

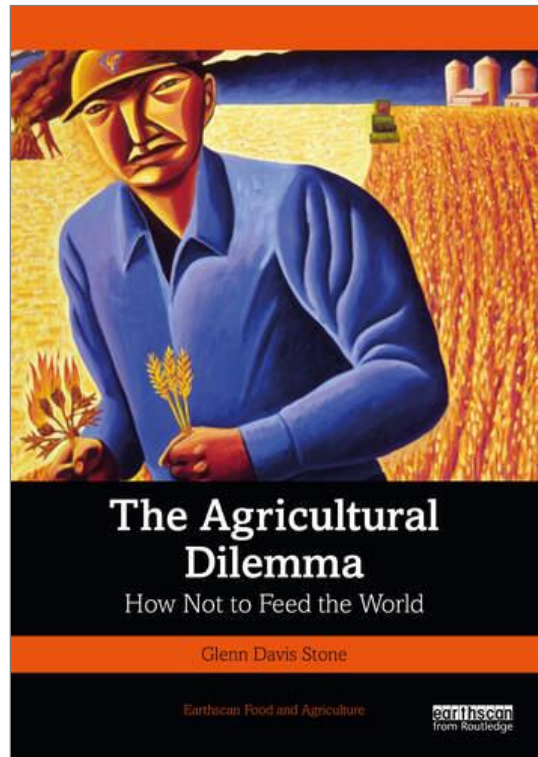
## The myth of “feeding the world”: Subsidizing agricultural overproduction and industrial technologies, and marginalizing alternatives

*Book review by*

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Review of *The Agricultural Dilemma: How Not to Feed the World*, by Glenn Davis Stone. (2022). Published by Earthscan, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group. Available as hardcover, paperback, and e-book; 246 pages. Publisher’s website: <https://www.routledge.com/The-Agricultural-Dilemma-How-Not-to-Feed-the-World/Stone/p/book/9781032260457>



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**H**ow many times have you heard some version of the phrase “we need to produce more food to feed a growing population”—often attached to impressively precise estimates of the percentage increases and specific dates far into the future?

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If you’re reading this journal, it’s probably in the thousands, if not more. In this book, Glenn Davis Stone dismantles such claims and shows who is really benefiting from their constant repetition (hint: it’s not most of us). He suggests a description of a problem that should be widely repeated instead: overproduction due to massive government subsidies—particularly for input industries—is leading to the runaway industrialization of agriculture and its numerous negative impacts.

Stone is an anthropologist with more than four decades of experience studying past and present food systems. He has conducted ethnographic and archeological research in locations that include

Nigeria, southern India, the Philippines, and the U.S. He explains that his motivations for writing this book include the marginalization of small-holder farmers by powerful interests, and the limited efforts to date to communicate research on the political ecological advantages of this scale of agriculture to wider audiences.

He examines the history of Malthusian thought with fascinating details of the lives of Thomas Robert Malthus and his followers, who incorrectly blamed the poor for their hunger and frequently concluded that interventions in food and population dynamics were unnecessary. This perspective had catastrophic implications for millions of people in Ireland and India in the late 1800s, who were subjected to starvation based on this philosophy even as tons of export crops from these regions continued to flow to England.

Stone agrees with Malthus that we should focus on the drivers of increasing agricultural production, but says that, “In a sense, Malthus had the causal arrow backward; agriculture did not determine population, but population determined agriculture” (p. 12). Farming that makes intensive use of labor and local technologies (and is less reliant on external inputs) tends to be highly innovative and flexible, and capable of achieving much higher productivity when necessary.

Industrial Neo-Malthusian thought is analyzed in even more detail by the author because it has had an enormous influence on society in recent decades. Embodied most perfectly by “Green Revolution hero” Norman Borlaug, Neo-Malthusians are more willing to intervene in food and population dynamics and to promote the dogma of industrial technologies as a means of increasing food production (p. 45). In practice, this has meant seeking public funding for input industries, which has enabled the appropriation of on-farm processes by large industries and decreased farmers’ self-reliance. This, in turn, has resulted in overproduction and additional costs to society and ecosystems. These costs can be divided into those that are direct, such as for storing massive grain and dairy surpluses, and indirect, such as the embodied

impacts of producing excessive amounts of corn, and then disposing of it by burning it as ethanol.

Fertilizer and seed industries are described as the core drivers of industrial agriculture, as well as having the biggest “halo,” which helps protect them from valid criticisms. Stone details the increasing flows of farmer payments to heavily subsidized fertilizer, seed, pesticide, irrigation, and machinery firms, as well as the credit required to make these purchases.

The Green Revolution receives particular emphasis. Stone suggests that this legend conceals the truth that it “didn’t feed anybody who would have otherwise starved. It was not even intended to produce more *food* than would have been produced otherwise, just more fertilized, irrigated, and pesticide-sprayed wheat as opposed to low-input rice, sorghum, and healthy legumes” (p. 9). Support for his perspective comes from India, which is currently the world’s leading exporter of rice and beef, and where in 2000, a parliamentary committee proposed dumping rotting grain surpluses into the ocean to make room for new harvests. My favorite part of the book is when he demolishes Aaron Sorkin’s character President Jed Bartlet in the insipid television drama *The West Wing*, who parrots the legend of the Green Revolution, as “the classic tale of how we find a way to attribute productivity to a piece of technology in the farmer’s field rather than to the external resources and policies that actually cause change” (p. 163).

Stone’s writing is clear, concise, and engaging. He synthesizes an impressive range of critical scholarship, interspersed with his own fascinating research findings. The index is much less comprehensive than I would prefer, but the accessibility of electronic versions that are searchable by keyword makes this almost a moot point.

This book would make an excellent supplementary text in a graduate or upper-level undergraduate food systems course. In addition, it should be read by every scholar and activist working on challenging the false premise that increasing yields are the *sine qua non* of food system change.

