



THE RAM'S HORN

A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF FOOD SYSTEM ANALYSIS

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Spikes and Speculation

Newspaper headline:

"Spike in grain prices causes chaos in marketplace"

Reading and hearing the reports about crop failures due to drought and high temperatures, and the 'spike' in food prices, one would conclude that the high prices are the direct consequence of the extreme weather conditions that have hit agriculture, right around the world.

Industrial monoculture production of grains and oilseeds in the world's 'breadbaskets' in Russia and North America has certainly been hard hit by severe and exceptional weather this year. This is the explanation given, over and over, for the 'spike' in food prices already underway. However, there is no greater food shortage today than there was yesterday, and any increase in commodity and food prices at this point is taking place before harvesting has really gotten underway in the northern hemisphere. In other words, there is no material connection between actual food production and the rise in commodity prices.

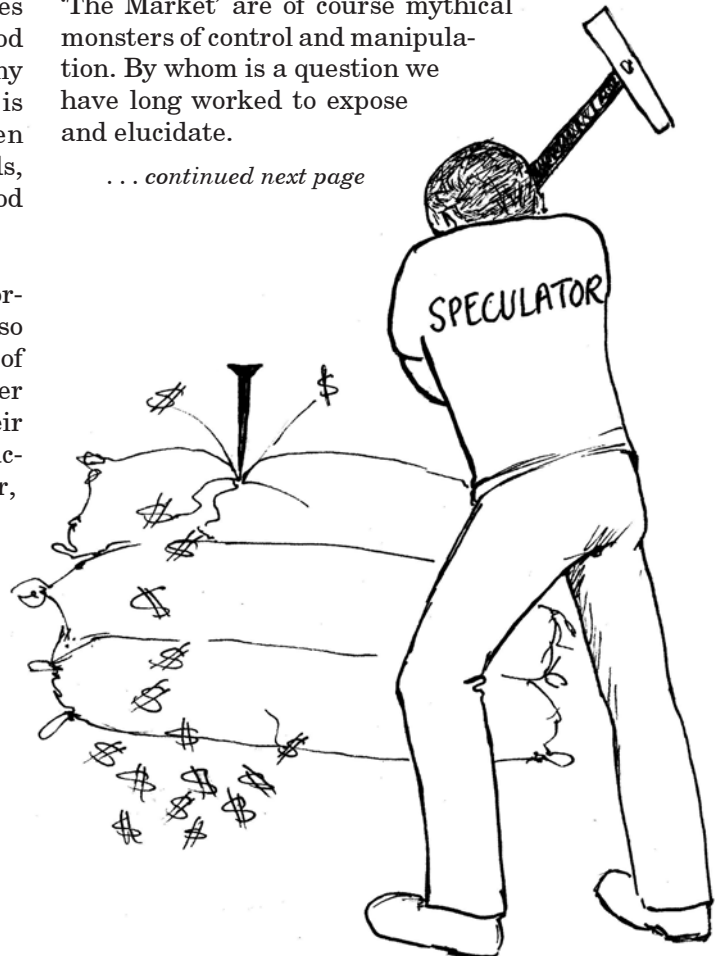
We need to note in passing that small-scale, organic, diversified food producers have not fared so badly, possibly because their soil and its population of micro-organisms is better able to withstand weather extremes. In North America it also helps that their produce attracts higher prices so the costs of infrastructure such as drip irrigation can be covered. However, the direct relationship between farmer-producer and buyer-eater experienced at your local farmers' market, legitimate and important as it is, can lead to a very simplistic understanding of the global food system. The connection between retail food prices and what farmers get paid for their crops is not a simple equation, despite a comment from the World Bank that higher grain prices can bring desperately needed income to poor farmers, "enabling them to increase their production and thereby become part of the global food security solution." —GM, 31/7/12

It's not drought that increases food/commodity prices. It is the buyers and dealers who increase the

prices to outbid other buyers and dealers for what appears will be a food shortage. As one commentator noted, 'You have to wonder how much of the price increase will be fuelled by speculation rather than supply and demand fundamentals' – completely omitting any mention of human agency. Speculation might imply human engagement, but "supply and demand fundamentals", are mystical equations operating according to the Law of Supply and Demand, or The Magic of the Marketplace.

