

Against Food Security: On Forms of Care and Fields of Violence

Abstract

This paper addresses recent changes to the policy landscape on global food security. It argues that a new consensus is emerging on how to tackle (or more hubristically 'end') global hunger and spur agricultural development. The consensus I speak of is evident in recent briefings by the World Economic Forum (especially its 'New Vision for Agriculture'), the 'New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition,' initiated by the G-8 (now G-7), the Grow Africa network, the US government's 'Feed the Future' programme, the philanthropy-led, Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa, not to mention the many flagship reports emanating from the International Financial Institutions as well key statements from global food retailers and leading agribusinesses. The paper argues that this 'new vision' for global agriculture is deeply problematic. Indeed the projected 'solutions' – in so far as they aim to radically transform agricultural life, especially in Africa – may well cause more harm than good. To put this argument more forcefully: what today is commonly called 'food security' is perhaps better seen as a way of subjugating the poor under the pretence of doing them good.

Key words: *Food Security, Poverty, Development, Philanthropy, Green Revolution*

Behind the last row of seats, a line of television cameras balanced on tripods, and as the huddled masses of scheming *journalisti* pushed into the little theatre, so did the buzz of prime-time hunger – transnational media, topic-A, try-to-spin-it-your-editor’s-way hunger. This was just the kind of hunger extravaganza the FAO publicity pack had labored for months to achieve: stuffed-pressroom, *carabinieri*-guarded, media-credentialed, and security-checked hunger, attended to by hordes of harried interns and crimson-blazered, perma-smiling FAO staff. This was the Nobel Peace Prize hunger, private-reception hunger, bedizened and be-flagged, flanked and branded by baby-blue FAO logo. Here was hunger tailored-made for the TV standups in their heels and makeup, ready for starvation Q&A. Here was hunger all gussied up in its ancient royal regalia, ready to seduce column inches from the *New York Times* and Reuters and Newsweek and the BBC. This was scramble-for-your-seat, silver-pitcher-of-iced-water-on-the-desk, video-streaming, closed-circuit hunger. High-Level Hunger. No hungry people in sight. Everyone could smell a story.

– Frederick Kaufman, *Bet the Farm: How Food Stopped Being Food*

INTRODUCTION

When the G8 met for its 34th summit in Hokkaidō, Japan, in the summer of 2008, global hunger was high on the agenda. The recent global food price crisis of 2007-2008 had shattered any optimism of achieving the second Millennium Development Goal dedicated to halving the proportion of people globally that suffer hunger (never mind the more ambitious World Food Summit goal of halving the total number of hungry people in the world by 2015). The G8 promised immediate and firm action. Hunger would be tackled, high prices would be dampened and political stability restored. But then the news broke.

Somehow the dinner menu from the luxurious Windsor hotel, where the world leaders dined, was leaked to the press. ‘To be sure, no-one expects senior politicians discussing poverty and hunger to survive off airdropped rice,’ commented Tim Hayward at the *Guardian*, but a menu consisting of nineteen extravagant dishes – including such mouth-watering delights as sea-urchin, caviar, kelp-flavoured cold kyoto beef (served with asparagus and dressed with sesame cream), a ‘G8 fantasy dessert,’ all washed down from a choice of five different wines and liqueurs – highlighted the hypocrisy of the ‘hungercrats’ who publicly warned the poor of the coming austerity, instructing them to ‘tighten their belts,’ meanwhile, satiated and satisfied, they loosen theirs.¹

The press leak chastened and embarrassed global leaders. Instead of directing the public gaze to the plight of the ‘haves less,’ attention turned instead to the ethics and behaviour of the global elite. In the flurry of reporting and commentary that followed, journalists questioned not only the integrity of the political classes –

¹ Tim Hayward, “On the Menu at the G8: *The Guardian* (July 2008), available: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2008/jul/07/g8japanfoodmenu> (accessed September 2015); Frederick Kaufman, *Bet the Farm: How Food Stopped Being Food* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2012) p. 132.

understandably their conduct was widely castigated as distasteful and insensitive – but also the very role and symbolic function of hunger summits themselves at which global leaders seem to take turns to outdo one another in the politics of pity. The daily expressions of solidarity and promises of humanitarian assistance that pour forth from such meetings seemed to some to be a cynical exercise in diversion – *panem et circenses*, only with caviar instead of bread.

In academic circles a great deal of work has been undertaken on how we represent stricken others. In the work of Boltanski on ‘distant suffering’², in Benthall’s writing on the emergence on ‘disaster-media-relief complex’³, in Susan Moeller’s work on the Western geographical imagination of suffering⁴, and indeed in a whole slew of recent writing on the politics of philanthropy⁵ and humanitarianism⁶, the spectacle of ‘the body in pain’ is often described as a necessary precondition for Westerners to imagine themselves as the valiant redeemer of an abject disaster victim.⁷ Indeed, Alex de Waal has even suggested that aid agencies and international relief organisations knowingly peddle traumatic images, deliberately amplify the sense of crisis, in order to promote and fund their efforts to ease the misfortune of others.⁸ For this reason Jonathon Benthall argues that we conceptualise giving as a *form of exchange*; broadly speaking images of suffering flow northwards, while packages of aid flow southwards.⁹ As well as enabling the Western aid reflex these tragedy-as-spectacle events also allow non-sufferers to cling to the cosy conceit that they are not responsible for the pain on display.¹⁰ The more tragedy we see, the more we redouble our efforts to wage war against misfortune – to ‘end’ hunger, ‘eradicate’ disease, and to ‘make poverty history.’ Ours is a mission of reform, not recompense, because we cannot readily see how we have anything to do with the suffering presented to us, except of course to bravely help with its remediation.

² Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ Jonathon Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2010).

⁴ Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (London, Routledge, 1999).

⁵ For example, see Behrooz Morvaridi, “Capitalist Philanthropy and the New Green Revolution for Food Security”, *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture & Food*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2012), pp 243–256; David Nally and Stephen Taylor, “The politics of self-help: The Rockefeller Foundation, philanthropy and the “long” Green Revolution”, *Political Geography* (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.04.005>; Japhy Wilson, “Fantasy Machine: Philanthrocapitalism as an Ideological Formation”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 7 (2012), pp 1144–1161.

⁶ See, for example, Samuel Moyn, 2014. *Human Rights and the Uses of History*. London: Verso, 2014); Simon Reid-Henry, “Humanitarianism as Liberal Diagnostic: The Geography of Humanitarian Reason and the Political Rationalities of the Liberal Will-to-Care”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2012): pp 418–431; Rob Skinner and Alan Lester, “Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas”, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (2012): pp 729–747

⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁸ Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: African Rights & The International African Institute in Association with James Curry and Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁹ Benthall, *op. cit.* p xiv.

¹⁰ James Wan, “The Politics of Pity”, *New African* (January, 2015), pp 10–12.

The present essay is an effort to extend the kinds of critical discussions that flowed in the wake of the G-8 scandal as well as add to the various academic critiques sketched above. In what follows I try to scratch behind the benevolent-sounding sentiments and pledges of the ‘hungercrats’ to expose the power dynamics and the global structures that lie hidden at their base. Exposing those power dynamics and global structures is important not least because the ministration of programmes of aid, far from being the solution to poverty, is frequently part of poverty’s perpetuation. Indeed, the claim to ‘help’ and ‘assist,’ as philosopher Marianne Gronemeyer has argued, is often ‘a means of keeping the bit in the mouths of subordinates without letting them feel the power that is guiding them.’¹¹ Here narratives of help and redemption are a constitutive moment in the creation and reproduction of the conditions of oppression – what poet Seamus Heaney memorably termed ‘pap for the dispossessed.’¹²

In what follows I apply these insights to the discourses and practices of global food security, and especially the recrudescence of food security initiatives in the wake of the global food crisis. My concern is that a consensus is emerging on how best to tackle global hunger and deliver agricultural development. The consensus I am talking about is evident in briefings by the World Economic Forum (especially its ‘New Vision for Agriculture’), the G-8’s ‘New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition,’ the Grow Africa network, the US government’s ‘Feed the Future’ programme, the philanthropy-led, ‘Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa,’ not to mention the many flagship reports emanating from the International Financial Institutions as well strategic statements from global food retailers and leading agribusinesses.

The formation of a consensus is troubling in my view. The US army General George Patton used to say that ‘if everyone is thinking alike then somebody isn’t thinking.’ How well this truism applies to the food security solutions today where the trend – with a few important exceptions – is to promote high-tech, capitalist agriculture and market-led initiatives to resolve global food insecurity. If pursued, I argue, this ‘solution’ will lead to lasting and drastic changes to land use, most notably the supplanting of small-scale peasant and subsistence-based agriculture with large-scale industrial production of just a few commercial crops. This is what has been happening under the auspices of global farmland acquisitions or what critics term ‘land grabbing’ – whereby local growers are expelled from the land and cash cropping and biofuel production takes their place – but unfortunately the problem, as this essay seeks to show, is much more pervasive than this very specific case might imply.¹³

In my reading, then, the consensus – as I am calling it – rests on a series of *mythologies* about global food insecurity. By ‘mythologies’ I mean a sequence of socially constructed ideas and narratives that over time are ‘naturalized’ as the truth or primary reality. All myths, as Roland Barthes reminds us, are created for a reason; modern myths no less so. In most cases, Barthes continues, ‘myths’ help perpetuate

¹¹ Marianne Gronemeyer, “Helping”, in W. Sachs (ed.) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 55.

¹² Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 130.

