


# Local Food: A Social Movement?

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Amory Starr<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article analyzes the development of “local food” institutions from a social movements perspective. Over the last decade, institutions that “shorten the links” between producer and consumer have developed through a diverse collaboration of many social sectors (farmers, agronomic experts, retailers, chefs, food writers, and several distinct consumer sectors). Some agronomists and rural sociologists critical of the globalization and industrialization of agriculture have recognized this development as heralding Polanyian “reembedding” of market exchanges in social relations. This article analyzes whether and how local food is a social movement, using new social movement theory as an analytic framework.

## Keywords

organic food, local food, localism, community-based economics, social movements,

## Introduction

Just a few years ago, consumers’ fears about pesticides were trivialized and organic agriculture was dismissed as impossible at large scale. Today, organic is a US\$60 to US\$90B global industry (US\$12B in the United States alone), 80% of which is owned and operated by the same companies that sell “conventional”/chemical-grown produce (Sligh & Christman, 2003). But alongside corporate organic’s huge market share is another statistic: The 2007 Census of Agriculture showed an *increase* (of 14,631) small farms since 2002—the first reversal in decades of farm consolidation and loss (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2007, Table 8). Are these social changes evidence of a social movement or just market shifts? Theorists have proposed the realm of “everyday life” as a medium for social movements, but skeptics wonder if it’s possible for social movements to operate through consumption, which is individualist, incremental, nonconflictual, and nongovernmental. This article examines local food using social movement criteria.

La Via Campesina, an international movement of farmers, has since 1996 promoted the international policy concept of “food sovereignty,” the “right to feed oneself,” encompassing land rights, indigenous and agroecological practices, domestic market protections, and cultural preferences. In 1998, Francis Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins followed her groundbreaking vegan book, *Diet for a Small Planet* with *World Hunger: 12 Myths*, explaining how export agriculture, dependency relations, U.S. agricultural subsidies, “food aid,” and agronomic technology collaborate to create hunger and dependency in agriculturally rich Global South Countries (Lappé, Collins, & Rosset, 1998). Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thompson (1999) threw down the gauntlet to feminists, demanding they consider the Global

South impacts of a form of feminism that refuses to be involved in “dirty work” like farming. The implications of this analysis were that more third world land needs to be devoted to domestic consumption and first worlders need to curb their appetite. It was an argument that seemed academic and far away for decades after Harriet Friedmann first articulated “the political economy of food” (Friedmann, 1982). Today, it seems immediate and urgent and also much more possible.

U.S. agronomists, concerned about the fate of farmers here in the context of global commodity policies, have been encouraging direct marketing since 1995 (Feenstra, 1997; Henderson, 1998; Hendrickson & Heffernan, 2002; Hinrichs, 2000; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, Lezberg, Master, & Stevenson, 2000; Wilkins, 1995). Much of the literature on local food systems examines urban–rural innovations and policies, providing encouraging reports and correctives (Boström & Klintman, 2006; Cone & Kakaliouras, 1995; Dixon, 1999; Jarosz, 2000; Moore, 2006; Pelletier, Kraak, McCullum, & Uusitalo, 2000; Pelletier, Kraak, McCullum, Uusitalo, & Rich, 1999; Venn et al., 2006). A number of scholars have used the Polanyian (1944) concept of “embedded” economics (and its corollary, “reembedding”). In 2008, the struggle for hegemony over the meanings and goals of U.S. farming have finally made an impact on the Farm Bill, with a shift from corporate agriculture subsidies to farmland protection, conservation, and community-based healthy food systems (American Farmland Trust, 2008). It seems that

<sup>1</sup>University of California–Santa Barbara

## Corresponding Author:

Amory Starr, PhD, Sociology, University of California–Santa Barbara,  
PO Box 1198, Venice CA 90294  
Email: [starr@trabal.org](mailto:starr@trabal.org)

Tim Lang and Colin Hines' policy scheme to "protect the local, globally," may soon be recovered from the stigma of politically untenable "protectionism" (1993). By 2006, the *New York Times* summarized the discursive emphasis of local food and food quality by proclaiming "the year of food" (Burros, 2006). The *Times* participated in this development early and consistently, noting in 2004 that "the adage in agriculture to 'get big or get out' is being turned on its head by growers who are staying small, and getting much more profitable" (Schneider, 2004).

Local food as a concept has expanded and fulfilled several political projects: The organic project has avoided co-optation. International solidarity movements have helped develop new paradigms of global consumption. And post-modern concepts of individuals "making history" (Flacks, 1988), becoming reflexive (Beck, 1992, 1996), and exercising agency (Giddens, 1991) have manifested. But is local food a set of policies, a consumer fad, a new market, or a social movement?

Scholars of consumption have struggled to demonstrate that consumption should not be trivialized or moralized (Campbell, 1991; Schor, 2007; Slater & Miller, 2007) and several have emphasized the possibility of consumption as a site equally important to production for achieving sustainability (Cohen, 2006; Martens & Spaargaren, 2005), yet they have not demonstrated that it is collective or conflictual, hallmarks of a social movement. They have shown how politics now touches the everyday, where mundane activities (particularly food decisions) become politicized and those who are politically marginalized (or very busy) find some power to express their politics (Stolle & Micheletti, 2003).

