

Corporate Livestock Production Implications for Rural North America¹

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North American agriculture is in the midst of a “great transition” – a transition that is fundamentally transforming rural America. Although my rural life experiences have been in the United States, I have spent enough time over the past decade in Canada, talking with Canadians, to believe the rural transformations of the U.S. and Canada are not all that different. Agriculture as we have known it, with family farms and viable rural communities, is being rapidly transformed into an industrial agriculture, with factory farms and dying rural communities.

This industrialization of agriculture is not a new phenomenon. The trend toward specialization, standardization, and consolidation – toward industrialization – began around the turn of the 20th century, with the mechanization of agriculture. Until recently, the most obvious consequence of this process had been larger farms, fewer farms, and fewer farm families. But, farmers and families, real people, were still making the decisions concerning what was produced, how it was produced, and for whom it was produced. Today, however, these important decisions increasingly are made in the boardrooms of giant, multinational corporations. These corporations are not real people; they have no families, no friends, no communities, and increasingly no single nationality. Their decisions are driven by the never-ending need to generate profits and to grow. The needs of families, communities, the land, and society in general, must be considered secondary to the needs of the corporation.

Nowhere is the industrialization more evident, in all of its dimensions and all of its ugliness, than in large-scale, confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and in the corporations which control and promote them. One of the most repulsive aspects of corporate livestock production is the process by which contract production is promoted to the farmers and residents of rural North America. Farmers are told that these corporate contract operations will give young people an opportunity to return to the farm and that significant government regulation of these CAFOs will deny rural youth of their only opportunity.

First, the number of independent U.S. hog farmers has declined dramatically since the large-scale operations have become prominent and most dramatically in those areas where CAFOs have been most prominent. The state of Missouri, for example, has lost about three-fourths of its hog farmers over the past decade, since large-scale contract operations first entered the state. The state of North Carolina preceded Missouri by doubling hog production, through CAFO operations, while cutting the number of independent hog producers in half. And, the CAFO operations have been virtually unregulated. So, unregulated corporate hog farms destroy opportunities for family hog farmers rather than create them – the facts on this are clear.

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Second, contract hog production is not “farming,” it’s a factory job that just happens to involve animals that traditionally have been raised on farms. Real farmers make their own decisions. Until recently, although farmers were becoming fewer and larger, farmers were still making all of the important production decisions, and most of these farmers considered how their decisions might affect the land and their neighbors. In contract livestock production, the corporation makes the decisions concerning design of buildings and equipment, genetics, feeding, animal health, time of placement, time of marketing, and virtually every other aspect of the production process. The corporation gives little consideration, if any, to the implications of these decisions for the land, the community, or even for the families of contract producers. A future in contract production is not a future in farming, no matter what the corporate representative or their lackeys in government or the state universities may say. Real farmers make their own decisions and accept the responsibilities for the impacts of their decisions on the land and on other people.

Third, it is difficult to understand why any parent would want their children to work in an unhealthy environment, to hire others to work in an unhealthy environment, or to impose an unhealthy environment on their neighbors. So, if parents want their children to become contract producers, it’s difficult to understand why they would be opposed to regulations necessary to ensure their health and to protect the quality of the water and the air in rural areas. The only logical conclusion is these parents want their children to live nearby and are willing to sacrifice the health of others to realize their own ambitions for their children.

Finally, there are other, better ways to farm and to raise hogs; the “sustainable agriculture” movement addresses the need to protect the rural environment and support rural communities, while providing opportunities for farmers to earn a decent living. But, sustainable farming takes more imagination and creativity than contract production – it requires taking care of each other and taking care of the land. Sustainable hog producers all across North America are finding that deep-bedding systems, including hoop house structures, and pasture based hog production systems often are not only more humane, ecologically sound, and socially responsible, but also, are more profitable than CAFOs. But, such systems require more management, more imagination, more creativity, more thinking, and thus, are more difficult to “promote.”

In a few years, the agribusiness corporations will leave North America, leaving their contract growers with useless investments in facilities, without “jobs,” without farming skills, and with “big messes” for which they must be held responsible. The community will be left with nothing on which to base future economic development. But, rural people don’t seem to be willing to look that far ahead. They are lured by the corporate promises of more jobs, increased tax base, and the false promise of corporate livestock production as a viable future for farmers.

Nearly ten years ago I was asked by a group of farmers in north Missouri to evaluate the potential impacts of large-scale, confinement hog feeding operations on rural communities. Since then, I have worked on this issue with grassroots community groups all across the U.S. and Canada.

Every community is a bit different, but the fundamental issues are always the same. Some people in these communities expect to benefit economically by adopting an industrial model of livestock production, while others expect to suffer the inherently negative consequences of agricultural industrialization. Perhaps no public issue has so split the social fabric of rural communities, as when those who benefit economically confront those whose quality of life is diminished and the rest of the community is asked to choose sides.

