Food First BACKGROUNDER

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Migrant workers process green peppers on Uesugi Farms in Gilroy, CA. *Photo Credit: USDA, Bob Nichols*

Overcoming the Barrier of Racism in Our Capitalist Food System

By Eric Holt-Giménez

This Backgrounder is excerpted from our newest book by Food First's Eric Holt-Gimènez, "A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism: Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat," co-published by Food First Books and Monthly Review Press. The following excerpt has been abridged by Erik Hazard. You can order your copy today at foodfirst.org/foodiesguide.

Classism, racism, and sexism predate capitalism, but they merged powerfully during the formative period of the colonial food regime and have been co-evolving ever since. Slavery, exploitation, and dispossession of the land, labor, and products of women, the poor, and people of color are still foundational to the capitalist food system, as are hunger, malnutrition, diet-related disease, and exposure to toxic chemicals. Poor women of color and children, especially girls, bear the brunt of these inequalities.

Many people think these injustices are unfortunate anomalies of our food system, or that they are pesky vestiges of prior stages of "underdevelopment." Some believe the high rates of hunger and malnutrition affecting underserved communities to be market failures, correctable through better information, innovation, or entrepreneurship. One way of thinking believes

that poor individual choices are what drive land loss, diet-related disease, unemployment, low wages, and the desperate migration of millions of peasant families out of the countryside. There is no doubt that good information, initiative, and good personal choices are necessary for building a better food system, but given the system's structures, personal choices alone are woefully inadequate for ending hunger, poverty, and environmental destruction.

The global food system is not only stratified by class, it is racialized and gendered. These inequities influence access to land and productive resources; which people suffer from contaminated food, air, and water; working conditions in food and farm jobs; and who has access to healthy food. These inequities affect resiliency, the ability of communities and individuals to recover from disasters such as the floods and droughts of climate change. The skewed distribution of resources and the inequitable exposure to the food system's "externalities"—including water, soil, and air pollution—are rooted in the inseparable histories of imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

But each form of oppression brings forms of resistance from workers, peasants, women, and people of color. Far from disappearing over time, struggles for justice take on new strategies and tactics, produce new leaders, forge new alternatives, and create new conditions from which to survive, resist, and fight for human rights. Understanding the structural conditions of struggle for those who are most exploited and abused by today's capitalist food system is essential to understanding not only the need for profound change, but the paths to transformation.

Racism within the food movement

Racism—the systemic mistreatment of people based on their ethnicity or skin color—affects all aspects of our society, including our food system.[1] Racism has no biological basis, but the socioeconomic and political structures that dispossess and exploit people of color, coupled with widespread misinformation about race, cultures, and ethnic groups, along with potential competition with the generally more advantaged white population for jobs and educational opportunities, make racism one of the more intractable injustices. Racism is not simply attitudinal prejudice or individual acts, it is a historical legacy, deeply embedded in our institutions, that privileges one group of people over others. Racism—individual, institutional, and structural—also impedes good-faith efforts to build a fair, sustainable food system.

Despite its pervasiveness, racism is almost never mentioned in international programs for food aid and agricultural development. Although anti-hunger and food security programs frequently cite the shocking statistics, racism is barely identified as the cause of inordinately high rates of hunger, food insecurity, pesticide poisoning, and diet-related disease among people of color. Even the widely hailed "good food movement," with its plethora of projects for organic agriculture, permaculture, healthy food, community supported agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, and corner store conversions, tends to address the issue of racism unevenly.[2]

Some organizations are committed to dismantling racism in the food system and make this central to their activities. Others are sympathetic but not active on the issue. Many organizations, however, see racism as too difficult to address, tangential to their work, or a divisive issue to be avoided. The hurt, anger, fear, guilt, grief, and hopelessness of racism are uneasily addressed in the food movement, if they are addressed at all.

Racism in the Food System

Calls to "fix a broken food system" assume that the capitalist food system used to work well. This assumption ignores the food system's long, racialized history of mistreatment of people of color. The food system is unjust and unsustainable, but it is not broken. It functions precisely as the capitalist food system has always worked, concentrating power in the hands of a privileged minority and passing off the social and environmental "externalities" disproportionately to racially stigmatized groups.

Statistics from the United States confirm the persistence of racial caste in the food system. In 1910 African Americans owned 16 million acres of farmland. But by 1997, after many decades of Jim Crow, several national farm busts, and a generally inattentive (or obstructionist) Department of Agriculture (USDA), fewer than 20,000 black farmers owned just 2 million acres of land.[3] The rate of black land loss has been twice that of white land loss and today less than 1 million acres are farmed.[4] According to the

Workers in a field in California *Photo Credit: USDA*

"Poverty results in high levels of food insecurity for people of color."

