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ABSTRACTS

INTERVIEWS

Silvia Federici - on capitalism, colonialism, women and food politics
In this interview Federici shares her thoughts on the relationship between food, agricultural production, women’s work, global capitalist accumulation and struggle around the world.

Julie Guthman - on globalization, neoliberalism, obesity, local food and education
Among other difficult questions, in this interview Guthman offers critical perspectives on the intersection of alternative food and political subjectivity, the social, cultural and bodily impact of neoliberalism, and the possibility of responsible food criticism and radical food pedagogy in a time of crisis.

Raj Patel - on rights, sovereignty, and suicide
In this interview Patel considers the ideological implications of “food security,” the limits of rights discourses and technocratic solutions in talking about food politics, the obfuscations of statistical knowledge and the possibility of mass participatory democracy today.

Michael Perelman - on globalization, economics, and the history of food crises
In this interview Perelman offers his insights into the contemporary food and economic crises, some of their historical antecedents, and themes ranging from speculation to dependency to class.

ARTICLES

Chad Lavin - "Pollanated politics, or, the neoliberal’s dilemma"
Keywords: Michael Pollan; neoliberalism; green consumerism; Obama; post-politics
Abstract: Michael Pollan has recently emerged as an informal spokesperson for the growing movement for responsible eating. This essay examines the assumptions underlying Pollan’s recent prescriptions.
for food reform and demonstrates how these prescriptions remain limited by the political horizon of neoliberalism. More broadly, the essay situates the recent politicization of food within a consumer society in which it is only as consumers, rather than as workers or as citizens, that Americans can imagine political action.

Gwendolyn Blue - "On the politics and possibilities of locavores: situating food sovereignty in the turn from government to governance"

Keywords: locavore, food sovereignty, governmentality, cultural politics

Abstract: This paper situates discourses of local food activism, specifically, and food sovereignty, generally, in conversation with the themes of governance, governmentality and biopolitics. Governance, in this sense, points to the movement of politics in line with neoliberal globalization which places emphasis on the individual and its self-governing capacities, on one hand, as well as new loci of power in local networks and communities, on the other. The turn towards local eating is embedded in and reinforcing of neoliberal forms of governance. How we make sense of these political transformations and contexts is a matter of debate. To conclude, I discuss the possibilities of the locavore movement as a form of popular political engagement.

Kelly Bronson - “What we talk about when we talk about biotechnology”

Keywords: Agricultural biotechnology; organic farming; culture; science and technology; ethnography; social movements.

Abstract: Genetic engineering (GE) of crops is an apogee of corporatized and industrialized farming and the technology threatens food sovereignty. A group of organic producers from Saskatchewan, Canada, has taken Monsanto to court because its GE canola has contaminated organic fields. An ethnography of case participants points to an impasse between the dominant framing of GE—within the logic of science—, versus farmer’s evaluations of the technology—as a set of knowledge practices that is rearranging social relationships. The case is exemplary of the need for increased citizen participation in decision-making about science and technology, and its participants represent the hope of renewed democracy around wider social justice issues.
Bethany Turner - “Corn Coalitions: Struggles for Food Sovereignty in Mexico”

Keywords: Corn; Mexico; GM food; food sovereignty; food security;

Abstract: Corn for many members of the various ethnic groups of Mexico sustains life. It is their principal agricultural crop and primary food source. However, the increasing liberalisation of the Mexican economy has resulted in greater importation of cheap, mass-produced US corn and the possible arrival of GM cultivars in the nation’s south. In response to these occurrences, many Indigenous Mexicans have joined resistance movements in an effort to protect their ways of life. However, those coalescing around corn are not simply reacting to localised fears of cultural annihilation, nor are they appealing exclusively to notions of authenticity and tradition to justify their cause. They are situating their demands within global concerns for food sovereignty and future food security.

Irena Knezevic - Monsanto Rules: Science, Government, and Seed Monopoly

Keywords: Monsanto, regulation, seed monopoly, genetic modification


Karine Vigneault - Terroirs as spaces of intergenerational justice: Building Communities for the “Food Citizen”

Keywords: local food, citizenship, intergenerational justice, post-cosmopolitanism, “government through communities”, governmentality.

Abstract: This article examines the “food citizens” naturalized in and through practices which identify themselves as “local food” through an exploration of the ways in which they conceive of food and of their subjects. More specifically, I argue that these practices contribute to a redefinition of food and eating as an issue of intergenerational justice pertaining to multiple spatial identities. In so doing, local food posits “food citizens” who are required to take responsibility for the many consequences – present and future, local and global – of their daily
purchasing practices and who are impelled to do so through their participation in moral communities.

**Michael Mikulak** – “Backyard Survivalism: The Global Politics of the Kitchen Garden”

**Keywords:** Slow Food, Life-Politics, Gardening, Alienation, Sustainability, Ecocriticism

**Abstract:** This article looks at the backyard garden as a political space. Michael Mikulak draws on his own experiences with gardening and small scale organic agriculture to consider the different ways in which the politics of the everyday are being complicated by various food-centred movements such as Slow Food. The growth in popularity of food issues can be understood as a desire to reconnect with a narrative of production and consumption, a narrative that has been replaced by brands and story-less food that are forcibly disconnected from the land and people who produced it. He uses the example of heirloom seeds as a way of understanding how resistance to industrial agriculture requires a maintenance of cultural and biological diversity that begins with the simple act of eating, and which can link up issues as diverse as environmental justice, biodiversity, class, race, gender, and environmental degradation.

**Emily Johansen** – “The Political Allure of the Local: Food and Cosmopolitanism in Timothy Taylor’s Stanley Park and Ruth L. Ozeki’s My Year of Meats”

**Keywords:** cosmopolitanism; local; global; responsibility; consumption; narrative.

**Abstract:** This article considers the potential political stasis produced through the ossification of a binary opposition between the local and the global. I consider, what I term, “territorialized cosmopolitanism” (a cosmopolitanism that emerges out of simultaneous multiple global and local affiliations) in two recent novels: Timothy Taylor’s Stanley Park and Ruth L. Ozeki’s My Year of Meats. I suggest that these novels point to a more radically political step; not the abandonment of the global for the local, but instead taking the lessons of the local and thinking through them globally.
Learning to Learn from the Food Crisis: Consumer Sovereignty and the Restructuring of Subjectivity

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“In every case, the geography of anger is not a simple map of action and reaction, minoritization and resistance, nested hierarchies of space and site, neat sequences of cause and effect. Rather, these geographies are the spatial outcome of complex interactions between faraway events and proximate fears, between old histories and new provocations, between rewritten borders and unwritten orders” (100).

-Arjun Appadurai, Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger

By virtue of the fact that their subject is food and their concern is the struggle of subjects against being stripped of the right to manage their own food, the diversely disciplined contributors to this issue have necessarily persuaded themselves that it is important, now, to intervene in what Walter Benjamin called the “fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist” (Benjamin 254). Arguing for food sovereignty means taking food seriously as a question of justice, survival and sustainability, of how to imagine radically democratic registers of political and economic participation. It also means thinking about food in terms of the pedagogical. As Julie Guthman notes in her interview with me in this issue, food is becoming an increasingly attractive object of study among the privileged class of educators and intellectuals who, Guthman insists, bear the responsibility to “reflect on potential levers of transformation” rather than glutting themselves on the capital which accompanies the rhetoric of prescribing what to eat.

The neoliberal cultural politics of the “end of history,” and the privatization of social concern, or what Giorgio Agamben terms the “lasting eclipse of the political” (Agamben 121), has left a social and cultural vacuum in which the collective agency required to build living alternatives to the global
gastropolitics of the contemporary global food crisis is difficult to imagine. Filling this vacuum are, on the one hand, radical movements like Via Campesina that assert the “right to have rights,” or the right to “act together concerning things that are of equal concern to each,” (Arendt 296) in relation to the vital labour of growing and raising food. On the other are notions of consumer sovereignty which offer what we might call an “informational” model of imagining the subjectivity of the consumer: if consumers are informed adequately and accurately about the sublimely large networks of neoliberalized and protectionist profit and supply that constitute the global food system, if they are educated in the exploitative conditions of food production (as well as revolutionary efforts to undo these conditions), they will adjust their consumption habits and, in so doing, effectively join in the “crude” struggles whose absence stunts the growth of “refined and spiritual things.”

A kind of limit case for consumer sovereignty, understood as an evolution from naive subject to savvy world citizen, is the SixthSense, a “Wearable Gestural Interface” device designed by Pranav Mistry of the MIT Media Lab. (http://www.pranavmistry.com/projects/sixthsense/index.htm) The device is essentially a fully-integrated Personal Digital Assistant (or PDA) which mediates the wearer’s every interaction with their daily environment. One of the more striking features of the gadget is that it carries a projector outfitted to display information—including live news broadcasts and information culled from various internet sources—onto objects in the user or wearer’s immediate vicinity. The type of cyborg consumer sovereignty this prototype allows us to imagine is one in which the screen-ing of the world, a virtualization of the topography of everyday experience, opens onto a certain liberal utopian fantasy: enhanced with the power to project onto a box of cereal or bag of chips the relevant information he or she needs to make sound decisions, the shopper-as-subject becomes the reliable and reassuring check on an otherwise unsustainable level of deregulation and corporate autonomy. This technological fantasy is underwritten by the dream of a world where all social problems are reducible to the sound or unsound choices of individuals.

This aligns nicely with the basic presupposition of liberal thought: that the individual, and more precisely the individual’s capacity for a rational expression of autonomy, is the foundation of all politics, or (under neoliberalism) all prosperity. But can consumer sovereignty be said to act as a “potential lever of transformation”? As a concept and political practice, consumer sovereignty and the privilege of knowing are not sufficient to engage, as a challenge to the social itself, the neoliberal capitalism which has
wrought our present global food crisis and made entire populations disposable. Instead, it operates as a normative or regulatory ideal which forecloses radically cosmopolitan ethical considerations regarding food and food crises. To posit the educated autonomy of the consumer against the necropolitics of the current food system amounts to what Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux term an “[e]rsatz democracy of consumers” (221), attenuating leftist food politics and undermining the fight of groups like Via Campesina against vampires of neoliberal globalization like Monsanto, Wal-Mart and Cargill.

Julie Guthman, Michiel Korthals and Clive Barnett et. al. have insisted that such gestures to the primacy of individual decision-making at the supermarket—while by no means irrelevant to food politics—are part of a desperate rear-guard action to preserve extant modes of biopolitical governance and colonial privilege against emerging movements for sustainable food cultivation and circulation. The limitations of this conceptualization of the shopper-subject should be considered in terms of what Deborah Britzman calls a “resistance to learning” provoked by knowledge which is “felt as interference or as a critique of the self’s coherence” (118). Indeed, Sharon Todd writes that the most common response to the weight of responsibility implied by witnessing the depth of one’s usurpation of the Other is “a powerful attempt to squirm out,” to escape the pedagogical move which attempts to unseat the student’s attachment that teaches him he need not feel remorse (94). This necessitates the generosity of what Britzman calls “making education inconsolable” (49). Todd finds evidence in the experience of guilt of the self’s problematic attempt to flee the sort of knowledge which unsettles its attachment to a certain subjectivity. “[G]uilt emerges,” in her account, because responsibility for the freedom of the Other (and indeed for the future as Other) “demands too much of the self” (110).

Today the dispossession underpinning all forms of corporate food cultivation appears to be producing a global epidemic of starvation and hopelessness. The most “dramatic” and “tragic” symptom of this hopelessness, for Indian feminist and ecological activist Vandana Shiva, is the escalation of suicide rates among Indian peasants “employed” by that most elemental thing, the land, yet facing a “crisis of survival” as a result. Since the monopolization of seed distribution began in 1997, 25,000 peasants in India have committed suicide. In India, there has been a concerted effort by the state to reinscribe statistics regarding farmer suicide along intelligibly “neoliberal” lines: reports purporting to apply “scientific analysis” have insisted that the causes are
psychological, not economic, and that much can be done to address the problem by requiring farmers to “boost up their self-respect (swabhiman) and self-reliance (swavalambam).” To what extent can competing notions of sovereignty be said to act as the hidden linkage between farmer suicides, the contemporary politics of disposability and the struggle for a sustainable system of participatory economics in food production?

Food is the “quintessential consumable,” in the words of contributor Chad Lavin, not only because it has the unique property of actually being ingested, or because (even when not eaten expressly for this purpose) it exists to fuel the body, but because the nourishment and pleasure food provides has a singular character, a certain sovereignty, and is vital to the formation of community. If we trust Sharon Todd’s point that “the other commands the subject into being and in so doing inaugurates responsibility,” if we agree with her reading of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas which suggests that responsibility for the other is not just a phenomenological possibility, but “the very structure of subjectivity” (109), then it follows that for a regime of power as destructive as neoliberalism to persist, it has to either suppress an inaugural yearning for justice or effectively restructure subjectivity through pedagogical tropes such as consumer sovereignty.

Works Cited


Author biography: Scott Stoneman is currently in the endless middle stages of writing a dissertation at McMaster University concerned with themes of embodiment and futurity in cultural narratives of childhood obesity.
I. The problem, once again...

At risk of being obviously unfashionable or unfashionably obvious, the problem with food in the world today is capitalism. Particularly, it is a form of capitalism that imposes uniquely local but ubiquitously global forms of market sovereignty over more and more aspects of our lives. Food, which names the spectre of one of the great crises of the 21st century, offers a particularly acute nexus of the power of and struggle against this omnicidal sovereignty. After all, everyone eats (or is prevented from eating) and the thematic of food stretches from our most basic ontological and epistemological categories (nature/culture, raw/cooked, wild/civilized, internal/external, tradition/science) to the infinitely complex and bitterly material relations of power in a globalizing world. Food speaks to the way emerging forms of global power influence all levels of life, from the genetic makeup of seeds to the ownership of land. From the gendered dynamics of agricultural labour to the persistence of neocolonial monoculture and cash-crop cultivation. From the infuriating inequalities of global trade to the tension between transnational corporation, international organizations, the transforming nation-state, and global and local social movements. From the homogenized foodscapes of urban Wal-Mart Supercentres (where Americans buy the single greatest proportion of their food) to the cultural and body politics of (over/under)eating (fast and slow). We encounter all of these and everything in between through the prism of questions of resistance, as unavoidable as they are inexorable: collectivist or individualist? Localist or globalist? Reformist or revolutionary? Utopian or apocalyptic?

For to speak about food is to always already speak about the future [1]; today it is to speak about the future in the shadow of its global foreclosure. As Frederick Jameson (2003) notes, as capitalism of a particularly neoliberal...
variety saturates our weary planet, when (it believes) all its historic enemies have been vanquished and all its territorial frontiers mapped, at the proverbial “end of history,” we begin to witness the “end of temporality:” the reduction of human social time to the unremitting now of free-market expansion where all alternative futures are already rendered impossible by cultural and material constraint. For Jameson, as well as critics like Henry Giroux (2004), this arrest of time within a bankrupt neoliberal utopianism is not just a matter of macroeconomic policy but a lived and everyday politics, something that is experienced, felt and culturally practiced. From the reticulation of the world in networks of national, personal and micro-credit debt to the intensification of localized forms of patriarchal oppression under intensified conditions of social and structural violence to the politics of food which are the subject of this issue, the emerging forms of global market sovereignty make political the rhythms of everyday life as never before[2].

This special issue is about just this mutation of sovereignty, as well as the demands for another, very different form of food sovereignty that would contest it. The contributions, each in their own unique way, take up the question of power and resistance in a moment confusing in its complexity, terrifying in its dangers, and electrifying in its potentials. By and large, they tend to approach this new form of sovereignty as neoliberalism, a term now familiar the world over as the economic ideology (and political, social and cultural theology) of free-market supremacy (See Harvey 2005).

But, as leading food critic Julie Guthman points out in the interview she provides for this issue, neoliberalism is never universally applied. Like Aihwa Ong (2006), who speaks of neoliberalism as a mobile and mutable set of technologies of governmentality [3], Guthman insists we look to its local implementations if we wish to be precise in understanding our adversary. Yet that which ties these diverse global iterations of neoliberalism together is not merely their ideological commitment to free-markets, deregulation, privatization and the bolstering of the repressive arm of state at the expense of the welfare arm (see Bourdieu 1999). While the ideology is important, the actual mechanics of how neoliberalism (and the form of capitalist sovereignty it champions) is globally coordinated is equally crucial for us to grasp, especially at a moment when the future of neoliberalism is by no means certain (though rumors of its demise have been greatly exaggerated). And this mechanics goes by the name so familiar to us now as another of those great crises of the 21st century: finance. And like the crisis of food, the crisis of finance is fundamentally a crisis of the future.
II. The peril of finance

As political economist Michael Perelman points out in his interview in this issue, the financial crisis that now throttles the world cannot be separated from the latest flare-up (at least in the global Northern imagination) of a food crisis which both he and feminist philosopher and historian Sylvia Federici (also interviewed in this issue) note is endemic to capitalism and its necessary corollary, (neo-)colonialism. Capitalism's history is haunted by genocidal famines caused by the violent severing of indigenous peoples and peasants from their land (and the extinction or appropriation of their accumulated agrarian and ecological wisdom) in order to create plantations and displaced (thus vulnerable) workforces (Davis 2001). This is a process which, as Federici points out here as elsewhere (2005) relied (and relies), in both centre and periphery, on the systematic destruction of women's social power and knowledge and the production of racial divisions (see also the work of Vandana Shiva).

For Perelman, the current crisis in food is partly a result of the havoc created as the trillions of dollars fictitious wealth, generated ex nihilo by increasingly complex financial instruments at the highest (elite, white, northern, urban) echelons of the increasingly integrated and borderless global market, rush in and out of national economies and speculative investment in food “commodities.” These tumultuous torrents of digital wealth introduce an unprecedented volatility in the local and global price, affecting consumers and producers and undermining the state’s ability to regulate either finance or food. The final effect is, almost everywhere, the ongoing enclosure of the commons, a process stretching back to the earliest days of capitalism and colonialism. Historically, it refers to the way hereditary land tenure and communal land ownership was violently stripped and common lands and resources where brought under private ownership (usually to be transformed into profit-generating enterprises focused on creating commodities for long-distance trade). More conceptually, enclosure refers to the way all those shared aspects of our lives, those relatively organic values of human collectiveness (like food, from growing to sharing/trading to eating) are rent asunder and replaced or overcoded by the hegemonic measure of money (DeAngelis 2007). Nothing speaks more nauseatingly to the exploitation inherent to the overvaluation of monetary (capitalist) wealth at the expense of what almost every person on earth would classify as “real” social wealth than the image of (mostly brown) farmers starving while harvesting luxuries like coffee or
bananas as (mostly white) hedge-fund and bank managers dine on cosmopolitan exotica after a day of hallucinating digital dollars.

Finance is a hegemonic sphere of human action of superhuman complexity, a chaotic network of frenzied cyborgian human-computer relations that even its most prodigious acolytes do not fully understand, especially in its sociological implications (LiPuma and Lee 2004). It is, however important to attempt a rudimentary sketch how finance works, beginning with its origins, in relation to food and sovereignty.

Finance is money to the power of money, a compounding and intensification of the abstraction of social value already at work in money in a capitalist society (see Nelson 1999). All money is, at base, a claim upon the future (specifically, future labour) and it has its roots in food. The earliest currencies issued represented claims against the coming year's harvest, underwritten by the authority of the state, which allowed farmers to purchase necessary materials in advance (Ferguson 2008). Since its earliest anthropological origins money has always had a crucial relationship to both food and sovereignty - indeed, it may even be the case that, in many non-capitalist economies, money's primary purpose is precisely to mediate food and sovereignty. Even through to the birth of industrial capitalism in the 19th century currencies were often tied, de jure or de facto, to the price of staple agricultural commodities (grains, salt, etc.), mediated or controlled by central state authorities. As Karl Polanyi (1944) (among others) notes, the commodification of food (and the policies which sought to defend society from this commodification) was a crucial struggle in the transition to capitalism [4]. It is this subordination of the deep and rich value of food (in the broad sense of social and cultural values as well as the narrow sense of its economic worth) to the cyclopean value of money-the way all those aspects of the socioculture which surround food become increasingly commodified-that characterizes the differential implementations of food neoliberalism around the world and connects them through a global web of unfettered digitized financial transactions.

Finance refers generically to the way money in a capitalist society is mobilized and, in particular, to the way money flows in and out of forms of investment. These forms include the more familiar stocks and shares in corporations and government bonds but increasingly produces huge amounts of value from the FIRE sector: finance (in this limited sense, speculative investment), insurance and real estate (Henwood 1998). Trade in commodity (a financial category which tellingly encapsulates all "gifts" from the earth from crude oil to timber to
food) “futures,” the politics of agricultural debt and financing, and the speculative nature of land ownership and rent are too complex to parse here, but all hint at the deep imbrications of finance in the global food chain. It is, however, necessary to point out that finance always and everywhere relies on the modern nation-state (and, some would argue, vice-versa) to offer a modicum of necessary “external” regulation to a system that is fatally volatile and to repress or provide life-support to various populations whose labour is at the heart of the social wealth upon which finance builds its magnificent castles in the sky (see Harvey 2006).

Finance, is, as David Harvey (2006) puts it, capitalism's “central nervous system,” the way an otherwise self-contradictory machine of reckless accumulation “thinks” or reflects on all those processes of exploitation under its sovereignty and contrives its own spread. Beyond simply (through crucially) redistributing surplus value across an integrated capitalist economy the system of financial circulation enables “market signals” (price fluctuations, profit margins, labour costs, indications of militancy, political stability, etc.) from nerve endings across capitalism's global body feed into this monstrous brain and trigger global financial markets to discipline wayward economic nodes. For instance, should a nation-state actually heed the demands of its people and, say, guarantee food sovereignty, it could expect a brutal flight of increasingly mobile capital, the extreme and nearly immediate devaluation of national currency, the fire-sale of government bonds, and an inability to access the transnational credit upon which countries from North to South now depend.

Similarly, the spread of biotechnology cannot be separated from the power of finance in the shares (and derivative securities) of biotech firms like Monsanto, its hold on research and development and the increasingly privatized university sector, the circuit of international debt and currency speculation which weaken country's regulatory ability, force them to advance land privatization schemes, and encourage them to adopt biotech schemes in an effort to appear economically “modern” and worthy of credit. The recent global debacle created when speculative capital rushed out of financialized debt and into bio-fuel producing grains (leading to prohibitively expensive food prices in many underdeveloped zones) is a good indication of how finance ties together seemingly unconnected areas of a world saturated with capitalist value in an evolving web of exploitation and volatility.

The way in which financialized neoliberalism creates this global network of disciplinary technologies has been referred to by Massimo DeAngelis (2007) as a global “fractal panopticon” within which, like in its Foucauldian precursor,
subjects (which in this case range form international NGOs to state bureaucracies to civil society to individuals) come to complete in disciplining themselves and conforming to the normative desires of transnational capital. This panoptic power, as readers of Foucault (1977, 1978, ) will know, is not merely punitive but also encourages a financial “care of the self.” In the fractal panopticon, subjects as large as nation states and as small as individual people are encouraged to develop a properly neoliberal subjectivity, largely based, as Randy Martin (2007) points out, on the astute management of that great privatization and instrumentalization of social problems: “risk.”

Crucially, this is accomplished not merely by the global flow of commodities, government bonds, and the stocks and shares of transnational corporations but by the redoubling of the abstraction of social wealth these things are already supposed to represent - namely, the trade in futures and other “derivatives:” bets on the future rise and fall of the prices of these underlying securities (rather than purchasing those securities outright). At the brink of the recent financial meltdown, the global trade in (over-the-counter) derivatives was (conservatively) estimated at over $683.7-trillion, roughly 11 times the gross-domestic product of the entire planet [5]. The now infamous “credit-default swap” and “mortgage-backed security” are only the tip of an iceberg of financial wizardry where the actual human, material relations on which the global economy is based (like food) disappear into commodities then disappear again into financial indicators, then disappear yet again into speculation, and so on.

We are, however, remiss to relegate this accumulation of “fictitious value” to the realm of pure fantasy: like all stories it has real, and in this case deadly, social power (King 2003). The over-production of financial wealth, though it produces massive global volatility whose fallout we are only today beginning to feel, is crucial to the way global capital everywhere forecloses on the future, always already overshadowing the lived experience of futurity. This is perhaps most clearly seen and affectively felt through the constraints on life imposed by debt (from state bonds to mortgages to microcredit schemes) but is also a function of the way financial logic of risk management “hedges” against any unforeseen eventuality (except all-out system failure - see LiPuma and Lee 2004) and eliminates or subordinates those spheres of autonomy and solidarity that could be the seeds of a different tomorrow.

This new form of power, one geared towards a control over not only the present but the future as well, represents, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri
(2000 and 2004) argue, an emerging form of global sovereignty, one that is as expansively global as it is intensively local. It is a sovereignty which seeks a form of control that is not territorial but biopolitical in the sense that it seeks less to create stable borders (rather, it creates multiple borders between and within the jurisdiction of the nation-states whose own sovereignty, as we have seen above, is typically subordinated to that of transnational capital - see also Balibar 2004) and more to intervene in all aspects of our lives, submitting them to a logic of commodification and neoliberal restructuring. It is a system which runs on war and inequality and the terrifying unfairness of it all, one which requires next to no justification because of its success in exercising power through the apparently anonymous and unaccountable technologies of finance (LiPuma and Lee 2004) and because it is neither a conspiracy nor a ruling class (though it does involve both). Rather, it is a hyper-contagious viral logic (McMurtry 1999) which answers only and always to its pathological (and, as we are now coming to realize, ecologically omnicidal) imperative to spread deeper and wider, to every corner of the globe and into every crevice of our being, down to the very elemental bios of our existence.

III. The promise of food sovereignty

The delineation of concepts above provides only a rough and insufficient sketch of the complexity of the matter. But it does serve to situate claims to food sovereignty within a broader paradigm of capitalist sovereignty, one that goes beyond a more surface reading of “neoliberalism” and which gestures towards the latter's place within capitalist development both structurally and historically. Food today is a key example and component of this system and, as the articles and interviews in this volume attest, a key site of struggle at the junctures of the global and the local, the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, the autonomous and the determined, the past, the present and the future.

It is for this reason that the activism around food sovereignty is so crucially important. As both Federici and Raj Patel (in this issue) point out, claims to food sovereignty [6] do not simply rehearse older notions of the sovereignty of the nation-state, nor do they reflect xenophobic or exclusively local struggles. Instead, sovereignty here refers to demands for autonomy, solidarity, dignity and the fundamental rights of people and their communities to decide the future of the food they grow and consume as a form of material democracy. As Bethany Turner notes in her analysis of the contemporary Maize movements in Mexico in this issue, food sovereignty is not an anachronistic retreat to pre-
global authenticity but reflects, both in theory and practice, a globalization from below which mobilizes new communication technologies to build a network of global solidarity strong enough to support both broad-based coalitions as well as lay the transversal foundations of another form of food interconnectedness not based on the vicissitudes of the free market. Such internationalism reflects the promise of a critical cosmopolitanism of overlapping, “territorialized” or “balkanized” jurisdictions of food responsibility hinted at by Patel (this issue) and in Emily Johansen's reading (also this issue) of two recent novels on food politics. Also in this issue, Kelly Bronson's photo essay speaks to the similar dreams of farmers and activists in Canada's bread-basket province of Saskatchewan resisting the corporate biotechnological colonization of (the potential for) independent and sustainable farming practices.

