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**Food Democracy II:  
Revolution or Restoration?**

by

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## FOOD DEMOCRACY II: REVOLUTION OR RESTORATION?

*Neil D. Hamilton\**

*Author's Note: This essay is a companion to the essay "Food Democracy," which appears in 9 DRAKE JOURNAL OF AGRICULTURAL LAW 9 (2004). In that essay, the author discussed many of the progressive trends that are helping reshape America's food system. These trends have a common denominator in their reflection of the democratic tendencies of the American populace. The desire of an increasing number of consumers to eat better food and to have access to the information, choices, and alternatives that make better food available are helping drive shifts in food production and marketing. Accompanying these shifts are political and legal debates over fundamental policy issues that relate to food labeling, support for local food production, the emergence of eco-labels, and examination of the relation between nutrition and public health.*

*Arrayed against the emergence of these new economic and policy developments are the institutions and values of the conventional food and agricultural sector, which the author collectively describes as Big Food. He argues the emergence and recognition of "Food Democracy" is a valuable development for helping America examine the future of the food and agricultural system. In this essay, the author provides further amplification of his thesis, in part using the recent "mad cow" incident to illuminate some of the differences in values and attitudes between Big Food and Food Democracy.*

### I. AMERICANS AND FOOD: DO WE KNOW WHAT WE WANT?

"It is impossible for Americans to think rationally about their food choices. We have no framework to evaluate risks in our diet!" thundered my colleague, a law professor from the University of Min-

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nesota. We were in Atlanta at the Association of American Law Schools convention, taking part in a session that I had organized entitled "Food, Agriculture, and the First Amendment." It was 8:30 on a Sunday morning in early January 2004, but the crowd was respectable. This was surprising, given the time slot and the history of the Agricultural Law Section in drawing crowds at a conference where sessions on the high-flying intellectual subjects that stimulate legal academics (Islamic Law was big that year) tend to be more popular than sessions on the real-life topics shaping society.

Our session was designed to consider the irony of how cases involving health claims on food and drug labels, and commodity promotions, are providing grist for the United States Supreme Court's mill of first amendment free speech analysis. The controversy over the recent discovery of bovine spongiform encephalopathy ("BSE" or "mad cow" disease), in our food supply resulted in the discussion quickly turning to the ability of various label statements, such as "natural," "GMO free," and "no added hormones," to aide consumers in their food choices.

My colleague, a brilliant but notoriously outspoken provocateur, was bemoaning how all the various label claims (what he called "food as love" statements) were confusing, unnecessary, designed to make consumers worry about their food and, in effect, waste their money. His comments were predictable, given his scholarship on libertarian free-market themes, but it was the comment with which his rant began that caught my attention. "In our house, the terms organic, free range, and natural are all I hear. My wife doesn't even let me near the grocery store to buy food anymore!"

There, in a nutshell, was my colleague's conundrum and perhaps the source of his frustration. He does not worry about BSE or pesticides in the food supply, because he understands the economic rationalizations we use and considers the personal risks minimal. His wife, however, decides what food to buy and what food to serve on his table, and she does worry about these issues and acts to reduce the risks she perceives for her loved ones. In doing so, she is supporting people who market clean food and work to create alternatives to the conventional global industrialized food system (what we will call Big Food).

I do not know my colleague's wife, but it sounds like she may be a closet food democrat, (or at least have those tendencies), something that no doubt frustrates the hell out of her professor husband. While he fights the good fight to keep the government off the back of Big Food and to protect consumers from wasting money on soft-headed, warm-hearted claims, the food dollars in his home are spent on "food as love." What is a fellow to do?

## II. FOOD DEMOCRACY AND BIG FOOD: PREDICTING THE REACTION

Knowing my colleague's views on "food as love," if I had taken time to tell him about this writing project, his response to the idea of Food Democracy would have been predictable. If I can channel his acerbic tongue, he might label it "a feel-good gloss for the nostalgic yearnings of food snobs and pretend farmers." Undoubtedly, opponents will criticize Food Democracy, charging it represents an elitist's dream world, peopled by mocha-sipping liberals who work weekend gardens and are more concerned with the newest variety of arugula than whether the poor can afford to eat. For these critics, the success of Wal-Mart (which is now the largest grocer in the nation) and the growing demand for McDonald's and fast food (even in light of the surging attention to obesity and health) are evidence that Big Food not only provides people with what they want to eat but what they can afford to eat. Critics of Food Democracy claim that regular people cannot afford to buy high-priced organic food, shop at farmers' markets, or worry about whether their steaks are locally grown or humanely raised. Attacking supporters of "good food" as elitists is a favored line of argument from the Dennis Averys<sup>1</sup> of the world, and from others fronting for Big Food. Their weapons include industry-funded public relation campaigns, such as Avery's "milk-is-milk" effort attacking organic dairies.

The charge of elitism is largely unsubstantiated; but like many such charges, it has just enough patina of logic to offer shelter for those trying to deflect the criticism of Big Food that is inherent in the food-democracy movement. Isn't organic food more expensive, and doesn't Wal-Mart succeed by driving down costs, which forces competitors and locally-owned grocers to do the same thing? Doesn't "all-natural" meat, like that sold by Niman Ranch, cost more? Isn't it unlikely that you can raise sufficient quantities of "locally-grown" produce during the winter in much of the country? The answer to all of these questions is yes, or at least a qualified yes; and if that is where the inquiry starts and stops, then the virtues of Big Food will triumph and continue unchallenged. There is more to the story, however, than these simple questions; there must be, or all of the powerful

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1. See, e.g., Betsy Tao, *A Stitch in Time: Addressing the Environmental, Health, and Animal Welfare Effects of China's Expanding Meat Industry*, 15 *GEO. INT'L ENVTL. L. J.* 321 (2003) ("Some, like Dennis Avery, Director of the Center for Global Food Issues at the Hudson Institute and senior agricultural analyst in the United States Department of State, make the argument that given the growth of the world's population and its growing affluence, factory farms, along with biotechnology and intensive crop farming, are essential for providing the world with an adequate food supply.").

trends reshaping America's food system, such as organic food, locally-grown food, eco-labels, farmers' markets, and more signify nothing.

Organic food can cost more, depending on where it is purchased, although the price spreads are coming down. No one claims, however, that organic food is the only measure of a Food Democracy.

Trying to equate any effort to improve agriculture with "organic" is a favored tactic of Big Agriculture, used since the early days of the sustainable agriculture movement in the late 1980s. Critics who felt threatened by efforts to examine the use of inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides, which when overused can damage the environment, used the "O" word to scare farmers away from entertaining such heresy. The beauty of sustainable agriculture as a philosophy and research goal, however, is how it marries the farmer's need to show a profit with looking for ways to protect the environment. If research shows how to produce the same amount of corn while reducing the application of nitrogen fertilizer by half, why continue to buy more fertilizer than needed and pollute the water supply with more fertilizer than the plants can use? The only people threatened by new knowledge like this are the ones selling nitrogen fertilizer.

Knowledge and good examples, which help farmers find better ways to produce food, helped "sustainable agriculture" triumph and thrive despite the efforts of many to derail it. This observation holds true today for the Food Democracy movement. There will be plenty of people willing to challenge the ideas and examples it reflects, but it is always wise to investigate the motives of one's critics.