Profits, not prices per se, or equitable distribution, are really their concern. 'The Law' and 'The Market' are of course mythical monsters of control and manipulation. By whom is a question we have long worked to expose and elucidate.

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High grain prices hit pig exports

The Manitoba “hog industry” produces about one million piglets per year. Virtually all are shipped to the US to be raised to market weight on US feed grains since Manitoba produces very little feed. If there is no feed in the US midwest due to drought, there will be no demand for Manitoba piglets! It would be appropriate, at this point, to question the wisdom of such specialization.

For centuries, the world over, pigs have been an integral part of household economies, living on leftovers and wandering freely to glean what they could. Once upon a time, in Costa Rica, we were visiting a friend of Jamie’s who lived in a traditional house built on stilts so the pigs and chickens could live underneath, part of the household but without access to the human living quarters. One day the pregnant sow disappeared, causing considerable dismay and much searching through the woods and underbrush – and great relief when she trotted out of the forest some days later with a brood of piglets following her. On our daughter and son-in-law’s farm in BC, the pigs feast on spent grain from the on-farm microbrewery (Crannóg Ales, if you want to look it up) along with garden excess and burdock roots etc. that they root up for themselves in the 4-acre field where they live.

Poultry producers in trouble

Factory farmers are beginning to agitate against the absurdity of ethanol (actually, obscenity might be a better description of an ‘industry’ totally dependent on public subsidies and legislated demand).

The governors of Maryland and Delaware have asked the Obama administration to eliminate or at least reduce the ethanol mandate for gasoline. The governors say that the grain (corn) being turned into ethanol is needed to feed livestock as opposed to people’s cars. Their demand reflects the incredible concentration of chicken factories in those two states with their resulting vulnerability. –GM, 11/8/12

Further down the line is the problem facing the supermarket chains. “Competitive pressures could temper the ability of retailers to pass along the increased food costs.” Chains such as Loblaws and Sobeys are facing increased competition from the food retailing of Shoppers Drug Mart and Walmart. On the other hand, there must be profits to be made, otherwise Shoppers and Walmart would not want to get into the food business in a big way.

A Threat To (or From?) the Poor

Headline: “Global warming likely to bring food inflation”: There is the possibility that global warming will bring still more extreme weather. . . To commodity investors that may sound promising. For the world’s poor and for many poor countries it is a serious and destabilising threat.”

–GM, 16/7/12

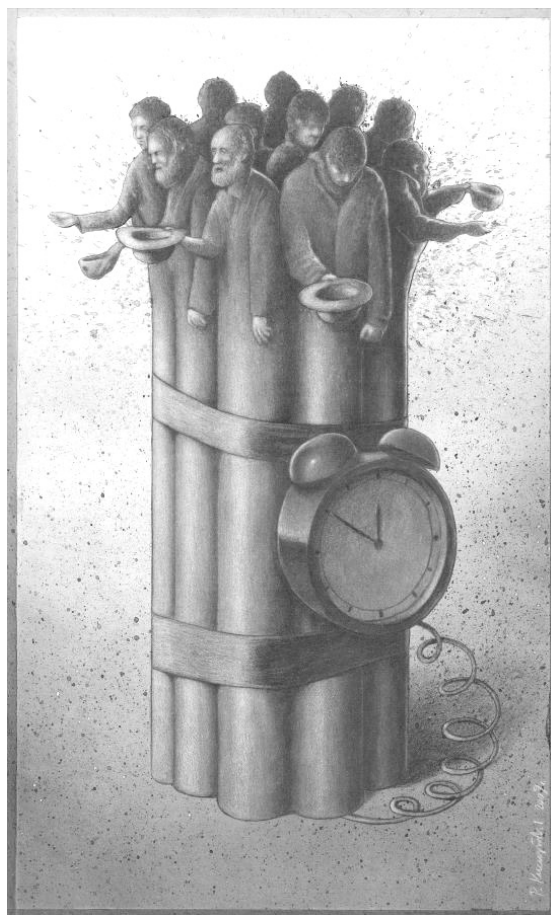
“Grain prices, which are hitting record highs as crop failures ripple around the globe, are likely to remain strong for at least three more years, threatening to push the price of nutritious food beyond the reach of the world’s poorest citizens,” says the World Bank. Does this mean that the world’s poorest have been able to afford a nutritious diet up to now?

