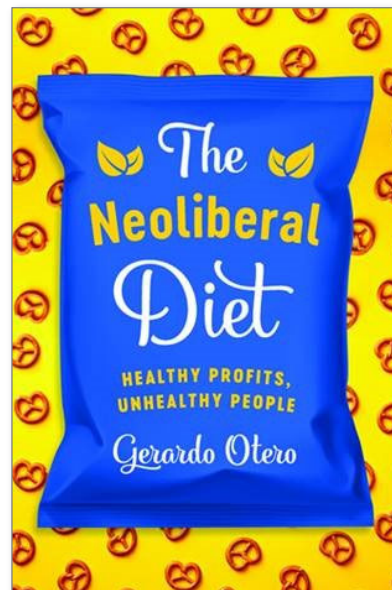


The capitalist diet: Energy-dense and profitable

Review by Nicholas Freudenberg, City University of New York *

Review of *The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People* by Gerardo Otero. (2018). Published by University of Texas Press. Available in hardcover and paperback; 256 pages. Publisher's website: <https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/otero-the-neoliberal-diet>



Submitted March 4, 2019 / Published online July 9, 2019

Citation: Freudenberg, N. (2019). The capitalist diet: Energy-dense and profitable [Book review]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 9(1), 139–140. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2019.091.013>

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The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People analyzes how global diets have changed in recent decades, what caused these changes, and who loses and gains by the transformation. Author Gerardo Otero is a professor of international studies at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and the author of several previous books on the global food system. In the book, Otero describes how the global diet that emerged at the turn of the 21st century has contributed to worldwide increases in overweight and obesity and how neoliberalism, the variant of capitalism that evolved in this period, promotes obesogenic diets.

Neoliberalism posits that markets are best equipped to solve all problems and that by deregulating, privatizing, and emphasizing

individual responsibility, governments can unleash capitalist economies for growth (Harvey, 2007). Harvey describes neoliberalism as the corporate capitalist class's political response to the threats to their control that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Otero makes several points that warrant the attention of food policy analysts and advocates. First, he shows how changes in global food regimes such as the growth of corporate managed food trade, the consolidation of agribusiness and food sectors into a handful of giant transnational corporations, and the industrial production of corn, soy, and sugar have created a new global diet. Carlos Monteiro, a Brazilian nutritionist, and his colleagues call the energy-dense, nutrient-poor, highly processed foods that these companies produce *ultraprocessed* food (Monteiro et al., 2019). Their research shows that ultraprocessed food constitutes a growing share of calories consumed in high-income countries and is rapidly gaining in low- and middle-income countries. Ultraprocessed

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food has been associated with the rise of diet-related diseases and obesity (Monteiro, Moubarac, Cannon, Ng, & Popkin, 2013).

Second, Otero makes the case that the neo-liberal diet exacerbates inequities between what low-income and wealthier people eat. Ultraprocessed food is generally cheaper and more available than healthier food and therefore is consumed more by the poor, while the better off can afford what Otero calls luxury foods—year-round fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and some kinds of meat. Around the world, inequitable access to healthy food is becoming the leading driver of inequitable rates of premature deaths and preventable illnesses from diet-related diseases (Peeters & Blake, 2016), a dire consequence of the globalization of the neoliberal diet.

Third, Otero coins the term “neoregulation” (pp. 39–43) to describe regulations that arise from partnerships between corporations and governments. He observes that neoliberalism not only deregulates but also shifts the focus of government oversight from protecting consumers to protecting corporations. Neoregulation emphasizes the protection of intellectual property rights for agribusinesses, voluntary public-private partnerships as an alternative to mandatory government regulations, and using public support to enlist universities and scientists in corporate research. According to Otero, neoregulation supports the evolving cooperation between national governments and corporations that characterizes neoliberalism.

The changing role of government leads

Otero to make a fourth point: governments can play an important role in protecting populations against harmful dietary changes. Some countries, even while engaging with the global economy and international trade, have made it a priority to safeguard their farmers and agricultural sectors, as a way to supply their own populations with real food and promote local economic development (p. 158). Until recently, Brazil illustrated this approach (Fukuda-Parr, 2018). Thus, he advocates efforts by civil society to pressure governments to defend farmers and eaters in the face of the embrace of the neoliberal food regime by corporations and high-income countries.

Finally, Otero highlights the roles of social movements in resisting neoliberalism and creating alternatives. He describes the role of social movements in the United States and elsewhere in improving conditions for food workers, taxing unhealthy commodities, protecting small farmers, expanding public food procurement, regulating the genetic modification of food, and enforcing anti-trust laws. These mobilizations challenge the dominant neoliberal food system and create spaces for testing more transformative reforms.

By engaging with other social movements, including those for strengthening democracy, defending immigrants, creating a universal health care system, and expanding the rights of workers, women, and other excluded groups, the food justice movement can contribute to the idea that another world—and another diet—are in fact possible.

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