

# Table Talk

Michael Pollan chats with Rod Dreher about how food culture can transcend the Left-Right divide.

*Rod Dreher is the author of Crunchy Cons—the book and the Beliefnet blog—and an editorialist for the Dallas Morning News. On TAC’s behalf, he recently interviewed Michael Pollan, the best-selling author of The Ominivore’s Dilemma and In Defense of Food. Pollan’s work, like Dreher’s, is about more than just eating well—it’s also about the health of communities. Dreher’s “Birkenstocked Burkeans”—localist libertarians like organic farmer Joel Salatin and young conservatives of many stripes—have increasingly taken an interest in Pollan’s writing. So we brought together the original Crunchy Conservative and the defender of real food. Their conversation follows:*

**DREHER:** What kind of conservatives do you find are interested in your work about food culture?

**POLLAN:** There is this Joel Salatin, evangelical Christian, libertarian right-wing, but there are not a whole lot of them. Frankly, it baffles me that this growing food movement doesn’t have more support on the Right. It’s very consistent with libertarianism, and it is very consistent with family values. Nevertheless, it is often portrayed in the media as a white-wine-sipping, arugula-chopping, liberal politic. Maybe you can answer for me why that is.

**DREHER:** It’s a point that I’ve struggled to figure out. I wrote about Salatin, too. He argues, as you do, that the state’s collusion with agribusiness has been disastrous...

**POLLAN:** For the last 40 years at least, our agricultural policy has been driven by an alliance of agribusiness interests and people in Congress. Farm policy has been organized around driving prices down, which is certainly not in the interest of farmers. It’s in the interest of people buying their products—Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, McDonald’s, and Coca-Cola. They are the beneficiaries to the way we’ve organized our agriculture.

Some farmers see this; many don’t. We have this institution called the Farm Bureau, which is believed to represent farmers, but they do nothing of the kind. They tend to represent agribusiness. And the states, in their regulations, have tended to favor the biggest interests against the people trying to do smaller things like raw-milk operations.

The USDA is also very much organized around promoting the interest of the largest meat packers. Four of them control 82 percent of the market, and all the rules are designed for them. Now, I can understand it from their point of view: one inspector at a national beef plant can inspect 400 carcasses in an hour. If you send him to a small regional plant that is only doing four carcasses in a day, that looks like bad business. But in fact, that small plant is supporting farmers in the community and putting out higher quality meat.

So the deck is really stacked against family farmers and people trying to build local food economies. The federal regulatory regime is choking out some

really vital start-ups in an important corner of the American economy.

**DREHER:** In cultural terms, how has consumer capitalism as applied to food traditions worked to undermine the family and, by extension, the community?

**POLLAN:** Look at what food marketing does to the family dinner. The American food industry spends \$32 billion a year marketing 17,000 new products to us. They are trying very hard to undermine parents’ roles as gatekeepers of the family diet. You have kids clamoring for dinners—as described to me by marketers at General Mills—that consist essentially of serial microwaving. Every family member microwaves his own entree and then they kind of cross paths at the table for a little while.

Food marketers work very hard to get us to eat 24/7, and if you look at the images on television, you see families too hurried to cook a meal. They’re so busy that all they can do is grab a cereal bar on the way out the door. All of this emphasis on snack food has the effect of eroding the crucial institution of families sitting down together. One of the great blind spots in American conservatism is not appreciating the role of consumer capitalism in eroding values such as the family dinner.

**DREHER:** And communal values. You are talking about how food traditions are a social glue...

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**POLLAN:** It's about sitting down and breaking bread among family or friends or even enemies—the rituals of eating together and cooking for people.

Reducing food to fuel or entertainment, which seems to be the goal of so much food marketing, takes away something important. Movements like Slow Food are fighting against this...

