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The Mechanics of the struggle for hegemony: A case study of Local Food

This lecture describes my relationship with the Local Food movement, and what it offers as a model for social change.¹

Biofoodography

In 1995, I was looking for a way to teach economics to students of color who wanted to empower their communities. I invented a course which I called "The Political Economy of Food", hoping that the topic would make economics more tangible. I taught this class for 14 years, during which food became a hot topic in the social sciences (and in communities of color) .

In 2005, I started an underground restaurant. There were various reasons for this. One was that the entire US anarchist left was rabidly campaigning for Kerry and I needed something else to do. Another was that I had been struck by Leo Panitch's description of Jewish radical culture in Canadian and Eastern US cities in the first half of the 1900s. He explained the density of community institutions through which people were learning, debating, and forming ideas about politics. Neighborhoods were saturated with the relevance and possibilities of political thought and action.² I started by inviting everyone I knew in Los Angeles to dinner.

Instead of politicizing people by exposing them to the violence of the police –as I had been doing in the alterglobalization movement– I tried politicizing them by exposing them to the taste of ripe heirloom tomatoes.

In 2008 Juliet Schor asked me to brief her on social movements literature, and I decided to re-read it. It was 10 years after *Naming the Enemy*, and I had experienced another 10 years of activism. Unlike my first tour through this literature, Eyerman & Jamison suddenly resonated, as did Melucci.³ And then one day Juliet looked at me over our Slow Food sandwiches and asked "Is Local Food a social movement?"

Even though I had been involved with food for so many years, the work I was doing didn't look or feel anything like what I had called 'activism'. There was no sense of being marginal, people from all political parties and social classes were interested, no one was accusing anyone of being a reformist, and perhaps most disorientingly, there were no cops.

Once I started trying to answer her question I recognized that a lot had changed since the first time I purchased some bulk food from a coop in 1987 and first bought black raspberries from a farmers market in 1990. In 2008, Local food was in every magazine on the rack except porn (actually, I didn't check) – news, fashion, fitness, design, cooking, parenting... Even the Left was starting to get it. (*Z Magazine* had peremptorily rejected an article I submitted in 1998 proposing that sustainability was a Left/social justice issue.)

By 2012, Local Food was putting \$4.8 billion of revenue into small farms, which meant they could be viable again, instead of an endangered species. In the same year, grocery retailers commissioned a report by market research firm ATKearney, which found 70% of respondents willing to pay more for local food (even 57% of low income respondents) – primarily because they believe it helps the economy. They also believe it offers more choice and is healthier.⁴

This market-based movement can no longer be reduced to individualistic expressive consumerism. It is organizing resources and engaging political conflicts and meme-wars. It has created and supported an economy that is about ethics, integrity, and respect for land, for animals, and for farmers. And it was built in the ruins of Wall Street.

So what can we learn about the struggle for hegemony?

In an attempt to make social theory useful and empowering, I try to translate concepts to relevant terms from popular culture. At the moment I'm experimenting with action movies as a trope for social movement struggle.

The Quest

In the alterglobalization and economic justice movements in which I participated as an activist since the early 1990s, there was always a lot of precision and angst and conflict about ideology and about tactics. We spent most of our time and energy policing the border between radical and reformist. And we replayed the 1960s' movements' plot of boys telling girls that they weren't militant enough. (There was less discussion about strategy than there should have been.)

Our quest was to get the ideology just right, and to make sure that everyone who

worked with us also had the correct ideology. Anyone who either chose or babbled a different ideology was playing for another team.

What I now believe we missed was the recognition that political ideas develop and deepen through experience in the movement. Alberto Melucci explains the role of alternative cultural spaces (he also calls them “laboratories”) in enabling people to experiment with new meanings and commitments. Someone who starts out concerned only about food safety may begin a journey in the Bio section of the supermarket. But as they discuss their concerns with friends, or want to know more than the labels tell, they may discover farmers markets, get to know farmers, and become advocates for peri-urban agriculture. A long time ago, Aimee Shreck and I jokingly theorized fair trade products as a “gateway drug to political economy”.

