

PLACE-BASED FOOD SYSTEMS KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Capitalism, food, and social movements: The political economy of food system transformation



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Food First

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Do foodies need to know about capitalism? Everybody trying to change the food system—farmers, farmworkers, chefs, people fighting to end hunger and diet-related disease—all of us need to know about capitalism. Why? Because we have a capitalist food system. After all, you wouldn't start farming without knowing something about growing plants, or start a website without knowing something about computers, or fix the

roof on a house without knowing something about carpentry. I know, most of us are too busy trying to solve problems *within* the food system to sit around analyzing the food system as a whole. We concentrate on one or two issues—healthy food

Note

This article is adapted from a keynote address entitled *Capitalism, Food, and Social Movements: The Political Economy of Food System Transformation* at the Place-Based Food Systems Conference, hosted by the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at Kwantlen Polytechnic University on August 9, 2018. The conference brought together community and academic leaders to share research and practice and to foster effective collaboration. More information is at <https://www.kpu.ca/pbfs2018>

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access, organic agriculture, GMO labeling, pesticide poisoning, seed sovereignty... The list is long. On top of that, we don't really talk about capitalism in capitalist countries. Before the 2008 financial crash, it was awkward even to mention the term 'capitalism.' But the truth is our food and capitalism have co-evolved over the last 200 years. If we want to know about our food system, we have to know about capitalism. That way, we can change it.

Global Hunger: Scarcity vs. Injustice

Frances Moore Lappé founded Food First 42 years ago with the proceeds from the book *Diet for a Small Planet*. Frankie said two things in that book which were absolutely revolutionary. The first was, "One in seven people on this planet is going hungry. And yet we produce one and a half times more than enough food for everybody." So clearly, hunger is not the result of scarcity. Hunger must, therefore, be a result of people not being able to afford and access food. The question "Why can't people afford to buy food?" then forged the mission of Food First: To end the injustices that cause hunger. So you can see we're not Malthusian. We don't believe in the scarcity that you hear talked about today, that there just isn't enough food in the world.

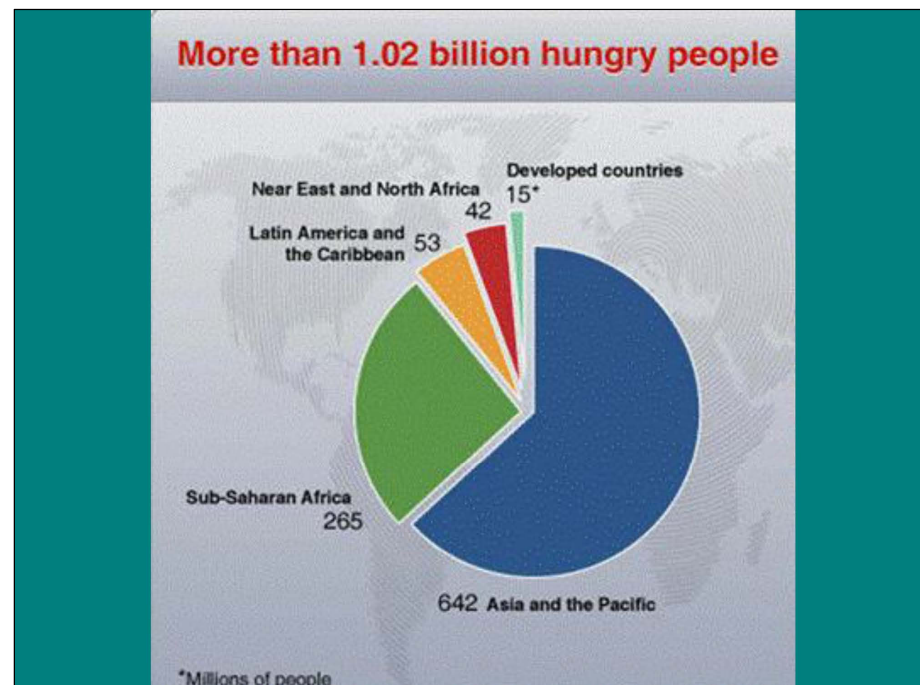
The second thing that Frankie said was that we eat too high on the food chain and it's causing environmental problems. She was one of the first people to say this publicly and attract attention to this dietary shift. So in a way, I'm not going to say anything new because today, 42 years later, we still have one person in seven going hungry on this planet, and we still produce one and a half times more than enough food for every man,

woman, and child. We still eat too high in the food chain, and the way we produce food is causing massive environmental and social problems.

It's important to mention that the measurement of a billion hungry people in the world—one in seven—is likely a gross underestimation (Slide 1). This is due to the way that hunger is measured. People are only identified as hungry if they experience hunger 12 months out of the year. If they experience hunger for only 11 months out of the year, they're not counted as hungry. Second, this measurement is based on caloric intake, and you can imagine that the required number of calories an individual must consume varies substantially according to height, gender, occupation, age, etc. The caloric intake threshold for determining hunger (around 2000 kilocalories) is fine if you sit quietly behind a computer for 8 hours a day. But most hungry people in the world are women farmers in the developing world who work under a hot sun all day long and are nursing one or more children. They need as much as 5000 kilocalories a day. Official estimates miss all of this.

The other thing is that most of the hunger in the world is concentrated in Asia and the Pacific.

