

Alternative Food Movements in Modern-Day America

Ariel Knoebel

This paper seeks to redefine the foodspace as a theatre of valuable labour and explore the relationships between community, values, and personal identity among food producers and consumers who seek out alternative methods of food provisioning. Here, we define the foodspace as the area in which food is sourced (through shopping, growing, or trading), prepared, and consumed as an individual and a community. The foodspace encompasses not only the physical space and social network in which these activities are performed, but also the social and psychological space in which values surrounding these activities are formed, expressed, and put into practice, and roles as food provider, consumer, and provisioner are defined in relation to one's self conception and social relationships.

The central focus of this study was a series of oral interviews and informal conversations, as well as hands-on activities, with individuals who have chosen to revert to traditional food provisioning practices: growing, canning, preserving, and hands-on sourcing their own food, or building relationships with the people who provide it, in an effort to stand in opposition to the current global food system. This study focused on several different sites in order to be able to explore forms of participation within the alternative food movement from different lines of inquiry. Participants were often connected to each other tangentially through their food communities while operating within completely divergent food provisioning methodologies, making a multi-sited approach integral to discovering the full extent of these alternative food communities.

Food and everyday acts of food production have long been marginalized in social research (Brady, 2011), and the routine, everyday nature of food studies research using traditional anthropological methods can cause participant observation to bleed into a study of self as much as a study of others. Thus, this research included not only observation and interviews, but heavily relied on the sensorial acts of growing, cooking, and eating in community, in addition to discussions of food with participants. This methodology follows new approaches to ethnography that challenge the importance of simple observation, arguing instead that 'ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process through which understanding, knowing and (academic) knowledge are produced' (Pink, 2009, p.8). This sensorial approach is particularly appropriate in these alternative food communities not only because food consumption is a sensorial experience, but also because members rely so heavily on the physical acts of food provisioning and consumption to foster personal connection. The tangible acts of growing, cooking, and eating are a major

component of what brings these people together. Many of the most interesting moments in this research emerged from weeding fields, swapping recipes, or sharing food with participants. Fieldwork took place between May and October 2015, at multiple sites in the Northeast United States. Eight major participants in the study all completed semi-structured interviews lasting roughly one hour, in which they shared their provisioning techniques, motivations, and values. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

There is some literature on the revolutionary power of food production (Billings and Cabil, 2011; Hayes, 2000; Ott, 2015; White, 2011), both as a rejection of the capitalist food system and a tool of empowerment for repressed social groups. In these cases, food production becomes political activism. White (2011, p.22) quotes an eco-feminist urban grower in Detroit who says, 'I am not engaging in commercialisms, not engaging in consumerism. The choice I'm making is to engage in the farm'. Such rhetoric of empowerment and choice is becoming more common among all demographics, not simply minority growers and provisioners, as more people feel powerless in the face of the modern industrial food system (Slocum, 2008; Guthman, 2008, 2011). Alternative food communities may serve to combat the helplessness and abandonment people feel when swept up in consumer culture by giving them an element of control over their fate, at least in terms of what they are putting into their bodies. However, there is a strong movement gaining traction in the space between radical anti-capitalism and status-quo industrial consumerism, in which people are taking control of their food consumption without rejecting the system all together. The sharing economy is becoming a way in which urbanites can build valuable cultural capital and social support while filling their needs as consumers (Gansky, 2011; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015): sites like Craigslist, Zip Car, and alternative outlets like skillshares and food swaps allow many people to increase not only their physical resources, but their interpersonal and cultural networks as well.

There is much literature on the effect of alternative economic practices and sharing in the domestic sphere (Belkin, 2003; Matchar, 2013; Warner, 2013), but food production usually plays a marginal role in the discussion, and is often only discussed as a shorthand for the oppressive role domestic labour has played in women's movements (Belkin, 2009; Matchar, 2013; Pollan, 2003; Warner, 2013). The role of food provisioning in alternative or non-capitalist models of living has yet to be explicitly explored, and the foodspace itself is often neglected as an

important theatre in which people are able to discover, reject, or re-create capitalist, anti-capitalist, or alternative values around time, consumption, and community.

