

THE FOOD SYSTEM

DEFINING FOOD

Food

Any substance or stuff that provides nutritional calories

Nutritionism

An ideology that conceives of food purely in terms of nutrients consumed for the maintenance & development of the organism's bodily health

AN ALTERNATIVE TO NUTRITIONISM?

Perhaps what we need now is a broader, less reductive view of what food is, one that is at once more ecological and cultural. What would happen, for example, if we were to start thinking about food as less of a thing and more of a relationship?

FOOD HOLISM

Food Holism

We should evaluate the status of a foodstuff as **food** with respect to its place in a chain of social practices, production, and consumption

- Is the foodstuff heavily processed?
- Is the foodstuff that is produced also consumed by its producers?
- Is the production of the foodstuff harmful to the environment?
- Is the production of the foodstuff heavily dependent on technological intervention?

THE OMNIVORE

Omnivore

An animal that can obtain chemical energy and nutrients from materials originating from plant and animal origin

THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA

To one degree or another, the question of what to have for dinner assails every omnivore, and always has. When you can eat just about anything nature has to offer, deciding what you should eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the potential foods on offer are liable to sicken or kill you. (p. 3)

- As omnivores, what should humans eat when we could, hypothetically, eat (nearly) anything?

FOLLOW THE FOOD CHAIN

My premise is that like every other creature on earth, humans take part in a food chain, and our place in that food chain, or web, determines to a considerable extent what kind of creature we are. ... The Omnivores Dilemma is about the three principal food chains that sustain us today: the industrial, the organic, and the hunter-gatherer. (Pollan, 6-7)

THE AGRARIAN IDEAL

Agrarianism

a social philosophy which sees farming as a way of life, valuable not only for the food and agriculture it produces, but also in itself.

INDUSTRIAL FOOD

Industrial Food

Any food whose origin is so complex or obscure that it requires expert help to ascertain

what exactly would an ecological detective set loose in an American supermarket discover, were he to trace the items in his shopping cart all the way back to the soil? ... the straightforward question "What should I eat?" could no longer be answered without first addressing two other even more straightforward questions: "What am I eating? And where in the world did it come from?" (Pollan, 17)

CRITIQUING THE IFS

Genealogy

an explanation of some cultural phenomenon in terms of the way it came about

- Critique by "genealogy"
 - reveals contingency of the phenomenon
 - historical causes might not justify the phenomenon with respect to relevant alternatives
- The genealogy of industrial food
 - Where does our food come from and why should it be so?

THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM

1. Technologically driven
2. Large scale
3. Highly efficient
4. Monoculture
5. Commodification

TECHNOLOGY

- Relies largely on *mechanized* production
- Consumes significant amounts of fossil fuels
 - High "carbon footprint"
- Makes heavy use of synthetic pesticides & fertilizers

SCALE & EFFICENCY

- 1850
 - Total population: 23.2 million
 - Farm population: (approx) 11,680,000
 - Farmers constitute roughly 50% of population & 64% of labor force
- 2012 (most recent farm census)
 - Total population: 314.1 million
 - Farm population: 3.2 million (roughly 2% of population)
 - Today's farmers produce 262% more food with 2% fewer inputs (labor, seeds, feed, fertilizer, etc.), compared with 1950.
 - Farm goods are shipped **globally** not locally

MONOCULTURE

Monoculture

The agricultural practice of producing or growing a single crop, plant, or livestock species, variety, or breed in a field or farming system at a time

- advantages include specialization & cheaper sale prices from economies of scale
- disadvantages include heavy dependence on fertilizers, pesticides, and GMO seed, all of which have known negative "externalities"

COMMODIFICATION

Commodity

an economic good or service whose demand has no qualitative differentiation across a market

Commodification

(1) the transformation of the market for a unique, branded product into a market based on undifferentiated products; (2) the assignment of economic value to something not previously considered in economic terms

WHAT IS A FARM?

