

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, JUNK: A HISTORY OF FOOD, FROM SUSTAINABLE TO SUICIDAL**

(Author: Mark Bittman. Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Boston.  
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“Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war...Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature.”

“...Bittman's history of the world as told through the seeds we've sown reminds us that our food system has been hijacked by a handful of multinational corporations (with the support of public policies), and that this new industrialized system has led to food apartheid, climate chaos, and an exponential rise in preventable diet-related illness...”

“In *Animal, Vegetable, Junk*, Mark Bittman takes us on a journey to show how the mechanistic, reductionist, industrial paradigm got to this nightmarish place in agriculture and food. Food has become the biggest threat to the health of the planet—and our health. But we can, and must, change the food system. Mark also offers a wonderful guide to beginning to find our way toward a food system that works for the earth and its people.”

These are apt comments from Naomi Klein, Bryant Terry and Vandana Shiva respectively, and they succinctly put forward the desperate importance of Mark Bittman's book which I have just finished reading. It is a text on the 1.8-million-year history of the food system and how we have been eating on planet earth. And I have found it to be the best interdisciplinary answer to the fundamental questions: What do we grow food for? Can we continue to eat or live without a sensible food system?

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Those who are sympathetically drawn to the farmer protests at the Delhi borders, and their “No Farmer, No Food” campaigning, they ought not to be misled so as not to examine these right questions. After all, we need a holistic understanding based policy solutions, not sectarian understandings and policies.

I can frame the discussion in the book as follows.

There are “Four Laws of Capitalism”, and there are “Four Laws of Ecology” or Nature. The former surely lead us to Hell, and the latter to Heaven, on earth.

The four laws of capitalism demonstrate how opposed the status quo is to sound ecology. The only lasting connection between things is the cash nexus. Every relationship is about money, including the relationship between humans and nature. It does not matter where something goes, as long as it does not re-enter the circuit of capital. Producers will always ignore the damages caused by production. For example, industrial farmers ignore the externalities of their operations and products, like pollution, crime and diabetes. Waste can be ignored. The self-regulating market knows best. Which means that it is an argument that it does not matter what you sell—junk food, pesticides, assault rifles—as long as it is profitable. Finally, nature's bounty is a free gift to the property owners. “Nowhere in establishment economic models does one find an adequate accounting of nature's contribution.”

By contrast, the four laws of nature make us realize that the cold-blooded reductionist thought—that a farm or a local environment or a food system or a planet can best be understood as simply the sum of its parts—does not capture the mystery of the natural world. Which is to say that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, that elements synergize to create something greater. Life itself was the emergence of a number of interactions among systems—which we do not yet completely know—each of which is explainable on its own but, taken together, becomes for more mysterious. Everything is connected to everything else. All social justice causes are interrelated and they are all related to nature. Everything must go somewhere. Which means that waste, from human to nuclear, cannot be made to disappear and will therefore always have an impact on the environment. Nature knows best. Working with nature is the smartest way to live on this planet. Finally,

there is no such thing as a free lunch. Which means that every gain has a cost. Nothing comes from nothing. Period.

The industrial agriculture that has spawned junk is married to high-yield monoculture, which in every way runs counter to the way nature establishes things. It is the agriculture manifested by the laws of capitalism incessantly at work. It has, along with its related industries, concentrated on maximising the yield of the most profitable crops. It has thereby done more damage to the earth than strip mining, urbanisation, and even fossil fuel extraction. Yet it remains not only underregulated but unabashedly subsidized by the governments of most countries.

“Junk was born in America, but it's spread worldwide, and everywhere the American diet goes, disease follows. People who switch from traditional diets and the traditional agriculture that supports them, to food invented in the 20<sup>th</sup> century develop more chronic diseases...By definition, food provides nourishment, and nourishment promotes health. And yet, in our perverse reality, so much of what we eat is promoting health's opposite. Ultra-processed foods, more akin to poison than actual (real, good) food, are making us sick as surely as if we were vitamin deficient.”

In contrast, agroecology, based on respecting the laws of nature, is the most sensible approach for agriculture and thereby our food requirements. It will first cut back on the toxic techniques innate to industrial agriculture, starting with chemical fertilisers and pesticides. It will then move on to replace them with alternative practices such as the use of compost, cover crops, crop rotation and multi-cropping, the encouragement of beneficial animal and plant interactions, and the complete elimination of chemicals. It will lead to shortening of the food supply chains, reducing the distance between growers and eaters, and establishing new ways of getting food to people. Eventually, it will make the global food system sustainable and equitable for all through widespread societal change in all areas, including the economy.

To conclude, “Eating is an agricultural act”. Which is to say that food does not come from nowhere; it comes from land and people. In turn, agriculture is a political act. We cannot eat and die by killing land and people. The policies and investments we

decide on as a society determine what agriculture we practice. This is the argumentative thrust of this pathbreaking book by Mark Bittman who is otherwise world famous for his numerous cookbooks along with his advocacy of Minimalism for social and environmental sustainability.

“Lasting change to our food system requires a two-pronged approach. Personal-level change is important wherever possible, for our own health and sanity, to support others doing good work, and even as an example. That may mean joining community supported agriculture that supports small-scale, agroecological farming, or changing our eating habits, or joining or forming a community garden, or supporting initiatives that improve the wages, working conditions, and rights of food and farm workers. These can be done by many of us today and, given the privilege that allows some of us to do them, might be viewed as obligations. At the same time, we need change on the macro level, change that starts by recognizing that access to healthy food is a basic and universal human right, and the planet's well-being takes precedence over corporate profits. Thinking hard about these things, embracing radical ideas we'd never considered, begins to change culture. One change will lead to another.”

This is not all. Stand for Green New Deal which ensures carbon neutrality, renewable energy generation, and sustainable agriculture, and in the process also provides guaranteed employment for those who can work and guaranteed income for everyone, an end to homelessness, universal health care, access to land for new farmers from the disadvantaged sections of society, the rewilding and rehabilitating of natural areas, and much more.

I shall be happy for you if you will study this masterpiece along with the article I have mentioned below. The book, to be sourced from amazon.in as a hardback for the time being, is expensive, though. A cheaper paperback is required for its diffusion everywhere in the world. It is a compulsory reading for everyone.

## **REFERENCE**

Susan Pedersen. 2019. The Ethics of Eating: How Our Food Culture is Killing Us. [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com) October 1.