Bull and Barbarity, Feeding the World

Simon C. Estok
Shanghai Normal University (东方学者)
and Sungkyunkwan University
estok@skku.edu

Abstract. This paper argues that food security is a very important topic in cosmopolitanism, one that has simply not received the kind of attention that it should receive. The paper reveals how global food monopolies destroy possibilities for national self-sufficiency, raises questions about neo-nationalism in an age of terror, and exposes the insidious and invidious corporate neo-imperialism that attends seed patenting. “Food, eating, and ethics” as a topic is rarely seen as a proper or important part of discussions about “the new cosmopolitanism,” let alone as part of literary discussions. This paper examines the violence and barbarity of transnational corporations such as Monsanto. I show what happens in the global supermarket and how lives and livelihoods are at stake, how the new corporate imperialism swallows up traditions and histories, and how dangerous food has become.

Keywords: food security, GMO foods, ecocriticism, globalization, cosmopolitanism

INTRODUCTION

In their bid to rule the world, the Nazis

killed six million Jews and 20 million Russians; the Japanese slaughtered as many as 30 million Filipinos, Malays, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Indonesians and Burmese, at least 23 million of them ethnic Chinese. (Johnson, 2003: 3-6)

Physical violence has long been a staple in the nutcase cookbook for world domination, and ISIS is but the latest manifestation. The usual tedious rhetoric about barbarians, infidels, heretics, and so on, though it changes slightly over time (we rarely hear the word “Philistine” these days), comes with the sword, but little else has changed among the groups that use those swords to rule the world, whether we are talking about the British and European colonialists or the Islamic fundamentalists, the nazis or the imperial Japanese, the American offensive under George W. Bush or the Bosnian Serbs under Ratko Mladić, the terror of Boko Haram or the Rwandan Genocide by the Hutu. Back in the US, an
innocuous Supreme Court ruling of 1980 would change the shape of world domination. Machetes, tanks, swords, and bullets are nothing compared to the kind of reach that corporations such as Monsanto have.

**PATENTING LIFE**

Whatever else food security may mean in the twenty-first century, one thing is certain: the whole notion of self-sufficiency simply is no longer viable. And when foods are attached to notions about national identity, as they so very often are, obvious problems arise. If *kimchi*, for instance, is the national food of Korea, and if Korea is having to import enormous amounts of cabbage from China to make the *kimchi* (or if Korea is having to import the ready-made *kimchi* itself), then what does this dynamic do to the national identity of Korea? If cosmopolitanism is about integrating difference, then surely it is not about white-washing cultural variation, bulldozing unique traditional geographies, and fostering transnational corporations into positions of terrorist power that surpass anything that 9/11 perpetrators or their ilk have achieved or can achieve? Yet, these are precisely the things that have happened. It all began some time back.

As Donald L. Bartlett and James B. Steele have noted in a *Vanity Fair* article entitled “Monsanto’s Harvest of Fear,” the US Supreme Court began “laying the groundwork for a handful of corporations to begin taking control of the world’s food supply” (Bartlett and Steele, 2008) when it extended the coverage of patent laws. As Barlett and Steele explain,

In its decision, the court extended patent law to cover “a live human-made microorganism.” In this case, the organism wasn’t even a seed. Rather, it was a *Pseudomonas* bacterium developed by a General Electric scientist to clean up oil spills. But the precedent was set, and Monsanto took advantage of it. Since the 1980s, Monsanto has become the world leader in genetic modification of seeds and has won 674 biotechnology patents, more than any other company, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data. (Bartlett and Steele, 2008)

Well, that was in 2008. While it is difficult to find reliable data on the exact number of valid biotechnology patents that the company currently holds (in 2015), there is enormous evidence for an unprecedented global control that Monsanto has achieved through its patenting of life. A
wealth of material on GMO foods has appeared over the years, much of it offering considerably detailed discussions of some of the global implications of corporations such as Monsanto. Marie-Monique Robin’s scathing 2010 book entitled *The World According to Monsanto: Pollution, Corruption, and the Control of the World’s Food Supply* (and the film on which the book is based) provides instance after instance of documentation about the lies and the crimes that Monsanto has committed, from mislabelling their products as biodegradable to dumping PCBs into public waterways in Alabama, from pressuring small farmers into forced admissions of alleged wrong-doings to maneuvering well outside of the law to protect its investments and its control.

