

pile of ground hardwood bark from local sawmills. A small flock of chickens is then allowed to forage on the pile, leaving their droppings on it and eventually transforming it into a high-grade compost, much in demand by nearby farmers and gardeners. The chickens, in turn, lay eggs that are sold back to the restaurants that supplied the scraps.

The chickens need no nourishment other than the vegetable matter supplied by the restaurants. This eliminates the need to feed the hens grain, which would have to be trucked into Vermont from as far away as the Midwest or Canada.

So far, Vermont Compost has joined with two area restaurants, which supply roughly a ton of food scraps each week, enough feed for 75 hens. The hens in turn are producing roughly three dozen eggs a day. Since neither of the restaurants serves 100 percent organic food, the eggs produced cannot be certified as organic, but nonetheless are extremely high quality and command a market premium. At a price of \$2 per dozen—midway between that of commercial and organic eggs—demand is already higher than the composter can meet. The operation is expected to expand steadily, bringing in more local restaurants—and more chickens—over time.

The elegance of Carl Hammer's idea is that two things of value—compost and eggs—are being created out of something that previously cost money to throw away. And since eggs formerly trucked in from elsewhere are now home-grown, more money stays in the local economy—enough, in fact, to create one full-time job so far. Pollution and fossil fuel use are reduced as well, and the compost created is adding fertility to farms and gardens that produce other local foods.

6

Food and Community

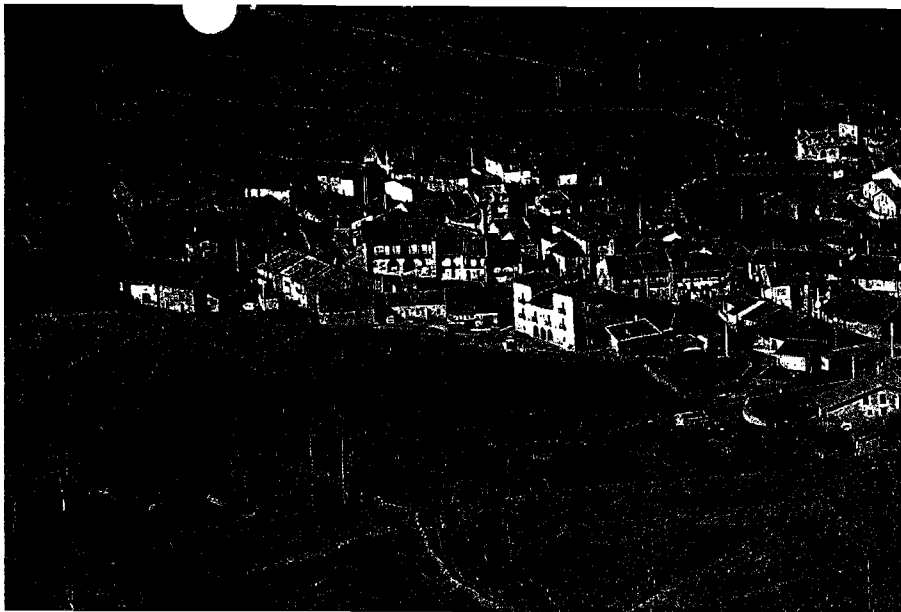
[There] isn't much community inside a big supermarket. There, we shop as isolated individuals, each in our own private world. Gone are the relationships with the soil, the grower, and, for the most part, even the distributor. Do you know the name of the produce manager in your supermarket? Or anything about his or her family?

—Art Gish, *Food We Can Live With*

IN ECONOMIES WHERE THE GAP between the richest and poorest is relatively narrow and no one lacks the necessities of life, anger and frustration are minimized, while feelings of mutual interdependence—the essence of community—are strong. Such circumstances are common in prosperous local economies, which tend to spread their gains evenly through the entire community. This is not the direction economic globalization is taking us: it is instead leading to an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, enabling some to accumulate vast fortunes while relegating others to abject poverty. In 1960, the income of the richest fifth of the global population was thirty times that of the poorest fifth; by 1997 the gap more than doubled, with the richest fifth receiving seventy-four times more than the poorest fifth.¹

Many people claim that accelerated economic growth will solve this problem. But economic growth does not lift all boats equally: for example, the longest continuous economic expansion in America's history, running from 1992 to 2001, mainly benefited the affluent, causing the nation's rich-poor gulf to widen further.² If trends like these continue, social unrest and violence are sure to increase dramatically.

