

Reading Analysis of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*

Michael Pollan emphasizes that “the old pastoral idea is alive and, if not well exactly, still useful, perhaps even necessary” (125). Visiting Joel Salatin at his Polyface Farm in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, Pollan argues that pastoral farming is superior in many ways to the conventional industrialized farming that has developed across the country. Pollan argues that industrialized farming such as the Naylor Farm, Cascadian Farm, Earthbound Farm, and Grimmway Farms, just to name a few, are only organic in nature because the USDA set light regulatory standards (154). Pollan was looking for large organic farms to compare their sustainability and Polyface Farms, although “technically not an organic farm, though by any standard it is more “sustainable” than virtually any organic farm. Its example forces you to think a lot harder about what these words-sustainable, organic, natural-really mean” (131).

Pollan quotes Joel Salatin about his views on “organic “agriculture and government, and instead of a simple answer, he received the following:

Me and the folks who buy my foods are like the Indians-we just want to opt out. That's all the Indians ever wanted-to keep their tepees, to give their kids herbs instead of patent medicines and leeches. They didn't care if there was a Washington D.C., or a Custer or a USDA; just leave us alone. But the Western mind can't bear an opt-out option. We're going to have to refight the Battle of the Little Bighorn to preserve the right to opt-out, or your grandchildren and mine will have no choice but to eat amalgamated, irradiated, genetically prostituted, barcoded, adulterated fecal spam from the centralized processing conglomerate(132).

After Pollan's discussion with Salatin, he was convinced that he needed to see for himself all that Salatin had ranted about other so-called organic producers. This included making a trip to Polyface Farms and other farms to see the differences between styles of organic farming.

I spent several weeks touring the organic empire to see if Salatin's criticisms, which had taken me by surprise, were just. A new, alternative food chain was taking shape in this country, and this seemed to me an unalloyed good: What had been a fringe movement in the 1960's was now a thriving business-the fastest growing corner of the food industry, in fact. Salatin was suggesting that the organic food chain couldn't expand into America's supermarkets and fast-food outlets without sacrificing its ideals. I wondered if this wasn't a case of making the ideal an enemy of the good, but Salatin was convinced that industrial organic was finally a contradiction in terms. I decided I had to find out if he was right (133).

First, Pollan decided to shop at Whole Foods and see where their "certified organic", "humanely raised", and "free ranged" food are grown and raised (134). Pollan was very surprised at the number of organic companies in competition with each other, and how all the packaging on the products stressed freshness and what made them organic, thus giving it a "literary genre" which he calls the "Supermarket Pastoral" (137). Pollan realizes that the literary narrative on the packaging may be a ploy to get consumers thinking they are buying from a farm such as Salatin's', but in all actuality it is a much larger and more industrialized company.

Pollan wonders, "Just how well does Supermarket Pastoral hold up under close reading and journalistic scrutiny" (139)? Pollan used several examples, but none was as troubling as when he used an example of an organic TV dinner called "Country Herb". Pollan also went to Petaluma to see how "free-range" little Rosie the chicken really was. To his disappointment, she really did not get to roam free at all, and the only thing "organic" was her food (140). Next on his quest was the People's Park in Berkeley, just down the street from Whole Foods. Pollan was again disappointed in what he saw; what once was a thriving vegetable garden in the late 1960's- early 1970's, was more a commune for a few homeless people with a poor unkempt little garden (140-141).

Pollan described how and why People's Park was established, and the movement toward organic food, and what led to businesses like Whole Foods. He and a *Whole Earth* correspondent feel that J.I Rodale and his magazine called *Organic Gardening and Farming* were instrumental in this movement (142-143). We are reminded that there was a war during this time and "organic's rejection of agricultural chemicals was also a rejection of the war machine, since the same corporations-Dow, Monsanto-that manufactured pesticides also made napalm and Agent Orange, the herbicide with which the U.S. military was waging war against nature in Southeast Asia. Eating organic thus married the personal to the political (143).

Pollan's next adventure led to Cascadian Farm located north of Seattle, where Gene Kahn developed his now General Mills owned empire. We are told that it did not start out that way, but as an almost failing attempt at organic farming, if not for Rondale's magazine *Organic gardening and Farming* and other books, one of those led Pollan to describe what he calls as the movement's bible (145). Sir Albert Howard is the writer of *The Soil and Health* and *An Agricultural Testament*, the latter being the "bible". This is also one of many books Salatin claims all organic farmers should have on their bookshelf. Pollan goes into detail, using Howard's book, describing the fall of agriculture and the use of NPK as fertilizer. He also tells us how soil fertility when allowed to work naturally, as it should, and what happened when it failed because of the NPK.

When we mistake what we can know for all there is to know, a healthy appreciation of one's ignorance in the face of a mystery like soil fertility gives way to the hubris that we can treat nature, so that when the synthetic nitrogen fed to plants makes them more attractive to insects and vulnerable to disease, as we have discovered, the farmer turns to chemical pesticides to fix his broken machine (148).

Pollan quoted Howard as saying, “Artificial manures lead inevitably to artificial nutrition, artificial food, artificial animals and finally to artificial men and women” (148). Howard also viewed that as history plays out, “the wholesale adoption of artificial manure would destroy the fertility of the soil, leave plants vulnerable to pests and disease, and damage the health of the animals and peoples eating those plants, for how could such plants be any more nutritious than the soil in which they grew” (148)? I see this as a profound insight on the part of Howard and Pollan realizes that Salatin is correct on his views of industrialized organic farming, for we see this event happening.

Pollan goes back to current time and Kahn’s farm discussing what transpired Kahn to sell his farm to General Mills. Kahn explained that he felt pressured to ship his food and to become privatized. He also said the Alar scare in 1990 caused him to lose almost everything that included control of Cascadian Farm to Welch’s of grape juice fame. Being a realist and a businessperson, Kahn had the following to say about his former business.

