A FOODIE’S GUIDE TO CAPITALISM

Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat

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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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INTRODUCTION

Do Foodies Need to Understand Capitalism?

The answer of course is yes. Everyone trying to change the food system—people fighting to end hunger, food insecurity, and diet-related diseases, as well as those working for equitable and sustainable agriculture and people who simply want access to good, healthy food—needs to know about capitalism. Why? Because we have a capitalist food system. And yet relatively few people recognize this.

This seems odd, particularly for those who identify with the food movement. After all, one wouldn’t start farming without some notion of growing plants, or build a website without knowledge of web software, or roof a house without understanding construction. Yet many, if not most, food activists trying to change the food system have scant knowledge of its capitalist foundations.

In part this is because most people in the food movement are too busy trying to deal with the immediate problems of the food system. Understandably, they concentrate their efforts on one or two issues rather than the system as a whole, such as healthy food access, urban agriculture, organic farming, community-supported agriculture, local food, farmworkers’ rights, animal welfare, pesticide contamination,
seed sovereignty, GMO labeling... the list is long. These projects are often funded by philanthropic foundations favoring projects that address urgent problems and organizations that can demonstrate tangible, quantifiable results. Given the severity of the problems in our food system, this is understandable, but this focus often eclipses work to build longer-term political movements that could address the root causes of those problems. What’s more, organizations often find themselves in competition for funding, making it difficult to forge diverse, cross-issue alliances dedicated to systemic change. Intrepid individuals and food entrepreneurs working on their own in specialized market niches are even less likely to address systemic issues.

But there are also larger political and ideological reasons why the food movement does not know much about capitalism. For the most part, capitalism is simply not discussed in capitalist countries—not even in university economics courses—where political-economic structures are assumed to be immutable and are rarely questioned. Until the global financial crash in 2008, it was socially awkward to mention the term capitalism in the United States. This is because even a perfunctory examination of capitalism immediately uncovers profound economic and political disparities, thus contradicting the commonly held notion that we live in a classless, democratic society. Those privileged enough to go to college usually need to wait until graduate school before delving into the foundational works of Ricardo, Smith, Mill, Marx, Polanyi, Keynes, and other notable scholars of our economic system. Even then, capitalism is often treated as an intellectual artifact to be studied in academic isolation rather than the dynamic social and economic system of wealth and power that constantly influences, shapes, and reshapes life around the globe.

Directed primarily (though not exclusively) to a U.S. audience, this book takes another approach. It applies a food system framework to explain some of the basic workings of capitalism, and uses a basic understanding of capitalism to understand why the food system works as it does. In the course of this analysis, social movements are discussed, showing the ways in which class interests, social perceptions, and political organization can affect outcomes in a capitalist food regime. If you are unfamiliar with this approach to understanding the world, don’t be surprised. You’re not alone.

In the late 1970s the United States and Great Britain introduced policies to lower taxes on corporations and the wealthy, privatize public goods, remove environmental and labor regulations, and liberalize trade. These policies encouraged the rule of what mainstream economists like to call the “free market,” that is, the freedom for huge corporations to produce what and where they want, import from where they want, and stash profits where they want, all the while evading tax obligations and transferring huge environmental and health costs to society. This suite of economic policies became known as “neoliberalism” because they revived nineteenth century ideas of free markets in a twentieth century context—to the benefit of the very wealthy. Neoliberalism did more than create a new plutocracy of billionaires and the highest levels of wealth and income disparity in history. In the face of privatization and capital’s growing monopoly power, the public sphere—that part of society where decisions are made by citizens engaged in political discussion and civic activity (rather than the market) and where public goods are shared—disintegrated. Unions were crippled, and the political influence of progressive organizations crumbled, frequently under the direct attack of well-funded reactionary forces. Although these developments are often presented as part of the “natural” evolution of the global economy, they were all based on decisions made by powerful wealthy classes to advance their own interests. Neoliberalism on a global scale became known as globalization, a class project advanced by the powerful owners of international capital we now call the 1%. Neoliberalism reinforces the notion that we are, each of us, completely responsible for whatever life outcomes we have experienced. It aims to make us as vulnerable as possible, and hence more easily exploited.

At the same time, new social movements based on gender, race, ethnicity, and environment have been growing since the 1960s. Highly fragmented, these movements tended to turn away from older forms of political organizing like unions, vanguard political parties, and politico-military organizations, which were often viewed
as undemocratic and unresponsive to the politics of identity and to environmental issues. As neoliberalism gained momentum, the established organizations of the “old left” became increasingly ineffective, while established political parties, like the Republicans and the Democrats in the United States, moved steadily to the right, embracing the new model.

The combination of globalization, the demise of the old left, and the spread of new social movements broke down a lot of encrusted political orthodoxy, opening the left to issues of gender, environment, ethnicity, and race. But in affluent countries, this also produced a generation of somewhat class-blind activists with little interest in how the economic system actually works, and little understanding of the role of capitalism in the social oppressions they were fighting. Critical knowledge of capitalism—vital to the struggles of social movements through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—largely disappeared from the lexicon of social change, precisely at a time when neoliberal capitalism was destroying the working class and relentlessly penetrating every aspect of nature and society on the planet. Many social progressives became unwitting accomplices to the rise of economic neoliberalism, giving rise to what Nancy Fraser calls “progressive neoliberalism”:

Throughout the years when manufacturing cratered, the country buzzed with talk of “diversity,” “empowerment,” and “non-discrimination.” Identifying “progress” with meritocracy instead of equality, these terms equated “emancipation” with the rise of a small elite of “talented” women, minorities, and gays in the winner-takes-all corporate hierarchy instead of with the latter’s abolition. These liberal-individualist understandings of “progress” gradually replaced the more expansive, anti-hierarchical, egalitarian, class-sensitive, anti-capitalist understandings of emancipation that had flourished in the 1960s and 1970s.¹

The fragmentation, depoliticization, and neoliberal co-optation of the food movement, however, is rapidly changing with the crumbling of progressive neoliberalism. The rise of racial intolerance, xenophobia, and organized violence from the far-right has raised concerns of neofascism, worldwide, and prompted all progressive social movements to dig deeper to fully understand the problems they confront.

Many people in the Global South, especially poor food producers, can’t afford not to understand the economic forces destroying their livelihoods. The rise of today’s international food sovereignty movement, which has also taken root among farmers, farmworkers, and foodworkers in the United States, is part of a long history of resistance to violent, capitalist dispossession and exploitation of land, water, markets, labor, and seeds. In the Global North, underserved communities of color—historically subjected to waves of colonization, dispossession, exploitation, and discrimination—form the backbone of a food justice movement calling for fair and equitable access to good, healthy food. Understanding why people of color are twice as likely to suffer from food insecurity and diet-related disease, even though they live in affluent Northern democracies, requires an understanding of the intersection of capitalism and racism. So does understanding why farmers go broke overproducing food in a world where one in seven people are going hungry.

As the middle class in the developed world shrinks, much of the millennial generation, underemployed and saddled with debt, will live shorter lives than their parents, due in large part to the epidemic of diet-related diseases endemic to modern capitalism. The widespread “back to the land” trend is not simply a lifestyle choice; it also responds to shrinking livelihood opportunities. And as young farmers struggle to access ever more expensive farmland, the public runs up against corporate intransigence to everything from oil pipelines and GMO labeling to foodborne illnesses and unhealthy school food. Environmentalists wage endless battles against industrial agriculture’s water depletion, pollution, and inhumane treatment of animals, biodiversity loss, and carbon emissions. There is a growing desire to understand the root causes of these related and seemingly intractable problems.

