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INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

FALL 2020

VOLUME 26 • NUMBER 3



Fight for \$15 Show Us Black Lives Matter. Photo by Joe Brusky (CC BY-NC 2.0).

Capitalism, Crisis, and the Political Challenge for the US Food Movements

By Eric Holt-Giménez

The following Backgrounder is an excerpt from Food First's "A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism: The Political Economy of What We Eat", written by Eric Holt-Giménez and co-published by Monthly Review. While published almost three years ago, we believe that this excerpt provides context for the current structural crises facing our capitalist food system and society, while also offering pathways we can take towards a just food system. It has been lightly edited and abridged for length and clarity.

Karl Marx wrote that people "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."¹

Today more people than ever are fluent on the topics of how food is grown, prepared, consumed, wasted, and how it impacts our health and the environment.

In an era of unprecedented economic inequality, dim millennial futures, and deep political disillusionment, food has also become a surrogate for hope—and freedom. The alienation of people from the products of their labor under capitalism does not stop at the paycheck. Alienation is a part of capitalist culture and all aspects of the value chain from production to consumption, alienating human beings from nature, from community, and from themselves. No wonder so many people try to reconnect to themselves, and with others, through food.

This is understandable and maybe even desirable, but at meal's end, our food isn't allocated by choice, desire, values, or even by need, but through market demand and through active creation of the demand for highly processed junk food. Capitalism is the silent ingredient in our food. It means that the 50 million people living in poverty in the richest country on earth—many of whom grow, harvest, process and serve our food—can't afford to be foodies because they're too busy worrying where their next meal is coming from. It means that contrary to the hopeful statistics presented by our governments and the FAO, over a third of the world is going hungry.² It is also the food manufacturers' quest for profits that pushes people to consume unhealthy junk foods high in sugar, salt, fat, artificial flavors, and other additives. If we care about people as much as we do about food, and if we really want to change the food system, we'd better become politically fluent in capitalism. The point of this political fluency is to better understand, communicate, engage, and change the world for the better.

For much of the food movement, this doesn't necessarily mean dropping what they are doing, but assuming the politics of what they are doing. The progressive

foodies, good food and food justice activists concentrating on the urban gardens, fair trade, farm-to-school, workers' rights, and farmers' markets need to keep working to change the practices of our food system. The radical food sovereignty organizations calling for an end to seed, chemical, and food monopolies and agrarian reform need to continue their political work to change the structures of our food system. When the work of progressives and radicals comes together, the food movement will be a strong enough counter-movement to force deep transformative reforms upon the food regime. For this convergence, progressives and radicals need to build strong strategic alliances within the food movement and between the food movement and the multitude of groups in the environmental and social justice movements. What do these alliances look like? Where can they be built? And what exactly is a strategic alliance?

Strategic alliances are those in which people and organizations agree to a position or actions that share a basic political platform. For example, La Vía Campesina (LVC) and the World March of Women (WMW) established a strategic alliance when WMW assumed food sovereignty as a plank in the platform for women's liberation, and LVC committed to an end to all violence against women as a necessary condition for food sovereignty. The convergence of two of the most powerful social movements in the world has far-reaching political ramifications, particularly for women, who grow most of the world's food.

Tactical alliances are also important, but they converge around actions rather than positions, for example, a shared project or campaign. People and organizations can work together, but don't

necessarily change their political position by doing so. This caveat is needed because many organizations in the food movement depend on grants from philanthropic foundations. This may begin as a tactical alliance in which the organization implements food security projects to better engage with the community and build community power to address the causes of food insecurity. Over time, however, the need for constant grant funding can draw the organization away from the radical work of deep social change toward a more reformist, service-oriented position. The tactical has defined the strategic.

Both strategic and tactical alliances are needed to build a strong social movement. The trick is to understand the difference and to make sure strong strategic alliances are not compromised by tactical demands. This also does not mean that food justice and food sovereignty organizations cannot build strategic alliances with funders. They can and do. There are many progressive family foundations and even consortia of progressive funders who support fairly radical organizations on the ground. The danger is when the strength of an organization comes from its funders rather than its constituency or its membership. Without a strong constituency, it is impossible to effectively advance a political position.

The greater political challenge for the food movement is how to build strategic and tactical alliances outside the food movement, with labor, women, movements led by indigenous peoples, people of color, environmentalists, progressive and radical political parties, anti-growth movements, and popular social movements for radical democracy, alternative economics, and others within the progressive radical trends of the world's growing counter-movements. The need

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for cross-sector alliance responds to the centrality of food to society and to capitalism. We won't be able to change the food system without transforming our economic system. This means that to change the food system, we have to change everything. That's a big order. But if we build strategic alliances, we'll have plenty of help.

