

# Taking on the Ethics of Industrial Agriculture

## Industry Versus Biology

by Joel Salatin

Sometimes it behooves us all to step back and look at the foundations of our own paradigm in order to give us a greater conviction in its defense. The philosophical underpinnings of our views are often easier to defend than specific details.

For example, I have debated agri-industrial darling Dennis Avery, author of *Saving the Planet with Pesticides and Plastic*, three times in public forums, and he is no dummy. A retired USDA big-wheel economist, a Ph.D. and spokesman for everything genetically engineered, irradiated or confinement reared, he is articulate and likable.

Statistics, data and details flow off his tongue fast enough to paralyze the most intrepid debater. Certainly, some of it seems twisted, illogical, or even contrived, but his appearances on the evening news with Peter Jennings, numerous national talk shows and constant speeches before prestigious scientific and agribusiness conventions attest that he is no pushover. He plays argumentation hardball.

But I have found a soft underbelly — philosophy. I look forward now to our next exchange. More importantly, honing this line of thought has actually made some diehard anti-biological folks turn their heads. All of us need ammunition in this war of ideas, this clash of paradigms between a system of food production that stimulates earthworms and one that destroys earthworms. To be able to articulate our position well should be the goal of all who espouse the eco-friendly approach.

I am borrowing the industrial approach heavily from agriculture economist John Ikerd of the University of Missouri. He says the four pillars of industrial paradigms are:

1. Specialization
2. Simplification
3. Routinization
4. Mechanization

In contrast, nature's pillars are:

1. Diversified
2. Complex
3. Flexible
4. Biological

Let's take these one by one and deal with the ramifications in our world.

### SPECIALIZED VERSUS DIVERSIFIED

The secret of the industrial paradigm is the interchangeable part. Furthermore, machinery and workers build up a skill level doing specialized tasks. Generalists are out of the industrial box. The idea is that if each person does only what he is exceptionally good at, we will all become wealthy because there won't be any lost motion learning skills.

A corollary principle is compartmentalization, which extends aggressively into our educational system. We have science, history, English and math, for example, and the subjects do not intertwine. That is why I can graduate with a degree in history without a clue what economics played in civilizational cycles or know the mega-political implications of the microscope.

In our university system, we have Ph.D.s. who know more and more about less and less. Recently, I attended an extension conference and listened to an agriculture economics specialist lecturing about whether or not to buy feeder calves or sell hay, assuming there is a surplus of hay. He had elaborate formulas for determining when it was better to feed the hay to the cattle or just sell the hay, with supporting price differential charts and high-falootin' computations.

At the end of the lecture, I asked him if he had thought about the fertilizer benefit from manure derived from feeding the hay on the farm. "Oh," he said, "I never thought about that." Why? Because he was not an agronomist.

Perhaps nowhere on the farm is spe-

cialization seen more obviously than in confinement factory facilities. These single-use structures enslave multiple generations to a single commodity production: dairy, hogs, eggs, broilers. They harbor pathogens that build up resistance to medications, sanitizers and fumigants.

In contrast to all this, nature is diversified. Perhaps no one has better examined this contrast than Allan Savory, in *Holistic Management*. His book and lectures provide ample evidence to the failure of assembling a bunch of specialists in one room to analyze a problem, but not using a holistic, everything-relates-to-everything approach during the process.

Healthy landscapes are not monocultures; they are polycultures. To be sure, each organism performs a specialized task, and multiple organisms in proximity is common. But nature's theme is toward diversity, symbiosis and synergism, not the other way around. Each organism exists in balance with others. Imbalances always correct themselves with population adjustments. Foxes get mange; wildebeests starve.

I would like to ask Don Tyson a question: How many chickens are enough? Living in the "poultry capital" of the east, I believe sometimes the industry really will not be satisfied until every square foot has a poultry house on it. It doesn't matter that we've turned the Shenandoah Valley into a toilet bowl because of the overabundance of poultry manure. After all, this is poultry production country. We just feed it to cattle.

Much of our problems in crop production are due to growing monocultures instead of polycultures. Of course, West Jackson is one of the heroes in this department. Maintaining large monocultures takes huge amounts of labor and energy, whereas polycultures offer greater resiliency. A specialized farm uses machinery a couple of months a year and then it sits the rest of the time.

