



# Harvesting Profits: The Roots of Our Food Crisis

By Christopher D. Cook

**E**very day in America, as we consume whatever food we can access and afford, the system that supplies our sustenance is engaged in its own form of consumption. It feasts on human toil, commodified animals, natural resources, and our own bodies. Food, one of the foundations of life, has become a hub of suffering and struggle.

Surveying the landscape of food, we find a long menu of problems, from farm closures to climate change. Corporate-patented genetically modified organisms (GMOs) threaten farmers, food democracy, and biodiversity. Honeybees, life-giving pollinators central to our food supply, are in mass decline from pesticides and other factors. In the United States and worldwide, hunger and malnutri-

tion remain rampant—affecting nearly one billion people globally, and at least forty-five million Americans—even as United Nations data show we have more than enough food to feed everyone on the planet.

In short, the whole world is imperiled by our industrialized, profit-driven food system—a system that requires constant growth, maximum profit, and an economy that

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relies on hidden costs and false cheapness. Today's harvest of disasters is remarkable for its sheer scope:

**Public health:** The epidemic of obesity, type II diabetes, and heart disease, linked in good part to our sugar-coated, fat-laden diet, annually contributes to hundreds of thousands of deaths and health costs in the hundreds of billions of dollars. Foodborne illnesses, such as the growing salmonella crisis in chicken, sicken forty-eight million Americans each year, resulting in 3,000 deaths.

**Environment:** Toxic pesticides and herbicides, roughly 800 million pounds annually, are polluting our waterways, fisheries, and air. Globally, industrial agriculture—led by livestock operations, as well as deforestation to produce more crops for feed and fuel—emits stunning quantities of methane, hydrogen sulfide, and other greenhouse gases, making food production one of the foremost contributors to climate upheaval.

**Vanishing farmers and farmland:** America continues to lose farmers, and farmland, at frightful rates. Some twenty-four million acres of farmland were gobbled up by development between 1982 and 2010, federal data shows. More than 100,000 U.S. farmers disappeared from the landscape between 2007 and 2012—that's 20,000 per year, fifty-four every day, more than one every half hour.

**Exploited workers:** The people who harvest our food and make our meals possible endure poverty wages, substandard housing, backbreaking toil, and dangerous pesticide exposures. Meanwhile, the meatpackers and poultry-processing workers who cut up chunks of animals all day long at a dizzying pace (set by industry and enabled by government) are routinely injured and crippled, leading to a lifetime of pain and lost earning power.

**Mistreated animals:** The animals we eat are subjected to horrific brutality—mass confinement by the tens of thousands in giant warehouses, the ground and air around them filled with toxic fecal matter. Even as “humane slaughter” labels gain popularity, the life and death of the animals we eat remains, as Thomas Hobbes put it, “nasty, brutish, and short.”

Everywhere on the planet, food is a source of power and conflict, with disparities of surplus and want used as playing cards in a cruelly stacked deck. This power is wielded by states and multinational corporations, aided

substantially by international “free trade” regimes, such as NAFTA, the WTO, and the looming Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Yet there is one consistent force underlying our troubles with food. It is the same answer doled out by journalist John Reed when asked to sum up what World War I was about: profits. To transform food and farming into a sustainable and equitable force for life, we must address the corporate-controlled food economy, and its deeper root—capitalism itself.

It is seductively easy to indict iconic corporate villains such as Walmart, Monsanto, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola. These powerhouses wield hefty influence over what farmers grow and what consumers eat. Walmart, with its massive buying power (it takes in roughly one-third of every grocery dollar spent in America), has greatly consolidated the supermarket industry while squeezing farmers and workers even tighter. Gorging on huge feasts of corn and soy, McDonald's and Coca-Cola help shape the nation's market and food-growing landscape. And most of that genetically engineered harvest is controlled by Monsanto, DuPont, and Syngenta.

But if we fixate solely on these corporate trees, we risk missing the forest of which they are a part. These corporations are the inevitable manifestations of capitalism's most basic dynamic—extracting maximum profit from labor and land. Corporate food power stems directly from capitalism's growth and profit imperatives.

“I don't think it's possible to understand the modern food system and its ills without understanding where it came from,” says Raj Patel, author of *Stuffed and Starved*. “Capitalism began in the fields with Enclosure, the process in which peasants were denied the right to sustenance and banished to the cities. From this moment, you had conditions ripe for intensive agriculture, empire and cheap food.”

**C**orporations' monopolistic power is a natural outgrowth of capitalism, not an aberrant tumor. It's worth remembering that the Sherman Antitrust Act was a response to beef trusts and other monopolies in the late nineteenth century. Even Adam Smith warned of capitalism's inherent lurch toward monopoly power. Capitalism requires relentless profit and expansion of production

and consumption, compelling an ecological and public health disaster.

The extent of corporate control over food today, up and down the entire food chain, demands attention. Food corporations' web of market control has widened dramatically in the past twenty-five years. In 2012, the top four beef producers (Cargill, Tyson, JBS, and National Beef) accounted for 82 percent of the market, up from 69 percent in 1990. The trend is similar in pork, poultry, and many other sectors. The top five supermarket firms feast on roughly half of all dollars consumers spent on groceries—twice as much as in 1997. According to the nonprofit ETC Group, three corporations now control more than half of the global seed business.

As University of Missouri Professor Mary Hendrickson explained in a 2014 speech, this industry-wide consolidation ripples across the entire food system: “There are fewer and larger farms, a change that corresponds to fewer and larger input supply firms, grain handling facilities, processing firms, distribution firms, grocers, and even food service distributors.” This limits the options available to farmers, forcing them “into the kinds of decisions that they otherwise would not have chosen for ethical or other reasons.”

