



The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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A Sustainable and Secure Food System

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The problems of today's food system are manifestations of a systemic disfunction within the structure of modern society. The economic structure has become based on market exchanges that depersonalize the process of labor and its products. With this disregard for the personal nature of work has come the glorification of consumption. The prestige of products and the perceived increase in status for their buyers are seemingly desirable factors for consumers. However, the product in itself has only a limited value.

Due to the little importance placed on the dynamic relationships between those who produce and those who consume in today's society, people are left with the sense of a vacuum in their lives. This feeling of emptiness is deepened by the loss of a natural connection to the environment. In a vain attempt to regain a sense of community and closeness to nature, people seek out products to fill the void in their lives. Indeed, providing consumers with the good feelings they crave is the goal of many new product sales and advertising campaigns to maximize profits.

Typically, buyers of food are given a vicarious, not authentic, experience of feeling good. For example, people make decisions to buy after watching products associated with make-believe, old-fashioned farms on television commercials instead of talking actually seeing food grown by real-life

farmers. This marketing gimmick, the promotion of a traditional farm mystique, sells food products but leaves consumers feeling inexplicably dissatisfied.

Reliant on superficial "feeling good" mass-marketing, the conventional food system machine gears itself to making maximum profits through factory-like volume production with no regard for the human dimensions or the spiritual aspects of growing food. As the food system has become more and more anemic, advocates of a sustainable and safe food system have been seeking ways to revitalize it. Those who have responded favorably to the premise of sustainable agriculture realize wholesome food that is truly life-building is an absolute necessity. They also recognize that the environment must be able to maintain its ecological health. Because people perceive that the quality of food is diminishing and the environment is being damaged, sustainable agricultural practices have gained considerable support. Although, sustainable agriculture advocates have rightfully focused on the rationale and implementation of sustainable production techniques, they would do well to emphasize the fundamental needs that buyers of food have within a social and spiritual context.

Through the ages, agriculture, the foundation of all modern cultures, not only sustained people but also made it possible for them to maintain close interpersonal relationships and have intimate contact

with nature. The circulation of goods within primitive societies was based on gift exchange. Sahlins (1972) describes primitive society as “the original affluent society” because resources were plentiful, whereas wants were limited and leisure time abundant. The movement of goods was tied to societal relationships of kinship and friendship. Most exchanges were personal. Impersonal market exchanges occasionally occurred only when people met outside the tribe. Even between outsiders, goods were often exchanged as gifts which created social bonds. They were the glue that held society together. “...The gift is alliance, solidarity, communion--in brief, peace...(Sahlins, 1972, p.187)”.

The movement of goods within modern society is very different from that of traditional systems: goods move as profit-making commodities instead of as warmly received gifts. The exchange has become largely impersonal.

In commodity exchange, it's as if the buyer and the seller were both in plastic bags; there's none of the contact of a gift exchange. ...Because of the bonding power of gifts and the detached nature of commodity exchange, gifts have become associated with community and with being obliged to others, while commodities are associated with alienation and freedom (Hyde, 1983, p.10 & 67).

It was not until agriculture become industrialized in the modern age that people lost their connectedness to agriculture. Today's impersonal marketplace is overly concerned with the freedom of the individual to make profits by moving large quantities of many kinds of goods over great distances to be offered to people who assumedly do not and could not maintain personal exchange relationships.¹

People today are yearning to regain a meaningful relationship to a post-industrial agriculture. They are looking for opportunities for re-connection wherever

they can find them by supporting farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture enterprises, pick-your-own farms, community garden plots, and by becoming interested in home gardening. These models of agriculture, as well as new emerging models, will continue to fulfill basic needs that people have to feel connected to farmers who grow food and to feel in communion with nature. People become loyal customers if they have a personal connection with farmers who engender credibility and trust. People need to see, touch, feel, taste, and smell growing vegetables and fruit in the earth, in the open air. People want to believe their life-giving food is not just produced for profit but is provided to them by a hard-working farmer who makes a fair living by striving to nurture customers and by sustaining the environment. In this way, people no longer feel alienated. They bond with one another as they did in pre-industrial times. Consumers respect the hard work of producers; producers serve a noble function. Consumers and producers alike form a deep attachment to the environment. In short, post-industrial agriculture will provide the means for the regeneration of a new society of individuals that feel good about their connection to a sustainable food system.

References:

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Endnote 1:

Today's political-legal structure and markets provide what Durkheim calls "contractual solidarity". The making of impersonal contracts defining property rights allows for the rapid and efficient movement of commodities through the mechanism of competitive markets that work with mathematical precision. Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is at work to produce a society in which there is a "cooperation which is automatically produced through the pursuit by each individual of his own interests" (Durkheim, 1964, p.200.) However, if society is regulated through economic and political conflicts that are based on the pursuit of self-interest, then what are the cohesive forces that bind individuals together into a unified society?

For if interest relates men, it is never for more than some few moments. It can create only an and external link between them. In the act of exchange, the various agents remain outside of each other, and when the business has been completed, each one retires and is left entirely on his own. Consciences are only superficially in contact; they neither penetrate each other, nor do they adhere. If we look further into the matter, we shall see that this total harmony of interests conceals a latent or deferred conflict. For where interest is the only ruling force each individual finds himself in a state of war with every other since nothing comes to mollify the egos, and any truce in this eternal antagonism would not be of long duration. There is nothing less constant than interest. Today, it unites me to

you; tomorrow, it will make me your enemy. Such a cause can only give rise to transient relations and passing associations. (Durkheim, 1964, p.203-4)

Self-interest does not ensure the stability of society. Underlying the impersonal contractual solidarity is a social order provided through what Durkheim calls "organic solidarity." Though the movement of goods is regulated by an impersonal state-market system, the cohesiveness of society is maintained by the totality of culturally defined personal relationships. "A contract is not sufficient unto itself, but is possible only thanks to a regulation of the contract which is originally social" (Durkheim, 1964, p.215).

Boulding (1978) refers to this organic solidarity as the integrative structure of perceived identities, wherein we define our identity and the identity of others. At the basis of all human cultures are the personal relationships that provide peoples' identities, give their lives meaning, ensure societal cohesiveness, and allow organized and predictable interaction of individuals. (See also Geertz, 1973 and White, 1973.)