



Critical Reflection and Civic Discourse within and across the Alternative Food Movement

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Born out of resistance to a faceless and essentially placeless food system, the alternative food movement has acquired a global reach. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the practice and politics of local food encompass everything from backyard (and front-yard) gardens, to national appellations, to calls for indigenous sovereignty. Organics are standardized, mass produced, and traded nationally and internationally. Fair trade products are familiar grocery store fare, their value represented by logos and their processes often dominated by multinationals.

There are those who see these changes as evidence of the movement's success. What was once an alternative vision has now moved into the mainstream, into popular (and global) awareness, bringing with it many enlightened values – care, ecology, sustainability, health, equity. There are others who see these changes as yet another demonstration of the power of market (or corporate) capitalism, its ability to commodify anything, underwrite neo-liberal policies, and reinforce the structures that gave rise to the original resistance. Frequently, opposing arguments (among practitioners, activists and academics) are as polarized and impassioned as the initial rhetoric that advocated 'a turn toward the local' and away from an industrial food system.

But, there are problems with either/or thinking, with seeing the world only in terms of 'us' and 'them'. Not the least of these is the question of who gets to say – act on and enforce – what is and isn't possible; who gets to decide what does or doesn't matter. Stated a bit differently, such essentialist thinking can lead to a loss of critical insight into the behavioural and thought processes that play out in lived contexts as well as across the many levels of what hopefully will become a generative and socially just food system. Given the severity of the problems we face on this once blue-green planet and the essential nature of food to our survival, we really need to stop cleaving to simplistic images and attacking convenient straw men. We need to expand our thinking and our tool chest in ways that permit, no, I really mean continually enable, public discourse and engaged citizenship. We also need to learn how to listen.

Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice and Politics is a bold step in this direction. From the outset, authors Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman explain that they want to steer a course between arguments of food system conventionalization and accounts celebrating the tenacity and virtuosity of the alternative vision. As they put it:

'We move away from bifurcated Manichean perspectives and a politics of "conversion" that seeks to change the world by embracing a perfect vision of an alternative world based on a fixed, static set of values, whether of

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the “good life” or “good food.” Instead, we rearticulate food politics toward an understanding of the world as relational and process-based rather than perfectionist. This relational worldview admits that its vision is never perfect but always can be improved by working in relationship with others, especially when informed by an open, reflexive, and contested view of “improvement” as an idea and a process’ (p. 6).

Their book is a theoretical exploration of the diverse patterns and practices that have shaped the alternative food movement and alternative food networks and their ability to contribute to greater ‘social empowerment and progressive change’. While never explicitly defined, alternative food networks can be understood (by this reader at least) as constellations of 1. shifting producer–consumer communities of interest and practice, and 2. continually contested and renegotiated knowledge claims that constitute and are constituted by trade relations and the economic and political infrastructure of the global food system.

To this end, the book is propelled along by dozens of timely questions, many of which the authors admit they cannot answer but which serve to push current conversation and future research in critical new directions. ‘How’, they ask,

‘can we grasp the proliferation of alternative food networks... since the 1990s? How can we understand the many different ways in which they are organized? Does the growth of these networks mark a watershed change...? How “alternative” are these re-localized networks? What are their relationships with mainstream provisioning? Is re-localization an oppositional move, articulating a new moral politics of food...? Are these moral politics grounded in a Putnamesque (re-)valorization of social community or is the quality “turn” to the local rather a new form of cultural capital in the Bourdieusian status wars of social “distinction”?’ (p. 65).

Like much of their earlier writings upon which this book is based, the authors’ perspective is informed by, or rather facilitated by, three analytical themes or ‘bridges’ that cross-cut their discussion of alternative food networks – reflexivity, shared knowledge practices, and alterity. Briefly, reflexivity refers to the practice of opening up inquiry in ways that move us beyond the normative, to recognize the complexities and contradictions of social life and the multiple notions of privilege and economy embedded within them (and it). With this awareness in mind, they wisely discuss the functions and contradictions of borders and networks and how they apply to localism both in the US and Europe. Local, they argue is not a ‘purified’ category, not ‘somehow given in the order of things’ but a site for exploring ‘the social struggle and contestation in the making of place and scale’ (p. 23). Consistent with their theoretical purpose, they focus on verbs (e.g. skirmish, bridge, negotiate, reimagine) rather than nouns (e.g. food, commodity, standards).

