

**Food production and consumption. By Graham Sharp, University of Brighton.  
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Philip H Howard. *Concentration and Power in the Food System. Who Controls What We Eat?* 2016. London: Bloomsbury

Jennifer Clapp. *Food* (2nd edition) 2016. Cambridge: Polity

Elaine Graham-Leigh. *A Diet of Austerity: Class, Food and Climate Change*. 2016 Hampshire, UK: Zero Books

The emerging world eco-socialist movement is increasingly paying attention to the role of food – its production, transportation and consumption – and indeed the waste it creates as an important element of the crisis of our environment. UK figures estimate that our food system is currently responsible for about 30% of CO<sup>2</sup> emissions (Foresight 2011), and that's not taking into account the effects on physical environments, animal welfare and human health.

The three books reviewed here, while quite different, are all trying to make a useful contribution to our understanding of what's going wrong with our food system and provide pointers to what and how it needs to change. The first two books by Howard from the United States and Clapp from Canada both adopt what can be loosely described as a 'political economy' approach to their analysis. However, there are some important differences as will be outlined below. The third book by Graham-Leigh is different in that it is written from an activist's perspective. The author has a number of year's political experience in the UK with the 'Campaign Against Climate Change' and writes in the context of the relation between climate change and food consumption with the added focus on concerns about class.

The central theme running through Howard's book is the increased level of concentration with fewer corporations capturing more market share. While in the United States this is not universal – the market is not completely oligopolistic either spatially or temporally - the question is why this general trend occurs. The author endeavours to analyse and answer this question.

Although Howard describes his approach as political economy, he draws on other scholarly traditions as well. He claims that typically when four firms control more than 40-50% of a particular market it loses its competitive characteristics. However, this only considers horizontal integration, but he stresses that vertical integration both at the level of the nation state and globally is even more significant. The author challenges the received wisdom that economies of scale benefit the consumer. In fact he argues that often the opposite can happen (8). Drawing on other scholars, he cites examples of obstructing technological innovation, manipulating alternatives to consumers and the capacity to threaten closure or relocation of operations elsewhere. Lobbying and attempts to influence government departments and legislation are characteristic of such large organisations – another important theme running through this book.

The author puts much emphasis on power, arguing that it is useful to look at capitalists (in food corporations) in terms of their motivations such as maximizing profits and increasing their personal wealth as major shareholders of the corporations. In this perspective, 'capital as power', as Howard calls it, attempts to quantify its influence on

consumers, while other players in the food chain 'will continue to acquiesce to the firms' power'. Interestingly, a page or two before he cited Gramsci as one of his influences, and it seems he is referring to the concept of *hegemony* here. So, his argument is that capitalism is 'better understood as a mode of power rather than a mode of production'. This puts more emphasis on social relations and in so doing keeps a keen eye on 'both quantitative changes in markets and qualitative changes in society as part of the same process of the accumulation of power'. If you look at marketing material easily found on the Internet, you will see lots of emphasis on societal changes in household composition, labour markets, hours worked, level of flexible working and so on, where food producers try to mould their products to these changes. In the United Kingdom for example, there has been an increase in the sale of ready meals, reflecting the busy lives members of households experience especially when it comes to meal preparation. Ready meals provide a solution to both a time squeeze and lost cooking skills.

Howard further argues, contrary to frequent assumptions, and influenced by economists such as Thomas Piketty, that large oligopolistic firms don't try to maximize their profits in the conventional sense, but attempt to ride over the cyclical ups and downs of the market by comparing their profits against other close competitors. So growth rates may slow down during a stagnant period in the economy 'but dominant capitalists are content to grow faster than the average or even decline less than the average, as this means their capitalization and power are still increasing in relative terms'.

There are two key strategies that such corporations engage in to increase their power and influence. The first is concentration. This can be by either internal expansion and growth or by way of mergers and acquisitions. Acquisitions are more favourable because internal resources, machinery etc. are already operating and often carry on under their original label, to the extent that consumers shopping in supermarkets do not understand whether they are making informed choices between different brands. The other strategy the author argues is 'depth'. This means that a corporation's oligopolistic position gives it more power to negotiate lower prices from suppliers, maintain lower wages for its workforce and obtain government subsidies.

