A FOODIE'S GUIDE TO CAPITALISM

Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat

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Foreword

by Marion Nestle

WHEN ERIC HOLT-GIMÉNEZ ASKED ME to introduce his *Foodie's Guide to Capitalism*, I said yes right away. I love the title, I think the food movement needs this book, and I am tired of having to treat capitalism as the "C word," never to be mentioned in polite company. Those of us "foodies" who love to eat and want our food system to produce tastier, healthier, and more sustainable diets—and to provide a decent living to everyone involved in this work—need to bring capitalism out of the closet, understand the problems it causes, and deal with them front and center. Eric (if I may) has done us an enormous favor by producing this book at this time.

We are endlessly told that the American food system gives us an abundant and varied food supply that is the envy of the world. Perhaps, but these purported benefits come at a high cost: food insecurity for 45 million Americans (half of them children), obesity in nearly two-thirds of adults, incalculable damage to the quality of our soil, air, and water, and foods excessively high in calories, sugars, and salt. Capitalism may not be the only explanation for these problems, but it is a great place to begin to understand why they exist.

We need food to live. But the purpose of food companies is not to promote our life, health, or happiness; it is to make money for executives and shareholders. The United Nations may declare that humans have a right to food, "realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has the physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement," but that is not how unfettered capitalism works. Capitalism turns food—a life essential—into a commodity to be sold like any other commodity. As Eric puts it:

> It doesn't matter if the food is fresh organic arugula or a Big Mac, teff from the highlands of Ethiopia, or Cheez-Whiz from Walmart. It doesn't matter whether you need it or not, whether it is good or bad for you, whether it is locally produced or traveled from afar or whether it was corralled, caged, free range, or led a happy life—if enough people *want* it (and have the money to buy it), someone will turn it into a commodity and sell it.

How did something as basic to our existence as food get transformed into an instrument for profit? This book recounts that history and explains its consequences. It addresses questions we should all be asking: Why are so many Americans too poor to buy food? Why do so many gain weight and become obese? Why has the price of fresh fruits and vegetables risen faster than that of soft drinks? Why can't beginning farmers afford to buy land? Why does the USDA consider fruits and vegetables to be "specialty crops"? Why does the vast majority of our agricultural land grow feed for animals and fuel for cars rather than food for people? Following the money is not a bad way to get to the answers to these questions.

In addressing them, Eric wants us to see the bigger picture and ask who "decides how wealth will be extracted and who will it belong to? Is it the consumer? No. Is it the worker? No. It is the capitalist. That's why the system is called capitalism and not 'laborism' or 'workerism.'"

My own work deals with the influence of the food industry on nutrition and health, the influence of capitalism, in other words,

though I rarely use the term. In my experience, the C word makes students and audiences uncomfortable. They don't like having to think about politics or the power relationships that govern how food is produced, sold, and consumed. But food *is* political, and deeply so. Recognizing the uncomfortable politics behind our food system is essential if we are really going to produce food that is more sustainable, less wasteful, and healthier for body and soul—and in ways that fairly compensate everyone involved.

Let me give one example of how understanding capitalism helps in my own area, nutrition. I am especially interested in the sharp rise in obesity in the United States that began around 1980. The immediate cause was that people began eating more food, and therefore more calories. But why? Genetics did not change. What did change was the environment of food choice. A look at the bigger picture takes us back to a shift in agricultural policies to encourage farmers to grow as much food as possible. Farmers responded and increased the availability of calories in the food supply to nearly twice the average need. The "shareholder value" movement of the early 1980s caused Wall Street to value companies on the basis of higher and more immediate returns on investment. Food companies now not only had to compete to sell products in an overproduced food economy, but also had to report *growth* in profits to Wall Street every quarter.

Overproduction makes food cheap. Cheap food encourages proliferation of fast-food restaurants, consumption of more food outside the home, and creation of larger—and more caloric—food portion sizes. In this fiercely competitive food environment, companies looked for new ways to sell food. They put food everywhere: drugstores, clothing stores, bookstores, and libraries. They increased marketing to children, low-income groups, and populations in developing countries. They did everything possible to encourage overeating. Hence: obesity.

As this book makes clear, such consequences are not accidents of history. They are predictable outcomes of an economic system in which profits take precedence over any other human value. A capitalist food system keeps labor and all other costs to a minimum and provides an enormous overabundance of cheap food, consequences be damned.

A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism takes you through the capitalist food system step by step. Eric's analysis of this system may be disturbing, but stay with it. If we want to create a food movement with real power, we need to know what we are up against.

Writing in the *New York Times* late in 2016, the journalist Michael Pollan argued that "the food movement still barely exists as a political force. It doesn't yet have the organization or the troops to light up a White House or congressional switchboard when one of its issues is at stake." We need both. Most of us troops are too immersed in trying to fix the food problems that most concern us—whether they be schools, farmers' markets, SNAP (food stamps), labels, fair trade, wages, or even the farm bill—to pay attention to the bigger organizational picture.

If we want to improve our food system, we need to know what has to change and how to make that change happen. Eric urges all of us to join together with everyone else working on food issues as well as with groups working on related social causes. Let's form a united movement with real power.

Read this book. Consider its arguments. May they inspire you to join the food movement and help make it succeed.

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