Beyond Efficiency - Reflections from the Field on the Future of the Local Food Movement

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Local food, as a concept, is at a critical transition point. Emerging from a need to create markets for farmers that were increasingly being left out of the dominant food marketplace, advocates of locally-grown food sought to connect local farmers with local consumers as a strategy to create economic opportunities for farmers. Initially focused on freshness and local economies, local food has blossomed into a full-fledged social phenomenon, resonating across a broad demographic and constituency. What started as a strategy to help smaller farms survive has grown to be about much more, and it is at a critical turning point - one that will determine if “local food” becomes a movement to liberate and decentralize food production and transform our food system or one that becomes co-opted and adapted to fit within the existing global food system.

As the movement to develop local and regionally based food systems continues to gain momentum, an approach that focuses on technological and logistical solutions has come to the forefront of movement strategies. In an effort to create space for locally grown food in mainstream markets, activities are focusing on increasing the “efficiencies” of locally grown food in order to compete within the existing and dominant paradigm of food production and distribution. This paper will argue that while there is a need for the development of efficiency fixes that address issues of distribution, processing, access, and other types of infrastructure, the movement’s essence is social in nature - fundamental food system change requires strategies that transform our relationships to food, to community and place, and to the material world. Efforts that give primacy to efficiency-based solutions reify the system they purport to challenge and have the potential to undermine larger and longer term movement goals to transform and create responsive food systems that are socially, environmentally, and economically just.

This paper begins with the assumption that the diverse initiatives and programs focused on locally grown food in the United States are part of an emergent and dynamic movement. The authors are both long term movement practitioners and the analyses and ideas put forth in this paper draw from this collective experience and from the research of the Local Food Research Center, which studies the economic, environmental, and social impacts of localizing food systems. In 2013, Perrett completed her dissertation on the movement in the region of Western North Carolina; this paper builds on her research and analysis and on her theoretical framing (Perrett 2013). It also draws from Jackson’s (1993) research around the 1970s back to the land movement and his analysis of the relationship between actions and beliefs and the need for greater alignment resulting in an “imperative” for personal and collective change.

We draw from social movements scholarship and from the notion of hegemony to frame the significance of social movements to societal formation. Social movements are part of an ongoing dialectic between dominant and subversive forces, which struggle to define the ideas and meanings that legitimize particular ways of living (Williams 1977). We use practice theory to frame the significance of human actions to the constitution of hegemonic formations (Ortner 1984,1996). The practices of ordinary living embody and reproduce particular meanings and rationalities; performed consistently and collectively, they organize and give stability to particular social orders (Clemens 1998; Ortner 1984,1996). To challenge the dominance of neoliberal policies and programs, social movements today engage in cultural politics - they develop and deploy alternative notions of economy, development, sustainability, citizenship, and so on to instill different social practices and bring about different material outcomes (Alvarez, et al. 1998;
The roots of the movement in the U.S. are part of a lineage of movements in the U.S. and abroad striving to regain power in the face of impersonal and external forces that reshape communities in ways that are outside individual control. Today’s movement extends back to the 1990s with the emergence of a handful of local food consumer campaigns in the United States responding to the loss of farms and farmland and the decline of rural communities. Nearly two decades later, “local food” is no longer a new concept. The degree to which local food has penetrated the U.S. food market and the public imagination is evident in the local food programs of major food system players like Walmart and Sysco, the growing prominence of Farm to School, and in the emergence of food system studies at universities.

The Local Food Movement has the potential to challenge the hegemony of an impersonal global food market and its negative impacts on the livelihoods of farmers, farm workers, and other food system workers, on human health and animal welfare, on rural communities and local ecologies. Initiatives to build local food systems advance a different notion of food and agriculture - one that is embedded in the relationships of a community and within the limitations and opportunities afforded by the ecologies of particular places (Allen, et al. 2003; Allen and Hinrichs 2007; Johnston, et al. 2009; Kloppenburg, et al. 1996). The development of food systems grounded in the relationships and conditions of place is a path toward the creation of food systems that meet economic, environmental, and social goals that extend beyond the confines of particular places to a fundamental refashioning of the relationship between people and food. The process creates the opportunity for the “ politicization” of the consumer, changing the role of people from powerless consumers in an impersonal marketplace to empowered and deliberative change makers.

For a movement that seeks to engage and transform the food system, this development presents both challenges and opportunities. The mainstreaming of locally grown food - its expansion into conventional market outlets - potentially increases its availability to a broader base of consumers and provides smaller scale farms (typically associated with the movement) with additional market outlets to sell their products. The reproduction of movement messaging by major food industry players has the potential to expand the reach of movement discourse and activity to a broader constituency.

At the same time however, interest in locally grown food by the food industry presents challenges to the movement. There are real contradictions between locally grown food and the conventional food industry. Strategies to mediate these contradictions are taking a turn toward efficiency-based solutions in an effort to help local food production meet the established standards and expectations within the food industry. One of the most prominent strategies to emerge is food hubs - central facilities that aim to coordinate the aggregation, storage, processing, and/or distribution of locally produced foods. While the movement aims to penetrate the conventional food industry, the current preoccupation with logistical fixes (like food hubs) potentially undermines the capacity of the movement to create meaningful change within the food system. The efficiencies food hubs and similar solutions are striving to emulate are at the root of the movement itself - these “efficiencies” are the source of poverty, hunger, environmental degradation, the loss of community autonomy, etc. Attempts to meet current market expectations are moving the movement further in the direction of the status quo - they support the current paradigm and only better enable the industry to conduct business as usual.
Developing local food systems will have to address gaps in infrastructure, but we argue that logistical-type solutions must fit within a broader, more fundamental effort that is striving not just to change the geography of food production but the meanings and values - and accordingly practices - that underlie it. While there is nothing inherently harmful about “efficiency,” to achieve the environmental, social, and economic goals of the movement, we need to question accepted notions of efficiency and instill a different notion that is accountable and transparent. The efficiencies of the global market, in externalizing and hiding social and environmental costs, are false.

Localizing food production, while subsuming the work to get local food to markets, is fundamentally a social process. Changes to our food system require a shift in the way we think about and relate to food and eating, the expansion of an awareness that recognizes our role in sustaining or changing the status quo through our everyday actions, and the emergence of a different sensibility around our act(s) of consumption. This shift in consciousness is the foundation of systemic change. The collective enactment of this emerging consciousness - through the performance of different practices around food and eating - has the capacity to develop new patterns of interaction and disrupt the stability of the dominant food order (Perrett 2013).

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