A Scenario

Imagine a doctor with a poor patient. The doctor informs the patient her diet is bad and her obese kids’ diet is even worse. The doctor tells her she should quit eating trans-fats and sweets like high fructose corn syrup, should eat more fresh vegetables and keep track of her calories and grams of fat, fiber and carbohydrates. No matter how sensitively presented or how much assistance is afforded, the message is still “shape up and eat right.”

You can also imagine what the poor woman feels and think: A sinking sense of personal and moral failing and incompetence. “Why can’t I deal with this? I can’t control kid’s eating. I’m a failed parent. What are trans-fats or high fructose? I have to get to work, then pick up the kids. I don’t have time for figuring out that other stuff, even if I knew how. They don’t have any fresh vegetables at the corner convenience store and I can’t get to a fresh market or grocery that has those things, and even if I could, I couldn’t afford it, and even if I could afford it, I wouldn’t know what to do with it.” So feeling utterly defeated the patient says screw it. The task is too overwhelming and the issue that afflicts her cannot be engaged.

Beyond the Individual

This exaggerated worst-case scenario illustrates how we think about food issues in this country, not just those of poor or disadvantaged communities, but those for nearly everyone. It is excessively individualistic.

This way of thinking is based on the belief that we are all rational calculating individuals who have the means to make self-interested market decisions that will maximize our benefits. You are on your own, and if you fail, it’s your fault. This is the fundamental principle of our economic system, but it’s based in mythology, not reality. Most people do not have the means to make and carry out what would be the best decisions. The mythology denies the reality of history as it has built the economic and power structures in which people live, in very different locations.

The first barrier that this myth does not recognize is that with most things in life, and particularly nutrition, there is too much confusing, often incomprehensible and non-existent information. Even if there were perfect and perfectly understood information, many other systemic and structural barriers to good nutrition remain: particularly those of cost and availability. The individual is told to make better decisions, but how can she? One answer is the long, slow and limited process of education about food choices. Another is understanding, coping with, and changing the systemic barriers in our food system.

This chapter is about our food system’s structures, how they came to be, and how they operate in our current economic system. When we limit ourselves to
individualist actions, we have little effect on the overwhelming problems these structures create. The individualist approach too often ignores power and how it keeps people trapped and dependent. Dieticians and nutritionists would be well-served by breaking these limits that disempower them and their clients.

This is not to say they should forego the individual, which is primary and essential work. It is to say that the playing field needs to be enlarged and the systems and structures taken on and changed, and that dieticians and nutritionists can have a major role in that project.

**Economy and Culture**

Economy and Culture are two sides of the same coin. The first task of any group is to provide food for its members, and the basis of any culture is how this food is produced and distributed. Economic systems-- how humans organize their communities, place value on things and actions, and produce and consume--are cultural systems. So when we look at a particular food economics system, how it came to be and how it operates, we need to keep in mind that it is culture. Culture literally becomes “second nature,” in the sense that it can seem as invisible as the air we breathe, even though it is made by humans as they make economies—you cannot separate the two. Culture and economic systems are both products of history—they are not “natural,” even though they appear to be. They can be changed, but only by social action.

**Food in Context**

The American food system is touted as one of the wonders of the world. Americans on average spend a lower percentage of their income on food than any other people. We grow so much grain we can turn it into motor fuel and export it. Like other western countries in the modern age, there has never been the remotest chance of famine due to food shortages.

Yet, an absence of famine doesn’t mean there hasn’t been and continues to be a great deal of malnutrition in this country. The average American expenditure for food hides the fact that high quality, healthy food is unavailable to many Americans. Food producers in our economy are not primarily motivated by a need to serve a community, despite what advertisers would have you believe. They are motivated by self-interest and profit. The necessity to maintain that profit and to keep profit rates from falling is why our food system fails to provide proper nutrition to so many.

Shortly after President Obama was elected, a symposium was held in the East San Francisco Bay about locally grown healthy food from the perspectives of public health. The moderator asked everyone, "If you caught Obama in the elevator and could pitch him in 30 seconds on building healthy food systems, what would you
say?” The Director of Community Health Services for the Alameda County immediately said, "provide affordable housing."

That might seem an off-topic answer, but she explained that unhealthy food is only part of the much bigger problem of economic underdevelopment in low-income neighborhoods. Local farmers markets and salad bars at schools are important steps, but even more important would be having local and locally-owned grocery stores run by local people who employ local kids to stock the shelves with healthy food from local growers that is purchased by community members who can afford it because they live in affordable housing. In the Bay area, housing is exceptionally expensive, so her response makes sense. People have to work longer and harder to pay rent, and thus don’t even have the time to buy and cook healthy foods, even if they were affordably available everywhere.

Why is a healthy diet so difficult today for many people, but particularly for historically underrepresented communities? The East Bay exchange above indicates that we need to account for the variety of conditions in which people encounter the food system. Someone in the East Bay faces different issues than someone in central Detroit, or someone in a small desert community or someone in a poor southern hamlet. The American food system, while in many ways a monolith, varies from place to place, as do responses to it. What we want to convey here is that no matter where one encounters it, it is still a system, part of the larger system that organizes an individual’s encounter with her or his food.

Two views of our food system:

1. It’s the greatest the world has ever seen—unbelievable choice, convenience, cheap and available to everyone, and keeps every American fed. The “free market” production system ipso facto provides everything that consumers demand at the lowest possible price.

2. It’s a recipe for diabetes, cancer, obesity, malnutrition, high blood pressure, and other maladies. It is over-processed, over-salted, over-sugared, over-fatted, over-chemicalized. Healthy, fresh, unprocessed food is often prohibitively expensive in terms of both time and money. It’s a racket that runs on public subsidies, is supported by socializing it's pollution costs—poisoned land, water and people—while keeping profits private, and is controlled by runaway oligopolistic companies that relentlessly reduce workers to peonage.

