

La faim, la bagnole, le blé et nous : une dénonciation des biocarburants (Hunger, cars, wheat and us: a critique of biofuels)

Nicolino Fabrice, Editions Fayard, April 2008, 175 pages, ISBN 978 2 213 63462 3

review by **GRAIN**

In his own unique style, often caustic but always engaging, Fabrice begins by reminding us that the two ancient peasant civilisations of China and India that are the backbone of our world are in danger of completely disappearing. He then examines the conditions that spawned industrial agriculture in the developed countries and the subsequent Green Revolution in Asia and Latin America and explains why this industrial food system, in order to survive, must constantly expand and create new outlets for its agricultural products, the main one today being biofuels for cars.

The primary objective of farming is to feed the world. So what happens to the world when agricultural production is diverted from this objective? Fabrice is clear that the rush into biofuels could provoke the return of famine on a massive scale, and he is scornful of what he calls “the macabre silence of intellectuals” on this issue. He also decries the absence of information in French on biofuels and the larger agricultural transformations that it is a product of. He says that, to his knowledge, no book in French provides a comprehensive assessment of the enormous changes brought about by the Green Revolution. He finds it hard to explain why there is such a dearth of publications about an experience that disrupted the lives of hundreds of millions of human beings and that changed the rules of the game in Asia and Latin America.


The author maintains that biofuels are a “Trojan horse” for the multinational seed corporations. By claiming that the crops are destined for biofuels and not food, these corporations have been able to penetrate into markets that were closed to their GMOs. Fabrice shows, using data to back up his arguments, how the industrial system, with its patents and perfect intermingling of public and private sectors, is built to impose biofuels on the world, even if this means destroying

immense areas of forest in Indonesia, Brazil and Africa.

One of the examples he gives, based on research carried out by Sylvestre Tetchiada, a journalist in the Cameroon, shows that 108,000 hectares of land in the south of Cameroon have been planted with palm oil, with 30,000 hectares of forest being cleared between 2001 and 2006 to make way for this new “product”. The increasing demand for biodiesel is a major factor driving forward this expansion in the production of vegetable oil, as western markets compete against each other for supplies. The book shows how the whole of Africa is in the grip of biofuels fever, especially after the meeting between President Abdoulaye Wade (Senegal) and Lula (Brazil) in April 2005.

Fabrice also provides readers with important technical information, especially

with regard to the foreseeable impact of agrofuels on the climate. For example, we learn that nitrous oxide (N₂O) is a potent greenhouse gas, with a Global Warming Index (GWI) 300 times greater than carbon dioxide. For Fabrice, biofuels are in fact “necrofuels”, that is, the fuels of death, not fuels of life, as their promoters would have us believe.

The author ends on a cautiously optimistic note, suggesting that reservations expressed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which brings together governments from 30 countries, might derail the biofuels project. More recent developments, however, show that the struggle is far from over, as these governments have not diminished their support for the industry and as more and more lands and more and more food continue to be converted to the production of biofuels. 



Abdoulaye Wade, President of Senegal, greets Luis Inacio Lula da Silva and Marisa Leticia Lula da Silva, President and first lady of Brazil, during President Wade's official visit in May 2007.