Activists across the food movement are beginning to realize that the food system cannot be changed in isolation from the larger
economic system. Sure, we can tinker around the edges of the issue and do useful work in the process. However, to fully appreciate the magnitude of the challenges we face in transforming our food system and what will be needed to bring about a new one in harmony with people’s needs and the environment, we need to explore the economic and political context of our food system—that is, capitalist society.

This book is intended as a political-economic tool kit for the food movement—from foodies, farmers, farm justice activists, and concerned consumers to climate justice and environmental activists. It is a basic introduction to the economic system of capitalism as seen through the lens of the food system, though it’s not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of either. By understanding some of the rudiments of how capitalism operates, we can better grasp why our food system is the way it is, and how we can change it. Conversely, understanding how capitalism shapes the food system can help us understand the role food plays in the structure and function of capitalism itself. These kinds of insights can help us put our different forms of activism into political perspective and recognize opportunities for building alternatives, forging alliances, taking action, and comprehending the difference between superficial and truly transformative reforms.

What is behind regional free trade agreements, carbon markets, GMOs, “sustainable intensification,” and the public-private partnerships to “feed the world”? Will more organic farms and gardens, community-supported agriculture, and “voting with our forks” transform the food system? Will more certified fair trade and microfinance rebuild rural economies in the Global South? Can we fight rising land values and corporate land grabs with land trusts and voluntary responsible agricultural investment principles, or should we demand massive agrarian reform? This book will help you address these questions.

While activist jargon and the arcane language of political economy is kept to a minimum here, we will introduce essential concepts of political economy, and the terminology may seem arcane. A detailed glossary of these terms is included for convenient reference. For those who want to dig deeper into issues of capitalism, food systems, and food movements, there is plenty of reference material.

Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it? These are the basic questions posed in the study of capitalism. To understanding how a capitalist food system works, we’ll answer these questions by introducing selected concepts from the study of political economy, a social science that predates economics by over one hundred years.

Our study begins with a broad, historical review in chapter 1, “How Our Capitalist Food System Came to Be,” which focuses on the role of agriculture in capitalist development and the role of capital in the development of agriculture over the last two centuries. The early commodification of key crops like potatoes, rice, and corn were instrumental in European colonialism, U.S. expansionism, and the rise of industrialization. Their cultivation and commodification were made possible through processes and events such as the imposition of enclosures, genocide, slavery, and indentured servitude. These were facilitated by the introduction of such revolutionary technologies as the fence (used for the enclosures), seabird droppings (to restore soil fertility), and New World crops like corn and potatoes (used to feed the growing ranks of the poor). Our study will discuss the agrarian question, the New Deal, and the Green Revolution, and will show how they all shaped the emergence of three historically linked global food regimes.

Chapter 2 starts out by addressing food as a special commodity. We’ll look at its use value and exchange value. Labor, the often forgotten ingredient in our food, is fundamental to food’s surplus value, the basis for the formation of the “capital” in capitalism. Ever wonder why organic carrots are so expensive? This chapter will help answer that question by exploring the concept of “socially necessary labor time.” Why do we have Concentrated Animal Feedlot Operations (CAFOs) and genetically engineered salmon? Look to “relative surplus value” for an explanation.

The appropriation of food’s value is impossible without private and corporate ownership. In our examination of “Land and Property”
in chapter 3, we will look at the interrelated role that public, private, and common property have played in the construction of our food systems. Understanding “land rent” reveals how capital’s cyclical crises unleash waves of land grabs and the steady financialization of farmland. Land use follows both a logic of capital and a logic of territory. We’ll look at a case study in the Guatemalan highlands to see how capitalism “drills down” to access and extract resources.

Despite its capacity to generate trillions of dollars in wealth, agriculture is hard work and a risky business, made riskier with climate change. Farmers can’t just pick up and move to a better location. The “disjuncture between labor time and production time” presents significant barriers to capital investment. How capitalism overcomes these barriers and avoids risks in order to profit from agriculture is nothing short of an economic marvel. Nonetheless, as the food system is steadily capitalized through a dual process called “appropriation and substitution,” it falls victim to capitalism’s cyclical crises. In chapter 4, “Capitalist Food and Agriculture,” we’ll see how governments have historically dealt with this problem, and how capital makes society pay for its devastating boom-and-bust cycles. We’ll look at contract farming, CAFOs, and global warming as part and parcel of the “metabolic rift” intrinsic to capitalist agriculture. Why is capitalist agriculture considered irrational, and what would a rational agriculture look like? Agroecology, the moral economy, and the diversity of farming styles help us address this question.

How did capitalism co-evolve with inequality? In chapter 5, “Power and Privilege in the Food System: Gender, Race, and Class,” we’ll look at the political economic history of patriarchy, racism, and classism in the food system, analyzing the common roots of exploitation of people of color, women, and the poor. How is racial caste and whiteness itself constructed in the food system? By introducing the relationship between imperialism and the spheres of production and reproduction, we’ll look at the mechanics of “superexploitation” in the production and consumption of our food. The differences of class, gender, and color in the food system also give rise to opportunities for alliances and resistance.

The list of social and environmental problems caused by capitalism—from hunger, malnutrition, global warming, and food waste—is vast. So is capitalism’s list of solutions to the problems it created. In chapter 6, “Food, Capitalism, Crises, and Solutions,” we’ll look critically at some of the key problems and proposed capitalist solutions, applying the lessons in political economy learned in previous chapters. We also describe capitalism’s new agrarian transition and compare it to the agroecological alternative.

The Conclusion to A Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism calls for “Changing Everything” (with thanks to Naomi Klein). We revisit the nature of the capitalist food regime and look at the ways in which the fragmented food counter-movement is converging to forge a new politics of food. The contradictory role of the “nonprofit industrial complex” and the importance of building a critical transnational public sphere are discussed. Our journey through the political economy of the food system concludes with an explanation of how to distinguish between strategic and tactical alliances, and a call to change everything. I’ve written a personal postscript, but don’t read it until you’ve finished the book.

For many readers, some of the concepts introduced in this book may be new and may seem counterintuitive at first, making it a challenging read. Stick with it. If we can share an analysis, we can formulate a shared strategy. If we can work strategically, we can change the world.
dispossession, unemployment, and misery, but most likely means global chaos.47

Won’t the laws of supply and demand in agriculture eventually work things out? The notion that capitalist agriculture will somehow self-correct flies in the face of three hundred years of agrarian history. Reforms to the food system are desperately needed. The spread of alternative food systems outside the existing global food system will be essential not only to demonstrate that “another agriculture is possible” but to build political will within the food regime for deep, transformative reforms. Clearly, there aren’t enough farmers in the United States to create the political will in the legislatures and in the committees that insulate the U.S. Farm Bill. Changes to agriculture will have to be anchored in strong consumer-farmer-worker alliances with a clear understanding of capitalist agriculture and a compelling vision for a better farm future.

Power and Privilege in the Food System: Gender, Race, and Class

Classism, racism, and sexism predate capitalism, but they merged powerfully during the formative period of the colonial food regime and have been co-evolving ever since. Slavery, exploitation, and continent-wide dispossession of the land, labor, and products of women, the poor, and people of color are still foundational to the capitalist food system, as are hunger, malnutrition, diet-related disease, and exposure to toxic chemicals. Poor women of color and children, especially girls, bear the brunt of these inequities.