Both statements are more or less true, although exaggerated. The first view has for decades been the official line of those who are invested in this system. Vested interests work very hard to present this view as inalterable fact, to make it the “common knowledge” of the culture--part of the second nature—, and many if not most Americans complacently accept this notion without much thought. The second view is more recent. It has bubbled up from below from many sources—public health activist groups, environmentalists, researchers and scientists, and common
citizens concerned about the food system--to challenge self-serving food industry presentations. What has been opening up over the past few years is a struggle over the future direction of how we provide for the nutrition and health of our communities. This is an inherently political struggle between vested interests and the community at large.

When we talk “system” we are not talking about only something “out there.” We are talking about ourselves, our places in this system, how we are formed by it, and how we as a community can reform it over time. The food system is not just the material facts of how food is produced, distributed, processed and eaten. It is also the myths and beliefs about it that have developed along with its material form through history, and which are present in our consciousness.

The first task is to take a historical look at the development of Agrarian Capitalism. This is critical because the underpinnings of the system were built in history and must become visible. A historical view provides understanding about how things got to be this way, and thus shows what things might need to be done to really reform the food system into one that’s healthy for all people and the environment.

The second task is to look at how the industrial food system works today, which can reveal the weak links in the chain, which can then be used to identify locations where actions to change the system might be initiated.

A third task is to again consider individuals who are entangled in the system, and raise some broad questions about how to move forward. Before getting to all this though, we need to understand a few interrelated principles and definitions that are basic to the following material.

**Food and Work--**

1. Food for people is a product of the bounty of nature and of *human labor*. Food doesn’t just appear in grocery stores or at your table; it is the result of work: work that produces machinery, raw materials and other inputs to grow food, work in the growing, processing and distribution of foods, work in the preparation of food for consumption, and work in all the ancillary activities throughout the process. Food work is not just that done in production, but also the work necessary for food’s consumption, i.e. earning wages to buy food, and the work of procuring and preparing it in the home or elsewhere. The changing circumstances of all this work, particularly how that work is organized and to what ends, is a focus of this chapter.

2. Technology does not determine our systems. It allows or facilitates certain systems to emerge or change, but technology is merely social knowledge achieved from human labor over the centuries. It is not some mystical force that demands a certain kind of social organization; an organization that cannot be challenged because it’s the natural and inalterable outcome of “modern technology.” It is simply knowledge built by work. What technology allows is higher productivity.
through higher efficiency. The issue is who “owns” or controls this knowledge and to what ends it is put.

3. *Time is money.* Work takes place in time. Technological advance in any production, such as food production, allows for higher productivity by speeding up production. More stuff can be made in a shorter amount of time, lowering the unit cost. This is neither a good or bad thing in itself—at issue is who pays the costs of this and who reaps the benefits. Productivity advances only via socially built knowledge, or by coercing people, either by the slave-masters whip or by market forces, to work longer hours or more intensively, i.e. faster.

4. *Productivity and Efficiency.* These two words are the key words to the economic theories that legitimize our current economic and food systems. In economic-speak efficiency really means *labor efficiency* – the amount of human labor that is necessary to produce some economic good or service; the less labor per unit of production, the more efficient. Productivity means *labor productivity* – how much value an hour of labor produces. If something can be produced with fewer hours of labor, the productivity of each hour of labor rises accordingly. Labor efficiency and labor productivity are the only means by which economic progress is made.

5. *Overproduction.* This key concept needs to be explained here because it can sometimes seem illogical. On the face of it, this is not a problem for the individual or consumer. It seems a good thing: more production means more plentiful and less expensive goods appear. It’s a big problem, however, for the capitalist producers, and it leads to activities that are generally not in the consumer’s interest, as we’ll see. The problem is basically this: there are a bunch of producers producing away like crazy, and creating too much produce for the society to be able to consume. Producer A should cut back, and would if he could, but he can’t because Producer B would take advantage of it by grabbing Mr. A’s market. Mr. B would get a larger market share, and Mr. A would have to go find work elsewhere. Other solutions must be found. It is a persistent problem of capitalist production, particularly in agriculture, as it relentlessly drives the profit rate toward zero and beyond. The problem is almost always exacerbated by increases in productivity and efficiency. We’ll see that this is the overarching reason for the poor quality of much of our food.

**History of the Capitalist Food System**

**Dispossession**

Capitalist agriculture emerged in the English countryside in the early modern era (roughly the 15th to 18th centuries). This form was ultimately transplanted to America in two basic types, business-farms based on family and hired labor, and plantations based on slave labor."
How and why capitalism emerged out of the medieval world may seem irrelevant here, but it reveals a basic process that is fundamental to understanding why we have a food system that fails so many individuals and communities. This process, which appears again and again in modern history, and is ongoing both here and around the world, is one of dispossession—stripping people of the means to independently provide for themselves and their community.

*The Medieval World*

This is a highly simplified view, but the English feudal world had three central characteristics. One, it was a status-based society. A peasant was a peasant for life, a nobleman a nobleman for life, etc. Each member of this hierarchical society had certain customary obligations and rights. A peasant was subservient to and owed the lord his labor, but the lord could not kick the peasant off the manor land—nor could the peasant leave the land. The peasant was part of the land and had certain customary rights in it. [That this relationship was much abused is testified to by numerous peasant revolts.]

A second aspect is the land was held in a kind of trust, deriving from God, down through the king, through the various lords, etc. It was not private property that could be sold, but was common property of the whole society, however unequally the fruits of that land were divided up. A third element was that lending money at interest—the grease of finance and business—was officially disallowed, which helped maintain the manor-based economy.

For capitalism to fully emerge, all three of these aspects had to be overthrown, but the one that concerns us most here is the labor issue. What becomes different with capitalism is how people relate to each other in producing goods and services. Capitalism erases customary relationships, rights, privileges and obligations as the guides to economic exchange and systematically replaces them with contracts and cash exchanges as the only relations of value.

