

Hungry for Change in Our Food System? "A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism" Tells You Where to Begin

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A FOODIE'S GUIDE TO CAPITALISM

UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WHAT WE EAT



BY ERIC HOLT-GIMÉNEZ

(Image: Monthly Review Press)

The centenary of the Russian Revolution has no doubt produced a cascade of lugubrious foodistas, made melancholy by the moribund march past 100. There is widespread disaffection with the fact that "capitalism is ... assumed to be immutable and [is] rarely questioned" according to Holt-Gimenez -- and rightly so. But the solemnity of the centenary was made much less draining by the availability of Eric Holt-Gimenez's *A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism* to read and reflect upon. Beneath the cringe-worthy

title is a serious attempt to reintroduce the "C-word" into the food discourse. Holt-Gimenez calls his book "an intensive language course" designed to equip readers with "fluency" in the political economy of our food system. Fluency which, he argues, will allow activists from across the many burrows of the food movement to see the systemic roots of their disparate causes, and enjoin them to find convergence in diversity. Moreover, it reveals, by virtue of its structural diagnoses of our various food crises, the inefficaciousness of certain progressive neoliberal proposals for reform, which, at best, fail to address the structural issues at the heart of our food crises, and at worst, reproduce them. While text-bookish at times, and short on solutions, Holt-Gimenez's central message -- that effective food activism begins with an understanding of capitalism -- is delivered convincingly, rigorously and with remarkably efficient prose.

Food Commodified, Land Privatized

The book's first act explores the capitalism in our "capitalist food system." Analyses of the foundational pillars of said system -- commodity production and private property -- are used to delineate the intractability of certain reformist proposals. But first, a genealogy of the "corporate food regime" is provided in chapter one. Holt-Gimenez draws on historical sociologist Philip McMichael's "[food regime](#)" framework, to paint a picture of a food system lurching between periods of liberalization and reform: from enclosure in the colonial regime, to New Deal corporatism in the second regime, back to liberalized trade during the "food aid" regime,

etc. Yet despite this constant tinkering, crisis has remained a ubiquity. Boom and bust cycles, dispossession, hunger and coercion are not the exceptions, but the rules.

Reformism has failed us, but will it continue to do so in the future? To answer that question, Holt-Gimenez turns to the predictive power of theory. In chapter two, Holt-Gimenez uses concepts like "surplus value," "exchange value" and "socially necessary labor time" to show that a whole catalog of myopic food system behavior is linked to commodity production, and argues that for this reason, reformist proposals promising to treat the symptoms of commodity production -- without challenging commodity production itself -- are defunct. For instance, the proliferation of large, unsustainable mega-farms is shown to be the result of production costs being calculated using "socially necessary labor time," which falls when land, water and chemical use is intensified to spare labor. Thus, there is a systemic bias toward unsustainable agriculture *built in* to the capitalist food system. Unfortunately, food labels signaling that promise to consign such unsustainable agricultural practices to the dustbin of history do precisely nothing about this systemic bias. Holt-Gimenez presents similar arguments in chapter three, but without critiquing proposals for reform. Myopic food system behavior is simply traced back to private property. Soil depletion, for instance, is linked to enclosure and the replacement of communal management systems emphasizing long-term sustainability with the profit maximizing logic of capital. Similarly, land grabs are shown to be the result of the "financialization of farmland" and the resultant use of said land as a sink for capital during crises of over-accumulation.

Big Ag's Cultivation of Exploitation

The second act of the book -- chapters four, five and six -- shifts the focus to the "food system" in

the "capitalist food system" -- and beyond. The universal pillars of capitalism are replaced by appendages with specific relevance to food and agriculture. For instance, Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson's [*From Farming to Biotechnology*] the notion of "appropriationism" -- capital's tendency to overcome structural barriers to investment in agriculture by seizing upstream production processes, simplifying them and thereby externalizing risk onto society and the environment -- is used to explain the rise of "contract farming," a kind of horrifying rendition of Antebellum sharecropping at the level of the firm. By adopting technologies like "stacked seeds," which combine numerous bioengineered enhancements like drought resistance, pest resistance, disease resistance, etc. agricultural conglomerates reduce the size of their input portfolio, allowing them to franchise, and ultimately, externalize the risks of long-term investments (in land, equipment, etc.) onto the contracted farmer.

Similarly, Maria Mies's "superexploitation" -- the appropriation of subsistence/reproductive labor -- which was originally used by Mies to explain the role of patriarchy in the capitalist process of accumulation, is used by Holt-Gimenez to explain the emergence of a semi-indentured class of immigrant farmworkers in the US agricultural sector. The reproductive labor required to reproduce immigrant workers -- carried out mostly by women farmers in Latin America -- is appropriated by capitalists in the US who benefit from having a cheap, flexible labor force at their disposal, but do not pay the costs of reproducing it. Various other causal chains delineating the structural roots of social stratification in the food system are explored in much the same way. These include the link between the "surplus value," slave agriculture and "racial caste"; between private property, animal *husbandry* and the loss of "mother-right"; and between class, "food entrepreneurs" and the "political fetishization" of food.

