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What's For Dinner?

Adam Smith promised that the division of labor would increase productivity and lead to a general increase in the wealth of a nation. Karl Polanyi warned that the attempt to extend the market system would come crashing down and destroy society. These and other writers and filmmakers have engaged in a dialogue about topics in political economy. Nowhere have we seen these conversations play out more dramatically than in the food industry. Since the agricultural and industrial revolutions, we have seen farmer productivity skyrocket; as a result, in 1900 over 41% of the population in the United States was employed in agriculture, while today it has dropped below 2% (USDA website). At the same time, the food industry has become far removed from society, so that Michael Pollan can marvel at the question he poses in the opening of *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, "How did we ever get to a point where we need investigative journalists to tell us where our food comes from?" (1). To answer this question, Pollan looks at four distinct types of meals – what he calls industrial corn, industrial organic, sustainable organic, and hunter-gatherer – and traces each back to its origin. Realizing that every action has a consequence, Pollan explores the many impacts that each food chain has on the environment, workers, producers, communities, and consumers. This paper will explore what Pollan has to add to the dialogue among political economists, and then look to the future with perspectives from this conversation in political economy.

Industrial Corn

Pollan opens by exploring what he calls industrial corn. He defines the industrial food system as one where an investigative journalist is required to figure out exactly what we're eating. In many ways, we can find elements of Adam Smith's argument in this industrial food

system. For Smith, productivity is the means through which wealth is increased. Smith would have been quite impressed with American farmers, who have become the most productive human beings to ever live (Pollan 34). George Naylor, an Iowa farmer whom Pollan interviews, has specialized in the production of corn and soybeans. Through specialization, the less than 2 million American farmers that remain today are able to produce enough food to feed the rest of us (Pollan 34).

Smith might also look with approval at the way that corn has been made into a commodity. Pollan traces the history of corn distribution to the time when it was bought and sold in burlap sacks (59). These sacks more often than not had the name of the farm, and in a way, the burlap sack linked the consumer to the farmer. Once railways and grain elevators became popular, the sacks became a problem, as it was easier to pump corn through a spigot. The breakthrough came in 1856 when the Chicago Board of Trade instituted a grading system. Now, any Number 2 corn was guaranteed to be just as good as any other Number 2 corn. It no longer mattered where the corn came from or where it was going to. Also, with minimal standards, farmers no longer had to worry about the quality much. They could focus on increasing their yield without worrying about who had more plump fruit or juicier vegetables.

Focusing on greater productivity and efficiency has led to drastic increases in the productivity of American farmers. In this country, we now enjoy plentiful food at very low costs. And the food story ends there for Smith and many others as a success. But Pollan, as well as political economists that come after Smith, realizes that there is more to this story.

“When it comes to food, nature can make a mockery of the classical economics of supply and demand” (49). Due to increased productivity, small farmers have to deal with the plague of low prices. Typically, as prices fall, a firm will decrease its output, close factories,

or cut jobs. But the economics of a family farm is different than that of a firm. In order for the farmer to maintain his standard of living, he needs to plant another acre when prices fall. This only exacerbates the problem by driving prices even lower. Thus we find farmers producing a great deal of a lot of corn and going broke doing so.

These low prices have come at other high costs as well. For example, Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), or feedlots, produce a great deal of meat at a very low cost. However, according to Wendell Berry, CAFOs take a neat solution and split it into two problems: instead of using animal waste to enrich soil, CAFOs have an enormous animal waste problem and farmers spend great amounts of money for fertilizers. Although CAFOs make economic sense from Smith's standpoint, they are an ecological absurdity. Also, CAFOs found that it is inefficient for cows to eat grass, so cows are trained to eat corn and then pumped with antibiotics so they don't get sick. Again, an absurdity in the name of efficiency.

Given Marx's discussion of the commodity fetishism, he might be concerned with the grading of corn. It allows people to buy corn without any knowledge of where it came from, and it allows farmers to sell corn without any idea as to where it is going. Here, ignorance is necessary for one to buy into the total economy. Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism portrays the commodity in a new light that allows for consumption with a deeper consciousness that is not compatible in the industrial food system.

Famous for his description of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption, Thorstein Veblen also enters into the dialogue about industrial food. First, we see how farmers have entered a system of status: "But in Iowa, bragging rights go to the man with the biggest yield, even if it's bankrupting him" (55). Also, we see conspicuous consumption come into play when food reaches the supermarkets: "as Tyson understood, you want to be

selling something more than a commodity, something more like a service: novelty, convenience, status, fortification, lately even medicine” (96).