Like many other scholars of food studies (e.g. Carolan 2012), Howard describes the US food system as like an hourglass, with large numbers of farmers on the top, most consumers at the bottom and an increasingly small number of firms in the middle - traders, food processors and retailers (supermarkets) - who have an increasing amount of power in the operation of the food system.

In the nine chapters that make up this book all the main characteristics of the United States food system are interrogated. In chapter 2 for instance there is a useful analysis of antitrust regulations; a potted history of antitrust laws is provided, telling for example that when Ronald Reagan became president in 1980 he weakened those laws on the pretext that with increased globalization large companies were operating in a global market rather than in their domestic market. Judges making rulings on unfair competition were influenced throughout the 1980s and 1990s to weaken the antitrust laws by privately established think tanks and consultancies. The supermarkets in this period increased their drive to mergers and acquisitions. Similarly in the United Kingdom about 70% of food retailing is dominated by four large supermarket chains (Simms 2007).

Two other developments in the United States food system are explained which to a certain extent have been mirrored in the United Kingdom. With respect to supermarkets we have seen them opening smaller convenience stores stocking the more limited ranges of produce. These smaller stores, to be found typically in busy shopping streets or integrated into a petrol station, reflect the changing character of consumers shopping habits. Another similarity is the rise of chain fast food outlets (and coffee shops) in most high streets.

The rest of the book covers ground familiar with food scholars. Chapter 4 for instance is aptly titled 'Engineering consumption: packaged foods and beverages'. Drawing on Harry Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, an incomplete discussion is started about the level of deskilling that takes place in the workplace, and this is compared to food production where the increase in processed, pre-packaged food products provides a gap for consumers lack of cooking skills or lack of time. It would have been strengthened if the author had made more of this aspect of the political economy of the food system by making the point that greater profits can be made from processed foods. In fact many researchers now talk about 'ultra processed foods' as not only providing greater capital accumulation for corporations but increasing health hazards to consumers in terms of added salt, sugar and fat to the products (Monteiro et al. 2013). Again without much development, he adds (chapter 7) that such a productivist food system is contributing to greater risk from climate change due to the vulnerabilities of concentrating on mono crops and restricting the range of animal breeds through selective genetic modification and increased use of antibiotics.

Jennifer Clapp's book *Food* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) is similar in content and intent to Howard's. Its difference is in how it sees the evolving food system in a more globalized, internationalist perspective. She starts off by outlining briefly the advantages of a global food system, which supplies consumers with a wide range of foods, particularly fresh fruit and vegetables, which can have nutritional benefits. However, this development is not without massive problems to human health, food security, and above all else the effects on the environment. Most of the book concentrates on the negative aspects of this global food system. She cites in particular large-scale industrial farming methods which, apart from the problems of monoculture that Howard mentions, give rise to biodiversity loss and human exposure to toxins because of the widespread use of pesticides.

The book is concerned about alternatives to the present globalized food system but she makes the important point that 'gaining an understanding of the big picture helps to contextualise the local'. The problem for alternative local food movements and initiatives is how do you scale up to make good food more widely available but under some kind of consumer democratic control. Clapp outlines four key forces that have developed over the last hundred or so years that have helped shape the food system we have today. They are: 1. State led industrialization and global market expansion, 2. Agricultural trade liberalization, 3 Corporate concentration, and 4. Financialisation. The first three have been covered by my comments on Howard's book, but financialisation is worth examining a little more closely. First is the increasing *commodification* of food. Historically food has been seen as a basic human need, a condition of human existence as well as a factor in binding various cultures together and creating sociability. Clapp argues that this is all changing with food being viewed as a commodity like any other 'that firms produce, sell and trade'. So, access to food has become largely a market transaction'. This is important for countries that rely on large quantities of imported food vulnerable to price changes in the market. This financialisation of food starts from the fact that certain food

products such as grain or coffee are internationally traded like any other commodity and goes onto create purely financial instruments – ‘futures’ and such like. The rise in land grabbing and increased production of bio fuels instead of food crops can be seen as arising from this financialisation. Clapp could have described this process more clearly, but she does well to draw out the implications, how the financialising of food has contributed to the ‘... distancing within the food system in new ways. It has resulted in far reaching and often difficult to trace consequences, including abrupt drops in access to food for the worlds poorest people’ (168). Such activities and processes become decoupled from the actual growing and consuming of food.