Yet as other contributors point out, the politics of food sovereignty are about not only the collective struggles of those we typically understand to be food producers, but also the common resistance of food consumers and the individual, subjective aspects of this process. For Karine Vigneault, local food movements in the North develop new global modes of responsibility based on their unique and evolving relationship to the past, present and future of geographic terroirs or nature-cultures within which they cultivate and from which they draw their sustenance, a theme echoed by Mike Mikulak's thoughts on the political, ecological and social importance of backyard gardening and heritage seeds.

As tantalizing as the promise of local food initiatives are, however, Gwen Blue points out that the saturation of neoliberal governmentality in North American culture and society leaves no practice, no matter how radical, untouched by its ideology of individualism and consumerism and its hostility to collective projects outside a commodified frame, a conclusion echoed by Chad Lavin's piercing critique of best-selling food-politics super-hero Michael Pollan. To this we can add the forms of economic and racial privilege which have so far characterized many local food movements in the North, as well as the way their champions elide the reality that, as Sylvia Federici points out (in this issue), poor people the world over, especially women, have been engaging in small scale personal and community gardens since time immemorial, an abject material basis on which all other forms of economics and exploitation rest.

Yet Blue continues that local food movements are not merely reproductive of global capitalist sovereignty. Rather, they represent always already
incomplete and unsatisfactory attempts to contest this power at the level of life itself. This biopolitical imperative, as Mikulak notes, is inherent to the politics of food. After all, food is among the few elemental substances of human life on which all other social, cultural and political structures must rely, recalling Bertolt Brechts famous dictum “first bread, then ethics,” reminding us that, as Georgio Agamben (1998) suggests, beneath all forms of modern sovereignty, even (and perhaps especially) the sovereignty of global financial neoliberal capitalism, lies the hauntingly emaciated figure of “bare life” or the animal-existence of human beings to which the most precarious, exploited and disenfranchised subjects of our global (dis)order are increasingly and horrifically reduced [7].

Against this omnicidal hegemony of capitalist value, against the subordination of all value to money under the discipline of finance, food sovereignty echoes a demand to reground value in the negotiation of human needs through democratic and autonomous community organizing. As Patel suggests (in this issue, as well as in Patel, Balakrishnan and Narayan 2007), food sovereignty calls for a “right” to food which is not merely a privilege to be granted (and withdrawn) by a nation-state but a demand for another world in which rights are the product of a complex, evolving, immanent solidarity. The abstract question of a world beyond all “top-down” sovereignty is pointless; food sovereignty “from below” and the utopian rights it demands are not mere fantasy but practices which articulate a shared horizon of social movements the world over. They are a common scream against hunger and exploitation, a way for our movements to find each other in the dark and “ask questions as we walk” [8]. Though our strategies may range from planting backyard gardens to taking state power to coordinating local food coops to enforcing international law to serving free food in urban cores to fighting the racism and sexism on which the system thrives, food sovereignty can animate our shared imagination based on the value of food not as a commodity, but as a social process and our elemental ontological commons.

Such an imagination has the potential to shatter the illusory value of capital and the ideology of neoliberalism which overvalue the luxury and idleness of the few at the expense of the starving, indebted and overburdened many. Food sovereignty can move us beyond more abstract notions of “multitudes” by grounding our conceptualization of global interdependence and the promise of democracy in the lived material practices of breaking bread. It can enrich our analysis of class, race, gender, colonialism and globalization by insisting that food politics is about more than personal consumer choice, that it
is a matter of bringing to birth new forms of political power. It also moves us beyond the facile politics of apocalyptic primitivism with its perverse and racist fantasies of population collapse and recreational biopolitics. Though it is open, as all things are, to cooptation, it is the responsibility of scholars and activists alike to probe the limits of the concepts and practices of food sovereignty with an eye enabling them to speak to one another and chart the considerable challenges we all face.

Endnotes


[2] Co-editor Scott Stoneman and I have explored this thematic more thoroughly in our treatment of Wal-Mart, the world's largest corporation, as a “panopticon of time” (forthcoming (2009) in the McMaster Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition Working Paper Series). The recognition of the interconnectedness of global political economy, everyday life and food has long been a theme in feminist scholarship and activism - see Mies 1986

[3] For an elaboration of governmentality see Gwen Blue's contribution to this issue.

[4] This was, for instance, a main ideological contention between economic defenders of the ancient regime in France (notably, the physiocrats whose name derives from their insistence that land and its ability to grow food - under proper aristocratic management - is the source of all value) and the bourgeois revolutionaries who, in dialogue with emerging economic thinkers like Adam Smith, based a whole system of property, law, philosophy, morality, and, arguably, scientific epistemology on the elemental value of (nominally) free labour (typically someone else's) and the productive power of monetary exchange. Such a devaluation of food and land and the subordination of inherited title and feudal rank to the universal power of money, not coincidentally, allowed for the intensification of the enclosure of peasant lands and the development of urban workforces (and the emergence of new forms of labour and population discipline) so crucial to the birth of capitalism. See Federici 2004 and Perelman 2000.

[5] Statistics on derivatives are notoriously unreliable given that they are both poorly regulated and extremely ephemeral. These come from a 2008 report

[6] The notion of food sovereignty is articulated differently in different venues but is widely influenced by the statements over the past 10 years by Via Campasina (Peasant Path/Way/Life), the movement of peasants, indigenous people and their allies around the world. See http://viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php

[7] Yet the history of food politics reveals Agamben's eurocentrism: where he takes the Nazi Holocaust to be the signature moment of modern biopolitics and the stark horror of bare life, the horrific conditions of (neo-)colonialism and the famines it created do far more to teach us about the nature of modern sovereignty - see, for instance, Mbembe 2004. Indeed, such a historical approach also lead us away from the unrealistic total evacuation of agency and complete social death on which Agamben's theory rests. Similarly, Federici (2004) has made clear that the origins of biopolitics are intimately tied to the tangled growth of modern capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism, key elements of which included the witch-trials of the 16th-17th centuries and the truck between the centre and periphery of technologies of bodily and population-oriented discipline and social dispossession.

Works Cited


Author biography: Max Haiven works as a PhD candidate at McMaster University in Hamilton Ontario where he lives with his family. He is active in local labour, social justice and international solidarity efforts. His research focusses on imagination and value in an age of finance capitalism through critical theory, popular culture, and utopian thought.
An interview with Silvia Federici

Interviewed by Max Haiven

Silvia Federici is a researcher, activist and educator. She was born and raised in Italy but came to the US in 1967 on a scholarship to study Philosophy at the University of Buffalo. Since then, she has taught at several universities in the US and also at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. She is now Emerita Professor at Hofstra University (Long Island, NY) and lives in Brooklyn.

A veteran feminist activist, Federici’s work is informed by and in dialogue with the many struggles which have animated her career. Since the early 1970s Federici was, along with theorists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, a founder of the International Feminist Collective and an organizer with the famous Wages for Housework campaign. This movement brought together a global alliance of feminist groups to make a revolutionary challenge at the very hinge of capitalist and patriarchal power by demanding economic sovereignty for women engaged in the elemental labour of social reproduction.

Federici has also been a central part of the Midnight Notes Collective and a co-founder of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA), a support organization for the struggles of students and teachers in Africa against structural adjustment. Between 1991 and 2003 she was a co-editor of the CAFA Bulletin. In 1995, she co-founded the Radical Philosophy Association (RPA) anti-death penalty project.

Her ground-breaking 2004 book Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation (Brooklyn: Autonomedia), received critical laudations and was much talked of in both academic and activist circles, supplying as it did a capacious, lucid and historically rigorous picture of the intersections of patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism and violence from the 15th to the 18th century. The book served as a crucial corrective to both Marxist analyses of the period of primitive accumulation which write gender out as well as to the fashionable academic discourse of biopolitics. The latter, Federici argues, has tended, in the work of both Foucault and his followers, to forget the witch trials of the 16th and 17th century. These were part and parcel of the systematic destruction of women’s power over biological and social reproduction and social creativity, a process essential to the enclosure
and colonial movements and the scene of the nascence of both capitalism proper and the modern state.

In other work, Federici has addressed themes of enclosure, colonialism, labour, patriarchy and racism in areas as diverse as the advance of capitalist accumulation, international development policy, the labour of “immaterial workers,” the analysis of social movement strategy and anti-colonial struggle.

In this interview Federici shares her thoughts on the relationship between food, agricultural production, women’s work, global capitalist accumulation and struggle around the world.

Max Haiven (MH) for Politics and Culture: Your historical work has focused on the way the process of what Marx called “primitive accumulation”—the way capitalism is created out of the destruction of other ways of life—has relied upon the systematic destruction of women’s power and the “accumulation of divisions” amongst the working class. Can you speak to how this relates to the history of food politics?

Silvia Federici (SF): There is a direct relation between the destruction of the social and economic power of women in the "transition to capitalism" and the politics of food in capitalist society.

In every part of the world, before the advent of capitalism, women played a major role in agricultural production. They had access to land, the use of its resources and control over the crops they cultivated, all of which guaranteed their autonomy and economic independence from men. In Africa, they had their farming and cropping systems, which were the source of a specific female culture, and they were in charge of the selection of seeds, an operation that was crucial to the prosperity of the community and whose knowledge was transmitted through the generations. The same was true of women’s role in Asia and the Americas. In Europe as well, until the late medieval period, women had land-use rights and the use of the "commons"—woods, ponds, grazing grounds—that were an important source of sustenance. In addition to farming with men, they had their gardens where they cultivated vegetables as well as medicinal herbs and plants.
Both in Europe and the regions the Europeans colonized, primitive accumulation and capitalist development changed this situation. With land privatization and the expansion of monetary relations, a deeper division of labor developed in agriculture that separated food production for profit from food production for direct consumption, devalued reproductive work, starting from subsistence farming, and appointed men as the chief agricultural producers, whereas women were relegated to the rank of "helpers," field hands, or domestic workers.

In colonial Africa, for example, British and French officers systematically favored men with regard to allocations of land, equipment, and training, the mechanization of agriculture being the occasion for a further marginalization of women's agricultural activities. They also disrupted female farming by forcing women to assist their husband in the cultivation of cash crops, thus altering the power relations between women and men and instigating new conflicts between them. To this day, the colonial system, whereby land titles are given only to men, continues to be the rule for "development agencies" and not in Africa alone.

It must be said that men have been accomplices in this process, not only claiming control over women's labor, but, in the face of growing land scarcity, conspiring to curtail women's communal land-use rights (wherever these survived) by rewriting the rules and conditions of belonging to the community.

Despite women's resistance to their marginalization, and their continuous engagement in subsistence farming and land reclamation struggles, these developments have had a profound effect on food production. As Vandana Shiva so powerfully described in her book Staying Alive [1], with the exclusion of women from access to land and the destruction of their control over food production, a large body of knowledge, practices, techniques that for centuries safeguarded the integrity of the land and the soil and the nutritional value of food has been lost.

Today, in the eyes of "development" agencies, the image of female subsistence farmer is one of complete degradation. For example, the latest World Bank annual report [2], dedicated to agriculture, begins "an African women bent under the sun, weeding sorghum in an arid field with a hoe, a child strapped on her back—a vivid image of rural poverty." For years in fact, following the footsteps of the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, the World Bank has tried to convince us that land is a dead asset when used for sustenance and
shelter, as it becomes productive only when it is brought to a bank as collateral to gain credit. Behind this view is an arrogant philosophy that sees only money as creative of wealth, and believes capitalism and industry can recreate nature.

But the opposite is the case. With the demise of women's subsistence farming, an incredible wealth is increasingly being lost, with severe consequences for the quality and quantity of the food available to us. What the Bank does not tell us is that much of the nutritional value of food is lost through the industrialization of agriculture. It also does not tell us that it is thanks to women’s struggles to continue to provide for their families' consumption, often farming on unused public or private land, that millions of people have been able to survive in the face of economic liberalization.

MH: This all brings up the importance of agricultural labor, especially women’s labour, to the processes of globalization. What’s your sense of how agricultural labour fits into how we are conceptualizing global labour today. Numerically, it remains the biggest employer of people’s time, especially women’s time, world-wide. But it seems to fall off the radar in analyses of the changing forms of work and capital these days.

SF: It is a mistake for left movements to underestimate, practically and analytically, the importance of agricultural work in today's political economy and, consequently, the transformative capacity of the struggles that farmers are making on this terrain. Certainly, the capitalists are not making this mistake. As the World Bank reports I mentioned (among other documents) indicate, the reorganization of agricultural relations always takes priority in restructuring programs.

Although the number of people employed in agricultural work is impressive (probably amounting to two billion people), its importance is not to be measured only by its sheer size. Most important is the contribution agricultural work makes to social reproduction. As I mentioned, subsistence agriculture in particular, mostly done by women, enables millions to live who would otherwise have no means to purchase food on the market. Moreover, the revalorization, extension, and reintegration of agricultural labor into our lives are a must if we wish to construct a self-sufficient, non-exploitative society.

There are many political groups and movements, also in the industrialized North (eco-feminists above all), who recognize this need. It is also encouraging that, over the last two decades, we have seen the growth of urban garden
movements, returning agricultural work to the heart of our industrial metropoles. But unfortunately, many in the left have not yet overcome the legacy of class struggle in the industrial era with its unique stresses on the factory and the industrial proletariat, as well as its belief in a technological road to liberation from capitalism.

For example, in Negri and Hardt’s Multitude [3] we read that the peasantry is destined to disappear from the historical scene because of the increasing integration of science and technology in the organization of agricultural production and the dematerialization of labor. It is disturbing that Negri and Hardt cite genetic engineering to support their view that the peasantry, as a historical category, is on its way to becoming defunct, given the fierce struggle farmers are conducting worldwide against genetically modified (GM) seeds, which, from this perspective, is already presumed defeated.

In reality, what we are witnessing is a process of re-peasantization and "rurbanization" which the present crisis can only accelerate. It’s already occurring in China: former immigrants to the towns are returning to the rural areas destined to become a body of laborers in constant motion between these poles. In Africa too, many urban dwellers are now returning to the village, but they often move back and forth, because they cannot find sufficient means of survival in any single place.

MH: There is something deeply chilling about this image of constantly moving labourers eking out an existence in a world of enclosures. I’m reminded of the sections of Caliban and the Witch where you talk about vagabonds as those condemned to wander having been dispossessed of their common lands through the medieval European enclosures. In the same vein, Zygmunt Bauman uses the metaphor of the vagabond (as compared to privileged “tourists”) to describe the paradigm of human dispossession under globalization [4]. It certainly should chasten the often too hasty celebration of mobility and unfettered existence which many on the left take to be the basis of a new politics. It brings up one of the things I’ve always admired about your work is your ability to keep globalization and colonialism central. Over the last few years you’ve done quite a bit of work on the new processes of enclosure in Africa under neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Can you tell us about how these are related to the ongoing global food crisis?
SF: A book would not be sufficient to describe the many interconnected ways in which colonialism, old and new, and neo-liberalism have contributed to created the present food crisis.

What we are witnessing today is but the latest act in long process that has been unfolding for at least two centuries. Colonialism disrupted the farming systems of Africa, Asia, South America through land expropriation, the introduction of cash crops and mono-cultures, and the enforcement of policies that degraded the environment (e.g. logging) or took workers away from food production.

Independence did not remedy this situation, although it allowed for the creation of domestic food markets. Land reform, based on the restitution of the stolen land which the former colonial subjects demanded as the fruit of the liberation struggle, was only very marginally realized. In a context of continuing economic and political dependence on the former colonial powers, the new states preserved the commercial, export-oriented, model of agriculture the colonizer had planted on their soils, even though it visibly undermined the ecology and the social relations of the rural areas, starting with the relations between women and men I mentioned earlier.

Two further blows to food production in the Third World in the post-independence period were the US sponsored "food aid programs," a weapon in the Cold War as effective as military intervention in creating new forms of political control, and the "Green Revolution." A bonus to the developing agribusiness, the Green Revolution industrialized Third World agriculture, made it dependent on imports from abroad (of hybrid seeds, pesticides and fertilizers), and expelled small farmers from the land.

By the early 1970s, the disastrous consequences of decades of colonial and post-colonial degradation of the rural environment became most visible in the form of recurrent famines, the most severe of which struck the countries of the Sahel Belt, just south of the Sahara, where more than 100,000 people died and many more were permanently displaced. By the 1980s, when, in the name of the debt crisis and economic recovery, the World Bank imposed on Third World nations across the world a rigid neo-liberal agenda, the agriculture of "developing countries" was already a disaster area, with famines and malnutrition an endemic reality. In this context, the requirements of "Structural Adjustment," as the World Bank's recipe was dubbed –(import liberalization, the removal of subsidies to farmers, the diversion of agricultural production
towards the production of "high quality," "luxury products" for the export market)— signaled a catastrophe in the make, as farmers, organization, anti-globalization activists, environmentalist repeatedly warned. Add to it the effects on farming of logging, of long distance pollution, of trade agreements sanctioning the appropriation and patenting of Third World farmers' traditional knowledge, the increasing and truly totalitarian corporate control of seed production, and you have what Mariarosa Dalla Costa defines as a "policy of genocide." And, in fact, many farmers, especially in India, have taken their own lives, utterly ruined by these policies.

We must be careful, then, when we hear that the worldwide hikes in the price of food in recent months have been the outcome of the same speculative drive that created the housing bubble. Speculation is possible only under certain conditions and it is with these conditions that we need to be concerned.

What we are dealing with is a crisis far deeper than it is generally acknowledged and one that cannot be resolved through more "regulations." Neo-liberalism, the speculative drives of the financial system, the promotion of bio-fuel, all have exacerbated trends that are inscribed in the logic of agriculture and food production under capitalism. As long as food is grown for profit and is a tool to be used to force people to accept the desired forms of exploitation, the creation of food scarcity will remain a dominant objective of agricultural production as planned by governments and financial institutions.

What is needed is a systemic change, a completely different form of agriculture, one that does not poison those who produce and consume food. And this requires, in the first place, a very different system of social relations and values.

MH: I’m glad you mentioned the way food and food politics become weapons to reproduce, spread and intensify systems of exploitation and, in particular, a capitalist and patriarchal system of value that is fundamentally genocidal. In this journal issue we’re trying to puzzle out this term “sovereignty” when it’s applied to food. On the one hand, the term signifies the fundamental principle of international politics of imperial Europe: the discrete nation-state and its exclusive right over territory and population. On the other, since anti-colonial movements of national liberation, the term sovereignty has taken on new meanings, speaking instead to the rights of people to self-determination. The term has also stimulated a lot of new reflections in critical theory camps with
the renewed interest in biopolitics and globalization. What’s your sense of the term? Do you think it’s useful or appropriate? Where and when?

SF: I understand that we should be suspicious of the concept of "sovereignty" given its genetic association with the history of the nation-state. But in the case of "food sovereignty" we should focus on its use rather than on its genealogical meaning.

"Sovereignty" today, as used since the early 1990s by the farmers' movements forming the Via Campesina coalition, is a weapon against the international corporate takeover of food production, against land expropriation, GM food and the industrialization and commercialization of agriculture. "Sovereignty," in this sense, has none of the monarchical or nationalistic connotations historically associated with the term. It is a call for autonomy, for self-determination, and it is a rejection of the capitalist model of agriculture, that expropriates people from their lands and their traditional knowledge, subjects them to deadly international regulations, and turns food into a poison. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa puts it, "sovereignty" is an affirmation "of the right of populations to decide what to eat and how to produce it," with a view of food as a "common good" rather than a commodity[5].

The question, of course, is whether "sovereignty" should be understood in the sense of total "autarchy." Despite some declarations suggesting this possibility, I believe those who have such fears are mistaken. Broad trade networks and sophisticated systems of exchange existed in Africa and the Americas for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, who proceeded to disrupt them. Thus, we should not be concerned that those calling for "sovereignty" today will be averse to trading with neighboring countries and in regional networks of the type that existed prior to colonization. A broad effort is already underway to construct regional exchanges based on the principles of dignity and autonomy. This will undoubtedly be one of the main challenges facing social justice movements in the years to come.
MH: On that note, your research on historical and contemporary women’s labour and struggle has been extremely insightful. How do women’s work and women’s struggle factor into the politics of food sovereignty today?

SF: Women’s work and struggles are central to the question of "food sovereignty" today. Women are those who pay the highest price for the increase in food prices, and the fact that their access to land and capacity as agricultural producers have been severely undermined is one of the reasons why such price hikes are possible.

As I mentioned earlier, women have been the world's food producers and processors since time immemorial. To this day, in some parts of the world (Africa above all) 80% of the food consumed is produced by them. Their subsistence agriculture enables millions to live who could not otherwise purchase food on the market. However, their ability to grow food is increasingly threatened by increasing land scarcity, the privatization of land and water, the commercialization of agriculture, and the shift in most Third World countries to export-oriented agricultural production (now dubbed "high value" agriculture by the World Bank). These trends reinforce each other. To the extent that the land available to farmers is constantly diminishing, even in regions where the majority of the population depends on agriculture, women are subjected to exclusionary procedures by their male relatives and male members of their communities so that their access to land and customary rights are increasingly restricted. This represents a major threat to food production and the food consumption of large segments of the world population. It also places the control over the food consumed out of the hands of women.

A campaign is now taking place in Latin America and Africa, conducted by women's groups and associations who demand that women's rights to land be guaranteed in the laws and constitutions of their countries. Meanwhile, women have been at the forefront of urban farming and land struggles. In many African cities, from Accra to Kinshasa, they take over unused plots of land to grow maize, cassava, and peppers, changing the landscape of African towns, adding to their families' food and monetary budget, and boosting their own economic independence. But the battleground remains the redistribution of lands and the guarantee that women have full access to them and to the waters.
than run through them. As feminists writers like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have stressed, food sovereignty is best guaranteed when food production is "in women's hands," in the sense that women have the means to control how food is produced and consumed.

MH: It seems that such demands have even made their way to the halls of international power, albeit in a typically neoliberal form. The recent micro-credit “movement” that is currently being promoted mobilizes the idea of Third-World women as crucial economic producers to promote small-scale loans. Critics argue that it is just a sort of neoliberalism from below which seeks to make women the new “economic men” of the Third World and agents of further enclosures. What do you make of this movement?

SF: World Bankers and other economic planners have discovered women as economic producers because they believe that women can be more easily controlled given their responsibility toward their families. They know that women will make any effort to ensure that their children are fed, or go to school, and also that they can be counted upon to be more responsible in the repayment of debts. They are also eager to integrate women into the money economy and discredit subsistence activities, which they consider a threat to the hegemony of the market.

Many women would most likely prefer to have land; that would give them more independence as well as the possibility of selling their surpluses to the local markets. But it is a solution economic planners never propose, because they oppose any redistributive policy, believing land should be used just for commercial purposes. Not surprisingly, a great advocate of micro-credit has been the World Bank, for its Structural Adjustment Programs are creating the very poverty and landlessness that the micro-credit schemes are supposed to "alleviate."

Micro-credit schemes are also a source of divisions within the community and among women by selecting the "worthy" of credit from the unreliable and subjecting women to a reciprocal policing that undermines their solidarity. They are also a perverse ideological tool, suggesting that self-discipline is all that is needed for a positive outcome, thus drawing a blanket on the disastrous conditions in which the majority of women live in Indian or African villages, thanks to policies that are not of their making.
Critics also point out that debt repayment often comes at the expense of the needs of women's families and that, after many years of experience, there is no evidence that micro-credit schemes have had any positive impact on the lives of women.

MH: While the global south has seen a huge rise in social movements contesting corporate globalization’s sovereignty over food it seems that food movements in the global north, and especially in North America, have tended to follow a consumerist logic (slow food, eating organic, etc.). Do you think there are new political possibilities for organizing around food that move us beyond this?

SF: The contrast is real, but a number of trends, in recent years, indicate that new ways of organizing around food are developing that move beyond the narrow concept of self-interest embodied in the demand for organic food.

First, there has been the urban gardens movement I mentioned before that has spread in several US cities. It has increasingly been acquiring a political dimension, thanks, in part, to the attacks against it by conservative politicians like former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani. His plan, to bulldoze dozens of gardens in New York in the mid ’90s, raised everyone's consciousness and had the effect of turning gardening into a movement. We now realize that the gardens are the seeds of another economy, independent of the market. Not only do they fulfill an economic function by providing cheaper, fresher food that many could not otherwise afford, but they create a new sociality; they are places of gathering, cooperation, reciprocal education between people of different ages and cultures.

There is also a new interest, among youth in North America, for farming, for learning the properties of herbs and plants, and for creating a new relationship with nature. I continuously meet young people in the U.S. who are genuinely disgusted with the consumerist culture that surrounds them, and become vegetarian or vegan out of concern for the ecological and human cost of cattle raising as well as their refusal of animal suffering. The spread of food co-ops, Community Supported Agriculture, and groups such as Food Not Bombs, indicate the existence of this new consciousness.

The problem we face in building a mass movement is that changing consciousness is not enough to change food buying and eating practice. Lack of access to land, lack of money, space and time (to shop, cook, and learn
about the conditions of production of what we eat) are the main obstacles in this respect. The food movement must be embedded in broader movements addressing the totality of our lives. At the same time, social movements need to build campaigns to stop

* large-scale /industrial concentrations of animals, that are as cruel as they are disastrous for our ecology and our health.

* the continuing devastation of million of hectares of lands and miles of coastal areas for the purpose of cattle ranching and fish-farming, both of which displace and impoverish large populations, destroy the land, and produce poisonous food.

* the systematic expropriation of the natural wealth of Third World countries, under the guise of structural adjustment, which forces them to export their food, see their fisheries depleted, log their forests, waste their crop land for luxury fruits and vegetables and now even bio-fuel.

Lastly, it helps us to be cognizant of the struggles which other countries are making to refuse our food exports, which always provide us with interesting information we in North America are the last to acquire. For example, I have learned from the EU's refusal to import frozen chickens from the US that, prior to packaging, they are plunged into a chlorine bath. I have learned that beef "produced" in the USA contains a cancer-producing hormone. And so forth.

Endnotes

An interview with Julie Guthman

Interviewed by Scott Stoneman

Julie Guthman is an Associate Professor in the Community Studies Department at UC Santa Cruz. Her pressing and rigorous work has dealt with the ways in which organic farming movements and reform in California strain the boundaries that obtain between nature and capital and between the local and the global (Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California), with governmentality, embodiment and resistance in the age of neoliberalism (“The Polanyian Way? Voluntary Food Labels as Neoliberal Governance,” “Embodying neoliberalism: economy, culture, and the politics of fat” [with Melanie DuPuis]), and the racial assumptions that impinge community projects for the distribution of local, organic food in African-American neighborhoods (“Bringing good food to others: investigating the subjects of alternative food practice”). Her developing research examines the biopolitics of obesity in terms of race, embodiment and the evolution of alternative food practices. Among other difficult questions, in this interview Dr. Guthman offers critical perspectives on the intersection of alternative food and political subjectivity, the social, cultural and bodily impact of neoliberalism, and the possibility of responsible food criticism and radical food pedagogy in a time of crisis.

Scott Stoneman (SS) for Politics and Culture: Can you describe the deterritorializing and political economic effects of the neoliberalization of food?

