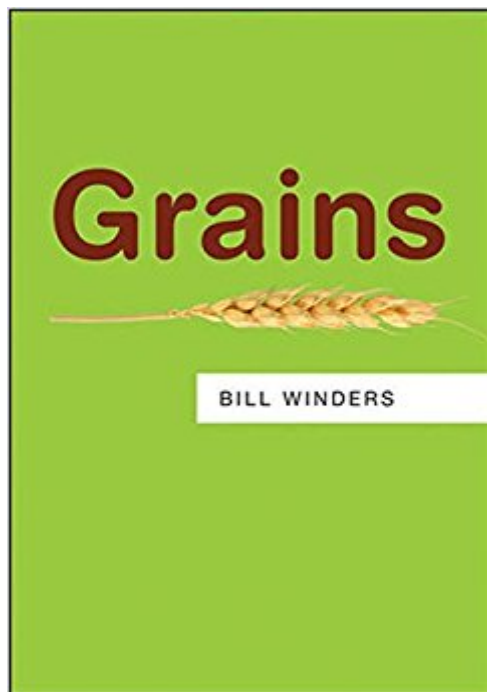


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Grains (Resources)



Synopsis

Grains - particularly maize, rice, and wheat - are the central component of most people's diets, but we rarely stop to think about the wider role they play in national and international policy-making, as well as global issues like food security, biotechnology, and even climate change. But why are grains so important and ubiquitous? What political conflicts and economic processes underlie this dominance? Who controls the world's supply of grains and with what outcomes? In this timely book, Bill Winders unravels the complex story of feed and food grains in the global economy. Highlighting the importance of corporate control and divisions between grains - such as who grows them, and who consumes them - he shows how grains do not represent a unitary political and economic force. Whilst the differences between them may seem small, they can lead to competing economic interests and policy preferences with serious and, on occasions, violent geopolitical consequences. This richly detailed and authoritative guide will be of interest to students across the social sciences, as well as anyone interested in current affairs.

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Customer Reviews

"Grains explores the foundational role that maize, wheat, and rice have played in the construction of global food regimes. Taking a deep dive into the political economy of food, Bill Winders combines trenchant analyses with a clear and engaging narrative about the three crops that influence everything we eat." Eric Holt-Gimenez, Food First, Institute for Food & Development Policy

"Banana wars, the Irish potato famine, food riots, climate change and the price of beer, anti-GM protests, food imperialism, and hegemonic rule are all integral features of food regimes. From production to consumption, Winders unearths the contribution of politics, economics, and geopolitics to the global food regimes of rice, maize, and wheat." Kathleen C Schwartzman, University of Arizona

Bill Winders is an Associate Professor of Sociology in the School of History and Sociology at the Georgia Institute of Technology. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Bill Winders, Associate Professor of Sociology at the Georgia Institute of Technology, tackles "Grains" for Polity's Resources Series. It seemed odd to me that a sociologist was called upon to discuss a topic that I have tended to think of as being about numbers, but "Grains" is about the geopolitics of grains, specifically of wheat, rice, and maize (corn), which account for 90% of the world's grain production. Soybeans are sometimes discussed in conjunction with maize, because they are both primarily feed grains, and quinoa is discussed briefly in chapter four, but Winders focuses on the three big grains. "People throughout the world consume grains as a central component of their diets. Grains are, therefore, a central factor in political stability, economic well-being, and even cultural heritage and traditions." Winders explains how and why. The running theme is that differences between food grains and feed grains have a big impact on policy. Rice and wheat are primarily food grains while maize and soybeans are primarily feed grains for animals. Food grains producers have historically favored supply management and higher prices, while feed grain producers have favored more liberal markets and price competition. The recent expansion in global meat production has increased demand for feed grains, which gives them the dominant political position. Winders takes the reader through the modern history of grain policies, beginning with the global food regime established by the British 1860-1914 and through the food regime established by the United States 1945-1975 (chapter 2) based on the "regulation of agricultural products and markets." Winders explains the origins of this policy and how it spread. The decline of the US food regime after 1975 saw supply management policies dismantled and "increased competition, conflicts, and economic instability" (chapter 3). Winders discusses some examples of political turmoil brought about by the shift in Mexico, where changes in land policy inspired armed rebellion by the EZLN, and the wheat subsidy war between the US and Europe in the 1980s. Winders then examines how the geopolitics of grains relates to world hunger and food insecurity (chapter 4). He looks at the Global Food Crisis of 2007-2008 and its recurrence in 2010-2011 that

