

Monsanto, Bayer and Neoliberalism: Towards the Corporate Model of Industrial Agriculture

A Case of Hobson's Choice

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A Bayer marketing professional recently stated on Twitter that critics of GMOs deny choice to farmers. It's a common accusation by the pro-GMO lobby. In a [previous article](#), I noted the idea that GMOs offer increased choice is erroneous and that, by implication, corporations like Bayer or Monsanto restrict options. Much evidence suggests that GMOs provide a false choice.

However, to get drawn into endless debates about the whys and wherefores of GMOs tends to overlook the fact that GMOs belong to a particular model of agriculture which is increasingly being challenged. To quote Charles Eisenstein from a [recent piece](#), what we should be talking about is the “choice between two very different systems of food production, two visions of society, and two fundamentally different ways to relate to plants, animals, and soil” (the table [featured here](#) provides concise insight into these visions).

The fact that someone chooses to market for a giant transnational company says much about a person's allegiance to and belief in corporate power, let alone the prevailing economic system that company benefits from and the model of agriculture it promotes. Corporate-inspired visions of the world tend to define choice – and indeed how the world should be – within strict parameters.

Choice, development and the future of agriculture in India

If current trends in India continue, it could mean dozens of mega-cities with [up to 40 million inhabitants](#) and just 15-20% of the population (as opposed to around the current 60% or more) left in an [emptied-out countryside](#). It could also mean [hundreds of millions](#) of former rural dwellers without any work.

Thanks to the [model of agriculture](#) being supported and advocated under the banner of ‘growth’, [the trajectory](#) the country seems to be on may entail a future comprising vast swathes of chemically-drenched monocrop fields containing genetically modified plants and [soils turning](#) into a chemical cocktail of proprietary biocides, dirt and dust.

[Monsanto, Bayer, Cargill and other large corporations](#) will decide on what is to be eaten and how it is to be produced and processed. From seed to field to plate, the corporate take-over of the food and agriculture chain will be complete.

Eisenstein notes the consequences of the model of agriculture being rolled out by these corporations:

“... an endless succession of new chemicals and GMOs to compensate for the consequences of mechanized chemical agriculture, which include depletion of the soil, herbicide-resistant weeds, and pesticide-resistant insects.”

In other words, as farmers become trapped on a high-tech, agrochemical-drenched treadmill, the ‘choice’ will be restricted options from an endless stream of proprietary inputs, which are churned out under the banner of ‘innovation’ in an attempt to address the issues and failures resulting from the previous roll-out of ‘cutting edge’ company technology.

In India, the existing productive system based on livelihood-sustaining smallholder agriculture and small-scale food processing will be all but a memory, while those remaining in the sector will be squeezed, working on contracts for market-dominating global seed and agrochemical suppliers, distributors and retail concerns.

Independent agricultural producers and village level processors will have long been forced out of the system and industrial agriculture will be the norm, with all the social, environmental and health [devastation and externalised costs](#) that the models entails.

The model of agriculture currently being promoted serves to further embed India into a US-dominated global political system which has played a [significant role in](#) creating food-rich and food-deficit regions. Throughout much of the world, a globalised system of ‘capitalism’, facilitated by the WTO, IMF and World Bank, has led to [structural inequality and poverty](#); the [privatisation of](#) seed, knowledge, land and water; [unfair international trade policies](#) which have devastated indigenous agriculture; the [marginalisation of smallholders](#), the [backbone](#) of global food production; [commodity speculation](#), resulting in food shortages; and [debt and export-oriented](#) agriculture, which has undermined rural economies.

Challenging the neoliberal agenda

It hasn’t helped that, since the 1990s, India has increasingly [tied itself to a system of neoliberal globalisation](#), an [unsustainable](#), [crisis-ridden](#) system that fuels national debt and relies on [hand-outs](#) ([demonetisation](#)) for banks and corporations. A system based on a credit/debt-based consumer economy, financial speculation, derivatives and bubbles, with nations no longer able to carry out their own policies, tied down by undemocratic trade deals, beholden to rigged World Trade Organization rules and following a path prescribed by the World Bank, regardless of any democratic will of the people. A system whereby governments are paralysed to act as both eyes are firmly fixed on ‘market confidence’ and fearful of capital flight.

