

WITH PIERRE DESROCHERS, B.A., M.A., Ph.D.



**Pierre Desrochers** is an associate professor of geography at the University of Toronto. Desrochers received his B.A. in Political Science from the University of Montreal, his M.A. in Urban Studies from the National Institute of Scientific Research, and his Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Montreal.

He is the author of over 40 peer-reviewed articles on topics ranging from economic development and globalization to energy and transportation issues and is affiliated with numerous policy research centres. Pierre has always made an effort to reach a broad audience through his over 100 columns and shorter pieces and regular contributions to various media outlets. He maintains a [detailed website](#). His unique strength as one of the most well-known critics of the locavore movement is his knowledge of a broader set of issues than other critics who have attacked only one facet of this movement.

### Frontier Centre: What convinced you to write your new book *Locavore's Dilemma*?

**Pierre Desrochers:** Well, I'm a geographer and at one point I specialized in international trade. Then I was asked to teach energy policy. I also knew a little bit about transportation and I grew up in the countryside. So I realized I was perhaps uniquely prepared to look at this issue from wider angles than other critiques who had been mostly engineers who debunked the notion of food miles and economists who sang the praise of comparative advantage. Yet, nobody brought out an historical perspective on the topic nor discussed food security or economies of scale in food safety and I knew something about these things. But while I might have had a somewhat unique background, I had no real interest in the topic. It was really my wife (and future co-author) Hiroko Shimizu, a born and bred Japanese, who conscripted me to write the book. She was taken aback by a statement made by a prominent Canadian academic who really believes that you should only feed from your local foodshed. He said that the Japanese were the "most parasitical people in the world" because they import more food than anybody else. If you know anything about Japan, you know that they're a large population and they don't have much land suited for agriculture. So what they've been doing for a century and a half is specialize in other things and trade with the rest of the world and so, as Hiroko is fond of saying, "we're not parasites, we pay for our food. We produce other things and we exchange."

Honestly, if Hiroko had not prodded me to write about the topic, I probably would not have done so. But, once I began looking at the literature and the issues, I realized perhaps I have something meaningful to say on this because again of my somewhat eclectic background. So, what I tried to do with Hiroko's help was to write the most comprehensive, yet accessible, critique of the whole movement to date. I believe we succeeded, at least according to the feedback I've received. We cover every angle that we could think of, from food safety, to military history, to production differentials between locations.

The book starts with a basic question: "If things were so great in the not-so-distant past when most food was local, why did people work so long and so hard to develop the

global food supply chain?" So, the main contribution of the book, I think, was to explain how the globalized food chain came to be, and the food safety and economic rationale that underlined it.

The topic is also a way to do some basic economic education. Many people who would otherwise not really listen to an economic argument might be enticed to do so in a discussion of food safety and security. So we essentially wrote the book with well-meaning people who have never been presented these arguments in mind. Food is also a good hook to teach some basic facts of economic and political life to a broader audience.

### FC: What exactly is the locavore movement?

**PD:** It's a lot of things. It's a reaction against globalization by people who don't like the lack of direct link or the impersonal nature of international trade. We're kind of hard-wired, I believe, to be tribal creatures and for most people, keeping to your local tribe or local environment is something that spontaneously appeals to them. And then you have old-fashioned agricultural protectionists. In Quebec, for instance, the local food movement is hosted in the building of the farmer's union, I mean literally. So, you have traditional protectionist interests who use those young, naïve activists as a front. It's the whole "bootlegger and Baptists" theory. You have some dry counties in the United States, where you can't sell alcohol either year-round or on Sundays. So, who is behind that movement? On the one hand, you have the Baptists who are against alcohol for obvious reasons, but also the bootleggers because business depends on the region remaining a dry country, because otherwise business is dead. So, you have this same type of coalition, I believe, with local food. You have young idealistic activists who grew up in the city and the suburbs who idealize nature and food production, and then you've got traditional vested interests who use them as a convenient front to push what they've always pushed, which is traditional protectionism. These guys might be in favor of using the latest technologies on their farm but they want to keep the competition at bay. Then you have these long time food activists who want organic and fair trade food that is now sold at stores of ill-repute like Wal-Mart. So how is an activist supposed to stick it to the Man if not by growing their own food? In my experience, local food activists are

motivated by a range of things to various degrees, such as a belief in reconnecting with people or supporting the community, combined with these vested interests I mentioned.

It's a diverse movement, but what these people all share is a complete lack of basic economic knowledge and historical perspective on the topic.

