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A Critique of Modern Agriculture and its Effect on Personhood

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Abstract

This paper outlines ways in which the alienated labor conditions of capitalism and certain technological applications in industrial agriculture contribute to the diminishing of one's personhood through the production and consumption of industrial food. Personhood is defined as a person's capacity to produce and consume food. The works of Karl Marx and Albert Borgmann are instrumental to the conclusions of this essay. Ultimately, the combination of Marx's and Borgmann's theories allow me to argue that a diminished form of personhood is the consequence of a food practice which encompasses the production and consumption of food using industrial agriculture.

"By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy and matter, light and darkness. In the cycles of farming, we carry the elemental energy again and again through the seasons and the bodies of living things, we recognize the only infinitude within reach of the imagination. How long this cycling of energy will continue we do not know; it will have to end, at least here on this planet, sometime within the remaining life of the sun. But by aligning ourselves with it here, in our little time within the unimaginable time of the sun's burning, we touch infinity; we align ourselves with the universal law that brought the cycles into being and that will survive them."

– Wendell Berry

Introduction

Maybe it is the snap of the peapod from its shoot. Maybe it is the smooth texture of the brown eggshell. Maybe it is the nourishing crumble of fresh soil or the smell of basil and morning dew in the air. Myriad causes brought me to work on this farm, and once I began digging in that dirt something deep, illusive, yet utterly fundamental kept me returning. Now I consider farming, I wonder at its philosophical implications, and I imagine others do also.

Hours spent over a garden bed on the banks of the Hudson River gave birth to this project, and while this undertaking does not strive solely to communicate my personal

knowledge or experience of farming, make no mistake it remains a personal matter. The food¹ we eat and our experience of its production is personal, it defines, at least in part, our personhood just as the practice of agriculture has defined much of the human experience throughout history.

This project, which assesses the implications that industrial agriculture and its products have on us as persons, uses Karl Marx's theory of personhood to explain why and how the current state of farming contributes to the alienation of people from what I am calling "the practice of their food." This practice includes both methods of food production and consumption of food from these methods. Producing food using industrial agriculture² diminishes personhood, and thus, persons implicated in the practice of producing and consuming food in this way suffer alienation from themselves.

Albert Borgmann's theory of technology and Paul Thompson's application of Borgmann's theory to the practice of farming will aid our understanding as to why the phenomenon of industrial agriculture developed as it did, and how it subsequently divorces us from ourselves through the consumption of the goods it produces.³ This current model is not sustainable from a ecological standpoint but as we relegate farming to the outcroppings of those practices we consider vital to our identity, one recognizes that the breakdown following from this current system is more than just ecological it is the breaking of our human character.

For many, "food" is a noun but, it is also a practice – we do food. We eat everyday, multiple times a day in fact, and society only moves, and breathes, and progresses, and changes because we feed it with food. This is the uniqueness and magnificence of food. However, while industrial agriculture changes the way we farm, we, the consumers, become less and less engaged in the processes that bring food to our table. We have little knowledge or experience of how our food came to be, often we are not aware of the contents of what were eating, and insofar as we consume this food, it becomes a part of us and fuels our daily processes and so we then have a diminished knowledge and experience of ourselves. This too is part of "food's" uniqueness, this is what elevates food above other products and makes food worthy of our deepest consideration. Our modern farms may afford us more time spent not cultivating our food, but in time, this practice divorces us not only from what we eat but also from our basic identity as beings that produce and consume food products. Over time we may lose sight of our capabilities in terms of cultivating food and ultimately we may lose the ability, all of us together, to consider the practice of our food.

A Theory of Personhood and Food

This section will describe a theory of personhood, where the production and consumption of food is vital to one being a person. If then, one chooses to reject the production of food (at least, the consideration of the production of food) as, I will argue, is done by way of industrial agriculture, then they also reject a piece of what it means to be a person.

