

Magazine *The New Scientist* (UK), 2 July 2008

Review: *The End of Food* by Paul Roberts and *Eat Your Heart Out* by Felicity Lawrence

- 02 July 2008 by [Anna Lappé](#)
- Magazine issue [2663](#). [Subscribe](#) and get 4 free issues.
- For similar stories, visit the [Books and Art](#) Topic Guide

- **Book information**
- *Eat Your Heart Out: Why the food business is bad for the planet and your health* by Felicity Lawrence
- Published by: Penguin Books
- Price: £8.99
- ISBN: 9780141026015

- **Book information**
- *The End of Food* by Paul Roberts
- Published by: Houghton Mifflin
- Price: \$26
- ISBN: 9780618606238

IN APRIL, Haiti's prime minister became one of the first political casualties of the global food crisis, when [he was forced to stand down](#) in the aftermath of violent food riots. Around the world, people are beginning to fear that such events are a harbinger of things to come. Skyrocketing prices for many of the world's food staples have triggered social unrest in more than 32 countries, and a global summit of world leaders met last month in Rome, Italy, to hash out an emergency response.

Both [The End of Food](#) and [Eat Your Heart Out](#) went to press before the present crisis made headlines, yet their dissections of our global food system help explain why there is mounting hunger despite the fact that the planet produces enough food to make us all chubby. Think the food crisis is due to bad weather in Australia or flooding in the US Midwest? Read these books.

Journalists [Felicity Lawrence](#) and [Paul Roberts](#) share a common view, despite their different styles. Both authors describe a food system that has been shaped not by a "random and inevitable process" but by "one of the most powerful and brutally efficient of all human forces - the market," as Roberts says. This is not the market ripped from the pages of an economics textbook, though. It is neither free nor fair. Instead, the market for food is distorted by powerful players, creating an "increasingly centralised, uniform and concentrated" system in which a handful of companies control much of the food supply for the world.

The global market for food is neither free nor fair. Some of these players are more familiar than others. [Cargill](#), for instance, may not be a household name, but as one of the world's largest agribusinesses its fingerprints can be found on most foods at the supermarket. Lawrence quotes a Cargill brochure: "We are the flour in your bread, the salt on your fries, the chicken you eat for dinner, the cotton in your clothing."

In one of her more fascinating chapters, Lawrence traces Cargill's influence throughout the food chain and around the world, illustrating how multinational corporations manage to extract profits from developing countries despite the impoverishment of their economies. Wal-Mart and Nestle, two companies Roberts investigates, are more familiar names, but we nevertheless know little of their behind-the-scenes operations. Roberts offers some illumination. He explains why advertising for cereal is so ubiquitous, for example. And how Wal-Mart can afford to sell food so cheaply.

The books also dig into history, showing how food is so often leveraged as a political weapon. Of the \$13 billion in [US Marshall Plan](#) aid given to Europe between 1947 and 1952, for instance, more than \$3 billion was spent on imports of food, animal feed and fertiliser from the US. By providing a stark contrast to the austerity of eastern Europe, Lawrence argues, this aid "nipped nascent communist stirrings in the bud".

By the 1950s, Roberts explains, most of the billions that the US handed out to developing countries was coming right back, used to buy America's surplus food. In other words, food aid was not an altruistic donation programme for the world's poor, but a clever subsidy system for American farmers. By expanding markets for these farmers, US food aid and trade policies decimated agricultural production in other countries. In the wake of the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) in 1994, domestic corn production in Mexico has fallen by an estimated two-thirds, Roberts says.

Roberts and Lawrence each close with a call to action. Because the food crisis is ultimately a systems failure, their solutions go beyond new approaches to shopping. As Lawrence says, we have to change the system "root and branch". That means lobbying governments to shift subsidies from the Cargills of the world to more sustainable and fair producers. It means joining school boards to advocate for fresh and healthy school meals. And it means getting back into our kitchens.

Lawrence ends with a whiff of hope, arguing that today's food crises are so pressing that the "short-termism that plagues governments" may be overcome. "Events," she writes, "will force the pace." With the food crisis playing out across the planet - and in millions of bellies - we can only hope that she is right.