Slide 1. Global Hunger by Region



Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

But Africa is the region we most hear about, from institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World Bank, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and Monsanto. Hunger in Africa is highlighted with an expression like, “Africa needs a new green revolution” or “It’s Africa’s turn.” Why are we so concerned about hunger in Africa without mentioning Asia, where we find the majority of the world’s hungry population?

There is a reason for the high profile given to the issue of hunger in Africa relative to that in Asia. The approach to end hunger routinely professed is the Green Revolution: produce more food with more chemicals and high-yielding seed varieties. Asia already had a Green Revolution and is consequently saturated with chemical fertilizers, GMOs, and modern farming machinery. While this transition has not eliminated hunger in the region, it has saturated the market for machinery, chemicals, and industrial seed. However, Africa is a wide-open market for a Green Revolution, and there is substantial money to be made selling these technologies. And while I think it’s important to talk about the issue of hunger in Africa, I think this is why hunger in this region receives much more attention relative to Asia.

Contradictions of Capitalism and Overproduction in Our Food System

Although she didn’t know it 42 years ago, in her book Francis Moore Lappé was addressing what political economists call ‘the first and second contradictions of capital.’ Capital is wealth that is seeking more wealth—this is the basis of capitalism. The first contradiction of capital involves labor, and it leads to all kinds of interesting situations. The contradiction of labor goes basically like this: Let’s say an industrialist hires six people to produce six widgets. If the owner pays their workers enough money to buy those widgets, they won’t make a profit. So, on one hand, they have to pay workers just enough to keep them working, and on the other, they have to produce more widgets to sell to more people. As an owner of capital, I have to expand markets beyond my workers, who don’t make enough money (or need) to buy all the

widgets they produce.

Now, Henry Ford was one of the first to try to address this contradiction. He made an assembly line and said that the workers were going to be able to buy cars. And sure enough, through the miracle of credit and the efficiencies of the assembly line, they were. But Ford produced so many cars that he had to expand into an open market where people who were wealthier than the workers were also buying cars. Other car manufacturers followed suit, creating industrial competition.

And now, coming back to our example, this group of six people is competing with that group, and that group is competing with another group, and so on. Each group is trying to sell more widgets than the other. One way to do this is by being more efficient in production. Another way is by producing more widgets and selling them at a lower price—the lower profit margins can be compensated for by just selling more widgets. The point of competition is to increase both profits and market share. Since everyone is becoming more efficient and producing more, pretty soon there is more product than demand and prices fall below the costs of production. This is called a crisis of overproduction. Small firms go out of business and larger firms take over, concentrating market power in just a few hands. Overproduction is a natural part of capitalism. And this is particularly true with capitalist agriculture.

Farmers usually aim to produce a surplus. They borrow a lot of money up front and want to be sure they sell enough to cover their costs of production. But there’s a lot of uncertainty. Agricultural markets are volatile and very demanding. A large portion of farmers’ costs are fixed—they can’t just plant less when the market is bad, and they can’t move their farm to find a better market. This means that when prices drop (because of overproduction), farmers don’t cut back on production—they produce more to cover their fixed costs, “farming their way out of debt.” What if the price goes up in the market? Again farmers produce more because they need more money to make up for the years they lost money. So farming especially lends itself to overproduction.

With overproduction, goods pile up unsold, workers are laid off, and demand drops. As a

capitalist, what can I do? I can break into some other market which is already established. With food production, one good way to do that is through food aid. The USDA started providing food aid because it had a huge surplus of grain and had to get rid of it. And so, through an arrangement with the governments in the developing world, they broke into those markets, basically selling the grain there at prices that were below the cost of production. This destroyed the markets for local farmers and made those governments dependent on foreign grain. Subsequently, they—well, we—had the markets to ourselves. So the contradiction between capital and labor has all kinds of consequences.

And of course, we know about the second contradiction—the ecological contradiction in which production and consumption ruin the environment. But where does it really start? It starts with the metabolic rift. The metabolic rift results from physically separating the places where we produce most of our food from the place where we consume most of our food. Nutrients used to produce food are not returned to the farm to be recycled through the food chain. Instead, these nutrients are consumed in cities, and dumped into rivers and oceans as waste.

The metabolic rift was first identified just as capitalism was emerging. Justus von Liebig, known as the father of fertilizer, isolated nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium in plants and noted that these could be added to the soil as fertilizers. He didn't elaborate on the process, but he got the theory right. Von Liebig actually wrote to the mayor of London cautioning that industrialization was driving people into the cities, where nutrients are not getting back to the farm but polluting the waterways.

The metabolic rift leads to all kinds of environmental challenges like overshoot, pollution, and, as we now know, global warming and resource depletion. It's been said that "All progress in capitalist's agriculture is progress not only in the art of robbing the worker but robbing the soil, the source of all wealth" (Marx, 1867/1976, pp. 637–638).

