

Let Them Eat Junk: Capitalism and Food

An Interview with Rob Albritton

Rob Albritton's *Let Them Eat Junk: How Capitalism Creates Hunger and Obesity* (2009), published by Arbeiter Ring Press in Canada, and Pluto Press in the UK, offers a welcome and urgently needed analysis of "how the profit fixation of capital has led us deeply into a dangerously unsustainable system of food provision, a system that totally fails when it comes to distributive justice and to human and environmental health" (p. 201). His analysis takes us inside capitalism and shows how its 'deep structures' manage our agricultural and food systems in irrational ways.

Socialist Project recently asked John Simoulidis to interview Robert Albritton about his book and current global struggles to address the failures of our agriculture/food system.

SP: You have written a number of books on Marxist theory and political economy: why a book on food?

RA: When I retired from York University's Political Science Department after teaching political theory and political economy for 36 years, I had more time to do research and writing. Previously most of my work was very theoretical, and I decided it was time to direct my attention to something more down to earth. I had many influences directing my attention toward food, not the least of which was my wife's career teaching food and nutrition at Ryerson University in Toronto. Now that I was retired, I could devote most of my waking hours to researching and writing this book on the food system – a topic that turned out to be far more extensive than my initial expectations. Indeed, the more I researched the topic, the more I discovered the numerous interconnections among our ecological crises, our social and physical health crises, our economic crisis and our global food system. The focus on the impact that capitalism has on food and agriculture is a particularly rich source if we want to make connections between the struggles for socialism and the struggles for ecological sustainability. I hope my book can contribute to a growing wake-up call that will bring about a refocus of human intelligence and material wealth toward reshaping the food system and the capitalist economy that it is embedded in.

SP: There are various and recently published books and articles offering critiques of the corporate control of the food system. What can readers expect to find in your book that is lacking in other critiques?

RA: After 40 years of studying capitalism, I believe that no single work makes more headway in grasping its inner logic and inner dynamic than Marx's *Capital*. It was this work more than any other that guided me in my central aim, which was to understand how capitalism has shaped our food system. It follows that the first difference between this book and others written on the topic of food is that I am not aware of any other food book that explicitly bases its theoretical framework (many do not have theoretical frameworks) on Marx's *Capital*. Second, no other food book has as broad a scope as this one. Third, no other food book has as much factual information. Fourth and finally, the above three points are combined in a way that makes this book the most radical critique of the capitalist food system yet written. This is because it seeks out connections between the food crisis and the other crises of advanced capitalism, and it illustrates that capital's indifference to use-value is particularly destructive when capitalism subsumes and commodifies the food system.

SP: What were some of the most interesting and/or surprising discoveries you made while researching and writing this book?

RA: I was shocked by many things. I'll mention a few. First, I was impressed by the immense power of the sugar industry. Sugar is one of the cheapest, the most addictive, and most profitable of food inputs. As a result more and more of it goes into much of our processed foods, even though it is the prime suspect in the current global diabetes epidemic. Efforts to place constraints on its use have mostly failed, despite a fledgling international "dump soft drinks" campaign led by The Center for Science in the Public Interest. Second, while I knew in a general way that the global distribution of food leaves many people struggling with hunger and malnutrition, I was not aware that globally nearly half the population makes \$2 or less a day, and that approximately one billion people are mentally impaired due to malnutrition. Finally, our food system spreads toxins in the environment; has played the major role in deforestation, the running down of water supplies, and the degradation of land; is a huge contributor to global warming; and is rapidly depleting the remaining reserves of fossil fuels. In short, it not only undermines human health, but also is leading us toward ecological disaster.

SP: What are some of the major themes that you address? What are some of the major failures associated with an agricultural/food system controlled by capital's 'deep structures'?

RA: The title could be misleading without an understanding of the reference to Marie Antoinette's "Let Them Eat Cake." In my interpretation "junk food" epitomizes capitalist food in this phase

of history, and junk food is high in sugars, fats, and salts, while being low in other nutrients. My book does not focus narrowly on junk food, but on a food system whose cutting edge has been junk food and whose largest corporations tend to be centered in the U.S., expanding outward to the rest of the world. The main themes of the book are the food system's failure to advance human health, environmental health, or social justice; and the connections between the food crisis and the myriad of other crises characteristic of late capitalism.

