

## Political economy of the world's agriculture and food systems

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According to a recent summary report from the EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems, "Global food production threatens climate stability and ecosystem resilience and constitutes the single largest driver of environmental degradation and transgression of planetary boundaries. Together, the results are disastrous. There is an urgent need for a major change of the global food system (EATLancet Commission, 2019). The Inter-Academy Partnership published a report on the "broken global food system" the year prior (The Guardian, November 28, 2018). Another viewpoint is that the world's food system "is not dysfunctional... It is operating exactly as a capitalist food system should: perpetually growing, consolidating riches in a small number of strong monopolies, and shifting all social and environmental costs onto society. These observations address the food system issue and its socioecological effects both singly and together.

### Antecedents of the present crisis

A cumulative rise in global temperatures, as well as an increase in economic and environmental refugees, is accompanied by the increased visibility of starvation, public health issues, and environmental damage. Political/economic and political/ecological linkages resulting from centuries of colonisation of landed cultures, which had catastrophic effects on native environments, are the long-term causes of the current situation. As these environments were transformed for the purpose of producing commodities to be exported to conquering powers, indigenous peoples and peasants were uprooted from their traditional ways of living on land and in the water. In a process referred to as "under-reproduction of nature," historical



frontier expansions have depleted Earth's "ecological capital" at the expense of long-term sustainability.

For instance, the British Raj (1848–1947) in India used tax and irrigation regulations to force farmers to grow commodities for export. This forced commercial cropping was made possible by new irrigation canals that replaced traditional irrigation systems. The 1901 Irrigation Commission received a report from a British engineer that stated: "Canals may not prevent starvation, but they may yield a tremendous return on your money." Between the 1890s and 1940s, the production of native food crops fell by 7% while the population grew by 40%, causing famine and social unrest as well as an increase in export crops such as cotton, jute, tea, peanuts, and sugar cane. Grain traders in London used cutting-edge telegraph technology to price grain in remote communities during times of famine and drought. With the help of new railway systems, merchants could purchase these reserves from complicit local chiefs and transport the grain to ports for export to Britain. By 1900, such Indian famine reserves provided 20% of the bread consumed in Britain. 143,000 peasants in Berar perished from starvation during the 1899–1900 famine as 747,000 bushels of grain were exported from the region.

As customary commons, woodlands, and pastures offered nonmarket resources, food exporting to the "mother country" caused starvation that was exacerbated by turning the "commons" into private property or state monopolies (e.g., grasses for ropes and fodder, medicinal resources, wood and dung for fuel, forest debris, and dung for fertilizer). Even though these were universal resources, for the poor they represented "the very margin of survival." Expulsion from community grasslands shattered "the old ecological interconnectedness of pastoralists and farmers," and as cotton and other monocrop exports increased, traditional crop rotation and fallow methods to replenish soils vanished.

### **Food regime's political economy**

Through the lens of food regime analysis, the current crisis can be positioned in relation to colonial history. The political history of global capitalism and its progressive reorganisations of food production and circulation on a global scale are seen from a distinctive perspective by food regime analysis. Throughout three periods of global hegemony—British (1870s–1914),



American (1940s–1970s), and neoliberal—food regimes provided affordable food everywhere (1980s to the present). Following the repeal of the Corn Laws (1846), the British imperial state instituted the first food regime, offshore the production of grains and meat to settler republics in the Americas, South Africa, and Australasia. These temperate goods complimented the availability of tropical foods from the colonies (sugar, tea, coffee, palm oil).

These imports collectively provided inexpensive caloric wage-foods for an expanding industrial worker force in Britain and Europe via the "imperialism of free trade" (Hobsbawm, 1969, pp. 128–129; Mintz, 1985). By the middle of the 20th century, the United States had displaced Britain as the global hegemon, establishing the nation-state as the proper developmental unit. The US economy integrated domestic manufacturing and agricultural sectors rather than being imperially dependent on foreign crops. The "development effort" of the mid-20th century was then framed by this idea (McMichael, 1996). This featured a US public food-aid programme that sold surplus foods (particularly cereals and dairy products) as wage-foods at low costs to support national industrialization in important Third World states along the Cold War frontiers.

In order to increase delivery of domestic wage-foods to growing urban populations, the United States added Green Revolution technology on enlarged acreage in important states to this approach (Patel, 2013). The Green Revolution, an early development programme in "technology transfer," began in Mexico in 1943 with financial support from the US government and the Rockefeller Foundation. Over the course of two decades, new investment priorities in Green Revolution crop acreage increased cereal and bean production by 300 percent. It then moved to South Asia, where Pakistan and India, who were both significant wheat importers in the middle of the 1960s, became self-sufficient in 1968 and 1974, respectively.

### **Food regime complexes**

In this crucial transnational complex, the food regimes (wheat, meat, and processed food) and their succession as a global food system matured are discussed. The second, US-centric regime, which expanded the scope of the food regime beyond the settler relationship to



gradually cover the "free world" through food aid, the Green Revolution, and nutritional enrichment for those with purchasing power, gave rise to its mutual relevance.

The third and current global food regime's so-called "second Green Revolution" was foreshadowed by the US-sponsored Green Revolution, which focused on increasing the production of staple cereals. Private (as opposed to governmental) investments in this area concentrated on "affluent foods" like animal protein, fruits, and vegetables, strengthening factory farming, aquaculture, chemical agriculture, and transgenic technology.

### **Crisis and resolution**

The "broken" global food system crisis is manifested in several ways. The Green Revolution's productivity gains from the 1960s to 1980s were exhausted, which led to the rises in food prices in 2007 and 2008. Exporting nations stopped trade, exposing the limits of relying solely on food imports, and hunger levels worldwide increased to about a billion people, mostly in the Global South. The world's maize prices increased by at least a third as a result of biofuel mandates in the United States and the European Union, highlighting the global shift from food to fuel crops.

This signalled the beginning of the financial interests that are unconnected to the food system in general taking control of commodity agriculture. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and FAO data show that only 20% of all agricultural aid went to the 10 nations that house about 70% of the world's hungry people (McMichael & Schneider). Last but not least, Sir Robert Watson, the chair of the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019), stated in the report that "the health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is degrading more rapidly than ever." The core basis of the world's economies, livelihoods, food security, and standard of living are being undermined