Michele Micheletti argues that political consumption "politicizes what we have traditionally conceived as private consumer choice and erases the division between the political and economic spheres." Moreover, political consumption, she writes, "challenges our traditional thinking about politics as centered in the political system of the nation-state and what we mean by political participation" (2003, pp. 2-3). She directs attention to "responsibility-taking" and "virtue traditions." Focused on the actions of (virtuous) citizens, for her collectivity is aggregation. Similarly, in reviewing debates about the theory of "environmental modernization," Mol and Spaargaren (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000) ask how incremental change can become structural change. For social movements, collective action is distinct from the behaviors of individuals, however virtuous, reflexive, or agentic.

In detailed studies of the nature of this collectivity at farmers' markets and in box schemes/Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs),<sup>1</sup> James Kirwan (2004, 2006) finds that "relations of regard" (Offer, 1997) are part of the framework in which economic transactions are embedded and "reciprocity" goes beyond the market exchange to include "enjoyment and fulfillment in the transmission and extension

of knowledge as well as in the products to which the knowledge [was] attached" (Lee, 2000, pp. 139-140). Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007), writing in the context of consumer studies, find that CSAs differ from the "disembedded imagined communities" of "polit-brands" in actively coproducing ideology, "emotional immediacy, confidence in outcomes, direct participatory involvement, and personal engagement" and, most important, collective ideological praxis. The ideology includes "reconstituting rooted connections, engaging in practices of decommodification, working toward an artisan food culture."

The grassroots organic mobilization hasn't missed a beat as corporations have defined it as a market; it has refined its politics to the idea of "local food" purchased directly from small farms, eaten seasonally, and exchanged in a context of community and ecological education. This article uses social movement theory to assess the significance of this activity.

### Theory/Analytic Framework

Traditional social movements scholarship, concerned with "contentious action," busies itself with instrumental analysis, identifying resources, political opportunities, and strategic framing (Eisinger, 1973; Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Snow, Rochford, Jr., Worden, & Benford, 1986; Tilly, 1995; Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). There are two important difficulties with this approach to social movements. First, activists find it useless. It seems to merely inventory things they already know they need (and don't have enough of), rather than helping them understand how they might work better with what they do have. Second, this approach does not tell us much about the relationships, pathways, and trajectories that must connect social and political activity. It does tell us about individual pathways into politics through political consciousness studies but not about the subtle ways that social events take or avoid politically influential forms. Part of the problem is the short time-scale of social movement studies, which often aim to explain uprisings. Another part is the great difficulty of attributing causation over a longer period involving many and complex social and institutional interactions.

Based on European post-1960s movements (which followed a different trajectory than the U.S. ones), "New Social Movements" scholarship finds politics in grumpy and innovative social activity. Alberto Melucci emphasizes identity, culture, meaning, space, and the long-term nurturance of "social conflicts" in "submerged networks" (Melucci, 1989). Ergo, the meaning people are making when they make shopping (or farming) decisions might be political. And these submerged networks of sociocultural activity may ultimately shift their society's "cosmology" (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991) 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. The newer social movement 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.

Determining whether a phenomenon is indeed a social movement is one of the most vexing questions of the social movements field. 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" without which the larger society would not be able to escape "the apparently neutral logic of institutional procedures" (Melucci, 1989, pp. 26, 11).

The most popular question about social movements is whether they are successful. To make this assessment, we must know what it is that they are supposed to do? Surely most would be failures in terms of achieving their own most visionary goals. So do we judge them in terms of their having successfully created some phenomena of protest, organization, or confrontation? Eyerman and Jamison (1991) argue that social movements contribute *new ideas* to their societies: "Best conceived of as temporary public spaces, as moments of collective creation," social movements generate "ideals," which are carried by intellectuals in many roles, using new technologies created by the movement, and organizational methods of communication developed by the movement (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 4; also see Fraser, 1990). Introducing a new idea may take decades, including periods during which the ideas exist only in what Melucci calls "submerged networks."

A third question, particularly relevant to the study of local food, is what counts as social movement activity? Specifically, what about shopping? Along with Foucaultian scholars who focus on the body and everyday lives as sites of governmentality and resistance, Melucci argues that the body itself, in its most mundane everydayness, is a site of political discovery because it is the site of "expanding control" (Melucci, 1989, p. 123). It is here that new social movement theory makes space for food choices to become political. "We should not underestimate the conflict potential of the search for identity based on the body: it carries an enormous charge of cultural innovation and social transformation" (p. 124). Thus "alternative life-styles" should not be interpreted as "marginal or residual" but as "the appropriate response to new forms of control that no longer correspond solely to state action" (Melucci, 1989, pp. 124, 171).

For new social movement theorists, protests, membership organizations, and campaigns tell us little about social

movements. They require us to enter the empirically challenging world of culture, meaning, and identity. Some scholars of local food have already done so. DuPuis (2000) demonstrates that the refusal to accept risk (particularly to children, and particularly in the case of cultural staples) indeed give rise to "reflexive consumerism," an attempt to exert control. Most significantly, she argues that consumers' search for control conflicts with consolidated organic agriculture, leading to increasingly collective political formations.