Finally, in chapter six, a full portfolio of the stopgap measures presently employed by the corporate food regime are critiqued, mostly using arguments recycled from earlier in the book. Commodification, for instance, reappears in the critique of "climate smart seeds," as well as that of "biofortification." Climate smart seeds, while green in an engineering sense, require green to be purchased. Thus, smallholders who lack the funds to access this commodified input will be displaced by larger farmers with more capital to spare, spurring the concentration of landholdings, which separates farmer from owner, and strips both of the incentive to invest in sustainable practices like rotation cropping, mulching and so on.

The Future of the Food Movement

Finally, in arguably the strongest chapter of the entire book, Holt-Gimenez draws the curtains by examining the implications of the preceding analyses, and providing an insightful treatise on the food movement in the context of a fragmented and depoliticized "new left." Liberalization and reform are said to be "two sides of the same capitalist coin," harking back to arguments made time and again throughout the preceding chapters about the inability of reformist measures to tackle the root causes of our present food crises. Holt-Gimenez argues that in order to prevent the "progressives" in the food movement from making a Faustian bargain with the "reformist" wing of the corporate food regime, "radicals" must reintroduce political economy into the food discourse. Only then will the systemic causes of our food crises become common knowledge, and delegitimize reformist measures that fail to tackle said causes. By highlighting the structural roots of our food crises, Holt-Gimenez argues that a reintroduction of capitalist critique into the food discourse would help delineate common ground between the food movement and other movements on the

left, facilitating alliance building -- a crucial task in this age of single-issue silos subservient to Big Philanthropy.

Holes in Holt's Hypotheses

The gaps in Holt-Gimenez's phalanx are few, but nonetheless worth discussing. First, the treatment of animal agriculture is paltry at best. Fred Magdoff gets a box on pages 80 and 81, and there are a few passing mentions of concentrated animal-feeding operations, but hardly any more than that.

The factory-farmed animal *is* the most extreme embodiment of the inherent contradictions of our capitalist food system. As [Kohei Saito](#) points out, "Marx condemn[ed] 'feeding in the stable' as a 'system of cell prison,'" and speculated that, under the capitalist logic of accumulation, animal agriculture could become so ecologically unsound as to sap the very "*life force*" from the Earth. There is also a myriad of linkages to the critiques of social stratification discussed elsewhere in the book -- philosopher Friedrich Engels's loss of "mother right," for instance, was predicated by animal *husbandry*; Alexander Pope's "racial caste" took precedent from the "Great Chain of Being," and so on. The treatment of animal agriculture, therefore, is entirely too thin.

A second weakness is the absence of culture from the book. One can scarcely imagine Latin American agroecology without "Buen Vivir," for instance. Without "Buen Vivir" or "wholesome living," it would be impossible to legitimize the trading of productivity for sustainability. Similarly, the state of the "Zero Budget Natural Farming" model of India, doesn't seem at all plausible without "Swaraj," India's cultural repertoire emphasizing harmony with Earth systems. Even in the west, France's "Decorissance" or "de-growth" was instrumental in giving the Ministry of Agriculture the political space to undertake its groundbreaking Agroecology Project, an initiative to make

France the world leader in agroecological farming models. Thus, cultural repertoires like Buen Vivir and Decorissance re-politicize the public sphere. That is, they open a space for systemic critique. It is surprising that Holt-Gimenez has nonetheless neglected culture, given that he calls for a re-politicized public sphere *numerous* times throughout the book. It is, in fact, one of his main themes. One can only speculate as to his rationale, but the book would have almost certainly been stronger with at least some cultural analysis. Third, Holt-Gimenez provides little in the way of solutions to left fragmentation and the power of Big Philanthropy, other than repoliticization of the public sphere. This is likely more a product of our time than the idleness of the author, living as we are in the ruins of the communist experiment, with the tender shoots of the next alternative to capitalism only beginning to emerge through the rubble. (One hopes climate change won't asphyxiate it before it has had time to blossom.)

These weaknesses, however, are more than made up for by the book's strengths. Holt-Gimenez imbues the book with a broad appeal the novice community gardener as well as the seasoned foodista alike will find useful. He brings in nonacademic voices, like those of George Naylor, the Iowan farmer, and Rosalinda Guillen, the farmworker and ecofeminist, putting into action his call for "organic leadership." He convincingly links critiques of capitalism, the food system and different forms of social stratification, finding in theory the common ground that has eluded the old and new left in practice for so long. The survey of anti-capitalist alternatives to the corporate food regime provided in chapter four is another strong point.

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Though not exhaustive, it gives a clear indication of the fact that there are other ways of organizing the production and distribution of food and fiber -- an important point to make given the strong currency of the "best of bad choices" line in this age of timid anti-idealism.

In addition, Holt-Gimenez draws attention to the "unusual suspects" holding the food movement back -- Big Philanthropy, nutritionism, food entrepreneurs and others -- loosening the stranglehold of the "dominant food narrative" on critical analysis of the food system. Holt-Gimenez's "food classes," especially those with no historical precedent, like "food entrepreneur," are extremely useful as heuristic tools for reading the food systems literature with an eye to the interests behind the text, and also, I imagine, for bartering between competing interest groups on the organizing front. So, on the whole, *A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism* makes a strong case for the reintroduction of "capitalism," and all addendum concepts, such as "surplus value," "metabolic rift," etc., into the food movement's lexicon, so as to break the eternal cycle of liberalization and reform, and unite the food movement under a radical program for real change. In so doing, it stokes us to speculate whether the food movement might just be, as Constance, et al suggest in their 2015 volume on alternative agri-food movements, the "vanguard social movement of our time."

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