

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE REQUIRES DEMOCRATIC FOOD SYSTEMS

By Nicholas Rose

There is a strong sense of *déjà vu* in the late Northern summer of 2012. The worst droughts in living memory have devastated corn and soybean crops in the United States and Canada; and extreme heat is damaging wheat yields in the breadbaskets of Russia and Ukraine. With increasing volumes of grain diverted to meet government-mandated targets for biofuel production, commodity traders are bidding up futures contracts. As in 2008, the result will be sharply rising food prices and another phase of the ongoing global food crisis, with all the intensified human suffering and political upheaval that this entails.

There is a tendency amongst both academic and popular commentators alike to resort to naturalistic metaphors such as ‘a perfect storm’ and ‘tsunami’ to describe such phenomena. This language obscures more than it reveals. Every element of the global food crisis, including anthropogenic climate change, has its origins in human systems and decisions. In particular, the triumph of neoliberalism in the early 1990s saw the ideological promotion of a marketised and privatised conception of ‘food security’, which had its institutional

expressions in the policies of structural adjustment and free trade in the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organisation, respectively. While these global governance institutions claimed to be delivering food security for all via the market, experience suggests that the principal beneficiaries of their policies have been agri-food corporations and financial intermediaries.

According to the marketised conception of food security, countries in the global South should abandon the goal of domestic food self-sufficiency via the national production of grains, in favour of export specialisation according to the doctrine of comparative advantage (Patnaik 2010: 95-6). National systems of procurement and price controls were accordingly dismantled, and with them domestic grain stocks fell sharply, leading to a majority of countries in the South being heavily dependent on food imports by 2008 (*ibid*). The poorest sectors of those societies were rendered severely vulnerable to price fluctuations on global markets (McMichael 2010: 62).

As in other spheres of human life, the most clearly apparent legacy of the era of neoliberal capitalism in food and



agriculture is sharply rising inequality (Duménil and Lévy 2001: 578; Harvey 2005; Guthman 2011: 62). It is no exaggeration to categorise the global food system as oligarchic, even plutocratic, with a small number of giant transnational corporations controlling the sectors of research and development, proprietary seed, agri-chemicals, grain trading, meat packing, food processing and, increasingly, retailing, to the detriment of most producers and consumers alike (Patel 2007: 12-15). The system is designed to meet the needs of corporations for profit and capital accumulation, with the goals of human health and ecosystem integrity being secondary or tertiary considerations. As proof, we need only cite a few statistics.

First, despite the fact that the world produces sufficient food for 11 billion people, close to 1 billion are malnourished (Bello 2011). Secondly, the rapid worldwide proliferation of the junk and fast food industries has resulted in a global obesity pandemic, now affecting in excess of 400 million people (Swinburn et al 2011). Thirdly, as much as 75% of all food produced in industrial countries is wasted (Stuart 2009). Finally, the corporate-controlled, industrialised food system is quite likely the single largest contributor to global warming, not to mention a whole suite of other environmental disasters associated with the proliferation of 'green deserts' (Altieri 1999: 20; UN 2005; Böhm and Brei 2008; Altieri and Pengue 2006; Patel 2007: 189-191). That the governments of the leading capitalist countries can continue to tout a system that has become so perversely dysfunctional as the best we are capable

of is testament to the dogged irrationality of their faith in free markets and free trade. And of their wholesale capitulation to the lobbying might of 'Big Food' (Nestle 2002: viii, 5; Swinburn 2011).

On one level, the plutocratic global food system faces a crisis of legitimacy, as the perversity of its operation, and the extent of its dysfunctionality, becomes more widely known. A crisis of legitimacy does not, however, translate into a systemic crisis, as long as the circuits of production and consumption can continue to be closed, enabling the system to expand and capital accumulation to persist. On another level, the system is confronted by a series of 'accelerating biophysical contradictions' (Weis 2010) which have the very real capacity to undermine its continued conditions of existence.

The origins of these biophysical contradictions can be traced to the institutionalisation by neoclassical economics of the practice of cost externalisation, in which 'nature' is treated, not as a factor of production that must be paid and accounted for like labour or rent or inputs, but as a 'free gift' (Patel 2010: 43-4; Albritton 2009: 28; Moore 2008: 56). Taken to its logical conclusion, this means that there is no limit in free market doctrine as to how far social goods, such as water, soil and air quality, can decline (McMurty 1997: 648). Contemporary orthodox economics, in its 'life-blind accounting', effectively obscures from view virtually the entirety of the foundations which makes 'economic' activity possible in the first place (McMurty 2003: 386).



These externalities constitute 'a vast series of implicit subsidies to cheap industrial food' which, combined with the large explicit subsidies funnelled to corporate agri-business in the US and Europe, greatly enhance the competitiveness of the globalising capitalist food system *vis-à-vis* 'more labour-intensive agricultural systems' (Weis 2010: 316). However, while some externalities, such as the costs of dietary related ill-health, can effectively be socialised, there are several others which cannot. These include 'soil erosion and salinization'; the drawdown of global freshwater supplies; biodiversity and 'ecosystem services' loss; the contribution of industrialised agriculture to climate change; and 'the intractable dependence of industrial methods upon a finite resource base, particularly

fossilised biomass' (Weis 2010: 316). This dependence is such that the industrialised food system now requires ten calories of fossil fuels to produce one calorie of food (Heinberg 2011; Martenson 2011). Such a ratio at once reveals the extreme fragility of the system as a whole in an era of declining cheap oil, and the necessity of politicising debates regarding the transition to a 'low-carbon economy' in order to overcome the inequalities inherent in 'capitalist configurations of scarcity' (Bridge 2011: 316-321; Panayotakis 2011).

