Feeding the World

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How should we think about global food politics? It is tempting to start with big moments on the world stage such as the United Nations discussing famine in Ethiopia or Syria. But this approach can be alienating. It locates global politics far away from daily life and sees food as just another issue that international leaders address on our behalf. So rather than this top-down approach, this chapter offers a bottom-up approach, beginning with everyday people like you and me. Through this perspective we can better appreciate the meaning of 'big' statistics like the estimate of the United Nations that 795 million people in the world are undernourished. What kind of lives do these individuals lead, and what is it like to go without food? We can also see that it is not just problems of hunger that food politics concerns itself with, but those relating to food safety, nutrition and livelihoods as well. Being attentive to everyday voices shows that these issues affect people in developed countries just as much as those in developing countries. Who in the world gets fed, with what, and by whom are fundamental questions that concern us all.

The bottom-up approach

When I started writing this chapter I was sitting in my local café, a Cuban-themed place with Latino music on the stereo and pictures of Communist revolutionary Che Guevara on the wall. In the newspaper was a story about the multinational drinks company SABMiller avoiding taxes in Africa. Visiting the supermarket later on with my family, we picked up sausages from Ireland, tinned tomatoes from Italy and peppers from Morocco. For dinner we cooked up a casserole, a dish with French roots, and sat in front of the television to eat. A celebrity chef was presenting a programme about diets in Japan and how the British could learn a lot from their healthy lifestyles. We wondered whether we might try sushi for our next family meal.

These encounters with national cultures, current affairs and global supply chains can be thought of as the social foundations of international relations. They are foundational in two senses. First, they create the cross-border flows of ideas, people and goods that make international relations, or how people in different nations see and relate to one another. For example, debates about how to govern the international trade of food wouldn't exist if people didn't buy foreign products to begin with or care about the effects of doing so. Second, it is through these interactions that individuals come to know their political community and form opinions about what is best for it, helping to construct 'the national interest'. This happens through multiple subject positions. In the story above, for instance, I was sometimes thinking from the perspective of a consumer, but at other times as a worker, a citizen, a cook, or a family member. This is important because different subject positions create different political priorities. Thinking as a consumer, I would prefer supermarkets to stock a wide variety of foods and keep prices as low as possible. But thinking as a citizen, I would prefer them to supply more food from local farmers and make sure everyone earned a decent living out of it. The bottom-up approach thus provides an alternative way of thinking about global food politics by analysing its social foundations. It recognises that important political decisions do not happen 'above' society, separately from it, but rest on the beliefs, opinions and actions of those who would be governed.

Sudden food shortages and the disenfranchised citizen

In 2007/8, and again in 2011, the world market prices of cereals, meat and dairy products, vegetable oils and sugar all began to increase rapidly. This was blamed on a variety of causes. These ranged from poor harvests in agricultural producing countries like Australia and Russia; policies in the United States and Brazil that encouraged food crops to be replaced by biofuel; rising gas prices that pushed up the cost of fertilisers; and financial speculation leading to volatile prices. Commentators spoke of a 'global food crisis' as the effects were felt in every country, albeit to differing degrees. In the United Kingdom (UK) the average cost of a loaf of bread doubled from £0.63 in January 2005 to £1.26 just four years later; an increase way ahead of inflation and an unwanted burden for those on lower incomes. In states with greater dependency on food imports and higher levels of poverty, though, the impact was felt even more deeply. These states could mainly be found in the Middle East and Africa, and in city after city riots broke out as people found it difficult to access basic staples at prices they could afford.

One of these cities was Algiers, the capital of Algeria. As elsewhere, people took to the streets not simply because food was hard to get hold of but also because of the injustice they perceived in the way their country had been run. Demands for affordable food ran alongside calls for jobs, political freedoms and an end to government corruption. Banners were written saying things like 'Give us back our Algeria' and 'No to the police state'. At first the Algerian government responded to these events with repression. The police fired tear gas and water cannons at youths who had angrily taken to the streets and set up roadblocks. Football matches were suspended as it was thought the crowds might turn political and become a threat to public order. However, aware of the Arab Spring revolutions and fearful that the uprisings seen in Egypt and Tunisia would be repeated in Algeria, the government soon relented. Import taxes on sugar and cooking oil were slashed and prices capped for flour and vegetables. The government also renounced the 19-year-old State of Emergency law that had prohibited peaceful protest in the country. The forcible removal of long-standing president Abdelaziz Bouteflika was thus averted, although widespread disapproval of his autocratic regime continued to simmer.

