Rationale, Gallatin School of Individualized Study. February 3, 2009
By Annie Myers (*Reynolds Scholar*, Agriculture and Regional Food Systems)

Dear Gallatin,

The following rationale presents the topic for my colloquium, which I have entitled *Brooklyn Brews and Oyster Pie: Visions of a Local Food System in the New York Region.* The colloquium itself will take place on March 30, 2009 at 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

Introduction

Over the past seventy-five years, agricultural production in the United States has undergone the process of industrialization. This process has included widespread farm consolidation and mechanization, expanded commodity production, the increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the genetic modification of seeds, and a considerable drop in the percentage of Americans' disposable income spent on food. Government agricultural policy, from the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 through the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008,[1] whether encouraging crop destruction or commodity overproduction, has disregarded the implications of the means used to achieve a rise in the "average farmer" income, an increase in the average acre's yield, or the development of a homegrown source of energy.

A long-standing resistance to the practice of industrial agriculture has recently gained momentum through an increasing popular awareness of climate change and the limits of natural resources, and has developed into a full-fledged movement for the agro-ecological cultivation of food. The movement charges industrial agriculture with being environmentally and socially unsustainable, citing the fact that industrial machinery contributes immensely to greenhouse gas emissions; commodity production destroys irreplaceable biodiversity and soil fertility; toxic chemical products poison farmworkers and contaminate food and water supply; cheap, processed foods contribute to the declining health of the population; and the lack of land stewardship and farmer ownership in the industrial model steals away any traditional sense of rural lifestyle and community. A

[1] The legislation of 1933 and that of 2008 are the first and latest versions of what is commonly known as the U.S. Farm Bill. This comprehensive, omnibus bill is the primary agricultural and food policy tool of the federal government, and is passed every five years by the United States Congress.

sustainable food system would instead support diversified, organic, small farms[2]; enable efficient, local distribution of fresh produce and other farm products to all communities, no matter their race nor income; ensure minimum wage and humane working conditions for farm employees; incorporate funding for fresh, whole foods into health care plans; and facilitate a relationship of understood dependency and trust between farmers, purveyors, and consumers. Public actions contributing to the development of this future food system have included proposing alternative agricultural policies, cultivating community gardens and urban demonstration farms, initiating farm education programs, creating entrepreneurial farm operations, and developing direct distribution models like farmers markets, CSAs[3], and farm-to-restaurant deliveries. Some individuals have even decided to leave their urban homes and start their own small, diversified farms.

The Topic

In my colloquium, I would like to define and discuss one of the central goals of the movement for sustainable agriculture: the localization of food systems. I would like to focus upon the potential reality of this process in the New York/Northeast region, though I will certainly touch upon the more general implications of the concept of food system localization. The "localization" of the food system in the Northeast, as I imagine this process, would include the introduction of place-based agricultural policies that most highly value small, diversified farms; the establishment of infrastructure for the production, processing, and distribution of local farm products; the education of consumers on the importance of how food is grown, by whom, and where, on what the health benefits of local food might be, and on how to cook with fresh, seasonal ingredients; the development of community support and appreciation for the cultural richness of local food history, for the reality of interaction among local producers and consumers, and for the trust and joy gained through the recognition of mutual dependency.

The questions I would like to address through this topic range from theoretical, abstract queries to practical, daily dilemmas. They require a combination of social, political,

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[2] The term small farm is used here to refer to a non-commercial, owner-operated farm, generally ranging from one to one hundred acres. (More poetically, it means a farm that is big enough to fulfill its purpose, whether to generate income or support a desirable quality of life, but to do so without destroying the health or vitality of the farmer or the land).

[3] Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, is a relationship of mutual support and commitment between local farmers and community members who pay the farmer an annual membership fee to cover the production costs of the farm. In turn, members receive a weekly share of the harvest during the local growing season. (Robyn Van En Center).

economic, and historical perspectives. The following paragraphs each begin with a few such questions, followed by a few words on the related books to be discussed.

• *As a food system is localized, what population benefits the most? Is there anyone that the "local food movement" leaves behind?* History has demonstrated what is lost, and who is hurt, by the industrialization and globalization of a food system. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* both highlight the hardships of living and working, whether as a farmer or factory-worker, during the time when industrialization changed the face of food production. Vandana Shiva's *Stolen Harvest* tells the story of "how those who labor, who grow foods, nature, and her amazing creatures, are being stolen by mechanisms being put in place by global corporations." At the same time, "food" did become more affordable (if only through hidden costs) during the past fifty years, and people throughout the US were introduced to various fruits, vegetables, spices, meats, and fish that they might never have tasted had the US not embraced international agricultural trade. Starving populations have also received thousands of pounds of food in the form of US commodities (whether or not such aid served them in the long-term). The movement for sustainable agriculture seeks to provide people with fresh, nutrient-rich farm products instead of cheap, processed "foods;" to increase physical and financial access to healthy foods in low-income communities; to secure living wages and humane working conditions for farmworkers; and to revive the social and economic strength of both urban and rural communities. Yet rarely do those active in this movement discuss what might be lost were our food system to be locally based, and who might feel excluded from a "localized" food community. What sort of cultural or regional exclusion might result? What sort of community divisions might develop? How can this be avoided?

