

The Food Wars (2009) is very informative and insightful, since its author, Walden Bello, has a quasi-Marxian view of the world. His concern is with the recent global food crisis—its causes and its possible revolutionary solutions. In the first chapter he places it in its historical context. It's the expulsion-of-the-peasantry thing, etc. But I'll go into some detail.—

The first “international food regime” emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century; it “consisted of two food grids existing under the institutional canopy of a global free-trade system promoted by Great Britain.” The first grid was the settler agriculture in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Argentina that specialized in the production of wheat and livestock for the industrializing metropolitan economies, and which displaced much European agriculture. (Hence, in part, mass emigration out of Europe and into the New World.) It was based mostly on family labor, not large, capital-intensive farms. The second grid was the system of capitalist plantation agriculture in what became the global South, which specialized in sugar, tea, coffee, tobacco, and cocoa for export, as well as raw materials like cotton, timber, rubber, indigo, and copper. The plantation economy often coexisted with a peasant economy that helped sustain the plantations' workers (who themselves went back and forth between the two economies).

After the interregnum of war, depression, and protectionism in the first half of the twentieth century, the Bretton Woods food regime emerged. Family farms continued to be important in the developed world, but now there was more corporate control of farm inputs, agricultural trade, and the food industry. Developed states protected their agricultural sectors, especially the bigger and richer farmers, by means of tariffs and subsidies. (Agriculture was exempted from the disciplines of GATT.) Some reasons for the persistence of the family farm are the limits to the advantages of greater scale in agriculture and “a distinct logic that aims not simply at profit maximization but long-term survival as a family enterprise.” In the global South they had developmentalism, a key feature of which was the advanced capitalist state's tolerance for import substitution policies that would help the growth of industry. Foreign investment tended to be strictly regulated, too, as in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. “In agriculture, there was strong protection from imports in the form of outright import bans, quotas, and high tariffs.” Market relations continued to spread, however, and landlord exploitation intensified. Also, “food aid” programs (a consequence of the U.S.'s grain surpluses that it wanted to get rid of) undermined the barriers against cheap imports. To prevent peasant-backed radical movements, the U.S. sometimes went so far as to support land reform measures that stabilized the countryside and fostered industrialization, as in Korea and Taiwan in the 1950s. There were also attempts by the World Bank and other entities to improve agricultural productivity in the South through technical and financial support, which didn't succeed nearly as well as hoped.

So eventually came the neoliberal era, with its structural adjustment programs. In agriculture, these entailed “deregulation of land markets and the reversal of land reform policies originating in the national developmentalist era; drastic cuts in farm subsidies and price supports and the disengagement of both postcolonial states and the World Bank from irrigation support; the expanded use of agrarian biotechnologies and expanded commodification of seeds and seed reproduction; a marked and growing dependence on chemical, biological, and hydrocarbon farm inputs;...expanded cash crop production for export as animal feed; [the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers;] and the export of niche luxury goods, fresh fruits, vegetables, and ornamental flowers for the global centers of overconsumption.” The use of new synthetic compounds for tropical products like sugar also had an adverse effect on agriculture in the South. And then there was the emergence of the genetic engineering industry, which threatens to completely wrest control of production away from farmers and accelerate their conversion into rural workers (in part because corporations have monopolistic intellectual property rights that favor globally integrated production chains). Hundreds of millions of rural and urban poor have, as a result, been shunted off to gigantic slums. But there’s hope, reader! Resistance movements have been spreading, and in the wake of the global recession, “deglobalization” has been occurring (as of 2009). Global production and supply chains are, according to Bello, threatening to wither away, and small-scale agriculture serving local and regional markets is starting to look more viable than capitalist industrial agriculture.

