
FOOD

Wanting & Needing & Providing

by Joan Gussow

In the decades immediately following World War II, complaints about the bountiful American food supply came largely from gourmets or, alternatively, from persons whom food professionals and their industry colleagues could comfortably dismiss as food faddists.

In the last 20 years or so, however, the attack on the food supply has begun to widen considerably. What were in the 1940s a few isolated criticisms on esthetic or nutritional grounds have been orchestrated into a symphony of vituperative booklength attacks on the corporations that provide Americans (and increasingly the citizens of the rest of the world) with their food.

Among the by-now most familiar of these denunciations are the following:

- corporations have, in the name of growth and profitability, flooded the marketplace with unnecessary, frivolous, overpriced, non-nutritious and possibly dangerous food products;

- the promotion of these products has trivialized eating (whose social meanings are of unknown essentiality for the formation of human community), has undercut parents and educators, and has created a generation of children unfamiliar with the look, the taste or the sources of real food;

- in seeking to secure their profits by control over the entire food chain, corporations have agglomerated both vertically and horizontally, squeezing out hundreds of thousands of small farmers and businessmen in this country and, in organizing to control sources of raw materials, destroying peasant cultures abroad; and finally

- in moving to expand their over-

seas markets these same corporations have promoted sales of inappropriate products, often (as with infant formula) at terrible cost to the world's poor.

The analysis offered here is intended neither to recapitulate nor to expand on those attacks, since the attackers have spoken passionately and often convincingly for themselves. The intention here is to create a space in which the "food problems" of the last decades of the 20th century may be seen less tendentiously as *common* problems. When Occidental Petroleum buys Iowa Beef on the grounds that food is going to be the petroleum — the scarce good — of the next decades, it seems clear that such objectivity is required. When shortage threatens even our abundance, we must all begin to wonder whether the "invisible hand" is indeed working things out for our — and our children's — benefit. What we are talking about here is economics.

The Economic Problem

An economic system is a way of allocating means so as to maximize the satisfaction of the wants of persons who are part of that system. To over-simplify drastically, such allocation may be planned, as in the socialist states, or it may be arranged by market forces, as it is intended to be in free-market capitalism. Economic problems result when the means of satisfying wants are in shorter supply than the wants.

Since food is one of the important means to human satisfaction, it is one of the very important "goods" which an economic system allocates. In glo-

bal terms, food has long seemed to be one of the scarce means, since there are large numbers of people who cannot get enough of it to keep from starving. Thus, food is part of an economic problem. So much is obvious.

There are, however, three characteristics of food which appear to differentiate it in vitally important ways from virtually all other goods that we leave to economic systems to allocate. The first is that it is a need rather than a want. The second is that it is needed — indeed can only be used — in rather specific amounts. The third is that it derives immediately from living substances which means that its availability is dependent upon the continued functioning of a collection of biological systems necessary to sustain life.

Food as a Need

Other than air and water, which for the most part the economic systems of the world have treated (inappropriately) as free goods, food differs from all other goods that we may speak of as essential in that it is daily required for survival.

(In other than temperate or tropical climates, clothing and/or shelter must probably also be considered essential to survival, but they differ markedly from food in that once acquired, they need not be daily reacquired. Moreover, since they are not in the literal sense consumed as are food, oxygen and water, they can often be improvised, by persons outside of the money economy, from other people's castoffs — witness the shelter building which takes place around the exploding urban areas of the developing world.)



The fact that food is a need rather than a want has suggested to many people that each person in the world has a *right* to food which ought to be put ahead of rich country wants. Others have responded to such claims by urging that much as we might like to see everyone eat, we dare not feed the poor since they can outbreed the earth's capacity to produce food and hence can bring starvation to us all. That argument will be touched on later. The point here is simply that since food is an everyday need, we may eventually have to question the appropriateness of treating its allocation as "a commercial as opposed to a basic maintenance enterprise."

