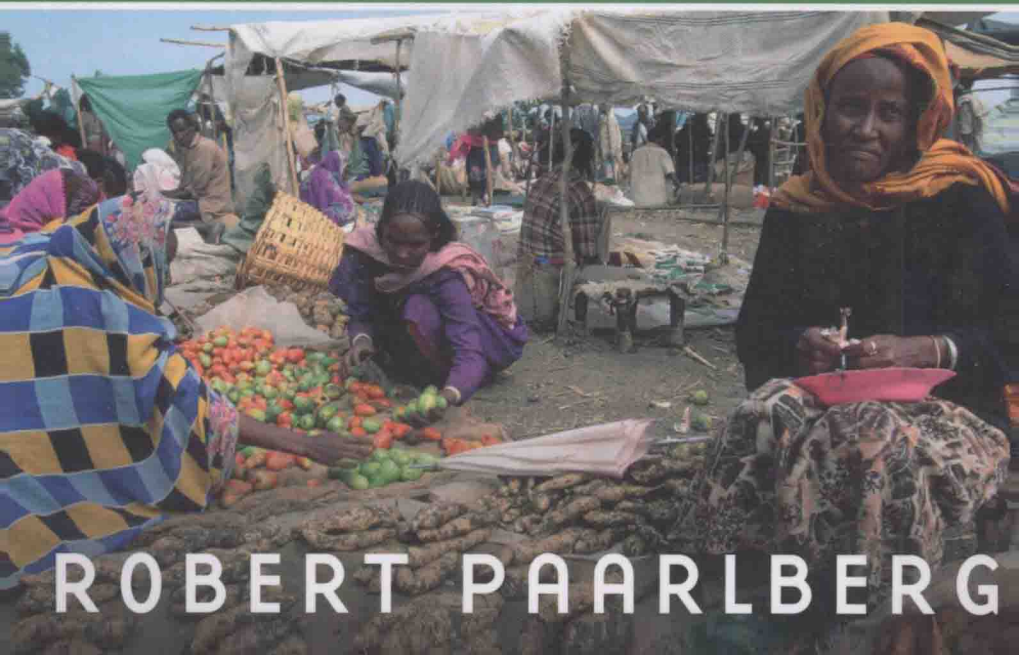




FOOD POLITICS

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW



ROBERT PAARLBERG

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This book was for me an interesting departure. It was not undertaken to solve a specific research problem, it was not supported by a funding agency, and there was no coauthorship or collaboration with a narrow circle of colleagues. In writing this book, I found myself drawing instead on multiple resources developed over my own lengthy career of research, consulting, and more than a dozen years of annual preparations for a course I teach on food politics. Many colleagues have helped me enormously along the way, probably with no idea it would ever lead to a book of this kind. Providing anything like a complete list of acknowledgments becomes out of the question.

I can, however, acknowledge several sources of constant help over all this time. Wellesley College has been my valued teaching home since 1976. This institution gives me generous research support whenever I need it and classroom access to some of the world's smartest and most talented young women. The friend who made my career at Wellesley possible, Lawrence Sullivan, is someone I cannot thank too often or too much. The Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University is a second institutional home for me,

a place to collaborate with world-class scholars and international affairs practitioners from scores of different countries. Here it is appropriate for me to mention the personal association I have treasured most at Harvard, with Stanley Hoffmann, a humane scholar and teacher who never had any particular reason to help me out, but did so anyway over the years because that has always been his nature. My third institutional home has been the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington, D.C., where I have enjoyed a diverse mix of research and consulting opportunities. My most valued connection here is with Rajul Pandya-Lorch, a careful and tireless presence, who manages to keep IFPRI's door open to my work and who always seems to know whom I should be in touch with in Nairobi, Delhi, or Beijing.

I also owe a continuing debt to Michael Lipton, who has reserved surprising amounts of his valuable time at key moments for reading and reacting to what I have been writing and for tutoring me with his deeply informed understanding of rural poverty. Like so many others, I fail to measure up to Michael's high standards, but with gracious good cheer he helps me out anyway. Valued lessons in food and farming around the world have also come to me continuously through collaborations and coauthorships with Merilee Grindle, Robert Thompson, David Orden, Carl Pray, Ron Herring, and Calestous Juma. Particular gratitude in support of this new book must be extended to William Masters and Philip Paarlberg, who agreed on short notice to read the manuscript in draft and to provide reactions. I have learned to trust their judgment. It goes without saying, the mistakes that remain in this book are my own responsibility and nobody else's.

Special mention next goes to Lowell Hardin, an agricultural visionary and a humanitarian who provided essential

support to my career in the early years when it mattered most. I learned later that Lowell has done this for countless others in the field and still does. Thanks, Lowell.

I also wish to thank my editor at Oxford University Press, Angela Chnapko, for originally suggesting this project and for guiding it to publication with a light but sure touch.

In the end, it is always family that matters most. This is particularly true in my case, as I was fortunate to be the son of one of the most respected agricultural policy experts of the second half of the 20th century, Don Paarlberg, from Purdue University. I dare not calculate how much less I would have done in my career without the constancy of his inspiration, example, and support. But wait, the Paarlberg family support system does not stop there! My father's younger brother, Hoey Paarlberg, and my cousin Philip Paarlberg are also agricultural specialists. Hoey grew up with my dad on a farm in Lake County, Indiana, and later managed farms for Purdue University. My conversations with Hoey have always been a learning experience as well as a great pleasure. Cousin Phil, meantime, is a widely published professor of agricultural economics at Purdue and the brains of the family. I am always flattered when mistaken for him.