On the organic front, the ground under the supporters of Big Food is shifting as more food companies like Kraft Foods, Tyson Foods, Campbell's Soup, and others move quickly to capitalize on the growing demand for organic foods. The mainstreaming of organic food makes it hard for people to brandish the term as an insult used to denigrate the motives or practices of farmers. The irony is how United States Department of Agriculture's ("USDA's") new national organic standard raises concerns for many pioneers in the organic community. Most traditional organic farmers adhere to organic principles because they believe that they are better for the land, the food, and their families. Legally, however, it was not possible to include all of the organic farmers' values in the USDA's rules for using the national organic label, even assuming USDA had wanted to include them. As a result, organic pioneers worry the industrialization of organic food is driving down prices and forcing small farmers out of the market. They are concerned that many "new" organic companies are simply in the business for money and do not share the more fundamental and philosophical goals of those who farm without chemicals.

These fears cause some observers to believe that the success of organic foods threatens the integrity of organic farming as an alternative to conventional agriculture. This may be true, but it is also unrealistic to think that one term, be it organic, local, natural, or whatever word you choose, can carry an unlimited amount of philosophical baggage about farming practices, worker standards, community ethics, or other goals for promotion through food products.

The important lesson of the growth and "success" of organic food is how it demonstrates that many people are concerned about what they eat and are willing to spend time and money to find foods they believe are, in some way, better for them. There is no reason to believe that the only way for farmers to serve these consumers is through organic food. Organic food is just one important alternative among many.

It is true that Wal-Mart has quickly become the nation's leading grocer, but questions have been raised about social and economic costs to the communities it is transforming and the workers it employs. In the press, a steady stream of news articles question the impact Wal-Mart is having on society. The scrutiny may not slow its growth, but the articles revealing the power and domination of Bigness, whether in food marketing or in any other part of our economic or social life, are hardly benign. The scrutiny of how food is produced and marketed is the healthy product of an open democratic system that not only protects freedom of speech but values the role local governments play in making decisions about land use and other public issues. Wal-Mart and McDonald's are not the only examples of the trend toward Bigness in America; they are just the most visible evidence of shifts in food retailing and of the pressure to reduce prices and serve consumers.

In fact, one can argue that Wal-Mart and McDonald's are examples of Food Democracy in action. By reducing prices and increasing the availability of foods, Wal-Mart is helping low-income citizens, and price-conscious shoppers of all incomes, spend less money on food so they have more to spend on life's other necessities and pleasures. By feeding millions of people each day, McDonald's has the potential to be a positive source of information regarding health and nutrition. What could be more democratic than giving folks an alternative place to shop and save money? What better expression of America's freedoms than to see the success of old Sam Walton's dream of bringing everyday low prices to citizens across the country?

Of course, most of the people easily described as Food Democrats do not see Wal-Mart or McDonald's as friends. To them, they personify the values and evils of Big Food, the domination of large powerful

businesses over smaller local businesses, spreading a universal seasonless cuisine of food sourced from anywhere in the world, with cost rather than quality as the defining goal.

No doubt there is much truth to these concerns, but the reality is that both parts of the food system need to, and will, exist. The market for Wal-Mart is undeniable, as is the growing interest in local food. The same is true for McDonald's. Offering consumers options to buy healthy, nutritious, and delicious locally-grown food, does not mean that other popular and affordable options must disappear. While there may be some competition between these two parts of the food system, a healthier way to view their coexistence is as counterbalances on different ends of a social scale. Farmers' markets and other avenues of promoting local food stand as a contrast and provide an alternative to Wal-Mart just as small bistros and home-cooked meals, slow or otherwise, are alternatives to McDonald's.

The key democratic value at stake here is the ability to choose, which requires having alternatives between which to choose. If people have concerns about Big Food, then locally-grown food can be an alternative. If you think local food is too expensive, then Wal-Mart is an alternative. The real threat to the ideal of Food Democracy is if either of the two cannot exist to serve as a balance and an alternative.

The future of Wal-Mart or McDonald's does not seem in doubt. It is the future of local food alternatives, so critically important to the future of Food Democracy, that need attention. This is why one of the key tasks of Food Democracy is helping ensure that farmers, consumers, and communities have alternatives for growing, selling, and buying better foods. How well the alternatives function and whether they are a "criticism" of Big Food depends on the people involved and the values they reflect.

### III. MAD COW, ANXIOUS CONSUMERS, AND A SURPRISED PUBLIC

As Americans tried to settle into the holiday spirit in late 2003, two government announcements reminded us of our connections to the real world. The first announcement was that federal authorities were raising the homeland security terrorist threat to level orange, which resulted in the cancellation of Air France flights from Paris to Los Angeles and the addition of armed air marshals to foreign flights bound for the United States. While these developments did not keep many people from flying, they did add to the jitters of still anxious travelers and left many wondering what our government expected us to do in the face of such warnings. The second federal announcement came right before Christmas, and sent a jolt of uncertainty

through the economy and a wave of fear into consumers: mad cow disease had come to the United States.

A sick cow from a Washington dairy tested positive for BSE, the disease that had wrought havoc on agriculture in the United Kingdom and led to the death of over 140 people in Europe. The news sent beef prices plummeting and consumers, especially the legions of new Atkins Diet-inspired meat eaters, scrambling to replace beef in their meals. The fastest scrambling, however, occurred amongst government officials and beef industry leaders who tried to confine the damage and reassure the nation, as well as the dozens of countries importing United States beef. A quick, though disputed, "discovery" that the diseased cow apparently came from Canada offered hope the crisis would be limited, but much of the damage had already been done. Within days, over two-dozen nations banned imports of United States beef, and domestic prices for cattle fell over twenty percent from the record highs that producers had been enjoying before the news struck. The lost export markets and sharp price declines caused hundreds of millions of dollars of value to vanish from the nation's beef sector.

This unfortunate, but predictable, incident brought new scrutiny to the United States food safety system and meat-processing practices, and the public (at least those paying attention) was disturbed by what it learned. The nation's first BSE episode was marked by coincidence and controversy more than strategy and reassurance. These factors surprised and puzzled the nation's consumers, and as a result USDA felt pressure to take quick and decisive action to assert control over meat processing and marketing practices.

The Washington cow that tested positive for BSE was allegedly a "downer," meaning she could not walk on her own power. Most people assumed that sick animals such as this did not enter the human food supply; but in this case, the animal's mobility was believed to be impacted by paralysis from giving birth to an oversized calf, and the vet who inspected her approved her slaughter. Public surprise number one was that this immobile animal, and thousands of other "downers," were regularly processed and sold to United States consumers without a clue of the animals' conditions.

Tissue from the cow was collected and tested for the presence of BSE at the National Animal Disease Laboratory in Ames, Iowa, which is located only thirty miles from our farm. In the days that followed, Big Food argued that the test and discovery proved the system worked; closer investigation by the media, however, showed that the discovery was almost an accident. Of the millions of beef animals slaughtered each year, USDA tests fewer than 20,000 for BSE, which is approxi-



mately one in every 1,700 animals. Furthermore, tests are concentrated on older animals, because it is believed that the disease develops only after a certain age and only in animals suspected of having central nervous system disorders. It is estimated that over 100,000 downers are sent to market each year, but only a fraction of them are tested for BSE. The Washington cow beat the odds and won the lottery by being selected for testing. The tiny number of animals tested for BSE, a number so small that a cynic might ask if we were trying to *not* find something, was public surprise number two.

