

BOOK REVIEW:

FOOD WARS: THE GLOBAL BATTLE FOR MOUTHS, MINDS AND MARKETS BY TIM LANG AND MICHAEL HEASMAN. PUBLISHED IN 2004 BY EARTHSCAN, LONDON. ISBN 1-85383-702-4 (PAPERBACK), 365 PAGES

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This is a splendid book – one that manages successfully to blend rigorous social science with strong critical insights into the ways corporate capital is dominating the contemporary agri-food sector. It is written in a lively, engaging, style but provides pages of references and notes for those desiring further information. The book's premise is that there is a crisis in the global food industry and the authors' task is to explain why. They do so by linking five main elements – public health, the commercial/business sector, consumer culture, the environment and food governance. According to Lang and Heasman the characteristics of the modern food chain are: the domination of farming by off-farm, corporate, forces; the growing power held by the food retailers; the diverging interests of the public for safe and healthy foods versus the corporate sector for profits and control; and, the marginalisation of health issues in relation to food production and supply. Many other agri-food authors have written about these topics: the importance of Lang and Heasman's contribution is to theorise why these characteristics have become part of the modern food system and to investigate the policy options that would lead to the evolution of a more fair, healthy and environmentally sustainable system of food production, distribution and consumption.

They begin by identifying various 'paradigms' for food production and distribution. The productivist paradigm, which currently dominates the agri-food sector, is one based upon the use of synthetic chemicals, monocultures, intensive animal production, increasing mechanization, fossil fuels and a focus upon efficiency and productivity. It arose in the context of the application of science to agriculture that has occurred since the 18th Century and has 'triumphed' in the mid-20th Century when issues of food scarcity and starvation created the need for food supply to match world population growth. Yet, today, with one third of the world's peoples remaining largely untouched by the technological advances of productivism, and productivism's 'dark side' – environmental pollution, land and water degradation, animal welfare concerns, and so forth – now clearly visible to all, this paradigm is under serious threat. Its emphasis upon quantity over quality – including an assumption that maximization of food output should somehow equate to consumer health benefits – together with a growing understanding about the need for sustainable development, is leading to concerted challenges.

The authors identify two new paradigms that, in predictable Kuhnian style, have arisen to confront the dominant paradigm of productivism. The first of these is labeled the Life Sciences Integrated paradigm – one characterized by the application of the

new biotechnologies to food and fibre production. This is much more than the genetic engineering of plants and animals and includes many new biological processes in the food manufacturing industry and applications (such as biopesticides) in agriculture. Nutrigenomics (an understanding of the ways gene functioning and nutrition are related) is viewed as means of addressing disease and matching food with body type. The creation of 'new' (functional) foods with altered characteristics that may impart particular health benefits is also a promise of the Life Sciences approach. The second challenge comes from the Ecologically Integrated paradigm, one based upon notions of agro-ecology and sustainability. Here, farmers eschew synthetic agri-chemicals, monocultures and other components of industrial agriculture and seek 'natural' means of controlling pests, look to local knowledge to solve problems, appreciate the biological importance of regional ecosystems, and attempt to reduce 'food miles' by growing for local markets. The emphasis is upon nutrient recycling, natural bio-control of pests and weeds, biodiversity, and the preservation of natural resources. The 'ideal type' is that of organics, but there are other low-input systems that also seek to reduce impacts on the environment and deliver fresh and healthy foods to consumers.

Food wars are being fought out between the three paradigms, with current national and global food policy a direct outcome of the 'battles' that occur on a regular basis. While productivism has been the dominant paradigm, the food system from which it springs has moved from crisis to crisis. How, then, is it possible for food policy to create and maintain nutritious diets in a world where 'obesity is a *leitmotif* for the modern food age, a symbol of surplus among hunger'? The answer lies, the authors contend, in all sectors of the food industry, and governments, accepting that there is an urgent need to integrate public policy – that is, to develop food policy across portfolios such as health, environment, agriculture, education, and transport and to have policies that move across various layers of governance (from local to regional to national to global). Population health must be better linked to citizens' rights, farmers must be paid a fair price for foods, and consumers must be guaranteed that the foods they consume arise from sustainable production systems. The lead has already been taken, they suggest, by food companies that have created, and have signed up to, EUREP-GAP. Governments must also assist by creating 'visionary' food and nutrition plans. Ultimately, the Ecological Integrated paradigm is the one that will deliver the best benefits to the peoples of the world.

Clearly, the authors are painting a grand and optimistic picture. In doing so they sometimes gloss over issues that might otherwise have been contentious. First, the idea that third party accreditation and auditing systems such as EUREP-GAP can create a basis for sustainable production and the delivery of increasingly nutritious foods has been questioned. In its present form EUREP-GAP looks very much like a means for supermarkets to limit their exposure to high levels of risk under neoliberalism through imposing new requirements on suppliers. There is a growing cost for producers to 'self regulate' – something that is likely to marginalize, rather than support, smaller farmers. Second, although the authors fully recognize the potential of the Life Sciences Integrated paradigm to 'chain' consumers to science (in much the same way as the productivist paradigm chained farmers to a technological treadmill) they are reluctant to identify the Life Sciences Integrated paradigm as simply an extension of productivism. Yet, a case could be mounted to suggest that biotechnology is the next silver bullet in the armory of productivism and is not a paradigm in its own right. Third, is the productivist paradigm currently under threat?

The answer would seem to be yes, and no. Yes, because consumers in the West are demanding clean, green and healthy foods and supermarkets are ‘reading’ such demands and responding to them by providing organic and other healthy food options. But no, in the sense that the juggernaut of agribusiness continues to dominate food production and supply throughout the world. The authors may be somewhat naïve in considering that new forms of agri-food governance will elevate the Ecologically Integrated paradigm over productivism in the near future.

These concerns aside, the ‘food wars thesis’ is a clever and novel way of understanding the pertinent agri-food issues of our time. The authors are to be congratulated for writing such a provocative and fascinating account of the agri-food sector. It should be essential reading for RC 40 members as well as academics and students involved in agriculture, ecology, food policy, health, and consumer and agribusiness studies. Let us hope, too, that it finds its way into the corridors of power in government and the corporate sector.