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Book Review

A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism: Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat

Eric Holt-Giménez

Monthly Review Press/Food First Books, 2017, 280 pages

Review by Jennifer Sumner

This book should be required reading for anyone interested in food. The topic is not a side issue of special interest, but central to how food gets to us every day of the year. As Marion Nestle states in her foreword, "I think the food movement needs this book, and I am tired of having to treat capitalism as the 'C word', never to be mentioned in polite company" (p. 9).

I couldn't agree more. I grew up during the Cold War, when no-one mentioned the word "capitalism" for fear of being branded a Communist. As a result, many people of my generation grew up not knowing how capitalism actually works, even though we lived it on a daily basis. This political/economic illiteracy continues into the present, as people try to grapple with the problems they see around them: why do some go hungry, why is junk food cheaper than nutritious food, why is the environment deteriorating on so many fronts and why are farmers are failing across the world? Nestle argues that capitalism is a great place to start understanding why they exist. She explains, "If we want to create a food movement with real power, we need to know what we are up against" (p. 12). This is the task of Eric Holt-Giménez—to help us understand what we are up against if we want to change the food system. He visualized the book as a primer to the economic system called capitalism, as seen through the lens of the food system. In essence, it is a "political-economic tool kit for the food movement" (p. 18).

According to Holt-Giménez, the first lesson we as activists and academics must learn is that the food system is not broken, in spite of our passionate arguments to the contrary. As he points out, the food system "is working precisely as a capitalist food system is supposed to work." That is because it operates within a larger economic system in which

> …profits take precedence over any other human value. A capitalist food system keeps labor and all other costs to a minimum and provides an enormous overabundance of cheap food, consequences be damned (Nestle, p.11).

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With this in mind, Holt-Giménez proposes that the basic questions posed in the study of capitalism should be: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it? He then addresses these questions in a series of chapters that lay out the contentious, often hidden, terrain of capitalism, including the origins of our food system, the commodification of food, land and property, the links between capitalism, agriculture and food, power and privilege in the food system, gender, race and class, and capitalist crises and solutions. He concludes with a nod to Naomi Klein and her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. Taking his cue from Klein's thesis that the present neoliberal form of capitalism is incompatible with reversing climate change, Holt-Giménez adds that "it is also incompatible with a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system" (p. 56). For all of us interested in alternative food initiatives, he points out that creating alternative markets is not the same as shutting down capitalist markets. Instead, he emphasizes that:

> Our food systems should and *could* feed everyone equitably and sustainably while providing dignified livelihoods and ensuring a good quality of life. To build a good, clean and fair food system, we need to build an alternative to capitalism, a system designed to concentrate massive amounts of wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands, no matter the cost to people or the planet (p. 213).

After reading this book, it becomes clear that "capitalism is the silent ingredient in our food" (p. 233). We need to understand the effects of this ingredient on our bodies, our families, our communities, our environment, and our future. Holt-Giménez's engagingly straightforward writing, aided by a useful glossary, invites the reader to see the food we eat through political-economic lenses in order to better formulate alternatives—based on the understanding that "we can't change the food system without transforming capitalism" (p. 172). My only quibble with this illuminating book is that the glossary did not go far enough. For example, it lacks entries on capitalism itself and on the public sphere, one of the many casualties of capitalism.

A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism gives people interested in food studies a great deal to think about. After reading this book, it becomes depressingly clear that no amount of tinkering around the edges of the capitalist food system will bring about the changes we desire. On the contrary, "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 fluent in capitalism" (p. 233).

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