¹³ David Nally, “Governing Precarious Lives: Land Grabs, Geopolitics and the Rhetoric of ‘Food Security’” *The Geographical Journal* (2014) doi: 10.1111/geoj/12063; Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

an idea of society that suits the interests of the dominant or ruling classes. In other words, mythologies lend *legitimacy to domination*.¹⁴ Accordingly this paper will address four dominant food security myths, but before proceeding a few disclaimers are in order. First, the selection of four myths is in one sense arbitrary.¹⁵ There are almost certainly more, although what I try to do here is to focus on themes that I feel are most germane to the food policy landscape, especially as it has emerged in the wake of the global food price crisis. Second, although the focus is on recent policy, I do attempt to anchor emergent strategies in the *longue durée* of agrarian development. This is essential if only to isolate the supposed ‘novelty’ of new programmes and policy directions. That said, I am painfully aware that the paper does not do enough to isolate alternatives to the consensus I describe.¹⁶ This is not because such alternatives are too minor or embryonic to be discussed, but rather the opposite: proper treatment of the ideas and strategies of the ‘anti-consensus’ would require a separate paper (or at least a much longer one than the present iteration). Finally, and crucially, braided through this essay is an account of what, after Simon Reid-Henry, we might call the ‘will-to-care’ – that is, the belief that one’s actions are always undertaken for the greater good and thus they ought to be enthusiastically welcomed everywhere.¹⁷ C.S. Lewis’s observation that the dedicated ‘do-gooder’ may be the most dangerous tyrant – because their actions are always carried out ‘with the approval of their own conscience’ – is therefore very germane to this discussion: for while it is certainly possible to extract examples of elites deliberately using mythologies to fool the public, there are many more examples of individuals and organisations acting with the ‘best intentions’.¹⁸ To better appreciate the ideological work of myths we need to grasp the *powers of desire* – the desire to heal, cure and elevate debased others – and how this underwrites and makes possible redemptive acts against misfortune. With a nod to C.S. Lewis, perhaps it is time to consider the desire to ‘save the world’ less as a noble attribute and more as a troubling pathology.¹⁹ With this in mind we begin our analysis with the mythology of utopian technologies, a fine example of ‘benign designs’ with disturbing consequences.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [Trans. by Annette Lavers] (London: Paladin, 1972).

¹⁵ In their best-selling book on global hunger authors Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins identify 12 myths perpetuating hunger; however, in the recent re-issue of that text the original 12 myths have been reduced to 10. Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins, *World Hunger: Twelve Myths* (New York: Grove Press, 1977); Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins, *World Hunger: 10 Myths* (New York: Grove Press, 2015). Susan George’s classic study, *How The Other Half Dies: The Real Reasons for World Hunger* (London: Penguin 1976) was perhaps the first myth-busting book on food security (although the term ‘food security’ only came into currency in the late 1970s). While the present essay owes a great deal to these inspiring and pioneering accounts, it differs from them in focusing attention more squarely on the utopian pretensions underwriting efforts to eradicate hunger and encourage Western-style development.

¹⁶ For a brilliant account of the alternatives to the ‘New Alliance’ programme, for example, see Raj Patel, Rachel Bezner Kerr, Lizzie Shumba and Laifolo Dakishoni, “Cook, Eat, Man, Woman: Understanding the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, Nutritionism and its Alternatives from Malawi”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 42, No 1 (2015): pp. 21-44.

¹⁷ Reid-Henry, “Humanitarianism as Liberal Diagnostic”, pp 418-431.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment”, *Res Judicatae*, Vol. 6 (June 1953) p. 228

¹⁹ See especially Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso 2011); Tania Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Tony Vaux’s, *The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War* (London: Routledge 2001) offers personal account of desire to improve others

MYTH #1: TECHNOLOGY IS THE SOLUTION TO GLOBAL HUNGER

Technology has always been the handmaiden of agrarian development. Once we stopped ‘chasing our food and started to raise it,’ human populations turned to engineering and technology to provide a suitable infrastructure and resource base for increasingly complex modes of living.²⁰ Larger settlements and proto-urban living inspired a transition from extensive to intensive modes of cultivation. Writing systems paved the way for trading structures and a greater degree of agricultural specialization. Much later came the steel plough and the shift from draught-powered to steam- and oil-powered machinery. There followed the chemicalisation of agriculture, nano- and bio-technology, and now synthetic biology. Our technical achievements have meant that modern agriculture has been able to feed a growing population with a wide variety of products even as agricultural labour is performed by fewer and fewer hands.²¹

This is the story of *homo faber*, the ‘creative man’ first theorized by Hannah Arendt.²² ‘Our confidence in [our] human ability to create a vision and shape it for our future,’ writes the serendipitously named Emmanuel Faber, co-Chief Operating Officer at the food company Danone, ‘has led us to believe that the more we put our scientific, rational skills at work to do it and organize ourselves and change our environment, the more likely we are to succeed.’ ‘I will call this our “engineering bias”’, continues Faber, ‘we think we can engineer the world in which we live, and as consequence, the life we live.’²³

Today we are gripped by this ‘engineering bias’, a bias that is at least as dangerous as it is hubristic. Techno-optimists believe that there is a cure-all, engineering solution to virtually every social problem we face. Geo-engineering will reverse climate change. DNA engineering will cure diseases and even produce more ‘desirable’ human traits.²⁴ New workflow software and technologies will interconnect the world, allowing formerly marginalized labour to participate in the global economy (as described in the ‘flat world ontologies’ of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman).²⁵ We are told that in the future ‘smart’ technologies will replace ‘dumb’ people – ‘it is much easier to teach iPhone to take great pictures than it is to teach

²⁰ Monsanto, “Why Does Agriculture Need to be Improved?”, n.p., available:

<http://www.monsanto.com/improvingagriculture/Pages/why-does-agriculture-need-to-be-improved.aspx> (accessed September 2015)

²¹ F Giovanni Federico, *Feeding the World: An Economic History of Agriculture, 1800-2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

²³ Emmanuel Faber, “Some Unconventional Thoughts About Food Security”, (July 2011) available: <http://downtoearth.danone.com/2011/07/19/some-unconventional-thoughts-about-food-security/> (accessed September 2015).

²⁴ For a positive take on bio- and genetic engineering see S.M. Liao, A. Sandberg and R. Roache “Human Engineering and Climate Change”, *Ethics, Policy and the Environment*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2012), pp 206-221. For a more critical reading see Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twentieth-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in The Twenty-First Century* (New York, Penguin, 2005). For a critical reading of Friedman see Matthew Sparke, ‘Everywhere But Always Somewhere: Critical Geographies of the Global South’. *The Global South*, Vol 1, No. 1/2 (2007a), pp 117-126; Matthew Sparke, ‘Acknowledging Responsibility For Space’. *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 31, N. 3 (2007b), pp 395-403.

millions of people to be expert photographers,’ gloats Apple’s promotional literature for its new iSight camera phone – and simulation culture will replace the tedium and tensions of daily life in real, physical space.²⁶ Some of this is extravagant fantasy of course, but it is not unique to our times or to the latest, new-fangled widgets. Billionaire philanthropist, Henry Ford claimed that his automobiles would bring harmony and accord to the globe. ‘In Mexico villages fight one another,’ Ford announced, but ‘if we could give every man in those villages an automobile, let him travel from his home town to another town, and permit him to find out that his neighbors at heart were his friends, rather than his enemies, Mexico would be pacified for all time.’²⁷ Technologies promise to *render complex systems controllable and difficult problems tractable*.

This certainly is one of the great appeals of agrarian technology. Researchers claim that they can design plants to ‘behave’ in new and better ways, creating a more abundant, nutritious, and ‘resilient’ harvest. Pest and disease resistance can be introduced to commercial crops. Higher-yielding varieties can be adapted to thrive in normal and environmentally stressed soils – seen by some to be the answer to climate change and predicted future scarcities. Other scientists promise that a mix of genetic selection, vaccines and reformulated animal feeds can limit the methane emitted by cows and other ruminants, producing ‘clean’ or ‘climate-safe’ animals for the future.²⁸ Still others suggest that lab-made ‘nutrition-smart’ foods will eradicate the suffering caused by micronutrient deficiencies. ‘Golden Rice’ is the poster child for this process of ‘bio-fortification’. Labelled ‘golden’ because of its distinctive hue, enthusiasts claim that the new rice will lead the fight against childhood mortality and ‘hidden hunger’. The Pope has personally blessed golden rice and powerful voices from around the world are presently lobbying for legislative reforms to permit the crops rollout.²⁹

There are, however, several problems with this narrative. First and foremost is the underlying assumption that technologies are ‘socially neutral.’ In its simplest, most reductive form this view assumes that new technologies can be developed in one context and then transplanted into another. Take the U.S government’s ‘Feed the Future’ initiative. Launched by President Barack Obama after the G-8 members and partner countries established a ‘New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition’ (hereafter ‘New Alliance’) in 2012, this initiative is devoted to promoting private sector investment in agriculture development. To this end, ‘Feed the Future’ is cooperating with the Government of India in a ‘Partnership for an Evergreen Revolution.’ The expressed goal is to ‘develop, test, and replicate transformative technologies to extend food security in India, Africa, and around the world.’³⁰ The initiative assumes of course that what global agriculture needs most is a turbo-charged

²⁶ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less from Ourselves* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

²⁷ Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City*. London: Icon Books, 2010), p. 47.

²⁸ Danone, ‘Will “Clean Cows” Change the Face of Agriculture?’, (May 2014), available, <http://downtoearth.danone.com/2014/05/06/will-clean-cows-change-the-face-of-agriculture/> (accessed 21 October 2014).