Julie Guthman (JG): To say anything about the effects of neoliberalism on the production and distribution of food we have to pay attention to “actually existing neoliberalisms”[1] rather than the free market myths that stand in as neoliberal philosophy. And, in fact, neoliberalism has been applied to food and agricultural sectors in highly uneven ways. On the one hand, agriculture and food sectors have been subject to some of the most intense attempts at neoliberalization – from the privatization of land and water rights, to the use of free trade agreements to dismantle national-level food safety regulations, to the dismantling of entitlement programs and other public support that exist to combat hunger (e.g., India’s “fair price shops”). On the other hand, neoliberalization has been limited in this sphere. Notwithstanding the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) provisions regarding Agriculture, in both the EU and US, domestic food sectors remain economically protected
through, for example, subsidy programs, and federal level agencies continue to play a major role in environmental and health regulation – although these regulations have been challenged in the WTO.

I find salutary the new found attention among American food activists to the US commodity programs, as evidenced, for example, in a significant reform campaign during the creation of the 2008 Farm Bill. These subsidies benefit some of the wealthiest farmers and clearly work against ecological farming practices. By the same token, the main critique activists forwarded during the campaign was that the commodity programs are responsible for the over-production of corn and soy, which, in turn, make for cheap, junky domestic food (perhaps a new iteration of our bodies, ourselves). In fact, rationales for farm policy are much more complex and historically dynamic, and much excess production never reaches the American stomach. Chronic food surpluses were put to strategic use abroad well before the advent of neoliberalism, most famously through Public Law 480, instituted in 1954, which allowed the US government to dispose of crop surpluses through direct aid, barter for strategic raw materials, and concessionary sales to other countries. The law proved to be an invaluable weapon for extracting political and military concessions. For example, Egypt became one of the largest recipients of US food aid (in dollars) upon its post-1973 accord with Israel.

I say this as a reminder that even though the US continues to urge the liberalization of farm and food sectors abroad, current US farm policy remains highly protectionist – and not simply to provide cheap calories for American consumers but also to open up new markets for exports. Many of the issues that have bogged down the last ten years of international trade ministerial meetings (e.g., in Cancun, Doha, and Hong Kong), are related to the recalcitrance (and hypocrisy) of the US (and EU) to terminate subsidies and walk the talk of free trade. Because, at the same time, farm sectors in much of the world have been neoliberalized, and many countries in the global South continue (and are often forced) to devote some of the best land to export crops to comply with neoliberal structural adjustment policies. Yet with some crops, notably cotton and rice, they can’t compete in US markets.

Given how this uneven neoliberalization exacerbates already existing global inequalities, you have to question localization as an ethical (or coherent) response. At the very least it is ironic that re-localization efforts have gained traction in some of the most well-off regions in the world. In coastal California, from where I hail, most local food initiatives have taken root in already existing
privileged communities, both economically and ecologically. Hundreds of crops are grown year round in these areas based on favorable climate conditions and a huge helping of technology. Clearly not all places in the world have similar resource endowments, in no small part owing to uneven developments. Yet, I see shockingly little reflexivity among both local food activists and writers as to how “going local’ might affect places that retain post-colonial dependencies on export markets. To be sure, any web site that hosts a “locavores challenge” posts many more comments from potential enrollees that express concern about giving up coffee for their morning wake-up than what it might mean for coffee farmers in, say, Sumatra.

SS: In this context, what is the importance of alternative food networks, or “morally embedded” supply chains, in the context of the transformation of the political economy of food since the 1990s? How does the emergence of alternative food change the way we read food as a commodity?

JG: One of the aspects of alternative food networks and so-called morally-embedded supply chains that interest me is the way in which they seem to replicate, and even create neoliberal modes of governance. We see projects which are putatively in opposition to neoliberalism that in some cases uncritically take up ideas of consumer choice, value capture, and pre-political communitarianism, while negating the role of the state as provider of services or regulator of externalities - all ideas which seem standard to neoliberalism.

I am particularly struck by various voluntary labeling schemes that use private organizations to certify to particular standards, giving consumers the choice to purchase particular social and environmental qualities. Voluntary food labels are in some respects analogs to the very things they are purported to resist, namely property rights that allow these ascribed commodities to be traded in a global market. Given that virtually all of these labels are incentivized through intentional barriers to entry, they are at best redistributional, meaning that they may allow producers who are somehow “better” in the their practices to capture more value (putatively from so-called middlemen but ultimately from wealthier consumers). Even then, different sorts of labels significantly vary as to whom and what they protect, and many commodities (and producers) in the world do not stand a chance of being valorized with a label at all. Recent research on fair trade, which is arguably the most explicitly redistributional of the lot, casts doubt even on that quality.
In the past my critiques of these labels has been rather hard-boiled, based more in political economy than, for example, the politics of affect. So I have been giving more thought to the non-structural effects of alternative food, and particularly questions regarding political subjectivity. Whose desires are reflected in the constitution of these networks and sites? What sort of activities does consumption of alternative food incite? Do these networks bring reciprocity between producers and consumers? On this last question, the research does not seem point to reciprocity or transparency – or even reflexivity on the part of those promulgating these alternatives.

For example, Catherine Dolan’s recent work on fair trade tea [2] suggests that producers of fair trade tea know little about the consumers of their tea and assume that fair trade is yet another form of development charity. And yet, in a world where activist politics have been highly constrained by larger political economic forces, these alternative networks may be one of the few tools available to provoke a broader politics. It is possible that social movements around labeling may help embarrass (or encourage) major suppliers into changing their practices as Unilever did in nearly abandoning the use of genetically engineered supplies of grain for its European market. They may make transparent corporate vulnerabilities that activists can then exploit. Or they might produce more radical and collectivist political subjectivities, including among those who are not particularly “helped” by these labels. The jury is still out on the multiplier effects of these networks, I think.

SS: A December 2003 article in The Economist hastily summarizes the relationship between body politics, public health, food and globalization in the following way: “When the world was a simpler place, the rich were fat, the poor were thin, and right-thinking people worried about how to feed the hungry. Now, in much of the world, the rich are thin, the poor are fat, and right-thinking people are worrying about obesity.”[3] How do we deconstruct this? And in what sense does it gesture to what Raj Patel calls the “big fat contradiction” (1) of the global food system [4]: the coexistence of a starving multitude and an “obesity epidemic,” or of what you and Melanie Dupuis have termed “accumulation by engorgement” (427) [5] and “accumulation by dispossession” [6] (the latter of which, in the context of the current food crisis, takes the particular form of food dependency)?
JG: Seriously, is it not possible to call into question the violence of the global food economy without picking on fat people?

Ok, I am working on a book on this issue and I can’t do it justice here, but here’s the basic argument: Many of the changes in the food system that are associated with obesogeneity can easily be traced back to the political economy of neoliberalism (particularly as it has taken shape in the US). Specifically forms of food processing, marketing, and regulation must be couched in larger transformations of post-war capitalism, in important respects outgrowths of falling profits, declining US economic competitiveness, and a political project of the right to remove obstacles seen as unfriendly to business. Specifically I would point to the persistence of geo-politically driven agricultural subsidies, the treadmill “logics” of intensifying farm production and cheapening food production, the reconfigured mandates of regulatory institutions, and the reduction in entitlement funding and real wages so that cheap food has come to substitute for income. Neoliberalism as a political economic project has also encouraged particular forms of urban economic development, from fast-food-choked strip malls to suburban environments hostile to walking to gentrified urban cores.

Yet, as your question suggests, not everyone is getting fat because of this so-called obesogenic environment. Indeed, these same policies have also produced profitable solutions to these problems, from food-like products that do not metabolize to weight loss-inducing pharmaceuticals to storefront exercise gyms. Creating purchasable solutions to the problems it generates has provided a doubly good fix for the crisis of capital accumulation that underlies the neoliberal political economic project.

Of course you can’t understand difference in body size without understanding the class differentiation that has been furthered with neoliberalism, and we need to understand this in a cultural way. These are ideas I am still working out, but I will say that current cultures of the body place a high premium on thinness as both a performance and requisite of success, while those who have little chance for success in the neoliberal economy have little to gain, so to speak, by trying to meet impossible bodily ideals. No matter what, it seems to me that the moral outrage with fat gets it wrong.
SS: In “Can’t Stomach It,” the piece you wrote for Gastronomica, you note the “moral superiority” with which “[Michael] Pollan et. al” engage with contemporary anxieties surrounding food (75). [7] How are the ethics of consumer choice or consumer subjectivity framed in popular food criticism? What is the main source of your impatience with Pollan et. al (as you cheekily put it), and how do you imagine the role of the intellectual in terms of the politics of her intervention, not just in the economics of food, but also in the interest of sustaining a dialectical tension in thinking about the “cultural, ecological and political-institutional” worlds of food, especially in a time of crisis?

JG: There is so much to say about Michael Pollan. He provides new writing fodder for me regularly. Just last week he had a piece in the New York Times (reference via endnote) that asked people to send him their food rules. All of the examples he provided of a possible rule, including one from his own grandmother (“I always like to leave the table a little bit hungry”), were about eating in a more refined way – more or less. For that matter, the last third of his latest book, In Defense of Food, reads like a diet book, a variation on the theme of Why French Women Don’t Get Fat, which is reportedly because they slowly eat deliciously prepared food with just the right amount of wine. They take pleasure in it – just not too much. Pollan is usually spot-on with his critiques of industrial food, but he often ends up in a messianic place that I find, well, distasteful – namely, he tells readers to buy and eat just like him. He appeals in that way to those who already are refined eaters and want to feel ethically good about it.

Yet, what really makes me impatient with Pollan is lines such as the following, also from In Defense of Food: “Not everyone can afford to eat high-quality food in America, and that is shameful: however, those of us who can, should...” (184).[8] To me, this is a punt, and an indefensible one. It’s not only that he shrugs his shoulders at issues of food security; it is that he sets aside the problem that the world food system developed through colonial labor and land relationships and that today’s food system, with its uneven neoliberalizations, continues to contribute to this structural inequality - as does eating “just like him.” Food politics cannot just be about the food.
SS: In this issue Michael Perelman, when asked about the hegemonic effects of economics textbooks in thinking about food, responds that “the textbooks have more to learn from the activists than the activists could get from the textbooks.” This, because the texts to which he refers merely reproduce normative neoclassical economic ideas about how to govern the flow of commodities, as well as the bodies which produce and consume them. What challenges do educators face in trying to negotiate the institutionalized discourses which obtain about food? And what is your sense of how educators might go about coordinating a critical or, dare we say, radical pedagogy of food?

JG: I think it’s pretty difficult to talk about food pedagogy without considering how food itself has become such a huge part of the social imaginary. Courses on food (from social, critical angles) are proliferating these days and students can’t seem to get enough. On my campus alone, about four social science faculty members regularly “teach food” and the rush to enroll in these courses seems unreal at times. So this tells you something about the current zeitgeist. For that reason alone, I think a radical pedagogy of food must provincialize its object of study and ask what is it about food that has interpolated relatively privileged people into studying it and/or reading about it.

No doubt a lot lies with the pleasure of talking about food (as some sort of surrogate for eating it?) and that food choice as politics has gained such traction. But since I’m somewhat critical of this move, in the several related courses I teach on food I make a big point of not making it about what I eat or my students should eat.

That said, it is hard to resist the “what to eat” move. For example, many food courses these days have students do commodity chain analyses so students learn how food commodities are constituted across the globe. Students learn a lot from these exercises: for instance, that not all crops are grown on giant factory farms, that unexpected places are sources of certain raw materials, that fair trade food isn’t as easy to trace as its claims to “transparency” promise.

The problem with this exercise is that for many students the take-home lesson is that knowing where you’re food comes from is of utmost importance – and this leads many students into what Branden Born and Mark Purcell call the “local trap” (195): the presumption that proximity is a good proxy for just or sustainable.[9] I want my students to go further than that. I push them to reflect on their own desires about food (and teaching others what to eat), including
pushing them on questions of who gets the privilege of knowing food and eating locally. A radical pedagogy must go beyond self-satisfying food choices and have students reflect on potential levers of transformation.

Endnotes


An interview with Raj Patel

Interviewed by Scott Stoneman

Raj Patel is an activist, organizer and visiting scholar in the Centre for African Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, as well as a Research Associate at the School of Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. He has written extensively on food sovereignty as an ethical injunction and political horizon, and his recent Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System, a compendious and cogent study of the genealogies of our current global food system, has made him a major voice in discourses of food today. In this interview, he considers the ideological implications of “food security,” the limits of rights discourses and technocratic solutions in talking about food politics, the obfuscations of statistical knowledge and the possibility of mass participatory democracy today.

Scott Stoneman (SS) for Politics and Culture: How has the notion of “food security” contributed to the system of trade which currently determines who is stuffed and who is starved - or who is made to live and who is left to die? And how does the framework of “food sovereignty” offer a way of rethinking food, beyond the logic of commodity, in terms of a radical politics of public health?

Raj Patel (RP): To understand ‘food sovereignty’, it’s important to see how it pushes away from ‘food security’. So here’s a 2001 definition, from the Food And Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: “Food security [is] 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.” [1] While no one disputes the importance of sufficient, safe and nutritious food to lead a healthy life, the key word here is ‘access’. Under food security, the question of power in the food system never comes up – as long as access is guaranteed under some system or other, there’s no problem. The trouble, however, is this: you can be food secure under a dictatorship. You can be food secure in prison. You can be food secure, in other words, and never have any say about what it is that you’re provided, nor the manner in which it comes to you. Food sovereignty takes these questions of power seriously. While the full definition is long and changeable, the common thread is that food sovereignty is about
‘peoples’ right to define their food system’. In other words, it’s a call to have rights about their food politics, not just their food qua commodity. As part of the deliberations around food sovereignty, concerns about public health will play a part, but so will concerns about other public goods, such as environment, education and culture. A sovereign food system is one in which a range of competing concerns around public space are balanced at appropriate levels, and in which food is treated not as a commodity, but as a right.

SS: In what way does the issue of local vs. state or corporate sovereignty and the urgency of feeding future populations transform dominant conceptions of “post-industrial” labour? Forced to square off against the managerial logic of the “network society” instantiated by companies like Wal-Mart and a seemingly universal obsession with technocratic solutions to the global food crisis, how are movements for participatory democracy such as the MST in Brazil and indigenous movements around the world making autonomies of food cultivation and consumption seem not only possible, but in your words, “beautiful” and “banal”?

RP: The debates around post-industrial labour, as far as I understand them, seem to be a little myopic. While it’s true that the major Northern cities in which these theories are spawned have seen a decline in industrial manufacturing, such manufacturing hasn’t gone away. If someone said that the world is now less polluted because Londoners’ cars need to pass a smog test, we’d think them mad. Similarly, just because food production is out of sight, it oughtn’t to be out of mind. And while Monsanto is keen, for instance, to pimp its products out as the magic bullet to end our concerns about the need for agricultural labour, it’s increasingly clear that their technocratic solutions aren’t working, nor are they likely to. A recent study by 400 scientists, the International Agricultural Assessment on Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD, online at www.agassessment.org) suggests that the solutions to questions about how we will feed the world in 2050, when there are 9 billion of us, will not be those provided by industrial agriculture. Instead, the answers will be ones that involve a great deal more regional and municipal autonomy, ones that rely on context-specific scientific solutions, rather than mass-produced technical quick fixes. For context-specific science to work well, it relies on local articulations of social and physical ecology. And the only way in which such ecologies can be effectively articulated is through a much more
engaged and participatory democracy, of the kind being pioneered by movements such as the MST.

SS: What are the limitations of theorizing consumer choice, or consumer responsibility, in relation to the global politics of food? In the place of politicizing the choices that consumers, as the objects of market strategies, make about the food they buy and even the pleasure they derive from the food they buy, what kinds of problems and questions ought to instead be considered in the interest of instating what Eric Cazdyn calls a “new candor” regarding the economics and cultural politics of crisis (655)? [2]

RP: For me, the problem here is one of ressentiment. Consumers are meant to be ‘free’ to choose, but the entire notion of consumer choice is premised on domination by corporate power. The interesting questions for me lie in the politics of pleasure and sensuousness, questions that try to reclaim corporeal freedom from the realm of specious consumer choice.

SS: In Stuffed and Starved, your thoroughgoing study of the effects of free market fundamentalism on bodies and the world food system, you discuss the vanishing of India’s rural poor, and in particular poor farmers, as a kind of “statistical sleight of hand.” What is the political function of statistical knowledge in the Global South? What form of power drives the erasure of dispossession and the informational suppression of the specific burden placed on women? And why is belying the growing instance of farmer suicides an especially necessary occlusion for the state?

RP: The question of how statistics function as a means of domination is akin to the use of maps as colonial tools – statistics and maps operate in similar ways as epistemic weapons of surveillance, centralization of power, and dispossession. The question of women being rendered invisible is not, of course, unique to the Global South, nor to agriculture. But sexism is particularly germane to agriculture because the majority of food eaten in developing countries is grown by women and because the majority of hunger is borne by women (60% of those food insecure on Earth are women or girls). Yet the confrontation of the full force of this fact, just as with the ongoing human and ecological disasters in agriculture more broadly, is something that states aren’t prepared for. Or, better, that the consequences of genuinely confronting this would lead to policy changes that profoundly upended capitalism. So farmers
are forgotten, and women’s reproductive labour exploited. The state doesn’t always forget farmer suicide, though. India, for instance, has an election-year stunt at the moment designed to keep farming communities sweet for four more years. The idea is to prevent farmer suicides by having a generalized debt amnesty – but it only works for those with formal sector loans who own their own land. In other words, it’s only for a fraction of the entire sector. And, of course, the stunt fails to address the underlying causes of debt, and fails to address the fact that the greatest burden continues to fall on women.

SS: Are there ways in which determining the rights of citizens to self-govern still excludes groups for whom citizenship is less certain? In other words, how might food and food crisis necessitate a different form of cosmopolitanism, or world citizenship, as a means of providing an ethical orientation to competing notions of sovereignty (i.e., state sovereignty, sovereignty as the right to local autonomy, corporate power/capitalist sovereignty)?

RP: The problem word here is ‘citizen’. It summons a Westphalian notion of nation-state membership that delimits the possibilities of ‘rights’. The kind of rights that are part of food sovereignty are, in an important way, human rights. Hannah Arendt’s work on refugees, and her observation that they are a population denied the right to have rights, is particularly appropriate in understanding what peasant and landless movements are fighting for. Take this quote, for instance, from The Origins of Totalitarianism, which might have been written directly about peasant struggle:

“…people deprived of human rights… are deprived, not of the right freedom, but of the right to action, not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion… We become aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerge who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation.” (177)[3]

To boot the domain of rights to a planetary level is not, however, to suggest that the appropriate body for enforcing those rights is a world government. It seems to me that what we need is not one authority, but several competing ones, with jurisdictions that match the appropriate decision-making scale. So, for instance, municipal participatory budgeting is good for making decisions
around how the right to the city is cashed out. But it’s not the best level for making decisions about regional watersheds, or planetary CO2 levels. This looks like I’m making a case for a sort of Kantian cosmopolitan federalism, but I think, following Andrej Grubacic’s thinking on this, I’m calling instead for a sort of Balkanisation, understood as a series of overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions and domains of government, resolved through consensus-based politics.

Endnotes


An interview with Michael Perelman

Interviewed by Max Haiven

Michael Perelman is a prolific and compelling scholar of contemporary economics and politics who teaches at California State University in Chico. He has published 19 books on a wide variety of topics. Graduating with a degree in agricultural economics, questions of the global inequalities of food production and distribution, both past and present, led Perelman’s to write several early books including Farming for Profit in a Hungry World (1977), Classical Political Economy, Primitive Accumulation and the Social Division of Labor (1983), and Karl Marx’s Crises Theories: Labor, Scarcity and Fictitious Capital (1987). All three touched on the “environmental, social, and economic costs of the current agricultural system” and the way those costs are disguised by reigning economic paradigms which facilitate the privatization of social wealth.

Perelman’s abiding concern with, on the one-hand, burning social issues and, on the other, the brutal deficiencies and complicities of mainstream economics has animated his career ever since with books including The Pathology of the U.S. Economy: The Costs of a Low Wage System (1993), The End of Economics (1996), Class Warfare in the Information Age (1998), The Invention of Capitalism: The Secret History of Primitive Accumulation (2001), Manufacturing Discontent: The Trap of Individualism in a Corporate Society (2005), and his most recent The Confiscation of American Prosperity: From Right-Wing Extremism and Economic Ideology to the Next Great Depression (2007).

In this interview Perelman offers his insights into the contemporary food and economic crises, some of their historical antecedents, and themes ranging from speculation to dependency to class.

Max Haiven (MH) for Politics and Culture: Before the recent financial crisis, discussions of an endemic and deepening food crisis was making its way into the mainstream press thanks largely to spectacular demonstrations in the global South and some anomalous prices for things like cereals at Northern supermarkets. Since the financial crisis was fully realized last fall, that food crisis seems to have been largely forgotten (along with the related problems of “peak oil” and general
resource scarcity). Is this coincidence of the food and financial crises an accident?

Michael Perelman (MP): The relationship between the financial crisis and the food shortage is not coincidental at all, although I do not believe that the ongoing crisis is merely a financial crisis. Instead, crises like these are endemic to a capitalist economy. A decades-long distortion of the entire economy, reflected, for example, in an epidemic of inequality and deregulation, has made this particular crisis even worse. I tried to describe the entire pathology in historical context in my recent book *The Confiscation of American Prosperity*. Inequality and lack of investment in productive capital, among other things, led to a speculative fever that eventually produced a financial crisis.

Once the bubble was set in motion, speculation in all sorts of raw materials, including food and energy, became part of the contagion. Once crops became seen as a cheaper form of energy production, a mania for producing biofuels created food shortages.

Now that speculation in raw materials is running in reverse, people in the less developed countries, whose economies depended upon the export of raw materials, will face markets with sufficient food, but without the wherewithal to afford it—a different kind of food shortage, but one that is just as lethal.

MH: One interesting aspect of the rallying cry of "food sovereignty" is its mobilization of the term sovereignty. Social movements around the world are using the term to speak to their demands for autonomous control over their food production and markets, often at the sub-state level. The term sovereignty is familiar to many from anti-colonial movements for national liberation. But it's also a loaded concept which mainstream political science associates with the European order of imperialist nation-states. What's your sense of this term sovereignty and how it relates to food?

MP: Here, you're treading on very difficult terrain. In an ideal world based on principles of equality, virtually everybody could be better off with some trading in food. Trade today, however, is not among equals.

Food—especially spices—was among the earliest goods involved in long-distance trade at the beginning of the age of empires. These spices were extraordinarily profitable. Ideally again, the producers of the exotic spices
could have profited from their product, which cost very little to produce and commanded a premium price in Europe. Instead, the spices were a curse. The colonial powers often fought each other over control of the places where exotic spices were found. When they were not fighting each other, they were subduing the inhabitants of the areas.

When you get to trading in basic food commodities on international markets, market forces can threaten basic survival of countries that depend on imports—not just because of the threat of embargoes, but to the variability of the market on which those commodities trade. We saw this happening recently when grains were discovered as a source of fuel: the price increased dramatically making a normal diet unaffordable for millions of people.

In this sense, concerns about sovereignty sound reasonable. After all, people would be ill-advised to put their money in risky investments when a loss would expose them severe difficulties. In the same sense, countries should take care to make sure that they have a certain degree of food security.

Market dependence makes countries vulnerable to political mischief. I am reminded of a statement by Senator Hubert Humphrey (who later to become Vice-President of the United States) to the Senate in 1957:

> I have heard... that people may become dependent on us for food. I know this is not supposed to be good news. To me that was good news, because before people can do anything they have got to eat. And if you are looking for a way to get people to lean on you and to be dependent on you, in terms of their cooperation with you, it seems to me that food dependence would be terrific.[1]

The United States, of course, has no problem with such dependency. First of all, it has plenty of basic foods and largely imports what might be considered luxuries. But the country is powerful enough to do great harm to any country that might interfere with its access to food. In short, trade does not represent much of a risk for the U.S. In so far as food is concerned, the greatest fear of the United States is that the market may become glutted, making food prices collapse.

Of course, for many countries, food self-sufficiency is virtually physically impossible. International solidarity is an important defense against either
market forces, political forces, or natural forces that might interfere with food supplies.

MH: In response to the food crisis, local organizers and global organizations have begun to adopt "food sovereignty" as their rallying cry. Neoliberals, however, have been quick to accuse these voices of some sort of anachronistic "protectionism" or other crimes against the market. This way of framing the debate also seems to dehistoricize this food crisis as merely the product of recent economic policies. What's your sense of the history of this crisis and the history of food crises in Capitalism's development more generally?

MP: In 1866, British industry could not get cotton from the Confederate states because of the American Civil War. Britain turned to its Indian colony for cotton, restricting rice cultivation and causing the infamous famine of 1866. Karl Marx reported that this famine cost the lives of a million people in the district of Orissa alone—a more extreme version of the recent food crisis resulting from the destructive biofuels movement I mentioned earlier. Similarly, when the potato famine hit Ireland in the 1840s, the country's agriculture was largely geared to exporting crops to England. Local poor people relied on potatoes. When the British finally got around to sending relief, they sent wheat, but the people had no facilities for baking.

In my book, The Invention of Capitalism, I tried to show how British economists and the powerful economic and political forces that they represented went to great lengths to figure out how to make people dependent on purchased food by making it impossible for them to produce for themselves. Masses of people were uprooted in the Enclosure Movement. In this case, food dependency was not national in nature, but class dependent. The idea was that once people had to buy on the market, they would have no choice but to accept wage labor, necessary for mass industrialization.

Today, wage labor is endemic. People take it for granted. Even so, extra-market forces continue to manipulate the food market. Generally, the problem is the powerful countries want to dump their subsidized agricultural products on poor countries, where the farmers have no such support. In fact, the U.S. and other developed countries force agreements on the poorer countries that prevent them from protecting their agriculture.
Peasants who had produced corn in Mexico prior to NAFTA felt the brunt of this manipulation of agricultural markets when cheap, subsidized U.S. corn flooded their local market, rendering their crops almost worthless in exchange. Similarly, cotton farmers in Africa—admittedly not food producers—have been cast into a deeper poverty as the result of their exposure to international markets.

MH: It seems like food and food production has had an interesting career in the history of political-economic thought from the Physiocrats to the response to them by classical economics to Marx's ambivalent and sometimes hostile approach to agrarian production to more recent attempts to retool Marxist political economy on a global stage. You're work often deals with the history of economic thought and especially the way ostensibly free-market thinkers were at the vanguard of the intellectual and legal justification of the enclosures of the agrarian commons. What's your sense of how food has factored into economic thought?

MP: Obviously, food played an important role in pre-capitalistic thought. I was recently in China. People showed me one written character for family. It was a roof and a pig. I took that to mean that if you could find food and shelter, you could have a family. Part of the character for happiness was another character for a field.

Early economists were struck by the fact that the 17th century Dutch economy flourished, despite the fact that it was heavily dependent on imports for everything. Although the Dutch had developed the most intensive farming techniques in Europe, economists paid virtually no attention to that part of their economy. Instead, they marveled at Dutch trade and finance and the sophisticated futures markets.

Agriculture appeared to be the alternative to capitalism, because every culture seemed to be relatively self-sufficient, rather than dependent on traded commodities. Its products are not valuable enough to export abroad. As I described in my book, The Invention of Capitalism, early economists were very concerned to find ways to squeeze people off the land in what Marx called primitive accumulation.

You mentioned the 18th century Physiocrats. Of course, their concern was very different. The French economy was relatively backward. Development, for
them, meant finding ways to modernize agriculture, by ridding the country of peasant agriculture to make way for capitalist agriculture.