The basic arguments are quite straightforward. Large-scale, commercial hog producers, most operating under corporate contracts, feel compelled to adopt a factory model of production, involving concentrated confinement housing, cesspool-like lagoon storage of hog feces and urine, and the spreading or spraying of manure on open fields. These producers claim that such operations represent a natural evolution of hog production and essentially are the same as any other family farming operation. Factory farming supporters argue that irrational and fanatical opponents are trying to deny their inherent “right to farm” and their right to pursue their economic interests in a free enterprise economy. They argue that without compelling scientific proof of extraordinary risks to the environment or to human health, there is no reason to treat these factory livestock operations any differently than any other family farm.

However, common sense leads to a quite different conclusion. For example, all hog waste “lagoons” (cesspools) leak wastes into the groundwater. The only questions relate to how much they leak and how great a risk they present to human health. Inevitably, hog manure from these operations pollutes streams. The only questions relate to how many spills will occur in how many months and how great a risk they present to human health. All large confinement hog feeding operations stink. The only questions relate to how much of what chemicals are contained in the stench and how great a risk they present to human health. All hog large CAFOs rely on human antibiotics to control disease. The only questions relate to how much this contributes to antibiotic resistance in treating human diseases and how great a risk it presents to human health.

The common sense answer to all of these questions is the greater the number of hogs concentrated in one place, the greater will be the risk to the natural environment, and ultimately, the greater the risk to human health. Large-scale confinement animal feeding operations are not “farms” they are livestock factories. When hogs are raised on real farms, they are given sufficient space to move about, they spread their own waste – and with common sense management, don't pollute the groundwater or streams. When hogs are raised on real farms, they “smell” but don't “stink” – the difference being, “smell” doesn't make people sick. When hogs are raised on real farms, they need antibiotics only when they are sick, and generally, they stay healthy. The greater the number of hogs crowded into one building, on one farm, in one county, the greater will be the risk to human health. It's a matter of common sense.

Certainly commercial hog producers have a right to pursue their economic self-interest in a free enterprise economy. But, they don't have a right to endanger the public health. “Private property rights” have never included the right to benefit at your neighbor's expense. The “right to farm” has never included the right to operate an “animal feeding factory.”

The state and federal government agencies may feel compelled to wait for scientific proof, perhaps for a significantly large number of people to become disabled or die from hog related illnesses. But at the local level, people have the responsibility of ensuring that they and their neighbors don't become those public health statistics. It is a contentions issue. People have no choice but to choose sides in this matter. Common sense – not economics and not science – should be our guide in deciding which side we should choose.

Today, rural North America is being “colonized.” Multinational corporations are extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of people in rural places everywhere, including rural America – corporate livestock production is but a symptom of a far more serious problem. Rural people are losing control of their local public institutions, as outside corporate interests, previously alien to their communities, use their economic power to gain controlling influence over local economies and local governments. Irreplaceable precious rural resources, including rural people and rural culture, are being exploited to increase the wealth of investors and managers of corporations that have no commitment to the future of their “rural colonies.” This is classic “colonization.”

Historically, a colony has been defined as a territory, acquired by conquest or settlement, over which a people or government, previously alien to that territory, has imposed outside control. A colonial relationship existed whenever one people or government extended its sovereignty by imposing political control over another people or territory. The only fundamental difference between the current colonization of rural areas and previous colonization of “lesser developed” countries is the nature of the entity carrying out the process – the source of power. Historically, colonization has been carried out by political entities, by governments. Today, colonization is being carried out by economic entities, by multinational corporations. However, the colonization process and its consequences are virtually identical, regardless of the source of power.

Rural people, whether in North America or elsewhere, are being told that they must rely on outside investment, like corporate livestock producers, to support local economic development. Outside investment will bring badly needed jobs and income, stimulate the local economy, and expand the local tax base. Economically depressed rural communities will be able to afford better schools, better health care, and expanded social services, and will attract a greater variety of retail outlets – restaurants, movie theaters, and maybe even a Wal Mart. Their rural community will begin to look more like an urban community and local people can begin to think and act more like urban people. Rural people have been left behind, they are told, and outside corporate investment is the only means by which they can advance fast enough to catch up with the rest of society.

These same basic arguments have been used by the powerful of all times to justify their colonization of the weak. Colonization was the only feasible means of improving the lives of the “natives” left behind in “primitive” societies – economically, socially, and morally. Since the indigenous people had no adequate means of developing their resources themselves, it was only fair they give up some of the benefits to the colonizing nation in order to acquire the outside investment needed for the development process. It was a “win-win” situation, so they were told.

Historically, the British, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Germans, and Dutch were among the great empire builders. They colonized much of North, South, and Central America, Australia, and Africa, as well as major regions of Asia. Through colonization, the “primitive” people already occupying these territories were given an opportunity to become a part of a modern society. After failing to gain cooperation through persuasion, the leaders of the indigenous “tribes” were invariably bribed, threatened, or coerced into colluding with the colonizing powers. After all, it was for the ultimate good of the “their people.” The 19th century empire builders, in particular, claimed they had a moral responsibility to help bring “backward people” some of the fruits of modern Western Civilization. And, if the “natives” continued to resist, they were subdued by force and their indigenous cultures destroyed – for their own good, of course.

