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Book Review

# The no-nonsense guide to world food: New edition

Wayne Roberts

New Internationalist Press, 2013: 184 pages

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For many, the world of food is complicated and riddled with confusion and misinformation. The food system has become so globalized and convoluted that it has become difficult for even the most conscientious reader or eater to feel adequately informed. Wayne Roberts' *No-Nonsense Guide to World Food* is a helpful antidote, and an accessible read appropriate for activists, students, or anyone curious about the complex terrain of food politics. This edition of *World Food* is both informal and informative—qualities known in the "No-Nonsense" book series.

Wayne Roberts is a prolific writer, social-media entrepreneur, and policy analyst based in Toronto, Ontario. Roberts has significantly influenced both local and national politics through his work with the Toronto Food Policy Council, and through his board membership with Food Secure Canada. He is known throughout the food community as an advocate for positive change, a cheerleader for civic involvement and innovation, and an actionist, as exemplified through his most recent publication *Food for City Building: A Field Guide for Planners, Actionists & Entrepreneurs*. His writing mirrors his personality, being peppered with positivity and encouragement. In many ways, *World Food* is comparable to a winding conversation with Roberts—one that is woven with personal reflections and a lifetime of learning about the complicated world of food systems and food politics.

*The No-Nonsense Guide to World Food* is pitched at readers in an era in which food and its "problems" have become part of daily discussion on the international stage. The book was revised and published following the peak of the 2008 global food crises and civil unrest, which were sparked by food shortage and price spikes in an era of food abundance and "cheap food." Roberts argues throughout that food is at the heart of future transformative change, and

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illustrates this point in six chapters that outline various conceptual tools that he sees as catalysts for new food revolutions.

In the introduction, Roberts apprises the reader of events and transitions that have occurred since the first edition (published five years earlier), observing that cities have become hubs for food policy change and activism—and that within them, youth have emerged at the forefront of the food movement. In Chapter 1, Roberts challenges the commonplace dichotomous views of food as a "problem" and notions of "good" vs. "bad" foods, and argues that alleged food "problems" are really problems with our food *system* that require systems-based solutions—such as improved systems of governance. A common sentiment throughout the book is that food should not be seen as a source of problems, but as a cause for joy and an opportunity for positive change.

In Chapters 2 through 4, the author briefs readers on transformations associated with the industrialization and supermarketization of the food system, which has become characterized—in North America—by abundance, choice, and convenience. The author assesses the implications of the modernist food system, highlighting environmental degradation, growing rates of chronic disease and obesity, and social polarization globally. However, Roberts does not dwell on these sobering trends of the havoc wreaked by the industrialized global food system. Rather, he reviews these issues as part of a history and baseline for readers, in order to reinforce the message of the need to change the (food) system.

In the last two chapters, Roberts shifts the focus to seeds of change seen around the world, where hegemonic food-system models are being contested. The book offers a series of vignettes from various corners of the globe, to convey how food systems are intricately connected with social, cultural, and ecological processes, rather than merely commercial food supply chains. Here, he argues that there is value in the commons and its ecosystems—including forests, meadows, and oceans—for nutritionally rich, wild food sources that can sustain food security and food sovereignty.

*World Food* is ideal for anyone who is new to food-system politics, as a primer for understanding many of the issues discussed in both academic and popular literature today. Likewise, this book would also be a useful tool for those who are already actively engaged in food activism, or have studied the issues to some degree, as the historical context is both illuminating and helpful in understanding present day circumstances. This book's greatest strengths are two-fold. First, it makes relatively complicated issues accessible for readers new to the subject. One section that stands out in this regard is Chapter 3, in which Roberts discusses "the real cost of cheap food," explaining how a system that produces cheap food exacerbates hunger and environmental degradation. He addresses the question: is cheap food cheap *despite* being processed, or *because of* being processed? Roberts also demystifies the complicated world of subsidies and "agro-financing"—the interconnections between economic systems and agricultural commodities. Trained as a historian—of all things—Roberts provides a fascinating account of the governance of food and health in World War II when nutrition was a national priority, to support industrial productivity and soldiers on the front lines. But postwar, food fell

under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture, not Health, and foods were increasingly stripped of their nutritional qualities, since the health of the population was not part of the Agriculture ministry's mandate. We also learn the dynamics of how, through industrialization and modernization, home cooks were de-skilled and the food system was de-personalized, as abundance, consumer choice, convenience, and affordability ruled the day. Peri-urban land for market gardens gave way to suburban sprawl, and food became de-localized.

In another section, Roberts explains the difference between the important, and often misinterpreted, concepts "food sovereignty" and "food security." He highlights the histories of their emergence, and distinguishes between them with the statement, "food security is about consumers, not producers" (p. 92). Here Roberts establishes that food sovereignty is deeply embedded in peasant movements of the "global south", while food security largely protects the needs of consumers generally, and does not include food producers within its definition. Though these concepts are arguably slightly simplified, their framing offers a good platform for those new to these terms.

The second key strength of this short and cleverly written book is its upbeat tone, emphasizing the opportunities to turn food system "problems" into triple-win solutions that enhance equity, economic viability, and ecological protection. This book also stands apart from some texts in that it does not encourage individualistic consumer-driven activism—a common critique of Michael Pollan's recent publications. Roberts sees this type of discourse as problematic in that it inhibits real change that should be occurring on the governance, or wider, systemic level. Having said this, we worry that for those who are new to navigating the food system, the title of this book may lead them to expect that it will offer eaters a handbook or guide to make more informed decisions about what they consume. It does not provide this level of decision-making advice, but does open up a much wider view of the many levels of change that are possible, from individual and community-scale, to provincial, national, and global initiatives.

The use of "world food" in this book's title could also mislead some readers. *The No-Nonsense Guide to World Food* is largely framed within a North American context, and refers to the experiences from elsewhere in relation to this global North reference point. The patterns of industrial agriculture—and food system activism—seen in North America were, and are, experienced differently in China, India, or the continent of Africa—some of the world's largest and most populated regions. That said, this book does positively highlight interesting histories, institutional food system innovations, joined up food policy, and social and agroecological movements in Cuba, Honduras, Brazil, South Korea, and beyond. And from a recent discussion with Wayne Roberts, we learned that he anticipates further research and writing to encompass cases from yet more corners of the world in a future edition—but don't let that stop you from buying this one in the meantime!

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