We know now that these externalities are quite severe. To list a few examples:

- **Soil loss:** About 75 billion tons/year, and it's been estimated that global losses in soil-based ecosystem services cost between US\$6.3 and US\$10.6 trillion annually. (That's about the same amount as the value of business the food system does every year.)
- **Water loss:** Agriculture uses up 80% of the world's fresh water. A large portion of industrial agriculture is reliant on aquifers with geologic recharge rates. Some of the largest of these ancient aquifers are located in the Punjab, India, where the Green Revolution was introduced, and in the American Midwest.
- **Biodiversity:** We've lost 90 percent of the world's agrobiodiversity because of monocultures and chemical use in agriculture.
- **Aquatic ecosystem health:** Eutrophic dead zones are growing in our bodies of water around the world, mostly from agricultural runoff and exacerbated by rising ocean temperatures. For example, the Gulf of Mexico is experiencing unprecedented plankton blooms and fish kills.
- And the other thing which has more to do with the first contradiction is if you look around the world today, **farms are getting bigger**—much, much bigger. To stay in business they have to produce much, much more because the profit margins are very small. So the volumes have to be very large in order to cover costs. But farms are also getting very, very small and around the world. Most of the smallholder farmers in the world are women. They produce over half of the world's food. Small farmers, by the way, produce about 70 percent of the world's food on 25 percent of the agricultural land. Now, this has got nothing to do with Cargill, has nothing to do with Monsanto, has nothing to do with "Big Ag." These are peasant farmers. Although poor peasant farmers produce most of the world's food, most of them are going hungry. Their parcels of land are too small. What they get paid for the products is too low. They sell it off

right away as soon as they harvest because they're poor and need money. Six months later, they're buying back food at higher prices, but they don't have enough money, and so they go hungry. The women and girls who feed most of the world make up 70 percent of the world's hungry. And these small farms are getting smaller. The most rapidly growing sector in U.S. agriculture is small farms, and most of these farmers are women. We can celebrate this. I think it's a good thing. However, we are condemning most of these women farmers to poverty because their farms are too small. And so you can see the sexism in all this . . . You know, the big boys on the big farms and the women with their families on little farms. That's the feminization of agriculture. But the way it's being done is not good.

- **Food waste:** Between 30 and 50 percent of our food is wasted somewhere between farm and fork. Food waste takes different shapes depending on where it's being wasted (e.g., Global North vs. South), demographics, cultures, etc. It's very particular. What's not particular is that a huge amount of our food is wasted. It's often said that reducing food waste can eliminate hunger. While this is conceptually true, it overlooks the influence of our capitalist food system. Food waste is part of that system. Industrial agriculture, capitalist agriculture, has to overproduce in order to stay in the market, and food waste is a consequence. There are programs that have invested millions of dollars in recovering food waste, such as the Rockefeller Foundation or the Ford Foundation. However, the moment you do this, food waste, which before was just throughput, now has value. Consequently, retailers, distributors, and other food supply chain actors will want to capture the value of food waste, and we're quickly going to see the capitalization of food waste. If you really want to stop food waste, we have to stop overproduction.

So where does this leave us? Here we are talking about place-based food systems. The sessions that I was able to participate in today were filled with incredible initiatives being done to reinvent our food systems so they're more equitable, sustainable, and democratic. We should continue to do this. However, in this work, we too often get dichotomized. "Yeah, that's nice, but it's too small, and actually we need big," or "that's great locally, but we need to go global because there are hungry people all around the world and we've got to feed them," or "Yeah, that's organic, that's quaint, but we really need chemicals because we have so many pests."

The discourse can become community versus corporate, people versus profit, authentic versus productive, idealistic versus scientific, traditional versus modern. And I think these are false dichotomies. I think this is a huge smokescreen. It's similar to what my president does. He gets caught doing something, and he says, "Oh, look over there. There's some real bad stuff happening there," or he'll make some other outrageous statement and you forget about the thing he did the day before. These are basically to take our minds off the real problems of hunger and production.

The Scarcity Narrative

The "golden fact" is the idea that, because of population growth, we're going to have to double our food production within a generation in order to feed the population.

Well, you'd be surprised who says this—people who know better. The FAO says this even though quietly they admit it's not true. USDA says this. Monsanto loves this. Respected scientists, whom I admire very much, such as Thomas Foley, a global ecologist, says this in *National Geographic* when he also knows it's not true. The scarcity narrative is such a powerful narrative because scarcity is an integral part of capitalism. Why? Because it brings up prices and generates more profit. Scarcity must be created even if it isn't there. And if you create it in people's minds, that's even better. (And by the way, who is going to produce all this new food? Modern industry, industrial agriculture, new capitalist technologies. . .)

We know the scarcity narrative is false because

if you look back over the last 10, 20, 30 years—if you go even farther back than this graph (Slide 2), what you see is that we have been increasing production by 12 percent per capita every year consistently for decades. *Per capita*. This accounts for population growth; every single person in this room, and everywhere around the world every year should be getting 12 percent more food. And yet we have at least one fifth or a third of the world population going hungry or malnourished. Despite this, absolute poverty has not changed. So no matter how much food you produce, these people can't buy it in a capitalist food system. Similarly, undernourishment—the little yellow dots—that hasn't changed. Why is it that we keep producing more and more food without solving hunger or malnutrition, yet the solution is always—always—to produce more food?

