

Environment, Politics and Development Working Paper Series

Department of Geography, King's College London

Year 2013

Paper # 60

**The Ecologies of Food Power: An Introduction to the
*Environment and Food Book Symposium***

Michael K. Goodman

Department of Geography, King's College London

©2013 by the Author(s)

This paper is posted at King's College London, Department of Geography at
<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/geography/research/epd/workingpapers.aspx>

The Ecologies of Food Power: An Introduction to the *Environment and Food Book Symposium*¹

Michael K. Goodman
Department of Geography
King's College London

As I sit down to write this, the world has just passed a profound and potentially grim milestone. On (or about) the 9th of May, 2013, the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere tipped over 400 parts per million (ppm) suggesting that the pathway to a climate changed world is not only accelerating but doing so in ways that are surprising the majority of climate scientists (Bawden, 2013). The supreme irony of this is that, as part of the continuing effort to deliver ever greater quantities of greenhouse gas-rich cheap protein sources, the political ground is being sown in the UK for the growth of US-styled 'mega' livestock and fish farms (Milmo and Levitt, 2013). Meanwhile parallel news reports spoke of how UK supermarkets will begin to source chicken fed with GM feeds at the behest of 'food cartels and GM food giants' (Dorward, 2013) and, in the US, a unanimous Supreme Court decision strengthened corporate control over seed patents to the benefit of the likes of Monsanto (Goldenberg, 2013). At the same time all this was going on, other more ostensibly quotidian stories were being told about how, in Britain, there has not only been a rise in austerity-fuelled hunger (Carr, 2013), but that scientific evidence reveals growing links amongst middle-age obesity, ill-health and dementia (McKie, 2013). To top it all off, the UN is now recommending 'insect farming' as a way to not only reduce the environmental impacts of farming, but also feed growing global populations (Vidal, 2013). What all of these seemingly unrelated reports suggest is that not only is there still quite a bit going on in the 'worlds of food' (Morgan, et al 2006)—indeed, the above events and reports happened within two

¹ These commentaries come from an 'author meets critics' book panel at the Association of American Geographers meeting in New York, 2012; many thanks to the panel, all of whom appear in this book symposium, the audience for a excellent discussion and, finally, Henry Buller for facilitating the publication of the symposium.

weeks of each other yet amazingly exclude any mention of the ongoing 'horsemeat' controversy (Lawrence, 2013)—but that this is a particularly portentous time for scholars to draw clear conceptual and empirical lines amongst ecological systems, food provisioning and eating in our accounts of these food worlds.

Drawing these connective lines fully and rigorously is *exactly* what Colin Sage does throughout his excellent volume *Environment and Food* (2012) right from his opening declaration that 'eating is an ecological act'. This statement is explored, analysed and illustrated in numerous ways throughout the book: from an authoritative descriptive analysis of the historical development of the global agri-food system, to the agro-ecological and wider environmental implications of food provisioning and shifting patterns of food consumption, to the need to re-programme social, political and environmental relationships for more sustainable food. In this, the socio-ecological and bodily implications of these contemporary ecologies of eating are held up in sharp relief against the background of the almost eye-wateringly complex food system whose incessantly caustic waves continue to crash on environments, societies and bodies alike. As highlighted in the disparate food-related news events listed above, climate change, hunger, large-scale industrial protein production, corporate food governance, obesity and alternative food provisioning—amongst other things in the context of food's ecological impacts—are all explored and, most importantly, coherently joined-up across the pages of *Environment and Food*.

Indeed, this book is no mere reprise or updating of the ground-breaking work of the likes of Magdoff et al (2000), Pimentel and Pimentel (2008), Goodman and Redclift (1991), Cook (2006), Tudge (2003), Lang and Heasman (2004), and Nestle (2002) and now so many others (e.g. Pollan, Schlosser, Bittman)—although many in this cast of characters and much their work informs the volume. Instead, analysis and debates are pulled, pushed and chewed over in ways that highlight the unique and forward-thinking contributions of the

book. Specifically, Sage's attention to what he calls 'final foods and their consequences'—in an exploration of food processing, distribution, retailing and waste—comes in for a comprehensive treatment in a dedicated chapter on the subject; much of this has yet to come in for any thorough-going scholarly treatment, although, in the UK, the much more narrow topic of food waste does seem to be on the NGO agenda (*This is Rubbish*, 2013) at the same time it drops off that of the Coalition Government (*Measure*, 2013). Moreover, his marrying of ecological concerns to food security, food sovereignty and what he, I think, in a more politically and practically useful term, calls 'nutritional security' urges us to think about the ways that food justice is also fundamentally about environmental justice, especially in a climate changed world. Here the *ecological* consequences of being 'stuffed and starved' (Patel, 2007) takes on novel significance in the realms of food provisioning. Further, being a geographer, Sage makes no bones about arguing that place and spatial difference—seen here in ecological and socio-economic terms—matter not only when conceptualising about and planning for nutritional security but also in the context of sustainable food systems. Place does and will matter to the provisioning and eating of food, whether that be in the different global experiences of climate change or the ways that different and more sustainable food systems, possibly brought into being through Sage's concept of 'food citizenship', might emerge.