In other words, quests are quests. They don't begin atop Mount Doom.

Melucci looks at how identity, culture, meaning and space nurture “social conflicts” (political struggles) in “submerged networks”. The meaning people are making when they make shopping (or farming) decisions becomes political. These submerged networks of socio-cultural activity may ultimately shift what Eyerman & Jamison call “cosmology”. Social changes sought by movements may happen less as a result of discrete confrontations and more (and more durably) because of slow long-term shifts in beliefs and values. This “New Social Movements Theory” echoes newer social theory, which, in efforts to identify the infrastructure of oppression and tools of liberation, examines the power of discourse, the collocation of subjection and agentic subjectivity, the structuring and subversive pathways of feelings and desire, and the phenomena of excess, identity, heterogeneity, information, and the body.

Eyerman & Jamison argue that “it is precisely in the creation, articulation, formulation of new thoughts and ideas –new knowledge– that a social movement defines itself in society.” My version of the cosmological and cultural quest of the Local Food movement is “food as community, not as commodity”. There are countless articulations of this idea. The movement proliferates serious and cute jargon like “food sovereignty”, “slow food”, “foodshed”, “food justice”, “farm to table”, “urban farming”, “locavore”, “indie food”, “small batch” and “foodportunity”... There is a respect for diversity and local expressiveness. This ideolinguistic creativity has facilitated the movement's jujitsu; when ‘organic’ was coopted by corporations, the movement went deeper: “know your farmer.”

In my interviews with farmers and artisan producers, I ask them why people buy from them. The answer is startlingly consistent: “The story.” People are willing to pay more, make extra trips, suffer inconvenience, change their recipe – *because more*

meaningful than the commodity itself is the story. The story is the undoing of global commodity chains, which are all about making the story invisible. Symbol schemes like bio or fair trade don't give us the story, they just tell us that the story is ok. For Local Food the most important thing on the dinner table is the (unfinished) story, and the ethics and relationships it embodies.

In the ideology of the Left there is only one story. The main characters are The Worker and The Capitalist. Supporting roles are played by The Police, The Unemployed, and the Union-Party. Derivative versions may also include The Wife or The Worker of Color. Outcomes are binary: Revolution or More Capitalism. Critics debate the wisdom of collaborating with the Union, Wife, or Worker of Color and of direct confrontations with The Police.

In the Local Food movement, every farm has a story, every cheese has a story, every recipe has a story. And these stories are complex and unfinished. We wonder about the farmworkers, we wonder at the Chinese terrace farms, the chemistry of bread, and why grandmother's potatoes tasted best. We have learned to eat in the company of earthworms and piglets, incomplete labels and pending regulation, comfort foods and "fair" foods, soil and ghosts.

Avery Gordon researches histories that have been lost. In this enterprise she welcomes "haunting remainders". She is hospitable to ghosts with unofficial stories to tell.¹ The Local Food movement has been hospitable to the ghosts of animals, fragile varieties, distant farmers, humble farmworkers, displaced peasants, all the former inhabitants of burned rainforests, generations of home-cooks and their unwritten recipes. We have tried to find a place at our table for all of these and more. They've made dinner much more interesting as we develop our palate to taste the terroir, the history, culture, and political economy from which the food has come. And the conversation turns to how we can learn to cook in a way that supports a global food system that is just, diverse, and secure.

One of the histories that always seem to get misplaced is the role of communities of color in social transformations. The Local Food movement in the US actually began with a series of projects and white papers organized by the Community Food Security Foundation from 1994. Although this organization is defunct, Black, Latino, and Native American communities continue to be most active in urban gardening and urban food projects. The Food Trust builds farmers markets in low income neighborhoods and works with low income, urban schools. The Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative is a network of activists working in communities of color. In 2006, the chief marketing officer for the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets explained "What's changed is the relevance of local and organic produce. It is no longer an elitist thing."²

LexiconofSustainability.com offers "information artworks", each of which presents a concept or practice, a clue to the quest.

Heros

Eyerman and Jamison explain that social movements generate new roles. The local food movement has created new archetypes of heroism. Farmers, chefs, and butchers have become influential political leaders.

