Definition: **food** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n
1 any substance containing nutrients, such as carbohydrates, proteins, and fats, that can be ingested by a living organism and metabolized into energy and body tissue. Related adjective: alimentary

2 nourishment in more or less solid form as opposed to liquid form: *food and drink*

3 anything that provides mental nourishment or stimulus: *food for thought*

[Old English *fōda*; related to Old Frisian *fōdia* to nourish, feed, Old Norse *faethi*, Gothic *fōdeins* food; see feed, fodder]

› *foodless adj*

Summary Article: **Food**

from *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*

The study of food, in its myriad social, geographical, and ecological contexts, is a key feature of global studies and reflects the broader interest, across many disciplines, in understanding food as a crucial nexus of social, ecological, and cultural relations. Today, networks of food production, distribution, and consumption have taken on a truly global dimension, driven by growing international trade in food, the globalizing activities of food corporations, and the complex cross-fertilization of global and local food cultures. Global scholars examine how these food networks bring distant social actors, ecologies, and places into new relations.

**Food as a Global Commodity**

The emergence of food as an important domain of global studies can be traced to the pioneering work of the anthropologist Sidney Mintz. Mintz was among the first to present the social history of a single food commodity—in this case, sugar—at a global scale. In his 1985 book, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, Mintz follows the transformation of sugar from medicine, spice, and luxury food of the wealthy prior to 1650, into a dietary staple of working people by the late 19th century. Mintz explains how colonial powers continually reconfigured the geography and social organization of sugar production, using it as an engine of colonial expansion and wealth accumulation. As sugar was introduced to wider and wider segments of European society, its use shifted from spice and condiment to sweetener (e.g., in tea) and preservative (e.g., in jam), serving as a cheap source of calories in working-class diets. The social history of sugar, therefore, revealed how a single food commodity had come to embody changing, sometimes contradictory, social relationships and meanings.

Mintz's work set the template for the large number of global food commodity studies that followed. There have been social and ecological histories of coffee, cocoa, potatoes, tomatoes, and spices, just to name a few. Likewise, there have been numerous social histories of world cuisines and diets, including several focusing on 20th-century fast food. Each of these traces the social relations, meanings, and ecological patterns bound up with particular foods and cuisines through time and space.

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Beginning in the 1980s, food scholars developed new concepts and methodologies for making sense of an increasingly globalized food system. One important example is the use of global commodity chain analysis, which traces the series of geographically dispersed “links” involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of a given commodity. Steven Sanderson, for instance, described how the internationalization of beef production in the 1980s linked Latin American cattle producers to international feed manufacturers, slaughterhouses, and markets, with increasingly standardized products distributed to different countries based on market demand and consumer purchasing power. Sanderson referred to this phenomenon as the “world steer” (in parallel to the “world car,” assembled from globally sourced components and marketed internationally), and his approach inspired many others to trace the increasingly globalized commodity chains involved in food production. These types of studies revealed the growing importance of transnational corporations in organizing and coordinating food production, with involvement in all aspects of the food chain, including seeds, chemical inputs, processed and packaged foods, distribution, and retailing.

**Food Regimes**

Complementing the political economy approach used in commodity chain research, the concept of food regimes was developed as a tool for interpreting the changing role of food and agriculture in global capitalist development. As initially proposed by Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael, food regimes are historically specific configurations of rules, institutions, and practices for regulating food and agriculture in the capitalist world economy. A food regime is said to exist when the political and economic framework shaping the actions of key social actors—farmers, states, corporations, and social movements—is relatively stable and predictable. Historically, this has occurred during phases of stable capitalist accumulation under the leadership of a hegemonic state (until 1914, the United Kingdom, and after 1945, the United States). Food regimes, nevertheless, contain internal tensions, which, during periods of system-wide crisis, may lead to conflicts among social actors based on competing interests and interpretations of reality.

