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Book Review

Concentration and Power in the Food System: Who Controls What We Eat?

Philip H. Howard

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Review by Chloé Poitevin-DesRivières

The conventional food system, despite its many faults, offers consumers a seemingly infinite number of food and beverage choices, uniquely packaged according to their types and brands. In his book *Concentration and Power in the Food System*, Philip Howard reveals that this apparent product and brand diversity is an illusion, since the majority of what we eat is controlled by a small number of large corporate conglomerates. He provides an overview of the ways in which power is distributed throughout the different stages of the food supply chain, which exposes the often hidden relations that structure the food system.

Howard begins by outlining his aims and theoretical perspective. He emphasizes the need to go beyond the narrow definition of power derived from classical economics, to engage with a broader and critical political economy that draws on Nitzan and Bichler's *Capital as Power* (2009). *Capital as Power* emphasizes capitalism as "a mode of power rather than a mode of production". He refers to the ways in which large food firms benefit from capitalism not only in acquiring profit but also in gaining the ability to shape government policy, economies, and socio-cultural norms. This framework leads Howard to inquire why firms organize the way they do, how governments interact with and impact these arrangements, and, most importantly, who benefits from or is disadvantaged by the concentration of power in food systems.

In addressing these concerns about the extent and impact of the distribution of power, the subsequent chapters delve into the distinct efforts and strategies used by firms to "restructure society, overcome restraints on concentration, and increase their control,"

(p. 15). Howard dedicates most of the book to detailing specific instances in which large firms have acted to secure and grow their power in various aspects of the food supply chain. He begins with retailers—the actors nearest consumers—and then moves on to distributors, manufacturers, and processors, ending with producers.

In outlining power relations, the book tends to play into the “big is bad, small is good” rhetoric that is often used in food studies literature to oppose conventional food systems processes. Nevertheless, Howard demonstrates that this characterization has merit. While each chapter focuses in on a specific phase of the food chain and/or a commodity—highlighting specific industries and their strategies for concentrating power—the same theme remains consistent throughout the book: the story of large companies restricting access to, or pushing out, smaller competitors from the market.

At almost every step in the food chain, larger firms have come to dominate the market as they are emboldened by weakened, antitrust legislation that has enabled buy-outs and acquisitions of smaller competitors. As a result, this has significantly reduced the number of actors in and the competitiveness of the market, which has in turn negatively impacted smaller firms and consumers. In effect, the concentration of power in food systems drives down wages in food retail and processing, increases food prices for consumers, intensifies farmers’ reliance on agricultural subsidies, and contributes to the homogenization of crop types and livestock breeds.

Howard effectively argues that decision-making processes, in both supply and demand, are relegated to a small number of individual and corporate actors. For instance, when purchasing foods consumers interact directly with retailers. These *gatekeepers* hold immense control over what foods are available and how they are displayed on shelves, which impacts the ways in which consumers purchase food. Beyond controlling food availability, Howard also stresses the impact that dominant firms have over peoples’ food knowledge and abilities. While firms require continuous market growth to ensure profitability, there are limits to what foods consumers are willing to buy. In order to circumvent these limitations, firms attempt to instigate new consumption patterns through advertising, introducing novel processed foods, and creating new markets. Howard links these tactics to the process of de-skilling, or decreasing consumers’ food literacy by employing marketing practices that favour convenience and one-way flow of information.

In addition to restricted flow of information, the lack of transparency throughout the food system also obscures power relations. Howard attempts to reveal how firms conceal the extent of their involvement in the food supply chain, pointing out that such practices mediate the concentration of power. For example, he points to “stealth ownership” as a strategy that enables a larger firm to hide their involvement in or acquisition of a brand or smaller firm. This tactic was clearly demonstrated in Howard’s example of the beer industry that shows how large brewers, seeking entry to the rapidly

growing craft beer market, mislead consumers through their purchase of existing small breweries or by introducing “fake craft beers” (p.57).

Howard also outlines the ways firms have controlled supply in order to gain direct control over food processing and agricultural inputs, pointing out that because many farmers have no choice but to sell to food processors, the latter are able to set production conditions. In some industries, such as pork production, processors have increased their power through the vertical integration of their operations and/or primarily purchasing from larger-scale producers.

