

Waiting to be discovered within the pages of The Omnivore's Dilemma is a carefully constructed boulevard. One which transports its readers to the very doormat of America's modern day food god—Corn. Along this yellow grain road, Michael Pollan takes an objective, evidentiary and observable stance on what our modern day food culture claims, perhaps shamefully, as its foundation, and how much of the food we consume can be traced back to the infamous origin of the corn fields. Although one may not literally observe rows of corn stacked upon the shelves of their neighborhood grocery stores, through fact, research, and personal experience, Pollan navigates the reader through the well-lighted aisles to inevitably bring one to discover just how the corn world has impacted the actual content of their food, as well as the way in which it has dictated the relationship one has to those calories they ingest. Pollan illustrates that the path in which corn travels through, is one originally rooted in indigenous cultures, soon finding itself moving through the fields of a few centuries of farmers, through the digestion of livestock, into the metal tubes of human developed refining factories, and into the hands of consumers. As the path is travelled, the ethical, cultural, and environmental challenges that corn requires humankind to face are clearly demonstrated.

The road of corn, as discussed by Pollan, was not paved with good intentions by its developers. He begins his investigative journey by introducing his readers to the very basic co-dependent relationship between corn and humankind. With a brief synopsis of the religious and ritualistic background that the indigenous people of North America had with corn, he quickly reminds his audience that it was corn that gave the settlers of the new world the tactical weapon to reap the rewards of the land, sustain their families, and dismiss those who had already known of its great powers.

Squanto had handed the white man precisely the tool he needed to dispossess the Indian. Without the “fruitfulness” of Indian corn, the nineteenth-century English writer William Cobbett declared, the colonists would never have been able to build ‘a powerful nation.’ Maize, he wrote, was ‘the greatest blessing God ever gave to man.’ (26)

It is crucial from a cultural standpoint to recognize that the very beginning of corn in the American culture was built upon a need for a new commodity in which could be used not only for the purpose of directly providing food, but also as a form of trade for other goods. Pollan notes that corn was more than equipped to rise to our demands. “...of all the human environments to which corn has successfully adapted since then, the adaptation to our own—the world of industrial consumer capitalism...surely represents the plant’s most extraordinary achievement to date (30).” It was from the very start that corn was deemed to be identified both as a means of natural and economic sustenance—and so the economic and ecological battle began.

The economic and ecological battle began as World War II came to a close. As discussed by Pollan in great detail on page thirty-four, this battle began when the farms in the United States were beginning to decline in their production, and less people could be sustained by the output of their labors. What began to evolve, or devolve, depending on one’s perception, was a shift from self-sustaining farms, to economically efficient ones. This shift created farms that were focused on and concerned with only a few crops, instead of those in the years prior which had many various crops, including the natural farming livestock. As the war ended, there was also a surplus of ammonium nitrate, which in addition to it being a great ingredient in creating explosives, also happened to be a great fertilizer. Such a surplus needed to seek refuge somewhere in the nation, and when this new chemical fertilizer came to be, the face of corn production changed, which according to Pollan, “in turn marks a key turning point in the industrialization of our food (41)...” With hybrid corn being an ideal candidate to receive such

rich fertilization, the production of corn now increased immensely. And now, while the surplus of ammonium nitrate was being graciously disposed of, there was now another problem on the horizon—the surplus of corn.

While farm dynamics were shifting alongside the new craze to produce maize, increasing government involvement gave a new dimension to the agricultural side of corn production. The capitalistic and economic approach became the forefront of agricultural direction, as opposed to environmental and ecological mindfulness. There was a definite shift from the ideas of natural farming to sustain life, to a clear economic and money generating machine. The ability to produce an over abundance of corn could be leveraged to feed livestock more cost efficiently.

America's food animals have undergone a revolution in lifestyle in the years since World War II. At the same time as much of man America's human population found itself leaving the city for the suburbs, our food animals found themselves traveling in the opposite direction, leaving widely dispersed farms in places like Iowa to live in densely populated new animal cities. These places are so different from farms and ranches that a new term was needed to denote them: CAFO—Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (67).

Michael Pollan maintains an even-keeled emotional position while he demonstrates the shift of pastured and ranched cattle to that of those confined to CAFOs and the impacts that they have on both the environmental and food realms, not to mention the advantages they created for those who sought to gain economically by it. In a world where time is money, the CAFOs brought with them an economic efficiency by paving a way for cattle ranchers to generate more profit at a much quicker pace. Corn could feed cattle for less money, and also drive down the amount of time it took for a cow to reach its fully expected slaughter weight. “Cows raised on grass simply take longer to reach slaughter weight than cows raised on a richer diet, and for half a century now the industry has devoted itself to shortening a beef's allotted span on earth....Fast food indeed. What gets a steer from 80 to 1,100 pounds in

fourteen months is tremendous quantities of corn, protein and fat supplement, and an arsenal of new drugs (71).”

