

Food Is Power and the Powerful Are Poisoning Us

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By Chris Hedges

Our most potent political weapon is food. If we take back our agriculture, if we buy and raise produce locally, we can begin to break the grip of corporations that control a food system as fragile, unsafe and destined for collapse as our financial system. If we continue to allow corporations to determine what we eat, as well as how food is harvested and distributed, then we will become captive to rising prices and shortages and increasingly dependent on cheap, mass-produced food filled with sugar and fat. Food, along with energy, will be the most pressing issue of our age. And if we do not build alternative food networks soon, the social and political ramifications of shortages and hunger will be devastating.

The effects of climate change, especially with widespread droughts in Australia, Africa, California and the Midwest, coupled with the rising cost of fossil fuels, have already blighted the environments of millions. The poor can often no longer afford a balanced diet. Global food prices increased an average of 43 percent since 2007, according to the International Monetary Fund. These increases have been horrific for the approximately 1 billion people—one-sixth of the world's population—who subsist on less than \$1 per day. And 162 million of these people survive on less than 50 cents per day. The global poor spend as much as 60 percent of their income on food, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute.

There have been food riots in many parts of the world, including Austria, Hungary, Mexico, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Yemen, Mauritania, Senegal and Uzbekistan. Russia and Pakistan have introduced food rationing. Pakistani troops guard imported wheat. India has banned the export of rice, except for high-end basmati. And the shortages and price increases are being felt in the industrialized world as we continue to shed hundreds of thousands of jobs and food prices climb. There are 33.2 million Americans, or one in nine, who depend on food stamps. And in 20 states as many as one in eight are on the food stamp program, according to the Food Research Center. The average monthly benefit was \$113.87 per person, leaving many, even with government assistance, without adequate food. The USDA says 36.2 million Americans, or 11 percent of households, struggle to get enough food, and one-third of them have to sometimes skip or cut back on meals. Congress allocated some \$54 billion for food stamps this fiscal year, up from \$39 billion last year. In the new fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, costs will be \$60 billion, according to estimates.

Food shortages have been tinder for social upheaval throughout history. But this time around, because we have lost the skills to feed and clothe ourselves, it will be much harder for most of us to become self-sustaining. The large agro-businesses have largely wiped out small farmers. They have poisoned our soil with pesticides and contaminated animals in filthy and overcrowded stockyards with high doses of antibiotics and steroids. They have pumped nutrients and phosphorus into water systems, causing algae bloom and fish die-off in our rivers and streams. Crop yields, under the onslaught of changing weather patterns and chemical pollution, are declining in the Northeast, where a blight has nearly wiped out the tomato crop. The draconian Food Modernization Safety Act, another gift from our governing elite to corporations, means small farms will only continue to dwindle in number. Sites such as La Via Campesina do a good job of tracking these disturbing global trends.

“The entire economy built around food is unsafe and unethical,” activist Henry Harris of the Food Security

Roundtable told me. The group builds distribution systems between independent farmers and city residents.

“Food is the greatest place for communities to start taking back power,” he said. “The national food system is collapsing by degrees. More than 50 percent of what we eat comes from the Central Valley of California. What happens when gasoline becomes \$5 a gallon or drought sweeps across the cropland? The monolithic system of food production is highly unstable. It has to be replaced very soon with small, diverse sources that provide greater food security.”

Cornell University recently did a study to determine whether New York state could feed itself. The research is described in two articles published in 2006 and 2008 by the journal *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*. If all agricultural land were in use, and food distribution were optimized to minimize the total distance that food travels, New York state could, the researchers found, have 34 percent of its food needs met from within its boundaries. This is not encouraging news to those who live in New York City. New York once relied on New Jersey, still known as the Garden State, instead of having food shipped from across the country. But New Jersey farms have largely given way to soulless housing developments. Farming communities upstate, their downtowns boarded up and desolate, have been gutted by industrial farming.

The ties most Americans had to rural communities during the Great Depression kept many alive. A barter economy replaced the formal economy. Families could grow food or had relatives to feed them. But in a world where we do not know where our food comes from, or how to produce it, we have become vulnerable. And many will be forced, as food prices continue to rise, to shift to a diet of cheap, fatty, mass-produced foods, already a staple of the nation's poor. Junk food, a major factor in obesity, diabetes and heart disease, is often the only food those in the inner city can buy because supermarkets and nutritious food are geographically and financially beyond reach. As the economy continues to deteriorate, the middle class will soon join them.

“It is clear to anyone who looks carefully at any crowd that we are wasting our bodies exactly as we are wasting our land,” Wendell Berry observed in “The Unsettling of America.” “Our bodies are fat, weak, joyless, sickly, ugly, the virtual prey of the manufacturers of medicine and cosmetics. Our bodies have become marginal; they are growing useless like our ‘marginal land’ because we have less and less use for them. After the games and idle flourishes of modern youth, we use them only as shipping cartons to transport our brains and our few employable muscles back and forth to work.”

Berry, who lives on a farm in Kentucky where his family has farmed for generations, argues that local farming is fundamental to sustaining communities. Industrial farming, he says, has estranged us from the land. It has rendered us powerless to provide for ourselves. It has left us complicit in the corporate destruction of the ecosystem. Its moral cost, Berry argues, has been as devastating as its physical cost.

“The people will eat what the corporations decide for them to eat,” writes Berry. “They will be detached and remote from the sources of their life, joined to them only by corporate tolerance. They will have become consumers purely—consumptive machines—which is to say, the slaves of producers. What ... model farms very powerfully suggest, then, is that the concept of total control may be impossible to confine within the boundaries of the specialist enterprise—that it is impossible to mechanize production without mechanizing consumption, impossible to make machines of soil, plants, and animals without making machines also of people.”

The nascent effort by communities to reclaim local food production is the first step toward reclaiming lives severed and fragmented by corporate culture. It is more than a return to local food production. It is a return to community. It brings us back to the values that sustain community. It is a return to the recognition of the fragility, interconnectedness and sacredness of all living systems and our dependence on each other. It turns back to an ethic that can save us.

“[The commercial] revolution ... ,” writes Berry, “did not stop with the subjugation of the Indians, but went

on to impose substantially the same catastrophe upon the small farms and the farm communities, upon the shops of small local tradesmen of all sorts, upon the workshops of independent craftsmen, and upon the households of citizens. It is a revolution that is still going on. The economy is still substantially that of the fur trade, still based on the same general kinds of commercial items: technology, weapons, ornaments, novelties, and drugs. The one great difference is that by now the revolution has deprived the mass of consumers of any independent access to the staples of life: clothing, shelter, food, even water. Air remains the only necessity that the average user can still get for himself, and the revolution has imposed a heavy tax on that by way of pollution. Commercial conquest is far more thorough and final than military defeat.

“The inevitable result of such an economy,” Berry adds, “is that no farm or any other usable property can safely be regarded by anyone as a home, no home is ultimately worthy of our loyalty, nothing is ultimately worth doing, and no place or task or person is worth a lifetime’s devotion. ‘Waste,’ in such an economy, must eventually include several categories of humans—the unborn, the old, ‘disinvested’ farmers, the unemployed, the ‘unemployable.’ Indeed, once our homeland, our source, is regarded as a resource, we are all sliding downward toward the ash heap or the dump.”



AP / Rick Rycroft

A waist-eye view of one problem: Poor people—and that’s more of us every day—can’t shop at Whole Foods (although no one can, now). Instead they often turn to less nutritious and more dangerous alternatives, such as fast food.

