



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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How do we ensure good food for all?

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How do we provide good food for all 323 million Americans? Differing answers to this question continue to distract, if not misdirect, the sustainable food movement. Some argue that organic, local, and other so-called good foods must accommodate the current industrial system of food processing and retailing. They point to the fact that organic food sales of nearly US\$40 billion per year (Organic Trade Association, 2016) are still less than 5% of total retail food sales. In addition, mainstream supermarkets and large specialty markets, such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s, account for

more than 90% of organic sales (Porterfield, 2015). Large corporate food processors also own and control production for most of the major organic food brands (The Cornucopia Project, n.d.). So, about 99% of foods still move through the industrial food system, even after accounting for local food sales of an estimated \$12 billion per year (Vilsack, 2015). To accommodate the 99%, some good food advocates urge farmers to find ways to accommodate the industrial food system.

Critics of the industrial food system tend to have a different concept of good food. They share Slow Food’s stated vision of “a world in which all

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*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer**? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. I spent the first half of my academic career as a free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. During the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t working and wasn’t going to work in the future—not for farmers, rural communities, consumers, or society in general. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark the needed revolution in economic thinking.*

people can access and enjoy food that is good for them, good for those who grow it and good for the planet” (Slow Food, n.d., para. 1). They agree that good food must be safe, nutritious, and flavorful. However, a system that produces authentically good food must also protect the integrity of natural ecosystems, ensure access to enough good food for all, and fairly reward farmers and farm workers for their contributions and commitments. A good food system is a sustainable food system. Admittedly, Slow Food members and other good food advocates have yet to agree on the means for fulfilling their missions of food access and fairness (Birdsall, 2011). However, a corporately controlled, industrial food system is fundamentally incapable of sustaining the provision of “good, clean, fair foods.”

Since organic foods are produced without synthetic pesticides, they obviously are safer than are conventional foods—even if they are produced, processed, and sold by large corporations. Organic foods may also be more nutritious and flavorful, particularly if they are grown on healthy, organic soils. Unfortunately, the publicly traded corporations that control the industrial food system are purely economic entities. There are no economic incentives to ensure that everyone has access to good, healthful foods, regardless of their ability to pay the price of organic foods. There are no economic incentives to ensure that workers on organic farms are paid decent wages or have tolerable working and living conditions. There are no economic incentives to ensure that prices paid to organic farmers are high enough to allow them to be stewards of nature—soil, air, and water—for the benefit of future as well as present generations.

Critics of industrial organics are accused of “allowing the excellent to become the enemy of the good.” This is a legitimate concern. However, apologists for industrial organics run a similar risk of “allowing the necessary to become the enemy of the sufficient.” Making good food accessible to more people is necessary for sustainability, and

marketing organic foods through mainstream markets may be a necessary place to start that process. However, publicly traded corporations are obligated to serve the “common interest” of their shareholders, and maximizing economic returns on investments is the only common interest of those who own today’s large food corporations. Economic incentives alone will never be sufficient to ensure enough good food for all of either current or future generations.

Responding to changing economic incentives is another necessary step toward a sustainable food system. Unlike corporations, most “real people” don’t make purely economic


decisions. We pay premiums for some things and avoid buying others, reflecting our social and ethical values. As more consumers express preferences for good, clean, and fair food by willingly paying premium prices, new economic opportunities will be created. However, relying solely on market incentives would allow the good food movement to be defined and guided by economics rather than ethics: “one dollar, one vote,” rather than “one person, one vote.” Some people in America have a lot more dollars than the most of rest of us. Questions regarding our relationships with nature and each other, including what constitutes “clean and fair,” are questions of ethics, not economics. Market incentives will never be sufficient to ensure the social and ethical integrity of food production and distribution.

Advocates of accommodation tend to accept the industrial structure of today’s food system as a given future condition as well. They fail to recognize that economies are continually evolving; that industrial agriculture, supermarkets, and fast foods only emerged in the mid-1900s. Signs of a new post-industrial era in retailing are already becoming apparent. For example, in July 2015 the stock market value of Amazon.com exceeded the total stock value of Walmart (Tharakan & Saito, 2015). Virtually all major retailers, including food retailers, are venturing into internet marketing and home delivery—neither of which lends an advantage to

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industrial organizations. Supermarkets may have been logical places to introduce organic foods to more consumers, but they seem unlikely to play a significant role in the future of the good food movement.

The new post-industrial sustainable food system need not be limited to face-to-face marketing. The National Good Food Network lists more than 300 “food hubs” (National Good Food Network, n.d.), which are cooperatives or alliances that allow farmers to aggregate individual production to serve markets larger than they can serve alone. Admittedly, if farmers compromise their ecological and social integrity in the process of scaling up, they will be little different from today’s industrial farmers. However, the key to sustaining relationships of integrity is a sense of personal connectedness and commitment between farmers and their customers, not necessarily based on geographic proximity. Those who share a commitment to the ethical and social values of sustainability will have increasing opportunities to completely bypass the industrial food system.

While community supported agriculture (CSA) and food-buying club memberships in the U.S. typically range in the hundreds, Riverford Organics (n.d.) in the UK delivers around 47,000 boxes of foods a week from its regional farms to local customers. Their products include not only a diversity of vegetables and fruits, but also meat, milk, eggs, and a variety of specialty products. Urban home-delivery programs, such as Blue Apron (n.d.) and HelloFresh (n.d.)—each of which delivers 8 to 10 million meals a month—allow sustainable farmers to connect with hundreds of thousands of customers in large cities. Innovations such as these have the potential to replace the current industrial food system, from farm to fork, and to restore the sense of personal connectedness and commitment essential to ensure good food for all. Replacing the impersonal industrial food system with a personally connected food network at least creates the possibility for fundamental and lasting change. 

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