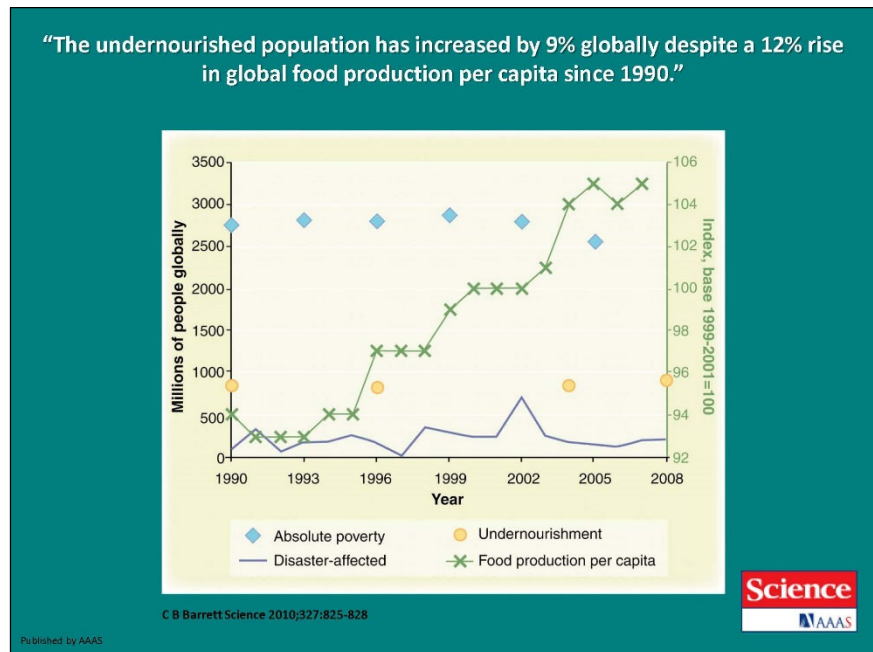
Food Crises in a Capitalist Food System

The food price index (Slide 3) illustrates the decline in food prices since the turn of the century. Why would that be? Again, overproduction. We're producing so much food that we have been driving down food prices for the past hundred years. We have never had a problem of underproduction. On the contrary, since the beginning of capitalism, we've had a problem of overproduction.

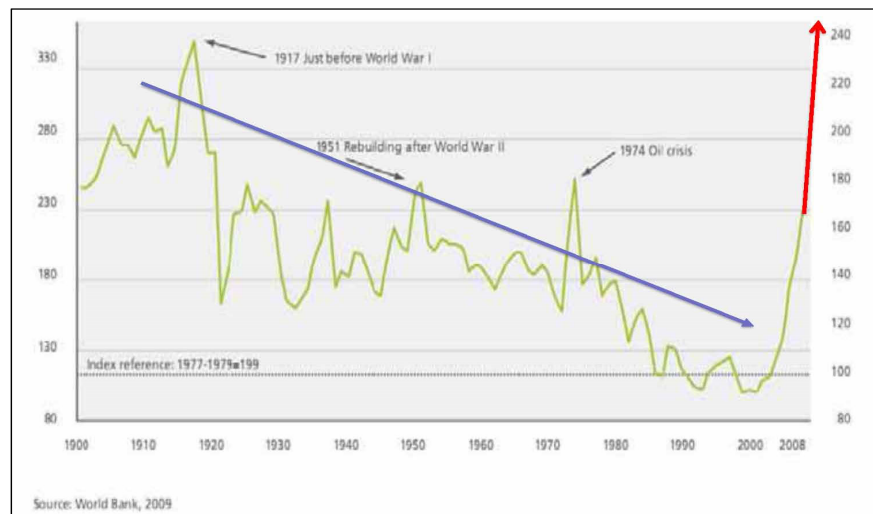
The downward trend in food prices changed suddenly in 2008, when prices shot up beyond anything we had ever recorded in the past. Why? Did food suddenly become

scarce? No. Actually, 2008 was a time of record harvests. This was also the case in 2010, when there was another food price spike. In these years, we saw record harvests, record hunger, and record profits by the oligopolies that control our food system. This means that the Monsantos, the Cargills, and the large retail chains were all making record profits at a time when millions of people were being driven into the ranks of the hungry

Slide 2. Global Food Production per Capita, Undernourishment, and Absolute Poverty, 1990–2008



Slide 3. Food Price Index, 1910–2008



because they couldn't afford to buy food.

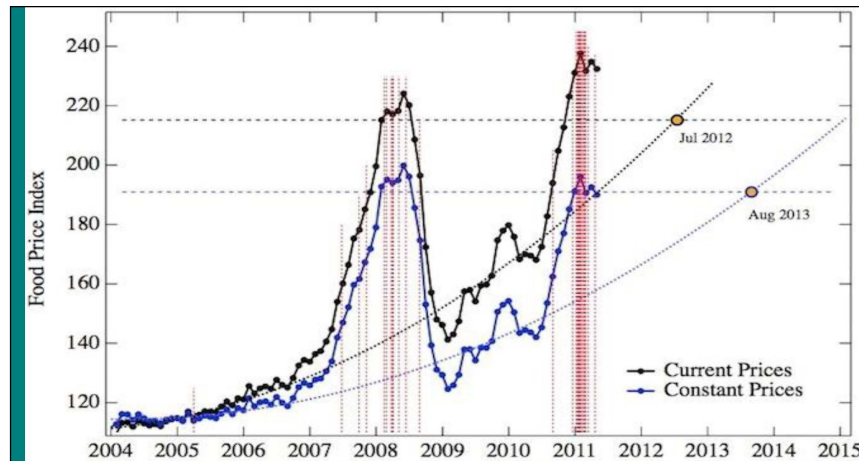
Slide 4 shows the two food price spikes in 2008 and in 2011. The vertical red lines represent the frequency of food riots around the world. The figure illustrates the threshold at which increasing food prices cause people so much pain that they start rioting. When food price decrease below that

