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A Critique of the Global Food System Concerning Justice and Ethics

by

Danielle Jordan Zickafoose

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Honors Capstone Director: Dr. Andrée Reeves Associate Professor of Political Science

Danielle Zickafoose 4/30/19

Student

Date

Andrée Q. Reeves 4/30/19

Director

Date

[Signature] 5-1-19

Department Chair

Date

[Signature] 5/8/19

Honors College Dean

Date



Honors College
Frank Franz Hall
+1 (256) 824-6450 (voice)
+1 (256) 824-7339 (fax)
honors@uah.edu

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Danielle Zickatoose
Student Name (printed)

Danielle Zickatoose
Student Signature

4/30/19
Date

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Danielle Jordan Zickafoose

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Abstract

The global food system is a capitalist system that was designed by capitalists in order to further their profit seeking agenda. The global food system is often considered a success due to the number of people that receive food through it. This success has been achieved though the exploitation of women and people of color. This mistreatment and exploitation of certain groups cannot be allowed to continue. All nations around the world have an ethical duty to restructure the global food system and ensure that all people are food secure and capable of subsisting.

Introduction

The Global Food System is a successful means of feeding the world. This success has been made possible by the exploitation of minorities and less affluent people living in the world. Regardless of this exploitation many researchers still believe the global food system is ethical due to the fact that it does manage to feed so many people around the world. Feeding the world is vitally important. I would argue it is equally important to ensure that people have proper access to healthy foods and that food workers have safe and fair working conditions.

Terminology

There are some necessary terms to define for this paper. First, the concept that refers to ensuring that every person within the food system is treated fairly is food justice. There are many ways to define food justice. Here are a few of the definitions that will be important for this paper.

First, food justice is the

norm that everyone should have access to safe, healthy, and culturally-appropriate foods no matter one's national origin, economic statuses, social identities, cultural membership, or disability (Whyte 1).

Another definition often used in discussions about food justice is the

norm that everyone who works within a food system, from restaurant servers to farm workers, should be paid livable and fair wages and work in safe conditions no matter one's national origin, economic statuses, social identities, cultural membership, or disability (Whyte 1).

Food justice is relevant to every aspect of life because food is so much more than just nourishment. Food is often used as a binding agent for many cultures and family relations. Without proper access to food resources many communities would be in danger of losing their culture. An example of the importance of food justice can be found in the Anishinaabek people who are an indigenous tribe located in Great Lakes region of the United States. Within this tribe there is an idea of "first foods," which refer to the foods collected through seasonal group activities of tending, cultivating, gathering, harvesting, processing, distributing, storing, and consuming diverse animal and plant (Whyte 6).

Many of these "first foods" are items such as walleye, blueberries, deer, hare, maple, and sturgeon. Wild rice, on the other hand, is vitally important to this culture because it is the most

abundant food source available in this region. Wild rice also provides a great deal of income for the tribe as a whole. Many families grow and sell this grain to people living in areas surrounding the tribe to enable them to subsist. These activities associated with “first foods” help renew many culturally important aspects such as family relations, a sense of community, and social and political relationships. The Anishinaabe people believe these activities and the relationships formed are what allow them to “achieve good lives in ways they could not achieve through their individual efforts alone” (Whyte 6). Therefore, their culture is very heavily dependent on having access to the land and tools needed to harvest these “first foods.”

Another aspect of food justice is the idea that *all* people deserve access to healthy foods, including the means to obtain these foods. However, purely having access to food is not adequate either. People must be in control of the types of food they consume. This idea is commonly referred to as food sovereignty. Food sovereignty generally refers to the right of individuals to control their own food. This right must be recognized and prioritized in every nation. Food sovereignty is important because, for many cultures, it is not just the access to food that is necessary but also access to the correct foods and the means of gaining them. Food serves as a form of communication among people; in many cases food is a way of showing love for another individual. Food also serves as a bonding experience among many people as well because the act of preparing food and consuming it can both be seen as a ritualistic way of staying connected with other fellow humans.