Turning to Marx, his understanding of agriculture evolved. In early years, Marx saw nature as something to be easily conquered through socialism. Agriculture was the domain of peasants and aristocrats, neither of which fit into his vision of the future at the time. But once the cotton famine hit during the Civil War in the United States, Marx’s thinking changed. I discussed this in quite a bit of detail in my book, Marx’s Crises Theories. At the time, workers suffered greatly because industry could not get the raw materials necessary to produce textiles. England’s response was to search for alternative sources of cotton. This effort led the British to convert a substantial part of Indian agriculture, leading to the famine I mentioned earlier. In the midst of these events, Marx began an intensive study of rent theory and agronomy, at one point saying that the agronomists have more to offer than political economists. In his later years, Marx became sympathetic to the potential of old Russian villages, seeing that their cooperative system had the possibility of moving directly to socialism.

Today, agriculture has become just another industry as far as economics is concerned. It may not be not as innovative as biotechnology or as profitable as finance typically is, but it is still just another industry. Given the direct share of agriculture in the US economy, food production is not a particularly important industry for economists.

The drought conditions affecting agriculture around the world may be a wake-up call. Not only is draught restricting production in poor countries, but agriculture in Australia and in California is in a crisis mode.

MH: As every first-year textbook insists, economics is ostensibly about the "rational" distribution of scarce resources. How can we imagine a form of economics adequate to dealing with the massive problems humanity faces concerning food?

MP: I think the economics textbooks today reflect the way most people think about the world in terms of food. In the textbook world, there are no massive problems as long as people kowtow to neoliberal principles: poverty exists because governments are too foolish or corrupt to open their economies up to market forces.
In short, the textbooks have more to learn from the activists than the activists could get from the textbooks.

One of the most important problems that economics—not just introductory textbooks—overlooks is the whole question of resources. Costs are seen as merely the expense of producing one more unit, what economists call a “marginal cost.” The concept of depletion has been disappeared from economics by assuming that markets somehow take account of scarcity. At the same time, economists understand that business has a 10 to 20% hurdle rate, meaning that investment is not worth pursuing unless you can be virtually certain of a 10 to 20% rate of return. By that calculation, the entire world would depreciate away to relatively little value in a couple centuries.

I dealt with all this in a different book, The Perverse Economy, where I told the story of the passenger pigeon. It turns out that the price of pigeons remained virtually constant as the entire species disappeared into extinction.

Our species does not face a threat as grave as the passenger pigeon, but the crisis is serious nonetheless. I wish that my field, economics, had more to contribute.

Endnotes

Pollanated Politics, or, The Neoliberal’s Dilemma

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Among the growing crowd of food pundits active today, Michael Pollan stands as perhaps the most thoughtful and the most visible. Pollan’s bestseller The Omnivore’s Dilemma (2006) quickly catapulted him to the status of literary celebrity and public intellectual, and today he can frequently be found contributing to The New York Times or having a conversation with popular TV hosts like Terry Gross, Bill Moyers, or Jon Stewart in his role as informal spokesperson for the growing movement for responsible (local, humane, organic, and/or slow) food. What’s more, Pollan has recently proven himself an astute witness to (and indirect participant in) food capitalism and electoral politics. After lambasting Whole Foods in The Omnivore’s Dilemma, Pollan found himself in an extended debate with John Mackey, the grocery chain’s libertarian CEO and founder, about the practices and values of the chain. This debate culminated in a public forum at Berkeley University in which Mackey responded to criticisms and presented his case for the social responsibility of business and a humanitarian approach to food and capitalism [1]. Similarly, just before the 2008 presidential election, Pollan published an open letter to the candidates in the New York Times explaining how reforming the American food system could also help deal with the seemingly more pressing issues of climate change, healthcare, and national security. Soon after, Obama was citing Pollan’s work in a discussion of US energy policy, and bloggers started buzzing about Pollan as a potential Secretary of Agriculture [2].

Pollan’s work has touched a cultural nerve, and this paper explores how and why this is the case. I argue that Pollan’s work has become persuasive to large numbers of people because his terms and rhetoric effectively capture the dominant understandings and opportunities for political will and action in the early 21st Century. Specifically, Pollan offers a food politics that resonates with the lived experience of neoliberalism, in which political agency is all but unthinkable except in the terms of consumerism and in which sovereignty is an embattled concept increasingly difficult to apply to the actions of citizens or states.
Pollan’s career as a food writer can be traced back to the two chapters on specific edible plants (apples and potatoes) in his 2001 book *The Botany of Desire*. But his transformation into a popular food pundit begins in earnest with a 2002 essay in the *New York Times Magazine* called “Power Steer” in which he examines the American beef industry by purchasing an infant calf and following it through its life cycle from insemination to feedlot to slaughterhouse. This essay re-emerged with minor changes as a centerpiece of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, a responsible foods reveille in which Pollan meticulously traces the ingredients for different types of meals and makes an appeal for Americans to create a more immediate relationship to their food.

Significantly, whereas the 2002 version of “Power Steer” was an inquiry into the iconic American food (beef) that offered the surprising revelation that the American food system rests entirely on an overproduction of federally subsidized corn, the later version of the essay is recast in light of this conclusion. When the essay returns in 2006, it is no longer a study of beef but is, instead, just one piece of a larger study of corn. The book reads as though in writing the magazine article, Pollan learned something that would guide his future investigations. And in the evolution of this essay one can see what is probably Pollan’s single greatest asset as a journalist: his genuine curiosity that prods him to dig into the issues that perplex or fascinate him, such that a study of meat becomes a study of corn, an inquiry into climate change leads to a study of thermodynamics, and a story on malnourishment becomes an inquiry into the dynamics of federal economic policymaking. It is probably worth pausing here to note the value of a journalistic profession that enables sustained inquiries without pre-conceived notions about profitable conclusions. Put more grandly: Pollan’s writing betrays just the sort of curiosity, intellectual engagement, and commitment to publicity that has anchored democratic theory of the past 400 years. But as admirable as Pollan may be as a journalist and pundit, his work bears the marks of a particular historical moment and reflects a paucity of capacities for political action and imagination under neoliberalism [3].

My guiding assumption is that Pollan’s work has circulated so widely because his claims resonate with some established prejudices of American culture. Specifically, in focusing his analysis and prescriptions on the political and environmental impacts of consumption, he suggests that it is primarily as consumers (rather than as workers or a citizens) that we act in the world. This
is surely at least in part due to the unique quality of food as the quintessential consumable commodity. But it is also just as surely due to our move into what Zygmunt Bauman (2007) calls a “consumer society” in which social integration and systemic reproduction is accomplished largely in our roles as consumers instead of as producers. Books like The Omnivore’s Dilemma examine food as a mode of consumption, but this was not always the case. Earlier food books like Sidney Mintz’s canonical Sweetness and Power (1985) and Upton Sinclair’s groundbreaking The Jungle (1906) explored food as a mode of production looking at plantation and slaughterhouse labor, industrial management, and the caloric needs of workers. Pollan’s characterization of responsible consumerism as political action is yet another symptom of a consumer society, in which identity formation and social control are largely a function of consumer choices rather than position in a labor hierarchy or workplace management.

One common critique of books like The Omnivore’s Dilemma is that their turn to responsible consumption is elitist; they place hopes for progress in the hands of a wise and benevolent upper-middle-class while delivering more by way of individual self-righteousness than meaningful political change. Notably, Pollan anticipates this criticism in Dilemma, admitting that responsible food is more expensive and so recommendations that people seek it out are susceptible to the charges of elitism (242-6). Despite this concession, however, Pollan has very little to say about any alternative means to achieving food system reform. In explaining the omnivore’s dilemma, Pollan performs the neoliberal’s dilemma: in order to politicize the US food system, he must revert to the obviously inadequate, arguably elitist, and ultimately depoliticizing language of consumerism. Reading Pollan in the broader context of a consumer society, one gets the impression that food has become such a fashionable political issue precisely because, as the quintessential consumable, it most readily fits into a consumerist politics [4]. If it is largely as consumers that Americans imagine politics, then food is ripe for politicization.

II.

Since 2006, Pollan has both defended and extended the argument put forth in The Omnivore’s Dilemma about creating a more immediate relationship with food. In 2008, in addition to a bestselling book arguing for a return to more traditional diets (In Defense of Food), Pollan published two high-profile essays in the New York Times Magazine which together offer a sustained statement of his politics of food. Both essays are clearly responses to the charges that
responsible foods movements are elitist, and both endeavor to provide a coherent set of ethical and institutional prescriptions to the problems of the industrial food system.

In the first of these essays, entitled “Why Bother?” (2008a), Pollan admits his suspicions about responsible consumption as he describes his reaction to the closing minutes of Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” where viewers are advised to buy energy-efficient appliances and bike to work. Considering the “immense disproportion between the magnitude of the problem Gore had described and the puniness of what he was asking us to do about it,” Pollan explicitly rejects the consumerist turn in environmental politics, and argues that an effective challenge to climate change would require more than responsible consumer choices and judicious energy calculations. Specifically, Pollan recommends that we approach the earth as producers rather than consumers, that we stop seeing nature as a bounty of cheap energy to use and instead actively involve ourselves in producing environmental balance. One way to do this is by “growing some – even just a little – of your own food.” Pollan argues that backyard gardens will not only reduce our need for fossil fuels by eliminating transportation and limiting the need for petroleum based fertilizers and pesticides, they will also change our relationship to the earth. When people are involved in producing rather than merely consuming food, he argues, they will develop an appreciation for the fragility and interdependence of life, intensifying their ethical bond with the environment.

Pollan’s other 2008 essay, “Farmer in Chief” (2008b), was the aforementioned open letter to Barack Obama and John McCain explaining how the next president could resolve crises in healthcare, energy, climate change, and national security by reworking what is currently a baffling and schizophrenic US food policy. Pollan offered three broad suggestions in the letter. First, redesign farm subsidies to reward sustainable growth of “specialty crops” (fruits and vegetables that people actually eat) instead of “commodity crops” (like corn bound for the feedlot or ethanol plant). Second, decentralize the American food system by promoting farmers’ markets and relaxing USDA regulations that only benefit large agricultural producers. Third, rebuild a national food culture by teaching children to grow, prepare, and appreciate fresh foods and through symbolic gestures like planting a vegetable garden on the White House lawn. But this essay is not only a letter to the presidential candidates. As a public letter explaining the significance of both symbolic and regulatory politics, it is implicitly a rebuke to all those who would read The Omnivore’s Dilemma and come away thinking that responsible consumption is
sufficient to fix the food system. Clearly, this essay was necessitated by the popular impression that the book denigrated state action and placed responsibility for political change in the lap of the consumer [5].

Together, these essays demonstrate Pollan’s belief that building a sustainable food system requires two strategies, a personal/ethical one and a political/institutional one. While critics of responsible foods movements may be right to claim that the turn to consumerism ignores institutional politics, Pollan is concerned that this critique belittles lifestyle changes and thus releases individuals from responsibility to change their own habits. For Pollan, talk of the need for political reform often gives license to avoid personal change, just as much as talk of the need for personal change distracts from the need for political reform. There is a stubborn entitlement that calls upon policymakers to fix the climate crisis even if citizen-consumers have not conveyed their concern for the environment by changing their lifestyles. Green consumerism may be self-righteous and naïve, but its rejection is cynical and counterproductive. As Pollan puts this, effective food reform requires that we “commingle [our] identities as consumer and producer and citizen” (2008a).

Pollan proposes that Gore recommends changing your light bulbs “because he probably can’t imagine us doing anything much more challenging, like, say, growing some portion of our own food” (2008a). This seems right. Gore speaks the language of pragmatism, and offers modest proposals with real possibilities for enactment. But note: Pollan’s specific gripe with Gore is not that his solutions are consumerist, but that they are individualist; his concern is that, in the face of the world’s most massive ecological problems, Gore remains tied to a limited political imaginary that continues to promote individual-level solutions: “Whatever we can do as individuals to change the way we live at this suddenly very late date does seem utterly inadequate to the challenge” (2008a). Echoing the charge against responsible foods, Pollan argues that such individualistic solutions often provide a sense of personal virtue as much as environmental change. And yet, the alternative that Pollan provides on the very next page is yet another individual level solution: grow some of your own food.

Using Pollan’s own critique, we might posit that Pollan suggests backyard gardening because he probably can’t imagine us doing anything much more challenging, like, say, reclassifying food and water as human rights rather than purchasable commodities. Pollan recommends buying fewer factory-farmed products because he probably can’t imagine abolishing a system of intellectual
property that prevents farmers from replanting seeds from season to season, or nationalizing a beef industry that has proven itself unwilling or unable to adhere to even the most basic worker safety and environmental protection regulations. Even as Pollan laments the paucity of political imagination in the face of an imminent threat to “survival of life on earth as we know it,” he still makes no mention of electoral politics or any other kind of non-individualistic solution. Caught in the neoliberal’s dilemma, Pollan offers private solutions because he probably can’t even imagine public ones.

Even at his most political, when he is addressing corporate CEOs or elected officials on the institutional remedies to the worlds’ food problems, Pollan’s prescriptions lack the familiar and necessary touchstones of political analysis. Pollan does address corporate power when he talks about the relative profit margins of fresh and processed foods; he does talk about agricultural subsidies and economies of scale; and he does talk about how federal legislation affects international grain markets and threats of global famine. But he does not talk about collective action, social antagonism, property rights, or even industrial regulation. Beyond responsible consumption, his prescriptions are almost invariably a series of commonsense (if recalcitrant) regulatory changes that promote environmental awareness or energy efficiency and that can be cast in the apolitical language of universal consensus. He offers, in other words, technocratic ethics disguised as a politics, a series of claims that exclude no one:

Reforming the food system is not inherently a right-or-left issue: for every Whole Foods shopper with roots in the counterculture you can find a family of evangelicals intent on taking control of its family dinner and diet back from the fast-food industry – the culinary equivalent of home schooling (2008a).

Pollan may be on firm ground claiming that hippies and Christians both like organic produce. But insofar as “reforming the food system” means interfering with the corporate control of vital resources, it is inherently a right-or-left issue [6]. Insofar as reforming the food system means imposing government regulation on agribusiness and insisting on clean and nutritious food as a human right rather than a purchasable commodity, there are definite political interests and traditionally left-wing ideas in play here. Insofar as Pollan is talking about food system reform that includes universal coverage for preventative medical care (which he clearly is), it seems disingenuous at best to claim that this is not an agenda that separates a (libertarian leaning) right from
a (welfare state) left. There is, of course, great strategic value to claiming that this agenda “enlists all of us in this great cause” (2008b). But in order to manage this enlistment, Pollan glides over the fundamental questions of political analysis and thus denies that capitalist society contains competing interests and irresolvable antagonisms. This retreat from politics is endemic to the neoliberal’s dilemma: how to write politically in an age of near-universal suspicion about state action, popular aversion to political conflict, and widespread belief that disagreement owes to differential access to information rather than to real, irresolvable conflicts over resources and opportunities. By skipping over such fundamental issues, Pollan offers a politics in which everybody wins. Which is, of course, no politics at all. It is, instead, a promise of universal reconciliation beyond the vicissitudes of class (or any other) conflict.

III.

Of course, Pollan’s dilemma is not unique. His work demonstrates a common horizon of political discourse in the US, where it is only as consumers (not as citizens, and certainly not as workers) that Americans can imagine political action. Stripped of opportunities for meaningful participation in the workplace or the state, Americans transpose erstwhile political problems to the one place where they can at least imagine being efficacious: the market. And so, despite all the sound and fury of culture warriors, there is no class struggle in the US; only various identity struggles and consumer boycotts that promise recognition within the uncontested framework of global capital. American politics, that is, might better be called post-politics.

One sees this same political horizon in the work of another fashionable pundit, Thomas Friedman (2008). Friedman promises that environmental catastrophe can be averted via federal subsidies for green R&D, and his “green revolution” amounts to market incentives for green technologies like electric cars. There is no rethinking the reliance on the market to manage scarce resources, nor any more properly political remedies like public transportation, municipal planning to shorten commutes, or reconsidering a regulatory system that allows the selling of fossil fuels to continue to be the most profitable enterprise on earth. This is, in other words, a neoliberal revolution in which we can combat global warming without interfering with profitability.

But surely the most visible demonstration of the neoliberal dilemma was the Obama campaign’s promises of a post-partisan, post-racial reconciliation that
systematically eschewed the democratic ideals of struggle and contestation. Simon Critchley (2008) voiced a common plaint among leftists that “Obama’s politics is governed by an anti-political fantasy,” meaning that Obama was not just a centrist, Clintonian “New Democrat,” but rather a political candidate who actually promised salvation from all social antagonism [7]. This is a politics consistent with a consumer society, since its guiding assumption is that class conflict can be reconciled within the established framework of a market-based allocation of goods and services. The label “post-racial,” however, sat clumsily alongside the fact that Obama had recently delivered what may have been the most significant speech on the enduring relevance of race in decades, just as the stamp “post-partisan” seemed bizarre in light of the fact that his first major policy proposal (his economic stimulus package) received the support of 97% of Democrats but only 3 Republicans in Congress. Slavoj Zizek (2008) noted that though Obama’s campaign was often couched in content-free statements about “hope” and “change,” he had “already [in September 2008] demonstrated an extraordinary ability to change the limits of what one can publicly say” by daring to suggest that race is an undeniable component of politics in the US, that atheists play a positive role in the world, that we ought to engage in negotiations with Iran, and that torture is intolerable. In other words, Zizek noted Obama’s post-political rhetoric, but identified it as a requirement of the political moment and praised Obama for convincingly speaking this language while also providing political content. The point, for Zizek, is not whether Obama is post-political or not, but that the language of post-politics is the language that wins elections.

Similarly, my point is not that Pollan is no better than Obama is no better that Friedman. It is, rather, to note how disparate contributions to political discourse are caught in the same neoliberal dilemma. When Americans can hardly imagine a politics that is not anchored in consumerism and when the animating prejudice of American discourse is that all problems can be solved without disrupting the market, it becomes increasingly difficult to offer a compelling politics without reverting to the codes of responsible consumption. Even in when the natural environment and the edifice of global capital stand imperiled by climate change and financial collapse, political discourse is shockingly stunted by the consumerist prejudice; even as global capital stands in a quintessential crisis of overproduction that Marx predicted (where the commodity being overproduced is debt), the political remedies almost invariably involve more consumption. Put more succinctly: even when the problem is too much debt, the solution is to go shopping.
IV.

By shedding light on the vicissitudes of the commodities markets and championing the power of human reason to overcome scarcity, Pollan’s studies of the industrial food system call attention to various ways in which the allocation of precious goods is or is not governed democratically. But perhaps the real value of Pollan’s work lies in its demonstration of the limited horizon of the American political imagination, where food cannot be conceived except as a consumable, and where politics cannot be imagined except within the limited restraints of economic neoliberalism. Even as trends in globalization literature herald the decline of both individual and national sovereignty, the most dynamic movement in American politics today is predicated on a relatively unspoken commitment to the economic principle of “consumer sovereignty” – in which individuals can be held responsible for the market choices they make, and in which discourses of freedom and self control are limited to the ability to buy one’s preferred goods and services.

In the 21st Century, it is primarily with reference to consumption – rather than work or citizenship – that the term “sovereignty” is spoken. This is the paramount expression of a consumer society, in which social integration is facilitated through consumption rather than production or any kind of collective action. In this context, food writers speak a language that everybody is ready to hear, they offer the redemptive hope of an end to political struggle, suggesting that even massive redistributions of wealth and challenges to the corporate control of natural resources becomes, fantastically, a politics without losers.

Endnotes

[1] This forum is viewable at "http://webcast.berkeley.edu/event_details.php?webcastid=19147". The initial exchange can be read at "http://www2.wholefoodsmarket.com/blogs/jmackey/2006/05/26/an-open-letter-to-michael-pollan".

[2] Obama invoked Pollan in an interview with Joe Klein for Time; transcript here: "http://swampland.blogs.time.com/2008/10/23/the_full_obama_interview"). In an interview with NPR’s Terry Gross, Pollan admitted that one of the campaigns approached him for assistance with their food policy – an invitation that he declined
"http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95896389". Pollan later told Bill Moyers that he would refuse a cabinet position if it were offered "http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11282008/profile2.html").

[3] By neoliberalism, I mean a political system that subordinates the positive commitments of classical liberalism to the economic rationality of the market. For a more sustained discussion of this concept, see Harvey (2005).

[4] Note that the books and movies about food by Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser, Peter Singer, Barbara Kingsolver, Barry Glassner, Morgan Spurlock, and Richard Linklater were written and in most cases released before the food contamination scares of 2007 and the global food crisis of 2008. For a more sustained engagement with these works and their political moment, see Lavin (2009).

[5] Pollan began expressing concern about this interpretation quite soon after his book was released. In a 2007 lecture, he warns that “voting with our forks can advance reform only so far” and that concerned citizens must “vote with their votes as well” (2007, 139).

[6] At least, inasmuch as these coordinates have some grounding in the history of class politics. Though again, note how Pollan presents the primary social cleavage in terms of religion and lifestyle rather than race, class, or gender.

[7] Nelson (2008) was writing about the popularity of salvation narratives in presidential politics well before Obama won the Democratic nomination, further testifying to the fact that this is a real historical dilemma rather than any shortcomings among particular political personalities.

Bibliography


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On the politics and possibilities of locavores: situating food sovereignty in the turn from government to governance

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Introduction
IN RECENT YEARS, eating local food has emerged as a viable, and for some, a vigorously promoted solution to the problems associated with global corporate agricultural production and distribution. Illustrative of this trend are an increasing number of popular books promoting local food consumption (for example, Bendrick 2008, Kingsolver 2007, Miller 2008, Nabham 2001, Pollan 2008, Smith and Mackinnon 2007). As well, a range of groups, from community activists to media corporations are promoting 'eat local' challenges to encourage people to explore, or perhaps more accurately stated, to devour their local agricultural products. In 2007, the term locavore was designated as the Oxford American Dictionary’s “word of the year” to denote this trend. Locavore refers to an individual, but it also describes a broader consumer movement. By eating local foods, consumers can reduce their food miles (the distance food must travel to reach them) as well as become more aware and appreciative of their local foodsheds (the origins and pathways of food) (Kloppenburg and Stevenson, 1996). Moreover, by connecting with local agricultural producers, locavores can bypass the powerful distribution networks of corporate agribusiness.

Eating local food is also a practical and feasible means by which the aims and values of food sovereignty can be realized (Halweil 2004, Norberg-Hodge, Merrifield and Gorelick 2002; Shuman 1998; Food and Water Watch 2007). Since everyone eats and because eating is so intimately bound up with our bodies, food is particularly well suited to mobilize a range of people. Generally speaking, food sovereignty refers to the political and economic right
of people to define and control their food and agriculture systems (Rosset 2006, Windfur and Jonsen 2005). Food sovereignty promotes the formation of trade policies and practices that serve the interests of local communities in terms of ensuring the supply of safe, healthy food produced in an ecologically sustainable fashion. Since the late 1990s, a global network of non-governmental organizations, activist groups and scholars have contributed to the development of this concept to situate the control of food production, circulation and consumption systems in local communities rather than placing the fate of food and agricultural systems in the hands of the state and global regulatory bodies and transnational corporations. Food sovereignty, in other words, aims to reconfigure power relations so that access to agricultural land as well as fresh, healthy and locally produced food products become a right rather than a luxury.

The turn towards consumption as a solution for the complex and entangled problems facing food and agricultural systems, however, is fraught with contradictions. Indeed, local food activism has received a range criticism (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Guthman 2008, Hassanein 2003, Hinrichs 2003, Winter 2003). These critiques do not aim to undermine consumer-based movements, nor do they deny that local consumption can provide a powerful political platform. Rather, they are motivated by a concern over the ideological construction of 'the local', a term that, as David Harvey (1996) has long argued, is far from innocent. The main point of contention is that local food activism and, to varying degrees, the scholarship that lauds it tend to be rooted in a persistent binary where the local is situated as a site of resistance and emancipation against a destructive global, capitalist logic. As a result, the local is often taken for granted at the same time it is reified as a normative category where local = good and global = bad. Popular food writing, local food activism, and, at times, local food scholarship perpetuate this dichotomy while failing to address more intractable issues such as labor concerns, inequality, migration, systemic patterns of social injustice, to name just a few. As a result, critics question the efficacy of local food movements as a consumer-based political movement in generating substantial political change.

In the spirit of forwarding the politics of local food activism, this paper puts the locavore, as a discourse and identity, in conversation with the themes of governance, governmentality and biopolitics. I draw from Julie Guthman's (2008) claim that, in order to better understand the possibilities and limitations of local food movements, the rationalities and techniques of governance that
have become taken-for-granted over the past three decades need to be made explicit. Governance, in this sense, refers to the movement of politics in line with neoliberal globalization which places emphasis on the individual and its self-governing capacities, on one hand, as well as new loci of power in local networks and communities, on the other. These shifting configurations of power are significant for food sovereignty discourses, primarily because food sovereignty is envisioned as an alternative to neoliberal globalization. As I will discuss, the turn towards local eating, specifically, and food sovereignty more generally, are bound up with and embedded in neoliberal forms of governance. How we make sense of this configuration remains a matter of debate. To conclude, I discuss the possibilities of the locavore movement as a form of popular political engagement.

**Neoliberal governance: from state government to governance**

Several analyses, from a range of disciplines, maintain that advanced liberal societies are witnessing the emergence of new forms of power based less on top down structures of government and more on diffuse systems of governance (Higgins and Lawrence 2005, Dean 2007, Miller and Rose 2008). Governance refers to structures and processes that enable decision making outside of traditionally appointed institutions and social agents. Governance points to the reconfiguration of regulation, triggered in large part by the global adoption over the past three decades of neoliberal policies that foster free-market ideologies and global flows of capital, and that in turn blur the boundaries between the public and private sphere. Although governance refers to the transformation of social spaces following the 'retreat' of the state from public institutions, it does not necessarily suggest the demise of state authority. Rather, governance refers to the complex intersections among state ideologies, policies, and practices and self-governing actors. Neoliberalism is a form of governance that endorses the self-regulation of consumers and communities, which, in turn, equates to support for market rule and global competition.

These formulations of governance are indebted to Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, broadly understood as a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of individual bodies as well as populations (Foucault 1991, Dean 1999, Nadesan, 2008). Governmentality challenges and extends the common-sense understanding of political governance as situated in and
emanating from the sovereignty of state institutions that exercise authority over a relatively bounded territory and group of citizens. Foucault maintains that power relations in liberal and increasingly neoliberal democratic societies are more diffuse and complicated than sovereign political models suggest. Power, in Foucault's formulation, is not repressive but productive of meanings, interventions and lives. It does not emanate from a single source, but operates diffusely from multiple centers. It does not work on bodies, but through bodily practices and knowledges. In other words, contemporary rationalities of governance have a strong biopower effect in that they immerse bodies in social relations of power. Foucault, in essence, orients an analysis of power not only towards its influence over ideology and consciousness, but also towards biological, somatic, and corporeal transformations. At stake in contemporary (bio)power is the production and reproduction of life itself.