To assess whether local food is a social movement, this article focuses on two key theoretical claims, Melucci's "we" and Eyerman & Jamison's "new idea," seeking to identify the cosmology, technology, media of dissemination, and intellectual roles developed around local food.

## Method

Seventeen years ago I unwittingly began a long-term participant-observation project about institutional and cultural development when a friend took me to a food coop in a Cambridge, Massachusetts basement. I have since been a consumer of organic produce in 5 cities in 3 states. In each, I have used farmers' markets, local cooperatively owned grocery stores, and both small and corporate grocery stores. My experience with CSAs is far more limited, but I have been a member of 2 CSAs in 2 states. In 1996, I began teaching a course on "the political economy of food," which traced shifts in agronomy, economic institutions, and consumption practices. With this development, my observations become more formal. Social scientists rarely have the luxury of such a long period of observation. The use of multiple methods (observation, discourse analysis [Dijk, 1988], and action research [Fals-Borda, 1987]) is customary in ethnography, as is iterative, inductive development of the research agenda in the field. In my case, the field turned into something significant while I was standing—or, shopping—and teaching in it. My long view helps me to see the shifting conceptual, institutional, and cultural landscape.

During the latter period (1996 to the present), I tracked the evolution of issues and discourse in the publications of Food First, the Community Food Security Coalition, and *The Ecologist* magazine (United Kingdom). I also tracked discourse on these issues in two mainstream publications, *Food & Wine* magazine and the *New York Times*. I completed a certified permaculture training course, and have tracked permaculture and urban agriculture email lists since 1997.<sup>2</sup> One of the CSAs mentioned above was at a permaculture farm, which I have visited and discussed with interns for 10 years. During this period, I made research visits to community gardens and farmers' markets wherever I traveled (including 10 U.S. and 6 non-U.S. cities). In 2002, on behalf of my university, I made investigative site visits to three other universities' sustainable agriculture programs.

Most recently, I undertook an action-research project, building a community social institution focused on local food. During the 2-year action research period, I spent 3 hr per week at farmers' markets, talking with farmers and fellow shoppers. While organizing the community institution and at our events, I had hundreds of informal conversations about food (varieties, seasonality, cooking, biotechnology, health, restaurants . . .) with people ranging from those who never cooked and had never been to a farmers' market to occasional farmers' market consumers.

### Analysis

*Formulating a "we" and sustaining it through sub-merged networks.* Has the local food movement formulated a "we"? And if so, how is it sustained? Movements create a "we" by "rendering common and laboriously negotiating and adjusting . . . the goals of their action; the means to be utilized, and the environment within which their action takes place." 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, 1989, pp. 26, 35).

The "we" of the U.S. local food movement had two moments of recognition; on a national level an identity appeared in the struggle for appropriate federal organic standards that challenged "regulatory occupation" of its ideas (Boström & Klintman, 2006). Without unifying, it then transformed, using ideas developed through dense but disconnected networks to move to a new analysis, a new "goal": accountable, verifiable, safe food, in which farmers retain agronomic authority and economic benefit. The "means" to be utilized changed from "symbol schemes" and "certification" to interpersonal trust and farm visits. Meanwhile, the "environment" in which this was all to take place was refined; personal relations between consumers (and their children) and farmers became the context for food purchases.

The second moment of recognition is less easily pinned down in time (and varied regionally), but it took shape through the emergence of a new kind of quality food, which carried specific values, relationships, and methods. Its means were constraints: seasonality, regionality, accomplished by close attachments to specific markets and farmers. Its values have shifted from predictability and standardization to historicity, diversity, and meaning. In Le Perche, France, "flight from the corporate world to an old farmhouse" has become a "familiar story" and farmers' children "feel strongly about the land . . . and return to live here" (Rossant, 2007).

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" (p. 49). Individual consumers of local food express a

collection of related critiques and values through "practices of commitment" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) to connecting with their farmers by "ritually" (Moore, 2006) shopping at the farmers' market rain or shine (or getting to the farm on the appointed CSA pickup day), cooking for themselves, reshaping desires around seasonality and regionality (a laborious and nontrivial act; Cone & Kakaliouras, 1995). 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.

Melucci provides a list of ways that the "we" is developed and sustained (p. 173). "*Alternative meanings and new codes*" may include "prophecy" and "paradox." (pp. 75-77). "Farming with a face on it" was one of the first new ideas of the movement, started in Germany and Switzerland and also in Japan in the early 1960s and becoming Community Supported Agriculture in the United States. This new language crystallized the concept that consumers personal relationships with their farmers could accomplish the interwoven goals of creating a more ecological society, increasing support for farmers as social actors, and verifying farming practices.