**FC: What is the historical experience with local food movements?**

**PD:** Basically, local food movements are probably as old as long distance trade, despite the fact that in the ancient world food was typically scarce and famines regular occurrences. In good years, in many parts of the world, local farmers have always fought against foreign competition. Local food movements as we understand them today, however, really only go back to industrialization and the railroad, because this is when food really started to become more impersonal. (Up to that point in time, only non-perishable items like grain and sugar could be moved over long distances. The railroad, steamship, canning and artificial refrigeration really took the long distance trade of food commodities to a new level.) Besides, going back to the land meant that your ancestors had already left it at some point. So, we discuss in the book, a series of part reactions against, even if was not yet globalization, at least the "continentalization" of food markets in the United States and Europe. You always had a reaction against that from local producers who were not able to compete with others who were producing in better locations. Or else, you always had these movements in economically depressed times. I'm told a local food movement has increased in Greece for example. When unemployment is high, these movements always make a comeback. It is true also for war times. Yet, the historical experience is pretty clear. As soon as things improve or the war is over and the economy picks up, these movements die. There's also an ideological component to it. I was talking about the Hippies of the 1960s, but I was also talking about the Transcendentalists of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in New England. So, there's some basic economic appeal when you're in very dire circumstances. But, these things never last as they stop as soon as things improve. Every generation seems to have a new cohort of young idealists who, again, want to re-build communities, or stick it to the Man or large corporations, aligned with inefficient agricultural producers who cannot compete. Again, the historical evidence is clear. These fads always come back but they never last. Each generation of hippies at one point realizes that well, maybe there's a reason everyone left the farm in the past when they could.

**FC: To what degree is the local food movement driven by a romanticized view of agriculture?**

**PD:** It seems driven by it to a great extent. A lot of my students get their notion of pastoral life from the Lord of the Rings movie. You know, from hobbits. Hobbits are happy and they don't need doctors, surgeons, or antibiotics. This is not what life was. People in the past did not have nice teeth. They were not tall and they were not very healthy.

You've had romantics going back for a long time, so in the book we discuss the son of the Roman nobility and these poets who write romantically about pastoral life. As long as

it remains the luxury of the kids of wealthy people, it is more or less harmless. But when romanticized notions of the past become the basis for social policy, this can only result in disaster. Romanticism is definitely there, especially among urban and sub-urban kids who think that vegetables grow in the truck that delivers them to the supermarket. So there's a lot of naïveté. People don't realize that many things can go wrong in agriculture and that growing stuff is a profession like other skilled professions. There's a lot more to producing food than just putting a seed in the ground and let Mother Nature do the work.... Nobody thinks that you can be a self-taught dentist, but somehow young activists think you can become a very good farmer just by downloading a few things off the Web. In real life, a lot of knowledge and skill and accumulated experience goes into food production, but local food activists typically downplay the amount of skill that goes in modern farming.

Modern activists take for granted our standards of living and our modern medicine. These things were only made possible by getting people off of the farm in the first place.

**FC: You had mentioned that the local food movement is perpetuating some myths. Can you outline the main ones here?**

**PD:** There are at least five, which we can break down.

The first is this notion that we will increase social capital if we have more local food. Of course, the local food movement will help you know a few farmers, which might not otherwise be the case. Yet, I suspect they won't get to know them all that well. I grew up in the countryside where my parents were hobby food producers (Among other things, we had 50 apples trees and 700 maple trees, but both my parents had full time jobs). My neighbours, however, were real farmers and at harvest time, I remember these people sleeping like three hours a night when things got really busy. So if farmers work really hard and still have the energy to engage in long conversations with other people at farmer's markets who end up buying \$5 of food, fine I don't have a problem with that. But, I suspect that what local food activists are missing is trade-offs. A lot of time and money needs to be spent promoting and buying local food, which is not available through other ways of building social capital. You will have less time and money to do things like coach in a local soccer league. Or, you will have less money to give to your church or other good local causes. So, it's not clear to me that spending more time and money feeding yourself is actually the best way to build social capital. There are others ways to do that. This seems driven by this naïve attachment to mom and pop stores. But, we point out that no one is forced to go to Wal-Mart or Home Depot. People do it because they get more value for their money. So, if you're doing that, you will have more resources and time to do other things.

Then there's the economic arguments which again comes back to why we have a globalized food supply chain in the first place. I mean, the reason we go to all the trouble of importing food from faraway places is that it supplies us with more bang for the buck. Better quality for a lower price. So, by definition local food, which isn't competitive, which you wouldn't buy for reasons other than it is local, will cost you more. So, yes, you will create a few unproductive local jobs,

but you will destroy a lot more jobs because you have less money to spend on other things. You will also destroy more jobs in other countries or other locations where people have less money to buy other things that are produced profitably in your own local economy. So, it's the old comparative advantage story: specialize in what you do best at and trade with other people. This is how you improve standards of living. The only way to get out of poverty is to trade with more advanced nations. So, there's no economic rationale for that.