With the development of the CAFOs, a string of issues came into existence. The way in which the cattle’s biology was being drastically affected by the intense consumption of corn was the most pertinent to the way the food chain would be affected. However, economically speaking, the health and happiness of the animals, nor the environmental impacts of such mass production, were of no true concern. From an economic standpoint, this was by far much more efficient.

The economic logic of gathering so many animals together to feed them cheap corn in CAFOs is hard to argue with; it has made meat which used to be a special occasion in most American homes, so cheap and abundant that many of us now eat it three times a day. Not so compelling is the biological logic behind this cheap meat. Already in their short history CAFOs have produced more than their share of environmental and health problems: polluted water and air, toxic wastes, novel and deadly pathogens (67).

Following the rabbit hole of economic efficiency, Pollan begins to point out the first real speed bump to hit the corporate food world was perpetuated by the unique dynamic of the supply and demand curve of the food world. While many other economic sectors could manipulate the demand of consumers, food found itself in a place where there was a limit of consumption—the human stomach.

As corn continued its travels to the factories of refinement and fashioned itself in the form of high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated oil, the economics of the food industry still needed to find a place to park extra calories.

The question now is, Who or what (besides our cars) is going to consume and digest all this freshly fractionated biomass—the sugars and starches, the alcohols and acids, the emulsifiers and stabilizers and viscosity-control agents? This is where we come in. It takes a certain kind of eater—an industrial eater—to consume these fractions of corn, and we are, or have evolved into, that supremely adapted creature: the eater of processed food (90).

As Pollan discusses the end of the path for corn, the human stomach, he discusses how from an economic standpoint, the expansion of the demand (i.e. the stomach) must occur, or the food sector will become stagnant. He provides an in depth discussion of how the “industrial eater” has become one who can consume calories without limitation.

Since the body can't break down resistant starch, it slips through the digestive tract without ever turning into calories of glucose—a particular boon, we're told, for diabetics. When fake sugars and fake fats are joined by fake starches, the food industry will at long last have overcome the dilemma of the fixed stomach: whole meals you can eat as often or as much of as you like, since this food will leave no trace. Meet the ultimate—the utterly elastic!—industrial eater (99).

As Pollan illustrates this incredible path of corn from crop to consumer, he seems so distant from the intensity of the issue. As a human being it would seem that he should be more moved positively or negatively by the subject matter; however, as a surveyor of factual realities, his tone and removed sense of emotion are understandable. His disconnect in certain aspects first instills frustration that one who is aware of such evidence ought to be of different mind, but it also carries with it a perfect demonstration of the cultural mentality in America.

Standing there in the pen alongside my steer, I couldn't imagine ever wanting to eat the flesh of one of these protein machines. Hungry was the last thing I felt. Yet I'm sure that after enough time goes by, and the stink of this place is gone from my nostrils, I will eat feedlot beef again. Eating industrial meat takes an almost heroic act of now knowing, or, now, forgetting (84)”

The shadow of American culture can be seen throughout the evidence that Pollan provides. What one can see unfold is this notion that food was once cultivated in conjunction with nature's already mapped out method. What the food industry has been able to do is to remove the need human have for nature to provide our sustenance, and replace it with human made science. This carries with it so many incredible implications. The fact that as a culture America has traded in their formerly sound relationship to natural food, for a system that is highly un-natural, over-processed, un-ethical, environmentally unconscious and un-healthy

provides tremendous insight into how man himself has become a machine. The age old saying of “you are what you eat” does indeed open the door for an intense examination of how man has become a calculable, economic commodity himself, succumbing to the cheap demands of a capitalistic system. Pollan helps to subtly demonstrate this by discussing the expansion of the human stomach and the evidence of such in their immense health issues such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. We now rely upon our own invention of the food chain, which could certainly be surveyed both by the humanities and religious disciplines in terms of what this indicates, for example, about our ability to have faith in the divine.

By taking control of changing the diets of species, using chemically based fertilizers, overproducing certain animals, certain crops and chemicals, what does that in effect say about humankind’s ability to truly believe and rely upon something other than themselves, such as God? I suppose a question that would need some serious attention is whether the food industry of America is capable of navigating its culture so far away from the divine that God and faith would no longer be an area of contemplation. If we are what we eat, then that first looting of corn from the native North Americans who held it as sacred was indeed our first step in dropping the supernatural baton in modern American culture and our first step towards truly becoming an industrial machine ourselves.