In *Stolen Harvest*, Vandana Shiva explains that “corporate control of food and globalization of agriculture are robbing millions of their livelihoods and their right to food” (Shiva, 200: 7). Indeed, as Dr. Geoffrey Hawtin, director general of the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute in Rome is quoted as having said, “at a stroke of a pen the research of countless farmers and scientists has potentially been negated in a single, legal act of economic hijack” (*The New Straits Times*, 1994: 33). Shiva goes on to explain in an interview for *The World According to Monsanto* that

The company [Monsanto] has always said that genetic engineering was a way of getting patents, and that’s its real aim. If you look at the research strategy it is now pursuing in India, you’ll see that it is testing twenty plants into which it has introduced Bt genes: mustard, okra, eggplant, rice, cauliflower, and so on. Once it has established ownership of genetically modified seeds as the norm, it will be able to collect royalties; we will depend on the company for every seed we plant and every field we cultivate. If it controls seeds, it controls food; it knows that, and that’s its strategy. It’s more powerful than bombs or weapons; it is the best way to control the people of the world. (Robin, 2010: 310-11)

**AN OVER-LOOKED AREA**

Food is very obviously a tremendously important area of ecocritical research. Susie O’Brien has recently explained in an interview in *ARIEL* that “Food is a rich site through which to think about a number of things: environment, colonialism, culture, affect, subjectivity, among others” (Szabo-Jones, 2013: 207). It is a fact that the global expansion of McDonald’s, Burger King, KFC, and other meat-based fast food compa-
nies is bad for the environment and for the people of the world in general, that meat is horrendously wasteful, that, as I explained in an article a couple of years ago, it is “difficult to take seriously […] the ecocritic who theorizes brilliantly on a stomach full of roast beef on rye” (Estok, 2009: 217), that “most simply put, someone who regularly eats factory-farmed animal products cannot call himself an environmentalist without divorcing that word from its meaning” (Foer, 2009: 59), and that

in the near future, ecofeminism and feminist ecocriticisms will need to articulate an interspecies focus within ecocriticism, bringing forward the vegetarian and vegan feminist threads that have been a developing part of feminist and ecological feminist theories since the nineteenth century. (Gaard, 2010: 651)

I have explained elsewhere about the importance of theorizing food’s under-theorization in ecocriticism and about how this theorizing needs to look at practice (Estok, 2012a: 681). What I was concerned with in that article was individual practices; in this article, I focus on the rather larger practices of corporate capitalism and on how the pursuit of profit in the American food industry neither produces viable or sustainable food sources nor sufficiently distributed food sources (as it seems to aspire to do) for the world. I’d like here to reiterate from my 2012 comments on the subject as follows:

As I write this, one in seven people on the planet is hungry, according to the 2011 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics (see World Hunger Poverty Facts and Statistics, 2011), even though “all the world’s farms,” Professor of Environmental Studies Steven L. Hopp explains, “currently produce enough food to make every person on the globe fat” (Kingsolver, 2007: 18). “It’s all about money,” drawled the man beside me on my flight to Bloomington [for the 2011 Association for the Study of Literature and Environment meeting]. But it’s not only that; it’s also about class and race and ethics and taste. It’s about gender and species and knowledge and ignorance. It is about consciousness and sexuality and work. It’s all about many things. There are no simple answers. (Estok, 2012a: 681)

The fact of hunger is seriously at odds with the promises of industrial agriculture:

Industrial agriculture has not produced more food. It has destroyed diverse sources of food, and it has stolen food from other species to bring larger quantities of specific commodities to the market, using huge quantities of fossil fuels and water and toxic chemicals in the process. (Shiva, 2000: 12)
The business of American industrial agriculture, Allison Carruth explains in *Global Appetites*, has long asserted power through promises of food abundance to the world from America:

At World’s Fairs that took place from the 1930s through the 1960s, the systemic connections between the nation’s farms and kitchens were evident in exhibits about the future of food, which were also very much about the U.S. appetite for international power. These futuristic displays presented a cornucopian nation whose agricultural surpluses and scientific innovations combined to generate a global utopia of edible goods. (Carruth, 2013: 2)

As Monsanto has shown, “the political and economic power that has accrued to those who control the world food supply has turned out to be an indicator of global power writ large” (Carruth, 2013: 4). Yet, the fact is that we simply do not need genetically modified food to feed the world: “Hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food but by a scarcity of democracy” (Lappé, 2001: 7). According to Jeffrey Smith, Executive Director, Institute for Responsible Technology, in fact, “We have more food per person than any time in human history. We have enough food grown to feed 11.3 billion people” (Null and Polonetsky, 2012).

**UNSUSTAINABLE ETHICS**

What, then, is it that causes the kind of scarcity that makes over a billion people hungry? Smith identifies “access” as one of the key problems. While Smith is talking about the economic structures that make or do not make food accessible, we need also to look at the related question of availability of the food produced. The United States feeds to cattle approximately two-thirds of the calories produced from grain farms. A 1997 report claimed that the US could feed 800 million people with grain that livestock eat (*Cornell Chronicle*, 1997).