²⁹ Golden Rice Project. “People Pope Blesses Golden Rice”, (November 2013) <http://www.goldenrice.org> (accessed September 2015)

³⁰ Feed the Future, *Progress Report: Boosting Harvests, Fighting Poverty* (Washington DC: USAID Publications, 2012), p 21.

version of the earlier ‘Green Revolution’ built on a technological package of high-yielding seeds, regular irrigation, and the application of large quantities of chemicals and hydrocarbons to crops. As historian Nick Cullather wryly notes, the ‘new’ Green Revolution begins with the careful rewriting of the ‘old’ one.³¹ Gone are the problems of labour displacement³², soil degradation³³, land consolidation³⁴, social unrest³⁵, and the loss of agro-biodiversity.³⁶ It is assumed that newer and better technologies can obviate these ‘second tier’ social problems. In the words of a flagship World Bank report, ‘The growth of competitive agribusiness in Africa is severely constrained by the low use of modern inputs and limited access to improved technologies. Wider uptake and more intensive use of improved seed, fertilizer, and other inputs would go a long way to closing the African “agricultural performance deficit.”’³⁷

The New Alliance is likewise making technology a touchstone of its development programmes. Through the brokerage of ‘Cooperation Frameworks’ – whereby governments commit to policy reforms and ‘production targets’ and in return the private sector promises certain levels of investment and support – New Alliance intends to abolish all barriers inhibiting the ‘use, flow and acceptance’ of advanced agrarian technologies. In Mozambique, for instance, the government has been asked to completely cease the distribution of free, ‘unimproved seeds’ except for pre-identified staple crops in ‘emergency situations’. In Burkina Faso, Monsanto is helping to promote the ‘intensification of agriculture’ through greater mechanization and the adoption of Bt Cotton (a transgenic plant engineered to produce insecticide). In Ethiopia DuPont are aiding the adoption of hybrid maize. In Tanzania Vodaphone is working to ‘optimize’ food supply chains by partnering smallholders and large agribusinesses. Other ‘Cooperation Frameworks’ include reforms to regulatory and legislative frameworks in order to stimulate the uptake of agrochemicals, nutrition fortification, and fertilisers.³⁸ Unfortunately, little attention has been given to how these frameworks structure and make possible new relations of power in the global food economy.

Indeed this assessment of power is what is most strikingly absent from the eulogies that usually trail technological advancements. Lewis Mumford, the author of the path-breaking book *Technics and Civilization*, is instructive in this regard for he shows us how technologies – from the most primitive to the very polished and

³¹ Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 265.

³² Andrew Pearse. *Seeds of Plenty, Seeds of Want: Social and Economic Implications of the Green Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

³³ Richard Levins and Richard C. Lewontin *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985)

³⁴ Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (London: Portobello Books, 2007)

³⁵ Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (London, Zed Books, 2002)

³⁶ Gordon Conway. *The Doubly Green Revolution: Food for All in the 21st Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1997)

³⁷ World Bank, *Growing Africa: Unlocking the Potential of Agribusiness* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2013), p. xxii.

³⁸ New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, *Progress Report Summary, 2013*. Available: http://new-alliance.org/sites/default/files/resources/New-Alliance-Progress-Report-May2013_compressed.pdf (accessed September 2015).

sophisticated – reorient our habits of thought and generate whole new ways of ordering social existence. The mechanical clock, he warns us, was ‘not merely a means of keeping track of time but of synchronizing the actions of men.’³⁹ With the invention of the clock came a new understanding of space, distance and movement and a new appreciation of punctuality and time-rationing. In turn this obsession with time – including the partitioning of daily life into hours, minutes and seconds – birthed a new appreciation of numbers. Henceforth ‘in time-keeping, in trading, in fighting men counted numbers,’ until finally, ‘as the habit grew,’ explains Mumford, ‘only numbers counted’.⁴⁰ The point is that while we make technology, *it in turn makes us*; it opens up new social relations even as it displaces or suppresses others. Taking heed, then, of the social dimensions of technology, let me offer some additional reservations about the present technification of agriculture.

First, the potential for technologies to deflect attention from more urgent and meaningful social reforms is real and troubling. Again this outcome is not specific to the new suite of agrarian technologies. Indeed in Mexico during the first Green Revolution the adoption of improved seeds was positioned as a surrogate for more difficult (and politically distasteful) land reforms. In a similar way, biofortification diverts attention from the *primary causes* of nutrition deprivation while ‘climate-smart’ foods (drought tolerant wheat, frost tolerant tomatoes etc.) steer research agendas away from mitigation and toward climate-change adaptation and ‘resilience’. Lakshman Yapa’s assertion that the reproductive capacity of nature is being replaced with the ‘productive capacity’ of industrial inputs is as salient as ever.⁴¹ The tendency of technology to replace collective forms of care and knowledge sharing can generate, directly and inadvertently, new patterns of dependency, or what Yapa helpfully terms ‘de-development.’⁴²

Second, we ought to question whether imported, labour-saving agrarian technologies are a help or hindrance in countries where under and un-employment are chronic problems. One need only look to the United States to see how drastic those changes can be. At the turn of the twentieth century close to half of the U.S. population was employed in farming; today less than 1 per cent claim farming as an occupation. In addition, the number of farms has fallen by 63 per cent, while the average farm size has risen 67 per cent.⁴³ ‘The agriculture of science and industry,’ comments Wendell Berry, ‘has served too well the purpose of the industrial economy in reducing the number of landowners and self-employed. It has transformed the United States from a country of many owners to a country of many employees.’⁴⁴

A similar drive to ‘rationalise’ African farm holdings – embedding mechanisation, commercial fertilisers, irrigation and transgenic seeds – could be

³⁹ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, (Chicago, University of Chicago, 2010 [1934]), p. 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴¹ Lakshman Yapa, “What are Improved Seeds? An Epistemology of the Green Revolution”, *Economic Geography*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (1993), pp 254-273.

⁴² Lakshman Yapa, “Improved Seeds and Constructed Scarcity”, in Michael Watts and Richard Peet (eds.) *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 1996), p 69-85.

⁴³ C. Dimitri, A. Efflan and N. Conklin, “The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy”, *United States Department of Agriculture: Economic Information Bulletin* Number 3 (2005), p. 2. Available: <http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/59390/2/eib3.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Wendell Berry, *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009).

catastrophic for the rural poor who typically lack off-farm employment opportunities. As Tania Li explains, there is no rosy proletarian future awaiting peasants who are driven from their farms.⁴⁵ For Mike Davis de-peasantisation has generated a vast ‘global residuum’ of dead labour swelling the slums of the global South – what he colourfully describes as a ‘shanty-town world encircling the fortified enclaves of the urban rich.’⁴⁶

Third, it matters greatly to what ends our ‘engineering bias’ is directed. Presently, vast sums of research money are spent to design plants better able to withstand the heavy spraying of particular herbicides and pesticides – essentially, engineering plants to produce a captured market for selling more chemicals. A well-known example is Monsanto’s transgenic Soya crop, which is engineered to withstand the liberal spraying of Monsanto’s herbicide ‘Roundup’. Today ‘Roundup’ is the most widely used weed killer in the world.⁴⁷ Put simply, the corporate control of technological processes means that R&D is increasingly directed to products that are commercially successful rather than foods that are nutritionally valuable or indeed culturally prized. The corporate capture of technology also means that a small number of commercially important crops are targeted for the lion’s share of scientific research.⁴⁸ The foods of the poor – precisely because they are the ‘foods of the poor’ – are mostly ignored.

Fourth, it is important to recognize that technologies not only embed producers in advanced networks of information, capital, and finance; they also recalibrate how ‘users’ (read farmers) think and conduct themselves. Programme reports speak of realising social efficiencies, generating better time management, instilling a spirit of risk-taking, actuating new modes of perception (seeing traditional seeds as ‘bad seeds’ and new seeds as ‘good seeds,’ for example), and fostering inventiveness and creative capacities. A company like TechnoServe, a non-profit promoting ‘business solutions to poverty’ and part funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, employs ‘transformative technology’ to build and promote entrepreneurial values. ‘It is a movement reflecting the time-honored traditions of free enterprise, stake, hard work and business acumen,’ writes founder Ed Bullard.⁴⁹ The company believes that real-time information gathering – enabled, for example, by mobile phone devices – will engender better decision-making on farms, while new data and information services will help governments combat fraud and manage environmental risks.⁵⁰ In this sense technology is instrumental to what Ilcan and

⁴⁵ See especially Tania Murray Li, “Exit from Agriculture: A Step Forward or a Step Backward for the Rural Poor”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2009a), pp 629–36; Tania Murray Li, “To Make Live or Let Die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations”, *Antipode*, Vol. 41, No. S1 (2009b): 66–93.

⁴⁶ Mike Davis, “Planet of Slums”, *New Left Review*, Vol 26, March/April (2004), p. 27.

⁴⁷ David Nally, “The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), pp 37-53.

⁴⁸ Here we would do well to remember Paul Virilio’s memorable aphorism: ‘When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck.’ Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst* (New York: Semiotext(e)), p. 89

⁴⁹ TechnoServe, *Strategic Plan 2013-2017*. (2013), p 6.. Available:

http://www.technoserve.org/files/downloads/2013-2017_strategic-plan.pdf (accessed September 2015).

