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Who's Growing You?

Michael Carolan

If the adage "You are what you eat" still holds true today, then we must realize, in this day of the global food system, that someone out there is growing you. In this age of the "world steer," we consume food that is increasingly without a face, without a name, and without a place. "We" have become the world steer. And as our food system becomes ever more disembedded, so too do we—from those who grow us, from nature and inevitably, from ourselves. Associated with this global food system are additional social and environmental costs whose presence is frequently masked by its very disembeddedness. We cannot see how the system's dependence on fossil fuels has polluted our air, or how its reliance on chemically intensive practices has contaminated our water, or how erosion and unsustainable cultivation processes have destroyed thousands of tons of topsoil. We are blind to the paradoxes this system perpetuates—such as the injustice of some people in this world having too much food while others do not have enough. We must, therefore, begin to ask ourselves whether this alienating, ubiquitous, unjust food system is our only option? Is this really the best we can do? Our current global food network will probably never completely disappear. But there's no reason why alternative food systems cannot emerge to complement and compete with it.

Commodity specialization, "free trade," and ultimately our global food system are rationalized by the theory of comparative advantage—first devised by David Ricardo in the early nineteenth century. According to this theory, countries with different technologies and resources will incur different relative costs when they produce the same goods. If they specialize in the production of those commodities for which they are most suited (socially, economically, culturally, and agronomically), then they have a "comparative advantage." If they trade freely with others to obtain other goods in which others have comparative advantage, then everyone wins. In practice, once you specialize you no longer have the "choice" of not trading—thus you lose independence, self-sufficiency, and ultimately a slice of freedom. If the costs associated with a global food system were to be internalized, instead of being ignored (which is becoming increasingly difficult), then this notion of regional comparative advantage might very well break down. For when one looks closer, the full costs of our current global food system are vast.

Comparative advantage does not, for example, address costs such as the ecological and social harm incurred by the extensive use of fossil fuels to ship

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food across the globe and the chemicals used to produce and preserve these foods. It forgets about subsidies (such as for fossil fuels and cheap irrigation water) that go into producing many of our food commodities. And it ignores the erosion of rural social and cultural life resulting from the dwindling number of farms throughout the countryside. When all costs are accounted for, the so-called "comparative advantage" may be an economic fallacy based on nothing more than fancy book-keeping and an ill-conceived view of modernity.

Not understanding the true costs of our global food system has allowed production to be concentrated in monocultures and confinement systems. Failing to internalize the full costs of fossil fuels has created a system that depends on pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, machinery, irrigation, packaging, and refrigeration. This has produced a widespread degradation of soil and water resources, ultimately creating a global dependency that will be hard to shake.

Consider the following examples. Research in Sweden compared the energy consumption of locally produced carrots and imported carrots and discovered that the latter required twice as much energy as the local carrots to get to Swedish grocery stores. In the United States, six to twelve cents of every dollar spent on food goes to transportation costs. This is not surprising, since food within the United States travels, on average, approximately 1,500 miles before it ends up on a kitchen table. Similar studies have likewise been done in South Africa, the Caribbean, Mexico, and Australia, all coming to similar conclusions—and distances are only increasing. Another Swedish study calculated the food miles accumulated in a single Swedish breakfast—which included an apple, bread, butter, cheese, coffee, cream, orange juice, and sugar. The total mileage estimate equaled the circumference of the earth. These growing food miles help explain why some people have too much food while others have too little: more food is being taken longer distances from where it's grown, often leaving the growers with too little to eat themselves.

Switching to locally produced food items can greatly reduce the energy used in getting food from farm to family, thus minimizing a food system's total environmental impact. A British study showed that purchasing local apples produced an almost 3,000 percent reduction in energy use and 87 percent lower carbon dioxide emissions compared with purchasing apples imported from New Zealand. A study of U.S. food consumption (focusing particularly on the state of Iowa) drew similar conclusions. The study showed that growing 10 percent more food for individual state consumption would produce savings ranging from 280 to 346 thousand gallons of fuel, depending on the system and truck type—a total fuel cost saving (based on June 2001 fuel prices) of between U.S.$440,3777 and U.S.$547,393. Such a reduction in fossil fuel would lead to a decrease in carbon dioxide emissions of between 6.7 and 7.9 million pounds.

It's true when they say that buying locally grown food has its advantages, not merely for freshness but also for environmental savings. For instance, Sustain, a green research group in London, estimates that 127 calories of fuel are expended per calorie of California lettuce flow to Britain. Much of this cost is hidden from consumers because international trade treaties provide tax exemptions for air fuel. Under the Kyoto Protocol, carbon emissions from international transport are not calculated into the overall national carbon figures. Officials argue that it

would be too difficult to know to whom such emissions should be assigned. But it's no coincidence that Western nations are the most involved in air-transporting their food.

