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## From Food Justice to a Tool of the Status Quo: Three Sub-movements Within Local Food

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**Abstract** The local food movement has been touted by some as a profoundly effective way to make our food system become more healthy, just, and sustainable. Others have criticized the movement as being less a challenge to the status quo and more an easily co-opted support offering just another set of choices for affluent consumers. In this paper, we analyze three distinct sub-movements within the local food movement, the individual-focused sub-movement, the systems-focused sub-movement, and the community-focused sub-movement. These movements can be combined within any particular campaign or within the goals of any particular organization or individual activist, but they are nevertheless quite different from each other, and come out of different conceptualizations of what food, people, and locality are. We argue that most of the critiques leveled against local food are actually directed against the individual-focused sub-movement, which is most compatible with the current industrial food system, and perhaps not surprisingly receives the most mainstream attention. Further, we argue that while each movement has its own strengths and weaknesses, it is the community-focused sub-movement that has the most potential to radically transform the global food system.

**Keywords** Local food · Food justice · Food security · Food sovereignty · Ethical consumption

### Introduction

Food is intimately bound up in our economy, our environment, our communities, our health, and many other important aspects of our lives. Increasingly, food is

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also seen as an area where issues of autonomy and democracy arise (DeLind 2002; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Sbicca 2012). For example, in the modern industrial food system, where food is produced on massive farms with the labor of a minimum number of people and shipped all over the world, people lose control over what they eat to large corporations and government policies (DeLind 2002; Guthman 2008, 2004; Vandermeer and Perfecto 2005). They are reduced to the apparent but ultimately shallow choices of brands and flavors in a supermarket. They also lose knowledge of the food that is a part of their lives, from how to produce it, to a full account of what's even in it (Turner and Turner 2008). Expanding the industrial food system is often seen as an important part of preventing famine, but even if it makes more food "available" in some sense, as Sen (1983) and others have argued, it worsens these moral and political problems (Crib 2010; Collier 2008).

One way to address these problems that has been widely proposed is the idea of local food (Dahlberg 1993; DeLind 2002; DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Many see this as a valuable economic strategy and social movement that can help individuals and communities regain their ability to control, understand, and influence the food they eat (Mount 2012; DeLind and Bingen 2008). Further, as we will see, some argue that it is a useful step in creating or recreating more vibrant communities and more ethical relationships at all levels of society, from the local to the global. At best, it might be a part of Dahlberg's (1993) concept of a "regenerative food system"—a system of interconnections at multiple levels, each with their own goals and values that contribute to the overall health and regenerative ability of the system, and which does so with what he calls the "The three E's-Ecology, Ethics, and Equity." The local food movement might be part of a way for actual regenerative systems of individuals, communities, and inter-community relationships to form, because it forges connections while making participants at all levels healthier.

However, there are also some reasons for concern. Critics have pointed out that some trends within the local food movement threaten to undermine its stated goals (Chicagoist 2009; DeLind 2011; Mitchell 2009). In this paper we will separate the local food movement into three fairly distinct sub-movements: The individual-focused sub-movement or IF, the systems-focused sub-movement or SF, and the food community-focused sub-movement or CF. We will argue that these three sub-movements each have their strengths and weaknesses, and that these come out of their different definitions of food and people. Perhaps not surprisingly, the movement with so many problems that it is the least likely to be effective is the one most prevalent in mainstream discourse.

### **Individual-Focused Sub-movement**

The individual-focused sub-movement or IF is the dominant sense in which the term "local food" is used, particularly in mainstream contexts. In this sub-movement, local food is seen as a choice made by individuals for a variety of

reasons, with that choice having far-ranging effects (DeLind 2011; Pollan 2009).<sup>1</sup> Because local food is conceived of as an individual dietary choice, it can be easily supported by people who are not strongly involved in issues like justice or environmental concern. Rather, they can just enjoy the taste of freshly-picked, ripe food, the interaction with farmers and others in their community, the increased awareness of the seasons and their landbase, and so on. This sub-movement can be viewed as the intersection of the local food movement with what is sometimes derisively called “lifestyle politics,” such as the recycling movement.

Proponents within IF argue that these easy-to-embrace choices can have profound impacts (Pollan 2009; Kingsolver et al. 2008). Environmentally, fewer food miles can greatly reduce the pollution associated with our food, and food grown in the US might be more likely to have less toxic pesticides. Economically, choosing to purchase local food takes money away from large corporations and puts it in the hands of members of one’s community (DeLind 2011). This by itself might be seen as a more just relationship than the vast majority of profit going to the grocery store rather than the farmer, and it has the added benefit of keeping money in circulation within one’s own community, which can arguably improve the local economy. Socially, it is hoped that Community Supported Agriculture, farmers’ markets, and the like will help bring people into more contact and eventually a better relationship with their neighbors, allowing their communities to flourish (DeLind 2002; Lyson 2004). From a public health perspective, there is reason to believe that eating local food will also improve people’s health, by reducing the amount of processed food consumed, and hopefully making people more mindful of what they’re eating overall (Anderson et al. 2001; McCormack et al. 2010). These consumer choices can have profound influence on the behavior of large retailers as well. Wal-Mart, to pick one telling example, now aggressively pursues local produce and advertises it as such in their superstores (Pollan 2010).

