Stupidity in Concentration

(2002)

I. CONFINEMENT, CONCENTRATION, SEPARATION

My task here is to show the great stupidity of industrial animal production. Factory farms, like this essay, have the aim of cramming as much as possible into as small a space as possible. To understand these animal factories, we need to keep in mind three principles: confinement, concentration, and separation.

The principle of confinement in so-called animal science is derived from the industrial version of efficiency. The designers of animal factories appear to have had in mind the example of concentration camps or prisons, the aim of which is to house and feed the greatest number in the smallest space at the least expense of money, labor, and attention. To subject innocent creatures to such treatment has long been recognized as heartless. Animal factories make an economic virtue of heartlessness toward domestic animals, to which humans owe instead a large debt of respect and gratitude.

The defenders of animal factories typically assume, or wish others to assume, that these facilities concentrate animals only. But that is not so. They also concentrate the excrement of the animals—which, when
properly dispersed, is a valuable source of fertility, but, when concentrated, is at best a waste, at worst a poison.

Perhaps even more dangerous is the inevitability that large concentrations of animals will invite concentrations of disease organisms, which in turn require concentrated and continuous use of antibiotics. And here the issue enlarges beyond the ecological problem to what some scientists think of as an evolutionary problem: The animal factory becomes a breeding ground for treatment-resistant pathogens, exactly as large field monocultures become breeding grounds for pesticide-resistant pests.

To concentrate food-producing animals in large numbers in one place inevitably separates them from the sources of their feed. Pasture and barnyard animals are removed from their old places in the order of a diversified farm, where they roamed about in some freedom, foraging to a significant extent for their own food, grazing in open pastures, or recycling barnyard and household wastes. Confined in the pens of animal factories, they are made dependent almost exclusively upon grains which are grown in large monocultures, at a now generally recognized ecological cost, and which must be transported to the animals sometimes over long distances. Animal factories are energy-wasting enterprises flourishing in a time when we need to be thinking of energy conservation.

The industrialization of agriculture, by concentration and separation, overthrows the restraints inherent in the diversity and balance of healthy ecosystems and good farms. This results in an unprecedented capacity for overproduction, which drives down farm income, which separates yet more farmers from their farms. For the independent farmers of the traditional small family farm, the animal factories substitute hired laborers, who at work are confined in the same unpleasant and unhealthy situation as the animals. Production at such a cost is temporary. The cost finally is diminishment of the human and ecological capacity to produce.

Animal factories ought to have been the subject of much government concern, if government is in fact concerned about the welfare of
the land and the people. But, instead, the confined animal feeding industry has been the beneficiary of government encouragement and government incentives. This is the result of a political brain disease that causes people in power to think that anything that makes more money or "creates jobs" is good.

We have animal factories, in other words, because of a governmental addiction to short-term economics. Short-term economics is the practice of making as much money as you can as fast as you can by any possible means while ignoring the long-term effects. Short-term economics is the economics of self-interest and greed. People who operate on the basis of short-term economics accumulate large "externalized" costs, which they charge to the future—that is, to the world and to everybody's grandchildren.

People who are concerned about what their grandchildren will have to eat, drink, and breathe tend to be interested in long-term economics. Long-term economics involves a great deal besides the question of how to make a lot of money in a hurry. Long-term economists such as John Ikerd of the University of Missouri believe in applying "the Golden Rule across the generations—doing for future generations as we would have them do for us." Professor Ikerd says: "The three cornerstones of sustainability are ecological soundness, economic viability, and social justice."

He thinks that animal factories are deficient by all three measures.

These factories raise issues of public health, of soil and water and air pollution, of the quality of human work, of the humane treatment of animals, of the proper ordering and conduct of agriculture, and of the longevity and healthfulness of food production.

