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WHO'S COOKING THE FOOD SYSTEM?

Globalization & the struggle for food sovereignty

By Nettie Wiebe

“To parallel our universal political rights, we have not yet established universal economic rights, such as the right to life-sustaining resources or the right to participate in economic decision-making.”

FRANCES MOORE LAPPÉ, *WORLD HUNGER: TWELVE MYTHS*

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF Human Rights sets forth certain basic rights that “all members of the human family” share. Curiously, however, *the right to sufficient food* is not specifically enshrined within the Declaration, even though many people would consider it to be a basic human right—a right that is increasingly in need of defending.

Adopting a rights-based food system would require a radical reconception of our relationship to food. It would also require taking a long, hard look at who has power within the food system—as well as looking at who *should* have power.

If food were recognized as a basic human right—and if hunger were seen as a violation of that right—then governments would be obliged to shoulder a considerably larger responsibility than many, including our own, currently assume. The charity of food banks would have to be replaced with the self-sufficiency of local food security networks.

As you can see, the question of access to food very quickly becomes a political question. Food—who has it, who doesn’t, and why—is an inherently political issue, and control over food, from seed to supermarket to supper tables, is a powerful tool that is at stake in struggles worldwide. Beyond being very profitable, food gives those who control it the power, intentionally or inadvertently, to re-organize markets, alter ecological systems, and destroy cultures. That power is also increasingly being concentrated in the hands of a small number of transnational agri-business corporations under the enforcement of neo-liberal trade agreements.

Under the banner of “globalization,” these corporations are building a global food system that is engineered to maximize their profits. But millions of peasants, small farmers and citizens are resisting this destructive corporate control and demanding “food sovereignty”—the right to produce their own food in ways that are culturally and ecologically appropriate and sustainable.

You are what you eat

FOOD PLAYS AN INTEGRAL ROLE IN shaping one’s choices, one’s values, and one’s relationship with the environment. For us to make healthy and appropriate choices, we need to know something about our food. In fact, we need to know *a lot more* about our food than many of us currently do.

To illustrate this point: I teach a class called “Food, Faith and the Rural Community” for graduate students in a seminary. The first assignment I set for them is to go away and learn something about the food they eat. I ask them to pick an item they eat fairly regularly—their Saturday night pizza, their loaf of white bread, their raspberry jam—and learn something about it. What are the ingredients, for instance? Where did they come from? How far did they travel? How much were the farmers paid for their produce?



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Consistently, my students find the assignment much more difficult than it originally appears. A student who has chosen to research his favourite brand of chocolate chip cookies, for instance, will often come back on the day the assignment is due to tell me, first, that he has decided to focus only on the chocolate chip, and second, that he needs an extension.

To discover where the chocolate in a chocolate chip actually comes from is not such an easy thing. You have to trace the ingredients back to various parts of the world, and you may have a hard time getting the companies to tell you where they get their ingredients. They may source a given ingredient from various places, and may consider the answers to your questions to be proprietary knowledge.

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With a bit of digging, however, the global nature of the system begins to reveal itself. Food travels. Much of the food we eat has travelled thousands of kilometres. Even if it was produced nearby, it has probably been sent somewhere else to be repackaged, processed and re-labelled before it comes back to you. And the farther it has travelled, the harder it is to know anything about the conditions under which it was grown, harvested, or packaged.

Why is this a problem? Because the less you know about something, the harder it is to make clear choices that reflect your values—and the harder it is to understand and be accountable for the consequences of your actions.

Furthermore, the less you know, the harder it is to be democratically engaged in the world, because democracy is premised on two things: knowledge, and a sense of shared

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DAVE OSWALD MITCHELL

responsibility. Food is less and less the subject of that kind of decision-making, both at the individual and the community level. These crucial decisions are increasingly being made neither by the communities that produce the food, nor the communities that consume it—but instead by the transnational corporations that stand to profit from both.

Wendell Barry, an American poet, essayist and farmer, notes that one of the primary requirements of industrialization is a separation of people, places, and products from their histories. Our food system is highly industrialized, which means that our food comes to us as if it had no history, as if it had simply fallen from the sky.

If there is any truth to the cliché “you are what you eat,” then we should be honest about the fact that most of us do not have the slightest idea what we are. We know so little about what we eat that we might as well be tagged, like those cheap little toys, with labels reading “100 percent unknown fibres.”

Manufacturing hunger

OUR LACK OF CURIOSITY ABOUT FOOD may be a symptom of the fact that most of us generally don't have to worry about going hungry. Unfortunately, however, there are many in the world who *do* have cause for worry. Presently there are some 850 million people who do not share the plenty that many of us enjoy—who deal with hunger on a regular basis. Ten years ago, that number was around 800 million. Hunger, worldwide, is increasing—not because there is not enough food to go around, but because food goes where the profit is, rather than where the need is. As the authors of *World Hunger: Twelve Myths* argue, “the root cause of hunger isn't a scarcity of food or land; it's a scarcity of democracy”—particularly *economic* democracy, the right to participate in decisions about how resources are allocated. This basic point remains true even as the food system comes under increasing pressure from climate change, soil depletion, and so on.

