

Corporate Hog Production: The Colonization of Rural America¹

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Today, rural America is being “colonized.” Giant multinational corporations are extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of people in rural places everywhere, including rural America. Thus, large-scale, corporate livestock production is but a symptom of a far more serious and systemic problem of economic colonization. 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 “colonialism.”

Historically, a colony has been defined as a territory, acquired either 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 entities carrying out the process – the sources of power and control. Historically, colonization has been carried out by political entities, by governments. Today, colonization is being carried out by economic entities, by large multinational corporations. Historically, the rulers of empires were kings or sovereigns. Today, the rulers are corporate executives. However, the colonization process and its consequences are virtually identical, regardless of the source and nature of the power.

Rural people, whether in North America or elsewhere, are being told that they must rely on outside investors, such as 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, so they are told. 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 a 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 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. The indigenous people had no adequate means of developing their resources themselves. So it was only fair that “natives” share the benefits from their resources with the colonizing nation to

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reward them for providing 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 – all 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 had been 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 masses of unemployed and many 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 the 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 and control is different.

The realities of colonization are quite different from the promises. The inevitable social and economic impacts of colonialism are readily apparent in many rural communities. Giant animal factories – producing poultry, eggs, hogs, milk, etc. – have become a major focus of economic and social life in these communities. Many have become “animal factory towns.” Most of these communities were, and still are, economically depressed because most of the jobs actually created by “animal factories” were low paying, menial labor. In addition, most local people eventually refused to work for employers they found to be exploitative, leaving most of the low-paying jobs to be filled by immigrants. A few local officials and land speculators lined their pockets by catering to the corporate powers, but very few local people ended up with good paying jobs. In general, young people are still forced to leave their home communities to find quality employment opportunities elsewhere.

The promised economic multiplier effects of outside investment on the local economy never materialized. Nearly all of the benefits have gone to corporate investors and managers, who have never lived anywhere near the communities they have helped colonize. Tax incentives, granted to corporations by many communities, have erased much of the potential benefits from increased property taxes. The “in lieu of tax” payments promised by the corporations have been reduced or forgotten – during “hard times” for the corporation. The increased demands on local public services – bilingual education, law enforcement, public health care, etc. – have added far more to government costs than corporate agriculture has added to local tax revenues.

In addition, these “animal factories” inherently pollute the natural environment, with noxious odors in the air and animal waste in streams and groundwater, raising legitimate concerns for human health and for the health of natural ecosystems. Few people want to move into, or even stay in, such communities. The only new economic development opportunities offered are likely to be urban waste dumps, toxic waste incinerators, more confinement animal feeding operations, or something else that few other communities will accept.

Perhaps even more important than the direct ecological and health impacts, such communities are split socially and politically by inevitable feuding. Those who benefit from the few good jobs, from corporate business, or increased tax revenues line up on one side with displaced family farmers and local residents who endure the polluted air and water on the other. The split community loses its ability to govern itself effectively, leaving the corporation to fill the leadership vacuum – it becomes a “factory town.” The corporations continually threaten to move their operations elsewhere where environmental regulations are less bothersome and local people are less hostile. And, when the corporation finds somewhere else, in the U.S. or abroad, where people will work even harder for less pay, they move on and leave the community with the mess to clean up and with broken relationships to mend.

After the corporations are gone, there is no reason to believe that rural Americans will be any less resentful of their previous “corporate masters” than are indigenous people of previously colonized nations of their previous “political masters.” As in earlier times, the new 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. When the corporations are gone, 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 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 the consequences are 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.

First, however, the people of rural America must come to realize that corporate livestock production is not a solution to their problems, but instead, is a exploitative response to their growing desperation. The solution for rural American is not to submit to corporate colonization, but instead, to declare their economic independence, and begin rebuilding their own communities from the inside out, and this time, to build them sustainably – economically, ecologically, and culturally.