

Voting with more than your fork; reclaiming food citizenship

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Reflection for panel on political movements at “Unstuck: Reviving the Movement for Social Justice, Human Dignity and the Environment”

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As for so many of us, the food movement’s greatest strengths are also in many ways its greatest weaknesses. Its great strength lies in inspiring people to see that they can assert their values, the way they want to live in relationship to the planet, their communities, and their families, with choices that they make every day. “Vote with your fork” is the slogan that tells us that we can make a difference with every meal we eat. Food activists have reached out in both low income and wealthy communities to share the skills of growing, cooking and eating food in ways that are healthy for our bodies and our souls. As a result of their efforts, many people are finding greater sources of meaning and pleasure in the food they eat and feed their children.

But much like the practice of a religion, becoming absorbed with eating as a way to express your individual values can have its dark side. First, food choices can become a source of anxiety instead of pleasure. I teach a course on the Politics of Food and I find that as they learn more about the problems with our food system, a few of my students become obsessed with how they individually can make the “right” food choices. And second, even more serious, absorption with issues of how to eat can result in becoming alienated from the vast majority of this nation’s people who are too tired, too busy, too poor, or too sick to spend their time going to farmers’ markets: people who don’t have kitchens and gardens; and people

who simply have other interests and passions that mean more to them than how they eat.

With all that it has done to enrich individual lives and communities, the food movement has not stopped rising rates of hunger and food insecurity. Learning how to grow vegetables does not help a single mom working two jobs and caring for a disabled child to access healthier food. A farmer's market makes little difference in the diet of the low-income elderly, without teeth to chew, glasses to see a recipe, and friends to eat with. Buying local does not stop farmworkers from being poisoned by pesticides, or food workers from being maimed and killed on assembly lines.

One of the most debilitating things about living in a country where inequality has risen so sharply for the last thirty-five years is that so many people have so many reasons to believe that the 1% controls our national institutions. But the reality is that we cannot impact the conditions of life faced by 8 million low-income food workers without putting our values and commitments to work in these institutions. To grow more than inequality, this movement cannot stay stuck with the idea that big government, big business, and big food are inevitably dominated by the worst priorities of corporate power; and that the best the rest of us can do is "vote with our forks."

Of course some organizations are so clear about their goals that they are already deeply involved in fighting and negotiating with big food and big government. Organizations like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and PETA have taken their fights directly to the biggest fast food companies in the country. These organizations have repeatedly shown that big, nationwide strategies aimed at corporations who care desperately about consumer opinion can have a huge impact. When McDonald's decides that it will not use eggs from battery caged hens or meat from poultry fed antibiotics, then we see a change in these practices across the country. Taco Bell and Burger King have the purchasing power to require higher wages and safer working conditions in the fields controlled by their suppliers. Bon Appetit, which now runs the food service at the University of

Pennsylvania, has shown that a multi-national corporation can provide markets for local farmers and ally with organized farmworkers. Citizen-activists have succeeded in working with politicians and policy makers to pass a food safety law and higher standards for school meals. Some are now fighting proposed cutbacks in SNAP (food stamps), while working for a healthier Food and Farm Bill and a higher minimum wage.

But many, perhaps most food activists still steer clear of most efforts to impact industry and government as worlds where they are all too sure they will lose their souls, their sense of community, and connections to the land. One important key to addressing this fear is to raise up the reality that far more than the 1%, it was our parents and their parents and grandparents, who built both our industries and our government. They made many mistakes; but they fought hard for a government, for schools, science, knowledge, and technology, for good jobs and benefits that would give their children and their children's children a chance at a better life. None of us should give up on these institutions, simply because the 1% has figured out so many ways to suppress and distort and take advantage of their dreams and visions. In short, for the food movement—and all movements for social justice, human dignity and the environment—to become “unstuck,” we need to reclaim our nation's history, politics, and institutions as arenas of ongoing conflict: contests over goals and values, *whose outcomes have not yet been determined*. The only way that the 1% wins for sure, is if the rest of us give up the fight.

Today, for example, many people think of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the Department of Agribusiness. But the reality is that the USDA and its interconnections with the state land grant colleges, experiment stations and extension service were built in large part by extraordinary political movements. After the South had left the union, leaders of Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party succeeded in passing the laws establishing a national agricultural bureau as “the people's department” and land grant funding for state agricultural and industrial colleges as key components of their campaign for free soil and free labor. Government support for agricultural science and education, they argued,

was a key means of affirming and realizing the dignity of labor –in direct contrast to the way that the Southern plantations relied on exploiting both labor and the soil. After the Civil War the great farmers’ movements of the 19th century fought hard for the USDA and the land grant colleges to develop and support forms of science and education, cooperatives and extension that would benefit working farmers’ ability to make a living from the land.

