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The Agriculture Issue

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The Future of Food

Prof. Joshua Muldavin interviews Deborah Koons Garcia

Deborah Garcia became a vegetarian and healthy food fanatic over 30 years ago. In her most recent film, The Future of Food, she explores the challenges facing the food system today and the exciting, healthy alternatives to these destructive trends. The film opened theatrically in over 30 cities, and has been shown all over the world by farmers, food-lovers, and activists. It was chosen by the Oscar screening committee as one of the best documentaries of 2004. It can be ordered from thefutureoffood.com.

Prof. Joshua Muldavin: In your view, when did food change from being a source of nourishment to being a highly politicized commodity?

Deborah Koons Garcia: Food has always been a political issue. At the same time, food is personal and our food choices are affected by politics and vice versa. The policies put in place by the U.S. government starting in the 1970s—the “get big or get out” mentality that was pushed by the Nixon administration—promoted the development of Big Agriculture and allowed corporations to control more and more of our food supply.

JM: Why has the green revolution’s promise to feed the world’s hungry failed? That is, what is keeping most countries from attaining food security?

DG: One of the problems with the green revolution is that it has made farmers dependent on off-farm inputs. They need to buy imported seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, machinery, and fuel for that machinery and bring their farm products into a worldwide marketplace so they can sell that food as commodity—competing with all the other farmers in the world, many of whom are subsidized by the wealthy nations. It’s the most vulnerable part of the population—the world’s poor and hungry—who are least likely to benefit from this industrialized model. The big issue is people—or communities or countries—being food independent (able

to feed themselves) or being food dependent (having to buy food or buy all the inputs to grow a crop they can sell to then buy food).

JM: What are the major similarities and differences between the green and gene revolutions?

DG: They are both dependent on corporations to keep them going, and in both models, the corporations benefit and dominate. They are both non-sustainable and promote the corporatization of agriculture—agribusiness. The green revolution uses chemicals and technology to grow food rather than relying on farmers’ knowledge and the gene revolution follows that same model. Plant a seed and just add chemicals and water. The gene revolution changes the nature of the plants, whereas the green revolution changes the nature of the soil.

JM: What are the (dis)advantages of genetically modified food?

DG: The advantages of GM crops are that farmers can weed a field of Roundup-Ready crops by spraying it with Roundup—everything but the GM crop dies—so it is faster than weeding using other methods, although the inputs are more expensive. Another advantage they tout is resistance to certain pests. The disadvantage is that most of the world does not want to grow or eat GM food. There is an instinctive rejection of it. The health effects of eating GM food are unknown—the testing they have done is not thorough. Some researchers have found negative health effects on rats that were fed GM products. The patenting of seeds and plant DNA is an advantage if you are Monsanto and a disadvantage if you are a farmer who gets that DNA blown into his fields and gets sued by Monsanto for using their patented DNA without having paid a license fee.

Most people have no idea what GM food is—that it is made using recombinant DNA technology and contains pieces of

virus and bacteria to carry DNA from one species to another. GM is definitely part of the corporate agenda to control our food supply.

JM: There have been instances of allergic reactions, diseases resulting from trace chemicals, etc. that can be attributed to the consumption of GM foods. Why do these not constitute a strong enough case for the labeling of GM foods in the U.S.?

DG: Because the U.S. government is very much in bed with Monsanto and the other corporations. Most Americans think they have never eaten GM food but virtually all of them have. The industry knows that if GM were labeled, very few people would choose to buy it. Labeling provides for accountability, too—problems could be more easily traced. Corporate power is against labeling although over 80% of Americans do want GM labeled.

JM: The organic movement has grown exponentially in the past decade. How can one know that the food we eat is truly organic?

DG: Millions and millions of people seek out organic food because they know it is better for them. So the food industry knows there is money there. Organic standards in the U.S. were established in the late 1990s and there is constant pressure to degrade the standards. The best way to know what you are eating is to ask your grocer or your farmer at the market, to discern the companies or farmers who grow food in ways you want to support, and then support those farmers and companies. It’s a good idea to develop a healthy relationship with the food you eat—to know where it comes from, who grew it, and what is in it. The Organic Consumers Association is a great place to find out what is happening around the term organic.

JM: As citizen activists, what can we do, beyond changing consumption habits, to help shift food production, distribution, and consumption systems toward a more environmentally sound and socially just regime?

DG: The food system is very fluid and we consumers are in the driver’s seat even though most of us don’t really recognize that. Our demands will control the supply—so we must

make those demands. Ask questions. Demand answers. Eat local and organic. The more food dollars people keep in the communities they live in, the better off everyone is. Vote with your fork and your food dollars, and demand that our government support the right things—not just act like corporate whores. If people ate less meat, especially grain-fed, industrially produced meat, we would be using up fewer resources. We all need to start making a lot more noise about food and connecting up food and health and food and social justice. Bringing healthy food into schools should be the next big thing. Almost everyone would like to support local farms, so let’s bring that onto the front burner. And enjoy your food! When food is valued, then where it comes from and how it’s made become more important. I think people are returning to the idea of enjoying growing food or buying it at a farmers market.

JM: What is the future of food?

DG: The future of food is up for grabs. It is within the next five or ten years that this future will be decided. If the agricultural system gets so degraded by chemicals, GM crops, Big Ag, and family farms are gone and the corporations own the entire seed supply and all the water—well, that’s going to be a bleak and frightening future. We won’t be able to come back from that because farmer wisdom and resources will be gone. We will be forced to eat a contaminated food supply. If more and more GM crops come out, they will literally take over the non-GM crops—everything will be patented, corporate, and controlled. If we learn that GM causes health problems, we would really be in trouble, as there will be no alternative. We’d all have to be on something pharmaceutical just to get through our lives—is that their ultimate goal?

Or we can insist on local healthy sustainable food systems—healthy for our bodies and our communities. I like the idea of everyone eating as much local, in-season food as they can, eating no processed junk food, eating in their local “foodshed.” If we no longer have the oil to feed industrial ag and can’t grow or ship the food, we would all starve. Communities being aware of their own food security issues, figuring out how they could feed themselves, is the brave new challenge.