The Bank adds that “so far crop projections do not indicate the potential for actual shortages in the major grains”, though it also points out that wheat, corn and soybean prices are up 30-50% since the beginning of June and 60% since the end of last year. –GM, 31/7/12

The Bank’s main concern, however, seems to be that higher food prices could deter “global growth” and lead to “social instability.”

Now we are getting closer to the operative fear: political instability – shades of Marie Antoinette.

In other words, the real threat is speculation, as FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva said in early July at a high-level debate on the issue at FAO Headquarters in Rome.



GRAPHIC BY POLISH CARTOONIST PAWLA KUCZYNSKIEGO

The world needs to take a hard look at speculation on the financial markets and its potential impact on food price volatility, he said. "Let's make one thing clear: We are not talking about speculation related to price discovery and the normal functioning of the futures markets. We are talking about excessive speculation in derivative markets, which can increase price swings and their speed," he added. "Excessive food price volatility especially at the speed at which it has been occurring since 2007, has negative impacts on poor consumers and poor producers alike all over the world."

"We are not talking about an abstract concept here, we are talking about something that is having a devastating, dramatic and brutal impact on the lives of people," and also puts governments at risk of destabilization.
 —fao.org, 6/7/12

"Financialization"

The World Rainforest Movement (based in Montevideo, Uruguay) monthly Bulletin for August explains this process as "financialization", a term they note may "sound overly complex and academic, or perhaps even made up. It could lead some people to ask, "finan-what?" However, it is increasingly being used in civil society debates and reflections, particularly with regard to the growing financial speculation tied to the goods and components of nature, including forests, which are of fundamental importance not only for the lives of local communities, but for the entire planet.

Obviously, this is not a new phenomenon. Speculation is inherent to the dominant capitalist economic model and has been around since its inception, as a result of the constant need for the expansion of capital. Through the application of free market policies and privatization, capital has gained ever greater control over natural goods, such as land, oil, energy, minerals and food, as well as expanding to new areas, particularly services that were formerly publicly managed.

This growing appropriation of nature has been facilitated by the intervention of governments, which have established the legal frameworks for the privatization required. They have also enabled the creation of a financial "infrastructure" – the "financial market" – where a series of financial instruments are negotiated, including derivatives markets, investment banks, hedge funds, indexed funds and exchange-traded commodities and others.

Within this context, and as a manifestation of the growing accumulation and concentration of capital which periodically leads to market collapse, economic-financial crises have arisen, and are generally "resolved" through the expansion of the investment frontier.

Currently, the financial market has acquired enormous economic weight over the market for trade in real products. Speculation in the currency exchange market, stock market, government bonds, government securities, etc., has reached unprecedented levels. The combined value of two types of financial products – derivatives and conventional financial assets – is now approximately five times greater than the total annual value of goods and services produced.

At a time when there is more private wealth than financial assets in which to invest it, the need to create new assets and expand financial speculation has led to speculation in new areas of nature. And while the financial sector grows and grows, production and employment lag behind, salaries are frozen or reduced, and inequality is deepened."
 —wrm.org

A recent Oxfam research report entitled *Cereal Secrets* notes:

'Financialization' is an over-arching term referring to the increasingly important role that investors play in the food system.

