



Book Review

Diet for a Dead Planet: Big Business and the Coming Food Crisis,

Christopher D. Cook, 2006

New York: The New Press

xiii + 326pp, ISBN-10: 1-59558-084-0 [pbk]

Food lies at the core of human existence. The discussion about food, in most cases, draws our attention when it relates to food safety. These days, this has come to the fore due to the increasing rate of obesity and food-borne illnesses in developed countries. However, such discussion deals with a part of the connection between food consumption and food safety. Some other critical issues need to be investigated to deftly explore the nexus between food consumption, the politics of agribusiness, and food safety. Christopher D. Cook makes an attempt at this endeavor. The broad issues of the American food system are the subject matter of his recent book *Diet for a Dead Planet: Big Business and the Coming Food Crisis*. Within a large canvas, he includes a number of issue: small producers, giant agribusiness corporations, the merger of companies/retailers, various government agencies, food consumers, cheap immigrant laborers, environmental issues, international food politics, neoliberalism, and alternative sustainable agricultural practices.

The book is divided into three parts. Each part contains a specific issue. In part I, Cook provides a short description of the food behavior of the American people and the food items available in supermarkets. Consumer psychology, consumption patterns, production and marketing strategies of agribusiness corporations, are discussed in this part. He also reflects on the roles of corporate bodies engaged in the food system. In the second part, a detailed account of the development of agribusiness corporations in America and the ways through which these corporations influence and manipulate state policies (agricultural and food policies) in their favor are presented. In the final part, Cook shows how industrial agricultural practices create environmental threats and pose challenges to sustainable agricultural practices. In so doing, he focuses on three issues: i) environment and labor issues in American industrial agriculture; ii) the politics of American food aid and its impact on Third World agriculture; and iii) alternative forms of agriculture and food distribution practices.

Working as a journalist on food issues, Cook renews his interest in agro-industrial corporate business and focuses on the political economy of industrial agriculture. How does agro-industrial business operate in America? How does this business influence agricultural production in America and in other parts of the world? What are the social, economic, and political effects of such influence? These are some of the critical questions which form the discussion of this book. The book represents Cook's critical analyses of the American food system within the large canvas of the political economy of industrial agriculture. Deftly exploring the intricate interconnection be-

tween agriculture and corporate business, he deploys a critical perspective to provide insightful and reflexive analyses of a wide range of issues. In a chapter titled 'Killing Fields: The Spraying of America', he reflects on the irony in which the profit-hungry agribusiness corporations are engaging themselves to destroy vast agricultural land in America.

In the beginning of the book, Cook inspires his readers to rethink what they buy from supermarkets and which food items they eat. Throughout the book, he vividly describes production and marketing aspects, and political dimensions of the American food system (i.e. the monopoly of agribusiness and its destructive agriculture practices), which some critics label as 'the tragedy of industrial agriculture' (Kimbrell, 2002). He then goes on to establish the linkages between industrial agriculture and economic and environmental problems. He states, 'Food, our most basic necessity, has become a force behind a staggering array of social, economic and environmental epidemics – a toxic cornucopia of poison laminated harvests, extreme labor abuse, and treacherous and secretive science... The way we make, market and eat food today creates rampant illness, hunger, poverty, community disintegration, and ecological degradation and threatens our future food supply' (p. 4).

In a chapter titled 'Food Gone Mad', Cook discusses the role of science in the American meat industry and the policies of various state agencies in this regard. In another chapter titled 'Dying from Consumption', he shows that there is an inter-connection between food-borne illnesses and the food consumption patterns of the American people. He says, 'An array of growing public health epidemics can be linked, at least in part, to the food industry's unrelenting push to maintain sales of meat and dairy products and to expand markets for all manner of junk food, including soft drinks, candy, and fast foods that are typically high in salt, sugar and fat' (p. 45). The problem, according to Cook, lies with the ways food is 'produced and consumed' (p. 47). This has led to the continued prevalence of food scares in Western developed countries, which German sociologist Ulrich Beck uses to theorize modern industrial society as a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992).