Lastly, a discussion of industrial food would be incomplete without Polanyi. Pollan suggests that the United States suffers from a ‘national eating disorder’ because food is not embedded in our culture. This national eating disorder has paved the way for the rise of the industrial food system. It also makes us vulnerable. For example, when the 1977 Senate committee set dietary goals warning about red meat, Americans cut back, and when the Atkins era of carbohydrate phobia arose in 2002, bread disappeared from American dinner tables. “Certainly it would never have happened in a culture in possession of deeply rooted traditions surrounding food and eating” (Pollan 2). In other words, a society with an embedded food economy is much more secure.

Big Organic

The next meal on Pollan’s agenda brings him to the world of organic foods. These are the foods that can be found at a Whole Foods, where food items are labeled as “certified organic” or “humanely raised” or “free range.” The organic world is a challenge to the Smithian idea of the economy, where only prices matter for exchange. “In the industrial food economy, virtually the only information that travels along the food chain linking producers and consumers is price” (136). Pollan notes that this price information travels both ways, and so farmers who get the message that consumers only care about price will only care about yield, and the food economy is reinforced. The organic movement attempts to convey more information down this chain. Perhaps Marx would approve that some people have realized that commodities are not such simple things, but rather strange things with far reaching consequences that are not immediately obvious.

Polanyi might see the organic movement as the countermovement to the industrial system. Especially at the beginning, the organic movement sought to protect society from the market system. People who were concerned with their livelihoods desired to protect themselves as well as the labor and land that produces their food.

However, Pollan concludes that now that organic has become an \$11 billion industry, 'organic' really conveys very little information. Once agribusiness got into the organic game, they wanted organic to be as lenient as possible so they could make anything organic. Thus big organic convinced the USDA that organic food could come from factory farms, include products from cows that did not graze on pastures, and contain synthetic chemicals. Under these rules, Joan Dye Gussow was able to demonstrate that a Certified Organic Twinkie was "entirely possible" (156). Echoing a theme from the lecture by Richard Wolff, regulation by the government becomes useless when profits are at stake because big businesses always seem to win.

Since 'organic' has lost meaning, organic companies have found it necessary to invest a great deal of time and energy into advertising their most pleasant, small family farms on the labels of their products. Pete and Gerry's Organic Eggs, a 'big organic' company, has succumbed to this journalistic rat race. On the back labels on the egg cartons there is a picture of Edna, the official spokes-chicken of the company, who reminds the consumer about how much she enjoys her 'cage free' life. As explained on the company's website:

Our Nellie's enjoy roaming freely about our cage free barns. A typical day in the life of a Nellie's hen includes scratching around with her friends, meeting them at the feed trough for a delicious taste of fantastic grain, and happily laying her eggs in the comfort of one of our nests. At night our Nellie's quietly gather where they please and slumber with the peaceful sounds of contentment.

I had the chance to speak with a former employee of Pete and Gerry's, who painted a very different picture of the company. He said it was "appalling how many chickens they fit into the barn." In his opinion, "the company does not care about the chickens, and it's frustrating that customers see the cute labels of the chickens and really have no idea what's going on" (interview 12/9/2008). It becomes clear why Pollan concludes that big organic may not be a whole lot different than industrial food chains. Certainly organic food leaves much to be desired.

Beyond Organic

Disillusioned with his findings about organic food, Pollan goes to meet Joel Salatin, a 'beyond organic' farmer, who runs the Polyface Farm. Joel calls himself a grass farmer because he recognizes that all energy comes from the sun, and the sun's energy uses grass as an intermediary to run the farm. At Polyface, everything is interdependent. The cows eat the grass, and three days later the chickens come to eat the fly larvae in the cow manure; the insects provide up to one third of their diet (210). The chicken manure is rich in nitrogen, which serves as a fertilizer for the grass. For Joel, the farm is more like an organism than a machine. Joel's is an alternative perspective, incompatible with the Smithian story. "Take the issue of scale. I could sell a whole lot more chickens and eggs than I do. They're my most profitable items, and the market is telling me to produce more of them. Operating under the industrial paradigm, I could boost production however much I wanted – just buy more chicks and more feed, crank up that machine. But in a biological system you can never do just one thing, and I couldn't add many more chickens without messing up something else" (231).

Joel Salatin does not buy into the neoclassical idea of the market for the food system. Hog plants serve as an example of contrasting ideas of efficiency. In industrial hog plants,

piglets are weaned ten days after birth because they gain weight faster on drug fortified feed than on sow's milk. But the pigs still have the desire to suck and chew, and so they chew on the tail of the pig in front of them. Most pigs would fend off a chewer, but these demoralized pigs do not. Sick pigs are not economically efficient, so they are often clubbed to death on the spot. In order to prevent tail chewing, the USDA recommends clipping of most of the tail, but not the entire tail. Why? Because the idea is to make the tail incredibly sensitive, so that even a demoralized pig will struggle to resist the immense pain. As irrational and bizarre as this whole system seems, it is economically logical in the eyes of efficiency. A different idea of efficiency reigns at Polyface Farm, where ecological wisdom and sustainability are factors too.