Many people think these injustices are unfortunate anomalies of our food system, or that they are pesky vestiges of prior stages of “underdevelopment.” Some believe the high rates of hunger and malnutrition afflicting underserved communities to be market failures, correctable through better information, innovation, or entrepreneurship. One way of thinking believes that poor individual choices are what drive land loss, diet-related disease, unemployment, low wages, and the desperate migration of millions of peasant families out of the countryside. There is no doubt that good information, initiative, and good personal choices are necessary for building a better food system,
but given the system’s structures, these alone are woefully insufficient for ending hunger, poverty, and environmental destruction.

The global food system is not only stratified by class, it is racialized and gendered. These inequities influence access to land and productive resources; which people suffer from contaminated food, air, and water; working conditions in food and farm jobs; and who has access to healthy food. These inequities affect resiliency, the ability of communities and individuals to recover from disasters such as the floods and droughts of climate change. The skewed distribution of resources and the inequitable exposure to the food system’s “externalities” are rooted in the inseparable histories of imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

But each form of oppression brings forms of resistance from workers, peasants, women, and people of color. Far from disappearing over time, struggles for justice take on new strategies and tactics, produce new leaders, forge new alternatives, and create new conditions from which to survive, resist, and fight for human rights. Understanding the structural conditions of struggle for those who are most exploited and abused by today’s capitalist food system is essential to understanding not only the need for profound change, but the paths to transformation.

**Gender, Patriarchy, and the Capitalist Food System**

During the 2009 global food and economic crisis, 1 to 2 baby boys per 1,000 births died who would have lived in a non-crisis economy. The figure for baby girls was 7 to 8 extra deaths per 1,000 births. That in the twenty-first century baby girls die at four to eight times the rate as baby boys during times of crisis should be a wake-up call for anyone who thinks the world has reached gender equality. The drivers behind this sordid statistic include a host of gendered inequities that include access to food, health services, fair incomes, and ownership. These are also reflective of women’s disproportionate exposure to violence and their exclusion from formal structures of political power. These are not just phenomena from developing countries. In the United States over 30 percent of women earn poverty wages compared to 24 percent for men, and women are paid just 78 cents for every dollar men make to do the same job. These statistics reflect deep structural injustices.

But it’s not only that women need to “catch up” with men. The inequitable position of women in the food system is actually part of what makes the food system work. How? Patriarchy.

Patriarchy predates capitalism by millennia. The emergence of agriculture, social hierarchies, and male privilege together established some of the pillars of what became the capitalist food system. In short, agriculture (probably invented by women) and animal husbandry (largely controlled by men) not only produced a surplus of storable food and a population boom within hunter-gatherer societies during the early Neolithic Period, but also unleashed a social struggle over the ownership and control of the food surplus. This struggle began between men and women.

Early control over the agricultural surplus was a defining moment for human civilization. The politics of nomadic hunter-gatherer societies—as often matricentric as patricentric—revolved around the laws of “irreducible minimum,” which meant that everyone in the community or clan had the same rights to its food, regardless of their sex, age, or ability. Mutual aid and cooperation were the primary tools of survival. Private property was basically nonexistent. The sexual division of labor between men and women did not confer power of men over women, or women over men. The gradual incorporation of agriculture, and a shift to semi-nomadic and sedentary communities, introduced a new mode of production and a new division of labor.

Men mainly hunted big game, an activity that allowed them to specialize in weaponry. They ranged far from the settlements where women took charge of gathering, small-game hunting, farming, and the care of young children:

In hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies, there was a sexual division of labor—rigidly defined sets of responsibilities for women and men. But both sexes were allowed a high degree of autonomy in performing those tasks. Moreover . . . in many
cases, women provided most of the food by combining motherhood and productive labor. . . Women, in many cases, could carry small children with them while they gathered or planted, or leave the children behind with other adults for a few hours at a time. Likewise, many goods could be produced in the household. Because women were central to production in these pre-class societies, systematic inequality between the sexes was non-existent, and elder women in particular enjoyed relatively high status.3

But the roles of production and reproduction began to shift as agriculture came to dominate community activities. Agriculture demanded more time and more labor. Whereas hunting societies tried to limit their numbers in order to adjust their population to limited supplies of game, agricultural societies sought to increase the number of able-bodied family members to meet the greater labor demands of field work. As men steadily dedicated more of their time to agriculture rather than hunting, women began to specialize in childcare and household activities.

Most early agricultural societies were polygynous or polyandrous and matrilineal. Children knew who their mother was, but not their father. This was not a problem for children. Men from the father’s clan were all “fathers,” and the aunts from their mother’s clan were also treated as “mothers.” When a man died, his accumulated agricultural wealth was passed on to children through the “mother-right” of the woman’s clan. What “wealth” did men have? Primarily livestock.

Men controlled much of the livestock and ranged far from the settlements to find forage. Livestock provided milk, blood, and an on-the hoof surplus of meat. As men controlled more and more of the surplus they were faced with a problem: How could they pass their accumulated wealth on to their children if they didn’t know exactly who their children were? Patriarchy and private property emerged as a way for men to control both the inter-generational and the intra-generational distribution of agricultural surplus. The destruction of women’s “mother-right” ensured men’s livestock were inherited by the male rather than the female clan. Relying on U.S. scholar Lewis Henry Morgan’s work with the Seneca communities of the Iroquois nation, Frederick Engels wrote:

Thus, on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased it made the man’s position in the family more important than the woman’s, and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in favor of his children, the traditional order of inheritance. . . . Mother-right, therefore, had to be overthrown, and overthrown it was. . . . The overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.4

For many, the rest is history—of patriarchy, property, and capitalism. Patrilocal inheritance and ownership shifted from clan to individual men, and eventually to primogeniture (the eldest son) inheritance. Monogamy (for women) was enforced to ensure only biological progeny inherited the father’s wealth. The foundation for capital accumulation, the state, and the nuclear patriarchal family was established. Trade in agricultural surplus increased, leading to an even greater accumulation of wealth. This led to more production for exchange. This required more labor, in the form of big families and slaves, both owned and controlled by men. Women were subjugated even further and their reproductive burden increased.

The Neolithic Agricultural Revolution, largely credited for an explosion in global populations, was a social and political revolution that laid the basis for the establishment of states and social hierarchies between men and women and between classes. The development of the state and class differentiation were accompanied by the formation of patriarchal societies. Of course, not all agricultural societies became patriarchal. The Iroquois Nation and many other indigenous societies provide examples that patriarchy is certainly not inevitable. However, all capitalist societies did establish the rule of patriarchy as the hierarchical basis for class rule.
Women's subjugated status did not end their participation in the food system, but it did devalue their work both inside and outside the home. This is readily evident today. Although women produce much of the world's food, cook most of our meals, and feed and care for nearly everyone, they have less access to land and the means of production than men and earn less working in the fields and factories than men. That these inequities are a reflection of patriarchy seems obvious, but to understand the intersection of gender and class we need to ask: How does capitalist patriarchy work in the food system?

**Production and Reproduction**

Two processes sit at the heart of capitalism: production and reproduction. In a strict capitalist sense, production is about making commodities to sell at a profit and reproduction is about providing human labor-power for capital. Workers who produce commodities need food, clothing, and housing. The cost of these "goods and services" over the course of the workers' productive lives—the cost of reproducing the labor force—is the cost of reproduction.

