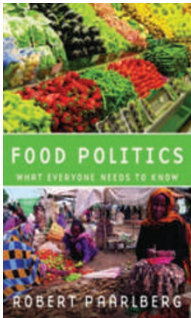


Food fuss



Food Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know

by Robert Paarlberg

OXFORD UNIV. PRESS:
2010. 240PP. \$16.95

Food is in the public consciousness. Food books become bestsellers, famous chefs are household names and films such as *Food Inc.* have become everyday cinematic fare. The time is right for a book such as *Food Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know* by Robert Paarlberg. In this accessible guide, Paarlberg aims to help the average person make sense of many topical food debates, including the so-called obesity crisis, the safety of genetically engineered foods, the recent spike in global food prices and problems with farm subsidies. Written in a succinct question-and-answer style, with a measured tone, this book is a valuable resource for undergraduates, university instructors and the average person trying to make sense of all the fuss.

The author is an academic, not a journalist, and his efforts to get the food facts right ring through on every page. Paarlberg challenges many ideas that are frequently voiced — but rarely questioned — in popular food discourse, including the environmental benefits of corn-based ethanol, the hazards associated with genetically engineered foods and the benefits of organic agriculture. Although many of his claims call into question sacrosanct principles in activist and academic circles, there are good reasons to hear Paarlberg out; he backs up his arguments with data, and writes based on decades of experience as a political scientist and policy analyst working in the field.

Paarlberg tackles the environmental critiques and technophobia underpinning the Green Revolution and genetic engineering head on. The introduction of high-yielding varieties of grain crops into developing countries in the mid-twentieth century has been criticized by many environmentalists, owing to the concomitant adoption of water-depleting

practices, and the application of damaging fertilizers and pesticides. Paarlberg argues that the Green Revolution helped to feed burgeoning populations and resulted in less overall environmental damage than traditional, low-input, low-yield farming techniques. He suggests that the high yields prevented fragile, dry and forested regions from being converted into cropland. He also challenges the scientific data that critics of genetic engineering rely on, including claims that genetically engineered corn kills monarch butterfly larvae.

Paarlberg argues that publically funded research into genetic modification could yield drought- and disease-resistant crops that benefit poor farmers and communities.

Paarlberg suggests that the western love affair with organic food reflects a myopic, privileged perspective

Many of Paarlberg's most convincing arguments concern the plight of African farmers. In sub-Saharan Africa, crop yields are low, 60% of all citizens live in the countryside and one in three is chronically undernourished. Paarlberg aims to upset romantic ideas of low-technology organic farming. Many African farmers "use traditional seeds, plant their crops in polycultures, harvest rainfall, purchase almost no inputs such as nitrogen fertilizers or pesticides from off the farm, and work from dawn to dusk". Although Paarlberg agrees that these farmers are essentially practising a version of organic agriculture, he argues that they suffer from low productivity and malnourishment as a result. He suggests these farmers need more synthetic nitrogen fertilizers, not less, and that the western love affair with organic food reflects a myopic, privileged perspective.

Global inequality is featured prominently. Paarlberg explains how rich countries use international food markets most heavily, whereas developing regions have to rely on their own produce, because they can't afford global market prices. Well-meaning ideas about global food flows, such as the notion that wealthy consumers eating less meat will somehow help poor

farmers in Africa, are challenged: grain freed up from meat production would not make it to poor countries, because these countries can't afford to buy grain on global markets. And the complex issues associated with agricultural subsidies in rich countries are clearly depicted; although these subsidies benefit farmers in affluent countries, they are inefficient, trade-distorting and punishing to poor farmers because they deflate food prices. Paarlberg's portrayal of global agriculture solidly counters journalist Thomas Friedmann's assertion that the world is "flat".

Although the format of *Food Politics* is designed to be broadly accessible, it is not entirely unproblematic. The dispassionate tone can sometimes come across as one-dimensional and lacking in nuance. For example, Paarlberg argues that the drawbacks associated with the corporate patenting of genetically modified crops are outweighed by the benefits to farmers — increased yields and decreased costs. He asserts that farmers buy these seeds voluntarily to cut costs. Although it is true that nobody forces farmers to buy genetically engineered seeds, Paarlberg overlooks the growing dependence of farmers on big corporations, and how the state could help to break up agribusiness monopolies and push science into the public domain. And he makes no mention of genetic pollution. For example, genetically engineered canola was invasive enough to drive organic canola producers completely out of production in Saskatchewan, Canada.

A final, minor concern is the referencing system. Quotes, statistics and data points are replete in the text, but there are no direct references — just a list of suggestions for further reading. As a result, food researchers and students may question where his statistics came from. But these criticisms do not detract from the overall utility of the book — both as a comprehensive source of information on food politics and as a launch pad for serious discussion about the most controversial, critical issues in the global food system. □

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