

# THE FOOD SYSTEM AND A ROLE FOR ECOLOGICAL ETHICS

By Isaac Kreisman

The ethical questions presented by the current globalized system of food production, distribution, and consumption are vast in number and complexity. They are deeply intertwined with issues of imperialism, environmental destruction, inequality, and democracy: in short, the problems of the food system are inseparable from the natural and political-economic context in which it exists. My initial goal in this project was to explore how a coherent philosophy, or systematic theory, could help provide a foundation for fixing a food system that leaves nearly one billion starving and an equal number overweight.

The assemblage of action and discussion around food and agriculture, loosely identified as ‘the food movement’ or, perhaps more accurately, a variety of ‘food movements,’ is united on the premise that the current food system needs to change. However the changes proposed are often contradictory, taking different forms in different locations and within different socio-economic groups. For example, while many activists across the globe rally against genetically engineered seeds (GMOs), the Gates Foundation collaborates with agro-chemical firms to broaden the reach of GMOs in Africa.

To think through this complex situation, my larger project has been oriented around addressing three general questions: how does the global food system function now?, how did it develop?, and how can moral philosophy help us understand how we should act in this context? What I found was that the answer to the objective question of how things are has tremendous bearing on the normative question of how we should act. In this paper, I will argue for a certain role for ethics to play in the transformation of the food system. Specifically, I will argue that ethics,

grounded in ecology, must be a catalyst for systematic transformation and not just a personal guide for navigating one's current range of options in daily decision-making.

My research has involved two categories of literature. The first category includes popular and academic works on the food system of the post-WWII era, addressing issues of agriculture, political economy, health, and the environment. I have focused on this time period because the current problems facing the food system are very much situated in the context of this era, given the role of the United States in the global balance of power, the growth of agro-chemical companies as part of industrialization for WWII, and the emergence and proliferation of neoliberalism both in theory and in practice.

The second category of literature I have used in my research is philosophical. As a guide, I have chosen the work of Norwegian philosopher and activist Arne Naess. Naess, who died in 2009 at the age of 96, was Norway's only professor of philosophy until 1954 and exercised an enormous influence over the country's intellectual milieu. His thinking is ecological in the most literal sense: it is rooted in an understanding of the interconnectedness and dynamism of earth's entities and processes. While 'ecological' is often used to mean 'earth-focused,' I do not read Naess as a philosopher whose theories demand the prioritization of non-human needs, but rather one who asks that we re-examine the division between caring for humans and caring for "the environment." Therefore, in this paper, I also use 'ecological' in this holistic way, distinct from the common use of "environmental."

In order to understand what role philosophical theory can or should play, the first task is to outline the context of the food system we are confronting. Most simply, food is a commodity, and the food system is highly consolidated. Today, the food economy can be represented as something like an hourglass, with a relatively large number of farm workers and consumers on either end, and a small number of distributors and processors in the middle.<sup>1</sup>

The scale of the companies in the center of this hourglass is colossal: Cargill, for example, is the world's largest privately held corporation.<sup>2</sup> It is one of three companies that control 90% of global grain trade, one of three companies controlling 71% of soybean crushing around the world, one of four companies controlling 83.5%

---

1 Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved* (New York: Melville House, 2007), 12-13.

2 Michael Pollan. *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006, 63.

of beef packing in the U.S., and one of four companies controlling 66% of pork packing in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Consolidation has occurred in land ownership as well, with seven million separate farms in the U.S. in 1935 shrinking to 1.9 million by 1999, and similar trends occurring around the globe. Consolidation in agriculture is not new. The railroads, for example, wielded outsized power as the first middlemen in the U.S. between farmers and market access.<sup>4</sup> The global scale of the modern agro-corporation, though, is truly unprecedented.

