

Q&A with Eric Holt-Giménez on *A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism: Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat*



Our latest book, *A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism: Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat* by Eric Holt-Giménez, is a hard-hitting investigation into the role capitalism plays in corrupting our food system (**to order your copy visit www.foodfirst.org/foodiesguide**). Our food system leaves 50 million people in poverty in the richest country on earth—many of whom grow, harvest, process and serve our food. They can't afford to be foodies because they're too busy worrying where their next meal is coming from; it's a system that allows over a third of the world to go hungry.

Q: *You talk about capitalism being a “silent ingredient in our food” and that we can't transform our food system without transforming our economic system. Can you explain the relationship between capitalism and food? And please define “Capitalism” and provide some concrete ways it can be transformed.*

A: Capitalism and our food system have co-evolved. The original wealth developed by early food systems was accumulated and used to fuel the industrial revolution. Then the food system itself was industrialized. All this time, wealth was being extracted from farmers, farm workers and food workers to form larger and larger food monopolies like the ones controlling seeds, fertilizers, processing and retail today. So, you really can't understand the food system without understanding capital or understand capitalism without understanding food. Some food activists seem to think they can change the food system in isolation from the larger, capitalist system, which is an illusion. True, we can tweak things and tinker around the edges of the system and do some good work in the process, but sooner or later most of these efforts get absorbed by capitalism, where the economic laws of the bottom line, the falling rate of profit, over-accumulation, and monopolization take over. So, in order to create a good, clean, and fair food system, we will have to transform the

**FOOD FIRST
INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND
DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

CO-FOUNDERS

Frances Moore Lappé
Joseph Collins

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Joyce King, *President*
Shyaam Shabaka, *Vice President*
Hank Herrera, *Treasurer*
Malik Yakini, *Secretary*
Michael Dorsey
Rosalinda Guillén
Demalda Newsome
Devon Peña
Bobby Wilson

STAFF & CONSULTANTS

Eric Holt-Giménez, *Executive Director*
Ahna Kruzic, *Director of Publications and
Communications*
Alyshia Silva, *Development Director*
Martha Katigbak-Fernandez, *Operations
Officer*
Rowena Garcia, *Administrative Assistant*
Erik Hazard, *Land Justice Tour
Coordinator*

FELLOWS

Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Miguel
Altieri, Marilyn Borchardt, Jun Borrás,
Jonathan Fox, Maria Luisa Mendoca,
Leonor Hurtado, Clara Nicholls,
Ivette Perfecto, Annie Shattuck, John
Vandermeer, Jahi Chappelle, Simran
Sethi, Nnimmo Bassey, Monica White

**FOOD SOVEREIGNTY TOUR
COORDINATORS**

Malia Everette, CEO Altruistas
Travel, Food Sovereignty Tours tour
operator

VOLUNTEER TRANSLATORS

Leonor Hurtado, Anna-Sarah Eyrich,
Maria de los Angeles Rivera, Allen
García, Felipe Gavioli, Juliana Glufke,
Mónica Goya, Robert Hilliard,
Geneviève Lavoie-Mathieu, Oliver
Mazeas, Alexandra Praun, Juliana
Ricarte, María de los Angeles
Rivera, Céline Rosso, Camille Vignerot,
Janaina Stronzake

Food First is a “peoples’ think tank” and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and solutions to hunger and poverty, with a commitment to fighting racism and establishing food as a fundamental human right.

capitalist system itself. This is a daunting task for people who are struggling just to ensure fair prices, living wages, and access to good food. Capitalism figured out a long time ago that food is a special, keystone commodity to the functioning of the rest of the economic system. Food activists need to situate their efforts strategically. The best way to change capitalism is to start with food.

