

EXAMPLE OF A TAKE-HOME ASSIGNMENT THAT WAS PARTICULARLY WELL DONE

1) The core idea of Michael Pollan's open letter to President Obama is that it is necessary for Americans to exchange the "20th-century diet of fossil fuel" for a return to a "diet of contemporary sunshine." Pollan insists that this transformation of lifestyle and values is not so much an option as a direct consequence of the dwindling of "cheap energy that we can no longer count on," amongst other factors. Citing the fact that the food system uses more fossil fuel than any other sector of the economy second only to cars (19%), and that it contributes "more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than anything else we do," (37%) Pollan's primary argument is therefore quite similar to Charlie Hall's. While he emphasized that he was not in the business of making solutions to this problem (aside from urging my generation to "live close to where [we] work!"), Professor Hall discussed peak oil, as it occurred in 2004. He observed that we as Americans will be living at a very different socioeconomic level just one generation from now, as fossil fuel (in its three types) is really the backing of our world currencies. Professor Hall said that though we would have far less discretionary income than we have in the past, as a result of dwindling national resources and the marginal quality of those remaining, we can make the transition hard or easy on ourselves depending on our attitudes and decisions. Pollan writes in a similar vein when he says that the unavoidable transfer away from "a fossil fuel diet and to a sunshine diet" will actually be beneficial to Americans in several ways.¹ Homeland security, the health our people and future generations, a lifestyle that includes family dinners and time spent on the land, and an autonomy from the precarious global food market are all boons of the end of the addiction to fossil-fuel. Where the theses of Hall's and Pollan's talks differ is that Pollan argues the logic

¹ "The good news is that the twinned crises in food and energy are creating a political environment in which real reform of the food system may actually be possible for the first time in a generation" (Pollan).

of addressing food first as a way of addressing the foundation of issues such as health-care and the energy crisis that President Obama did actually campaign on.² After all, it is due to the age of cheap fossil fuel (and subsequently cheap food) that America shifted from a regional to a global food-economy. Now that we can consider the oil basically gone, we can make a shift that would have been beneficial fifty years ago. Professor Hall spoke about why oil can be considered the ‘actual’ backing of the world economy, how its inappropriately low prices created a false inflation of wealth in the American economy, and how the American future will be drastically different because of it. Pollan writes about the most fundamental foundation of American lifestyle and the sustainability of the American state in writing about food. However, he argues that instead of waiting for reasons based on oil, health, security, greenhouse gases, or economic inflation to change the structure of our food system, we must change it now. In doing so we will positively impact all of those concerns before they become irreversible damage. Pollan offers several suggestions, including perennializing commodity agriculture (“slashing the fossil fuel now needed to fertilize and till the soil, while protecting farmland from erosion and sequestering significant amounts of carbon”), urging families to have one meatless day per week, adding a “second caloric intake” table on to all foods that reveals that fossil fuels involved in its processing, and the moving of animals off of feedlots and back onto farms. Prof. Cummings would emphasize the positive effect on reducing green house gases that Pollan’s plan would result in and that Prof. Hall’s “peak oil” scenario will inevitably bring about. Carbon emissions will decline as food is produced and consumed regionally, deforestation for feeding cattle could decline (as would their methane emissions), and rotated crops would store carbon all year round instead of monoculture crops dominating converted land and leaving it empty for seasons.

² “Make the reform of the entire food system one of the highest priorities of your administration: unless you do, you will not be able to make significant progress on the health care crisis, energy independence or climate change. Unlike food, these are issues you did campaign on.”

2) Prof. Dean-Otting discussed thinkers from St. Francis of Assisi to 20th century environmentalists and their commentary on religion in relation to environmental attitudes and policies. Regarding Lynn White's criticisms of the Judeo-Christian tradition in western society as an anthropocentric phenomenon, Prof. Dean-Otting challenged us to look within the Scripture itself before coming to conclusions. First, she argued that all regions, including even Confucianism and Taoism, are anthropocentric in nature, and the blame of individualistic attitudes (which end up being fairly selfish environmental attitudes) cannot be fully placed on 'western' religions. Even within the Bible, God rants at Job for his self-centered nature. Secondly, within scripture, including the story of creation (or their two phases) in Genesis 1-3, and in the ways to live described in Psalms (Psalm 104), Prof. Dean-Otting pointed out that it was actually not all about man and his dominance. For one thing, Adam was created from the same dirt or clay that the animals were, symbolizing a kind of equality, companionship, and sibling relationship.³ Also, in the original language of Scripture, the name 'Adam' means earthling, not man, and thus is he not meant to assert dominance over the rest of the 'earthlings' (meaning plants and animals as general living beings). All of this leads to Adam's and Eve's duties on Earth; in the story of the Old Testament, if God created them as equals and companions of all living things, then they were clearly meant to be stewards of the Garden of Eden (representative of the planet), not masters. From this idea, Walter Lowdermilk even created an "11th Commandment" in the 1940s calling for this stewardship. Ultimately, Lynne White did not necessarily recognize the tradition of interpretation in the religions he condemned or that the emphasis on "redemption of communities," not just "redemption of individuals," is very much tangible in their official texts. (White did see that perspective in St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticle," however).

³ Interestingly, Prof. Dean-Otting also pointed out that it was only after the creation of man that God did not say "And it was good." This certainly humbles those who place the emphasis on humans as God's focal creation.