Another important concept to understand is exploitation. For the purposes of this paper, exploitation refers to the action of taking advantage of something or someone in an unfair or unethical manner; utilization of something for one's own ends (OED). It is important to understand exploitation because the global food system uses exploitation to further itself. There are also many ways in which food justice is directly correlated with food security through

exploitation. Food security refers to the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

Last, another important aspect of food justice is subsistence, which refers to the ability to maintain or support oneself at the most minimum level. Subsistence must be important to the leaders of the world because when individuals are not capable of meeting the bare minimum of what is required to survive, they have poor quality of life and will eventually die. Quality of life is broadly considered a standard of health, comfort, and happiness. All nations have a responsibility to ensure that every individual is afforded the right to a quality of life that offers the ability to subsist. The right to subsist is especially relevant in developed nations because they have more developed economy and advanced technological infrastructure relative to other less industrialized nations. Developed nations are more than capable of being able to provide people with a high quality of life that affords the ability to subsist. However, the emphasis on developed nations should not remove the responsibility to ensure a right to subsist from undeveloped nations. All individuals have the right to subsist regardless of the nation they reside in. I am making the point that the right to subsist exists regardless of whether a government chooses to recognize it. Also, I am arguing that all governments have a responsibility in recognizing and aiding this right. However, in many nations this is not the case because of exploitation within the global food system.

Exploitation of Women

Many groups suffer exploitation by the global food system within the United States, but one of the largest of these is women. The primary way women are exploited is through wage differences. “[I]n the US over 30 percent of women earn poverty wages compared to 24 percent for men,” (Holt-Giménez and Nestle 145) meaning that women, overall, make less money and therefore are less capable of purchasing substantive food. These wage gaps are possible because of the subjugated status of women. It may sound odd discussing the subjugated status of women in a nation that claims to be the “land of the free,” but women are treated far from equally in the United States.

One main reason women remain in this subjugated status is the fact that they hold significantly less political power than men do. Political power refers to the authority that is held by a particular group within a society that allows for the administration of public resources and has the power to implement policies for society. In the United States for the year 2019, in the House of Representatives only 23.7 percent of the seats are held by women and only 25 percent of the seats in the Senate are held by women. On the state level, these statistics are much the same with only 25.4 percent of state legislative seats being held by women and only 12 percent of all governors being women. (Rutgers) According to the 2010 census, women make up 50.8 percent of the population, meaning there are more women than men residing in the United States. But women have overwhelmingly less political representation, resulting in little room for policy improvement in the United States, Women continue to remain in their subjugated status. Men in the United States benefit from having fewer women holding political power because men can continue to make policies that keep women “in their place,” benefit other men, and ensure relative advantages for men.

Their subjugation has not in any way removed women from being participants in the global food system. This status has simply devalued their work inside and outside the system (Holt-Giménez and Nestle 148), mostly by exploiting the productive and reproductive roles that women play in the global food system. According to Holt-Giménez and Nestle, “Production refers to the making of commodities to sell for a profit” and “reproduction refers to the act of providing human labor power for capital” (Holt-Giménez and Nestle 148). Reproductive labor goes beyond providing new individuals for labor power. In this context, this term refers to “housework, cooking, child bearing, child rearing, and family nurturing” (Holt-Giménez and Nestle 149). In this sense, the owners of the means of production need the workers to manufacture goods. And the workers in turn need to sell their labor to the owners to be able to purchase the goods they are manufacturing. After the industrial revolution, the owners began exploiting the labor of men, women, and children even more than they had before in order to maximize their profits. Eventually unions arose in an attempt to force the owners to provide better working conditions and shorten the workday. After the first World War was over, men were beginning to join the workforce again, and many women were forced to become homemakers again. However, demands for fair working conditions placed the business owners at a disadvantage because now they must pay the employees a fair wage and use workers for less time each day. This situation led the owners to seek different ways of maintaining the same profit while meeting union standards for fair wages and acceptable working conditions. As a result, business owners lowered the wages of the workers while still requiring the same number of hours or work. This plan backfired because the goods being produced were not being purchased as readily as they had been, therefore driving the price down. According to Holt-Giménez and Nestle, the owners settled on making up this difference by exploiting the reproductive work of women. A great deal of behind the scenes reproductive work—the

