

Book review

Agriculture, Sustainability and Competition Law: Policy Paradigms and Their Legal Implications by *Martin Milán Csirszki*

Abstract

Agriculture, Sustainability and Competition Law: Policy Paradigms and Their Legal Implications by Martin Milán Csirszki, published in English by Routledge in 2025, examines competition law and policy as applied to agricultural producers within the competing paradigms of neoliberal agricultural policy and food sovereignty. The book aims to explore the growing pressures faced by agricultural producers arising from market liberalisation and sustainability concerns, and the resulting debates on the relationship between competition, agriculture, and sustainability. By bridging disciplinary gaps between competition law and agricultural policy, the monograph develops an integrated perspective with a particular focus on sustainability. This review outlines the book's main contributions and reflects on the readership to whom it will be most valuable.

Keywords: Book review, agriculture, sustainability, competition law, food sovereignty

Book Review

It is always a notable achievement when a monograph is authored by a practitioner-scholar who combines deep doctrinal expertise with sustained engagement in policy debates. Martin Milán Csirszki's *Agriculture, Sustainability and Competition*

* | dr. jur., JUDr., LL.M., Ph.D., Senior researcher, Central European Academy, Budapest, e-mail: hajnalka.szinek.csutortoki@centraleuropeanacademy.hu, ORCID: ID 0000-0002-1535-6750.

Hajnalka SZINEK CSÜTÖRTÖKI: Book review. *Agriculture, Sustainability and Competition Law: Policy Paradigms and Their Legal Implications* by *Martin Milán Csirszki*. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Law* ISSN 1788-6171, 2026 Vol. XXI No. 40 pp. 537–544



Law: Policy Paradigms and Their Legal Implications,¹ published in English by Routledge as part of the Routledge Research in Competition Law series,² exemplifies such a contribution. Across 290 pages, the book examines the complex relationship between agricultural policy, competition law, and sustainability, engaging questions that have become increasingly central to both legal scholarship and regulatory practice. Rather than analysing these fields separately, the author of the book brings them into a sustained dialogue, producing a synthesis that bridges multiple disciplinary perspectives. The resulting approach is attentive not only to efficiency but also to the social, environmental, and policy considerations that shape the current regulatory environment.

The mentioned synthesising character may be understood in at least two distinct senses. First, it brings together strands of scholarship (namely competition law, agricultural policy, and sustainability studies) that have traditionally developed separately. By integrating these fields into dialogue, Csirszki demonstrates how their interactions shape both normative frameworks and practical regulation of agri-food markets. Second, the book reflects a broader shift within competition law itself, moving away from a narrowly efficiency-driven, consumer welfare-centric paradigm toward a broader, policy-sensitive framework. This approach, which is increasingly visible across Europe, recognises that competition law cannot be fully understood or effectively applied when divorced from social, economic, and environmental considerations that define specific sectors such as agriculture.

After a detailed introduction and before the concluding summary, the book is structured into four main parts, each building the argument in a clear, logically progressive way. It begins by examining the clash between agriculture and competition policy (Part II), then turns to the role of sustainability within both areas (Part III). This is followed by a detailed analysis of the competition rules applying to agri-food markets and to sustainability agreements of agri-food market players (Part IV). Finally, it considers how competing policy paradigms, particularly neoliberalism and food sovereignty, shape and interact regulatory outcomes (Part V).³

From a disciplinary perspective, the monograph is situated at the intersection of competition law and agricultural law – two fields with distinct traditions and normative orientations. Competition law, especially in its neoliberal and Chicago School variants,⁴ has long emphasised efficiency and consumer welfare. Agricultural law, by contrast, has historically incorporated social, distributive, and environmental objectives. The author of the monograph shows that this structural

1 | Csirszki 2025.

2 | A complete list of books in the Routledge Research in Competition Law series is available on the publisher's website. See: <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Research-in-Competition-Law/book-series/COMPETITIONLAW> [19.12.2025].

3 | See the Contents of the book.

4 | Cf. Hovenkamp & Scott Morton 2020, 1852; Witt 2019, 172–213.

tension has consistently influenced the legal treatment of agricultural markets throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, both in the European Union and the United States.

From a methodological perspective, the monograph adopts a consciously interdisciplinary approach, bringing together doctrinal legal analysis, policy evaluation, historical context, and comparative perspectives.⁵ At the heart of the analysis is a distinction between narrow antitrust law (focused on anti-competitive agreements, abuse of dominance, and mergers), and broader competition law (understood as encompassing sector-specific regulatory instruments that govern market fairness, producer cooperation, and trade practices).⁶ This distinction is particularly important in the context of agriculture, where regulation must address structural imbalances, concentrated downstream markets, and the social and environmental dimensions of production. By adopting this framework, Csirszki treats legal rules not as abstract, technical constructs, but as practical tools through which public policy objectives (such as income stability for farmers, rural development, and sustainability) are advanced.