But this way of understanding things treats workers as gifts of nature. Where did the workers come from? Who fed, clothed, and cared for them and raised them to working age? As adults, who cooks, cleans, and cares for them when they are sick, ensuring they can have long, productive lives? What are the conditions of these caregivers? What is their economic status, their role in society, and their contribution to culture? What is their potential for transforming the conditions of production and reproduction? Addressing these questions brings us to the realm of social reproduction because workers aren't simply being "produced." They come from societies that correspond to a particular mode of production. Societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production are profoundly differentiated by class, race, and gender.

The food system is an essential part of the social reproduction of capital because it produces food that everyone eats and engages more people in productive activities than any other economic sector. Women, domestic labor, sexuality, and procreation are central to production and reproduction in the food system; women work throughout it and care for most food system workers and their families.

During the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the sphere of reproduction was practically ignored. The textile mills of eighteenth-century England ran on the labor of men, women, and children who were quite literally worked to death. Labor was treated as an inexhaustible and disposable resource. Capital made no investment in the reproduction of labor. As capitalism shifted to heavy industry and the running and maintenance of machines became more complicated, it required a more skilled, less disposable worker. Because these workers were in shorter supply, the reproduction of this labor force required greater investment (in training) on the part of the capitalists, raising the value of specialized labor. But it did not mean that the reproductive work carried out by women (housework, cooking, child bearing, child rearing, and family nurturing) was paid at its full value. On the contrary, just as with wage labor, most of the value of women's reproductive work was passed on to the capitalist through the appropriation of the surplus value of the worker. In other words, the unpaid work of women in raising children and doing other housework was for all practical purposes a subsidy for the bosses, contributed by the wives of male workers. Women's domestic work was part of a capitalist mode of production that required it to take a certain form, one that disciplined it to play a subservient role in the production process just as capital had disciplined the worker to give up the product of their labor for an hourly wage.

Silvia Federici describes this as the "shift from absolute to relative surplus value" in the nineteenth century. In the first instance, capitalists simply increased the length of the workday in order to increase their profits above and beyond the wages paid to the worker (absolute surplus value). Violent clashes between laborers and capitalists brought hours from 16 hours a day down to 8. This shifted the strategy of capitalist accumulation to one of extracting profits by increasing relative surplus value. This is accomplished either by increasing productivity
(through mechanization or automation) or by lowering wages. To lower wages without starving workers, the cost of wage goods (food, clothing, and housing) must be reduced. But, barring breakthrough technological advancements, decreasing the prices of wage goods purchased by workers means decreasing the price of commodities, which would decrease profits. Where did capitalism find the savings necessary for a decrease in wages? In the reproductive (domestic, care-giving) work of women. The cleaning, feeding, and physical and emotional care-giving carried out by women has a value to capitalist production because it maintains the labor force—the source of labor power. While this was always free to capitalists, it became more important as competition and technological development drove firms to cut costs and find savings in their quest for profits. This largely explains the capitalist turn from the exploitation of women as factory workers to their exploitation as full-time housewives.6

Another century would pass until mechanization ushered in the shift from absolute to relative surplus value in agriculture. Rather, colonialism expanded agriculture to new, conquered land where the exploitation of rich soils and abundant resources provided a natural “subsidy” to capitalist food and fiber markets (in addition to the “subsidy” provided by workers earning at or below subsistence wages). As the natural subsidy to agriculture inevitably waned, fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery were introduced to intensify the production process. This was accompanied by a steady shift of women’s activities out of the field and into domestic (reproductive) work.

In her seminal work Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor, Maria Mies challenges the orthodox Marxist bias in understanding the social origins of the gender division of labor. Less interested in when this division of labor occurred, Mies is concerned with why it resulted in a hierarchical structure of patriarchal oppression. “This division,” writes Mies, “cannot be attributed to some universal sexism of men as such, but is a consequence of the capitalist mode of production, which is only interested in those parts of the human body which can be directly used as instruments of labor or which can become an extension of the machine.”7

Capitalism requires worker’s heads, hands, legs, and backs as labor power in order to produce surplus value. While women’s heads, hands, legs, and backs also enter the labor market, their life-giving wombs and mammary glands are not considered profit making. This determination by capital relegates women’s reproductive functions to the realm of nature. The capitalist division between “human labor” and “natural activity” values men’s physical labor power as productive, but devalues women’s reproductive activity as not productive. “Productive” in this strict sense refers only to the production of surplus value. Valuing only the work that produces surplus value—rather than the reproductive activity that produces the worker—is at the heart of the gender bias in the capitalist system.

Maria Mies rejects this narrow interpretation of the productivity of labor and considers women’s production of life as non-wage “subsistence” labor—that is, the amount of labor needed for the production of life. She links the exploitation of women with the exploitation of slavery, colonialism, and of primary food producers—peasants:

[The] general production of life, or subsistence production—mainly performed through the non-wage labor of women and other non-wage labourers as slaves, contract workers and peasants in the colonies—constitutes the perennial basis upon which “capitalists’ productive labour” can be built up and exploited. Without the ongoing “subsistence production” of non-wage labourers (mainly women), wage labour would not be “productive.” In contrast to Marx, I consider the capitalist production process as one which comprises both: the superexploitation of non-wage labourers (women, colonists, peasants) upon which wage labour exploitation is then possible. I define their exploitation as superexploitation because it is not based on the appropriation (by the capitalist) of the time and labour over and above the “necessary” labour time, the surplus labour, but of the time and labour necessary for people’s own survival or subsistence production. It is not compensated by a wage, the size of which is determined by the “necessary” reproductive costs
of the labourer, but is mainly determined by force or coercive institutions.8

Immigrant farm labor is another modern-day example of “super-exploitation.” In the United States during the Second World War, the labor of white farmworkers largely disappeared as men went to war and women moved into the factories. Peasant farmers from Mexico were imported under the Bracero Program to pick the country’s crops. Mexican farm women largely stayed behind, taking care of families. The farm labor workforce has been treated as disposable ever since, with increases in productivity coming from increases in hours and a relative decrease in pay. Because it is treated as inexhaustible, there is no thought to the reproduction of the immigrant labor force, even in the twenty-first century.

However, the last three decades of neoliberal globalization have steadily destroyed household and village economies in the Mexican countryside, driving women across the Northern border in search of work. The massive transition of both the productive and reproductive

Women Farmworkers

The agricultural sector has historically been and continues to be one of the largest employers of women worldwide. In developing and developed countries alike, women in agriculture have less access to productive resources and opportunities than men.9 Female farmworkers in the United States suffer disproportionately from workplace discrimination and abuse as a result of their intersectional identity—as farmworkers, people of color, women, and immigrants, be they permanent, temporary, or undocumented. Female farmworkers (who make up 24 percent of the U.S. agricultural workforce) earn less than male workers for several reasons: they work fewer hours, are sometimes paid less than men for the same work, and are occupationally segregated into lower-paying “women’s work” positions. Some employers refuse to hire or promote women, and others have refused to give women benefits offered to men, such as housing.

Childcare is virtually never an employment benefit of agricultural work, and thus farmworkers’ children work in the fields, “play” around the fields while their parents work, or are cared for at home, usually by grandmothers, aunts, or siblings. Agricultural employers, like the employers of other transnational migrants, rely heavily on the unpaid caring labor of some women to make possible the wage work of other women and men. The few rights that female farmworkers do hold are often violated purely on the basis of gender. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports, for example, that some employers take advantage of women’s marital status by illegally paying women on their spouse’s paychecks instead of issuing individual payment.10 This illegal practice allows employers to deny women the minimum wage and evade extra payments like Social Security.