While Smith did warn that there was a role for the state in order to prevent humans from becoming "as stupid and ignorant" as possible, Joel Salatin takes this caveat to a new level. He might argue that the government is encouraging farmers to be "stupid and ignorant" in their methods of production. Polyface farm is a very complex operation, and a great deal of intelligence and local knowledge in agriculture are important, whereas the industrial farms no longer use complexity, but rather find every solution "in a plastic bottle" (220). Salatin challenges that it is a foolish culture that entrusts its food supply to simpletons (221).

Salatin also refuses to ship any products anywhere. Instead, each Thursday, people come from the surrounding area to pick up freshly slaughtered chickens. Sure, the prices are higher than at a supermarket, but Salatin claims "you can buy honestly priced food or you can buy irresponsibly priced food" (243). Pollan found reasons why people come out to get Polyface food: there was more trust, they had built relationships, and the quality of food was far superior to supermarkets. Basically, this food economy is still embedded in society.

And better than USDA rules or regulation, the transparency of a local economy best insures humanly and cleanly processed chickens.

At the end of this section of the book, Pollan engages the question of freedom in the economy. For someone like Deidre McCloskey, the market system and freedom are compatible and perhaps even necessary for each other. For Pollan, these local agriculture relationships are an attempt to opt out of the market system because “so much about life in a global economy feels as though it has passed beyond the individual’s control.” Wendell Berry argues that the total economy brings about destruction and slavery (Berry). From the consumer’s perspective, Berry claims that ignorance is required for the total economy, and that consumers forgo important information when participating in the total economy, as far as where food is produced, and how, and what is in it. From the farmer’s perspective, the market dictates what they should produce. For Naylor, the market tells him to produce corn and soybeans, and so he does (Pollan 54). He has forgone the freedom to choose what to produce. Joel Salatin, who has opted out of the market system, seems to have more freedom in that he can chose to produce what he wants and at what quantities.

Hunter and Gatherer

While acknowledging its impracticality, Pollan uses the last part of the book to prepare a meal by hunting and gathering. This is the shortest food chain and, in Pollan’s opinion, the perfect meal because he know where every part of the meal came from and how it was prepared. He has reached the highest degree of consciousness of his meal.

Perhaps unknowingly, Pollan is again engaging dialogue with the classics in political economy. As he had to learn, it takes a great deal of knowledge and skill to succeed at hunting wild boar and gathering edible mushrooms. By engaging in productive activity without entering the market system, he is building evidence for Polanyi to show that

economies existed before the rise of the self-regulating market economy. This point is crucial to the argument from *The Great Transformation*, which claims that the self-regulating market economy was born at a certain point in time, and it was preceded by different economic activity that was embedded in society. Adam Smith views these activities as non economies. While it would be impractical to regularly hunt and gather meals in today's society, Pollan seems to suggest that this is indeed another type of food system right along with industrial, big organic, and beyond organic.

Looking Ahead: Interpretation from Political Economy

It was not until I traveled to Tanzania that I experienced a short food chain. It was there that, for the first time, I ate fresh fruits right off the trees and saw my dinner running around in the morning. Despite the vast amounts of chicken that I have eaten during my lifetime, I did not learn how to kill and prepare it until I lived in Tanzania. It was then that I realized my ignorance as far as food and I first experienced the deep satisfaction of eating in fuller consciousness with regard to my food. My experience in Tanzania left me asking many questions about how to eat in fuller consciousness in the United States, and this book along with the topics discussed in the course have shed some light on the questions.

Farmers' markets, and eating locally in general, shorten the food chain and provide an alternative to the industrial food economy. In Polanyi's terms, farmers' markets are more embedded into the local community than industrial systems and supermarkets. Pollan also explores the shortcomings of organic foods. While well intentioned to pass down more information than just price, big organic labels largely miss the point and leave much to be desired.

Most of all, I have learned to ask questions. These ideas were reinforced in *Fast Food Nation* as well. I learned to think about how food arrived on the plate; there are health,

labor, environmental, and ethical factors that are all affected by food chains. Surprisingly, even something as simple and routine as eating can have immense effects on our world.

We have a choice, to eat in ignorance or in fuller consciousness. A total economy, where prices are the only information passed down the food chain, requires a great deal of ignorance. Eating in a fuller consciousness requires a stark shift in the way many Americans think about food.

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