The Washington cow was not suspected of being ill, which is why her meat was approved for people to eat. Her tissue was tested because the inspector happened to request it for her; and if he had not pulled a sample of her tissue and sent it to the laboratory in Ames, the BSE discovery would have never happened and our beef supply would still be "safe." Public surprise number three was how fluke and good fortune (or bad fortune if you had fat cattle to sell), as opposed to a purposeful and successful BSE-detection plan, resulted in the discovery of BSE in the United States.

The positive test result was announced by USDA on December 24th, and triggered a cascade of actions and investigations. One of the first orders of business was to find the meat from the diseased cow. Even though federal officials reassured the public that the brain and spinal column had been removed during slaughter and the "muscle meat" posed no risk, its location was a priority. But the public remained concerned and confused: how was it that this meat had already been sold, and in many cases already consumed, if the animal was being tested for possible illness? This was public surprise number four: the meat and carcasses of animals suspected of illness are not held until the test results are known, because we do not have the facilities to hold the meat and have not wanted to spend the money to implement faster testing.

Tracking down the meat would prove a challenge. The processing facility in Washington where the cow was slaughtered is a relatively small operation, and officials determined that only 10,000 pounds of meat were suspected of possibly having come into contact with her carcass. In the days following the announcement, however, as officials worked to track where that meat had gone, the modern marvel of America's food distribution chain was revealed. The meat had gone to two other meat-grinding facilities and from there had been distributed to retailers in at least eight states and Guam. Public surprise number five was the discovery that the meat we eat for dinner may have traveled halfway across the nation and earned more frequent flier miles than the eater.

Finding the meat that came from the animal, and finding out more about her origin, helped public officials gain control over the story and helped reassure markets and eaters alike. But another question of use and distribution was raised in the thinking public's mind: what happened to the cow's brain and spinal column, and for what exactly are byproducts like this used? The myriad of uses for the bits and pieces left after processing animals (the "droppage" or "offal" in meat-packing lingo) is a story unto itself. FDA soon announced the public had nothing to fear because all of the concerned materials had been found and a "hold" had been placed on them. But the door to Pandora's box had been opened just a bit and people began to learn about public surprise number six: what really goes into dog food and what are those "animal byproducts" that are fed to livestock other than cows, such as chickens and pigs?

There were other surprises woven into the BSE story, such as the fact that Congress had tried to ban the slaughter of downers for human consumption on three occasions but had been strongly opposed by a cattle industry that did not want to miss out on the income from those sales. All of these surprises proved too much for the public, and USDA had to act swiftly to get ahead of this snowballing crisis in the public's confidence in the safety of America's beef supply. Restrictions on using downers were put in place, protections on how meat near the spinal column can be processed were implemented, and an enhanced testing protocol was established.

Many months have passed since the initial BSE discovery, and the crisis appears to have blown over for the time being. There were many casualties from the incident, however, such as the farm-owned meat-packing plant in Iowa which had the unfortunate timing of having its first exports to Japan on a ship as the incident broke.

Market prices and consumer confidence in beef have later rebounded, and at the time this article was written there was hope that foreign markets would reopen in 2005. USDA's new enhanced testing protocol is underway (although USDA's own Inspector General has questioned its adequacy) and the announcement that several preliminary "positive" tests were later proved incorrect roiled the market and producers in the summer of 2004.

One major result of the incident has been renewed attention to developing a National Animal Identification System to allow for tracking beef cattle from the farms where they are born to their final slaughterhouse. The goal is to create a method of tracking animals and locating the possible sources of disease, which would have been very useful during the situation that developed in Washington while trying to determine where the BSE cow and her colleagues were. The

proposed program involves many important policy issues relating to cost, responsibility, and control over the information being created. The current proposal is a classic example of modern American agricultural thinking, and it requires that all beef producers buy some form of high-tech device to place in each animal, which can then be used to track transfers and movements. While the premise may be valid, the irony is that we will spend millions to develop a system that will give us better information about the current location of any living cow than we have about any human, be it a lost child, a foreign visitor, or a violent criminal. The costs and complexity of such a system and the resulting recordkeeping required will present significant operational hurdles, as does the intended "mandatory" nature of the program. For an agricultural sector that cannot even agree to the idea of labeling meat in the marketplace with its country of origin, the apparent "consensus" on the need and expense of an animal identification program is surprising and even suspicious.

#### IV. CREEKSTONE FARMS AND TESTING FOR BSE: MAKING FOOD DEMOCRATS OUT OF BIG FOOD'S REFUGEES

John Stewart is an unlikely candidate to be either a spokesman for Food Democracy or a hero for consumers and farmers alike. He did not expect to trigger a controversy illustrating the fault lines between Big Food and Food Democracy or to stimulate a debate with serious implications for international trade and America's food system. As the owner of a beef-packing company, an avowed free-market businessman, a former head of the American Meat Institute, and a bulwark of Big Food and its dominion over America's diet, you might expect Stewart to be assisting industry efforts to resist consumers' desires for more information and choices in the food system. Instead, Stewart is in the thick of a fight with USDA and the meat industry over the right of his Kansas-based meat-processing company, Creekstone Farms, to test each of the 300,000 animals it butchers a year for the presence of BSE. In recent years, Stewart's company developed a very profitable market raising and selling high quality black Angus beef, especially to Japan. The discovery of BSE in the United States brought that market to a sudden stop, at least until Japanese officials and consumers become convinced that imported United States beef is safe. This is when the free-market spirit came over Mr. Stewart. He reasoned if Japanese customers want assurance that his beef is free from BSE, then he would test each animal processed, a practice allowed in both Europe and Japan. The only wrinkle in his plan was that such testing is unprecedented in the United States and he

needed USDA to approve the testing method involved. This is when Mr. Stewart learned a lesson about how USDA really feels about responding to consumers' desires for more information and about the meat industry's ability to influence the rules for domestic and international marketing of food.

I had the opportunity to meet John Stewart when he spoke at the Consumer Federation of America's national food policy conference in May 2004. His presence seemed to send a chill through the representatives of Big Food who filled the room, perhaps reflecting a mix of resentment for one of their own who dared challenge the doxology of Big Food and fear that his read of consumer hopes may be accurate. While Stewart was given the cold shoulder by United States food flacks, he was trailed by a pack of Japanese journalists and numerous Japanese TV crews that were in attendance for his session. The point seemed to be that you can become a hero to Japanese customers, but at the cost of becoming a pariah to your brethren in the United States meat industry. Stewart was the main attraction for a session on BSE and USDA's proposed testing program. Dr. Peter Fernandez, Associate Administrator of USDA's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), had the job of explaining and defending USDA's response. His main point was that USDA's goal is to develop a testing procedure in which consumers can have confidence, especially in foreign markets like Japan. He argued that the way you deal with meat safety concerns from BSE is by removing the SRM (specific risk material), the meat that may include spinal columns, not through testing like that proposed by Stewart and Creekstone. He explained how USDA would soon announce an enhanced testing protocol, costing over \$70 million. Later, in response to a question from the audience, he specifically said that "universal testing is not sound science."

