

Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal

Edited by Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar

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In *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal*, Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar outline the problems facing our current global food system through a critical, political economic lens. Over the last few months, in many ways mirroring the 2007-2008 global food crisis, food prices have risen to their highest levels recorded by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and prices are predicted to continue increasing over the next decade.² As a myriad of factors ranging from commodity speculation, increased use of biofuels, emerging meat-based diets in Less Developed Nations (LDNs), and wide-spread crop failures have been blamed for these price increases,³ the authors in this volume primarily focus on the subsequent failure of neoliberalism to construct an equitable world food system future. Instead of a world food system in which food prices are dictated by an oligarchy of transnational corporations, this volume stresses the need to understand how contradictions within our current systems are exacerbating global problems of hunger, farming, and food security. Magdoff and Tokar conclude their introduction by stating that “[i]f there is one conclusion...it is that ‘food for people, not for profit’ should be the underlying principle of a new agrifood system.”⁴

In *Medical Nemesis*, Ivan Illich writes that “[t]he coming hunger is a by-product of the inevitable concentration of industrialized agriculture in rich countries.”⁵ Illich continues his critique of industrialized food by stating that “[f]amine will increase until the trend towards

¹ I would like to thank Raul Clement and Crista Cuccaro for their comments and suggestions on this review.

² Caroline Henshaw, “U.N. Says World Vulnerable to Food Crises,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7 March 2011.

³ Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar, *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

⁴ Ibid, 30.

⁵ Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 264.

capital-intensive food production by the poor for the rich has been replaced by a new kind of labor-intensive, regional, rural autonomy.”⁶ For Illich, the shift toward an “industrialized nemesis”⁷ by modern society invariably leads to an ethical bind in which our perceived technological ability to transcend limitations distorts our ability to see the paradoxes in the “price of progress.”⁸

Illich’s concept of *radical monopoly* provides an area of entry into the contradictions of our currently constructed world food system. For Illich, a radical monopoly emerges when the “industrial production process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes nonindustrial activities from competition.”⁹ In situating his concept of radical monopoly within Herbert Marcuse’s concept of one-dimensional thinking, Illich contends that the “radical monopoly of institutional over personal values, and faulty technology,” limit our ability to see alternative forms of social organization.¹⁰ As a result, Illich finds technological progress to be problematic because it monopolizes perspectives on the world and overemphasizes the need for industrial development over other forms of social organization. Illich contends that unless societies can recognize needs that exist beyond technological progress, people will become “totally enclosed within [their] artificial creation, with no exit.”¹¹ Through Illich’s understanding of the paradoxes and limitations of technological development, we see how Magdoff and Tokar’s edited collection offers valuable insight demonstrating the need to understand both areas of conflict and resistance within our current world food system.

⁶ Ibid, 265.

⁷ Ibid, 262.

⁸ Ibid, 265.

⁹ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), 52.

¹⁰ Ibid, 50.

¹¹ Ibid, 51.

In chapter one, Walden Bello and Mara Baviera argue that the 2007-2008 global food crisis was a “perfect storm” in which rapidly increasing food prices, arguably the end to the era of cheap food, led to protests and riots in over thirty countries.¹² While the conditions that led to the 2007-2008 global food crisis are the result of a plethora of different factors, the neoliberal policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s arguably resulted in the “erosion of the capacity of peasant agriculture” throughout the developing world.¹³ As a result of these devastating structural adjustments and trade liberalization policies, the current crisis of food is at its core a “centuries-long process of displacement of peasant agriculture by capitalist agriculture.”¹⁴ The effect of this agricultural erosion affirms Illich’s idea that radical monopoly is implicitly a form of “social control because it is enforced by means of the imposed consumption of a standard product that only large institutions can provide.”¹⁵

In another chapter, Sophia Murphy outlines the intersection between “free trade” policies and the shift from government control toward private ownership food production. Murphy argues that while “[f]ree trade has been a powerful mantra over the last thirty years,” the realities of neoliberal policies require further analysis.¹⁶ Under the guise that free trade policies would eventually lead to global food security, the 1996 World Food Summit ushered in a new era of ostensibly cheap food and open markets. Instead, the reality of free trade agriculture was the degradation of domestic agricultural production in LDNs. The removal of import trade tariffs flooded South American, African, and Asian markets with heavily subsidized food from the

¹² Walden Bello and Mara Baviera, “Food Wars,” in *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal*, eds. Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 34.