"While supply and demand fundamentals remain important, herd behaviour among investors ... may make price swings more dramatic than they otherwise would have been. Financial actors who know little about the physical production of food are

affecting the real world of food production and consumption through investments on commodity futures markets. As such, financialization has further abstracted food from its physical form. This financialization has occurred in a broader context of capital deregulation that has reshaped the way in which food markets interface with financial markets.

Traditionally the food system involved producers (farmers) and a series of commercial interlocutors, who traded, processed, distributed, and sold food. Today, banks and other investors, as well as dedicated investment funds . . . have invested billions of dollars in food commodities with no interest in taking possession of any physical commodity. Their behaviour is intimately linked to what is happening to the physical trade of food, of course, but is also affects that trade by affecting prices and behaviour. This is what is meant by the financialization of commodity markets.



A second dimension of financialization . . . refers to the increasing involvement of investment funds of different kinds in buying or leasing land and producing agricultural commodities.”

– www.oxfam.org/en/policy/cereal-secrets-worlds-largest-grain-traders-global-agriculture

Climate change is certainly having a major effect on agriculture worldwide, but it is not climate change that bids up the price of maize or soybeans. Alarm over “food prices”? More to the point would be alarm over capitalism, and financial capital in particular.

Bank Stops Food Speculation

There are a few encouraging signs that it is not just left-wing “political activists” who are alarmed over the ethics of all of this. Germany’s second-biggest lender, Commerzbank, says it will no longer participate in market speculation on basic food prices. The bank says it has removed all agricultural products from its ComStage ETF CB Commodity fund for moral reasons.

Commerzbank stated that the move came in response to a series of international studies claiming that similar agricultural funds had played no small role in artificially pushing up food prices, contributing to widespread hunger in many parts of the world. – 9/8/12

Get Out of Jail Free

“The bad thing about farming – and the same as stock markets – somebody is going to get hurt for the next guy to benefit. You don’t like to see anyone get hurt, but it is a game you gotta play. Next year that could be me.”

– *An Albertan who voted for the elimination of the Wheat Board*
– *G&M, 9/8/12*

We received an email notice from the Harper Government of a photo op on August 1st “to celebrate the official opening of the Wheat Market for grain farmers” on a farm in Kindersley, SK. The photo op turned out to be Harper’s announcement that he was pardoning the “courageous” farmers convicted in 2002 for illegally exporting Canadian grain to the USA. Harper tried to make it appear that the Wheat Board was responsible for their conviction, but actually this small group of farm-



ers, led by Jim Chatenay, deliberately violated the law by smuggling wheat into the USA from Canada. They were convicted of violating the Immigration Act, the Customs Act, and the Criminal Code for their brazen illegal activity. Harper announced his pardon on a farm in Saskatchewan against a background of a blue sky and puffy white clouds with a green field at the bottom. On the podium in front of Harper is a sign says “Marketing Freedom/Liberté de Marché”. – *GM, 2/8/12*

Harper’s political opportunism and contempt for the law was manifest in his arbitrary elimination of the democratically created and governed Canadian Wheat Board. By issuing this pardon, he seems to have assumed a Royal prerogative as well.

Who will feed China?

