



# Shock and Awe in the UNFSS

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## Abstract

The unholy alliance between the UN and the World Economic Forum in staging a Food Systems Summit is the culmination of deepening public partnerships with the corporate food sector on an international scale. This article examines how the WEF has exploited this relationship to position its private constituency to oversee global food market governance at the expense of multilateral principles, and against China's expanding state-centered model of international self-reliance.

**Keywords** Multilateralism · Stakeholder capitalism · Great reset · Hegemony · Food sovereignty counter-movement · Chinese alternative

Naomi Klein's 'shock doctrine' describes moments of evident crisis, when corporate interests enlist a state to prevent crises from generating organic moments encouraging progressive policies. This is 'disaster capitalism' (Klein 2017). There is an element of this 'disaster capitalism' response in the staging of the UN's Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). But the Summit has a *global* institutional dimension insofar as the World Economic Forum (WEF) has enlisted the United Nations in a Faustian bargain. Here member states' collective institutional representative has surrendered the principle and practice of multilateralism<sup>1</sup> to a crudely sophisticated smokescreen called 'stakeholderism.' This highly selective ruse enables corporate capture. And in a system of multi-stakeholder governance, there are 'no recognized standards governing the internal decision-making process of MSGs or ones that clarify the obligations, responsibilities, and liabilities of these new 'governors'' (Gleckman 2016: 102).

In July 2019, pre-pandemic, WEF President Börge Brende outlined a 'global risks landscape' facing the western world: 'one near-term, one long-term and one that contains blind spots for stakeholders'. For the WEF, the *near-term* risk involves geo-economic tensions between the US and China risking global economic growth. As below, the real

risk is of China's accumulating power as the US empire unravels, threatening corporate interests with a state-centered model of development that may be more effective in addressing Brende's *long-term* risks of climate change and deepening extreme weather events. The final risk is 'technology,' such as AI, biotech and cyber-related risks as blind spots not 'readily understood' (Brende 2019). This appears to refer to the substantial known unknowns of bio-digital engineering transforming landscapes, agricultural practices, and food varieties (Mooney 2018). They are issues of central concern to food producers and their global allies who value ecological farming, as we shall see below.

Brende associated such risks with a rising discontent with the 'system' at large, such that 'the notion of 'taking back control'—including from multilateral organizations—has gained currency in recent years among citizens and leaders alike...risks eroding the global community's ability to properly manage the primary economic, environmental and technological risks facing the world today' (Brende 2019). What is telling here is that the WEF's reference to systemic discontent, lacking mention of deepening austerity and involuntary migration, masks the dispossessions and deprivations of privatization, corporate privilege and financialization. Allusion to a legitimacy crisis of multilateralism in fact *reframes* the shock doctrine in such a way as to enable the spectre of corporate capture to address evident global risks (Canfield et al. 2021). By 2020 this spectre materialized with the COVID-19 pandemic exposing not only a

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<sup>1</sup> Nation-states are the central and key actors in multilateralism (Gleckman 2016: 98).



‘broken food system’, but also profound public incapacities, further compromising multilateralism. In this moment Klaus Schwab, founder of the WEF, and co-author of *The Great Reset*, opined:

The connectivity between geopolitics and pandemics flows both ways. On the one hand, the chaotic end of multilateralism, a vacuum of global governance and the rise of various forms of nationalism make it more difficult to deal with the outbreak... On the other hand, the pandemic is clearly exacerbating and accelerating [prior] geopolitical trends that were already apparent before the crisis erupted (Schwab and Malleret 2020: 8, 44).

Such a claim regarding the evident incapacity of multilateralism fetishizes the global crisis conjuncture, as if a governance ‘vacuum’ lacks a political history. This clears the way to ignore four decades of state privatization to enable ‘corporate advantage,’ privileging transnational capitalism at the expense of national sovereignty and regulatory efficacy. In effect, states were repositioned to sign on to the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules premised on a governing principle of states serving markets—to be consummated in ‘corporate capture’ via the UNFSS.

In the shadow of COVID-19, the WEF has mobilized to reconfigure ‘the totality of institutions, policies, norms, procedures and initiatives’ through which public–private/multi-stakeholder interests ‘try to bring more predictability and stability to their responses to transnational challenges’ (Schwab and Malleret 2020: 47). It is this claim that animates the WEF’s override of the longer standing UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), in staging a Food Systems Summit in partnership with the UN leadership. And the displacement of ‘food security’ by ‘food system’ in the naming of the Summit signals two shifts: first, the formal replacement of the CFS as the key UN-based organization responsible for global food security and nutrition, including rights to (produce) food; and second, the refocus on a food *system* (singular) as the domain of corporate power.