What effect did these food riots have on international relations? First of all they created the sense that there was a 'global food crisis' to resolve. It is important to note here that if a food crisis were to be simply defined as the existence of widespread hunger, then the situation would have been nothing new. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s there were consistently between 800 million and 1 billion people in the world who were chronically undernourished. Living largely in rural areas in Asia and Africa, these people suffered away from the spotlight. However, based on the position of the disenfranchised citizen, the food riots that broke out in volatile urban areas directly challenged the legitimacy of political leaders and forced a response (Bush 2010). This kind of hunger could not be ignored.

Attempting to manage the food crisis, world leaders gathered at the United Nations' High-Level Conference on World Food Security. They produced a declaration to provide more emergency aid, prevent international agricultural trade from being disrupted, and increase global agricultural production. Critics saw this as a conservative response that did not address the root causes of the crisis. Instead of ensuring people had decent incomes and accountable leaders, reflecting the demands of the protestors, the focus was simply on bringing down world market prices. This also reproduced the misleading idea that hunger is best dealt with by growing more food rather than changing existing power relations. Oxfam, a confederation of charitable organisations, made this point when they said that there was already enough food to feed everyone. For Oxfam the problem unveiled by the riots was not so much lack of supply but unequal distribution (Oxfam 2009). During 2008, the height of the food crisis, there was a global average of 2,826 calories produced, per person, per day according to official United Nations data. The recommended intake for an adult is between 2,000–2,500 calories. So, if the data is taken at face value, there was no actual shortage of food. Rather, political decisions had created a situation where some people could acquire food more easily than others.

Chronic hunger and the civic participant

A different approach to governing hunger can be seen in Brazil. Although the country was for a long time a net exporter of agricultural products, it also had huge numbers of undernourished people living within its borders. This reaffirms the point that, in and of themselves, food surpluses do not prevent hunger – even at state level. So, when the left-wing Workers' Party was elected to power in 2003, their leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva made the Zero Hunger programme a cornerstone of his government's social policy. He declared in his inauguration speech: 'We are going to create appropriate conditions for all people in our country to have three decent meals a day, every day,

without having to depend on donations from anybody' (cited in da Silva et al. 2011, 9).

This commitment came out of the country's re-democratisation process in the 1990s, when civil society began to exert a greater influence in national politics after two decades of oppressive military dictatorship. The Council on Food and Nutritional Security, which was supported by Lula, was a particularly important institution in this respect. Composed of 54 representatives, two-thirds from civil society and one-third from federal government, the Council drove forward a number of policies, including increased funding for school meals and support for family farmers. It also promoted the National Law on Food and Nutrition Security, which obliged the federal government to uphold people's right to food and create food councils at more localised levels. Along with cash transfers given to poor mothers and an increase in the minimum wage, these reforms lifted millions of people out of chronic undernourishment. The Zero Hunger programme could claim real success. In contrast to Algeria, diverse groups in Brazilian society – including teachers, farmers, clergy and health professionals – were able to play a more proactive role in national food politics. Indeed, their collective contribution also reshaped international policy. When the minister for food security in the Lula government, José Graziano da Silva, was elected to the head of the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation in 2011, he began to promote many of the same policies that had been developed in Brazil. A twin-track strategy based on investments in rural areas to boost the incomes of farming families and basic welfare payments to protect the most vulnerable in society was advocated.

Backed by other United Nations agencies and the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, over the next three years Zero Hunger Challenge programmes were launched in a number of countries including St. Lucia, Laos and Zambia. This approach also informed the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals, which set out a roadmap for the end of world hunger by 2030. That said, it is a lot easier to make policies and plans than to achieve them. Key in the Brazilian case was the mobilisation of national civil society, which brought forward people willing to play a role in political affairs. In countries where this is not encouraged, it is hard to see plans for the reduction of poverty and hunger taking effect. Moreover, Brazil itself is far from perfect, with mass protests and political upheavals in 2016 reflecting the nation's slide into ever-deepening recession. Chronic hunger may have diminished but temporary hunger and poor diet remain, especially in the impoverished areas of Northeast Brazil and among indigenous communities. Ensuring their right to food is an ongoing struggle, and one that will have to overcome the significant domestic political and economic challenges that Brazil faces.

