

Beginning to End Hunger: Food and the Environment in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and Beyond

By M. Jahi Chappell

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Because food is such a fundamental aspect of existence, the discussion of food tends to mirror whatever advantages and shortcomings exist in public discourse as a whole and also those associated with historical and geographic power relations (Giroux, 2014). The risks of questioning the current dominance of corporate agri-business are clearly stated by the University of Florida's chair of Horticultural Sciences, Kevin Folta. In response to a letter that Chappell (and I) signed criticizing the "pro-science vs. anti-science" GMO advocacy film *Food Evolution*, he suggested that the signatories "hold deep beliefs against technology." He went on to state that "as a university administrator, I really have to question the judgment of these folks. Would you sign your name to a public document that says climate change is a hoax?" (Folta, 2017; Montenegro et al., 2017).

Chappell has extensive training and experience in ecology, food and engineering, and he does not directly confront academic–corporate disciplinary techniques (such as Folta's above) in his book *Beginning to End Hunger*. However, the nature of his argument makes clear that he is well aware of this landscape. Chappell's study of Belo Horizonte is supported by eight key postulates. First, there is currently more than enough food for everybody in the world. Second, there is more than enough food within most countries. Third, if diet and waste are addressed, we currently have enough food for 9–10 billion people. Fourth, current population estimates 'bake in' existing oppression of women. Fifth, during a typical famine or drought, there is usually enough food relatively nearby to prevent widespread hunger and starvation. Sixth, problems of diet and waste have led to a reality where some eat unhealthy amounts of certain foods while others do not have adequate access to food. "More confusing yet, sometimes these people are one and the same" (p. 26). Seventh, farmers and rural laborers make up most of the world's hungry, but more food is not necessarily the answer. Eighth, most of the recent decrease in hunger has not been

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due to increased food production, but rather to clean water and sanitation as well as gender equity. Fundamentally, Belo Horizonte has demonstrated the importance of accountable and responsive democratic institutions.

Chappell prefaces his case study by addressing the general academic–corporate landscape (though not specifically the disciplining) and cautions that “we must recognize that the stories we tell ourselves [including about food] often circulate not because they are true, but because they are useful in maintaining some political systems that many of us would otherwise question” (p. 6). Chappell suggests that these stories fall into three tendencies. The technocratic neo-productivist tendency derives from Malthusian ‘population pressure’ arguments, where scarcity of food is the problem. He uses the appellation *we-bono* to categorize this tendency to blame others as the first principle and presents evidence that the facts do not support this. The second tendency covers Sen’s work about entitlements and the Food and Agriculture Organization’s approach to food security (FAO, 2003; Sen, 2013). While the entitlement and food security approaches go beyond productivity to distribution, they do so primarily through individualist and ahistorical orientations. By prominently featuring Rocha’s Five A’s framework (2007)—availability, accessibility, acceptability, appropriateness, and agency—Chappell argues that these approaches lack agency. The third tendency focuses squarely on “power, justice and distribution as key questions to be dealt with from the very start” (p. 59). Food justice (and especially food sovereignty) movements view access to food as intertwined with all aspects of political systems, particularly self-determination and democracy. In short, food justice and sovereignty combine a “progressive–radical conjuncture” of social and political pressure with a strong emphasis on agroecology, “the science, practice and movement of a sustainable and just agricultural system” (p. 82).

Thus armed, Chappell then makes a remarkable and even unique contribution to ethnographic research around hunger and power, using Belo Horizonte as an exemplary case. In the early 1990s, the rise of the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil opened a forum where “technocrats’ limited conception of ‘rational governance’” could be replaced by debates about “fundamental approaches to hunger” (p. 115). SMASAN (Municipal Under-Secretariat of Food and Nutritional Security) built a program that focused on food consumption and nutrition, distribution, and production (p. 102). Fundamentally and according to a staff member, SMASAN’s program “created a general ‘culture of food security’” (p. 115). In Belo Horizonte, this led to some of the greatest trends in food-related health improvement, including decreased diabetes and infant mortality as well as a 25% increase in fruit and vegetable consumption. Further, the farms of Belo Horizonte represent rarely researched evidence that biodiversity in vegetable crops (like the more commonly researched biodiversity in coffee and cacao) has a significant positive effect on the sustainability of nearby wilderness ecosystems: “the possibility that the food security programs

of SMASAN may be indirectly supporting biodiversity conservation ... is a novel and potentially important contribution to our understanding of the food security–biodiversity nexus” (p. 200, 220; Perfecto et al., 2009; Winqvist et al., 2012). “In short, [Belo Horizonte]’s programs have redefined national and international standards for institutions governing the right to food” (p. 88). However, Belo Horizonte and SMASAN have also been limited by a lack of resources, leadership turnover, and related institutional blockages or reluctance of administrators (though often not their own membership) to work with the most marginalized farmers. “[W]ho will support the rights of the ‘disenfranchised’ to be emancipated (in Ribot’s terms) and how?” (p. 124; Ribot, 2014).

These questions appear to point towards the possible need for increased movement democracy, whereby polyarchic (Dahl, 2007) and bureaucratic mechanisms of representation and governance are insufficient to gain and sustain pressure on Brazilian state leaders and, perhaps more importantly, on the global corporate entities that constrain state administrators (e.g., the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and Monsanto). This, I would suggest, marks the main weakness of the book. After demonstrating the necessity of incorporating power and history into stories about food, Chappell overlays a complex, dynamic, and potentially transformative narrative with the kinds of analytical frames that characterize the neo-institutional “governance” literature that the World Bank and other intergovernmental development organizations use to save technocratic neoliberal structural adjustment. These include the multiple streams approach, “policy entrepreneurs,” and the “state-society synergy” of Peter Evans (Evans, 1996), though to a lesser extent. Alone, these approaches (especially Evans’s) assist conceptual organization around the margins. However, when together in the core, they tend to undermine the distinctive historical and political story of Belo Horizonte, “cui/we-bono” and “what is to be done?”

In particular, these approaches overwhelm examination of solidaristic interventions into history such as Kerssen’s *Grabbing Power* (2013), Holt-Giménez et al.’s *Food Rebellions!* (2009) and Benjamin Dangl’s *Dancing with Dynamite* (2010). Further, Chappell’s narration of a quote by Freire in a daycare center is a valuable missed opportunity to dig into Freire’s pedagogies of the oppressed, of hope, and of the role of critical education in effectively engaging with, confronting, and perhaps even transforming institutions that seem capable of limited support for food sovereignty or food justice programs (Freire, 1996, 1997).

Despite what I see as analytical gaps, Chappell’s book is essential reading for students of food policy, practice, and, especially, transformation. Further, the book is a critical, thought-provoking resource for those both within and outside government policy-making circles who seek an understanding of how to break through the corporate agri-business monopolies and transform agriculture into a more sustainable and effective tool to combat hunger and sustain our ecosystems.

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