It raises the question about what could be done to prevent a future full-fledged neoliberal dystopia taking hold in India.

The authors of [this piece](#) argue that long-term measures could include land reforms and correcting [rigged trade](#) that is against the cultivating class:

“Far-sighted and sustained policy initiatives to provide farmers dignified livelihoods are required. In an economy driven by jobless growth, compulsive migration to cities is often a case of distress transhumance. These migrants then become the new “serfs” of the informal services and construction sector, while the existing rural and agrarian problems remain unresolved.”

Such policy initiatives may well be based on [agroecological solutions](#) that could be developed and scaled up to move beyond the dynamics of the farm itself and become part of a wider agenda, which addresses the broader political and economic issues that impact farmers and agriculture.

Various official reports have argued that to feed the hungry and secure food security in low income regions we need to support small farms and diverse, sustainable agroecological methods of farming and strengthen local food economies (see [this](#) report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food and [this](#) (IAASTD) report).

[Olivier De Schutter](#), former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food:

“Today’s scientific evidence demonstrates that agroecological methods outperform the use of chemical fertilizers in boosting food production where the hungry live, especially in unfavorable environments.”

The success stories of agroecology indicate what can be achieved when development is placed firmly in the hands of farmers themselves. A decentralised system of domestic food production with access to local rural markets supported by proper roads, storage and other infrastructure must take priority ahead of exploitative international markets and supply chains dominated and designed to serve the needs of global agribusiness.

If policy makers were to prioritise and promote agroecology to the extent ‘Green Revolution’ practices and technology have been pushed, many of the problems surrounding poverty, unemployment, rising population and urban migration could be solved. With that in mind, readers may wish to read some important things that farmer/campaigner [Bhaskar Save](#) had to say on the matter.

As long as agroecology and a commitment to localisation and local/regional self-sufficiency continue to be marginalised, however, we need look no further than [Mexico](#) to see what may be in store for India. Aside from destroying the nation’s [health and home-grown food supply chain](#), ‘free’ trade under NAFTA allowed subsidised US [corn to be dumped](#) in the country, fuelled unemployment and transformed a former productive peasantry into a [problematic group](#).

Instead of proscribing a [neoliberal death warrant](#) for many of those currently involved in agriculture, India [must try to delink from capitalist globalisation](#), manage foreign trade to suit its own interests and expand domestic production, which can be achieved by protecting and encouraging indigenous small producers, not least smallholder farmers.

By encouraging localisation, self-sufficiency and support for these types of producers, meaningful work can be generated for the majority. The exact opposite of the globalisation agenda ([tens of millions of livelihoods](#) are in danger as foreign corporations move in).

The real choice

Charles Eisenstein argues that if we believe society’s main institutions are basically sound, it is irrational to oppose the (GMO-)high-tech, chemical-intensive model of agriculture. By implication, it is also irrational to question the notions of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ currently being fuelled by the neoliberal globalisation agenda. And if we take for granted the narrative that justifies the continued depopulation of the countryside in places like India,

there is little alternative to the current unsustainable, livelihood-destroying system.

Thereafter, once you have indicated an allegiance to corporate power and neoliberal capitalism (and [all it entails](#)), everything falls into place. Any choices offered will occur within the narrow parameters set by the global food and agribusiness conglomerates. While spouting rhetoric about providing a choice of approaches, any genuine alternatives will be (and are being) marginalised.

However, once you acknowledge that society's institutions are anything but sound, that scientific institutions and government bodies have been steadily corrupted by corporate money, funding and influence and that the neoliberal agenda has been little more than a recipe for corporate plunder – then you are in the position to appreciate that the real choice is between a dystopian future of deregulated capital and unaccountable corporate conglomerates and a wholly different way of viewing the world and the role of agriculture in shaping it for the better.

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