

Activists Not Always Interested in Advancing Democracy

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JEL Classifications: N50, Q1

Keywords: Cotton, Food Democracy, Sustainability

In a recent *Choices* opinion piece offering an understanding of the "Food Democracy" movement, Norwood asserts that a resentment of the role played by large corporations is at the core of criticisms of modern food production (Bailey, 2015). "Food Democracy" is said to describe the "nobler goals of environmental protection, sustainability, kindness to animals, and social justice" supported by advocates of organic agriculture, and non-government organizations (NGOs), such as Pesticide Action Network, Climate Action, and others.

Democracy? Nobler goals? Resentment of corporations? Hardly.

Opposition to modern agricultural production methods, meaning technologies that focus on yield enhancement, resource use minimization and maximization of consumer acceptance, goes far beyond resentment of corporate power in food production and distribution and encompasses opposition to modern agricultural technologies themselves. Cotton is not normally considered a food crop, even though cottonseed oil is a major vegetable oil outside the Western Hemisphere and cotton is regulated as a food crop in the United States and the European Union. Nevertheless, the criticisms leveled against the cotton industry are analogous to those leveled against food production, and an evaluation of the allegations leveled against cotton provides insights into the motivations behind attacks on all of agriculture.

Examples of the demonization of cotton by NGOs, retailers and environmentalists include practices years out of date being described as current, statistics given without context or perspective, or linkages alleged between cotton and harm made without scientific basis. These actions represent something far different than a resentment of the role played by large corporations. Campaigns against the use of modern agricultural technologies are generally driven by self-interest in enhancing sales and personal careers, not a desire for greater "democracy," as represented by greater consumer choice and satisfaction.

Demonization of Cotton to Enhance Brand Identity

The cotton industry is frequently criticized for having negative impacts on the environment and for social abuses. To cite several examples, the clothing retailer Patagonia Inc., distributes information on garments at the point of sale saying, "cotton is one of the most toxic crops on the planet," and goes on to misstate chemical use in cotton production, to use the terms "insecticides," "pesticides" and "synthetic chemicals" interchangeably, and to equate biotech crops with "risky" (Patagonia, Point-of-sale hangtag distributed on clothing at a Patagonia retail outlet in Washington, DC., February 2016). This same company extols the virtues of recycled polyester and organic fibers. Patagonia is itself a large corporation, and it is self-evident that attacks on cotton on point-of-sale merchandise constitute efforts at sales enhancement, not a concern for democracy.

Another organization, Environmental Justice Foundation, has a specific project on cotton and states on its web site, "valued at over \$32 billion every year, global cotton production should be improving lives. But this 'white gold' too often brings misery." The cotton project of this organization is complete with films, photos, and celebrity support, and like PAN uses emotive language without citation, definition, or quantification. Such language serves to demonize

rather than inform. Advocates of organic production practices often fail to differentiate between risk, exposure and hazard. Like many NGOs, they seem to use emotive language to scare, not to inform. They often make normative statements without definition or quantification.

Incentives Matter: How One Retailer Demonizes Cotton for Market Share Gain

Modern agriculture is highly technical and constantly developing, improving and adapting, but to listen to critics, you would think cotton production technologies are both destructive and static. To look at one example in detail, C&A Foundation, the charitable arm of the eponymous clothing retailer, released its Annual Report 2014 in July 2015. As is typical of its genre, the C&A Foundation uses evocative language, exaggeration, and repetition of allegations years out of date to demonize, rather than inform, in the service of enhancing the C&A brand. The report is unremarkable, except that it is relatively recent, and serves as an example of efforts by NGO's, retailers and environmentalists to build sales and enhance careers, while undermining the livelihoods of tens of millions of households engaged in cotton production and marketing. Efforts by C&A Foundation to build brand identity for C&A, the retailer, hardly reflect a desire for democracy, nor a resentment of corporate involvement in agriculture, they represent a strategy of brand enhancement.