Besides the environmental costs of the current food system, there are also social costs. While these may be more difficult to "internalize," this does not mean they should be ignored. For example, when someone reaches for an apple—whether they live in Sri Lanka, Tokyo, or New York—it will likely be an apple grown in China (since it's now the world's leading apple producer). But an apple is not all that's being reached for. Like all food, that apple has an inside meaning. It represents the global agricultural complex and its effects on our rural landscape. It may also represent the displacement of peasants from their land, forced labor, inhospitable working conditions, and the like.

But the food system's most abhorrent social costs are the social injustices it produces. Global food conglomerates realize, on average, at least a 20 percent return on their investments. This occurs while even the world's most profitable farms have only 3 percent or 4 percent returns. The rest of the world's farmers earn much less. The global corporate giant Phillip Morris, for example, receives the equivalent of ten cents for every dollar spent on food in the United States.

If so much money can be made in the food sector, why have so many farmers been pushed out of production agriculture? By developing local or regional food systems, we could help farmers reap a higher percentage of each dollar spent on food. This would keep money and farmers from leaving rural communities, and provide farmers with an alternative to the conventional food system and its large-scale, specialized production agricultural model. We could provide farmers a way out of the "get big or get out" scenario that has so typified agriculture for the past half century, thus allowing them to "get out of getting big."

When we examine the Western countries, we discover that developing markets for locally produced foods in these nations could diminish markets for foods grown in poorer countries, countries where the growers themselves go hungry because they are underpaid and thus poorly fed. This is frequently the case in countries where labor is cheap, labor laws are minimal (and often ignored), and environmental regulations are rarely enforced. We also find in developing countries farmers by the droves abandoning agriculture entirely. They are doing so because they cannot compete with the heavily subsidized foods flooding their markets from the Western nations, backed up by trade rules and International Monetary Fund conditions that force these developing countries to keep their markets "open." Meanwhile, the United States has passed a farm bill that will increase subsides to the largest agri-businesses by U.S.$18 billion a year for the next ten years.

Poor farmers in developing countries are struggling to buy even conventional seeds. And GM (genetically modified) crops may make these inequalities worse, at least in the short run. Overproduction in the West—thanks to biotechnology breakthroughs—coupled with an economic and political order that outlaws trade barriers but allows subsidies to continue, will increase the amount of food unloaded in developing nations at prices greater than many can afford. This will

further undermine the economic viability of farmers in those countries while increasing the vulnerability of the rural poor.

Much of the "too much" that we in the Western world eat could be more efficiently (and some could argue more justly) used if we only rearranged the structures of production and consumption. Take, for instance, the large amounts of animal products and alcoholic beverages are consumed in the United States. These involve the indirect consumption of large amounts of grains in the form of animal feed, and hops and barley for alcoholic beverages. Each U.S citizen consumes per year, on average, 66 pounds of beef, 44 pounds of pork, 66 pounds of poultry, 573 pounds of milk, 35 pounds of eggs, and 36 gallons of beer. The consumption of these grain-intensive products could be significantly reduced without negatively affecting the nutritional quality of the average North American's diet.

Thus, we must bring the issue of justice—particularly global justice—to the forefront of any discussion of food and agriculture. Global food conglomerates may believe they are making the world more just. But for them, justice is "just us"—they see the world through a narrow economic lens (which heavily discounts the environment and ignores social costs). Justice must be broader than this: it should offer choices and provide opportunities. It should recognize the true costs associated with the current food system. It should promote a moral economy. And, it should build a sense of community, cooperation, and fellowship.

Of course, this will require more than merely words. It will also require action—by consumers, by producers, and by those in positions to create meaningful policy. This will involve educating consumers across the globe about the full costs of their food—both environmental and social costs. It will require developing new partnerships: urban and rural, producer and consumer, government and advocate, expert and layperson, scientific knowledge and local knowledge, and so forth.

Some progress has occurred. A surprisingly high percentage of the world's food does not come from conventional farms. According to a UN report, approximately 15 percent is grown in urban areas. Hong Kong, for example, one of the densest-populated cities in the world, raises two-thirds of its own poultry, a sixth of its pigs, and half of its vegetables. Farming within such densely populated quarters has its risks (such as when sewage water was used to irrigate urban crops and led to the spread of cholera in Peru in 1992). But when properly managed, such strategies can prove to be both environmentally and socially sound.

Here's another example: in northern Darfur, one of the driest areas of Sudan, 14,000 households have developed strategies to increase crop yields simply by collecting water in innovative ways, and by introducing donkey ploughs and manure fertilizing techniques. Durfur farmers have since doubled the area they can cultivate and yields have increased by as much as 400 percent. Alternatives to the monolithic just-us global food system are out there; we just need to look for them.

If "you are what you eat," then someone out there must be growing you. Should that responsibility be given to the Phillip Morrises, the Monsantos, and

the ConAgras of the world? I would much rather my food had a face, a name and a place. I want to know who's growing me. And I want to be sure they are doing it justly. Don't you?

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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