My late brother, Don Paarlberg Jr., also played an important role in setting my career path. It was a 1967 trip to visit Don, who was then a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal, that triggered my interest in international development and introduced me to the dramatic challenges facing Asia's rural poor. In addition, it was Don and his wife, Heeja, who introduced me and my own wife, Marianne, to the sensory pleasures of well-prepared Korean and Chinese food.

Marianne gets the last but strongest acknowledgment of all. During her own long career as the art director at a major

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university press, she taught me important lessons about how authors should and should not behave. And as a versatile chef, she also knows her way around food. Nutritious and well-prepared food was as important on her side of the family as successful farming was on mine. Together, we make a good combination.

PREFACE

When it comes to food, everybody is interested. Humorist Will Rogers opened his routine by saying, "I never met a man I didn't like." In my own life, I have never met a person who did not like food, either growing it, preparing it, tasting it, or in many cases, arguing about it. We all have strong opinions about food, just as we do about politics. Food issues that become political are thus doubly divisive.

For this reason, I hesitated when asked by Oxford University Press to write a book describing "what everyone needs to know" about food politics. For each issue I would cover, a number of readers with views opposed to my own would be offended. Food politics can be a realm of irreconcilable difference. For each issue, there would also be specialists better informed than I, ready to notice even the smallest error. With each topic covered, then, I would be angering one group of readers while revealing my limitations to the other.

What persuaded me to write this book was press coverage of the so-called world food crisis of 2008. When international food prices spiked upward sharply in the spring of that year, I was struck by the different stories told. Journalists reported that the world was running out of food. Environmentalists

asserted that modern agricultural production methods had become unsustainable. Humanitarians warned that too much food was being diverted for use as transport fuel. Others said the problem was too many food imports by China. In fact, none of these popular explanations touched the core of the problem. The international food price spike was part of a temporary bubble in all commodity prices, oil and metals as well as food, a macroeconomic effect that was worsened inside the food sector by a series of national export bans and then panic buying triggered by those bans.

There was also public confusion over the consequences of the price spike. Did high prices on the world market really mean an additional 100 million people would now go hungry? Few seemed to appreciate that most food consumers around the world were largely insulated from international price fluctuations thanks to the restrictive trade policies of their governments (including the export bans that had amplified the spike). The export price of food is not the price most consumers pay. The “international” price of rice may have tripled, but rice consumers in China and in many other countries were not paying any more than before. I concluded that a book shedding light on these and other basics might be useful after all.

I also agreed to write this book in the hope of rebalancing some debates about food and farming. In recent years, a swelling body of popular literature has persuaded much of the attentive public, including many of my closest friends, that high-productivity farming based on specialization and modern science is a mistake. Popular writers now argue for a return to something like the farming and eating styles of an earlier era. Agricultural production should once again take place on small diversified farms rather than on large specialized farms. Soil nutrients should be replaced “organically” using

composted animal manure without any synthetic nitrogen fertilizers. Food marketing systems should be more local and less international. The preparation and consumption of food should be slow rather than fast. These assertions that the best food will be organic, local, and slow require critical scrutiny by someone other than a journalist or a “food writer.” Most of the academically trained specialists I have worked with—nutritionists, agricultural economists, toxicologists, biologists, soil scientists, and irrigation engineers—have serious reservations about these most recent food fashions. I decided it might be useful for Oxford’s readers to learn why.

The information in this book has come to me from the published work of other academics plus my own lifetime of work among such specialists. For those with the appetite, a sampling of suggestions for further reading is at the end of the book. My credentials for writing this book include my discipline as a political scientist plus the considerable topical and geographic diversity of my research and published work. Over the course of my three-decade career, I have conducted research on food and agriculture in the United States, Europe, India, Bangladesh, China, Brazil, Argentina, and most recently, in more than a dozen countries in Africa. In doing this work, I operate as an independent scholar; I have never accepted corporate funding for any of my research. My work has been supported generously and continuously by my home institution, Wellesley College, and also by the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, where I maintain a research affiliation. I have also received support on more than one occasion from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Council on Foreign Relations, the Brookings Institution, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller

Hunger problems of this kind are increasingly difficult for citizens in wealthy societies to comprehend. We now struggle with eating too much food rather than too little. In this book, the politics of food scarcity and food abundance get equal time.

Communicating useful information on food politics to an aware audience of nonspecialists is a challenging task. How much technical knowledge should be assumed? In addition, specialists often rely on terms of art that nonspecialists find unfamiliar and unhelpful. My own approach to this challenge has been shaped over the years by my work at Wellesley College, where every year I teach a multidisciplinary seminar on food and agricultural policy to an elite group of seniors. These students are smart, curious, hard working, and well traveled. Quite a few are international students. Most are naturally skeptical, including toward me. Week after week, from their seats around the seminar table, they find ways—both gentle and harsh—to let me know when I have failed to provide clarity or when my arguments are not convincing. Nobody writing a book of this kind could have a better test audience. I wish to dedicate this book to my seminar students at Wellesley. Over the years, many have gone on to careers of their own in the field of food and agriculture to my everlasting satisfaction and pride.

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