These benefits come out of the conception of food employed by this sub-movement. For IF, food is a *product* whose consumption benefits or harms individuals. If individuals use their power as consumers, they can represent a force for changing how food benefits or harms people. This can be a local, national or more global phenomenon, allowing efforts at multiple scales—one can think very “small” in terms of a local based consumer movement with the confidence that there is a cumulative effect to one’s efforts.

This movement is very well-represented in mainstream discourse, and indeed can be seen as the public face of the local food movement. As DeLind (2011) says of the “locavore” phenomenon, which can be seen as part of IF,

Locavores and would-be locavores (theoretically the public-at-large) are told repeatedly through popular films (e.g., *Supersize Me*, *Fast Food Nation*, *King Corn*, *Fresh, Food, Inc.*), and books (e.g., *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *In Defense of*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the development of this trend, see DeLind’s (2011) article “Are local food and the local food movement taking us where we want to go? Or are we hitching our wagons to the wrong stars?” published in *Agriculture and Human Values*. In addition, see works by Michael Pollan (2009), such as *A Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*, and other works by popular local food writers.

Food, Animal, Vegetable, Miracle) and media features (e.g., PBS, NYT, Yes!, Mother Jones, Business Week) that they—as individuals—can effect change one vegetable, one meal, and one family at a time. It suggests that what is wrong with the world (from monocultural practices, to obesity, to global warming) can be addressed through altered personal behavior (p. 276).

## Critique of IF

However, IF is not without its critics. One set of problems comes from IF's conception of who we are. Delind (2011), in her critique of the local food movement, has pointed out that the discourse on "locavores" fundamentally privileges the individual. The many wide-ranging problems with the food system are seen as being addressable by your personal changes, rather than looking at these systems or working collectively. This can let us off the hook from the much harder work of actually addressing systematic problems while still letting us feel that we are one of the ones who care and are making a difference. Moreover, Delind points out that this locavore is defined not only as an individual but as an individual *consumer*. It is their purchasing choices which will solve the health crisis in America and the myriad problems with industrial agriculture. Delind argues that being a consumer who wants to "vote with their dollars" and who values "choice" doesn't reflect the full range of our identities as "residents, poets, bus-drivers, grandmothers, and neighborhood activists" (p. 276). It also forecloses many possible avenues of change that would be opened to us if we also saw ourselves as citizens, neighbors, or just humans.

Part of the problem with making the individual locavore the main actor in local food's attack on the status quo is that the current food system *already* sees food decisions as being truly up to the individual. For example, issues in public health like obesity and diabetes are often seen as being reducible to questions of individual choice to eat healthy or unhealthy food (Horgen 2001). We might support educating individuals about their supposed free choices and the consequences thereof, but in much of mainstream discourse it is still ultimately up to each person to "do the right thing." This is profoundly inaccurate, and overlooks predictable injustices along class, ethnic, and gender lines. IF perpetuates this illusion of control by giving people (who can afford it) yet another choice they ought to make for themselves.

In addition to critiquing IF for its definition of people as individual consumers, this sub-movement can also be criticized for its definition of food solely as a product (DeLind 2011). If food is something merely purchased and consumed, then other relations it creates and is created by (which we will discuss later in the paper) are missed. Additionally, food-as-product is more easily co-opted by those with the resources to dominate production and distribution in this economy. Delind (2011) calls this the "Walmart emphasis". Walmart has gone for local foods in a big way, and for good reason. Not only does it save money on transportation cost, but they can use their massive purchasing power to distort what local growers are producing, making the farmers dependent on these regional chains and ensuring that they will create what Wal-Mart wants at the price they want it. At the same time, "local" is

one of the “good words” like organic, fair trade, and so on, but local is seen as much more easily achievable than these other words with their third-party or even governmental certifications. It allows people to feel that they are contributing to a better and more just food system, while still enjoying Wal-Mart’s “signature low prices” and convenience, even though these are ultimately irreconcilable (DeLind 2011, pp. 277–278).

Further, the current food system depends on people lacking knowledge of how food-as-product is produced and distributed, and about its nutrition. This is manifested in part as a politics of expertise. We are supposed to simply trust that the FDA and USDA (in the US), and the corporations that increasingly produce and distribute our food will ensure the safety of food and its nutritious content. This leaves us at the mercy of unexaminable experts and private corporations; as critics since at least Feyerabend (2010) have pointed out, this is hardly a conducive situation to democracy.

