

## **Ideals are Important, But Our Reality Has Other Ideas**

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### **Abstract**

Barnhill and Bonotti ask how liberals might justify public policies to promote healthier diets. Milburn asks how a decent food system would involve other animals, and considers why liberal states should foster such a system. I welcome these attempts to imagine ways to feed people better and treat other animals with humanity, and to relate these to liberal ideals.

My comments offer some reservations. Barnhill, Bonotti and Milburn suggest compelling grounds for states to intervene. I would prefer to say: there are compelling grounds for states to intervene *differently*. These books set aside the structure of existing food systems. But to explain why the world's more liberal states have ignored similar arguments over many decades, we need to take some view of these systems. In fact, these systems rest on interventions by liberal-democratic states. These interventions show little regard for liberal reasoning. Their results are bad for human health, and disastrous for animal and planetary well-being.

These points support the authors' calls for more rational, liberal and humane food policies, with one caveat. Democratic debate can only make headway if we appreciate how many policies carry us in the wrong directions. When we consider how ideals support state intervention, we should be realistic about how states currently intervene.

### **Keywords**

Food systems; State power; Trans-national corporations; Sustainability; Inequality

## **Background: A drumbeat of warnings about global food systems**

The world's food systems are in terrible shape. They are genuinely global and systemic – interconnected in complex chains of matter and energy, dependency and power. Costs, risks and benefits range over the planet, reflecting profound national and global inequalities.

These food systems economise brutally on priced inputs – human labour, above all. Agricultural and food workers face exploitation and abuse at every stage. At the same time, these systems are utterly wasteful of unpriced inputs – ecological resources, above all. They damage and destroy ecosystems at a horrifying rate.

Costs and damage fall unevenly and unequally. When some parts fail, this brings chaos and hunger to many. Other parts continue to function – more or less, for the time being. Resources still flow to people protected by economic and political power. Everyone else must scratch a living from whatever is left.

Commodity crops are the basic material ingredient of this system: wheat, rice, soy, corn, oilseeds, sugar. Their monoculture is bad for ecosystems. It usually depends on high rates of pesticide and fertiliser use; it displaces biological diversity. Diets based on commodity crops are bad for human health. Some commodities make decent staple foods, at least if not refined. But healthy diets also require fruits, vegetables, and additional protein. Soy is high in protein, but almost all the world's production is used for animal feed, oil and biofuel.

Still, commodities are ideal for transport, food processing, feeding industrial livestock, and financial trading and speculation (Clapp 2023). The result is systems that funnel ultra-processed foods and industrial meat to those who can afford them, wherever they may be. As Barnhill and Bonotti stress, this promotes unhealthy diets even for the world's better-off people. As Milburn stresses, the planet now resembles a giant meat grinder. Most non-human

animals live and die in awful conditions so that wealthier people can eat their bodies and products.

This meat grinder is astonishingly wasteful. Animal husbandry makes environmental sense in some niches. But industrial meat is an abomination, not just morally but also in ecological and energetic terms. It destroys huge quantities of food to create a much smaller output. It causes massive pollution, not to mention antibiotic resistance and zoonotic diseases. It functions, first, because of cheap commodity crops and freedoms to damage ecological resources. It functions, second, because of global inequality: relatively privileged consumers who can pay, non-human animals whose suffering counts for nothing.

As Barnhill has noted elsewhere: ‘There is a drumbeat of calls from experts and institutions for urgent and dramatic action on healthy and sustainable diets’ (Barnhill & Fanzo, 2021, p. 73). Experts have been drumming the calls for change for at least half a century, ever since the ‘green revolution’ promised to end hunger. One problem is that, on an unequal globe, increased yields do not follow need (De Schutter, 2015) – think of all that soy pouring into the industrial meat grinder. From the start, critics also warned about fertiliser pollution, environmental damage from pesticides, reliance on subsidies and commercial inputs, and these methods’ irrelevance to marginal or drought-prone contexts. Some hope that this industrial-agricultural revolution can turn to ‘sustainable intensification’. This names a worthy goal, not the stubborn trends.

So far as food systems are concerned, every significant measure moves in the wrong direction: more reliance on a few commodity crops, more complex supply chains, accelerating loss of finite resources, more land grabs, more deforestation, more pollution, more ultra-processed foods, more industrial meat, more greenhouse gas emissions, more biofuel, less support for

small farmers and peasants, fewer rewards for stewarding land and natural resources, less investment for the future, more pressure to focus on the shortest of short-terms.

The world's food systems are bound to change drastically, and soon. We are crossing planetary boundaries with terrifying prospects; agriculture is one of the main culprits (Richardson et al., 2023); climate collapse spells disaster for every part. We had better have better alternatives in view, if we are to prevent something even worse.

So I happily endorse the prescriptions of Barnhill and Bonotti's book, and warmly welcome Milburn's attempt to envision food systems that take proper account of our fellow animals. Public health is a powerful 'public reason' to change our food systems. Ending cruelty is a compelling reason to stop the industrial use and consumption of animals.