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Specialists have given us the ability to plant, fertilize and harvest corn using global positioning satellite technology — *wow!* — but nobody is asking the question, Should we plant corn? As Stan Parsons says in his “Ranching for Profit” seminars, “We’ve become incredibly accurate at hitting the bull’s eye of the wrong target.” Food production is fundamentally a nature thing, not an industrial thing. And a nature thing leans toward diversity, not specialization.

### **SIMPLIFIED VERSUS COMPLEX**

The second pillar of an industrial paradigm is simplification, because every job must be doable by any dummy. The whole goal is to hire cheap labor, taking thinking out of the process, and dehumanize everything to minimize variation. That is why fast food joints have a plethora of timers, buzzers, pre-cuts, and low-choice menus. They need low-skill staff, and that requires taking the brain out.

Voluntary serfs who join vertical integrators in the poultry and swine industry do as they are told by the specialist “field reps.” The multinational corporate structure does not lend itself to experimentation based on the farmer’s ideas. The only ideas worth adopting are the ones that come down from the appropriate academic departments at accredited government-run institutions.

Perhaps this pillar is epitomized by the famous quote attributed to Henry Ford, father of the modern factory, who allegedly said, “The only thing I don’t like about this is that I have to hire a whole man, when all I need are his hands.” Doesn’t that sound like the kind of guy you’d love to devote your life to? A real lover of humanity, wouldn’t you say?

In contrast, nature is complex. Even the most simplified landscapes are a complex network of plants, animals, bacteria, minerals and water. Furthermore, farming requires analyzing a complex number of variables in decision making, often in a split second. A foolish culture entrusts its food supply to simpletons.

A simpleton accosted me at the stockyard a couple of months ago while waiting to rent a couple of acres in a riparian zone that we had carefully fenced off to protect it from the livestock. I carefully explained that we were trying to protect

the stream and wanted to let the vegetation grow for landscape diversity, wildlife enhancement and watershed rejuvenation. He replied, exasperated, “Well, you’re not using it. Why can’t I?” How do you talk to someone like that?

The natural result of this simplification template in agriculture is a monumental brain drain from America’s countryside. For several decades now, we’ve exported our students to the cities to be bankers, lawyers, engineers and scientists, while the C and D students stayed home to run the farm. Is it any wonder that the sharp siblings in the city are absconding with the wealth of the countryside? On the whole, farmers are no match for their academic city cousins.

The stereotypical red-neck bumbling buffoon out on the farm is ubiquitous: Jon Arbuckle’s parent’s are farmers in the “Garfield” comic strip; Zero, in “Beetle Bailey,” is a farm boy. And now the droves of humus, actinomycetes and omega 3 fatty acids is complex, complex, complex. It is an interconnected web, complex beyond the human imagination, not a simplified factory system of input-output.

### **ROUTINE VERSUS FLEXIBLE**

The next pillar of industrial principles is routine. The same thing, day after day. The material may change, but the procedure stays the same. The machine does the same function day after day after day. Workers show up for shifts at the same time every day of the year, for decades.

Routine is necessary because of the huge financial and emotional capitalization required to set up the assembly line. Office cubicles are close to the assembly line concept. The “Dilbert” comic strip, of course, pans this whole monotonous routine and the bureaucracy involved with maintaining status quo. Every reasonable suggestion meets with derision from higher-ups. It’s the nature of the beast.

Routine is important to ensure that what goes out the back door every day looks exactly alike. In a factory, interchangeable parts won’t be identical very long if different machines or procedures are used in the manufacturing process. Identical copper fittings falling into the bag at the

end of the assembly line are a product of routine everything.

In contrast, nature is flexible, or dynamic. It changes every day. Floods, droughts, hurricanes, epidemics — the face of nature is ever fresh, ever new. Birth, youth, maturity, and finally death is in direct contradiction to the routine. Nature is full of variables, full of changes.

A pond built today looks sterile and unliveable. But soon, overflying birds drop in some seeds and eggs, migrating amphibians set up housekeeping, and in a few short years, the pond is full of plants and animals. This natural dynamism is magical almost, happening regardless of human input. Fresh foods deteriorate and eventually decompose, regardless of human manipulation. To create nonperishable qualities in food is to eliminate its nutritive capacity. Living food decays.

This is why a landscape cannot be immobilized, or frozen in time. National parks with a no-

cut, no-burn policy are accumulating dead and downed biomass at unprecedented rates. The large Yellowstone fires of a few years ago are harbingers of things to come. You cannot freeze a landscape in time.