Several powerful paradoxes emerged. Although globalization promised consumers infinite, immediate choices of cheap commodities, people began to choose "hand-made" and "artisanal" goods and fragile "heirloom" varieties. As "sanitation" gained a new international enforcement through the WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary agreements, European activists created a new code, "endangered foods" (such as cheeses made in caves that haven't been cleaned for centuries). And some of the supposed beneficiaries of the globalization, high-end symbolic analysts, abandoned their cosmopolitan lives for "meaning" they asserted was to be found in goat raising and cheese making. New York's Greenmarkets are a "nutritional beacon in some neighborhoods and a fancy-food mecca in others" (Severson, 2006; quotation from photo caption).

"*Exchanges, circulation, and participation.*" Developing ideas offered by Appadurai (1986) and Abercrombie (1994), Dixon emphasizes a "cyclical . . . flow of authority" as "the defining relation in distribution and exchange." (Dixon, 1999, p. 157) This authority circulates through the intellectual networks of ecological and economic education organizations, chefs' ideas, home cooks, and farmers and artisanal producers. The joyful informal flow of encouraging ideas through the local food movement leads to the development of new products, new cuisine, new economic relationships, and new markets. Food blogging has democratized cookbooks and restaurant reviews, elevated by CNET's purchase of Chowhound (f. 1997) for US\$10M. (Duxbury, 2006)

The new organization of farm–consumer relationships has increased the autonomy of small-scale farmers. Farmers' markets receive licenses and permits from the state and municipality, but their internal policies are determined democratically by the farmers who participate. Markets are diverse and this diversity is protected by decentralized policymaking. CSAs also enable farmers to create their own timelines, crop diversity, choose who will eat their products, and set their own exchange policies. Farmers violate normal exchange relations when they give away samples, cut prices, and save special items for regular customers. They seduce their customers through personal histories, appreciation of varieties, visits to the farm, and good conversation.

On a more formal level, a polycentric network of organizations who do not agree about everything collaborate and copromote while acting autonomously to provide education (about cooking, health, composting, ecology for children and adults, political economy, food and agricultural history, varieties), policy projects (farm to school projects, lobbying on farm bills, opposition to free trade agreements, new USDA programs), alternative market possibilities (Fair Trade projects), training for farmers into direct marketing skills, and new institutions. These create new markets that enable people to practice their values (reducing footprint, supporting farmers, teaching children ecology) and participate in the emerging "we." The lack of centralization of the movement is noteworthy.

Black, Latino, and Native American communities have been most active among low income communities in establishing community gardens and developing local food projects focused on nutrition, culturally appropriate ingredients, youth education, experience of nature, and skills development.<sup>3</sup> This movement is old (established) in these communities and is constantly innovating (Klindienst, 2007). The Food Trust (f. 1992) builds farmers' markets in low-income neighborhoods and works with low income, urban schools.<sup>4</sup> The Healthy Corner Stores Network is focused on increasing the "sale of healthy, fresh, and affordable foods in small, neighborhood stores in underserved communities."<sup>5</sup> 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" (Severson, 2006).

Enthusiasm for local food confounds familiar battlegrounds. Advising a student group in 2008, my coadvisor and I experienced a shock unprecedented in our activist experience. The long-term strategic campaign we had helped the students define was obviated by an easy victory. The Director of Food Service wanted to serve sustainable food and was ready to do it. She had been waiting, wondering if there was sufficient student support to make a dining hall conversion successful.

"Cultural laboratories...individual investments . . . experimentation." Carolan (2006) studies the "experiment" of face-to-face "trust" as a method not only of securing safe food but also as an agentic experience between social actors, across significant occupational and cultural differences. When young people devote themselves in farm internships, demand organic agriculture training from universities, and leave cosmopolitan lifestyles to become farmers (Salkin, 2008), they are responding to new meanings and codes, participating in new ways, and they are making individual investments in a new life.

Organized only through cultural networks (including their own social networking site, [www.theghet.com](http://www.theghet.com)), underground restaurants require participants to engage in experimental and trusting relationships—make a reservation and pay for an unknown and inflexible meal, to be eaten with unknown people, cooked by nonprofessionals, in an informal and unfamiliar space. At these events, I noticed that people conversed with nearly all of the other guests, opening themselves to a rich social as well as gastronomic experience while exuding "I've never been to anything like this before. I observed that when educational material was offered (interactive wall maps, zines, and games), 75% of the guests participated (also see Defao, 2006; Karp, 2006; Lawrence, 2005). A patron of a NY underground resto writes "we shared a table with 8 strangers and actually spoke to them" (rbrite1, 2008).

"Spaces." Both CSAs and farmers' markets evoke abandonment of anonymous, defensive distance and entry into trusting, convivial, neighborly conversation atypical of public spaces characterized by distrustful course. Information flow at the market is not only rich and effective but also committed and caring. Farmers are concerned to inform their customers ("Now remember I won't be here next week!" "Personally, I like this one. It's not very pretty, but it's sweet and tart." "They're really not ready yet, it's going to be a couple more weeks before the flavor is there."). Customers tip farmers to trends, marketing opportunities, bring them seeds, and tell their farmers when they'll be missing a market. When a market shopper exclaims "what are these?" not only the farmer will answer with his favorite recipe but also fellow shoppers as well. There is an excitement and celebratory air to this exchange.