As farmers have moved into direct marketing (which has not always been an easy transition in terms of resources and personality), they have produced new identities valorizing their calling, as autonomous entrepreneurs, traditional agrarians, peaceful pastoralists, stewards, husbanders, and ecologists. Farmers are active teachers, discussing agronomy, varieties, and cooking. They are an army of bodhisattvas visiting the city. Full of joy, carrying novel perspectives on life, death, and money, as well as a level of scientific knowledge that astonishes their "educated" customers, these iconoclasts seem whole even though they are out of fashion. In 2008 an urban farmer, Will Allen, received the MacArthur Genius Grant.

Chefs have embraced a responsibility to create "sustainable cuisine" which means not only attending to issues of food production, but finding ways to do community nutrition and cooking education. Alice Waters created the Edible Schoolyard Project. Dan Barber researched how the Local Food movement can effectively change the global food system through his concept of "the third plate". Barny Haughton created the Square Food Foundation, which provides cooking classes to elders, sex workers, and troubled youth. "Food is a class issue...There's no reason why people with less money should have to eat rubbish. It's all about information and confidence and access to ingredients... it's cheaper to do it that way."³ Chef Ann Cooper's foundation is devoted specifically to reforming school food to ensure child nutrition.

The new heros have resurrected dead crafts, such as butchering and affineur (cheese manager), "Farmers market manager" has changed from a part-time job for an environmentalist to a career path. "Brokers" do personal shopping for chefs and "foragers" gather wild foods.

The new generation of butchers are especially impressive. They have taken responsibility for educating their customers in how to cook what Corey Mintz describes as "wildly inexpensive, unloved cuts of meat" to avoid wasting any part of the animals. They have relationships with their suppliers and work to build customers' palate for sustainably raised meats. This is called "nose-to-tail" eating. They talk about the renewal of local butcher shops as a "fulcrum" of the local food movement, and as creating a sense of place in neighborhoods.⁴

Even retailers have taken on a leadership role in the movement. Sam Mogannam purchased his father's grocery store, Bi-Rite Market, and has transformed it into a leader of small retailers. He works directly with farmers, even loaning them money to rebuild after fires and other problems. He has written a book, *Eat Good Food*, and founded a non-profit cooking education program, 18 Reasons. "We believe in the transformative power of food. We love good food and think that every person has a right to eat well." Mouth.com is an online retailer working "to help indie food companies thrive."

Eyerman & Jamison also point out that established intellectuals may be drawn into a movement, taking up positions as empathetic documenters, experts and theorists, antagonists, apologists, revivalists, organizational reformers, or ideologists/grand theorists who "study the ideology of the movement at the same time as she attempts to contribute to that ideology." Philip Howard maintains a bibliography of non-fiction books and documentary films made about food since 1998, currently numbering 395.⁵ Academics (and journalists) are writing about food culture, global economics, and nutrition in new ways. Novelists are writing about adventures into the cosmology of local food. And one of the most comprehensive texts, *New York Times* columnist Michael Pollan's's 2006 book, *Omnivore's Dilemma* spent 70 weeks on the NYT Bestsellers list as a hardback.

Academics have also built new interdisciplinary courses, programs, associations, journals, and library sections. Although not all focused on local food, the movement's push into public discourse that has helped to expand space for new scholarly knowledge. Demand from students for agroecology and ecogastronomy training has pushed universities to create new programs over the last decade, listed at food-culture.org and agroecology.org. (The number of these programs has tripled since I first analyzed this movement in 2008.⁶)

Young people, even highly educated ones, are keen to learn farming, and to help build community gardens. The website, goodfoodjobs.com lists opportunities in farming and artisan production to help entrepreneurs connect the generation of young people who want to do this ethical, meaningful work. They currently have 20,000 listings.