**DREHER:** I mention Slow Food in my work and find it ironic that it was started by an Italian Marxist...

**POLLAN:** Communist.

**DREHER:** Yeah. But it's very conservative.

**POLLAN:** It is. I always saw myself as being to the Left of center, although whenever I write about food or nature, I feel like I am actually to the Right. Somebody just sent me a blog post from the Tory Anarchist—you're mentioned in it, too—that says, "You might call it the Wendell Berry-Michael Pollan Right." I had not seen all those words strung together before, but it points to why this issue mixes up the usual categories—and it should.

I think that this movement will find trends on the Right. You see signs of it in Matthew Scully's work coming at animal welfare from the Right, which makes perfect sense as soon as you start reading it.

I think a lot of the problem is with the cultural signifiers, the fact that the movement's DNA comes out of the '60s. I wrote about this in *Omnivore's Dilemma*—the counterculture and its discovery of organic food—but you go back a few decades and organic food is very much a Tory issue in England.

**DREHER:** Well, among conservatives this discussion usually sparks an angry response, curiously enough based on class, this idea that to criticize the way

Americans eat or even to propose thinking critically about it is elitist. The most angry letters I've gotten about my work are from fellow conservatives who say, "You're just an elitist. You want to go to Whole Foods, and that's good for you, but don't criticize the way we eat."

**POLLAN:** I get it from the Left also—"you're promoting the kind of foods that average people can't afford." And the fact is, eating healthy, carefully grown food in this country does cost more. But I think the focus has to be less on that than why the other food is so cheap. The reason is that it's unfairly subsidized—from direct government subsidies in the form of crop subsidies to the kind of support of agribusiness that I was describing earlier to the fact that the companies growing this food are not required to pay the cost of the environmental damage they do. Did you know that if you've got a feedlot and you're polluting local streams, the government will pay you to clean up your mess? That seems deeply unfair to someone trying to do it right.

Obviously, all the public-health expense that goes with lousy food is also not borne by the people producing the food. If you could really internalize all the cost of that 99-cent double cheeseburger at McDonald's, you would be astounded at what an elitist food it is. It's a \$10 burger when you add in all the real costs.

When you pay for that supposedly elitist expensive grass-fed hamburger, you are paying the real cost. You are not depending on illegal-immigrant labor. You are not depending on government subsidies.

You could produce a lot of cotton with slave labor, and it was a great deal. But if I'm selling cotton that I paid people a living wage to grow, and it costs 10 times more than your cotton, am I the elitist cotton seller? I don't think so.

**DREHER:** The argument you hear is that if we stopped growing food by industrial methods, people would starve. At a time when hunger is an increasingly important global issue, is now really the time to move away from industrial agriculture?

**POLLAN:** Well, it isn't clear that you couldn't feed people with a more sustainable agriculture. I don't see us moving to a Joel Salatin model all over the country, with all of us fed locally, but the reason is not for lack of land. The reason is lack of farmers.

Industrial agriculture is a Faustian deal. If you are willing to move to a highly mechanized, monoculture-based agriculture that depends on chemicals, each individual farmer can produce a lot more food. We can't move away from that because we don't have enough farmers to feed ourselves sustainably right now. However, in the rest of the world, there are still plenty of people who want to stay on the land. And supposedly, if the whole world's agriculture could achieve the level of organic agriculture in the West, that would increase productivity 40 percent overall worldwide. So I don't know that the problem is land so much as labor, and in places where you've got the labor, sustainable agriculture deserves a real try.

In Joel's model, he gets an immense amount of animal protein off 100 acres of grass. He can out-compete anybody in that system, but it takes three or four guys to do it, whereas a feedlot can produce a lot of meat with very few guys.

We haven't really tried to feed a lot of people organically, and I think that we could do a lot more than we have. But we have driven people off the land over the last 100 years, while we have increased the productivity of each farmer dramatically. I have trouble imagining us going back, although there

is a new generation of farmers coming up. We'll see how they do.