*The Transition to Capitalism.* Exactly how landlords achieved this was a long and complex process, but it basically comes down to raw power. The effect was peasants—the laborers who were the primary producers of the society's wealth—as well as their families and whole villages, were either expelled from the land or required to pay cash rent. Their customary rights and obligations were simply done away with. Tenancy became common, and a growing population of landless and impoverished wage laborers and paupers drifted through the countryside and into emerging cities with nothing to sell except their labor. Aristocratic landlords gradually became capitalist businessmen, credit became more common—allowing claims on the hoped-for future productivity of emerging enterprises, and over time land became a commodity (this last was much more true in America than in England).

Dispossession from the land continues; its effects are what drive much of the migration from Latin America to the United States. Dispossession strips people of
their own means of producing for themselves and makes them increasingly dependent on the capitalist market for life itself. Dispossession of land access is the first step, but the process continues over access to tools, materials, knowledge, and ultimately, time.

**Early America—Globalization**

The dispossession of the peasantry was not the only element of the transition to capitalism. The scientific revolution provided tools and ways of thinking that sped the pace of change and allowed increased production. Improved transportation and industry allowed for a global economy—the most famous aspect being the triangle trade route between Europe, Africa and the New World, with its infamous middle passage.

With excess labor and scarce land, the emerging English agrarian capitalist class began investing in new world lands, and landless labor immigrated to work them. Looking for a cash crop that would provide profits, the investors settled first on tobacco, then sugar, rice, and cotton. This export-oriented staples agriculture was organized through plantation production.

With a continent of land before them, Europeans only had to seize it from the native people and occupy it, and laborers, many of them arriving as indentured servants, did just that. This was a problem for plantations. Why work for someone who was living off your labor, when you could head out west, grab a piece of land and produce for yourself? This created the necessity for slavery in the eyes of the plantation masters and English investors. Globalized production and trade gave new life to the institution of slavery, which created one of the dominant forms of American agriculture, and its social and cultural order.

In the North high yields from underworked land, particularly once farming moved out of stony New England, helped create a republic of mostly small farmers. The cash from surplus allowed for the importation of English manufactured goods and helped build northern industries such as textiles and ironworking.

**Expanding markets**

In the 19th century, the factory system arose in the North, the plantation system was solidified throughout the South, and vast fields of grain production were opened up in the rich virgin lands of the Midwest. These activities were facilitated by gains in technological knowledge: the cotton gin, advances in coal and steam power, better plows, textile factory machinery, steamboats, railroads, mechanical harvesters and threshers, and large scale grain elevators.

In the South, a powerful landowning class expanded and developed their plantations by borrowing money from northern capitalists who were making money on shipping and textile production, and later, other industries. Profits came from
commanding ever-larger labor gangs of slaves. Cotton was the leading economic sector and key to the antebellum economy.\textsuperscript{vii} Wealth was created by the theft of slave labor, but that was just the start. The slave system needed inputs to produce. Slaves needed to be shod, clothed and fed in order to produce and reproduce. Most of the clothes and shoes, and some of the food came from the North. Indirectly, northern farmers profited from feeding the industrial hands making the shoes and clothes.

In the North and Midwest, technical changes allowed farmers to increase operations, reduce labor input, and begin specializing. By the 1850s some farmers could ship grain via railroad to a new-fangled grain elevator in Chicago, from whence it could be shipped around the world.

\textit{More Dispossession—Industrial Capitalism Arrives in America}

Farmers and artisans considered themselves the producing classes, unlike the land speculators, bankers, merchants, shippers, lawyers and others whom they considered parasitic on the honest wealth created by laborers’ sweat. In this world, an artisan like a shoemaker would do quality work, sell it at the fair price that his labor morally commanded, and would buy at the local market the food of the local farmers, who labored in much the same manner and were paid in the same moral fashion. While this is somewhat idealized, there did exist for a time in parts of America this transitional economy that, even though moral and community concerns are very important in governing economic exchange, is not feudal, but also not fully capitalist. But it was not to last, as a second form of dispossession overtook the artisan class and created the unskilled factory worker. A closer look at the shoemaker illustrates this.\textsuperscript{viii}

The shoemaker had his own shop, owned his own tools, procured his own hides from local tanneries, and knew the ins and outs of all the tasks in making shoes. Much of the economy was this sort of production—tailors, furniture makers, butchers, candle-makers, etc. But, merchant shippers controlled a large and increasing part of the early economy, shipping cotton out of the South to northern and English textile mills. While this is not the only way industrial capitalism emerged, how merchant-shippers inserted themselves into things like artisan shoemaking illustrates how the artisan classes were dispossessed of their materials, tools and skills.

As merchant shippers accumulated more capital, they acquired the means to begin organizing northern shoe and clothing production to outfit the southern slaves in a manner that would be as cheap as possible to the slave-owner. They began to have shoddy cheap goods made in what were known as slop shops. This drove prices down, but volume in the now expanded market, which the merchant shippers largely controlled, more than made up the difference. Over time, this expanding market power gave control of all production to the capitalized merchant who could provide struggling artisans with cheaper materials and tools. But the product was now no longer the property of the artisan, who was increasingly impoverished,
while the merchant shipper who now owned the product of the shoemakers labor, became an industrial capitalist.

Now controlling production, the new industrial capitalist reorganized it further by gathering the impoverished shoemakers into one manufactory and dispossessing them of the last thing they still owned--their knowledge of how to make a shoe--by instituting a division of labor. The worker now learned and developed just one skill of the trade, such as stitching uppers, or cutting patterns.

The modern factory worker, utterly dependent on wages and the market, emerged in a transformation that had nothing to do with any technological change. What changed were social and economic relationships.

Almost all crafts—textiles, furniture making, etc.--went through a similar process in the 18th and 19th centuries, and teeming industrial cities emerged. Of course this method had been instituted in the industrial fields of the South since the beginning of plantation agriculture, albeit by direct coercion of the lash instead of the indirect coercion of the market. In the rural North, farmers were able to forestall this process for a very long time, in some ways even until today, where they maintain an illusion they are still artisans.