Aside from the direct purposes of these market institutions, their emergence is significant in the context of the decline of civic institutions. These agora do not simply provide a public good for consumption in mixed company. Bound together in sustaining the market's economy, participants share a politics but not a political party.

### *Creating a new idea*

Eyerman & Jamison propose a compatible way of analyzing social movements when they 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.” (1991, p. 55) There are four aspects of this activity: the creation of a cosmology/“utopian mission”/ emancipatory aims (Habermas), the creation and use of technologies, the mode of organization for production and dissemination of knowledge (pp. 68-69), and the proliferation of intellectual roles necessary to implement movement ideas in a variety of settings.

The “*cosmology*” of the local food movement is food as community (instead of commodity). The movement aims to build “local food systems,” based on ecological analyses such as watersheds, sustainable farming, seasonality, heritage of biodiversity, and cultural preferences. Food is transformed from a commodity to a pleasure made possible by human relationships, the limitations/specificities of an ecology, attentive husbandry of biodiversity, and responsible global citizenship.

The “*technologies*” used include agronomic innovations (agroecology, permaculture, biointensive, and biodynamic methods); innovations in economic institutions such as Community Supported Agriculture/“box schemes”<sup>6</sup> (and their diversifying iterations for different household sizes, cultural groups, and income situations<sup>7</sup>), restaurants owned by farmer’s unions (McKee, 2006), grocery stores owned by farmers (Schneider, 2004), farms owned by restaurants (Katauskas, 1999), Farm-to-School and Farm-to-College projects,<sup>8</sup> and community gleaning (volunteers gather leftovers from fields after the harvest; Varda, 2000); policy innovations such as the rediscovery of open markets, food subsidy (WIC/EBC) coupons accepted by farmers’ markets, incubators for value-added food processing (Bowen, 2006), education<sup>9</sup> and supports specifically for small farmers and direct marketers (Schneider, 2004), and farm incubators (Severson, 2006).<sup>10</sup> Part of what is important about these technologies is the demonstration that alternatives are possible: “to provide, in other words, not just an alternative point of view, but also the means whereby it can be made practicable.” (Melucci, 1996, p. 165)

The “*organization of production and dissemination of knowledge*” is prolific and decentralized. Indeed not a single lurid and contentious national convention has been held, yet the movement’s message gains presence and consistency. Knowledge is distributed through several modes.

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, 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. Farmers have been abruptly elevated to expert status. In 2008 an urban farmer, Will Allen, received the MacArthur Genius Grant.

Farmers’ market associations provide information tables, often including educational demonstrations regarding

seasonality, bees, home composting, and even cooking demonstrations (with a “market basket” from today’s offerings). The paragon “space” is San Francisco’s historic Ferry Plaza, renovated in 2003 as a permanent church of local food.<sup>11</sup> Hours of food tasting, learning about food and agriculture, and talking to farmers has been turned into a form of entertainment in a fundamental challenge to the experience, activity, and meanings of the supermarket. Cities are catching on to the economic and touristic benefits of local food. The County of Cornwall in England has a website and a magazine devoted to local food.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, box scheme/CSA farmers are as busy building an educational environment as reconceptualizing a transaction. Arranging for families to visit the farm for ecological education is one of the promised benefits, but as it turns out, what is crucial for success of the scheme is acclimatizing people to the joys and limitations of seasonal eating and teaching people to cook all the odd vegetables they will receive. (Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition, 1996). In a previous study, my colleagues and I learned how difficult it is for farmers to find time and develop skills for direct marketing. (Starr et al., 2003) Since that study, farm associations have begun to offer workshops.<sup>13</sup> CSAs demand they expand their skill set further.

A second mode of knowledge distribution is chefs. The best known of these is Alice Waters who, along with Jeremiah Tower and Wolfgang Puck, extended the ideas of nouvelle cuisine started to “make your menu from the marketplace every day.” (Elder, 2001) By 1985, California Cuisine had taken hold and gained national (Lindsey, 1985) and international attention. Rose Gray & Ruth Rogers opened The River Café in London in 1987. By 1993 an organization called Chefs Collaborative was founded in the United States on the idea of “sustainable cuisine.” “Eating is an agricultural act,” says Chef Dan Barber. (Genzlinger, 2004) But chefs didn’t just cook, they helped to build new institutions and were active educators, not only of their diners but also of local schoolchildren as well. U.K. Chef Barry Haughton, who started sourcing local and organic in the 1980s, offers cooking classes in his restaurant for low-income people: “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.” (Kingsnorth, 2007)

And chefs entered the chain of knowledge production as students of farmers, learning about heirloom varieties, seasonality, and meat production and processing. This learning has resulted in restaurants working to support farmers in many ways, such as learning to use unusual cuts of meat to help the farmer sell more of the animal. Several chefs have specialized in teaching people about alternative cuts of meat and offal (Clark, 2006).<sup>14</sup>

A third mode of knowledge distribution is media, from newspapers to newsletters. I use the term “secondary” media to describe how corporate-owned magazines and newspaper sections seen as filler or entertainment have leeway with regard to hegemony.<sup>15</sup> Food & Wine followed the spread of local food beyond Waters’ Chez Panisse, profiling “eco-conscious” chefs like Suzanne Goin in 1999 who saved her compost and returned it to her farmers. (Krader, 1999) For years I expected their articles on local food to be anomalies or fade away; but 7 of the 10 best chefs of 2007 were localist or seasonalist (Food & Wine Magazine, n.d.). In addition to glossy corporate and alternative media, the food movement has spread through a variety of political and social organizations (and their media) through the frames of child nutrition, food safety, toxins in food, and obesity and health concerns.