The so-called ‘food system’ is already highly concentrated, with the top four global seed and agrochemical firms controlling approximately 70% of the global pesticides market and 60% of the global seed market (Clapp 2021). Global corporate food chains now account for three-quarters of all global trade (Schwab and Malleret 2020: 72), constituting ‘roughly 30–50 percent of the food systems in China, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, and 20 percent of the food systems in Africa and South Asia’ (Bello 2020: 5). And food corporations ‘command billions more in infrastructure [beyond] multibillion-dollar markets for their goods’ (Philpott 2020: 181–2)—including \$540bn *annually* in global subsidies, ‘on track to soar to \$1.8tn (£1.3tn) a year by 2030’ (Carrington 2021). Ultimately, such infrastructure has the

capacity to ‘lock-in’ governing structures, foreshadowing override of the CFS in the name of (global) ‘food system transformation’ geared to SDG 2030. This would formally complete corporate capture, ending the decade-long juxtaposition of civil society and private mechanisms in the CFS, addressed below.

## Corporate Capture Complete?

The UNFSS ‘stakeholder’ structure certainly appears like Shock Doctrine culmination, consummating the process of corporate capture. This process has two related dimensions. The first is the emergence and consolidation of a ‘corporate food regime’ from the 1980s through its institution in agribusiness-friendly World Trade Organization (WTO) rules in the mid-1990s to the present. Associated food crises, displacement of farming cultures, and environmental degradation via expanding industrial monocultures have deepened adversity, precipitating global protest directed at state complicities with the corporate regime. As below, the WEF has been exploiting such dissent as an indicator of declining multilateral efficacy. This claim has more recently been strengthened by the pandemic, enabling the WEF to take advantage of global public health disarray to advocate corporate governance in a moment of extreme world crisis.

For Klein: ‘The ‘shock doctrine’ is the political strategy of using large-scale crises to push through policies that systematically deepen inequality, enrich elites, and undercut everyone else. In moments of crisis, people tend to focus on the daily emergencies of surviving that crisis, whatever it is, and tend to put too much trust in those in power’ (Solis 2020). While billions of people are unaware of WEF capture of the UN and remain subject to the discourse of a *single* global food system, there is nevertheless a global resistance fundamentally mistrusting corporate ‘techno-productivism’ at the expense of human rights to (produce) food and advocating democratic territorial food systems. Arguably, this mobilizing vision has potential since the current elite response to ‘disaster capitalism’ in promoting corporate capture of food system governance can only magnify the ‘disaster’, as soils, biodiversity and atmospheric health deteriorate and rural population redundancy rises.

Schwab certainly understands the conditions for social unrest, which ‘has been on the rise globally’, with the pandemic intensifying ‘the macro challenges of social inequalities’, and with many citizens denouncing ‘a breakdown of the social contract, expressing more and more forcefully a general loss of trust in institutions and leaders’, and so an ‘increase in unemployment and limited and no access to food could trigger large-scale social unrest followed by



mass movements of migration and refugees' (Schwab and Malleret 2020: 37, 34, 41, 53).

Aside from any anxiety about 'reverse colonization' via *le grand remplacement* (Camus 2011), the trigger is *already in effect*. Corporate agro-technologies are not about 'food access', and if further unleashed by the WEF's 'stakeholder capitalism', they may well precipitate a mass exodus of over a billion rural peoples, undermining diversified farming systems that manage half the world's land and three quarters of its fresh water and provide up to 70% of the world's food (Cribb 2010).

The point here is that the WEF maneuver, while couched in terms to listen, protect, and deliver, is ultimately aimed at undermining the multiple collective resistances to corporate governance of food across the world—including any multilateral principles that stand in the way. While the pandemic provides a proximate rationale, privatization has been intensifying this century. In effect, if there is a Shock Doctrine now underway, it is really a *culminating* process—as corporates and their institutional allies have been building a political infrastructure for a global industrial agriculture over the last quarter century. And, as above, the culmination is, in effect, the attempt at a 'Great Reset': whereby an economic contract is to replace the social contract, such as it is (not to mention the urgency of an ecological contract).

