



Book Reviews

The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People, by Gerardo Otero, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. 256 pp. \$34.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-4773-1698-6.

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There is an obesity epidemic spreading across the world. The epidemic is caused by the neoliberal diet. The neoliberal diet was created in the United States in the second half of the 20th Century. It is based on the industrial substitution of GMO-grown calories (fats, sugars, starches, and vegetable oils) for traditional nutrients. It creates energy dense but nutrient poor foods. The diet is diffused around the world through the political-economic power of agribusiness multinational corporations and supermarkets as part of neoliberal globalism. The solution to this crisis cannot be found in either the social constructionist perspective focused on changing individual behavior (voting with the fork) or the macro political economy of the world systems approach that underestimates the continued importance of the state in facilitating resistance from below. Otero re-centers the state as the arena of struggle as alternative agriculture movements mobilize to challenge the industrial agrifood system. He employs the study of the rise of the neoliberal diet as part of the larger process of neoliberal globalism to link increasing social inequality and unhealthy people. The neoliberal diet increases health problems, reifies class diets, and exacerbates trade inequalities. Rising global obesity is linked to rising global inequality and the advent of the neoliberal diet.

Otero's goal in *The Neoliberal Diet* is to provide a greater understanding of the structural forces shaping the agrifood system. The problematic he addresses is the incorrect academic assessment of and proposed solutions to the growing obesity epidemic around the world. He criticizes social constructionist views that blame the victim but ignore the structural constraints. He advances a macro historical-power perspective grounded in Agrifood Regimes Theory. Neoliberal Globalism is dominated by neoregulation at the national and super-national levels in support of GMO-based agrifood systems, agribusiness multinational corporations diffusing the neoliberal diet production model globally, and supermarkets and fast food restaurants selling the unhealthy food to the working class in developed countries and growing middle classes around the world.

Otero does an excellent job of zooming out for macro political-economic context and then zooming in for very specific empirical analysis. The book flows well from early chapters that set up the problematic and conceptual frames, then, moves to chapters that apply those frames within and between the NAFTA countries, and then expands the analysis to other developing countries. Otero shows how the neoliberal diet was created originally by the collaboration of the Land Grant Universities, agricultural commodity groups, and USDA subsidy policies linked to the Cold War, and then, diffused globally via the development project through global supra-national organizations such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. He illustrates how the early language of food security focusing on food as a right was coopted by development interests. Otero uses FAO-STAA data primarily to document the decline of the traditional diet and the rise of the neoliberal diet. He shows convincingly how Mexico has fared far worse in the NAFTA years, suffering rapid decline in food security, increased out-migration and class polarization, increased obesity, and a declining trade balance. In my view, his most noteworthy contribution is his Neoliberal Diet Risk index, which he employs to analyze the susceptibility of various nations to the imposition of the neoliberal diet in that country.

After reading the book, I think Otero missed a chance to make an important sociological point. He is careful not to call the rise in obesity an "epidemic." He says why, because it does not meet the criteria for contagion in the medical sense. I would argue we are better able to understand its spread as a coordinated cultural contagion process. Sophisticated advertising combined with well-researched gastronomical combinations attack our taste buds with fats, sugars, and oils, and much like a drug, we are "hooked" by a science of taste. Time constraints as more family members work and a lack of availability and greater expense of healthy foods pulls many of us to the neoliberal diet. I think Otero has shown the pattern and the trend is clear. To expect individuals to resist by voting with their forks is short-sighted and focuses on the symptoms. To expect the dominant actors to self-regulate is naïve. Structural change is needed to address the cause, which is profit maximization of powerful agribusiness multinational corporations who use their influence to manipulate state agricultural subsidies and policies in their favor.

Otero's answer to the problem is engaged social scientists working with alternative agrifood movements to lobby the state to restrict the imposition of the neoliberal diet and support the maintenance of traditional and/or healthier diets. This Gramscian resolution acknowledges well the obstacles and difficulties to gaining successful access to the state-apparatus to bring about a more sustainable and just agrifood system.

This intellectual pessimism is tempered by numerous more optimistic examples of social movement resistance from below at the sub-national, national, and supra-national levels. As Otero “recenters” the state as the forum for resistance, I would have liked to see him speak more directly on how this research informs the literature on the role of the state in regime studies and the political economy of the world system.

The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People provides a valuable investigation into the complex interplay of social forces driving the globalization of the “unhealthy” agrifood system. Otero challenges the neoliberal assumptions of maximum individual choice and industry self-regulation as the best paths to socioeconomic development. He thoughtfully engages the development, inequality, and dietary regimes literatures to provide a nuanced understanding of the structural factors behind the rise of the obesity epidemic. The book is accessible and appropriate for upper-level undergraduate and graduate agrifood studies courses. It could also be a valuable supplement to nutrition and development studies courses. *The Neoliberal Diet* should be required reading for scholars and practitioners dedicated to bringing about a more sustainable and just agrifood system.

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Going Public: A Guide for Social Scientists, by Arlene Stein and Jessie Daniels, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017. 230 pp. \$19.00 (paper). ISBN: 9780226364780.

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With a wit and open writing style that defines accessibility, two leading public scholars, Stein and Daniels, have gifted the academic world, and graduate students especially, a book that is destined to guide more scholarship into the world. From the opening pages to the closing chapter’s advice on how to “go public,” the book creates a sense of dialogue between the author and reader. The overarching guiding principles in the text mix seamlessly into concrete examples which support the thesis: all scholars can, and should “go public” with their ideas and research.

In eight chapters, the book’s narrative provides sound pathways for scholars and graduate students to re-examine their own work, and become more accessible for the generally engaged public. The introductory chapter provides readers with an argument that traditional graduate