



Food Riots and Protest: Agrarian Modernizations and Structural Crises

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Summary. — Food riots in the developing world have (re)gained momentum coinciding with converging financial, food, and global energy crises of 2007–08. High staple food prices across the world, and increasingly un-regulated food markets, have highlighted among other things the political dimensions of food-related protests. This has been the case especially in the MENA region but also in Sub Saharan Africa, East Asia, and Latin America where food-related protests have often been catalysts to contest wider processes of dissatisfaction with authoritarian and corrupt regimes.

After many years of silence, food-related struggles have begun to receive more attention in the academic literature. This has mostly been in the context of emerging debates on land grabbing, food security/sovereignty, and social movements. Yet there have been few attempts to provide a systematic enquiry of existing analytical perspectives and debates, or a clear assessment of what some of the political and economic implications may be, for what now seem to be persistent food protests and social struggles.

This article tries to fill this gap by mapping and reviewing the existing and emerging literature on urban and rural food-related protests. It also explores theories and methodologies that have shaped debate by locating these in an alternative world-historical analysis of political economy. The article includes, but also goes beyond, a critical review of the following authors and their important contribution to ongoing debate; Farshad Araghi; Henry Bernstein; Henrietta Friedmann and Philip McMichael; Jason Moore; Vandana Shiva, the World Bank and FAO publications and recent special issues of *Review*, *Journal of Agrarian Change* and *Journal of Peasant Studies*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the debates about food riots, why and how they have emerged and why they continue to be a persistent feature of development and underdevelopment in the Global South.

The article argues that food riots are just one acute form of structural, historical patterns of underdevelopment that are shaped by and in turn shape the political economy of food. The silent violence of hunger (Watts, 1983) is the most enduring feature of social formations in the Global South and there is much that has been written about it. Seldom, however, are food riots and the debates around them framed in the context of deeper patterns of capital accumulation that we argue have contributed to them. There is much debate about the efficacy of globalization, the importance of free trade and comparative advantage of southern food exporters but this mostly takes place in the continued and now rather labored rhetoric of “food security”. The preoccupation of the international financial institutions (IFIs) continues to be with getting prices right, improving opportunities for exports of usually high value, low nutritious foodstuffs, and for the food insecure states to import what they may not grow. Seldom is the international context used to help better understand national and local strategies for agrarian modernization and the consequences of that for levels of genuine food security: the ability of populations to access, whether through purchase or other means, sufficient calories to stave off hunger. The contradiction, seldom explored, is that food producers suffer first from hunger and that while urban workers and the precariat often lead riots, peasants and farmers also protest their absence of food security.

2. FOOD PRICES AND FOOD SECURITY

There has been an upward trend in global food commodity prices since 2000. Figure 1 indicates that the increase has been more acute since 2007. The price increases for wheat especially but also rice led to the period 2007–08 being labeled as the global food crisis (Bello, 2009; Johnston, 2010, p. 69; McMichael, 2009a). Overall world food prices in 2008 were 83% higher compared with 2005. The price of wheat rose by 130% and rice doubled in the first three months of 2008. The FAO food price index increased by more than 40% in 2008, compared with 9% in 2007—“a rate that was already unacceptable” according to the erstwhile head of FAO, Jacques Diouf (cited in Araghi, 2009a, p. 114; see also Bush, 2010; Schneider, 2008). This rapid fluctuation of food prices was dubbed “agflation” (McMichael, 2009a, p. 283). It occurred in tandem with rising prices of oil which for some authors not only signaled that food prices were driven by fuel price hikes but there was also “the integration of energy and food prices” (Patel & McMichael, 2009, p. 19; cf. Bradsher, 2008). For many critical scholars the world food price spike in 2008 indicated the end of cheap food (Moore, 2010a) and cheap ecology (Araghi, 2010).

The *Economist* food price index showed that “food prices were higher than any time since the index was created in

