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# Hunger is man-made and man can unmake it

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### **Jean Ziegler interviewed by Éric Toussaint on the occasion of the release of his last book: Destruction massive, géopolitique de la faim, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2012.**

For all who seek to understand the issues concerning hunger in the world, this book is a must. In a style at the same time vigorous and straightforward this latest work by Jean Ziegler, ex United Nations rapporteur to the right to food, presents the necessary insights to understanding why one sixth of humanity is under nourished, sometimes to death, but always to the negation of the most elementary human rights. More than just an analysis of the causes, this book pleads for a radical change of system.

#### **Eric Toussaint – What causal relationship do you perceive between national debts and the state of hunger from which a very important part of the population of this part of the world is suffering?**

Jean Ziegler – Before answering your question I would like to explain the extent of the disaster.

The annual massacre of tens of millions of human beings by hunger is the scandal of our times. Every five seconds a child under ten years old dies of hunger, 37 000 people die of hunger every day and one billion – of the seven billion that we are – are deformed by permanent malnutrition... On a planet that is overflowing with riches !

The same FAO food security report that gives these figures, says that world agriculture is actually capable of producing food for up to twelve billion normal adults (2200 calories per adult per day). That is nearly double the actual world human population.

Starting this new millennium, there is absolutely no fatality for hunger nor are there any objective shortages. A child who dies of hunger today has been assassinated.

For eight years, I was the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food. This book is the story of my struggles, my failures, my occasional fragile victories and also my betrayals.

The problem of the famished is not the general availability of food on the planet, but their personal access to it, essentially their lack of money to buy it.

Structural hunger takes its daily toll because of insufficiently developed farming in the rural areas of the southern hemisphere.

Conjunctural hunger, on the other hand, hits when an economy collapses suddenly through war or following natural catastrophes.

To get back to your question. The relationship between debt and destruction by hunger is particularly apparent in the struggle against conjunctural hunger.

Between 2008 and 2010, the World Food Program lost almost half of its budget : from 6 billion dollars in 2008 it has fallen to 3.2 billion today. The industrial countries have become massively indebted in order to refinance their banks...

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and have scrapped or massively reduced their contributions to the WFP. Now it so happens that the WFP is the organization charged with supplying food aid to populations struck by catastrophe and/or war.

Consequently : the World Food Program can no longer purchase sufficient food for urgent famine aid : as in the Horn of Africa where UNO aid workers refuse entry into any one of the region's seventeen established camps to hundreds of starving families and refugees every day. The debt is responsible for the destruction of hundreds of thousands of human beings.

### **Considering this perspective, how do you relate the world famine crisis to the quasi-simultaneous 2007/2008 banking and economic crisis in the highly industrialized countries?**

The 2007/2008 crisis provoked by banksterism has had two notable consequences. Firstly, after 2008, hedge funds and the big banks modified their fields of intervention, easing off from the financial markets to take heavier positions on the commodity markets, particularly in agricultural products. As a result, the prices of the three basic food-stuffs (maize, rice and wheat), that cover 75 % of world food consumption, have exploded. In 18 months the price of maize has increased by 93 %, the ton of rice has increased from 105 dollars to 1010 dollars and the ton of milling wheat has doubled since September 2010 to attain the price of 271 euro. This explosion of prices makes astronomical profits for the speculators but kills hundreds of thousands of men, women and children in the slums, favelas and shanty towns.

A second consequence is the rush of the hedge funds and other speculators to buy up arable land in the southern hemisphere.

According to the World Bank, last year, 41 million hectares (over 101 million acres) were taken over by investment funds and multinationals in Africa alone, resulting in the expulsions of small farmers. The role of the World Bank must be denounced here, but also that of the African Development Bank, that finances these land grabs. To justify this they present the pernicious theory that African agricultural production is very low. This is true, but not because the African farmer is less competent or less hard working than any other. It is because these countries are strangled by their foreign debt. They do not have the money necessary to constitute disaster funds or for investing in subsistence farming. It is wrong to claim that the solution is to cede the lands to multinationals.