The idea of redemption of communities is parallel to the return to agrarian lifestyle that Pollan writes about and that the Helts have accomplished. In religious and moral terms, Professor Dean Otting showed that the Bible showed us receiving insight in “The Fall” when we ate from the tree of knowledge, and now Pollan and folks like the Helts urge us to use it to become the stewards we are meant to be. That knowledge can be applied to the issue of sustainability of food which is really a social values issue. Pollan says that the

administration’s food policy must strive to provide a healthful diet for all our people; this means focusing on the quality and diversity ... of the calories that American agriculture produces and American eaters consume... policies should aim to improve the resilience, safety and security of our food supply. Among other things, this means promoting regional food economies both in America and around the world. And lastly, your policies need to reconceive agriculture as part of the solution to environmental problems like climate change (Pollan, January 2009 *New York Times*).

These priorities address sustainability issues of “destroying the source” or capital, the health of the environment, autonomous American ability to feed itself, and the value of both a return to agrarian, rural society and ‘natural’ eating. The Helts demonstrate this by shortening the modern food chain, cycling crops to minimize use of fossil fuel fertilization, and raising animals locally and naturally to minimize the oil-intensive grains that they consume or are alternatively used in their transport to large corporate facilities; Pollan calls on the Obamas to join in this “image of stewardship of the land, of self-reliance and of making the most of local sunlight to feed one’s family and community.” Finally, while the Helt’s food might be a little more expensive than Walmart or Kroger produce, Pollan would observe that cheap food, like cheap oil, was artificially cheap due to government handouts and regulatory indulgence, and more importantly in terms of the traditional values and morals Professor Dean-Otting discussed, the exploitation of workers, animals, and the environment. Therefore, “cheap food is dishonestly priced—it is in fact unconscionably expensive” (Pollan).

3) Evaluate the important points of this article regarding sustainable agriculture/local foods using the perspectives of Prof. Sacks, the Helts, and your background readings.

Michael Pollan's article calls for a movement that Professor Sacks very much endorses, and seeks to organize in his local community, and one that the Helts have already embodied. Pollan and Prof. Sacks identified many of the same problems currently in the way of sustainable farming. Cheap oil has allowed us to grow mass monoculture farms of grains, soy, and corn, and in the process, made food cheap in cost and quality. Oil's low price has allowed a small number of very large farms to dominate American agriculture, pushing out small farms, chemically fertilizing the fields and destroying the land with a lack of rotation or at least fallow seasons, and causing America to import a great amount of the food it doesn't grow. (The free-trade of food is a system in particular peril each year, for both economic and political reasons). The Helts spoke about soil erosion, which has been a major problem in Ohio. As Prof. Sacks had told us, resisting the use of (chemical) fertilizers and pesticides will involve a lot more work on the part of the farmer (as opposed to the "drive and spray" that Pollan notes many 'modern,' commercial farmers describe as their work), but both the soil and food are the better for it. The Helts used organic pesticides which avoids many issues, including carcinogens in later human consumption and damaging run-off into local streams, rivers, and lakes. Any sort of crop rotation also helps to restore essential nutrients to the soil and keep it at a quality that can both contain water and ward off erosion; Pollan also cites successful examples of well-engineered crop rotation in locales such as China and Argentina. Sustainable farming also addresses the fossil-fuel based industrialization of the agricultural sector by eliminating chemical fertilizers (made from natural gas), pesticides (made from petroleum), farm machinery, modern food processing and packaging and transportation. For the reasons of the decline of fossil fuels and the economic repercussions, national security, health, and values of stewardship, all three parties would argue that we need to shift over to

regional, small, and sustainable farms, both as a society of consumers and with a fair number of growers too.

There are many policy changes that need to occur in order to make sustainable farming a more viable way of feeding the nation (and then the globe). One is regionalizing Federal Food Procurement by requiring that some minimum percentage of government food purchases for school-lunch programs or federal prisons go to producers located within 100 miles of institutions buying the food. This is similar to the initiative that Prof. Sacks discussed working on for Kenyon and Knox County General Hospital. Another improvement would be local Meat-Inspection Corps facilities. This would make possible the revival of local, grass-based meat production which had dwindled with the disappearance of regional slaughter facilities. This means less land destroyed for grazing, healthier animals making healthier meat, less fossil fuel used for transport, animal waste available to be used as a non-harmful way to fertilize crop fields, a stop to the pollution of feedlots, and simply the ability to make economic sense while raising local livestock. The Helts do raise their sheep and chicken free-range and sell locally in this manner. This is also an important step to avoid the use of the antibiotics that are necessary on feedlots for the animals to survive such unnatural conditions. The antibiotics create resistant strains of bacteria that are taken-up by humans, a phenomenon that we have seen on the rise in the past few decades. Writers such as Pollan would also like to see a removal of the federal subsidies that prop up this inherently destructive mode of farming (“it is the product of a specific set of government policies that sponsored a shift from solar [and human] energy on the farm to fossil-fuel energy,” not of natural market demand, he points out). Finally, as a lifestyle factor, Pollan argues that while organic food and concepts of sustainability have typically rung “elitist” to many Americans, if any, this is a bipartisan issue. Prof. Sacks’ movement for sustainability, regional growing, and farmers’ markets in Mt. Vernon should be the greatest proof of the fact. Pollan hopes that the Obamas could even spearhead a new “Victory Garden” like movement to show the values, feasibility, and civic responsibility of sustainable food lifestyles.