



## The reproach of hunger: food, justice, and money in the twenty-first century, by David Rieff

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BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE RENDU DE LIVRE

**The reproach of hunger: food, justice, and money in the twenty-first century**, by David Rieff, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2015, 432 pp., ISBN 9781439123874 (hardcover)

I once sat with farmers at a long winter table in Bizkaia, warming up with a flaming *carajillo*, trying to keep my wits in the steep, unforgiving drizzle of the Basque Country. A grizzled shepherd listened wordlessly to my proposals for action-research on how farmers practice *food sovereignty*, a call for the radical democratisation of the food system. Suddenly, he slapped his hand on the table; “Stop studying the poor!” he bellowed, “Study the rich!”

His meaning was clear: “We farmers can take care of ourselves if you get the rich off our backs”. Given that most of the world’s hungry people are poor peasants (who feed half the global population using just a quarter of the planet’s agricultural land), this cuts to the core of the hunger debate: Does hunger result from scarcity or injustice?

David Rieff’s new book, *The Reproach of Hunger: Food, Justice and Money in the Twenty-first Century*, addresses this question in a wide-ranging analysis of how the rich understand human progress and why their proposals to end hunger are based more on faith than science, and on hubris rather than empathy.

My Basque farmer friends would approve. However, Rieff not only criticises the neoliberal dreams of the global ruling classes and their phalanx of professional executors as unworkable, he also maintains that the radical proposals for food sovereignty are impractical because they ask “What kind of world do we want?” rather than “What kind of world can we realistically expect to have?”

*The Reproach of Hunger* starts with the 2007–2008 global food crisis, when the numbers of desperately hungry people in the world swelled to over 1 billion. People went hungry not because of a lack of food, but because they were too poor to buy the food that was available.

The question “Why are people poor?” was answered over 60 years ago by US President Harry Truman at his inaugural address: because they are *underdeveloped*. Development – both the original, state-led version and today’s market-led iteration – has been the capitalist solution to poverty and hunger ever since.

*The Reproach of Hunger* questions the optimistic claims, heroic technological assumptions and unfulfilled promises of development. It also takes aim at development’s neoliberal champions from academia, science, industry and big philanthropy.

Development as a Cold War foil for the economic exploitation of the Third World has long been exposed by social theorists and Left-leaning political economists. The literature of Development Studies is rife with critiques of the practices and poor results of the multi-billion dollar development industry. *The Reproach of Hunger* is a millennial update – from a US perspective – on the failings of development under the present conditions of climate change, high and volatile food prices, deepening economic inequality, massive migration and the rise of a new uber-class of blindingly rich and hopelessly optimistic development crusaders.

In an intellectual prose that will tax the attention of those accustomed to soundbites like “making poverty history”, Rieff deconstructs the slogans and the icons. The World Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Bono’s ONE Campaign, Jeffery Sachs’ Earth Institute, OXFAM, World Vision, Save the Children, Concern Worldwide and others are called out for serving up facile solutions to the structurally complex problems of hunger and poverty. (Rieff

returns again and again to emblematically flog Bill Gates, the quintessential technocrat whose mid-life foray into development provides rich material for critiques of imperial hubris.) Rieff denounces the *carpe diem* mystique behind the campaigns inviting us to believe that we can end hunger (and avoid an apocalypse) by clicking a mouse and spreading the North's technological bounty to the underdeveloped South. *The Reproach of Hunger* challenges development's ontological premise that "things are getting better all the time", and asks whether, under current conditions, ending hunger *is even reasonably possible*.

This is a bold question; one that no one in industry or any government, multilateral, or philanthropic agency would ever dare ask out loud.

But Rieff does not limit himself to the development industrial complex. He also takes progressives to task for proposing rights-based alternatives that he considers unfeasible, criticising Oliver De Schutter, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, for suggesting that democratising the global food system is a "realistic and achievable goal" in a world in which increasing economic inequality is systematically destroying democracy; and admonishing food activists for assuming that the food system can be transformed without a "radical transformation of the entire global political system" (p. 142). Rieff is not convinced that global systems change is possible, and does not believe in *Vía Campesina's* position (or in the publications of this author) that a shift to food sovereignty is practical.

*The Reproach of Hunger* dismisses both Right and Left visions, asserting that, "[In] an age where hope and optimism are presented as the only morally licit stance [...] hope can also be a denial of reality and 'solutionism' a form of moral and ideological vanity" (p. 10).

This is a brutally honest position for which David Rieff will make very few friends.

But then what? After dismissing both neoliberal development and the social movements challenging our inequitable and unsustainable food system, one expects Rieff to offer a clear-headed alternative. He does not. In the book's last paragraph, he writes: "Where does this leave us? I wish I had a better answer, but it seems to me the only feasible one is to be found in the strengthening of the state and in the promise and the burden of democratic politics" (p. 335). He then briefly posits Brazil's laudable *Fome Zero* programme (Zero Hunger) as an example of a state-led development success and ends with a liberal-democratic apology: "Locke said of reason that it was a 'dim candle' but that was all we had. The same can be said about the state in the twenty-first century" (p. 336).

Thank you, David Rieff, for your thorough treatment of the twenty-first-century development industrial complex and for challenging the politics of blind hope and shallow optimism. But, I'd like to invite you to reflect and to dream; in a politically practical way.

Your example of state-sponsored reforms – *Fome Zero* – the result of a populist government put in power with significant support from the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), would have been inconceivable without the tremendous social pressure exerted by the Brazilian food sovereignty movement. While the programme falls short of the radical food democracy called for by *Vía Campesina*, the MST, Oliver De Schutter and Food First (the organisation I direct), we all consider it a strategic victory in the struggle to transform not just the food system but also society.

You are not alone in calling for a regulatory state. However, without re-establishing the *public sphere* pushed for by food sovereignty movements, the state's return will be dominated by the billionaires and corporate monopolies currently holding our economy hostage. The struggle to reassert the public sphere is taking place at local, regional and municipal spheres in many forms, from food policy councils to land takeovers. It is also occurring at the United Nations within the Committee on Food Security. (Much of this flies under the development radar, but that's probably for the best at this juncture.)

The corporate odds are stacked against us. But please consider that the World Bank's market triumphalism and Bill Gates' technocratic optimism are fundamentally different from the call for food sovereignty. In the first case, optimism is a way of diverting attention from fundamental inequities in a system that is condemning most of the world's farmers to abject misery and locking our civilisation into a protracted climate disaster. In the second case, food sovereignty is a utopian vision of those for whom giving up hope is not an option. This is essential to draw our imaginary away from the disastrous dystopias you denounce. As Eduardo Galeano reminded us, utopia, always on the horizon, keeps us going; we step towards her, she steps away, leading us forward through a wilderness of despair.

Historically, capitalist systems tend to swing between periods of liberalisation and reform. Reform is not inevitable, however, and requires powerful social movements to force changes upon the state. This happened with the New Deal and for *Fome Zero*. It will likely be the case for the world food system also.

Mr Rieff – colleague – the question is not whether we can end hunger in the absence of systems change, but how the food movement might catalyse society to demand the transformational reforms upon which our collective future depends.

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