Farm

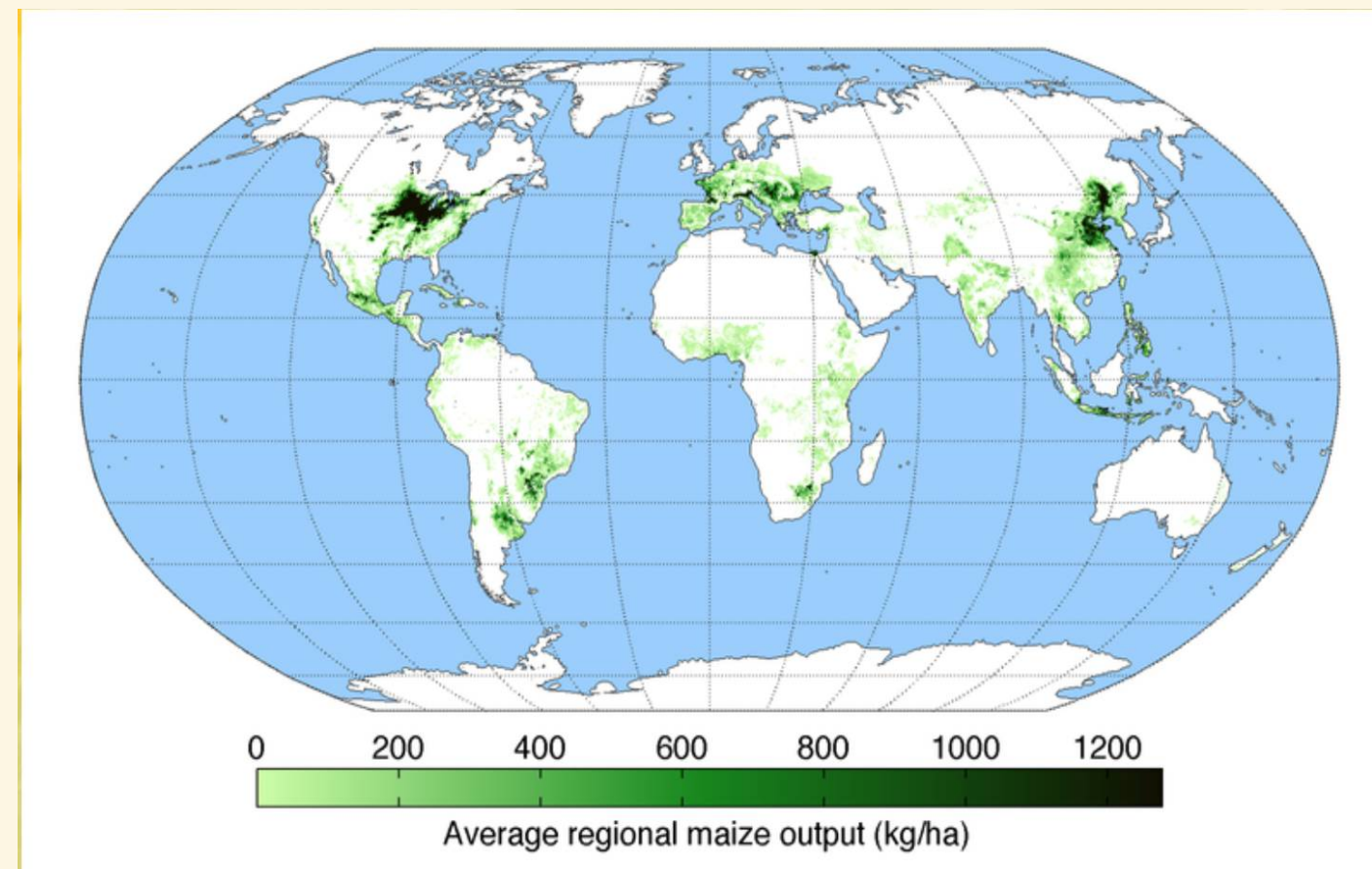
Any place from which at least \$1,000 of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year (from [USDA](#))