USDA 2012 Census of Agriculture, of the country's 2.1 million farmers, only 8 percent are farmers of color and only half of those are owners of land. Though their farm share is growing, particularly among Latinos, who now number over 67,000 farmers, people of color tend to earn less than $10,000 in annual sales, produce only 3 percent of agricultural value, and farm just 2.8 percent of farm acreage.[5]

While white farmers dominate as operator-owners, farmworkers and food workers—from field to fork—are overwhelmingly people of color.[6] Most are paid poverty wages, have inordinately high levels of food insecurity, and experience nearly twice the levels of wage theft as do white workers. While white food workers have an average annual income of $25,024, workers of color earn only $19,349 a year. White workers hold nearly 75 percent of the managerial positions in the food system. Latinos hold 13 percent and black and Asian workers 6.5 percent.[7]

The resulting poverty from poorly paid jobs is racialized. Of the 47 million people living below the poverty line in the United States, less than 10 percent are white, while 27 percent are African Americans, 26 percent are Native Americans, 25.6 percent are Latinos, and 11.7 percent are Asian Americans.[8]

Poverty results in high levels of food insecurity for people of color. Of the 50 million food-insecure people in the United States, 10.6 percent are white, 26.1 percent are black, 23.7 percent are Latino, and 23 percent are Native American. Even restaurant workers—an occupation dominated by people of color (who should have access to all the food they need)—are twice as food insecure as the national average.[9]

Race, poverty, and food insecurity correlate closely with obesity and diet-related disease; nearly half of African Americans and over 42 percent of Latinos suffer from obesity. While less than 8 percent of non-Hispanic whites suffer from diabetes, 9 percent of Asian Americans, 12.8 percent of Hispanics, 13.2 percent of non-Hispanic African Americans, and 15.9 percent of indigenous people have diabetes. At $245 billion a year, the national expense in medical costs and reduced productivity resulting from diabetes are staggering.[10] The human and economic burdens of diabetes and diet-related disease on the low-income families of color are devastating.

Trauma, Resistance, and Transformation:
An Equitable Food System Is Possible

Recognizing racism as foundational in today's capitalist food system helps explain why people of color suffer disproportionately from its social and environmental "externalities:" labor abuses, resource inequities, and diet-related diseases. It also helps explain why many of the promising alternatives such as land trusts, farmers' markets, and community-supported agriculture tend to be dominated by people who are privileged by whiteness.[11] Making these alternatives readily accessible to people of color requires a social commitment to racial equity and a fearless commitment to social justice. Ensuring equal access to healthy food, resources, and dignified, living-wage jobs would go a long way toward "fixing" the food system.

The trauma of racism is inescapable. In addition to the pain and indignity of racialized mistreatment, people of color can internalize racial misinformation, reinforcing racial stereotypes. While white privilege benefits white communities, it can also immobilize them with guilt, fear, and hopelessness. Both internalized racism and white guilt are socially and emotionally paralyzing, and make racism difficult to confront and interrupt.

Difficult, but not impossible. Since before the abolition movement and the Underground Railroad of the mid-1800s, people have found ways to build alliances across racial divides. The history of the U.S. food system is replete with examples of resistance and liberation, from the early struggles of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to the Black Panthers' food programs and the boycotts and strikes by the United Farm Workers. More recently, the Food Chain Workers Alliance has fought for better wages and decent working conditions. The Detroit Food Policy Council is an example of the increase of local food policy councils run by people of color, and the spread of ethnic urban farming groups reflect a rise in leadership by those communities with the most at stake in changing a system that some have referred to as "food apartheid." Indigenous peoples

"An Early Union Meeting." Black and white union members of the Southern Tenants Farmer Union gather in 1937.

Photo Credit: Louise Boyle/ CC BY.

and other oppressed communities have developed ways of healing historical trauma, and there are peer counseling groups with skills for working through the immobilizing feelings of internalized oppression, fear, hopelessness, and guilt. All of these resources and historical lessons can be brought into the food movement.

Racism still stands in the way of a good-food revolution. If the food movement can begin dismantling racism in the food system and within the food movement itself, it will have opened a path not only for food system transformation, but for ending the system of racial castes in the US.

Endnotes

[1] This section is taken from an article co-written with A. Breeze Harper, Executive Director of the Sistah Vegan Project, http://www.sistahvegan.com

[2] Alison Hope Alkon, *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and the Green Economy* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

[3] Pete, Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.)

[4] Anuradha Mittal and john powell, "The Last Plantation" (Food First, 2000); john powell, "Poverty and Race through a Belongingness Lens," *Policy Matters* 1:5 (March 2012).

[5] Eric Holt-Gimènez, "This Land is Whose Land? Dispossession, Resistance and Reform in the United States," *Backgrounder* (Oakland, CA: Food First/ Institute for Food and Development Policy, Spring 2014), http://foodfirst.org/publications/this-land-is-whose-land/.

[6] Of the total land rented out by operator and non-operator landlords, 97 percent of principal landlords are white. Landlords who are white accounted for 98 percent of rent received, expenses, and the value of land and buildings in 2014. From U.S. Agricultural Census total survey results in 2014.

[7] Food First, Food Chain Workers Alliance, & Restaurant Opportunities Center, "Food Insecurity of Restaurant Workers," 2014, http://foodfirst.org/publication/food-insecurity-of-restaurant-workers/.

[8] Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States (2012)" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, September 2013), http://www. census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf; Hossein Ayazi and Elsadig Elsheikh, *The U.S. Farm Bill: Corporate Power and Structural Racialization in the United States Food System,* Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, U.C. Berkeley 2015, http://www.haasinstitute.berkeley.edu.

[9] Elsadig Elsheikh and Nadia Barhoum, "Structural Racialization and Food Insecurity in the United States; A Report to the U.N. Human Rights Committee on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, UC Berkeley, September 2013.

[10] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "National Diabetes Statistics Report, 2014: Estimates of Diabetes and Its Burden in the United States," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014, https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pdfs/data/2014-report-estimates-of-diabetes-and-its-burden-in-the-united-states.pdf.

[11] Julie Guthman, "'If They Only Knew': Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions," in *Taking Food Public: Redefining Foodways in a Changing World* (New York, London: Routledge, 2012), 211-23.

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