In a perverse irony, reducing barriers to trade in agricultural

products—something neo-liberal trade agreements have consistently foisted on developing countries—has not improved the flow of food to those who need it. Instead, it has increased the amount of food flowing from the hungry to those who are well-fed (and even over-fed). Land traditionally used for subsistence farming has been diverted to the production of more lucrative crops for export to wealthier customers, thereby reducing local food supplies while enslaving farmers to international commodity prices. Fertile land in India grows flowers for centerpieces on European tables and the best valleys in Honduras produce bananas for North American fruit baskets, while millions of displaced, impoverished peasants hunger for rice and vegetables. Meanwhile, mass-produced, subsidized produce from industrialized countries is dumped into local markets, often as tax-deductible “food aid,” thereby undermining prices for those farmers still struggling to make a livelihood there. The familiar “cost/price” squeeze that has driven thousands of Canadian families off the farm, when applied by corporate agri-businesses and held in place with trade agreements, crushes peasant agriculture and local control over food resources, with devastating results.

Lean and mean: the industrial model

THE WIDE VARIETY OF PRODUCTS we find in the grocery store may lead us to think that globalization is exposing us to a greater diversity of food. But this apparent explosion of variety is largely illusory. Both worldwide and in North America, the variety of food is actually shrinking. Two varieties of apples, for example, make up about 50 percent of the North American market. Seventy-three percent of the lettuce in North America is iceberg lettuce—one variety. It is estimated that about 75 percent of diversity has been lost in the world's 20 most important food crops over the past half-century.

Short-sightedly, the industrialized food system is standardizing production and moving to fewer and fewer varieties of crops. This loss of biodiversity represents many dangers,

including increased susceptibility to disease and greater risk of massive crop failures.

As a farmer, I can state with utmost certainty that it is not farmers driving this trend—neither here in Canada, nor anywhere else in the world. Rural people everywhere are faring badly under this system. Whether you are producing a cash crop for the export market or a food staple for your domestic market, the crops that farmers are growing are increasingly devalued, while the cost of inputs keeps growing. There's a lot of money in the food system, but more and more of that money is going to a smaller number of huge companies.

Agri-business is in the process of reorganizing itself to become increasingly profitable and increasingly concentrated, with fewer and fewer companies taking control of larger parts of the food system. The power of companies like Cargill, Monsanto, and ConAgra within the food system is unprecedented. These are enormously profitable empires. And you and I shore up that profitability, because we eat more or less three times a day. The entire food system is built on an industrial model that dictates increased production, increased inputs, and standardization of both production methods and the resulting products. These are the dictates of industrialism: large-scale production, standardized processing and limited variation.

This standardization of people, of ideas and of seeds is a brutal, violent process. It takes its toll not just on the people who work the land, but on the land itself.

Agriculture and the environment

THE STANDARDIZATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION of the global food system has had such an enormous environmental impact that not only has there been an astonishing loss of biodiversity, but it is also affecting the climate and the water basins, the air quality and the soil. Half of the world's 500 largest rivers, for instance, are now seriously depleted. Dozens run dry before reaching the sea. This is principally due to dams and the agricultural uses of water. There is water pollution even in a sparsely-populated place like Saskatchewan because of our methods of agricultural production. The adverse effects of intensive and high-input agricultural production on our water systems are undeniable.

Furthermore, when our oranges come from Florida, our lamb chops from New Zealand, our organic green peppers from Israel, and our rice from Thailand, we are clearly not doing enough to reduce our use of fossil fuels.

With all the talk of "sustainability" these days, it is worth remembering what *unsustainable* really means: it means *we simply can't go on like this forever*. Our food system is literally unsustainable, and if we don't change it—and soon—we will suffer the consequences.

Learning to love the potato

ALL OVER THE WORLD, THERE ARE people who are coming to exactly this conclusion. People are experimenting with ways of rebuilding our food system from the ground up, and they are advocating for alternative models that we can implement. Bringing these alternatives into being, however,

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will take a fundamental change in the ways we conceive our relationship to food.

That's where that whole concept of *food sovereignty* emerges. The effects of the global, industrialized food system have led a lot of peasant leaders, speaking through organizations like the Via Campesina, to stand up and say, "we cannot allow control of our food systems to be taken from us. We have a right to eat and to produce food in ways that are culturally and ecologically appropriate and sustainable."

A lot of the initial impetus for the food sovereignty struggle has come from the wisdom of people who are still living much closer to the land, people who understand the value of the ecological systems within which they produce food. Internationally, the whole model of food sovereignty, led by farmers in the Global South, has become a vigorous, lively struggle. More and more people are beginning to see that the loss of local control over the food system is lethal, not only for the people who grow the food, but also for the people who consume it.

We need to unhook ourselves from this globalized food system that is controlled by a few corporations. We must begin to reassert control over the food system in our own neighbourhoods and our own bio-regions. Farmers are not going to be able to do this on their own. And Western governments, closely advised by agri-business leaders, are certainly not going to democratize the food system for us. Broadly-based coalitions of concerned citizens are going to have to struggle to retake popular control of the food system.

We have to give up the superficial view that somehow we are better off if we are eating a so-called exotic fruit from some far-away place versus something that's in season here at home. This means giving up avocados, and learning to love the potato. That's the sort of mental shift we need to make.

We should not see this shift as limiting our choices. If we can reclaim food sovereignty from the transnationals, we will, in fact, have richer, more integrated menus and lives. We will certainly have happier rural communities. And we will also have cleaner water and air, and the prospect of a planet that doesn't collapse around us because we have eaten out its innards.

And then, of course, we will be able to eat together with great joy. We will have feasts, knowing that those who come after us will also be able to feast. 🍌

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