Rational behaviour under capitalism requires that capitalists continually shift production from goods and services that are unprofitable (and will, in due course plunge them into bankruptcy) to goods and services that are profitable. Since competition forces them to maximize short-term profits, it is this quantitative focus and not the quality of use-values that becomes the overriding goal. For example, if a capitalist learns that by adding more sugar to baby food, profits will increase both because sugar is a very cheap input and because babies will eat more baby food and later adults will eat more sugar, then a rational capitalist would do this, despite many studies that show a craving for sugar that borders on addiction can be established very early in children through a diet of sugar dense foods. The capitalist cannot afford to be concerned with the lifetime of obesity and connected illnesses that such a diet might generate. In short, in order to be rational, a capitalist needs to focus on profits (quantity) and not the quality of life of humans (or use-values) unless that quality can be easily converted into profits. Similarly, if the market for palm oil is profitable, and the easiest way to expand its production is to cut down the remaining rainforests of South East Asia, then a rational capitalist would not hesitate to do this. Finally, if capitalist farmers profit from paying low wages to undocumented field workers, then any capitalist farmer who does not do this is likely to lose out to the competition. Unfortunately these and many other destructive trends are all too current.

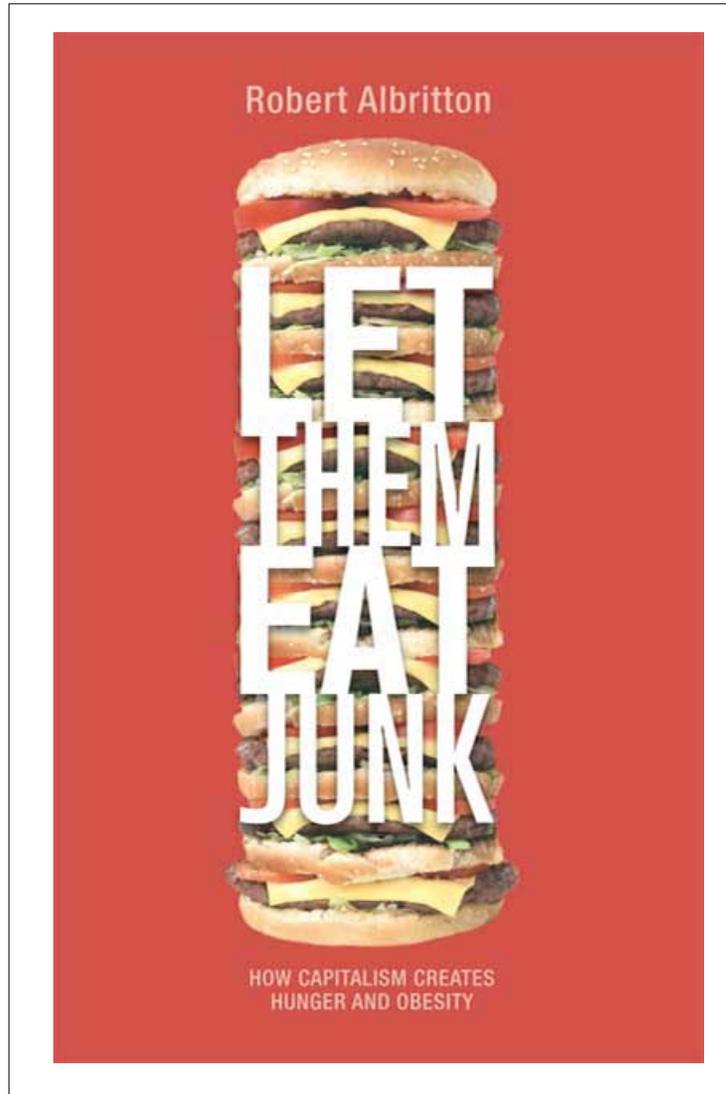
SP: How does the crisis in the food system relate to the broader economic and ecological crises of the current phase of neoliberal capitalism? How will its impacts be felt and distributed globally?

RA: The food crisis feeds the other crises which in turn feed it. The American food system is so dependent upon fossil fuels that it has been estimated that all known fossil fuel reserves would be exhausted in seven years were the whole world to adopt the U.S. system. Indeed, at approximately one-third of the total, the food system contributes more to global warming than any other sector of the economy. At the same time global warming will reduce crop yields due to extreme weather and higher temperatures. Further, to mention only two of the many causes of pollution: the massive petro-chemical inputs of agriculture coupled with the

pollution of bodies of fresh water by confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) make the capitalist food system a major contributor to the toxification of the environment, which is now reaching alarming levels. Finally, given the petroleum dependency of the food system, the price of food will go up with the price of petroleum, and the use of food crop land for ethanol production will only push food prices yet higher. Declining yields due to global warming and extreme weather will also increase food prices. Without action now these price increases will soon be disastrous for the 40 percent of global population that lives on \$2 or less a day.

SP: Your reply addresses how capitalism creates hunger. Can you explain how it at the same time produces obesity?

RA: The producers of junk food that profit from the ease with which people become quasi-addicted to sugar, fat, and salt provide consumers with lots of calories but few nutrients. Hooked on junk food and lacking the income to afford more nutritious food, people consume too many calories and not enough nutrients. This is a recipe for obesity, a weakened immune system, and ultimately illness and death. A report published by the American Medical Association claims that if current practices continue, one-third of American children born in the year 2000 will get diabetes. Even more serious than what some have called the "pandemic of obesity," is the hunger and malnutrition suffered by over a billion people in the world. It has been estimated



that during each half hour an average of 360 children under the age of five die of starvation or hunger-related illnesses.