### **Two reservations about these books' approach**

Nonetheless, I have two reservations. The first is that the long 'drumbeat' of similar arguments has had so little effect. The problems with our food systems are systematic and dynamic: for decades, they have been growing in defiance of material limits and rational argument. In this situation, I think even ideal theorists should consider why the real moves so relentlessly away from any realistic ideal.

Part of the answer is that our food systems are economies of visibility. Better-off people and politicians see hardly anything – including the threats now impairing these systems. Better-off consumers can also be grateful for what they do see. Although ultra-processed foods and industrial meat pose long-term health risks, they are safe, plentiful, and cheap. Although we are seeing (and *not seeing*) the first cracks in supply chains, supermarkets carry an astonishing variety of other foods, too.

Off-stage, the larger corporations operate in night and fog. They are experts at keeping secrets; they lobby for laws to conceal their abuses. Mostly they face away from consumers and citizens – shipping, commodity trading, chemicals, machinery, seeds. Large food companies and supermarkets cloak themselves with elaborate marketing and PR. Even if we see through this fog, the systems are so vast and complex that they defy overview.

The result is widespread social ignorance. Many people feel some anxieties, given the experts' distant drumbeat. But surely, if it were as bad as all that, there would be urgent concern. So things can't be that bad. Kept in the dark, we sing ourselves a lullaby.

But it is the dynamics of state activity, also largely unseen, that I want to emphasise here. Barnhill and Bonotti ask: how might liberals justify public policies to foster healthier diets in wealthier countries? In the final chapter of his book, Milburn joins them by exploring parallel arguments: how can liberals (and others) justify state policies to recognise animals' rights in food systems?

Here is my second reservation. This framing ignores – and, I fear, obscures – how deeply states are involved in our food systems. In my view, questions about legitimate state intervention, or broader political responses, are better framed if we acknowledge how states are already intervening. When we consider what political measures are apt, let us keep one eye on how states currently act.

Narratives that ignore state involvement have been a major factor in the worsening dynamics of global food systems. Alongside the view that markets are the best way to manage supply and demand, the idea that states are only marginally involved generates a burden of proof. It seems as if proposals for state interventions in food systems need some extra justification. Otherwise, we should leave things to 'the market'. Business lobbies have made much of this line.

Obviously, I agree that justifications can be given for state intervention – not least, the ‘public reasons’ advocated by Barnhill and Bonotti. My objection is that our authors implicitly adopt a laissez-faire baseline: that is, they discuss the issues as if states were not already much engaged. I have no objection to exploring prescriptions and ideals. I do worry about idealisations that obscure current realities (O’Neill, 1987).

Perhaps our authors will agree that state activity is crucial to the structure and dynamics of our food systems. Still, I will take the risk of pushing at an open door and do my best to hammer home the point. Liberal-democratic states don’t just intervene; they act in astonishingly destructive ways. They create and uphold food systems that feed better-off people unhealthily, do much worse by poor people, treat animals abominably, and break planetary limits. Our food systems are nothing like the free(ish) markets of liberal theory, needing only some decent interventions in the name of public reason. These systems rest on public policies that serve only sectional interests, both within liberal states and worldwide.

### **States structure food systems at three levels**

As I see it, there are three key levels at which states intervene. I offer a few comments to illustrate each.

First, there are policies by which states structure food systems. Agricultural subsidies provide the most striking instance. State commitments to producing large quantities of a few crops were central to the food regime that emerged after the Second World War. This had a sound justification: starvation and mass hunger are intolerable; let there be, at least, basic commodity crops to prevent this. State-sponsored development of these crops is largely history. Rich countries’ huge subsidies are not.

The unintended effects of these subsidies have been visible for at least half a century, even as the original justification has disappeared. Massive commodity production enables industrial meat, the ultra-processed food industry, and biofuels. It depends on an agro-industrial complex based on interlocking use of fertilisers, pesticides, seeds and machinery. Both are possible only because water, soil, biodiversity and pollution are treated as costless or nearly so. Commodity systems overproduce unsustainably and undercut sustainable alternatives; they *still* leave people to starve. No public reasons can support this.

Second, these policies sit alongside global arrangements that enable international resource flows and ignore transnational pollution. Beginning with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, 1948–1994), international trade rules hinder governments from subsidising export industries. Richer countries always insisted that agriculture be exempted. This allowed them to export subsidised crop surpluses worldwide. The costs to small-scale farmers in poorer countries are well-known: their unsubsidised, non-industrial crops cannot compete. The resulting dynamics favour more industrial agriculture, more reliance on commodities for feeding people, and – given sizeable inequalities and the increasing ease of global shipping – the growth of a meat industry that feeds on cheap commodities to feed the better-off.