provision of labor for capital—is performed by women. The global food system does not value this type of work. So, while men in the workforce receive better pay and benefits as a sign of value for their labor, the behind the scenes work done by women is not acknowledged—but it is certainly exploited. This reproductive labor is necessary for the global food system to continue to function as it does; however, this work does not yield any direct profit for the owners. Therefore, it has no monetary value. Since profit is the only thing valued in a capitalist system, such as the global food system, no compensation goes to women for this type of reproductive labor. Holt-Giménez and Nestle argue that the owners recognize the reproductive labor of women as essential but exploit it intentionally because this type of work will always be performed whether or not women are compensated for it. So, in other words they might as well take advantage of free labor.

Women’s domestic work was part of a capitalist mode of production that required it to take a certain form, one that disciplined it to play a subservient role in the production process just as capital had disciplined the worker to give up the product for their labor for an hourly wage. (Holt- Giménez and Nestle 149)

This exploitation of reproductive labor allowed the owners to make back some of the profits lost by being forced to provide their workers with a decent wage. They were able to exploit the workers in these ways because the labor force was being well maintained. Also, this exploitation ensures that women would remain inferior to men because their work hold no “true” value in society. However, Holt- Giménez and Nestle (150) state that “this largely explains the capitalist turn from the exploitation of women as factory workers to their exploitation as full-time housewives” This type of exploitation directly benefited men in the sense that men hold most of the jobs within the food system and their labor is compensated, thus preventing any competition from women for the jobs that historically belonged to men. These inequalities have continued for many years and are especially prevalent within the global food system.

Another way women are exploited within the global food system is through unequal job opportunities. Many women are not even given an opportunity to work within the food system because of the difficulty of the work. Holt- Giménez and Nestle state that, “for every four farmworkers in the United States only one is a woman” (154). They claim that this imbalance is because women are not viewed as being as capable of this type of labor as men are. The owners understand that farm work is strenuous labor that must be compensated. So, it would not be logical to hire women to perform these types of jobs since they would not be able to do this type of work as quickly. It makes more sense to hire men and still get the reproductive labor of women for free. Also, from the business owners’ viewpoint, it makes more sense to hire men who are more physically capable of performing this type of labor because there is a greater chance of getting more labor for the same cost. Therefore, the labor of women is once again not “worth” it for the owners, who have the ability to hire men and get the labor of women for free.

Exploitation of Minorities

Gendered exploitation is just one of the many ways that the global food system continues to exploit individuals. Within the United States racism has allowed for the global food system to exploit minorities as well. This type of abuse of racial minorities continues to thrive in the United States because of deeply embedded racism. Racism refers to the systemic mistreatment of individuals based on their ethnicity and/or skin color. There are several ways that racial minorities within the United States are disenfranchised by the global food system.

One way this exploitation has taken place is through the loss of land ownership among minorities. Land ownership is significant because it allows families to feed themselves affordably by farming. It also allows individuals to generate an income by selling the foods grown on a farm. According to Holt- Giménez and Nestle,

In 1910 African Americans owned 16 million acres of farmland, but this has been steadily declining so much that a 2012 census showed that out of the 2.1 million farmers in the US only 8% were farmers of color and only half of those were owners of land.
(161162)

However, the farm share for people of color has been growing in recent years, particularly among Latinos, who now number over 67,000 farmers (Holt- Giménez and Nestle 163). Farm shares refer to the ability of members in a particular community to interact and purchase healthy foods directly from farmers. However, growth in farm share does not directly correlate to an increase in sales by people of color. Actually, people of color typically earn less than \$10,000 in annual farm sales and only produce three percent of the agricultural value (Holt- Giménez and Nestle 163) The lack of land ownership among people of color drastically reduces their ability to have large commercial farms for income. Holt-Giménez and Nestle state that overall, white farmers dominate as operator-owners. Whereas most of the “field to fork” work is done by

people of color. “Field to fork” refers to the farm/field work that is performed in the fields, essentially the manual labor. However, it does not refer to owning the farm.