Q: *Transforming an entire global food system sounds like a daunting task. Can you give specific examples how a successful movement could be built, and how such a transformation could be achieved?*

A: Well, a successful movement is being built as we speak, and we need to learn from it. Historically, capitalism has only introduced social reforms when strong social movements took advantage of economic crises in order to create political will for reform. In the past, labor movements, political parties and armed revolutionary movements created the political will for change. Today, things are different. There are a plethora of social movements working to change all aspects of society: gender, racial, and class relations, climate, food, and environmental justice, immigrant rights, disability rights, veterans’ rights... the list is long, and you will find many of these movements and concerns within the food movement itself. It is a rich political landscape that is bold and dynamic, constantly pushing the envelope. Unfortunately, these movements tend to be very fragmented as a whole and tend to work in silos rather than in alliances. The other problem is that they have been largely “depoliticized” in that their work remains in the cultural sphere and lacks a systemic critique of capital—the major political force in our society today. So, the challenge is to find ways to respectfully converge in all this diversity on one hand, and to “re-politicize” the movements on the other. In the food movement, progressive projects that are

busy forging viable, practical alternatives like agroecology, CSAs, farm-to-school programs, and school gardens need to reach out with the more radical projects (radical as in “go to the root”). These radical projects seek to change the rules and institutions of the food system so that the practical alternatives have a fighting chance. Together, this alliance can create the political will for reform—perhaps even transformative reforms.

**Out of the Ashes:
Rebuilding Resilience with
our Food & Farming
Community in Sonoma**
*By Caitlin Hachmyer and
Eric Holt-Giménez*

When the rain finally came, we welcomed it more than the first blooms of spring.

For over a week, the Sonoma fires had blazed uncontrolled through our forests, farmlands and cities, terrorizing our communities. Tens of thousands evacuated as thousands of structures burned. Despite the best efforts of community heroes, first responders, and thousands of firefighters from around the world, 40 people died and more than 200,000 acres of rural and urban land were transformed into a charred landscape.

Within 24 hours of the first flames, choking on the smoke, farmers, workers, distributors, and chefs organized to feed people. Farmers pulled products from their smoky fields and from winter storage, loading them onto trucks. Thousands upon thousands of pounds of food came pouring into emergency centers from small-scale farms across the county. The Farmers Guild and FEED Sonoma partnered, calling on Bay Area food networks as far as San Francisco and the South Bay

to help them bring in fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy. Restaurants repurposed their kitchens for emergency food service. Tens of thousands of meals were cooked, packed and distributed to the far reaches of the county. As the fires burned, a coalition of organizations called Another World is Possible put together a benefit and created the North Bay Just and Resilient Futures Fund raising more than \$100,000. Community members and local businesses donated thousands to the Farmers Guild for impacted farms, farmworkers, and communities. All of this was possible because of the far-flung, yet remarkably well organized, local food movement.

People in the food movement are passionate—not just about farming or a good, justly-produced meal. They sow justice as well as grow food. The extensive solidarity and collaboration in the face of the fires don't just happen because of a desire for better food. They happen because of a widely-shared belief that another world is possible.

We're still in shock over the fire's staggering damage to lives and livelihoods. Still, we pause to thank each other... in the fields, the kitchens, and

the emergency centers, for coming together. Reflecting on what just happened, we ask ourselves, "What might be possible?"

The sheer impact of the fires laid bare our social inequities as well as our environmental vulnerabilities. It also brought out our bravest, smartest, and most compassionate natures as we reached across the wine country's diverse landscape to face the inferno. Our local food system turned out to be not just a culinary treasure, but a pillar of social resilience.

The incidents of extended droughts and severe storms are increasing, along with related climate hazards like fire, floods, and massive slides. One way or another, our food—and the farmers and workers who bring it to our table—will be a key part of future mitigation and relief efforts. To build strong regional resiliency, we need a reconstruction strategy that invests in a strong local food system.

Our farm community—while thriving—lives on the economic fringes of a beautiful, enviably wealthy, agrarian region. What of the farmers who lost homes, crops, and livelihoods to the

blaze? What of the undocumented workers too frightened to go to evacuation shelters, and the farmworkers unable to regain lost income? Normalized immigration status, affordable housing, and sustainable farmland access—pressing needs before the fires—are now urgent.