For me, this book is about power: it is about the power of corporate capital to control the food system and wreak havoc on ecosystems and bodies through industrial food systems, the 'productionist' food paradigm and the political economic power it wields to gain favourable global trading regimes. It is about an explicit critique of this power but also a parallel implied critique in the hope-filled alternatives Sage proposes to redirect power over food back to societies, communities and, indeed the very bodies involved in the production and consumption of food. What else does food sovereignty, nutritional security and food

citizenship imply, except a re-jigging of power in the food system that might lead us to, dare I say it, a food democracy that sees the provisioning of and access to healthy food for all? Here then is something else *Environment and Food* is about: in essence, it is a requiem for so-called ‘cheap food’ and the inequalities of power and dastardly socio-ecological affects that these systems, networks and policies have wreaked on our worlds of food. Same too, and most powerfully, it is a requiem for the ‘food denialists’—clearly the first cousins of climate denialists—who continue to tell us that there is no alternative to the productionist paradigm and, indeed, it should instead be deepened and broadened. Business as usual is now only really an option for corporate capital but certainly no longer the case for the starving and obese millions across the globe and the degraded agricultural landscapes that simply await greater pressure under a changed and changing climate.

Given the portentous nature of *Environment and Food*, it says something significant that this book serves as the inspiration and focus for the first ever book symposium to grace the pages of *Sociologia Ruralis*. To facilitate debate and further engagement, four leading food and environment scholars have contributed short commentaries on key aspects of the volume. Mike Carolan takes up critical questions over food needs, consumption and choice, while Anna Lopez-Carr and David Lopez-Carr work to introduce issues related to population, health and labour. Both Lucy Jarosz and Phil McMichael engage the book through discussions of food security and sovereignty but from different angles: Jarosz explores the ways that these concepts have been problematically operationalised in recent FAO reports and argues for a re-claiming of what she sees as a more potent political ecology approach to food systems study. McMichael, on the other hand, pulls apart Sage’s analysis of food security and sovereignty in detail in efforts to engage these concepts further in what he calls ‘an age of rising social and environmental uncertainty’. Finally, Sage has worked up a response to many of the points raised by the commentators and has done this in a way that

works to take these points forward as well as suggest wider scholarly engagements with the environmental consequences of the contemporary food system. It is my hope that with the publication of *Environment and Food* and the subsequent commentaries here, our broader work as a community of scholars might look to not only act as critique in the worlds of food—in a sense, speaking truth to the ecologies of food power—but also might open up even more space for those actually existing alternatives that build and re-build healthy people, societies and ecosystems as much as they do feed people.

References

- Bawden, T. (2013) Carbon dioxide in atmosphere at highest level for 5 million years, *The Independent*, Available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/carbon-dioxide-in-atmosphere-at-highest-level-for-5-million-years-8611673.html>
- Carr, M. (2013) Hunger rises in great britain, *Inter Press Service*, Available: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/05/hunger-rises-in-great-britain/>
- Cook, D. (2006) *Diet for a dead planet* (New York: The New Press).
- Doward, J. (2013) M&s, co-op and sainsbury's say chickens will be fed on GM soya, *The Guardian*, Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/may/11/supermarkets-chickens-gm-soya>
- Earth Day Network. (2013) The face of climate change, Available: <http://www.earthday.org/faceofclimate/>
- Goldenberg, S. (2013) Us supreme court rules for monsanto in indiana farmer's gm seeds case, *The Guardian*, Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/may/13/supreme-court-monsanto-indiana-soybean-seeds>
- Goodman, D. & Redclift, M. (1991) *Refashioning nature: Food, ecology, and culture* (London: Routledge).
- Lang, T. & Heasman, M. (2004) *Food wars: The global battle for the mouths, minds, and markets* (London: Earthscan).
- Lawrence, F. (2013) Horsemeat scandal: Timeline, *The Guardian*, Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/may/10/horsemeat-scandal-timeline-investigation>
- Magdoff, F., Foster, J. & Buttel, F. (2000) *Hungry for profit: The agribusiness threat to farmers, food and the environment* (New York: Monthly Review Press).
- McDonnell, T. & West, J. (2013) We just passed the climate's "grim milestone", *Climate Desk*, Available: <http://climatedesk.org/2013/05/we-just-passed-the-climates-grim-milestone/>
- McKie, R. (2013) Middle-age obesity 'will lead to a surge in dementia cases', *The Observer*, Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/may/12/obesity-dementia-alzheimers-disease>
- Mesure, S. (2013) Food-waste agency faces further cuts to its funding, *The Independent*, Available: <http://www.thisisrubbish.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Counting-What-Matters.pdf>

- Milmo, C. & Levitt, T. (2013) Campaigners warn against rise of the 'mega-farms': Could massive pig, fish and dairy units harm the environment?, *The Independent*, Available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/campaigners-warn-against-rise-of-the-megafarms-could-massive-pig-fish-and-dairy-units-harm-the-environment-8612471.html>
- Morgan, K., Marsden, T. & Murdoch, J. (2006) *Worlds of food: Place, power, and provenance in the food chain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Nestle, M. (2002) *Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health* (Berkeley: University of California).
- Patel, R. (2007) *Stuffed and starved: From farm to fork, the hidden battle for the world food system* (London: Portobello Books).
- Pimentel, D. & Pimentel, M. (2008) *Food, energy and society (3rd edition)* (Boca Raton: CRC Press).
- Sage, C. (2012) *Environment and food* (London: Routledge).
- This is Rubbish. (2013) Countign what matters: Industry food waste audit proposal, Available: <http://www.thisisrubbish.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Counting-What-Matters.pdf>
- Vidal, J. (2013) Breed insects to improve human food security: Un report, *The Guardian*, Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/may/13/breed-insects-improve-human-food-security-un>