The USDA's response to testing for BSE is parallel to the Starlink matter involving the discovery of non-approved GMO corn in foods. Their argument is "Trust us. We have rules, and they work." This is true, but only if we take enforcement of the rules seriously. The timing of Dr. Fernandez's defense was complicated because the papers that morning detailed a new incident at a small packing plant in Texas, where a cow showing signs of neurological problems was marked for testing but was then somehow disposed of before the testing could be done. The incident fueled conspiracy theorists in the food community and led to a May, 2004, *New York Times* editorial entitled "More Mad Cow Mischief,"<sup>2</sup> questioning how such a mixup could happen. What is troubling is how the incident plays into the hands of

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2. *Mad Cow Mischief*, N.Y. TIMES, May 8, 2004, at A16.

critics (and competitors) who feel that the United States is not really serious about trying to find mad cow cases, greatly complicating efforts to clear the name of United States beef. One of the ironies with the untested cow in Texas is that the packing plant in question did not take downer animals because it had a contract with McDonald's, which refused to buy them. This is why few BSE samples were taken, and why no USDA inspector was present. The inspector was at the other meat-packing plant in town, because that plant did take downers!

John Stewart asked Dr. Fernandez "why USDA continues to underestimate consumers' ability to appreciate information and why the agency is willing to spend \$300 a head to test cows when Creekstone can do it for \$20." Dr. Fernandez replied that the USDA's opposition to the tests is due to the "intimation" of safety that would be drawn from them. He portrayed the proposed tests as an attempt to guarantee the beef is safe, even though this is not what the company or foreign buyers have said. In any case, it was a fine example of changing the issue and using the "we know best" approach at the same time.

In his comments, John Stewart said "we are a business and in business to make money." He said the safety of the United States beef supply is not in dispute but that we have to recognize BSE is new territory for everyone, and it is not clear we understand the new science. At some point it will become clear, and what we need to test will become clear, but in the meantime he proposed testing be allowed. He said that Creekstone does not support testing as a safety issue but "we have to listen to consumers, these are smart people. There is one clear message: if you want to test . . . the government should let you." Stewart explained how the company has received thousands of e-mails of support but none of opposition. He said, "The only three groups that say don't test are the government, the AMI [American Meat Institute], and the NCBA [National Cattlemen's Beef Association]. Now why is that?" He concluded by noting that the government is worried about the costs of testing but that what USDA does not understand is that consumers make the decision as to value. If it is worth it to them, they will pay. "They [USDA] don't understand free enterprise. I haven't seen a case more blatant of government trying to tell business how to operate." He said the government should step back and re-evaluate its policy. "Consumers want [testing] whether it is safe or not. What does it matter? It is their choice. I represent free enterprise and my customers; I [do not] represent the government."

## V. THE COSTS OF FOOD: GOOD, BETTER, BEST, OR ELITISM COMES TO THE TABLE

From an economic perspective, many controversies in the debate about our food system revolve around how we account for the costs to society associated with different methods of producing and marketing food. As the Food Democracy movement grows and opportunities for consumers to buy foods they believe are better increase, then the prices of such foods may come down as supplies expand. As we learn more about the health and safety risks of some foods, and about the environmental costs of industrialized agriculture, our accounting might change as well.

One value of the alternatives offered in Food Democracy is that they make it possible for consumers to consider the true costs Big Food may impose on society and our health. Certainly the lessons drawn from the “mad cow” episode show there are risks and costs in our food system about which consumers are uninformed. If there is any good news in the mad cow discovery, perhaps it is how it finally prompted USDA to regulate practices, such as banning the use of downer cows for human consumption, which should have been stopped long before.

The bad news for Big Food is how more consumers now realize that the livestock industry long defended these practices, giving more weight to the small economic gain from them (such as feeding animal parts back to cattle) than to the possible risks to consumers. The danger to Big Food in defending practices that may be ultimately indefensible (such as using antibiotics as a growth promoter) is how it may change consumers’ respect and deference to Big Food’s explanations. What might be the tally if consumers pause to ask the question “what else don’t we know about the food processing industry that may be jeopardizing our health and the quality of the food we eat?”

If the downer cow incident in Washington is any guide, it shows how increased public scrutiny and consumer concern can lead to change. A ban on eating downer cows might add to the cost of meat, although there is little evidence to prove this. Even if prices do rise, though, has the value of the meat not gone up with removal of this risk? If prices go up, is this not a cost consumers will gladly pay if it means the meat supply is safer? Certainly some consumers, who in the face of BSE worries now seek out natural beef and find local sources of meat in which they have greater confidence, are willing to pay more money and spend more time buying food. Is there any reason to think there are not other, similar, efficiency-driven food processing practices that deserve more public scrutiny as well? The

lesson from the Washington incident and the BSE scare may be that when a more complete accounting of the costs of food is possible (whether in the market price or in consumers' judgment and knowledge) that we may find food produced by Food Democrats to be a better bargain than the products of Big Food. The support for Food Democracy reflected in the growing demand for better food, farmers' markets, organic food, and natural beef shows that for many consumers the issue of price is not the only factor in their food buying decisions if we give them the information and alternatives to make those decisions in an educated manner. For these people, the question is not whether we can afford better food, but whether we can afford the risks presented by our current food system or the possibility of not having better food available to purchase?

What, then, do we make of the critics from Big Food and their expected charge that Food Democracy is elitism served only on healthy tables? It is true that there are people interested in new varieties of arrugula. I know, because we grow hundreds of pounds of it at Sunstead Farm. The customers who buy it represent one component of the better-food movement and the fresh-food market; but from my experience, most Food Democrats are not driven by elitism or a desire to segregate any more than the motive of Big Food is humanitarianism or altruism. The motivations driving the majority of Food Democrats are more basic—families trying to create livings on their farms, food producers marketing healthier foods, consumers wanting to eat better and healthier food—and more communitarian and humanitarian in nature than the simplistic images that critics may try to project.

The premise that somehow the desire for better food and for creating more opportunities in our food system is an elitist goal should be rejected. So should the corollary premise, which is that high quality, fresh, nutritious food is somehow a luxury that only the wealthy can afford. How can good food be the province of the rich when *historically it is the birthright of small farmers and people who worked the land*? What does it say about society if we come to the point where the measure of our food system is that cheap food is good enough for you but if you want fresher, tastier, more nutritious food you will have to pay more, probably more than you can afford? Is this not, however, the premise of those who criticize the goals or values of people who make up the body of Food Democracy?

Don't take my word for it. Consider these features of the Food Democracy movement and then decide if they are elitist in nature or intent.

Many of the freshest, most nutritious foods, such as the foods sold at farmers' markets, come from the gardens and small farms of people not typically in the upper economic classes. These are working families, earning a living or a second income from the land, and doing so by sharing the unique patrimony of agrarian life. The knowledge of heirloom seeds, of canning and preserving foods, of curing hams and bacon, of making cheese and jams, and many other aspects of local food is essentially the cultural wealth of low-income rural people. How is it elitist to spend money with these farmers and support the transfer of their knowledge and products to a new generation of eaters? Many efforts to support regional food identities are built on highlighting unique foods and recipes indigenous to the areas. Most jams, jellies, meats, and cheeses are of humble or rural origins.

Marketing opportunities, such as the farmers' markets and CSAs often associated with Food Democracy, are structured to offer lower prices and make food affordable and accessible. By putting more income in farmers' pockets while still offering consumers lower or competitive prices, both groups can benefit economically. Then how can it be said that farmers' markets, CSAs, and other direct marketing efforts are elitist or luxuries of the wealthy? Anyone who visits a farmers' market will recognize the fallacy of such a charge. Every market to which I have been is a mix of people, young and old, rich and poor, and more a cross-section of the community than an extension of the country club.