Never Waste A Crisis

Antonio Gramsci wrote: "The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."³ Today, neoliberalism, capitalism, and liberal democracy are in crisis. In the absence of strong radical unions and progressive political parties, and when most social organizations are funded not to be political, neoliberal capitalism proceeds unchecked, wreaking havoc on society, the economy, the environment, and the culture of politics itself. Around the world, right-wing, neo-fascist demagogues, like US president Donald Trump, are leaping into the vacuum of political leadership, channeling the widespread frustration with mainstream politicians into a toxic ideology that ostensibly denounces business as usual, but targets and scapegoats Muslims, immigrants, people of color, feminists, and "liberal elites." Although US presidential cabinets have typically been a revolving door between business and government, with a net worth larger than a third of all Americans combined, the present Trump cabinet indicates that far from abandoning neoliberalism, Donald Trump is privatizing the presidency by putting the country under direct billionaire management.

The United States was founded by colonial elites who, at first, ran the new republic themselves. With time, they turned management over to professional politicians. True, most of the US presidents have been multimillionaires, or became rich after leaving office. But a crony cabinet of billionaires with little to no understanding of, or respect for, the mechanisms of liberal democracy reflects a breakdown in the model that has managed capitalism for the past two hundred years. The billionaire capture of the White House is less a reflection of elite power than of a crisis within elite power. Trump represents a break in the political ranks of the rich, not their consolidation. We can expect him and his cabinet to maintain the general mantle of neoliberalism while seeking competitive advantages for themselves. What will be much more difficult for the Trump administration is to manage the tension between democracy and keeping the masses quiet while corporate elites plunder the economy. We can also expect a lot of anger, nativism, bigotry, and scapegoating as "crony neoliberalism" pushes our health, housing, labor, energy, environment—and our food system—over the edge.



Will we continue to see state violence as the crises unfold? *Photo by Adam Cohn (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).*

But by calling for an end to free trade agreements, aren't the new so-called "populists" against neoliberalism? What is important to understand about neoliberalism is that it is not just a collection of activities for privatization, deregulation, regressive taxation, and financialization on a global scale. Neoliberalism is a class project, designed to undermine the power of labor and to consolidate the power of elites.⁴ As free trade agreements cease to be useful to this project, they will be happily abandoned, as will other agreements and proposals.

Much like the 1930s, liberal democracy is finding it difficult to resolve the contradiction between the voracious corporate appetites of the one percent and the erosion of the social and environmental conditions for the functioning of capitalism. At that time, the United States ushered in the New Deal; Germany and Italy ushered in fascism. The world is facing similar choices today.

The food movement cannot escape the political crisis of capitalism. Nor should it try. A political crisis is a moment of tremendous social convergence and deep politicization of society. A crisis is precisely what the food movement needs in order to mobilize the tremendous power of the food system. Hundreds of thousands of people across the United States and around the world have taken to the streets to protest for Black Lives Matter along with other monstrous moves on the part of the Trump administration over the past four years to scapegoat Muslims and people of color, dismantle due process, and consolidate power in the hands of a small cabal of

family members, “alt-right” zealots, and billionaire cronies.

Can the food movement reverse capitalism’s ugly turn? Yes, but not alone. The food movement is well positioned, however, to help build the broad-based political alliance we will need to resist the fascist trends gaining power within capitalism. The construction of alternative food systems already begun at the local level brings together a wide array of farmers, communities, churches, social workers, educators, small entrepreneurs, restaurateurs, food and farm workers, and local politicians. These relationships are part of a new public sphere that is now challenged to change the system in which we produce and consume our food. The food movement must continue to do the practical, everyday work to build a new food system. But for these alternatives to have a chance, we must also build a different food regime by changing the rules and the institutions that govern our food. This means we also need to invest in our political education: studying, analyzing, and discussing the political-economic challenges and contradictions of our



Walmart workers demand that the largest grocer in the nation actually pay its workers a living wage. *Photo by UFCW International Union (CC BY-NC 2.0).*

food systems within the larger context of capitalism and its devastating crises.

We cannot choose the circumstances for advancing social change, only adapt our work to present conditions. For the food movement, this means using the moment of crisis to build a powerful movement for transformation, one that is capable of mobilizing resistance and inspiring change. This in turn means constructing fierce alliances with and supporting the leadership of women,

people of color, immigrants, and others who are not only central to our food system, but who have suffered the most under neoliberalism and are now bearing the brunt of the attack on civil liberties.

We don’t know what the outcome will be of such a struggle, but do know the outcome if we don’t struggle. It’s time to organize and take action to transform the food system. There never was a better time.

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Please visit foodfirst.org/publication/capitalism-crisis-and-the-political-challenge-for-the-us-food-movements to view the endnotes and citations.

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