

**Mauro Balboni, (2017) *Il pianeta mangiato, La guerra dell'agricoltura contro la terra*, Lucca: Dissensi**

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As the world population is projected to reach 10 billion inhabitants within a few decades, the failings of industrial food systems cannot be denied. Several studies<sup>1</sup>, commissioned by International Organizations have concluded that the modern global agriculture system has to be radically transformed to avoid ever greater environmental and social problems. Modern industrialised food production methods contribute to the global pollution of air, soil and waters. They are the cause of malnutrition. They are also inequitable and unjustifiably wasteful. And they are concentrated in the hands of a few corporations and subject to increasing financialization. Linked to the many crises humanity is facing, the problem of a sustainable food system should be considered a key challenge of our times.

Balboni's book, *Il pianeta mangiato, La guerra dell'agricoltura contro la terra*<sup>2</sup> is a good addition to the Italian literature on this subject. The author aims at increasing the awareness of Italian citizens and politicians about the impact of the global agro-food industry. By producing, transforming, and distributing food on a global scale, it is heavily responsible for our rapidly approaching and/or going beyond planetary limits, which in environmental literature are described in terms of climate change, biodiversity loss, nitrogen and phosphorus cycle disturbances, increasing rates of soil use changes, depletion of fresh water, chemical pollution, ocean acidification, and atmospheric ozone depletion.

The author, starting from the ideas of William Vogt presented in "Road to Survival" (1948), appears to see himself as one of the so-called "apocalyptic environmentalists". His major concerns can be summarized as follows: *The present global system of food production, which has been evolving through the 10.000 years of Holocene, is conflicting with the global common goods (fertile soil, water, climate and*

*biodiversity) because of both population growth (especially in Africa Asia and even USA) and urbanization and increased purchasing power of emerging bourgeoisies. Collapse of the present food system can be seen as likely within a few decades – the author indicates the year 2080 – with the inevitable impossibility of ensuring adequate food supply for everyone.*

Within such a gloomy perspective, the author cannot see any viable solution, since the present alternative narratives about the future food production appear to him as looking backwards:

1. Intensifying the output of agriculture through the common model of petrochemical, large-scale, one crop, intensive farming: the so called "green revolution" model;
2. De-intensification of production going back to an "idealised" more natural way of producing food of the pre-industrial period.

With rich documentation and cogent reasoning, the author illustrates the unfeasibility of the first alternative, because of the environmental damages and resource shortages it procures, along with its impact on the population's health: obesity being the product of processed food high in fats, sugar and sodium. This narrative, promoted mainly by the big agro-industrial complexes, is based on the false assumption that the increasing world population needs more food, whereas the real problem is malnutrition due mainly to the increasing dominance of corporations that for short-term profit-making objectives are supplying more and more processed food and animal proteins. These trends in production of so-called "dense loaded and layered food" rich in fats, sugar and sodium from a very limited number of crops (manly maize, soybeans and palm oil), are the combined results of big financial corporations aiming only to maximize short-term profits and the increased number of people residing in urban or semi-urban locations.

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<sup>1</sup> IAASTD – International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technologies Reports – A joint initiative of the World Bank, the UNDP, The FAO of the UN and other institutions involving over 400 scientists.

Subsequent international studies by the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food annual Reports.

<sup>2</sup> In English: *The Eaten Planet. Agriculture's War Against the Earth*

To highlight the unsustainability of the industrial food system, Balboni discusses its impact on climate due to its huge greenhouse gases emissions, the problem posed by nitrogen-based fertilizers, like eutrophication of water resources, the question of pesticides and herbicides, the loss of agrobiodiversity, and the new plagues of globesity (global obesity) and metabolic diseases such as diabetes. At the same time, he also contests the unrealistic position posed as the second and alternative narrative by those thinking that the future should rely on an ancient agricultural system that was hardly capable to support a population of 5 million people at the beginning of the Holocene and less than 2 billions during the industrial revolution, but at high costs in terms of social inequity (e.g. serfdom and slavery).

The author, reminding us that the cultivated field is a simplified ecosystem, criticizes naming *natural* the products of pre-industrial agriculture, a practice used for marketing even by modern food processing firms. The agroecosystem is different from a natural ecosystem because of the human-induced loss of the complexity of plants and animals that once allowed an ecological homeostasis. As such, the cultivated field, the Latin *ager*, cannot survive without man: it is a product of both nature and culture.