If the people in our state and national governments undertook to evaluate economic enterprises by the standards of long-term economics, they would have to employ their minds in actual thinking. For many of them, this would be a shattering experience, something altogether new, but it would also cause them to learn things and do things that would improve the lives of their constituents.
II. FACTORY FARMS VERSUS FARMS

Factory farms increase and concentrate the ecological risks of food production. This is a well-documented matter of fact. The rivers and estuaries of North Carolina, to use only one example, testify to how quickly a "private" animal factory can become an ecological catastrophe and a public liability.

A farm, on the other hand, disperses the ecological risks involved in food production. A good farm not only disperses these risks, but also minimizes them. On a good farm, ecological responsibility is inherent in proper methodologies of land management, and in correct balances between animals and acres, production and carrying capacity. A good farm does not put at risk the healthfulness of the land, the water, and the air.

The ecological differences between a factory farm and a farm may be paramount in a time of rapidly accelerating destruction of the natural world. But there is also an economic difference that, from the standpoint of human communities, is critical.

A factory farm locks the farmer in at the bottom of a corporate hierarchy. In return for the assumption of great economic and other risks, the farmer is permitted to participate minimally in the industry's earnings. In return, moreover, for the security of a contract with the corporation, the farmer gives up the farm's diversity and versatility, reducing it to a specialist operation with one use.

According to one company's projections, a farmer would buy into the broiler business at a cost of $624, 275. That would be for four houses that would produce 506, 000 birds per year. Under the company's terms, this investment would produce a yearly net income of $23, 762. That would be an annual return on investment of 3.8 percent.

I don't know what percentage of annual return this company's shareholders expect to realize from their investment, I do know that if it is not substantially better than the farmer's percentage, they would be well advised to sell out and invest elsewhere.
PART I: FARMING

The factory farm, rather than serving the farm family and the local community, is an economic siphon, sucking value out of the local landscape and the local community into distant bank accounts.

To entice them to buy Kentuckians’ work and products so cheaply, our state government has given the animal confinement corporations some $200 million in state and federal tax “incentives.” In gratitude for these gifts, these corporations now wish to be relieved of any mandated public liability or responsibility for their activities here.

I don’t know that the arrogance and impudence of this have been equaled by any other industry. For not only have these people demonstrated, by their contempt for laws and regulations here and elsewhere, their intention to be bad neighbors; they come repeatedly before our elected representatives to ask for special exemptions. But in that very request they acknowledge the great risks and dangers that are involved in their way of doing business. Why should the innocent, why should people with a good conscience, want to be exempt from liability?

It is clear that the advocates of factory farming are not advocates of farming. They do not speak for farmers.

What they support is state-sponsored colonialism—government of, by, and for the corporations.

III. SUSTAINABILITY

The word “sustainable” is well on its way to becoming a label, like the word “organic.” And so I want to propose a definition of “sustainable agriculture.” This phrase, I suggest, refers to a way of farming that can be continued indefinitely because it conforms to the terms imposed upon it by the nature of places and the nature of people.

Our present agriculture, in general, is not ecologically sustainable now, and it is a long way from becoming so. It is too toxic. It is too dependent on fossil fuels. It is too wasteful of soil, of soil fertility, and of water. It is destructive of the health of the natural systems that surround
and support our economic life. And it is destructive of genetic diversity, both domestic and wild.

So far, these problems have not received enough attention from the news media or politicians, but the day is coming when they will. A great many people who know about agriculture are worrying about these problems already. It seems likely that the public, increasingly conscious of the issues of personal and ecological health, will sooner or later force the political leadership to pay attention. And a lot of farmers and grassroots farm organizations are now taking seriously the problem of ecological sustainability.

But there is a related issue that is even more neglected, one that has been largely obscured, even for people aware of the requirement of ecological sustainability, by the vogue of the so-called free market and the global economy. I am talking about the issue of the economic sustainability of farms and farmers, farm families and farm communities.