Food regimes history, as developed by many scholars over the past two decades, provides a compelling account of the development of global food and agriculture relations over time. The first food regime (1870-1914) emerged from the establishment of a world market in wheat. In the late 19th century, the rapid expansion of agriculture in the settler states of North America, parts of South America, and the antipodes opened up vast new territories to the production of food staples for export. This trade established an international division of labor in which settler states supplied Europe with food in exchange for European manufactured goods, capital, and, through migration, labor. In Europe, imports of relatively cheap wheat and meat from the settler colonies helped fuel the process of industrialization by keeping wages down. In settler states such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, the expansion of the agricultural frontier was integral to the process of national development.

At the same time, settler agriculture transformed the social and technological basis of farming through the spread of commercially oriented family farms and the adoption of industrially manufactured plows and early types of farm machinery.

A second, complementary, international division of labor existed during the first food regime—that between the European powers and the parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America under direct colonial administrative control. These colonies specialized in tropical food products such as coffee, tea, oils, and sugar, generally produced under systems of plantation agriculture that undermined indigenous
agriculture and disrupted local ecologies. The stability of the first food regime was underpinned by the United Kingdom’s hegemonic role in the global order, which, by the early 20th century, was challenged by the increasing industrial and military rivalry of leading capitalist states. World War I marked the beginning of a 30-year period of crisis and transformation of the world capitalist system, lasting until 1945.

This period posed no less a crisis for the prevailing patterns of food production, distribution, and consumption. Settler agriculture met up against ecological limits, as the intensive exploitation of previously uncultivated land exhausted soils and made them extremely vulnerable to erosion. Meanwhile, prices for agricultural commodities collapsed during the Great Depression, leaving many farming households destitute and causing international friction over the disposal of grain surpluses. In response, governments experimented with policies to stabilize and regulate agriculture, including price supports, marketing boards, and international price agreements. The role of governments in regulating prices and markets would become a key feature of the second food regime, which emerged only with the return of relative stability after World War II.

The second food regime (1945-1973), also called the mercantile-industrial or surplus food regime, revolved around the new role of the United States in the international political economy. After World War II, the United States used its position of economic and political leadership to shape many postwar institutions according to its strategic aims. One of its goals was to reassert itself in the world food trade, which it did in two key ways: first, by retaining Depression-era commodity programs that tended to encourage production and, hence, surpluses; and second, by insisting on the exclusion of agriculture from the postwar framework of trade liberalization among industrialized countries (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT]). Both of these strategies helped the United States achieve a position of dominance in world agriculture, which lasted until the 1970s.

Immediately after World War II, the United States funneled its vast agricultural resources into European reconstruction. As a result of government policies that encouraged production, however, the United States soon returned to a situation of chronic surpluses. In the mid-1950s, the United States began redirecting a significant portion of its surpluses to the industrializing Third World through the institution of food aid. The food aid program allowed the United States to meet commercial, strategic, and humanitarian aims, turning surpluses into a powerful tool rather than a liability. Commercially, it served to expand U.S. grain exports and open up new markets. Politically, it helped to bolster the United States’ image in the world and to secure the loyalty of geostrategically important Third World states. Food aid recipients became increasingly reliant on grains from the First World, which tended to undermine the self-sufficiency of Third World states.

Together, the government policies and technological changes (e.g., the use of agrochemicals) of the second food regime consolidated the highly productive model of large-scale industrial monoculture. In turn, the increasing availability of cheap grains contributed to the development of new sites of capitalist accumulation—what Friedmann and McMichael refer to as commodity complexes. The livestock complex emerged from the development of intensive livestock production methods, based on the use of manufactured animal feed made from soy and maize (key U.S. commodity crops). As meat consumption increased with rising household incomes, demand for feed grains absorbed an increasingly large share of the agricultural output. The United States exported this model to Europe through transatlantic shipments of feed grains, which stimulated the growth of the European livestock sector.
The durable foods complex developed around the use of basic grains in the manufacture of processed and packaged foods. Food manufacturing became a major industrial sector led by increasingly large, multinational corporations marketing branded food products to consumers. These food corporations consolidated their power and profits by sourcing raw materials from around the world and, where possible, by substituting the products of tropical agriculture (oils, sugar) with those of temperate agriculture (e.g., high-fructose corn syrup, from maize). For Third World countries made dependent on exports of tropical crops during the colonial era, this form of substitutionism severely eroded their exports.