⁵⁰ See for example the 2014 report from New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, *Progress Report 2013-14*, available: https://new-alliance.org/sites/default/files/resources/072814_NewAlliance_FinalC_508.pdf (accessed September 2015)

Phillips term ‘developmentality’.⁵¹ It actively assembles the idea of the ‘good worker’ and the ‘good society,’ and as such technology leads the charge in the desired metamorphosis from traditional institutions and values to modern systems and processes. In short, technology is envisaged as a kind of cultural elixir, uniquely capable of modernising the minds and habits of the poor.⁵²

Fifth and finally, discussions about agricultural technology rarely if ever broach the vexed issue of ownership. We need to ask who really stands to benefit from the new technologies and their intellectual property (IP) regimes, not whether the technologies are in themselves ‘good’ or ‘bad’. It is the social dimension of technology that really matters – and if recent practice is any guide, then poor countries have cause to be concerned. In North America the big seed and chemical companies have not hesitated to sue farmers who they claim have contravened company patents. In self-provisioning societies – where an informal moral economy of seed saving and sharing prevails⁵³ – patents threaten to squeeze peasants into new forms of debt peonage and ‘bioserfdom.’⁵⁴ Seeds that were once free and exchanged through the commons become subject to commercial exchange and transaction. In short, trade displaces mutual aid.

In this respect it is certainly significant that an early promise by New Alliance to explore alternatives to commercial IP rights (copyleft, open access, and the like) were after ‘further assessment’ dropped on the grounds that ‘there is little benefit in this approach to development.’⁵⁵ Unfortunately the report fails to specify why non-commercial, ‘open-access’ licenses were deemed prejudicial to development, but one likely reason is that ‘benefit’ here is narrowly construed as profit for private seed companies.⁵⁶ DuPont, a close partner in New Alliance’s country programmes, encapsulates this worldview very well:

The protection of IP around the world, in all its various forms, will encourage more research and development, lead to better products, and facilitate much needed trade. Innovations flourish in countries that offer strong IP rights. A lack of enforceable IP regimes in developing nations will also prevent their farmers from obtaining the best, new products, such as biotechnology traits that improve the nutritional quality of plants or advances in traditional breeding that can help create drought-resistant plants.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Suzan Ilcan and Lynne Phillips, “Developmentalities and Calculative Practices: The Millennium Development Goals” *Antipode*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2010), pp 844–874.

⁵² Nick Cullather, “‘The Target is the People’: Representations of the Village in Modernization and U.S. National Security Doctrine”, *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2006), pp 29–48.

⁵³ Olivier de Schutter, “Seed Policies and the Right to Food”, *Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, to the 64th session of the General Assembly* [UN doc. A/64/170] (2009), p. 20.

⁵⁴ Jack Kloppenburg Jr., *First the Seed: The Political Economy of Plant Biotechnology* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 322.

⁵⁵ New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, “Progress Report Summary, 2013”, *op. cit.*, p. 9 [Annex 4].

⁵⁶ Jack Kloppenburg, “Re-purposing the Master’s Tools: the Open Source Seed Initiative and the Struggle for Seed Sovereignty”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (2014), pp. 1225-1246.

⁵⁷ DuPont Advisory Committee, *Agricultural Innovation and Productivity for the 21st century: Report and Recommendations* (2011), p. 13, available: <http://read.uberflip.com/i/33253> (accessed September 2015).

As the above makes clear, the quest is not simply to embed new-fangled technologies in traditional social structures, but rather to fashion a brave new world in which private property rights and rent-seeking practices are normalized. Technology here is not used to service human needs or create a more equitable social support system; rather, it is deployed for the more narrow and utilitarian purpose of capitalist market creation. As others have shown, in agriculture the historical task of commodification can be quickened either by wresting control of production from farmers (via mechanisation or the commercialisation of seeds, for example) or by creating the political and legal instruments for private markets to flourish.⁵⁸ For these reasons it is important to distinguish between technology (which again, intrinsically, is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’) and its social functions. Technology *can be* ‘pro-poor’; unfortunately it is rarely so when powerful business interests control both R&D and product rollout.

MYTH #2: FOOD INSECURITY RESULTS FROM ARRESTED SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Today’s new green revolutionaries openly discuss wholesale ‘transformational changes’ in ways that would have embarrassed even the most ardent Rostovian ‘take off’ theorist of the 1960s. ‘Historical trends are not, I believe, a speed limit on the future,’ declares James Borel, an Executive Vice President at DuPont.⁵⁹ Bill and Melinda Gates describe themselves as ‘impatient optimists’. ‘The world is getting better, but it’s not getting better for everyone, and it’s not getting better *fast enough*,’ remarked Bill Gates in a speech to global leaders at Davos.⁶⁰ Thus the dominant concern is not whether the theory of historical development is right or wrong, but whether the process of transformation can be super-charged and rendered ‘catalytic’ for the sake of the poor. This ‘impatience’ for change is evident in the choice of words. The avatars of AGRA and New Alliance picture development as a noble struggle against the deadening weight of tradition – thus they face ‘blockages,’ ‘constraints’ and ‘barriers’ that must be torn down – and they depict progress as a matter of ‘leveraging’ and ‘scaling up’ their ideas and activities. Such rhetoric depicts ‘poverty’ as a noun and ‘assistance’ as a verb. They are passive; we are active. They ‘lack’; we ‘impart’.

But what is it that the poor and benighted so obviously lack? Or to say this differently, how exactly does development construct its object?⁶¹ A co-authored paper

⁵⁸ Richard C. Lewontin, “The Maturing of Capitalist Agriculture: Farmer as Proletarian”, in Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster and Frederick H. Buttel (eds.) *Hungry for profit: the agribusiness threat to farmers, food, and the environment*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), p. 93–106.

⁵⁹ James C. Borel, *Agricultural Innovation in the 21st Century: Optimistic Science Meets Global Demand*, (2010), p. 5. Available: <http://us.vocuspr.com/Newsroom/ViewAttachment.aspx?SiteName=DupontEMEA&Entity=PRAsset&AttachmentType=F&EntityID=119107&AttachmentID=c3417907-46f4-420e-875c-7676d2fe72f7> (accessed September 2015).

⁶⁰ Bill Gates, “A New Approach to Capitalism in the 21st Century”, *Remarks by Bill Gates, Chairman, Microsoft Corporation at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, January 24 2008*. Available: <http://news.microsoft.com/2008/01/24/bill-gates-world-economic-forum-2008/> (accessed September 2015). Emphasis added.

⁶¹ Arturo Escobar, “Planning”, in Wolfgang Sachs (ed.) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 145-160.

by staff at AGRA and the Rockefeller Foundation published in 2008 affords us some insight. Hobbling African progress is a depressing list of problems including poor soils, ‘traditional crop varieties,’ small and shrinking plots of land, scarce and unreliable water supplies, crop losses (from pests and pathogens), inequitable land distribution, poor transportation infrastructures and ‘inefficient’ market conditions.⁶² Omitted from this taxing list of problems is any mention of the devastation imposed on African farming by Western policies, first under the auspices of colonial rule and later via programmes of structural adjustment imposed by the International Financial Institutions – not to mention the skewed system of international trade that forces ‘economic liberalisation’ on poor countries whilst permitting protectionism and subsidies for rich ones.⁶³ This is not to argue that the causes of poverty identified by the authors at AGRA and the Rockefeller Foundation have no basis, but rather, following Thomas Pogge, I want to insist that those ‘causes themselves have causes.’⁶⁴ It is striking how frequently African poverty is radically endogenized, a move which creates the impression that the West has little or nothing to do with those circumstances. Furthermore, if poverty is defined as the *absence* of certain things (credit, fertilizer, improved seeds, entrepreneurialism etc.), rather than the *presence* of other things (debt bondage, financial speculation, agro-fuels policy, state disinvestment, etc.) then it is easy to see how development sets as its target the rapid remedy of those imputed deficiencies. Indeed the ‘impatience’ for change reflects the self-assurance that the diagnosis and projected cure are both sacred and unimpeachable.

In a speech delivered at Stanford University, Cargill’s Chairman and CEO, Greg Page addressed the same problem, but in a different way. If we are to feed the planet, he commented, we are going to have to make farms, particularly small farms, more productive. But how are we to accomplish this feat, wondered Page, without generating widespread, destabilising rural to urban migration as some farmers predictably lose out to rationalisation? For Page modernisation is a zero-sum game because there are real and important costs to keeping the ‘inefficient’ peasant on the land – what Page telling terms a ‘rural sociology premium.’⁶⁵ That the CEO of Cargill can lecture the public about what he elsewhere terms the ‘Solomonic burden’ of retaining smallholdings, while failing to mention the damage caused by corporate practices, says a lot about the moral ledger of big agro-companies.⁶⁶ In fact one can read through the whole of Page’s public address without ever appreciating his firms role in global commodities speculation⁶⁷ and the production of agro-fuels,⁶⁸ two

⁶² Gary Toenniessen, Akinwumi Adesina and Joseph De Vries, “Building an Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa”, *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, Vol. 1136 (2008), p. 233.

⁶³ Walden Bello, *The Food Wars* (London: Verso, 2009); Ray Bush, *Poverty and Neoliberalism: Persistence and Reproduction in the Global South*, (London: Pluto Press, 2007)

⁶⁴ Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p. 14.

⁶⁵ Greg Page, ‘Food Security: Balancing the Race to Caloric Sufficiency with Rural Sociology’. *Speech at Stanford University, Program on Food Security and the Environment*, (February 2011) available: <http://www.cargill.com/news/speeches-presentations/food-security-balancing-caloricsufficiency-ruralsociology/index.jsp> (accessed September 2015).

