

REVIEW ESSAY

The Political Economy of Food

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Albritton, Robert. 2009. *Let Them Eat Junk: How Capitalism Creates Hunger and Obesity*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing. ISBN 978-1-894037-38-9. Paperback: 21.95 CAD. Pages: 259.

Miller, Sally. 2008. *Edible Action: Food Activism & Alternative Economics*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 978-1-55266-280-9. Paperback: 22.95 CAD. Pages: 191.

Robert Albritton and Sally Miller have both written engaging analyses of the global agriculture/food system and its alternatives. Within this general subject area, the authors take interest in different foci and use different theoretical frameworks in their analyses. The result is two analyses that seem more complementary than competitive, which together offer us a comprehensive understanding of the global capitalist food regime and many food movements and initiatives producing alternatives to it. Albritton is a renowned political economist and Professor Emeritus in the Department of Political Science at York University who offers us a Marxist analysis of one of the central contradictions of our time: why are so many in the West over-fed and over weight to the point of obesity while many more of the rest are malnourished and starving to death? His project delivers a critical analysis of the global food regime, how it is organized to leave half the world's population malnourished (either underfed, overfed, or fed predominantly junk food), and how it is a major contributor to the killing of the planet through its dependence on petroleum and the extensive use of arable land for the production of non-food crops and products, such as tobacco, cotton, and ethanol. The purpose of his project is not to explicate the myriad of alternative food movements and initiatives and the messy work they undertake in trying to make change. This is where *Edible Action* comes in. Miller is a popular educator whose academic training in anthropology and environmental studies is complemented by her almost twenty years of experience in the alternative food, agriculture, and co-op sector. She is a gifted storyteller who teaches us about the ills of

genetically modified seeds and foods for farmers and eaters and of the two-headed monster of scarcity and surplus. But the majority of her book is dedicated to delivering a cultural analysis of the multiplicity of food movements and enterprises designing and doing the messy work of implementing alternatives to the global capitalist agriculture/food system.

I don't want to come off as one of those activist-academics who brushes aside a theoretical text as intellectually enlightening but of little practical use. There is a complex relationship between theory and practice that often does not get its due in such generalizations. Some theorists can work with Marx's *Capital* for their whole career, but are unable to explain the ongoing relevance of this classic text in an accessible and effective manner to audiences unfamiliar with it. Albritton is not one of those theorists. His brilliance is not just in his understanding of Marx's magnum opus, but his ability to communicate an analysis of the global agriculture/food system in such a way that it is not unreasonable to think it of interest to engaged senior high school readers, but it is also substantive enough to work well in third and fourth year university and college classrooms of political science, sociology, labour studies, and environmental studies. Adult readers looking for an accessible yet challenging read will also find this book enjoyable. Albritton has written the type of book I looked for in high school and in my undergraduate classes on social theory, labour, and the environment, a critical social analysis that is relevant to my life and that provides me with a framework for addressing some of the 'big questions' of how the world is socially organized, who makes the far-reaching decisions that affect so many, how are those decisions made, who do they benefit and who do they oppress.

Albritton's overarching argument is that the vastly unjust distribution of food across the world and the proliferation of junk food is not an act of nature, nor is it the fault of specific corporations, governments, or individuals; rather, the root cause of the global food crisis is the capitalist agricultural/food system that emerged in the US after World War II and subsequently spread to varying degrees across the globe. He shows how the current underfed/overfed dichotomy is amongst the manifestations of the contradictions and irrationalities of the capitalist (mis)management of agriculture and food provision. He takes seriously the reality of global warming, and explicates the irrationality of the reliance of the capitalist agricultural/food system on petroleum and the extensive use of arable land for producing non-food crops and inputs for the manufacture of ethanol. He closes the book with a decisive argument against the seemingly widespread assumption that capitalism and