The real solution is to bring these countries to a state that would permit investment and to give their small farmers the necessary tools, irrigation systems, selected seeds, fertilizer, and so on, that would increase their productivity.

In fact, on the whole African continent only 3.8% of arable land is irrigated. There are no more than 250 000 draft animals and a few thousand tractors. There are practically no mineral fertilizers nor selected seeds.

### **What is the central thesis of your book, Destruction massive ?**

That hunger, being caused by man's greed, can be eradicated by man's actions.

The main enemies of the right to food are the ten or so private transcontinental companies which almost completely dominate the food market. They fix prices, control stocks and decide who will live or die, since only those with money have access to food. Last year, for example, Cargill controlled more than 26 % of all the wheat commercialized in the world. These trusts have at their bidding mercenary organisations such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These are the three Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Even if they do acknowledge that famine is a terrible thing, they consider that any intervention in the market is a sin, and appeals for agrarian reform, a minimum wage or life-saving subsidies on staple foods for the very poor, heresy. These great

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trusts, which together control nearly 85 % of the food market, hold that famine can only be vanquished by the total liberalization of the markets and the total privatisation of the public sector.

The neo-liberal theory underlying these ideas is obscurantist and deadly. In 1991, the Soviet Union imploded (which was a good thing). Hitherto, one third of the world's population lived under a communist regime, while the capitalist mode of production was limited to certain regions. However, over the last 20 years, financial capitalism has spread like wildfire throughout the world. The only regulatory force to have emerged is the global market, the so-called invisible hand. States have lost their autonomy and the pyramid of martyrs has grown. Had the neo-liberals been right, liberalization and privatization should have brought an end to famine. Yet the opposite has happened. The pyramid of martyrs continues to grow. This collective murder by famine becomes more horrifying with every day that goes by.

But in spite of its title - Destruction massive - my book is a book of hope.

Democracy is never powerless. There are concrete measures that we, as citizens of the democratic states of Europe, can impose with immediate effect. We can ban speculation on food products; block the theft of arable land by multinational companies; prevent dumping of agricultural produce; write off the external debt of the poorest countries to enable them invest in their own agriculture; have done with the use of bio-fuels, and so on. All that is within our reach, if people mobilize and campaign for it. I wrote "Destruction massive, géopolitique de la faim" to galvanize citizens' awareness. Even as we talk, I repeat, a child under ten years of age is dying of hunger every five seconds. There are mass graves to prove it. And those responsible can be clearly identified.

Furthermore, farmers' uprisings, totally ignored by the mainstream Western press, are taking place as we speak in numerous countries of the South : the Philippines, Indonesia, Honduras and Northern Brazil. Populations are re-occupying lands stolen from them by multinational companies, fighting, often dying, but sometimes they emerge victorious.

Georges Bernanos writes : « God has no other hands than ours ».

The present cannibalistic world order can be destroyed and material happiness ensured for all. I am confident that in Europe, the time when awareness turns to revolt is close at hand.

**For years now, especially as Vice-President of the Consultative Committee of the UN Council for Human Rights, you have been working towards the adoption of an international pact or a similar international legal instrument that would guarantee smallholders' rights the world over. How far has that got, today?**

The project for an international convention to protect smallholders' rights (the right to land, the right to seed, the right to water, etc.) will be submitted to the Human Rights Council in June. It gives substance to the principle of extra-territorial obligation incumbent on States. As a concrete example of what this means, the French State could be held responsible for the violations of smallholders' rights in Cameroon or in Benin, by the Bolloré and Vilgrain companies.

The outcome is uncertain.

**How can the CADTM's analyses and actions contribute to the fight for the right to food and, beyond that, for a radical change of direction in the matter of human rights ?**

Neoliberal obscurantism has poisoned most governments and the majority of public opinion. The analyses

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undertaken and struggles waged by the CADTM are essential. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote: « Know the enemy, fight the enemy. » The CADTM is doing a magnificent job of carrying out this double action.

*Translated by Vicki Briault and Mike Krolikowski for CADTM.*