⁶⁶ Greg Page, “Smallholders: Big Impact”, *Speech at the World Food Prize's Norman E. Borlaug Dialogue*, (October 2010), available: <http://www.cargill.com/news/speeches-presentations/smallholders-speech-at-world-food-prize/> (accessed September 2015).

⁶⁷ One report castigates food speculation on the grounds that it has ‘no economic value because unlike stocks and bonds it does not place capital in countries or businesses.’ Food Watch, *The Hunger-makers: How Deutsche Bank, Goldman Sachs and Other Financial Institutions are Speculating with*

trades that have been repeatedly linked to food price spikes and the surge in global hunger. Instead Page concludes with an appeal to history; indeed his language recalls colonial descriptions of peasants ‘transitioning’ into sturdy yeomen and day labourers, a violent and wrenching process, sanitized, then and now, as stadial progress.⁶⁹ ‘We must find a way to allow supplies of food to increase in the medium term until,’ he says, ‘in the long term, smallholders can travel down to a more natural free market path. History shows us that this can be a painful journey, but to evolve in sustainable agriculture attention must be given to the whole issue of revenue adequacy.’⁷⁰ There is a lot of ideology packed into that little word ‘evolve.’

The position of Big Philanthropy is also noteworthy on this point. While the Gates Foundation publicly professes its support for smallholder agriculture, a leaked strategy document suggests that this position not as straightforward as it first seems: ‘Over time, this [agrarian strategy] will require some degree of land mobility and a lower percentage of total employment involved in direct agricultural production.’ As authors Raj Patel, Eric Holt-Gimenez and Annie Shattuck comment: “‘Land mobility’ is an Orwellian term meaning the land stays where it is but the people on it are driven off. The foundation stands behind this idea, saying that peasants will head to cities “because there are a lot of them who don’t want to be farmers [and] people make their own choices.””⁷¹ The Gates Foundation’s vision stands in marked contrast to the views of the UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food: ‘Only by supporting small producers can we help break the vicious cycle that leads from rural poverty to the expansion of urban slums, in which poverty breeds more poverty.’⁷²

Whereas Greg Page and the Gates Foundation merely *imply* that smallholders are an encumbrance to progress, Paul Collier, an Oxford economist and author of the best-selling book *The Bottom Billion*, puts the matter bluntly. ‘Peasant farming is not well suited to innovation and investment,’ he says. Indeed for Collier the ‘most realistic way’ of drawing down global food prices ‘is to replicate the Brazilian model of large, technologically sophisticated agro-companies.’⁷³ Continuing in the pages of *Foreign Policy*, Collier goes on to mock ‘the middle- and upper class love affair with

Food at the Expense of the Poorest (Berlin: Thilo Bode, 2011), p. 65

⁶⁸ A practice that Tony Weis says requires almost as much, if not more input energy as comes out as liquid ‘bioenergy.’ Tony Weis. *The Ecological Hoofprint: The Global Burden of Industrial Livestock* (London: Zed Books, 2013), p. 88.

⁶⁹ Compare, for example, the words of the English reformer George Nicholls writing about nineteenth-century Ireland: ‘By the term “transition period,” I mean to indicate that season of change from the system of small holdings, allotments, and subdivision of land, which now prevails in Ireland, to the better practice of day-labourer for wages, and to that dependence on daily labour for support. This transition period is, I believe, generally beset with difficulty and suffering. It was so in England; and it is, and for a time will probably continue to be so, in Ireland.’ George Nicholls, “Report of George Nicholls on Poor Laws Ireland”, *British Parliamentary Papers* Vol. 69, No. 51 (London: HMSO, 1837) p. 236. See David Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press).

⁷⁰ Greg Page, “Smallholders: Big Impact”, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Raj Patel, Eric Holt-Giménez and Annie Shattuck, “Ending Africa’s Hunger”, *The Nation* (September 21 2009) available: <http://www.thenation.com/article/ending-africas-hunger#>. (accessed September 2015).

⁷² Olivier de Schutter, “Agroecology and the Right to Food” *Report Presented at the 16th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council* [UN doc. A/HRC/16/49] (2011), p. 5.

⁷³ Cited in, Fred Pearce, *The Landgrabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth* (Eden Project Books, London, 2013), p. 397.

peasant agriculture’ and the view that ‘peasants, like pandas, are to be preserved.’⁷⁴ Given the present food crisis, Collier announced, support for small-scale farming reflects a ‘retreat into romanticism.’ In his view ‘the world needs more commercial farms, not less.’⁷⁵

Collier’s comments give us an insight on the discursive strategies employed by the savants of big agribusiness. The first step is to accuse smallholders of being ‘inefficient’ and ‘unproductive’. Next they claim that the champions of small-scale farming are schmaltzy, desk-bound urbanites detached from the realities of farm work and wistfully preaching the return of an ‘Old Macdonald’ bucolic ideal. To these desk-bound urbanites the peasant is a ‘noble savage’ farming an unspoiled rural paradise – a view that critics easily paint as naïve, if not delusional. Finally, critics such as Collier argue that the world faces a food crisis of such magnitude that it would be immoral not to support large-scale industrial farming and the expansion of ‘sophisticated’ agro-tech companies. In this framing the smallholder is a symbol of obsolescence, no more capable of agricultural improvement than the dodo was capable of flight. It follows, naturally enough, that smallholders must be removed from the land before productivity can flourish and yields can increase. As Wendell Berry astutely remarks, typically this kind of judgement is passed on ‘by people who probably would not have given such advice if they were themselves in a position to suffer from it.’⁷⁶

The misanthropy aside, this ‘peasant-is-obsolete’ argument simply ignores all the science that shows that peasant-based smallholder agriculture is more than capable of feeding the planet. For example, a global report by the IAASTD, a high-profile panel comprising of over 400 scientists from more than 80 participating nations and which took four years to complete, concluded that ‘a focus on small-scale sustainable agriculture, locally adapted seed and ecological farming better address the complexities of climate change, hunger, poverty and productive demands on agriculture in the developing world.’⁷⁷ Tellingly the Monsanto Company, an erstwhile partner in this study, withdrew its support once these scientific findings were revealed.⁷⁸

The UK’s Foresight Report on *The Future of Food and Farming* considers the smallholder ‘an important component of both hunger and poverty alleviation,’ while the UN’s International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), normally a restrained and conservative organisation, is on record as saying that small farmers are part of the solution, not the problem.⁷⁹ Similarly several academic studies echo these

⁷⁴ Paul Collier, “The Politics of Hunger: How Illusion and Greed Fan the Food Crisis” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2008) available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64607/paul-collier/the-politics-of-hunger> (accessed September 2015).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Berry, *op. cit.* p. 41.

⁷⁷ Raj Patel, Eric Holt-Giménez and Annie Shattuck, “Ending Africa’s Hunger,” *op. cit.*; Jules Pretty, “Can Ecological Agriculture Feed Nine Billion People?” in Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar (eds.) *Agriculture and the Food Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), p. 298.

⁷⁸ Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel, *Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice* (Nairobi: Pambazuka Press, 2009) p. 129.

⁷⁹ Foresight, *The Future of Food and Farming: Final Project Report* (London: The Government Office for Science, 2011) p. 25; IFAD. *Viewpoint: Smallholders Can Feed the World* (Rome IFAD Publication, 2011).

conclusions, highlighting how smallholders from around the world are pioneering innovative, low-external-input techniques that are proving crucial to preserving ecosystems and mitigating climate change. ‘Rather than treating smallholder farmers as beneficiaries of aid,’ writes Olivier de Schutter, ‘they should be seen as experts with knowledge that is complementary to formalized expertise.’⁸⁰ These studies are disregarded no doubt because they challenge the loud modernization chorus that champions large-scale farming and agro-companies and sees smallholders as atavistic relics obstructing the deferred development of the global borderlands. When viewed from the throne of Solomon the world is full of subjects who ought to do what the venerable and wise have decided is best for them.

MYTH #3: FOOD INSECURITY IS PRIMARILY AN EXPRESSION OF SCARCITY

More than three decades ago Amartya Sen (at the time a Professor of Economics at Oxford, and today a Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard), published a book titled *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. The aim of Sen’s book was neatly stated on the first page:

Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. *It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.* While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of many possible causes. Whether and how starvation relates to food supply is a matter for factual investigation.⁸¹

In case study after case study – Bengal in 1943, Ethiopia in the 1973-74, Bangladesh 1974, and the famines in the countries of the African Sahel in the 1970s – Sen showed that food availability decline was neither the original nor primary cause of distress. Sen postulated instead that people starve when either their ‘endowments’ (that is, the sum total of their resources) or their ‘entitlement set’ (that is, the bundle of goods and services that a person may legally exploit) shift to such a precipitous extent that they can no longer obtain sufficient sustenance. In short, Sen shatters the common view that food scarcity is a necessary precursor to starvation.

While Sen was awarded a Nobel Prize for his contributions to economic theory, the conclusions he reached were not exactly novel. Irish nationalist John Mitchel (1815–1875) described the Great Irish Famine as an ‘artificial’ scarcity. It was caused, so Mitchel alleged, by the punitive reactions of the British government, including the failure to prohibit the exportation of foods as famine conditions worsened. ‘Ireland exported four quarters of grain for every quarter she imported,’ Michel wrote in his *Jail Journal*, a bitter account of his imprisonment and transportation to Van Diemen’s Land for insurrectionary activities.⁸²

From the standpoint of global history, the Mitchelite claim is in fact astonishingly common. Writing in 1516 the Tudor lawyer and statesmen, Sir Thomas

⁸⁰ Olivier de Schutter, “Agroecology and the Right to Food” op. cit., p. 18.

