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The failure of regime transformation: a reply

Raymond F. Hopkins and Donald J. Puchala

We welcome the commentary by Helge Bergesen on our introductory and concluding chapters in the special issue of *International Organization* on the global political economy of food. We have little to offer as a joinder to his comments, since he is in substantial agreement with both our analysis and recommendations. Moreover, his observation that achieving the prescribed regime will be difficult usefully makes explicit a key point implicit in our analysis. His recital of the political and institutional barriers to realizing a transformation of the current regime are especially timely. Certainly the collapse of the negotiations for an international grain reserve to enhance world food security in 1979, and growing difficulties in expanding food aid and assistance to improve food and agricultural development, drive one to pessimistic assessments regarding the degree of change in the current regime invoked by the 1973–74 crisis. In light of these recent failures it is certainly appropriate to dwell on the difficulties blighting the possibility of ever achieving the prescribed regime.

Bergesen does offer two points with which we do take exception, however. First, noting that we overlooked the “problem” of overconsumption in rich countries, he proposes that an attack on such overconsumption might be a useful step that could “lead to a change in distribution of power in the western food systems by strengthening a political/cultural force which works in favor of an international solution to the world hunger problem.” And second, he alleges that the proposition that increased interdependence “leads naturally to enhanced political cooperation” is an implicit assumption in our argument that is empirically contradicted by evidence.

It is true that we did not include overconsumption as a problem in the global political economy of food. The reason is simple: it did not seem ger-

mane. Per capita caloric consumption in the United States and several other industrialized European countries has in fact declined slightly over the last half century. This decrease is due largely to changing lifestyles and taste. People work less hard, expend less energy on the whole, and eat far less starch. The sedentary lifestyle of people in rich countries probably contributes more to health problems than do their nutritional habits. Admittedly and deplorably, gluttony and hunger exist side by side in rich countries, but this issue is not central to the political and economic forces shaping the diplomacy of food. Moreover, the peripheral effects of rich-country diets are mixed. Note that large amounts of grain, which otherwise would have been used for animal feeding, were freed up for export from the United States during the food crisis of 1973–74, as D. Gale Johnson points out.¹ This is a hidden asset in grain-fed animal production. It gave the United States one more degree of backup capability in bearing a large portion of the adjustment caused by the worldwide grain shortfall. If livestock growers had been unable to switch to strategies of slaughtering more animals and putting more on pasture land in response to high grain prices, the plight of the world's poor would probably have been even more adversely affected in the critical shortage years. Thus, overconsumption strikes us as not a food problem; rather it is a health problem.

No doubt there is a correlation between international altruism among the elite of industrialized countries and awareness that eating fat is unhealthy; however this is most likely an artifact of the level of education and the cultural milieu within which such elite circulate. Mass opinion on food issues is rather different, as a March 1979 Gallup poll, undertaken by Carter's Commission of World Hunger, shows. Those with lesser education and income give lower priority to world hunger as a problem. Emphasizing better health through better diets, therefore, seems a dubious prescription for mobilizing public opinion to the point where it might "tip the balance" or lead to "a new international food policy from the western countries." That elite priorities about world hunger need to be altered significantly seems clear; that a focus on overconsumption might accomplish this seems unlikely.

More troublesome is Bergesen's argument concerning economic interdependence. He incorrectly attributes to us the assumption that interdependence leads "naturally" to cooperation. Underlying much of our analysis is an assumption about the effects of interdependence—namely, that significant interdependence, especially when accompanied by disrupting events, forces government and corporate elites to deal with problems arising from such worldwide interconnections. The greater the interdependence, the greater the compulsion for elites to take action. Such action can be defensive or conflictual, as well as collaborative or cooperative. In the current global food regime, and particularly over the last half decade, elite actions have manifested all of these traits. Bergesen is correct to observe an increase in

¹ D. Gale Johnson, "World food institutions: a liberal view," *International Organization* 39,3: 844.

conflict. We are equally correct to note in the same period an increase in collaboration and in cooperation.

In general, we are in disagreement with Bergesen on two points. First, increased interdependence does not lead “naturally” to anything per se (neither cooperation, as he incorrectly alleges we assume, nor conflict, as he argues). Second, responses from 1972 through 1977 to global food problems arising from or soluable through international transactions were characterized by both heightened and cooperative activity. International action was more ineffectual than conflictful—although unquestionably some elements of conflict emerged.

For any problem arising in a context of international economic interdependence, whether conflict or cooperation will be the dominant trait in the responses of concerned actors depends upon various factors, including whether a reduction of dependence is seen as a solution to the problem. For a number of countries increasing their food self-sufficiency is certainly desirable. But it is unclear that achieving greater self-sufficiency among states would increase the consensus needed to achieve greater food security through a system of international reserves, as Bergesen argues. Countries with less stake in food imports would also seem less interested in contributing to reserve mechanisms that would provide for it. As for conflict between First and Third World countries over food issues, it is clear that in specific food arenas, such as the World Food Program, the World Food Council, the FAO, and the 1974 World Food Conference, Group B countries and the Group of 77 countries have regularly clashed over the size of resource transfers and their guaranteed availability through greater international control. Somehow arguments between recipients and donors over the size of the donation do not strike us as evidence of conflict per se, since both sides agree on the principle of donation. It is equally interesting to note the absence of food as a serious item of dispute in those arenas in which North-South conflict is quite sharp and which deal with the more fundamental rules of economic order. For instance at the UNCTAD sessions of 1976 and 1979 and the CIEC meeting of 1976–77 little concern was evidenced over food issues; the Third World did not put these on the central agenda because food was not an area of substantial conflict. Thus while we accept Bergesen’s point that interdependence may increase conflict, we think its most predictable effect is simply to increase the attention and action of elite specialists in different countries when confronted with problems. Both conflictual and collaborative efforts are likely to emerge from attempts to resolve problems that either arise from or may be addressed by interdependent activity.

To summarize, we welcome Bergesen’s commentary. His pessimistic assessment about the prospects for reforming the current food regime is accurate. We are, however, skeptical that an attack on overconsumption in rich countries offers a solution to barriers to regime change and we reject his interpretation of the relationship between economic interdependence and political response, both that which he attributes to us and the opposite—namely, that interdependence promotes conflict.