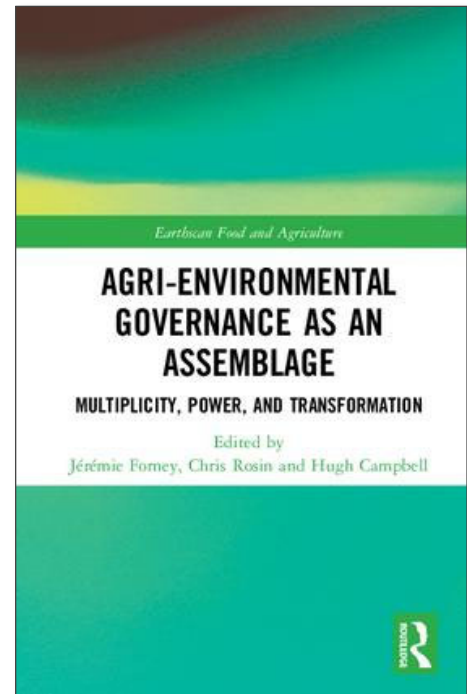


Rethinking control: Complexity in agri-environmental governance research

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Review of *Agri-environmental governance as an assemblage: Multiplicity, power, and transformation*, edited by Jérémie Forney, Chris Rosin, and Hugh Campbell. (2018). Published by Routledge. Available as hardcover and ebook; 236 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.routledge.com/Agri-environmental-Governance-as-an-Assemblage-Multiplicity-Power-and/Forney-Rosin-Campbell/p/book/9781138070738>



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Discourse on governance always faces the challenge of describing, and usually simplifying, the many voices who formally and informally participate in controlling, and therefore governing, shared outcomes for community members both

locally and globally (Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2009). Environmental and agricultural governance faces this problem redoubled, as outcomes and governing bodies cross boundaries between species, affecting humans and nonhumans, animals and otherwise (Latour, 2017; Tsing, 2015). Addressing incoherence, difference, and complexity (Law, 2004) is a general research concern among social scientists who wish to avoid subjugating otherwise marginalized participants. By looking to measurements and research methods that arise from studies outside politics and economics, actors that would be hidden or silenced by political

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economic critiques and metrics may become visible. For engaged governance research, the benefits of this are clear: a more inclusive social science of governing stakeholders. This edited collection brings together diverse international scholarship in agri-food social science research to rethink the framework of agri-environmental governance. The editors frame the selection of essays as efforts to look to the mess of stakeholders, legislators, growers, eaters, food councils, lands, crops, assessments, and so forth as a governing assemblage. By doing this, researchers are able to explore meanings and social experiences that diverge (although do not entirely separate) from neoliberal (e.g., large, corporate) frameworks in ways that complicate the governing underpinnings that are continually at work (*re*)territorializing the world of agriculture, food, and environment policy and praxis.

The collection organizes contributions into three intellectual arcs representative of concerns and techniques brought to light by this approach to agri-environmental governance. The first arc, *Assembling ontologies: Multiplicities and agencies*, includes research on the constructive relations between actors and the discourse (e.g., marketing, food labelling, court arguments, crop consulting, etc.) by which foodways, environmental policy, or governance are more broadly co-produced in the social relations and expressions of humans and materials involved in the *assemblage* of governance. The second arc, *The politics of territorialisation*, looks particularly to the social spaces filled up and enrolled by these assemblings; to put it another way, this arc looks to the flexibility, breadth, and depth of control expressed by these complex governing assemblages and how these assemblage enter into conventionally political and economic spaces. The third and final arc, *Assemblage for building new AEG practices*, takes a more speculative approach, imagining some ways in which assemblage, as an ontological research approach, opens new avenues for future governing formations and collaborations and how dominant methods of governance may be met with resistance when needed.

Forney, Rosin, and Campbell's collection as a whole operates as a sort of continuation and riff on an earlier collection, *Biological Economies* (Le Heron, Campbell, Lewis, & Carolan, 2016), with many of the same authors and editors. In some ways, this book is a more active and pragmatic extension of this earlier collection. In this sense, it shares part of its goals with Roelvink, Martin, and Gibson-Graham's *Making Other Worlds Possible* (2015), which draws from a wide range of disciplines to rethink many approaches to managing and imagining environmental problems and solutions. What this collection offers, which the prior collections do not, is more sustained attention to non-economic ways of governing food production, and environmental care. Take Burch et al.'s examination of the governing responses to the 2011 TEPCO power plant meltdown in Fukushima prefecture.¹ It explores the nuances of food-safety labeling and measurement techniques for safe levels of radioactivity beyond a simplistic economic explanation: the government's monied interest was on limiting the economic loss of agricultural food production damaged by the radioactivity of food near the power plant. This economic motivation becomes the background for a more nuanced exploration of how the language of measurement and the in/visibility of radioactivity in food, alongside the trust of buyers and eaters, all act as interconnected forms of cooperation and resistance in a governing assemblage (2018, pp. 129, 131).


Similarly, O'Connell and Osmand's assemblage approach to understanding farmers' decision-making reveals that the economic bottom line is not always the motivating factor. Instead, "by viewing farmer decision-making as complex assemblages, we propose that incongruities are to be expected, and gains in water quality will come from diversifying outreach and implementation programs from the beginning to increase the number of early adopters and hasten the overall pace of adoption and diffusion of conservation practices over farmers' social networks" (2018, p. 39). In one instance, they find that Carolina

¹ In 2011, the coinciding occurrence of an earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima prefecture set off a chain reaction resulting in multiple nuclear meltdowns and the release of radioactive contaminants into the surrounding region, affecting its inhabitants and the food supply.

farmer's motivations to use water-conserving exclusion fencing techniques diverged widely from one another (2018, p. 49) and was not particularly influenced by economic concerns. The decisions of these farmers most often related to one's sense of aesthetic, neighborliness, and belief in environmental goods (2018, p. 49). Encouraging uptake using diverse methods more effectively addressed the diverse relations, positions, and intentions of the many stakeholders in this (and any) formation of agri-environmental governance.

At times, the many and varied approaches presented in *Agri-Environmental Governance as an Assemblage* can present as disconnected, broad retheorizations of local, national, and international foodways. However, taken together, the collection offers a critical and timely rethinking of the varieties, challenges, and disconnects in a world of agri-environmental governances. And, perhaps most importantly, it offers a peek into what these rethinkings can offer for intentional engagement

with distributed assemblages of governing power in contemporary agri-food regimes. The collection's intellectual gesture is a meaningful contribution to both academic theoreticians and practitioners of agri-food and environmental research. While its message to stakeholders and policy-makers is less direct, it offers a conceptual reordering that meaningfully engages with the socio-relational pragmatics of changes in governance, often revealing that looking to farm-aesthetics, moral orders, or neighborliness may be as (or more) productive than more conventional efforts to apply economic boons or political sticks to promote agri-environmental conservation techniques. In the same sense, organizers, policy-makers, and agri-food stakeholders, particularly at the grassroots, may find the conceptual reordering of governance as assemblage, instead of top-down hierarchy, a productive space in which to imagine new ways forward for more sustainable and ecologically just governance.



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