The same is true with gardening; it is an equal-opportunity experience. The essence of gardening is empowering people to grow some of their own food so they can appreciate fresh produce and experience the beauty and bounty of nature's cycles. Yes, there are wealthy people who garden, just like there are poor people who go to farmers' markets. The reverse is true as well, but neither gardening nor shopping for vegetables is widely seen as a favored pastime of the upper class any more than it is an exclusive trait of the unemployed. The truth is that gardening and farmers' markets are, at their essence, democratic and about the pursuit of happiness. The motivations that draw people, rich or poor, young or old, to the market and the garden are not those of elitism. What attracts people to these pursuits are human values, ones that reflect the simple love for good food, beauty, being in nature, and connecting with the land. One defining element of Food Democracy is enjoyment—of food, of experience, of people, and of nature.

Many components of Food Democracy share the goal of opening new economic opportunities for people in our food system. The opportunities may be for retirees moving to the country to find a new life



producing food, be it wine, cheese, or meat. The opportunities may also be for the college-aged couple committed to environmental values who want to think globally but live and eat locally. For both types of people, and for everyone else in between, being involved with farming and food is the magnet that draws them to Food Democracy. Are they elitists? If you go to one of the winter meetings of the people working these farms, such as the Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, those in attendance will not strike you as elitists. The families and young people you will see are anything but elitists. In many ways, they are the newest expression of America's historic cycle, of a "back-to-the-land movement" in which people find an economic outlet for their agrarian values.

Rather than scorn new farmers as educated fools and "part-timers" who make no contribution to America's food system, criticisms you hear so many times in traditional farming circles, should we not welcome their energy and talent and applaud their willingness to return to rural America? Do we not need someone willing to do the work that it takes to help feed us? Is one of the cherished freedoms of our democratic society not the freedom to choose how and where we want to live and work? Helping more people find a rewarding future in food production and marketing should be viewed as a national goal, not a threat to the hegemony of Big Food.

An important segment of people drawn to the opportunities in local food systems is America's newest citizens. A primary beneficiary of many local food initiatives is the new immigrant farmers—the Hmong flower growers in California, the Korean fruit producers in Washington, the Latino vegetable farmers in Michigan—as well as their fellow immigrants who rely on them to produce and market the foods of their cultures. All of these groups combine to make a new homestead movement that promises to bring energy and life to rural areas now being depopulated by industrialized farming.

Is it elitist to hope that a new generation of land-owning small farmers might emerge from these groups, especially if we are wise enough to implement public policy to assist them? Or is the truly elitist vision for the future of our food system the vision based on maintaining new immigrants as a landless pool of unskilled laborers available to fill the needs of the meat packers and livestock factories, or the other "opportunities" offered by Big Food? To read more about how bleak that future is, see David Shipler's book, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*,<sup>3</sup> which documents the continuing "harvest of

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3. DAVID SHIPLER, *THE WORKING POOR: INVISIBLE IN AMERICA* (2004).

shame” and the underpaid workers who make our “cheap food” possible.

Access to education and information are at the heart of the Food Democracy movement, just as these public values have driven and fed much of the historic social and economic progress in our nation. Education has been, and will continue to be, the most powerful force in creating economic opportunity and promoting political equality in society. Is it elitist to give people more information about the sources of their food and about the impact of their choices? Had it not been for the discovery of BSE in the cow in Washington we would still be eating downer cows, but now that we know, who would want to go back to the way it was before we knew the truth about that aspect of our food system?

The fundamental values driving Food Democracy are not about elitism or economic discrimination; they are about access to healthy food, building stronger communities, creating more economic opportunity, and opening more personal connections in society. They are about personal satisfaction and human enjoyment and fulfillment; and these are truly public and democratic values, not the values of an elitist or exclusionary mindset. Decisions on value are made by consumers in a Food Democracy; this is the freedom of choice we should have in a democracy and in a capitalistic system.

For the majority of American consumers, the issue is not really about cost at all. We are fortunate that many of us can all afford to eat whatever we choose to purchase, be it organic food or Niman Ranch meat. Our choices depend on our priorities and how, in turn, those priorities shape our food-buying habits. Do we want better-tasting food, more confidence in its safety, and more information about its production—or is cost our main concern? Our food choices are a function of many things, in addition to price. How much we know about our food and our own values, the availability of food options, and competing demands on our funds all shape our decisions and priorities.

Acknowledging the truths about the difference in cost does not make any food, or the person selling it, an elitist. How can being a successful businessman and using the market to obtain higher prices for a better product make you an elitist? This is a strange argument to make in a culture where the business community prays on the alter of the free market and worships in the temple of capitalism.

Some parts of the Food Democracy movement reflect America's history of political change, but is this a reason to fear Food Democracy or to reject the underlying values or goals being promoted by Food Democracy? Pause and ask yourself, in light of the scrutiny of Food

Democracy, what are the motivations of those who defend and protect Big Food? Are they really defenders of the poor and less fortunate in society? Is feeding the masses and creating healthier eating opportunities what motivates them? Are they interested in the values of a true democracy? These could be their goals, and if so, they are welcome and free to promote their agenda; but if this truly is the goal of Big Food, then why is hunger still a bane to our nation and food insecurity on the rise in many states? Why is the nation experiencing an epidemic of dietary ills that threaten the health of our children and the long-term stability of the nation's health care system? The reality behind any criticisms of the ideals of Food Democracy, criticisms which no doubt come from those most threatened by its growth, is that those criticisms will be more defensive of the status quo and of the economic interests of Big Food than they are concerned about the public good.

The irony of the "costs more" argument of Big Food is that the higher costs of Food Democracy are, in part, a function of how much our current economic system has enabled the marketing of cheap food and hidden the costs of Big Food. Today, much of the real cost of cheap food is shifted out of the market and onto society in other ways—poor diets, obesity, environmental damage, exploited workers, and underpaid farmers. If one goal of Food Democracy is to help people understand the true costs of producing healthy, high-quality food and to give them ways to support an alternative system, then one side effect may be to increase food costs. The story of organics, eco-labels, farmers' markets, and all of the marketing avenues of Food Democracy is a story in which consumers voluntarily pay more for these products. This is not an expression of their elitist desire or proof they have more money than sense; it is the reflection of their success in finding ways to buy the foods they want and to support the farming practices that they feel are best. It is the story of farmers finding markets and staying on the farms to care for the land and their families. The consumers who choose these more "expensive," better food options are voting with their feet and mouths, spending their money to support Food Democracy. Some may call it elitism, but the people involved call it freedom.

## VI. FOOD IS A TOOL, NOT A WEAPON

Food is the centerpiece of the Food Democracy movement. This idea may seem simplistic, but it bears repeating. What differentiates the Food Democracy movement from what has come before, in terms of various agrarian movements and consumer campaigns, is the role

that food plays as the meeting point and focus of the debate. Earlier forms of agrarianism, such as the populism of the early twentieth century and even the more recent sustainable agriculture movement, focused primarily on the role of the family farm or the need for environmental protection. None of these movements had much to do with food, largely because food was constant as to its quality, source, and how it was processed and marketed. Before the twentieth century reign of the food scientists made manufacturing new foods with chemistry and technology common, we had not altered food so drastically. This meant that concern about the quality or safety of food did not provide a means of connecting the interests of consumers to the needs of farmers.

A critical part of what is different today in the debate over food in society is that our the food is different. We have altered it, processed it, and cheapened it. For many people, we have unfortunately turned it into something to fear as much as to value.