Images of Agriculture
By the 19th century powerful images and ideas that influence how we think about food and its production today had been fully formed. These images originated in antiquity, but received a powerful boost by Thomas Jefferson, who famously wrote, "Cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens." Jefferson’s view has colored American sentiment for more than two centuries—the iconography can be seen today in advertisements from local banks and groceries to those for Monsanto or other large agricultural product corporations.

This idea that there is a repository of virtue in the countryside—the honest hard-working independent man as the backbone of America--has a broad romantic appeal to many Americans, but it is used to mask the realities of rural life and food production. And of course it ignores the fact that the agricultural work at Jefferson’s estate was done by slaves. It’s not surprising that many of those who escaped the brutal countryside of the Jim Crow south or have suffered similarly harsh agricultural environments are not as enamored of this notion of rural virtue.

It’s easy to dismiss Jefferson’s statement as hypocritical. Yet it and many others like it originate in his intense dislike of the kind of urban and industrial development he had witnessed in Europe—captured by the poet William Blake phrase the “dark, satanic mills” of industrialization. As an agrarian, Jefferson’s thought opposed the northern industrialists and merchants, as well as Alexander Hamilton’s vision of industrial production, great cities, and economic empire.
Although he could not escape the millstone of slavery, Jefferson nonetheless understood something about the alienation from nature and life that the Hamiltonian world-view would result in. Marx called this phenomenon the metabolic rift, one in which alienation from the land creates a sense that mankind is separate from nature, and is realized in the separation of the country from the city, and in all the social and environmental ills thus brought about.

So by the Civil War agriculture was imagined in curious ways both North and South. The Civil War was in important ways about the nature of labor. While moral outrage over the evil of slavery surely drove northern political sentiment, it was more than just that. What was so offensive to many northern independent farmers and artisans was that slavery debased labor. It made it into something without inherent value. It was an affront to their own work and thus their sense of themselves as free and independent men who held sovereignty. The Republican Party thus emerged with the motto of “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men.” From our vantage point we can see that this was only a transitional economy, a kind of petty production that would not withstand the pressures of industrial capitalism.

Southern apologists for slavery saw this clearly, arguing that southern slaves had it better than the growing class of “wage slaves” in the North. But they also saw farm labor as inherently degrading and fit work only for the lowest.

Today we see these views presented as wholesome families and the seat of virtue and citizenship in the country. But that’s largely imaginary and can be compared to the reality of factories in the fields worked by exploited immigrant and displaced labor or slave gang labor, or by self-exploiting farmers. Many see agricultural labor the lowest form of human endeavor--fieldwork as something dirty and loathsome, and those who do it as low and backwards. These individual and community psychological responses to foods and the food system were forged within the circumstances of its historical development and its structures.

**Industrial agriculture**

American farmers were producing a large surplus of food after the war as more acreage of exceptionally productive land was planted and efficiencies improved. Without growing demand, prices would fall so farmers were interested in increasing the size and scope of their market in order to keep prices up. Increasingly packed industrial cities provided that expanded market. New transportation systems, particularly the extension of railroads provided the way to feed industrial cities.

*Cowboys and Immigrants* The cowboy, that great American icon, was actually a displaced low-wage industrial worker. The roundups and drives moved cattle to a railhead that was attached by rail to the new stockyards and meatpacking plants of cities like Chicago. The cattle was cut up along disassembly lines and then delivered to butchers and other urban outlets. On the other end, cities were filling with displaced American workers, but increasingly also with dispossessed peasants and
farmers from continental Europe as it went through the transition to capitalist agriculture that England had earlier.ix

_Commodity Grain._ With an expanded market and longer supply lines, food systems became less regional or local. The invention of the grain elevator in Chicago led to the commoditization of grain. Before, every farmer’s product would have remained identified as his product. Now all corn would be combined into one system and bought and traded on commodity futures markets. Farmers thus became more and more embedded in world markets.x Steam powered farm machinery allowed them to farm larger tracts with fewer hands.

In the South, the invention of the mechanical cotton picker would have to wait until after World War II, so labor needed to be compelled through debt peonage sharecropping and Jim Crow regimes to continue the production system. In the west, vast government funded water projects allowed huge corporate farms to be built, worked by low-wage displaced people.

Problems arose—soil exhaustion, railroad monopolies appropriating most of the surplus value of crops, and too much surplus and overproduction. An illustration of the overproduction and cheapness of food (one that continues today) is illustrated by the free lunch. In workingmen’s bars throughout industrial America, the free lunch spread was ubiquitous. You could eat as much as you wanted—if you bought a drink or two. In other words, food was cheap, but a value-added product like liquor could turn a profit.

**Populism**

Jefferson imagined our nation and culture as an ideal society of small farmers and craftsmen. That vision was a powerful idea, around which political movements of farmers could congeal. The heart of the vision is independence—not being beholden to anyone else, or under someone else’s power. With the great expansion of the market and with increasing competition, however, farmers were pulled two ways—the possibility and need to get bigger, more efficient and make more money or, on the other hand, preserving a way of life and independence.

Some farmers practiced “safety-first” agriculture. They were perfectly willing to sell on the commodity markets, but only after growing enough to live on, pay taxes and expenses and set their children up. They keep the Market at arms length and refused to maximize profits by putting all their land into cash crop production. But as time went on, this position became less and less viable as the market expanded. Gradually more and more farmers became evermore firmly embedded in the Market.xi

By no means was all farming a kind of artisan or semi-artisan production. Giant bonanza farms, manorial estates, huge cattle ranches and the like all existed
throughout the period and into today. Farms were worked by displaced and
dispossessed persons wandering the country looking for agricultural work as hoe
boys, from which we get the word hobo. Land speculators, bankers, storekeepers
and merchants were the richest men in every country town (often the same man),
and also often the largest landowners—who had their farm holdings worked by
tenants.

In the meantime, railroads, which had vastly expanding the market, helping to
consolidate and organize production, exercised their monopoly powers, squeezing
the farmers and bringing on the political movement of populism, an attempt to
restore the Jeffersonian vision.

