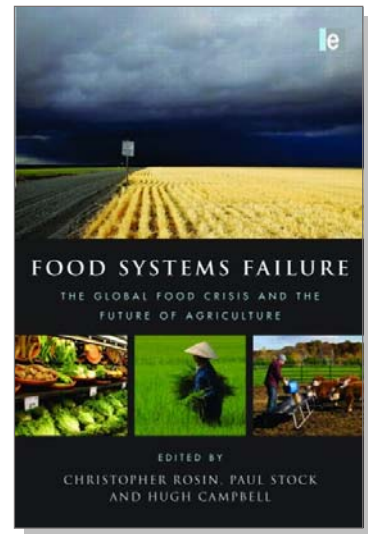


The possibilities and pitfalls of future food systems

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Review of *Food Systems Failure: The Global Food Crisis and the Future of Agriculture*, by edited by Christopher Rosin, Paul Stock, and Hugh Campbell. (2012). Published by Routledge in its Earthscan Food and Agriculture series. Available as hardcover and paperback; 242 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.routledge.com/products/9781849712293>



Submitted October 15, 2015 / Published online January 14, 2016

Citation: Fazzino, D. V., II. (2016). The possibilities and pitfalls of future food systems [Book review]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6(2), 303–305. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.062.002>

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The contributors in the 14 chapters of *Food Systems Failure: The Global Food Crisis and the Future of Agriculture*, through different theoretical perspectives, view the global economic and food crisis of 2008 as a reflection of pervasive structural inequalities present in food systems, rather than as a one-off event or crisis. The text is a product of a regional conference focused on the global food crisis and was one of a series of conferences held

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to address what were perceived as pressing problems in food systems at a variety of scales. Organizationally, the text maintains internal coherence through introductory and concluding chapters by the editors, the use of an index, and the efforts of the various contributors as they reference one another's chapters. Taken as whole, *Food Systems Failure* provides fertile ground for discussions in where we have been in conceptualizing food systems and where we might be going, including the power of envisioning “utopic possibilities” in the face of neoliberal “realities.”

These “realities” require a selective interpretation of data by separating marketable products from the processes of production. This is apparent in the discussion of Marx’s “metabolic rift,” where in soils and labor are exploited in the process of

accumulating capital (Colin Butler and Jane Dixon's chapter 7, "Plentiful Food? Nutritious Food?"). Externalities and increasing vulnerabilities, including the impacts of climate change on agriculture, are also considered (Geoffrey Lawrence, Carol Richards, Ian Gray and Naomi Hansar's chapter 9, "Climate Change and the Resilience of Commodity Food Production in Australia").

Advocates of the neoliberal, productivist approach to agriculture tend to justify their continued exploitation of social and ecological systems by describing their endeavors as heroic ventures to feed the world. The multitude of challenges in food systems, including the failure of food systems to live up to their full potential in provisioning each one of us with sufficient and high-quality food, presents neoliberal actors with an opportunity to suggest solutions. Scoping these issues as a series of interrelated crises implores actions, something, indeed anything must be done in the name of the future sustainability of social and ecological systems. This allows for a wide latitude of potential solutions, some of which appear to be less scrutinized than others. This is likely the case in Robert Watson's prologue, "Food Security — Now is the Future," wherein he notes that "there is considerable debate over the environmental impact of biofuels" that can "raise fuel prices and reduce our ability to alleviate hunger" (p. xiii). He nevertheless maintains that, "increased public and private investments are needed to develop next-generation biofuels" (p. xiii). In doing so he seemingly argues for a technological fix and neglects the issue of social justice, such as global land grabs, in the name of "developing" the energy sector as discussed in Philip McMichael's chapter 5, "Biofuels and the Financialisation of the Global Food System."

