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Review of Jennifer Clapp's Food

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Review of Jennifer Clapp's *Food*.



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Jennifer Clapp. 2012. *Food*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 218 pages, ISBN 978-0-7456-4936-8 Paper (\$19.95).

Food, by Jennifer Clapp, is a valuable contribution to the burgeoning critical social science scholarship on agriculture and food. It is part of Polity Press's "Resources" series, whose other books include the similarly succinctly titled *Timber*, *Coltan*, *Fish*, *Water*, *Coffee*, *Oil*, *Land*, and *Diamonds*. In *Food*, Clapp takes a global perspective, identifying major political and economic forces shaping the global food economy and fueling its crises of hunger, uneven development, and ecological devastation. *Food* is written in clear, accessible language, and is coherently organized and focused on key political economic dynamics that play leading roles in these major social and ecological problems in the global food economy.

Clapp begins by detailing the increasingly globalized scope of food trade today and specifying that the book examines the international political and economic dimensions of the global food economy. The book focuses on four key forces: developed countries' investments in industrial agriculture and international food market expansion; international rules and agreements that unevenly liberalize agricultural trade; the rise of transnational corporations; and, the financialization of food and agriculture. She highlights what she calls the new "middle spaces" that have been opened up by these forces—nodes in the global food system "where control and influence over how it operates has become concentrated" and "where norms, practices, and rules that govern the world food economy are shaped by the very forces that are leading to its expansion" (6). This analytical focus on such global-scale political and economic actors and forces makes the book a welcome addition to recent literature on agriculture and food, which has paid more attention to localized food systems, specific commodities, and regional food politics.

The next four chapters elaborate these primary explanations for the contemporary crises in agriculture and food. First, Clapp succinctly details the history of developed countries' investments in industrial agriculture and the expansion of international food trade. Chapter 2 focuses on post-war government food aid programs, price supports, and other policies designed to maximize domestic agricultural production and create markets for the surplus product, as well as the Green Revolution programs to export the industrial model to countries in the global South. Clapp adeptly explains the underlying changes in developed nations' logic, specifies how these different initiatives articulated with each other, and identifies the resulting social and ecological consequences.

In Chapter 3, Clapp identifies the role of uneven trade rules in shaping the current global food system. Specifically, she details how the trade liberalization components of structural adjustment policies and international trade agreements systematically serve the interests of developed countries by allowing them to maintain their own long-standing protectionist policies, and how they disadvantage developing countries by making them liberalize their agricultural sectors and render them vulnerable to market forces. The chapter importantly identifies not only what is problematic about neoliberal policies in principle, but the uneven and unfair ways in which major policies and agreements have been implemented in practice. That said, it would have been helpful here if Clapp had provided more explanation for *why* the policies evolved in this lopsided way. She rightly emphasizes the World Bank's argument – which undergirded this uneven set of trade rules – that subsidies (which many developed countries have) are less “trade-distorting” than import tariffs (which were more available to resource-strapped developing nations). However, I wanted some technical evaluation of this argument. Is it well justified, or not? Relatedly, Clapp does not discuss the governance processes within these institutions; a political economic analysis of decision-making processes in the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization would help explain how these institutions' outcomes have evolved in these grossly uneven ways.

In Chapter 4, Clapp details the rise and practices of transnational corporations (TNCs). She explains that, while some corporations have operated internationally in agricultural trade for hundreds of years, their power has skyrocketed under the trade liberalization policies detailed in the previous chapter. Clapp details the degree of corporate concentration in agricultural inputs, processing, distribution, and retail, and she valuably identifies mechanisms through which TNCs use their power to shape the rules of the game.

Clapp devotes Chapter 5 to financialization, detailing the ways in which food and finance have become increasingly and problematically linked in recent decades. Clapp describes this “intermingling of food and financial markets,” shows how this has led to increased global land

grabs and investment in biofuel production, and identifies how these trends put food and agriculture in the hands of financial investors, and thereby contribute to catastrophic volatility in food prices. This chapter is Clapp's most novel contribution to the scholarship, as these are new forces whose impacts are just starting to be understood. However, I imagine that many undergraduates will need guidance through this chapter, as derivatives, futures contracts, commodity index funds, and other technical concepts will be new to many of them.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Clapp showcases several ways in which social movements are working to combat these problems: fair trade, food sovereignty, and food justice advocacy efforts to reform existing rules. I especially appreciate that she introduces the reader to social movement efforts to confront and reform agricultural policies of developed nations and the World Trade Organization, rather than only showcasing the secessionist, market-based, and perfectionist forms of activism that tend to dominate popular and scholarly accounts of food politics. Clapp ends the book by posing a question – “Which way forward?” – inviting the reader to consider the potential of the various efforts to combat the global food system's multiple, complex crises. Clapp offers no answer, but I don't fault her for this. Clapp is focused on identifying the roots of the problems. Examining the strengths and limitations of various reform efforts is a task for us to take on elsewhere.

Readers will notice that much of the content here has been covered well by other scholars. While this is true, Clapp's contribution is bringing this material together, updating it, and, crucially, making it accessible. The book is particularly well suited for undergraduate audiences, who will appreciate the clear writing as well as the thoughtful suggestions for further reading. As one who regularly teaches an introductory Food and Society class to undergraduates, I am always on the lookout for new scholarship that clearly explains complex global political and economic material to readers unfamiliar with these institutions and their activities. Clapp's *Food* fits the bill. It is timely and up-to-date, and it makes otherwise abstract material readable, compelling, and engaging. Importantly, it makes clear why global political issues – not just local ones – matter.

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