

The High Road to Food Security

BY MATT HANCOCK

By some measures, we are at the height of human progress. We have the technologies that make instantaneous communication around the globe possible. The technology for the sustainable generation of energy on a large scale exists. So do the know-how and experience needed to produce good food plentifully and in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Yet the phenomenon of “squalor within affluence” has never been more acute. The gulf between rich and poor globally is worse today than thirty years ago. In the United States, the wealth of the top 1% of households exceeds the combined wealth of the bottom 95%. Obesity is approaching epidemic proportions, while millions lack ample sources of nutrition. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 13.5 million American families in 2004 “were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all household members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food.” Of these, 4.4 million “were food insecure to the extent that one or more household members were hungry, at least some time during the year, because they couldn’t afford enough food.”

In short, we live in a world of both grave contradictions and unprecedented possibilities. All of us experience these contradictions everyday in the way we eat, or don’t eat.

Solving these problems requires a determined struggle for a model of development that is competitive in the marketplace, environmentally and socially sustainable, and just. Articulating such a vision requires moving beyond the familiar frameworks for change, beyond neo-liberalism as well as the socialist “command” and social democratic models.

Low Road & High Road

Historically, labour and communities have ceded control of the market to the private sector. Management of the firm and the economy has been the exclusive right of management and owners, while labour and communities have focussed instead on fighting for a more equitable redistribution of wealth. They contend for their vision in the state (through elections and policy) and in civil society (through protest, strikes, boycotts, and other mass actions) – but not in the market. The “market” is unfamiliar terrain that some progressives demonize as corrupting, just as others paint all business or “corporations” as bad.

The real Food Wars are happening in the marketplace, & it is the market that will determine which paradigms succeed or fail, dominate or remain marginal. This is why proponents of the Ecological Paradigm must contend in the market, as well as policy arena, to advance this emerging vision.

For some time, labour and communities could afford to stay out of the market – so long as owners and managers sought to make a profit in ways that built the productive capacity of both the company and society. Getting a bigger slice of the pie depended on the pie getting bigger.

With the advent of new information and communications technologies and the global market in currency trading and other types of financial speculation, however, it has become very easy to make much higher returns from speculation than from investment in productive capacity. Combined with the emergence of

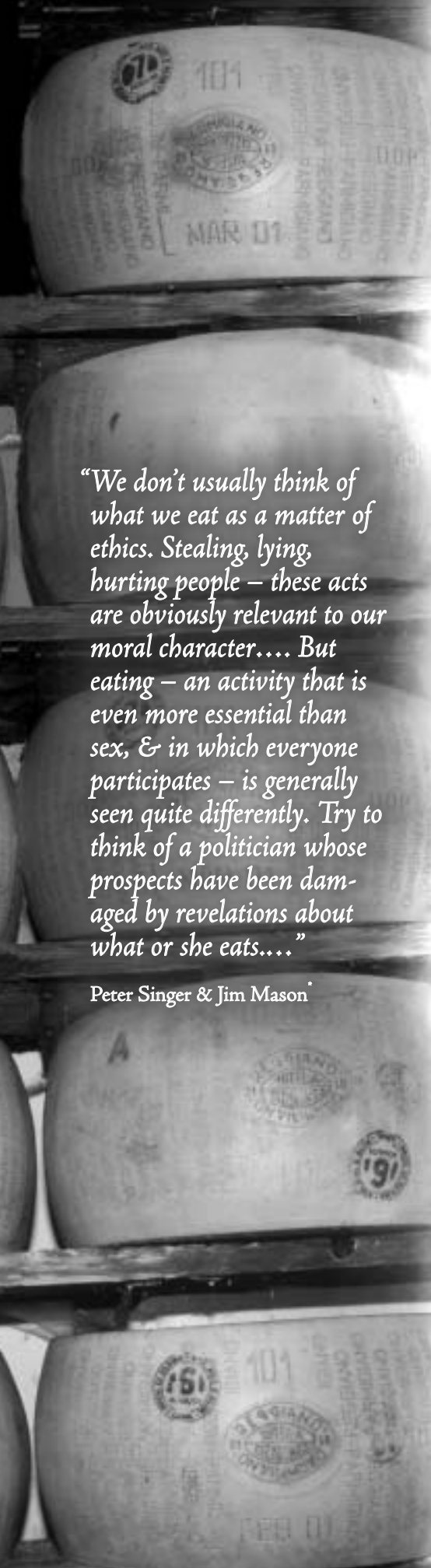
new, leaner competitors in both the developed and developing world, these conditions have given rise to a powerful new trend in the private sector: the Low Road. It seeks short-term returns at the expense of the long-term value of the company, the health of the workforce, and the local community. In cities as a consequence, the population of working poor and marginalized grows at all points of the business cycle. In the countryside, farmers suffer under the “Wal-Mart effect,” which demands that they accept ever-shrinking margins in order to appear on the shelves of the world’s largest retailer.