The third is the environmental argument. In the book, we revisit the "food miles" logic, which has been debunked by a lot of other people. We did not contribute anything original to that. Basically, long distance transportation is so efficient that it's insignificant in terms of environmental impact in the grander scheme of things. It's really the production side that matters. It so happens that in some locations you have better pasture lands, or more sun or more heat or water than others. These things matter a lot more in the grander scheme of things than long distance transportation, especially by railroad and container ships.

What we brought to the discussion, which from what I know was not brought up in the context of the locavore movement, is how modern agriculture and long distance trade really resulted in significant reforestation or afforestation of agricultural land. Again, I did not come up with the data. I knew it existed. But, nobody had connected that to the local food movement and pointed out that long distance trade and increased agricultural yields using modern production methods was one of the main factors that explains why we have so much more forested lands today than we did in the past. If you look at what environmental activists were complaining about several decades ago before the 1960s – there was an environmental movement then, although it's forgotten today – they were complaining about land erosion. Their complaint was that there are too many people engaged in unproductive farming. They complained about people farming on slopes and other bad lands. They're destroying the environment, they would say. I mean there was a whole 'erosion is killing us' movement back at that time. It was the global warming scare of environmental activists in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. So, we point out that if we go back to when more food was local and organic, environmentalists at that time were complaining that farming was destroying the land and they had a point because farming in bad conditions does cause significant erosion problems (although activists back then often exaggerated specific problems). Long distance trade and increased yields took people off of farming those bad lands. It led to reforestation. In the book, we argue this was good for nature. The argument was not new but it was not made in the local food context.

The next issue was food security. What local food activists are telling you is to put all your food production eggs in one regional basket. Their rationale is that a local food movement will promote, by definition, a more diverse type of agriculture system than if you have one big monoculture that supplies other parts of the world. So, let's say you produce a lot of wheat and you have a new epidemic that comes along, then your wheat is all gone and you're

screwed. But if you produce wheat, potatoes, and dairy products, you will always have something to fall back on. But, as we point out in the book, this is subsistence farming logic. This is why historically subsistence farmers were trying to spread the risk in what they do. The problem is that this is not productive. If you're a jack of all trades, you are master of none. So, their yields were always very low. And then local food activists forget that you have a whole host of agricultural problems that can really be terrible for you no matter how diversified you are. If you have a flood, it doesn't matter how diversified you are. If you have a drought, it doesn't matter how many different crops you grow. If you have a type of disease that will affect sheep, goats and other livestock simultaneously, you're kind of screwed. And the same is true when you struggle with a locust invasion, a frost, an earthquake or a tsunami.

What we point out in the book is that historically the one thing that put an end to famine and malnutrition in advanced economies was long distance trade, especially using railroad and steamships. I have a map which describes trade routes when they had smaller wooden ships powered by wind. These ships were very limited in terms of how big they could be and, more importantly, where they could travel as they had to follow ocean currents and wind patterns. But, when the steamship came along, the whole world opened up as it did not matter what way the wind blows or the currents go. With much larger steamships, you also had economies of scale in transportation.

Another problem is that people don't realize how bad land transportation was before the railroad came along. In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, for example, moving things on land between Manchester and Liverpool was as expensive as moving them across the Atlantic Ocean. So, crossing 30 miles on land was like crossing the North Atlantic. That's how costly things were in moving things on bad roads. So, again, we point out that the only thing that put an end to famine and malnutrition is the large scale and economic movement of large quantities of food over long distances from regions that had good years to those that had bad ones (and they would not be the same over time). Of course, we've also only gotten better at moving things around in the more recent past, especially with the development of inter-modal container shipping.

The food safety argument is that cannot really trust the Chinese or people in locations that don't have the same health and environmental standards we do, or else large impersonal firms that don't look their customers in the eyes to deliver safe food? And we argue yes you can, especially those large firms because they're worth suing. If you get screwed at the local farmer's market, you don't sue. There's no point because there's nothing in it for you. The incentive to cheat and to lie in terms of what you sell are actually much more significant in the context of a farmer's market where people can sell you stuff from Costco or other places and pretend it's organic and local. How do you really know? Whereas if Wal-Mart does that and you find out, well, you have a juicy target. There would be no shortage of trial lawyers who would be willing to go after Wal-Mart.