In its scramble to be like the US, rapidly industrializing countries such as China scramble toward the mistakes and idiocy inherent in the unbridled American dream. No unbridled dream can result in much good. Rather, the result is “a mosaic of culinary monotony” (Carruth, 2013: 2), wherein food has become something quite foreign, what Michael Pollan calls a “foodlike substance” (Pollan, 2008: 27). Indeed,
terms like *polyunsaturated*, *cholesterol*, *monounsaturated*, *carbohydrate*, *fiber*, *polyphenols*, *amino acids*, *flavonols*, *carotenoids*, *antioxidants*, *probiotics*, and *phytochemicals* soon colonized much of the cultural space previously occupied by the tangible material formerly known as food. (Pollan, 2008: 27)

This is not Pollan just being cute. Marie-Monique Robin through painstaking research has unearthed a principle that the US Food and Drug Administration follows regarding GMOs:

In most cases, the substances expected to become components of food as a result of genetic modification will be the same as or substantially similar to substances commonly found in food such as proteins, fats and oils, and carbohydrates. (Robin, 2010: 146)

This has been called “the Principle of Substantial Equivalence.” The global scramble to be like Americans (a scramble aided by American greed and expansionism and abetted by victim economies and cultures themselves that suffer from a degenerating sense of what A.A. Phillips calls “cultural cringe”) will only result in global tastelessness.

Allison Carruth charts “the centrality of food to accounts of globalization and U.S. hegemony that pervade the literature of...” the period from WWI until the post 9/11 period (Carruth, 2013: 5) and shows that while “U.S. food power is [...] global in scope” (Carruth, 2013: 4), it also inspires tremendous resistance and opposition. Despite such resistance, the flow of people from rural areas into major metropoli continues like a retreating tide, a global phenomenon made possible only by the fact that people have radically changed food production methods.

In an interview with Paraguayan farm activist Jorge Galeano for the filmic version of the book *The World According to Monsanto*,

Robin asks: Do you think that GM crops can co-exist with the crops of small farmers? Galeano responds: No, we are sure they can’t. There are two incompatible models that can’t co-exist. It’s a silent war that eliminates communities and families of small farmers. In addition, it destroys the bio-diversity of the countryside. It brings death, poverty and illness, as well as the destruction of the natural resources that help us live. (Robin, 2008)

And we should have no illusions about the origins of these changes: they are a direct result of an ethical system that puts profit before life. American capitalism is funded by a marked absence of concern about the well-
being of people in general, the health of the environment, or the security of the future. The cancer of corporate capitalism is much more than simply the McDonaldization of the world, the invasion of American fast-food chains and coffee outlets across the planet, the reformatting of local food systems with American chains of junk food: these are the large manifestations of the cancer which has roots deep in the guts of the US – not in the laboratories of Monsanto (which are yet another manifestation, not a cause) – but in the US Supreme Court and, more broadly, in the American ethical system that allows for legislators to imagine that it is okay to allow patents on life. It is a monstrous ethical system (scientific and legal) that thinks it is okay to take the DNA from one organism and force it into another. The ethical problem here is that the risks posed both to the environment and to people simply isn’t known. The unknowns – both short-and long-term here - are reminiscent of another American gamble: the Trinity atomic test.

On July 16, 1945, the US detonated the world’s first atomic bomb. No one was quite sure how things would work out, either in the short- or the long-term. In the moments leading up to the detonation, Italian physicist Enrico Fermi,

To break the tension, [...] began offering anyone listening a wager on “whether or not the bomb would ignite the atmosphere, and if so, whether it would merely destroy New Mexico or destroy the world.” Oppenheimer himself had bet ten dollars against George Kistiakowsky’s entire month’s pay that the bomb would not work at all. (U.S. Department of Energy - Office of History and Heritage Resources, 2005)

Well, the world didn’t burn up, but one wonders whether these men had envisioned the Cold War and the proximity to total annihilation to which that Cold War would take the world. The Berlin Wall came down, and the USSR collapsed, but the game is not over, and one wonders how long it will take for ISIS or some such group to get their hands on a nuclear device. One also wonders if those men that day in the desert had imagined such a future. The Bomb may have stopped the atrocities of the Japanese Imperial Army, but the ethical problem here is that the more long-term risks posed both to the environment and to people simply wasn’t and isn’t known. Nuclear bombs and recombinant DNA are not ethical. While both exhibit a nonchalance that might properly be called ecophobic, the extension of American patent law to cover “a live human-made microorganism” has profound linguistic determinants that
require analysis. The centrality of language indeed both to the American laws allowing patenting of life and to colonialism needs attention.

**LANGUAGE, FOOD, CONTROL**

The relationship between colonization and language has a long recognized history: Antonio de Nebrija explained to Queen Isabella I of Castile that “Language has always been the perfect instrument of empire” (de Nebrija, 2007).