Much of this “field to fork” labor performed is compensated with poverty level wages. The owners of the major commercial farms that employ massive numbers of people are attempting to get the most labor from their employees for the lowest wage possible. Which is the most basic way to exploit an individual. In a capitalist society, such as the United States, workers are expected to sell their labor in exchange for life supporting wages. However, the owners have continued to devalue the labor of the workers to the point that their labor is no longer enough to allow them to subsist, directly benefitting the owners because now workers need to work more hours in order to provide for themselves.

This exploitation has created a large wage gap between white workers and workers of color because in the United States the business owners have historically been more capable of getting away with paying racial minorities less than they pay white people. White people working in the food system in the United States on average are paid better than minorities are. For example, “white food workers have an average annual wage of \$25,024 while people of color in the same jobs make \$19,349” (Holt- Giménez and Nestle 163). This wage gap results in having more people of color living with poverty level incomes as a result of working in the global food system. In many cases, these incomes barely allow people of color to subsist. According to a U.S. Census report from 2016, white people currently make up 60.7 percent of the overall population, while African Americans make up 13.4 percent, and Hispanics make up 18.1 percent. Logically it should follow that there is higher percentage of white people that would be impoverished because of the large population differences. However, out of the 47 million people living below the poverty line, 22 percent of African Americans and 19.4 percent of Hispanics live in poverty conditions (Holt- Giménez and Nestle 163). Compare these numbers

to the 8.8 percent of white people currently receiving poverty wages (Semega, Fontenot, Kollar 12). The previously stated statistics show the ways in which wage differences impact the most disenfranchised groups.

There are studies directly correlating poverty with food insecurity. Applying the previous statistics would depict a disproportionate number of people of color that live food insecure. According to Holt- Giménez and Nestle, “Of the 50 million food-insecure people in the United States, 10.6 percent are white, 26.1 percent are black, 23.7 percent are Latino” (163). These data are similar to the percentages of people in the United States living in poverty conditions, further proving the point that impoverished people are more likely to be food insecure. An example of this data can be found in restaurant workers, who are more likely to be people of color than white. One would expect restaurant workers to have as much access to food as they need because of the nature of their work. However, restaurant workers are more than twice as food insecure as the national average. (Holt- Giménez and Nestle 163)

Adding to this food insecurity is the fact that there is a food monopoly meaning that ten companies own nearly all food that can be purchased. These companies are: Nestlé, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Unilever, Danone, General Mills, Kellogg's, Mars, Associated British Foods, and Mondelez. These corporations own most of the food available in grocery store leaving very little room for farmers. Also, these corporations are so large and bring in such a large profit that the prices of the goods they produce can be driven down. Whereas local farmers cannot compete with these extremely low prices which eventually puts them out of business. These corporations also control which seeds many farmers can purchase and which foods they can grow ensuring that the farmers will never be in competition with the corporations. An example of this monopoly power can be found in India. PepsiCo is currently suing a group of farmers for growing a “patented strain of potato.” Each individual farmer is being sued for \$150,000 for growing these

potatoes. This lawsuit brings up many questions about food sovereignty. I would argue that food should never be patented, and all farmers should be able to grow whichever foods they wish. Also, because these corporations own nearly all of the food supply, most of the food available is being heavily processed and unhealthy. Since the big corporations are able to drive their prices down so much, the foods that are most available to impoverished individuals are the most processed and the least nutritious.