Chinese Companies with Overseas Agriculture Projects

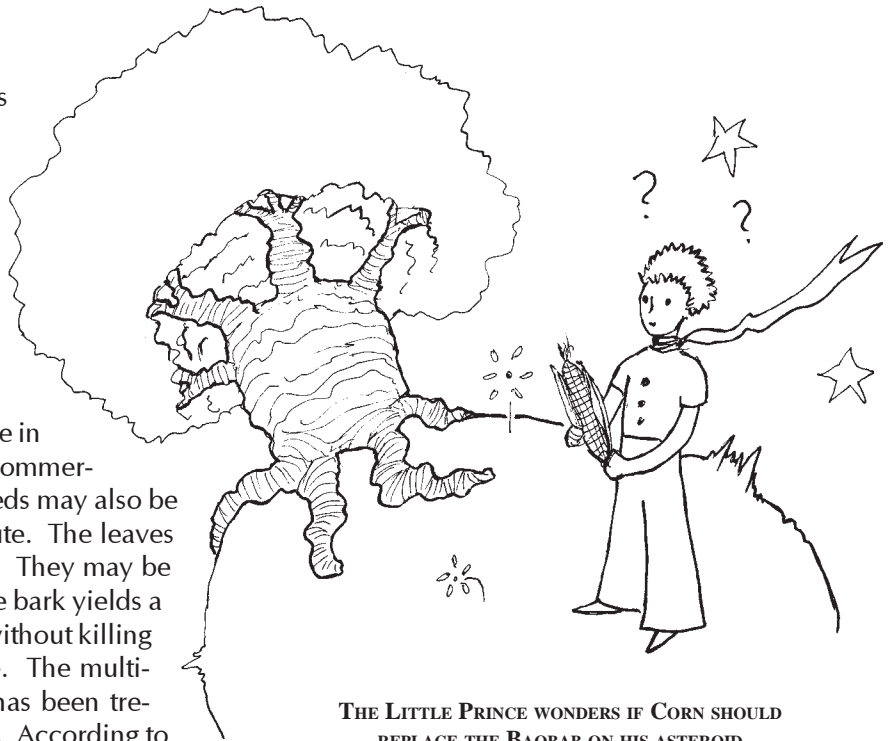
- State-owned Chongqing Grain Group has set aside US\$3.4 billion for an overseas expansion that includes a 200,000 ha soybean farm in Brazil, a 130,000 ha soybean farm in Argentina’s Chaco province, and plans to produce oilseed rape in Canada and Australia, rice in Cambodia and palm oil in Malaysia.
- State-owned Beidahuang manages over 2 million ha of farmland in the province of Heilongjiang. In Argentina, it is pursuing a partnership with Cresud, the country’s largest farming company, to acquire farmland. . . It has also leased 426,667 ha of land in Russia.
- ZTE Corp, China’s largest telecommunications company, acquired 30,000 ha of oil palm plantations on Indonesia’s Kalimantan Island, 50,000 ha for cassava production in Laos, and a 10,000 ha farm in Sudan for maize and wheat. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo it has two pilot farms and a 100,000 ha concession for an oil palm plantation that it has yet to develop.
- Shanghai real-estate company Penxin Group invested more than US\$20 million in a 12,500 ha Bolivian soybean and maize farm, established large-scale farms in Cambodia and Argentina, is negotiating to buy 200,000 ha of land in Brazil for soybeans and cotton, and purchased 16 dairy farms in New Zealand.
- Shaanxi State Farm signed a US\$120-million investment agreement with the government of Cameroon that includes a long-term lease on 10,000 ha of land where the company intends to produce rice, maize, and cassava.
– *GRAIN, 4/8/12, www.grain.org*

The Wonderful Baobab

The Baobab tree (*Adansonia* species) is native to the African continent. These trees have the unique ability to grow outward rather than upward, creating an unusually bulbous and stout trunk. They produce hard-shelled oblong fruits, which are said to be extremely high in vitamin C. The powder of the fruit can be used to make juice or in baked goods such as sour dough breads. The seeds of the fruit yield oil that is edible in small quantities, but more often used for commercial purposes such as cosmetics. The seeds may also be roasted and ground into a coffee substitute. The leaves are edible and are a high source of iron. They may be used as a suitable spinach substitute. The bark yields a fiber that may be sustainably harvested without killing the tree and woven into fabric and rope. The multi-functional economic value of this tree has been tremendously overlooked by most of Africa. According to an article in National Geographic, as of 2010 the potential value of the international market for baobab products stands at a billion US dollars per year.