The agribusiness corporations have intensified their control over the production of food. Thus, food has become a commodity in the market economy, which leads to a situation where the corporations are continually increasing their profit margins and the consumers stay in dark and know very little about the supply of food. Throughout the book, Cook uncovers the process which guarantees huge profit for the agribusiness corporations. He also unveils the characteristics of the advanced capitalist system in the food sector, focusing on the merger of the retail stores and the consolidation of small farms to increase its profit margin. The ultimate result of such a merger and consolidation is that more and more food is produced and marketed by a few agribusiness corporations. The domination of a few corporations over a large market indicates the improper functioning of the market economy, which some critics label as a 'hypermarket economy' (Lang, 1998, pp. 20–21). The production and management processes of the American food system neglects the nature and the human dimension of food production. In this connection, Cook presents statistical accounts, which reveal the most devastating environmental consequences of mass agricultural production.

In the later part of the book, Cook reflects on the issues which form the international dimensions of the problem: cheap labor and subsidy. In a chapter titled 'Sliced and Diced: The Labor You Eat', he reflects on the conditions of the work place and the living conditions of the workers who work in large meat industries. This reminds

us of the classic works of Marx and Engels. Marx (1965) analyzes the living conditions of the working class during the period of the early industrial revolution in England. Engels (1999) presents a detailed analysis of the lives of the workers of the manufacturing industries in Manchester in his classic work *The Conditions of the English Working Class in 1844*. Cook points to immigration issues and the supply of cheap labor for gigantic agribusiness corporations in America. However, a political economic analysis of the broader context of NAFTA and its effect on the cross-border illegal migration from Mexico and other Central American countries to America would uncover the politics of industrial agriculture, monopolized by small group of American business corporations.

Cook reflects on the politics of agricultural subsidy and its global consequences, which he labels as 'The Globalization of Death' (p. 230). Agricultural subsidy, the export of subsidized food items to Third World countries, and the hegemonic role of the WTO (World Trade Organization) contribute to diminish Third World agriculture, which further affects poverty and well-being in these countries. Cook cites the example of a number of Third World countries (i.e. Mexico, India and Sudan) to show that American agricultural subsidies generate poverty and impoverishment in these countries. He shows that agricultural subsidy is not an issue affecting local agricultural production in America. It is a global issue. It affects global agricultural production, especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The irony is that the World Bank and WTO view subsidy and market protection in developing countries as obstacles to neoliberal policy agendas, for which these international organizations are working tirelessly. They keep quiet while addressing these issues in the developed countries of the West. Cook provides a balanced analysis of the context in his book (p. 231–234).

While analyzing the global consequences of American agricultural subsidy, Cook relates the role of American agricultural subsidy and food aid to the broader arena of the political economy of food. He says 'simply giving food to poor countries, while temporarily feeding the hungry, exacerbates food dependency' (p. 241). Therefore, subsidy and food aid generate poverty in developing countries in stead of eliminating poverty and hunger. The causes of the problems do not lie with the supply of food, it depends rather on the poverty situation and access to food in the developing countries. Amartya Sen, in his seminal work *Poverty and Famines* (1983), provides strong arguments regarding food crises and the entitlement of poor people while analyzing a number of famines in Asia and Africa. The American agricultural system with huge subsidy and foreign policy support to export cheap and surplus food to developing countries works as a double-edged sword: diminishing Third World agriculture on the one hand and generating poverty and hunger on the other.

In *Diet for a Dead Planet: Big Business and the Coming Food Crisis*, Cook has deployed the data and ideas of a wide range of multidisciplinary researchers to shed light on a series of critical issues. This is an outstanding book, in which Cook has demonstrated a brilliant mixture of his journalistic and academic imaginations. The book, rich in data and critical observations, indicates that he has devoted much energy to gather evidence on the capitalist nature of food production and global food politics. It is a valuable book and it will encourage all who care for this planet to engage in a critical understanding of the connections between industrial agriculture, environmental pollution, health damages (diet-related diseases), and labor issues (abuse of workers, mostly immigrants). Cook says, 'Our ignorance is nurtured by and strengthens the growing corporate stranglehold on our food system' (p. 7). This book will en-

hance awareness among readers, who may form a critical mass to initiate protest against the brutality of agribusiness corporations and to support alternative forms of sustainable agriculture.

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