Book Review

Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice, by Eric Holt-Giménez & Raj Patel with Annie Shattuck

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Food Rebellions!, by Eric Holt-Gimenez and Raj Patel with Annie Shattuck,1 dissects the global agricultural system in an attempt to understand the recent increase in food prices and global hunger. Holt-Gimenez et al. tell a shocking tale of injustice, documenting the abuse perpetrated against the Global South by agricultural corporations and international financial institutions of the North. Food Rebellions! is best judged in context. It is not the most comprehensive scholarly work of its kind, nor does it provide an exploration of every practical solution to the problems it presents. Yet the book seamlessly weaves together a vast array of evidence from various disciplines to enrich the authors’ narrative of the world’s broken food system. The book’s greatest strength is in its power to ensnare the reader in the fury of the food crisis and encapsulate her in the details of that great injustice.

The authors begin by analyzing the proximate and root causes of the recent devastating global food crisis. Holt-Gimenez et al. note that the current situation qualifies as a “food crisis” because of the sudden increase in food prices that reversed a trend of steadily decreasing prices, and resulted in a huge spike in global hunger that reached record levels in 2008.2 The injustice of this crisis stems from the fact that there is more than enough food to feed the Earth’s population—enough, in fact, to feed the world’s population 1.5 times over.3 The authors observe that people go

2. Id. at 6-10.
3. Id. at 7.
hungry because they are priced out of the market. High food prices are fueled by a host of factors, including volatile oil prices, rising meat consumption, poor climate conditions, a boom in the agrofuels industry, and price speculation in the agricultural commodities market. Yet, the authors are quick to point out that solving these proximate causes would not be sufficient to alter the structural problems responsible for the food crisis: that is, a global system of injustice.

Holt-Gimenez et al. paint a sobering picture of a global agricultural system that is grossly inequitable, dominated by concerns for corporate profits rather than considerations of sustainable development or poverty reduction. After World War II, U.S. and European agricultural companies began developing technologies resulting in higher agricultural yields, which led to a production of food that greatly exceeded domestic consumption needs. Propped up by state price supports and subsidies, the agricultural industry began dumping surplus products as food aid or inexpensive exports in developing countries instead of scaling down production levels. At the same time, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were forcing structural adjustment policies on most developing economies, which required developing governments to remove all price supports, subsidies, and other state controls over agriculture.

Criticisms of structural adjustment programs and their contribution to hunger and poverty abound. In his book Beyond the World Bank Agenda: An Institutional Approach to Development, Howard Stein shows that, despite the fact that the World Bank has publicly admitted the failure of structural adjustment programs, its institutional approach to development nevertheless continues to incorporate the same neoliberal ideology. Holt-Gimenez et al., consistent with these critics, argue that structural adjustment programs had devastating effects on the economies of many developing nations and regions. Africa, one example explored in the book, was formerly a net exporter of food. Because of the collapse of state support for agriculture and an inability to cope with import surges, this trend was reversed and Africa became a net importer of food, resulting in

4. Id. (quoting World Food Programme Director Josette Sheeran).
5. Id. at 11.
6. Id. at 11-14.
7. Id. at 14-15.
8. Id. at 15-16.
9. Id. at 16-18.
10. Id. at 22 (“The rise of food dependency and hunger in the global South is not the result of overpopulation, a conspiracy, or the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. As we shall see, it is the result of the systematic destruction of Southern food systems through a series of economic development projects imposed by the Northern institutions.”).
11. Id. at 24-25.
12. Id.
13. Id. at 37-45.
15. HOLT-GIMENEZ ET AL., supra note 1, at 37, 40-45.
16. Id. at 45.
massive increases in poverty and hunger throughout the continent.\textsuperscript{17} In one example, the authors note that Ghana used to produce much of its own food for local consumption; however, due to economic liberalization policies, local production now accounts for only around ten percent of domestic consumption in key industries.\textsuperscript{18}

Holt-Gimenez et al. also blame the hunger crisis on the Green Revolution.\textsuperscript{19} The Green Revolution was proposed as a mechanism to help eliminate poverty by modernizing farming inputs and thereby increasing agricultural output.\textsuperscript{20} The authors claim that the practical results of this revolution were increased inequality, the concentration of land and resources in the hands of a wealthy few, loss of biodiversity, pest problems, and other environmental consequences.\textsuperscript{21} Other commentators, such as David Naguib Pellow, have offered similar criticisms of the Green Revolution, noting specifically the environmental inequality associated with Green Revolution policies.\textsuperscript{22} For example, “most pesticides banned for use in the United States are exported, dumped, or used throughout the Global South—a clear case of global environmental inequality and racism.”\textsuperscript{23} Holt-Gimenez et al. also vividly illustrate the personal costs of the Green Revolution by exploring the rise in farmer suicides in India, which occurred because small farmers with less than twenty acres of land were priced out of the market or forced into unprecedented levels of debt when the Green Revolution took hold.\textsuperscript{24}