Rather than treating sustainability as a recent or external constraint on competition law, the author shows that agricultural policy has historically held a privileged position in relation to antitrust enforcement. Sector-specific exemptions, rules governing producer organisations, and regimes on unfair trading practices illustrate that agriculture continues to be regulated in light of its particular economic, social, and environmental characteristics. While sustainability considerations are increasingly visible in competition policy discourse, the monograph makes clear that it has long been more deeply embedded within agricultural policy than within antitrust doctrine as such.

One of the major contributions of Martin Milán Csirszki's *Agriculture, Sustainability and Competition Law: Policy Paradigms and Their Legal Implications* lies in its detailed exploration of the relationship between agricultural and competition policy. The author traces the historical privileging of agriculture within competition law, showing how sector-specific exemptions, producer organisation rules, and regulations on unfair trading practices have long shielded agricultural markets from strict antitrust enforcement. He highlights the divergent goals of these policy domains: agricultural policy is fundamentally producer-focused, aiming to secure fair farm incomes and livelihoods, while competition policy is consumer-oriented, prioritising low prices, product quality, and free choice. These tensions are intensified by market structures, as concentrated processing, wholesale, and retail markets exert downward pressure on farm-gate prices, creating outcomes that competition law interprets as efficiency gains but agricultural policy perceives as detrimental to producers. The book demonstrates that, in practice, agricultural

5 | Cf. Csirszki 2025, 16–23.

6 | Csirszki 2025, 30.

policy often prevails, using antitrust exemptions and regulatory tools to protect producers' economic and social interests.

Sustainability serves as a central analytical lens throughout the book. The author traces its emergence in agricultural policy during the 1990s, decades before competition law incorporated environmental and social objectives, and highlights how sector-specific exemptions have long privileged sustainability. In the EU, Art. 210a of the CMO Regulation⁷ provides the only binding antitrust exemption for sustainability agreements in the agricultural sector, and it operates more flexibly than general soft-law tests. While environmental policy integration has become a core element of sustainable agricultural governance, the author shows that in competition law, social considerations remain largely implicit, surfacing primarily where agricultural policy derogations intersect with enforcement priorities. The author of the book critically examines the presumed desirability and feasibility of integrating sustainability into competition law, demonstrating the limits of efficiency-driven frameworks when confronted with complex environmental and social imperatives.⁸

A notable strength of the monograph is its sustained engagement with the food sovereignty paradigm, which the author treats not as rhetorical or marginal, but as a serious policy framework capable of reshaping competition law analysis. Csirszki traces the evolution of food sovereignty from its initial formulation in 1996 to the 2007 Nyéléni Declaration,⁹ situating it as a normative counterpoint to neo-liberal agricultural policy.¹⁰ Food sovereignty foregrounds producers' economic and ecological interests, challenges market liberalisation, and emphasises social and environmental justice, offering a conceptual lens through which the limits of conventional antitrust law can be assessed. The discussion is further enriched by engagement with ordoliberal competition theory, particularly the Freiburg School's¹¹ focus on maintaining competitive order and protecting economic autonomy. Drawing on thinkers such as Wilhelm Röpke and Constantin von Dietze, the author highlights the paradox of agriculture: a sector characterised by near-complete competition at the production level, yet marked by significant structural disadvantages in downstream markets. These insights underscore the need for regulatory frameworks capable of safeguarding not only efficiency but also social equity.¹² In this respect, the ordoliberal perspective serves as a conceptual bridge

7 | Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products and repealing Council Regulations (EEC) No 922/72, (EEC) No 234/79, (EC) No 1037/2001 and (EC) No 1234/2007 [2013] OJ L347/671.

8 | Csirszki 2025, 73–74.

9 | Declaration of Nyéléni, February 2007, <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>. [28.01.2026].

10 | Csirszki 2025, 189–190.

11 | In connection with this, see, for example, Behrens 2015. See also Csirszki 2025, 213.

12 | Röpke 1942, 111–112; von Dietze 1942, 129–157.

between conventional competition law and the normative concerns articulated by the food sovereignty paradigm.¹³

Csirszki's comparative analysis of EU and U.S. regulation further illustrates how these theoretical insights operate in practice. EU law explicitly allows pre-production coordination and supply restrictions within producer organisations, incorporates sustainability considerations into sector-specific exemptions, and links antitrust assessment to the objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy. By contrast, U.S. law focuses mainly on post-production activities, imposes stricter limits on production coordination, and generally interprets instruments such as the Capper-Volstead¹⁴ and Packers and Stockyards Acts through a consumer welfare lens. Despite these differences, both systems share the goal of strengthening producers' bargaining power, though the EU framework more fully integrates social, environmental, and sector-specific objectives than its U.S. counterpart.¹⁵

Beyond its focus on sectoral and doctrinal issues, the monograph also develops an implicit theory about the limits of competition law. Sustainability is not treated as an internal mechanism capable of reshaping antitrust's core objectives; rather, it is framed as an external normative demand that can be accommodated only through carefully circumscribed exemptions and sector-specific regimes. In this regard, the author takes a deliberately cautious stance toward the prevailing optimism about surrounding policy integration. His analyses highlights both the conceptual ambiguities and the institutional constraints involved in incorporating sustainability objectives into competition law, particularly when the latter remains grounded in economic efficiency and market openness. The sustainability-competition nexus is thus approached not as a matter of doctrinal interpretation, but as a question of legal design, the allocation of regulatory competences, and broader political economy considerations.