## The Economic Contract

The essence of the 'economic contract' is the forging of a deal by the public sector with the private sector. That is, rather than a social contract where states assume responsibility for citizen rights and well-being, the WEF claims governing responsibility for a corporate governed food system as the vehicle of global well-being. The goal is to institute 'market rule' on a world scale.

Historically, states formed to institute and protect territorial property rights, within emerging world market relations. Colonial capitalism introduced tension between a 'capital logic' and a 'territorial logic' (Arrighi 1990). While central to the imperial age, this tension has shaped a corporate food regime since the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 instituted market rules of economic liberalization overriding national farm sector protections, precipitating a counter-movement of small-scale producers against the global capital logic (McMichael 2013a).

In eroding the possibility of territorial food systems, largely with member state consent, this regime has granted transnational food corporations both trade and investment privileges, in the name of 'feeding the world'. At the time, Director-General Renato Ruggiero characterized formation of the WTO as 'writing the constitution of a single global economy' (Ruggiero 1996). The long-term consequences

have materialized as a process of 'de-territorialization' of food production and circulation. It is symbolized by dumping of artificially cheapened grains, global retailer monopolies, land grabbing, excessive agro-exporting, and value-chaining farmers. The consolidating capital logic threatens sovereignty, rural dweller livelihoods, and ecological balance on a world scale. States facilitated this logic, signing on to WTO liberalization rules subjecting them to international capital mobility and rising competitive economic relations. In this moment, the international peasant coalition, led by La Vía Campesina, had the foresight and frontline experience to propose 'food sovereignty' in opposition to deterritorialization.

The current crisis revisits this tension between the corporate and agrarian worlds. But, as the WEF sees it, erosion of state sovereignties calls for global corporate governance, to manage a 'food system transformation.' In consequence of state complicity in a capital logic compromising multilateralism, states face nativist and/or progressive backlash, deepening that compromise. The *Great Reset* trope feeds on this disarray, abandoning a territorial logic and reducing citizens (and refugees) to an afterthought, or at best as selective 'stakeholders' with no real voice in a deliberately opaque venture.

## The Economic Contract for Food

How did this 'economic contract' come to claim such strategic importance, even as it overrides national government responsibility for civil rights (and the right to food) vested in states and enshrined in the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights?

This public sentiment arose from post-war food shortages, with the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) established to stabilize and manage food security on a world scale, where food was to be 'treated as an essential of life rather than primarily as merchandise' (Phillips and Ilcan 2003: 441). This vision began to erode as the US organized the Cold War world order—reconstructing post-war Western Europe with commercial agro-technologies, overriding UN proposals to establish a World Food Board by developing its own bilateral food aid programmes in the 1950s, and exporting green revolution technology to select Third World states in the 1960s (Canfield et al. 2021).

Such exports of food and agro-inputs prefigured the rise of a corporate food regime, as the 1980s debt crisis compelled agro-exporting from the Global South to defray debt. By the early 1990s a discernible transnational corporate 'global sourcing' of foods was most obvious in the technologies of seed modification, cooling and preserving, and transport of fruits and vegetables as non-seasonal, or year-round, access for relatively affluent consumers became available



through the management of archipelagos of plantations across the Global South. This agro-export modeling framed WTO rules, stimulating a proliferation of global commodities anchored in value chains reorganizing farm labour, and ‘world farms’ occupying a majority of all the world’s cropland to feed livestock, rather than people (Milman 2021).

This global set-up was mediated by states, as they administered such issues as dispute mechanisms, preserving intellectual property rights, and national treatment of investor rights, but on behalf of private interests. Further, the implementation of WTO-style liberalization advanced extra-territorial interests of transnational corporations and foreign investors. The twenty-first century saw the rise of new agro-exporting states, such as Brazil, Russia, India, China (the BRICs), Ukraine, Argentina, Thailand and Vietnam, in competition with the US and EU ‘global breadbaskets.’ This motive became clear when Brazil, India and China challenged the hypocrisy of US/EU farm protections in violating WTO rules for agricultural liberalization. Their challenge was to Western power rather than the WTO’s neo-liberal paradigm of market rule (Hopewell 2021) producing a multi-polar agro-food system.

Beyond such multi-polarity, *substantively* the food regime occupies a de-territorialized ‘multiplex world,’ where ‘economic interdependence today is denser, consisting of trade, finance, and global production networks and supply chains, whereas ... multipolarity is mainly trade-based’ (Acharya 2017: 11). Corporate webs of global production and commercialization express the partnering or mediating role of states in the interests of competitive market positioning, and/or political and economic elite access to export revenues and profitable investments, and/or mutual complicity (Halperin 2013).