The conclusion to be drawn from the above discussion is that industrialising capitalist agriculture finds itself at a serious impasse; and yet its promoters in Northern governments apparently find themselves capable only of urging its continuation and expansion because their worldview is so constrained by orthodox economics, and the vested interests of large corporations, that they cannot see any alternative. Further, the 'long waves' of capitalist expansion over centuries have in turn rested on a series of agricultural revolutions, beginning with the first English agricultural revolution of the 'long seventeenth century'; succeeded by the second English agricultural revolution of the nineteenth century, and most recently the industrialisation of agriculture, led by the USA, in the twentieth (Moore 2010: 403). These revolutions have played this enabling role by bringing about, through a combination of outright 'plunder' (in the form of the dispossession of indigenous



peoples of their land and resources) and technologically-driven productivity gains, an 'ecological surplus', with 'cheap food' at its centre, that has managed to restrain the cost of labour relative to other factors of production, and so enable sustained profitability (Gutham 2011: 54; Moore 2010: 392-3).

The trouble is that as capitalist industrial agriculture encounters its biophysical contradictions in the form of a series of planetary boundaries and a steadily widening 'ecological rift' between humanity and nature (Foster et al 2011: 76-79; Rockstrom et al 2009), and as the global capitalist system as a whole now appears to be stagnating and entering a period of crisis, no new agricultural revolution, and thus no new 'ecological surplus', is in sight. Large hopes have been, and continue to be, placed in genetically modified organisms, but the evidence to date reveals a disappointing 'failure to yield' (Sherman 2009). The current era of cheap food may be drawing to a close, thus elevating the current crisis into a truly systemic, 'epochal' one, and intensifying the uncertainties and risks of the decades ahead (Moore 2010: 398).

Responses to these dynamics are diverging. On the one hand, the major capitalist powers and their allies are, as noted, seeking to advance the 'free markets' and 'free trade' agenda to the benefits of their corporations and exporters, in the name of a particular conception of 'food security'.

Secondly, some states (e.g. Arab oil states, China, Korea) are leading players in a 'global land-grab' to shore up their own domestic food security (Rosset 2011:

21). Corporations and hedge funds are also major actors in one instance of ongoing processes of 'accumulation by dispossession' undertaken in the name of the putative 'green economy' (Harvey 2003: 71-73, 139-145; GRAIN 2011: 139; Guthman 2011: 63-4). In the case of corporate and financial actors, the motivation for what are euphemistically termed 'large-scale land acquisitions' is typically not food security, but the production of biofuels through crops such as jatropha (a flowering plant which typically produces the physic nut) and sugar cane.

Thirdly, other states (Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Cuba, Mali, and Nepal for example) are charting a different path, focusing on decentralising and democratising their food systems according to the principles of food sovereignty (Schiavonia and Camacaro 2009). The roots of food sovereignty lie in debates within the global peasant and family farmer movement, *La Via Campesina*, in the lead-up to the 1996 World Food Summit. Like food security, it has several different articulations, but they all revolve around the apex of food as a basic human need and right; and of the right of peoples, especially peasant and family farmers, to self-determination and autonomy. The central message is that while industrialised, capitalist agriculture has exhausted its progressive potentialities and has now become overwhelmingly destructive in social and environmental terms, the path of smaller-scale, more localised, more labour-intensive and bio-diverse agriculture and food systems offers the possibility of genuinely sustainable and socially just futures. As one proponent puts it, whereas small farmers



have a 'food-producing vocation' and represent a 'model of life', industrial agriculture has an 'export-producing vocation' and is a 'model of death' (Rosset 2010: 190-191).

In concrete policy and practical terms, as observed for example in the 2008 *Food Sovereignty Law* of Ecuador, we can distil three central pillars of food sovereignty. The first is redistributive agrarian reform: breaking up large estates held by rich and often absent landowners, and distributing them amongst poor and landless families, to grow food for themselves and for local markets. Such agrarian reform, it should be remembered, has historically been central to self-sustaining economic development and improved living standards around the world. The second pillar is a prioritisation on the principles of agro-ecology. Agro-ecology, conceived as 'the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agro-ecosystems', is a method of agricultural practice that eschews the uncritical embrace of corporate-led 'high' technology and large-scale mechanisation, in favour of a reliance on building and sustaining local human capacity and peer-based exchanges of knowledge (Altieri 2010: 121).

The third pillar of food sovereignty is the establishment of localised and regional food distribution systems, with closer relations between primary producers and end consumers. The aim here is to internalise more of the social and environmental costs of the food system, achieving better returns for farmers, improving access to healthy food for consumers, and healing the ecological

rift by re-connecting people with the source of their food.

Together, these pillars represent a pathway to a democratic food system. In transitioning away from the destructive oligarchy and plutocracy of market-led industrialised agriculture and agri-food regimes, the democratisation of food systems is a pre-condition to making them sustainable, fair and resilient. Many regions in North America have years of experience with democratic governance of their food systems via Food Policy Councils, and these models are now being embraced and adapted elsewhere (Food First 2009). At the global level, the reformed Committee on World Food Security offers the possibility of a more inclusive space for policy formation; and *La Via Campesina* have articulated a powerful framework for the protection of peasant and family farmers in their draft Declaration on Peasants' Rights (La Via Campesina 2009). The food sovereignty movement has momentum: can it shift the power of vested interests?

Notes:

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