**DREHER:** The *New York Times* reported recently that more and more young people are reading your work and the work of others and going back to the land. The difference between their movement and the '60s counterculture is that it's now financially viable. So isn't there hope for positive change through the free market?

**POLLAN:** Yeah. There is a new food economy based on local and artisanal food systems, and the farmers market movement is providing a real option for small farmers who are close to metropolitan areas. Many of these organic farms started as communes. It was a social experiment, more than an economic experiment, and now there is an economics behind it. That's very encouraging.

I think it's a false choice to say we've got to choose one system for growing our food—industrial or organic or grass-fed. It's got to be all of these things. We should create conditions that make it possible to experiment and see what works in the marketplace. If the industrial system is as unsustainable as people have been saying, it is going to fail in some ways, and we still want to be able to eat.

**DREHER:** Well, the fuel crisis, if it is permanent, could force these sort of experiments.

**POLLAN:** That tremendous increase in productivity I described is all about cheap fossil fuel. It's the result of fertilizers made from natural gas, pesticides made from petroleum, and diesel fuel driving all this equipment and processing. To get to a point where one American farmer can feed 126 Americans for a year, it's one farmer plus cheap fossil fuel.

The big move of American agriculture over the last 100 years is from a dependence on photosynthesis and solar energy to a dependence on fossil fuel. If indeed the era of cheap fossil fuel is over, we are going to have to find ways to put our food system back on a solar-energy basis, and those who are ahead in doing that are organic and grass-fed-animal farmers. Every calorie you have ever eaten is a product of photosynthesis. So it should be one of the easier parts of our economy to re-solarize, but it will be expensive.

**DREHER:** We see these big cultural shifts happening on the food front, but still we end up with monstrosities like the recent Farm Bill. At the legislative level, what practical goals should reformers be working toward?

**POLLAN:** We definitely need policy changes, and the Farm Bill we got was a travesty. Farmers would much prefer to be growing real food that people are eating and enjoying than industrial raw materials that get turned into high-fructose corn syrup or ethanol. We need to give them a path out of that commodity system.

I'm convinced from my reading that completely deregulating agriculture—removing all subsidies or crop supports—would probably not work. We have been there before—the agricultural depression of the '20s. We need some kind of organized mechanism to help farmers keep from bankrupting themselves by overproducing.

There used to be something called the Ever-Normal Granery that would buy grain when it was in oversupply and sell it when it was under supply, sort of like the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. This would give the government or some farmer organization a way to cushion big price spikes, as we have seen this year, and give us as a society a sense of security.

Grain reserves are talked about in the Bible. During fat years, you put some away...

**DREHER:** That was Joseph's genius—how he got in good with Pharaoh...

**POLLAN:** Exactly. You see it in other traditions, too: the Mayans also had grain reserves. Now the amount of grain we have worldwide is a six- or eight-day supply. If there were a major shock to the system, people would go hungry quickly. It was one of the reforms of the Nixon administration to get rid of the grain reserve under enormous pressure from agribusiness and big grain traders who wanted more control over the market and wanted to be able to speculate on grain prices.

I also think we need to make it easier for farmers to convert to sustainable agriculture if they want to. That means hiring enough meat inspectors so small processing plants can sprout up around the country.

And given the preciousness of arable land, I think we have to take a look at the rules governing the conversion of farmland in the same way that if you want to build on wetlands, you have to meet a very high burden. I know that's not a conservative idea, but if we reach a population of 10 billion, we will really regret all the houses we are putting up on some of the finest land in the world.

**DREHER:** One of Salatin's most revolutionary concepts is that a farm is not a machine but an organism, and its parts have to be allowed to express their true natures. A chicken has to express its chicken-ness, for example. More broadly, your work implies that contrary to the basic assumptions of philosophical modernity, there are certain ends in nature that we ignore at our peril...

