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**Varieties of capitalist agriculture –
a meso variation of a macro approach**

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VARIETIES OF CAPITALIST AGRICULTURE –

A MESO VARIATION OF A MACRO APPROACH

Abstract

The socioeconomic discourse on varieties of capitalism has revealed remarkable insights into prevailing macroeconomic patterns. This paper transforms this macro approach and uses the agricultural sector to test its applicability for the sectoral (meso) level. Agricultural policy indicators, environmental variables, average farm size, self-sufficiency and per capita food expenditures are used to cluster developed countries. Three groups emerge: one group consists of active exporters with large farms and low, if any, subsidies and a high level of emissions per output, while another group combines a high level of public support and high food expenditure with low self-sufficiency and good environmental performance. As the third group is mostly situated in between the other two, we conclude that the varieties of capitalist agriculture are largely placed on a one-dimensional scale.

Keywords

farming, diversity of capitalism

1. Introduction

The debate around varieties of capitalism has become a central pillar of socioeconomic discourse. Within this debate, Hall and Soskice (2003; 1) distinguish two different lines of thought with respect to the observed differences between the various market-based economies:

“Some regard these differences as deviations from ‘best practice’ that will dissolve as nations catch up to a technological or organizational leader. Others see them as the distillation of more durable historical choices for a specific kind of society, since economic institutions condition levels of social protection, the distribution of income, and the availability of collective goods.”

As economics started as a relatively one-dimensional science in which output was the variable that really mattered (and was usually assumed to be relatively synonymous with utility), this first discourse (of which Hall and Soskice, 2001, and Coates, 2005, are good examples) is less provocative and innovative than the second one which bids farewell to the notion of an unequivocal normative framework on which economic systems can be judged.

This paper will repeatedly refer to this novel approach in macro-socioeconomics and will attempt to complement it with a sectoral perspective: What happens to the concept once different developments in different sectors have been acknowledged? Are what Amable (2000) refers to as “institutional complementarities” in each sector the same as in any other sector? Will the same variety of capitalism be chosen in each sector of a specific country? Or are there mesoeconomic specifications that unveil new similarities and dissimilarities between countries? If the answer to the latter question is “yes”, “varieties of capitalism” could turn out

to be an undue generalization. Instead, there could be varieties of a capitalist industry, varieties of a capitalist service sector, and, finally, varieties of capitalist agriculture, i.e., a farming sector relying on market exchanges. This latter possibility will be explored in greater depth throughout this paper in order to find out whether we can achieve a better understanding of economic realities by adding a mesoeconomic perspective to the economics of macro and micro.

This paper attempts to explore this possibility on both a theoretical and an empirical basis. In Section 2, the added value of the theoretical approach of the “varieties of capitalism” is discussed. Focusing on the primary sector, Section 3 reviews the debate around agricultural systems, showing the missing link between the two discourses. Section 4 introduces the methodology used to identify varieties of capitalist agriculture; results are presented in Section 5. Section 6 offers a conclusion.

2. Varieties of capitalism, varieties of sectors

While the powerful movement in social sciences describing and explaining different varieties and eventually the resulting diversity of capitalism can be understood as a stand-alone approach, it is probably more fruitful to depict it as a countermovement to the impression of the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992). By taking this perspective, Peck and Theodore (2007; 732) describe how “the varieties approach represents a fecund interdisciplinary zone of engagement within the wider field of heterodox economic studies.” After socialism had almost ceased to exist, it was neither useful nor necessary to depict capitalism as a homogeneous ideological block against collectivization and nationalization. Instead, an increasing number of social scientists started to describe the diversity of market-based systems.

Albert (1991) took a first step by describing the difference between a ‘Rhinish’ model typical of continental Europe and the classically neoliberalized path of Anglo-American countries, but a more thorough and formalized proposition was introduced by Amable (2003). He used cluster analysis to identify groups of countries with similar patterns concerning key socioeconomic variables such as labor organization, social policy and education. He found that countries with similar patterns were also often geographically adjacent, suggesting a strong cultural or at least geographical force behind the emergence of those systems.

It is easy to see that institutions play a key role in shaping the specific characteristics of capitalism in the country concerned, but less easy to understand why such different institutions would emerge. Hall and Thelen (2009; 7) emphasize the role of political equilibria: “Persistence of institutions depends not only on their aggregate welfare effects but also on other distributive benefits that they provide to the underlying sociopolitical coalitions.” At least as important, however, is the role of culture in shaping such national systems. Bruff (2008) has explored this relationship in detail and, due to the many facets that the term culture can have, suggests referring explicitly to Gramsci’s (1985) concept of common sense in society. Empirically, Schwartz (2007) is able to show that the observed differences in cultures can partly be traced back to people’s value orientation. In attempting to explain the persistence of “varieties of capitalism”, particularly in small countries, Elsner and Heinrich (2009) develop a game theory model indicating that homogeneous groups are formed within society in order to make cooperative behavior predictable.