The author does not limit himself to a presentation of detailed documentation of the causes that will lead us to a disastrous collapse of the present industrial food system, but also makes recommendations for technical, economic and political measures to mitigate and indeed avoid it. His view on the present socio-political order is very pessimistic and he maintains it is impossible to see any current action aimed at changing the situation. Neither national governments nor the European Union are acting to change the Common Agricultural Policy which annually spends almost 500 billions in subsidies to farmers, most of them applying polluting production processes and contributing to the speed of the trajectory toward global collapse.

The author is also critical of many current positions concerning the concept of sustainability. In a chapter, titled

“Sustainababble” (a neologism created by Robert Engelmann, the president of the WorldWatch Institute) the very idea of sustainable development is questioned as an oxymoron. All too often the definition of sustainability merely refers to the capacity of our planet to replenish resources exhausted or damaged by human civilization with the objective of allowing it to carry on in its present course. That is, sustainable development is something that the present rich population of the world desire in order to carry on with its consumption models.

Even the European Commission document “Sustainable Food” (Nov. 19, 2015) presents us with the same contradictions. After defining sustainable agriculture as a process that will allow us to maintain food production even in the future, it indicates, among others, the goal of a growth of the food industries: the very cause of the problem.

Similar approaches to and definitions of sustainable food can be read in the documents of *Big Food* companies (industrial firms devoted to the production, trade, processing and distributing business of food). They stress the question of economic sustainability, forgetting that the present costing of food does not include its hidden costs due to negative externalities. The current food system produces many externalities, and a lot of the costs do not appear in agriculture production, but rather in recovering from soil, water and air pollution and in human consumption because of the high charges for food-related diseases.

A common refrain among advocacy militants for an alternative food system is “use your purchasing power by abstaining from buying the ‘wrong’ foods”. The author thinks, however, that this commendable behaviour of individual aware consumers is not sufficient for the needed changes. At the same time, he considers any action that increases the consumers’ awareness to be very positive.

He is quite pessimistic about the actions of democratic institutions because they have a short-term horizon (4 to 5 years) and are very weak in facing the lobbying actions by big corporations involved in producing inputs for all the phases of the food systems as well as in the

processing and distributing of outputs. He also stresses the need for urgent actions. There is urgent need for a global authority. Unfortunately, “there is no other world order but a wildly individualistic market”.

However, the author thinks that some remedies may come from proposals such as taxation of energy dense food, food education in the school system, reduction of greenhouses gas, getting ready for resilience measures to the Anthropocene climate, new food production without soil, chemical synthesis of proteins, insect rearing for food, and redirecting CAP<sup>3</sup> budget to food production innovating systems.

Unfortunately, the political question is not adequately dealt with. The global monopolies of the industrial agro-food complex, with the help of international finance institutions and the complicity and inadequacies of national governments, have created and continue to support a global food system that is socially, environmentally, and financially dysfunctional.

Food has become another commodity subject to financial speculation. Although the author denounces the trends in genetic simplification and power concentration of *Big Food*, there is no analysis of the links between the capitalist economic system in its present financial stage, and the ills of the food system.

In addition, the narrative about the future of the food system is lacking a full discussion of Agroecology and the question of Food Sovereignty. There is considerable literature<sup>4</sup> on these questions, which is documenting analyses and proposals, presenting also the organized actions of the victims of the food systems being they agricultural labourers, small peasants, labourers in the processing agro industries, and consumers.

In conclusion, Mauro Balboni has certainly to be commended for its successful endeavour in presenting such a multifaceted subject in a format accessible to a large audience, while maintaining a technically accurate presentation. His professional experience as an international executive in the agribusiness sector and the painstaking digging into official institutions reports and academic researches make this book a good advocacy text for ways of changing the present trends in the food production sector.

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<sup>3</sup> CAP: Common Agricultural Policy in the European Union (EU)

<sup>4</sup> See proceedings of two conferences at Yale University in the New Haven, Sept. 2013 and at the ISS in the Hague, January 2014. See also *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2014, Vol. 41

FAO/UN, International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition, Sept. 2014 and 2nd International Symposium on Agroecology: Scaling Up

agroecology to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in April 2018.

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