When the Great Depression hit the nations’ countryside after WWI, the USDA faced extraordinary challenges. Farming still counted for almost a quarter of the nation’s jobs; and the farm economy was essentially bankrupt. The price of corn had fallen so low that farmers were burning it to keep warm. Henry Wallace, Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture, and his top advisors decided that the only way that they could save the nation’s farmers was to work with them to cut back production enough to raise the prices for their products. These programs were not pretty. The government led a plough up of 10 million acres of cotton and bought up and slaughtered 6 million baby pigs and distributed their meat through the Federal surplus relief corporation in August and September of 1933. But hungry people received free food and commodity prices went up enough to raise farm incomes by 30% by the end of the year. 4,000 farmers committees were set up to run land use planning programs to maintain “balanced production” at the local level.

These committees and the principle of communities working together to plan crop production in ways that would conserve the soil and allow farm families to make a living on the land had the potential, Wallace believed, to put the Sermon on the Mount into action as public policy instead of “the law of the jungle.” At the end of the first year of the New Deal, Wallace went back to his home state of Iowa. Speaking to several thousand farmers at the Des Moines Coliseum, he declared that he had come home to find out whether his countrymen intended to return like dogs “to the vomit of capitalism or move to a new age of cooperation and generosity.”

“Only the merest quarter-turn of the heart separates us from a material abundance beyond the fondest dream of anyone present,” Wallace preached. “Selfishness has ceased to be the mainspring of progress....There is something more.... Let us maintain sweet and kindly hearts toward each other, however great the difficulties ahead.” (Culver and Hyde, 128-129.)

Today, of course, we know that to a large extent, Wallace did not succeed in his mission to bring American agricultural and economic policy closer to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount than the “law of the Jungle” that had come so close to bankrupting the nation’s economy. The more the New Deal Agriculture Department tried to guarantee that farm tenants, sharecroppers and farmworkers began to benefit from some of the same types of organizing and extension efforts, public health and education campaigns that had made such a difference to so many more established farm families, the more enemies it made, especially among big Southern planters, Western growers and their representatives in Congress. By 1946 Congress had completely dismantled most of the New Deal Department’s most innovative efforts to develop agricultural policies and programs that would respect the priorities of appropriate land use, the needs of families who worked the land, and a full employment economy. And the stories that began to be told about these programs were only about the ways in which they benefitted big farmers and planters; and the ways that these men drove so many tenants and sharecroppers off the land. (Summers, 1996)

Of course the leaders of the New Deal farm programs made many mistakes. But the defeats they suffered were much more for what they got right than what they did wrong. And what they got right built an important base for political movements for generations to come. The children of African American farmers, for example, who owned farms in what was left of the old New Deal Resettlement communities, led voter registration drives in the 1960’s without the same worries about retaliation from white landlords that dominated so much of the rural South. (Salamon, 1979) Many of the leaders of the 1980’s family farm movement’s fight for supply management programs that would keep more farmers on the land and put an end to taxpayers’ subsidies for all-out, capital intensive production were inspired by “old-timers” stories of the New Deal farm

programs. Some went on to work with labor and environmental leaders to take on the ways that “free trade” agreements were under-cutting environmental regulation, wages and working conditions, as well as driving farmers off the land both in the United States and around the world. (Summers, 2001) Some are still leading the fight for a Food and Farm bill that supports farmers in growing healthy food in environmentally sound ways, rather than the current subsidies for commodities that underwrite massive feed lots and the production of junk food. Others continue the fight for a Farm Bill that provides better funding for the nation’s critical nutrition programs, SNAP, WIC, school meals, and food banks as crucial keys to ending hunger and food insecurity. (Imhoff, 2012)

While my own research focuses on the history and politics of agricultural institutions in the United States, perhaps the key example of the problem with treating the rise of corporate power as the central thrust of American history is Reconstruction. After white supremacists had succeeded in virtually abolishing African Americans’ rights as citizens in the South, generations of scholars treated Reconstruction as either an embarrassment, or window dressing for what they saw as the most significant outcome of the Civil War: industrialists’ takeover of the economy. But within my life time, men and women who fought to make the words of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments once again an enforceable, institutional reality found strength and inspiration in opposing such monolithic views of American state development with attention to the *history and politics* of Reconstruction: how the Congress in Washington and African Americans in the South voted; what programs they established; how they were defeated; what they achieved; and how the United States of American could still build on those achievement.

I strongly believe that today’s food and farm movements will get much farther if we recover more of the history of the Department of Agriculture than the idea that its goal has always been to facilitate the dominance of big planters and the rise of agribusiness; just as we need to recover the story of labor unions, as far more than an effort to retain the privileges and power of white, male workers and mob bosses. There are, of course, important truths in stories of the dark side of every political and social movement; and we disrespect the memory of those who

fought the hardest for liberty and justice for all, if we do not tell them. But the greater disrespect towards both past and future generations is to allow the betrayals and defeats, the compromises and mistakes to become the main story.

--So to bring us back to where we started, it is a great thing to revel in growing healthy food and eating well, but these are pleasures that should send us out into the world as citizens as well as into our kitchens and gardens. Good food is a cause that needs us in the streets, super-markets, board-rooms, and Congress, as well as in farmers' markets. A passion for food can translate into a passion for justice and a healthier world for all. And we owe it to those we feed as well as those who have fed and feed us to make that happen.

References

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