Reproductive oppression persists to the extent that women’s reproduction is affected by 1) poverty rooted in low wages, low benefits, and exploited labor, 2) the work of migration that adds significantly to women’s unpaid domestic labor, 3) hazardous work conditions, including pesticide exposure and increased vulnerability to sexual violence, and 4) weak labor and safety regulations limiting those hazards. It is important to recognize that though work sites are not gender segregated, men make up the majority of farmworkers in the United States and hold most of the supervisory positions, allowing the agricultural industry to foster a culture of patriarchal dominance. Together, the labor/occupational conditions of farmwork, the state of U.S. healthcare for farmworkers, and pervasive and stigmatizing social relations interact to create a context that regulates, controls, and exploits women farmworkers. In short, women work in a context of reproductive oppression.
workforce from South to North has allowed segments of the U.S. food system to prosper, especially large corporate farms producing fresh fruits and vegetables, processing enterprises, and restaurants. Similar patterns have played out in other parts of Latin America, Asia, and Africa as impoverished men, women, and children flood into North America and Western Europe searching for work.\(^\text{11}\)

The “globalization of exploitation” in the food system’s productive and reproductive spheres has given rise to diverse and broad-based movements for social justice up and down the food value chain. For example, for every four or five farmworkers in the United States, one is a woman. The preponderance—and militancy—of women in these movements is striking and has shifted the agenda for social justice in ways that reflect their condition and their presence.

**Food—Systems—Racism**

Racism, the systemic mistreatment of people based on their ethnicity or skin color, affects all aspects of our society, including our food system.\(^\text{12}\) Racism has no biological foundation, but the socioeconomic and political structures that dispossess and exploit people of color, coupled with widespread misinformation about race, cultures, and ethnic groups, along with potential competition with the white population for jobs and educational opportunities, make racism one of the more intractable injustices. Racism is not simply attitudinal prejudice or individual acts, it is a historical legacy, deeply embedded in our institutions, that privileges one group of people over others. Racism—individual, institutional, and structural—also impedes good-faith efforts to build a fair, sustainable food system.

Despite its pervasiveness, racism is almost never mentioned in international programs for food aid and agricultural development. Although anti-hunger and food security programs frequently cite the shocking statistics, racism is rarely identified as the cause of inordinately high rates of hunger, food insecurity, pesticide poisoning, and diet-related disease among people of color. Even the widely hailed “good food movement,” with its plethora of projects for organic

**People of the Earth**

**ROSA LINDA GUILLE\(\text{N}, farmworker, organizer, ecofeminist:**

[My father] loved being a farmworker. . . . He loved growing food, growing plants. He talked to us about it and kept journals about it. In those journals he would write, “Today I sat out in the fields. I was getting ready to go out, and the smell of the soil was this way. The birds sounded this way . . . the clouds . . . the air. Touching the soil makes me feel happy. It makes me whole.” He was a person of the earth. He said, “We are people of the earth. There’s no getting around it. We are people of the earth and we have to be in it.” My father was a self-educated man. . . . He would say, “You are children of people of the earth. You are farmworkers. Don’t let anybody make you ashamed for being that.”

Industrial agriculture has taken the farmworker’s voice away, so we don’t hear them identifying themselves as people of the earth. We have been identified as machines, as beasts of burden. It’s convenient for people to identify us that way because it’s easy to exploit us. But if you’re talking about a human being who can express herself or himself as a person of the earth, with this intellect and wisdom about the right way to grow food, then it’s not as easy to exploit. A lot of the family farmers and growers know that the way they’re growing food and treating the earth is wrong. They feel guilty, and want a buffer between them and the reality of what farmworkers will say if you give them the opportunity. You’re looking at that human being every day, knowing that you are doing wrong.

My father would say, “This is special. What you do is a work of grace, because what you do will make somebody else healthy and whole. You are feeding humans, and nobody else is doing that except for the person growing the food or the animal.” I have to say that when I was in the fields working, I liked it. My father would say when the soil was ploughed,
“Just stand here, mi hija, and smell. Take a deep breath.” And we would. And he would say, “This is the only time you can smell that smell.” Then when you irrigate it’s another different smell, but it’s the same earth. It’s nourishing itself. Every time is different. You know the smell of the plants when they grow and the different types of plants by touching, sitting in the fields.

When we drive up to the field, you hire us to work and we sit in the field. We watch the sun come up, and the mist comes out of the soil, and the smells change, and the breezes come up, and the earth comes alive. And you feel an energy. Nothing else can give you that energy. And you want to get to the hoeing or whatever it is you’re doing. It makes you feel good—the beauty of the earth around you, with the birds flying and the bees buzzing. There is nothing like it in the world. You know it, and I want you to know that we know it and we feel it, too. And it’s wrong that you will not recognize that we are the same as you.¹³

agriculture, permaculture, healthy food, community supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, and corner store conversions, tends to address the issue of racism unevenly.¹⁴

Some organizations are committed to dismantling racism in the food system and make this central to their activities. Others are sympathetic but not active on the issue. Many organizations, however, see racism as too difficult to address, tangential to their work, or a divisive issue to be avoided. The hurt, anger, fear, guilt, grief, and hopelessness of racism are uneasily addressed in the food movement, if they are addressed at all.

Racial Caste

The term racial caste describes a “stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom.”¹⁵ Racial caste is one consequence of a hierarchical imbalance in economic, political, and social power (sexism and classism are others). In North America and much of Europe, this racial caste system privileges light-complexioned people of Northern European ancestry. (Although racial caste has some social similarities to the Hindu caste system, it is historically very different.)

Any country that has been subjected to Northern colonialism has been structured by a racial caste system in which “whiteness” grants social privileges. This system was originally developed to justify European colonialism and enable the economic exploitation of vast lands in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Outright dispossession through genocidal military conquest and government treaties affected 15 million indigenous people throughout the period of U.S. westward expansion. Colonization was largely carried out by white planters and aspiring white smallholder-settlers.¹⁶

In the Americas, Europeans and people of European descent murdered and dispossessed indigenous populations for their natural resources, sometimes enlisting them—for example, the Spanish Catholic missions. People from West African regions were enslaved, forcibly shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, and sold as chattel to do backbreaking labor, primarily on sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations. Although slaves acquired through war and trade had been part of many societies for thousands of years, widespread commerce in human beings did not appear until the advent of capitalism and the European conquest.

The superexploitation of enslaved human beings on plantations allowed slave systems to outcompete agrarian wage labor for over two hundred years. Under slavery, human beings were bought, sold, and mortgaged as property. The tremendous wealth generated from slavery was sent to Northern banks where it was used to finance military conquest, more plantations, and ultimately, the Industrial Revolution.¹⁷

The social justification for the commodification of human beings was the alleged biological inferiority of the people who were used as property, and the supposed divinely determined superiority of their owners. This division of power, ownership, and labor was held in
place through violence and terrorism. It also required constant religious and scientific justification, constructed on the relatively new concept of “race.” Although enslaved peoples came from ethnically and culturally different regions of West Africa, they were classified as black. Though slave owners came from different areas of Europe where they had been known by vague tribal names like Scythians, Celts, Gauls, and Germans, they were classified as white.

