

From Albrecht to Monsanto: A System Not Run for the Public Good Can Never Serve the Public Good

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Global Economy](#)

The following extract is from the 2011 lecture '[Healthy Soils, Healthy People](#)' by Professor John Ikerd. The lecture discussed the legacy of renowned agronomist William Albrecht, who died in 1974.

We have justified the demise of family farms, decay of rural communities, pollution of the rural environment, and degradation of soil health as being necessary to provide food security for the nation. These justifications are no longer valid or acceptable... an agriculture driven by economics failed to provide for the health of the soil or the health of people. The problems we are facing today are the consequence of too many people, including scientists, pursuing their narrow self-interests without considering the consequence of their actions on the rest of society and the future of humanity... the pursuit of individual, impersonal self-interests – not the long run interests of society or humanity. – Professor John Ikerd

The original text of this excellent lecture (readers are urged to read it in full to grasp the important relevance of Albrecht today) does not include the underlining, which has been added here because that passage is key to understanding why we have arrived at the point where we now find ourselves: embedded within a globalised system of food and agriculture that rakes in massive profits for the few at the expense of the majority.

With so much slick PR from agribusiness companies about 'helping farmers' and 'feeding a hungry world', it may be easy for some to lose sight of the fact that what we have is an economic system that rests on self-interest and profit, which has resulted in producing a model of food and agriculture that has led to the falling nutritional value of food and the growing of it with poisonous inputs; it has led to major adverse impacts on the environment, soil, human health and communities; and that model has been used as a tool to secure geopolitical power, undermine food security and create dependency.

Ikerd talks about how narrow self-interests have prevailed in agriculture and have not considered the consequence their actions on the rest of society and the future of humanity. Although he never mentions 'capitalism' in his lecture, Ikerd refers to the hugely negative impacts on soil and human health as a result of the drive for profit by powerful commercial interests that have come to dominate food and agriculture.

Blatant self-interest and hegemony

People often attempt to disguise blatant self-interest by saying their intentions and actions coincide with what is good for everyone else and what they are doing is essentially underpinned by good intent. It is a classic case of hegemony: gaining authority and

legitimacy by fooling others that your aims and their aims are one and the same, while in reality the opposite is the case. It is what capitalism has relied on, with state violence always (and, these days, increasingly) at hand as a back-up.

Take Monsanto CEO Hugh Grant, for instance. According to [Reuters](#), he could receive more than \$70 million if Monsanto is taken over by Bayer AG. Monsanto says it is open to engaging in further negotiations with Bayer after turning down its \$62 billion bid.

Reuters reports that Grant said his company firmly endorsed “the substantial benefits an integrated strategy could provide to growers and broader society.”

Nice sounding words, but he would say that, wouldn't he?

The report shows how Grant's exposure to shares and options means he has an incentive to hold out for the highest possible sale price, which would not only be in the interests of shareholders but also increase the value of his holdings. Other senior figures within Monsanto would also walk away with massive financial gains in shares, bonuses and severance if a deal goes through.

These corporate managers belong to a global agribusiness sector whose major companies all rank among the Fortune 500 corporations. They and their companies, not least major shareholders, are high-rollers in a globalised system of capitalism, where oversized financial packages and huge company profits are directly linked to [bad food and poor health](#), [inequitable trade](#), [environmental](#) devastation, the [destruction of communities and ecocide](#), [degraded soil](#) and farmers who live a [knife-edge existence](#) and for whom [debt](#) has become a fact of life.

Then there is Britain's political mouthpiece for the GMO biotech sector Owen Paterson, who attacks critics of GMOs through emotive outbursts and by proclaiming his concern for the poor in countries far away. Paterson is an MP and belongs to the Conservative Party, whose neoliberal policies (also adopted by 'New Labour') since the 1980s have plunged millions in Britain into poverty, unemployment and debt. Despite him saying he wants to feed the hungry of the world with GMOs, his government's policies have driven hundreds of thousands towards food poverty in recent years. His hypocrisy is [clear for all to see](#).

Narrow self-interest abounds, whether it is corporate CEOs, wealthy shareholders, ideologically driven politicians like Paterson who do the bidding of global agribusiness or, for example, various [molecular biologists](#) and their well-funded career paths who keep the ideological flag flying for the current system of agriculture they advocate, while often touting the 'virtues' of a 'choice-friendly', 'democratic' ['free market' capitalism](#) that exists only in their own delusions.

Challenging capitalism

This capitalism thrives on [commodity speculation](#), [land speculation](#), [corrupt banking and finance cartels](#) and [rigged trade](#). The [World Bank](#), [IMF](#), [WTO](#), and other machinery of globalisation (like [corrupt](#) trade deals like TTIP, TPA and NAFTA) operate to serve the interests of a small elite of private individuals (an increasingly integrated [“transnational ruling class”](#)) who own and control private capital and who ensure the system they benefit from is perpetuated. These interlocking, self-serving interests have instituted a globalised system of war and structural violence that results in poverty and [devastated economies](#).

From [Somalia](#) and [Ethiopia](#) to the [situation](#) across Africa in general and in places like Mexico (see [this](#) on the health impacts of NAFTA and [this](#) about the overall devastation of Mexico, which NAFTA has contributed to), strategically placed (see [this](#) and [this](#)) agribusiness has made a financial killing from policies that have destroyed local economies and indigenous farming and which have often turned countries from largely self-sufficient food nations into food importing ones.

People March against Monsanto, campaign against glyphosate or highlight the actions of individual actors or companies. But these entities, products and figures will be replaced with others, the system and its negative impacts will persist and the marches and campaigns against the [newest conglomerate](#) to emerge or newest poison to hit the market will continue.

Despite what the well-paid media shills, the co-opted scientists and politicians and the industry PR people say, a system not run for the public good can never serve the public good. Many of these individuals are little more corporate lobbyists or neoliberal ideologues (see [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)) who hide behind dogma about choice, democracy or improving productivity, while attacking ‘fundamentalists’ (i.e. anyone who opposes their pro-corporate model of agriculture and ideological neoliberal allegiances). In response, people are fighting back and resisting. From [Ghana](#) to [India](#) and from [Europe](#) to [beyond](#), food sovereignty movements are demonstrating a deep-rooted resistance against neoliberal doctrine and its negative impacts on agriculture, health, communities and the environment. And they are armed with [realistic alternatives](#) to corporate dominated agriculture and the policies and framework which allows it to prosper at the expense of both people and the environment.

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