In Malawi, there are a few products that are starting to be generated at a local level. Our friend, Shupe, has been making baobab juice for several years now and using it to supply grocery stores and other local markets. There is also a business just up the road from Never Ending Food called 'TreeCrops' that is marketing the powdered baobab fruit and exporting the oil, along with other products. Unfortunately, despite the growing economic interest, we have yet to see many individuals or projects devoted to the replanting or replenishing of these trees. One of the reasons for this may be due to the fact that the baobab tree doesn't need to be replaced very often as it has been estimated to live for upwards of 2-4,000 years! That's amazing return on your energy if you can take 5 minutes to put a seed in the ground that has the potential to give food to a nation for the next several thousand years. We have planted several of the trees at Never Ending Food and while we are waiting for the trees to give us fruit we have been eating the leaves as a vegetable crop for several years already. The marvellous tree should be celebrated as an African 'miracle' for all of its uses, but instead (as with many other local resources) it is all too often viewed as a 'bush food' and even, at times, cut down to allow for the further planting of maize (corn) crops.

– Kristof Nordin, 2/7/12, www.neverendingfood.org/plant-of-the-week-baobab/



THE LITTLE PRINCE WONDERS IF CORN SHOULD REPLACE THE BAOBAB ON HIS ASTEROID

We encourage you to go to the website for more on the Nordins' exciting work.

On the Outside

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture, long considered (by itself and others) as the voice of Canadian farmers and a good friend of whatever government is ruling at the time, now finds itself essentially shut out of its traditional consultative relationship with the federal government. The government intends to make drastic cuts to the current farm income stabilization programs without any consultation with the CFA. CFA president Ron Bonnett says, "I think they are doing this behind the scenes and then want to present a package to us once it is negotiated. . . We really have been on the outside looking in and we are the most affected."

This is sad; the CFA and other farm organizations should have recognized by now that neither they, nor any other sector of Canadian society, have any special relationship with the Harper regime – with the exception, that is, of the energy sector and the heads of major corporations. ("The Canadian Council of Chief Executives brings CEOs together to shape public policy in the interests of a stronger Canada and a better world." – www.ceocouncil.ca)

As veteran agriculture Barry Wilson put it, "for



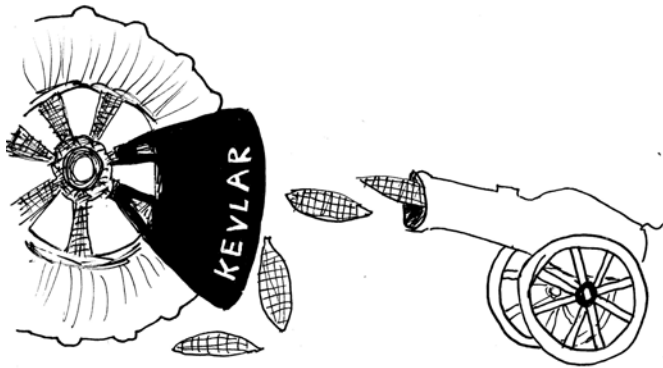
years farm leaders have been arguing that agriculture should be viewed as one of Canada's largest economic engines and not a 'lifestyle' sector. They are getting their wish in spades. And they are not being consulted as the changes are negotiated. The unstated message from government is becoming: 'You are a business, this government is intent on opening markets as you asked us so live by the market opportunities or move on.'

– WP, 19/7/12

Genetically Modified Tires

It's a battle out there in the fields: tires vs. thousands of corn stalk spears. Why not turn to the military for a little help?

Genetically modified crops have transformed the economics of US farming in unforeseen ways. One of the unintended consequences of transgenic crops is their practice of puncturing the tires of farm equipment in the field. Iowa corn and soybean farmer Mark Dimit said tire damage from the prior season's corn and soybean stalks, much tougher in GM crops, repeatedly brought spring planting to a standstill on his 4,000-acre farm two years ago. Mr. Dimit blames stubble for at least a half dozen flats on a new planter, costing about \$35 a tire to plug a leak.



Mr. Dimit's complaints to Titan International Inc., one of the largest farm tire suppliers, caused the company to suggest he test a newly developed tire with four layers of Kevlar, the synthetic fabric best known for its use in military helmets and bulletproof vests. Mr. Dimit installed them on his planter more than a year ago. "I've not had a flat tire since," he said. Kevlar is (conveniently) made by DuPont, one of the largest producers of GM corn and bean seeds through its Pioneer division.