In her work on construction of the 'Plentitude' lifestyle, Juliette Schor (2010) has framed the sharing economy and accompanying lifestyle around four principles: new allocation of time, self-provisioning, true materialism (environmentally aware consumption), and investment in one another and communities. Each of the practitioners in this study made the decision on some level to construct a 'one-life' existence (Schor, 2010). There is a strong trend amongst the participants to change or abandon established careers, as many of them chose to leave successful jobs or industries in order to pursue a more integrated lifestyle. These alternative food practitioners embody 'Plentitude' by shifting the focus of their labour away from the productive social capitalist sphere to the domestic sphere, particularly the foodspace. A one-life existence encourages people to find economic value in non-wage work, diversify their time to meet both economic and social needs, and build their lives around community and social structures. This includes an increased emphasis on skill building and sharing within community networks, forms of non-economic exchange, and a new appreciation for traditionally undervalued domestic labour. For members of these communities, the foodspace becomes an important part of their lives as it becomes the place where community, moral values, and self-identity converge.

Alternative food communities develop the importance of cultural capital for their members. In a series of small daily choices, participants in these communities choose to place cultural capital over economic capital by increasing their time spent on food provisioning and domestic labour, valuing traditionally un-waged labour more than labour within the capitalist system, and building relationships and networks of cultural importance over economic importance. In doing so, these provisioners are creating an alternative to the capitalist, consumption-oriented food system of their greater society by operating as a revolutionary alternative within the capitalist system. By opting not to reject it completely, they are working to redefine what alternative economy means, beginning with the foodspace.

Capitalism is a difficult concept to oppose in the modern world, because it has become such an all-encompassing entity in modern American society. In trying to undermine the social totality of Capitalism in modern America, J.K. Gibson-Graham (1993, 2003) reveals the importance of a nuanced understanding of the economic and social structures that make up the overarching system we call Capitalism: 'understood as a unified system or structure, capitalism is not ultimately vulnerable to local and partial efforts at transformation... Capitalism cannot be chipped away at, gradually replaced, or removed piecemeal, it must be transformed in its entirety or not at all' (1993, p.14). This construction of Capitalism forces the discourse on social and economic

evolution, and revolution, to disregard any possibility that capitalism may evolve, coexist within and around other systems, and/or be affected by other interactions. A huge portion of modern economic activity, particularly economic exchanges within these alternative food communities, is non-capitalist, relying on other important forms of exchange, exploitation, and economy, despite being situated to some extent within the capitalist system.

The participants in this study all re-defined their foodspace as a labour space, whether that was solely within the domestic sphere, or through forms of economic exchange or wage labour. In doing so, they have all broken down the work/home, production/consumption binary set up by Capitalism. Gibson-Graham also points to the importance of this shift in their work; 'the household in so-called advanced capitalist societies is a major locus of production...in terms of both the value and the output and the numbers of people involved, the household sector can hardly be called marginal. In fact, it can arguably be seen as equivalent to, or more important than the capitalist sector' (1993, p. 19). The work of these alternative food communities is in rendering the labour of the foodspace visible through social connection and creating cultural capital that is gained from involvement in the foodspace.

The work of rendering the foodspace visible requires a strong shift in priorities. There is a huge social, emotional, and time commitment required for membership in these alternative food communities. Participants all expressed a redefinition of their identity around their foodspaces and communities. They restructured their lives in ways that put food provisioning at the centre, forcing their social networks to radiate around these practices. This re-prioritization of time and energy often comes with a social and emotional cost for participants, however. Many practitioners expressed frustration with the time required to undertake these practices, despite their commitment to them.