Another issue downplayed by local food activists is the development of modern food safety protocols. It's like anything else. You need specialized knowledge and years

of investment before you become good at that. It's not a nice thing to say, but local farmers, no matter how well-intentioned they are, cannot be good at everything. So, they might be good at growing their broccoli, but then they might not be as good at preventing the spread of *E. coli* or something. If you look at the data, we are less sick than we were in the past. The main argument put forward by people who know about these things is that yes, you're better off having people who devote themselves full-time to think about food safety protocols. Hiroko and I visited a Maple Leaf plant after the *Listeria* problem. They showed us their safety protocols for their facilities and I can tell you the binders were that thick and that long. They think about absolutely everything. And, of course, things will go wrong from time to time. But, they test at every step of the way, they try to avoid cross-contamination. They have a number of safety procedures, which the cantaloupe farmer I mentioned today cannot even begin to fathom. So, cross-contamination is likely to occur in a small facility even more than a big one because typically the local farmers want to grow a lot of different things and typically don't use synthetic fertilizers. If you believe in the data, it tells you there is such a thing as economies of scale in food safety and that having large centralized facilities and control points at different stages of the globalized food supply chain has made our food supply much safer than when our food supply was much more decentralized. There's a reason you'll get sick if you go to places like India or sub-Saharan Africa and eat the food everyone else is eating. People are not immune to these bad things. You look at the number of people dying from food poisoning in India or sub-Saharan Africa and it's much higher than people in our economies here. But the point is that the food exported from these economies is not the same food that local people eat, but typically food aimed at export markets that has benefited from a lot of knowledge transfer from advanced economies. This is good in at least two ways. First, local people get more money for their hard work. Second, over time this knowledge is adapted to local food produced for local people.

**FC: You argued that cities have traditionally been better than the countryside for food security and affordability? Why is that?**

**PD:** If you look at places in the world where the food is the cheapest outside of the United States (where you have huge economies of scale), it's places like Singapore where they don't produce anything. Historically, city-states or countries like the Netherlands, have always been the best fed *because* they produce so little and are hence very reliant on the world market. Cities were always created by merchants who were the people who could go places and get stuff. City states with very little land were always the best fed because they could rely on the world market and they were always more food secure than people who had some agricultural land but were protectionist and were destroying incentives because whenever world markets go up, the government tends to block exports. If you know your government is going to do that what is your incentive to

become more efficient and to scale up your operations? This is why we argue that historically the best fed people always lived in the cities, not the countryside. (And indeed, in past famines the typical movement of people was from the countryside to cities, not the other way around.) This is because the cities had multiple food supply sources. We take the analogy of the city to the world today and say wherever you are you are always best fed when you have multiple suppliers, not just one local supplier who despite all his best efforts, or even if he is an angel or a very altruistic person, will have to deal with frosts, floods, animal diseases or other things.

**FC: What is the discourse surrounding local food now?**

**PD:** If you believe a policy should be guided by facts rather than emotions, then we argue there is not much to be said on behalf of the local food movement, except when people buy local food for other reasons than it being local. We don't have a problem with buying good local food because good food needs to be grown somewhere. So, if it happens to be in your garden and you're a gardener and these are the best tomatoes, then fine. But then it's a hobby, don't make it a policy. Not everyone has the inclination to grow tomatoes. The problem that we see with the local food movement is that it is becoming coercive. You have a lot of movements, especially in the U.S. but it has been coming to Canada, where activists want to force school boards, hospitals, universities, military bases, to spend more money buying local food in order to promote economic growth. If it was a fad and was purely voluntary, there would be much less of a problem. And let's face it. If you want to help poor people improve their situation, teach them a valuable skill (say, plumbing or electricity) rather than encourage them to grow their food.

Many people want to do the right thing but they've been misinformed. I debated a former candidate for the mayor of Vancouver who used to be a business journalist. His argument was that people want local food so I'm going to give it to them. But the point is people have been misinformed.

So, at least, if nothing else, we want to try to bring some facts so that people can make more informed food purchasing decisions. What we're telling them is if you're spending extra money and you are going to extra trouble to buy local food because you believe it's good for the environment, or it's good for the local economy, then don't. It's not true. At some point, you should judge a policy on its results, not on its intentions. Again, if nothing else, the point of the book is to help dismiss some misinformation.

But of course, you can bring a horse to the fountain, but you can't force him to drink. A lot of food activists don't want to listen to facts, but we didn't write the book for them. Our hope has always been to have a more informed around food policy. So if people still want to buy more expensive local food then fine, but don't pretend that you're doing it to help poor people, or Mother Nature or what have you, because you're not.