



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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Ethnicity and the war on big food

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A recent *Fortune* magazine story, “Special Report: The war on big food” begins, “Major packaged-food companies lost [US]\$4 billion in market share alone last year, as shoppers swerved to fresh and organic alternatives. Can the supermarket giants win you back?” (Kowitt, 2015, para. 1). The story describes how a wide range of consumer concerns is eroding the market power of

the large corporate food companies. The consumer concerns include artificial colors and flavors, pesticides, preservatives, high-fructose corn syrup, growth hormones, antibiotics, gluten, and genetically modified organisms. All of these concerns stem directly or indirectly from the industrial paradigm of food production and distribution, including industrial agriculture.

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Why did I name my column “The Economic Pamphleteer”? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. Current ways of economic thinking aren’t working and aren’t going to work in the future. Nowhere are the negative consequences more apparent than in foods, farms, and communities. I know where today’s economists are coming from; I have been there. I spent the first half of my 30-year academic career as a very conventional free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. I eventually became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t good for farmers, wasn’t good for rural communities, and didn’t even produce food that was good for people. I have spent the 25 years since learning and teaching the principles of a new economics of sustainability. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark a revolution in economic thinking.

No one has more at stake in the outcome of this war than America's ethnic minorities. Today's industrial food system has failed in its fundamental purpose of providing food security, leaving many Americans without adequate quantities or qualities of foods to support active, healthy lifestyles. In 2012, nearly 15% of all Americans were classified as food insecure (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-6), and more than 20% of American children lived in food-insecure homes (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7). Ethnic minorities experience significantly higher levels of food insecurity than the U.S. population as a whole. In 2012, 25% of African American and 23% of Hispanic households experienced food insecurity (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7). One study found that 40% of American Indians lived in food insecure households (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7). This level of insecurity is far higher today than during the 1960s—the early years of “big food” and “big farms.”

Furthermore, the industrial food system is linked to a new kind of food insecurity: unhealthy foods. There is growing evidence that America's diet-related health problems are not limited to unhealthy lifestyles or food choices but begin with a lack of nutrient density in food crops produced on industrial farms (Ikerd, 2013). A recent global report by 500 scientists from 50 countries suggested that “obesity is [now] a bigger health crisis than hunger” (Dellorto, 2012). Obesity rates in the U.S. for 2011–2012 indicated that about 35% of all adults were classified as obese (Trust for America's Health [TFAH], 2014; TFAH & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF], n.d.). The overall childhood obesity rate was just under 17% (TFAH & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF], n.d.). Again, ethnic minorities fare far worse than average. Nearly 48% of Blacks and 42% of Latinos were obese, compared with less than 33% of all Whites (TFAH & RWJF, n.d.). For minority women, the differences were even more glaring, with 57% of Black women and 44% of Latino

women classified as obese compared with 32% of White women (TFAH & RWJF, n.d.). More than 20% of Black children and 22% of Latino children were obese, compared with 14% of White children (TFAH & RWJF, n.d.). Limited studies show that obesity rates for American Indians are even higher than for other ethnic minorities (RTI International, 2014, p. 1-7).

Ethnic minorities have much to lose in the big food war, but they also have much to contribute to an ultimate victory. The post-industrial paradigm of food production and distribution must be fundamentally different from the industrial paradigm of today. The traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities could be of tremendous value in developing a new paradigm for sustainable food production. Unfortunately, ethnic minorities have been scarce on the front lines of the sustainable food movement. As Duncan Hilchey pointed out in his call for papers for this issue of JAFSCD, “It is really no secret that the food movement has a level of whiteness that,

even with the best of intentions, can still be exclusionary” (JAFSCD, 2015, para. 1).

One reason for the scarcity may be that relatively fewer ethnic minorities are farmers, although their numbers are growing. In the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 95.4% of principal operators reported being White (USDA, ERS, 2014a). Hispanic farmers made up the largest percentage of non-White farmers with 3.2%, African Americans made up 1.6%, American Indians or Alaska Natives, 1.8%, and Asians, 0.6% (USDA, ERS, 2014a). Admittedly, about half of all hired farmworkers in the U.S. are Hispanic or Latino, but most are laborers in industrial farming operations (USDA, ERS, 2014b, “Demographic characteristics”).

The greatest contributions by ethnic minorities to creating a new food system are likely to be cultural rather than economic. This conclusion and my perspectives regarding cultural diversity reflect seven years of service on the Diversity in Extension task force at the University of Missouri during

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the 1990s. The task force was ethnically diverse, with equal representation from the faculties of the University of Missouri and Lincoln University—Missouri’s historically Black or 1890 Land-Grant University. Over time, we became an effective team by going through the essential processes of forming, storming, norming, and performing. None had more to learn than the “persons of privilege”—including the “token old White man,” as I jokingly called myself.

One important lesson was the difference between diversity and discrimination. Cultural diversity refers to cultural differences among groups identifiable by features such as gender, age, social status, and ethnicity. Discrimination occurs when individual members of such groups are indiscriminately treated as if they possess the stereotypical characteristics of their specific group. Individual members of an ethnic minority may or may not possess the cultural differences associated with their particular ethnicity. To create new sustainable farms and food systems, we must understand that the value of gender, age, social status, and ethnic diversity can be realized only in the absence of discrimination.

The industrial food system, and industrialization in general, fits the stereotypical culture of the White, European male. Specialization, standardization, and control through domination are characteristics associated with “old White men.” White boys are taught to be ambitious, assertive, competitive, and aggressive if they expect to succeed. Success is measured in terms of wealth, power, or fame. It should not be surprising that today’s business, politics, food industry, and farming are dominated by men who have these stereotypical characteristics. Women and minorities also find it far easier to “succeed” if they learn to think and act like old White men.

Like most other people, I know far less about the cultures of other ethnic groups than I know about my own. However, I know that African

American and other traditional tribal cultures tend to place far higher priorities on social relationships than do European cultures. American Indian and other indigenous cultures place far higher values on relationships with nature than do European cultures. Females tend to be conciliatory or nurturing rather than competitive or dominating, and among ethnic minorities, women traditionally provided and continue to provide most of the farm labor. Somehow, we must create a new sustainable food and farming culture that balances the economic efficiency of the dominant culture with the social and ecological integrity of minority cultures. Such values will be essential in

winning the war on big food and ensuring that everyone, globally, has enough good food to sustain active, healthy lifestyles—including both current and future generations.

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