

# The plate economy: capitalism, food and nutrition in the service society

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## Introduction

In his key writings, Karl Marx addressed the relationship between nutrition and human food, highlighting the intrinsic connection between the production, distribution and consumption of food and the socioeconomic and power structures in capitalist society(1, 2). Marx analyzed how the capitalist system turns food production into a commodity, linking it closely to property relations and labor exploitation. He also pointed out how alienation, a central concept in his theory, is reflected in workers' food(2).

In "The Communist Manifesto," Marx, along with Engels, explored the influence of class struggle on the distribution of wealth, including food. He highlighted how this struggle creates a gap between classes, affecting living conditions and access to adequate nutrition, perpetuating an ideology that legitimizes exploitation and oppression(1). Despite not focusing specifically on food, Marx and Engels' analyses of capitalism and class dynamics provide a basis for understanding how these issues are related to current socioeconomic realities, especially in the transformation of industrial economies to post-

industrial labor-based economies, where information is crucial and the labor flexibility of knowledge workers is highlighted(3, 4). It is for this reason that this essay explores the relationship between food, nutrition, and Marxist theory in a capitalist society.

## Food and nutrition: deciphering a recurrent confusion between constructs

In the complex landscape of the 21st century, the exploration of the meanings of food and human nutrition acquires an unusual urgency under the shadow of a neoliberal capitalist economic system characterized by the primacy of free competition and market deregulation, which has shaped the perception and practice of food in unexpected and sometimes conflicting ways.

For example, food not only satisfies biological needs, but also serves as a symbol of identity, status and belonging. Social networks and consumer culture have intensified this dynamic, by sharing food online to validate individual identities and construct narratives of success. This convergence of food with self-image and consumption is influenced by the logic of neoliberal capitalism, which according to Harvey (5), is characterized by the defense of minimal state intervention in the economy, the promotion of the free market, the deregulation of industries and the primacy of private property and capital accumulation; through promoting competition and market efficiency and relying on the self-regulation of markets to achieve economic growth. This dynamic, compounded with the search for personal fulfillment, often translates into the consumption of products and experiences that, in the case of food, can displace the nutritional and sustainable considerations that at the biological level are the pedestal for the understanding of

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these phenomena from the point of view of the WHO, the PAHO and the FAO(6).

Globalization has also transformed our relationship with food in the 21st century. Global food production, distribution and consumption patterns have allowed for an unprecedented diversity in the availability of products. However, this same process has also led to highly industrialized food systems where the homogenization of diets and the overexploitation of the means of production are protagonists of a scenario in which food and nutrition are increasingly approached from a biomedical and performance approach, leaving aside the cultural, social, and emotional aspects of food(7).

In addition, the economic inequality exacerbated by neoliberalism is also reflected in food choices. Disparities in access to nutritious and healthy foods are more evident than ever. Marginalized and disadvantaged communities often face food insecurity and have limited access to nutritious options, amplifying gaps in health and well-being.

Marx's historical materialism is a theory that seeks to understand how economic and social structures influence the historical development of societies; thus, it focuses on how production and property relations determine social and cultural dynamics over time(8). That is, historical circumstances are determined by concrete and specific factors that give rise to the social relations and structures we observe in the present. Consequently, what we experience today is the result of past actions and events, as well as of the material conditions that have influenced the development of society. Hence, this current of thought invites us to assume that the current reality is not a natural and immutable state, but rather the product of historical and material forces that have interacted over time.

One of the fundamental concepts of Historical Materialism is the notion that the material basis of society, i.e., the economic conditions and relations of production, act as the engine that shapes social, political, and ideological forms. In "The German Ideology," Marx and Engels argue that "the production of ideas, of representations and of

consciousness is in the first place directly intertwined with the material activity and material exchange of men"(8).

This means that human capacities such as consciousness, thought and the understanding of the world do not arise in a vacuum. They are influenced and shaped by the concrete experiences and actions of human beings in the real world, such as the interaction between subjects and their relationship with the economic structures that determine, to a large extent, the institutions, culture, beliefs, and power relations that characterize a society.

Another key concept is class struggle, a driving force in Historical Materialism, which holds that the history of all societies to date has been a history of class struggles between those who control the means of production and those who work to produce goods and services. In "The Communist Manifesto", Marx says that

"The whole history of human society, down to the present day, is a history of class struggles. Freeman and slaves, patricians and plebeians, barons and serfs, masters and officers; in a word, oppressors and oppressed, always face to face, engaged in an uninterrupted struggle, sometimes veiled, sometimes frank and open, in a struggle which leads at every stage to the revolutionary transformation of the whole social regime, or to the extermination of both belligerent classes"(1).

These struggles are driven by the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system, in which the interests of the working class come into conflict with those of the ruling class.

Social change and historical transformation are also essential concepts in this school of thought. Marx argues that history consists of a series of stages of development resulting from the interaction between productive forces (technology, labor, resources) and the relations of production (the ways in which production is organized and resources are distributed) (9).

In his view, history is not just a linear account of events, but rather, an intricate web of interactions between productive forces and relations of production that could metaphorically be likened to a dance between the two forces. Thus, throughout

history, these two forces intertwine and collide, creating a drama of progress and struggle. Each stage of development, each chapter of our history, emerges from this constant dialogue between what we can do with available resources (technologically and through labor) and how we choose to use those capabilities (the social and economic structures we adopt - for example, the sale of labor power in exchange for a wage). In this narrative, such a dance is the engine that drives social change and transformation; a backdrop to human history that can help us understand everything from the earliest forms of production to the post-industrial mode of production.