Oivind: I have friends and colleagues, they just give up. The food they got didn't fit the lifestyle they had. They never changed it. We changed our cooking habits; if you don't do that, forget about it...and I think what kind of happened was first, we had so many vegetables we had no idea what to do with them, and then it started changing the way we ate, and then we really started getting into doing more of it on our own. [September 15, 2015]

All of the participants discussed a turning point, in which they were forced to decide whether or not to commit to their food provisioning techniques, and the new commitments that inevitably come with them, or revert to the status-quo lifestyle of an industrial food consumer. While their commitments to alternative food varied in intensity, each participant made the choice to operate in resistance to the traditional capitalist food economy.

Meryl and Sasha both work within the foodspace for a paycheck, but they consider their work not simply wage

labour, but an important part of their identity and expression of their values. Meryl discussed her choice to continue farming as a seasonal worker every year, before committing to her career full time:

I think sometimes you get lucky with what doors open to you at what time, and it definitely made sense, year after year, to come back. The nice thing about getting involved in seasonal work when you're a young person is that you have that winter time to think, 'is this what I want to do again?' It's not so cyclical that you have to go back; it sort of gives you this break, and this chance to break free. 'Hey, you're making seven dollars an hour, do you want to do something else?' But, every winter, it was like, I can't think of doing anything else. So, I think it was just being really lucky and doing the right thing. I think it just combined all the things I wanted; being outside, working with your hands, and the fact that I was learning how central, how really central, understanding better how central food is to people's sense of community. [October 22, 2015]

Meryl discusses here the strong pull she felt towards farming as a way to build community and live within her values. She mentions briefly the difficulties a career in farming can present: low pay, long hours of physical labour, and inconsistent seasonal work. Despite these barriers, she felt called to this work for reasons far beyond collecting a paycheck. Farming is not just a job, but a lifestyle choice that she has made in order to resist the traditional food system. Her repetitive assertion of food's centrality to community illustrates her conviction that community building is imperative to her work as a farmer. Sasha is in a similar position, as her 'farm families' continue to grow into some of her most important personal relationships. She discussed this when talking about her transition from her work on a farm in New York to Powisett:

You have to go looking for community. Slow Food, that's how I found my community. Those were my first friends in New York. That felt super important. And all of these farm families that I have now...I know that when I left my first farm I was like, 'my farm fam! I'll miss you so much and I'll never find this ever again'. And then I came here and I was like, whoa, what? This exists elsewhere? I can also create this community, I don't just have to stumble upon it. I can help create it, help nourish it. [September 14, 2015]

The opportunity to build community both on and around the farm is essential to the work these growers are doing. They are breaking down the walls between the wage labour space and the domestic foodspace by inviting others to participate in their labour through personal connection. While still working for a salary, Meryl and Sasha directly resist the capitalist system by turning their wage labour

space into their domestic and social space, thereby breaking down that binary.

The other practitioners have shifted their focus from the wage labour sphere to the domestic sphere in order to restore balance in their lives and create the 'one life' model. Tod discussed his decision to leave his stable job in healthcare marketing in order to pursue freelance food writing:

It was one of these things where it was like, jeez, I can do food stuff and take care of the kids and make a family whole, while at the same time pursuing this thing that I love, and it was just perfect. We did the dual income thing for several years, and that's hard to sustain. You're making a lot of lifestyle choices with that, obviously. [July 20, 2015]

Tod illustrates here the re-prioritization these food provisioners have to undergo to commit to their practices. In order to shift focus to one's foodspace, it is imperative to place social relationships and skill building over economic solvency. Tod and his wife decided that his family could afford to live on a single income, and that there was greater value in the non-waged work he was performing by feeding his family and parenting than the wage he would collect from a job at which he was proficient, but not impassioned. Through his extensive volunteer work, Tod is able to strengthen his community ties well beyond his family and participate in skill building practices within his greater food community.