A later generalization of their approach by Elsner and Heinrich (2011) emphasizes the importance of the ‘meso’ level and leads directly to the (much smaller) discourse on mesoeconomics, the analysis of economic sectors. It is probably fair to claim that, due to large-scale negligence in socioeconomic research, neither intrasectoral nor intersectoral dynamics are yet well understood, despite a few individual contributions on this issue (Ng, 1986; Mann, 2011; Dopfer, 2012). The potential connection between the ‘meso’ and the ‘varieties’ approach becomes clearer when focusing on the important role that cultural specifications play in both theoretical frameworks. Few scholars would reject the widespread notion that there exists an industrial culture (Sadler and Thompson, 2001; Mole, 2007), a peasant culture (Viola, 1999; Henningsen, 2001) and perhaps even a service culture (Edvardsson and Enquist, 2002; Skinner Beitelspacher et al., 2011) in all countries and, to some extent, also in regions.

If there are national and sectoral cultures, the question about interdependencies between the two dimensions is key. The answer to this question will be explored for the case of the primary sector. Before that, however, it should be shown that scholars who are active within the agricultural sector have not really been concerned with the more general debate on complementarities leading to varieties.

3. The discourse on varieties of agriculture

The agricultural sector is strongly dependent on land; it is older than the industrial and service sectors and it targets more basic needs. These factors may partly account for the fact that some of the characterizing variables of agriculture will probably be different from those of other sectors. This claim becomes clearer when applying the five core variable blocks proposed by Amable (2003) to the farming sector.

One case in point is the wage-labor nexus used to characterize varieties of capitalism. In both developing and developed countries, family farming is the dominant form of production. This implies that wage-dependent labor has a far lower impact than in other sectors. The organization of financial systems may also have some importance for the organization of farming, but financial services are a sector of their own, distinct from agriculture. The main tools of social policy are of primary relevance to urban areas (Todaro and Stilkind, 1981; Mann, 2005), so that the focus of these policy instruments is not appropriate for an understanding of agriculture. Education may be more relevant to agriculture than the indicators mentioned above, but probably less so than for other sectors. Hence, four of the five blocks used by Amable (2003) to characterize the diversity of capitalism are of very limited use when restricting ourselves to the agricultural sector.

From Amable’s set of choices, the product-market-regulation variables may be most relevant for the farming sector. The level of protection in agriculture is markedly higher than in the other two sectors (Josling, 2000; Morley and Piñeiro, 2007; Matsumura, 2008). Of one dollar earned, more than 50 Cents generally come from tax money, mostly through direct transfers to farmers and market support. This fact, of course, has grave consequences for the shape of the sector and individual farming strategies.

The fact that governments differ greatly in their support to agriculture is widely acknowledged among agricultural economists. Brunstad et al. (1999), for example, recall Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Japan and Finland as the “biggest spenders of OECD” (p. 541).

This finding is either disregarded as welfare-destroying misbehavior (Tyers and Anderson, 1988; Hertel and Keeney, 2006) or as a conscious strategy or view labeled as multifunctionality (Paarberg et al., 2002; Wüstemann et al., 2008). Multifunctionality emphasizes the importance of environmental amenities provided by farmers in addition to mere food production.

Potter and Tilzey (2005) identify three different discourses in agriculture: neoliberalism, terming most interventions in the sector as welfare-decreasing; neomercantilism, where national sectors attempt to protect themselves from foreign export interests; and multifunctionality, where public intervention is considered as internalizing the ubiquity of external effects of agriculture. Mann (2016), however, claims that only neoliberalism and multifunctionality, due to a strong welfare-economic theoretical backbone, would also qualify as paradigms.

There is thus a strong normative discourse among agricultural experts about the “right” strategy for their sector. The lessons to be learned from the debate around the diversity of capitalism – complementarities that allow for certain characteristics of a society and not for others – have not yet really been learned in the farming sector. It is therefore worthwhile to leave aside the normative debate and empirically analyze the existing diversity of capitalist agricultural systems.

4. Method

Scholars concerned with empirical work on the diversity of capitalism have generally used cluster analysis in order to identify similar patterns among countries (Amable, 2003; Farkas, 2011; Schneider and Paunescu, 2012). There is no reason to change this when shifting attention from the national to the sectoral level. However, as indicated in Section 2, there is a reason to start afresh by identifying appropriate variables for our purpose.

4.1 Variable selection

As mentioned in the previous section, governmental support plays a significant role in shaping this sector. In particular, tariffs for food imports and direct transfer payments to farmers are instruments which are still broadly applied to protect domestic production. The Producer Support Estimate (PSE) by the OECD (2016) has for many years been a widely accepted measure used to quantify the support given to the farming sector. While the PSE is measured in absolute money terms, it becomes more meaningful if set into relation with Gross Farm Revenues (GFR). This number, the percentage PSE, describes how many Cents of one Dollar a farmer owes to the state’s agricultural policy.

