When it comes to food,” suggests Robert Paarlberg in the preface to his book Food Politics, “everybody is interested” (p. xv). This interest makes sense as a brute function of biology. At the same time food is a basic feature of cultural, economic, and political life. Yet despite food’s obvious importance, it has for long stretches been an object of only marginal interest to the social sciences. Food is mundane and of the body—hardly the stuff to excite disciplines concerned principally with things exotic and of the mind. In the last few years, however, as the four excellent and distinctive books examined here attest, food studies, and the politics of food in particular, have become increasingly fashionable areas for scholarly investigation. This development is welcome, even though many of the factors driving this growing interest, from soaring rates of chronic hunger to environmental harm associated with dominant modes of agricultural production, are not themselves any cause for celebration.

Each of the books discussed in this essay sheds important light on crucial food-related concerns, and, more importantly, has things to say about what might be done to address them. They do so through engagement with quite different subject matters. There are nevertheless some major themes that connect these books. The first has to do with governance, in its broadest sense. In a range
of ways and with differing conclusions, each of these books asks, why does the global food system look the way that it does? Which actors have power within this system, and what forms does this power take? How is this power wielded, and to what ends? The second theme has to do with the likely shape of the food system(s) of the future. This concern has both empirical and normative dimensions, and is apparent in these books through their engagement with high-profile and hotly contested public debates about such issues as food safety, global trade, corporate power, and genetic modification. What will it take, in the days ahead, to provide plentiful quantities of healthful food for all people, in ways both sustainable and just?

In discussing governance, it makes sense to begin with Paarlberg’s book, since as a matter of form and content it is quite distinct from the other three books examined here. Paarlberg’s volume is a broad introduction to key concepts and debates within global food politics, written principally for an undergraduate audience. The book opens with a couple of definitional chapters, and then offers short meditations on a series of contemporary food concerns: high food prices, hunger and famine, food aid, and obesity, among others. Each of these thematic chapters is itself approached by way of a series of leading questions. In the chapter on “The Politics of Farm Subsidies and Trade,” for instance, Paarlberg offers crisp answers to such questions as, “Do farmers in rich countries need subsidies to survive?” (p. 97) and “Did NAFTA hurt poor corn farmers in Mexico?” (p. 108). (He answers “no,” by the way, on both counts).

The book’s final chapter, on governance of the world food system, devotes a few pages each to describing key international political and scientific organizations, international NGOs, and private foundations. The bulk of the chapter, though, is given over to an analysis of the role of states. Paarlberg’s basic message here is that most of the action within the international food system happens not between but within nations. Most countries, he points out, import and export a relatively small proportion of their food, and agricultural production relies on land, water, and other assets that themselves tend to be under the ultimate control of individual states. The implication seems to be that country-level policies and other actions of governments are largely to blame for food-related challenges, and that the state typically represents the appropriate locus for efforts at reform.

The other three volumes implicitly or explicitly take issue with this relatively narrow understanding of food governance. None ignore the state, but each is more interested in governance as it occurs within transnational spaces. Moreover, collectively they argue, contra Paarlberg, that among the most important features of contemporary food provisioning is its increasingly globalized and interconnected nature. Each of the remaining books suggests that nonstate actors have been basic to the form taken by this transformation, through driving it, in the case of corporate actors, and through opposing it, in the case of two important social movements.

In the introductory chapter to their edited volume, for instance, Jennifer Simon Nicholson
Clapp and Doris Fuchs note how, beginning in the late months of 2007, food price volatility rippled around the world, sometimes with devastating effect. Such widespread volatility indicates high current levels of global agrifood integration to Clapp and Fuchs, and served to expose some of the inherent challenges associated with this relatively new food reality. Clapp and Fuchs offer evidence that transnational corporations have been at the heart of this transformation, as a way of setting up a book that is interested in the roles played and the power wielded by large corporate agrifood actors.