# Interview

**POLLAN:** One of the things I find as I study natural systems is that there is tension between them and capitalism. The drive for efficiency leads to monoculture, which is not the natural expression of plants or any living creatures. Nature is based on mutualistic relations between many different species. This produces lots of value in an ecological sense, and it also cushions against shock. Nature values resilience much more than efficiency. You get a lot of cheap protein by putting 50,000 chickens in one building, but at enormous risk.

**DREHER:** Yet we think we can organize nature in ways to suit human desires—that it is infinitely plastic and we can do whatever we want with it without paying some price.

**POLLAN:** Nature has got other business besides pleasing us, and we are very arrogant in the way we approach it. I wrote a book about a plant's-eye view of the world called *The Botany of Desire*. As you go through that imaginative act of understanding what an apple tree wants, you find that you are a better husbandman. You take better care of it, and it will thrive—indeed, it will give you what you want.

We see nature as an inert protoplasm—clay that we can mold into whatever we want—and we are learning that that doesn't really work. We can only grow animals in this kind of confinement with antibiotics, but when we start using them in these amounts, we're suddenly breeding lethal microbes. Look at the staph infection that killed 19,000 Americans two years ago—more than died from AIDS that year. That microbe has been traced to pig farms in Europe and Canada. We haven't traced it to pig farms here because the industry won't let us study it, but presumably it's happening here as well because we swap pigs with Canada all the time.

This makes perfect sense from an efficiency point of view: grow pigs in concentration and use pharmaceuticals on them. But from a biological point of view, it is a disaster.

**DREHER:** What about human society as an organism? Many people think of Wendell Berry as a man of the Left because he criticizes humankind's unnatural exploitative relationship to agriculture and the environment, but Berry has argued on similar grounds against the individualist sexual ethic pervasive in contemporary culture. Is he on to something?

**POLLAN:** Berry's on to a lot of things. He's a very wise man. Is he Right or Left? Those categories don't fit him. He is a fierce critic of capitalism because he sees it destroying community, destroying traditional sexual relationships, destroying family. I agree with a lot of that, but not all.

This is a blind spot in a lot of contemporary conservatism—not understanding that while capitalism can be a very constructive force, it can also be very destructive of things that conservatives value.

**DREHER:** It's also a blind spot of contemporary liberalism to fail to see how pursuing a sort of autonomous individualism when it comes to social forms undermines a community in the same way that capitalism does.

**POLLAN:** That's right. The Left can be blind to that possibility also.

**DREHER:** How has your work on food culture and tradition changed your politics?

**POLLAN:** I keep surprising myself. When I follow the logic of natural systems and the history of our food culture, I find

myself trying very hard to defend traditional ways of doing things, and I never thought of myself as a traditionalist.

When I look at Slow Food, it has got a Left component—a critique of consumer capitalism—and it's got a Right component—that these traditions contain great communitarian and biologic value and are very important to defend.

Conservatism has changed a lot in the last 50 years. The modern incarnation of it looks a lot different in its full-throated embrace of capitalism and not making distinctions between, say, small enterprise and monopoly enterprise. Both ends of the political spectrum have boxed themselves in to some contradictions.

**DREHER:** Last question: do you see any potential in our fast evolving political environment for Left-Right coalitions based around food, farming, and environmental issues?

**POLLAN:** I do, but you have to scrape a little bit and get past these class signifiers—words like “arugula” that in our culture signify a social formation characterized by the sort of East Coast, Ivy League cultural baggage that David Brooks is so good at chronicling.

“Arugula,” we should remember, is a marketing term invented by somebody who thought that this very common green, known by farmers all over the Midwest for many years as “rocket,” needed to be tuned up and given new appeal. It's a complete marketing creation, and it's completely ruined a very healthy green—at least from a political point of view.

I think there is an enormous amount of political power lying around on the food issue, and I am just waiting for the right politician to realize that this is a great family issue. If that politician is on the Right, all the better. I think that would be terrific, and I will support him or her. ■

# Burning Dinner

Government's scheme to fill gas tanks leaves stomachs empty.