Consider how we can take clean, wholesome beef from a farm and then slaughter and process the meat in ways that introduce the threat of contamination so extensively that we must consider irradiating it. In effect, we are considering treating meat as a biohazard, just to be sure it is safe to eat. The cumulative result is that today's consumers are recognizing that food is different, and are questioning whether there are alternative types of farming and marketing that can produce better, healthier, more satisfying food.

Some farmers and food companies are responding by looking for ways to produce and market the better foods that consumers want. The truth is that in the process of industrializing agriculture, we may have threatened many of the traditional processes of farming and the integrity of food marketing. We may have also placed the public's confidence in food in jeopardy. The negative consequences of our actions (falling consumer confidence, increasing food safety fears, and growing diet and nutrition impacts) have led many to finally realize what agriculture produces—food—and ask for better products.

The opportunity to use food, something we all need and in which we all have a common interest, as the centerpiece for social and political discussions makes Food Democracy a powerful and encompassing theme for developing linkages and partnerships between components of society. The growing role of food as the focus of public attention is apparent in many ways. Recent trends within sustainable agriculture research, such as the work of the Leopold Center on the concept of food miles and increased attention to farm marketing and “value-added” agriculture, illustrate this shift in focus. Food is the main character in all the debates about obesity and nutrition, from concern over

fast food marketing aimed at children to the United States' policy on sugar consumption. Food is undoubtedly the canvas, the political backdrop upon which future farm policies and social relations will be developed. The significance of shifting our attention to food is how it finally offers a direct way to make discussions about farming and agriculture relevant to consumers who are affected by how agriculture performs. Because we all eat, "consumers" are really a proxy for the public, and because all consumers eat, the public has an immediate and available way to vote on its interests, to take action, and to influence the future of our food system. Whether and how the public will vote depends on the information and education available. This is the reason why control over food knowledge, especially over food labels and the information that can be shared about food, is the key battleground in the debate.

This shift in public focus can be used as the way to stimulate discussion about Food Democracy. Food is the medium for communication and understanding, but it is also a tool to support farmers and companies serving the needs of consumers. Food is not just the endpoint of a production-marketing equation; it is a pathway, a form of communication about society's values. It is not just the food; it is everything about it—taste and enjoyment, sharing and knowledge, participation and identity—that makes it fulfilling. The new American food movement is not about gastronomy and novelty as much as it is about community and democracy.

The idea of using food as a tool to build democracy is in contrast to the 1960s idea, best expressed by former United States Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, of using food as a weapon. America "plant[ed] fence row to fence row" and used food to defeat communism and maintain our economic supremacy in the world. The enemies were hunger, poverty, ignorance, and Communists, as well as nations who did not open their markets to American exports or subject their farmers to the forces of free trade and the power of America's farms. Today, most of the "commies" are gone, and those who remain are major customers. Other enemies still remain, though, and unfortunately our approach to food helped them spread, even into our own society.

We treat food as a weapon and use this rationale to continue the destruction of farming culture and rural areas here and abroad. In our quest for economic domination we employ every new technology available, even over the objections of our customers. The fact that Europeans do not want hormones in their meat or genetically modified grain in their food does not stop us from challenging their right to object. Today, our attitude is repeated by rejecting the right of the Japanese to have beef tested for BSE. Worse still, USDA is refusing

the right of Kansas meat packer Creekstone Farms to voluntarily perform BSE tests so it can regain the Japanese markets it lost after the discovery of BSE in the United States. In asserting the correctness of our science at the high cost of losing these markets to competitors, we have forgotten a simple lesson of marketing: you have to produce something that customers want to buy. Today, the greatest fear of Big Food is that Americans will want something other than the foods it insists on producing.

We have treated food as a weapon and then turned it on ourselves, the small farms, the rural towns, the workers, and ultimately the consumers of America. We undervalue the contributions of farmers, depopulate the towns, underpay the workers, exploit the land, and overfeed the rest of us. The food industry has mounted a campaign to convince us that there is no such thing as bad foods, just bad food choices; but it is doing all it can to multiply our opportunities to make bad choices. In an effort to avoid responsibility and liability for the nation's nutrition and health problems, the food industry says that the answer to obesity is simply for consumers to "move more." Increased physical exercise will undoubtedly benefit many people, but this simple message of personal responsibility should not obscure the role of Big Food.

Today, we have the ability to change our attitude and approach to food and to consider food as a tool and a pathway to better farming and a healthier future. Many Americans have decided to "move more," but part of that movement is to look for better food and a new relationship with the food system. They are discovering just how powerful a tool food can be as a way to forge bonds between farmers and consumers, to support sound farming practices, and to produce better and more nutritious foods.

## VII. FOOD AND VALUES: NOT MORE, BETTER

The idea of Food Democracy is premised on there being people and businesses interested in supporting its emergence and in highlighting the contrast with the existing food sector. The key to understanding the difference between Food Democracy and Big Food is not just size; it is the values around which they are created. The essential value differences between Big Food and Food Democracy concern the difference between "cheap food" and food that is more satisfying.

Food Democrats are looking for more satisfaction from food, and their goal is to create a better food system. Is this not why we have a political democracy? We support political democracies because they are more satisfying than other political forms, and we believe they are

better for society and more liberating for the human spirit. The goal is similar for Food Democracy. More satisfaction and better food can come about in any number of ways. For some people, it means the food was raised locally by people they know. For other people, it concerns revealing what the food may contain, such as pesticides or added growth hormones. For some, it concerns the methods of production, such as how the animals were treated or the land was farmed. For others, it is whether the food was sold at a farmers' market or at a natural food store. For some, it will be how it tastes—the most personal of food's attributes. The others' measure of satisfaction may be in how it was purchased, like whether it was bought directly, or whether it is a certain brand, which is seen as an indicator of quality. For some people, food satisfaction will mean having the ability to participate in the production of food on their own farms or in their own gardens.

Food Democracy is really about enlarging the number of ways that food and the food-buying experience can be enhanced. It is about breaking free of the tyranny of an industrial food system that substitutes its own set of values, or what it believes should be your values, for more choices and more knowledge about food production and marketing.

The contrasting values between Big Food and Food Democracy are not simply minor issues of taste or sensibility; rather, the differences are more fundamental and significant for society. Several values reflected by Big Food are the most troubling. The first is opposing the consumer's right to know more about food, such as how it is raised or even what it contains. America's food labeling laws are based on companies being required to provide only the minimum amount of information mandated by government, an approach that protects the right not to reveal other information and to resist efforts by marketers who do. The hypocrisy of opposing efforts to provide consumers with more information while simultaneously arguing "the consumer is king" is apparent.

A second value conflict is the lack of any sense of place or identity with most food products marketed by Big Food. In the United States, our view is "food is food," and where it is raised is no more important than how or by whom it was produced. Big Food resists creating ways to identify food with either the place it is grown, such as whether it was locally or internationally raised, or with the farmers or factories who produce it. This attitude is best exemplified by the food industry's fierce opposition to Congressional efforts to require country-of-origin labeling on meat, produce, seafood, and other commodities. Big Food's approach is to treat food and its ingredients as fungible

commodities, giving no value to a sense of place or origin and creating no incentive for supporting local production. It resists the idea of identifying food with place for a number of reasons, namely because it is costly and difficult to do, assuming it can be done at all. If people have an idea where food is produced, they might want to buy locally raised food, something Big Food finds nearly impossible to supply. It is not easy to develop a food processing or marketing system to maintain any sense of identity or to preserve local production capacity. This is true even if your heart is in it. The fungible nature of food ingredients lets Big Food substitute any product sourced from any location, at any time, into the mixture without worrying about describing the product differently. The potatoes may come from Idaho today or Canada tomorrow; it does not matter. The underlying message of many of Big Food's media campaigns, like the industry's "milk-is-milk" attack on natural dairy products, is that it does not matter how food is produced or where it comes from as long as it is edible.