Additionally, the authors are highly critical of agrofuels, which have become a booming profit-making industry propped up by government subsidies.\textsuperscript{25} The authors state emphatically that “[d]espite industry claims to the contrary, agrofuels do raise food prices.”\textsuperscript{26} This is because agrofuels use inputs that could be consumed as food, therefore driving up demand and prices for food commodities.\textsuperscript{27} The authors also note that agrofuels threaten food prices by increasing corporate monopoly power, due to the vertical integration of agrofuels production.\textsuperscript{28} Additionally, they threaten the ecological sustainability of arable land in the Global South.\textsuperscript{29} The authors further imply that there is something grossly inequitable about an industry designed to feed the North’s energy consumption needs at the cost of increased hunger in the Global South.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{17} Id. at 44-49.
\textsuperscript{18} See id. at 41.
\textsuperscript{19} Id. at 27-37.
\textsuperscript{20} Id. at 26-27.
\textsuperscript{21} Id. at 27.
\textsuperscript{22} DAVID NAGUIB PELLOW, RESISTING GLOBAL TOXICS: TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE 150 (2007).
\textsuperscript{23} Id.
\textsuperscript{24} HOLT-GIMENEZ ET AL., supra note 1, at 32-35.
\textsuperscript{25} Id. at 72-75.
\textsuperscript{26} Id. at 69.
\textsuperscript{27} Id. at 69-70.
\textsuperscript{28} Id. at 70-72.
\textsuperscript{29} Id. at 80.
\textsuperscript{30} Id. (“The tragedy of agrofuels is that the global South will sacrifice its forests, savannas, peat bogs and productive land to satiate the energy appetite of the industrial North.”).
Although Holt-Gimenez et al. present a persuasive story of the causes of the food crisis, one weakness of the book lies in the authors’ tendency to draw occasional unsupported and unqualified conclusions by inferring bad intentions on the part of many elite actors. The authors seem to subtly—and in some cases openly—suggest that global actors, such as the IMF, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank, are not concerned with eliminating poverty and hunger, but are actually motivated by a desire to further entrench the power of certain global elites. For example, the authors note that the World Bank has determined that small farms are not economically viable.\(^{31}\) Holt-Gimenez et al. argue that this has been used as part of a strategy to take land away from the less “efficient” poor.\(^{32}\) It is not necessarily clear that the authors intend to suggest that the World Bank aims to promote the use of its theory for politically-motivated land grabs. Yet, absent further clarification, the reader may infer such a conclusion. The authors similarly allege that the unspoken aim of the Green Revolution was to prevent any major land reform which would benefit the poor.\(^{33}\) Though this allegation may in fact be true, the authors fail to offer adequate evidence or detailed analysis to support this conclusion, but instead rely on inferences drawn from circumstantial evidence.\(^{34}\) These conclusions and the limitations of such conclusions would be better explored in detail. It is entirely possible that organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank are well-intentioned but ill-informed, an opinion espoused by William Easterly in his book *The Elusive Quest for Growth*:\(^{35}\) The conclusions reached in *Food Rebellions!* would be stronger if the authors addressed such counterarguments.

Part II of the book is devoted to exploring solutions to the food crisis. Holt-Gimenez et al. spend a good deal of time advocating for agroecology, sustainable and ecological agriculture.\(^{36}\) They argue that agroecology can have tangible environmental and social benefits, as well as the prospect for greater production output. Specifically, they point to the superior performance of agroecology in its resilience to extreme weather, its ability to sequester carbon and thus combat global warming, and its contribution to well-balanced diets.\(^{37}\) The authors discuss some convincing evidence to support their conclusions about agroecology, including an in-depth study carried out by researchers from the University of Michigan showing that a switch to organic production of food worldwide would not, as alleged by

\(^{31}\) Id. at 44.

\(^{32}\) Id. at 44-45.

\(^{33}\) Id. at 31 (“An unspoken objective of the Green Revolution was to avoid implementing agrarian reform. In this sense, the Green Revolution was less a campaign to feed the urban poor than a strategy to prevent the rural poor from seizing land to feed themselves.”).

\(^{34}\) The authors support their conclusion merely by pointing out that this was the practical result of the Green Revolutions. Id. at 31.


\(^{36}\) Holt-Gimenez et al., *supra* note 1, at 99-100 (“While sustainable agriculture has frequently been dismissed by international agricultural research centers as ‘lacking science,’ the fact is that the practices of many ecological farmers have been racing ahead of industrial science’s understanding of sustainability for some time.”).

