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SOLUTIONS
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Finding the Worth: A Case Study of Local Food in Wisconsin

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Abstract

Amidst the rapid expansion and consolidation of the agricultural sector, some actors choose to produce and distribute food within local systems. Presently, local food projects are seen as the antithesis to industrialized agriculture, and work to oppose agribusiness. The large guiding question for my research is, “is local food worthwhile?”. The more focused research question I will be asking is, “how do local food producers in Wisconsin perceive and observe their work to be worthwhile?”. I answered my questions through unstructured phone interviews with local food producers in Southeastern Wisconsin, and used thematic analysis to identify key themes from the interviews. I found that local food projects are effective at improving social relations and community health in their immediate community. My findings are significant because they emphasize the social benefits of local food and de-emphasize the broader de-emphasize the positioning of the local food movement as a political project in opposition to the negative societal and environmental effects of industrialized agriculture. This begs the question, if local food is not able to penetrate and affect larger food systems, is it really worthwhile?

Introduction

Driving down any country road in Wisconsin, one is encased on both sides by sprawling fields of corn and soybeans, with large tractors moving slowly through them. In this place whose landscape has been visibly altered and dominated by the heavy hand of modern industrialized agriculture, farmers and everyday people are practicing different methods of growing food. Farmers' markets, CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), and community gardens are vehicles for farmers to push against the dominant system. Through this, the local food movement is found taking root in Wisconsin, and integrating into Wisconsin's economy. More broadly, local food is all around us. The proliferation of local food into grocery stores and public consciousness comes with a set of cultural beliefs and values. Local food is seen by many as an inherent and undeniable force for good. The term "locavore", meaning a person whose diet contains explicitly local food, became an official part of the English language in 2007.

Amidst the rapid expansion and consolidation of the agricultural sector, it is no wonder that local food has gained momentum and a positive reputation. Modern agricultural practices have been highly criticized by academics and scientists. The environmental impacts associated with modern agriculture are numerous: soil depletion, use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and high fossil fuel emissions, to name a few. Aside from the myriad of environmental issues, modern agriculture is characterized by exploitative labor processes, and a lack of production transparency. As David Tilman notes in his 1999 publication, a "more of the same" approach to agriculture will not be possible, as we are approaching a threshold (Tilman 1999, 5598). Rapidly increasing global population will require more intensive agriculture, and according to Tilman, we

will soon surpass our capacity to practice agriculture sustainability via current methods. Tilman asserts that regenerative and environmentally sound practices must be implemented into our agricultural system (Tilman 1999, 5598).

There are multiple schools of thought about how to incite change within the food system. Some solutions involve large-scale change, and some solutions are found in grassroots movements. Local food and alternative food movements emerged as grassroots movements in response to the trends of consolidation and alienation within the agricultural sector. The local food movement as it exists today in the United States, gained traction starting in the 1970s, drawing upon methods associated with organic farming, and indigenous methods of permaculture. The local food movement stresses the importance of a return to small, localized, restorative systems, and has become characterized by charismatic figures such as Michael Pollan and Alice Waters. These individuals emphasized the importance of understanding where one's food comes from and helped to popularize the concept of "slow food"—a movement aimed at "preventing the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteracting the rise of fast life and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us" (Slow Food Seattle 2022). There is overlap and reciprocity between the local food and slow food movement. As individuals became more interested in their food, sourcing food locally became preferable. In the present day, the local food movement has reached mainstream success on a number of fronts, chiefly the expansion and ubiquity of farmers markets and CSAs. Local food has been positioned as an answer to the environmental degradation caused by conventional agriculture, through less intensive farming methods (Dahlberg 1999) (Levkoe 2006). While the local food movement has had success in

gaining traction and expansion, the global food system is still dominated by agribusiness conglomerates, within a system that operates without transparency or traceability.

Framing Question

“Is local food worthwhile?”

For my research, I will be focusing on those who, in the midst of the expansion and mechanization of the agricultural sector in Wisconsin, choose to return to the localized methods of food production and distribution. There is not one cut and dry definition of local food. It is an idea that is large and amorphous at times. For my research, I will be guided by Gail Feenstra’s definition of local food: “a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies – one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption is integrated to enhance the economic, environmental and social health of a particular place” (Feenstra 2002, 100). This is a thoughtful definition that works to encompass all the dimensions of local food. Issues of environmental sustainability and social relations are both interwoven into Feenstra’s definition of local food.