The monograph is also prescriptive. The author advocates a cascading threshold system to address buyer power *ex ante*, combining downstream market shares with suppliers' economic dependence, and recommends implementing reforms through soft-law instruments and interdepartmental coordination within the EU context. Analogies, such as the 'murderer with a weapon', convey the strategic logic of preventative regulation, reflecting a nuanced understanding of policy design and operational feasibility.¹⁶ Throughout, the book links legal doctrine with historical, economic, and social considerations, showing that conventional antitrust metrics of price and output fail to capture the multidimensional harms faced by agricultural producers in concentrated markets.

The book is supported by a well-structured scholarly background, reflecting the author's deep and sustained engagement with the subject matter. The references

13 | Csirszki 2025, 213–215.

14 | Frederick 2002, 68.

15 | For more information, see, for example, Rosales 2004, 1497–1498.

16 | Csirszki 2025, 244.

are carefully categorised, allowing readers to navigate sources with ease. The work draws on an extensive body of scholarship, including 483 items, alongside 20 newspaper sources that situate the analysis within broader public and societal debates. In addition, 57 institutional documents are cited, demonstrating close attention to the work of relevant organisations and policy-making bodies. The legal dimension is thoroughly documented through 45 references to laws,¹⁷ as well as 44 cases. This comprehensive referencing is further complemented by a detailed index, improving the book's ease of use and facilitating targeted research.

It is clear that the monograph goes far beyond the straightforward presentation of basic information typical of lecture notes or schematic teaching aids. Rather than offering a simplified or purely descriptive overview, the author undertakes a more ambitious scholarly enterprise. The work is characterised by analytical depth, conceptual rigor, and a deliberate engagement with the subject matter. Rather than limiting itself to the presentation of primary knowledge, the book – by integrating theoretical reflection, contextual interpretation, and systematic evaluation – encourages readers to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the field. In this sense, it functions not only as an educational tool but also as a substantial academic contribution, inviting reflection, debate, and further research.

Overall, *Agriculture, Sustainability and Competition Law: Policy Paradigms and Their Legal Implications* represents a significant and timely contribution to legal scholarship. The monograph addresses a problem that has become increasingly difficult to ignore in both academic debate and policy practice: how competition law functions in agricultural markets that are expected to deliver efficiency, sustainability, and socially acceptable outcomes for producers. By examining this issue through the lens of competing policy paradigms – particularly neoliberal agricultural policy and food sovereignty – Csirszki makes a thoughtful and well-substantiated contribution to debates on the regulation of agri-food markets. The book will therefore appeal not only to scholars of competition and agricultural law, but also to policymakers and practitioners concerned with how agricultural regulation can adopt to growing sustainability challenges.

17 | Including both binding legislation and soft-law instruments.

Reference list

1. Behrens P (2015) *The Ordoliberal Concept of “Abuse” of a Dominant Position and Its Impact on Article 102 TFEU*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2658045 [29.01.2026].
2. Csirszki MM (2025) *Agriculture, Sustainability and Competition Law: Policy Paradigms and Their Legal Implications*, Routledge, London.
3. Frederick DA (2002) *Antitrust Status of Farmer Cooperatives: The Story of the Capper-Volstead Act*, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
4. Glick M (2019) *American Gothic: How Chicago Economics Distorts ‘Consumer Welfare’ in Antitrust*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3423081 [29.01.2026].
5. Hovenkamp HJ & Scott Morton F (2020) Framing the Chicago School of Antitrust Analysis, *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 168(7), pp. 1843–1878, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3481388>.
6. Rosales WE (2004) Dethroning Economic Kings: The Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921 and Its Modern Awakening, *Wisconsin Law Review* 2004/5, pp. 1497–1533.
7. Röpke W (1942) *International Economic Disintegration*, William Hodge and Company Limited, London.
8. von Dietze C (1942) Landwirtschaft und Wettbewerbsordnung, *Schmollers Jahrbuch*, pp. 129–157.
9. Witt AC (2019) The European Court of Justice and the More Economic Approach to EU Competition Law – Is the Tide Turning?, *The Antitrust Bulletin* 64(2), pp. 172–213, DOI: 10.1177/0003603X19844637.