⁸¹ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) p. 1. My emphasis.

⁸² John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin, M.H. Gill & Son, Ltd, 1921) p. 40.

Moore (1478-1535), drew attention to the practice of hoarding and collusion among grain dealers. ‘Take a barren year of failed harvests when many thousands of men have been carried off by hunger,’ Moore exhorted. ‘If at the end of the famine the barns of the rich were searched, I daresay enough grain would be found in them to save the lives of all those who died from starvation and disease, if it had been divided equally among them.’⁸³ As early as 650 BC the Chinese minister Kuang Chung complained: ‘That people are starving for lack of food is because there is grain hoarded in storehouses of the rich instead of in government granaries ... if the ruler fails to take heed, then the traders wander in markets and take advantage of want among people.’⁸⁴ A sixteenth-century play that took for its theme the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt in England includes these terse but resonant lines:

And at last moulder into common clay.
Why then these vain distinctions! – bears not the earth,
Food in abundance? – must your granaries
O’erflow with plenty, while the poor man starves?⁸⁵

This brief historical excursion is not meant to undermine the scholarly contributions of Sen. On the contrary, Sen was able to prove what others had mostly intuited, and arguably no one before or since has demolished the argument that hunger implies a decline in food availability with the same precision, clarity and power. My point, rather, is to show how little a dent this scholarship has had on popular appreciations of ‘food insecurity.’ The so-called food crisis of 2007-08 is a case in point. In 2008 the FAO reported that as a result of food price spikes and the global financial crisis a further 75 million people were added to the hunger ledger, with the global figure for those experiencing hunger surpassing the one billion mark in 2009.⁸⁶ For the most part, as we shall see, the narrative to explain this surge in ‘food insecurity’ was one of *demand outstripping supply*.

One popular tack is to blame the new growth economies, particularly consumer demand in China and India, for causing a drawdown in global food supplies. In a missive to potential investors, Niels Jensen, a partner at Absolute Return, a London-based investment firm, warns of an imminent ‘protein bomb,’ as the rising middle classes of Asia move from a grain-based diet to a food regime dominated by protein, sugar and fats. The analysis is meant both to shock and prime investors.⁸⁷ After all, as demand grows and supply tightens the price of agricultural goods will increase, generating large profits for investors willing to back the ‘bull run’ in soft commodities. But the larger claim that Asian consumption is generating global shortages is echoed again and again in policy circles and in global media.

Industry voices have also joined this chorus of supply-side explanations. Global Harvest Initiative (GHI), ‘a private-sector voice for productivity growth throughout

⁸³ Cited in, Pierre Spitz, “The Right to Food in Historical Perspective”, *Food Policy* 10 (1985), p. 306.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Peter Linebaugh, *Stop Thief! The Commons, Enclosures and Resistance*. Oakland CA: PM Press, 2014) p. 172.

⁸⁶ FAO, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2008* (Rome: Organization of the United Nations, 2008).

⁸⁷ Niels Jensen, *The Absolute Return Letter March 2012: The Protein Bomb*, available: http://www.arpinvestments.com/downloads/Absolute-Return-Letter/2012/The_Absolute_Return_Letter_0312.pdf (accessed September 2015)

the agricultural value chain,' has loudly called for at least a doubling of food output by 2050. Each year GHI publishes its trademarked 'Gap Report' which aims to quantify global agricultural productivity as well as establish industry benchmarks to meet 'future needs.'⁸⁸ Similarly in 2008 the Monsanto Company announced its new Sustainable Yield Initiative (SYI). The company's promotional material highlights the gravity of supply constraints: 'In seven of the last eight years, the world has consumed more grain than it produced. Experts now predict our planet will need to double agricultural output by 2050 to feed a growing population. By some estimates, that means producing 'more food in the next 50 years than has been grown in the last 10,000 years.'⁸⁹ For Syngenta, the Swiss seed and agrichemical company, this predication means that 'enough is [now] a moving target.'⁹⁰

'Demand is in the hunt for supply,' James Borel of DuPont told an audience at the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City in June 2010.⁹¹ And because only a small percentage of food is traded internationally, Borel reasoned, productivity increases are going to have to happen *where the hungry live*: 'The geography of agriculture is too-often overlooked. We speak of the looming food "gap" between production and population. We don't speak enough of the potential "mismatch" between the location of production and the location of people.'⁹²

It turns out that others had already been thinking hard about the significance of geography. In 2006 the Rockefeller Foundation published a seminal report entitled *Africa's Turn: New Green Revolution for the 21st Century*. The report is a backwards look at achievements of 'venturesome philanthropy' and its much-publicized role in more than doubling global food production in the twenty years from 1965 to 1985. But as the report laments, the Green Revolution had a geographical blind spot – 'it stopped at Africa.' What follows is a clarion call 'for a fundamental transformation of Africa's agricultural economy' to address widespread hunger and rural poverty.⁹³ The very same year that call was answered by Bill and Melinda Gates who joined forces with the Rockefeller Foundation to sponsor a new philanthropic plan: 'The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa' (AGRA). Much like the industry voices cited above, AGRA repeatedly links production shortages to hunger and poverty, *as though the first automatically causes the second*: 'Africa's agricultural production falls far short of its potential. Cereal yields are one-quarter the world average. For decades African agriculture has been neglected, and the cost of this neglect is now being borne by her people. Nearly 220 million people are hungry. National grain reserves in most African countries are too low for comfort.'⁹⁴

⁸⁸ GHI, *Gap Report*TM: *Global Revolutions in Agriculture: The Challenge and Promise of 2050*. (2014) available: www.globalharvestinitiative.org/GAP/2014_GAP_Report.pdf (accessed September 2015).

⁸⁹ See comments available at: http://www.monsantoafrica.com/sustainability/produce_more/default.asp (accessed January 30 2015). Syngenta make the same claim on their website. <http://www.syngenta.com/global/corporate/en/goodgrowthplan/challenges/Pages/grow-more-food.aspx> (accessed September 2015)

⁹⁰ See comments available at: <http://www.syngenta.com/global/corporate/en/goodgrowthplan/challenges/Pages/grow-more-food.aspx> (accessed September 2015).

⁹¹ Borel, op. cit., p. 3.

⁹² Ibid. p. 10.

⁹³ Rockefeller Foundation, *Africa's Turn: A New Green Revolution for the 21st Century* (New York: Rockefeller Publications, 2006), p. 9.

⁹⁴ AGRA, *Building on the New Momentum in African Agriculture* (Nairobi: AGRA Publications, 2008), p. ix.

An important World Bank enquiry into the phenomenon of land grabbing partly excused the practice in Africa on the assumption that the potential surge in production outweighed the risks involved. ‘None of the African countries of most interest to investors,’ the report asserts, ‘is now achieving more than 30 per cent of the potential yield on currently cultivated areas.’⁹⁵ Tellingly, when quizzed about the propriety of land deals, Bill Gates seemed equally unperturbed. ‘Many of those land deals are beneficial,’ he answered, ‘and it would be too bad if some were held back because of Western groups’ ways of looking at things. Whenever somebody invests in Africa and actually builds infrastructure in Africa, they’re the ones who are at risk. You can’t take the infrastructure home!’⁹⁶ These kinds of means-ends calculations (which display such a cavalier attitude toward the social and environmental fallout from land grabs) become more common when the focus is directed so resolutely toward the narrow utilitarian goal of yield and productivity increases.

Over and over again we see that scarcity is presented as the true index of hunger. When viewed this way, the food crisis must be addressed through greater investment, which automatically generates more production, higher yields and less hunger. But is this picture of the food crisis accurate?

Let us deal first and only briefly with the ‘protein bomb’ claim. No question dietary transition is an important structural feature of the global food economy as the ‘grain-livestock industry’ aggressively pursues urban Asian markets and big food retailers move to shape middle class tastes (the fact that our tastes are shaped by the food and advertising industries is conveniently left out of accounts that present ‘dietary transition’ as both natural and inevitable). Yet the claim that demand increases from India and China have produced global food scarcity does not hold up. In fact comparing changes in the global grain situation in 2007–8 (the beginning of the food crisis) with the situation in 2008–9 (when in fact the food crisis grew more intense for many developing countries) economist Jayati Ghosh concludes that ‘aggregate food use has increased very little, and less than both production and supply.’⁹⁷ One important reason for this is that China and India continued to exhibit falling food grain consumption both in per capita terms as well as in the aggregate, completely belying the view that increased demand from these countries had contributed even partially to the global price rise.’ According to Ghosh the real culprits are financial deregulation (which amplifies global commodity speculation), the diversion of grain acreage and food crops for agro-fuel production (and the cost-push effects this diversion induced), and the increased vulnerability of poorer countries’ farming sectors to global financial movements and shocks (global economic integration means that governments often experience weak sovereignty when it comes to buffering their economies from food crises). In short, for Ghosh the

⁹⁵ K. Deininger, D. Byerlee (with J. Linsay, A. Norton, H. Selod, and M. Stickler), *Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can it Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits?* Washington DC: The World Bank, 2011), p. xiv; Tania Murray Li, “Centering labor in the land grab debate”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* Vol. 38, No.2 (2011), p. 294.

⁹⁶ Cited in, All Africa, “‘Best Chance’ to End Polio: Bill Gates Promotes Vaccines and Food Programs to Attack Poverty”, (February 2011), available: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201102091101.html> (accessed September 2015).

