



Books

How neoliberalism ruins traditional diets and health

Capitalism makes us sick. This blunt observation is the compellingly argued thesis of both Gerardo Otero's *The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People* and Alyshia Gálvez's *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico*. Free-market ideology leads to replacement of traditional agriculture and healthful diets by commodity agriculture and ultra-processed (junk) foods. These produce cheaper and more convenient diets, but at high cost to health and society. The health costs are obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic diseases. The social costs are even more devastating: loss of subsistence farms, depopulation of farming communities, rural-to-urban migration, low-wage employment, and greater economic inequity. As the prime example of these processes in action, both books examine the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexico. The authors are social scientists—Otero is a sociologist and Gálvez an anthropologist—who draw on their disciplines to document the collateral damage of free-market approaches to food production.

NAFTA required Mexico to accept imports of subsidised and overproduced American corn. The dumping of this cheaper corn undermined the viability of small-scale corn farmers, forcing them to abandon the land, and thoroughly disrupted historical food traditions. Mexico is now well on its way to making the nutritional transition from an indigenous to an industrial food economy. About 10% of Mexican children remain stunted or wasted, but more than two-thirds of Mexican adults are now overweight or obese—the highest proportion in Latin America. Unsurprisingly, type 2 diabetes is rampant. WHO reports that nearly 15% of Mexican adults

have type 2 diabetes; this condition is now second only to heart disease as a leading cause of death.

How did this happen? Otero's answer: *The Neoliberal Diet*. Despite its title, this is not a book about weight loss. It is a closely argued sociological treatise replete with in-text references and a great many tables and figures. It is difficult to read in places, and, alas, unreliably indexed (eg, Philip McMichael, whose work on food regimes underpins many of the book's arguments, is not listed). Otero draws on reams of data to demonstrate that neoliberal ideology—the belief that human welfare is best achieved through state-supported private enterprise—results in market-based agricultural systems that destroy subsistence farming, traditional diets, and health, while blaming the displaced victims for their own fate.

Otero points out that, before NAFTA, Mexico was self-sufficient in food and able to export surpluses. Now, it is a net food importer. Ironically, it exports its healthy products—tomatoes, peppers, avocados, lemons, grapes, and the like—but imports corn and soybeans that end up in animal feed or as sweeteners and other ingredients in ultra-processed foods. Because the effects of trade dependency, inequality, and exposure to junk food are so predictable, Otero can use these factors to construct a Neoliberal Diet Risk Index, on which South Africa ranks first in vulnerability to unhealthy diets, with Mexico running a close second.

Gálvez tells the same story, but from a more personal perspective derived from her extensive observations and interviews with people directly affected by NAFTA. She mourns the destruction of Mexico's indigenous food culture. This culture was based on maize, beans, and squash—the

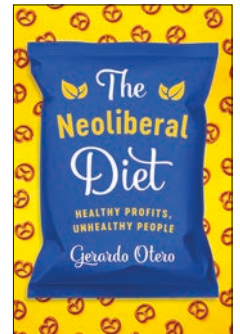
classic Mesoamerican trinity. This traditional cuisine was delicious and provided the nutritional foundation of pre-Columbian, pyramid-building civilizations as well as those surviving the Spanish conquest.

Eating NAFTA is an elegy for the loss of this cuisine, particularly of its iconic food—the hand-made, labour-intensive, delicious, and wonderfully nutritious corn tortilla. Gálvez loves them (as do I), but is clear-eyed about their fate. Their daily preparation required many hours to soak and grind corn and form it into dough before the tortillas could be cooked. Once NAFTA interrupted the livelihoods of small-scale corn farmers, the local mills also closed, and rural towns emptied. In cities, cheap commercial tortillas filled the gap, but have nowhere near the flavour or texture of the traditional version. Ironically, hand-made tortillas, if available at all, are priced beyond the reach of the displaced and are now food for the elite.

Gálvez suggests that energy balance is just one theory to explain obesity, and that chemicals in the food supply might also be causative factors. More convincing is her tracing of the effects of rural displacement: stress, violence, trauma, drug trafficking, social unrest, and emigration. These too, she says, have bodily effects that contribute to Mexico's rapid rise in type 2 diabetes. Overall, she views NAFTA as "a full-frontal assault on the poor".

What is to be done? Otero calls for more research on how social movements can nudge states to reduce inequality and encourage healthier food systems. Gálvez uses the tortilla as a metaphor for social change: "The key is to restore its relationship to the people to whom it historically belongs so they can eat tortillas if, when, and where they want them."

Marion Nestle



The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People
Gerardo Otero
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Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico
Alyshia Gálvez
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