Clearly, becoming part of a colonial empire brought numerous economic, health, education, and technological benefits to past colonies. In some cases, such as North America and Australia, the indigenous population was sufficiently small to be essentially eliminated by immigrants who shared the culture of their colonial masters. Some colonies became strong enough to gain independence and a few are now more powerful than are their one-time masters. But, most colonies were not granted independence until well into the 20th century, when world opinion shifted against colonialism on ethical and moral grounds.

According to contemporary standards of international behavior, colonialism is inexcusable because it conflicts directly with the basic rights of national sovereignty and self-determination. The recognition of such rights, worldwide, ended political colonialism as a means of promoting economic and cultural development. Political colonialism was abolished worldwide, because it had obvious harmful effects on the people of colonized areas – socially, culturally, ecologically, and economically. Long established social life-styles were suddenly disrupted, complete cultures were destroyed, natural resources were depleted, and the natural environment was polluted with industrial chemicals and toxic wastes.

After the colonizers had completed their exploitation, the local economy was left in shambles with no indigenous community structure or any other means of self-government to address the shameful legacy of colonialism. In spite of the obvious economic and technological benefits of colonization, the indigenous people of virtually every previously colonized country of the world, including the United States, still harbor a deep resentment of their former colonial masters. Political colonization is no longer morally or ethically excusable.

However, the “corporate colonization” of rural areas everywhere, including America, continues virtually unchecked. The earliest colonial intrusions into rural America were motivated by exploitation of its abundant wildlife, vast forest lands, and precious minerals deposits – invariably leaving behind frontier “ghost towns,” after the wealth had been extracted from the land. More recently, intrusions have been motivated by the exploitation of cheap rural labor, by the textile and food processing industries, for example. But, once the corporations found people who would work even harder for less money in other countries, the textile industry moved on, leaving behind deserted factories and unemployable people. With the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the food processing industry now seems likely to abandon North America to colonize rural Mexico instead. However, corporate colonialism continues in rural America. Many rural areas are still being colonized to exploit remaining pockets of

valuable rural resources, including an agricultural work ethic, trusting communities, and open spaces in which to dump various kinds of noxious wastes, which urban people have rejected.

Today, corporate livestock production provides a prime example of corporate colonization of rural North America. Local people are promised new jobs, more income, an expanded tax base, and an opportunity to “catch up” with the rest of American society. Local leaders are courted or coerced, as necessary, to shape local policies to accommodate industrial hog production methods. Local farmers are told industrialization is the wave of the future for agriculture and they must embrace the new technologies to survive. Rural people are told that local regulations to protect the public health and natural environment will drive existing farmers out of business, will stifle economic development, and will doom their community to continued “backwardness.” These arguments are no different from past arguments used to support political colonization; only the source of power is different.

In reality, few local people will gain from such colonization. A few local officials and land speculators may line their pockets and a few local people may get relatively good paying jobs, for a time. But, nearly all of the profits and good paying jobs will go to corporate investors and managers who will remain outside the community. Most rural Americans eventually will refuse to work for exploitative employers, leaving most of the low-paying jobs to be filled by immigrant labor. Eventually, the colonizing corporations will move on, once local resources have been depleted or local resistance to their exploitation begins to affect their bottom line. Perhaps some post-colonial rural communities will be prosperous, but these so-called success stories will be limited to places with unique landscapes and climates deemed worthy of preserving for the enjoyment of affluent outsiders.

As in earlier times, the 21st century corporate empire builders claim they feel some responsibility to help bring “backward people” of rural areas some of the benefits of the modern economy. However, rural people are not necessarily “backward,” just because they have not embraced the exploitative system of industrial development and have been reluctant to discard their traditional rural cultural values. After the corporations are gone, there is no reason to believe that rural Americans will be less resentful of their previous “corporate colonial masters” than are indigenous people of previously colonized nations of their previous “political corporate masters.” They will resent the loss of rural culture, rural values, and their previous sense of connectedness to place. They will resent the loss of a once safe and healthy rural environment in which they had hoped to live and raise their families. They will resent the loss of their self-governing ability, as their communities will have been split apart by dissention during the colonizing process. They will resent the loss of their sense of community.

The threat of colonization is always present. The economically and politically powerful will always be tempted to dominate and exploit the weak. However, differences in economic and political power only make colonization possible – not necessary or inevitable. The powerful can be restrained from their natural tendency to expand their sovereignty over the weak, and even if they are not, the weak can always find ways to resist the powerful.

The strongest defense rural North America has against the threat of corporate colonization is the knowledge of what is happening to their communities, why it is happening, and what are the consequences of their doing nothing to stop it. The colonization of rural America is not

inevitable. But, rural Americans must stand together to preserve their priceless rural culture, to protect their valuable natural and human resources, and pursue a different strategy of “sustainable” rural economic development. But first, the people of rural North America must come to realize that corporate livestock production is not a solution to their problems, but instead, is but an exploitative response to their growing desperation. The solution for rural North Americans is not to submit to corporate colonization, but instead, to declare their economic independence and begin rebuilding their own communities from the grass roots.