

# THE NEW POSSIBLE

Visions of Our World beyond Crisis

Edited by

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*Foreword by Kim Stanley Robinson*



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THE NEW POSSIBLE  
Visions of Our World beyond Crisis

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# FOOD



*Everybody Loves the Farmers Market*  
by Lindsay Jane Ternes

# 18

## COVID-19, the Industrial Food System, and Inclusive Justice

EILEEN CRIST

“Suffering which has not yet come should be avoided.”

—Sri Patanjali

THIS VOLUME EXPLORING THE implications of COVID-19 is being put together amidst the still swelling pandemic and its historic ramifications for human and nonhuman worlds. As I write these words, worldwide COVID-19 cases have topped sixteen million and the global death toll has surpassed 650,000 people. In the United States, an epicenter of the crisis, more than 150,000 people have died. After partial re-openings of businesses and civic spaces in May of this year, infection transmission in the US is resurging, dashing hopes of a slowdown from warming weather.

Data continue to pour in, but it is clear that people are not getting sick and dying equally. The elderly are most vulnerable, but that is only the most obvious facet of the COVID-19 profile. According to the CDC and other sources, a disproportionate burden of illness, hospitalization, and death is falling on poor people and people of color. The CDC highlights certain factors to account for the populations most susceptible: crowded living

conditions, work circumstances, and obstacles to healthcare access. Buried among the CDC's listed factors of higher prevalence of infection among the underprivileged—and mentioned passingly—is the most significant: “serious underlying medical conditions.” For example, the website informs that by comparison to whites “black Americans experience higher death rates and higher prevalence rates of chronic conditions.” Dryly stated, as one might expect of a government agency.

More pointedly, racial and class discrepancies in morbidity and mortality rates are largely attributable to what the food movement calls *food injustice*. The disparity of the quality of food available to socioeconomically stratified Americans is cavernous. In truth, most Americans across race, class, gender, and other divisions are forced—to one degree or another—to contend with SAD: the Standard American Diet, largely composed of cheap animal products, sugary sodas and candies, low-quality vegetable oils, refined grains, and all manner of processed and prepared foods. “Conventional,” as the label goes, refers to foods laden with pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, artificial additives, and more. Conventional foods are notoriously cheap, and thus especially marketed and attractive to poor Americans.

The environmental justice movement surged in the 1990s when sociologists and activists brought to public awareness the practice of polluting industries locating their operations in the vicinity of African American and poor neighborhoods. The food movement has taken umbrage with an equally pernicious pattern: Underprivileged inner city and rural areas are where America's food deserts cluster—human habitats where fresh and nutritious food is unavailable without a long, usually motorized trek. On the other hand, sodas, beef jerky, industrial-corn sweetened candy, Budweiser, and Doritos are a dime-a-dozen, so that food deserts are also *food traps*. Moreover, fast food franchises target poor neighborhoods to site their businesses. Unhealthy and over time disease-causing foods are consumed across American society and the Western-influenced world. However, the brunt of bad food consumption falls on the underprivileged, which in the US includes racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, poor people, the institutionalized, and children.



In the midst of the current pandemic, the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer sparked a civil-rights uprising across the US and beyond. The Black Lives Matter movement has shaken America to its core. Its large popular base is reflected in the numbers of people of all races

participating in demonstrations. What has also been politically pivotal is the widespread social and media solidarity with this civil-rights rebellion and its confrontation with a racist US administration. It has become more evident than it's been in decades that the racial divide—rooted in a history of slavery and still stitched into structural inequities in American society—must be dismantled and healed. Urgent changes are needed not only in the US legal system, prisons, and police departments, but more broadly in ensuring equal opportunities for employment, healthcare, good living conditions, and education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed another disturbing systemic pattern that resonates with Black Lives Matter. Who is more likely to sicken from the virus? Who is more likely to die? The answer is the disempowered people of America, in large part because of the low-quality food forced on them economically, geographically, and culturally (for example, through targeted advertising). Today we know that the main driver of the chronic “diseases of affluence” is low-quality food that has become conventional in the US and in Western-influenced societies. While socially pervasive, these chronic diseases chiefly afflict the poor and otherwise disadvantaged. Those suffering from diseases of affluence—“serious underlying medical conditions,” in the words of the CDC—are the populations most vulnerable to COVID-19 (or to any infectious disease for that matter).

Diabetes, hypertension, stroke, heart disease, obesity, asthma, certain cancers, autoimmune syndromes, and emergent bowel disorders—these constitute the *chronic* pandemics of our time. People are suffering and dying prematurely of diseases that are overwhelmingly preventable by means of a wholesome diet and healthy lifestyles. But the people who are afflicted by chronic diseases are not all suffering and dying simultaneously as with the current pandemic. The chronic diseases of affluence of our time are purveyors of what analyst Rob Nixon calls “slow violence.” These diseases do not make headlines: they lack the sensational and spectacle-rife qualities of infectious epidemics; and they mostly afflict the downtrodden and demeaned, whose lives are tacitly deemed not to matter.