Such economic interdependence is premised on a deepening commodification of the natural world, structuring policy decisions regarding land, forest and mangrove ‘development’. Here, ‘market-driven calculations are being introduced in the management of populations and the administration of special spaces [realizing] the territoriality of global capitalism’ (Ong 2006: 7). Such embedding of national territory in food regime circuits of resources and value expresses the accommodation of states to the capital logic.

The elevation of market rule by the WTO in the corporate interest laid the groundwork for the triumphal private, scientific and technological language that undergirds the UNFSS. This is expressed by a Scientific Group tasked with ‘ensuring that the science underpinning the 2021 summit is robust, broad and independent’ (von Braun et al. 2021: 28). Led by academic scientists, and certainly not frontline small-scale farmer practitioners, this elite group works from a premise of ‘the more global, dynamic and complex food systems become’ the more challenges facing scientists (von Braun et al. 2021: 29). And, while acknowledging that ‘food is a

contentious topic’ (eg, agroecology vs biotechnology), they conclude that the Scientific Group aims ‘to offer a scientific basis to this diversity of perspectives’ (von Braun et al. 2021: 30). The implicit message is that smallholder farming and landscape knowledges are of minimal value, even as they remain a powerful and democratic solution to biodiversity and carbon sequestering (Rosset and Altieri 2017).

### Economic Versus Social Contract for Food Security

Such claims express the food regime’s principal tension between practitioners of industrial and (grounded) agro-ecological sciences (McMichael 2013a). The attempt to marginalize agrarian movement voices championing agro-ecology and food sovereignty emerged from the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, when the leader of the international peasant movement, La Vía Campesina (LVC), critiqued transnational agribusiness claims to feed the world with standardized high-tech ‘agriculture without farmers’. In 2002, La Vía Campesina (LVC) joined 51 other civil society organizations to form the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), resolving to gain a presence in the UN’s Committee on World Food Security (CFS). This materialized in CFS reform, with admission of the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM—now the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism) and a Private Sector Mechanism (PSM) in 2010, following the 2007–08 ‘food crisis’ which had called CFS food security governance into question.

The food crisis precipitated cascading food riots in 30 countries, from Haiti to Italy as food prices inflated, especially following a switch from food crops to (‘green’) fuel crops (Patel and McMichael 2009). Such a serious legitimacy crisis for the UN spurred Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to convene a High-Level Conference on World Food Security in June 2008. Its outcome nevertheless replicated previous food summits in confirming and intensifying market rule for food regime productive ‘efficiency’ (Clapp and Moseley 2020: 1395). This was consistent with the new (and belated agricultural) agenda of the World Bank, in its 2008 *World Development Report*, where agriculture would be ‘led by private entrepreneurs in extensive value chains linking producers to consumers’, with the expectation that the private sector would drive ‘the organization of value chains that bring the market to smallholders and commercial farms’ (World Bank 2007: 8). This was a key moment in formalizing public–private partnering which has mushroomed over the last two decades and finds its most virulent form in the WEF’s scheme to turn the UN *inside out* to establish a private–public partnership (Gleckman 2019).

The exemplar for ‘value-chain agriculture’ was the Gates Foundation’s Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Initiated in 2006, AGRA *showcased* the public–private partnership (PPP) model, initiated in 2000





via the UN Global Compact to encourage corporate social/sustainable goals in their programming. But AGRA *also showcased* the way in which the PPP served as a mechanism for accessing public funds for private purpose in agro-food ventures. AGRA established an agro-dealer infrastructure (10,000 agro-dealers) encompassing farmers in value-chains comprising agro-inputs (seeds, fertilizer, pesticides) and contracts for delivery of produce to corporate processors and retailers, subsidized by northern donor governments. Its record exemplifies ‘disaster capitalism’: ‘AGRA has raised more than \$1 billion, mostly from the Gates Foundation, on promises it would double yields and incomes for 30 million African farmers and cut food insecurity in half by 2020. Instead, the number of severely undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa has increased by nearly 50 percent since 2006, according to the latest UN hunger report’ (Malkan 2021). And its claim to raise agriculture productivity ‘has been marginal at best compared with the gains made by agroecological farming in West Africa, with government support’ (Belay and Wise 2021).