The concept of governmentality directs attention towards two salient transformations resulting from the deepening reach of the neoliberal framework in politics and economics. First, the traditional politics we associate with themes like citizenship, public life and collective action have been replaced by 'life-politics' geared towards self-actualization and self-invention. Questions specific to citizenship (how we inform ourselves, who represents our interests) are answered more often than not through private consumption of commodities than through traditional democratic processes and practices. These transformations in citizenship are bound up with a displacement of politics where matters of concern for the state are positioned as individual concerns and responsibilities. Concepts such as consumer sovereignty, political consumerism, cultural citizenship and the citizen-consumer represent attempts to grapple with and, in some instances, move beyond the traditional distinctions between citizens, who are assumed to be politically active, and consumers, whose action is limited to the economic sphere (Korthals 2001, Micheletti, Follesdal, Stolle 2003, Miller 2007, Canclini 2001). The distinctions between citizens and consumers are eroding with the advance of globalization and economic liberalization. Increasingly, consumers are demanding that commodities conform to ethical standards, including safety, health, environmental integrity, animal welfare and labor circumstances and fair trade. These preferences are being expressed in the marketplace and not solely in traditional political forums.

Neoliberalism promotes an image of the consumer as a free, self-actualizing and empowered agent who negotiates choices and exercises power in the
marketplace. Scholarship on governmentality, by contrast, calls into question the separation of the consumer from the state. Although responsibilities are pushed onto individuals and communities due to the retreat of the state from the public sector, the traditional means of state control (instruction, regulation, restraint) have not necessarily disappeared but have been augmented by attempts to govern consumer behaviour through appeals to culture and consumerism (Miller 2008: 2). Consumers, in other words, are not necessarily separate from the state nor are they directly manipulated by corporate or state activity. Rather, consumer choice is made intelligible, manageable and governable through the market by techniques such as brand-based marketing and consumer research (Moor 2008, Lury 2004, Lockie 2002). As such, the neoliberal consumer is not a free agent who rationally mobilizes the market economy but a subject whose choices, needs and desires are governed by more diffuse forces including corporate, market and state interests.

Neoliberal governance not only 'empowers' the consumer to exercise consumer politics, it is also bound up with a turn towards regional and local governance (Higgins and Lawrence, 2005). This emergent governance framework is based on the reinvention of national government through multi-level partnerships, coalitions and networks. Moreover, as Mitchell Dean argues, the state today finds itself increasingly more like an 'enslaved' sovereign because its autonomy is compromised (1999: 53). It must rely on relationships with non-state organizations (businesses, charities, non-governmental organizations) as well as attract transnational corporations and flows of investment. It has obligations to international governmental organizations such as the World Trade Organization. And it is often undermined by impersonal forces, such as world market that integrates the decisions of transnational corporations and private enterprise in finance, industry and trade.

The concept of governance enables a diagnosis of our present moment as one in which global transformations have lead to a new emphasis on individual self-governing capacities, on one hand, and new forms of political organization (local networks and communities) on the other. How do these transformations inform local food politics and food sovereignty discourses, more generally? Put differently, what is the relationship between consumer sovereignty and food sovereignty?
The final declaration of the World Forum on Food Sovereignty (2001) describes food sovereignty as a guarantee of lasting and sustainable food security for all people. Accordingly, food sovereignty ought to be an obligation of international, national and regional governments. It should also concern society as a whole. To achieve food sovereignty would entail radical changes in governance such that agricultural producers would be granted equitable access to productive resources as well as the necessary training, financing and capacity to produce and sustain local food self-sufficiency. How to implement these political transformations remains a pressing question. The regulatory frameworks that currently govern agriculture are increasingly oriented towards export markets and international free trade. Moreover, state sovereignty has transformed as a result of these political transformations. If the state is "enslaved" by global institutions and market forces, as Dean suggests, how realistic is it to hope for a transformation of existing state policies?

In light of these challenges, the emphasis on individual consumer action to guide the transformation of the food system does not seem ill-placed. The sensibilities, critical consciousness, pleasures and popularity of the locavore movement might signal a viable site of transformative political action. Or, are local food politics bound up with contemporary political structures in ways that reinforce and perpetuate them? In her trenchant critique of local food activism, Julie Guthman argues that contemporary local food politics, as they are presently conceived, reinforce rather than challenge neoliberal political formations (2008: 1181). Food activism discourses uncritically incorporate a range of neoliberal characteristics that place the onus of responsibility on the consumer. These range from voluntary food labeling schemes that depend on consumer choice as a means of regulation to food localism as a response to globalization of the food system. In short, local food politics are bound up with a broader political context that neoliberalism has rendered possible and imaginable. Food activism, in her estimation, contributes to the production of neoliberal subjectivities of the sort that acquiesce to consumer society. Indeed, the increased visibility of food politics may itself reflect the neoliberal turn, as much of this politics is engaged through consumer purchases. In some instances, people have given up on or do not even consider the role of the state to enact political transformation. Guthman concludes that consumer-focused food initiatives bear only a tenuous relationship to a more robust politics that might potentially restructure how food is produced, distributed and consumed.
As a strategy conducive to neoliberal contexts in which individual consumers are increasingly called upon to take responsibility for health and environmental issues, the locavore movement can easily slip into normative proclamations that situate responsibility onto individuals while effacing the complex changes that have occurred within systems of governance. In her review of locavore literature, for example, Susan Wiggins sums up the hopes and aspirations of the 'eat local' movement:

Even if the government fails its citizens, trading their health for cheap oil and political power, there will always be those who refuse to let bad policies dictate their diets. They are the ones now eating from edible schoolyards, enjoying organic lunches on college campuses, keeping up with food blogs, or perhaps even raising their own chickens (2008: 85).

This quote illustrates, quite remarkably, the ways in which local food activism can be read as a form of neoliberal governmentality. To what degree does the language of consumer choice dominate a broader understanding of food politics so that the possibility of collective, political action aimed at changing government policy is not even realized as a possibility? In the above quote, Wiggins highlights the centrality of everyday practices (eating from edible schoolyards, buying organic foods, writing, growing one's food) that can counterbalance the withdrawal of the state from its role in protecting public welfare. Significantly, she neglects to mention other forms of political resistance to poorly envisioned and executed government policies, such as voting, supporting a non-governmental activist organization or even running for political office..........

So the locavore is a neoliberal subject, now what?

Gramsci said: 'Turn your face violently towards things as they exist now'. Not as you'd like them to be, not as you think they were ten years ago, not as they're written about in sacred texts, but as they really are: the contradictory, stony ground of the present conjuncture. (Hall 1989, quoted in Clifford 2000: 94)
I conclude with a brief consideration of the politics and possibilities opened by the locavore movement. As Guthman notes, the most central organizing theme in contemporary food politics is consumer choice (2008: 1176). This is not surprising in a context in which we are increasingly encouraged to voice our political preferences through consumption, by 'voting' with our dollars and, in the case of food politics, with our mouths and stomachs. Situating local food politics within neoliberal discourse helps to illuminate the ways in which consumer politics can reinforce political structures. Is the locavore movement, however, necessarily limited by its neoliberal characteristics, or, can neoliberalism be read as a condition of possibility for food sovereignty? Put differently, what is the relationship between consumer sovereignty, as a neoliberal discourse of empowered consumption, and food sovereignty, as a call for policy transformation?

The locavore movement is noteworthy precisely because it is popular and this popularity warrants examination. As the above epigraph suggests, popular movements beckon us to make sense of them by taking them on their own terms. In the past few decades, we have witnessed the emergence of an extraordinary array of cultural politics organized around issues of identity, lifestyle, the body, and food. These emergent politics challenge, and in some cases, defy theoretical assumptions about what counts as transformative political engagement. In mapping the effects of commodity markets on processes of political engagement, Néstor García Canclini shows that market forces, while closing some political avenues, also offer openings. To be clear, Canclini does not hold to the view that consumer choice is necessarily the same as viable politics, yet he does propose that "consumption can be good for thinking and acting in a meaningful way that renews social life" (2001: 47). Canclini is mindful of Antonio Gramsci's contention that progressive intellectuals have not always understood the specificity of popular subjects' historical, cultural and ideological formations. Gramsci's work serves as a reminder that revolutionary strategies, if they are to be successful, must permit the development of procedures and policies in which popular groups can participate.

Foucault's analytic framework offers guidance in this regard. Foucault approached neoliberalism with cautious optimism with regard to its capacity for political and social transformation (Gordon 1991: 6). He positioned it not only as a rationality and technology of governance but also of an art and an ethic of living. Foucault's theoretical and political legacy opens analyses to the
empowering potential of power. It may be that, by literally ingesting local (and, by extension, global) food politics, locavores signal and embody a distinctive art of governing food sovereignty that is inventive, innovative and, for lack of a better word, neoliberal. In other words, locavores are, for better and worse, the logical, practical and vital extension of contemporary political dynamics. They represent a form of political engagement that is full bodied, so to speak. Or, to use a Foucaultian inspired term, they manifest at a biopolitical as well as political level. They engage power at the level of life itself.

My aim is not to uncritically celebrate local food politics, nor to draw attention away from the need to transform government policy regarding food and agriculture, but to acknowledge the popularity of local food politics. If scholarship on cultural politics has taught us anything, it is that effective democratic mobilizations begin where people are, not where they 'should' be (Hall, 1998, Clifford, 2000). We make and remake politics in contradictory, impure and imperfect ways, negotiating and drawing from the resources that we have at our disposal. The task of critical analysis, and perhaps the project of critical eating more generally, will be to embed discourses and practices of food politics and food sovereignty within the political networks that are inherently steeped in global consumer markets. This will not provide any political guarantees nor will it necessarily generate elegant theoretical conclusions, but it does ground analysis in emergent popular struggles. Hopefully, these struggles will enable a future where access to food and productive land is a right, not for the privileged few, but for all.

Works cited


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What we talk about when we talk about biotechnology [1]

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Photos by Kelly Bronson

AS MICHAEL POLLAN (2006) writes, the human desire to liberate food from nature via technological intervention is as old as eating. In 1960s North America, significant developments in breeding and chemicals catalyzed the transformation of agriculture into a highly technologized business. New nutrient-efficient hybrid seed varieties, mechanical innovations, and the introduction of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides prompted astoundingly higher yields of corn, rice, and wheat (Boyens, 2001). While these “efficiencies” succeeded in lifting both rural and urban societies beyond subsistence living, they rendered many farmers economically redundant. This technological change coincided with the liberalization of national markets, which placed Canadian farmers in competition with farmers from around the world. Since this time, farmers in Canada frequently face record-low commodity prices on the global marketplace and they face incredibly high costs of chemical and technological inputs due to a lack of competition among the transnational corporations who supply them (National Farmers Union, 2007). Canadian farmers are encouraged by the agricultural economic orthodoxy and government incentives to further increase the scale and intensity of their operations in order
Many farmers in Canada have been encouraged to use genetically modified (GM) or genetically engineered (GE) crops as a way of hopefully increasing yields and profits. At the same time, the Canadian government hopes to be a global competitor in the development of biotechnology (Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy, 1999). The DNA of these GM varieties has been manipulated at the molecular level to give them traits advantageous to higher crop yields such as increased resistance to common diseases, greater durability to climate extremes, and a higher proportion of edible or useful plant parts. One such crop, “Roundup Ready” canola, is widely used on the Canadian prairies (see Phillips, 2003). The well-known U.S. multinational corporation, Monsanto, developed this technology to allow Canola to withstand the spraying of its powerful herbicide, Roundup, thus allowing farmers to spray unselectively.

While the structural tendencies unleashed by high-input farming have forced many farmers into a treadmill of increasing technological competition (Boyens, 2001; Goodman and Watts, 1997) not all farmers have been drawn into the fray. Recent Statistics Canada (2006) data indicates that unfortunately many small family farmers have left the land because they are unable to buffer the high costs and risks associated with industrialized farming in a volatile global marketplace. Others have simply chosen not to buy into the newer technologies but continue to rely on more traditional seed varieties and farming techniques. More and more Canadian farmers are turning toward organic methods for ideological reasons but also as an economic strategy: although more labour intensive, the input costs for organic production are relatively negligible and the prices are higher for this value-added end product (Lighthall, 1995; Saltiel et al., 1994).

There is evidence, however, that the very presence of agricultural biotechnology threatens the existence of non-biotech farming approaches, and as such the sovereignty of farmers and ultimately consumers to reject GM technology. A group of organic farmers in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan have taken Monsanto to court, alleging that “Roundup Ready” canola has contaminated organic pastures through seed and pollen drift to the extent that they can no longer sell their product as organic. I will draw on interview data from a two year long ethnographic study of the community of people involved in and around this lawsuit. My experience with this ongoing conflict suggests that agricultural biotechnology has not only colonized the material environment, but, more significantly in my view, there appears to be
no official discursive space for evaluations of the technology outside of the language of science. As a result, evaluations of the cultural and social implications of the technology are silenced with dramatic consequences.

On January 10, 2002, two organic farmers of Saskatchewan filed a statement of claim against Monsanto Canada on behalf of the province’s certified organic grain farmers (see http://www.saskorganic.com/oapf/). The case rests on the argument that the genetically engineered canola produced by Monsanto and other biotech multinationals is contaminating canola crops across the prairies so extensively that certified organic farmers can no longer sell their product as organic, robbing them of access to a lucrative and growing market. The claim states that when Monsanto introduced their GE canola they knew (or ought to have known) that it would spread and contaminate the environment.

When I first heard about this lawsuit I was working in a genetics laboratory at Queen’s University and biotechnology applied to the food system was already controversial. When the first GE product entered the North American food supply in 1990 the public was wary (for a history of the technology’s controversy, see Smith, 2004). In late 2001 there had been public outcry against the Canadian government decision not to label foods containing genetically modified ingredients, and against the Consumer’s Association of Canada, which supported the government’s decision despite polls indicating that 95% of Canadians wanted labeling. Both industry and government insisted that labeling would be too difficult and would unnecessarily damage the GE industry since the public would make “uninformed” purchasing decisions (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2002). Also in 2001 the Royal Society of Canada, among the country’s preeminent scientific institutions, released its scientific review of food biotechnology, indicating that the technology was not free of potential environmental and health consequences.
The poverty of public debate around the question of GE foods in Canada was striking. In my own experience, trying to engage other scientists in conversations about the technology at the time was frustrating because I would commonly receive the response that since there was nothing proved wrong with the science, negative public attitudes toward biotechnology were irrational and ignorant of this fact. As I searched for information regarding public perceptions of biotechnology I began to realize that this was the dominant framing of negative public responses to the technology (see Knezevic, 2006). According to this logic, the organic farmers of Saskatchewan were irrational and perhaps even anti-biotechnology to challenge the leading biotechnology multinational in the courts.

I found myself unsatisfied with this understanding of the situation, in part because previous rulings had highlighted the courts’ reticence in addressing the issue of responsibility for the accidental spread of genetically engineered seed. In 1998, Monsanto brought another Prairie farmer, Percy Schmeiser, to court for growing Roundup Ready canola without having paid for the technology (see Sudduth, 2002). Unlike the thousands of farmers who each year settle out of court with Monsanto, Schmeiser decided to fight back, arguing that the seed had actually contaminated his property and he had unwittingly repopulated his fields with it by saving seed, a traditional farming practice. The Supreme Court treated the case as a clear-cut patent ruling and decided that whether by intent or by accident, genetically engineered canola was grown without requisite contract and that the seed and resultant crop were the property of Monsanto as the patent-holder (Sudduth, 2002). Given this precedent, it seemed unlikely that the organic farmers of Saskatchewan would win their lawsuit. Knowing they would certainly be aware of their meager chances for success in the courts, I began to wonder at the broader significance of these events.

I moved to Saskatchewan and began getting to know farmers and food policy activists in order to gain their perspectives on agricultural biotechnology generally and the lawsuit in particular. I was surprised by what they told me. Not one of the 20 people I interviewed talked about the lawsuit in merely strategic or technical terms. Instead there was an ongoing insistence on linking the specific issues being faced in the lawsuit with broader questions of social and political justice and with larger societal objectives. Doug Bone, an organic farmer, put it this way:
It’s maybe tilting at windmills to a certain extent. These companies have very deep pockets and organic farmers don’t so we likely won’t win. I think it’s a fight that has to be fought whether we win or lose. If we lose then we’ll have the satisfaction that at least we tried. And I also think this is just one little fight that organic farmers are involved in—I think worldwide there is a growing movement of people, not just farmers but the general public, that is rising up to take control of their lives back from the corporate agenda. Our class action lawsuit here is just a part of a growing movement that combines all sorts of related issues: social, political, economic...I think globally there are all kinds of groups and causes that are related and can take inspiration from this.

Surprisingly, not one of the farmers I interviewed spoke against the science of biotechnology per se. Almost half of those I interviewed had studied in the natural sciences and they were all very comfortable talking about specific issues within the language of science as they arose in conversation, such as the current status of scientific testing on the environmental and health effects of GM organisms. Yet science is irrelevant to understanding what is at the root of their dissent, which is instead cultural and social.

Those involved in the lawsuit see themselves as standing up against not the technology, but the foundations on which the corporate enterprise behind biotechnology rests. To these farmers, agricultural biotechnology in its current structure as a for-profit big business furthers the corporate ownership of land, genetic and other resources that has historically undermined people’s and community’s rights to define their own food production and consumption practices. In essence, the fight is about food sovereignty [3]:
I’m extremely negative about the whole cultural endeavour of biotechnology because I think it’s concentrated, and it’s more of the control over nature and people to extract a profit for a very small number. And I think it’s completely the wrong view of ourselves within the web of life…it’s completely the wrong view in terms of other values around culturally appropriate food, nutritious food, healthy and safe food, food for everybody...values that are undermined by this technology [Nettie Wiebe].

Farmers defined the effects of biotechnology within discussions around the integrity of the daily experience of farmers and rural communities. Many farmers see the application of GE technology to agriculture as an apogee of the corporatization and industrialization of farming, which have made “terminal” the livelihoods of many small family farmers in Canada. As one retired conventional farmer remarked, “For many of us farming is a terminal enterprise and it’s sad, because farming is a wonderful life...but under these circumstances it’s painful to try and stay in year after year” [Marc Loiselle]. Many of the conventional farmers I spoke with detailed the rising costs of farm inputs and they were palpably helpless against the power of the multinational corporations on whom they depend for things like chemicals and machinery. According to one cattle producer:

The NFU [National Farmers Union] have graphs that show grain prices slowly working their way up and fertilizer prices tracking them perfectly. And this opportunistic profiteering is what’s forcing farmers to leave the land, corporations have just squeezed us so hard that everyone’s leaving...well... they’re forced out...[Arnold Taylor].
Others detailed the loss in public and cooperative structures like local grain elevators and the old, hard fought-for Canadian Wheat Board, as private interests have encroached on once-common institutions. Many farmers talked about the growing number of corporate farms and their relationship to the erosion of rural communities and social cohesion among farmers. Those farmers directly involved with the lawsuit envisioned their action as addressing these issues of sovereignty: a fight on behalf of farmers everywhere to be able to continue farming, and in the manner of their choosing. Wally Satzewich, an organic urban gardener and a strong proponent of community food security initiatives:

*If we don’t stand up now we’ll be serfs on the land—these large companies will own everything. If it’s not the chemical companies, it’s the seed companies. I think there’s a real element of greed that rises to the surface when decisions concerning agriculture are left up to biotechnology corporations...this is leading to more of a corporate controlled food system instead of one where people have real choices. And at some point not only are organic farmers going to suffer but also farmers of all kinds, and consumers too.*

I asked those involved with the lawsuit why they would go so far as to bring these issues to court. If their grievances were not strictly technical but more cultural and social, why air them through the highly technical legal system? The answers were straightforward and consistent: because nobody would listen to their cultural and social concerns about agricultural biotechnology. They had tried letter-writing campaigns to provincial and even federal politicians, public forums, creative public gatherings and protests. The National Farmers Union had even staged a popular boycott of Roundup herbicide in the prairies. Yet they were repeatedly dismissed, not only by the multinationals who arguably
have a “corporate social responsibility” but, even more alarmingly, they were ignored and rendered functionally silent in the expected channels of representation in a democratic system: the mainstream media and government. As one farm policy expert put it:

We’ve done everything we can to get the government to listen to our difficulties with GM technology. That’s one of the big problems: that the Canadian government can’t see the proper description that we lay in front of them, that this technology, and the corporations who own it, threatens the livelihoods of many farmers. They can’t see that, and I don’t mean can’t as in unable but I mean can’t. So, it is really hard to get people to look at the real problems—they label us backwards or anti-science. They might be o.k. to look at a drought. That’s non-controversial, it’s an act of god. But it is really hard to hold their nose to looking at the real-life impacts of a technology that they are heavily invested in [Darrin Qualman].

The close association between government and industry in the very development of biotechnology undeniably influences policy discussions about the technology and its development. But the failure of legitimate political channels to be open to cultural and social critiques of the technology is also a consequence of a long-standing cultural bias toward a technologized approach to farming. The food policy expert whom is quoted above, Darrin Qualman, is among many others in describing how, because of the dominant framing of biotechnology, there is just no room within the orthodox communication channels of a democratic system for non-technical assessments [4]. And so a group of organic farmers in Saskatchewan felt it necessary to create a public spectacle of Monsanto—a beacon of the corporatization of agriculture—using the courts, in the hopes of garnering as much media attention and public
sympathy as Percy Schmeiser did. As long-time organic farmer Jim Robbins put it:

Although very few people are ever able to challenge [Monsanto], least of all farmers who are labeled as not educated about the science and discounted, there’s another picture where it looks different. We’re at the point now where there’s a whole other way of thinking—and this is the optimistic me—where consumers are getting suspicious of the dominant model and what kinds of foodstuffs they get out of it, to farmers who are starting to look more carefully at their options and pushing for better options than the productivist model of agriculture. And it’s handy to have a label for the thing standing in the way of all this positive change: Monsanto. But Monsanto of course represents a whole range of interests: corporate interests, a way of seeing the world as resources to be exploited, a way of looking at people as exploitable, a way of seeing living organisms as manipulable and exploitable. Monsanto really represents a way of seeing and organizing the political domain such that fewer actors get to determine what life, the environment, and economy will be like without any reference to the citizenry and their democratic rights. This lawsuit is in many ways shorthand for these two opposing and competing ways of making sense of the world.

Scholars working in Science and Technology Studies (STS) have cited the growing worldwide debate around the risks, benefits and social consequences of biotechnology that began in the late 1990s as exemplary of the need for greater dialogue between science and the public and for increased participation in decision-making about science and technology (Jasanoff, 2003). Interestingly, STS researchers have surveyed public disputes of biotechnology in the UK and the USA and they have shown that, similar to farmers in Saskatchewan, Canada, people in these areas of the world are interpreting genetic science and technologies in the context of wider understandings of the nature of corporate technological development (see Kerr et al., 1998). An in depth-survey coming from Lancaster University showed that the UK public was not simply anti-science in its intense opposition to GM foods, but the public was concerned about specific characteristics of the GM food industry (Grove-White et al., 2000). Also similar to findings highlighted in this paper, surveys conducted in Britain have found that among those most critical of specific applications of GM science are groups that have considerable
scientific knowledge (Evans and Durant, 1995). Such work is key to informing current thinking about the way in which the public responds to science and as such policies on science and technology. In particular, studies like this are pivotal in counteracting the prevailing “deficit” model—the argument that if the public knew more about the science they wouldn’t be opposed to it. Interventions like those of the Saskatchewan farmers are undoubtedly contributing to the growing awareness among those of political authority that we need to supplement the narrow preoccupation with measuring the costs and benefits of innovation within the logic of scientific and economic evaluation with greater attentiveness to the broader politics and social justice of science and technology if science and politics don’t want to suffer a serious legitimacy crisis.

The organic farmers of Saskatchewan also represent the hope of renewed democratic participation among civil society around issues not only facing agricultural communities but also larger social justice concerns. In her essay, Opinionated Natures: Toward a Green Public Culture (2002), Catriona Sandilands situates herself among political commentators like Jurgen Habermas who lament a declining public sphere—a space where citizens engage one another in issues of common concern (Habermas, 1989). Sandilands agrees with thinkers like Habermas and Jeffrey Isaac (1998) who describe some new social movements as “oases in the desert,” or islands of invigorated political engagement in what is otherwise a generally politically frustrated society for whom the energies of democracy seem depleted. These thinkers agree that many new social movements, in dealing with specific problems (like GE canola contamination of Canadian organic fields) cultivate broad and sometimes international networks of organizing and information-sharing around issues of class, gender, and race, and thereby bring public awareness and participation to issues of wide political importance.

Sandilands suggests, however, that in order to transform a local movement into a more widely shared public or common interest, deliberative participation is insufficient (Sandilands, 2002). Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy, Sandilands insists that an approach which makes it possible for individuals’ opinions about issues to be debated and refined in public—in essence a performative politics—is essential for invigorating a truly public culture. Unfortunately, and this is Sandilands’s main point, many movements (in her case, environmental movements) are hamstrung in their ability to generate such a public debate because of an appeal to discourses of scientific “truths” in
their contestations. Sandilands reminds us that, for Arendt, political persuasion begins with forms of knowledge that are qualitatively different from scientific “truths”; performative politics is about the realm of opinions. Sandilands also reminds us that Arendt understood the claim to truth as dangerous to the formation of public opinion because it overrode the specificity of an issue as it might be meaningful to each person, its subjectivity (Arendt, 1958). The more that the “truth” about the quality of food, for example, or its context of production, is understood to lie beyond individual sense-perception and everyday experience to instead lie in the realm of, say, chemical make-up, the less a commonality and therefore a constitutive public discussion is possible.

There is of course a functional element to the actions of the organic farmers of Saskatchewan: they are defending private interests (the local organic canola market) through litigation. But they are also, and perhaps primarily, exemplary of the kind of performative politics that Sandilands sees as opening up dialogue on social issues beyond the truth-claims of science; in this case, bringing evaluations of agricultural biotechnology beyond the realm of scientific reasoning into discussions about the technology’s threat to the sovereignty of all farmers and consumers. The performative dimensions of the activities of the organic farmers of Saskatchewan not only build on the objectives of stopping the contamination of GE canola and widening the public sphere of debate around food and biotechnology, they also challenge the foundational legitimacy of scientific and economic logic as the only modes of making sense of and discussing the technology.

In conclusion, the organic farmers of Saskatchewan involved in the lawsuit against Monsanto are anti-biotechnology only if we define technology in the way they do: not simply a tool but as a set of knowledge practices that stand to significantly change social relationships, our culture. Ursula Franklin has written about the danger of what she calls “prescriptive technologies” that are designed by scientific experts to perform a specific function but which when applied reorganize social relationships according to the logic of the technology, displacing other types of social logic like compassion or community obligation (Franklin, 1990). I began this essay by presenting biotechnology as an extension of the industrialization of agriculture, which illustrates it as a prescriptive technological intervention. World War II saw considerable advances in chemicals and machinery which called for application in the post-war period. New chemicals became fertilizers and were made into food additives that allowed for longer product shelf-lives. New machinery made the
individual packaging and shipment of agricultural goods commercially viable. These new goods in turn needed consumers who were at first reticent of chemical additives and increased costs. This in turn inspired the intense marketing of industrially processed food—from T.V. dinners to “Betty Crocker” products—geared toward women, promising a liberating and exciting addition to their lives (see Davis and Schneider, 2007). Discussions of the cultural implications of technology were circumscribed within these limited discourses of liberation from work for farmers and housewives alike, while discussions of the social implications of the spread of these technologies within larger structures and social organization were marginalized to the early organics and ecology movements. Looking back on the social history of these technologies we can now see that the real story was nothing less than the restructuring of food and farming. There is little reason to expect that the new technological approach and logic of agricultural biotechnology won’t have similarly vast consequences, thus making it a collective responsibility to reflect on what exactly it is we talk about when we talk about biotechnology.