A fourth mode of knowledge distribution is ad-hoc social institutions. Small-scale farmers are sharing agronomic and marketing knowledge at small farm and organic growers conventions, with neighbors, and at farmers’ markets. Growing the supply and quality will attract more customers. Eaters collaborate to, in underground restaurants, as “locavores,”<sup>16</sup> or in what the Slow Food movement calls “convivia,” spaces where people “come together to share the everyday joys food has to offer” and to assert “our right to pleasure and our consequent responsibility to protect our heritage of food, traditions and cultures that go along with it.”<sup>17</sup>

Eyerman & Jamison’s final analytic category is “intellectual roles” invented by movements. (These may include social critics, professional partisan, counterexpert, grassroots engineers, public educators, credentialized movement intellectuals, administrators of formal organizations, campaign strategists.) In addition to spokespeople and strategists in a wealth of NGOs from the venerable Food First<sup>18</sup> to the newer policy-oriented Organic Consumers Association, the movement has indeed given birth to new occupations. Food policy councils transform faith-based and secular food bankers and soup kitcheners into advocates for sustainable agriculture and seasonal produce-based nutrition for their constituents. “Farmers’ market manager” has changed from a part-time job for an environmentalist to a career path. “Brokers”<sup>19</sup> and “foragers” (Hunt, 2006; Thomas, 2004) know all the local farmers and their daily harvests and do personal shopping for chefs. Institutional food buyers, retrained by students and parents, are learning to evade contracts with corporate distributors. A new sub-specialty of chefs is school cafeteria cooking, consistent with the goals of Farm-to-School. They intern with Ann Cooper (Schrambling, 2007).

The traditional job of affineur (cheese manager) has returned. Meat fabricators—nearly extinct in the United States where meat is butchered into standard cuts on an assembly line by workers who only make a few specific

movements—are in demand by a few “custom” slaughterhouses. Adam Tiberio is one of a new generation of butchers and fabricators. He teaches chefs about nonstandard cuts and to cut and cure. According to James Lionette of Lionette’s Market, “5 years ago, the slaughterhouse I bought pork from was throwing away the heads and feet. I could not get the jowls to make guanciale, which is better than bacon and pancetta. I could not get the feet for customers who want them. Now, they are starting to understand and it’s getting easier.”<sup>20</sup>

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” (pp. 41-42). An impressive bibliography compiled by Phillip Howard documents more than 140 nonfiction books and 60 documentary films made about food since 1998.<sup>21</sup> 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, a *New York Times* columnist’s 2006 book, spent 70 weeks on the NYT Bestsellers list as a hardback. (Pollan, 2006) Indeed, there is so much intellectual activity that one sociologist has penned against a critical perspective on food. (Glassner, 2007) Academics have also built new interdisciplinary courses, programs, associations, journals, and library sections.<sup>22</sup> Although not all focused on local food, it is the local food movement’s push into public discourse that has helped to expand space for new scholarly knowledge.

## Conclusion

Although the withdrawal of Northern consumers’ purchases from the global commodity markets may immediately neither cause the financial collapse of those systems nor return more resources to people of the Global South, its more important effect is hegemonizing a new cosmology (or paradigm) of food production, distribution, and consumption. This movement deserves many more investigations to gain deeper and clearer understandings of its social construction and production, its “purposive, meaningful . . . orientation,” its “relation between intentions and constraints, possibilities and limits” (Melucci, 1996, pp. 386-387).

Already, several scholars have taken issue with the local food framework (and the enthusiasms of agricultural scholars): In 2003, Volume 19, No. 1 of the *Journal of Rural Studies* highlighted debate among scholars regarding the politics of local food, including concerns about its impotent size and alternative orientation, its class positionality, and its commitment to social justice (Allen, et. al. 2003; Buttel, 2001);

DuPuis & D. Goodman, 2005). Morgan, Marsden, and Murdoch (2006) respond that the dichotomization of “place/provenance” and “power” is inaccurate. These critiques reaffirm the importance of this article’s research question: Critiques of the politics of local food have treated it as a set of institutions, policies, or commodities. If, instead, local food is a social movement, then we would understand its promise as a participatory process and long term dialogue. From a social movement’s perspective, elite interests and activities could alternately strengthen the existing system or provide a resource for movement activity. To properly assess their contribution, the many projects and expressions of current food and consumption trends need to be considered in the context of social movements.