threshold, people stop rioting. You can see this threshold being crossed in both 2008 and 2011, where high food prices are accompanied by spikes in food riots. It's important to note that these riots did not just occur in locations that have ongoing struggles with hunger, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Haiti, where people were subsisting off of mud

biscuits at the time. Riots also occurred in Italy and Milwaukee, rich, productive places. So what does this mean? What's happening with our food?

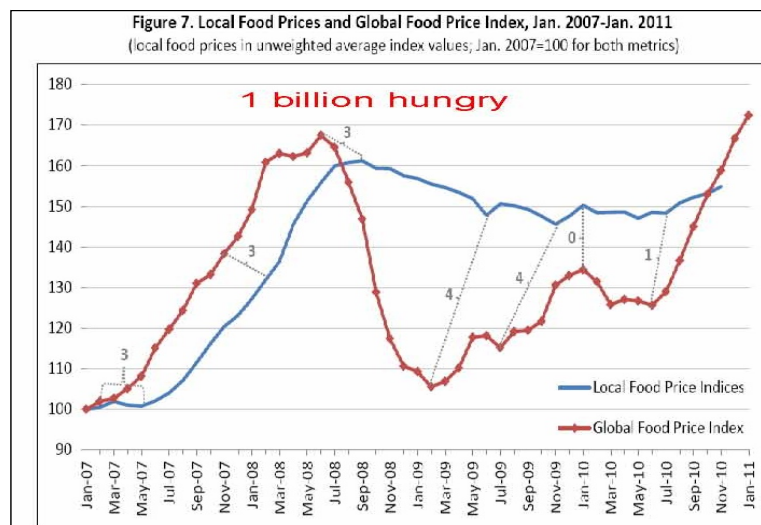
Slide 5a illustrates the global (red) and local (blue) food prices between 2007 and 2011. Again, we see the spikes in global prices in 2008 and 2011. The local price—the retail price—increases with the global price in 2008. This makes sense; as food gets more expensive globally, its price in the store increases as well. But then the global price of food drops precipitously while the retail price stays the same. This is called gouging. There's no other word for it. Consumers

Slide 4. Global and Local Food Price Index and Frequency of Food Riots



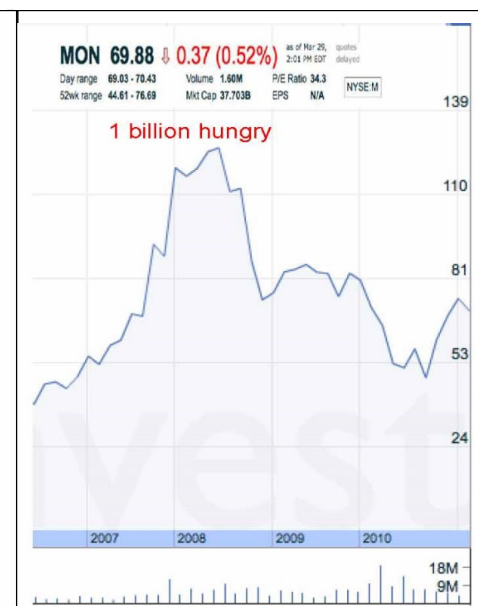
FAO Price Index at current prices (black curve) and corrected for inflation (blue curve) between January 2004 and May 2011. Red dashed lines signify the beginning dates of food riots and unrest in North Africa and the Middle East. Black and blue horizontal lines represent the current-price and inflation-adjusted food price thresholds for riots. "The Food Crises and Political Instability in North Africa and the Middle East." By Marco Lagi, Karla Z. Bertrand and Yaneer Bar-Yam. arXiv, Aug. 11, 2011.

Slide 5a. Global and Local Food Price Index, 2007–2011



Source: FAO [2010a and 2010f] and authors' calculations
 Note: The grey lines connect corresponding local and global food price ascents and descents, with the grey number representing the estimated global-to-local price transmission time number of months

Slide 5b. Monsanto Share Price, 2007–2011



are getting gouged; poor people are getting gouged while food companies make incredible profits. For example, Wal-Mart, one of the biggest grocers in the world (soon to be outseated by Amazon) made so much money that they had a crisis of over-accumulation. They had made huge profits that needed to be reinvested as capital, but there was nowhere to go because we were in a recession.

The share prices of Monsanto's stock (Slide 5b) reflects the profits seen by large food oligopolies during these food crises. Monsanto's share prices increase as people go hungry. As people's hunger is alleviated, Monsanto's share price goes down. So what does Monsanto need? They need food crises.

There's a lot of talk about the causes of global food price spikes, including increased droughts globally, changing climates, rising meat consumption in India, Brazil, and China, low grain reserves, etc. I call these proximate causes. But really, while we have all of those contributing factors, what raised food prices beyond anything we'd ever seen was speculation with our food, as reflected in the explosion of trading in commodity index funds. Financial houses were speculating with our food and pushing prices up.