Endnotes

[1] My title takes inspiration from the American writer Raymond Carver’s famous 1981 collection of short stories under the title, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. While love is clearly ineffable, there is tacit agreement that we all define biotechnology (and technology in general) in the same way(s) yet my paper’s main problematic is that there is actually a disconnect between the dominant technological regime and the way those most affected by biotechnology evaluate its implications.

[2] Industry often refers to biotechnology as any technique using living organisms to make products, such as improving plant or animals through traditional breeding. In this paper, I am referring to modern biotechnology, which is the industrial use of
recombinant DNA, or the modification of genes or their transferring between species.

[3] “Food sovereignty” was originally coined at the 1996 World Food Summit to refer to an approach that claims the right of peoples to define their own food production and consumption ways in contrast to having food decisions determined by international market forces.

[4] In a recent personal communication, Darrin Qualman also pointed out another divide in technological evaluations: the government measurements of the effects of biotechnology can’t account for the real experience of the farmers because the total effect cannot be predicted by looking at the parts. Each agricultural technology, evaluated individually, is shown to improve farmers’ bottom lines but the sum total of all these revenue- and net-income-increasing technologies is to reduce net income to zero (where it has been for Canadian farmers for decades). While the individual technologies can be shown to be financially beneficial, the totality of the high-input industrialized farming system is ruinous.

Works cited


Royal Society of Canada, Elements of Precaution: Recommendations for


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MEXICO IS THE BIRTHPLACE OF CORN and it is here that the world’s greatest biodiversity of this plant exists, largely under the guardianship of diverse indigenous farmers. The Maya of Southern Mexico have a particularly close spiritual and cultural connection with this plant, as their creation story details how their flesh is made from corn. However, the liberalisation of the Mexican economy, which has intensified since NAFTA came into effect in 1994, has resulted in a massive increase in the importation of cheap, mass-produced US corn into Mexico. The drive towards economic efficiency, at the expense of biodiversity and cultural sensitivity, is threatening the livelihood of many indigenous Mexicans. There are also reports that it has led to the unexpected arrival of GM cultivars in the region which threaten to contaminate and reduce the genetic variability of native corn, raising questions about food sovereignty and future food security. The presence of foreign GM corn in Mexico also poses a threat to the sociocultural identity of the Maya. In response to these occurrences, and encouraged by the Zapatista uprising, indigenous communities in southern Mexico and all over the country have been actively engaging in coalitional resistance movements which centre on a reappropriation of corn as a marker of cultural identity. These movements have positioned their struggle as one against neoliberalism and they have courted the support of international civil society to strengthen their resistance.

The purported presence of GM corn in Mexico challenges national sovereignty, regional security, and local practices. However, the rise of new political and cultural alliances centred on corn do not just represent efforts to maintain, or to revert to, the authenticity and purity of Mexican corn and its indigenous cultivators (though, this is an important element for many participants). It also represents a struggle to maintain economic rights and control of their products in response to concerns that transnational corporations may seek to patent local Mexican corn varieties. Furthermore, it serves to
highlight the interconnectedness of the global food trade and global food security. The political and cultural alliances that have developed around corn do not just represent efforts to close down borders and to challenge the advances of technoscience to protect traditional or local interests. They represent localised movements working within contemporary global food networks, in an effort to protect their niche, way of life, and sociocultural subjectivities.

Conflict over resources is not new in southern Mexico, but the battle over corn represents the first time that these issues have taken on such a significant global dimension. This is largely attributable to the development of worldwide support networks, primarily in the form of international NGOs and their electronic portals. These networks were readily available to these corn movements thanks to the preparatory work of the EZLN which courted and operationalised global electronic support for their ongoing uprising which began in 1994. The Zapatistas themselves benefited from the existing presence in Chiapas of many NGOs that had established bases in the state prior to the 1992 quincentenary celebrations of Columbus’s discovery of the “New World”, and had stayed in Mexico to assist the indigenous peasants fight against the alterations to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution (which protected indigenous rights to communal land), therefore, against the implementation of NAFTA. The EZLN’s connection with a vast range of International NGOs led to them engaging in what has been described as a “netwar” facilitated (Ronfeldt et al., 1998). Indeed, Cleaver writes of a “Zapatista effect” which he claims has the potential to permeate and inform social struggles throughout the world and reweave “the fabric of politics” by demonstrating the ability of grassroots movements to form national and international collectives to challenge the power of the nation-state and global economic trends (Cleaver, 1998: 637).

The movements coalescing around corn began as localised collectives mobilising through existing indigenous networks in an effort to protect indigenous ways of life, however, the shape and structure of their struggle has also been formed in relation to contemporary global networks which resist neoliberalism and the threat it poses to indigenous traditions, economic sustainability, food sovereignty and food security. These concerns are articulated through the intensified information flows and interconnectedness that are the hallmarks of globalisation. As a result of the “Zapatista effect”, these corn-based movements have gained worldwide support to assist them achieve their local and regional goals. This success is largely attributable to the
fact that their struggle has been successfully positioned within the intricate, interconnected global economic, political, cultural and communication network which is a defining feature of the current era.

In January 2002 representatives of national Mexican civil society, from environmental, human rights and peasant organisations gathered in Mexico City along with academics and Indigenous authorities “ranging from the Tzeltal nation on the southern border to the O’odham people on the northern” for the First Forum in Defense of Corn (Ross, 2002). This forum prompted the development of cooperative nation-wide strategies aimed at combating the presence of GM corn which was declared a threat to food sovereignty and the way of life of indigenous and rural Mexicans. More broadly, the forum positioned their struggle as one against neoliberalism, the dictates of which had enabled GM corn to enter Mexico and threatened their economic viability and sociocultural identity. The forum issued demands to the Mexican Government, calling for an end to the importation of GM food, and, importantly, also to international institutions such as the FAO, demanding they proceed with caution and engage in dialogue with local communities before introducing GM food and crops around the world (Herrera, 2004). This attracted further attention from international movements, especially those concerned with resisting the introduction of GM food, preventing biopiracy and protecting biodiversity, food sovereignty and food security. These included groups such as the Organic Consumers Society, GRAIN, Greenpeace, the ETC (Action group on Erosion Technology and Concentration), and the Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism. Perhaps the most significant node in this network is Via Campesina, an international movement which was established in 1992 with the principal aim of developing “solidarity and unity among small farmer organizations in order to promote gender parity and social justice in fair economic relations; the preservation of land, water, seeds and other natural resources; food sovereignty; sustainable agricultural production based on small and medium-sized producers” (http://www.viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task =blogcategory&id=27&Itemid=44).

Meanwhile, on the local level with the support of national and international civil society rural indigenous Mexicans initiated independent testing of their corn. Concurrently, at the end of 2002, some of those coalescing around corn also joined a new rural organisation, “The Countryside Can’t Take it Anymore,” composed of subsistence farmer and as well as medium to large
agricultural producers and peasant organisations. This movement has been vocal in its demands for a renegotiation of the agricultural chapter of NAFTA, but despite the government’s participation in discussions, the significant changes many in the rural sector are calling for have not been realised. Around this time, “members of Mexican civil society, international organizations and, in particular, indigenous and peasant groups from Oaxaca” petitioned the Commission of Environmental Cooperation (CEC), a by-product of NAFTA designed to promote tri-national dialogue, incorporating public input to preserve the shared environment of North America, to undertake an independent study into the effects of GM corn in Mexico (Commission for Environmental Cooperation, 2004). They agreed, and the momentum of the corn-based movement prompted the convening of the Second Forum in Defense of Corn in 2003. Here, the international dimension of their struggle was reinforced but increasingly the movements were feeling that change at the international level was going to take time. Aldo Gonzalez, a Zapotec corn farmer declared that “This is no time to beg for alms from the aggressor” (in Ribeiro, 2004). What followed was a refocusing of their energies on local community strategies, such as education programs to inform both the cultivators and consumers of the potential threats of GM corn. Despite these local moves, the importance of global connections in their local struggle are reaffirmed by groups such as Via Campesina, who continue to organise campaigns designed to protect food sovereignty and security around the globe. These efforts are highlighted by the mass protests and mobilisations against neoliberalism organised to coincide with the annual meetings of the World Bank and IMF in Singapore in September, 2006.

What Cleaver calls the “Zapatista effect” seems to offer a significant political advance for marginalised groups who previously would have struggled to find a national, let alone international media presence. However, he warns that such groups will continue to encounter strong resistance from those with a vested interest in maintaining the supremacy of the nation-state. This was demonstrated when the success of members of civil society and indigenous groups in petitioning the CEC study was tempered by the failure of the NAFTA nation’s to implement the recommendations of the report released in 2004. In fact, all of the governments have expressed concerns over the manner in which the independent study was designed, carried out, and how the results were compiled. Still, the use of information-age technology to stimulate the creation of collective transnational support networks presents as a useful strategy for contemporary social struggles, but it does not guarantee the procurement of
significant political, economic and social change.

Mexican resistance movements revolving around corn should not be categorised as localised movements that simply make use of the technologies of globalisation to support small-scale, regional concerns. Instead, these movements are indicative of the globalisation of contemporary information and food networks. The shape and structure of the localised struggles are fabricated within contemporary global networks, not only in resistance to the consequences, and the neoliberal ethos, of the global food trade but in conjunction with the broader information flows and interconnectedness that are the hallmarks of globalisation. Those who are coalescing around corn are not simply reacting to localised fears of cultural annihilation, or appealing to notions of authenticity and tradition to justify their cause. They are situating their demands within global concerns for future food security and food sovereignty.

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Author biography

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Monsanto Rules: Science, Government, and Seed Monopoly


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THE CATALOGUE OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS exploring the ethics of global capital and corporate control has received a noteworthy addition from France. Marie-Monique Robin’s The World According to Monsanto was co-produced by the European Arte Network and the Canadian National Film Board. While the information presented in the film is thoroughly researched, the filmmaker’s approach makes it accessible to a wide audience. Throughout the film, Robin searches Google, keying in phrases such as “Monsanto PCB [polychlorinated biphenyls],” “Roundup biodegradable,” and “Monsanto farmers patent infringement,” and then follows these digital leads. In other words, she sets out to learn about Monsanto as an average citizen would, but then investigates the company further by unearthng documents and talking to scientists, farmers, and citizens in several countries including the United States, UK, Scotland, Paraguay, France, India, and Mexico.

Robin explores a number of controversies that have plagued Monsanto for decades and hones in on the current debate surrounding the company’s genetically modified (GM) crops. While independent research has consistently suggested risks to human and environmental health associated with GM agriculture, Monsanto’s science continues to deny them. The film details how government agencies approve the crops based on the company’s (sometimes falsified) studies. In Canada, many GM crops including several varieties of corn, soy, canola and sugar beet have been approved. This, in spite of a 2003 poll that indicated a staggering 88% of Canadians wanted to see mandatory labels on foods containing GM organisms (Moore). Yet, as Anita
Lahey writes, “Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency have conducted no independent assessments of the GM crops approved for growth and sale in Canada since their introduction here in 1995” (23). Similarly, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does no GM testing but rather approves the products based on companies like Monsanto’s own test results. Robin suggests that the reason for such weak government regulation in North America is the incredible amount of influence Monsanto has over government bodies through lobbying and political insiders. One of her interviewees, Dan Glickman, who served as the US Secretary of Agriculture from 1995-2000, admits that not all the scientific checks were made prior to introducing GM crops in the US and that he felt pressured not to prevent approvals, as other government officials and lobbyists would have looked at such interference as anti-science and anti-progress. James Maryanski, a former Biotechnology Coordinator for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also acknowledges that biotech regulation in the US is shaped by politics and not science. Part of the reason is the infamous “revolving door” of government officials and company executives who swap positions between Monsanto and government agencies many times in their careers. Technology commentator Jeremy Rifkin, also interviewed, states that he has never seen one company have “so much overwhelming influence at the highest levels of regulatory decision-making” as Monsanto.

This influence over governmental regulation feeds into what is perhaps the most important issue that Robin tackles, that of Monsanto’s effort to effectively control the world’s food supply. Aside from regulation, Monsanto has the upper hand over the legal framework that oversees patenting allowing the multinational conglomerate a great deal of control over farmers: both those who purchase the seed and those who are found with patented seed in their fields without a licence, as often happens as a result of crosspollination. In 1999, Arthur Anderson Consulting Group (best known for their involvement with the Enron scandal) developed a promotion plan for Monsanto that outlined a strategy for flooding the market with GM seeds and ensuring that within five years “95 percent of all seeds would be genetically modified” (Smith 2). While this scenario did not come to pass, in 2008 125 million hectares of GM crops were planted worldwide (James, 2008). 90% of those crops are Monsanto-licensed representing control over 41 percent of the global market in commercial corn seed and 25 percent of global soybean seed (Murphy). Additionally, in the decade ending in 2005 Monsanto acquired over 50 seed companies around the globe. In the words of one US farmer Robin interviewed, Monsanto is on
the road to “owning food, all food.” Vandana Shiva concurs. As one of the world’s most prominent food activists and GM seed opponents, Shiva calls the process “the Second Green Revolution” in reference to the post-World War II agricultural transformation that laid the foundation for industrial agriculture around the world. But Shiva tells Robin that unlike the first revolution, which was driven by the public-sector, this second Revolution is “Monsanto-driven.” She highlights the dangers of this, arguing that the first Green Revolution “did have a hidden objective of selling more chemicals, but its first objective was providing food, it was food security... The Second Green Revolution has nothing to do with food security... If they [Monsanto] control seed they control food. They know it, it’s strategic... this is the best way to control the populations of the world.”

Robin also examines GM contamination of traditional corn varieties in Mexico, where corn has been cultivated for 10,000 years. The local food economy was already undermined when free trade agreements allowed for the heavily subsidised US corn to compete on the market. Now the GM contamination threatens to damage a crucial part of economic, scientific and cultural life in this part of the world. One farmer in Oaxaca calls it “the new kind of conquest, the transgenic conquest that threatens to destroy local landraces.”

These critiques of Monsanto are in essence critiques of the global food system where the decision-making power has been concentrating in the hands of few corporate suppliers and distributors. This concentration has been identified as a significant economic and cultural threat to farmers around the globe (Kneen, Lang & Heasman, Patel). The current food regime has been described as an hourglass where multiple producers and consumers are connected through a handful of “middlemen” who wield great influence over food economy and food governance. Robin maps how a farm economy crisis is affecting farmers from India, where many escape mounting debts by committing suicide, to Canada, where farm incomes are now lower than they were during the great depression (Qualman). By contrast, in the first quarter of 2009 alone, Monsanto posted over $2.6 billion in sales, and a gross profit of over $1.5 billion.

As global concerns over food and food justice mount, food movements are flourishing. Food security, food sovereignty, and food democracy are concepts that are bringing greater numbers of people together in order to resist the
concentration of economic power, make alternative production and consumption choices and pressure governments to revisit existing food policies. In the industrialized world organic food is taking over a growing share of the market and the local food movement is emphasising factors beyond just locality. These and other alternative food choices are sending a message that consumers are claiming more power in shaping their food system. On the producer end (as Robin shows) farmers are starting to opt out of the regime that has consistently benefited only the likes of Monsanto. La Via Campesina, the largest peasant movement on the planet representing literally millions of producers from over 50 countries, works on objectives including sustainability and food sovereignty, neither of which brings Monsanto to mind. The company is known to have hidden for years their knowledge of how harmful PCBs were and has for years sold their Roundup herbicide as biodegradable (for which they were found guilty of false advertising in 1996 in the US and 2007 in France). Why they would be trusted with their claims about GM seed seems to escape virtually all of Robin’s interviewees. Granted, Monsanto representatives refused to take part in the filming, so the film may strike some as somewhat slanted. Monsanto is no stranger to public criticism, but Robin’s film may just be a sign of a new wave of criticism Monsanto. A comprehensive look at one of the most important players in the contemporary food regime (and perhaps the greatest foe of the food democracy movement), The World According to Monsanto is an important addition to any documentary collection and a great resource for educators, food activist and those who simply want to better understand the global food system.

Works cited


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Terroirs as spaces of intergenerational justice: Building Communities for the “Food Citizen”

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TO ABSTAIN WITHOUT PRESSING REASONS FROM EATING chocolate, black pepper, bananas, sugar and coffee for a full year would probably sound like a pretty ludicrous idea to most of us. But not to Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon, who, in 2005, decided to renounce for a year all foods produced outside of a hundred mile range from their Vancouver home – that is, to embark on a “100-mile diet.” The demands on the authors’ lives were considerable: no bread or pasta for seven months (but plenty of potatoes) as well as numerous hours spent tracking local producers, preparing meals from scratch, and canning for winter. Yet thousands of people chose to commit to a 100-mile diet for a more or less extended period of time, inspired by the chronicles of the couple’s adventure [1]. The popular appeal of Smith and MacKinnon’s diet may at first seem rather puzzling and yet it is really only one of the many manifestations of the prominence recently gained by local food in North America, Australia as well as most parts of Europe: farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes are booming, the Slow Food community’s membership is steadily increasing, a growing number of celebrity chefs are championing local food, and several countries are putting in place Protected Designation of Origin labelling schemes [2]. Concurrently, academics and activists alike are pushing for “food sovereignty” to be recognized as a guiding principle of international trade relations and international law. In these and other practices, “local food” is posited as the privileged solution to a whole set of alimentary, ecological, economical, and health-related problems, from the environmental impact of food transportation to the insufficiencies in regional economic development to the alleged tastelessness of industrially grown food.
In what follows, I would like to depart from discussions as to whether or not local food can actually fulfill all of these promises. Rather, I propose to examine how food practices and their subjects are conceived of by local food discourses in order to foreground the “truths” that these later tend to naturalize. My primary aim, then, is not to valour or to reject these “truths” – even if I intend to stress some of their exclusionary effects by way of conclusion – but to critically expose them as contingent forms of power-knowledge [3]. More specifically, I contend that, in locating the value of food well beyond its sole nutritional content, local food contributes to a redefinition of food and eating as an issue of intergenerational justice pertaining to a temporally but also spatially extended community. In so doing, these practices deploy and naturalize subjects who are to be understood as “food citizens” required to take responsibility for the many consequences – present and future, local and global – of their daily purchasing practices.

The Local Food “Movement”

While some theorists have rightly pointed to a lack of transparency in the scope and signification of the “local” in the multitude of contemporary local food practices [4], all “local food” projects do share an understanding of food products as intrinsically linked to the locations from which they originate. As a result, the value of a given fruit or jelly is not to be found solely in its nutritional content (as it is the case in the numerous discourses on “super-nutrients” and their ideology of “nutritionism” [5]). Rather, a given food item has to be assessed first and foremost on the basis of the geography, know-how or tradition involved in its production process:

In its broadest sense, a ‘local food product’ is a food that is typically linked to an identified location either through geography, know-how or tradition. On the one hand local products can merely relate to closeness (meaning farm products from the local area), making the local aspect quite physical and concrete. On the other hand local products can relate to origin and cover different types of localised, or re-localised, food products that often add value through quality. [6]

The French notion of terroir epitomizes this understanding [7]. Since its inception at the turn of the twentieth century, this notion has come to occupy an
increasingly prominent place in the imaginary and agricultural policy of a growing number of nations. Not incidental to this success is the fact that terroirs are a very effective marketing tool for local food products as they embody:

...the combination of natural factors (soil, water, slope, height above the sea level, vegetation, microclimate) and human ones (tradition and practice of cultivation) that gives a unique character to each small agricultural locality and the food grown, raised, made, and cooked there. [8]

It thus encompasses all at once the geography, the know-how and the tradition required for the production of unique foods – a set of processes (ecological and cultural but also economical) that are in dynamic interaction and that form politically, I suggest, an environment to be preserved. Indeed, the rationale deployed in/through discourses on terroir and, more generally, on local foods is basically that consuming foods that require unique local environments for their production is a means of ensuring the safeguard of these very environmental conditions for generations to come. [9]

**Terroirs as spaces of intergenerational justice**

The ideal of preservation plays a pivotal role in local food practices. It emerges, for instance, in the opening statement of Slow Food’s official philosophy, which declares that “everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that make this pleasure possible” [10]. Furthermore, it is rendered even more apparent in the explicit endorsement of sustainable development’s goals in many local food discourses. For example, consider the “Quebec in your plate” media campaign launched in early 2008 by the Government of Quebec. In these advertisements consumers are told that by buying locally produced and/or transformed foods they contribute to “upholding the know-how of local people [while] having a determinant impact on the environment and collective prosperity” [11]. Such references to sustainable development or to its three pillars – social, ecological and economic sustainability – are frequent in discussions concerning the benefits to be expected from local foods and they contribute to construe local food as connected to the movement towards sustainable development that has become ubiquitous in the last
decade or so.

Through and in local food practices, then, a given product’s value is perceived as dependent upon the web of (ecological, social and economical) relations of which it participates, itself evaluated in terms of its capacity to maximize the possibilities for future generations to ensure their own well-being – a “truth” of food which differs significantly from that mobilised in other widely circulated discourses such as that of international trade, for instance. Yet what has to be preserved and transmitted here is not a fixed set of products or recipes which would warrant protection by virtue of being traditional or intrinsically better than others. This is particularly manifest in North America, where terroir is a relatively new category and appeals to “reinvent” terroirs – that is, to create them – are frequent [12]. Hence community-supported agriculture, the 100-mile diet and, for that matter, practices driven by the ideal of sustainable development in general, are not intended to preserve a predetermined set of resources. Rather, local food is conceived in and through these discourses as a way to maximize diversity in order to ensure that the environmental potential available to future generations will be sufficient for them to creatively “meet their own needs”. Each terroir, therefore, embodies a very unique potential to be preserved and transmitted.

One effect of this objectification, I suggest, is to posit local food as an issue of intergenerational justice whereby subjects are impelled as members of a “transgenerational community” [13] from which they derive moral obligations to future generations. Thus put forth and naturalized, then, are “food citizens” whose duty in choosing between locally grown strawberries and those shipped across the country is to balance their own preferences with the potential impact of each option on the environments to be devolved to the next generations.

Yet not only is this transgenerational community spread in time but it is also spatially extended. Indeed, local food’s spatial imaginary is not that of more or less precisely defined “local communities,” as opposed to “the global”. To the contrary, I would argue, these practices mostly reject such a dichotomy to rather conceive of all spatial identities (those of the nation, the family and the body included) as intrinsically linked to one another. More precisely, they are conceived of as ongoing and interrelated constructions – that is, as relational spaces [14]. With regard to local food, such a view translates, for instance, into Slow Food’s contention that terroir foods have to be protected primarily so
that every consumer around the globe can exert her “right to pleasure”. Or, again, into the 100-mile diet’s slogan: “Eating local for global changes” [15]. To return to my earlier example, then, in choosing between locally grown strawberries and those shipped across the country, subjects are impelled to care for the potential impact of each option on the resources to be devolved to the next generation considering that this impact pertains to multiple spatial identities (individual, familial, local, global, etc.). Practices which self-consciously identify themselves as “local food” thus presume subjects who buy vegetables from their neighbour or grow backyard gardens not out of economical necessity or habit but as a means to care for distant others – an understanding which has rightly been repeatedly criticized as restricting access to food citizenship to the economically privileged while overseeing the ways in people (mostly women) have been doing small-scale subsistence agriculture for years.

**Governing Through Food Communities**

In locating their subjects in a spatiotemporally extended community of obligation, local food practices can be seen to put forth a food citizenship which overlaps substantially with the emergent notion of post-cosmopolitanism. In line with citizenship studies’ recent revival of interest in spatially distant others and non state-centred forms of citizenship, post-cosmopolitanism supports the idea of a globalized citizenry, but is does so not on the basis of abstract human rights and universal principles of dialogue (as with cosmopolitan citizenship), but in the context of the socio-ecological obligations which have arisen as a result of the historical unfolding of globalization (Dobson, 2003, p.81). [16]

As this quote suggests, the political space of obligation of post-cosmopolitanism is not fixed or predetermined but historically produced through the “activities of individuals and groups with the capacity to spread and impose themselves in geographical [and] diachronic... space” [17]. Post-cosmopolitanism, that is to say, is concerned with the non-reciprocal obligations which originate from the material relations constitutive of globalization and their more or less spatially and temporally distant effects. In that sense, the post-cosmopolitan and the local food citizen are similarly impelled to consider the impacts of their daily
activities on future generations and remote members of the community.

Yet discourses on local food and post-cosmopolitanism diverge significantly as the former uniquely posits a citizen who is involved in communities of values. Post-cosmopolitanism indeed suggests that those who wish to fulfil their duty as citizens can do so primarily through voluntary changes in their lifestyles: more recycling, fair trade coffee, reusable grocery bags. The citizen here is conceived of as an autonomous and rational subject choosing to engage (or not) in given practices on the basis of risks/benefits calculus [18]; the potential impact of one’s actions on global warming against the amount of time required for rinsing recyclable items or, again, the contentment of helping poor farmers against the extra cost of fair trade products. This is a view which contrasts from that deployed in local food discourses, in which the objective is chiefly to “reconnect” producers and consumers – that is to foster the development of affective bonds so that autonomous subjects come to see themselves as members of communities of values. Examples abound here: from the rather obvious case of CSA initiatives to the routine depiction of farmers’ markets as sociability-inducing sites where community members (e.g. producers and consumers) can meet [19] or, again, Slow Food’s insistence that slow consumers consider themselves as co-producers who are “part of and a partner in the production process.” [20]

The subjects put forth in and through local food, therefore, are not isolated individuals but ethical subjects who govern themselves as members of affective communities from which they derive an obligation to care for others. Buying local food becomes one’s duty as member of a community of values, be it from a farmers’ market, a 100-mile diet group, a CSA or a Slow Food convivium. This understanding – which may or may not be actually taken up by all subjects engaging in such practices – deploys a conception of the citizen as an ethical being which is also pivotal to one the rationalities of government of advanced liberalism, the Third Way [21]. This strategy of rule indeed entails practices of “government through communities” in and through which:

The person whose conduct is to be governed is not seen as living their life as an individualized isolate, but neither are they understood as a member of a national collective, a society. They are understood as citizens of communities, of associations, of networks, of belongingness, of cultures, of identity. Hence, it appears, political strategies can act upon them indirectly. By acting upon these
associations, networks, cultures of belongingness and identity, by building networks, enhancing trust relations, developing mutuality and co-operation – through a new relation between ethical citizenship and responsible community, fostered by, but not administered by, the state – citizens can now be “governed through community”.\[22\]

“Building networks” and “enhancing trust relations” so that those involved will feel morally obliged to act in a given way is exactly what local food is about: bringing consumers to buy their vegetables directly from the farmer who has produced them as a way to create relations of mutual trust which most would feel rather uneasy to betray simply because there is a discount that week at the grocery store.