If the goal is to provide the most benefits to the most people, a shift toward local food would be an important first step. Improving the economic welfare of farmers, farm workers, small producers, and shopkeepers benefits entire local economies, providing in turn deep social benefits to communities as a whole. Some of those advantages would be clearly visible at first glance: instead of business districts with boarded-up storefronts or rows



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of identical corporate-owned stores, towns and villages could once again become lively, distinctive places, centers for social interaction and cultural vitality.

Webs of Interdependence

In the 1940s, an important study neatly documented the social and economic benefits of small-scale family farms to a community. Researcher Walter Goldschmidt studied two similar-sized rural towns in California: Dinuba, where numerous family farms still dotted the adjacent countryside, and Arvin, where corporate-owned industrial farms were the norm. Goldschmidt found that the town surrounded by family farms was far better off economically, supporting twice as many businesses and generating over 60 percent more retail volume than the industrial farm town. Overall, Dinuba had a higher standard of living and a narrower gap between rich and poor than the industrial-farming community.³

The economic advantages of retaining family farms translated into higher scores in various indicators of social vitality as well: Dinuba had more civic organizations, more newspapers, more public recreation centers and parks, even more schools and churches than Arvin. Participatory democracy was also stronger in Dinuba: there, town decisions were often made through popular vote; in Arvin, county officials imposed most decisions from above, with little input from the public.⁴



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None of this is surprising. When the web of economic links among small farmers, processors, retailers, and consumers is strong, both the economy and the sense of interdependence characteristic of real community are strengthened as well. One researcher in England described such links among seventy-five local farmers and businesses in the town of East Suffolk:

A wholesale family butcher buys meat from about thirty local farmers. This business cuts and sells fresh meat to other outlets, cures and smokes bacon, makes sausages and cooked meats, and provides freezer packs. These products are supplied to twenty-one small shops. In addition, the family runs two butcher shops, which in turn are sourcing other produce, such as eggs, vegetables, cakes, and preserves from twenty-four local producers.⁵

Local food systems can also provide a link between people in a community who might otherwise have little or no connection at all. A vendor at one of Connecticut's sixty-three farmers' markets pointed out that such markets provide "a great chance to get out and talk to customers, to find out what they like, to explain what we're doing." Another added, "to many of the regular shoppers, the farmers have become like friends."⁶

Farmers' markets in small towns invariably become social events, and the purchase of food can even become secondary to the social interactions the market encourages. Shoppers at farmers' markets often look forward to the event, and linger to socialize with friends, neighbors, and farmers long after their purchases are made. Almost every town that hosts a farmers'

market finds itself enlivened on market day.

CSAs and other forms of direct marketing similarly strengthen bonds in a community, enabling the consumer and farmer to see one another as real people. When CSA members meet at the farm on work days or festivals, the bonds among them can grow even stronger.

Compare this to the global food system, which promotes anonymity at every turn. Consumers, farmers, processors, and distributors of industrial foods rarely know one another—and may not even live within 1,000 miles of each other. Shopping in a supermarket, meanwhile, is for most people a boring and lifeless chore, certainly not something to be anticipated with joy.

In this way the industrial food system is already quite soulless, but before the collapse of the dot-com bubble it was deemed revolutionary to use the Internet to strip still more social interaction from it. Software provider SCT, for example, claimed its merger with Internet food marketer ecFood.com would allow “an industry traditionally characterized by personalized relationships between processors and suppliers to modernize.”⁷ Eliminating personal relationships was deemed beneficial not only for businesses but for consumers as well. Several Web-based companies enabled shoppers to purchase groceries while comfortably cocooned in front of their computers, rather than in real markets where they would encounter real people.

