

Agribusiness Takes on Organic Food, Farming

By E.G. Vallianatos

Humans have forever raised food for themselves and others, selling the excess grain or vegetables for money. Or, if money is scarce, they barter their food for things they don't have or cannot manufacture.

This food sovereignty or equilibrium, which has to some degree prevented large-scale famine, starvation or hunger, is under attack all over the world, especially in societies that have returned to an industrialized version of feudalism. This is an ancient system of food production and land ownership in which very few farmers or corporations control an exceptionally large part of the country's agricultural and food economy.

The US and other "industrialized" countries deny their agricultural economy is feudal because, in theory, slavery is illegal. Yet, in practice, the economy of industrialized farming relies on purchased slavery, that of hundreds of thousands of migrant farm workers, most of them foreign, replicating the lives of slaves. So industrialized agribusinesses dress up their feudal nature with pseudo-science, calling their practices "advanced," "modern" and other lipstick-like epithets.

The reason for this regression is political. The global massacre of the 1940s that ended with 60 million dead, the manufacture and use of the atomic bomb, and the hatred of the ideological "cold war" between Russia and America that lasted for the remaining 20th century perverted human relationships, returning most of the world back to the dark ages. Agribusiness feudalism, mechanized and armed to the teeth with biological- and chemical-warfare weapons, has been a logical product of this toxic age.

American agribusinesses practically own the land-grant universities from which they extract techniques, be they pesticides, bird flu vaccines, animal growth hormones, massive tractors and genetic engineering.

Agribusinesses are also in charge of US agricultural policy, becoming the beneficiaries of government-funded research and lucrative subsidies with the result that they have driven most family farmers out of farming and rural America while, for all practical purposes, they enslave those who become "contract workers," managing their animal farms.

In this political context, organic farming emerged in the shadow of feudal agribusiness, becoming merely a boutique niche for food "certified" clean of toxins, genetic engineering and sludge. Americans became tempted by this version of clean food so organic food began to grow since 1990 by about 25% per year, earning its practitioners some \$13 billion in 2005.

Agribusiness, however, since the 1980s wanted to kill the organic experiment lest Americans conclude the food they buy from the supermarkets is not clean, and in fact may be hazardous to their health. But the enormous public support for organic food in the

late 1990s put agribusiness on notice. This did not prevent agribusinesses from entering organic farming and food, which they did on a large scale, subverting the rules of clean food and making a killing in the process. For example, America's largest agribusinesses -- Pepsi, Tyson, Dole, ConAgra, Cargill, Heinz, Campbell Soup, Kellogg, General Mills, Kraft, Coca-Cola and Dean Foods -- have a stake in organic food and farming.

But, more than any other agribusiness firm, it is Wal-Mart that is shaping organic food in the United States. Wal-Mart's organic-food business and politics mirror the fundamental transformation forced on the organic-farming experiment of this country.

Wal-Mart is so huge a corporation that its policies (the Wal-Mart effects) have almost planetary implications, usually bad for small businesses, family farmers and peasants. So its decision to bring it to the masses, costing no more than 10% more than conventional (pesticide-loaded and bioengineered) food, had very little to do with democracy or with appreciation and support of healthy food and small organic farmers in the United States. Rather, Wal-Mart, in business as usual, is trying to wreck organic farming by importing "organic" food from China and by contracting with agribusinesses, which "produce" organic food in massive plantations, using all the mechanical and marketing infrastructure of industrialized agriculture.

Mark Kastel, senior farm policy analyst for the Wisconsin-based Cornucopia Institute, was right when he said Sept. 28 that Wal-Mart had declared war on organic farmers, using agribusinesses for the takeover of organic farming in the United States.

And since the George W. Bush administration has been on the side of agribusiness, this outright grab for power, inextricably tied to corruption, goes unchallenged, making the work of Wal-Mart and its agribusiness partners all that much easier. This wrong-headed and undemocratic policy has made Wal-Mart the nation's largest seller of "organic" milk, which comes from animal farms with thousands of cows confined to their cement stalls, rarely seeing a green field or eating grass.

Finally, the Wal-Mart effect on organic farming and food, added to that of the rest of agribusiness firms, has the potential to destabilize America's fragile experiment with a new non-agribusiness form of family farming: Wal-Mart is reconverting organic food and farming to agribusiness products, gradually destroying the hopes of America's family farmers that, with organic farming, they could bring to life, once again, a treasured American agrarian and democratic tradition of good food and a good life in rural America.

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