As corporations merge and consolidate across the entire food chain, farmers are forced, as Nixon's Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz famously put it, to “get big or get out.” This propels consolidation of farmland into giant-sized operations to serve the raw ingredient needs of those corporations.

“The commodity farmers who are integrated into these global networks of production must fit into the scale of these networks,” writes Hendrickson. “Larger entities are interested in dealing with entities of a similar size which can provide the quantity of product with the greatest efficiency of transaction.”

Not only are we losing farmers and farmland—hollowing out rural communities, eliminating vital knowledge, heritage, and ecologies—but those farmers who remain are, for the most part, compelled to follow the corporate supply chain model of monocrop, mass-scale production.

The drive to maximize profits “begins at the top of the food chain, with corporations putting pressure on

their suppliers,” explains Wenonah Hauter, founder and executive director of Food and Water Watch, a nonprofit public interest group. Farmers “suffer the most from the pressure” to grow ever larger, simply to survive, even as they reap smaller returns.

Farmers' portion of the food dollar, Hauter says, “has shrunk so dramatically that a conventional corn producer gets four to five cents from the sale of a box of corn flakes and two to three cents from the sale of a full-sized bag of corn chips. The corn content of a soda in the form of high-fructose corn syrup nets the farmer two cents out of each consumer dollar. Ninety-eight cents goes to the food companies that make, market, and sell soda.”

**T**he near-monopoly control over our sustenance is neither pure economics, nor pure politics. Rather, it represents their symbiosis.

Hauter, author of the 2014 book *Foodopoly: The Battle over the Future of Food and Farming in America*, points to both the profit imperative and corporate-friendly policy. “Since the assault on antitrust law that began under Ronald Reagan and has continued unabated,” she says, “we have seen a merger mania in the agribusiness and food industry that has left us with a small number of bloated firms that control market share and have enormous political power.” The food industry underwent seventy-five mergers in 2014 alone, according to Hauter.

The rise of today's food oligopoly affects everything from food prices to workers' wages and conditions. Filmmaker Sanjay Rawal, co-producer of the much-praised documentary *Food Chains*, explains: “In essence, the most powerful companies within the food industry—namely, food retailers—have free rein to source products and set prices.”

In *Food Chains*, Florida farmworkers with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers fight for a livable wage—enough to survive and work their way out of extreme poverty. While their campaign targets one regional grocery chain, they are also battling the larger structure of the food industry.

“This oligarchy amongst food retailers is contrary to a free market and is, in fact, capitalism run amok,” Rawal argues.

**S**o what are we to do? Certainly, decentralizing and diversifying the food economy would enable more democratic and socially just access to food and land. But simply scaling down bigness or criticizing corporations does not change capitalism's relentless push for maximum growth and profits—the very dynamics that got us where we are today.

Other approaches are flowering across the land: school gardens, urban agriculture, numerous iterations of farmer-to-consumer relationships, and vigorous justice movements for farm laborers and food workers. There are market-oriented campaigns, such as fair trade and sustainability labels. The anti-GMO movement incorporates a critique of corporate power, consumer and farmer rights, and biodiversity.

A growing worldwide agroecology movement is producing significant gains by showing, scientifically, that diversified organic farming can in fact “feed the world.” Throughout Latin America, Africa, and South Asia, mass peasant-based movements such as La Via Campesina, millions of farmers strong, are fighting not only for sustainability, but also for food sovereignty, access to land, and economic justice.

What is missing, particularly in the United States, is a larger vision for transforming the economic and political power relations that underlie our food troubles. This means talking about how capitalism spawns so many food injustices, and how it looms over the horizon of change. How we tame or slay this Leviathan-like beast remains to be seen, but we must face it, honestly and courageously.

Movements based on alternative consumption and marketing do provide us with more healthful and sustainable options, but they reaffirm the same economic system that created today's corporate industrial food madness. Witness the rise of organic food corporations, which for the most part continue to exploit farmers and farm workers.

“Consumers have very little power within the food system,” says Rawal. “The idea of voting with your dollars is a misnomer. The fact is, for the time being, most of our food is grown within the conventional system. We need to find ways to transform that system even as

we develop different structural models.”

There are reforms that would at least blunt the current system's forces of concentrated power and profits. These include beefing up antitrust law and enforcement, restructuring public subsidies around sustainability and health principles, and pushing food corporations through policy and public pressure to share more of our food dollar with farmers and workers.

Serious change will also mean building a new, democratic, and socially just food system from the ground up.

“The food system is built upon exploitation,” says longtime activist LaDonna Redmond, an organizer with the Campaign for Food Justice. “Capitalism is also built on exploitation of people and land. The various factions of the food movement would have to unite around exploitation and exploitive practices in the food system, fully accepting that some of the most explosive practices are aimed at communities of color.”

Redmond says our many food struggles are defined by a potentially unifying common theme: “Whether we are talking about fair wages for fast food workers, unions for farm labor, animal welfare, climate change, or getting better food to underserved communities, the food movement must stand against all forms of oppression to end exploitation.”

As Raj Patel sees it, many food movements are doing just that, focusing attention on structural causes. “Social movements' success in overcoming the problems in the food system rest on their understanding of these problems as systemic,” he says. “Luckily, many movements already have this vision, as well as a vision for the systems that'll emerge after capitalism.”

Perhaps amid this struggle, there is room for hope. Awareness of our many food crises—and their interconnectedness—is on the rise.

“Activists across the food movement are beginning to realize that the food system cannot be changed in isolation from the larger economic system,” writes Eric Holt-Gimenez, executive director of Food First. The question is whether the broad rainbow of food movements can form a more unified umbrella of sustainability and justice—and whether that movement will confront the political economy underlying our food madness. ♦