Karl Marx's "Manuscript on Alienated Labor" provides an account of human nature based on the fact that humans produce consciously and freely. Marx argues that given certain labor conditions (similar to those we have in place on today's stereotypical industrial farm) products of human labor become social commodities. Commodities are things produced for the purposes of exchange – everything from food to fax machines. Human beings produce a variety commodities, even our labor is a commodity we produce and exchange for a wage. We produce in a way that is different from animals insofar as we are free to choose the objects of our production, but still, we necessarily produce. Similarly, we choose to produce things that will be consumed in one way or another and we consume the things that are produced. Given this, production and consumption of goods cannot be avoided, as they are necessary in order to survive and also, for Marx, to express and develop oneself. Marx argues that productive activity is intrinsically satisfying to human beings. It allows us to develop our faculties, capacities and abilities and given leisure time in which we are not thoroughly exhausted we will choose to engage in productive work over other, less or non-productive activities. However, given our current capitalist economic situation, humans engage in labor but often see it merely as a necessary drudgery to obtain wages.⁴ We are beings, "bound by the necessity to do unpleasant work that brings us into conflict with other people. Alienation from [our human nature], then, is essentially misunderstanding our fundamental nature" i.e. by engaging in this type of work that we see as drudgery we deny part of what makes us human. That is, the ability to engage in labor qua an expression and development of our being.⁵

The application of Marx's theory of personhood to the practice of our food, though Marx himself never addressed it explicitly, is of utmost importance. Marx might have easily foreseen the rise of industrial agriculture, as it is, simply, another manifestation of capitalist production. As it exists today, industrial agriculture is motivated by the desire and charge of increasing capital and profits, not by the desire and charge of increasing the value of human beings. In order to meet this charge, it depends on alienated labor for its production. Industrial agriculture alienates us from ourselves (as producers) at the most fundamental level – i.e., as producers of food insofar as it is our means of subsistence. Under non-alienated conditions of production, humans produce freely and creatively (even when it comes to producing means of our subsistence) – as an expression of our human essence. Under conditions of capitalism and alienation

(e.g., using industrial agriculture as a mode of production) we are alienated from the most fundamental level of what we produce – means of survival. Food is different from other commodities (like fax machines) in that we must produce it and consume it in order to survive. I think it is important to note, Marx would contend that human nature is not set in stone but rather a result of social conditions, which brought out a particular character. This does not collapse my thesis but rather upholds it – we may choose to reject the practice of producing our food, in fact we already have in many ways, but this transforms our nature and encourages an alienated state of being. Just as we can control what we choose to produce, we can also control our nature as we labor to bring about the conditions that define it.

Capital in Farming

In “Wage Labor and Capital” Marx outlines capitalism and its ramifications. Much of this is relevant to industrial farming as many of the same ramifications take effect. Commodity fetishism, labor conditions, monopolization, and globalization all come into play with industrial agriculture, all of which lower our concern, appreciation, and regard for the production of our food.

Within any given commodity is embodied the sum total of human labor that went into its production but this is not something we see like we see the physical characteristics which make an object useful. Because of this, we mistakenly assign value to physical commodities that does not account for the labor conditions under which those commodities were produced – this is commodity fetishism.⁶

We fetishize farm products much like we fetishize other commodities and in doing so, we lose sight of the way in which these products came into being (through the efforts of human labor) and assign value to them apart from the conditions under which they were produced.⁷ For example, if a pepper grown in one’s own garden and a pepper grown through industrial methods are presented to a given buyer, assuming they look similar and the buyer does not know which is the homegrown or industrially grown, rather they only see that the price of the industrially grown is lower than that of homegrown pepper, it seems they would choose the cheapest pepper. In doing so however, they would be ignoring the conditions under which that pepper was produced and, as ridiculous as it may sound, fetishizing the pepper.

Once we begin to fetishize farm products, many of the other flaws within capitalism begin to translate as well into flaws within industrial agriculture. Labor conditions are less important when, by bettering them, one cannot add anything to the value of their product. It should also be mentioned with regard to labor conditions that our current farming model significantly decreases the number of people required to produce farm products. Given that fewer and fewer people remain a part of the means of production

when it comes to food, this also alienates us from “food” as a practice. Moreover, as smaller farms with better labor conditions become unable to match the prices set by larger industrial farms that cut costs by lowering their standards of labor conditions, the industrial farm drives out the small farm competition and gains a monopoly on the production of certain farm goods. Finally, insofar as industrial agriculture must sustain its high levels of production in order to maintain control over the farm market, they must expand their buyer market exponentially to distribute all of the goods they have produced. This is why we are now part of a food market that is global rather than local.⁸

All of these ramifications stem from the production of food by means of industrial agriculture. Compounded, commodity fetishism, poor labor conditions, monopolization, and globalization contribute to an alienated food practice and thus an alienation from that which is contained within our personhood on both a collective and individual level as producers and consumers of food. We can point to scientific quantifications in order to calculate the damage industrial agriculture has done to our global ecology but the alienation from our food practice cannot be expressed quantitatively. Rather, we may only point to qualitative ramifications of industrial food practices i.e. the ramifications previously discussed. This is the evidence which supports my claim that, given producing and consuming food is contained within one’s definition of what it means to be a person, the further we remove ourselves from the practice of food by producing it through industrial means, the further we divorce ourselves not only from what we eat but from who we are.