Corporate power, Clapp and Fuchs note, is not simply a function of market share nor balance sheet. Rather, they urge an analysis of corporate power in three dimensions: 1) instrumental power, indicated by an ability to directly influence policy processes or the decisions of other actors; 2) structural power, granted by the indirect influence corporations have by virtue of their important economic positions within countries, or by ongoing changes in global governance that increasingly allow private actors to set rules directly; and 3) discursive power, wielded by corporations as they seek to frame concerns and gain political and public legitimacy. The remainder of the volume offers a series of case studies of corporate action and influence. Each chapter employs, to varying effect, some aspect of Clapp and Fuchs’ power analytic. The case studies are organized in two parts. The first part offers a wide-ranging selection covering retail corporations and the development of private safety and quality standards, food marketing and certification standards in Southeast Asia, corporate influence over the Codex Alimentarius process, and the politics of United States food aid. The second part groups together four chapters focused on aspects of food biotechnology.

Taken together, these case studies provide compelling evidence that Paarlberg’s quite strict focus on the governance role of the state is far too narrow, and that the contours of the global food system are increasingly determined, in sometimes surprising ways, by corporate actors. At the same time other actors clearly matter, too. Matthew Reed’s Rebels for the Soil, and Rachel Schurman and William A. Munro’s Fighting for the Future of Food, also look at governance beyond the state, though of a different sort, via the work of two different transnational social movements. Reed examines what he describes as the global organic food and farming movement; Schurman and Munro explore the work of activists opposed to the more widespread development and deployment of genetically modified organisms. Both studies offer rich analyses of key players, trends, and motivations within these movements. Each also offers important insights beyond the arena of food studies for those interested in how effectively to study social movements, and how those movements themselves can improve their effectiveness.

Reed begins by pointing out that organic farming means quite different things to different people. For some it is a technical system of food production, for others a branding opportunity, and for yet others an ideal(-ized) future (or past) to which to aspire. His work suggests that there is value in moving beyond
such narrow views of organics, to appreciate it as a social movement that has emerged from the work of an identifiable constellation of individuals and groups. In Reed’s telling, the organics movement is, like most social movements, a shifting coalition of mutating, sometimes tenuous, and at times competing interests and ideas. Still, there have been important moments of relative coherence, and the transnational organics movement can be described as having passed through three distinct phases. In its first phase—the movement’s “prehistory,” as Reed describes it (p. 23)—the organics movement was characterized by a loosely connected network of farmers, researchers, and enthusiasts scattered around the globe, with only a nascent sense that their work was contributing to some collective effort. This approach changed, Reed suggests, through the 1930s and 1940s, when the organics movement became more explicitly a scientific enterprise concerned with perfecting and demonstrating the effectiveness of organic farming techniques. The movement’s mandate and tactics then expanded a little during a third phase that began in the 1970s, as some activists pushed rich country governments to support regulatory standards, for instance, and some supermarkets began to make room for labeled organic food.

The organics movement has certainly had broad impact. Organic agriculture has provided a crucial meeting place for a range of concerns that might otherwise be seen as only tenuously related, from environmental protection to global trade reform to struggles for agrarian land rights. The organics movement has also provided significant and, as Reed sees it, important opposition to the ongoing industrialization of agriculture. Reed suggests, though, that the movement throughout its history has missed important opportunities to be even more effective, largely by focusing too much on the technical aspects of organic production to the relative exclusion of the political work needed to establish organics as a broad-based social alternative to the mainstream food system. Reed’s book closes by postulating that a fourth phase of the organics movement is now becoming apparent. This fourth phase is informed by increasing levels of political awareness. The movement remains, however, wrought by inherited tensions. It is a movement that still struggles to move beyond its technical leanings, finding it difficult to fully actuate a growing concern for environmental well-being and social justice. It has an uneasy relationship with commodification of organic production and produce, with some in the movement treating commodification as an essential tool and others as an unwarranted selling out.

By contrast, resistance to the rise of food biotechnology represents, in Schurman and Munro’s compelling and eminently readable account, a movement with a much more coherent agenda, based around a strongly held oppositional “lifeworld” (p. xvi). On the one hand biotechnologists and their supporters have largely operated based on a worldview in which any technological development is an inherent good, in which each new genetic modification is a discrete tool to be evaluated based on its ability to help address a discrete problem, and in which the unfettered market is an appropriate and final arbiter of value. On the other hand, anti-genetic modification activists have focused on
food biotechnology as a unitary and deeply inconsistent technological enterprise, and have adopted a series of normative concerns inextricably opposed to anything perceived to represent or portend the commodification of life, the use of science for private gain, potential irreversible environmental effects, and negative effects on smallholder farmers in the global South.