\(^{37}\) Id. at 101, 103.
some critics, lead to a decrease in agriculture output.\textsuperscript{38} The authors also note that when total output is considered under a polyculture farm, as opposed to single crop production, yields can increase (from twenty percent to sixty percent).\textsuperscript{39} Although this evidence provides support for the proposition that small organic farms have social benefits and may produce competitive levels of output, it is not clear that small-scale organic farms are superior in production capacity. Reed et al. accurately point out that “Neither side in the debate has been able to table definitive evidence to support their opinions. The debate has remained a clash of ideologies and philosophies rather than a discussion of the different qualities of farm businesses and what they bring to communities.”\textsuperscript{40} Holt-Gimenez et al. do some work in establishing evidence about the nature of the qualities of small farm businesses and what they bring to communities. Yet the authors do not rigorously compare this evidence against the evidence supporting large-scale non-organic farms. Thus, while Part II helps establish the central ideology of agroecology and provides some evidence in support of the practice, it does not definitively settle the debate regarding which agricultural practice produces the greatest output.

Holt-Gimenez et al. also explore the notion of food sovereignty, which they define as “the democratic control over our food systems.”\textsuperscript{41} The authors echo many conclusions reached by Wright and Middendorf in \textit{The Fight Over Food}, which emphasizes the current movement to reclaim control over our food systems and our rising food consciousness.\textsuperscript{42} Wright and Middendorf point out that the rise in food consciousness “stem[s], in part, from our postmaterialist age, in which some of us have the luxury of putting quality and identity issues surrounding food front and center in our consciousness.”\textsuperscript{43} They observe that many people in developing countries are unfortunately still concerned with basic food insecurity.\textsuperscript{44} Yet, Wright and Middendorf note, “The desire for accessible ‘quality’ food, a healthy environment, and regional economic development transcends the social markers of race, class, gender, and geography that divide us. We all want and need sustainable livelihoods.”\textsuperscript{45} In \textit{Food Rebellions!}, Holt-Gimenez et al. echo this thought, arguing that activists and organizations around the world are working to regain control of their food systems in order to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{38} Id. at 111 (citing Catherine Badgley et al., \textit{Organic Agriculture and the Global Food Supply}, 22(2) \textit{RENEWABLE AGRIC. \\& FOOD SYS.}, 86-108 (2007)).
\bibitem{39} HOLT-GIMENEZ ET AL., \textit{supra} note 1, at 113, 116.
\bibitem{41} \textit{Holt-Gimenez et al., \textit{supra} note 1}, at 84.
\bibitem{43} Id. at 5.
\bibitem{44} Id.
\bibitem{45} Id.
\end{thebibliography}
ensure quality food and a healthy environment.\textsuperscript{46}

Part II may disappoint some readers in that the authors fail to explore concrete political and legal mechanisms for the implementation of their proposed agroecology. They speak generally about political will\textsuperscript{47} but fail to provide robust practical solutions to overcome the current institutional inertia. Based on the causes of the food crisis explored in Part I, there seem to be many areas ripe for domestic legal changes, including regulation of the agricultural commodities market, reforms in antitrust law to diffuse the concentration of power wielded by monopolies in the agricultural industry, and revision of the U.S. Farm Bill, which governs agricultural subsidies and food aid policy. Yet the authors do not discuss such legal reform, nor do they discuss the strategies of political maneuvering necessary to implement such reforms. The authors argue that, “To overcome the food crisis, we need to transform the food system”\textsuperscript{48} and “The challenge is to remove the structural barriers that are holding back all these promising alternatives.”\textsuperscript{49} Suppose one believes in the book’s premise that the root cause of the global food crisis is a system of global injustice perpetuated by powerful elite actors and that the solution involves a transformation of the food system to allow space for agroecology. How does one then go about removing the structural barriers preventing the kind of transformation envisioned? Unfortunately, \textit{Food Rebellions} does not answer this difficult question.

How relevant is \textit{Food Rebellions}? In April 2008, “The world’s economic ministers declared . . . that shortages and skyrocketing prices for food posed a potentially greater threat to economic and political stability than the turmoil in capital markets.”\textsuperscript{50} The problems that Holt-Gimenez et al. document are some of the most pressing areas of global concern and one finds it difficult to read their account without feeling a strong sense of indignation at the global injustice. Due to the tone of the book, it would appear that \textit{Food Rebellions!} was meant for popular consumption. True to form, it will likely fuel the fire of activists and the socially-conscious alike, helping to strengthen the army of people who demand change in the global food system. Some might wish that the book did more to inform practical strategies for such change. Yet perhaps we should recognize the value to rallying the army, and leave it up to others to arm themselves with the various weapons necessary to fight the system of injustice.

\textsuperscript{46} Holt-Gimenez et al., \textit{supra} note 1, at 84.
\textsuperscript{47} Id. at 169.
\textsuperscript{48} Id. at 84.
\textsuperscript{49} Id. at 85.