This simplistic attitude toward food underpins the third value conflict between Big Food and Food Democracy, the idea of food as a definition for a product rather than as a set of values or traits of the product. In the United States, chicken is chicken; it is how it is defined as a food. How or where it was raised does not go into the equation of it being chicken. In fact, if you ask for more information about the origin of the chicken the people selling it will have no idea and will look at you strangely for even asking; but anyone who eats chicken knows that there can be more to it than just the correct species of fowl being processed. Many things can make chicken satisfying, or even delicious. Chicken can taste good, look good, and be safe to eat, but if being safe to eat and cheap are the only measures of the product's value then the opportunity for satisfaction is more happenstance than planned.

Our idea of chicken is in contrast to the French method of producing and marketing the many varieties of chicken designed to meet various consumer desires, but we do not have to develop a laundry list of chicken options for it to be more satisfying. In fact, a proliferation of different types of chickens might be confusing for Americans; the point of this idea is not simply to acknowledge how much better chicken could be, but to recognize how we have reduced food to the lowest common denominator. The reductionist view of food has reduced not just the variety of food but the opportunities for consumer satisfaction. In our system, chicken has been reduced to a commodity rather than a food; and if you want something special about your chicken (including one that tastes like old-fashioned chicken) then the burden is on you, either as a seller or a buyer, to make the connec-



tion. The goal of Food Democracy is to create more diversity and choices, including more and better types of chicken. Yes, the starting point may be the same species of fowl, but the products marketed could be from different types of chickens, fed and raised in different methods and produced locally, all with different prices.

The fourth value of Big Food in conflict with Food Democracy is the idea of cheap food. The most powerful organizing principle of Big Food has been to reduce the cost of producing food by increasing production and efficiency, and using any new technology or labor-saving device to do so. The argument used to justify everything people find troubling about modern industrialized agriculture and food processing is cost and efficiency. Name a controversy about America's food system, a food-safety scare or a practice the public finds offensive, and no doubt you will find that the justification is to reduce cost and increase efficiency. From processing downer cows for people to eat, to injecting growth hormones to produce more milk for us to drink, to feeding hormones to produce more meat more quickly, to planting GMO crops, to feeding processed chicken feces to cattle, to confining thousands of pigs to one building, to forcing millions of laying hens into battery cages, to spraying crops and the workers who harvest them with powerful chemicals, to speeding slaughterhouse lines and increasing the risks of contamination, to promoting irradiation of the meat as the way to make the feces on it edible . . . all of these practices and methods introduce more risks into our food supply, and once discovered, they make people fear their food. They are the result of the drive to make food cheaper. Perhaps the ultimate cost and the greatest price that Big Food's values impose on the public is the fear of food. The desire to not be afraid of food, but instead to trust and enjoy it, is a major force driving millions of consumers to search for Food Democracy.

### VIII. FOOD AS FEAR, FOOD AS LOVE

The idea of Food Democracy is that there are Food Democrats, people who are helping drive the debate and the movement to a better food system. In thinking about what Food Democrats are looking for, several goals are clear. Many of these goals I call the "C words:" connection, community, confidence, choice, and comfort. These are all traits the foods, and relations created within a Food Democracy, can have. They are also looking for a different form of accounting for costs, in that cost is not just the price tag on the food but a sum of other impacts and effects of the food they buy.

Another way to help explain the value of Food Democracy is to consider whether modern society sees food as fear or food as love. The concept of food as love may be a bit strong for many to swallow, including my law professor colleague, but clearly food is the very basis of love. From the child at a mother's breast to sitting around the dinner table, from the romantic meal to the family holiday feast, food is a major language for expressing and experiencing love. If you have trouble thinking of food as love, is it not more appealing than thinking of food as fear?

Food as fear, however, is for many Americans an increasing experience and, in some ways, the destination where the Big Food ideology is taking us. Irradiate your meat, be sure and cook it well, wash and scrub your fruits and vegetables (even the raspberries), think twice about the chicken, do not lick the bowl or eat cake batter because the eggs are raw, do not cross-contaminate your cooking surfaces, be sure to disinfect your counters, and for heaven's sake do not use that wooden cutting board! These are the admonitions of an increasingly industrialized and fearful food system.

It is not wrong to make consumers aware of the need to fight bacteria, but do we not also need to stop to think of how the bacteria got there? In our rush to educate consumers and to make them accept their responsibility for food safety, do we also need to rush to absolve the food processors and marketers whose practices and cost saving efficiency help sow the sources of many food safety concerns?

What are the social and psychological costs when we come to fear our food rather than revel in it? One economic advantage of making people fear their food is how it makes it possible to profit from the fear, because one thing is for sure—people are not going to stop eating. I remember an incident from a summer class, Legal Issues in Farm Direct Marketing, when I asked students about going to farmers' markets. One student explained how her family never shopped at roadside stands or farmers' markets because they were worried the food would not be clean. Even though you could not get closer to the source, for her family the grocery store offered the promise of clean, wholesome food. The grocery industry does all it can to promote and protect the safety of food it sells, but having said this, viewing the stores as a protector of safety might offer a false sense of security. The truth is that when the doors open and the food comes off the truck, it might as well be coming out of a black hole in terms of providing consumers with information as to the production methods used or the location where the food was raised. Big Food's resistance to efforts by Congress to mandate "county-of-origin labeling" illustrates that more

information is not everyone's primary goal. Local food allows consumers to see where and how the food is raised.

#### IX. FOOD DEMOCRACY: REVOLUTION OR RESTORATION?

Can you have a revolution if no one gets shot? Can you have a revolution if those leading it do not consider themselves revolutionaries? If the most that happens is that food tastes better, farms are more profitable, eaters are healthier, and communities are stronger, then is it accurate to call the changes underway in America's food system a revolution? These questions come to mind as I think about the future of Food Democracy and the struggle between people working for a better food system and the forces defending the status quo. Many people have used the language of revolution to describe what is underway in America's food. For example, Alice Waters describes what is happening as "a delicious revolution," a wonderful turn of phrase that captures both the pleasure and the promise involved. And John Robbins, author of *Diet for a New America*<sup>4</sup> and *The Food Revolution: How Your Diet Can Help Save Your Life and Our World*,<sup>5</sup> focused on changing how we eat as a society as the best way to change societal health.

When you consider recent changes in what we eat, America's food scene has undoubtedly experienced several "revolutions," not the least of which is the fast food revolution so ably documented in Eric Schlosser's modern masterpiece *Fast Food Nation*.<sup>6</sup> Other mini-revolutions in recent years provide reasons for optimism about the future of Food Democracy. The growing popularity of artisan bread, the success of local micro-breweries, and more recently, the production of high-quality farmstead cheeses, all reflect new opportunities in our food system. We should not overlook the amazing transformation of coffee either; with the emergence of the corner coffee house, a new type of retail food establishment is growing at a pace that shows little sign of abating. Each year, some new idea "revolutionizes" the food sector (such as the low-carb diet, which was popularized by best-selling diet books) but food trends can be fleeting. The bloom may now be off the rose of artisan bread, not because it is not better but because bread itself has fallen from favor as a casualty of the low-carb craze. Is Food Democracy just another trend, an interesting name but a silly idea longing for a goal that can never be reached?