Child Labor

The introduction to the report refers to “child-picked cotton in Uzbekistan,” even though the International Labor Organization (ILO) has documented the elimination of all forms of children’s work and child labor under the age of 16 in the cotton industry of Uzbekistan since 2012. The C&A Foundation report does not actually say that cotton is harvested with child labor in Uzbekistan anymore, but the negative impression is obvious. Employees of the C&A Foundation are surely aware, or should be aware, of the ILO reports providing evidence of improvement. Contrast between C&A and other retailers—to enhance the C&A brand—is provided by the C&A Foundation (2015) report. It is in the interest of the C&A Foundation to imply that by shopping at C&A, consumers will be assured they are buying responsibly sourced apparel.

Cancer, Environmental Harm and Suicides

According to the C&A Foundation report, “cotton grown conventionally leaves a heavy footprint. Not only does it damage the environment, it also affects the health of farmers and their communities.”

The report merely asserts that cotton grown conventionally is harmful; it provides no evidence or citations and makes no specific allegations that may be investigated, thus avoiding accountability. In an industry of 250 million, there are sure to be examples of error, accident, and even perfidy, but the C&A Foundation report makes no effort to quantify or provide perspective, leaving the impression that harm is widespread. If the allegations of harm caused by conventional cotton were true, one would have to believe that millions of farmers around the world are stupid. Why else would farmers continue to grow cotton if it damages their environment and negatively affects their health?

The report continues, “we have seen heart-wrenching stories of farmers in cotton producing regions across the world getting sick with cancer. And in India, more than 270,000 conventional cotton farmers saddled with debt have committed suicide since 1995.” The report does not actually say that the use of agricultural chemicals in cotton causes cancer but leaves the impression that this is so. The C&A Foundation uses sympathetic imagery of cancer victims to bias understanding in the same way a prosecutor might show bloody pictures of a murder victim, in lieu of evidence of guilt, to bias a jury against a defendant.

There is no statistically valid evidence of increased rates of illness in cotton growing regions compared with other regions of India or anywhere else, and the assertion of causality between cotton production and cancer in India or elsewhere is no more valid than the claims by American actress Jenny McCarthy that vaccines cause autism. The C&A Foundation has no incentive to provide objective information or to carefully investigate epidemiological studies of the health impacts of the use of agricultural chemicals. Those who demonize cotton in the service of image promotion and sales growth can make statements without accountability, and thus they have every incentive to do so.

Further, the report offers no sense of proportion or scale in the discussion of suicides. Farmer suicides in India have been studied extensively. All suicides are tragic, but there is no evidence of a statistically unusual number of suicides among the millions of cotton households in India. The linkage implied by C&A Foundation between debt and suicides ignores other aspects of farmer stress, including usurious interest rates charged by unscrupulous lenders, costs of production of all agricultural products and other social and economic factors.

Organic Cotton

The C&A Foundation report extols the virtues of organic cotton and reports that C&A is the largest buyer of organic cotton in the world. Support by the C&A Foundation for small-holder agriculture in developing countries is laudable, but there is no reason that the Foundation's annual report must demonize conventional cotton production in order to assist the small holders participating in C&A Foundation projects. Demonization of 24 million tons of conventional cotton worldwide in order to extol the virtues of less than 150,000 tons of world organic cotton largely serves the interests of C&A in creating contrast with other retailers, not the interests of small-holder cotton farmers.

Changing Incentives

The C&A Foundation, and others like it, can demonize conventional cotton production because it is without cost to do so. As with those who demonize cotton, those who demonize food production are generally seeking something far different than "democracy," they are seeking to limit the use of productive technologies in the service of their own self interest of expanding sales and enhancing individual careers. Within the demographic of urban consumers and activists ignorant of the realities of agriculture, allegations can often be made without challenge. Only by repeatedly and volubly challenging those who demonize, with public, specific, fact-based rebuttals, will agriculture be able to make demonization expensive and thus shift the structure of incentives that currently makes demonization profitable. Those who demonize production agriculture should not be allowed to claim the mantle of "democracy" without a challenge. Organizations representing production agriculture and research must start demanding accountability, by rebutting spurious allegations, and by publicly challenging those who undermine the livelihoods of farmers in order to enhance brand identity for their companies and organizations.

For More Information

C&A Foundation. 2015. Annual Report 2014. Available online:

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The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association.

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