The title of the last chapter of Clapp’s book poses a question: Can the world food economy be transformed? She looks for an answer by comparing three food movements that are trying to tackle the domination of the multinational food corporations, namely Fair Trade, food sovereignty, and global food justice advocacy. Each movement is described, although I found her assessment of Fair Trade rather uncritical. A number of writers on Fair Trade have reservations as to its future and point to how, in their eyes, it has been incorporated onto the shelves of the supermarket giants. (Raynolds, Murray and Wilkinson 2007) The conclusion of this last chapter is that all three of these movements need to overlap and work alongside each other if they are going to be a challenge to the dominant food system.

So, two books covering similar ground, both informative and up to date. Howard restricts himself to a political economy of the US food system whereas Clapp tries to encompass a more global view. These books will be useful to undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as the more general reader wanting to understand some of the complexities of the modern food system.

Graham-Leigh’s book is quite different from the first two although had some of the issues covered in those books been used in this book it would have strengthened some of her arguments. The author has been an activist in the Campaign against Climate Change in the United Kingdom for more than 10 years and has written widely on the subject. The book attempts to link class, food and climate change, a laudable project, but I have doubts about how successful this attempt is.

The book is divided into six chapters with chapter 1 looking at the class bias of the media towards not only working class people but fat working class people. The author goes into this perspective in some detail, even conducting her own survey of 150 obesity-related stories on the BBC news website that had visual images of fat people. She assumes that the people in the images were predominately working class people because of the clothes they were wearing and concludes from this that fat people are viewed as poor and unemployed.

This theme that the media demonizes such people may have some truth in it but there are weaknesses in the argument. First it was only from one media source – the BBC - and second she has a very fixed notion of who the working class is. In fact she conflates poverty, class and overconsumption. What becomes clear as we work through this book is that she is influenced and guided by the Fat Acceptance movement. This movement may seem legitimate by some (it had its roots in United States feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s) and may expose the bias in society’s media in favour of the ideal, thin body being what we should all strive for, but it tends to assume that there is no health risks in being overweight or obese. They believe health is independent of body weight. In

fact this author has gone out of her way to find legitimacy in this claim by citing a pair of scholars in Australia, Michael Gard and Jan Wright, who wrote a book in 2005 called *The Obesity Epidemic: Science Morality and Ideology* where they argue that there are no ill health consequences of being fat. If you examine the book closer you will find that they are working in an extreme social constructivist paradigm. Although anyone can choose what theoretical paradigm they wish to work within, Graham-Leigh makes strong claims that she is a socialist working in the Marxist tradition yet at the same time denies the materiality of most of the medical science that suggests obesity is an important health issue that in some parts of the world is reaching crisis proportions.

There seems to be confusion also about the amount of food eaten by 'normal' and obese people. On page 33 she states: 'In fact, studies have consistently failed to find any significant difference between the diets of the obese and 'normal' weight subjects,' citing Gard and Wright (2005). In fact the problems with the 'standard American diet' go well beyond the total calories consumed. It is not only that the quantity of the diet but also its quality needs to be considered, but she seems unaware of the massive increase in the consumption of 'ultra processed foods' (Monteiro et al. 2013; Stuckler and Nestlé 2012; Moodie et al 2013), or the growing evidence of the harm such foods are doing to our bodies.