My next research is about artisan entrepreneurs' business decisions and values, which seem to take a route contrary to predictions by both microeconomics and the Left. I am studying how they make decisions about *resources*, how they want to *work*, and how they create *relationships* along the commodity chain and with the commodity itself. Chad Robertson of Tartine Bakery makes 175 loaves of bread a day. That's the right number. He spends the rest of the time teaching restaurateurs and home cooks to make their own bread. Charles Heying's research

on artisan industries in Portland finds collaboration, mentorship, and solidarity within and across industries, rather than competition. Paul Cavallo of Spitfire Motorcycles describes his work as “This is all about building something that has a soul.”⁷

Action movies tend to celebrate a hero, but he is never alone (and he almost always has a muse). Social change is only possible through collective action. Melucci argues that movements' fundamental task is the “formation of a more or less stable ‘we’ from which they generate “conflicts”. These conflicts make a crucial contribution to society by “asking questions about meaning.” Melucci identifies both collective and individual aspects of the “we”. Collective identity involves “making emotional investments, which enable individuals to recognize themselves in each other.” Melucci also acknowledges that collective identity is not enough. In the current historical era, action has meaning primarily for the individual: ‘if it doesn’t make sense to me, I am not participating; but what I do also benefits others’ ...”

And let's not forget the heroes at the last point of the commodity chain, who I'd rather call “cooks” than “consumers”. They cultivate new values, tastes and desires, and train themselves to what Robert Bellah et. al. call “practices of commitment”⁸ – to farmers and whole animals, to region and seasonality, to cooking in an ecosystem.

Gadgets

Activists of the Local Food movement have innovated new economic institutions. These institutions address places where the new economy gets stuck. But perhaps more importantly, they make people feel empowered about the possibilities for social change. So I call them “gadgets”.

The most familiar of these is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), through which a household invests in a farm's growing season and in exchange receives a weekly “share” of the harvest. The institution has become more sophisticated, through “multi-farm CSAs” which combine the offerings of several farms and through specialized software which enables cooks to customize the contents of their boxes. (One of the major challenges for CSAs is cooking skills. When cooks feel they are wasting unfamiliar or excess food, they tend to leave the program.)

Ensuing innovations have built on both the successes and failures of the CSA system. Farmigo.com facilitates direct relationships between farms and households, building on the CSA model of community-organized pick-up hubs. Worker-owned Three Stone Hearth offers members cooked food with a weekly menu. “Dinner-kit” schemes like Plated.com offer ingredients organized around a specific set of meals (recipes included). In San Francisco, Forage.co delivers

prepped ingredients for meals based on popular restaurants' recipes, so you can cook restaurant food in 20 minutes. LukesLocal.com offers customizable weekly boxes with a mix of prepared and meals to cook, along with kitchen staples, kids' food, and breakfast burritos. In Berlin, Kochhaus stores are organized around a series of tables, each containing ingredients for a beautifully illustrated recipe. You can gather all the ingredients for a set per-person price. All of these services use local, organic, free-range, ethical foods. (There are also dinner-kit delivery services which use industrial-quality food.)

Along with chefs and retailers' cooking classes, the cooking problem seems well in hand. To support farmers in their transition to direct marketing, which demands transportation and human resources, a new gadget is the Food Hub, which replaces exploitative middle-men with an ethical intermediary that provides transparency about pricing and maintains "source identity" throughout the process. More than 200 Food Hubs across the country organize and transport food to retailers, restaurants, and households.⁹

Small-scale livestock farmers face the problem that meat for retail sale must be safety certified by the government. The large meatpacking corporations bought up that part of the commodity chain, and farmers had no choice but to sell their animals to slaughterhouses at whatever price the corporations would pay. In order to take control of the transaction, they need to retain ownership through slaughter and butchery so that they still own the animal at the point of retail meat sale. Cooperatively owned abattoirs, mobile slaughterhouses, and other gadgets unified by the term "niche meat processing" enable farmers to share the costs of certification.

