11. Food and agriculture
Hunger and the political economy of the world food system

Stephen J. Scanlan

Introduction

Walking in Boston I happened upon the Irish Famine Memorial dedicated in 1998 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of an Gorta Móir—the Great Hunger. I was moved, not only by the imagery the memorial's sculptures invoked, but also by the narrative accompanying them. In particular were words included from Irish poet Lady Jane Wilde noting how “the stranger reaps our harvest, the alien owns our soil” in reference to British colonial rule at the time, which in effect starved or displaced millions of Irish people.

These words capture the essence of hunger in the world food system—not only then but today as well. They reflect the reality of a system of haves and have-nots in a world where there is hunger for some and plenty for others, where inequality, politics, and power enable sustenance at the expense of the exploited. In this essay I discuss these dynamics, laying out the relevance of food insecurity for world-systems analysis.

2007 and 2008 witnessed an explosion of discontent as a global food crisis led to protests and food riots in dozens of countries (Patel and McMichael 2009). Demonstrations erupted in Indonesia over soybean shortages, for example, and China put price controls on staple foods to quell potential violence among the poor and working classes increasingly vulnerable to hunger. The accompanying economic collapse and soaring food prices due to rising energy costs, growing demand in biofuels, and production concerns resulted in more people than ever in human history experiencing hunger at 1.02 billion in 2009, a total decreasing to 925 million people at the end of 2010.

The typical argument is that food insecurity exists primarily because of production shortfalls, natural disasters, or population pressure. Such “scarcity arguments” can be compelling, but from a critical world-systems perspective, miss the reality that food is plenteously available and that the core problem of hunger is rooted in inequality in food access associated with the socioeconomic and political dynamics of the world-system. In what follows, I elaborate on sociological insights and research regarding food insecurity and important areas of inquiry regarding the global political economy.

Food insecurity and famine: Conceptualization and theory

Although often presented by the media and relief agencies in the wake of crisis situations such as the conflict in Darfur or the earthquake in Haiti as such, food insecurity and its connection to the world-system is much more than what occurs in emergencies—it is an emergency in and of itself.
Academic and policy discussions use the multi-dimensional concept of “food insecurity” to account for hunger’s complexities. Hunger and famine have existed for millennia but food insecurity as a concept came from the 1974 World Food Conference creating the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Committee on World Food Security. Definitions have evolved since then, with one commonly cited being that of Reutlinger (1986: 1) who defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life”; food insecurity is individuals lacking this access and living without enough food in their day-to-day lives. DeRose et al (1998) further elaborate, noting that food insecurity entails food shortage (the food supply), food poverty (lacking access to food), and food deprivation (the nutritional value of available and accessible food). Multiple dimensions of food insecurity are essential to consider because too often the focus is on supply, neglecting the food poverty and deprivation resulting from power, politics, and the commoditized nature of food.

The conceptualization of food security has recently taken on additional components: stability and sovereignty. Food stability refers to the ability of individuals or nations to handle sudden shocks such as a natural disaster or war, or disruptions in cyclical events such as growing seasons or markets that impact food security (FAO 2006). An important world-system consideration to food stability is who is most vulnerable to such shocks and how have they been exacerbated by the characteristics of “the global food order.” McMichael defines food sovereignty as “the social right of a community or country to determine its own policies regarding food security (adequate supply and appropriate cuisine) and the cultural, social and ecological conditions under which it is sustained” (2004: 347). Here the emphasis is on controlling food shortage, poverty, and deprivation where individuals and entire countries are not empowered to feed themselves. The goal is maintaining the integrity of self-sustaining, local food systems—an important consideration for world-systems analysis. Taken together, the above components provide a well-rounded approach to what is typically described as hunger.

Like hunger, famine is a more familiar term than food insecurity. Famine implies widespread displacement, starvation, and death from shocks to and lack of sovereignty within the food system, be it in supply, distribution, or the nutritional value of the available food. Although complex emergencies derived from conflict or disasters are typically believed to be the root cause of famines, a critical world-systems perspective would emphasize macro-structural determinants tied to politics and inequality within the world-system.

When examining famine, one should contrast “outsider” versus “insider” perspectives. According to Devereux (1993: 18), outsider definitions of famine are preoccupied with three characteristics: a critical food shortage, starvation, and excess mortality. As Devereux (1993) notes and Ó Gráda (2009) confirms, one can look to the history of famine and see that hunger and starvation has occurred in many places where food was plenteously available, meaning that numerous famines fail to meet the assumed criteria. Therefore a different perspective and conceptualization is needed. “The contrast between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ definitions is starkest when it is recognized that victims see widespread death as the end result of a famine process, while outsiders see it as the beginning” (Devereux 1993: 18). Those looking at famine from the outside need to consider that the real experience for hundreds of millions of people around the world is the life of destitution that puts them in a vulnerable position. Famine is thus an ongoing condition tied to the constant dynamics of the political economy of the world-system, not simply an “event” that “happens”.