Food regime scholars identify the crisis of the second food regime with the oil and food shocks of the early 1970s. In 1972, a massive grain deal between the United States and the USSR—which had maintained a trade embargo over the course of the Cold War—rapidly absorbed the world grain surplus, triggering a price spike and subsequent food crisis. The conditions that flowed from this crisis led to a structural shift in the world trade in grain. On the one hand, food aid shipments dried up, forcing many Third World states to buy grain commercially. On the other hand, it led to increasingly fierce competition among the major grain exporters, which, by the 1980s, included the European Union. Facing greater volatility and uncertainty, the United States and the European Union engaged in destructive trade practices, including the use of price-depressing export subsidies.

Meanwhile, the spiraling costs of food and fuel destabilized world capitalist growth, ushering in rapid inflation and economic recession. These conditions devastated many countries of the global South, which, by the 1980s, were wracked with debt crises. Under the advice of multilateral lending agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, many states drastically restructured their food and agricultural sectors in pursuit of export earnings. Typically, this involved adopting large-scale agro-exports and scaling back policies of food self-sufficiency. Several countries that redefined their development strategies around agro-exports became known as the New Agricultural Countries. Brazil, for instance, became a major world exporter of soy (as a key component of animal feeds), and Thailand, a major exporter of shrimp and animal feed.

In the global North, farmers struggled to come to grips with international price volatility, mounting farm debt, and the rising costs of key agricultural inputs. Governments of some agro-exporting countries (particularly Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) responded to the ballooning costs of farm programs combined with budget deficits by deregulating their farming sectors. By the mid-1980s, these countries called for agricultural trade liberalization, hoping to reign in U.S. and European subsidies. They were joined in this demand by an increasingly influential agribusiness lobby, now dominated by transnational corporations, many of them vertically integrated through several links in the food chain.

The crisis of the second food regime thus ushered in a shift away from government and multilateral regulation of agriculture and toward free trade. This transition was institutionalized through the 1995 Agreement on Agriculture, reached under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO; the successor to the GATT). Under the 1995 Agreement on Agriculture, states agreed to open up their markets to imports, reduce domestic support of farmers, and cut export subsidies. Agribusiness viewed trade liberalization as a condition of its continued expansion, allowing for better access to raw materials and new markets, while many countries of the global South sought better access to wealthy markets in the North.

Yet, the globalizing effects of the free trade era have had negative consequences for some regions
and actors. Trade liberalization has generally deepened the dependence of the global South on agro-exports, at the expense of self-sufficiency, while simultaneously exposing small-scale farmers to the flood of cheap imported grains. In the global North, increasing competition among farm sectors has led to the consolidation of agricultural resources into fewer and fewer hands. Everywhere, free trade and deregulation have redefined food security as the ability to purchase food through markets, leading to increasing class polarization of diets. Meanwhile, trade liberalization has generally empowered agribusiness and food corporations that source their inputs globally and sell into class-differentiated markets.

Likewise, the free trade era has failed to bring stability to global food relations. On the one hand, intractable conflicts among key agro-exporters have derailed the prospects of further trade liberalization under the WTO. Despite their commitments to do so, the European Union and the United States have largely failed to cut agricultural subsidies. In response, countries of the global South, led by the rising global powers Brazil, China, and India, walked out on WTO negotiations in 2003. On the other hand, the social and economic dislocations of the neoliberal era have given rise to multifaceted challenges by social movements. Under these conditions, scholars are divided on the question of whether or not a new food regime—centered on the privately regulated networks of production, trade, and consumption organized by capital—has emerged. All agree, however, that the global food system of the 21st century is rife with contradictions and tensions.