An innovation of the Community Food Security Coalition from the early 1990s was Food Policy Councils, which brought together government policy makers, charitable food banks, agricultural organizations, and other parties to identify interventions to promote sustainable and secure food systems. In 2014 there were 200 in the United States, 57 in Canada, and 6 in tribal nations. Sixty percent of FPCs are independent grassroots coalitions, 21 percent are independent nonprofit organizations, and 19 percent are government-appointed advisory bodies.¹⁰

Another important legacy of the Community Food Security Coalition was gadgets to supplement poverty programs and support healthy eating. Since the 1990s, mothers eligible for food aid have received additional coupons to spend at farmers markets through the WIC program. An additional program, SNAP, provides food subsidies to low-income families. Both programs have designed systems to enable certified farmers markets to accept the payment cards. In California, the public-private Freshworks program enables farmers markets to double the benefit. These programs are designed to increase recipients' purchasing power when

buying the healthiest possible food.

The concept of “food deserts” is used to describe neighborhoods without retail access to healthy, fresh food. In addition to urban gardens and CSA programs, other gadgets are mobile produce vending programs and “Healthy Corner Stores” projects, such as New York City’s healthy bodegas initiative, which enables stores to sell healthier food at the same price as junk food. And in New York City, the FRESH program will subsidize new retailers or renovations which meet specific criteria for offering fresh and healthier food.

The Union of Concerned Scientists has proposed a National Food Policy which would shift agricultural subsidies from corn and soybeans (pumped into junk food and feedlot animals) to produce needed to enable every American to eat the government’s recommended diet of 50% fruits and vegetables. Their economic analysis concludes that shifting \$90M of the current \$5B in subsidies would also produce 189,000 new jobs and \$9.5 billion in new economic activity. Without subsidies, junk food would take its true market price, higher than unprocessed foods.

One of the most long-standing food system innovations (also started by the Community Food Security Coalition) is Farm-to-School, which develops policies to enable school food services to buy directly from local farmers, as well as developing school gardens, and other agro-eco-gastro educational programs. 26 states now have supportive procurement legislation, and 40,000 US public schools now have programs, affecting 23 million students and spending \$385 million on local farm products.¹¹

University students have not only demanded agro-eco-gastro education, but that their administrations transform the campus food-service systems to support local farmers and provide students with higher quality food. Since 2008, the Campus Real Food Challenge has secured \$60 million in purchasing pledges. 27 Universities have committed to source 20% or more of the total food served from “real food” sources.

Melucci argues that spaces and laboratories where people can experiment with new meanings and practices are crucial to cultural change. Eyerman and Jamison also point out that movements develop organizational methods for sharing information. A visible and powerful spatial gadget is the market. In the US, farmers markets had declined so that in 1994, there were less than 2000 markets in the whole country. In California in 1970 there were no farmers markets. A social movement started and there were 7 markets by 1977, 52 in 1981, and 729 in 2011.¹²

But farmers markets aren't the only food-centered space. Underground Restaurants are events which are about decommodifying dining. Rising to popularity between 1999 and 2006, they have diverse agendas, but in general they are trying to expand how people think about food, cooking, and eating by getting strangers to converse over food, close to the chef. FindaSupperClub provides an international directory of underground restaurants.

Creating spaces and events where food is a destination is a way to get people to think about the pleasure they get from food and to convince them to invest in quality and in artisan producers. These spaces take the form of food truck vending zones to annual festivals. In Australia food festivals include cooking classes and lectures by chefs. Here in Berlin, in addition to traditional farmers markets, there are a number of entrepreneurial spaces celebrating artisan food. Markethall Neun has a street food market, a breakfast market, and a dessert market and Neue Heimat offers drinking and music surrounded by artisan food vendors all day on Sundays.

To support artisan food entrepreneurship, "culinary incubators" provide certified commercial kitchen space at hourly or daily rates.¹³ Access to this space allows food startups to produce goods legal for retail sale and to build businesses without capital investment. According to a 2013 recent report on the 135 incubators operating in the US, 61% of users are women, 28% are low-income, and 32% are people of color.

Outside of Europe, enthusiasm for artisan food outstrips producers' knowledge and skill. Cheesemakers travel to Italy to study. Sydney's Rootstock is an innovative natural wine festival at which organizers require that winemakers pour their wine in person and half of the festival is devoted to closed sessions for the winemakers to taste and teach one another. European winemakers are welcomed to the festival for free, as educational partners to the Australians and New Zealanders.