The Kevlar tires cost almost \$300 apiece, roughly twice as much as regular tires. Titan says the price is offset by lower costs for repairs and tire replacements.

– source: Wall Street Journal, 31/7/12

Fungi to the Rescue

"Nature's figured it out, we haven't."

While this story is both intriguing and hopeful, it also reveals the ideological 'science' bias of New Scientist magazine. It opens with a statement about genetic engineering of crops to be resistant to drought that is simply not true. The fact is that while companies such as Monsanto have been bragging about making plants more drought resistant, they have nothing to show for it except promises. Meanwhile, working with nature is making some delightful discoveries, as in the excerpt below:

During such droughts, plants that have been genetically modified to need less water become more attractive [in theory]. But the expense and time needed to get GM plants to market has many looking for faster solutions.

One shortcut might lie in the plant microbiome – the consortium of fungi, bacteria and viruses that live in the root systems of every plant. Plants that live in extreme environments use the microbiome to survive stressful conditions. . . .

In 2002, Russell Rodriguez of the University of Washington in Seattle and colleagues were studying a grass – *Dichanthelium lanuginosum* – that grows at 70°C at the geothermal hot springs of Yellowstone. When the team sterilised the grass seeds to remove the fungi that grow inside the plant, also known as endophytes, the grass could no longer grow at high temperatures. That gave them an idea: perhaps transferring the microbiome of a drought-tolerant plant to a normal plant would help it use less water.

To test the idea, Rodriguez and his colleagues isolated spores from *D. lanuginosum*'s endophytes and sprayed them onto wheat seeds, which normally grow at temperatures up to 38°C. With the spores, the wheat could grow at 70°C and needed up to 50 % less water than normal.

Different microbiomes can confer a range of super-powers to a number of crops. Rodriguez's group have also isolated endophytes from a salt-loving dunegrass (*Leymus mollis*), and a strawberry plant (*Fragaria vesca*) that grows at high altitude at temperatures as low as 5°C. Rice plants that had been sprayed with the fungi became able to tolerate salt and cold, respectively. They also grew five times larger and needed half the water of normal plants.

The results were immediate: within 24 hours of being sprayed, the seeds began sprouting a greater number

of longer roots than untreated seeds, and the team found that they expressed genes involved in stress-resistance and drought-tolerance. . . Rodriguez thinks the fungi are jump-starting the plants' metabolism, although the exact mechanism is still unclear. "The plant has the ability to do all this, it just can't get its act together without the fungi," he says.

While attempts to genetically engineer plants to become drought-tolerant involve switching on metabolic pathways one at a time – a costly, drawn-out process – the fungi appear to activate them all in one go. . .

What's more, lab tests suggest endophytes do not harm the plant in wet conditions, in contrast to drought-tolerant GM plants, which tend to grow poorly when the weather turns.

Rather than isolating individual species of fungi, Mary Lucero, at New Mexico State University, believes it might be more effective to harness the whole microbial community by mulching up drought-tolerant plants' roots and growing crops in them. The cross-talk between the different species of microbe might be as important as that between the microbes and the plants. – Sara Reardon, NS, 26/7/12



'fascist' to Harper and his gang, but Harper's appeal is to the corporate/business elite, not to the populism more characteristic of fascism historically. So we should, perhaps, settle for describing Harper's goal as dictatorship.

I am writing this on what we refer to as 'Labour Day Weekend', but as we enjoy the waning of summer, we should be acutely aware that there is little respect for, let alone celebration of, labour. The premier of

Ontario is intent on passing legislation this coming week that will freeze (i.e. reduce) public school teachers salaries and outlaw any strike action by teachers – but McGuinty remains silent about, and thus silently approving of, the "sky-high profits" (\$8.2 billion) of Canada's Big Six banks in the 3rd quarter of the current year.