Delind’s (2011) and others’ critiques show that IF perpetuates these problems. People rely on a new set of (dubious) experts who recommend eating local food as a good “choice”, and corporations still have a central influence over us. If the current food system is one where democratic participation and control is deeply lacking, then this movement is just as anti-democratic, even if it does have some benefits environmentally or economically. Unfortunately, most people who offer these critiques, such as Delind, see these as problems for the local food movement as a whole, rather than problems for a specific sub-movement within the larger movement, and coming out of this particular sub-movement’s concepts of food and people. As we will see, there are other concepts at play in other sub-movements.

### **Systems-Focused Sub-movement**

In Kenneth Dahlberg’s (1993) paper “Regenerative food systems: Broadening the scope and agenda of sustainability,” he stressed the necessity of analyzing whole systems when looking at food. This is the systems-focused sub-movement or SF. The main difference between SF and IF can be seen in their answers to the question “What can I do about it?” Rather than answer with strategies based on personal consumer choice, SF talks about modifying laws and policies, changing or creating new organizations, and institutional involvement to address things at a systems level. This sub-movement can be seen as the intersection between the local food movement and the food security movement (which will be defined below), which is the concern of organizations like FAO, IFAID, the IMF, and the World Bank. What differentiates SF within the larger local food movement from the overall conversation of food security is the argument that part of the solution to the problems of the current food model is altering the system such that it promotes local food production and consumption. This is because local food both avoids many of the environmental, economic, and political problems of the current system, and increases people’s ability to feed themselves and eat the kinds of food that match their cultural and personal preferences.

For example, the FAO defines food security as “A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and

nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2003, p. 28) (“Trade Reforms and Food Security,” p. 28) While the FAO is no absolute champion of local food, it does admit that it has its uses: speaking of the “wealth multiplier” of investing in agriculture, it says “The multiplier is most significant where any incremental income generated is spent on labour-intensive, locally produced nontradable goods and services, (for example, where basic food is the main consumer expenditure item) and where production in the commodity generating the increase in income is labour-intensive.” (“Trade Reforms and Food Security,” p. 78) SF advocates (including those within major organizations such as the FAO) stress these and other benefits of local food, and see the way forward as requiring international organizations to change structures and institutions to encourage this kind of local production.

Put another way, for SF food is not understood only as a product consumers buy and sellers sell, but also something that is always institutionalized. SF accounts for many of the assumption of the first movement, but adds that actions to change the benefits or harms of food always occur in institutional contexts. The complexity of institutions makes it difficult to make change unless the institutions are also changed, and so the emphasis falls on advocacy and policy.

Systems-focused sub-movement is therefore not particularly vulnerable to the critiques discussed for IF. It defines people not as individual consumers, but as citizens and activists who are necessarily engaged with an eye to altering the system. Thus SF promotes engagement and participation rather than passivity and “choice.” When food is defined as being inherently institutional rather than as a product, companies have a harder time co-opting the movement. If the intention is to pass laws to make the practices of megamarts illegal, it’s difficult for that to be offered in Wal-Mart’s grocery aisles.

## Critique of SF

This is not to say that SF is without problems of its own. The food security movement, even in its manifestation as SF, integrates communities into neoliberal globalization.<sup>2</sup> The problem with conceiving of both food and people as inseparably bound up in systems is that one is committed to those systems, albeit while trying to overhaul them. This globalized economic system has long been criticized for its inequity and injustice against poorer people, indigenous communities, minorities, and other marginalized groups. This is true both in the sense that the global food system tends to reduce their cultural identity, and the institutions have historically benefited the wealthy and powerful. As William Schanbacher (2010) argues in his book *The Politics of Food: The Global Conflict between Food Security and Food Sovereignty* (recall that food security overlaps with SF) “Ultimately, the food security model is founded on, and reinforces, a model of globalization that reduces human relationships to their economic value” (p. ix).

<sup>2</sup> Neoliberalism is, roughly, a form of liberalism that promotes the distribution of goods via an unregulated market system. For more information, see Mirowski and Plehwe’s (2009).



Further, there may well be environmental degradation as part of the systematic maximization of food production. For example, a systematic approach to maximizing food security may well include GMO's, intensive use of chemical fertilizers, and other accoutrement of the green revolution. Even if these foods are then consumed locally, this still weakens the fertility of the land and has other side effects on the environment that we don't yet fully understand.

Proponents of SF will say that these systems are the most effective levers for enacting change, and that the problematic nature of the institutions can be reformed. However, this possibility for reform is an open question. Some critics, including Schanbacher (2010) and Whittman (2010), argue that the assumptions built into the institutions engaged in SF will infect any attempt to help the global food crisis. As Whittman argues, "These contemporary policies aimed at food security offer no real possibility for changing the existing inequitable, social, political and economic structures and policies that peasant movements believe are the very causes of the social and environmental destruction in the countryside on both the North and South" (Whittman, p. 3).