Technology and Food Consumption

As it stands, Marx’s theory has only taken us as far as the production of industrial food leading to a certain diminishing of personhood. In that persons lose their free, conscious, productive activity they undermine a fundamental aspect of their humanity that is ensconced in the production of their means of subsistence. But, as I have said from the beginning it is both the production and consumption of industrial food that diminishes personhood. This section will recount Albert Borgmann’s philosophy of technology, Paul Thompson’s application of that philosophy to the practice of farming, and assert that, with regard to these philosophies, the consumption of food produced using industrial methods contributes to a loss of personhood as well.

Borgmann spells out a theory of technology where certain practices are not merely instrumental, but actually are good in and of themselves, these are called focal practices.⁹ Similarly, with regard to technology there are also “focal things,” which are objects that afford us the ability to engage in focal practices. We take an inquiring stance towards these things and engage with them on a regular basis; in understanding and engaging with these things they become central to our practices. However, when technology takes us away from a given practice, Borgmann calls these technologies

devices. Just as focal things connect us to focal practices, which are inherently good, devices take us away from focal practices, which is inherently bad.¹⁰

Therefore, let us consider Thompson's argument – "farming demands the engagement of mind and body with the world."¹¹ In this, Thompson makes the claim that farming is a focal practice¹² and goes on to further establish that "in this industrial age, the actual practice of farming becomes wholly preoccupied with devices that stand between person and task, person and land."¹³

I assert that just as one can consider farming a focal practice, industrial agriculture is a device that disconnects people from the process of farming. To illustrate this I will use Thompson's example of a dairy farm: On a non-industrialized dairy farm the farmer has no choice but to know and understand each cow as an individual and attend to their individual needs. This farm is limited to the amount of information the farmer and his staff members are able to manage. However, in an industrialized dairy operation, cows are tracked using barcode ear tags. A computer scans the cows in for milking, feeding and medicating and tracks their production and health, which is in turn monitored using an algorithm that the computer recognizes. In the industrial type of operation the focus (or focal-ness) of the practice is lost. The computer takes over the practice as a whole and in so doing keeps the farmer from engaging in the practice in any meaningful way.¹⁴

On the face of this consideration it is easy to fall into the trap of looking at the computer as inherently bad whereby one reaches the conclusion that modern agriculture should strive to reduce its reliance on such technologies. However, this is not the case. Ultimately, the understanding of the value of dairy farming as a whole shaped the way people began to use technology in its practice – when we view dairy farming (the practice of it) as necessary drudgery in the production of milk, cheese, yogurt and so forth, we see no reason to employ technology in a way that brings us closer to the dairy farm itself but rather we seek only to direct the power of our technology towards producing dairy products. Using Borgmann's theory and Thompson's instantiation of the theory we see that our technology often brings us closest to the "things" we value. In industrial farming we tend to value products rather than the practices which produce those products.

This has ramifications in terms of society's consumption of food produced using the device of industrial agriculture. Industrial agriculture estranges us from the goods we consume, from our natural surroundings, from others and from ourselves; it pulls us away from the focal practice of farming and in so doing, acts as a device.¹⁵ Consumption of commodities produced using industrial agriculture cannot be separated from the production of those commodities as both consumption and production represent inseparable parts that make up the practice of food as a whole. Insofar as we

consume the products of industrial agriculture we support the use of the devices and feed the system of production that, as was previously established using Marx, alienates us from our personhood.¹⁶ Thus, consumption of industrial food contributes to diminishing personhood just as much as production of industrial food. For if one were to produce food, but then, instead of consuming the food they produced, went out and purchased an industrially manufactured meal and consumed that instead, they would still be participating in a disengaged food practice and thus diminishing their personhood. While their efforts toward the production of food would be well focused, consuming food that comes from different means of production is directing resources towards the alienated systems which produced that food, it is making use of a device and it is disregarding the labor conditions under which that food was produced. So, in consuming those fetishized commodities prepared by industrial devices we further fetishize the commodity, make greater use of the device and become more and more detached from ourselves.

Conclusion: The Possible Implications

Ultimately, the combination of Marx's and Borgmann's theories allow me to argue that a diminished form of personhood is the consequence of a food practice which encompasses the production and consumption of food using industrial agriculture.