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4. JOHN ROBBINS, *DIET FOR A NEW AMERICA: HOW YOUR FOOD CHOICES AFFECT YOUR HEALTH, HAPPINESS AND THE FUTURE OF LIFE ON EARTH* (1998).

5. JOHN ROBBINS, ET. AL., *THE FOOD REVOLUTION: HOW YOUR DIET CAN HELP SAVE YOUR LIFE AND OUR WORLD* (2001).

6. ERIC SCHLOSSER, *FAST FOOD NATION* (2001).

The future of Food Democracy will be written by the actions of farmers, consumers, food marketers, and government officials working to satisfy their own needs and, in the process, resolving the issues that shape the debate about America's food and farming future. Whether what unfolds will be as significant as I believe, or simply the collective muddling through to another day that marks much of society's progress, depends on whether food becomes a central issue in the personal and political agendas of America's eaters. If the personal stake is significant, then the changes to come may be as well. If the present concerns about food fade or are lost in a fog of conflicting advice and unfilled expectations, then the future may be more of the same.

Wendell Berry, whose writings over the last thirty years have inspired and educated a generation of Food Democrats, sees the struggle between local food and global forces as a revolt. In a 1999 essay, "The Whole Horse," he wrote, "What agrarian principles implicitly propose—and what I explicitly propose in advocating those principles at this time—is a revolt of local small producers and local customers against the global industrialism of the corporations."<sup>7</sup> Berry asks rhetorically whether there is hope such a revolt can succeed and have significant influence on the world. Here is part of his answer:

Yes, I do. And to be as plain as possible, let me just say what I know. I know from friends and neighbors and from my own family that it is now possible for farmers to sell at a premium to local customers such products as organic vegetables, organic beef and lamb, and pasture-raised chickens. This market is being made by the exceptional goodness and freshness of the food, by the wish of urban consumers to support farming neighbors, and by the excesses and abuses of the corporate food industry.<sup>8</sup>

Berry argues that the pattern of economic revolt is due to the scale of industrial agriculture, which increases the abuse of food and the land and renders it unable to see or serve the small local opportunities created in its wake. He notes, "the market for so-called organic food, for example, is really a market for good, fresh, trustworthy food, food from producers known and trusted by consumers, and such food cannot be produced by a global corporation."<sup>9</sup>

My experiences raising and selling food grown on our farm and visiting with Food Democrats all across the nation support Berry's con-

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7. Wendell Berry, *The Whole Horse*, in *THE ART OF THE COMMONPLACE: THE AGRARIAN ESSAYS OF WENDELL BERRY* 236 (2002).

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

clusion. It is important to understand that changes in our food system are happening, and not just because Berry or other leaders are urging them. They are happening because of the desires of farmers and consumers for better food and more satisfaction. Let the reader judge whether it is a revolution, although the name may not be as important as what the stories mean for the promise of Food Democracy. To paraphrase Aldo Leopold's comment about the possibility that our nation will someday embrace a land ethic, I believe that Food Democracy is an evolutionary possibility and a culinary and cultural necessity. Our inherent tendency towards democracy and the undeniable demands for better food, for food with a connection to the land, for food with a story, and for food with more flavor, indicate that we are well underway in our search for Food Democracy. If you think about revolutions as being quick and violent, this is not the case with Food Democracy, as the movement has grown and evolved over the last two decades. If revolutions need a firebrand leader and a central cause as a trigger, Food Democracy fails the test because it has hundreds of leaders and almost as many issues at its core. Rather than being centrally organized and led, it is more insurgent, dispersed to thousands of kitchens, farms, and markets all across the nation. Still, many issues underpinning the Food Democracy movement do have a revolutionary quality, if that means opposing the status quo and the economic values now in control. Fair trade food, eco-labels, heirloom vegetables, heritage livestock breeds, sustainable agriculture, organic farming, buy local campaigns, and the Slow Food movement all find their origins and motivations in the perceived misdeeds of Big Food and industrial eating, as well as in the desire of farmers and eaters to find a better way.

If we use the term "revolution" to describe the Food Democracy movement, then two related questions must be considered. First, against what are people revolting, and second, is the goal the same as most revolutions—that of replacing oppression and totalitarianism with democracy? What eaters are revolting against is fairly clear—the faceless standardization of our food, the economic and political dominance of companies and institutions comprising Big Food, and the lack of human values and satisfaction reflected in industrialized agriculture. The answer to the second question is perhaps less clear, in part because we are loath to consider how economic trends and current political goals can reflect anti-democratic values (let alone produce oppressive or totalitarian results). So rather than focus on the darkness of characterizing others, let us turn to the sunshine of the promised future.

The goal of Food Democracy is a food system offering more opportunities for farmers and consumers, greater varieties of products,

more information, more choices, more local involvement, as well as greater attention to health, the environment, animal welfare, and human values. The goal is a food system that offers more personal connections, a stronger sense of community, and more satisfaction in all the ways that food can satisfy human needs. It is not just a “revolution,” it is also a restoration, an effort to restore democracy to our food system. It is about replacing the realities of industrialized Big Food with the democratic ideals of a more locally driven and human-oriented food system, based on values other than mere economic efficiency.

In *The Soul of Capitalism*,<sup>10</sup> William Greider paints a compelling portrait of the problems in America’s economy and argues that we need to reinvent American capitalism to reflect human values. He examines the contradiction between our fabulous wealth and our growing feeling of personal impoverishment and concludes that an increasing number of citizens are willing to question the politics and economic assumptions of our quest for “more.” Most importantly, Greider marshals the economic evidence to show how our current approach to capitalism sanctions greater concentrations of wealth and generates greater social inequalities. He concludes that our current path threatens the very essence of our democracy, and argues that the “house of economics is due for major renovations.” Reading Greider’s book in early 2004 gave me optimism for Food Democracy, because our themes and conclusions mirror many of the same developments, although he adds a cogent economic rationale for what I have merely observed. Perhaps his most important insights are on the theme of democracy, in particular his observations about the inherently anti-democratic aspects of our two most common economic environments—corporate governance and the workplace. He asks if it is really so puzzling to see evidence of declining citizen participation in some forms of democratic expression, such as voting, when most of us spend our working lives in anti-democratic environments and have our fortunes and retirements invested in the fate of corporations. This shunting of democratic expression in our economic life makes even more important the opportunity for democratic expression and fulfillment in our social life, in what we eat, and in how we live. His book is full of ideas on how to address the weaknesses in our form of capitalism and in the process help restore our democracy.

Greider’s theme of “restoration” is at the heart of my view of Food Democracy. Food Democracy is not something new that people

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10. WILLIAM GREIDER, *THE SOUL OF CAPITALISM: OPENING PATHS TO A MORAL ECONOMY* (2003).

are seeking to assert. There is no revolution in seeking better food or wanting more information or alternatives; these are the promise of the democratic system we hold dear. Democracy is not something we can take for granted, and the Food Democracy movement is about restoring something we should have today. Restoration is what drives the Food Democrats, not just revolt.