⁹⁷ Jayati Ghosh, “The Unnatural Coupling: Food and Global Finance”, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010), p. 80.

food crisis is ‘policy-determined,’ not scarcity-driven.⁹⁸

Let us now take the claim that we face imminent global scarcity, and consequently, low-yield countries ought to be targeted for productivity increases. Can we really feed ‘three extra Indias’ by 2050, to cite the alarmist language of the *Economist* magazine (*viz.*, 2 billion extra people plus the one billion who presently experience hunger)?⁹⁹

The fact is that the world already produces enough food to feed everyone on the planet.¹⁰⁰ Indeed by some estimates there is more than enough food to feed the planet twice over¹⁰¹, especially if one takes into account food waste (estimates suggest that as much as one third of all food produced globally is wasted) and the use of crops to fuel cars rather than feed people (Lester Brown calculates that the grain required to fill a 95-litre fuel tank of an SUV is enough to feed an average person for an entire year).¹⁰² Furthermore, the call to ‘double food production,’ repeated *ad nauseam* in industry, policy and media circles, is itself problematic. The claim appears to have originated with the FAO, but as Isobel Tomlinson shows, the report in question actually states that the scale of increase would necessarily depend on the food groups involved.¹⁰³ If we assume as natural and inevitable that we will continue to consume more meat, fish and eggs and that agro-fuels are here to stay ... well, then, yes, yield increases seem very likely.¹⁰⁴ But those assumptions depend on prioritising the energy and food needs of the affluent – something we ought to be upfront about, instead of hiding behind humanitarian rhetoric, which implies that our primary goal is to ‘feed the global poor.’

Most importantly, as Tomlinson again points out, the FAO’s attempt to estimate future production trends was never intended to serve as a ‘normative policy goal.’ So why do industry voices insist on misquoting the projections, while failing to discuss, say, the conclusions of the ‘High Level Expert Forum,’ part of the FAO’s Committee on World Food Security?¹⁰⁵ Writing in 2009 that panel said:

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁹⁹ The Economist, “How Much Is Enough?” (February 2011) available: <http://www.economist.com/node/18200702> (accessed September 2015).

¹⁰⁰ UNICEF, *Improving Child Nutrition: The Achievable Imperative for Global Progress*. New York: United Nations Publications, 2013), p. 27.

¹⁰¹ Jean Ziegler, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food”. *Report Presented at the 7th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council* [UN doc. A/HRC/7/5] (2008), p. 2. See also Eric Holt-Giménez, “We Already Grow Enough Food For 10 Billion People and Still Can’t End Hunger”, *The Huffington Post* (February 2012) available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-holt-gimenez/world-hunger_b_1463429.html (accessed September 2015).

¹⁰² Lester Brown, *Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity* (Washington DC: Earth Policy Institute, 2012).

¹⁰³ Isobel Tomlinson, “Doubling Food Production to Feed the 9 Billion: A Critical Perspective on a Key Discourse of Food Security in the UK”, *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 29 (2013): pp 81-90. See also Soil Association, “Telling Porkies: The Big Fat Lie about Doubling Food Production” (Bristol: Soil Association Publication, 2010) <https://www.soilassociation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=qbavgJQPY%2Fc%3D&tabid=390> (accessed September 2015)

¹⁰⁴ B. Bajželj, K.S. Richards, J.M Allwood, P. Smith, J.S. Dennis, E. Curmi and C.A. Gilligan, “Importance of Food-Demand Management for Climate Mitigation”, *Nature Climate Change*, Vol. 4, (2014) pp 924-929

¹⁰⁵ Isobel Tomlinson, “Doubling Food Production”, p. 82.

During the recent decade global food production has generally followed a positive growth trend, even on a per-caput basis. Nevertheless, the number of chronically undernourished has further grown, not fallen. The extraordinary increase of hunger during the recent food crisis in 2007/2008 occurred in spite of a record cereal harvest in 2008. This is a clear reminder that ensuring an **adequate supply of food at the aggregate level, globally or nationally, does not guarantee that all people have enough to eat and that hunger will be eliminated.**¹⁰⁶

The idea of *absolute* scarcity is a canard. Amartya Sen described it well when he said it was like looking for a black cat in a dark room that is not there. People starve not because of a shortage of foods but because of other factors. The continual focus on scarcity and yield-boosting programmes means that those ‘other factors’ are excluded from rational discussion – that is, when we are talking about *how* to increase yields we are not talking about whether there is a *need* to increase yields. Furthermore the entire discussion leaves untouched the assumption that an increase in calorific availability will translate into a nutritional adequate diet for those who are currently malnourished. When so many go hungry under conditions of global surplus (not to mention the many more who suffer adverse health caused by overconsumption) this supposition seems naïve at best and at worst knowingly disingenuous. We need to call off the search party for the missing black cat.

MYTH #4: FULLY LIBERALIZED MARKETS ARE AN ESSENTIAL PREREQUISITE FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

In 1944 the Viennese economic historian Karl Polanyi published his magisterial book, *The Great Transformation*.¹⁰⁷ In this book Polanyi pointed out that for much of human history markets were ‘embedded’ in society by which he meant that the original and primary function of markets was to aid and abet society – markets encouraged human interaction and mutual flourishing. Then in the nineteenth century comes the ‘great transformation’ that gives Polanyi’s book its title. Slowly political forces favouring market liberalisation (‘free trade’) gather momentum and move to ‘dis-embed’ the economy from society, to the point that the economy now drives society rather than the other way around. For Polanyi the ‘great transformation’ turns society into a ‘mere adjunct’ of the market. Commercial values now reign supreme.

In actual fact the ‘great transformation’ is neither as extreme nor as complete as this stylized reading of Polanyi might suggest. In practice, moments of ‘dis-embedding’ are frequently followed by episodes of ‘re-embedding’ as the social and environmental costs of extreme market liberalisation are judged to be too high. The history of free market capitalism then is rather like the stretching of an elastic band (to use Fred Block’s splendid metaphor in his introduction to Polanyi’s text) – liberalisation stretches the social fabric to a ‘break point’ where the only viable option is to contract, thus re-embedding market forces in the ‘social shell,’ in order to save

¹⁰⁶ HLEF, *How to Feed the World in 2050* (Rome: FAO Publications) p. 27, available: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/docs/expert_paper/How_to_Feed_the_World_in_2050.pdf (accessed September 2015)

¹⁰⁷ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

the band of society from shattering altogether.¹⁰⁸ Seen this way, fully liberalized markets – or what is sometimes referred to as ‘free market fundamentalism’ – are a form of *thanatopolitics*.¹⁰⁹ Its complete realisation represents nothing less than an existential threat to planetary life.

For the purposes of this discussion I want to argue that the consensus I have been discussing marks an attempt to dis-embed the market from all remaining social constraints (perhaps this explains why ‘resilience’ is such a buzzword across the social and natural sciences today. The question seems to be: how far can we pull the band before it snaps, or how ‘resilient’ is the elastic to the expansionary forces of capitalism?)

It is striking how frequently such thinking is boxed in the high-minded rhetoric of global engagement and benevolent assistance. Richard Ferguson, head of global agriculture at the investment bank Renaissance Capital, believes that ‘a free market with transparent pricing, enforceable property rights and liberalized trade would *solve just about every agricultural problem under the sun*.’¹¹⁰ ‘We need to get the economics right,’ say DuPont, ‘we must incentivize the right kind of private behavior (and do it in the right ways) ... Only within a healthy marketplace will farmers reap the benefits of unlocked innovation, fair and open competition, increased choice and continued growth in international trade.’¹¹¹ According to a GHI report published in 2011, ‘trade is the mechanism that links supply to demand, and trade liberalization plays an essential role in promoting global food security by making the international food system more efficient.’¹¹²

Similarly a key objective of the AGRA is ‘to transform subsistence farming into a sustainable, viable commercial activity.’¹¹³ In another report AGRA stresses that ‘governments in sub-Saharan Africa need to put in place consistent and more robust policies that foster the growth of private markets, and in this way attract private investment capital that can complement the investment of public resources.’¹¹⁴ Grow Africa, a partnership platform established in 2011 to promote private sector investment in Africa, puts the task rather bluntly. ‘From the beginning,’ one of their framing documents begins, the aim has been to re-structure ‘agriculture as a business, not a social enterprise.’¹¹⁵ The *New Vision for Agriculture*, promoted by the World Economic Forum, also prioritizes market-based approaches to food security. As the 2013 report rather awkwardly asks: ‘Are smallholders able fully to participate in the

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxv. The idea of the ‘social shell’ is taken from Gerry Kearns, “The Social Shell” *Historical Geography* Vol 34 (2006): pp 49-70

¹⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984 Volume 3*, J.D. Faubion (ed) (New York: New Press, 2000) p. 416.

¹¹⁰ Cited in, Pearce, *op. cit.* p. 398, emphasis added.

¹¹¹ Borel, *op. cit.*, pp 2, 8.

¹¹² GHI, *Gap Report™: Measuring Global Agricultural Productivity* (2011), p. 16, available: www.globalharvestinitiative.org/GAP/2011_GAP_Report.pdf (accessed September 2015).

¹¹³ AGRA, *AGRA in 2011 – Investing in Sustainable Agricultural Growth: A Five-Year Status Report* (Nairobi: AGRA Publications, 2011), p 13.

¹¹⁴ AGRA, *Africa Agriculture Status Report: Climate Change and Smallholder Agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa* (Nairobi: AGRA Publications, 2014), p. 142.