Populism strove to corral the distant corporate market power that appropriated
most of the surplus value of the crops, exacerbating the problems of overproduction
already plaguing farmers. It was bound to fail. Newspapers and city dwellers
heaped scorn on it. Even local newspapers, increasingly beholden to commercial
advertisers instead of local subscribers, mocked the populists as rubes and ignorant
hicks out of touch with the modern economy.

The modern food economy was increasingly national in scope. The comparative
advantage, augmented by the rail system and new refrigerated cars (plus publically
subsidized water projects), of the California climate led to lower priced fruit and
vegetables from that region, driving local truck farms out of business. In response,
Midwestern agriculture turned more and more to grain based monoculture to feed
cattle and hogs. Meat production was increasingly dominated by the huge
stockyards and packing houses of oligopolists like Swift and Armour. Prices for all
foodstuffs were now nationally set instantaneously, via the telegraph, at such
institutions as the Chicago Board of Trade. Farmers were price-takers with no
choice or bargaining power. Against that kind of economic power, the Jeffersonian
dreams of the populists stood no chance whatsoever. Industrial agriculture had
arrived.

Populism was the last movement of any real consequence that embodied the
Jeffersonian vision of agrarian independence. The appeal was one of survival of
course, but it also looked backward to restore some imagined past while still
seeking benefits of capitalist agriculture. But the past was not coming back, unless
as farce. Still, the dream lives on as an illusion and a marketing tool.

The Twentieth Century

Absentee Ownership  The first half of the 20th century witnessed much of the same
kind of growth: increasing peonage and tenancy, and the general impoverishment of
small farmers. High prices around the First World War led to “suitcase farmers,”
land investors who hired tenants to grow grains on land ill suited for farming on the
great plains, creating the dust bowl. [Some of the damage done from this kind of
farming in semi-arid regions has been ameliorated by pumping water from the
Ogallala Aquifer, and irrigation. However, the aquifer water is being used at a much higher rate than it can be replenished and its level is dropping fast.

In the later 1920s agricultural commodity prices dropped and remained low and dropping, due again to overproduction. Tenant farmers were driven off the land and made up the “Okie” migration from Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, Missouri and other places on the margins of food production. Even in the center of grain production, places like Iowa, farmers sold out to larger operations and moved to places like Los Angeles to retire.

Mixed farming became even rarer; large scale monoculture more common. A concomitant phenomenon is that farmers increasingly lost the knowledge, tools and materials for mixed farming, and became increasingly dependent on hybrid seeds from seed companies (which could not be saved, only bought fresh every year), information from seed and fertilizer salesmen, and extension agents from state universities that were often cozy with the corporate agriculture sector.

**The New Deal: Farm Programs.** The great depression was first felt in the farm sector, well before the stock market crash. Farming was plagued by problems of overproduction and under-consumption (or inadequate aggregate demand) It seemed insane that there was so much productive capacity in industry and agriculture and that people were not working and in soup lines. Dependent on nation-wide markets for income, people could barely survive without money flowing through those markets. The New Deal was devised to put people back to work, first in government jobs, to get money into their hands in order to boost demand to take up the overproduced surplus.

In the farm sector, the approach was different. Here, the federal government enacted the first farm programs, which attacked overproduction by paying farmers to not plant some of their fields. The success of this program continues to be debated, but the reason for it is pretty clear: the political power of farm states, the pull of Jefferson’s ideal, and the devastation of rural communities in the ‘30s as families were driven off farms, all contributed to the passage of the first comprehensive farm programs, which remained in place is one form or another until the 1970s.

**Post-war boom and corporate consolidation.** Grain yields boomed after the war with the widespread adoption of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. New pesticides were developed out of chemical warfare research, and munitions industries, which produced nitrogen for explosives, were converted to producing nitrogen fertilizers. The industrialization and consolidation of agriculture continued apace, as more and more food firms became vertically integrated (one company controlling several steps in the production process, for instance, an oil company owning refineries and gas stations).
In the South, the development of the mechanical cotton picker was the push to get sharecroppers off the land. Opportunities to escape the Jim Crow South were provided by post war industries in the industrial North.

Farms continued to become larger and more specialized, and more people left rural areas for cities as mechanization increased. Overproduction was kept in check by the New Deal farm programs that paid farmers to take land out of production, by growing exports markets after World War II, particularly with the devastation of Europe, and by public food assistance programs, which would eventually become food stamps and associated programs, that boosted demand.

Another important element of the boom was the rise in wages that lasted from the war until well into the 1970s. Workforce unionization and American dominance of markets, again partly due to the devastation of Europe and the underdevelopment of Asia, gave workers the disposable income to buy higher-value food products, such as meats and the more processed foods that were beginning to take up more and more grocery shelf-space.

The Long Downturn. In the early 1970s The Nixon administration made a major change to federal farm programs that had a significant effect. The essence of it was Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz’s statement to farmers to “get big or get out.” The old New Deal restrictions on production were jettisoned, and Butz told farmers to “plant from fencerow to fencerow.” Farmers, now calling themselves agribusinessmen, took out huge debt loads to buy more land, and ever-larger and more expensive machinery to work it. Part of the goal was to boost agricultural exports, particularly to places like the Soviet Union, which were facing shortages. But that was short-lived and the result was, by the early 1980s, a collapse of the farm economy, with many farmers going out of business, and as Butz had urged, the bigger getting much bigger.

At the same time, grain handling companies became much more concentrated. Ever-smaller margins meant only the biggest companies handling huge amounts of grain could survive. Consolidation in the grain industry was soon followed in the meat and poultry industries.

To stem the low price crisis in farming, commodity price supports were instituted in order to keep land from just going fallow, which would cut off the cheap inputs for higher-value food products. In essence, a price floor is set, and if the price of a commodity is below that, the government cuts a check to the farmer. In a perverse way, this helps keep the price of inputs low for the large grain companies, meat producers and others who use grains in industrial production--the real beneficiaries of this taxpayer-funded program.