You have a choice of getting sad about all that or moving on. We tried hard to build a cooperative community and a local food system, but at the end of the day, it wasn’t successful. This is just lunch for most people. Just lunch. We can call it sacred, we can talk about communion, but it’s just lunch (153).

Not only did Kahn’s farm get acquired by a mainstream company, but others as well and by recognized companies such as Gerber’s, ConAgra, Dole, and Heinz, just to name a few. The Organic Food and Production Act (OFPA) was passed in the same year (1990) (154). Pollan then described the task that USDA’s National Organic Standards Board had to contend with OFPA and managing to get around some of the rules it set forth. Pollan described the conflict in which the board wanted some synthetics placed in organic TV dinners. Kahn feels we should forget about the “Supermarket Pastoral” and see the true picture of the good industrial organic farm represents (158).

Behind every organic TV dinner or chicken or carton of industrial organic milk stands a certain quantity of land that will no longer be doused with chemicals, an undeniable gain for the environment and the public health. I could see his point.

Now Pollan sets out to other industrialized farms to see who was correct in their views, Kahn or Salatin.

His next stop was at Greenways Organic (near Fresno) then to Earthbound Farms (near Salinas). He found that Greenways had both organic and “conventional” fields of vegetables growing “side by side”. Both companies used different methods which Pollan feels it is a greener machine than if the foods were grown using “conventional methods” (159). Take for example the Earthbound Farms harvesting their baby greens:

...a car-sized lettuce-shaving machine that moves down the rows, cutting the baby greens at a precise point just above the crown. Spidery arms extended in front of the machine gently rake through the bed in advance of the blade, scaring off any mice that might find their way into the salad. A fan blows the cut leaves over a screen to shake out any pebbles or soil, after which a belt conveys the greens into white plastic totes that workers stack on pallets on a wagon trailing alongside. At the end of each row the pallets are loaded onto a refrigerated tractor trailer, entering a “cold chain” that will continue unbroken all the way to the produce section at your supermarket (166).

This is just the start of the process for those baby greens. It takes a lot of energy in processing, refrigerating, bagging, and transporting to stores such as Costco and Whole Foods.

The last place on Pollan’s tour was in Petaluma to see Rosie the “free-ranging” chicken, which he found an office building. Petaluma Poultry not only processed Rosie, but other Cornish Cross broilers. Disappointed by what he saw in the processing plant, he

went to see where they lived pre-processing and again he is frustrated by the experience. One point Pollan makes is although Rosie does not roam the lawn outside of the brood house, she does not get any antibiotics (172).

Pollan returns home and describes his organic industrial meal that he purchased at Whole Foods, including asparagus that came from Argentina. Pollan states that he feels this meal was better than if all the food was grown or raised conventionally, but he wondered if it was more nutritious (178). Pollan describes in several pages different studies on the nutrition of food grown organically and in a University of California, Davis 2003 study, they found that organic food did have more nutrition, even though the secretary of agriculture had refuted that notion in 2000 (178-179).

Finally, Pollan visits Joel Salatin and Polyface Farms. Here, Pollan is not disappointed; it seems he has an epiphany! Watching how Salatin uses his land and rotate the cattle on their "salad bar", made sense to Pollan and with all he had learned in his tour of industrialized farming, he decided that Polyface Farms had a complex system also, but they did it all using a system to "be faithful to the logic of biology" (202). Not only did Pollan see how the work was done, but he actually joined the Salatin's in working on the farm, thus giving him a greater sense of reality. Lastly, Salatin explains how his father got into the business in Venezuela and eventually had to leave for political reasons and decided to find a place near Washington, D.C. (204-205).

In this portion of Pollan's book, I believe he gave good information based on organic farming and the reasoning behind why conventional farming became so large, but what struck me most is the difference in opinions that the organic farmers showed in their interviews with Pollan. Each farmer had their reasons to become industrialized or not, but most of them did it for financial reasons. For example: Kahn with his Cascadian Farm felt

he had no choice but to sell to Welch's (153), but then became a V.P. for General Mills (145). Earthbound Farms started as a small local farm by two people who had no idea what a farm looked like nor how to establish one, but they became successful with the help of Myra's father and an order from Costco requesting their prewashed baby greens only non-organic (163). Also, going back in the past with Rodale's magazine (142) and with the information on Sir Albert Howard (143) both Pollan and Salatin prove their point that industrialized organic farming is not true, back to the earth, experience that we should consider as organic farming.

The USDA set regulations for the organic industry, but set those standards so low that it made it easier for the industrialized organic farmers. The problem with insubstantial regulations, is that the term organic was never truly defined. What constitutes organic for Kahn and the Goodman's is different from that defined by the Salatin's and our other writers, Kingsolver and Gould. Pollan best expresses his view with the following:

Could a factory farm be organic? Was an organic dairy cow entitled to graze on pasture? Did food additives and synthetic chemicals have a place in processed organic food? If the answers to these questions seem like no-brainers, then you are stuck in an outdated pastoral view of organic. Big Organic won all three arguments. The final standards do a good job of setting the bar for a more environmentally responsible kind of farming but, as perhaps was inevitable as soon as bureaucratic and industrial thinking was brought to bear, many of the philosophical values embodied in the word "organic"-the sorts of values expressed by Albert Howard-did not survive the federal rule-making process (155).

In addition, to add to the horror, the unsuspecting public is ignorant to those standards developed by our government and as Pollan describes "the organic food

industry finds itself in a most unexpected, uncomfortable, and, yes, unsustainable position: floating on a sinking sea of petroleum (184).