Adulterated milk and the protective parent

In September 2008 news broke that the industrial chemical melamine had been found in powdered milk infant formula in China. Within two weeks, more than 50,000 babies had fallen ill and developed kidney stones. The mass poisoning became a national scandal and within the space of a year the Chinese government had overhauled its food safety laws and inspection systems. Provincial courts also sentenced 21 people involved, ultimately executing two of the traders caught selling adulterated milk. On the face of it this was a sudden crisis that had been swiftly dealt with. In actual fact, the melamine milk scandal was long in the making and slow in the breaking.

Milk consumption had been encouraged in China from the late 1990s by the government and by dairy companies as a way for people to become healthy and 'modern'. Competition to supply this growing market thus intensified. Milk was watered down and melamine was added so as to make the protein content appear normal, but the practice was knowingly covered up – a fact disclosed by company executives in the subsequent trials. Neither the dairy industry nor government officials wanted the public to panic as this would be disastrous for sales and the country's reputation, especially while hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. It was largely thanks to the parents of affected children that the problem was finally acknowledged. Some took to the internet to raise awareness and vent their anger while others held impromptu press conferences to give their side of the story and gain assurances about their children's long-term health. In both instances there were cases of parents being detained or jailed by the police for inciting social disorder.

The scandal had profound international consequences. Government authorities in Asia and Europe began to pull Chinese dairy and baby food products from the shops, while the United States had so little faith in the Chinese food safety system that they installed their own officials in the country to check US-bound exports. Doubts about the safety of Chinese milk also spilled over into diplomatic tensions with Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Hong Kong, there was a

public backlash against travellers and smugglers who began buying up infant formula to take back to China, leaving little for local consumption. In Taiwan, demonstrators used the milk scandal to publicly contest the wisdom of plans by the Taiwanese ruling party to forge closer ties with Beijing. Finally, the World Health Organization tried to agree on an international standard for safe infant formula at the same time as its director-general reinforced the message that breast milk is best for babies, implicitly criticising the Chinese government for promoting the use of powdered milk in the first place.

From the protective parent's point of view, then, ways of feeding the infant population had become criticised and politicised. However, Chinese parents should not be treated as a homogenous group. For example, one response by richer parents worried about using unsafe infant formula was to hire other new mothers to breastfeed their children. Most of these 'wet-nurses' were migrants from the countryside and so poor that they chose to sell their breast milk for money, feeding their own babies potentially harmful formula instead. Another class dimension of the scandal was the fact that many of the Chinese businesses involved were part-owned by multinational companies. Sanlu, the Chinese company at the centre of it all, was in fact only able to expand its operations thanks to a large investment by a dairy cooperative based in New Zealand called Fonterra. A political question for global capitalism is thus to what extent such transnational companies should help protect consumers in other countries as well as profit from them.

Childhood obesity and the bad mother

Concerns over food safety can also be extended to include foods high in salt, sugar and fat. These do not cause immediate harm in the same way that melamine-tainted milk does, but their cumulative effects can still be dangerous. The World Health Organization has warned that unhealthy diets are a leading global risk to health because of their link to illnesses like heart disease and stroke. In fact, these are the two biggest killers in the world, each causing more deaths every year than HIV/AIDS, lung cancer and road accidents combined. This aspect of food malnutrition – 'mal' meaning bad rather than insufficient – should be just as worrying as the existence of food shortages. In the United Kingdom, the public debate about malnutrition has paid particular attention to children's diets. Some of the debate has focused on problems experienced during childhood itself. For example, in 2014 it was reported that the consumption of sugary foods and drinks had contributed to 25,000 children aged five to nine being admitted to hospital to get rotten teeth pulled out. But mostly it has focused on childhood obesity and the risk this poses for children later in life. Under pressure from campaigners, including doctors and other health professionals, successive British governments have introduced policies to promote dietary change. Restrictions have been placed on junk food adverts, minimum nutritional standards have been applied to school meals, families have been targeted with healthy lifestyle campaigns, and food manufacturers have been asked to lower the salt, sugar and fat content of their products. To cap this off, a 'sugar tax' on high-sugar soft drinks was announced in 2016.

Despite first impressions, these internal debates have actually had an international dimension. In this respect it is important to remember that the United Kingdom is a nation-state made up of four countries (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), with the latter three each having some devolved political powers of their own. As such, policy debates about diet have often become proxy wars over the further devolution of power away from the central state. This happened in 2014 when the first minister of Scotland declared that the Scottish policy to offer more free school meals to pupils showed that Scotland would be better off as an independent country. International data has also been used to defend or discredit domestic policy proposals. The successful campaign to tax sugary drinks, spearheaded by the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, constantly referred to a similar policy introduced in Mexico to show that what worked there could work in the United Kingdom.