Famines have primarily human-induced causes as opposed to being strictly “natural” events. Devereux (2007: 10) accentuates this in a paradigm shift that moves thinking on famine from asking the question “what caused the famine?” to instead considering “who caused the famine?” thus emphasizing the centrality of politics and calling for accountability connected to human actions.
and decision-making. The capacity exists to feed the planet but malevolent intent in some cases and limited political will in others have failed to eliminate famine (Devereux 2007: 10).

The most important body of theoretical work on food insecurity has derived from the “entitlement perspective” of Sen (1981; see also Drèze and Sen 1989; Drèze et al 1995). Referencing hunger and malnutrition, Ellmann speaks to this approach noting “it is not the lack of food but the inability to purchase it that causes such catastrophes. People starve because they have no food, not because there is no food” (1993: 5). Entitlement theory therefore emphasizes that hunger stems from differential access to the capital and purchasing power to acquire available food in the world-system.

Numerous other theories exist for explaining hunger, including discussions of modernization, natural disasters, political economy, and social disruptions, among others (see Buttel 2000), but the most attention has been given to the perils of population. Population pressure and ecological concerns connect to dire Malthusian predictions regarding the dangers of unchecked population growth for human well-being. At the risk of oversimplification, Malthus and his modern-day advocates emphasize that limited resources and the inability to meet the demands of overpopulation will contribute to widespread suffering and famine. Malthusian ideas have long been at odds with Marxist interpretations of “the population problem” and its connection to hunger, which are at the roots of a more radical political economic perspective. Although population problems exist and environmental degradation is also an essential consideration, from a world-system perspective such issues are a result of capitalism (Araghi 2009; Foster 2009) and are products of power and inequality in their relationship with food insecurity. As Cereseto (1977: 34) notes, this system is driven by dependency that generates underdevelopment and poverty that actually cause population growth in poor countries as families struggle to survive displacement from the land, low wages, and limited safety nets (see Bennett 1986; George 1991). Population concerns thus matter mostly in that they exacerbate the problems of the poor who are more adversely affected by such dynamics.

Globalization and the world food order

Building on Sen, World-systems analysis emphasizes the centrality of access to food insecurity and the need to move beyond a focus on production and supply problems. In this regard the perspective looks to politics and power in determining Sen’s entitlements and Devereux’s accountability for hunger. However, world-systems analysis offers a more critical perspective on the political economy of the world-system that questions the very nature of capitalism itself and the inequality and exploitative dynamics driving it. Global inequality is ultimately what matters most—and hence the emphasis of this essay.


An essential starting point of any discussion of world-systems dynamics is inequality inherent to global capitalism, and as a symptom of that inequality, hunger is no exception. As McMichael notes, famine and related issues are a product of the historical legacy of empire and contemporary neoliberalism in which, through global capitalism, “agriculture has been converted into a branch of industry” (2009: 1; also see Magdoff et al 2000). Poverty and hunger are closely interwoven
with globalization and the presence of a world food system that dictates not only supply but also food poverty, deprivation, stability, and sovereignty. Trade in and acquisition of foodstuffs have been a part of an expanding world-system for centuries, but over the last few decades the world has become an increasingly interdependent cultural, economic, political, and social system fueled by advances in technology. Everything that is a part of our daily lives—including basic needs such as food—is dependent on borderless processes. Hunger results when food is commoditized in a global economy that has successfully increased the overall food supply with advances in agriculture, marketing, storage, and transportation but done little to guarantee access to that food for a global citizenry increasingly unable to acquire it. The roots of hunger have long been considered to stem from the inequality in the world-system and the significance of globalization should therefore not be underestimated (Cereseto 1977; George 1991; Magdoff et al 2000).

Agribusiness is at the center of globalization as the world shifted to large-scale agricultural production and increases in food imports and exports worldwide. The system is characterized by highly specialized, industrial food production, market-focused distribution, and a food surplus that seeks to keep the price of food cheap as demanded by growing urban populations that become increasingly distant from the sources of their sustenance (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Magdoff et al 2000; Patel 2007). Such dynamics have enormous consequences regarding the power one has over what is eaten, where it comes from, how it is produced, and how much it is going to cost. Hunger remains a large concern because of this.