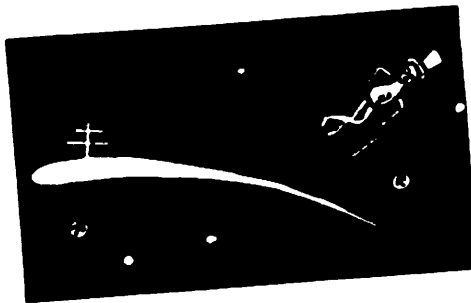
Food as a Limited Need

In theory, allocational justice might be made easier by the second unique quality of food as an economic good — that there are natural limits on individuals' food consumption. If enough food for all were produced on the globe (which it is) then there might, in theory, be no problem arranging its equitable distribution since there is no rational demand for extra food as there might be, for example, for an extra pair of shoes or a larger dwelling. In fact, though persons cannot consume more than a certain quantity of food, they can change the form in which they consume it. In the West they have rapidly done so, a fact attested to by the increase (by a factor of ten) in the number of food products available in supermarkets of the U.S. in the last 50 years.

Moreover, individuals and populations can effectively dispose of much larger than the necessary minimum quantities of food by moving from a largely vegetarian diet to one based heavily on grain-fed animal products. This is because animals are inefficient converters of vegetable material into themselves (partly because they make a lot of bone, fat, skin and hair, as well as flesh). In the West our grain-fed animals swallow much of the "surplus" generated by our very productive agriculture. In such a manner each American consumer was able to

add about 350 pounds of grain (in the form of flesh, eggs and dairy products) to his/her yearly diet in the ten years prior to 1975. Some of it, as we shall see, was produced directly off other countries' land — land which might otherwise have fed the poor.

So even though natural constraints on the amounts of food individuals can consume would seem to provide a push toward fair food distribution, in fact the rich have always been able to outbid the poor since they can afford products which are more expensive calorically or otherwise. They can, to give another example, afford to import not only coffee, sugar, cocoa, tea and other staples, but such delicacies as vegetables and tropical fruits grown on other people's croplands despite the high transportation costs of doing so. Which leads us to consider the third unique characteristic of food as a good.



Food as a Part of the Biosphere

The fact that food is a need rather than a want may seem to put some moral force behind the notion that there is a *right* to food; the fact that food is consumable only within narrow limits may help explain the kinds of products that will be emphasized in a growth-oriented society; but it is the third unique characteristic of food as a good that raises the most serious questions about whether our economic system is able to allocate food so as to optimize even our own welfare.

To understand this it will be necessary to consider two things: how food comes into being and based on what kinds of information the market allocates it. Foods are, as was earlier pointed out, living (or once living) substances. Food or its raw materials must be grown somewhere by someone using certain inputs. For the foreseeable future, most food will be produced on cropland. (Hydroponics, the science of raising plants almost anywhere in

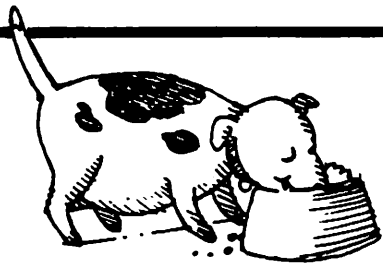
tanks or nutrified water, is unlikely — for a variety of economic, ecological, energetic and other reasons — ever to make a contribution to the supply of major food crops, though it may provide supplementary vegetables.)

Now land itself has certain characteristics — fixed supply, non-portability, foreverness — which makes it difficult for the free market to allocate effectively. Since "they are not making more of it," useful land (for example, land around cities) will tend to sell for whatever use will bring the highest price, more often than not, for housing, shopping malls, highways or other peri-urban necessities. Cities tend to grow up near food supplies; hence land around cities often is good farmland. And while farms can shift from one crop to another when the market demands, the shift from crops to construction is normally forever, even if food becomes extremely expensive.