¹³ Ibid, 40.

¹⁴ Ibid, 48.

¹⁵ Illich, *Tool for Conviviality*, 53.

¹⁶ Sophia Murphy, “Free Trade in Agriculture: A Bad Idea Whose Time Is Done,” in *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal*, eds. Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 103.

global North. As Murphy argues, free trade agriculture policies are almost exclusively in line with the interests of industrialized agriculture, ignoring the “interests of the billions of farmers who do not live in that world.”¹⁷

While the first half of Magdoff and Tokar’s volume deals with the contradictions and conflicts laden throughout our current agriculture model, the second half of the book focuses on areas of resistance and social change. The chapter by Peter Rosset discusses the need for land reform in creating alternative models for the establishment of global food security. Rosset suggests that global food production can be understood in terms of a dichotomy between industrialized agriculture, on the one hand, and small-scale farmers producing food for “local and national markets.”¹⁸ Over the last couple of decades, a coalition of farmers, peasants, and rural workers have banded together to form the global alliance, La Vía Campesina. In addition to promoting rights for landless rural workers, La Vía Campesina has “proposed an alternative policy paradigm called *food sovereignty*.”¹⁹ As one-sixth of the world currently suffers from food insecurity, food sovereignty proposes the radical idea that access to safe, nutritious, and healthy food, along with agricultural land, is a basic human right for all people. As Rosset concludes, the language of food sovereignty rests upon the reality that land reforms are not only necessary for the continuation of rural and peasant communities, but also the foundation for creating social and environmentally viable agricultural practices.

Furthermore, Jules Pretty concludes the volume by discussing the ability of ecological agriculture to feed a growing global population. In the same way in which Illich describes radical

¹⁷ Ibid, 112.

¹⁸ Peter Rosset, “Fixing Our Global Food System: Food Sovereignty and Redistributive Land Reform,” in *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal*, eds. Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 190.

¹⁹ Ibid, 191.

monopoly as “reflect[ing] the industrial institutionalization of values,”²⁰ Pretty posits that great progress in industrialized farming has led to “hundreds of millions of people...hungry and malnourished.”²¹ For Pretty, along with many of the writers in the volume, the focus rests on changing the future of agriculture toward sustainable and just systems of producing and distributing food. Instead of seeing agriculture and food as merely an industrialized commodity, the future of food resides in a change in agriculture that “clearly benefits poor people and environments in developing countries.”²² Already, as Pretty argues, the current model of global food production is failing to feed the current 6.7 billion people, and a “massive and multifaceted effort” will be needed to solve future problems of hunger, health, and food security.²³

While Illich’s critique of food production focused more on the consequences of global health, as opposed to a critical, political economy analysis of food production, his insight into radical monopoly offers valuable theoretical tools for understanding the contradictions and problems within our current food system. If the future of agriculture depends upon confronting and challenging dominant norms, values, and beliefs, Illich’s position that “[r]adical monopoly is generally discovered only when it is too late” seems only too fitting.²⁴ This volume offers readers valuable insight into areas of conflict and resistance within our global food system. In the end, the analytical tools of Illich offer new areas of inquiry into these current problems, and provide invaluable methods for continued research into the future of food and agriculture.

²⁰ Illich, *Tool for Conviviality*, 54.

²¹ Jules Pretty, “Can Ecological Agriculture Feed Nine Billion People?” in *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal*, eds. Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 283.

²² Ibid, 297.

²³ Ibid, 297.

²⁴ Illich, *Tool for Conviviality*, 55.

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