Globalization in its modern form has created interdependency in which problems and needs in one corner of the world affect another and the global food order amplifies this. There is an unprecedented global connection to the food on our plates as it travels thousands of miles from field to table (Petrini 2006). Developing countries have moved from feeding themselves to producing and exporting cash crops for the global marketplace and becoming net food importers through purchasing food for consumption. In this system, the United States has sought to become the breadbasket to the world through geopolitics and the institutionalization of “food power” under the banner of neoliberalism and free trade (McMichael 1998). To effectively participate in the system, less industrialized countries have been pushed by development experts and international organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to pursue niche markets and comparative advantage policies that have left many countries and their citizens dependent and poor (Jarosz 2009; Madeley 2000). Structural adjustment programs intending to boost agricultural productivity and alleviate poverty, for example, “probably wrought greater havoc on peasant agriculture globally than any other force, social or natural” (Bello 2009: 31) and this is worsened with deepening debt, environmental degradation, gender inequality, immigration, and weak wages among other connections (Chattopadhyay 2000; Mukherjee 1994; Samatar 1993). This often makes the IMF and World Bank targets of protest and great discontent in less industrialized countries (Ryan 1998; Walton and Seddon 1994). Needless to say, food is central to human well-being and when people are powerless to meet their needs, desperate actions are certain to result.

The world food system is about satisfying market shares and profits (Magdoff et al 2000) more than feeding the hungry, and without sufficient entitlements to food, access remains problematic. Consider a government push for commercial prawn aquaculture in the Philippines, for example (Dunaway and Macabucac 2007). Here, the drive for export-oriented fishing ventures in the global supply-chain has made the country one of the world’s top shrimp exporters, but only at the expense of subsistence fishing households, who suffer from increased food insecurity, the destruction of local livelihoods, the loss of access to ecological resources, and the loss of social services connected to structural adjustment agreements with the policy. The end result was a development agenda, which among other impacts, “privileged a small elite of export-oriented
capitalists … (and) left fishing households with fewer survival options than they had before …” such outward-focused policies (Dunaway and Macabuac 2007: 324).

Building on this and turning to players in the global food order, the world’s powerful agribusiness multinational corporations (MNCs) demand scrutiny. MNCs dominate the global food system in which “agribusiness imperialism is central to the coercive use of institutional mechanisms to monopolize control of world agriculture and flows of food” (McMichael 1998: 208; also see Patel 2007). Contributing to hunger, global agribusiness forms enormous conglomerates that operate at every level of the food commodity chain, establishing a presence in all corners of the world and capitalizing on humanity’s need of food for survival. Although claiming themselves to be good corporate citizens as when Archer Daniels Midland touts itself as “the supermarket to the world,” agribusiness practices can have adverse effects on hunger with links to land access, food sovereignty, biodiversity, loss and sustainability.

Often with cooperation from the state, global agribusiness practices hearken to colonialism and foreign dominance. Consider “land grabs” (Spieldoch and Murphy 2009; Zoomers 2010), for example, which shift productive land from local to global use with little benefit to the local citizenry dependent on that land. Such practices are touted as “win-win” situations by foreign governments and businesses that purchase or lease land for export agricultural production and other development purposes, claiming to introduce much-needed revenue into poor countries. Critics argue, however, that this is another form of exploitation creating dependency with food production parallel to other resource extraction practices in the global economy (Wilk 2004). There is also the practice of bioprospecting—or “biopiracy” as called by its critics—and its impact on indigenous communities. Although typically associated with global pharmaceutical corporations and their search for cures for disease, there are hunger implications as agribusiness seeks control over and patents on the natural world through biotechnology (Mendieta 2006; Shiva 2000) or privatization and control over natural resources such as water (Barlow 2003; Shiva 2002).

Research has shown the detrimental effects of foreign investment on food security (Barkin 1982; Wimberly 1991; Wimberly and Bello 1992), while agribusiness sees itself as doing no harm. From a world-system perspective, then, the power of MNCs reflects a new form of imperialism in which exploitation and dominance govern who has access to the land, its products, and the benefits and basic needs that can be derived from it—all of which has implications for food insecurity.

The power of global agribusiness is exercised in the “proletarianization” of the agricultural labor force and its persistent poverty. The small landholder or peasant farmer most dependent on the land often has to work for wages in plantation agriculture or is displaced from the land altogether and forced to migrate to urban slums in search of alternative means for survival (Bello 2009). Those producing the world’s food ironically go hungry (Barkin 1982; McMichael 2004) from their lack of purchasing power. Even the neoliberal World Bank agrees (2007: 135–37) acknowledging poverty and food insecurity problems from agribusiness concentration. The World Bank calls for greater competition and recognizes the significance of small- and medium-sized farms for development and food security, reinforcing the importance of agriculture not just for subsistence but sale in small-scale markets. Recognition of such issues is encouraging, but the system itself needs greater repair if empowerment from below will be possible. The “supermarket revolution” in which the global citizenry relies on large-scale operations to obtain their food can be devastating—particularly when the poor are shut out by rising global food prices and limited food sovereignty (Patel 2007).