Movement critics (academic and activist) tend to write like restaurant reviewers, assessing the worth of a movement’s “product” (always expected already to be running at peak performance). I have recently come to see social movements are long, stuttering conversations in which conversants do not begin with the same mother tongue but over time develop both linguistic and cultural literacy. I see social movement culture functioning as a process of recognition, query, and expansion, repetitious, slow, but growing bigger in each conversation. Consumers join box schemes for a variety of reasons, which a critic might see as politically inadequate. But through participation their politics expand to embrace more issues promoted by the CSA framework (Kirwan, 2004, 2006). What this means is that rather than looking for correct analyses when we look at events—we-think-or-hope-might-be-or-become-social-movements, we should look for trajectories and expansions. The question for a social movement should not be “what has it done?” but “what are its vectors of expansion?” Movements’ agendas and ideologies are rarely investigated by traditional social movements’ scholarship (Oliver & H. Johnston, 2000). But which direction the movement is headed is a matter of grave concern to observers. Has the Fair Trade movement won or lost the battle with Starbucks? Has the organic movement won or lost when WalMart sells it?

A second important and difficult implication of this project is the relationship between social movements and entrepreneurship. But put more precisely, the question is the relation of the Left and the market. Anticapitalists generally spurn market projects as ideologically inadequate pragmatism. The limitations of the market as a place to solve global social problems have been precisely articulated by critics of fair trade. (Johnston, 2001; Shreck, 2005) But anticapitalists have innovated precious few strategies engaging to the alienated, individualistic, fearful consumer culture we find ourselves organizing in. If the market is where society increasingly spends its time and attention, then we need to learn to organize in the market, keen to identify its fissures and expand them into new worlds. This

is not reformism or apologetics, it is recognizing the historical-political-cultural reality in which we find ourselves and those with whom we would like to make revolution.

Social movements will take place in the market. The question is whether the Left will deign to work with these movements. For those who participate in alternative food movements, their market activity is an inchoate longing and urge to protect things that never should have been marketized in the first place—health, ecology, farms, locality, artisanship, community relations. I would argue that we should not allow ourselves to be overly concerned with whether these transactions are romanticized, individualistic, or superficial. As Piven & Cloward pointed out so wisely, organizers do not create the conditions for revolt, but they may play a role in guiding the energy. Radicals have the choice to disdain this energy, to dissipate it, or to concentrate it and guide it to become more powerful. In my view, the role of organizers is to encourage this sentiment into a powerful form, not to critique the location of its emergence and the limitations of its current expression.

Social entrepreneurship is a model of social change quite different than social movements, but it is not necessarily for-profit. (Bornstein, 2007) Responding to a political landscape that seems to offer only dead ends, energetic social entrepreneurs are making things happen with resolute utopianism. They are creating space, enabling new experiences, innovating, and providing meaningful jobs for other people who want to work their values. Social entrepreneurship as an approach to social change is personalistic, isolated, and unaccountable, but also experimental, decentralized, agile, and multi-issue. And entrepreneurs know that cultural relevance is necessary to their success, a lesson many social movements refuse to learn.

I recently faced the significance of social entrepreneurship to the landscape of social movements in the denouement to a painful and poignant conflict with my local food cooperative. I had offered to help them identify local producers. They ignored me. They had also suppressed labor organizing and fired two workers, triggering concerns about racism. The board rebuffed members organizing on these issues. Down the street a social entrepreneur opened a small grocery advertising a company “mission” committed to fair trade, local products, and good jobs. They stocked the store based on customer requests. And it’s a hip scene. A worker told me that the next goal of the thriving market is the ambitious project of providing health insurance for the workers—this is not even on the agenda of the coop.

The growing green consumption movement seems in danger of a form of marketization, which does not necessarily serve its values. It might learn from how the local food movement has expanded its values as it has built a market. In my ongoing research, I am keen to explore the possibility of rebuilding an artisanal economy for household goods.



(I call it “slow objects” or “local stuff”) I am interested in the possibilities of artisanal production to simultaneously address employment, sustainability, social justice, and the experience of work (which I distinguish from working conditions).

The local food movement is remarkable (although not unprecedented) in its use of pleasure (Campbell, 2006; Haraway, 1991; Shepard, 2010; Soper, 2007) to push political analyses forward. Not only do most participants willingly inconvenience themselves but also they do so with deepening joy and increasingly significant effects. Stephen Pfohl argues that “embodiment”—touching the vegetables, smiling at the farmer, cooking the food—is an overlooked dimension of liberatory impulses and practices. (Pfohl, 1992) And certainly for farmers and artisans themselves, who are often not making much money, it is the sensual material embodiment of ecology and craft that is satisfying. It is an important sign of the movement’s evolving politics that this joy is inclusive and expansive, welcoming and enthused about diversity. By creating and investing with meaning social and economic space around modes of production and exchange, this movement has generated a lively space of inclusive discourse, yet with evolving normative terms. Overwhelmed by the market, we may recall Chayanov’s (1926) point that “food is different” (also see Rosset 2006). I have witnessed, on hundreds of occasions, farmers enthusiastic to share their abundance, filling our baskets with new economics. And this movement has given birth to a new generation of farmers, a wholly unexpected and striking event.