The *New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition* (NAFSN) complemented AGRA, in 2012, as a partnership between the G8, the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), nine African governments, and over 100 private corporations. This multi-stakeholder PPP reframed participating government land and food policy to promote cross-national ‘agricultural growth corridors,’ enclosing land for large-scale industrial agriculture, and incorporating small producers into corporate value chains, producing foodstuffs primarily for export (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013; McKeon 2014).<sup>2</sup> And two years later, the *UN Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture* (GACSA) formed, with 14 governments and 32 organizations (including food corporations such as Coca-Cola, Dupont, Dow, Monsanto, Walmart, Tyson Foods, and Unilever) to encourage 500 million farmers by 2030 to practice climate-smart agriculture,<sup>3</sup> which narrowly focuses on technical fixes at the level of production, net of ‘questions concerning power, inequality and access’ (Taylor 2018: 89).

Alongside national governments managing the passage of land into these PPP schemes, the World Bank, as an international public authority, has assisted with land classification. Its Foreign Investment Advisory Service (FIAS) has eased land titling procedures on the pretext that some lands are ‘idle’ or ‘unproductive’ for a range of investors: from individuals through financial houses and pension funds to sovereign wealth funds. The Bank’s International Finance

Corporation (IFC) deploys legislative and policy reforms or investment promotion agencies to remove barriers to foreign investment (Narula 2013: 111).

In short, as predicted by the IPC at its parallel *Terra Preta* Forum in Rome during the 2008 World Conference:

The serious and urgent food and climate crises are being used by political and economic elites as opportunities to entrench corporate control of world agriculture and the ecological commons. At a time when chronic hunger, dispossession of food providers and workers, commodity and land speculation, and global warming are on the rise, governments, multilateral agencies, and financial institutions are offering proposals that will only deepen these crises through more dangerous versions of policies that originally triggered the current situation....<sup>4</sup>

Here, the proposed solution is not to restore the health and viability of small-scale farming systems across the world with public subsidies and institutional supports, even as small farmers produce a majority of the world’s food. While the proximate goal of value-chains is to improve smallholder productivity, the outcome encloses farmers in monocultural dependency on agro-inputs and food exports—thereby depleting local food provisioning, in turn exacerbated by farmer debt and displacement (McMichael 2013b).

## Food Regime Power

These initiatives express the deepening of corporate food regime power—beyond simply a license to profit from organized liberalization of foreign trade and investment by food companies and financial interests. Now states partner collectively, through alliances or UN membership, to mobilize public resources and reframe land and agricultural policy in the name of productivity, food marketing, and green practices to be managed by transnational food corporations. Most importantly, the notion of the ‘public good’ is undergoing reformulation via discursive legitimation, as best served by private interest.

The blending of public and private interests constitutes a new standard, with the rights of the notional ‘invisible hand’ displacing the rights and sovereignty of farmers and civil society at large. The WEF represents itself as a global platform for public–private cooperation, having ‘catalyzed stakeholder support for ambitious global political initiatives such as COP21 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, [and further] The Forum is officially recognized

<sup>2</sup> France has since withdrawn from the project, on grounds that it undermines farming livelihoods of the producers concerned.

<sup>3</sup> <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/global-alliance-for-climate-smart-agriculture-launched/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://viacampesina.org/en/civil-society-declaration-of-the-terra-pret-a-forum/>.



with a special status to act as the International Organization for Public–Private Cooperation’.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the WEF has been a key player promoting PPPs, elevating the private dimension with global consequence—especially enabling and legitimizing corporate power in international public reforms. And so, the WEF claims to have ‘influenced global thinking by being at the forefront of concepts such as multi-stakeholder engagement, social entrepreneurship, corporate global citizenship and the Fourth Industrial Revolution’.<sup>6</sup> What ‘citizenship’ means here remains to be seen.