As we ready our spirits for the task of reconstruction, we have an opportunity to create a more local, resilient and equitable food system, one that lowers our risk and buffers everyone from climate-related disasters—including the ones who grow our food.

Jornadas Agroecologicas: On the Agroecology Trail in Ecuador

By Eric Holt-Giménez

In 2009 Ecuador adopted food sovereignty into their constitution. It was a long, hard-fought and well organized campaign carried out by hundreds of Ecuadorian food and farming activists. The law included provisions to ban GMOs, support agroecology and small, organic, and indigenous family farms, healthy food access, local food production, and much more.



Photo by Eric Holt-Giménez

So when the Agroecology Collective of Ecuador invited me to participate in the fourth national campaign for agroecology this month, I jumped at the chance. Formed in 2008 in the lead-up to the Food Sovereignty law, the Agroecology Collective is made up of different organizations, networks, groups of farmers, and consumers that have come together to build agroecology and food sovereignty in Ecuador. Their invitation included accompanying them on a staggeringly beautiful road trip from the coast to the Andes. In Guayaquil, Riobamba, Latacunga and Quito we met with farmers, chefs, students, professors and local government officials to share experiences in agroecology and discuss supportive public policies for agroecology. We talked about strategies for movement building.

Mostly, I presented research from the Campesino a Campesino movement in Central America, fielded questions about agroecology, and shared the recently-released Spanish version of *Fertile Ground: Scaling Agroecology from the Ground Up*. I also got to listen to Ecuadorians present and debate about the state of their movement, and even visited some of the farms deep in the Andes. The main question I wondered about was “Has the food sovereignty law made a difference in Ecuador?”

The answer is yes—and no.



Cuba: Organic Revolution &
Evolution
foodfirst.org/cuba

Certainly, the food sovereignty movement is strong, and is tightly networked between farmers’ organizations, CSAs, farmers markets, and chefs in the major cities. Agroecology is widely promoted as a practice among many of Ecuador’s indigenous farmers, and is part of the curriculum in its agrarian universities. The indigenous farmers that I met—both men and women—were knowledgeable about agroecology and articulate about food sovereignty. Something that really warmed my heart was the easy familiarity everyone had with the farmer-to-farmer methodologies and was very moved when some of the farmers mentioned they had studied *Campesino a Campesino: Voices from Latin America’s Farmer to Farmer Movement for Sustainable Agriculture*.

On the other hand, the food sovereignty law has yet to be regulated for legal application. Former president Noel Correa regretted opening up the law’s discussion and formulation process to civil society, and was

steadfastly against the moratorium on GMOs. He invoked a clause in the law to permit the entry of GMO seeds for research purposes. Ecuador’s large-scale, conventional agriculture sector is powerful and extensive, taking up the best land and applying copious amounts of chemicals to vegetables and flowers for export.

Many of the people I spoke with in the food sovereignty movement questioned the wisdom of spending so much organizational time and precious resources on the passage of the law, now stuck in limbo between its formulation and regulation. Others were clearly proud of the effort, and felt it was a milestone on the road to regaining democratic control over the country’s food system. All, however, felt that it was time to use the law to grow the social movements for food sovereignty, and advance favorable public policies for smallholders and agroecology. Time will tell if their strategy proves effective.

So many ways to support Food First in 2017 & beyond:

- Food First accepts tax-deductible contributions in cash, check, credit and debit cards, and stock. You can give in person, over the phone, through the mail, or online at www.foodfirst.org/support.
- Become a monthly sustainer so we can count on your support throughout the year!
- Name Food First in your will, IRA, or life insurance policy to leave a living legacy for future generations fighting for a fair food system.
- Donate real estate, set up a pooled income fund, or create a charitable remainder trust for your investments. Check with your tax and legal advisors to determine what is best for your situation.
- Help a young activist or farmer connect with the global food sovereignty movement by supporting the Food Sovereignty Tours Scholarship Fund: www.foodfirst.org/FSTscholarship.
- Have other kinds of gifts you can share? Check out our opportunities to intern and volunteer with Food First.