"FAMILY" VS. "CORPORATE" FARMS

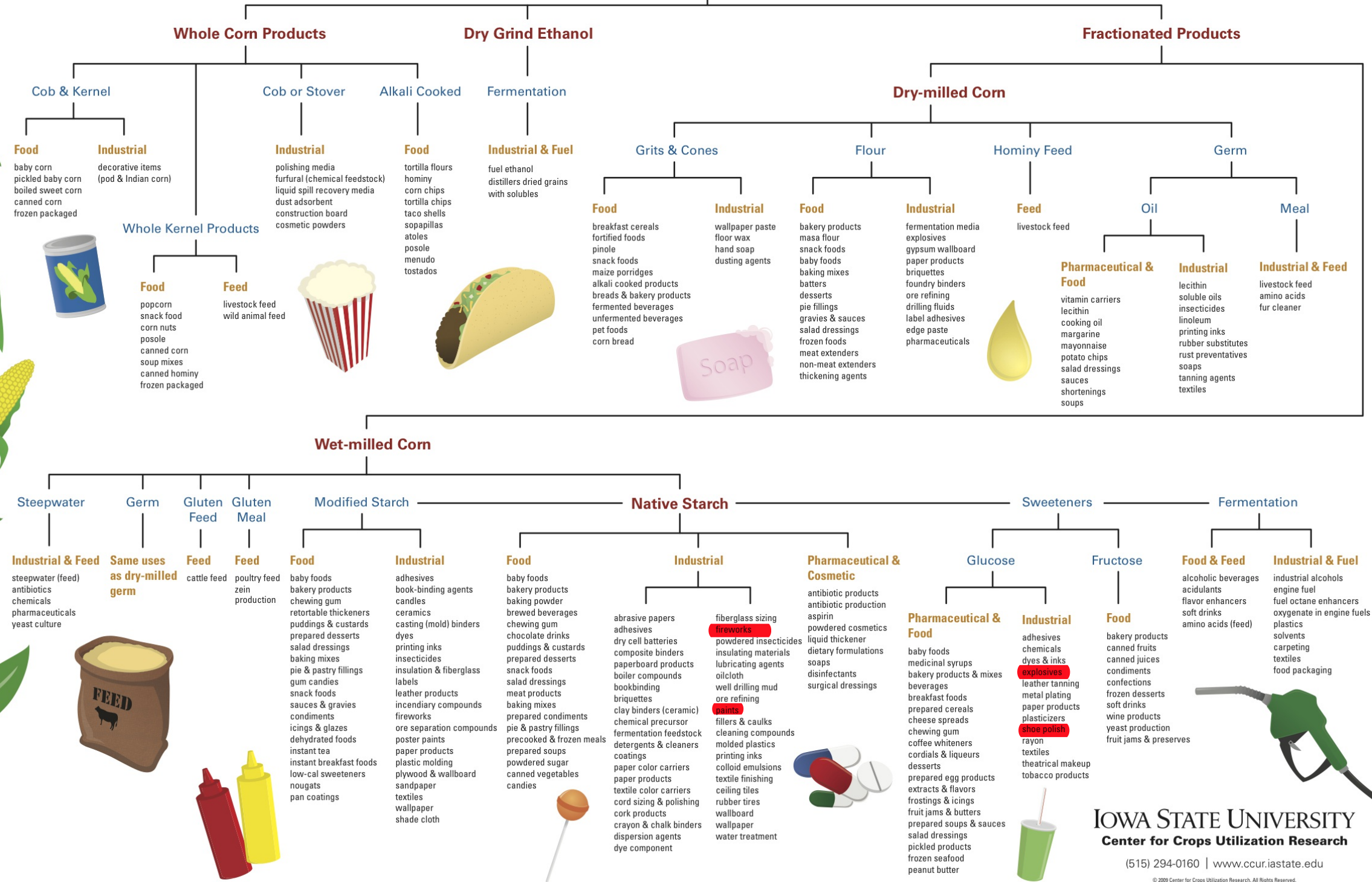
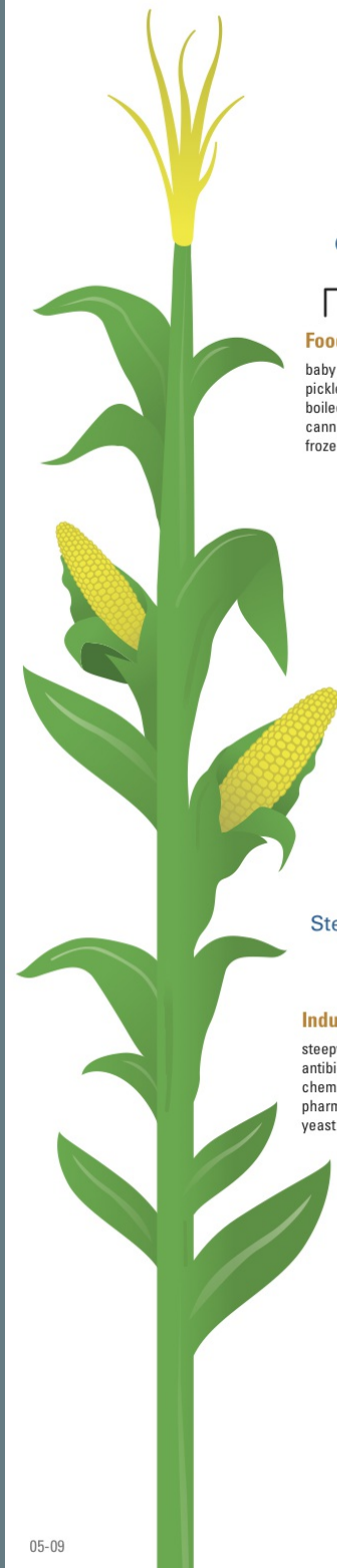
- A critique of the IFS should not be in terms of "corporate" vs. "family" farms
- 96.4 percent of the crop-producing farms in the U.S. are owned by families, and they represent 87 percent of all the agricultural value generated