SP: Perhaps the most challenging part of your book for readers not familiar with Marx's Capital or the Unoist approach that informs your theoretical work concerns the two chapters in Part II of your book where you provide an outline of 'capitalism in the abstract and general' and 'consumerism' as a phase of capitalism. Can you elaborate briefly on why this kind of theoretical work is necessary in order to understand the global and local failures of the agriculture/food system?

RA: The more abstract level of analysis clarifies the basic features of fully developed capitalism: showing how it subsumes social relations while deepening and expanding itself. Capital's abstract dynamic is present in history to the extent that capitalism is. At the same time capital is constrained and/or supported by historically specific structures and agencies that shape it and are shaped by it. The abstract level of analysis brings out the reasons why even when capitalism is functioning at its competitive best, its management of a fully capitalist agricultural/food system is likely to manifest significant contradictions and irrationalities. My mid-range level of analysis illustrates the form that these irrationalities take in the phase of consumerism after World War II. Finally, these two higher levels of analysis help us to understand the evolving food system over the past twenty years or so. One can easily list large numbers of alarming facts about current tendencies associated with the capitalist food system, but theory helps us to weigh the importance of the facts, to understand their interconnections, and hence to understand the most important forces shaping and being shaped by the food system. The better we understand how the current system operates, the more effective our strategies of transformation.

SP: You describe the current phase of capitalism in terms of a 'capitalist command economy.' Can you briefly explain what this means and how it frames the issues you raise in the concluding chapter of your book on 'the fight for democracy, social justice, health and sustainability'?

RA: The food industry always emphasizes the enormous choice it offers the modern consumer, but this is an illusion. First of all because most people in the world are too poor to buy any but the cheapest of foods. Second, those that have the money are confronted with a huge array of processed foods that are largely rearrangements of soy, corn, fat, sugar, and salt. If you are allergic to GM soy, you will have to avoid the majority of processed foods since so many of them contain soy and soy by-products, and there is no labelling requirement for GMOs. Third, food indoctrination is so widespread and powerful that most food choices are already heavily conditioned by the toxic food environment and its powerful marketing techniques. Fourth, nearly all foods in the typical supermarket are the products of a few huge corporations (for example, Nestlé and Kraft).

During the "cold war," western economists often sharply contrasted "totalitarian command economies," characteristic of

the communist bloc, with "free market economies," characteristic of the capitalist bloc. Today, the world capitalist economy ought to be labelled a "corporate command economy," because large corporations run by small elites have way too much unaccountable power to command the future of humanity. Markets are now largely planning instruments utilized by corporations for creating both supply and demand. Large profits are made even when much larger social costs (externalities not included in market prices) will need to be paid by taxpayers and future generations. While in reality most markets have never worked as pictured by the ideal of optimality that many economists have presupposed, now this ideal is so deeply ingrained that it can still be used to justify "free markets" when in reality we more and more see the corporate use of markets as planning mechanisms to maximize their short-term profits while creating huge long-range costs to society. These social costs can be viewed as debts that future generations will have to pay whether they are economic debts, ecological debts, or health debts.

We need to turn this around, and we need to do it fast. This will require clearing our minds of the free market myth, so that we can begin to consciously use markets as democratic planning mechanisms to advance human and environmental well-being. Besides democratizing markets, we also need to democratize corporations and governments. Democratizing corporations means making their decision making transparent so that they can be held accountable by the public. The first step in democratizing governments is to find ways of preventing them being held for ransom by giant corporations.

In the current circumstances, it is particularly important to democratize the labour market. There will always be unmet social needs, and therefore, there should always be jobs to meet those needs. Existing labour markets are extremely ineffective ways of mobilizing human energies to meet human needs. Computer technology could be utilized to find new ways of prioritizing social needs and of mobilizing the human intelligence and material wealth to meet them. Anyone who wants to work and is able to work should never be unemployed unless it is to gain skills needed to meet particular needs, and such education should be subsidized.

Finally, and this will perhaps be the most difficult, we need to find ways to redistribute wealth globally in order to advance the equality that is necessary for democracy to be effective, and for freedom to have any meaning. Democratizing markets, corporations, and governments is, in my opinion, not a "middle way" that compromises its soul to neoliberalism, it is the best way forward that I can think of – a way that offers a just and humane way out of the myriad of crises that confront us. **R**

Rob Albritton is Professor Emeritus at York University and the author of *Economics Transformed: Discovering the Brilliance of Marx* (2007) and contributed an article to the recent issue of Socialist Register (2010): *Morbid Symptoms: Health Under Capitalism*.