There are thus two distinct ways in which issues of community are deployed in/through local food discourses. Responsibility for the impact of one’s food choices on various environments in which more or less spatiotemporally-distant others evolve is somewhat connected with – or, maybe more accurately, ensured by [23] – the duty one has towards the specific communities of values of which one is a part. This can translate into a variety of practices, from one’s involvement in the nearby Slow Food chapter’s effort to support an artisan food producer in Uruguay to one’s decision to enter in a 100-mile diet so as to maximize the resources that will be available for the children of her village to meet their own needs. For, as we have seen, the relational conception of space mobilized in local food implies that practices directed at a multiplicity of communities (one’s family or neighbourhood, a group of local milk producers, etc.) can as well be considered to impact the resources to be devolved onto generations to come. Moreover, there is certainly more than one community of values in which citizens may engage, often with uneven conviction. Hence, it does not matter that much whether one buys local food primarily to provide a healthy environment to his own children or to preserve regional agricultural traditions, whether one feels loosely bounded to the farmers she interacts with every week or is strongly engaged in a CSA group as long as the “problem” to which these practices are posited as an answer is the same.
Conclusion

What does seem to matter, however, is that these are primarily purchasing practices. Indeed, as should be apparent from the examples given so far, the crux of local food discourses is that citizens should buy local products; nothing really emphasizes how these products should then be prepared and/or consumed [24]. Some “locavores” may well post their own imaginative recipes on the 100-mile diet’s official blog, but overall the focus is clearly on (a change in) the purchasing practices of a “citizen-consumer”: finding boutiques specialized in terroir products, supporting the nearby farmers’ market, looking for labels of origin, picking up one’s CSA weekly basket, stopping by small cheese factories on one’s vacation route, etc. Such an understanding may seem somewhat self-evident in light of the recent burgeoning of interest in the role of the citizen-consumer of political consumerism. Yet I would like to illustrate, by way of conclusion, how it effectively limits what can be said (or not said) of the citizen of local food discourses.

Scanning websites on local food will not teach you anything about community gardens. This is a rather surprising “omission” given that there is arguably no food that is more “local” than that produced in one’s own neighbourhood and that these are organized around groups of individuals sharing affective bonds and values. It does make some sense, however, in light of what has just been said – that these websites are both presuming and impelling citizens as consumers. This is due to the fact that the market rationality mobilized in/through such an objectification precludes consideration of practices, such as that of community gardens, which cannot be thought of in terms of a consumers/producers dichotomy. In focussing on purchasing habits, then, local food discourses tend to reassert and naturalize the categories of the consumers and the producers, thus leaving unquestioned the basic premises of the market rationality. Besides, they clearly posit the “problem” of local food on the consumption end of the exchange process; what is needed, first and foremost, is a shift in the shopping habits of the citizen-consumer and not changes in patterns of production and distribution [25]. Except that the stress is laid upon the purchasing choices of abstract “citizens-consumers” with no mention made of the potential limitations to one’s actual capacity to buy local food. What about, for instance, those who do not earn enough income to “chose” to pay more for local products? Or those whose culturally-determined food demands or needs cannot be met by local products? How are inhabitants of “food
deserts” who do not have access to a car to engage in such practices? These are some significant questions, I believe, that are silenced by the way in which “the citizen” is objectified in/through local food discourses. And this is why we should seek to challenge discourses positing local food as a panacea by foregrounding the ways in which they simultaneously legitimate certain practices and preclude others.

Endnotes

[1] Both were writing for an online journal at the time of their adventure ("http://thetyee.ca/Series/2005/06/28/100Mile/") and they have since set up their own website ("http://100milediet.org") and published The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating (2007).

[2] “Community-supported agriculture” consists in a group of individuals who become “partners” of a farm by purchasing in advance a share of the season’s harvest that is then made available through food baskets that have to be picked up weekly at a given drop-off point (see the United States Department of Agriculture’s website for more information: "http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml"). Slow Food, on the other hand, is a non-profit “eco-gastronomic” international network aimed at preserving and promoting local food traditions; founded in 1989, its membership is now of over 85 000 members in 132 countries ("http://www.slowfood.com").

[3] As pointed out by Foucault, to critique is not to adopt a normative stand but to show the unquestioned presumptions, familiarities and rationalities on which are based accepted practices (« Est-il donc important de penser? », p. 997-1001). The critique of the “truth” of the citizen that local food tend to naturalize that I am proposing here is part of a larger dissertation project building on Michel Foucault’s notions of power-knowledge and of governmentality to examine contemporary food practices as privileged sites in/through which issues of citizenship are currently deployed (Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison, 36; see also Foucault, “Governementality”, 87-104 and Dean, Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society).


[7] There is no rigorous English translation for this term, as Trubek, between others, has observed (The Taste of Place. A Cultural Journey into Terroir, 9).


[9] It can be argued, I suggest, that discourses on terroir and local food basically share the same rationale as they both assume that the quality of a product derives from its ecological, economical and social conditions of production. In fact, the deepness of the historical roots of the “traditions” involved seems to be their main point of distinction, particularly in the few countries such as France which actually have long-standing traditions of artisanal food production.


[12] For instance, Daniel Pinard – one of the most celebrated food show hosts in the province of Quebec – launched his latest show by declaring that “We
don’t have a culinary past. Our ancestors were fishermen. We thus have to reinvent a terroir for ourselves and this is what we will be talking about.” (Paré, “De la politique à l’assiette”, my translation). Similar appeals are observable all over North America.

[13] De-Shalit advocates this concept of “transgenerational community” in his communitarian-inspired discussion of our moral obligation to intergenerational justice. Membership in this community is posited as the rational and free decision of reflexive subjects (Why Posternity Matters. Environmental policies and future generations, 16), an understanding which proves quite consistent with the view put forth through and in local food practices. De-Shalit’s transgenerational community does, however, differ significantly from that of local food in that it is spatially restricted by the need for cultural interaction and moral similarity.

[14] According to Massey, a relational conception of space presumes that “space is a product of practices, trajectories, interrelations (...) we make space through interactions at all levels, from the (so-called) local to the (so-called) global, [and, accordingly] those spatial identities such as places, regions, nations, and the local and the global, must be forged in this relational way too, as internally complex, essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing (...)” (“Geographies of responsibility”, 5).


[18] This is a conception of the subject-citizen that is central to the dominant neoliberal rationality of government, understood as a historically contingent assemblage of discursive and non-discursive practices through which contemporary subjects are “governed at distance” (Rose, Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood; Dean, Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society, 149-175).
[19] According to Halweil, for instance, “Sociologists estimate that people have 10 times as many conversations at farmer markets than at supermarkets.” (Eat Here. Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket, 10).


[21] I do not have the space here to expose the specificities of this rationality of government, which basic premises have been expounded in Giddens’s The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy for instance. It is important to note, however, that I do not conceive of the Third Way as a set of concrete policies nor as an ideology but as a form of governmentality (see Larner, “Neo-liberalism: Policy, Ideology, Governmentality” for an illustration of the respective implications of each of these conceptualizations). Therefore, I consider the Third Way as a strategy of rule – that, once again, I neither valour nor reject – rather than as a specific policy framework (most notably implemented in Britain under Tony Blair).

[22] Rose, "Inventiveness in Politics", 471.

[23] This is not to say that the latter are simply strategic means to an end, so that they would somewhat exist “outside” or prior to those discourses which posit local food as practices of intergenerational justice directed at various communities (local-global, present-future, etc.). This way of posing the “problem” to which communities of values are seen as an answer indeed has an effect on the way we conceive of the latter. We have to be aware, however, that those same groups can be mobilized in very different discourses where they are disconnected from issues of intergenerational justice (the Slow Food chapter as community of refined gastronomes who value “real” food and eating, for instance). More broadly, subjects may engage in local food practices for quite different reasons than those exposed here as these practices may be simultaneously mobilized in other competing discourses. We may think, for instance, that some people shop at the nearby farmers’ market out of economical necessity rather than care for others. Similarly, one can choose to engage in Slow Food for the sole pleasure of discovering new food products.
In emphasizing the “food citizens” presumed and naturalized in and through local food practices I do not intend to suggest that this understanding is necessarily or directly taken up by all subjects engaging in such practices.

[24] Slow Food may be considered as an exception here as it explicitly advocates that “slow eaters” devote more time cook and share meals – a requirement that is somewhat implicit, at least in terms of cooking, in most local food discourses as the products they are promoting usually need to be cooked from scratch. Yet Slow Food does connect with these other similar initiatives in that it is similarly concerned with a citizen-as-consumer, notwithstanding its use of the concept of “co-producer”.

[25] Of course, I do not mean here that production and distribution practices are completely silenced for, as we have seen, the value of local food is posited as dependent upon the web of relations of which it participates. Nonetheless, discourses such as that of the 100-mile diet are not advocating new laws against the agribusiness giants; they are encouraging consumers to buy local products so that sustainable modes of production and distribution will be favoured.

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Backyard Survivalism: The Global Politics of the Kitchen Garden

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WENDALL BERRY HAS FAMOUSLY SAID THAT “eating is an agricultural act,” reminding us that even in the act of consumption, we are co-creators of a system of food production (Berry). Eating is not just personal, it connects us to the world in profound ways, and increasingly, as worries about global warming’s effects on food production begin to ripple through public consciousness, people around the world are taking up the question of food sovereignty and food security as central aspects of political struggles surrounding issues of poverty, environmental justice, gender equality, and class struggle. The United Nations recently released report on the Environmental Food Crisis paints an alarming picture of a world profoundly effected by climate change, peak oil, population growth, demographic shifts, and a greater demand for both meat and biofuels (cf United Nations Environmental Program UNEP). Food security is on the lips of military advisers, peasant groups, backyard homesteaders, and policy makers, because the realities of the situation are such that, within the next fifty years, the biopolitical injunction to “make live”, to provide for life, may shrivel in the heat of the sun. As Foucault has pointed out, biopower changes the sovereign right to take life or let live” into “the right to make live and let die” (Foucault Defended 241). Food security is in a sense thus the first biopolitical act, and the legitimacy of a government rests on the ability to make the population live. As the environmental crisis worsens, this basic pact is beginning to unravel. According to the Earth Policy Institute, six out of the last seven years have seen world grain harvest fall short of consumption, drawing down carryover stocks at the end of the crop year to 57 days, the smallest buffer in over 30 years (Earth Policy Institute). With a global system of commercial food production already at full capacity and based fundamentally on an energy deficit [1] that can only be sustained by the disastrous geopolitics of cheap fossil fuels, modern agriculture is on the brink of failure. For a small but growing group of people, these factors have motivated learning a set of agrarian and more broadly food-related skills their grandparents had, but which they no longer posses.
In Britain, the allotment system of community owned garden plots has become overburdened as people scramble to get a piece of land to grow their own food, spurred by the example of celebrity chefs like Jaimie Oliver and shows like the River Cottage Treatment, worries about climate change, and a desire for the unbeatable freshness of new peas and potatoes from the garden. Some places have waiting lists of ten years or more for an allotment as urbanites rush out to develop their green thumb and get a taste of the good life. In the same vein, movements like Slow Food, the 100 mile diet, school garden programs, and numerous other community initiatives that teach people how to garden, cook, preserve food, bake bread, and otherwise become more self-sufficient, are helping affluent consumers in the global North address a largely dysfunctional and ecologically destructive relationship with food. While many parts of the global South have never fully relinquished these skills, organizations like Slow Food are connecting consumers and producers in a form of “virtuous globalization” (cf Petrini) that helps preserve both cultural and natural diversity from the homogenizing effects of globalization. Events like Slow Food’s Terra Madre, a biannual meeting artesinal producers from around the world, has been hugely successful in linking up food communities and providing small scale producers with the resources necessary to maintain their way of life. Moreover, food issue writers like Michael Pollan have become household names as people begin to realize the ways in which a simple task like eating connects them to the world and is emblematic of a whole host of economic, political, and environmental issues.

Much of the impetus behind these movements is based on a desire to shorten the foodchain and to regain some measure of connection with the land, the farmer, and one's own labour in ways that sustain, rather than destroy, the environment. In many ways, a shorter food chain is a literary experience, one driven by a demand for narrative. The alienating act of purchasing nameless, story-less food in the supermarket is at the root of the problem, especially as more and more companies use the words natural, organic, eco, and bio in their advertisements, attempting to seduce consumers into a false belief that their product is worth the markup. In an era of unprecedented greenwashing by governments and corporations, the only way to be sure the food you are eating is sustainable is to either meet the farmer or grow it yourself. The growth in popularity of urban chicken coops, backyard gardens, CSAs, and community gardening reveals a dissatisfaction with the current globalized food system. Most of the food we eat contains a brand rather than a story, and the
narratives afforded to us by meeting the farmer or growing the food yourself, allows for a way around the bureaucratic mystifications of organic certification and commodification. There is a pleasure in the narrative of food because it connects us with the world in a single bite and helps to circumvent a system designed to mystify the origins of the food we eat.

But what is food sovereignty? Although this term speaks to many things, including neoliberalism, capitalist globalization, the industrialization of food, the enclosure of the commons, peasant land rights, biofuel production, the environmental crisis etc, the premise is quite simple. Food sovereignty is about people regaining control over their food at a time when consolidation, industrialization, and globalization are the organizing principles of the agricultural systems around most of the world. It is one of the key principles of what Vandana Shiva calls “Earth Democracy,” an idea that links up social justice, environmentalism, peasant rights, eco-feminism, and a critique of corporate globalization. Shiva contends that “by taking back control over our food systems, we can produce more food while using fewer resources, improve farmer’s incomes and strengthen their livelihoods, while solving the problem of hunger and obesity” (Shiva 152). By emphasizing local production and helping to change government regulations that favour and subsidize large scale producers, food sovereignty is attempting to build and maintain an infrastructure capable of feeding a population without externalizing environmental and human costs. Slow Food has been involved in many such campaigns. For example, the European Union employs health codes and laws that often make it impossible for traditional producers to pass regulations, even though many of the concerns over contamination are generated as a result of industrial production. Thus a traditional salami maker or raw milk cheese facility simply cannot afford to meet the requirements of a system of regulation skewed in favour of industrial producers. Slow Food has been involved in lobbying to get small producers exempt from these laws, making it possible to maintain traditional communities, products, and biodiversity (cf Petrini).

For many urban Canadians and Americans, encouraging food security is no easy task. We are used to spending very little time and money on our food. In Canada and the US, we spend roughly 10% of our income on food (cf Pollan Defense), and much of that is spent in restaurants and on convenience foods. Shockingly, 19% of meals in America are eaten in a car (Pollan Omnivores 110), a fact that speaks to the dysfunctional relationship people have with the Western diet, and has spurred countless books and articles on the topic. But
what it fundamentally comes down to is alienation: as industrial agriculture has become the model for producing food around the world, and as convenience, cheapness, and speed has increasingly defined our relationship with eating, people have become disconnected from what Carlo Petrini refers to as the “gastronomic axis.” Our relationship with food in the West tends to be mediated by the commodity form and largely about consumption. What, how, when and where we eat determines, in a very basic and profound way, how we relate to nature and time, whether this means eating with attention to the natural rhythms of your body and the environment, or ignoring them completely. The ontologization of speed so characteristic of capitalism, inscribes our bodies from inside out, and the politics of food is where it all begins. Food connects us to the world and to each other, even though it is often used as a means of separation. It is at this economic, political, ethical, and environmental transversality where “form of life” and “bare life” (Agamben) coalesce in the most basic and necessary activity; an activity that forms the base of all superstructures, even in a postmodern, informational economy—the cultivation, storage, transportation, preparation and consumption of food.

For the Slow Food movement, responsibility comes in the sustainable maintenance and creation of naturecultures (cf Haraway) in which both consumer and producer respect the local environment by learning to decode the language of a territory and celebrate its unique contribution to our shared biocultural life. Eating is something we all have in common and, as such, it provides a way to transform everyday life into life politics (cf Giddens). Like many institutions of modernity, agriculture has been transformed into an expert system, and eating has increasingly become an industrial act. The basic skills of planting, growing, tending, cooking from scratch, and preserving are quickly disappearing, and so to are the ontological and epistemological conditions necessary for food sovereignty. There are more prisoners in the United States than farmers, and even those farmers that are left are little more than factory workers, applying chemicals from giant air-conditioned combines onto fields treated like sponges for oil.

Sustainable agriculture is a knowledge intensive industry: it takes years of study and observation and requires that farmers intelligently manage the ecosystems they intentionally manipulate in ways that are both respectful and generative. Industrial agriculture simplifies food systems into vast monocultures and applies an input-output paradigm that inevitably leads to the degradation of soil. In
many ways, the health of soil is a cultural question, requiring that humans reinvest time and effort in learning how to support diversity in the soil and on the farm, a task that first requires a broad cultural shift. The culture of agriculture is quickly disappearing, as is the potential for a sustainable food culture. As Anthony Giddens points out, modernity relies on a general deskilling of day-to-day life, a process which is “an alienating and fragmenting phenomenon so far as the self is concerned” (Giddens 137). The institutions of bureaucratic modernity rely on expert systems that displace local control, as is the case with the disappearance of the local, diverse, organic farm, or the decline in cooking ability and the concomitant reliance on processed food.

The personal and political coalesce in the daily act of eating, but in general “ecological problems highlight the new and accelerating interdependence of global systems and bring home to everyone the depth of the connections between personal activity and planetary problems” (Giddens 221). The ecological crisis is simultaneously a personal issue involving individual choices and lifestyle politics, and one of profound global consequences that will be solved on levels far beyond the reach of individuals. In this sense it is perhaps the quintessential crisis of modernity. Food becomes a convenient site for considering many of these interconnected issues and also a moment for pedagogical intervention. The focus on school garden programs in Slow Food USA, where teachers teach kids how to grow vegetables and incorporating them into healthy lunches, is but one example of how taste education can link up personal and political issues in complicated and yet accessible ways. Because food is such a basic commonality, it can provide a convenient way of discussing numerous issues of environmental justice, consumerism, labour relations, and globalization.

For the rest of the paper I will consider the growing popularity of heritage seeds and the politics of the kitchen garden. One of the most important aspects of the Slow Food movement is the emphasis on biodiversity and sustainable agriculture. For example, The Ark of Taste is a Slow Food initiative that tries to catalogue plant and animal varieties and provide resources to maintain them. It is a “protective receptacle for quality produce that should be saved from the deluge of standardization and world-wide distribution” (Parkins 23). It is estimated that 30,000 vegetable varieties, and 33% of livestock have become extinct in the last century (Parkins 23). This represent the destruction of a significant cultural heritage, since most of these plants and animals are also intimately tied into traditional ways of life. Moreover, as global warming shifts
the climactic contours and conditions of bioregions around the world, our collective survival depends on the ability of agriculture to adapt, and the means of doing so lies in the seeds we sow. Industrial agriculture has shaped the food we eat very literally: by breeding plants for yield, synchronized ripening, the ability to withstand long distance transport, and visual uniformity, many modern day cultivars have sacrificed taste, nutrition, disease resistance, and adaptability on the altar of efficiency (cf Roberts, Pawlick, Belasco, Nestle). Corn, rice, soy, and wheat now provide most of our calories and much of that is limited to a small group of cultivars, many of which are quite sensitive to climactic variations (Shiva). For example, the pollination of both rice and corn is significantly effected by temperature: a few degrees increase during pollination and both crops have a tendency to fail dramatically. In the relentless drive for cheap and abundant calories we are very literally putting all our eggs in one basket.

Among the most important ways to resist the agricultural-industrial complex is a process of re-skilling and the time-honoured but increasingly corporatized and privatized act of saving seeds. For the last three years I have been trying to come into my foodshed more completely. As part of the research process for my PhD thesis, and a general life-politics, I have tried to re-skill myself by planting a heritage garden, working on an organic farm that runs a Community Support Agriculture initiative (CSA), learning how to preserve foods, foraging for wild edibles, and in general learning how to eat outside the industrial-agricultural complex as much as possible. This has been a fascinating and, at times, difficult journey, but one that is infinitely rewarding and illuminating. But I want to specifically discuss heritage seeds here, as I think some of the most pressing issues of food sovereignty come down to the seeds we plant. As I have already mentioned, most of the plants and animals we are accustomed to purchasing in the supermarket are products of an astonishing constriction of biodiversity. Although a typical store may contain 45,000 items, many of them are the result of scientific and industrial engineering and based on recombinations of corn, soy, wheat and rice. As Michael Pollan has documented in The Omnivores Dilemma and In Defense of Food, the abundance and diversity of the supermarket is largely an illusion: “There are some forty-five thousand items in the average American supermarket and more that a quarter of them now contain corn” (Pollan Omnivores 19).

The simplification of the food chain has profound effects on the availability of alternative cultivars with the result that anyone wanting them must go outside
the typical pathways of corporate agriculture by finding a farmers’ market with progressive farmers, or by growing the food themselves. Many seed catalogues and seed groups are emerging that are struggling to save our common agricultural heritage. Since seeds need to be grown every few years in order to be maintained, it is vital that people actually plant them. Groups like Seeds of Diversity in Canada provide a forum for members to exchange heritage, open-pollinated cultivars and thus the opportunity to transform the space of the backyard into a site of political, ecological and social transformation. It all comes down to regaining a measure of sovereignty over the skills, time, and land required to live a dignified, healthy, and sustainable life. Nature is a relationship and sustainability is about figuring out how to live well, to get along with the world around you. Although time and space is often an issue, the resources are available to almost anyone. While questions of race and gender obviously need to be addressed, the concept of food communities and projects like Terra Madre are starting to make connections between the global South and North in ways that are sensitive to the politics of inequality. By linking up food communities and trying to support traditional ways of life, groups like Slow Food are trying to connect people of various socio-economic classes in a shared struggle.

When I first started my forays into food production, I lived in an apartment and so I rented a small patch of land in a community garden. For less than a 100 dollars a year, I had land, access to shared tools, and a ready community of individuals all interested in the same thing and eager to help. Now I have turned my small 40 by 60 foot backyard into about 250 square feet of raised-bed gardens which I intensively crop using a variety of techniques that mimic natural relationships by growing plants in families and taking advantage of their unique properties and needs. Through this system, I have grown hundreds of pounds of vegetables from a very small area. I grow mostly heritage varieties of plants, all of which are open-pollinated [2], so I can save their seeds and continue the rich legacy of natureculture hybrids embodied in each plant. Plants like Ronde de Nice, a round French heirloom variety of zucchini with succulent, almost watermelon-like fruit that are excellent for stuffing but would never make it to the market because they bruise very easily. Or Dragon’s Tongue, a Dutch heirloom bush bean with beautiful purple stripes and a buttery flavor. Each seed has a story: a history of time, place, and people that is embodied in the careful coevolution of humans and plants - an evolution lost to us in the world of high-yield hybrid seeds controlled by corporate patents and which cannot be saved because their traits do not
manifest in the second generation. To pick up a heritage seed catalogue is to engage in an act of historical preservation and to participate in a long narrative of naturecultures; it speaks to a desire to know where a plant or animal comes from. For me, spring begins in January when my seed catalogue arrives in the mail and I begin to imagine the wonderful new varieties I will grow this year. I feel connected to a whole new world as I read up on each cultivar and how it came to be.

It also gives you the opportunity to adjust to the climate in helpful ways. Because Hamilton, a city on the Western bank of Lake Ontario where I live, has been getting relatively hot summers recently, I will try out a new cucumber this year. The Armenian Cucumis melo var. Flexuosus is actually a melon, but the flesh of the fruit is shaped and tastes like a cucumber and it is capable of growing vigorously in the summer heat. With global warming effecting regions all around the world, access to various open-pollinated seeds is vital for the success of agricultural production. Without the aide of backyard gardeners and organizations that help people save and trade seeds, many of these varieties would simply disappear, and so to would the legacy they embody. Because many of these cultivars bruise easily, do not ripen at the same time, cannot be picked by machines, or are not uniformly shaped, most cannot be incorporated into an industrial foodchain. The growth of food-based movements and projects like Seeds of Diversity and the Ark of Taste are hopeful signs in the ongoing struggle against neoliberalism and corporatization. The backyard garden is quickly becoming a site of struggle and victory as more people take up the simple, life affirming act of growing food.

Endnotes

[1] Studies have shown that industrial agriculture takes on average 10 calories of oil to produce one calorie of food (cf Pfeiffer). In addition to this energy deficit, long distance transport, processing, and vastly unsustainable water usage is threatening the basic viability of the system in profound ways.

[2] Hybrid seeds are the result to two dissimilar plants bred together, often producing a plant that has high disease resistance and yields. However, the offspring of two hybrid plants produces a plant with unpredictable
characteristics and thus in order to receive the same yields, one must purchase the seeds once again. Open pollinated seeds pass on their traits to the next generation and more easily adapt to their environment and are central to food security issues because they undermine the monopoly that companies like Monsanto have over growers.

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The Political Allure of the Local: Food and Cosmopolitanism in Timothy Taylor’s Stanley Park and Ruth L. Ozeki’s My Year of Meats

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Recent debates surrounding sustainable food production, distribution and consumption have been articulated around the idea that the more local these processes are, the better – an idea most clearly (and publicly) put forth in Alisa Smith’s and J.B. MacKinnon’s best-selling The 100-Mile Diet but also taken up in, among other texts, Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle and Michael Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma. Yet this idea – that local food is a more sustainable environmental choice that has positive economic repercussions for local food producers and communities – has often and all too easily become synonymous with the idea that the global is something to be wary of, an apolitical zone dominated by the values of neoliberal capitalism. These two ideas set up a dichotomy, then, in which the local is inherently the site of responsible political action and the global is inherently the site of irresponsible corporate greed. This fetishization of the local at the expense of the global sets up an untenable binary that suggests, at best, a highly romanticized yet anachronistic longing for an imagined past where the global did not intrude on daily lives or, at worst, a model for political action that invalidates necessary solidarity-building with others throughout the world, promoting a chauvinistic view of international relations – both at the macro level of the nation-state and the micro level of the individual. This focus on the local is perhaps particularly galling coming from citizens of Euro-American nation-states as it suggests that these citizens have no ethical or political responsibility in the situation of citizens of other places.

Through an examination of two recent novels that take up from different angles the question of sustainable or ethical eating and the local – Timothy Taylor’s Stanley Park and Ruth Ozeki’s My Year of Meats – I argue that a more radically political step is not the abandonment of the global for the local but instead taking the lessons of the local and thinking through them globally. One way in which these two novels point to their varying commitments to the local and the global is in their attitudes toward
cosmopolitanism – attitudes which will be the focus of this paper. Taylor’s text reproduces an all too common leftist critique of cosmopolitanism as alienating and elitist – characteristics that I will argue Stanley Park actually imbues the local with. In contrast, Ozeki’s text points to what I will call a “territorialized cosmopolitanism” – a way of looking at the world that emphasizes multiple affiliations but which locates these affiliations in specific, though often multiple, places while simultaneously stressing the importance of real commitments to places and their inhabitants (human or otherwise). I want to begin this paper by giving a brief definition of what I mean by cosmopolitanism and, more particularly, territorialized cosmopolitanism. I will then move on to examine Stanley Park and My Year of Meats in turn.

Cosmopolitanism as a concept, following James Clifford, “evokes mixed feelings” (“Mixed Feelings” 362). It raises questions about where social responsibility and affiliations can and should lie. It seems to echo neoliberal desires for a border-free world as well as pointing to liberating forms of mobility that resist the neoliberal paradigm. Under the umbrella of “cosmopolitan theory,” debates surrounding globalization, post-colonialism and citizenship overlap. Bruce Robbins notes that “the term cosmopolitanism is ordinarily taken to [refer to] aesthetic spectatorship rather than political engagement” (Robbins, Feeling Global 17; emphasis in original). This centrality of aesthetic spectatorship seems to be the main point at which cosmopolitanism evokes mixed feelings as it implies an affective response to the world, but no ethical or political engagement.