Cropland is only one of the resources needed to grow food. Others are water, appropriate soil nutrients, good weather and farmer skills. (Modern agriculture is also heavily dependent on energy, but a discussion of the significant constraints this fact puts on food production is outside the scope of this paper.) Because the prices of some of these inputs — land and labor, for example — are high in the U.S. and because certain crops cannot be raised in the rich northern countries, U.S. and other affluent consumers are being fed off the croplands of others to an extent of which they themselves are largely unaware. The effects such demands can have on the hungry poor is amply illustrated by Randolph David's paper on Philippine banana export agriculture. Here the desire of one affluent culture to have bananas costs another culture a measure of food self-sufficiency and thus creates hunger. This is the response to the question of whether we dare feed all the poor. The reality is at present the poor are feeding us!

Problems for the Biosystem

Meat, as we have seen, is even more resource-intensive and can create even more serious problems. For Americans or Europeans, "exercising their 'right' to freely buy varying amounts of meat for themselves and their cats and



dogs, may mean that somewhere other people will remain without sufficient food." This is because "resources that were previously used to produce the maize, the beans, or the rice consumed by the local population are now being devoted to the production of . . . grains to feed the animals that will supply the Americans and Europeans with the meat that they and their pets appreciate so deeply. The McDonaldization of the world is modifying consumption habits and generating enormous changes in production and land structures in Mexico and other Latin American countries, favoring large-scale ranching and processing operations, destroying the social fabric of existing peasant economies." (Jacob Schatan, in *The Right to Food vs. Freedom of Choice*, a working paper prepared for a workshop on Food as a Human Right, in Gran, Norway, September 1981).

If peasants displaced from the croplands of Mindanao retreat to the upland forest areas of the Philippines to find land on which to grow food, thereby contributing to the ongoing destruction of the Philippine forests (which are half gone in 35 years) and if the destruction of the forests contributes to a decline in the uptake of carbon dioxide (and a parallel decrease in the output of oxygen), and if the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide causes a warming trend which produces polar melt and a rise in the level of the world's oceans, then it is the coastlines of the world that will be inundated.

It must be emphasized here that we are no longer discussing a *justice* issue. We have gone beyond the question of whether it is *fair* for my banana to be produced at the expense of some poor farmer's survival. It is *my* survival that is at stake. For what we are discussing here is the continued functioning on a world-wide scale of the system that provides the world with its food. Short of atomic war (from which we are more likely to be spared by economic justice than by armaments) there is probably no more serious problem that confronts us than

the destruction produced by our business-as-usual assaults on the biosystem which sustains us all.

I have written elsewhere that we cannot save only half the ecosystem. It is our environment. If pressure on the food supply becomes too great, frightening ecological damage will ensue as mankind struggles to eat. Witness the present attempts to turn Brazil's Amazon jungle, "the lungs of the world," into cropland; witness the devastating desertification taking place in Africa; witness worldwide soil erosion. It is our mutual life support system that will be destroyed by the frantic attempts of others to survive.

Food and Economics

What is it about the way the market works in regard to food that allows consumers to make market decisions hostile to the survival of their children? The assumption underlying our market system is that the willingness of people to pay for a given item is a signal that, having taken alternative uses of their assets into account, they have made a free choice designed to optimize their own well being. While there have been objections to this view of how the modern marketplace actually works, these have been limited, where food is concerned, to assertions that advertising has weakened consumers' perceptions of their true needs. People are said to be unable to make free choices because they have been convinced by advertising to seek out aspects of food products which have nothing to do with their true value.

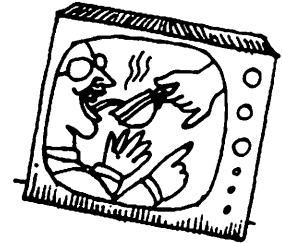
A more profound criticism arises out of the understanding that many of the food choices now being made have enormous hidden costs (and not only health costs) of which the purchaser is entirely unaware. Does the Japanese purchaser of bananas understand the cost to Philippine farmers of getting that fruit to her table? Given the choice between having a fast-food hamburger and enhancing the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the rural poor in a developing country, which choice would an American consumer make? Does the market price signal the true cost of the "goods" being traded?