Morbidity and mortality from chronic diseases, disproportionately plaguing the disadvantaged, are pervasive but backgrounded, pandemic but muted, socially caused but treated as individually fated. They are the outcomes of structural factors, but those factors are obscured, or worse, concealed, by blaming genes or blaming the victims. The diseases of affluence cannot be redressed with vaccination; they demand revolutionary change in how we eat and how we live. These preventable diseases are globally escalating pandemics causing immense suffering and demanding colossal expenditures of funds and resources. They go mostly unremarked for the

flagrant injustice they epitomize against the bodies of the poor, the underprivileged, and the uneducated, as well as against the bodies of children and institutionalized seniors or inmates who have no say on what's fed them. Indeed, toxin-loaded, disease-causing food is an assault *against nature* in the form of the human body across age, class, racial, gender, or any other lines. Bad food is also an assault against human potential, by cutting lives short; diminishing the overall quality of life; dimming physical vitality, mental acuity, and emotional clarity; and claiming resources that could be invested in sorely needed services such as universal family planning and education.



Enter COVID-19, the revelator: it is overwhelmingly sickening and slaying those people whose body functions and immune systems have been afflicted by an iniquitous food system. Yet the plot thickens, for the food system also abuses the natural world and domestic animals; it is anti-ecological and anti-life. Thus, hierarchical stratification on Planet Earth is *one*. In this hierarchy—which here I bring into focus with respect to the food system—non-humans are decimated and driven to extinction, ecosystems and biomes are razed, animals are unspeakably maltreated, disempowered humans perform the tedious and unhealthy labor, and the poor carry the biggest load of food-related illness and premature death. Ultimately, though, everyone suffers and will suffer by a food system that pays no heed—let alone honor—to the most precious gift we all share: planetary health, animal health, and human health to the extent that it lies within our power to cultivate it.

While there exists a diversity of food-producing systems around the world, my focus is on the spreading modes of industrial food production—the ones that make the cheap food driving chronic diseases, nature destruction, and animal hurt. Industrial food producers peddle products that run roughshod over the human body, as well as over our relations with the more-than-human world. These production systems are callous toward nonhumans (both targeted and bystanders) and are massively implicated in the deepening erosions of life. They are food systems propelling mass extinction, climate breakdown, and global toxification—intensifying catastrophes that harbor penalties that will make the challenges of COVID-19 look like a cakewalk.

Industrial agriculture operates through extinguishing ecosystems, and even entire biomes, such as grasslands that are all but globally gone. Vast monocultures are imposed on the land to mine the soil—the very soil created by the organisms who are extirpated and displaced to access it. Industrial

agriculture pollutes land, freshwater, estuaries, and atmosphere with pesticides and artificial fertilizers, which are deployed as fixes for the problems that the agro-industrial model itself generates. The resulting pollution has produced hundreds of marine dead zones around the planet, while today even insect populations are collapsing, triggering the downfall of species that depend on them. Synthetic fertilizers contribute greenhouse emissions, and just manufacturing them yearly produces as many greenhouse gases as all US homes. Industrial agriculture claims eighty percent of the freshwater humanity appropriates, critically endangering freshwater biodiversity. Globally, freshwater populations of creatures have plummeted, with an unknown number of extinctions having occurred and more imminent. Where tropical forests are giving way to beef, soy, palm oil, or sugar operations, industrial agriculture is directly extinguishing lifeforms in exchange for mass-produced, internationally traded raw materials funneled into the industrial food system. Much of what comes from industrial agriculture is turned into animal feed for confined operations (more on that below), bio-fuel production, artificial sweeteners (implicated in rising rates of diabetes and obesity), and added ingredients in processed and packaged foods for the global middle class.

The impact of industrial fishing, in the service of mass-produced cheap fish, is one of the most ignored atrocities of our time. That impact is a consequence of a food-production system unaccountable to relations with the denizens and ecologies of the global ocean. Think scale: ninety-five percent of the ocean is open for fishing, much of it with mega-technological gear and on-board fish processing machinery. Cheap fish—available anywhere, anytime, and in any amount in the developed and increasingly the developing world—has exacted an appalling price. Eighty to ninety percent of the big fish are gone; former prodigious abundances of forage fish are no more; all species of sea turtles are decimated and endangered; seventy percent of seabirds have disappeared; many marine mammals are declining or barely hanging on; trawlers have demolished coastal seas, continental shelves, and seamount habitats. With fish and other marine life among the world's most subsidized and traded "commodities," the norm of cheap fish is spreading. What's more, chemical and plastic pollutants—many of them directly connected to industrial food, such as pesticides, fertilizers, fishing gear, and supermarket bags—are entering the marine food web, and that pollution is also seeping into human bodies.