Despite the seemingly progressive claims to replace shareholder capitalism with stakeholder capitalism, the WEF solution of marginalizing the most inclusive UN agency (the CFS) and its research arm, the HLPE, is a clear example of selective stakeholderism to strengthen corporate governance. While traditionally a multilateral forum, with member government representation and voting power, the CFS reformed a decade ago to include civil society (agrarian movements and progressive NGOs) and private sector representation, with voice but no vote. As noted earlier, the IPC was tireless in negotiating this global policy space through which to represent frontline producers, farmworkers and Indigenous Peoples (McKeon 2015; Duncan 2015; Claeys 2015; Edelman and Borras 2016; Gaarde 2017; Mann 2019). And CSM input has shaped such landmark reports as *Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security* (FAO 2012) and *Connecting Smallholders to Markets: An Analytical Guide* (Kay 2016). Meanwhile, the CFS commissions research from its High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), who produce annual scientific and field research reports on significant food security-related topics. These include Agroecology, Smallholder Agriculture Investment, Nutrition, Water, Sustainable Livestock, Youth Engagement and Employment, Food Waste, Biofuels, Fisheries, Climate Change, Land Tenure, Gender, and more. Sidelining of these voices and reports by the UNFSS in the name of a vacuous ‘stakeholderism’ is testament to corporate takeover of such critical spaces.

Whereas previous food summits focused on food *security* issues, usually sparked by agrarian and/or food crises, the UNFSS of 2021 has focused explicitly on food *system* transformation, seemingly contributing to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>7</sup> And here the emphasis shifts to the role of ‘science policy’ (as distinct from local knowledges): ‘At the international and multilateral level, there is a growing

effort to build collective expertise to formulate state-of-the-art scientific knowledge regarding specific global problems’ (Hainzelin et al. 2021: 2). Pertinent to this effort, the Gates Foundation recently formed a new Agricultural Innovations initiative, called ‘Gates Ag One,’ with the goal of bringing ‘climate-smart’ scientific breakthroughs to smallholder farmers via ‘the affordable, high-quality tools, technologies, and resources they need to lift themselves out of poverty.’ And this is in context of considering consolidation of all 15 CGIAR Centers into a single center, co-chaired by the Senior Program Officer of the Gates Foundation, which would blur the ‘lines between the private and public sectors,’ and fulfill the Gates Foundation’s website claim: ‘a key trigger of agricultural transformation is a conducive policy environment’ (Navdanya 2020: 67, 70).

In short, whereas CFS inclusiveness embodies debate and often agentic recognition of valuable eco-knowledges of alternative decentralized food producing cultures, the WEF reset *beyond* the CFS privileges private-driven science policy governance. In this way, the PPP nexus is reformulated in such a way as to legitimize centralized institutional power for corporate food. As such, it is the foundation and model of a new *global economic contract* premised on override of the social contract as the reciprocal rights of citizens and governments in national territories. The ultimate vision of ‘food access’ accompanying this contract resembles the World Bank’s 1986 definition of food security as ‘the ability to purchase food’ (Jarosz 2009: 51). This suggests that the ‘stakeholders’ distinguished by the UN/WEF alliance are those that have voice within a capital logic at large, via a narrative identifying wholesale commodification of food systems as the key to feeding the world. Those who produce and reproduce territorial foodstuffs via local and national markets do not have a substantive seat at the table, as they share seed, work communally, and tend to identify farming wealth less as a market benefit, and more as a socio-ecological resource and virtue (van der Ploeg 2018; Patel 2021).

## The China ‘Risk’

In order to address the WEF’s concerns about the geopolitical context, this final section addresses two, related issues regarding China’s presence. First, China’s power as an economic rival to western capitalism does not fit with the WEF’s world vision, given its development model and strength of state-centered economic governance. And second, China’s exceptional agrarian protectionism potentially offers an attractive alternative model to western discounting of agrarianism.

The 2019 ‘Davos Manifesto’ embraces corporate social responsibility, via the goldilocks trilogy: ‘shareholder capitalism’ is a model for private profit that is ‘no longer

<sup>5</sup> [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Institutional\\_Brochure\\_2016.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Institutional_Brochure_2016.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Institutional\\_Brochure\\_2016.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Institutional_Brochure_2016.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> As differentiated by CFS Secretary Hegadorn (2021), prefacing debate about CFS efficacy.



sustainable'. 'State capitalism' models public economic governance, with China as the exemplary threat. But the 'stakeholder capitalism' model is just right—positioning 'private corporations as trustees of society' (Schwab 2019).

A stakeholder capitalism strategy seeks to contain the China risk, even as the 2017 WEF embraced Xi Jinping as a free trader, and China was represented as the 'present champion of economic globalization' (Zeng 2019: 578). Around this time, China appeared to be poised to both inherit and reorder global economic relations, modeling an authoritarian political framework in a state-system already compromised by capitalist power, deterritorialization and deepening political polarizations. At Davos, President Xi claimed: 'All roads lead to Rome'—implying that the 'liberal internationalist world could accommodate many different forms of government, including China's totalitarian one-party dictatorship' (Babones 2019: 69), and expressing neoliberal priorities of economic over social rights (practiced by Western powers).