As language has always been central to colonialism, pursuit of food too has been central. The very act and fact of migration itself is prompted by a quest for food, a point Kwame Anthony Appiah makes ever so subtly in his extraordinary work on cosmopolitanism: in the long and complicated history of the people who have migrated, he explains, “most were looking for food” (Appiah, 2006: xviii). What, then, happens when we look at these matters in conjunction?

David B. Goldstein, in a fascinating study about eating and ethics in early modern England, maintains that “that notions about and literal practices of eating confirm the boundaries of community, [and] that these notions and practices help constitute community” (Goldstein, 2013: 5). Building on the work of nineteenth century Scottish theologian W. Robertson Smith, Goldstein painstakingly shows that the “language and practices of eating help define, exclude, and do violence to [marginalized] groups – to devour them, spit them out, or toss them aside” (Goldstein, 2013: 6).

The most obvious example of the exclusionary function of the language of eating is around the figure of the cannibal. Invariably a part of European imperialism and its discursive mappings of space and place, the discourse of cannibalism extends its attendant metaphors of civility and barbarity to the land. As I have explained elsewhere (Estok, 2012b),

With the land itself a site of danger, hostile geographies of difference, along with their cannibals, become ethically inconsiderable, open to whatever regimes are necessary for control - and an important part of this control was linguistic. The semiotics of cannibalism reiterate a set of spatial and environmental assumptions that often constitute the very core of early modern travel writing. Stephen Slemon’s “Bones of Contention” comes close to discussing how “the discourse of cannibalism” (Slemon, 1992: 165) is significant to the writing of a hostile environment. Slemon argues that the discourse of cannibalism “necessarily designates an absolute
negation of civilized self-fashioning in a place that is no place, and is always out there” (Slemon, 1992: 165). It is a fashioning that offers a demonized geography that is to be both feared and despised. (Estok, 2012b)

If colonialism mapped, drafted, and designed the blueprints of world domination, globalization realized the structures, cemented the material practices, and expanded beyond imagination the material and conceptual meanings of conquest: “Colonialism initiated (and globalization continues to drive) circuits of physical and virtual mobility that impact on the construction of place” (O’Brien, 2011: 242-3).

In an interview for the documentary Seeds of Death (2012), Shiv Chopra summarizes from his book entitled Corrupt to the Core about a published speech by a Monsanto executive saying how they are going to control the whole world, not just by genetic modification but they’re going to take charge of the whole world by influencing the White House, the White Hall, the French Parliament, the Canadian Parliament, the Japanese Parliament: this is published information. (Null and Polonetsky, 2012)

Whether or not there is empirical evidence for such a claim is not something I can answer here, but there certainly is ample evidence that whatever its intent, Monsanto has achieved a kind of global domination.

Marie-Monique Robin reveals in an interview with a Mexican farmer the destruction of local traditions in the West in ways similar to Vandana Shiva’s so piercing observations about Monsanto’s erasure of the local within India:

Mexican farmer: This corn was my ancestors’ favorite. Robin: It existed before the Spanish conquest? Mexican farmer: Yes, and now there is another conquest. Robin: What’s the new conquest? Mexican farmer: The transgenic conquest, which wants to destroy our traditional corn so industrial corn can dominate. If that happens, we will become dependent on multinational corporations for our seeds. And we will be forced to buy their fertilizers and their insecticides, because otherwise their corn won’t grow. Unlike ours, which grows very well without chemical products. (Robin, 2010: 245)

CONCLUSIONS

Depriving communities of their food sovereignty in the interests of corporate profit is an affront to the good of humanity as a whole, an ethical choice of self-interest over everything else:
The notion of rights has been turned on its head under globalization and free trade. The right to produce for oneself or consume according to cultural proprieties and safety concerns has been rendered illegal according to the new trade rules. The rights of corporations to force-feed citizens of the world with culturally inappropriate and hazardous foods has been made absolute. The right to food, the right to safety, the right to culture are all being treated as trade barriers that need to be dismantled. (Shiva, 2000: 18)

“Food, eating, and ethics” as a topic is an important part of discussions about “the new cosmopolitanism,” about an insidious and invidious corporate neo-imperialism of companies such as Monsanto, and about what happens to the autonomy of nations in the global supermarket. The literature of food is central to ongoing allegories of imperialism. Globalized food is central to unprecedented barbarity, easily surpassing any genocides of the past. Novelists and other writers have produced enormous amounts of literature over the past two decades about food, food security, locavore logistics, food production, food and class, food and race, and so on, but still, as Carruth notes, “the disciplines of literary history and cultural theory have not, in the main, taken up food studies” (Carruth, 2013: 165). It is time for change.

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