A major shift in the 1970s was that wages began to stagnate as European and Asian economies came on line full strength, imports increased, manufacturing was moved to low wage countries, and unions were broken.
While productivity continued to rise, more of the surplus was captured by the financial world. While stagnant wages would seem to indicate a lower level of consumption, the increasingly flush financial world began offering easy personal credit, and consumers began financing more and more of the lifestyle they had grown accustomed to on the emerging world of personal credit cards and other debt. That this is unsustainable is obvious, but so far this system of ever increasing debt has survived, in no small part to several bubbles, from the Reagan tax policies that caused the Savings and Loan and commercial real estate bubbles in the 80s, the dot.com bubble in the 90s, and the housing bubble in the first decade of the 21st Century. The great recession that began in 2008 is not resolved as of this writing, and it’s not clear how or when production can reach its former levels.

Still, to maintain profit margins, firms, particularly companies in the food business, needed to keep their prices low to maintain sales. The explosion of cheap fast-food franchise restaurants across the country—a high-speed, high-volume factory form of production became a dominant part of the landscape starting in the 1970; a fact not coincidental with wage stagnation and government agriculture policy that underwrites and encourages excessive grain production.

The Industrial Food System Today

Today the US food system is fully industrialized. Large agribusiness corporations dominate agriculture. Just three or four large companies handle almost all grain in US. The industry is rapidly consolidating and centralizing—from seeds to grocery store. In a monopolistic or oligopolistic capitalism, a few giant corporations control the vast majority of a particular market.

As one observer notes, “Capitalism presents us with the paradoxical reality of a rapid growth of food production and perpetuation of overproduction (relative to markets and income distributions) on the one hand, accompanied by the reinforcement of social exclusion and thus the growth of hunger on the other.”

We think of agriculture as just farmers growing food. Yet there is a huge industry that provides the inputs for modern industrial agriculture—seeds, fertilizers, machinery, fuel to grow the food, then ship, process, package and retail it. The kind of monoculture cropping that is done as regions have specialized leads to a race between pests who evolve resistance to pesticides and newer pesticides, at ever-greater cost. Energy inputs and costs continue to rise, not only in all the transportation and farm machinery uses, but also in fertilizers, which are made from fossil fuels. In addition, the biotechnology seed market is being increasingly monopolized by a couple of companies and prices to farmers have shot up by enormous amounts in the past few years.
The Logic of The Market

With this kind of power, the largest agribusiness and food companies can control the costs paid for raw materials [i.e. grain] and can keep prices high enough to ensure profits. The food industry has been the second most profitable industry after pharmaceuticals.xv

A vast overproduction of basic food inputs and outputs creates the need to control market price and to always sell more to keep the price from collapsing. As price is driven ever downward, profits accrue only from high volume and market domination. A capitalist enterprise must grow or die; if you don’t cut costs to the bone your competitor will and then you’re out of business. Over time this leads inexorably to monopoly or oligopoly. Because excess production capacity and thus production puts downward pressure on prices and profits, the most efficient producer will attain monopoly.

This food system cannot exist without government supports. For example, in the early 2000s, grain farming was operationally profitable in Champaign County, Illinois, which has one of the three richest soils in the world. But this was only due to government subsidy payments. Input costs for such things as fertilizer totaled more than the cash value of the grain. This is even before land costs are considered. Plus, the value of food and drink consumed in the county far out surpassed the value of all agricultural production in the county. In other words, despite living on one of the richest and most productive soils in the world, the county imports most of its food, and that food is of much higher value than what is actually grown on that soil. Government transfer payments underwrite this type of production, and keep farmers who are practicing this production from going out of business.

Overproduction of food is exacerbated by the simple fact that limited stomach capacity in the population limits demand. The combination of overproduction and limited demand drives the need to add value. In the case of grains, the first option is turning them into meat. But even here, overproduction of meat is always a threat—which indicates just how much over-productive capacity exists. There is a plethora of products on a supermarket shelf, but as Michael Pollan has shown, nearly all are overwhelming comprised from corn, and all the corn byproducts that modern industrial chemistry has allowed. xvi Farmers and large agribusinesses need these high-value uses of corn to use surplus grain and maintain profits. At the end of the day the market has to be skewed by subsidies to keep the players who have the political connections in business.

The direct subsidies to maintain this system are immense. These subsidies are bolstered by all the other subsidies or government projects, such as roads for trucks, water projects, state university facilities for corporate sponsored research in biotechnology and many, many other aspects. Cheap food also helps to dampen demands for higher wages, so it’s in the interest of employers to maintain the current system. In addition, a great deal of capitalist wealth is realized in high and
rising land values (with cheap labor provided to work the land), again reinforcing the political will to maintain the current system.

Our Food Today

*Grains.* Most grain production in America is not food that humans can eat as is. It is industrial feedstock for meat, highly processed food, and most recently, motor fuel. Most of our diet is corn and soy, grown through heavy inputs of fossil fuel-based products.\textsuperscript{xvii} The landscape in the broad sense has been fully transformed in terms of infrastructure. The entire supply and distribution chain and all the money invested in the land and in equipment is designed to produce a good for market and not for human consumption that has the highest cash value. The capital investment in all of this system is simply enormous, and those invested in it will go to any length to protect their investment. So change will be difficult.

*Meat.* Most of our meat comes from confined animal operations, where animals in tiny stalls (movement uses up energy more profitably put toward rapid fattening) are fed a diet from the overabundant grains and seeds. Animals are then shipped to large factory slaughterhouses, now mostly in low wage parts of the country, which are often staffed by poorly paid immigrants from places like Mexico and Vietnam and/or poor Americans in historically poor regions of the county.

Smaller processing units have had no chance to compete as large units can pay most if not all of there operating expenses on the drop—the inedible parts of the animal that can be sold to large scale processors of things like industrial chemicals and pet food. Large manufacturers of these products would find dealing with small local operations un-economical, as the transactions costs would be too high. Only very large food processors can cut overhead costs to the bone and thus create an oligopolistic market in products.

