



## Food Sovereignty and the Collapse of Nations

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on July 25, 2008 - 8:00am

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*This is a guest post by Aaron Newton, who is working with coauthor Sharon Astyk on the forthcoming book, [A Nation of Farmers](#). Aaron contributes at [Groovy Green](#); he also blogs at [Powering Down](#). Aaron is a land planner and garden farmer in suburban North Carolina, seeking ways to transform the current course of human land use development in an effort to prepare for the effects of global oil production peak and its outcome on automotive suburban America. Aaron's post "[The Four Day Work Week: Sixteen Reasons Why This Might Be an Idea Whose Time Has Come](#)" has gotten a lot of national press lately as well.*

In his book, *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia*, economist and former Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, suggests that between 1966 and 1990, 80 million Soviet farmers urbanized stalling grain production and putting pressure on the government to use revenue from oil and natural gas production to buy grain from abroad. When fossil fuel production did not expand in such a way that provided increased profits for purchasing food the Soviets had to borrow foreign money to buy bread. Loans from the West came with strings attached. Those offering the credit demanded that the Soviets no longer use force to keep their states in line and political collapse, not famine, visited The USSR.

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Interestingly Mr. Gaidar doesn't seem to suggest that the collapse of his country happened because a large portion of the population moved from the countryside into the cities and stopped growing their own grain. Instead he seems to place the bulk of the blame for collapse on economics- on the inability of the Soviets to feed themselves not because there weren't enough people growing grain in that country but because of their inability to buy enough grain from other people to feed themselves because of decreasing oil and natural gas revenues. The idea that the Soviet collapse was due in part to the fact that the Soviet Union gave up on its capacity for food self sufficiency (food sovereignty) in an effort to pursue industrialization seems absent from his theory. All of this has interesting implications for the United States regarding our own food sovereignty as the rising cost of food means more people are priced out of a healthy diet.

Here in the United States about 40% of our population farmed for a living around the turn of the 20th century. By 1950 that number had dropped to 12%. Today fewer than 2% do the work of growing food in America as we too have industrialized and urbanized our population. The other 98% of us work at a job which provides us money that allows us to buy food from a small number of domestic producers and from others who grow it abroad. We have given up our own food sovereignty as a people and instead rely almost entirely on an economic system to provide us with meals.

Should we be pleased that the USSR shifted from a rural population towards a more urban population and were then unable to feed themselves leaving their leaders no choice but to consent to revolution in the face of a starving population and no way to pay for food? Maybe. But that is an oversimplification of the history of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Countries don't collapse for any single reason but because of a host of pressures. However the agricultural situation surrounding the Soviet collapse suggests that America should be asking herself some questions. If the economic system in the United States, an economic system based on growth, runs up against a depletion of resources that physically slows or stops our ability to grow economically, will we face a similar collapse? Could our nation, like the Soviet Union, come to regret our willingness to hand over our food sovereignty? Will fewer jobs mean less food? If the American economy of growth falters, how will the 98% of non-farmers be able to buy bread? Are we in for a revolution when a certain percentage of the American people are unable to buy food?

I'm not talking about a revolution based on some sort of ideological difference like that between capitalism and communism. I'm talking about a revolution due to an increasing resource scarcity that chokes the life out of industrial agriculture. In an era of unprecedented growth and materialist prosperity, many people have come to believe that the grocery store aisles will always stay stocked, but there is only so much of the natural world we can convert into human resources. Mother Nature has her limits and infinite growth in our finite system is impossible even if short term growth seems to suggest that it is inevitable. Will our failure to recognize this fact visit our dinner tables?

Many Americans think that, unlike the Soviets, we have real choice in this country about what they eat. But our choices are made by grocery store managers, transported to us by truckers and grown a thousand and a half miles away. Our choices are harvested by migrant workers who are paid poverty level wages or worse and grown under contract by corporations whose practices destroy local communities and the biodiversity of healthy ecosystems. Just because we buy our food at the grocery store doesn't mean we have any real control over how we fed our families. What we have is the illusion of control and in this regard we might be worse off than the Soviets in terms of susceptibility. In a country where most of our heavily lobbied congressional representatives support a farm bill that rewards the makers of cheap junk food to the detriment of our children and those who grow our fruits and our vegetables, can we really say that we have a choice in what we eat? How it's grown? What chemicals are sprayed on it? Would an agricultural revolution not also give us back real choice?

Of course we have an alternative. The population of the United States of America could make an anticipatory change away from industrial agriculture and decrease our dangerous reliance on it? We can, as a nation, turn away voluntarily from industrial agriculture by rejecting a culture of hyper consumption and promote a culture of creation- not factory farming but local farmers meeting local food needs. We can embrace the freedom and stability of agricultural self sufficiency and local interdependency- the battle cry can be Food Sovereignty! And we can do it in advance of any possible economic troubles because of speculation, liquidation, inflation, or any other manipulative practices that might further distort food price and access. We can begin again to

base our society on providing our own needs and the needs of our communities.

This sort of democratization of support systems could lead in turn to a stronger democratic system of governance with the population ruling over themselves not being provided for by the few. A population that can feed itself can express power over a ruling minority by withdrawing their dependency from the system of reliance by which corporatization and globalization have indentured all of us depend on far away others for food. We can grow it in our own front yards and buy it from the besieged family farmer down the road.

The ability of a nation to feed itself locally is important in establishing any attempt at addressing the crises currently facing humankind. Rapid resource depletion, population migration, global climate change, peak energy, a pandemic illness or any combination of these converging calamities could lead to more conflict and the possible collapse of our current system of living. Facing these issues can best be handled through a collaborative effort involving real education and a democratic approach towards problem solving. A swift move towards self sufficiency, along with a return to local interdependency, could go a long way towards mitigating our problems and stabilizing our democratic goals and aims. We could learn something from the Soviets. Not the notion that large-scale communism is untenable- we already know that- but the idea that giving up our ability to grow food locally makes us more susceptible to an economic downturn. Can we use this insight to regain control over our food and our governing institutions before the real want of limits sets in? We shall see.



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