

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD IN CRISIS: CONFLICT, RESISTANCE, AND RENEWAL

by Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar. New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010. \$18.95 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-1-58367-226-6. Pages: 1-298.

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The economic and political failings of a dated and self-interested system based on capital accumulation have generated a new battle cry for the modern era: Our food system is in crisis! This system, centred upon tightly consolidated, large-scale, transnational corporations, is also responsible for squeezing all stages of food production – scarring the land, air, and people that are each an integral part of this same system.

Taking the 2008 global food (and financial) crisis as the point of departure, Magdoff and Tokar paint a damning picture of the truly global scope of our failing food system. Unearthing the true stranglehold that political and economic power has had on many facets of the food supply, Magdoff and Tokar outline a number of contemporary issues. The use of biotechnology in the age of peak oil and soil, food sovereignty and land reform, and the perennial question of how we are to feed the nine billion eaters that this planet will carry by 2050. Each of these concerns have erupted from age-old issues of colonialism, degradation of indigenous knowledge systems, and the erroneous belief in free trade as a solution to food provision. This is a rendition of the usual suspects (e.g. International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization, governments), up to their usual tricks (faith in export-oriented markets and the illusory benefit of comparative advantage), except in this version of the story – the masses are beginning to resist.

The book is set in two parts: first, pieces by Philip McMichael and Walden Bello contextualize the latest iteration of the food crisis through the historical and politico-economic underpinnings of capitalized production of agrofuels, livestock feed, and international land grabbing. In order for institutional, long-lasting change to occur, the workings of the industry must first be laid bare. In the next section, the book offers case studies of resistance to this dominant food system. While the call for food

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policy based on food sovereignty, agro-ecology, and small-scale landholding – particularly from a Global South perspective – provide a hopeful and improved form of agricultural productivism, rhetoric of export-oriented production is one of the most truly devastating and thus lasting influences that capitalist agribusiness firms have had in this crisis. The inefficient global marketplace is one where food is treated and traded like any other commodity, essential skills are destroyed, and those we depend on for its production, while dwindling in number, have become disenfranchised “labourers for agribusiness” (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010,14). Each of these facets signals the lasting degradation of poor and ineffectual agricultural policies mirrored as food policies. When food’s status as a nourishing life-essential is degraded to speculative futures trading deals, we all risk marginalizing the health of our bodies and of our communities.

The message of the book is clear: If you eat, and if you care about your ability to eat in the near future, you should care about the issues considered in this book. The range of disciplines represented by the contributing authors is among the book’s strengths. Contributions include work by a sociologist (McMichael), an economic geographer (Fahy Bryceson), food activists and advocacy groups (Kirschenmann; Schiavoni & Camcaro; GRAIN), agroecologists (Altieri; Holtz-Giménez), economists and policy analysts (Patniak; Murphy), alongside some contributors who fall across a number of different categories. This transdisciplinarity adds depth to the treatment of such a complex set of problems, which are intertwined with an array of agricultural, ecological, social, and policy questions. The information offered here provides evidence of the truly global linkages that exist between flawed production and consumption patterns.

A central theme in this collection concerns the glaring inefficiencies of industrialized agriculture, which have become normalized as unavoidable costs of production. The contribution from GRAIN outlines the land-grabbing that results from finance capitalists seeking to diversify their portfolio stocks (GRAIN, 2010,143), while the Tokar piece describes the implications for land-use of expanding ethanol agrofuel production (Tokarm, 2010, 127). Contributions by Howard, Patnaik, and Fahy Bryceson detail the gross inefficiencies of our current food system, as land is diverted to use for mono-cropped soy for livestock feed (Howard, 2010,176), which later results in a grossly insufficient consumptive calorie conversion (Patnaik, 2010, 87), and risk to biodiversity (Fahy Bryceson, 2010, 81).

Once the reader is sufficiently angered by the bleakness of the current food crisis, and the powerful institutions and the governments that have played a role in its development, the latter half of the text provides cases of resistance. There are accounts of peasants enacting change through “occupation and reclamation – “reform from below...” (Rosset, 2010, 195) when higher levels of reform were ineffective, along with the subsequent potential for poverty alleviation through more labour-intensive, small-scale holdings. There is also a wonderfully positive spin to the projected spike of oil prices that will serve to make the cost of industrial agriculture prohibitive (Kirschenmann, 2010, 232), and essentially force a better designed and managed food system.

Our food system is indeed in crisis. The 2008 food crisis that swept across much of the globe was one of those times when the sheer magnitude of the impacts became glaringly obvious. The issues are not new, but are rather the intensification of productivist policies based on greed and appropriation. We must each state our claim and our position in this crisis, and insight into the historical development and complex path ahead, is the first step for us all to fight for a fairer food system.