The commodification of food came with this consolidation of the food system. By this I mean that, with agriculture incorporated into the capitalist market, the market pressures on these conglomerates to produce profits dictate each stage of the food system. For farmers, this has resulted in a reduction in their power, and a subsequent reduction in their income, with a steadily declining share of the market price of food going to the farmer.<sup>5</sup>

For consumers, this consolidation and commodification has meant an increasing vulnerability to the volatility of global food markets, with the number of hungry people doubling since 1974 despite an overabundance of food.<sup>6</sup> This vulnerability to market fluctuations resulted, for example, in massive protests in 2008 throughout Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia when food prices spiked. Yet the policies that created this vulnerability have continued despite the recent upheavals; this was a crisis for the world's poor, not for the food system's largest players. As prices soared at the end of 2007, quarterly profits for Cargill rose 86%, for Monsanto 45%, and for Archer Daniels Midland by 42%.<sup>7</sup>

For the environment, this situation has resulted in a plethora of challenges. For example, the agricultural sector's heavy reliance on non-renewable energy sources leaves it as a chief contributor to global climate change. Intensive fertilizer use and highly concentrated livestock operations have caused groundwater contamination, and runoff of excess nutrients

---

3 Eric Holt-Gimenez, Raj Patel, and Annie Shattuck, *Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2009, 18.

4 William D. Heffernan. "Concentration of Ownership in Agriculture." In *Hungry for Profit*. Ed. Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel. 63. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

5 Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*, 104.

6 Holt-Gimenez, Patel, and Shattuck, *Food Rebellions*, PAGE!?

7 Holt-Gimenez, Patel, and Shattuck, *Food Rebellions*, PAGE!?

has been detrimental to lake and river ecosystems, as demonstrated by the large 'dead zone' in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

This consolidation and commodification has also meant that attempts to opt out of this system by, for example, purchasing local and organic food, have been met with limited concrete success, as the market demands on local producers are still dictated by the major global players that are able to set the political-economic 'rules.' The 1960's counter-culture's attempt to create ecological alternatives, a lineage that has given us "certified organic," has been almost entirely incorporated into mainstream capitalist agriculture. The U.S. board setting the standards for certified organic includes, for example, many representatives from corporate interests among its fifteen members, including from General Mills, Whole Foods, and Campbell's Soup.<sup>9</sup>

It has been argued that this system is necessary to meet the world's needs. This claim, though, is unfounded. A 2007 University of Michigan study examined 293 examples comparing sustainable organic and conventional agriculture, and found that, in the most likely scenario, a switch to organic farming would actually result in a 50% increase in global yields. Even in the most conservative scenario, a switch would cause only a slight decline in yields, still producing 2,641 kcal per person, still well above the healthy intake level for adults.<sup>10</sup> The ineffectiveness of chemical-intensive agriculture is not a new revelation, though. In the early 1960's biologist Rachel Carson extensively documented not only the ecological consequences of agro-chemicals, but also their often useless, and sometimes counterproductive, role in controlling pests.<sup>11</sup>

It is with this understanding, of a food system that is neither inevitable nor a reflection of human needs, that I would like to consider

---

8 John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff. "Liebig, Marx, and the Depletion of Soil Fertility: Relevance for Today's Agriculture." *Hungry for Profit*. Ed. Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 54.

9 Stephanie Strom, "Has 'Organic' Been Oversized?," *The New York Times*. July 7, 2012, accessed July 8, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/business/organic-food-purists-worry-about-big-companies-influence.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/business/organic-food-purists-worry-about-big-companies-influence.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

10 Catherine Badgley, Jeremy Moghtader, Eileen Quintero, Emily Zakem, M. Jahi Chappell, Katia Avilés-Vázquez, Andrea Samulon and Ivette Perfecto (2007). Organic agriculture and the global food supply. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, 22, pp 86-108 doi:10.1017/S1742170507001640.

11 Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.

ethics and a framework for reimagining ecological relationships. In looking at Arne Naess's work, I will focus in particular on the methodology for which he argued, the view of interconnectedness that anchors this methodology, and the ethics that follow from it.

For Naess, ontology, methodology, and ethics, or the way things are, the way we should approach them, and the norms that guide our actions, are all intimately connected with one another. It is this approach that characterizes Naess's notion of "Deep Ecology," perhaps his most famous philosophical contribution. Naess formulated his concept of depth in ecology in 1972 as a means of distinguishing the ecological approach he favored from the superficial, short-term solutions sought for narrowly-defined environmental problems. It entailed beginning with a "rejection of the man-in-environment image" and inspired the subsequent Deep Ecology movement.<sup>12</sup> Rather than addressing mere manifestations of the flawed relationship between humans and the rest of the world, a deep approach would seek out the roots and structures that underlie the crises of the moment. While this strain of the environmental movement and its philosophical foundations has come to mean very different things to different people, plurality is not contradictory to Naess's formulation of deepness in the way that inconsistencies are often problematic for moral theories. This is perhaps because Naess more accurately argues for a certain moral *approach* than a systematic moral theory.