Shared knowledge practices suggest that not only are there inherent differences in cognition and meaning among food system actors and paradigms but that the process(es) by which these understandings come to be shared or parts selectively adopted and reframed provides significant insight into the evolving nature of new imaginaries and political asymmetries. Here, their discussion of Wilkinson’s theory of corporate reframing and the subsequent ‘overflow’ of alternative values provides insight into the processes that have propelled and transformed both organics and fair trade movements. This orientation also supports their argument that the consumer cannot be regarded simply as a passive or manipulated player in the dialectic

tics of food network analysis but rather consumer agency (especially when collectively realized) can be understood as ‘a form of political action’, one that may not lead the revolution, but still ‘wields power to shape the food system’ (p. 42).

Finally, alterity refers to a critical inquiry that accepts (and appreciates) the strategies by which alternative movements challenge the industrial food system while, at the same time, accepts their need to coexist within that system. According to the authors,

‘Alternative economies are... powerful but not intrinsically equalitarian. They are unfixed; that is they are always open to question. It is this “unfix- edness” that makes it necessary to keep food systems in the larger ongoing civic conversation about making a better world, with the “better” defined differently and reflexively by different people. It is the process of building this world despite our differences world views that makes the dynamic of alternative economies so complex, and so powerful’ (p. 156).

For the authors, innovation and especially innovation that brings with it greater social justice is possible within (rather than oppositional to) a capitalist market economy. A set of intriguing case histories (i.e. milk orders, organic materials, and organic pasturing) illustrate the internal conflicts, interdependencies, and policy outcomes that have occurred as alternative interests negotiate their way within the conventional system. The results are never clean or wholly satisfying. Neither are the authors sanguine about them but rather recognize that the process itself – a civic conversation open to democratic participation – is the sine qua non of coexistence and eventual equity and sustainability.

Alternative Food Networks is a necessary book. It provides both historical back- ground and theoretical critique for much contemporary food system scholarship, nationally and internationally. It is learned and sharp, and it challenges us to take stock of where we are in our personal and collective thinking about alternative and conventional food systems. Ultimately, *Alternative Food Networks* guides us through a bout of mental housekeeping – a reorganizing and polishing of our theoretical furniture – not because company is coming but because if we are going to continue to inhabit this intellectual space (and make good on the claims of an alternative food system), then we need to periodically manage our clutter before continuing on with our work and our lives. Still, I sense that the authors would be the first to point out that we live in a house and not a museum. All things are mutable. Everything should be questioned. And clutter itself is a sign of life – of ongoing inquiry and innovation. It should never be eliminated, but periodically it can (and should) be reorganized and re-evaluated. So, in the interest of making more clutter, I offer a few thoughts of my own prompted by the authors’ discussion, my training as an anthropologist, and my recent experiences working within the context of urban food and farming.

First, I must confess to being a bit perplexed by the nature of the authors’ engage- ment with context and the particular. When talking about shared knowledge claims as part of more process-oriented inquiry into alternative food networks, they write, ‘This notion of knowledges embedded in the habits and routines of “communities of practice’... performed and reproduced in the daily round of lived-experience, lends conceptual clarity to the durable polyvalence of food production–consump- tion practices’ (p. 51).

To my mind this is a profound and exhilarating statement, one that acknowledges the experiences and understandings of real people living in real places. To me, it

suggests the need for ethnography and thick description – for multi-sensual expression. It suggests spending time in lived communities, not just for the purpose of observing (and illustrating) how others express themselves behaviourally and conceptually but also for allowing the experience itself to serve as a catalyst for critical self-reflection. What do ‘we’ learn from this involvement – about ourselves and our relationships to existing structures of power and privilege? How does this help us ‘see’ the relationality of our differences and overcome our own myopic view of the world?