A short way down the same page, Watson continues calling for more technology in the face of climate change and world hunger:

Currently, the most contentious issue in agriculture science is the use of recombinant DNA techniques to produce transgenic products, primarily because there is not yet widespread agreement on the

environmental, human health and economic risks and benefits of such products. Many believe that less technology and intervention is the answer. But, against a backdrop of a changing climate and the threat of even larger parts of the world going hungry, it is clear that integrated advances in biotechnology, nanotechnology, remote sensing and communication technology, for instance, will be important in providing opportunities for more resource efficient and site-specific agriculture. For any technology it will be critical to assess the risks and benefits on a case-by-case basis. (pp. xiii–xiv)

I reproduce this paragraph in full in order to examine some of the underlying assumptions that Watson utilizes in order to justify the use of all means available. Here Watson reiterates the near-inescapable triumphant narratives of industries that have been the primary drivers of these technologies, have worked to control the flow of scientific information on said technologies (as the recent reports on glyphosate indicate), and have attempted to assert the moral high ground by stressing the importance of using all possible avenues in order to arrest human death and suffering resulting from nutritional deficiencies. While acknowledging that transgenic products (GMOs) are contentious, Watson flattens and marginalizes the varied counterarguments by simply noting, "Many believe that less technology and intervention is the answer" (p. xiii). He then goes on to equate efficiency with the increased use of technologies, suggesting they can work in synchrony with one another to provide "opportunities for more resource efficient and site-specific agriculture" (p. xiv).

The prologue is particularly noteworthy in the context of how the editors frame their analysis in chapter 1, by noting the tension between corporate control of agriculture that necessarily treats foods as commodities, and in chapter 14 (Table 14.1, p. 224) where they refer to genetic modification as a nonsystemic change that in itself "can only perpetuate the business-as-usual model" (p. 225). The use of GMOs is specifically challenged in several chapters. Navé Wald, Christopher Rosin, and Doug Hill's chapter, "'Soyisation' and Food

Security in South America,” discusses the social meaning of GMO use, particularly how elites associate GMOs with modernization and the ideal of productivity, whereas “an exemplary anti-hegemonic peasant organization” views them as destructive of forests (p. 167). The aforementioned chapter 9 covers how GMOs are promoted by the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics as a part of a neoliberal approach to agriculture and how GMOs are typically paired with “expensive proprietary petrochemicals” (p. 142), which increase costs to farmers and exacerbate climate change. Finally, Paul Stock and Michael Carolan’s chapter 8, “A Utopian Perspective on Global Food Security,” recalls the qualitative rejection of U.S. shipments of GMO corn as food aid to southern Africa, underscoring that what is acceptable food is more than calories to be gratefully consumed (p. 116).

This is not to suggest that the contributors of this volume are merely celebratory of local and alternative food institutions, as the utopic possibilities are balanced with potential pitfalls in terms of social justice (see the aforementioned chapter 8 and Kristen Lyons and Kiah Smith’s chapter 12, “Negotiating Organic, Fair and Ethical Trade: Lessons from Smallholders in Uganda and Kenya”). While Hugh Campbell’s chapter 3, “Let Us Eat Cake? Historically Reframing the Problem of World Hunger and its Purported Solutions,”

shows us that shifts in food systems are indeed possible, as there have been two historical shifts in the last 170 years, current and historical models of food systems fall short of being models of food systems sustainability. While solutions are varied and particular, they fail to reach a one-size-fits-all solution for replacing the approach of production agriculture. As the editors note in their concluding chapter, “the underlying concern of the contributing authors is that more just, flexible and productive food systems are subject to the overwhelming influence of structural constraints and local context. Perhaps the key conclusion to be drawn from this group of cases is that we must abandon the beguiling notion that there is *one* solution for world hunger” (p. 223). This is a powerful shift that avoids what the editors frame as the pitfall of entertaining the “global trap.” This would entail shifts to more appropriately scaled models wherein alternative (utopian) governance spaces and possibilities for culturally embedded agriculture (see Jules Pretty’s chapter 2, “Agriculture and Food Systems: Our Current Challenge”) can more freely emerge as they have in some settings (see Alec Thornton’s chapter 13, “Food for Thought? Linking Up Urban Agriculture and Local Food Production for Food Security and Development in the South Pacific”) so that food can become a human right we all enjoy (see Claire Mahon’s chapter 6, “The Right to Food: A Right for Everyone”). 