The economic viability of the choices these food provisioners have made is important to consider in these alternative food communities. Many of the participants in this study are able to leverage some form of individual resources in order to make the shift to the domestic sphere a viable reality. Generally, the informants fall into three different categories of food provisioners: community growers, self-provisioners, and food entrepreneurs. Sasha and Meryl are both community growers, or people who participate in community-organized food production on a professional level. They decided to engage in farming as a career in order to support their foodspace ideologies through their own wage labour. Community growers create economic viability within their alternative food community. Cathy, Tod, Kimi, and Oivind are all self-provisioners. They engage with their food communities as an alternative to or supplementation of their participation in the consumer economy. Self-provisioning activities stem from dissatisfaction with the lack of control faced by consumers in the industrial food system. These participants still engage with the capitalist economic system through their primary careers, but have shifted their foodspace outside of that system. Jeremy and Helen are food entrepreneurs, who have decided to commoditize their food provisioning through market exchange. They are working within the framework of the capitalist system to become community-based producers and encourage consumers to connect with their products, build and share

skills, and to engage in intentional consumption practices. Both of these provisioners are attempting to gain economic solvency from their businesses, while simultaneously choosing not to rely on wage labour in the most traditional sense. They both removed themselves from their career fields in order to pursue alternative practices.

The valuation of labour within the foodspace is difficult to assess, because within the traditional wage labour/domestic labour binary, this entire category of unpaid work is not considered to have exchange value or use value precisely because it is not commoditized; indeed, it is usually not recognized as labour at all. The devaluation of domestic labour has a number of important consequences, from masking or making invisible the work that goes into food production to skewing the true cost of food, including, Bewiener argues, wage levels for workers within the food system: 'It is likely that all of the unpaid labour that takes place throughout the food system helps explain why so many of the paid food system jobs are so poorly paid' (Beiwener, 2015, p.24). A large part of the work food provisioners in AFCs are doing is assigning value of some sort, whether economic, social, or ethical, to any foodspace labour, thereby breaking down the consumption-production binary of the consumer economy.

Bringing the domestic sphere into the space of visible, and valuable, production undercuts the traditional practice of 'interpreting household work, informal exchange, or gifting economies solely in terms of how they benefit capital,' which 'not only masks their potential lessons for sustainable local production [but] devalues the immense creativity, cultural knowledge, and human connection that can potentially be transmitted and reinforced through such practices' (Gowan and Slocum, 2014, p.29). The alternative food practitioners here all work in different ways to render their domestic labour visible to their community through relationship and skill building. In doing so, they are shedding the intimacy of the domestic space by bringing the foodspace into the productive sphere and normalizing the value of domestic work as something worth paying for, whether through traditional currency exchange or alternative methods.

In appreciation of labour, foodspace, and food

Alternative food communities fill an important gap in the American food system, but questions of economic viability, ideological supremacy, and general scalability arise when considering these communities as a larger movement away from the consumption-based, industrial food system. AFCs are often categorized as 'fringe movements', implying a lack of cohesion and an inability to achieve a common goal or create lasting effect within the broader society. The alternative food communities described here have to address issues of economic viability and scalability, but it is important to recognize that groundwork has been laid. In considering how AFCs might cross this hurdle, it is useful to consider the ideas

of inclusion, reformation, and transformation as laid out by Stevenson et al. (2007). In their analysis of alternative food movements, the authors argue that the power of these social movements can be determined by the efficacy of their players, working in conjunction to create inclusion, reformation, and transformation of the status quo. They identify three types of players: Warriors resist corporate oppression and political opposition; Builders create alternative food initiatives and economic structures; and Weavers link the two, create connections, and build the overall movement. These three types of workers, when unified under a powerful vision, can foster an alternative movement that may be strong enough to overtake the mainstream.

Aspects of all three categories can be seen in the alternative food communities studied here. Many of the participants work within all three identities to some extent. Warrior work actively seeks adherents to the cause of alternative food, for instance through the active community building by Meryl and Sasha on the farm, and Jeremy through Boston Ferments. Builder work is more entrepreneurial, and works to create alternative food initiatives on which to base the greater system, like the direct marketing and small business work of Jeremy and Helen, and the skill-sharing in which Kimi and Oivind take part. Finally, Weaver work is 'most explicitly oriented toward movement building' (Stevenson et al., 2007, p.46-47), and is something all participants in the study focus on through their leadership in their communities. Weaver work links the Warrior and Builder to mobilize civil society and create connections between groups.