Slavery produced over a century of “scientific” misinformation that attempted to classify human beings on the basis of their physical traits. Eventually, people were racialized into three major categories: Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid, with Caucasians awarded superior intelligence, physical beauty, and moral character. Scientists argued over how to classify the many peoples that didn’t fit into these categories, such as the Finns, Malays, and most of the indigenous people in the Americas. The messiness of the categories was unimportant to the political and economic objectives of racism. Systematically erasing the unique ethnic, tribal, and cultural backgrounds of the world’s people while elevating a mythical Caucasian race was a shameful exercise in egregiously bad science, but it endured because it supported the control of the world’s land, labor, and capital by a powerful elite.¹⁸

Slavery had a tremendous influence on food and labor systems around the world and was the central pillar of capitalism’s racial caste system until it was widely abolished in the late nineteenth century. In the United States, after nearly three years of bloody civil war, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 released African Americans living in Confederate states from slavery, though it took nearly two more years of war before ex-slaves could freely leave their plantations.¹⁹ The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution finally put a legal end to slavery in the United States in 1865. But after a “moment in the sun,” African Americans living in the former Confederacy were quickly segregated and disenfranchised through “Jim Crow” laws, which criminalized and discriminated against formerly enslaved African-Americans and maintained the racial caste system in the absence of slavery.²⁰

The Birth and Mutation of Whiteness

The concept of race has always been fluid, shifting to accommodate the changing demands of capital and the ruling class, while undermining political struggles for equality and liberation. For example, in colonial America, there was little social difference between African slaves and European indentured servants. The colonizing British and Anglo-American population had reduced immigrants and slaves alike into one undifferentiated social group of inferior status. But when they began organizing together against their colonial rulers, the Virginia House of Burgesses introduced the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705. These laws established new property rights for slave owners; allowed for the legal, free trade of slaves; established separate trial courts for whites and blacks; prohibited black people from owning weapons and from striking a white person; prohibited free black people from employing whites; and allowed for the apprehension of suspected runaways.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, poor, light-skinned Irish-Catholic immigrants living in the United States were initially treated as an inferior race and experienced discrimination as nonwhite. American cartoonists of the time depicted the Irish with the same racist stereotypes they applied to African Americans, illustrating both ethnic groups as subhuman monkeys in an effort to dehumanize them and justify their exploitation.

As the historian Noel Ignatiev observed, the Irish in America had to become white in order to overcome the structural barriers that kept them alongside African Americans on the lowest rung of the economic ladder.²¹

The Irish made the strategic choice to differentiate themselves from African Americans by aggressively aligning themselves with the Democratic Party and labor unions, and by embracing a virulent strain of racism. Trade unions
defined certain jobs as fit only for whites, and excluded blacks from lowly jobs open to the Irish. Slave owners cultivated Irish American support for slavery by suggesting freedmen would head north to compete for jobs. In essence, the Irish "became" white. In doing so, they helped to create the modern concept of "the white race," by systematically discriminating against blacks. Mediterranean peoples, Eastern Europeans, and light-complexioned Latin Americans underwent similar processes as they immigrated to the United States.

Racial caste has systematically shaped the food system, particularly during periods of labor shortage, as it did during the Second World War, when over 4 million Mexican farmworkers were brought to the United States. Mexican labor was cheap and ruthlessly exploited. This was made socially acceptable through a system of racial norms that classified Mexicans as inferior.22

To this day, important sectors of the food system in the United States and Europe continue to be defined by dispossessed and exploited immigrant labor from the Global South. Their systematic mistreatment is justified by the centuries-old racial caste system.

**Racism in the Food System**

Calls to "fix a broken food system" assume that the capitalist food system used to work well. This assumption ignores the food system’s long, racialized history of mistreatment of people of color. The food system is unjust and unsustainable, but it is not broken. It functions precisely as the capitalist food system has always worked, concentrating power in the hands of a privileged minority and passing off the social and environmental “externalities” disproportionately to racially stigmatized groups.

Statistics from the United States confirm the persistence of racial caste in the food system. In 1910 African Americans owned 16 million

**Racism Definitions**

- **INTERPERSONAL RACISM:** The prejudices and discriminatory behaviors by which one group makes assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intents of other groups based on race. This set of prejudices leads to cruel intentional or unintentional actions toward other groups.

- **INTERNALIZED RACISM:** In a society where one group is politically, socially, and economically dominant, members of stigmatized groups, bombarded with negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth, may internalize those negative messages. It holds people back from achieving their fullest potential and reinforces the negative messages that, in turn, reinforce the oppressive systems.

- **INSTITUTIONAL RACISM:** This is when assumptions about race are structured into the social and economic institutions in our society. Institutional racism occurs when organizations, businesses, or institutions like schools and police departments discriminate, either deliberately or indirectly against certain groups of people to limit their rights. This type of racism reflects the cultural assumptions of the dominant group.

- **STRUCTURAL RACISM:** Although most of the legally based forms of racial discrimination have been outlawed, many of the racial disparities originating in various institutions and practices continue and accumulate as major forces in economic and political structures and cultural traditions. Structural racism refers to the ways in which social structures and institutions, over time, perpetuate and produce cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. This can occur even in the absence of racist intent on the part of individuals.

- **RACIALIZATION:** The process through which "race" (and its associated meanings) is attributed to something—an individual, community, status, practice, or institution.
Institutions that appear to be neutral can be racialized, shaped by previous racial practices and outcomes so that the institution perpetuates racial disparities, or makes them worse. This is true of the criminal justice system, the education and health systems, and so on.

- **REVERSE RACISM**: Sometimes used to characterize affirmative action programs, though that is inaccurate. Affirmative action programs are attempts to repair the results of institutionalized racism by setting guidelines and establishing procedures for finding qualified applicants from all segments of the population. The term “reverse racism” is also sometimes used to characterize the mistreatment that individual whites may have experienced at the hands of individuals of color. This too is inaccurate. While any form of humans harming other humans is wrong, because no one is entitled to mistreat anyone, we should not confuse the occasional mistreatment experienced by whites at the hands of people of color with the systematic and institutionalized mistreatment experienced by people of color at the hands of whites.

- **RACIAL JUSTICE**: Racial justice refers to a wide range of ways in which groups and individuals struggle to change laws, policies, practices, and ideas that reinforce and perpetuate racial disparities. Proactively, it is first and foremost the struggle for equitable outcomes for people of color.

Growing, particularly among Latinos, who now number over 67,000 farmers, people of color tend to earn less than $10,000 in annual sales, produce only 3 percent of agricultural value, and farm just 2.8 percent of farm acreage.25

While white farmers dominate as operator-owners, farmworkers and food workers—from field to fork—are overwhelmingly people of color.26 Most are paid poverty wages, have inordinately high levels of food insecurity, and experience nearly twice the levels of wage theft as do white workers. While white food workers have an average annual income of $25,024, workers of color earn only $19,349 a year. White workers hold nearly 75 percent of the managerial positions in the food system. Latinos hold 13 percent and black and Asian workers 6.5 percent.27

The resulting poverty from poorly paid jobs is racialized. Of the 47 million people living below the poverty line in the United States, less than 10 percent are white, while 27 percent are African Americans, 26 percent are Native Americans, 25.6 percent are Latinos, and 11.7 percent are Asian Americans.28

Poverty results in high levels of food insecurity for people of color. Of the 50 million food-insecure people in the United States, 10.6 percent are white, 26.1 percent are black, 23.7 percent are Latino, and 23 percent are Native American. Even restaurant workers—an occupation dominated by people of color (who should have access to all the food they need)—are twice as food insecure as the national average.29

Race, poverty, and food insecurity correlate closely with obesity and diet-related disease; nearly half of African Americans and over 42 percent of Latinos suffer from obesity. While less than 8 percent of non-Hispanic whites suffer from diabetes, 9 percent of Asian Americans, 12.8 percent of Hispanics, 13.2 percent of non-Hispanic African Americans, and 15.9 percent of indigenous people have diabetes. At $245 billion a year, the national expense in medical costs and reduced productivity resulting from diabetes are staggering.30 The human and economic burdens of diabetes and diet-related disease on the low-income families of color are devastating.
Trauma, Resistance, and Transformation:  
An Equitable Food System Is Possible

Recognizing racism as foundational in today’s capitalist food system helps explain why people of color suffer disproportionately from its social and environmental “externalities”: labor abuses, resource inequities, and diet-related diseases. It also helps explain why many of the promising alternatives such as land trusts, farmers’ markets, and community-supported agriculture tend to be dominated by people who are privileged by whiteness. Making these alternatives readily accessible to people of color requires a social commitment to racial equity and a fearless commitment to social justice. Ensuring equal access to healthy food, resources, and dignified, living-wage jobs would go a long way toward “fixing” the food system.