Marx explains that production and consumption of goods are necessary to one's being and cannot be avoided as they allow humans to survive and also to express and develop themselves. Production is an intrinsically satisfying activity that humans seek out. He outlines the issues of alienated labor, commodity fetishism, monopolization and globally expanded markets that arise given a capitalist system of industry and their effects on human's engagement with their labor. I simply apply this theory to industrial agriculture and thus extrapolate that: humans are producers and consumers by nature, our personhood is encompassed within the production and consumption of our food, and production of food using industrial methods is an alienated form of labor that fetishizes food products, creates monopolies on food production and globally expands the food market, all of which diminish personhood.

Borgmann outlines a theory of technology where focal practices are practices that intrinsically satisfy human beings and devices are technologies that remove persons from focal practices. Thompson applies this theory to farming and asserts that farming is a focal practice. I then assert that if this is so, industrial agriculture is a device. I use this theory to explain that given the logically biconditional relationship of production and consumption, consuming industrial food uses devices that contribute to a means of production that is not satisfying or engaging. Therefore, industrial food is problematic both in its consumption as well as its production.

Finally, seeing as I have already elaborated on the unique nature of food and its practice as something that is important and unavoidable, and thus worthy of consideration in this way, I must end with the grand implications of the consequences of a disengaged food practice.

If industrial agriculture disassociates people from the practice of food and also from themselves, further use of this device will allow us further disengagement from our food practice. While, for now, – I consider farming, I wonder at its philosophical implications, and I imagine others do also – I am unsure as to how long this will last. If we continue to produce and consume food without any consideration or understanding of its origins, is it not such a far reach to imagine that we would eventually lose the ability to consider, meaningfully, the production and consumption of our food at all? Perhaps the ecological ramifications of industrial food practice would eventually force people to reform the practice of food production in order to survive. But insofar as food is about more than mere survival, in that it is an economic and social practice as well as an ecological practice, this has bearing on who we are, on our personhood. And, if it is not such a far leap to imagine that we would eventually lose the ability to consider meaningfully the production and consumption of our food, perhaps it is also not such a far leap to imagine that we would also lose the ability to consider, meaningfully, the cultivation of our own personhood as well.

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¹ Perhaps it is important to note here that throughout this paper, when I mention food, I am referring to any animal, fruit or vegetable product that can be produced via agricultural methods.

² It should be noted here that when I refer to industrial agriculture, industrial methods of producing food, conventional food, industrial food, and the like I am referring to "food that depends on massive [technological], chemical, and biological inputs, huge monocultures, and factory-like farms and that results in huge corporate profits." This exists in varying degrees over various practices and so, the question then becomes not whether or not your unique practice is industrial but rather, how industrial is your unique practice? (*Fatal Harvest Reader*, 1)

³ Thompson, "Farming as a Focal," in *Technology and the Good*, 166-81

⁴ Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour," Marxists.org, accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>.

⁵ Georganna Ulary, "Marx's Manuscript on Alienated Labor" (lecture, Marist College, Fall 2012).

⁶ Karl Marx, "Capital: A Critique of Political Economy," Marxists.org, last modified 1999, accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/>.

⁷ Marx, "Capital: A Critique of Political," Marxists.org.

⁸ Communist Manifesto, part 1

⁹ Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*, paperback ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1-2.

¹⁰ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 196.

¹¹ Paul Thompson, "Farming as a Focal Practice," in *Technology and the Good Life?*, ed. Andrew Light, Eric Higgs, and David Strong (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 169.

¹² It is important to note here that something being a focal practice does not mean that, that practice is necessary to retain personhood. The mention of farming as a focal practice is included to establish that farming has intrinsic value whether or not one chooses to participate in it.

¹³ Thompson, "Farming as a Focal," in *Technology and the Good*, 172.

¹⁴ Thompson, "Farming as a Focal," in *Technology and the Good*, 172.

¹⁵ The idea to assert this particular point about industrial agriculture arose out of Joseph Campisi's idea to assert the same point with regards to fast food in his article "*Feast and Famine, The Technology of Fast Food*"(page 42)

¹⁶ Though there are many focal practices and all of them, according to Borgman, provide intrinsic fulfillment, food practice is unique. Insofar as food remains a part of our means of subsistence (a fact I do not see changing any time soon), it occupies an inimitable space in our survival. While one could argue for playing a musical instrument as a focal practice, if one chooses not to participate in this particular focal practice they will continue to live. One cannot choose in this same way, not to eat. In this food is an unavoidable practice and so its potential for being focal can be elevated above other focal but unnecessary practices.