

## Module on Agriculture, day 1

### Michael Pollan and Brian Walsh – what’s wrong with our food system?

#### “Farmer in Chief” (Michael Pollan, Oct. 9, 2008)

- What evidence supports the claim that “the era of cheap and abundant food...[is] drawing to a close”?
  - What does it mean to say that the end of cheap oil leads to the end of cheap food?
- Pollan argues that the food system is directly related to the health care crisis, energy independence and climate change. How so?
- What effects do rising food commodity prices (i.e., the **global food crisis**) have on those most in need?
- How does Pollan say our food system got the way it is (see: Earl Butz, ‘get big or get out’)
  - Wendell Berry: “to take animals off farms and put them on feedlots is to take an elegant solution—animals replenishing the fertility that crops deplete—and neatly divide it into two problems: a fertility problem on the farm and a pollution problem on the feedlot. The former problem is remedied with fossil-fuel fertilizer; the latter is remedied not at all.”
- What to do?
  - Provide a healthful diet by focusing on quality and diversity, rather than mere quantity, of calories
  - Improve the resilience, safety, and security of our food supply (promoting regional food economies)
  - Reconceive agriculture as part of the solution to environmental problems like climate change.
- The aging of the American farmer...
- Creating a definition of “food” (as against what Pollan calls ‘edible food-like substances’)
- This article is one of Pollan’s best-known works, but it is just one of many articles, books, and films (the best current example is *Food, Inc.*) that are growing increasingly critical of our current food system.
  - Next class, we will look at an alternate perspective, one that accuses Pollan and his ilk of food elitism (‘against the agri-intellectuals’)

#### “Getting Real About the High Price of Cheap Food” (Brian Walsh, Aug. 20, 2009)

- Opening passage on ‘the state of your bacon’...
- Recent food safety scares reminiscent of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*
- For all its hype, sustainable agriculture is still only 1% of American cropland
- Americans now spend less than 10% of their income on food (down from 16% in 1966, and more earlier)
- Why do fruits and veggies cost more than grain-based goods (whether or not you know they’re grain based...)?
- What are some of the human health and environmental effects of animal farming in concentrated animal feeding operations (**CAFOs**)?
- Walsh mentions Bill and Nicolette Hahn Niman’s farm as a possible solution (we’ll be reading an *NYT* op-ed by Nicolette next class)—but this solution isn’t necessarily scalable in terms of meeting burgeoning national and global demand for meat and dairy.