**Twenty-First-Century Food Politics**

One key axis in the struggle to shape the global food order is captured by the resistance of small-scale farmers to corporate power. Since the early 1990s, a transnational network of peasants—led by the social movement organization La Via Campesina—has challenged the legitimacy of agribusiness power and free trade in agriculture. La Via Campesina proposes the principle of food sovereignty as a remedy to the way in which the globalized food system privileges trade, markets, and corporations over the livelihoods of small farmers. Food sovereignty affirms the right of countries, regions, and communities to define their own policies regulating food and farming. For this reason, La Via Campesina has called for a repeal of the WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture, and for re-embedding food economies at the local, regional, and national scales.

A second, and related, axis of conflict is that between the privatized knowledge of the global food system and the local knowledge of indigenous peoples, farmers, and cooks. In the realm of food preparation and consumption, the Slow Food movement seeks to reclaim local food knowledge from the spread of homogenizing fast-food culture. In agriculture, the decline of publicly funded research since the 1980s has given way to the privatization and centralization of agricultural knowledge. Corporations now carry out much agricultural research, using intellectual property rights to protect their ability to commercialize and profit from new technologies. Biotechnology corporations, for instance, have used patent rights on genes and organisms to restrict the use of genetically engineered seeds by farmers. Here, farmers are prevented from saving and reusing seeds through legally enforced licensing agreements that are a condition of purchasing genetically engineered varieties.

Food sovereignty movements and small farmers have struggled against the privatization of seeds and mounted campaigns to re-embed agricultural knowledge in local communities. This resistance was given expression in the findings of the United International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, in 2008, which called for the reorientation of agricultural research.

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toward the needs of small farmers. A second form of resistance is to be found in the small but growing movement of open source biology, which noted rural sociologist Jack Kloppenburg considers a promising tool for achieving seed sovereignty. Taking its inspiration from the open source software phenomenon, open source biology calls for collaboration between scientists and farmers in producing new seed varieties available publicly on the basis of shared-use licenses.

Most fundamentally, the 21st-century global food system faces the interconnected ecological and social crises arising from hunger and climate change. Governments and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the G-8 recognize the pressing need to address chronic hunger, which affects nearly 1 billion people. Typically, these agents and institutions frame the question as one of achieving higher agricultural productivity amid growing resource scarcity and environmental insecurity. Yet, industrial agriculture is increasingly understood as a contributor to environmental problems, including climate change, where food production contributes to a large and growing share of global greenhouse gas emissions.

The food crisis of 2007-2008, during which skyrocketing food prices plunged tens of millions of vulnerable households into hunger, has only sharpened the contradictions. One cause of the food crisis was a large-scale shift toward the production of agro-fuels, driven by government policies intended to combat climate change and decrease dependence on fossil fuels. The question is, therefore, whether new and better agricultural technologies can feed a growing world population, provide an alternative source of fuel, and do both within the constraints of a changing climate.

Environmental, global justice, and food sovereignty movements read the food crisis and its aftershocks as a call to re-embed food systems in their social and ecological contexts. These movements underline the gross distortions of a food system that produces a polarization between “the stuffed and starved,” a phrase coined by intellectual and activist Raj Patel. On the one hand, wealthy classes of consumers shape global demand for food products, tending toward diets high in fat, sugar, and animal protein, with negative consequences for their health. On the other hand, classes of marginalized workers and peasants struggle to get enough to eat amid rising food prices, degraded ecosystems, declining local food cultures, and urban food deserts. La Via Campesina insists that the dual crises of hunger and climate change can be addressed only through a food and farming revolution led by small farmers. According to its slogan, small farmers can lead the way in “feeding the world and cooling the planet” if provided with adequate resources, supportive government policies, and control over agricultural knowledge. Global studies of food will undoubtedly continue to contribute to new ways of illuminating these pressing dilemmas.

See also:
Agriculture Sector, Corporations, Transnational, Cuisine, Fisheries, Global Conflict and Security, Global Health and Nutrition, Globalization, Phenomenon of, Inequality, Global Economic, Malnutrition, Social Movements, Trade, World Food Program, World-Systems Perspective

Further Readings

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