Because of the above arguments, we believe that in the XXI century, this theory can be applied to an analysis of how economic and social conditions affect food and the nutrition of people. This, due to its ability to grasp the complexities involved in the social and economic development of humanity over time, from a series of fundamentals and premises that unmask the intricate relationships between the material basis of society and its ideological superstructures.

### **The relationship between food, nutrition, and the material basis of society in the service/information society of the 21st century.**

Currently, the relationship between food, nutrition and the material basis of society has become a topic of profound interest and analysis in the context of the service/information society of the 21st century. From the perspective of Marx's historical materialism, the economic base and the relations of production are crucial factors that influence the configuration of social, political, and ideological forms. In the following section, we explore how the service/information society, characterized by a globalized economy and a rapid expansion of information, interacts with food and nutrition, framed in the context of Marx's historical materialism.

#### *The Material Basis of Society and its Impact on Food and Nutrition*

Through the lens of historical materialism, the shift in the material basis of industrial society to the

post-industrial form of production has significant implications for food and nutrition. In this new context, food production and distribution are influenced by the dynamics of the global market and the privatization of goods and services, characteristic of neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism (10).

Examples of this transformation include food delivery services. Companies such as Uber Eats, DiDiFood, or Rappi have emerged as intermediaries between restaurants and consumers. The production of manufactured goods (food in restaurants) is combined with the delivery service, generating an experience in which the service becomes as important as the product itself. This influences food and nutrition, as fast and processed food options become more accessible, which can have an impact on people's health. This type of food e-commerce encompasses the online purchase of fresh ingredients or packaged products, which shows how food production and distribution are being shaped by the generation of online information and the convenience of delivery services.

Likewise, social networks and food trends have become key platforms for the transformation of work itself. As technology redefines the limits of communication, the Internet influences people's food choices through platforms that allow for the sharing information about food and dietary trends. In this way, so-called "influencers" emerge as the perfect reflection of this transformation of work(11). Although, in the specific case of influencers related to the health field, this can result in channels for the dissemination of misinformation and advice not supported by solid scientific evidence but by economic interests divorced from the welfare of consumers.

#### *Labor Flexibility and Labor Precarization: Impact on the Food Industry*

In the dynamics of the service/information society, labor flexibility and labor precariousness emerge as unavoidable phenomena. Outsourcing and underemployment, driven by companies' relentless pursuit of efficiency and profits, cast a shadow of uncertainty over the labor horizon; in this scenario, workers face unstable conditions and insufficient

remuneration, generating a direct impact on food and nutrition.

The acute difficulty in accessing nutritious, quality food is a grim outcome of this reality. Financial stress and job uncertainty stand as barriers that can prevent the fulfillment of essential nutritional needs, setting off a chain of effects that impacts the health and well-being of individuals. In an era where the pursuit of a dignified livelihood is threatened by volatile working conditions, the importance of addressing the link between job instability and nutrition resonates with urgency.

#### *Globalization and Privatization: Effects on Food Availability and Quality*

Globalization has transformed food supply chains, affecting the availability and quality of food. The connection between continents and cultures has intensified, a seemingly inexhaustible variety of products resulting from the search for efficiency in their production and distribution, as well as the overexploitation of natural resources. (12) From the perspective of historical materialism, this dynamic reflects the prioritization of capital accumulation over people's basic needs. In addition, the privatization of goods and services can exacerbate inequalities, resulting in disparities in access to healthy food despite its availability.

An obvious example of this process is the displacement of local food by imported products from distant lands. As shipments cross oceans, the heartbeat of the world economy is synchronized with the quest for efficiency and capital accumulation. However, this quest is not always allied with nutrition. Fresh and regional foods, with their connection to the land and local communities, often relinquish their space to packaged and processed goods that make a long journey before reaching the table. The prioritization of profit maximization may be weaving a veil between humanity and its most basic essence: food that nourishes and connects.

Privatization, another act on the stage of globalization, rises as a potentially divisive force. Under the shadow of private property, food distribution is not exempt from the grip of inequality. Those who own the resources have the

ability to hoard, control and sell, erecting invisible walls that separate many from nutritious and accessible food. The vast diversity of food can become a luxury reserved for the few, while others struggle to meet their most basic needs. From Marx's perspective, this process can be seen as the manifestation of the inherent contradiction between the accumulation of wealth and equal access to essential resources.

It is the presence of the specters of globalization and privatization in the food industry that provokes a deeper reflection of these phenomena through the prism of Marx's historical materialism. Through this lens, they can be understood as manifestations of an intricate relationship between capital accumulation and human needs, and not just as mere economic movements. Thus, as the flavors of the world intertwine, a persistent question arises: to whom does the food we consume really belong? The answer, driven by the forces of history and economics, may carve the path to a future in which nutrition is a universal human right rather than an exclusive privilege.

#### **Conclusion**

The proposal presented in this essay, based on Marx's historical materialism, offers an alternative vision for health professionals on the phenomena of food and human nutrition, which sheds light on their interconnection with the economic and social structures of modern society. Through his focus on the production, distribution, and consumption of food in the capitalist system, Marx invites us to examine inequalities in the access to nutritious and healthy food, as well as the ideological implications of advertising and unsustainable consumption. By adopting this perspective, we can work toward more equitable and just food systems, which are aligned with Marx's vision of a society that transcends exploitation and inequality.

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