Over the same time, the local butcher (one of the last artisan trades to go down) and local grocery stores have been driven out of business by the large regional and national chain stores, who can operate on a much lower margin due to volume.

Boxed beef is the archetype of efficiency through the system: cattle fed corn on confined feedlots (and fed chemicals to accelerate growth and forestall the disease inherent in such conditions) are shipped to large packing plants where they are disassembled and then boxed by cut or turned into hamburger to ship to large buyers like McDonalds and chain stores.

A variation on this, and one that recalls the plight of the shoemakers, is seen in the poultry industry. Here, oligopolistic firms use their market power to organize production by contracting with local chicken producers. The company provides most of the inputs, tools and decision-making on how to maximize production. The actual producer becomes a laborer financing his own debt, but without a laborer's right to collective bargaining. Earning as little as five cents a pound, the contracted
farmers discover that this system is rife with abuse, and that they have no recourse against the power of the company.

*Produce.* Most of our fresh produce comes from large-scale industrialized farms in California and a few other states. High use of dangerous chemicals has been the norm, and government water projects that keep water prices artificially low benefit the growers. In addition, large scale buyers of produce, for instance McDonalds’ demand for potatoes for its French fries, gives them enormous power over what kinds of food is produced and how, and at what price.

Increasingly, much of our produce is coming from overseas—Latin America and China in particular—and from Mexico, areas with much lower production costs (and environmental regulations), particularly as the agricultural economies consolidate in these regions. Small holders and peasants are again driven off the land as industrial capitalist relations take hold, and immigrants flow to the United States in an attempt to provide for their families. It’s not all that different from England at the dawn of capitalism.

**Dispossession at home and abroad**

Farmers have retained the artisan mindset to this day—even though they are often in effect just agricultural laborers, renting land, paying interest on the money borrowed for necessary tools such as extremely expensive combines, their knowledge of production limited to what seed and fertilizer salesmen tell them. The farmer imagines himself as a free independent yeoman or an “agri-businessman,” when all he really has to sell is his labor. When asked why his company just didn’t buy land and farm it, one large agribusiness executive said his company would not be allowed to exploit its workers as much as farmers exploit themselves.

Farmers have been among the last of the original artisan producer classes to be dispossessed. Much of this has already occurred in the US, although the trend continues. Farmers are a miniscule part of the workforce, so few that they are not even listed as an employment category in the Federal Census (farm workers—mostly migrants—on the other hand are much more numerous), even though agriculture itself remains a huge part of the economy.

In the rest of the world, the process of capital accumulation and dispossession grinds on: small farmers continue to be driven off the land and into the urban slums of the underdeveloped world. This is in no small part due to the actions of the developed and wealthy world. One such action is American subsidies to domestic growers, which allows them to export the flood of surplus to developing countries, thus undercutting and eventually destroying local producers. Another is the current land grab in Africa, where wealthy operators from places like Saudi Arabia are securing vast tracts in places like Ethiopia to grow food industrially to provide for Arabia. Small Ethiopian producers slip further into abject poverty and even
starvation. The dispossession of Mexican small holders, in no small part due to NAFTA, creates the desperation that leads them north into the barrios of American cities, or to become exceptionally low-wage field hands on corporate farms, in order to simply survive.

**Modern Life and Time**

Overall, it's probably safe to say that the diet of an average American is an improvement over most previous eras. But again, the average conceals a great deal. The farmer who once ate local milks and cheeses, grass-fed meats, organic eggs, fresh and canned vegetables from the garden or neighbors’ gardens, and apples dried and fresh from his orchard, might now be living in a food desert—only an ill-stocked convenience store in his local town, with little fresh food, but much long-shelf-life processed food—his garden long given over to commodity production, trying to make enough cash to stay above water.

Yet even poor diets are better today than previous eras that saw widespread scurvy, pellagra, rickets, beri-beri, and other dietary-based diseases, not to mention the distended stomachs of children with severe malnutrition that could easily be seen even in the 1960s in the South, or earlier diets of nothing but hoecakes and ash cake, or nothing but hardtack or biscuits and bulldog gravy.

Still a better diet does not mean a good diet.

**The taste of industrial food**

The modern system aims to keep food cheap, while still extracting large profits from the surplus grain. It is this equation that gets us supersized meals, large cheap sugary drinks, and aisle upon aisle of extremely processed food in the grocery. It's almost all made from corn and/or soybeans. This production is heavily subsidized to keep it artificially cheap, and it's produced through vicious labor practices that keep wages low. But the food is high in calories to keep the workforce operating, even at the expense of its health.

Visitors to America are sometimes surprised at how sweet the food is, even food one normally wouldn't think of as sweet, such as bread. It’s indicative at how our tastes have become accustomed to the inclusion of sugars (and fats and salt), which are pleasing flavors, into so much of our diet. Over time, we come to expect this flavor, and would miss it if it were removed. The intent of doctoring even basic foods is to have us eat more and thus buy more of these products.

With fast food meat production, excess corn is fed to cattle that will become the hamburger. Corn is not part of a cow’s natural diet—they evolved to eat grass—and the corn diet produces fattier meat. That fast food hamburger is appealing in large measure because it is fatty, a taste Americans have become accustomed to and want.
So why do we eat this stuff? It’s partly because we like the taste, and because it’s relatively cheap in terms of initial outlay [the long term cost, particularly in health, is another matter]. Another reason is the sophisticated marketing done to make these foods appealing. Food advertising need hardly be mentioned as a factor in creating and stimulating consumers’ desires and choices. Suffice it to say that billions of dollars are spent on this activity every year, and the people spending the money are nobody’s fool. It works.

Beyond this kind of advertising there is another kind of psychological manipulation that is ongoing—one in which the food system is presented as essentially benign and good for you. This draws on the iconography of the Jeffersonian vision. The hearty yeoman mythology and iconography is pervasive in food advertising, as if farmers were still those 19th century characters, virtuous sorts who are in business only to serve you the best and least costly food in the world.