The Corporate Food Regime

I want to talk about the root causes of these crises, namely the concentration of power across the food system that leaves it vulnerable to shocks. We've experienced unprecedented consolidation across agri-food industries, such that only a few companies control most of the sector. For example, in 2014, the top eight firms held over 60 percent of the market share of crop seeds/traits, farm machinery, animal pharmaceuticals, and agrochemical. In the case of the agro-chemical, the top eight firms held over 80 percent of the sector's market share (IPES-Food, 2017). This is what we call the "corporate food regime," where the global food system is governed according to a small number of corporate interests.

We've had several food regimes throughout history: a colonial food regime, a Keynesian food regime, but what we have today is the corporate food regime. The food regime is defined as all of the institutions and all of the rules that control our

food. Examples of institutions that make the rules include the World Trade Organization and the free trade agreements, the USDA, the farm bill, etc., and then the global corporations that profit from this. These institutions all dictate the conditions and rules for our food systems and effectively set the price of grain for the world. This food regime began with the Green Revolution that sold the forms of industrial production from the Global North to the Global South.

First, in the '50s and '60s, we loaned the South the money to buy new hybrid seeds, agrochemicals, etc., for them to start producing more food. But the North was also producing food so there was oversupply and the market crashed. This meant that neither the countries of the Global South nor the farmers on North America could pay back their loans to the banks on Wall Street. As a result, U.S. farmers went bankrupt. For the countries of the Global South, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund applied structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1980s and '90s. The World Bank said, "I will loan you the money so that you can keep up your payments to these banks on Wall Street." (World Bank money, by the way, is public money. It's from our taxes.) However, these loans were conditioned on structural adjustment policies from the International Monetary Fund. The policies included privatizing economies, devaluing currency, dismantling grain reserves and marketing boards, specializing in non-food export crops, etc. The North continued to send food aid to the South.

With the corporate food regime, instead of Southern colonies supplying the North with raw materials (including food), now the North supplied food to the South. The South became dependent on the North for its food to a tremendous degree. Then these structural adjustment policies became signed into the free trade agreements of the 1990s (e.g., NAFTA, CAFTA, etc.). And what this did is sanction overproduction in the North (using subsidies powered by tax dollars) to dump the surplus in the South. Essentially the public is coerced into destroying the food systems of Global South so that Big Grain can make its money. What was the result?

Well, the Global South went from producing a

food surplus to becoming food-dependent. In the 1970s, the Global South generated about a billion dollar surplus annually from food production. Toward the end of the century, this changed to an annual deficit of approximately 11 billion dollars. In addition to forcing food dependence on the Global South, the expansion of the global food regime has unleashed far-reaching ecological, economic, and social crises on the entire planet. Industrial agriculture is responsible for:

- Producing up to 40% of the world's greenhouse gases (depending on how you calculate it).
- Using up 80% of the world's fresh water.
- The loss of 75% of crop diversity.
- Widespread bankruptcies; e.g., the bankruptcy of 1.3 million smallholder farmers in Mexico following the signing of NAFTA. This initiated the large-scale migration of farmers to the United States in search of work.
- The explosion of diet-related diseases from the increased prevalence of grain-based processed foods that are high in salt, sugar, and fat.
- The financialization and concentration of agricultural land.

The thing that really strikes me about this process is the erosion of the public sphere. Our public institutions were privatized, our grain boards and our marketing boards were dismantled... even our schools in the United States and our health system—virtually everything—was privatized. Our minds become privatized, and we begin to think that the only available solutions to our problems are through the market—not through community, and not through negotiation, and not through deciding things among ourselves.

I went through school and finished my doctorate without paying a penny. I got public scholarships. The students interning at Food First today have US\$30,000–US\$40,000 in debt for a liberal arts degree because we've privatized education. But we've lost the practice and power of the public sphere to hold the market and the private sector accountable.

Ten years ago, the International Assessment for Agricultural Science and Technology for Development [IAASTD] came to this conclusion after a five-year study (financed in large part by the World Bank):

The way the world processes food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and the hungry if the world is going to help cope with growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse.

The backstory here is a funny, actually a sad, story. It was, in fact, Syngenta who went to the World Bank and said, "We need a global study which shows that we can save the world with our GMOs." So James Wolfensohn, director general at the World Bank at the time, pulled together a very large and talented crew, including 300 scientists who, for five years, investigated this problem of hunger and environmental destruction in great detail. At the end of the study, they said, "Actually, GMOs are irrelevant to ending hunger, and the free trade agreements don't really benefit poor people. What really works are things like agroecology and place-based food systems in order to build wealth in rural communities through agriculture." The United States, Canada, and Australia refused to sign off on the work. Syngenta walked out in a huff, and the World Bank shelved the report.

It isn't surprising that we talk about our food system as a broken food system. But I would submit that we don't have a broken food system, and I think this is really the wrong way to think about it. If you think that the food system is broken, it implies that it used to work well. When did it work so well? And for whom? It certainly didn't work well for the native peoples who lost their land, or the slaves and indentured servants who worked the plantations, and it hasn't worked well for immigrants who pick our crops in the U.S. today.

