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FALL OF THE 'CRUNCHY CONS'

Why are libertarian right wingers defending a dysfunctional, state-engineered food system?

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by **Tom Philpott**

Back in 2002, in the right-wing *National Review*, Rod Dreher [declared the rise of the “crunchy cons”](#)—political conservatives who had come to value alternative food systems and reject the dreck served up by corporate giants.

Dreher’s epiphany came when he got hold of a lefty Brooklyn neighbor’s weekly CSA share one day.

Who knew cauliflower had so much taste? It was the freshness of the produce, not its organic status (of dubious nutritional advantage), that we were responding to. But you can’t get produce that delicious in grocery stores here, so when this summer rolled around, we signed up enthusiastically. Now, Julie picks up our weekly delivery in her *National Review* tote bag.



Dreher reported at the time that his conversion to locavorism struck a chord among readers, hundreds of whom emailed to say that they loved Rush and loved real food, too.

Such scenes would not be possible without government policies that encourage cheap corn. Why do conservatives fetishize industrial food, again? [Wikimedia commons](#)

The development seemed to hold great promise for food-system reform. Here was a food regime, propped up by government subsidies and one-size-fits-all regulations, that failed just about everybody, save for shareholders in a few corporations. The food being churned out by our factory system delivered sorry flavor and dubious nutritional value—and its environmental impact even spooked “creation care” types.

Meanwhile, libertarians had thundered for years against commodity subsidies and the crony capitalism practiced by agribusiness giants and their kept politicians. Significantly, the best thing ever written about how Archer Daniels Midland fattens itself on taxpayer cash is probably this [1995 expose](#) from the libertarian Cato Institute.

So why not a right-left coalition against Big Food and in favor of alternative food networks?

Sadly, such a coalition has never really gained traction—at least not in any way that’s evident to me. And the right-wing media machine has been rewing up in defense of Big Food and Big Ag.

Last summer, *The American*, an American Enterprise Institute-funded journal influential among conservative intellectuals, ran a [long attack](#) on the sustainable-food movement entitled “Against the Agri-Intellectuals.” (I responded [here](#).)

Meanwhile, the Cato Institute may deplore Archer Daniels Midland’s political influence and ability to raid the Treasury; but it [lionizes](#) Norman Borluog, [intellectual father of industrial food](#).

And now *Forbes Magazine*, play toy of conservative icon Steve Forbes, has been cranking out ringing defenses of the agri-food industry. Recently, *Forbes* [declared](#) agrichemical and GMO seed giant Monsanto “company of the year,” echoing company talking points in a fawning profile.

And now it’s got a [column](#) essentially refrying the above-mentioned *American* piece, complete with denunciations of “agri-

These articles tend to fetishize corporate food and acknowledge none of its faults. Most absurdly, they contradict libertarian ideology by completely ignoring the federal government’s central role in developing and maintaining the industrial food system, [ably documented](#) by Atul Gawande in *The New Yorker*.

Currently, Congress is preparing to consider school-lunch reauthorization; and in just a couple of years, it will be time to revisit the Farm Bill. Both pieces of legislation will have a dramatic effect on the kind of food Americans eat over the next generation. Will conservatives follow the path of the “crunchy cons” and fight for new food systems—or the path of *Forbes* and fight to prop up the old one?

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