Internet grocery shopping is—for now at least—just one of many failed dot-com business models. In retrospect, the flaws of those businesses are all too obvious, but the massive support they received from financial institutions and the media says much about the west’s unreasoning infatuation with technology.

The Death of Rural Communities

The destructive impacts of the global food system include an overall decline in rural services. As agricultural production is industrialized and rural people are uprooted, many of the social and economic institutions of villages and small towns are consolidated or transferred elsewhere, often in the name of efficiency. Four out of ten parishes in rural England today have no shop or post office, six out of ten no primary school, and three-quarters no bus service or clinic.⁸ The people who remain in these communities, meanwhile, can easily lose their sense of belonging and commitment to a particular place. When people see no economic future at home for their own children, they are effectively seeing the life of their community coming to an end.

The sense of despair in many rural communities is exacerbated by a barrage of media and advertising images emphasizing the glories of modern



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life and sending the message that rural ways have no place in a future that will be, above all else, thoroughly high-tech. In the South, the overly glamorous lives depicted in films and on television lead children in particular to see their own rural ways of life as primitive and boring by contrast. Village life—already undermined by global economic forces—can easily seem an anachronistic dead-end, while location-specific social institutions and cultural practices can appear pointless and hopelessly out-of-date.

Similarly unrealistic and one-sided media messages undermine rural self-esteem in the North. People are told that milk will someday be produced in factories, using vats of genetically engineered bacteria rather than cows; that being adept at using a computer is already a prerequisite for getting *any* job; that refrigerators will read the bar codes on store-bought food, enabling an internal computer to order more as needed; that the Internet is creating a global consciousness that redefines community; and so on. Rarely, if at all,

do portray. the future respectfully depict rural people or land-based ways of living.

Misplaced Blame

Rural self-esteem sometimes absorbs even harder blows. In many parts of the North, farms have been disappearing at record rates for well over a generation, a trend that is a direct consequence of government policies and the power of agribusiness corporations. Yet farmers who have lost their farms are implicitly told that they have no one to blame but themselves. As Wendell Berry points out, "With hundreds of farm families losing their farms every week, the economists are still saying, as they have said all along, that these people deserve to fail, that they have failed because they are the 'least efficient producers', and that the rest of us are better off for their failure."⁹

For people whose land is taken from them—in many cases land their families have lived on and worked for many generations—the sense of shame and anger can be immense. A recent article in *The New York Times* detailed the plight of a fifty-seven-year-old farmer in Iowa who lost a farm that had been in his family for more than a century:

A week before [he] was forced to sell his cattle, he sat and cried, tears streaming down his face, making no sound, his body shuddering. "I lost all desire to do anything," he said. ". . . This is like a death, you know."¹⁰

Many farmers direct those emotions inward, and suicide can be the result. In the United States, in fact, suicide is now the leading cause of death among farmers, occurring at a rate three times higher than in the general population.¹¹ Things are no better in the United Kingdom, where farmers are taking their own lives at the rate of one per week.¹²

More and more, however, the anger is being directed outward. While many dispossessed rural people are coming to understand the broad systemic forces that are ruining local economies and entire cultures the world over, many others have been convinced that their problems can be traced to racial minorities or Catholics, to immigrants, to a vast Jewish banking conspiracy, or to a world government run by the UN and enforced by swarms of black helicopters. The mix of hopelessness and misdirected anger in America's economically ruined rural heartland is leading to increasing incidents of violence, played out in places like Ruby Ridge, Waco, and Oklahoma City. These events, and others like them, should be counted among the many externalized costs of the global economy.

Unmanageable Cities

Rural areas are not the only places that pay a heavy price for the globalization and industrialization of food: urban areas suffer as well. Throughout most of human history, rural areas and cities were mutually dependent. Now, as rural people are uprooted, cities are increasingly the repositories for those whose way of life has been destroyed.