destabilized so many governments. Prices for wheat rose 200% in one year despite increased production, which brings the author to his point that agricultural production is not always the solution to food insecurity. Nations sometimes export during a food crisis. There is a chapter about genetically engineered grains. This doesn't address the reasons for acceptance or rejection of GE crops but discusses the patenting of seeds and consolidation of the global seed market since the 1990s and, again, the role of food vs. feed grains. "The balance of power in food grains favors forces opposed to GE crops, while the balance of power in feed grains favors forces in support of GE crops." And the expansion of global meat production demands feed grains, so we know who is going to win that fight. Winders mentions Golden Rice, a GE grain that was touted as a solution to vitamin A deficiency in the developing world. He claims that resistance and legal complications kept Golden Rice off the market, but my understanding is that it had development problems. No one was able to imbue the rice with sufficient quantities of vitamin A. "Grains" last chapter focuses on "how the processes outlined in this book affect people's access to land," namely the policies of land expropriation, which favors privatization and market processes, versus land reform, which pursues redistribution from large landowners to smallholders. The British food regime favored the former; the US food regime favored the latter; now we are back to privatization policies and market-led agrarian reform (MLAR). Land policy is a fascinating and frustrating topic that would require a small library, but Winders explains the reasoning behind the two opposed approaches, the reasons policies changed, and provides some examples of their consequences. Although Winders tends to introduce what he is going to say before he says it, I found "Grains" to be one of the more lucid and straightforward books in the "Resources" series.

Bill Winders is an Associate Professor of Sociology. His previous book, THE POLITICS OF FOOD SUPPLY, examined the geographic competition between different region of the US. In GRAINS he broadens his approach to look at the 3 major grains -maize, rice, and wheat- and how they influence world politics and economics. As I said in the review title, GRAINS won't be for everyone. This is an extremely data rich book, and as you would expect from the publisher, Polity, it has an academic flavor. I liked the book because it opened my eyes to how these three grains have influenced and are influencing the world. The discussion of price supports, export subsidies, and tariffs is particular poignant given current political discussions. There are numerous groups who will find GRAINS a useful read. Commodities traders might find the overview of keen interest. People like me will find the politics of production and hunger of interest.

This is a book which is focused on the international grain market and varied grains as commodities. It is well indexed so if you have a particular interest or question, it is easy to find. For example, I have been hearing about Golden Rice since nursing school and the potential that this Vitamin A infused rice could wipe out nutrition related blindness. I was always curious what happened to it. It seems to have gotten caught up in red tape as well as the general later hysteria about GMO goods. Just a couple pages on it here but definitely answered my questions. There is a lot of geopolitical content here and you become very aware of the international implications of crop growth. Some of the chapters were more technical than my interest but I did come away with a much better understanding of the mercantile aspects of grains.

Grains is written in a somewhat academic - but reader friendly - style that covers both the political and economic realities surrounding the cultivation, distribution and habits associated with each of the three major grains outlined in the book. That brings me to the first "wish list" item...more grains to be included. Yes, these are the major ones and as such, have disproportionate importance yet that alone is not sufficient for a full understanding or discourse; what emerging factors might change the status quo, what is the role (if any) of less popular versions of grains and how are we (as a society) to plan, evaluate, monitor and cultivate alternatives? This is still a very interesting book and well worth the time investment.

As the synopsis on the back of Bill Winders's "Grains" says, "...we rarely stop to think about the wider role they (grains) play in national and international policy-making..." Count me in that "we" because while I know on the periphery that food and access to food is a global issue, I didn't realize how politicized it is. Winders has a clear and concise way of writing so he's able to communicate to the reader, even one as new to the topic as myself, the subject matter at hand. He takes the reader through the various areas of grains starting from grains for food and grains for feed and going from there. It isn't a long read and again, Winders keeps it understandable so I felt like I was learning as I was going along rather than feeling lost. It is a big topic though so if you have to start somewhere on this topic, this is a great book to start with in how a grain affects us on a socio-political-global scale.

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