
Book Review

‘We Let Them Starve’

by G. and E. Neudecker

Wir lassen sie verhungern: Die Massenvernichtung in der Dritten Welt (We Let Them Starve: Mass Extermination in the Third World)

by Jean Ziegler

Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2012
hardbound, EU19.99

Jean Ziegler, an advisor to the UN on food issues, is known for his no-holds-barred representation of reality. His new book about world hunger leaves no doubt where the roots of the problem lie.

The Swiss author begins by breaking a taboo: Going against the *Zeitgeist*, he asserts that there is enough agricultural land on Earth now to feed 12 billion people. But lack of technology, waste, wrong-headed ecological insanity, and disregard for the rights of the rural population in the developing world are making the hunger situation worse. Ziegler enrages the “overpopulation” fanatics by excluding the theme of family planning, and relies on tried-and-true strategies.

Like the plague in the Middle Ages, famine was often considered an inevitable scourge, to halt the growth of population. Thomas Malthus’s theory has been used to ease the consciences of the ruling class and to maximize profits.

Ziegler describes how humanity has freed itself from such fatalism, such as how the horrendous consequences of World War II were overcome. In his view, the situation today can also be solved with enough material, logistical, and financial support, and above all by collective action: “Why should this not also be possible for the problem of hunger in the world?” It is mankind’s responsibility to eliminate

this disaster, he writes, and there is nothing fatal or inevitable about it.

Ziegler points to the work of Josué de Castro, who detailed the catastrophic consequences of monoculture for the rural population of Brazil. Castro was a doctor in the 1930s in the Recife region, one of Brazil’s largest sugarcane-growing areas, which had previously been a prairie with a great diversity of agricultural uses and fertile red soil. But with the increasing cultivation of sugarcane, traditional crops disappeared, such as maize, beans, cassava, and other vegetables. The food supply has declined so much, that today, 85% of the food needs of the state of Pernambuco, where Recife is located, have to be imported. Castro also recognized such effects of the increasing monoculture as malnutrition, hunger, and stunted development of children.

He recorded his experiences in his book *Geography of Hunger* (1946), which was translated into many languages and became the practical handbook for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which was founded in 1945. Later the book was retitled *Geopolitics of Hunger*, based on the realization that it is not geography that is key, but the interests of people, politicians, and companies, in the utilization of agricultural areas.



Jean Ziegler

What It Takes To Stop Famine

With reference to an FAO report, but mainly to his own experience in traveling around the world, Ziegler uses many examples to show that it is not sufficient to provide food to fight hunger: Sometimes only the very specific addition of minerals, vitamins, etc., to provide a long-term balanced diet, can prevent disease.

He describes a terrible disease called Noma (*cancrum oris*), which especially affects malnourished young children. Its cause is the collapse of the immune system. Germs and bacteria easily enter the mouth, where they cause inflammation of the gums, then mount a massive attack on the oral mucosa, and eat holes in the jawbone and the cheeks. This can lead to immobility of the jawbone and disfigurement of the face.

As horrible as the effects of this disease are, it can just as quickly and easily be cured, using antibiotics, a

proper diet, and rigorous oral hygiene. The Swiss foundation Winds of Hope says that a cure for one child costs only EU2-3 and takes about ten days. This is a further example of Ziegler's thesis that mass extermination by starvation is anything but inevitable.

Ziegler shows why, despite increasing food production, it has not yet been possible to eliminate hunger. It is not only the failure of the aid agencies that bothers him—and as Vice President of the Advisory Committee of the UN Human Rights Council, he could give a comprehensive picture of this—but also the control by the food cartels and the politics of biofuels, just to mention some additional factors.

The Earth's population has almost doubled in the last 40 years, from 3.7 billion people in 1970 to more than 6.7 billion today. Although food production has increased enormously, along with the increase in population, we have not been able to eliminate the problem of hunger. Nearly a billion people are still suffering from it, and every five seconds a child under ten years of age dies of starvation.

As already mentioned, Ziegler sees food control as an important reason for starvation, describing how only five companies control 85% of world agricultural trade.

After the collapse of the financial markets, speculators rediscovered the food market as a field for their activity. He calls them “tiger sharks,” who are deliberately driving prices for wheat, rice, corn, and soy into the stratosphere in order to maximize profits, and are making food unaffordable—and not only for the people of the “Third World.”

Another field of operations for the modern robber barons, he writes, is colonization by the purchase of land by investment companies and countries such as China and Saudi Arabia. These land areas are then often used to produce biofuel, making the hunger crisis even worse.

This policy has resulted in an outcry for change, not only in the developing countries, but also in developed countries. That is where Ziegler sees a glimmer of hope: that by collective rebellion, one of the greatest horrors of this century can be defeated.

Hopefully, more and more people will not only endorse the argument of his book, which unmasks the “enemies of the right to food,” but will adopt our slogan, which has often been discussed in this publication: “The world needs more people!”

Translated from German by Susan Welsh.

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