So I don't think that the food system is broken. I think it is working *exactly* as a capitalist food system is supposed to work. It overproduces, it concentrates power in capital in the hands of a few, and it leaves us with all of the externalities.

I think we're looking at a battle between an old system, which is clearly dysfunctional but refuses to die, and a new system which is having tremendous difficulty being born. More than this, I think we are actually all engaged in a long-term, deep historical process when we talk about place-based food systems and these alternatives.

Now, capitalism does a curious thing. We've actually been studying capitalism for several hundred years, and know a lot about it. (You don't get to learn about it in university. You learn about markets, but you don't learn about capitalism.) Capitalism has two phases: one is a phase of liberalization. That's what we mean by neoliberalism. In this phase, we take the gloves off the market. We take off all the regulations. We take off the environmental regulations, labor regulations, bring tariffs down, etc. The WTO and free trade agreements advanced liberalization, which removes restrictions to allow capital to move freely. The result of liberalization is a tremendous concentration of wealth, not necessarily overall economic growth. An example of this would be the Roaring Twenties. But liberalization is often followed by a phase of reform.

Countermovements

Capitalism continues to successfully concentrate wealth. We have significantly more billionaires today than we did 10 years ago. It's predicted that we'll soon have the first trillionaire. But the liberalization period of capitalism wreaks such havoc and visits such pain on communities that they eventually rebel; they can't take it anymore. We can't take being unemployed anymore. We can't take having our water polluted. We can't keep getting sick from eating this lousy food. And people develop what's called a "countermovement" and demand reforms.

The last countermovement against capital was in the 1930s. In 1930s, following the liberalization of the Roaring Twenties—and the devastating financial crash of 1929—staggering unemployment rates and poverty among a large portion of the population caused people to join unions, form alternative political parties (e.g., communist parties, socialist parties), and build an extremely powerful countermovement to liberalization.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) was president at the time in the United States, and it looked like capitalism might fall. So he introduced reforms to stabilize the system. Markets and overproduction were brought back under control, and social programs were implemented. He broke up monopolies. That was the New Deal. The only reason FDR was able to do that was because there was a powerful countermovement that created the political will for reform.

Now it's important to realize that liberalization and reform are two sides of the same coin. The New Deal reforms were not introduced to move us out of capitalism toward socialism; they eliminated the excesses of capitalism to stabilize it and avoid socialism.

Counter Movements in the Food System

I think that the food movement is an emerging counter movement like just like the global women's movement and the climate justice movement. These are counter movements that, at their core, are pushing back against the injustices of capital.

We have a corporate food regime and a counter food movement. Each of these can be separated into two political tendencies (Slide 6), and I'll talk a bit about each one.

Corporate Food Regime

Within the corporate food regime, we have a neoliberal wing and a reformist wing. Right now the neoliberals are in command, and they have been for some time, while the reformists are very weak.

Food System Countermovement

The countermovement also has two different tendencies: a progressive tendency and a radical tendency. The progressive tendency, I think, is probably most of us [in attendance]. These are people who are really doing things: starting a CSA or a farmers market, creating food co-ops and food hubs, convening conferences and figuring out the next steps, etc. This movement is solving the problems that are being visited upon our food system in favor of people who need it. It is very practical.

And then you have the radicals. These are

Slide 6. Politics, Production Models, and Approaches of the Corporate Food Regime and Food System Movements

	Corporate Food Regime		Food Movements	
POLITICS	NEOLIBERAL	REFORMIST	PROGRESSIVE	RADICAL
Discourse	Food Enterprise	Food Security	Food Justice	Food Sovereignty
Main Institutions	International Finance Corporation (World Bank); IMF, WTO; USDA; Global Food Security Bill; Green Revolution; Millennium Challenge; Heritage Foundation; Chicago Global Council, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation;	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank); FAO; U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development; International Federation of Agricultural Producers; mainstream Fair Trade; Slow Food; some Food Policy Councils; most food banks and food aid programs.	Alternative Fair Trade & many Slow Foods chapters, many organizations in the Community Food Security Movement; CSAs; many Food Policy Councils & Youth food and justice movements; many farmworker & labor organizations	Via Campesina, International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty; Global March for Women; many Food Justice and rights-based movements, UN Committee on Food Security CSO Committee, many farmer organizations w/in federations (PELUM, ROPPA, ESAFF,) African, US, EU Food Sovereignty Alliances
Orientation	Corporate	Development	Empowerment	Entitlement
MODEL	Overproduction; Corporate concentration; Unregulated markets and monopolies; Monocultures (including organic); GMOs; Agrofuels; mass global consumption of industrial food; phasing out of peasant & family agriculture and local retail.	Mainstreaming/ certification of niche markets (e.g. organic, fair, local, sustainable); maintaining northern agricultural subsidies; “sustainable” roundtables for agrofuels, soy, forest product, etc; market-led land reform	Agroecologically-produced local food; investment in underserved communities; new business models and community benefit packages for production, processing & retail; better wages for ag. workers; solidarity economies; land access; regulated markets & supply	Democratization of food system; Dismantle corporate agri-foods monopoly power; parity; redistributive land reform; community rights to water & seed; Regionally-based food systems; sustainable livelihoods; ; protection from dumping/ overproduction; Revival of agroecologically-managed peasant agriculture to distribute wealth and cool the planet
Approach to the Food Crisis	Increased industrial production; unregulated corporate monopolies; land grabs; expansion of GMOs; public-private partnerships; Liberal markets; Int’l. sourced food aid;	Same as Neo-liberal but w/increased middle peasant production & some locally-sourced food aid; more agricultural aid, but tied to GMOs & “bio-for tified/ climate-resistant” crops.	Right to food; Better safety nets; sustainably-produced, locally-sourced food; agroecologically-based agricultural development; guiding document;	Human right to food sovereignty; Locally sourced, sustainably produced, culturally appropriate, democratically controlled focus on UN/FAO negotiations
Guiding document	WB 2009 Dev. Report	WB 2009 Dev. Report	IAASTD	Peoples’ comprehensive framework for action; UN Right to Food series; IAASTD; Food Movements Unite