It ought to be obvious that in order to have sustainable agriculture, you have got to make sustainable the lives and livelihoods of the people who do the work. The land cannot thrive if the people who are its users and caretakers do not thrive. Ecological sustainability requires a complex local culture as the preserver of the necessary knowledge and skill, and this in turn requires a settled, stable, prosperous local population of farmers and other land users. It ought to be obvious that agriculture cannot be made sustainable by a dwindling population of economically depressed farmers and a growing population of migrant workers.

Why is our farm population dwindling away? Why are the still-surviving farms so frequently in desperate economic circumstances? Why is the suicide rate among farmers three times that of the country as a whole?

There is one reason that is paramount: The present agricultural economy, as designed by the agribusiness corporations (and the politicians, bureaucrats, economists, and experts who do their bidding), uses
farmers as expendable "resources" in the process of production, the same way it uses the topsoil, the groundwater, and the ecological integrity of farm landscapes.

From the standpoint of sustainability, either of farmland or farm people, the present agricultural economy is a failure. It is, in fact, a catastrophe. And there is no use in thinking that agriculture can become sustainable by better adapting to the terms imposed by this economy. That is hopeless, because its terms are the wrong terms. The purpose of this economy is rapid, short-term exploitation, not sustainability.

The story we are in now is exactly the same story we have been in for the last hundred years. It is the story of a fundamental conflict between the interests of farmers and farming and the interests of the agribusiness corporations. It is useless to suppose or pretend that this conflict does not exist, or to hope that you can somehow serve both sides at once. The interests are different, they are in conflict, and you have to get on one side or the other.

As a case in point, let us consider the economics of Kentucky's chicken factories, which some are pleased to look upon as a help to farmers. The Courier-Journal on May 28, 2000, told the story of a McLean County farmer who raises 1.2 million chickens a year. His borrowed investment of $750,000 brings him an annual income of $20,000 to $30,000. This declares itself immediately as a "deal" tailor-made for desperate farmers. Who besides a desperate farmer would see $20,000 or $30,000 as an acceptable annual return on an investment of $750,000 plus a year's work? In the poultry-processing corporations that sponsor such "farming," how many CEOs would see that as an acceptable return? The fact is that agriculture cannot be made sustainable in this way. The ecological risks are high, and the economic structure is forbidding. How many children of farmers in such an arrangement will want to farm?

Some people would like to claim that this sort of "economic development" is "inevitable." But the only things that seem inevitable about it
are the corporate greed that motivates it and the careerism of the academic experts who try to justify it. On May 28, the Courier-Journal quoted an agribusiness apologist at the University of Kentucky's experiment station in Princeton, Gary Parker, who said in defense of the animal factories: "Agriculture is a high-volume, high-cost, high-risk type business. You have to borrow a tremendous amount of money. You have to generate a tremendous amount of income just to barely make a living."

The first problem with Mr. Parker's justification is that it amounts to a perfect condemnation of this kind of agriculture. In an editorial on June 4, the Courier-Journal quoted Mr. Parker, and then said that such agriculture, though compromising and risky, "can generate great rewards." The Courier-Journal did not say who would get those "great rewards." We may be sure, however, that they will not go to the farmers, who, according to Mr. Parker's confession, are just barely making a living.

The second problem with Mr. Parker's statement is that it is not necessarily true. In contrast to the factory farm that realizes a profit of $20,000 or $30,000 on the sale of 1,200,000 chickens, I know a farm family who, last year, as a part of a diversified small farm enterprise, produced 2,000 pastured chickens for a net income of $6,000. This farm enterprise involved no large investment for housing or equipment, no large debt, no contract, and no environmental risk. The chickens were of excellent quality. The customers for them were ordinary citizens, about half of whom were from the local rural community. The demand far exceeds the supply. Most of the proceeds for these chickens went to the family that did the work of producing them. A substantial portion of that money will be spent in the local community. Such a possibility has not been noticed by Mr. Parker or the Courier-Journal because, I suppose, it is not "tremendous" and it serves the interest of farmers, not corporations.