International comparison has also been used in depictions of national identity. British newspapers have run countless stories saying it has become a nation beset by increasing obesity. For some people, especially those with right-wing political views, this has been taken as evidence that the British are becoming lazy and that standards of parenting have worsened. Since childhood obesity is positively correlated with poverty, meaning that children from poorer backgrounds are more likely to be overweight, this interpretation also produced a divisive image of the nation. Put simply, it implied that poor parents were to blame for the country's moral failings. Moreover, since it is women that tend to be the primary caregivers, the figure of the bad parent inevitably assumed a female face.

Low wages and the deserving worker

So far in this chapter we have focused on food consumption, on what people eat. But how that food is produced and exchanged is important in its own right. Indeed, if we include all the jobs involved in providing food – from farming and fishing through processing and distribution, right up to retailing and cooking – then it is arguably the most important income-generating sector in the world. In the United States (US), there has been a long history of struggles over food work. John Steinbeck captured a slice of it in his 1939 book *Grapes of Wrath*, writing about a family of tenant farmers evicted from their home in Oklahoma and who end up working on a peach plantation in California for a pittance. This fictional book based on real events echoes in the lives of farmworkers in the United States today. Jobs like picking fruit and weeding vegetables are still tough and still done by migrants – only now they typically come from Latin America. In 2012, their average pay was less than $19,000 a year. The US government's own statistics would place this income thousands of dollars below the minimum threshold for meeting the basic needs of a family of four. In other words, even though they were living in the world's richest nation, they were living in relative poverty.

There are some differences between Steinbeck's story and contemporary events, though. In *Grapes of Wrath*, a preacher called Casy tries to organise his fellow workers into a trade union and is murdered by the police for his troubles. For the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a group of immigrant tomato pickers based in Immokalee Florida, their initial meetings in a local church grew into something much bigger. They first used tactics like work stoppages and hunger strikes to demand higher wages from their employers, but as their public profile grew they sought to reorganise the food supply chain itself. In 2011 the Coalition launched the Fair Food Program. Major restaurant and supermarket chains were encouraged to pay a few cents more for a pound of tomatoes and to buy these tomatoes from suppliers who pledged to follow labour law and put the extra money in their workers' wage packets. The Coalition scored its biggest success when the biggest retailer in the world, Walmart, agreed to join the Fair Food Program and to extend it beyond just tomatoes.

But while Walmart made commitments to *these* workers, with its own workers it has been less forthcoming. In 2012 its regular employees like cashiers, cleaners and warehouse assistants were paid on average just $8.81 an hour (Buchheit 2013). This meant that they, too, were paid a poverty wage and thus qualified for additional social security benefits like food vouchers, many of which were then spent by workers back in Walmart stores! This costs the government billions per year and is surely the grand paradox of the American economy. For all its wealth and Wall Street millionaires, the national minimum wage is so low that many people in full-time work still cannot make ends meet. Nor is it just Walmart where this happens. Supermarket cashiers, farm labourers, fast food servers, cooks, dishwashers, bartenders and waiting staff are all among America's lowest paid workers. The price of cheap food in the country has been gross inequality.

In both the Walmart case and that of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the position of the deserving worker has been crucial in contesting this inequality. We can see this first in the way that immigration policy has been conducted. For years US farm companies lobbied the government to allow them access to cheap foreign labour, which the government achieved by issuing temporary immigration visas and turning a blind eye to the use of additional undocumented workers. This created tensions with the general public, some of whom were worried about wages being undercut and others about the decline of 'American values'. A 2013 proposal by Republican and Democratic Party senators to offer permanent citizenship to undocumented farm workers thus had to cast them in a particular light. They were not called 'illegal immigrants', as was more usual in political discourse, but portrayed as 'individuals who … have been performing very important and difficult work to maintain America's food supply' (Plumer 2013). What the politicians were implying was that these were honest and hardworking people that could and should be made into Americans.