¹¹⁵ Grow Africa, *Annual Meeting Davos 2014*. Available: [https://www.growafrica.com/sites/default/files/GA_Davos%20Report%202014\(3\).pdf](https://www.growafrica.com/sites/default/files/GA_Davos%20Report%202014(3).pdf) (accessed September 2015).

market, or are most still mainly at the subsistence level?’¹¹⁶

In all of these statements there is an implicit contrast between market participation (‘good’) and subsistence agriculture (‘bad’). In reality, however, the issue is much less straightforward. Indeed as an agricultural group, subsistence farmers are often insulated from the worst effects of price increases precisely because they do not rely on the market for food provisioning. On the contrary when prices soar it is the poor who are partially or wholly reliant on food markets that are rendered precarious. An important report authored by the World Food Programme observed that while food markets help ‘promote efficiency in resource allocation, especially through the signals they send to food producers ... [they] tend to fail *most often and most severely* for those who need them the most – the hungry poor.’¹¹⁷

The trouble is that agrarian reformers rarely acknowledge the tendency for markets to tilt against the ‘hungry poor’; nor should we expect them to when their primary goal is to introduce commercial values at every point in the food chain. Witness Nigeria’s Minister for Agriculture, Akinwumi Adesina – recipient of Forbes magazine’s ‘African of the Year’ award in 2013 – summarize his intentions to modernize his country’s agriculture: ‘[W]e are restructuring the space for the private sector to add value to every single thing.’ ‘[In the past] we were not looking at agriculture through the right lens. We were looking at agriculture as a developmental activity, like a social sector in which you manage poor people in rural areas. But agriculture is not a social sector. Agriculture is a business. Seed is a business, fertilizer is a business, storage, value added, logistics and transport – it is all about business.’¹¹⁸ In his acceptance speech for the Forbes award Adesina made his priorities crystal clear: ‘My goal is to make as many millionaires, maybe even billionaires, from agriculture as possible.’¹¹⁹ The number of billionaires may indicate national economic growth, but it certainly tells us nothing about inequality, environmental justice and human welfare, issues that ought to be at the heart of ‘development’ if the term is to mean anything. But this matters not because modernisers like Adesina firmly believe that policies that hasten marketization are *by definition* ‘good’ policies. For them marketization is both means and end.

It should be noted that for all the bluff about ‘de-regulation,’ today’s free-marketers recognise that without state support they would be unable to implement their radical programme of trade liberalization. This helps to explain why agro-companies were to the fore in condemning the ‘irrational’ actions of governments who responded to recent food price increases by imposing temporary export bans on vital provisions (despite the fact that such ‘irrational’ responses have been a

¹¹⁶ World Economic Forum, “Achieving the New Vision for Agriculture: New Models for Action”, *Report by the World Economic Forum’s New Vision for Agriculture Initiative, prepared in collaboration with McKinsey & Company* (2013), p. 11 available: www3.weforum.org/docs/IP/2013/NVA/WEF_IP_NVA_New_Models_for_Action_report.pdf (accessed September 2015).

¹¹⁷ World Food Programme, *World Hunger Series: Hunger and Markets* Earthscan, London, 2009), p. 25.

¹¹⁸ Adam R. Green, “Agriculture is the Future of Nigeria”, *Skoll World Forum Special Report on Agriculture: Realizing Africa’s Potential*. (2013) available: <http://skollworldforum.org/2013/08/08/agriculture-is-the-future-of-nigeria> (accessed September 2015).

¹¹⁹ BBC, “Nigeria’s Akinwumi Adesina Named Forbes African of the Year”, (December 2013) available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-25199787> (accessed January 30 2015).

cornerstone of anti-famine policies for centuries).¹²⁰ It explains too why the food industry is warning countries against experiments in food sovereignty and self-sufficiency. ‘The terms “food security” and “food self-sufficiency” are not one in the same,’ asserts Paul Conway, the Vice Chairman at Cargill. ‘We strongly believe that people should produce what they are best at producing and trade their surpluses with others. This makes very basic economic sense.’¹²¹ Conway’s colleague, Greg Page, cites Libanius, a 4th century philosopher, who depicted commerce, and specifically the theory of comparative advantage, as God’s plan:

God did not bestow all products upon all parts of the earth, but distributed gifts over different regions to the end that we might cultivate a social relationship, because one would need the help of another. And so God called commerce into being, that all might have common enjoyment of the fruits of the earth, no matter where produced.¹²²

When the Pope blesses transgenic seeds and free trade is branded as Godly-design then it is easy to see how secular facts quickly lose their appeal.

Nonetheless, the warnings issued by Page and Conway to global leaders illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the liberalisation project. On the one hand, unless governments create policy environments conducive to private sector growth (so-called ‘pre-competitive investment needs’¹²³) the liberalisation project will stutter and stagnate. On the other hand, the history of recent policy reforms – including state-supported business development services, concessional lending practices (in order to attract foreign direct investment), encouragement of private property rights, rights to full repatriation of goods produced, tax holidays, exemptions from export duties, low land-use fees and permissive land policies, free or cheap use of the commons and so on – show that the private sector has been extraordinarily successful at state capture. On the plus side, seeing capitalist markets as *made* – a point also made by Polanyi and recently reiterated in two excellent studies¹²⁴ – opens up the possibility that they might be *made differently*.¹²⁵ ‘The market economy does not work alone in globalized relations,’ writes Amartya Sen. It follows from this that critically informed ‘public action ... can radically alter the outcome of local and global economic relations.’¹²⁶

¹²⁰ See for example John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550-1850* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

¹²¹ Paul Conway “One Billion Farmers Can’t be Wrong: Why Prices and Markets Matter”, *Speech at The Economist Conference: Feeding the World, the Nine Billion People Question*, (February 2012) available: <http://www.cargill.com/news/speeches-presentations/one-billion-farmers-prices-markets-matter/index.jsp> (accessed September 2015).

¹²² Greg Page, “The Price of Responsibility”, *Speech at FT Commodities Summit, Switzerland*. (2013) available: <http://www.cargill.com/news/speeches-presentations/the-price-of-responsibility/index.jsp> (accessed September 2015).

¹²³ New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, “Progress Report Summary, 2013”, *op. cit.*, p. 3 p. 3.

¹²⁴ See Ha-Joon Chang, *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008); Bernard E. Harcourt, 2011. *The Illusion of the Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (Cambridge M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹²⁵ For two very different perspectives see Peter Barnes, *Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers: 2006); Susan George, *Another World Is Possible If...* (London: Verso, 2004).

¹²⁶ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), p. 138.

CONCLUSION

This paper has traced not so much the emergence as the *aggressive expansion* of what Tony Weis has term ‘market-based or commoditized food security.’¹²⁷ I have argued that the globalisation of this approach to food security depends on a series of mythologies about the primary causes of global hunger. Arguments that suggest that technology will ‘solve’ hunger and agricultural poverty, for example, fail to appreciate that technologies are only ever as strong as the political, social and economic forces that promote them. They are not automatically ‘pro-poor’ and will only serve the needs of people if they are designed and supported as part of a wider campaign of human rights and social justice. Those who believe that production and yield increases ought to be the focus of food security programmes typically ignore or downplay the fact that hunger is not an outcome of *absolute* food scarcity (such accounts also tend to turn a blind eye to how the present predicament of *relative* food scarcity is socially produced). Equally the high priests of market liberalisation fail to appreciate how capitalist markets can foster inequities and work against those who are most vulnerable. Thus the push to ‘de-regulate’ markets continues unabated, even as dominant economic powers belie the ‘free market’ position by pursuing subsidies for agro-fuels and supporting legislation enabling the ever-deeper financialisation of the global food system. And finally arguments that depict hunger as an outcome of arrested development betray an astonishing disregard for alterity and difference as well as breathless confidence in the superiority of Western values and powers to organise society for the better.¹²⁸

I have suggested that the mythologies summarised above are invoked to bolster strategies that remove food policies from democratic discussion and participation, prioritizing instead the privatized administration of global food provisioning. One way that this ‘consensus’ is advanced is to say that progress of this nature is inevitable. It is, quite simply, ‘the way of the world’ and as such ‘there is no alternative,’ as Margaret Thatcher famously announced.¹²⁹ Yet another way to advance this inflexible agenda is to suggest that all efforts promoting it are simply an expression of philanthropic care for humanity. The claim that it is the white man’s burden to ‘fill full the mouth of famine’ remains as powerful as ever. Similar to modern humanitarian reason, then, food security serves to galvanize public empathy and in the process it converts a relationship of dominance (the governance of stricken lives) into one of assistance (the provision of a remedy).¹³⁰ As philosopher Marianne Gronemeyer argues, ‘[t]he metamorphosis from a colonialism that “takes” to one that supposedly “gives” has been completed under the protection of this euphonious word, help.’¹³¹ Nowhere is this metamorphosis more complete and triumphant than in advance of global food security policies today.

¹²⁷ Weis, *op. cit.*, 76.

¹²⁸ James Scott’s examination of ‘high-modernist ideology’ and the faith placed in schemes of social engineering is very germane to this discussion. James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹²⁹ Pierre Dardot and Christian, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal society* [Trans G. Elliott.] (London: Verso, 2013).

¹³⁰ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 3.

¹³¹ Gronemeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

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Author biography

David Nally is a senior lecturer in the Department of Geography and a Fellow of Jesus College at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (2011) and co-author of *Key Concepts in Historical Geography* (2014, with John Morrissey, Ulf Strohmayer and Yvonne Whelan).