



Book Review

Facing catastrophe? Food politics and the ecological crisis

By Carl Boggs

Political Animal Press, 2020: 309 pages

Review by Amanda Shankland

Carl Boggs is a social science and film studies professor at the National University in Los Angeles. He has written several books on social theory, American politics and military policy. In his most recent work, *Facing Catastrophe*, Boggs takes aim at the environmental movement and calls for radical reform. The author argues that political change matching the extent of the ecological problems we face is urgently needed, and that “there can be no routine, painless ‘greening’ of a neo-liberal world order rooted in the incessant accumulation of wealth, power, and geopolitical advantage, and protected by the largest military apparatus in history (Boggs, 2020, p. xvii).” The book makes suggestions for reform that include redirecting military funds toward the environment, reducing the number of people living in cities, and transitioning to plant-based diets across the world.

Boggs faults environmental scholars, including Barry Commoner, Murray Bookchin, Joel Kovel, George Sessions, Bill McKibbin, Al Gore, and Naomi Klein, for being indifferent to the relationship of food and ecology, and their lack of attention to what he calls the “McDonalized society” (p. 20). Focused on the industrial meat complex, the book brings awareness of environmental concerns to a popular audience. A health case for meat-free diets is argued, focusing mainly on over-consumption of meat in the context of corporate America. Citing Colin Campbell (2005), Boggs explains that an increase in meat consumption by people in China led to a serious deterioration in the health of those researched.

Even though this book is directed toward a popular audience, it is problematic from my perspective as a food politics scholar. Boggs shows little awareness of the complexity of the *agri-food* system and the ways in which food impacts environments. Even though he is correct in pointing out the problematic nature of our corporate food complex, he places the blame squarely on meat. He agrees with Howard Lyman that “You can’t be an environmentalist and eat animal

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products, period” (p. 20). Boggs vilifies some of the most prominent agro-ecologists for their support of sustainable animal production. He targets Arne Naess’s deep ecology for its defense of animals as food, “Naess argues that humans should be allowed to intervene in nature to satisfy vital needs, appearing more like a sympathizer of corporate power in a fast-food culture than principled defender of biospherical equality” (p. 218). From his perspective, the consumption of animals in any form is an assault on nature.

Boggs associates meat consumption with an ethos of human domination and destruction of nature; however, Boggs does not address the role of regenerative agriculture in sustaining arable land, nor does he discuss the use of animals to help foster regeneration. The book focuses on what animals consume but makes no mention of what they bring to the land in terms of a diversified ecology and retention of soil carbon. A lack of integrated and complex ecologies is a major problem. Removing animals from the land, which produce manure and help regenerate soil, has increased the reliance on synthetic fertilizers. In the book *Defending Beef* Hahn Niman (2014) explains how natural cattle grazing adds manure and organic matter to the soil and encourages plants that help draw down carbon. There is a growing wealth of evidence to support her conclusion that, when done sustainably, grasslands can sequester significant amounts of carbon (Stanley et al., 2018; Rodgers & Wolf, 2020). Equally problematic, Boggs fails to recognize that removing livestock from developing countries would have devastating consequences for subsistence farmers, particularly women farmers. The cows, pigs, sheep, goats, and chickens that families keep on their farms provide some of the only substantial sources of protein and help farmers hedge against the impacts of drought and other climate related disasters by providing crucial dietary needs in times of crisis (Headey, 2018). Animals provide ecological benefits when reared sustainably and ensure that children do not grow up malnourished.

Boggs appears to have only a seminary knowledge of the thinkers he critiques, particularly his analysis of Murray Bookchin. Boggs contends that the non-hierarchical forms of cooperation and governance that Bookchin imagined are an impossible fantasy. He labels Bookchin’s social ecology as utopian, and calls Bookchin’s well developed theories of libertarian municipalism, “laughable” (p. 216). Boggs spends most of the book condemning speciesism and all hierarchies related to the domination of animals; however, he thinks Bookchin’s rejection of hierarchical forms of organization, including in government, “suffers from a disabling utopianism” (p. 216). If domination is the root of the problem, then why is that not the case with regard to human social organization? From my perspective, Bookchin’s vision of social ecology and the elimination of hierarchical governance models is indispensable in the battle to create equitable outcomes in the ecology movement.

Criticizing the environmental climate of the 1960’s, Boggs writes, “Given its famous anti-authoritarianism, the American new left fetishized democratic localism inherited in part from anarchism, assimilating both its strengths and weaknesses” (p. 220). He claims these movements were weak and gained little “organizational and ideological durability” (p. 220). These statements undermine advances that took place during the period, and the legacy of

environmental action that stood in its wake. Further, the so-called *left* recognized the real danger of an environmental movement that did not confront authoritarian tendencies. The threat of ecological authoritarianism is discussed in great detail in the works of writers like Bookchin. This danger is more present today than at any time in history. Social equity and justice are critical to a responsible ecological movement. The solutions that Boggs presents seem paradoxically bottom-down. He believes that liberal democracy has exhausted its capacity to deal with the climate crisis and suggests that a Hobbesian-style sovereign may be the only viable solution (p. 272). The author's lack of confidence in the public's capacity to create change, his blanket denial of meat as a viable food choice, and his Malthusian condemnations of over-population offer a prescription for authoritarian-style solutions.

Facing Crisis may appeal to a popular audience and provides some valuable critiques of the current ecological crisis and the role of agriculture in that crisis. However, the discussion of agriculture focuses on domesticated animals and meat consumption as the primary concerns, ignoring other systemic factors that contribute to the current crisis. Boggs also refers to people on the left as if they were a unified force in the ecological movement, “as liberals and progressives continue to be mired in multiculturalism and identity politics, the ruling interests are perfectly happy to further consolidate their boundless wealth and power” (p. 65). In truth, there is a great diversity of opinion within so-called liberal or progressive environmental literature. For this reason, the book is somewhat reductionist and polarizing, which limits its value in terms of educating students about the environmental crises we face as a society.

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