The Low Road is currently the most powerful trend in business and the most pressing threat to our communities and

the health of the environment. Addressing this threat requires that labour and communities do more than insist on a more equitable distribution of wealth. They must take full responsibility for the wealth production process and carry out a determined fight *in the market* for an alternative that is economically viable and socially and environmentally sustainable: the “High Road.”

The Ecological Paradigm

Tim Lang and Michael Heasman’s “Food Wars” provides a useful framework for



“We don’t usually think of what we eat as a matter of ethics. Stealing, lying, hurting people – these acts are obviously relevant to our moral character.... But eating – an activity that is even more essential than sex, & in which everyone participates – is generally seen quite differently. Try to think of a politician whose prospects have been damaged by revelations about what or she eats....”

Peter Singer & Jim Mason*

addressing the High Road and Low Road trends in agriculture. They identify three models or paradigms in agriculture. The Life Sciences Paradigm and Ecological Paradigm are both reactions to the same problems of sustainability, nutrition, scarcity, and consumption created by a model (“Productionist,” in their terms) based on quantity. The Life Sciences Paradigm remains fundamentally driven by the profit margins demanded by agribusiness. The Ecological Paradigm, by contrast, is rooted in the idea that businesses can be competitive and provide a decent return to producers in ways that are environmentally sustainable and enriching to communities in terms of nutritious food, fair wages and working conditions, and local self-reliance. That is a High Road vision for agriculture and food.

The promotion of the Ecological Paradigm is a policy issue – but it is not *only*, nor *primarily*, a policy issue. Sustainability can’t simply be regulated by the government. The real Food Wars are happening in the marketplace, and it is the market that will determine which paradigms succeed or fail, dominate or remain marginal. This is why proponents of the Ecological Paradigm must contend in the market, as well as the policy arena, to advance this emerging vision.

In short: a shift to the Ecological Paradigm requires a greater role for labour, ecological farmers, and communities in wealth production, a move to higher value-added food manufacturing, and a higher wage economy in general. This is the material basis for a shift in our food culture as a whole.

In addition, if the Paradigm is to succeed, it cannot be perceived as promoting the narrow self-interest of any one particular group (labour versus communities, countryside versus cities, etc.). It must garner support from a broad array of stakeholders, up and down the value chain, from where crops are cultivated, to where food is processed, and on to where it is consumed. This means there are three key groups of stakeholders to organize: farmers, food manufacturers and labour, and communities and consumers. The 50 million “cultural creatives” in the United States are obvious consumers for ecological

food products. But a successful campaign must include those who are most hurt by the current development paradigm – working class and low-income communities.

The same rule applies beyond national boundaries. A vision of a sustainable future must include the well-being of marginalized people the world over. Development in one community can no longer come at another’s expense.

Walking the High Road

There are many experiences that demonstrate a High Road approach to security and sustainability in food and agriculture. These are among the most salient, and touch upon the entire value chain, from farm to table.

In Italy, producer co-operatives are an important and often dominant market force in agriculture and food manufacturing. The Parmigiano Reggiano consortium, for example, brings together a group of farmer-owned co-operatives that produce gourmet parmesan cheese for the domestic and global markets. The consortium guarantees consistent and higher-than-market returns to producers through quality control, innovation, and sophistication in value-added production and marketing.