A territorialized cosmopolitan sensibility, as I define it, is one that is simultaneously affiliated with the local and the global. In other words, someone who exhibits a territorialized cosmopolitan sensibility self-consciously positions themselves as both a citizen of (someone who has ethical and moral responsibilities to) the world as a whole and of a specific local place, or even places. Further, a territorialized cosmopolitan sensibility that emphasizes responsibility rather than the privileges of wealth and sophistication must develop out of an engagement with people and cultures different from oneself that does not seek to then eradicate difference. Similarly territorialized cosmopolitanism demands commitment to difference, not just exposure to or tolerance of difference. Here my definition is shaped by theorists of vernacular cosmopolitanism such as Timothy Brennan (1997), Homi Bhabha (1996), and Bruce Robbins (1998) who have expanded the idea of who counts as cosmopolitan in order to account for cosmopolitan practices that do not stem necessarily from economic privilege; Bhabha, for instance, posits refugees as vernacular cosmopolitan subjects. My definition of cosmopolitanism is thus inflected by postcolonial theory’s criticism of unquestioned and unlocated universals.
What territorialized cosmopolitanism offers, then, is a way of considering everyday interactions between the local and the global and emphasizing the interconnection between these two categories that are, after all, defined only relationally to one another. Instead of seeing cosmopolitanism as only the domain of the global – a view popularly put forth by Pico Iyer (1997) and Leah McLaren (2008) and criticized by Ghassan Hage (2000), this paper argues that a territorialized cosmopolitanism might actually open a more politically responsible way of being. I want to argue that thinking through narratives about global food production offers a way of localizing global questions but in such a way that constantly draws us outward. What Stanley Park and My Year of Meats draw our attention to is how we are already global citizens through the food we eat – whether we acknowledge this or not. In other words, these texts reveal the inescapability of both the local and the global, suggesting that attempts to evade one or the other are perhaps doomed to failure.

**Stanley Park and the Local as Fetish**

Taylor’s 2001 novel has been selected in two prominent Canadian literary competitions: it was the One Book, One Vancouver selection of 2003, and, more prominently, one of the finalists in Canada’s state-funded public broadcaster, CBC’s, widely popular Canada Reads competition of 2007. Stanley Park’s media prominence is further enhanced by its au courant (and, at the time of its publication, prescient) subject matter: local food. Jeremy Papier, the novel’s protagonist, returns from French culinary school and opens a restaurant, with the financing of Dante (the CEO of a Starbucks-like coffee chain), that serves primarily local food. For a variety of reasons, the restaurant goes under and is saved by Dante with the caveat that Jeremy take the advice of the designers Dante brings in who demand sophisticated food from no clear national cuisine. At the same time, Jeremy begins to spend more time with his father, the Professor, an anthropologist living with the homeless in Vancouver’s Stanley Park. The juxtaposition between the resolutely global demands of Dante and his employees (who include Jeremy’s opportunistic girlfriend, Benny), and the thoroughly local affiliations of the Professor and his friends/ethnographic subjects lead Jeremy to cook an opening meal at the revamped restaurant consisting entirely of scavenged food from Stanley Park.

Taylor’s novel addresses many of the issues that preoccupy both cosmopolitan and food theory: the ethics of locality, globality, and physical place. What I want to suggest, however, is that, by reading this novel through the lens of territorialized cosmopolitanism, the text is revealed to be radically anti-cosmopolitan. This is not to suggest that being radically anti-cosmopolitan is necessarily problematic. Instead, I would argue that Taylor refuses to engage with cosmopolitanism in a serious way.
despite using the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism throughout the text to characterize the central characters. The novel deploys a caricatured version of colloquial cosmopolitanism to make an ultimately conservative point: that crossing borders is an inherently negative, victimizing and destructive act. To use James Clifford’s formulation: “roots” are good, but “routes” are bad (Routes). Stanley Park works in a vexed space where it uses the commodity trappings of cosmopolitan sophistication – expensive food and drink – and the global affiliations of its protagonist to reveal the sensibility that undergirds Jeremy’s and his father’s passions and to simultaneously denounce the equally cosmopolitan sensibilities of Dante and Benny. On the surface, the novel seems to suggest a territorialized cosmopolitanism where the global and the local are inter-connected. Instead, the novel fetishes the local in a way that further re-enforces an inflexible binary between the global and the local. The novel privileges the local as a site of moral superiority but, in its obliviousness to debates about urban food sovereignty, takes no interest in the potential political ramifications or possibilities of such a stance towards the local.

Stanley Park raises two compelling and topical questions that are intertwined throughout the narrative. Firstly, with the general emphasis given to the global as the sign of newness in an era of accelerated globalization, what space is left for the local that is not predetermined as nostalgia or authenticity? Authenticity is understood in the novel as contemporary repetitions of long-standing ethnic traditions; tradition, to be worthy of approbation here, is emphatically unchanging. Hybridity is something to be wary of; indeed, part of what makes Dante such a menacing figure is his hybrid nature. Secondly, where does ethical responsibility lie when affiliations exist at numerous different levels? In Stanley Park ethical responsibility exists exclusively at the level of the local. The national is non-existent in this novel and the global is characterized only by corporate finance and “post-national” sophistication (Taylor 63) with the suggestion that ethical responsibility is impossible at any level besides the local. Dante’s gangster-ish persona is emblematic of the ethical bankruptcy perceived to exist at levels beyond the local. And Dante becomes especially gangster-ish once he takes an interest in Jeremy’s local restaurant, suggesting the seemingly inevitable danger to local places when the global becomes involved.

Jeremy’s commitment to local food – a commitment which would suggest global environmental responsibility – is never articulated in terms of the political. Instead, it only marks his personal/ psychological commitment to local place and an attempt to understand his position within an authentic tradition. Early in the novel, Jeremy is asked to explain why he prefers local food; he is unable to put words to his desire and falls back on the language of nostalgia: “I was trying to remind people of something. Of what the soil under their feet has to offer. Of a time when they would
have known only the food that their own soil could offer” (23). Jeremy is uninterested in, to the point of seeming unaware of, the politics of eating local food. For him, it is the “good” thing to do, but only to reclaim a seemingly stable and authentic subjectivity. His ethical commitment which is unclear and centered around authenticity is, thus, only to the local. While eating local food has global consequences – something we are increasingly aware of – these consequences are incidental to Jeremy’s choice. Food is literally only ingredients, components in the expression of traditional models of food preparation; food as something that emerges from biological processes, cultivated by farmers and enmeshed in complex economies does not exist in the world of Stanley Park. Indeed, the only food-related labour that the novel addresses is that of the chef, a highly trained and privileged individual.

Jeremy’s preparation of local food is mirrored throughout the novel to his father’s residence with the homeless inhabitants of the city, particularly those who reside in Stanley Park. Like its attitude toward food, Stanley Park approaches the residents of Stanley Park with “great deference” (14). The Professor sees the residents of Stanley Park as the spiritual descendents of First Nations people: “There had been a First Nation, of course. Squatters later. Men who lived in trees. But this generation was the homeless, the new Stanley Park people” (14). Later the Professor posits the homeless as a symbol of what contemporary culture in its entirety has lost: “In our rootless day and age, our time of strange cultural homelessness – and worse, our societal amnesia about what used to constitute both the rewards and limitations of these roots – I wonder if we might look to these homes… to find an emblem of the deepest roots of all” (136). These two attitudes towards the homeless reduce them to ahistoric symbol and disavows the real contemporary presence of First Nations people in Stanley Park and Vancouver.

A similarly reductive approach is at work in Taylor’s characterization of the three residents of Stanley Park who are given names: Chladek, Siwash, and, most particularly, Caruzo. Indeed, Caruzo (whose name alludes to Enrico Caruso, the early twentieth-century operatic tenor) is a saintly figure, contrasted with the devilish Dante. Caruzo acts as an acolyte to the memory of two brothers murdered in the park in the early 1950s. And this devotion is understood in terms of deeply rooted feelings toward the park:

He went to where the Babes in the Wood were. He found the trail. The secret offshoot. The crush of ferns, the leaning trees that did not touch the sacred ground. He went to the edge of the moss. Right there, he put his hands flat on the ground. Both hands, side by side, the thumb and index fingers touching. His heart beat faster, painfully. He sat in the salal. Sat and could not move.
This passage, which describes the moments before Caruzo’s death from an unknown cause, makes clear his commitment to the park as a physical location. As Stephen Finucan notes, *Stanley Park* is “a modern morality play with Jeremy Papier’s very soul at stake.” The homeless act, then, as the contemporary catalyst for Jeremy’s spiritual salvation which is expressed through his increased local affiliations. Jeremy and the Professor are fundamentally uninterested in how or why these men are homeless except to understand this as both a chosen and prophetic lifestyle. This seems, in some sense, to be an awfully convenient way of understanding Chladek, Siwash and Caruzo and one that absolves Jeremy, the Professor and the city’s other inhabitants of any ethical or political responsibility to the homeless.

Yet this attitude is in keeping with the text’s more general refusal to approach its commitment to the local in any terms beyond the personal. Both Jeremy’s and his father’s respective investments in locality, are understood in the text as a response to the death of Jeremy’s mother, a no-longer nomadic Roma woman. Jeremy’s father explicitly connects his decisions to live and study in Stanley Park, not only to her death, but to the end of her lapsed nomadism: “it was as if she put down roots and they did not take... when it became apparent to her, she fell back into a place of no place. Unrooted but constrained, celebrating neither. And stranded in this way, she became the key to all of what has consumed me, capturing the universe of my studies in the small frame of a single, very beautiful person” (231). The failed rootedness of the mother and wife becomes the determining factor for son and husband’s obsession with locality. Their commitment to the local, then, is framed as a personal psychological choice, rather than part of a larger commitment to the local as local or as part of a larger global system. Just as Jeremy falls back on the rhetoric of nostalgia to describe his commitment to local food early in the novel, the text uses similar rhetoric to explain his feast of local (scavenged) food at the close of the novel:

> in this brave new world of post-national cuisine, Chef Jeremy left his little reminders about what he thought had been lost. He had a whole list of nostalgic examples: regional tastes, local ingredients, passed-down recipes, family farms... And more: embedded in this cuisine... were messages about knowing the earth’s bounty and your connection to it. Understanding where one stood, understanding loyalty and the sanctity of certain soil. (389)

Not only does this make explicit use of nostalgia, it is a nostalgia that is rooted in personal experience and authenticity, with no other particular goals and without a clear referent. Jeremy is nostalgic for the past but a past that remains unidentified.
Jeremy’s local cuisine (like the homeless in Stanley Park), then, is a contemporary symbol that implies a connection to a local and seemingly to an authentic and traditional, though hazy, past. This connection to an authentic past is also echoed in the immediate precursor to Jeremy’s Vancouver restaurant, the rural French restaurant at which he worked as an apprentice. The chef of this restaurant serves, on Sundays, local farmers – whom Jeremy terms the “rubber-boot people. The people from here” (40; emphasis added). This informal and local service acts as an epiphany for Jeremy. At the first Sunday meal that he participates in, Jeremy becomes romantically involved with Patrice, a local woman who works there as a waitress. Significantly, this meal and relationship is juxtaposed with the immediately preceding scene where Jeremy’s father meets and falls in love with Jeremy’s mother over dinner (38-39). This juxtaposition further connects locality with family history exclusively. Jeremy’s epiphany, then, about local food is removed from any connection with global politics; his interest in the “rubber-boot people” is that they are local and like family to the restaurant’s chef, not that they are farmers or less wealthy than the restaurant’s typical patrons.

This local and family-centred vision of food is contrasted most clearly throughout the novel with Dante’s vision for Jeremy’s restaurant after he assumes ownership of it. Like his coffee shops, Dante wants the restaurant to be “post-national,” to be potentially interchangeable with any other restaurant in the world. This homogeneity is coded as cosmopolitan sophistication: the restaurant, like the coffee shops, will belong nowhere and everywhere. Dante’s protégé and Jeremy’s girlfriend in Vancouver, Benny, rejects Jeremy’s initial idea to remake the restaurant as a French bistro, saying “I think of French bistros as belonging in France... Not the hippest option” (252). For Benny and Dante, the most prominent characters to espouse a form of cosmopolitan sophistication, local and traditional forms of dining are inherently limiting and and decidedly “unhip:” “Our power-alley demographics, the twenty-five to forty-five-year-old, new economy, urban, food enthusiasts – what we’re calling the fooderati – they want something wired, post-national, with vibrant flavours. They want unlimited new ingredients, they want grooviness and sophistication, and both purple and gold score very well” (256). Jeremy dismisses, rightly so the novel implies, the focus group’s desire for purple and gold food. The meal that prompts Jeremy’s parents to fall in love is “an old recipe, an open tribute,” a lamb stew with yogurt and lemon (38) and Jeremy, his father, and the inhabitants of Stanley Park cook simply, over open fires. For Benny, Dante and the other sophisticates, newness is everything and tradition, or rootedness, is undesirable.
Taylor’s characterization of Dante’s cosmopolitanism as shallow, elitist and preoccupied with consumption points to the text’s overwhelming rejection of cosmopolitan sensibilities. What reading this text through the lens of territorialized cosmopolitanism allows us to see, however, is the way in which, despite his emphasis on the importance of rooting oneself in the local, Taylor continues to reify binaries between the global and the local that do not reflect their actually existing interconnections. Not only does Taylor ignore where the global currently interacts with the local, but he also suggests that these interactions are necessarily harmful and traumatizing. A territorialized cosmopolitanism suggests, however, that local and global connections are always at work and that, in order to be a citizen of the world, one must find ways to create local and global connections that can be emancipatory and non-marginalizing as a way of resisting the de-territorializing forces of contemporary globalization. Thinking through cosmopolitan sensibilities that have been territorialized not only expands what we mean when we talk about the cosmopolitan but acknowledges the oscillation between the global and the local of everyday lived cosmopolitanism.

My Year of Meats and Global/Local Responsibility

Like Stanley Park, Ruth L. Ozeki’s 1998 novel, My Year of Meats, takes up the question of food and sustainability. Unlike Taylor’s novel, however, My Year of Meats focuses this discussion on an examination of the production of food rather than the preparation of it. My Year of Meats is told primarily from the perspective of Jane Takagi-Little, a Japanese-American documentary filmmaker, who is hired by an American lobby organization called by BEEF-EX that “represented American meats of all kinds... as well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups” (Ozeki 9-10). The lobby, in an attempt to sell American meat in Japan, produces a television program called “My American Wife!” which is a hybrid of documentary and cooking show featuring idealized American housewives preparing featured American meats – essentially acting as an infomercial for the American meat industry. Interspersed with Jane’s travels throughout rural America to find suitable wives to appear on the show is the narrative of Akiko Ueno, the wife of Joichi, a Japanese producer of the “My American Wife!”

Akiko’s bulimia and Joichi’s verbal, physical and sexual violence towards her are connected throughout the novel to Akiko’s role as a Japanese viewer of “My American Wife!” and the way it transforms her views about femininity, motherhood and the eating of meat. Like Akiko, Jane undergoes a similar (though less violent) process of development as she grapples with her own infertility, the result of her
mother having been prescribed DES (a synthetic estrogen believed in the first half of the twentieth century to prevent miscarriage) while pregnant with her. Not only was DES prescribed to expectant mothers and menopausal women, it was also used to control the growth and fertility of livestock. The novel, then, sets up a complex relationship between gender, nation, capitalism and the production and eating of meat.

What I want to specifically focus on, however, is how Ozeki imagines territorialized cosmopolitan responsibilities. *My Year of Meats* actively takes up what it means to be both a global and local citizen, and what ethical and political responsibilities accrue from these positions. *Stanley Park*, as I have argued, avoids the question of politics at all costs – positioning individual accountability as the only kind available. By contrast, *My Year of Meats*, while suggesting that individual choices are important, places them in the context of the necessity of larger collective choices. If Taylor’s novel only conceives of food as the materials of a chef’s artistry, Ozeki’s novel emphasizes the complex interconnections between the global and the local, and the producer and the consumer that shape and delimit the consumption and production of food. This focus on interconnections rather than stark oppositions makes *My Year of Meats* a more territorialized cosmopolitan text rather than the cosmo-multicultural *Stanley Park*.

Throughout *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki depicts Jane’s developing cosmopolitan affiliations. Indeed, it is not just that Jane transitions from non-cosmopolitan to cosmopolitan subject but that there is a shift from a cosmopolitanism as individualized identity politics to a territorialized form. While Jane’s attitudes at the beginning of the text are not merely superficial, Ozeki portrays a movement away from a fairly individualized cosmopolitanism to a more clearly collectivized cosmopolitanism. Jane is initially attracted to a superficial and hyper-individualized cosmo-multiculturalism. Her relationship with her sometimes-lover Sloan maps this change. Sloan, who arrives, randomly, at the various locations where Jane films is described in ways that echo Ghassan Hage’s definitions of the cosmo-multiculturalist: “[Jane] started to realize that the world Sloan roamed was much larger and richer than [hers…] He took [her] to exquisite restaurants, where [they] ate rich urchin roe that melted like butter, and paper-thin *fugu* with chili *ponzu* sauce, and a thimbleful of black-market *caviar*, wrapped in a translucent skin and tied with a chive, then covered with trembling pieces of gold leaf” (159). Sloan is reminiscent of the way Hage posits the cosmo-multiculturalist: “an essentially ‘mega-urban’ figure: one detached from strong affiliation with roots and consequently open to all forms of otherness” and “just as important as his or her urban nature, the cosmopolite is a class figure and a White person, capable of appreciating and consuming ‘high-quality’ commodities and cultures, including ‘ethnic’ culture. That is, it is a class figure in a cultural sense” (201;
emphasis in original). Sloan’s “larger and richer” world echoes Dante’s in Stanley Park where food is ostensibly dis-located from any kind of labour or ethno-traditional, and economic context.

Yet while Sloan’s cosmo-multiculturalism is initially appealing and enticing to Jane, she begins to view it as empty, sterile and isolating. This becomes particularly evident to her once she visits his Chicago apartment: “There is nothing soft about Sloan’s apartment. It is all polished surfaces, acute angles, hard glass, cold chrome, and leather. Like an abattoir, it could be hosed down without too much difficulty if anything unsightly, like an attachment or a sentiment, happened to splatter the walls” (220). As Monica Chiu notes, this description suggests that it is Jane “who has come to be slaughtered” (113). Chiu goes on to suggest that the end of the novel – where the status of Jane’s and Sloan’s relationship is unclear “underscores the novel’s wary stance toward men and the impossibility of a harmonious and workable heterosexual relationship” (113). Yet this changing relationship also marks a shift away from the superficial and hyper-individualized cosmo-multiculturalism that Jane, through Sloan, begins to adopt towards the socially responsible territorialized cosmopolitanism that Jane espouses by the close of the novel. Jane’s footage from the Dunn feedlot, revealing the illegal and ongoing use of DES, is in demand from “every major television news program and talk show in the country” as well as from Japanese and European news outlets (355-56). The demand for Jane’s footage seems, in many ways, to be a wish-fulfillment-happy ending yet it nonetheless suggests a new kind of global orientation for Jane.

This is a global orientation that leads Jane to recognize ethical and political responsibilities to people other than her, locally and globally, and to recognize that she herself holds local as well as global affiliations. This is not to suggest that she is unethical or irresponsible at the beginning of the novel but that, through developing a territorialized cosmopolitan world-view, these responsibilities become more conscious and explicit. Jane recognizes her own global culpability as a documentarian – a culpability that she had previously ignored or misunderstood: “I have heard myself protesting, ‘I didn’t know!’ but this is not true... I knew enough. But I needed a job. So when My American Wife! was offered to me, I chose to ignore what I knew... Maybe this exempts me as an individual, but it sure makes me entirely culpable as a global media maker” (334-35; emphasis in original). Jane’s new sense of responsibility as global media maker is distinct from her earlier acknowledgement of her own ethical dis-engagement from the results of her job (176).

Shameem Black suggests that “in contrast to words such as ‘transnational’ or ‘global,’ which can describe both progressive and hegemonic phenomena, ‘cosmopolitanism’...
suggests a provisionally viable way of conceptualizing and forming communities across cultural borders. As a way of envisioning other people and imagining affiliations among them, cosmopolitanism attempts to encode an elusive ideal within imperfect histories” (228). Black further argues that, particularly, in My Year of Meats this elusive ideal centers on technologies of female fertility. What I am suggesting, however, is that Jane is situated as a global and local citizen at a number of different points – not all of which are solely reducible to questions about her fertility (though this certainly plays a central role in this narrative). Ozeki’s attention to genre and form, and its role in shaping ethics and politics is particularly global in focus, despite her attention on two of the most prominent First-World nation-states, Japan and the United States. As Palumbo-Liu writes (52), Ozeki “is especially interested in the different ways in which people might be affected by literary texts and by media images so as to act ethically and with a sense of being together.”

The way that an audience is affected by texts and images is particularly evident in Akiko’s storyline; “her story traces a shift from a passive audience to an active one, detailing her ability to read persuasive (if romantic) lessons between the lines of television corporate messaging” (Black 233). While Joichi’s violent rape of Akiko is ultimately what leads her to leave him and move to the U.S., it is the episodes of “My American Wife!” that he demands she watch that establish the conditions of possibility for her to leave him. In a fax that she surreptitiously sends to Jane, whom she only knows from her husband’s communications and the television show she produces, Akiko articulates (in broken English) how central the program has been to her changing sense of herself: “I feel compelled to writing for the reason of your program of the Lesbian’s couple with two childrens was very emotional for me. So thank you firstly for change my life. Because of this program, I feel I can trust to you so that I can be so bold” (213-14). Once Akiko arrives in the U.S., she goes to visit two of the families featured on the show. One couple – the lesbian couple she mentions in her fax to Jane – helps her to find an apartment of her own. Once Akiko is on her own, she begins to frame herself as a writer – a producer, rather than consumer, of culture: “she had to write, otherwise it would never end” (347). This writing takes the form of a letter to Joichi to make clear the reasons why she left him; she “had plenty of very good reasons for leaving, and she wanted him to know each one” (347). Yet her use of the list as a genre echoes the excerpts from the medieval Japanese author Sei Shônagon’s The Pillow Book which frame each chapter of My Year of Meats and which both Jane and Akiko read from frequently. If Akiko’s “prose becomes exuberant, fluid, and exhibits a style much different than Shônagon’s and inflected with a new confidence” (Chiu 118), it nonetheless remains connected to the generic format of Shônagon’s work.
While Akiko’s development in *My Year of Meats* does not conclude with the ethical and political awakening that Jane’s does, it nonetheless maps a journey from individualism, even isolation, towards community. Akiko’s writing now has an audience, even a small audience and only Joichi, suggests a shift from its previously private nature when she hid her poetry under her mattress. Jane queries the audience of her own work, asking “who would want to see it?” (335), yet sends it on to those who have acted as pedagogical guides for her. Akiko’s writing follows a similar trajectory – though on a somewhat different scale. While Jane’s text seems to grapple more explicitly with questions of ethical and political responsibility, Akiko’s text demands similar sorts of responsibility from Joichi: it demands that he consider his ethical failings and responsibilities to her and other women. What Akiko’s text then makes visible is the near-impossibility of confidently producing a pedagogical response from an audience. Joichi might read Akiko’s letter and learn something – or he might not. Similarly, the viewers of Jane’s documentary might learn the lesson she intends it to produce – or they might not. What is important in *My Year of Meats* is the attempt to teach these lessons without any particular assurances of the outcome; “how do stories do their work? Once affect has been installed, how is it supposed to be harnessed to an ethical action” (Palumbo-Liu 58)?

Similar questions are at work in the formal structures of Ozeki’s novel itself. *My Year of Meats* is a notably hybrid text stylistically, using a number of different formats and rhetorical styles: there are faxes, letters, articles, “documentary interludes,” a television script, footnotes, a list of further reading at the end provided by “Jane,” the excerpts from Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book*, and then the narrative itself which follows a relatively straightforward realist pattern (it progresses in a linear fashion and attempts for a kind of verisimilitude). These hybrid formal qualities perform the majority of the text’s pedagogical function. Not only is there the development of a cosmopolitanism of social justice depicted, in Jane, in the text’s narrative, but the content of the text itself attempts to provide the same kind of education for the reader that Jane receives as she films “My American Wife!” Like with Akiko’s poetry, it is perhaps impossible to judge the success of such a goal. Nonetheless, this marks a significant difference from Taylor’s *Stanley Park* which satisfies itself with a more straightforward narrative style and much less explicit pedagogical project. As Julie Sze suggests, “the novel... connects meat production with global consumption, including advertising, that functions to create and shape the needs and desires of individual consumers and in national and global markets.” The bulk of these connections are made through the narrative itself. Jane acts as audience stand-in/witness to “international crimes and explores how women combat them [articulating] new forms of personal, political, and narrative organization that help to build a cosmofeminist future” (Black 231).
Through the use of documentary interludes, footnotes, and the list of further reading, Ozeki (acting as ventriloquist through Jane) demands that her readers act as witnesses to the immense local and global physical and environment costs of the global meat industry and to the less quantifiable costs of global media. In other words, Ozeki seeks to make territorialized cosmopolitan subjects of her readers, encouraging them to see their own local enmeshment in global systems through the very food they eat. The effectiveness of this in *My Year of Meats* in comparison to the failed political challenge of *Stanley Park* lies in the fluidity between the individual and the collective, the fictional and the extra-fictional (here I mean the world outside the novel, rather than just the non-fictional elements of the novel itself). One of the possible criticisms of the novel is its (seemingly too tidy) happy ending: Jane and Sloan tentatively re-start their relationship, though its status does remain ambiguous; Akiko has left the abusive Joichi and creates a community of women for herself in the United States; and Jane’s damning footage of the Dunn feedlot has garnered a great deal of media interest. Ironically, the close of the novel has Jane observing that “I don’t think I can change my future simply by writing a happy ending. That’s too easy and not so interesting” (361). Yet Ozeki suggests in the interview included in the trade paperback edition of the novel that “happy endings satisfy the emotions, and I wanted to provide that type of satisfying narrative closure in the hope that it would free the intellect to continue its trajectory beyond the story line, pondering the issues the book raises” (13). For Ozeki, then, the pedagogical is not limited to the educational process but must include the transformation of that learning into global and local political action. Shameem Black argues that “the governing assumption behind her explanation suggests that the emotional paralysis and ambiguity of ambivalent narrative endings directly translate into intellectual and political stasis. Complex, open endings, she implies, mire the reader within the social space of the novel and prohibit the translation of affect into action” (247). In *Stanley Park*, it is a primarily an aesthetic and emotional response that is demanded. This form of affect is certainly at work in *My Year of Meats* yet it is explicitly connected, through the narrative itself and its formal elements, to a global politics.

What *My Year of Meats* theorizes, then, is the way a territorialized cosmopolitanism might lead to a real sense of commitment to the other citizens of the globe. Jane and Akiko feel real commitments to specific places in both Japan and the United States. In *Stanley Park*, commitments are much more singular and lead only to expressions of sub-local solidarities. Jeremy and his father are connected only to the memory of their mother and wife and the inhabitants of Stanley Park – not even the other inhabitants of Vancouver. What these two novels help us to understand, then, is the problems of over-emphasizing the local and rejecting too readily the global as a site of possibility. Instead, what *My Year of Meats* points to is the political potential of taking local and
global commitments and translating them locally or globally. What Ozeki usefully argues is the foreshortened possibilities that emerge when we ignore our roles as both global and local citizens.

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