Poverty, race, and food insecurity all directly correlate with diet-related diseases due to the fact that healthy food options are drastically more expensive and less accessible. Accessibility is one factor that prevents individuals who are barely subsisting from being able to purchase healthy foods. In most cases, healthy food options are more expensive and require more time to prepare.

Another factor that prevents impoverished individuals from being able to purchase healthy food options is the existence of food deserts in low income communities. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), "Food deserts are areas that lack access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up a full and healthy diet." The reason food deserts are more prominent in low income areas is because large chain retail grocery stores have no motivation to build in these communities, resulting in the only food locations being fast food restaurants and convenience stores. These stores sell mostly unhealthy, microwavable food that is overpriced, but cheaper than having to find a way to travel miles to the next closest grocery store meaning that impoverished people are being forced to survive on extremely unhealthy foods that can lead to diseases such as diabetes and obesity. Since the majority of impoverished people are people of color it follows that there is a higher chance that they are going to develop these type of diet related diseases. These diseases require lifesaving treatments and medications that cannot be afforded by individuals that are only barely

capable of subsisting. All of these factors create a poverty cycle that becomes almost completely inescapable for generations. This cycle of poverty continues in the ways that it does because children continue to grow up in food deserts without proper access to healthy foods, putting them at increased risk of diet related diseases. Also, these poverty cycles allow for the continued exploitation of generations of people of color.

Utilitarian Argument

Despite evidence shown above, there is still a utilitarian argument that can be made for the global food system being ethical. There are many reasons that such a large number of people continue to support this system in the face of such gruesome facts. The first claim is that the global food system has managed to feed such an immense number of people. Supporters of this claim typically state that there are millions of people around the world who are impoverished and would otherwise have no access to any type of foods without having such a massive global system for exporting goods. Another claim made in this argument is that the global food system has created millions of jobs. There are many farmers, field workers, and restaurant workers who otherwise would not have the same opportunities to work. The demand for these jobs is so great because the needs for different foods are so great. Because the global food system supplies food around the world, there is a much greater need for foods that generate a greater need for workers, thus creating more life supporting jobs. A final claim made for this argument is that the global food system drives the prices of goods down. The driving of prices down is capable of being done because it is such a large system and so many foods are produced in mass quantities. These foods are then exported/imported to different countries which essentially drives the costs of individual food items down. Lower food prices allow more people to be able to provide for their families. Therefore, applying this argument one would determine that the standard for a food system to be ethical is that it be capable of aiding in food security for *most* people. Then taking a quick glance at the global food system would reveal that it is an ethical system that is successful in feeding *most* people. Many supporters of this system are content to accept that a system that meets the need of the majority is ethical. The best summary of this type of argument is, simply put, the global food system is the best system that has been developed to feed the world's

hungry, and, if *some* people are left food insecure, that is justifiable since the needs of a majority are being met.

I would reply to this utilitarian argument by first stating that it is fundamentally unethical. Due to the nature of the argument that bases its claims on the fact that what is best for the majority is the most ethical approach. I would argue that ethically the needs of the majority could never outweigh the needs of each individual. I would further argue that a food system that fails to ensure that each and every individual in the world is food secure is unequivocally an unethical system. Fundamentally, all individuals are equal and share the same rights. As stated earlier, I would argue that there is an a priori right for every individual in the world to be able to subsist. I make this claim based on the overwhelmingly accepted idea that individuals have a right to life. Therefore, it follows that if individuals are born with a right to life then they must also enjoy a right to the means of survival. Applying the utilitarian argument, it would appear that only majorities are afforded the right to life since in many cases the global food system directly prevents so many individuals in the minority from being able to subsist. This inequality in access to quality of life supports my claim that the global food system is a system of exploitation, and that it does so by the violation of basic human, individual rights. Therefore, the global food system cannot be an ethical system.