movements such as *Via Campesina*—a global peasant movement. They say, “All those things are great, but for them to prevail what we need is structural change. We need land reform because young farmers don’t have access to land. It’s too expensive.” Now they’re not talking about land trusts—who has enough money to buy all that land? We need land reform. We need to take agriculture out of the World Trade Organization. Food is different. Get it out of there. We need to dismantle the oligopolies. Not just actually implement our anti-trust laws (which we’re not doing), but go farther and dismantle these huge corporations that are too big to fail—because they’re going to fail us all. So radicals are looking at the structures, and the progressives are looking at the practices. I think that if these two tendencies were to integrate, the food movement would become a powerful countermovement. It could apply social

pressure onto the corporate food regime and create the political will to institute reforms.

What kind of reforms? This is the real political question. Will they be reforms to stabilize capitalism, which is always expanding and eating us out of house and home? Or will they be transformative reforms to fundamentally change our food systems?

The problem is that most of us don’t have money. Certainly the farmers don’t have enough money, and community organizations don’t have much money. And so the reformists, who are weak and can’t really institute reforms, reach out to the progressives to form alliances. And the reformists actually do have money. They’ve got foundations, and they have corporations. They’ve got political power in government—not much, but it’s there. And so obviously we want to reach out to them and build support for reforms. But historically this

is *not* how reforms are introduced. This alliance would split the back of the countermovement. It is the countermovement that provides the social force for the political will for reforms. So I think that it's important to build these alliances between progressives and radicals that would strengthen rather than split the countermovement. Well, why haven't we? Because it's hard. If it was easy, we would have done it already.

There are a couple of major obstacles which we have to confront head-on. Those things which deeply, deeply divide us; historically, that would be racism, sexism, and classism. So, yes, it's true that the white patriarchy is a real problem for the food system and the food movement. Racism is a problem for the food system and for the food movement. Most of the people who are working in the food system are women, and people of color have the highest rates of food insecurity. So racism and sexism are ingrained within our food system.

But it's not just our food system; it's within our own organizations. As I look around me today and I look at the faces here, it shows me that this is a place of extreme privilege. It may not feel like you have a lot of privilege; you may have difficulty making your house payments every month. But in fact, if you're here, you have some privilege, more than most people in the world. So when we talk about dismantling racism in the food system and food movement, we also have to think about dismantling these things within ourselves. Racism, sexism, and classism are double-edged swords. On the one hand, they hurt women, people of color, and working people. But on the other hand, they also hurt white people and men. Those of us who care about this can easily become immobilized with fear and guilt, whereas people who are discriminated against because of their color, or their gender, can experience internalized oppression.

So this is an internal process as well as a social and political process. And it's very hard. It's actually painful. And it's impossible to do alone. Luckily there are a lot of groups out there, programs out there that deal with this kind of trauma. And how do you work through this trauma and how do you get your mind clear? We need to be thinking


clearly. We can't be held down by trauma and guilt and pain.

At Food First we say dismantling racism isn't extra work that you do after you're working on the cooperative or the CSA. Dismantling sexism isn't extra work after you've formed a food hub. *Dismantling racism, classism, and sexism is the work, and we have to do it now.* This is just as urgent as everything that was talked about this morning in terms of global collapse. If we don't do it, then we can't form a strong countermovement. If we don't form a strong countermovement, then we can't get create the political will for the change that we desperately need.

I'll close with something that a farmer said to me in Latin America, where we were at a farming workshop with a group of poor peasant farmers. These farmers were part of a movement called *Campesino a Campesino* (farmer to farmer). They were working to reinvent agriculture, share their knowledge with each other, establish agroecological systems, and wean themselves off of the Green Revolution's technological treadmill that perpetuates the cycle of debt for farmers.

This farmer said, "Look," as he drew a picture of a stick figure on the ground with his machete, "Our movement walks on two legs: innovation and solidarity. We invent new things, and we share them with each other. And it works with two hands; production of food and protection of the environment. We know we need both." He drew two eyes, "And we have eyes to see a change and imagine our future. We have a mouth and a voice: we can say what we want and what we need to do."

Then he drew a heart. He said, "This work is hard. Farming is hard. You can't farm unless you love farming. And it's even harder to change farming, to introduce agroecology and new ways of doing things. That's even harder. So I think you have to love more. You have to love farming and nature and your family, and you have to love all farmers, and you have to love your God. We can't do this and we can't change the world unless we love."

I believe my friend. We need to love to transform the food system. Thank you. 

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