In China, for example, the globalization of the economy and the modernization of agriculture will uproot an estimated 440 million people from rural areas in the next few decades, all of whom will be migrating to urban areas. According to China's vice minister of construction, 600 new cities will be needed by 2010 to handle the influx.¹³ More often, rural people are drawn into cities that already have more people than they can accommodate, creating social and environmental problems that are largely unmanageable. Thanks to the systematic undermining of rural life, there are twenty more Third World cities with populations over ten million today than there were in 1970.¹⁴ While this is often attributed to increases in overall population, the South's urban population explosion is far more closely linked to economic development. Cities like Karachi, Manila, and Lagos, which more than doubled in size between 1970 and 1990, grew twice as fast as overall population growth in their respective countries.¹⁵

People pulled into Third World urban centers almost invariably find themselves on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. Cut off from their communities and cultural moorings, people from many differing ethnic backgrounds face ruthless competition for jobs and the basic necessities of life. With individual and cultural self-esteem already eroded by the pressure to live up to media stereotypes, the elements are in place for a dramatic increase in anger and hostility, particularly among young men. In the intensely demoralizing and competitive situation they face, differences of any kind become increasingly significant, and ethnic and racial conflict are the all but inevitable results.

In its most virulent form, conflict can escalate to the level of ethnic or religious cleansing. It can also result in acts of terrorism against the west, as happened on September 11, 2001. These horrifying events should be a reminder of the heavy cost of leveling the world's diverse multitude of social and economic systems. The attempt to create a global monoculture in the image of the west is ultimately an extreme act of violence, and we should be unsurprised when some people respond in kind.

Loss of Democracy

As economic scale grows, both producers and consumers become increasingly dependent on faceless middlemen who have no stake in the community, eroding the ability of individuals and communities to determine their own destiny. While people within smaller-scale economies are often deeply engaged in the decisions that affect them, this involvement rapidly diminishes once they are linked to a much larger-scale economic system. One of the authors observed this effect in the once-remote region of Ladakh, as development brought the area into the orbit of the global economy:

In the decentralized village-scale economy, individuals had a real influence on the important decisions affecting them. They depended on people they knew, and on local resources they controlled themselves. Nowadays, as they are drawn ever more tightly into the socio-economic structure of India, each individual becomes just one of 800 million; as part of the global economy, one of over 6 billion. Their influence over the political and economic forces that affect them is being so reduced that they are essentially powerless.¹⁶

For most citizens in today's global economy, the levers of power can easily seem to be beyond the reach of all but corporate CEOs, industry lobbyists, and wealthy campaign contributors. Even worse, decisions that directly affect the livelihoods of millions of people are routinely made behind closed doors in huge corporations or in supranational institutions like the WTO. In these cases, there is not even the pretense of democracy: the decision makers are neither democratically elected, nor is the decision-making process open to public scrutiny.

For countries as a whole, losing food self-sufficiency can quickly lead to a loss of political independence. Discussing the so-called Food for Peace program, in which American food surpluses are given to countries with food shortages, former US Vice President Hubert Humphrey pointed out how the program would help further America's foreign policy objectives: "If you are looking for a way to get people to lean on you and to be dependent on you, in terms of their cooperation with you, it seems to me that food dependence would be terrific."¹⁷ Not so terrific, however, for food-dependent nations.

According to José Bové, French sheep farmer and leader of the grassroots Confederation Paysanne, the tyranny of the global economy is clearly revealed in the US attempt to force European markets to accept beef treated with growth hormones—against the clear wishes of the majority of Europeans: "There have been three totalitarian forces in our lifetime. The totalitarianism of fascism, of communism, and now of capitalism. How can people try and tell us that we must import hormone-enhanced beef? What is that?"¹⁸

It is certainly not democracy. And yet proponents of globalization speak as though the spread of the global economy and the spread of democracy were somehow inextricably linked.

Shifting course will not, of course, immediately change the undemocratic nature of many of today's entrenched institutions. But if the scale of our economies were reduced—with the distance between producers and consumers shortened, so that most regions and nations were less dependent on food imports channeled through giant transnational corporations—then the principles of participatory democracy could more easily be established. If the heavy hand of global markets was lifted from farmers and small producers, decisions about what to grow and how to grow it would be based on the needs of people and nature, not on the impersonal demands of international finance.