Naess was often reluctant to draw a clear distinction between ethics and ontology, claiming that arguments about how we should act are often really arguments about how things are.<sup>13</sup> This perspective is understandable with a view of interconnectedness: how we ought to behave is largely dictated by the way we divide up the world. In reality, norms are unavoidable, as even this approach demands certain better and worse ontologies.<sup>14</sup> However, it is a distinct way of framing ethical action, and one that draws certain inspiration from Kant's concept of beautiful actions. For Kant, when one acts in accordance with moral laws, but does so out of his or her natural inclination rather than a

---

12 Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

13 Arne Naess. *The Ecology of Wisdom*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2008, 77.

14 Arne Naess and David Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think?* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 159.

sense of duty, one acts beautifully.<sup>15</sup> If we are to construct a morally just world, argues Naess, we must begin with a total ecological view, allowing us to act beautifully. “We need environmental ethics, but when people feel that they unselfishly give up, or even sacrifice, their self-interests to show love for nature, this is probably, in the long run, a treacherous basis for conservation,” he argues.<sup>16</sup>

The total view Naess wishes to promote is inspired by Rachel Carson’s work, and the concrete ways she demonstrates that the world is full of ecological systems, not atomized objects. It draws also from philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who characterizes the world as consisting of a single substance, with no definite divisions between individual subjects. Spinoza’s work, along with Buddhist philosophy, form the basis for Naess’s rejection of Descartes’ mind-body dualism, as well as the subsequent dichotomies he wishes to reject between subject and object, and humans and nature. “The term ‘environmentalism’ is meaningless,” Naess argues, “because it implies a very artificial cleavage between humans and everything else.”<sup>17</sup>

The relevance of this philosophical view in thinking about food is clear. There is hardly a more literal example of the process by which distinctions between ourselves and nature break down than in the consumption of food: nature, that which was once outside us, becomes our body. Applying Naess’s view to food illustrates the absence of any fundamental antagonism between caring for humans and caring for nature. The agrochemicals, for example, to which many consumers object, are simultaneously destructive to natural ecosystems, and to the health of farmworkers who must handle them.

The larger question for my project, and for others concerned with injustice in the food system, is where this moral perspective fits. If our current food system is the result of the pursuit of profit, not the reflection of collective needs or ethics, then simply operating within this system while attempting to maintain a “deep” outlook is of little help. Considering ethics only in the context of our range of current choices within this system is not enough because choice, either by

---

15 Naess, *Ecology of Wisdom*, 134.

16 Naess, *Ecology of Wisdom*, 85.

17 Naess and Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think?*, 66.

farmers or consumers, has not been the determining force in building this food system.

This perspective, that personal choice has not constructed our system and cannot guide its reconstruction, is not uncontroversial, and directly contradicts much of the discourse advocating that we must, for example, “vote with our dollar.” Many moments in history, though, demonstrate the relative lack of choice, and the role of political, economic, and physical force. In Brazil, for example, gross land inequality has long been maintained through corruption and fraud: by the estimate of its own government, an area of land 50% larger than all of Central America has been claimed through fraud. When a center-left government attempted to implement land reform and redistribution, it was overthrown in a 1964 US-backed military coup.<sup>18</sup> In Guatemala, the US similarly backed a coup in 1954 after the attempted redistribution of unused land held by United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands), with the subsequent genocidal war claiming 200,000 lives.<sup>19</sup> More recently, neoliberal economic policies have been utilized to maintain the distribution of power. With the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the flood of subsidized corn from the US led to the displacement of 1.3 million small farmers in Mexico.<sup>20</sup> Similar free trade agreements have continued to be enacted, with the Obama administration currently involved in negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership, dubbed “NAFTA on steroids.”<sup>21</sup>

This does not mean, though that moral action has no place. Rather, it means it must be directed at what sociologist C. Wright Mills calls “structural immorality” rather than individual immorality.<sup>22</sup> We must recognize the ways in which deep thinking, and the recognition of interconnectedness, are incompatible with capitalist agriculture, and moral energy must serve as a catalyst for systematic transformation. It is important to note that this catalyzing role for ethics is limited to people

---

18 Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford. *To Inherit the Earth*. (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2003), 4, 20.