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### Notes

1. An economic arrangement in which consumers purchase a “share” of the harvest up-front. This share entitles them to a proportion of the farm’s seasonal fate of abundance and loss.
2. Permaculture is a design system for human habitats based on observation and patterning of local ecosystems. One of the first articulations of sustainability, the system was developed by Bill Mollison & David Holmgren during the 1970s (see Mollison et. al. 1978, 1988, 1991). There are permaculture training institutes all over the world.
3. See [www.foodsecurity.org/](http://www.foodsecurity.org/)
4. See [www.thefoodtrust.org](http://www.thefoodtrust.org)
5. See [www.healthycornerstores.org](http://www.healthycornerstores.org), Bolen and Hecht (2003) Factsheet on land use planning “To get more fruits and vegetables in your neighborhood” from Planning for Healthy

Places, a project of Public Health Law & Policy at the Public Health Institute, <http://www.healthypartners.org>

6. See [www.localharvest.org/csa/](http://www.localharvest.org/csa/). The French version is <http://alliancepec.free.fr/>
7. Toronto’s Good Food Box program transformed charity food money to subsidized produce boxes. The program grew from 40 boxes in 1994 to 4,000 in 2003, distributed through 200 neighborhood drop-offs, with affordable fees payable by the box, starting at US\$12. See [www.foodshare.net](http://www.foodshare.net)
8. The Community Food Security Coalition supports farm-to-school connections in all kinds of institutions. Resources at [www.foodsecurity.org/farm\\_to\\_school.html](http://www.foodsecurity.org/farm_to_school.html). In November 2007, 150 student leaders met at Yale University (whose cafeterias use 40% local food) to strategize a challenge to area universities on their local sourcing. See <http://www.yale.edu/sustainable-food/RealFoodSummit.html>
9. Colorado State University Extension in Boulder County offers evening classes to help new farmers explore farming as a business and intermediate and experienced farmers refine their business, production, and marketing skills. <http://www.coopext.colostate.edu/boulder/AG/smallfarms.shtml>
10. In addition to state programs, Whole Foods’ pilot “Local Producer Loan Program” funds farm expansion and capital expenditures (not operating expenses) at 80% of costs and up to US\$50,000.
11. [www.ferrybuildingmarketplace.com/](http://www.ferrybuildingmarketplace.com/). The Farmers’ Market is now run by the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture. [www.cuesa.org](http://www.cuesa.org)
12. See [www.insidecornwall.co.uk](http://www.insidecornwall.co.uk) and [www.foodfromcornwall.co.uk](http://www.foodfromcornwall.co.uk)
13. North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association [www.nafdma.com](http://www.nafdma.com). Example: Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont’ 3rd Annual Direct Marketing Conference, Vermont Law School, January 2008.
14. See Chris Cosentino’s guide to all good guts: [www.offalgood.com/](http://www.offalgood.com/)
15. Amory Starr, “Post-9/11 media observations,” unpublished. Secondary but corporate media unincorporated into the news hegemony ran stories about humanity and culture in Afghanistan while the rest of the media beat war drums.
16. See [www.100milediet.org](http://www.100milediet.org), [www.locavores.com](http://www.locavores.com)
17. See [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)
18. Founded by Frances Moore Lappé, author of *Diet for a Small Planet*, and Joseph Collins, author of *World Hunger: Causes and Remedies* (1974), Food First has published some of the most influential books on food, including Lappé & Collins, *World Hunger: 12 Myths* (1986); Weir & Shapiro, *Circle of Poison* (1981); Strange, *Family Farming* (1988); Bello, *Dragons in Distress: Asia’s Miracle Economies in Crisis* (1990).
19. A nonprofit organization founded in 1996 by a fair trade advocate, “Red Tomato’s mission is connecting farmers and consumers through marketing, trade, and education and through a passionate belief that a family-farm, locally based, ecological,

- fair trade food system is the way to a better tomato . . . . Our principle concern is the survival of small growers. " <http://www.redtomato.org/>
20. Lionette's Market event, "The Art of Butchering a Pig," Saturday January 19, 2008.
  21. Website of Dr. Philip H. Howard, Michigan State University, <http://www.msu.edu/%7EHowardp/booksfilms.html>
  22. UCSanta Cruz, Tufts, NYU. The Canadian Association for Food Studies (f. 2005) lists academic programs, conferences, and networks of scholars, [www.foodstudies.ca](http://www.foodstudies.ca), [www.gastronomica.org](http://www.gastronomica.org). Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh: [www.clpgh.org/subject/food/foodstudies.html](http://www.clpgh.org/subject/food/foodstudies.html) University of Michigan: [www.lib.umich.edu/grad/collections/foodstudies/](http://www.lib.umich.edu/grad/collections/foodstudies/)
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## Bio

Amory Starr is the author of *Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization*, the first systematic survey of the movements, which would shortly converge into the antiglobalization movement, and *Global Revolt: A Guide to Alterglobalization*, which distills the movement's concepts, dilemmas, and tactics. She is coauthor of a forthcoming book on the social control of the alterglobalization movement. Her PhD is from the University of California—Santa Barbara Department of Sociology.