By Timothy P. Carney

THE "FATAL CONCEIT" that Friedrich Hayek wrote about—the hubristic belief that intelligent central planners can better advance the common welfare than can people acting freely—is often used as an analogy or, at least, an overstatement. In the case of ethanol, however, it is literal: by pushing this fuel on us, governments could be starving people to death.

As food prices worldwide shatter records, a quixotic campaign has been launched on the Left and the Right to roll back the government programs that force ethanol upon the American population. Other countries, too, are rethinking programs that turn plants into fuel. The lobby to defend ethanol subsidies and mandates is entrenched—agribusiness, some venture capitalists betting big on government action, and certain hawkish conservatives hoping to end our dependence on Arab and Venezuelan oil. But with corn futures topping \$7 a bushel, riots over food prices erupting around the world, and landscapes in the U.S. changing forever, political support for this subsidized moonshine may be on the wane.

This much is clear: burning food for fuel threatens people's ability to eat.

Ethanol is alcohol squeezed and distilled from agricultural products. In the United States, it almost all comes from corn, while in other countries, most notably Brazil, sugar is the feedstock for ethanol.

Corn ethanol is basically unaged bourbon whiskey—it's the same thing backwoods moonshiners in the mountains of Kentucky and West Virginia used to

make in order to dodge the excise tax or skirt Prohibition. With a gallon of ethanol, you could have a pretty good party on your front porch or drive your Honda Accord about 20 miles on the highway. (You would probably damage your car's engine if you didn't blend it with gasoline.) On an ethical level, many writers have asked recently whether it's immoral to burn food for fuel. The complementary question, especially for an Irishman, is whether it's a sin to pour your booze into a gas tank.

For a century, we've known that grain alcohol can fuel a car. Henry Ford foresaw his automobiles running on ethanol. But gasoline proved to be cheaper and more powerful—a gallon of gasoline will take that same Honda Accord about 30 miles on the highway—and burning corn for fuel was not the most profitable way to use cropland or corn.

But the oil crisis of the late 1970s convinced Uncle Sam to get in the moonshine business. Over the years, governments have found a handful of reasons to subsidize ethanol: it gets us off of foreign oil, it's an oxygenate that helps turn deadly carbon monoxide into harmless (or so environmentalists used to argue) carbon dioxide, and it benefits farmers. The true motivation for government support of ethanol, of course, has been the political influence of the ethanol lobby—Archer Daniels Midland, the world's top ethanol producer, is legendary for its political connections, and Iowa's role in the presidential nominating process has made corn converts of many ambitious politicians.

In the Energy Tax Act of 1978, Congress created a special carve-out to boost ethanol: gas stations could earn a 4-cent credit against the gas tax for selling gasoline that included at least 10 percent ethanol. If you ran a gas station and bought a gallon of ethanol for \$2.00, you were really only paying \$1.60 because of the tax credits.

This tax credit eventually grew from effectively 40 cents per gallon of ethanol to 52 cents and was then switched from a gas-tax credit to an income-tax credit. But Washington didn't stop there. Congress imposed a tariff on imported ethanol of 54 cents per gallon and granted huge allowances in federal fuel-economy standards to carmakers who sold cars that can run on high-percentage blends of ethanol. States soon piled on with subsidies for ethanol processing plants and for gas stations that installed pumps for E-85 (85 percent ethanol).

More recently, with all these subsidies still insufficient to create a booming demand in ethanol, Congress dropped the carrot and picked up the stick: the 2005 Energy Bill mandated that gas companies buy biofuels. In 2007, Congress boosted the mandate so that now U.S. consumers are required to buy 9 billion gallons of ethanol. By 2022, the mandate will be 36 billion gallons.

The lesson is clear: people would hardly buy ethanol as fuel if not for government action. Without the subsidies and mandates, ethanol demand would be negligible, which would be a good thing.