Chapter 3 starts off with an informative account of food price hikes since 2007 and 2008, explaining that what Clapp calls the financialisation of food is a major cause of such rises. An interesting debate begins about meat consumption and the ratio of grain to meat, where one kilogram of beef would require seven kilograms of feed, in contrast to chicken with a two to one ratio. The debate then focuses on the perceived problem of China and India wanting to increase their meat consumption. There is little or no discussion about grass fed animals, rather debate hinges around fairness of resource allocation and the effects of animal meat on climate change. This debate is then left hanging with no conclusion or ending. The chapter then spends some eight pages discussing Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society* where a rather spurious and weak argument is presented that working class consumption is frowned upon by those in authority such as politicians or policy makers. This conclusion is not then brought back to the debate about whether it is OK for the Chinese and Indians to eat more meat. The chapter's last page develops from nowhere the following:

'... if problematic overconsumption is defined as 'eating until obese', the group responsible becomes different. Overconsumption is no longer about middle-class people competing for status through fancy cars and LCD TV's, it's about working class people eating' (94)

This obsession with an ill-defined working class runs throughout the book. I was hoping for something more analytical when putting class alongside concerns about climate change. Apart from a page or two of brief discussion about processed food there is no analysis about food systems and capital accumulation. A problem for capitalist food producers and the supermarkets that sell their products is that food is relatively inelastic – there is a limit to how much an individual can eat. Given fierce competition between producers and supermarkets other strategies need to be employed and an important one is to reduce the costs of the 'forces of production'. In other words it is necessary to reduce the cost of producing the food. This is mainly achieved by high levels of processing, or what is now becoming known as 'ultra processed' food

In the Appendix to Volume 1 of *Capital* Marx discussed the development of capitalism as moving from the formal subsumption of labour to the real subsumption of labour, and this concept can be extended to include the subsumption of nature (Smith 2006). What we can see clearly in the modern ultra processed food industry is the real subsumption of nature, as food is increasingly decoupled from its biological origins. Natural ingredients are either mixed with or substituted by synthetic ingredients, which have the effect of lowering costs of production, transportation and increased storage times. This real subsumption tends to create relative surplus value rather than absolute surplus value, making profits variable according to market mechanisms and technological innovation (the forces of production). (Sharp 2016)

As authors like Monteiro et al. (2013) argue, ultraprocessed foods contain higher amounts of fat, sugar and salt, all injurious to human health. The profitability for the food processor and supermarkets comes from standardization of products, reduced costs of ingredients and flexibility in transportation together with longer shelf life compared to fresh food.

There are two important issues that Graham-Leigh's book overlooks. The first is what the working class eat *is* important: eating highly processed food is bad for human health. Because we are presented in this book with an undifferentiated and monolithic working class there is no room to analyse people and movements who are attempting, in many different ways, either individually or collectively, to eat a decent diet. Second, the highly productivist food production system that is expanding over more and more parts of the world is contributing to climate change. Such alternative activities to the mainstream food system can be seen as forms of resistance, which, in the final chapter, Graham-Leigh is rather dismissive of. The back cover of the book informs the reader that Graham-Leigh is a member of the UK Counterfire organization – a movement that broke away from the UK Socialist Workers Party a few years ago when there was a lot of infighting. A quick look at their website suggests that there is little difference in each organization's political approach to struggle. They seem to adopt a Leninist approach that not much can improve until the revolution takes place, but never explain how that revolution will be hastened. The last paragraph of the book perhaps sums up the author's pessimism and indifference to what people do or eat in relation to food.

*“Concluding that it makes little difference what individuals choose to eat or not eat is not the same as arguing that what individuals do doesn't matter. But the place for climate change campaigning is as a central part of the fight against the depredations of the capitalist system, not standing on the sidelines analyzing what either side is eating.”*

We need to become more aware of the changing political economy of our foodways and how it is linked to the changing character of our food consumption. The first two books reviewed here are a useful if partial contribution to that process. The third book is disappointing and in places very confused, taking fat acceptance as unproblematic and without a clear definition of a basic sociological term like 'working class'. Maybe a workerist perspective has obscured her search for alternatives that might actually make inroads into capitalism and making the working class (whoever we are!) healthier.

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