Another argument that could be made in favor of the global food system could claim that the global food system does not directly create the mistreatment listed above. Because of the fact that most of the exploitation and violation of rights listed above did not originate in the global food system, solving the inequalities within the system would not actually fix any of the issues listed. The inequalities stated above exist outside the global food system and are not capable of being fixed by simply changing the global food system itself. Making these types of changes would require a transition in the world around the global food system. Supporters of this

argument go so far as to argue that the global food system is not capable of being unethical because it just acts as best as it can within the given system. Therefore, when inequalities outside of the global food system get fixed the system will change as the rest of the world has and will behave in a way appropriate for the world outside.

This argument makes an interesting point by stating that the global food system does not create any of the inequalities it thrives on. The statement is false in the sense that it absolutely creates inequalities. However, it is completely correct in stating that the system is just a result of a capitalist economy. In other words, the global food system is not a broken system; it is functioning just as it was intended to so many years ago. The issue I find with this argument is the idea that the global food system could be ethical if the inequalities in the outside world did not exist. The system could not function as it does if the inequalities around the world did not exist. Due to the fact that the global food system was designed to exploit individuals in order to function as it does. This is a system that was created by capitalists for capitalists. The global food system as a whole will continue to exploit as many individuals as necessary in order to continue functioning. This is a system that was intended as a way for the owners to thrive and make more money off of a basic human necessity: food. Therefore, the assumption that the global food system was created to serve as anything other than a means for the wealthiest people to become even more wealthy must be invalid. The issues of food insecurity, food sovereignty, and exploitation are issues that are deeply embedded in society and need to be corrected. However, the global food system takes advantage of these preexisting issues in order to thrive as it does. Holt- Giménez and Nestle argue, “when power is concentrated in the hands of a powerful minority social/environmental externalities fall to racially stigmatized groups.” (Holt- Giménez and Nestle 161) The powerful minority refers to the owners. And the global food system is not

broken, but rather it is a system that was created with the sole purpose of thriving in an already existing system of inequalities and mistreatment.

Necessary Changes

The inequalities taking place within the global food system demand immediate attention. It is unethical for societies to continue excusing the exploitation of any individuals. However, the global food system cannot simply be fixed because of the relationship between the capitalist economy and the capitalist nature of the system. The global food system needs to be restructured in a way that puts the needs of the individuals it serves above the profits that can be made requiring a move away from the capitalist economy that currently exists in America. Since, money is the only thing in a capitalist economy that holds true value, any system modeled after this type of economy will also value money over all else. The well-being of individuals must be considered when concerning food relations. Food is a basic necessity needed for all individuals to subsist and one's wealth should never determine whether he or she has proper access to food.

Food should never be used as a tool for gaining profit. First, I would suggest removing the capitalists from the system all together. The workers that are laboring within the system should be the only ones reaping the profits from their labor. Farmland should be made communal, and anyone that farms it will reap the benefits of his or her own labor, allowing for food prices to be decreased and food workers not to have to be concerned with being food insecure. Second, I would suggest a governmental intervention in the global food system that would break up the ten main companies that own most of the means to food. The means to provide food belongs to individuals and never for-profit corporations. Next, I would call for governmental intervention to further develop the existing food aid programs in order to ensure that all individuals are able to continue being food secure. This intervention would include funding to bring proper food outlets to food deserts, providing grants to farmers in order to aid in bringing the cost of the production of foods down, and constitutional amendments banning food

taxes within states and food monopolies. Adding these changes to the global food system as a whole would begin the change needed to move toward an ethical food system.

Conclusion

Overall, the global food system is nothing more than a capitalist food system that thrives on the exploitation of millions of individuals. Within the United States this exploitation takes many forms, but primarily disadvantages people of color and women within the system. The only true way of shifting the global food system to a more ethical system is by a complete restructuring in which the food workers would own the means of production and could split the profits evenly. There would need to be governmental policy changes in order to ensure that for-profit corporations are never in control of access to food. Also, a policy change to ensure the right of all individuals to subsist is being recognized. All governments around the world have a responsibility to ensure that all individuals are food secure. Failure to meet these standards results in a system of exploitation in which no individual should be subjected.

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