Not just cheap fish, but cheap animal products in general are the norm. None are more egregiously extracted than those coming from Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). CAFOs epitomize the severing of relationship. Domestic animal breeding programs have been accelerating,



since the 1950s, to engineer bodies that grow faster, make more products, and churn out bigger litters. Lifespans have been minimized. Life processes, like egg laying and milk production, have been maximized. Whatever interferes with production—tails, beaks, scrotums, male chicks, or spent dairy cows—is liquidated. Mother-offspring relations are undone. Natural rhythms of sexual reproduction have given way to the depravity of clock-work artificial insemination. The feed that streams into CAFOs (after being laced with antibiotics and other additives) is grown on industrial landscapes saturated with herbicides and fertilizers, in the stead of grasslands and tropical forests, and including a sizeable portion of the global fish catch. The flesh of tortured animals, contaminated with unnatural substances, is turned into human food (though not for the well-to-do, who are parlayed organic, artisanal, and boutique fare). By their very makeup—overcrowded, genetically uniform animals force-fed copious antibiotics—CAFOs are incubators of perilous infectious diseases. Like COVID-19, such diseases are far more likely to assail the underprivileged, who are forced to eat the chronic-disease causing refuse streaming out of the places that are also brewing infectious pathogens.



Injustice pervades the entire world, human and nonhuman. From privilege to abjection, stratification constitutes a single pyramid. Its foundation is nature colonialism. Earth's biologically rich world, brimming with intelligence and splendor, possessing an extraordinary intrinsic and dynamic order, creative beyond comparison, and replete with sentient, aware beings—this world is transmogrified into “natural resources.” Morphing life into resources enables the dominant socioeconomic order to spurn relationships with ecologies and nonhuman beings. What's made cheap and made without ethics in agro-industrial landscapes, in much commercial fishing, and in CAFOs is made by an exploited workforce composed of minorities, immigrants, minors, and other disempowered people (for example, prison inmates). The labor in those industrial sites is monotonous, underpaid, nonunionized, dangerous, unhealthy, and often traumatic or abusive. In brief, cheap food is made by colonizing the natural world, on the backs of the global proletariat, with cruelty toward animals, and at the expense of human wellness and longevity.

To create an ecological civilization it is of utmost significance for us to recognize and dismantle hierarchical stratification as a singularity. Deep transformation will respect the entangled wellbeing of people, animals, and

planet. All human beings have the right to food that is wholesome, nutritious, and fresh; food made by preserving rich soils; food made with organic, ethical methods and in reverence for wild and cultivated biodiversity. The abomination of CAFOs must end. Food from the ocean can be consumed as an occasional treat (by those who still choose to eat it), acquired through the lighter touch of artisanal fishing. It is best to enjoy food grown locally or regionally, so that it is fresh and generates fewer or no climate-wrecking emissions. Importantly, the impact of food cultivated nearby is ecologically and socially far more transparent, for it is easier to invisibilize the destructiveness and inequities of foods imported from distant places.

In an ecological civilization, food cultures will vary from place to place, according to ecological affordances and cultural predilections. Yet a universal imperative in the service of planetary and human health is that the greatest proportion of nourishment come from a broad diversity of plants. By supporting the substantial lowering of domestic animal numbers, a mostly plant-based diet will free vast habitats for wild beings, biomes, and processes to resurge.



When passion for inclusive justice—for planet, people, and animals—ignites the human imagination and becomes translated into action by communities, the slow violence of globalizing, chronic-disease pandemics will diminish precipitously. This will not only liberate people from unnecessary suffering and premature death. The parallel embrace of wholesome and mostly plant-based food will also spark a newfound recognition that health is a state of physical and mental wellness and stamina *far more profound* than just the absence of disease. Healthy food will also free up the skyrocketing amount of resources currently claimed by healthcare budgets. Once humanity has rid itself of preventable diseases, people will also be emancipated from the parasitism of big pharma, which—in classic disaster-capitalism style—makes a killing from the disease burden caused by the dominant food system.

With a robust immunity of equitably nourished people, when infectious diseases happen to move through the human population, they are far more likely to be sloughed off than cause illness and death. With the shuttering of CAFOs, one ticking bomb of infectious diseases will be disarmed. With the broad realization that the health of all—human and nonhuman—is intimately aligned, the violation of wild areas for industrial agriculture, poaching, mining and logging operations, and other profit-driven

incursions will end. This will prevent infectious diseases, like COVID-19, that emerge through violence perpetrated against wild animals and their homes.

The conservation and restoration of forests, wetlands, grasslands, savannahs, rivers, lakes, and seas will create beautiful, connected expanses for the flourishing of all life, human life included.

One planet, one health. Humanity as one planetary citizen among millions, all equally deserving to be here and to thrive. We can choose to re-create ourselves as a modest, economically and demographically downscaled component of a biodiverse and rewilded Earth. An ecological civilization will accomplish far more than I've addressed in this essay. In the realm of food, an ecological civilization will respect justice and cultivate wellbeing for all. Does this sound idealistic? Perhaps. Yet it aligns with what author Ursula Le Guin evocatively called "the realism of a larger reality." That reality beckons, and now is the time.