The anti-genetic modification movement can be deemed a failure, if the measure of the movement’s effectiveness is halting the spread of genetically modified crops. Schurman and Munro contend, though, along with some of the closing chapters in Clapp and Fuchs’ volume, that the anti-biotech movement has mattered a great deal to how genetically modified organisms are understood by the general public, to the establishment of country-level and international regulatory frames, and to the profits of the large corporations that are the technology’s chief developers. In winning such victories, though, Schurman and Munro suggest that descent ever-deeper into mutually exclusive lifeworlds has fostered rage on all sides of the food biotechnology debate. Anti-biotech actors are enraged by corporations that they argue are cynically pushing a flawed technology for profit. Food biotechnology developers are enraged by cynical activists standing in the way of viable options for the alleviation of environmental distress and human suffering. Ultimately, say Schurman and Munro, while anti-biotech activists have opened up important space for the consideration of alternatives to a blanket industrialization of global agriculture, the strident and deeply polarized nature of the food biotechnology debate is now operating to the detriment of opportunities for development of a more just and sustainable agricultural future.

The second major theme that connects these volumes is the shape of things to come. Again, Paarlberg’s book stands apart. His is a book with a clear agenda. It is a volume, as Paarlberg puts it in the preface, aimed at “rebalancing” contemporary discussions about food and agricultural production (p. xvi). Paarlberg is concerned that these discussions have been skewed by a well-meaning though fundamentally misinformed group of wealthy-country authors and activists. It is now commonplace, he notes, to hear calls for systems of food provisioning based on small diversified farms using low levels of external inputs, that privilege organic foods, and that seek to limit global trade in seeds, chemicals, and food products. Paarlberg views such “food fashions” (p. xvii) as dangerous and anti-scientific. Later in the book he asks, “Could the world be fed with organically grown food?” (p. 147). The short answer, for Paarlberg, is “no.” Current high crop yields are made possible with synthetic nitrogen, he argues, and to replace that synthetic nitrogen with animal manure would require space and forage for an additional 7–8 billion cattle. Far better, then, is perfection of the agricultural project begun with the industrial revolution and accelerated with the green revolution, through such means as greater use of genetically modified crops.

Yet such questions regarding the productivity or the relative environmental and social costs and benefits of various forms of farming are not as straight-
forward as Paarlberg’s assessment would have one believe. For one thing, Paarlberg’s assessment turns on an oppositional framing based itself on a contested set of categories. Organic agriculture means, as Reed’s book makes clear, many different things. It can certainly mean agricultural production that makes limited use of scientific understandings or technological inputs, as remains the case on many of the world’s smallholder farms in the world’s poorest countries. Nobody would want that as the basis for global food production. Yet organic agriculture—or, better, low external input agriculture, which is a category of agricultural production that can include controlled use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides—can also be highly scientific and technological; it is simply science and technology turned, tellingly, to something other than an industrial end. It can also be a highly productive agriculture, though quite how productive is a matter of some debate.

Just how productive different forms of agriculture can be, under what conditions, and with what environmental and social implications, are conversations worth having. They are conversations that are shut down, however, by rhetorical efforts to pit the worst rendering of one form of agriculture against the best of another. Such efforts have become loaded and imprecise ways to understand the options that lie ahead as the world struggles to feed itself sustainably. Schurman and Munro close their book by suggesting that deep-rooted commitments to immovable ideas and claims can be great for the effectiveness of a movement and can open important space for alternatives to the status quo. Ultimately, though, the construction of alternatives may require a loosening of strict positions. This lesson is as true for those fundamentally opposed to all uses of food biotechnology, say, as it is for those who believe genetic modification the only way forward. It is, in other words, an important lesson for all concerned with the future of food.