A second example is the way that trade unions have tried to organise Walmart employees across national borders. The company's takeover of food retailers in other countries has given it a truly global workforce. Walmart now employs over two million people worldwide; only the United States and Chinese militaries employ more. Concerned that the labour standards in its American operations might be adopted in these supermarkets and their supply chains too, groups like the UNI Global Union have thus tried to link people together through the shared subjectivity of the deserving worker and create a sense of international solidarity between them. As a UNI coordinator put it: 'When I

can connect a Chinese worker with a Mexican worker then it doesn't become about a Chinese worker taking their job. Workers can see, "Oh they [Walmart] are screwing us both. We have to unite to win"' (Jackson 2014).

Land dispossession and the traditional peasant

The examples from the United States were about waged work, but most of the jobs in the food sector are unwaged. People who farm, fish, herd, hunt or forage for food are effectively self-employed: they sell some of what they get for money and keep the rest to eat. As far as farming goes, there are an estimated 570 million agricultural plots in the world, the vast majority of which are small-scale family farms (Lowder *et al.* 2014). Whether these rural livelihoods will disappear as farming becomes mechanised and people migrate to cities is much debated (see Weis 2007 and Collier 2008). Either way, it is evident that the transition from small-scale peasant agriculture to large-scale industrial agriculture can be extremely violent. This can be seen in a case from Cambodia.

In 2006, large areas of land were granted by the Cambodian government to private holders to transform into sugar plantations so they could export this 'cash crop' to the European Union. However, the plan ignored the fact that many people already lived on the land and didn't want to be evicted. But the protestations of the existing tenants fell on deaf ears. In part this was because they did not have legal title to the land as a previous government, the Khmer Rouge, had banned private property and burned land records. Things got worse still. Financial compensation and alternative land that the current government was meant to provide was either inadequate or not forthcoming. When people resisted, force was used to remove them. Buildings were burned, land was bulldozed and animals shot. Over 1,700 families lost their land (see Herre and Feodoroff 2014). Responding to these events, community groups and human rights organisations formed the Clean Sugar Campaign. Given that the Cambodian government was itself involved in the land sale, the campaign's search for justice took on an international dimension. First of all they tried to pressure the investing companies by filing complaints with the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. Then they turned their attention to the rules and relationships incentivising sugar export. They pressurised the European Union to suspend the free trade access it gave to Cambodia, began legal proceedings against Tate & Lyle in the UK for importing illegally produced sugar, and publicly shamed the project's financial backers, Deutsche Bank and ANZ Bank, to make them withdraw their money. This can be described as a form of 'boomerang activism' (Keck and Sikkink 1998) – working through institutions in other countries meant that the campaign first left Cambodia but then came back.

In the course of their activism, campaigners did not just point out the breaches of law involved in the 'land grabs' but also made a political argument about why this way of producing food should be opposed. This turned on the fact that it was not just people's livelihoods that were being threatened but also their identity. The land that was lost was used not only to grow rice and collect water but also to worship ancestral graves. It was their home as well as their workplace. This is a common experience of people displaced by commercial agriculture – they are not just victims of dispossession but see their very way of life destroyed. The position of the traditional peasant adopted in the campaign thus gave it a broader resonance in global civil society. For example, the charity Oxfam has used the plight of the Cambodian peasants as an example of the dangers facing rural dwellers the world over, and has lobbied companies like Coca-Cola to make sure they source ingredients like sugar in a responsible fashion. However, there is still a long way to go for full restoration or compensation for the land loss, and unfortunately much of the damage has already been done.

Conclusion

The cases presented in this chapter show that political authority over food is globally dispersed. People in each case were affected by decisions taken in the state, in international organisations and in corporations. This constellation of institutions, sometimes referred to as global governance, reminds us that power does not lie in any one single site, even though in certain situations some actors take on greater significance than others. Thanks to our bottom-up approach, we also saw how individuals outside these central institutions can inform and challenge the way that governance is organised. The chapter demonstrated how professional networks, charities, trade unions, political groups and even celebrity chefs all claimed their own kind of authority on the basis of expertise, morality, membership or personality. This allowed them to speak for large numbers of ordinary people; the kind of people often

excluded from top-down accounts of global politics. The chapter also showed how looking at different subject positions can help explain how collective action happens. Some positions were based on political identity (the disenfranchised citizen, the civic participant), some on familial identity (the protective parent, the bad mother), and some on economic identity (the deserving worker, the traditional peasant). What is important about each of these is the way they spoke to people in a particular way, giving them a shared lens on the world and a common language to articulate it. These positions are also important in shaping international relations, along with class relations, race relations and gender relations. They show how global food politics are built from the bottom up, based on contested ideas about who we are and what is in our best interests.

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