WTO admission of China in 2001 assumed that it would embrace market rule. But WTO rules were not written in the early 1990s with China in mind, and the WTO was criticized for failing 'to adequately police Beijing for using a mix of private enterprise and state support to dominate global industries' (Swanson 2019). As a member of the US Council of Foreign Relations commented: 'China is no longer seen as on a trajectory that favours the US' (Farmer and Kuo 2019). After the 2008 world financial crisis, when China, with its substantial financial reserves, created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), US Presidential economic advisor Lawrence Summers declared this 'the moment the United States lost its role as underwriter of the global economic system' (Weisman 2015). Since the crisis, the US 'share of global economic power fell from 50% to just 15% in 2017' (McCoy 2018). This changing of the world-economic guard motivated Trump, whose administration challenged the WTO's trade dispute mechanism, intensifying a trade war with China, advancing protectionism at the expense of the global trade system (Hopewell 2020).

The China risk is now symbolized in the PRC's adoption of an aggressive, state-centered form of the PPP. China inverts western private hegemony in this partnership, via the 2013 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) representing a new 'going out' strategy, led by State-Owned Enterprises (SOE). The BRI comprises substantial alternative global economic, institutional, digital and diplomatic networks to *extant* trade and investment relations centered in the US/EU nexus, and to energy supplies from the West 'via routes the U.S. military cannot disrupt' (Chatzky and McBride 2019: 2, 6).

The BRI represents a long game, rhetorically centered in 'South-South cooperation' and a principle of 'mutual benefit' with host governments, potentially reshaping global development around state-centered capability, even as China's short game is embedded in current western-style

investment and trade relations. China's short game involves cooperating with *extant* International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and building a diversified agri-food empire, centered in Asia and Latin America, for long-term food security via the BRI. It is the world's largest food importer (with 9% of the world's land and 20% of its population), recently securing access to grains from Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, reducing dependence on the US. China is also the third largest exporter of agricultural commodities in the world, its food exports concentrated in fish, fruits, vegetables, and processed foods (McMichael 2020).

Perhaps most significant is China's current strengthening of state property for rural revitalization, via President Xi's new concept of 'dual circulation'—what I would call 'international self-reliance' (McMichael 2020: 11). It involves securing an integrated national economy complemented with global engagement, including competing with foreign agribusiness, to enhance China's global political-economic power in the long run. The rural economy and peasantry symbolize China's renaissance, beginning in 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). And even as Xi has stepped up 'agricultural modernization', enabling competition with foreign agribusiness, China's historic land reform stabilizes much of its home-grown agrarian sector.

The recent Indian farmers' rebellion is instructive here, in distinguishing contemporary Indian and Chinese models. Prime Minister Modi seeks to dismantle public protections of its huge farm sector for corporate control, deepening agro-exporting, whereas China sustains its modern peasant sector. Here the public right to (territorial) land is the exception to the western discourse of farms as private 'economic holdings,' subject to dispossession (van der Ploeg and Ye 2016). This policy stabilizes a peasant sector, where almost half of annual grain production provides grain reserves (for food security), representing a rational defense of modern peasant economy (Tsui et al. 2017: 328). And this is complemented with increasing recognition of the potential of agricultural multifunctionality in resolving landscape ecological damage.

China's state-centered path, involving extensive public ownership (especially of land), and of banking, offers an increasingly attractive alternative to four decades of the World Bank's redefinition of 'development' in 1980, as 'participation in the world market' (Hoogvelt 1987: 58). Such participation in the world market is not driven by 'comparative advantage', but a more strategic long run sensibility. The so-called 'Beijing Consensus' projects state-centric development cooperation in contrast to the volatile and austere market rule associated with the legacy of the Washington Consensus, to which the Great Reset responds in now expecting social responsibility on the part of corporations. But as prospective global food system governors, who or what will govern corporations—especially following the



UN/WEF food system summit, premised on dismantling international institutional infrastructure?