It should be clear by now that this is hogwash, but you can’t turn around without seeing some icon of the pastoral barn and field with a windmill, or the upright moral, rugged but caring farmer. That calculation is as important as the product specific advertising, which is really only about product differentiation among products that are largely the same in terms of being made of corn, fat, sugar and salt.

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**Home Sweet Home--The Final Site of Dispossession**

There is another component to why our food system is unhealthy: Time. “Time is money” is a truism that is, in fact, true. Food costs are kept low by efficiency, which is fundamentally about time. You speed up production to get more product through the line in a given amount of time, which lowers unit price. But there is a huge time component on the demand side, too. Here we have to look at the entire economic system, and then the food system’s place within it, to see how the eater becomes an integral part of industrial capitalist production. The concept of fast food illustrates this: the demand for it is not just due to taste, or advertising, or cheapness, but because people have been deprived of time—time to cook, time to sit down and enjoy a meal, time for leisure or creative activity.

The relentless downward pressure on wages since the 1970s has more than anything been responsible for “economic growth” over the past 40 years. The effect has been the necessity for more Americans to work longer hours, and to look for less expensive options in things such as food. As mentioned before, it is no accident that fast food restaurants have become so common over the same period that wages have been stagnant or falling in real terms.
The loss of time, and the easy access to cheap fast food, has greatly contributed to an erosion of a family’s in basic life skills, such as food preparation. The ongoing process of dispossession here enters the household, slowly stripping people of what was the last bit of personal capital they owned: knowledge of how to produce a meal.

This stage of dispossession is not some minor or happenstance occurrence. It is part of the entire growth of Capital, from the original dispossession of the peasants to the modern kitchen. Capital is compelled to continue extending its reach and extracting value from people’s labor. It must grow or die. Work within the household, if we conceive of it in traditional terms, is beyond the reach of capital. But it is a lucrative market, and it is increasingly being exploited.

People become incapable of feeding themselves—they must rely entirely on The Market, completely controlled by Capital. People don’t have access to the land, they don’t have the tools or materials, and they don’t have the knowledge of how to grow, process, preserve, and cook. Certainly there have been great labor saving devices and we must note the gendered characteristic of this. Nobody wants to fetch water from the well or chop stove wood or deal with ice boxes anymore. Even so, the long-term trend is increasing numbers of people who simply don’t know how to cook anything, let alone cook healthy meals from fresh and bulk foods.

Tasks for which there was once time and skill to do, such as putting up the summer garden harvest for winter eating is now only an artisanal skill for hobbyists and a few oldsters. Gardening remains, but is limited, and most people have lack of land, let alone the time to do it. Yet, still, it’s not for nothing that Michael Pollan has called gardening “a revolutionary act.”

**Summary**

We focused on three things in this chapter.

1: Overproduction of Food. At first glance, the concept of overproduction of food seems nonsensical. It’s a little like saying there’s an overproduction of air, or water. Nature is bountiful, and human ingenuity has been able to give labor the knowledge to produce more than enough food, at least since the dawn of the modern era. But “overproduction” makes complete sense as a concept when some sort of scarcity must exist so that someone can make a profit on production. Overproduction means no profit. In this sense, the American food system has been plagued with overproduction since the beginning, driving the need to ever expand the market.

2: The Capitalist Production System. We have taken an historical overview of how the system we’ve inherited developed. It is a story with roots the rise of the capitalist class in England, in slave production, in the extension of markets, in
government and political-economic action and theory, and in the drive toward the centralization and consolidation needed to control the market. The historical perspective is needed to not only see how we got here, but how deeply the roots of our current system run, and thus some of the barriers to change.

3. Dispossession and Market Dependency. The story of capitalist social relations is one where those whose labor produce wealth out of nature are systematically dispossessed of rights to land, tools and technology, or the knowledge of production. In the end, they have nothing to sell except their labor power, and are utterly dependent on The Market for everything in life, and life itself. That is the situation most people find themselves in today, particularly when engaged with the food system.

We started with the fictional tale of a patient and her doctor, who gives the advice to go improve herself. She might be able to do that, as might many others. But most will not be able to for any number of reasons. One can hardly blame the doctor for giving the advice she did—there is little else that can be done at the individual level.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show how the food system that is powerful, pervasive and deeply ingrained into our consciousness as “second nature,” was built and how it works, and how because of all this it is virtually unassailable by individuals acting alone.

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ii What might appear as an exception to this, the Irish famine of the 1840s, was due not to overall shortages, but to political-economic beliefs and structures—there was plenty of grain to feed the starving, but it was owned by the landlords and was for export and profit. Part of the reason for the absence of western famine is imperialism, and there have been serious famines elsewhere in the world that is in significant measure due to the activities of the west up to the present time. See Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausets: El Nino and the Making of the Third World* (Verso, 2002).

iii The issue of affordability of healthy foods is often raised as a barrier. This issue, which is addressed at the end of this chapter, is often overstated. Affordability is often an accessibility or informational issue in disguise

iv There are many exceptions to these two types, but for our purposes in sketching the history of food systems they are adequate. The varieties of Americans’ experiences with their food system(s) cannot be adequately explored in a single chapter. We will follow only the Anglo-American strand of development, since it is the dominant one, but the history of food systems in Spanish America has had significant impact on the story, and is regretfully passed over here only due to space.


viii The debasement of artisans, and farmers, into proletarians, takes place in different ways at different times. Shoemakers are chosen as an example here because the process has been extensively studied by scholars. See, Laurie, Bruce. Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth Century America (University of Illinois Press, 1997).


xv Magdoff, op cit.

xvi Pollan, Michael. The Omnivores Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (Penguin Press, 2006)


xix Jaffe, JoAnn, and Michael Gertler. “Victual vicissitudes: Consumer deskilling and the (gendered) transformation of food systems,” Agriculture and Human Values, 2006 (23)