Emphasizing marketing and scientific solutions to increasing the global supply, agribusiness has sought to address hunger by producing, packing, shipping, and selling food throughout the world. This does nothing for food poverty or deprivation, however, in that the global citizenry is not...
guaranteed access to expanding markets, and food stability and sovereignty become increasingly threatened. Global processes have local consequences and it is in understanding the vulnerabilities of these dynamics that a need to engage global versus local food systems more fully through a world-systems lens becomes evident (Lacy 2000).

Conclusions

World-systems research has offered much toward understanding the dynamics and complexities of the political economy of the world food system. Taking a critical perspective on global capitalism, conflict, power, environmental considerations, globalization, politics, and poverty and inequality have hunger consequences. Offering a much-needed alternative perspective to that typically espoused by agencies such as the FAO and the USDA (US Department of Agriculture) let alone the neoliberal leanings of academic research in development economics, world-systems ideas have emphasized stratification that generates food poverty and deprivation, while threatening food stability for those most vulnerable to shocks and the food sovereignty of the global citizenry.

The processes creating hunger are as political as they are economic. Additional issues connecting powerful and powerless in the world food system include the politics of food aid and food subsidies. Research often shows that the assistance countries receive has little to do with actual food insecurity needs and more to do with global geopolitics (George 1991). Murphy and McAfee (2005), for example, highlight the problems with the international food aid regime, noting that the primary winners of US food aid policy are not citizens in hungry countries desperate for survival but global agribusiness producing the food surplus. Critics further argue that aid creates a system of dependency on food imports in developing countries that historically had sustainable, self-sufficient food systems (Lappé et al 1998). Thus, as with marketing food globally, food assistance disrupts local markets and organizations such as Oxfam and others have argued that the best type of aid is depoliticized, direct cash payments that support livelihoods through an injection of much-needed money that will circulate locally. Similarly problematic for the world’s poor and their ability to survive in the global food economy are government subsidies to agribusiness for the production of export crops in the developed world (Weis 2007). Tens of billions of dollars is given to farmers annually by governments in the European Union and the United States to produce food, keep food prices cheap, and agribusiness coffers flowing. Subsidies are an essential ingredient for corporate dominance of the world food system, indicative of a vastly uneven playing field that puts the world’s poorest nations relying most on agriculture at a vast disadvantage—such state intervention on behalf of agribusiness is a far cry from the free trade mantra of the World Trade Organization. Analyzing the role of agribusiness in these and other issues is essential to understanding corporate power and influence in food systems and on agencies such as the USDA that develops programs and policy and ultimately what politics means for hunger (Nestle 2007).

There is much research to be done regarding hunger in the world-system. World-systems analysis reveals the interconnectedness and globalized nature of numerous important issues examined from this perspective. Food insecurity is no exception and hunger is an excellent example of how “human needs are shaped by human history” (Ellmann 1993: 5). Future research on food insecurity must foster these connections and seek to understand hunger in a way that is enlightened by and contributes to the larger body of work from political economy of the world-system scholars.

The world food system remains an important structural condition related to hunger, and analysis is needed regarding the institutions and organizations wielding power within. One area of particular importance is the politics of the global food aid regime and connections to poverty and power noted above. In addition, discussion with regard to environment and society and the
hunger considerations that are central to these dynamics is increasingly important. Although hunger is not always directly discussed as an environmental issue, food availability starts with the land and must be produced using sustainable means. Next, with regard to the political economy of contention, there is a great need for new and ongoing research. This essay has not done justice to the significance of such concerns and research must build on the links between hunger and conflict in the world-system. Until the world finds a more peaceful means to resolve its disputes, militarization and war will remain a root cause of food insecurity. At the same time we must consider conflict and instability as a consequence of hunger and the revolutionary potential that poverty and want can generate. Be it a small-scale food riot or much larger social upheaval, the world-system roots to these are prevalent and in need of new analysis (see Natsios and Doley 2009; Patel and McMichael 2009). Similarly, food movements in a variety of forms such as the back to the land, food justice, food sovereignty, locavore, slow foods, and sustainable agriculture movements that seek “food security from below” (Wekerle 2004) are ripe with potential. Finally, these questions ultimately come down to democracy, human rights, and social justice in the global political economy (Kent 2005). Until food security is not only guaranteed but upheld as a human right as claimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the global food regime will continue to starve hundreds of millions throughout the planet (George 1986).

To conclude, hunger has been, is presently, and will remain important for world-systems analysis. Using the theoretical expertise and range of methodological skills incorporated by those doing research from this perspective, the causes and consequences of food insecurity in all of its forms can be better understood and research can ultimately contribute to much-needed solutions that lead to the goal of “a world without hunger” long-desired by policymakers and practitioners on the frontlines.

References

Hunger and the world food system


Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 17:02 14 Sep 2023; For: 9780203863428, chapter11_2, 10.4324/9780203863428.ch11_2

Stephen J. Scanlan