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2014 UVM FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT KEYNOTE COMMENTARY

Racism and capitalism: Dual challenges for the food movement

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Our modern food system has co-evolved with 30 years of neoliberal globalization that privatized public goods and deregulated all forms of corporate capital, worldwide. This has led to the highest levels of global inequality in history. The staggering social and environmental costs of this transition have hit people of color the hardest, reflected in the record levels of hunger and massive migrations of impoverished farmers in the global South, and the appalling levels of food insecurity,

diet-related diseases, unemployment, incarceration, and violence in underserved communities of color in the global North.

The U.S. food movement has emerged in response to the failings of the global food system. Everywhere, people and organizations are working to counteract the externalities inherent to the “corporate food regime.” Understandably, they focus on one or two specific components—such as healthy food access, market niches, urban agriculture, organic farming, community supported agriculture, local food (farm to table), food and farmworkers’ rights, animal welfare, pesticide contamination, seed sovereignty, genetically modified organism (GMO) labeling, etc.—rather than the system as a whole. But the structures that determine the context of these hopeful alternatives remain solidly under control of the rules and institutions of the corporate food regime, e.g., the farm

The keynote speakers at the 2014 University of Vermont Food Systems Summit were invited to contribute commentaries to this issue of JAFSCD, which also includes presenters’ papers.

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Photo of Eric Holt-Giménez by Stephen Mease.

bill, the free trade agreements, the USDA, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, USAID, global supermarket oligopolies, meat, fisheries, grain, seed, and input oligopolies, and big philanthropy.

Neoliberal globalization has also crippled our capacity to respond to the problems in the food system by destroying much of our *public sphere*. Not only have the health, education, and welfare functions of government been gutted; the social networks within our communities have been weakened, exacerbating the violence, intensifying racial tensions, and deepening cultural divides. People are challenged to confront the problems of hunger, violence, poverty, and climate change in an environment in which social and political institutions have been restructured to serve global markets rather than local communities.

Notably, the food justice movement has stepped up—supported largely by the non-profit sector—to provide services and enhance community agency in our food systems. Consciously or not, in many ways the community food movement, with its hands-on, participatory projects for a fair, sustainable, healthy food system, is rebuilding our public sphere from the ground up. This is simply because it is impossible to do one without reconstructing the other.

But as many organizations have discovered, we can't rebuild the public sphere without addressing the issues that divide us. For many communities this means addressing racism in the food system. The food movement itself is not immune from the structural injustices that it seeks to overcome. Because of the pervasiveness of white privilege and internalized oppression in our society, racism in the food system can and does resurface within the food movement itself, even when the actors have the best of intentions. It does no good to push the issue aside because this undermines the trust we need to be able to work together. Understanding why, where, and how racism manifests itself in the

food system, recognizing it within our movement and our organizations and within ourselves, is not *extra* work for transforming our food system; it *is* the work.

Understanding how capitalism functions is also the work, because changing the underlying structures of a capitalist food system is inconceivable without knowing how the system functions in the first place. And yet many people trying to change the food system have scant knowledge of its capitalist foundations.

This is because in capitalist countries the foundational political-economic structures are assumed to be immutable and are rarely systematically (or systemically) questioned. Doing so immediately uncovers the structural causes of the profound economic and political disparities between social classes (thus contradicting the notion of a classless society). Tragically, critical knowledge of capitalism—vital to the struggles of social movements throughout the 19th and 20th

centuries—has largely disappeared from the lexicon of social change, precisely at a time when neoliberal capitalism is penetrating every aspect of nature and society on the planet and is exacerbating the intersectional oppressions of race, class, ethnicity, and gender.

Luckily, this is changing as activists in the food movement dig deeper to fully understand the system behind the problems they confront. Many people in the global South, especially peasants, fishers, and pastoralists, can't afford *not* to understand the socio-economic forces destroying their livelihoods. The rise of today's international food sovereignty movement, for instance, is part of a long history of resistance to violent, capitalist dispossession and exploitation of land, water, markets, income, labor, and seeds. Underserved communities of color in the global North—there as the result of recent and historical waves of colonization, dispossession, and exploitation—form the backbone of the food justice movement. Under-

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standing *why* people of color are twice as likely to suffer from food insecurity, obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and other diet-related disease—even though they live in affluent northern democracies—requires an understanding of the intersection of capitalism and racism.

Activists across the food movement are beginning to realize that the food system cannot be changed in isolation from the larger economic system. Sure, we can tinker around the

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edges of the issue and do useful work in the process. However, to fully appreciate the magnitude of the challenges we face and what will be needed to bring about a new food system in harmony with people's needs and the environment, we need to understand and confront the social, economic, and political foundations that created—and maintain—the food system we seek to change.