Food produced seasonally, from its own bioregion, is far superior to that trucked in from a thousand miles away. Why must everyone be able to buy fresh tomatoes in January? More importantly, why in the world would the organic community try to duplicate this pillar of the industrial paradigm?

When we began marketing eggs to restaurants, I offered preventive apologies for the quality reduction that our chefs would see in the winter when the birds cannot be out on fresh daily pasture. One chef responded, “Oh, that’s no problem. In chef’s school in Switzerland,

we had special recipes we used for May eggs, June eggs, and July eggs. Every month had a little different nuance in the eggs, based on local layer diet, and we

capitalized on the differences with the menu.”

Isn’t that powerful? In our industrialized U.S. culture, we want eggs to be the same color every day of the year. We want sameness, sameness, sameness, in-

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stead of celebrating the dynamic changes from nature's pantry. The identical offerings from vending machines perhaps epitomize the unnatural qualities of much American food. The industrial giants extrude, reconstitute, amalgamate and adulterate so that everyone can enjoy Soilant Green. We want square tomatoes, cardboard apples and french fry potatoes — everything to fit the same box and the same picker.

Life is distinctive, ever-changing and fresh. "Variety is the spice of life," is a saying as old as our culture and true about life. Food is life. Let's treat it that way.

### MECHANIZATION VERSUS BIOLOGICAL

Here, to me, is the crux of the paradigm difference. Food is animate, not inanimate. Viewing life as a mechanical process creates all sorts of ethical and moral dilemmas.

Every historical culture, from Hindu to Scandinavian, from Native American to Judeo-Christian, has maintained a reverence for life. The mystery surrounding life brings awe and wonder to the heart and mind of any reasonable, non-proud person.

We can take apart a plant to its cells, to its molecules, and even to its electrons, protons and neutrons, but we cannot put it back together again. There is a mystery of life that far exceeds the human grasp, and a reverential distance must be maintained when dealing with life. In our mechanistic view, we arrogate divinity to ourselves and say, "I think the pig should have been made this way."

And so, with genetic engineering, we make tomatoes that are half pepper, and pigs that are part human, until nothing is distinctive at all — only a jumble of DNA. We say to the chicken, there is nothing special about a

beak. It's in the way when we crowd nine birds in a 16-inch by 20-inch cage, one wire tomb among thousands in a football-field-sized factory house. So we cut off the beak.

We put pigs on slatted floors in crates, thousands upon thousands. Nothing is special about the plow on the pig's nose, it is useless. In fact, pigs would be a lot better off without them. Our cleverness to manipulate has no ethical boundary.

The movie *Jurassic Park* contains the pregnant line, uttered by the journalist to the brilliant scientist intoxicated with his brilliance, "Just because we can, should we?"

Today, we must dare to ask the same question of our industrial food community. Just because we can clone a sheep, splice tomato genes into pepper plants and "terminate" soybeans, should we? Are there really any ethical questions at stake?

No, not if life is nothing more than a pile of protoplasm. Not if individuality is a misnomer, distinctiveness an old-fashioned idea. A pox on human animal production! Animals are only piles of electrons, protons and neutrons, suitable for interchanging and manipulating as we see fit. And if that is what life is, why do we wonder that our young people have no self-worth? Why do they say life is cheap, nothing sacred?

At the risk of being declared a raving ecology freak — I am not — let me say unequivocally that biology is not mechanics. Life is not inert. How dare we approach life as if it were just as subject to our discretion as a lump of clay, a hot iron bar, a spinning mass of plastic fiber? The result is mechanical food and mechanical people — lifeless, bored, depressed and devoid of meaning.

At its most fundamental level, food is biological, not chemical. Wrestling life from

food leaves it devoid of life-giving properties.

As members of the clean food movement — "Industry"? Ha! — we must understand the diametrically opposed paradigms regarding food and life between us and the multinational industrial complex. Our passion, not to mention our apologetics, in articulating these differences is key to helping people understand our position.

Here are some simple questions: Is food animate or inanimate? Are there any ethical boundaries to life manipulation? What kind of person would you like producing your food? These can act as catalysts to a healthy discussion of the underpinnings of a clean food system. If we allow ourselves to get bogged down in the "how" instead of the "why," in the details instead of the conceptual, we will lose every time, because data and statistics always carry more "wow" power, more pizzazz, than philosophy.

Believe me, the soft underbelly of the industrial paradigm is philosophical. Steering conversations down that road may yield some sweet victories in this war over what is on the world's dinner plate.

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