democracy are mutually supportive. His second to last chapter elaborates on the basic idea that democracy requires a high degree of equality, and capitalism encourages and produces inequality, as his analysis throughout the book brings home vividly. While neoliberalism points toward individual rights and the individualization of responsibility, Albritton calls for a balance of individual rights and social rights and responsibilities. Students of critical social policy analysis of Western welfare states that have seen a retrenchment of social rights and an emphasis on individual responsibility and risk throughout the last thirty-odd years of neoliberal globalization will be familiar with this sort of analysis. Albritton's point here is that corporations and markets must be made to be more transparent and democratically accountable if we are to address the gross imbalances of distributive injustice that the global capitalist agricultural/food system encourages and exacerbates, and if we are to address global warming and the global food regime's dependence on petroleum, especially in light of peak oil.

For Miller, food is not simply sustenance, it is imbued with many complex meanings and plays a key role in how people from various cultures see and talk about the world. Food is also an inspiration, catalyst, and ally for making social change. In *Edible Action*, Miller has two overarching interests. The first is to explore a number of the ways that food has inspired social change. The second is to explain why food is an excellent catalyst for social change. These dual foci direct Miller's explication of thoughtful practice and critical reflection. A sort of map emerges of these alternative movements and enterprises, particularly those happening in Canada and the US, but also the peasant and landless people's movements happening in Brazil and across much of the majority world. Miller offers some mournful reflections on the significant drop in the number of workers involved in agriculture in Western countries since 1950, the rising number of farmers who commit suicide or sell their land to developers, and the threats posed by genetically modified seeds and food. The majority of her book, however, is focused on the positive movements for change. But, she is not an uncritical cheerleader of food movements and alternative enterprises. It is obvious that she has learned a lot in her almost twenty years of experience in the alternative food, agriculture, and co-op sector. I appreciate her honest discussion of food democracy and the practice of democracy in coops. She describes participatory democracy as time consuming and a lot of work but ultimately worth it. She teaches us that democracy is not about pure agreement but negotiated agreement that is continuously in process. Miller writes about these issues and more

in a highly accessible manner. Her book would work well in first and second year university and college courses on food, coops, social movements, environmental studies, and anthropology. The combination of her vast experience, her orientation to writing as a popular educator, and her gift for storytelling enables her to take us on a journey into farmer's fields, farmer's markets, community gardens, and membership meetings of various coops.

Despite her gift for storytelling, at times the story seems to get away from her. This is certainly the case for her chapter on fair trade particularly. Whereas most of her book consists of narratives about food movements that she has experience with in some capacity, Miller lacks experiential knowledge of fair trade and she does not make up for that by engaging a sufficient amount of secondary sources. There are some factual errors in the chapter as well. For instance, she claims that fair trade started with the production and trade of coffee and chocolate about thirty years ago. This is inaccurate. The genealogy of what is today called 'fair trade' has many threads, from Latin American farmers who sold coffee to fund national liberation struggles to charitable religious organizations acting paternalistically toward folks in formerly colonized territories, but all of these threads stretch back further than thirty years ago. Miller also uses the term 'fair trade organization' incorrectly. In fair trade, this is a technical term that refers to organizations who are members of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO). The WFTO was previously called the International Fair Trade Association and before that it was the International Federation of Alternative Trade, back in the late 1980s when what is today called 'fair trade' was still called 'alternative trade.' In addition, Miller writes as if TransFair Canada, the national fair trade labelling initiative in Canada, and TransFair USA, the national fair trade labelling initiative in the US, are the same organization. They are not. TransFair Canada, TransFair USA, and other national labelling initiatives are member organizations of the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO). Miller makes no reference to FLO International or the WFTO. She also writes as if fair traders from producers to traders to certifiers to advocates share a common set of values. Arriving at a common set of values amongst a group of people is extremely difficult. Miller writes about this extensively in relation to decision making processes in coops. Needless to say, 'the' fair trade movement is no different. One could argue there are several fair trade movements.

Overall, with the above caveats in mind, I would recommend *Let Them Eat Junk* and *Edible Action*.