In order for this alternative food movement to become successful on a larger scale, the overall vision must be solidified. Stevenson (2007) identifies the missing piece in alternative food movements thus far: a shared vision of what is wrong and what needs to be done to make things right. These alternative food communities are grounded in the belief that the current industrial food system, with its growing disengagement with food, invisibility of domestic labour, and lack of personal connection is wrong; further, they believe that starting from scratch with new forms of exchange based on community, conscientious skill-building and knowledge-sharing, and bringing the foodspace and its labour to the forefront of consumer consciousness will help make things right.

The participants in this study are all doing the work of Warriors, Builders, and Weavers within the current food system, but the movement so far is lacking a sense of ideological leadership. The major strength of these communities, the ability to foster interpersonal connections through small-scale sharing economies, is also one of the greatest challenges in building the movement to a larger scale. It is important here to revisit Gibson-Graham's re-definition of Capitalism, and refrain from falling into the trap of presenting it as a unified system that can only be replaced by a 'massive collective movement' (1993, p.21). A large part of the work of alternative food

communities is presenting the economy as a system as fractured and nuanced as all other parts of society. Discounting the small-scale influence of these communities fails to recognize the power many small changes can have over time; 'possibility suggests the ever-present opportunity for local transformation that does not require (thought it does not preclude and indeed promotes) transformation at larger scales' (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p.xxiv). Local shifts towards Schor's 'one-life' model allows eaters to invest in time, relationship, and community through their decisions as food producers and eaters.

By creating an alternative foodspace around their communities, participants not only change their values to better fit this lifestyle, but they are able to define their space to better align with these values. Sasha, in talking about her choice to go into farming as a college-educated middle-class woman, discussed the power that she derives from the manual labour of growing:

[You] create the space yourself, as opposed to having to fit into someone else's idea of what a space should be like; that feels like pretty important. I guess there's a desire to be a part of and change or shift food systems. You know, because that feels accessible and immediate. As opposed to being a politician or something like that. I guess you don't need a lot of training to be a farmer and to be a part of the system...I [have] met so many people who love and appreciate food and really want to like, I don't know what it is about those people and how they're drawn to this thing, and I feel like it's similar to what I'm drawn to, but I don't know—to be able to like, grow things. To be able to grow things in a world that is not about that, it's just against.... consumerism, it's against all of these things, like, the patriarchy, I don't know. It feels like an act of resistance. [September 14, 2015]

Meryl shared similar thoughts on her idea of farming. For her, there is a sense of personal awakening along with the social agency Sasha described.

When you create a space, or there is a space that allows you to connect to land, I think it's really awakening, and it brings spirit to people, and I think that a lot of young people need that. We're like, tuned out and distant from things a lot of the time, and when you're here you feel really connected to something bigger than yourself, and if you get to do work, and you feel like that satisfaction. Part of what's addictive about farming is that you do tasks and you get to cross tasks off every day, and I think that's an extremely addicting way of being in the world.

I guess it's that there's something in the work of farming—the way that it feels satisfying—the way that it feels in my body, the satisfying thing that it

brings me—just creates a sense of ease. Whatever tensions and anxiety that exist in the world—and there's a lot of it, and there's certainly a lot swirling around in myself—something about working the land, literally working it, or harvesting, or being out there, there's something in that that calms me. It clears away anxiety, it clears away sadness, there's something that just put things in order. [October 22, 2015]

They operate within these communities in order to resist the disengagement from the foodspace so present in consumer capitalism. These communities are able to resist such practices without necessarily removing themselves from the industrial system altogether, however. Operating within the traditional food economy while maintaining strong agency and consumer ideologies allows these practitioners to render food labour visible within their communities and assert the importance of the foodspace to eaters both within and outside these alternative communities.

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