Says R. Hueting, in *New Scarcity and Economic Growth: More Welfare Through Less Production?* (Amster-

dam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1980):

"Our problem. . . is how people's preferences are expressed. In the case of goods and services going via the market, this occurs 'automatically' for the subjects spend their income in a manner that is deemed to correspond to their preferences. In that sense market prices reflect actual wants. But in the case of the environment, this mechanism is in-operative. Nature is not traded via the market."

If the present manner in which we are producing our food contributes to the degradation of our own croplands and reduces the food-producing capacity of others, how can these realities be reflected in the economic system? How are consumers to assess the effect of their demand on the world's total supply of sustainability? Even if we have no moral duty to feed others, are we not being foolhardy to permit what the Human Economy Center calls "a blind inhuman system" operating in the marketplace to over-rule (temporarily, of course) the "rules of nature and the needs of unborn generations?"



But how is the purchaser of bananas or hamburgers to make a choice that really reflects his/her long-range interest? That is a question to which all those concerned with food (that is, everyone in the long run) must address themselves. In light of the fact that consumers can hardly deal with the choices they already have to make in this "commodity intensive society", it is probably naive to argue that the solution is to provide consumers with information about the distant effects of their food purchases. And, given the present negative view of the appropriate role of government, it is probably wistful to assume that our elected representatives will begin to act on our behalf on these matters, even though, as Kenneth E. Boulding has pointed out,

"Government is the only agency in the society which has an obligation to
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look at the total system [and] to make decisions with a view to whether the system as a whole is moving over time to positions that are regarded as better rather than worse."

Boulding has suggested that we must make more use of impact statements. We might consider, he says, "distributional impact statements which will throw some light on the question of who is benefitted, who is injured and who is unaffected by any particular proposal or action. These would often turn out to be extremely surprising because of the great interconnectedness of the system and the way in which the distributional incidence of anything. . . floats around the system in an intricate series of 'passings-on' and may finally end up in a very different place from what was the intention of the original act."

Unquestionably it would be useful as a beginning to document the way in which the benefits from eg. bananas, grain, coffee, sugar— as surrogates for topsoil, water, fertility, self-sufficiency and other pieces of the world—"float" around the system. But there is no reason to imagine that our present Administration would take the lead in something as far-sighted as "distributional impact statements" given its expressed conviction that stimulating corporate profits will solve all problems.

"In recent times, many analyses paint a gloomy picture yet withdraw from the suggestion of a solution," economist John Robinson observed in a recent issue of the *Ecologist* (Nov./Dec., 1982). What we need, he says is "an increase in self-confidence" that would allow us to acknowledge the need for major changes in our political system and begin the debate on what kinds of new forms will be required if civilization is to survive. "How can multinational corporations be stopped from ruining the earth unless the corporations are removed completely? Is it possible to control them in a capitalist 'free-market' system?" Clearly our present administration considers such questions not merely unnecessary but subversive, since it is the market that is supposed to save us.

This administration's most dramatic effort at saving the environment so far has been the indictment of some Indians (!) for killing eagles. Meanwhile toxic wastes continue to be dumped in crowded neighborhoods, top-soil continues to erode, ground waters continue to be used up and contaminated, our "aid" continues to encourage countries to degrade their croplands in feeding us ("The Rich Feed the Poor," UN Bulletin, December, 1982), and the great communicator in the White House tells us that the real threat to our way of life comes from Nicaragua, a country the size of Iowa.

What is really wrong with our food supply is deeply embedded in the way in which food uniquely interacts with the systems we have devised for allocating society's goods. What is really wrong with our food supply is that it deceives us about its true price in human lives, in top-soil, in water resources, in the sustainability of the very way of life it reflects. If the corporations that control that food supply have no way to reform themselves, the people will have no choice but to impose reform, directly through their power as consumers, indirectly through their power as voters. The unanswered question is, however, what sort of catastrophe will be required to arouse them to their own danger?

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