The trauma of racism is inescapable. In addition to the pain and indignity of racialized mistreatment, people of color can internalize racial misinformation, reinforcing racial stereotypes. While white privilege benefits white communities, it can also immobilize them with guilt, fear, and hopelessness. Both internalized racism and white guilt are socially and emotionally paralyzing, and make racism difficult to confront and interrupt.

Difficult, but not impossible. Since before the abolition movement and the Underground Railroad of the mid-1800s, people have found ways to build alliances across racial divides. The history of the U.S. food system is replete with examples of resistance and liberation, from the early struggles of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to the Black Panthers’ food programs and the boycotts and strikes by the United Farm Workers. More recently, the Food Chain Workers Alliance has fought for better wages and decent working conditions. The Detroit Food Policy Council is an example of the increase of local food policy councils run by people of color, and the spread of Growing Power’s urban farming groups reflect a rise in leadership by those communities with the most at stake in changing a system that some have referred to as “food apartheid.” Indigenous peoples and other oppressed communities have developed ways of healing

The Pedagogy of the Oppressed

First published in Portuguese in 1968, Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed presented a detailed analysis of the mechanisms of oppression, examining the relationships between those he defined as “the oppressors,” or colonizers, and “the oppressed,” the colonized. He details how every person, however submerged in the “culture of silence”—the system of dominant social relations that silences and subsumes the oppressed—can gradually come to perceive their social reality through developing a critical consciousness with which they can question and challenge the values, norms, and cultural conditions imposed on them by their oppressors. Liberation, Freire argued, lay in the education of the oppressed, so that they may recognize the oppressive class structures and overcome them:

[The] great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed [is] to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity,” which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source.
historical trauma, and there are peer counseling groups with skills for working through the immobilizing feelings of internalized oppression, fear, hopelessness, and guilt. All of these resources and historical lessons can be brought in to the food movement.

Racism still stands in the way of a good-food revolution. If the food movement can begin dismantling racism in the food system and within the food movement itself, it will have opened a path not only for food system transformation, but for ending the system of racial castes.

Class, Food, and Power

Food systems have always had some form of social division, though as we have seen, this didn't always mean that some people had more power over the food supply than others. Power over food began with animal husbandry, the spread of irrigated agriculture, the differentiation of tasks (crafts, rituals, war, and child-rearing), and the struggle to control agriculture’s surplus. As hunter-gatherer societies were displaced by agriculture, clans were replaced by kin-based chiefdoms that were in turn replaced with princely states.

States divided society into classes of royalty, nobility, commoners, and slaves. Priestly, political, and military castes gained power in the agrarian civilizations of Mesoamerica, Europe and the Mediterranean, Asia, and the Nile River Valley. These elites kept a tight grip on the food produced by slaves, serfs, and peasants. The old social divisions were the substrate upon which capitalism was to construct an entirely different form of social differentiation based not on kinship, caste, or lineage but on capital itself.

Capitalism revolutionized all prior social relationships. The aristocracy was overthrown by the bourgeoisie, who dispossessed the peasantry to construct an industrial proletariat and a massive under-employed lumpen-proletariat underclass to ensure a “reserve army of labor.” These transformations to the established social order were defined by land, labor, and capital. For example, workers (proletariat) were people who owned their labor-power, which they sold for wages; landowners (gentry) owned land from which they received rent; capitalists (bourgeoisie) owned capital and got an income from profits, either through production or trade. A constellation of small property owners, shopkeepers, merchants, professionals, and civil servants emerged as the petty bourgeoisie, who followed the ideology of the more powerful bourgeoisie, but were unable to accumulate as much capital. Then, there was the peasantry, capitalism’s eternal “awkward class,” which resisted these changes, routinely withheld their surplus and their labor, and were a poor market for capital’s products.

The three founders of social science, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, had similar but different ideas about class. Following on the works of economist David Ricardo, Marx (and Engels) centered private property and ownership of the means of production at the core of class conflict. They believed that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Weber agreed that property was a driver of class conflict, but he thought that class was one of several aspects of social stratification, which included status and politics. This introduced complexity in that classes could adopt contradictory ideologies and form alliances in unpredictable ways, making Marx’s class war likely, but not inevitable. Norms, beliefs, and values undergird Durkheim’s theory of “collective consciousness,” the objective ideological glue that holds society together at the same time class conflicts pull it apart. (Weber and Durkheim’s thinking helps explain why classes “vote against their interests” in elections and support politicians who appeal to social and cultural mores but enact impoverishing economic policies.) All three scholars were trying to explain the cataclysmic changes that capitalist society had wrought upon community life. Their studies of class become foundational for the discipline of sociology. Later, in the revolutionary crucible of the early twentieth century, researcher-activist thinkers and leaders like Rosa Luxemburg and Emma Goldman elaborated on the nature of imperialism, class struggle, and the state itself.

Another important concept is Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony,” the multiple ways in which the ruling class exerts its ideological power on the state and civil society in order to obtain the political and
social consent of those being ruled. intellectuals play a fundamental role in extending the worldview of the ruling class over the rest of society, so much so that these views are often taken as natural laws. For example, today under free-market capitalism, the notion that free (liberalized) markets are the natural state of affairs is largely accepted as fact. Not only are liberal markets not really free, the only verifiable fact about them is that they serve the class interests of multinational corporations that seek to move capital across borders, unimpeded by labor or environmental regulations. As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky point out, the media plays a decisive role in advancing class hegemony because “[among] their other functions, the media serve and propagandize on behalf of the powerful societal interests that control and finance them.”

Class relations and theories regarding social stratification have become much more complex since the fathers of sociology published their seminal texts. Ironically, reference to class today is typically limited to income, consumption patterns, and lifestyle choices. Liberal democracies in Western societies don’t talk much about class—class interests were supposed to have vanished with the prosperity of capitalism. But as inequality, poverty, and hunger have worsened, the hegemonic ideology of a “classless society” is beginning to crumble. Both class divisions and class alliances are on the rise, especially in the food system.

Food: What Difference Does Class Make?

In the food system, the principal class division is still between workers (field, packing, processing, retail, restaurant) and the owners of the means of production (the food, grain, and chemical monopolies). We don’t typically call the former the “food proletariat” and the latter the “food bourgeoisie,” but few other modern industries have such a classic division between capital and labor.

Farmers, however, are a more complicated group. Most of the farmers in the world are peasant women who produce food on very small farms both for themselves and for the (usually local) market.