THE RISE OF "KING" CORN

- Corn production dwarfs all other agriculture production in the US
 - 386.75 million metric tons of corn
 - soybeans: 118.69 million
 - wheat: 62.86 million
- Versatile food & commodity
- The "protocapitalist" plant



Corn



05-09

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Center for Crops Utilization Research

(515) 294-0160 | www.ccur.iastate.edu

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INDUSTRIAL FERTILIZER

- Synthesizing nitrogen via the **Haber-Bosch process**
- Cheap fertilizer was initially due to WWII excess
- Synthetic fertilizer made monocultural farming practices possible on a large scale

Pollan on monoculture:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxX-i1iNw7U>

AGRICULTURE POLICY

- Abolition of the "ever-normal granary" scheme of fixing commodity prices
- Institution of "direct pay" programs to farmers during price shortfalls

Question: What would an alternative to the industrial food system look like? Would you prefer it to the IFS?

INDUSTRIAL MEAT

- Inexpensive corn becomes high-energy feed for livestock
- Corn-fed cattle reach "slaughter-weight" in less than 1/3 of the time grass-fed cattle require

"The economic logic behind corn is unassailable, and on a factory farm there is no other kind. Calories are calories, and corn is the cheapest, most convenient source of calories on the market. Of course, it was the same industrial logic - protein is protein - that made feeding rendered cow parts back to cows seem like a sensible thing to do, until scientists figured out that this practice was spreading bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) more commonly known as mad cow disease" (Pollan, 75).

FOOD ECONOMICS

- "Inelasticity" of demand
- Constant threat of commodification

Commodification: "But the underlying reductionist premise - that food is nothing more than the sum of its nutrients - remains undisturbed. So we break down the plants and animals into their component parts and then reassemble them into high-value-added food systems" (Pollan, 98).