Yet, this level of intimate involvement and self-questioning seems largely to be missing from the authors’ discussion. I do not recognize any of the kids, parents, or grandparents who inhabit the urban neighborhood where I work. Nevertheless, their interactions with vacant lots, red-hot Doritos™, SNAP benefits, and the police are ongoing, and they certainly inform the local food movement in Lansing, Michigan, my own urban agriculture project being a case in point. Likewise, the language the authors use to speak about alternative projects remains wholly academic and scientific. The ‘people’ they refer to tend to be institutions and formal organizations. Despite a concern for the daily experiences and processes that extend resource ownership and political empowerment, the authors tend to keep themselves at arm’s length from the ‘unsanitized’ realities (and reflections) they understand too often go unexamined. Without a wider selection of practical, expressive, and theoretical tools, including those of the arts and humanities, I think it will be hard to move marginalized actors and knowledges into an open and democratic civic conversation. As the authors so clearly note, we cannot advocate critical political theory and be unwilling to engage directly with (and learn from) those who are not like us.

Second, the authors argue for a more tightly integrated approach to the local food system and its continually negotiated (as opposed to idealized) nature. They write,

‘a wider institutional understanding of the local food economy would extend beyond the market-embedded nexus of locality/local food to the myriad social enterprises, non-governmental organizations, and other organizations working to reduce inequities in health and access to fresh, nutritious food, alleviate “food poverty” and build sustainable local procurement systems’ (pp. 82–83).

This is a fine statement and it suggests to me that local food economies, like communities of place or of practice, cannot be approached or understood solely on the basis of formal market relations. If food economies are socially embedded then such things as history, geography, landscape, story, and identity all contribute to their ultimate shape and durability. Likewise, community members are multidimensional and their relationships are simultaneously meaningful, spontaneous, contradictory, and redundant. I am perplexed, therefore, that the authors have focused so heavily on producers and consumers (production and consumption) and the actions, tensions and negotiations that occur between them. The concern I have is that when market relations, rather than community relations, are privileged (as is so often the case), real people are easily reduced to shallow or instrumental players. Where does an urban neighbour fit who has been a unskilled farm labourer all his adult life, who is raising an autistic child, who voluntarily helps a friend fix his car (‘because my friend has no money’), who cannot read or write English, who loves tomatoes, and wants to plant a fruit tree on our urban farm so we will not forget him? He is a poor consumer, a poor producer and quite invisible on any conventional food chain. But

this same urban neighbour has spoken with his congressman about his dishonest landlord, joined the neighbourhood watch, planted his own garden, and is most definitely present in our lives and within his immediate community. The point I am trying to make is not only that markets tend to disappear whole portions of the population, but that other sorts of relationships and other sorts of knowledges (expert and otherwise) are essential for understanding and enabling local or place-based economies (food and otherwise) that are just and sustainable. It seems to me that consumers and producers (assisted by scientists and politicians) constitute only part of the alternative food discourse. We also need urban planners, landscape architects, community organizers, poets, preachers, archivists and neighbors to cultivate a less partial and more nuanced view of community life. In a recent essay, Wayne Roberts (2012) writes that Japan was able to handle its recent earthquake and tsunami because of shared values and relationships embedded in the society prior to the disaster. Japan's social stability, he suggests, does not hinge on the maintenance of producer-consumer relationships per se (though they are certainly part of the mix) but on a culture of caring and civic responsibility – 'of a strong sense of social cohesion and disciplined commitment to collective well-being' held in place by 'longstanding practices promoting equity' (Roberts, 2012). It is time, I think, to enlarge our food system inquiry and practice by relying less on external and emergency interventions and more on a deeper awareness of what predisposes communities of place and practice to act care-fully and sustainably.