Urban gardening is full of gadgets, from agronomic innovations such as composting devices, aquaponics, raised beds to avoid contaminated soil, to educational services, such as City Slicker's free backyard gardening program, which installs vegetable gardens for low-income households and at low-income childcare sites. Urban farming programs often provide jobs and training for low-income youth. Growing Power transforms 44 million pounds of compost into one million pounds of micro-greens and vegetables while providing jobs and farmer training for urban youth at their sites in Wisconsin and Illinois. Growing Power offers subsidized baskets to hungry community members. City Slicker sells their organic biointensive produce on a donation basis.

Land-use regulations are a key gadget for making cities sustainable and food secure. Greenbelts, protections for peri-urban farmland, edible landscaping, and

urban farms can be developed and protected through legislation like California's 2013 Assembly Bill 551, which allows cities and counties to create tax incentive programs for urban farms.

Exploring the Lexicon of Sustainability images mentioned above, I was intrigued by an image presenting the gadget of "farm fairies". At full size I recognized that the farmer in this image is Jeff Broadie, who was part of my activist community in the early 2000s. He was a punk rock anarchist who lived on cigarettes and pizza and beer. But he took my food class, with a puzzled look on his face the whole time. Now he and his partner Kasey run a farm in Oregon. And this image is about how another couple (the "fairies") decided to invest in Jeff's farm, instead of trusting their money to Wall Street.

¹I have foregone citation where I believe the organization or information will appear promptly to a search engine. In a few places I have footnoted resource hubs which might not be obvious to searchers. Where possible I have named organizations by their websites rather than by their proper names. When quoting other authors, I adhere to academic protocol.

²Leo Panitch, "Back to the Future: Contextualizing the Legacy" in *Jewish Radicalism in Winnipeg, 1905-1960*, ed. Daniel Stone. 2003: Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada.

³Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*. 1991: Penn State Press. Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements & Individual needs in contemporary society*. 1989: Hutchinson.

⁴Kirk Johnson, "Small-Scale Farmers Creating a New Profit Model." 1 July 2012: *The New York Times*. James Rushing and Jens Rühle, "Buying into the Local Food Movement." January 2013: AT Kearney.

¹Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. 1997: U Minnesota Press.

²Kim Severson, "Greenmarket at 30 Searching for Itself". July 19, 2006: *The New York Times*, D1, D4.

³Kingsnorth, P. (2007, May 17). Local Hero: Barny Haughton. *Ecologist Online*.

⁴Corey Mintz, "The Way We Eat Now: Toronto's love affair with a new generation of innovative butchers". March 18, 2014: *Toronto Life*. On the revival of butcher shops, see Thrash Lab, "New Generation Butchers Revive the Craft" 9 January 2013: www.thrashlab.com.

⁵ Philip Howard's list is here www.msu.edu/~howardp/ along with regularly updated infographics portraying corporate consolidation of organic processed foods, seed, beer, wine, and coffee.

⁶Amory Starr, "Is Local Food a social movement?" December 2010: *Cultural Studies*. vol. 10 no. 6 479-490.

⁷Todd Oppenheimer, "Breaking Bread." October 22, 2010: *San Francisco Magazine*. Charles Heying, *Brew to Bikes: Portland's Artisan Economy*. 2010: Ooligan Press. Thrash Lab, "Custom Motorcycle Builders" 14 November 2012: www.thrashlab.com.

⁸Robert N. Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. 1985: University of California Press.

⁹To learn about food hubs, visit the National Good Food Network, www.ngfn.org/resources/food-hubs.

¹⁰The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for a Livable Future provides a directory and resources (such as sample legislation) for Food Policy Councils. <http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/projects/FPN>

¹¹The National Farm to School Network, www.farmentoschool.org provides extensive policy resources and archives of legislation.

¹²Russell Sydney *A History of the Farmers' Market Movement in California*. 2005: Santa Monica, CA.

¹³Econsult Solutions, Inc. "U.S. Kitchen Incubators: An Industry Snapshot." August 5, 2013: Philadelphia, PA 19102.