

Book Review

Let them grow, make and eat – what?

'Let them eat cake' is the famous retort attributed to the hapless Queen Marie Antoinette, alleged to have ignited the fuse culminating in the explosion that replaced the whole French political order. In Boris Pasternak's magisterial account of the Russian Revolution, *Dr Zhivago*, it is the scene of the immiserated urban masses peering into the restaurant where the elite are wining and dining, that most vividly captures the gross injustice of Czarist Russia.

It should not be surprising that the production and provision of food – or, more accurately, the fear of hunger – should have played such a central role in the consciousness of the French and Russian élites and masses in those times. In his new book⁽¹⁾, Tim Lang of City University in London and his co-authors David Barling and Martin Caraher remind us that the French suffered over 150 serious famines between 1000 and 1900 CE, an average of one every six years, and that Britain experienced ninety-five famines before 1500. Indeed, it has been argued by other writers that fear of hunger has been one of the key drivers of history, either as the mother of innovation and imperialism, or else as the harbinger of the demise of empires and the break-up of societies⁽²⁾.

The three phases of food policies and actions

One of the perceived successes of modern capitalism has been the astonishing expansion in agricultural production. This has resulted in more than enough food on average for everybody on Earth. The authors of the book reviewed here describe how this has been achieved through three phases of modern food policies and actions. The first, in the middle of the last century, was shaped by the failures of the market during the Great Depression and the success of the state to mobilise production capacity during World War II. This phase saw the development of agriculture policies that substantially expanded state agricultural investments and market intervention. The authors also say that reliance upon state support for agricultural production was shaken in the 1970s by the famines in Bangladesh and Sudan and the oil crises. Both sets of events highlighted the limits of a sole focus on agricultural production and led to the second phase, the rise of a food policy discourse that emphasised other parts of the food supply chain, in particular processors and retailers. But still the focus was overwhelmingly on improving the capacity of the state to manage such processes.

The third phase has followed a general demise of the belief in the welfare state and a swing towards 'market'-oriented reforms. It has created a global food system dominated by a small number of very big multinational corporations. Thus, ten agri-chemical companies have 84% of the global pesticide market; ten food companies have 24% of the global food processing market; and ten retailers have 24% of the global food retail market. In the US and UK markets such concentrations of power are even more marked.

The economies of scale achieved by such a concentration, along with technical advances, have resulted in significant increases in food production and efficiency gains in the distribution chain. However, access to quality, safe and nutritious food has not been achieved in many parts of the world. In 2008 alone, around thirty-seven countries experienced food riots. Agricultural subsidies are a major drain on the finances of leading economies. The environmental costs of modern agriculture are becoming more visible. Poor food safety has seriously damaged the trading credibility of countries such as China. Everywhere, the financial and human costs of malnutrition of all types are mounting. New forms of imperialism have emerged, as businesses from wealthier countries with limited agricultural potential start to buy land in poorer countries. It is no wonder that food policy discussions are now once again close to the top of the agenda both at global and national level.

New systems needed for this century

It is in this context that the authors set themselves the ambitious task of drawing together a wide range of literature, in order to enable the reader to gain a better understanding of international food policy. They are also concerned to promote food policies and actions that integrate health, environment and society. In nine well-researched chapters (each has an average of 150 references) they take us on a tour of the origins of modern policy discourses and continuing controversies concerning food and nutrition.

Their main argument is that the conventional focus on increasing agricultural production, through improved scientific techniques, or better planning of inputs/market controls, or by deregulation, is outdated. The growing concerns around malnutrition, food safety, the environment and protection of food cultures require a broader

'ecological public health'. Food policy, they say, must now incorporate issues such as social justice, ecology, nutrition, culture and governance. Whole chapters discuss such topics in the context of food policy. Much of this material is very valuable, and it is the first time that such diverse but connected topics have been brought together in one book.

However, I did finish the book feeling rather overwhelmed with all the different complexities, and with no real sense of how to prioritise or organise them. Inclusion of such a diversity of topics has crowded out, or at least underplayed, the continuing importance of agricultural production itself. After all, three-quarters of the world's poor in lower-income countries live in rural areas; agriculture is still the major source of livelihood for the majority of them; and the majority of undernourished mothers and children are found in these populations. Agriculture policies and programmes in both the North and South remain critical, and not only for rural populations. The recent food price rises have also hurt the urban poor. It would have been helpful had the authors provided a set of tools to examine the issues shaping agricultural production, such as trade rules, subsidies and the rise of bio-fuels.

Public health nutrition practitioners living and work in the South are often frustrated by the mismatch between official national policies and actual implementation of programmes. The authors correctly remind us of the general literature in the policy analysis arena that focuses on the gaps between policy and implementation. But rather disappointingly they do not provide detailed case studies of how this has played out in the food and nutrition field. For example, there is a growing literature highlighting how global and national political will to

tackle malnutrition is being dissipated by divergent institutional interests and disagreements among lower-level policy makers^(3,4).

If we are to make real, sustained progress in securing fairer access to safe nutritious food produced and distributed in a sustainable manner, we require practitioners who have a broad understanding of the multiple factors involved. Tim Lang and his colleagues have written a valuable book that is essential reading for students and practitioners concerned with food policy. The next step is to convert this knowledge into the strategic capacity and competencies required to shape food policies and systems for the rest of the 21st century.

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Reference

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