Less than half of the world’s food is produced on large, highly capitalized industrial farms for the global market. Many of these producers are large, corporate family farms; others are not so large (and only a couple of crop failures away from bankruptcy). Some of these farmers—like poultry producers—are owners of their means of production in only a tenuous sense. They are more like “food serfs” than the yeoman farmers of Jeffersonian lore. Other farmers may own their land and machinery but are highly leveraged and locked in to growing commodities like genetically modified corn, soybeans, or sugar beets for the market. There is a small, undercapitalized but highly committed subclass of small-scale family farmers growing for Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) and farmers’ markets in the Global North who live almost as precariously as peasants in the Global South—but without the extended family and village support networks.

Then there is the “food petty bourgeoisie” made up of small restaurateurs, and retailers, producers for high-end niche markets, the technicians and bureaucrats in the agricultural ministries, midsize philanthropic foundations, and “food entrepreneurs” producing everything from liquid meal replacements and boxed meal ingredients to wine aerators and smartphone food apps. Their media presence far outweighs their actual activity in production itself.

The “food intellectuals” also make up a part of this class (and sometimes that of the bourgeoisie). Though it is fashionable to consider the celebrity chefs, individual scientists, technicians, professors, authors, and commentators working in the food system as independent thinkers, they all serve the needs of some class. (Some celebrity chefs are full-blown, multi-million dollar capitalists.) Gramsci believed that every class, except for the peasantry, had their own group of “organic” intellectuals who helped them advance their class interests. "Intellectuals," he wrote, "think of themselves as independent, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own." But for Gramsci, intellectuals were characterized less by the intrinsic nature of their activities and more by the ensemble of social relations in which they carried out their activities. We can see this in our modern food
system: some scientists, professors, and internet trolls and food bloggers work in the class interests of the great food monopolies, whereas the work of other intellectuals reflects the interests of small farmers, and farm and food workers, and the efforts of still others reflect the interests of the petty bourgeoisie.

Does this mean that all classes are ultimately doomed to serve the dominant class interests of the bourgeoisie? Not necessarily. The poor want affordable food; capitalists need compound growth rates and a 15 percent return on their food system investments; farmers want parity; workers want at least living wages; and most intellectuals want a comfortable salary and social recognition.

Karl Polanyi wrote, “The fate of classes is much more often determined by the needs of society than the fate of society is determined by the needs of classes.”

We can better understand Polanyi’s formulation by applying it to our food system. Polanyi did not dismiss class, class interests, class struggle, and class warfare (nor would he likely have dismissed gender or racial equity struggles). On the contrary, in his study of the impact of capitalism on society, he found that class alliances—more than the independent struggles of classes themselves—were a fundamental aspect of social change. Success in the struggle against rapacious liberal markets depended on the ability of the most negatively affected classes to ally with other classes. This, in turn, depended on their ability to work for “interests wider than their own.” This way of thinking about class is especially important in understanding the transformation of our food systems.

Food embraces the concerns of class, but also those of gender and race. This means that food provides an opportunity to build alliances on the basis of interests “wider than our own.” The question is, what kind of alliances, and with whom? What are the transformative interests and social classes of today’s food system and which can build an alliance for its transformation?

Given that the food and agriculture sector is the largest employer in the world, it would seem obvious that any transformation of the food system would have to place the interests of the “food proletariat” prominently in any strategy for change. This is not the case. With the exception of the very few farmworker unions and food retail and restaurant workers’ coalitions, most of the good-food movement centers on food access that, in the words of Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini, is “good, clean and fair.” The mainstream media, the internet, and social media all give the impression that the food movement is either about entrepreneurs inventing clever food apps, consumers seeking an authentic food experience, or underserved communities seeking healthy food. Farmers are presented as individuals rather than as a class with material and social demands, and workers are largely ignored.

The prominence of intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and classless consumers in what some analysts call “the dominant food narrative” is an ideological reflection of a food system in which farmers and blue-collar food workers have lost power in relation to multinational corporations. It is also a reflection of a capitalist system unable to resolve chronic crises of overproduction and underemployment. Thus we have a handful of innovative farmers and food entrepreneurs held up as success stories, while tens of thousands of retiring farmers are forced to sell their farms and millions of food workers are underemployed, mistreated, and underpaid. A triumphant “food revolution” is touted on television food channels, on the internet, and in college courses at a time when the relations of production (and the wealth of the food system) are firmly under corporate control. Even initiatives that ostensibly benefit farmers, like Fair Trade, are run by managers and distributors rather than farmers, which helps to explain why the fair trade premium is based on market prices rather than costs of production. Above all, ownership of the most basic factor of production—land—is unquestionably rooted in a capitalist system of private property that economically shunts out new farmers, particularly women and people of color.

The Fetish of Food and the End to Oppression

The popularity of food in the media and talk of food revolutions give the impression that society is transforming the food system by dint
of improved technologies, disruptive ideas, and conscious eating. Market-based strategies for farmers, restaurateurs, and incubator kitchens invite us to believe that patriarchy, racism, and class exploitation in the food system can be eliminated if only we help women, people of color, and the poor become better capitalists. The rise of monopoly ownership of the means of production—land, labor–power, and capital—is blithely ignored in favor of a happy narrative of middle-class economic development, precisely at a time when the middle class is disappearing worldwide. This hegemonic food discourse not only reflects the dominant ideology of the corporate food regime, it avoids addressing how the capitalist food system is inextricably based on the oppression and exploitation of women, people of color, and workers. Worse, this dominant food narrative lulls us into the magical belief that somehow we can change the food system without changing the capitalist system in which it is historically embedded. This is the political fetishization of food.

We can’t change the food system without transforming capitalism. Yet we can’t transform capitalism without changing the food system. And we can’t do either of these without ending patriarchy, racism, and classism. So, if we want a better food system, we have to change everything. Admittedly, this is a tall order for any social movement. The question for the food movement, however, is not “how do we change everything,” but “how is the food system strategically positioned to influence systemic change?”

Clearly, a true food revolution would upend the social relations of patriarchy, racism, and classism in the food system and in society as a whole. A food revolution would also smash the monopoly ownership of the means of production by disabling the mechanisms of monopoly power: corporate personhood and intellectual property rights, corporate amnesty (from paying the health and environmental costs of the industrial model of food production), corporate financialization of land, food speculation, and the ability to buy elections and determine food, labor, and environmental policy.

These instruments of power must be addressed if patriarchy, racism, and classism are to be eliminated in the food system; they are precisely what hold these oppressions in place. The food movement’s strategic advantage in the struggle for food system transformation is that the main oppressions within it are the primary oppressions of capitalism itself. If hunger, food insecurity, poverty, and social disenfranchisement are addressed not as “problems” to be “fixed” within the existing food system, but rather as part of a historically constructed capitalism based on gender, race, and class oppression, the road to transformational change within and beyond the food system becomes increasingly clear.

The next question is, of course, who will lead this transformation? History indicates that those with the most at stake in system change are the most effective leaders. Peasants have led movements for agrarian reforms; workers have led struggles for wage and workplace improvement; women have led the struggles for equality and suffrage; and African Americans have led the movements for civil rights in the United States. Two things were essential to the successes of all of these movements: cross-class alliances and legitimate “organic” leadership.

The movements for good food, food justice, food democracy, and food sovereignty that have gained traction around the globe are often led by women, people of color, workers, and peasants. However, the gatekeepers of the dominant food movement discourse are professionals, academics, intellectuals, and bureaucrats who are mostly white males. This disjuncture ultimately depoliticizes the food movement, taking its attention away from capitalism and impeding effective alliances, which are difficult under the best of circumstances. Supporting the radical leadership of women, people of color, peasants, farmers, and food workers—and centering food system change within capitalist transformation—will go a long way to overcoming these obstacles.