### **Community-Focused Sub-movement**

The final sub-movement we will look at is the community-focused sub-movement or CF. CF can be seen as the overlap between the local food movement and the food sovereignty movement. As such, it reverses important aspects of the previous two sub-movements' assumptions about what food and people are. Despite their differences, IF and SF share some similarities in their concepts. Both sub-movements see food as essentially an interchangeable commodity, though they disagree on whether that commodity must be understood alone or only as a part of systems. Both also see people as the autonomous agents of liberalism, though differ on whether the best lever is in their buying habits or their rights as citizens.

For CF, on the other hand, "food" and "people" are much more intertwined. Food is not only a consumptive product or institutionalized good. Rather, it comes before these things in that the way people grow, consume and sell food is a matter of how they create and reproduce communities and culture. Food has a more fundamental category as a collectivizing force, especially among marginalized groups, which can become seats for activism. CF conceives of people as being members of a community and distinct culture, including in its food needs. These are more than IF's individual preferences or SF's focus on sheer amount and distribution of the "good." If communities and food are co-constituted, then the particular culture and the particular food become much more important, as does the symbolic nature of food. Indeed, as Desmarais (2008) argues, for members of the CF sub-movement, activism is equally co-constituted with communities and their food:

This place-bound identity, that of "people of the land," reflects the belief that they have the right to be on the land. They have the right and obligation to produce food. They have the right to be seen as fulfilling an important function

in society at large. They have the right to live in viable communities and the obligation to build community. All of the above form essential parts of their distinct identity as peasants (p. 139).

Coming out of these definitions, the answer to the “What can we do” question for CF lies in strengthening relationships and building new ones within and between communities, in marked contrast to the single relationship of consumers in IF. And instead of trying to use and reform existing unjust institutions as SF recommends, CF advocates for creating new networks of more just interdependencies between communities. Quoting Schanbacher (2010) again, “The food sovereignty model considers human relationships in terms of mutual dependence, cultural diversity, and respect for the environment... Ultimately, if food sovereignty’s demands are not met, the current global food system constitutes a massive violation of human rights” (p. ix).

### Critique of CF

While CF is the most radical of the three sub-movements, and the most fundamental challenge to the status quo, this radicalism can also be seen as a problem. The recommendations are much vaguer and less developed than in the first two sub-movements, and simultaneously ask much more of people participating. To understand this critique, it is worthwhile looking at a definition of “food sovereignty” from the well-respected declaration of Nyéléni:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal – fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations. (declaration of Nyéléni 2009).

This seems to be quite a heavy burden for local food to carry. As Flora (2011) has argued, there is a tendency in (what I’m calling) CF (she refers to food sovereignty) to group all manner of social justice movements “From the Zapatistas to the women’s movement” under the umbrella of food sovereignty and food justice

(pp. 545–547). There is the danger of a muddled movement without clear priorities, and one that is unable to move forward until some standard of ideological purity is met. However, these problems may be unavoidable, in that CF argues that culture is co-constituted with food and food practices. As such, it is impossible to “just” deal with food and leave political and social issues for another day. Indeed, arguably precisely this segmenting of the problem is what gives IF and SF the problems discussed above. Nevertheless, this danger of a muddled movement is a serious one, and one that should be avoided as much as is possible.

## Conclusion

We have argued that the three sub-movements can be understood in the way they define people and food and how this affects their approach to locality. The individual-focused sub-movement, which sees people as consumers, food as product, and locality as a useful way to improve that product is simultaneously the most ineffective and the most supported by mainstream discourse. The systems-focused sub-movement, which sees people as participants in institutions, food as institutional good, and locality as an efficient way to distribute that good and a wedge to reform the institutions, has the chance to make a deeper impact and is the dominant discourse in NGOs and intergovernmental organizations. The community-focused sub-movement, which sees people as members of communities, food as being co-constituted with those communities, and locality as a necessary part of building more just communities and inter-community relationships, is the least well-defined, but possibly the one with the most radical potential. It is also, not surprisingly, the one least discussed in mainstream discourse.

This paper has not been an argument that these different movements are inherently incompatible, however. There is no reason to think that *strategically*, one might not ally with people advocating any of the sub-movements' goals, nor even pursuing ones that come from problematic concepts, as long as this is done with a clear understanding. The problem comes when, as is the case with many advocates of local food, the sub-movements are confused with each other, and the extent to which they come from incompatible concepts and are aimed at incompatible goals is not understood. This leads to confusion, internal conflict, and ultimately ineffectivity. By coming to understand what the different sub-movements are, one can more clearly analyze what the possibilities and challenges in local food.

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