

## Class Notes on the Global Food System – Animal Studies, Thur Oct 28

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

- 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.”
- 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.

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

- 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)
- Walsh mentions Bill and Nicolette Hahn Niman’s farm as a possible solution, but this solution isn’t necessarily scalable in terms of meeting burgeoning national and global demand for meat and dairy.

### The Omnivore’s Delusion (Blake Hurst – *The American: Journal of the American Enterprise Institute*)

- “He thinks that farmers are too stupid to farm sustainably, too cruel to treat their animals well, and too careless to worry about their communities, their health, and their families. I would not presume to criticize his car, or the size of his house, or the way he runs his business. But he is an expert about me, on the strength of one book”
- “Some of the largest farms in the country are organic—and are giant organizations dependent upon lots of hired stoop labor doing the most backbreaking of tasks in order to save the sensitive conscience of my fellow passenger the merest whiff of pesticide contamination.”
- “The parts of farming that are the most “industrial” are the most likely to be owned by the kind of family farmers that elicit such a positive response from the consumer.”
- “Biotech crops actually cut the use of chemicals, and increase food safety...Herbicides cut the need for tillage, which decreases soil erosion by millions of tons.”
- The example of pig gestation crates and turkeys raised outdoors (even though “the turkeys don’t seem to mind” wallowing in their own waste, apparently...)—are you convinced by Hurst’s arguments here?
- What is Hurst’s response to the argument that manure ‘lagoons’ are a big environmental and health problem?
- “If we are about to require more expensive ways of producing food, the largest and most well-capitalized farms will have the least trouble adapting.”
- Why does Hurst argue that commercial fertilizers are, for better or worse, an absolute necessity?
- What did you think were the strongest points of Hurst’s arguments? The weakest? Are you convinced?

### Spoiled: Organic and Local is so 2008 (Paul Roberts – *Mother Jones*)

- “Many of the familiar models don’t work well on the scale required to feed billions of people, Or they focus too narrowly on one issue (salad greens that are organic but picked by exploited workers. Or they work only in limited circumstances. (A \$4 heirloom tomato is hardly going to save the world...because concepts like local or organic dominate the alternative food sector, there is little room left for alternative models.”
- “Consider our love affair with food miles...[how might] a 20-pound shopping basket of locally grown produce actually represent a larger carbon footprint than the same volume of produce purchased at a chain retailer”?
- More important than food miles, though, is ‘resource intensity’
- “To achieve [comparable] yields, polyculture requires far more intensive and continuous management”
- “If we wanted to rid the world of synthetic fertilizer use—and assuming dietary habits remain constant—the extra land we’d need for cover crops or forage...would more than double...the current area of farmland.”
- What are some limits of the local food movement in light of the ongoing urbanization of the planet?
- “One farmer in Oregon with a few hundred acres can grow more pears than the entire state of Oregon eats.”
- “We obviously need to rethink such practices as air freighting raspberries from Mexico or salmon from Chile” (Do you agree? What are the implications of this ‘rethinking’?)