The world's more liberal states imposed these arrangements deliberately and against much resistance. They did the same in the mid-90s, when the World Trade Organization was formed from GATT, with new 'intellectual property' provisions. In Jagdish Bhagwati's words, the WTO became a 'royalty-collection agency' – imposing 'an unrequited transfer' to rich countries (2002). Patents and similar measures reward research and development by granting now-global monopolies – mostly to business corporations.

We rarely notice the logic of this system. States ensure rewards for research in excludable, standardised, saleable products. This research has no interest in readily shared innovations or

the needs of anyone who cannot pay. As such, it cannot serve small or poor farmers well. Such research has no stake in broader ecological resources. Inevitably, it looks to standardised crops grown at industrial scale for paying markets. It has locked new seed varieties™ together with new pesticides™ and artificial fertilisers™, not to mention novel animal strains™ bred for brutal factory conditions. ‘Sustainable intensity’ has joined ‘food plenty’ on the advertised menu. But it has no place at this table.

Our food systems do not need corporate research sustained by state-sponsored exclusions, monopolies and licence fees. Better food systems need sustained research into sustainable farming: of diverse crops; in diverse environments experiencing increasingly chaotic weather conditions; with the fewest possible industrial inputs and least possible pollution. This demands the widest possible dissemination of findings to farmers who have little ability to pay. The research must reflect their priorities. In a world that has already over-shot planetary limits, state support for saleable, profitable inputs is not just inept but deadly.

Third, legal frameworks provide the organisational basis for food systems – above all, their corporate structure. Alongside commodity crops and state-imposed monopoly rights, the other basic component of global food systems is transnational business corporations (TNCs). It is these organisations which handle food as a global commodity. This level may be the hardest to recognise – and, I fear, the hardest to change.

On many framings, TNCs are creatures of the ‘free market’. But a corporation can only exist by virtue of political and legal intervention (Ciepley 2013; Pistor 2019). In the first place (roughly, the second half of the nineteenth century), states in Europe and north America authorised incorporation based on directorial power and shareholding. These corporations were also granted the power to own shares in other corporations. Then, European powers imposed these laws worldwide, mostly as part of colonialism (Pistor et al. 2002, pp. 799f). The result

was the emergence of TNCs: organisations headquartered in one state, with subsidiaries operating abroad.

Legally, a subsidiary is a corporation in its own right, authorised by the laws of whichever state it operates in. But its shares are owned by another corporation. This gives headquarters the power to appoint the subsidiary's directors. Those directors do not, therefore, run the subsidiary as a business in its own right – as corporate law originally anticipated. Instead, the subsidiary's directors act at the behest of headquarters: local activities reflect foreign decision-making and priorities.

In contrast to normal market transactions, then, one party determines everything that the other does. Subsidiaries buy and sell from headquarters on terms set by headquarters. This makes up the vast majority of international 'trade'. As Salvador Allende put it in 1972, a year before his death in a US-supported coup, weaker countries find their economies 'dominated by foreign powers; outsiders hold all or part of their territory; they still endure the yoke of colonialism' (quoted in Pahuja & Saunders 2019, p. 149).

This state-sponsored arrangement has major costs for state power and for healthy, humane food systems. Poorer states can hardly regulate or constrain foreign-run subsidiaries. For these states and their elites, even slight financial benefits outweigh the costs to weaker citizens and ecological resources. Richer states happily accept their gains – albeit only a small trickle relative to corporations' and larger shareholders'. As I have stressed, the whole system is oriented around the following: commodity crops (interchangeable and storable, so only marginally affected by climate or ecological crises in specific regions) or cash crops (whereby scarce local resources earn a few foreign dollars); research and development of excludable, saleable technologies and inputs (irrelevant or damaging so far as sustainability and poorer

farmers are concerned); heavily processed foods (risky for human health); and industrial meat (a moral and ecological crime).

## **Conclusion**

My comments challenge the framing of Barnhill and Bonotti's argument, also adopted by Milburn in his final chapter. We do not need to justify fresh or more determined state interventions – not primarily, anyhow. More important, the world's wealthier, more liberal states must face up to their damaging activities and policies.

At best, these policies reflect only short-term and sectional interests. They are unjustified in terms of public reasoning or other liberal ideals. They give legal blessing to immeasurable cruelty to animals and to 'using the commons as a cesspool' (Hardin, 1968, p. 1245). They empower transnational corporations – businesses which exercise huge power across borders, but which are powerless against market pressures: to cut costs, to exploit un(der)priced resources, and to privilege those who can pay.

Of course, we may fear that states hardly know how to stop. Against the drumbeat of warnings, they have made and encouraged and enforced these systems. As the ecological costs finally fall due, richer states remain best insulated from paying. Nonetheless, progress toward healthier or humane or sustainable systems requires us to face the culprit: not state inaction, but interlocking layers of state activity. Even when we focus on ideals, we should not idealise our starting point or ignore the dynamics driving increasing harms to human, animal and planetary health.

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