Brands like these depend just as much on *where* they’re produced as *how* they’re produced. The farmers’ commitment to process cheese, wine, meats, and other products locally creates good jobs in their communities while maintaining the brand’s competitive advantage.

COOP Italia, a consumer co-operative and Italy’s largest retailer, works closely with consumers and farmers to guarantee quality products at fair prices while providing suppliers with the margins they need to continue to grow. By these means the co-operative movement has kept Wal-Mart and other Low Roaders out of Italy.

In Chicago, the Food and Candy Institute (FCI) has been working for over ten years with labour, government, and manufacturers around a High Road vision for the food manufacturing industry. FCI provides workforce development services, technical consulting, conducts policy-

research, and is in the process of setting up an incubator and shared-use kitchen for food entrepreneurs. It also promotes policies and business strategies that are economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and that provide living-wage jobs for residents. FCI's work to train the workforce of one Chicago-based food manufacturer led to significant increases in productivity and efficiency. The company reversed its decision to move to Mexico and awarded employees who participated in the training raises that averaged \$2,500.

Another specialist in High Road food practices is the nonprofit Institute for Community Resource Development (ICRD). Many of Chicago's poorest neighbourhoods, ignored by the major grocers and retailers, have virtually no access to fresh, healthy foods, let alone organic products. To help address that, ICRD will break ground in the coming months for a major grocery on the city's South Side, The Good Food Market. It will be an anchor for good-paying retail jobs and allow residents access to quality healthy and organic foods at fair prices. The Good Foods Market will work with farmers and food manufacturers to guarantee quality as well as decent margins to its suppliers. It will be the only big retailer in Chicago to market food that is primarily organic and locally produced.

Success also depends on actively blocking the Low Road. In Chicago, the Center for Labor and Community Research led a 10-year fight against food industry magnate Klaus Jacobs, who single-handedly destroyed Brach's Candy, one of the city's most important candy manufacturers and an employer of 4,000 people. That campaign included a labour-management effort to purchase Brach's. (Imagine a major candy company that produced sweets that were good and good for you.)

How Local?

Although that buy-out was ultimately unsuccessful, it demonstrated the power of the High Road vision and of multiple constituencies, including labour and

business, when they work toward common goals. Succession issues create literally hundreds of opportunities for labour and communities to pursue ownership of food companies and root important productive assets, jobs, and technology locally.

But what are the implications of the High Road vision for local food systems? While local communities should seek to assert greater control over production, including through ownership, sustainable systems cannot rely solely on local production. Survival can certainly be local; sustainability cannot. The High Road vision means maximizing what you can do locally, but engaging with other communities in ways that foster mutual development. Trade, especially in the globalized world in which we now live, can be an important development tool, just as it can be used to exploit. As in all things, there is a High Road, as well as a Low Road to globalization.

A good example of this comes again from Italy. Conapi, a co-operative of honey producers, has members in South America as well as Italy. Conapi's honey is certified fair trade, much of it organic, and is marketed by COOP Italia. Today, Conapi's brands have national recognition and provide consumers with high quality, healthy food and a good return to its members in a way that is environmentally sustainable. This is the kind of High Road globalization, trade relationships, and engagement with other communities that the Ecological movement should advance.

The Management of Complexity

The shift in the dominant development paradigm requires a struggle in the state, in civil society – and in the market. The market is a part of any society, and has both positive and negative features; some businesses choose to take the High Road, others choose the Low. Which features dominate depends on the values of society and the *values of those engaged in the market*.

Those who promote the Ecological Paradigm must take their values right

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into the market. The broad alliances we create – uniting High Road farmers, manufacturers, labour, and communities – will be our competitive advantage in the market. Our movement needs to be skillful in building alliances with all those on the High Road, in managing the complexity that comes with such an approach, and in contending in all spheres of society with a powerful vision rooted in sustainability and justice. 

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The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter (2006), p. 3.

(far left) Rounds of Parmigiano Reggiano Vacche Rosse, the superb parmesan produced by a small co-operative in Emilia Romagna, Italy. Its demand is also helping to reinvigorate the Reggiana or breed of red cow native to the region and the original source of parmesan cheese. Photo courtesy of John Restakis, British Columbia Co-operative Association.