• *For states and regions to localize their food systems, it is generally acknowledged that agricultural policy must change dramatically. What will these policies look like? What economic theories must they utilize?* Currently, most agricultural policy is included in the national omnibus legislation known as the Farm Bill. Can federal policy successfully dictate the rules and regulations of "localized" food systems? Must states be given more autonomy in establishing agricultural policy, for local food systems to develop and function? Could/should such autonomy be dictated by geographic region, rather than by political boundaries? The founders of the United States raised these same questions. Thomas Jefferson's idealized vision of the yeoman farmer went hand in hand with his support for states' rights and a limited Federal

government. Agriculture naturally defies uniform regulation over a landmass as large as the United States, and yet it is hard to imagine the immense shift it will take to decentralize such policy. Some of the most controversial policies of the Farm Bill are those granting agricultural subsidies, or government payments to commodity farmers, which violate the US participation in the WTO. Would a local food system offer government support to small, diversified farmers? Must the government intervene to help farmers survive? If commodity subsidies were to be cut off, would small, diversified farmers find themselves on any more of an "even playing field?" Can local food systems work within the free market economy? How, logistically, can a capitalist system recognize the benefits of a food system wherein "efficiency" is mostly based on economic "externalities?" These are questions I have considered while reading the work of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Karl Marx. How does the localization of a food system interact with the invisible hand of capitalism, the demands of a growing population, the need for vibrant community associations, and the psychological identity and pride of a worker in his or her product.

- *What sort of social and community values does localization evoke? What sort of community structure and agency would evolve out of a local food system?* Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* lends a framework for discussing these questions, with her rigid categories of labor, work, and action. While I have embraced Arendt's work regarding the importance of action, I wonder if the trusts and mutual dependencies in a community with a local food system might merge her categories until they were no longer recognizable or applicable. While food consumption is a necessary and daily task, and its acquisition (according to Arendt, and many others) mundane and unremarkable, what if it were instead a form of action and agency, as well as a source of community and friendship? How might Arendt's theories about action apply to a society where *labor* was in fact the *action* by which one appreciated the *work* of one's neighbor? And if through productive *work* (done by farmers), communities were brought together in collective, even joyful, *action*?

- *What will a local food system look like in New York? ? What can we learn from our past? What are the region's primary assets, concerns, and limitations today?* Food production and consumption is inherently shaped by geography and culture. New York has a rich geographic and cultural history, of embracing the fertile soil of the region, and utilizing the local waterways, for the production and distribution of food. What did the local Indians grow, catch, and hunt? How did the Dutch farmers of Brooklyn begin distribution to New Amsterdam's Manhattan

island? How did the food system of New York change as the population of the city grew during the 18th and 19th centuries? This sort of local history will inform and shape any development of a local food system today. Both Richard Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World* and Mark Kurlansky's *The Big Oyster* tell stories of the New York region, from the coming of the Dutch in the 1600s on into the modern day, and paint pictures of the old Brooklyn farms, of pigs roaming Manhattan streets, of East River markets, and of oyster barges moored in a row on the Hudson. Where are our markets now? Where must they be revived? How and from where do the farmers arrive? Where in the landscape have these institutions and pathways been historically? A local food system will have no integrity if it is not developed with a consciousness of the local past.

Conclusion

This topic is, admittedly, magnificently broad. These are questions I'll be asking for the rest of my life, and I don't expect to address them all in a two-hour conversation. Still, considering that the colloquium is to be the culmination of four years of learning, I believe that the ideas outlined are perhaps appropriately expansive. In preparing for the colloquium itself, I promise to focus in upon and polish specific questions and points of interest among those mentioned here. And then we will talk.

Looking forward to it,

Annie

Booklist, Gallatin School of Individualized Study February 3, 2009
By Annie Myers (*Reynolds Scholar*, Agriculture and Regional Food Systems)

Ancient, Medieval, and Renaissance Classics

- Homer, *The Odyssey* (8th c BCE)
- Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella, *Res Rustica / De Arboribus* (1st c BCE)
- Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis* (44 BCE)
- Varro, *Rerum Rusticarum* (37 BC)
- Virgil, *Georgics* (29 BCE)
- The Bible: *TBD*.
- Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1537)

Modernity – The Humanities

- Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781)
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835)
- Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, (1972)
- Assata Shakur, *Assata Shakur: An Autobiography* (1987)
- Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to this Place* (1996)

Modernity – The Social and Natural Sciences

- Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1775)
- Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (1776)
- Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798)
- Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*
- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958)
- Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (2000)

Area of Concentration

- William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*
- Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*
- John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
- Michael Pollan*, The Ominvore's Dilemma*
- Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster*
- Richard Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World*
- José Saramago*, The Cave (2003)*

Other Books in Consideration…

- Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*
- Howard Zinn*, A People's History of the United States*
- Edmundo Desnoes*, Memories of Underdevelopment*
- Richard Rorty*, Achieving Our Country (1998)*
- Bill McKibben*, Deep Economy*
- T. Colin Campbel*l, The China Study*
- Fernando Funes & others,
  Sustainable Agriculture and Resistance: Transforming Food Production in Cuba