In some countries, not only producers but also consumers benefit from generous public policies, making food more affordable. Producer and Consumer Support Estimates add up to the Total Support Estimate (TSE; Tangermann, 2004; OECD, 2016). If set into relation with the country’s GDP, the ratio gives a useful impression of what share of national wealth is used to keep farmers and food consumers happy – or, if negative, how the food sector is used to fund other parts of the economy through taxation, for which Ukraine would be an example.

The size of farms also shapes the agricultural system. While there are many possible ways to statistically measure farm size (Mann et al., 2013), a global comparison is well advised to

focus on acreage. It is obvious that an average Chinese farm with 0.7 hectares must be organized along different lines than an average Australian farm with 3200 hectares. Lowder et al. (2016) provide an excellent overview of the frontiers of knowledge regarding worldwide farm sizes. Admittedly, for some countries with a very bifurcated agricultural structure, the information provided by this variable is of only limited use. Russia and South Africa, for example, have two coexisting agricultural systems in their countries: big commercial farms and a large number of smallholders (Greenberg, 2010; Lerman and Zedik, 2013). The average for these cases is therefore of little importance. However, this weakness is accepted in light of the precious information the variable provides in most other cases.. Consequently, South Africa and Russia were kept in the sample.

Another indicator will be trade balances. Agriculture in countries where food is the main export item will have a different perspective than agriculture in countries where it mainly competes with imports. Most self-sufficiency measures compare calories produced with calories consumed (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). The FAO also uses monetary figures. This value may give a more balanced picture of the trade balance, as it also considers the value of the traded goods, and it will be used for our analysis.

Agriculture is a sector with major environmental impacts, accounting for 9 % of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions and being the most important emitter of methane and nitrous oxide (Sensi, 2016). The resource efficiency of agriculture has become a central concept for scientists (de Wit, 1992; Hayashi, 2000; Keating et al., 2010; Altieri et al., 2012) and policy-makers. As the FAO has collected and published estimates on emissions of nitrous oxide and methane per country, it is useful to set these emissions into relation with the agricultural outputs of the countries concerned, as a rough estimator of environmental resource efficiency.

Last but not least, food expenditure per head was also used as a clustering variable. While food expenditure is usually considered as a proxy for food security (Esturk and Oren, 2014) or income (Oyekale and Adesanya, 2012) in poorer countries, it does not lose its relevance in wealthier regions. The costs borne by households to feed themselves are a good descriptor of the interplay between food prices on the one hand and purchasing power on the other. The amount spent on food also reflects quality components which are difficult to operationalize and many factors from the agri-food chain that are likewise difficult to grasp.

4.2 Variable processing

The variables as described in the previous section are summarized in Table 1. The question for which countries these variables should be collected and processed is answered through data availability and conception issues. On the latter issue, most empirical studies restrict themselves to wealthier countries, because the “varieties” otherwise would often just distinguish poorer from wealthier countries, as Solga (2014) explains.

As another distinction from clustering exercises on general economic characteristics, it does not make sense to treat European countries separately. For more than 50 years, the European Union has enjoyed a Common Agricultural Policy, so that important characteristics are no longer nation-specific, particularly not the degree to which agriculture is subsidized. Therefore, the EU is treated as an entity in the analysis.

Table 1: Variables used for the description of varieties of agriculture

Variable	PSE %	TSE %	Farm size	Suff.	CH ₄	N ₂ O	Expenditure
Explanation	Percentage Producer Support Estimate	Percentage Total Support Estimate of GDP	Average farm size in ha	Value agricultural products consumed as percentage of value agricultural products produced	CO ₂ equivalents of methane divided by food production	CO ₂ equivalents of nitrous oxide divided by food production	Food expenditure per head (US-\$)
Mean	18	0.88	284	139 %	0.87	0.69	562
Minimum	-7	-3.05	0.7	84 %	0.06	0.12	245
Maximum	62	4.57	3243	526 %	1.88	1.30	1117

K-means (Steinhaus, 1956; Jain, 2010) as the most established algorithm of cluster analysis was used in stata. The average farm size was eventually transformed into a logarithmic scale in order to avoid a too-powerful influence on the outcome. After various attempts, it was decided that dividing participating countries into three groups would generate the highest explanatory value.

