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# Organic is not ‘utopian’

**By Dean Hulse,****Published Sunday, March 05, 2006**

Forum Editorial Page Editor Jack Zaleski’s Feb.19 column (“Organic is fine, but not very practical”) is a sledgehammer defense of “production agriculture.” Within the first few lines, Zaleski assails organic consumers as being “utopian,” “uniformed and arrogant,” and “patrician.” However, I infer that he includes himself among the “people who understand the complexities of agriculture and food production.”

Even though I grew up on a North Dakota family farm, I clearly must be one of the uniformed, lacking “a gram of sense,” because I don’t understand the dichotomy Zaleski attempts to create. All forms of commercial farming qualify as production agriculture. Zaleski is defending industrial agriculture, which tries to replicate the economic efficiencies of factories. The key benefit of this industrial model, according to Zaleski, is cheap, mostly nutritious food.

Cheap food, but at what social cost? Outmigration – i.e., rural decline – is a cost of industrial agriculture in the Midwest and Great Plains regions. Pair an industrial agriculture system with neoclassical economic theory and the result is the necessity to spread fixed costs as thin as butter over as many acres as possible. Bigger farms, fewer farmers. Author Wendell Berry calls this arrangement “community-killing.” Take a Sunday drive in the North Dakota countryside and try to refute Berry’s realism.

Of course, no country is immune to the social ills of agricultural industrialism. Columnist Harold Meyerson, in criticizing the North American Free Trade Agreement, says that from 1993 through 2002 at least 2 million Mexican farmers were driven off their land. Further, 40 percent of Mexican immigrants, legal and illegal, have come to the United States in the past 15 years.

Cheap food, but at what environmental costs? Virtually all of the synthetic inputs for industrial agriculture are fossil-fuel based, which implies air, soil and water degradation, along with reductions in plant and animal diversity. But the plentiful yields Zaleski credits industrial agriculture for are well worth it, right?

Consider the following: “Two institutions with 16 cropping-year experiments showed that organic wheat produced 97 percent of the conventional yields,” says Bill Liebhardt, a retired soil scientist and sustainable agriculture specialist. Liebhardt’s comments appear in “Get the facts straight: Organic agriculture yields are good,” an article from the Summer 2001 “Information Bulletin,” a publication of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. He cites data from South Dakota State University and Michigan State University.

It’s too bad neoclassical theorists have yet to adopt 21st century thinking so they can begin the hard, essential work of quantifying the pollution costs resulting from industrial agriculture. Until they do, industrial food will continue being subsidized by a free-enterprise system that ignores unintended consequences such as pollution.

Through this utopian view, pollution is an “externality.”

Tragically, the economic problems associated with fossil fuels extend beyond food production to distribution. Sooner than later, we’ll be forced to see that a food transportation system based on shipping subsidized goodies hundreds or thousands of miles in fossil-fuel-gulping trucks is reaching the end of its road.

Hulse, Fargo, is former chairman of the Dakota Resource Council.

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