So what’s causing the recent food crises? I’ll get to the reasons for the recent high prices of food later; more fundamental than such explanations, though, is the fact that structural adjustment in the developing world has led to massive food insecurity there. To explain how, Bello devotes much of the book to analyses of neoliberal restructuring in Mexico, the Philippines, Africa, and China. The first three were turned from net food exporters to net food importers by structural adjustment and trade liberalization in the 1980s and after. The gutting of government budgets, “especially the drastic reduction or elimination of fertilizer subsidies,” was the key factor. But unfair trade practices by the EU and the U.S. also contributed: low-priced, government-subsidized beef and cereals from the West displaced native producers. Export-oriented agriculture, such as cotton production, usually couldn’t step into the breach successfully, again because of insufficient government investment in the developing countries and unfair trade practices by the West.¹ The upshot of IMF-imposed “depeasantization” (and deindustrialization) was that the regions became very vulnerable to price fluctuations: if international prices of food rose too high, millions of people would be left to starve unless their governments somehow intervened. This is what Malawi did in 2005,

¹ Export agriculture had made some progress in the era of developmentalism because of government assistance. But neoliberal dogma forbade such assistance.

against the advice of the IMF and World Bank, thereby preventing a famine and turning the country once again into an exporter of food.

The basic and obvious problem with structural adjustment, according to the World Bank's own Independent Evaluation Group, was that in "most reforming countries the private sector did not step in to fill the vacuum when the public sector withdrew." Why not? For lots of reasons, among them poor infrastructure, an inadequately developed private sector to begin with, and, as Bello says, a lack of business confidence due to the terrible investment climate created by structural adjustment.

China, too, has been liberalizing its trade, which has devastated many farmers (sugarcane, soybean, cotton) and contributed to the recent slowdown in poverty reduction. More broadly, "the adoption [since 1984] of a strategy of urban-centered, export-oriented industrialization based on rapid integration into the global capitalist economy" has harmed the peasantry greatly, since the urban industrial economy has been built on the backs of peasants.² Heavy taxation of peasant surpluses and falling prices for agricultural products have transferred income from the countryside to the city. Health, education, and agricultural infrastructure haven't improved. Moves toward a regime of full private property rights in the countryside have been taken, which could cause a capitalist transformation of agriculture. (Big landlords with rural laborers, etc.) And of course millions of peasants have been forced off their land to make way for dams and urban environments. The result of all this is massive peasant unrest and China's loss in 2008 of its status as a net food exporter.

Getting to the more immediate causes of the crisis... An important reason for the disastrously high and volatile prices of food between 2006 and 2008 (and later, I assume) was the higher global production, stimulated largely by U.S. and EU government demand, of *agrofuels*, mainly ethanol and biodiesel, and the corresponding rise in demand for corn, sugar, beets, and wheat, which are the raw material for these fuels. Midwestern America, for example, is "slowly being transformed into a giant agrofuels factory": in 2008, about 30 percent of corn was allocated for ethanol.³ As usual, much of the incentive for corporations to invest in agrofuels (or biofuels) is due to government subsidies, begun (in the U.S.) under G. W. Bush. Biofuels are in fact not very good for the environment, but policymakers want "energy security," you see, so they subsidize the production of these fuels for transportation purposes. The agricultural systems in the U.S. and EU can't fill the targets set by policies, so agrofuel production is dramatically increasing in the South too, including Latin America,

² Industrialization is almost always at the expense of peasants and farmers in some way or other. Think, for example, of Soviet and Chinese collectivization—squeezing surplus out of agriculture and transferring it to industry.

³ I needn't point out that this also means less corn, wheat, etc. is used for *food*. So food prices go up.

Southeast Asia, and Africa. (Some of this production is for the sake of the Southern countries themselves, which likewise desire energy independence.) Rainforests are being cut down and workers are being treated like slaves.

Agrofuels production also compromises development in poor countries, “where households typically spend about half their income on food.” Ergo, with higher food prices, less money is spent on other items that can stimulate economic growth, and more people are forced into poverty.

To quote Via Campesina, “The contemporary food crisis is not really a crisis of our ability to produce. It is more due to factors like the food speculation and hoarding that transnational food corporations and investment funds engage in, the global injustices that mean some eat too much while many others don’t have money to buy adequate food and/or lack land on which to grow it, and misguided policies like the promotion of agrofuels that devote farm land to feeding cars instead of feeding people.”