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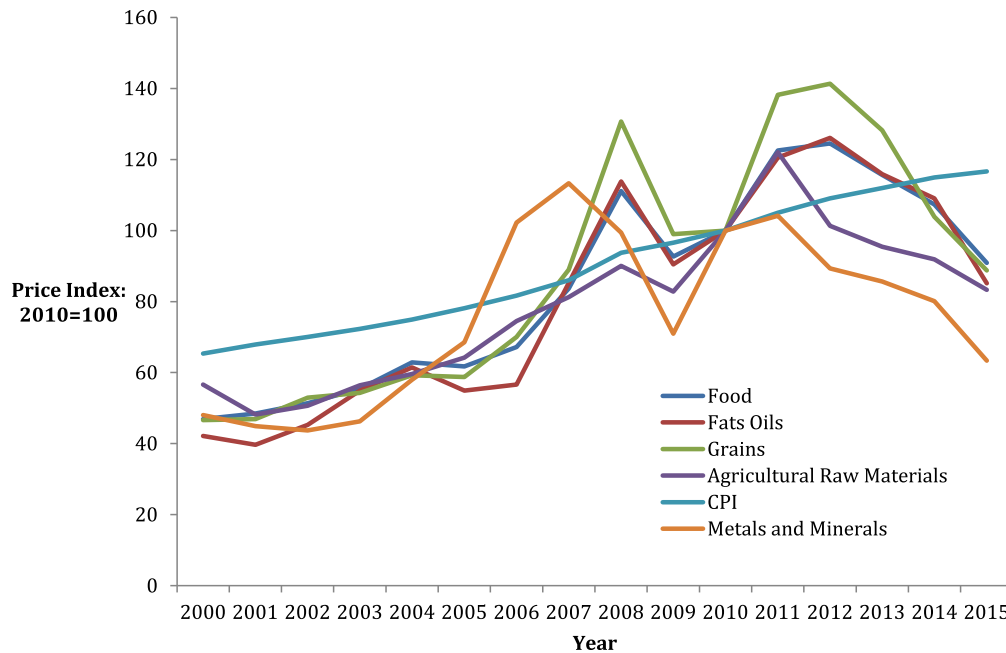


Figure 1. Selected world price indices 2000–15. Source: For Commodity price indices: World Bank, *Global Economic Monitor* [http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=global-economic-monitor-\(gem\)-commodities](http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=global-economic-monitor-(gem)-commodities). For World Consumer Price Index (CPI): World Bank, *World Development Indicators* <http://databank.worldbank.org/>

1845” (Araghi, 2009a, p. 113). Figure 1 indicates both the topsy turvy world of food prices, and how they outstripped agricultural raw material prices, metals, and minerals. In 2011, three years after the price spikes of 2008 the UN spoke of “global food crises” [emphasis added] (UNDESA, 2011, p. 62). Successive issues of the World Bank’s Food Price Watch (created in 2010, World Bank, 2010 but not published since 2014) highlight a new “episode” of the commodity boom. They described another round of food prices since the end of 2010 that remained high and near the 2008 peak and then, after a short decline at the end of 2011, peaked again in 2012 (see World Bank, 2016).

At the end of 2012, the World Bank noted “Even as the world seems to have averted a global food price crisis, a growing sense of a ‘new norm’ of high and volatile prices seems to be consolidating.” (World Bank, 2012).

Prices declined in 2013, spiking again in 2014 raising new anxieties about the possible re-occurrence of widespread food riots (Ahmed, 2014; World Bank, 2014, Year 5, Issue 17, May 2014). The prices of internationally traded grains and “other” foods increased 7% between January and April 2014 but they fell to a five-year low 14 months later in June 2015. The World Bank announced abundant food stocks and as oil prices fell so too did the energy-fueled grain prices. The World Bank has, however, been cautious. One senior economist noted;

The decline in food prices is welcome, because more poor people can potentially afford to buy food for their families. However, unexpected domestic food price fluctuations remain a possibility so it is crucial that countries are prepared to address dangerous food price hikes when and if they unfold.

[World Bank, 2015]

Food prices may have fallen, largely because of the fall in oil prices, and food stocks improved, but famine continues in Sub Saharan Africa. More than ten million people were on food aid in Ethiopia in 2016 and almost 5 million in Somalia,

40% of the population needed humanitarian assistance (IRIN, 2016). Poor country grain importers have difficulty managing domestic economies, not only when there are adverse weather conditions but also when they have to deal with dramatic price fluctuations in maintaining domestic food security. Price uncertainty and insecurity of supply adds to planning difficulties and potential domestic conflict. The World Bank has noted this with concern that political upheaval may accompany crises of access to food and the potential for hunger to be aggravated (Swan, Hardley, & Cichon, 2010). There was certainly a dramatic increase in “food riots” in the Global South during 2007–08. More than 25 countries were impacted (Schneider, 2008) and these riots took place as the poor became increasingly unable to access cash to buy food. Food crises were thus moments that highlighted broader patterns of poverty, power, and politics. They are also moments underpinned by persistent structural crises of people’s access to food at affordable prices that meet people’s changing needs and expectations. Price stabilization *per se* is insufficient to guarantee poor peoples access.

The first price spikes were almost a decade ago in 2008. Recent stabilization of prices may indicate that the situation is under control. But it seems that government social policy may be lagging a decade or so behind the reality for people under stress. Stabilizing prices, while welcome, is neither assured, nor is it going to be enough to provide development opportunities to those who have already been forced to change their way of life, for whom high prices remain a crucial barrier to improvements to life and for whom cultural change has swept away much that they once could rely on. It is time to start thinking not only about stabilizing the price of food, but also making it possible for citizens to have greater control over what and how they eat, alongside rights to care, equitable gender relations and a fair working environment.

[Green, 2016, np]

The dominant trope regarding “food security” fails to meet the concerns that Green has highlighted so clearly. The notion of food security emerged after the first world food summit in

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