The suppliers of agricultural inputs further dictate terms to farmers through their majority control of crop and livestock genetic material. Howard shows the extent of control that a very few large seed and pesticide firms, such as Monsanto (now Bayer) and DuPont, have gained through intellectual property rights. Most concerning to him is the “imposed homogeneity” of foods produced through the reduction of the number of types of seed varieties and livestock breeds that are available on the market, as well as through the loss of common resources to privatization, which prevent farmers from engaging in traditional seed-saving practices (p. 82).

Although the production side of the food system faces the least amount of power concentration in the supply chain, food producers have still faced difficulties in terms of power imbalances. Howard demonstrates this by dissecting the role agricultural subsidies have played in favouring high-value commodities and in diminishing the number of small- to medium-sized farms in the United States since 1935, in favour of large-scale operations. He links the endurance of government subsidies to the increased concentration of power in processing and agricultural inputs, and again notes the role of corporate influence over government policy.

The prospect of achieving a fair and sustainable food system seems rather bleak in the face of the uneven concentration of power throughout the supply chain. While at the end of each chapter Howard outlines potential ways forward, the challenges seem insurmountable as he notes the myriad ways in which dominant firms often co-opt these solutions. For example, in the latter part of the book he points to the organic food industry, once seen as a viable alternative to conventional food production, as an example of dominant firms colonizing a movement built on social and ecological values. Again, transparency is an issue as larger firms buy out organic brands and exert their power in order to weaken standards.

Throughout this chapter, Howard raises objections similar to Guthman’s (2003) well-known analysis of pre-washed and bagged salad greens, pointing to the assimilation of sustainable and alternative modes of food production in order to incorporate them into a neoliberal agricultural system. However, he does not completely dismiss the potential benefits organic farming might have in reducing chemical inputs and inciting consumer consciousness. Howard also touches on the creation of markets for bagged salad as a facet of consumer de-skilling processes in chapter four (p. 65).

In his concluding chapter, Howard raises the question of whether food production is necessarily headed toward a global monopoly. He also questions the sustainability of the efforts aimed at resisting dominant firms, asking whether alternatives to conventional food production are doomed to be incorporated into the mainstream practices. While no clear solution is offered, he hints that the growth of firms and the scale of production are subject to the limits of markets and of biophysical environments.

Howard's overview of power distribution and concentration in food systems offers specific examples centered in a North American context; however, I feel that the broad lessons and concepts can be applied elsewhere. What sets this book apart from others is the use of illustrative tables and figures, which provide an effective and accessible means of dissecting aspects of power and concentration, allowing readers to visualize the extent of concentration in different food industries. Howard's graphs, illustrations, and maps provide roadmaps to trace different power relations and distributions. A number of Howard's other scholarly works (DeLind & Howard, 2008; Howard, 2009; Howard, 2014) include similar figures, and I have found these to be striking and often more effective than written descriptions in exemplifying concepts and issues. I also enjoyed the addition of quotes from popular works of science-fiction (notably passages from television shows *Firefly* and *Star Trek*) at the beginning of each chapter, as they provide an enlightened interpretation of the moral quandaries that frequently frame power issues in food systems.

Overall, Howard has drafted a book with an intriguing chronicle revealing the role of dominant firms in food systems and he provides clear links between theoretical conceptions of power and the grounded realities of different food systems actors. While the book appears brief at just over 200 pages, he manages to cover significant ground, delivering a comprehensive guidebook to understanding and conceptualizing power in food systems. One of the book's greatest strengths lies in the exhaustive accounts of the diverse tactics employed by firms in the pursuit of power, through which readers can see for themselves the breadth and depth of this hegemony in all aspects of the food system. Howard's book is a valuable addition to the interdisciplinary series *Contemporary Food Studies: Economy, Culture and Politics*, intended for upper-level students, as he captures the intricacies of power relations in an accessible manner, without overly-simplifying the more complex political economic notions that underpin food systems processes.

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