5. Results

The three clusters are summarized in Table 2. Cluster 1 is the smallest of the three, containing Japan, South Korea, Norway and Switzerland. As an average, more than every second dollar earned in these countries is politically induced. This public support apparently comes to farmers by way of direct payments, rather than through artificially high food prices, as can be seen from the moderate Total Support Estimate. As this cluster contains both Korea and Japan, two countries with average farm sizes of just over one hectare, it is hardly surprising that this cluster has the smallest farm size. It is the only cluster with net food imports. The differences between clusters concerning environmental performance are considerable. It is obvious that Cluster 1 with its protective and small-structured approach produces much lower emissions per unit of production than the other clusters. Per-capita expenditures on food are considerably higher than in other countries, where Switzerland (with 1100 US-\$ per person/year) holds the top place.

On the other side of the global spectrum, Cluster 3 unites countries which are much more directed toward free markets. It contains New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Ukraine, Vietnam and South Africa, with average farm sizes of over 100 hectares. These countries come closest to free markets of the global community. As an average, they largely abstain from subsidizing either farmers or consumers, although some participants such as Ukraine (TSE = -3.05 %) are effectively subsidizing food prices instead of increasing them. 50 percent of the food output in these countries is exported to other countries. It seems that the price for this expansive strategy is high emissions per food produced.

Cluster 2, the largest block, contains Turkey, Russia, Kazakhstan, Israel, Columbia, China, Canada, the USA and the EU. Although food expenditures per capita are considerably lower than for Cluster 1, it is the group with the highest taxation on food products. All other measures are situated in between the two other clusters. There seems to be a broad middle course between a strong export strategy with large farms and cheap food at the expense of the environment and a greener strategy based on small farms, generous subsidies and food imports.

Tab. 2: Results of the cluster analysis

Cluster	PSE %	TSE %	Farm size	Suff.	CH ₄	N ₂ O	Expenditure
1	54	1.2	4.7	84 %	0.41	0.32	832
2	16	1.5	17.3	120 %	0.81	0.69	535
3	1	-0.2	127.7	200 %	1.21	0.91	451

6. Discussion

The clustering on a sectoral level has revealed some remarkable results, particularly if compared to the cluster results on the macro level as obtained, for example, by Amable (2003). The diversity of capitalism becomes even more diverse when broken down on a sectoral level!

An initial finding is that the clusters on the meso level, at least in the case of agriculture, diverge strongly from the results on the macro level. Canada and the US, for example, share a cluster in both cases, but on a macro level they join Australia, which in the agricultural clustering is in a different grouping. In the agricultural analysis, Switzerland is in company with Japan and South Korea, while the latter two form a cluster of their own in Amable's (2003) study.

This leads to a peculiarity of the agricultural clusters. Compared to their macro peers, the single clusters reveal far fewer geographical patterns. Cluster 1, for example, may be shaped on the one hand by the historical experience that self-sufficiency is a worthwhile goal, and on the other hand by climatic and topographic factors making self-sufficiency difficult. However, Norway and South Korea, for example, have few commonalities beyond that, either culturally or geographically.

It is certainly worthwhile to reflect on both the causes and the impact of these differences. Some scholars already have linked different attitudes to different policies. Aerni (2009),

for example, shows that citizens in New Zealand consider agriculture in the context of agricultural competitiveness, while their Swiss counterparts watch new technologies with skepticism when it comes to sustainability aspects. This indicates that different attitudes among voters might be a cause of different varieties of capitalist agriculture; other strains of the literature also name history as a crucial factor. Spoerer (2015) nicely showed how disadvantaged farmers in the European Union managed to make the moral case for a welfare policy in favor of the farming sector. In Australia, where agriculture does not have the traditional face but is rather considered as another entrepreneurial activity, this would not have been possible.

7. Conclusion

The three clusters have been shown to provide some added value for the intra-agricultural discourse. While it is common ground, for example, that Japan, Switzerland and Norway are protective in terms of agricultural trade and pursue the model of multifunctional agriculture, this is much more often put into a context with the EU than with South Korea (e.g., Brunstad

et al., 1999). Thus, the exercise of using sectoral variables for clustering reveals some new patterns.

The results on the sectoral level may be slightly less interesting than those on the macro level, where multi-dimensionality is one of the greatest assets. Finally, the three agricultural clusters can be situated on a rather one-dimensional scale. On one side of this scale, we observe an import-dependent agriculture which enjoys ample subsidies and produces high-priced food, but has relatively low emissions per output. On the other side, a strong and export-oriented sector is doing well without state involvement, while causing environmental pollution. Most countries are in between these two extremes, feeding themselves with some support for the farming community. This indicates, as a worldwide pattern, that societies are willing to transfer resources to farmers to substitute imports. When enough food is available for the population, the rationale for this transfer is apparently lost. The connection to the level of pollution certainly deserves increased future attention.

Still, the main advantage of the “varieties of capitalism” debate certainly also holds for agriculture. The concept teaches us to emphasize complementarities rather than (sometimes artificial) welfare effects. Thus, worldwide agriculture can be sensed as a colorful and rich composition of different, fruitful modes.

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