– GM, 31/8/12



CROSS-TALK

A letter to the editor of New Scientist muses that the 400% rise in productivity in the US between 1951 and 2007, had it been applied to benefit American workers, would have meant that the average worker could achieve a 1950s standard of living with an 11-hour working week. This has not happened, of course, because the benefits are siphoned off, not just to corporate capital but also to fund cold war militarization.

With the Harper regime, this agenda did not stop with the cold war. They are implementing a systematic program to erase Canada's historical 'peacemaker' role on the world scene while simultaneously militarizing Canadian culture – by means of constructing war memorials all over the country, glorifying "the war of 1812", and 'protecting' the government from the public through isolation of politicians and senior bureaucrats and fortifying Parliament in a manner similar to the way the Americans have fortified their Embassy in Ottawa. Since the cold war threats have lost their edge, the language of 'terrorism' is used to frighten the public into consent.

How has this situation come about? What has happened to our political framework that the spectrum runs from centre social democrat to far right reactionary with no political voice for socialism, the public good, or any political program even remotely left of centre?

What obliterated the left in North America? I think it was the highly toxic anti-communism that was nurtured from the Korean War (1950-1953) through the 1950s and on through the 1960s, only receding from



Editorial

Maybe it shows, maybe it doesn't – but my mind, and attention, have been pulled, as if by giant magnet, into mega-politics and economics and away from the more specific and detailed analysis of what's going on in the food realm. Fortunately, not only is there a great deal of activity in organic and ecological agriculture, local food distribution and CSAs, but also a substantial increase in reporting on these and other positive developments in the global food system and among its deviants, escapees, and avoiders. It seems that after 30+ years of publication, The Ram's Horn is no longer alone in this field.

Less widespread is the more systematic exposure of corporate concentration and control along with analysis of its methodology and direction. It is this which I feel compelled to focus on now, as regular readers have probably already noticed.

Part of this refocusing is the result of my increasing concern (I could say 'alarm') at the deterioration of Canadian 'democracy' and the systematic assault on it by the Tory regime of control freak Steven Harper. Some people have been tempted to apply the term

public view with the 'victory' of capitalism ('the West') signified by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Through this time, and even to the present, any questioning of western individualism and capitalist, market economics was branded and dismissed as communist. Socialism could only be spoken of as 'social democracy'.

Since the purpose of capitalism is the accumulation of capital, the growing inequity in society should not surprise anyone: it is not an unintended consequence, but the natural outcome of an unnatural economy, supported by an immense propaganda machine that includes just about all of the media and government's own PR campaigns paid for by us, as taxpayers.

Now we find ourselves in a situation where capitalism and the market have had to be bailed out and supported by the very institution – the state – that we have been told is bad and evil and robbing us of our 'freedom'.

There is no hope for us, or anyone else other than a tiny elite of the world's people, as long as we accept the dogma that the rich have to get richer because they are the ones that keep the economy functioning – in spite of that being an obvious lie, and in spite of the fact that it is the pursuit of 'economic growth' that is causing global warming and extreme weather 'events'.

The Occupy movement's framing of the 1% versus the 99%, which finally offers an accessible public framework within which to speak of class and power, is a sign of hope. Watching the dynamic young people who are mobilizing around issues of climate change and social justice, I find myself drawn into a reflection on my own history since I was their age, and seeing a parallel between their determination to overcome the rhetoric of inevitability and feelings of despair, and our movement for nuclear disarmament.

I think that an analysis of the forces at work over my six decades of left-wing social activism could be a helpful contribution at this point. So I am working on my next book, looking back over my own history as someone who never gave up what some might dismiss as utopian thinking, but which I would refer to as a Christian hope for social justice. In the spirit of the '60s, the book will be a personal and political story which will, I hope, illustrate why we face such a dismal political situation today – and provide an alternative vision. – **B.K.**

We had hoped to get this issue out in August, but as you can see it is September already. And what with Brewster focusing on his book, and Cathleen having hip replacement surgery this month, the next issue may be a while in coming. Please bear with us – and keep your news and feedback coming!



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