pre effect before people would take to the streets, but it's very contentious and it definitely works its way into political elections.

Jeremy: You say at one point in the paper, you say that agriculture is the least liberalised economic sector. But is that because it's so strategic?

Marc: That's my sense. Yeah. My sense is that because it's so strategic, because there's always kind of like, there is something primal — right? — to food, and all of those deep seated psychological associations with it because we're ... This is something that, if we worry about running out of food, there's something kind of that kicks in in our reptilian brain that, this kind of fight or flight response. And I think, to make a broader point about this, I think this is why it's so hard to have a rational conversation surrounding food, any kind of food policy, right?

So, Jeremy, you and I have talked about food waste in the past. I've worked on a number of more controversial topics like food waste, like farmers markets, like all kinds of things. And and the minute you talk about food, it's so low on Maslow's hierarchy of needs that it's like if you threaten people's shelter, right, or their Wi-Fi, as it were. And people just kind of lose their minds if you say like, oh, no, no, no, we're going to delegate this to some other people overseas. I think it's really, you know, there is something kind of deeply cultural, but also kind of like in our subconscious about this.

Bernhard: I think, I think it definitely is true. And when we look at in Europe, the CAP and much of U.S. policy, it has its roots after the Second World War. And back then, policymakers were like, let's produce as much food as we can as cheaply as we can. This is the time of of the stark policies, the butter mountains, when people were throwing away milk because there was just so much excess. And over the time, I think we kind of forgot about World War Two. And we also forgot about the reasons. And then at some point, you see a lot in the literature, people ask themselves, why do we have this supply subsidy? This is producer lobbyism and this is producers trying to, you know, to rig the game for themselves. But then you also have to ask this:

why is it that ag lobbies get to have this much power? You know, there's, as Marc was saying, there's just something to food that is very, very important. And that's where these policies came from, from that time. And clearly that was the driving motive behind it.

Jeremy: And certainly, I mean, farmers' political clout far outweighs the number of them who vote. But they have big tractors and loads of manure and they can disrupt things pretty effectively. So let me just ask you, and this really is a final question, what do you expect ... Do you have any expectations that things will change when the paper is published and people in adjacent disciplines have read it and maybe taken it on board.

Marc: That is certainly our hope. I expect, you know, if you've read *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Kuhn, Jeremy, you'll remember that the people who are most resistant to change are people who are just starting out their career and who have had, you know, 5 or 6 years of training and don't want things to be too different, and people who are really invested in the status quo. And the people who are most open to changing are people who are at the end of their career — so very, very senior academics — and people who are just starting out in grad school, whose minds are just ready to be filled with new ideas and who are not too invested in ...

So what I think will happen is that the ideas and the direction we're pointing in will be taken up by people who are starting out— so we're kind of listing a number of open things or open areas — and by people who are very senior. And in fact, I was just noticing there's a very, very senior ag economist who has been working in that area already, and, you know, at that point has really nothing to lose and has decided to kind of go in that direction, without us prompting him, right. This was something he had already started working on. I think when you tell people, hey, there's all those open questions, they're important, people tend to listen. And that's what I'm hoping is going to happen now. But maybe Bernhard has different expectations.

Bernhard: Well, I was going to say maybe the paper will not, but this podcast, maybe. I have high hopes of the podcast. Maybe that's the better audience for people to pick up this work than in the academic sphere.

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