My final comment has to do with what seem to me to be contradictory assertions on the part of the authors; first that 'different knowledges' (i.e., paradigms) can coexist 'without having to compete for dominance' (p. 186) and second that alternative food networks can and do exist within an industrial, capitalist, and global market economy. With this as background, they provide the reader with well-researched illustrations of how the alternative food movement has evolved over time, come into direct conflict with the conventional food regime, and ultimately resolved or accommodated their differences. Milk orders, organic materials and certification, fair trade values and ownership, as noted earlier, offer evidence of how marginal practices have been disappeared and/or how alternative strategies have been politically re-worked to suit dominant interests.

I understand that not all has been lost as alternative food movements have been stripped of essential relationships and contexts and as 'quality' and 'local' have been simplified and commodified by the mainstream food system. Values do 'overflow' and 'social movements can successfully rearticulate their demands and new forms of collective action [can] emerge to take up the banner of progressive change' (pp. 90–91). What I don't understand is why the authors see this process as a form of partnership and mutual coexistence, while, at the same time, they claim that activism and alternative knowledge claims serve principally as 'brakes' in the totalizing trajectory of corporate domination and inequity.

If alternative movement actors and conventional food system players are to be partners in an evolving global food system, then I would expect that both sides (not just one) would make significant sacrifices as well as work toward reducing their gross discrepancies in size, material assets and influence. Partners would need to respect (though not necessarily agree with) one another. They would need to share power (not absorb one actor into the next), and they would need to honour the decisions and protect the decision-making processes that emanate from a participatory democracy, especially as it operates at the smallest (most grounded) level. I don't

see this happening. It is really not possible to negotiate with someone who can take what he wants with impunity, whose control is hegemonic. For this reason I am suspicious of rhetoric that obligingly chirps 'big and small, there's room for all'. What is Hantz sacrificing in Detroit? What is Wal-Mart sacrificing in its organic or buy local campaigns? What is Nestlé sacrificing in its ownership of fair trade products? They have all been privately improved through innovations nurtured by the alternative food movement.

If, as the authors seem to suggest, the decades of sweaty, painstaking work accomplished by activists at the margins – with few material resources, minimal infrastructure, and much personal sacrifice – amounts to little more than keeping the beast from swallowing us whole, then perhaps it is time to rethink what we are doing. My interest has never been to slow down the likes of Hantz or Wal-Mart or Nestlé. Rather it has been to provide the physical and conceptual spaces within which alternative and unauthorized ways of knowing and being are made possible. Food and the agri-food system hold tremendous potential in our finite but infinitely variable world for doing just that. I would rather go down swinging – fighting for the alternative (and thinking it closer to an ideal than the dominant system) if all we can say at the end of the day is Starbucks handles seven types of fair trade coffee and Whole Foods now offers benefits to its workers.

But, being provoked in this way is good. Perhaps that is what the authors intended all along – to keep us from growing complacent, to push us into deconstructing what we know (or think we know). Toward the end of their book they pose yet another set of questions to move us forward, questions that don't accept defeat and don't fall prey to easy 'we vs. them' dichotomies. They ask, 'can we design new modes of governance as mechanisms to formalize more complex relational worlds that acknowledge and work with multiple ways of knowing? Can we protect the autonomy of different ways of knowing while keeping boundaries between them more leaky, enabling more hybridization between them?' (p. 193).

Not only are these critical questions, but the authors go on to suggest that the place to begin looking for answers is within

'small groups of local people, cognizant or not of their putatively neoliberal subjectivities or the consolations of intellectual critique, [who] continue to experiment and strive for what they see as greater empowerment by adopting a politics of practice: of attempting to remake the world as the find it in the places they inhabit' (p. 247).

How we engage with the 'politics of practice' in all its mundane and heroic, informal and formal manifestations, I think, becomes our next critical challenge – as does understanding how such action plays out on real streets, informing place-based discourse and engagement as well as connecting with larger geographies and greater levels of socio-political abstraction. Despite, or rather because of, the popular acceptance of alternative food projects, locally and globally, there is now more reason than ever to be vigilant – to know the local and the particular well, while simultaneously questioning the familiar and challenging the patent answer.

Reference

ROBERTS, W. (2012) *Citywatch: Japan's Earthquake*. Published online <<http://blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishing-the-planet/citywatch-japan-earthquake>>, accessed 25 June 2012.