## Conclusion

The juxtaposition of WEF and Chinese distinctive economic models raises the broader question of global governance. Even as the WEF claims multilateralism is dead, leaving a vacuum to be filled by corporate infrastructure and know-how, this is likely to be a short-term private ‘solution,’ lacking substantive public stability. As Giovanni Arrighi noted with respect to such conjunctural quandaries: ‘A dominant state exercises a hegemonic function if it leads the system of states in a desired direction and, in so doing, is perceived as pursuing a universal interest. It is this kind of leadership that makes the dominant state hegemonic. *But a dominant state may lead also in the sense that it draws other states into its path of development*’ (Arrighi 1990: 367, emphasis added). China could be that dominant state as this century unfolds, with public health and planetary well-being facing staggering challenges.

It is not as if such challenges do not have answers, however. These are embodied in a world-wide protective countermovement, composed of a mushrooming variety of alliances with a socio-ecological sensibility demanding territorial solutions formed in response. While its recent focus has been on unmasking the deceptions of the UN Food Systems Summit, it stands as an organized mobilization of affected and allied groups ultimately championing sovereignty—of citizens and food producers. Again, India’s farmer rebellion models an astounding web of non-farmer alliances. Public sentiment may be compromised, as Schwab maintains, but it certainly has been expressed in widespread food riots and austerity protests over the last decade or so. Dispossession of public infrastructure, and the privatization of public responsibility along with hegemony of market discourse has failed these uprisings for social rights. Even so, these outcomes nurture a notable suspicion of global financial and political elites prioritizing an economic, over a social, contract. And this widespread state legitimacy crisis represents a watershed moment embodying a ‘double movement’ of corporate power consolidation countered by rural and urban civic and environmental mobilization for democratic, territorial and ecological food systems.

Ultimately socio-ecological relations over-determine food provisioning futures, given massive biodiversity decline, soil and water degradation, global heating, and public health deterioration. The UN projects that at current soil loss rates, the world has about 60 years of food harvests left (Monbiot 2015). Given this scenario, transformation of food systems will involve contention between green agro-industrial interventions (eg, sustainable intensification, climate-smart

agriculture, bio-digital platforms), and agroecological initiatives geared to protecting and reproducing natural processes and cycles and addressing the climate emergency. While these models represent distinctive practices, they overlap in practice across time and space, where economic (markets and subsidies) and environmental pressures force (unequal) adaptations in both forms of agriculture. As such, it made no sense for the Summit to surrender recognition and incorporation of grassroots practices and voices, as rights and democratic solutions, respectively.

Recent reports underscore the *consequences* of an emboldened corporate food regime: ‘The global production of food is responsible for a third of all planet-heating gases emitted by human activity, with the use of animals for meat causing twice the pollution of producing plant-based foods, a major new study *Nature Food* has found’ (Milman 2021). Meanwhile, a UNEP spokesperson claimed agriculture accounts for 70% of biodiversity loss and 80% of deforestation, and while international finance offers \$105b a year for climate change and deforestation, ‘governments are providing \$470bn [in farm support] that has a huge damaging impact on climate and nature’. And this support includes ‘price incentives for specific livestock and crops, subsidies for fertilisers and pesticides, and distorting export subsidies and import tariffs’ (Carrington 2021).

An extensive and entrenched financial infrastructure is premised on the devaluation of non-western/non-industrial farming cultural practices and knowledges. This regime consummates a world-historical narrative of development built on racism and abyssal thinking: where what is made visible is at the expense of what is rendered invisible: indigenous peoples, migrant labour circuits, and farming systems that appear to belong to ‘the past’. In this vein, the 2019 US Ambassador to the FAO, Kip Tom, railed against a growing sentiment among UN member countries, and the FAO itself with its HLPE report on *Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches*, that such policy recommendation ‘did not share the basic values and core assumptions on which we operate here in the United States [and is] an explicit rejection of the very idea of progress’.<sup>8</sup>

Such techno-fetishism is an outdated cover for a corporate regime dedicated to large-scale management of nature for purposes of covering tracks (eg, GM failures, superweeds, toxic chemicals, animal cruelty), and attempting to perfect ‘agriculture without farmers’,<sup>9</sup> which, to put it simply, is widely recognized now as unsustainable at best and perilous to human and planetary health at worst. Under these

<sup>8</sup> <https://foodtank.com/news/2020/05/u-s-agribusiness-takes-aim-at-global-food-policy-reform/>

<sup>9</sup> La Vía Campesina (2009), <https://viacampesina.org/en/a-g8-on-agriculture-without-farmers-more-hunger-and-poverty/>.





circumstances, it is short-sighted, to say the least, for the UN leadership to validate the ‘Great Reset’, in the interests of corporate capture.

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