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Robert Biel: Sustainable Food Systems: The role of the city
UCL Press, London, 2016, 145pp, ISBN 978-1-911307-08-2

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This is an impressive book, weaving a convincing narrative about the potential future food system that could overcome many of the tensions in today's food regime. Whilst a 'short' book, it covers a remarkable range of topics, drawing on physics, biology, history, anthropology and geography, all underpinned by a Marxist philosophy. This is a mostly theoretical book, drawing on a wide and diverse secondary literature, punctuated with a number of empirical examples.

This book offers arguments and evidence for a vision for a transformed future food system that embraces sustainability and nature, rather than seeking to control and manage nature. I found it particularly reassuring as Biel focuses on the social and material aspects of food that connect nature-culture, and deftly suggests how this future vision might be made real. However, for some, this will be uncomfortable reading, easily dismissed using the (dominant, neoliberal) discourses and devices Biel discusses. Whilst presented as a discussion of the role of the city in sustainable food systems, the sustainable food system envisaged applies equally well to non-urban areas, and it is only in the later chapters that the urban is explicitly addressed. The book builds on a wider discourse that the city is the right scale for experimentation in low carbon and sustainability initiatives. Biel argues that the city can be an ideal scale for food experimentation, and that given the industrialisation of rural areas, the city can perhaps be a vestige of biodiversity (I feel that this needs further consideration: *certain* forms of biodiversity might flourish while others do not if current transport systems do not also experience similar transformations to the food system advocated here).

The book provides many interesting opportunities for reflection on the mainstream neoliberal food system, and reminds us that the global food system only works because it externalises its high (and unsustainable) environmental costs. Key areas for focus for a more sustainable food system include paying attention to soils, as is increasingly being recognised by researchers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, as well as community cooperation, and perhaps most importantly, a vision for how this might be achieved. In this book, Biel elegantly employs theories and concepts from a range of disciplines to articulate an inspiring vision of how the food and farming paradigm might be transformed, and relates this to the urban scale. However, in places there is a tendency to overly reify traditional and indigenous approaches, which many may find problematic – these approaches also need to be subject to critique and debate, as Biel recognises in some places. Biel also has a tendency to equate modernist with bad (food), and tradition with good (food). Food sovereignty is highlighted as a potential solution for some of the contemporary food system problems, but again food sovereignty could have been unpacked further (see Sonnino et al., 2016). Further, on occasions, it felt as though regular citizens were being judged for their existing practices, without recognising the wider pressures that coerce them in certain practices and behaviours. The collaborative tone of the book is encouraging, but at times seemed (to me) to be unrealistic (and I'm not a proponent of the globalised food system!). For instance, on p. 39 there is a section putting forth the idea that societies can work together in the face of conflict and disaster; while this can and does happen on the small-scale, how can this be extrapolated to the global level in face of challenges like climate change? Given that Carter and Clements (2015: 210) find that only 10% of the UK population feel that the environment is an important issue that political parties should focus on, this needs further reflection. The book more widely calls for the dispossessed to take action, but there are significant

challenges and barriers facing the 'dispossessed,' following 10 years of austerity programmes in many countries, political shifts to the right, combined with growing corporate power.

In discussing how negative feedbacks might mitigate climate change (p.68), Biel suggests "a food productivity gain in temperate regions might outweigh a loss (to drought, for example) at the tropics." To me, this glosses over some of the ideas of fairness and equity that are central to his argument (this might, for example, result in distributional issues as wealthier Northern countries benefit at the expense of already disadvantaged countries in the Global South), as well as assuming a degree of substitutability in foods and environments.

Biel critiques ideas that are often seen as being the panacea for a food system that can both adapt to, and mitigate against, climate change. For example, Transitions Towns are commended but the dangers of co-optation by a capitalist system need to be recognised, Biel argues, before their transformative potential can be fully realised. Further, Biel critiques the colonial approaches adopted by many seed-saving initiatives (p. 63).

I especially liked the discussion of the complexity of soils, and that soils are temporally and spatially variable – it's never 'just' soil, despite the claims by some, e.g. advocates of systems such as aquaponics. Later, Biel notes that soils hold significant quantities of carbon and so are important in storing carbon, but that it's not a simple quantitative equation, rather a qualitative one: the key is not how *much* we grow, but *how* we grow (p. 69) that affects soils and society.

There are some neat formulations of complex ideas that I have used in teaching, for instance the paradox of capitalism where this history is one of constant innovation but that each round of innovation reproduces and further embeds the previous iteration (the opposite of creative destruction?). He sees genetically modified organisms and sustainable intensification as the latest in a line of similar concepts that do not challenge the regime.

This book is likely to appeal to food scholars, especially those from a political ecology background, and primarily for postgraduate students and faculty. I feel that the book is designed to be read in its entirety, rather than dipped into at various points, and is, as such, less likely to appeal to undergraduates. It is certainly a thought-provoking book, and has given me ideas to consider further.

References

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- Sonnino, R., T. Marsden, and A. Moragues-Faus., 2016. "Relationalities and convergences in food security narratives: Towards a place-based approach." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41: 477-489.