19 Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*, PAGE NUMBER?!

20 Michael Pollan, “Exporting Cheap Corn and Ruin. In *The Land Institute*. <http://www.landinstitute.org/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/04/27/408ec4c975493>

21 Lori Wallach, “NAFTA on Steroids”. In *The Nation*. June 27 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/168627/nafta-steroids#>

22 John Bellamy Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), 46.

with a certain level of security. For billions who are starving or precarious, their catalyst for systematic change is simply the need for daily survival. Ecology and sustainable agriculture can be pursued once the space for these considerations is made, and there are inspiring examples of this happening.

The exact nature of the transformation of the food system that is required, and that I argue ethics can help catalyze, is beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear is that moral outrage must focus on broad, political-economic transformations. While conscious consumerism, such as the purchasing of fair trade products, may have some limited success, we must recognize that systematic problems cannot be confronted with limited solutions: we must fight for a new system, not only better labeling.

## Bibliography

- Belasco, Warren J. *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry, 1966-1988*. New York: Random House, 1989.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.
- Catherine Badgley, Jeremy Moghtader, Eileen Quintero, Emily Zakem, M. Jahi Chappell, Katia Avilés-Vázquez, Andrea Samulon and Ivette Perfecto (2007). Organic agriculture and the global food supply. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, 22 , pp 86-108 doi:10.1017/S1742170507001640.
- Collier, George A. and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello. *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*. Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2005 (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.).
- Foster, John Bellamy. *Ecology Against Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002.
- . *Marx's Ecology*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- Foster, John Bellamy and Fred Magdoff. "Liebig, Marx, and the Depletion of Soil Fertility: Relevance for Today's Agriculture." *Hungry for Profit*. Ed. Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

- Grimes, William (2009, January 14). Arne Naess, Norwegian Philosopher, Dies at 96. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/world/europe/15naess.html>
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- . *The New Imperialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Heffernan, William D. "Concentration of Ownership in Agriculture." *Hungry for Profit*. Ed. Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- Holt-Gimenez, Eric, and Annie Shattuck (2011) 'Food crises, food regimes and food movements: rumblings of reform or tides of transformation?', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38:1, 109-144.
- Holt-Gimenez, Eric, Raj Patel, and Annie Shattuck, *Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2009.
- Koont, Sinan. (2009) The Urban Agriculture of Havana. *The Monthly Review*, 60. Retrieved from <http://monthlyreview.org/2009/01/01/the-urban-agriculture-of-havana>.
- Naess, Arne and David Rothenberg. *Is It Painful to Think?* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Naess, Arne. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- . *Life's Philosophy*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998.
- . *The Ecology of Wisdom*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2008.
- Patel, Raj. *Stuffed and Starved*. New York: Melville House, 2007.
- Pollan, Michael (2004). Exporting Cheap Corn and Ruin. *The Land Institute*. Retrieved from <http://www.landinstitute.org/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/04/27/408ec4c975493>
- . *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Sontag, Deborah (2012, July 5). Earthquake Relief Where Haiti Wasn't Broken. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/world/americas/earthquake-relief-where-haiti-wasnt-broken.html?\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/world/americas/earthquake-relief-where-haiti-wasnt-broken.html?_r=1&hp)

Strom, Stephanie (2012, July 7). Has 'Organic' Been Oversized? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/business/organic-food-purists-worry-about-big-companies-influence.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/business/organic-food-purists-worry-about-big-companies-influence.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

Wallach, Lori (2012, June 27). NAFTA on Steroids. *The Nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/article/168627/nafta-steroids#>

Wright, Angus and Wendy Wolford. *To Inherit the Earth*. Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2003.