Making the switch to buying local produce is one of the only real ways that consumers can act in opposition to large agribusiness. DeLind writes that since the early 1990’s, local food lovers may have “arrived” (DeLind 2010, 273). By this, she means that the cultural adoption of local food, and the integration of local food into the economy may be championed as the local food movement having “succeeded”. In a 2021 study by Benjamin Ferguson and Christopher Thompson, both find that for consumers, local food does imply a sort of moral high ground (Ferguson and Thompson 2021). This plays into the notion that by engaging with local food—specifically on the consumer side—encompasses more than solely food.

It is within this cultural backdrop that I want to pose my framing question: “*Is local food worthwhile?*” I hope to identify the ways in which actors who are engaging in the production and distribution of local food find it to be worthwhile. Choosing the metric of worth is purposefully broad. As evidenced in the diversity of working definitions of local food, local food aims to tackle much more than food, keeping human health, environmental health, economic vitality, and community health as goals in addition to food. In conducting my research I aim to ascertain if local food is a worthwhile pursuit as defined by the actors practicing local food.

Situated Context: Southeastern Wisconsin

My chosen context is Southeastern Wisconsin because of my personal connection to the region, and of its potential as an interesting case study. Wisconsin’s landscape has quite literally been shaped by the practice of agriculture, and, in more recent years, the presence of agribusiness farm consolidation and monocropping. Wisconsin has a long history of agriculture, with agriculture playing a dominant role in the state’s economy. Wisconsin’s first cash crop was wheat, which was eventually replaced by dairy farming. Dairy farming was a boom, and led to the University of Wisconsin developing agricultural programs to teach people how to become dairy farmers (Wisconsin Historical Society 2022). Wisconsin has a history of adopting alternative agricultural processes, and becoming a repository of knowledge for these practices. Sustainable farming networks began popping up in the state in the 1970s and 1980’s as a response to the University not doing enough to teach sustainable farming practices (Warner 2007). Currently, Wisconsin and the Midwest as a whole are home to a growing number of farmers’ markets and CSAs—two of the most ubiquitous ways that producers and consumers engage with local food systems (Robinson and Farmer 2017). My case study in Wisconsin will

highlight realities about the process of implementing local food initiatives into communities of a region heavily shaped by the rise of agribusiness.

Focus Question

“How do local food producers in Wisconsin perceive and observe their work to be worthwhile?”

Sharing stories and accounts from local food producers, allows a fuller picture of the reality of local food in Wisconsin to emerge. My focus question is purposely broad, while remaining grounded in my context and research parameters for this reason. The goal for my research is to prompt producers, through my research question, to begin to unwind and discuss all of the different dimensions that are implied in their work local food. Using the metric of “worth” allows my interviewees to recount the ways that they have observed local food to be impactful, and does not constrain them to a single arena. Based on the dominant scholarship and my background research, I expected certain themes and ideas to be present. Environmental sustainability, organic farming, low-input methods, regenerative methods, and a willingness to work against the dominant mode of agriculture are some themes I was expecting to be present throughout my interviews.

My interviewees all engaged with local food in different capacities, taking very different life paths that eventually led them to work in local food. These details on their background proved to affect the way in which they answered the question. The use of my focus question allowed me to capture all of these dimensions through detailed accounts given by my interviewees.

The presence of mechanized agriculture is large and undeniable in Wisconsin. By implementing my focused research question in my situated context, I expect to observe how

local food initiatives are affected by the dominant agricultural methods of the region. The region that my interviewees are situated in, Southeastern Wisconsin, is a unique region compared to the rest of the state. It is home to the urban centers of Milwaukee, Racine and Kenosha, as well as rural areas. This creates a diverse landscape. Historically there is concentrated momentum around organic and alternative farming practices in Wisconsin. Organizations like Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, a well known working farm and agricultural school that specializes in biodynamic and regenerative systems, work to affect attitudes around alternative farming practices. This along with the presence of The University of Wisconsin Madison were proven to be impactful on my interviewees. Hearing a firsthand account from actors working at the ground level will assist me in answering the question, “*is local food worthwhile?*”.

Methods

Methodology

To answer my focus question, I conducted unstructured interviews over the phone with actors who are engaged with local food production in Wisconsin. I interviewed individuals from a set of organizations that have diverse goals, but all operate within the realm of local food: CSAs, working farms that sell at farmers markets, farms that provide produce to food banks, and community gardens. I prompted the interviewees with a series of questions that remained largely the same from interview to interview with the inclusion of follow-up questions. In an attempt to find patterns in the responses of the actors I spoke with, I used the transcriptions of the

interviews to perform thematic analysis—a qualitative methodology that allows one to identify broad themes from a data set. Though I encouraged my interviewees to tell stories, I did not focus on narrative structure, but used the stories as vehicles in which to identify significant themes. I used psychologists Braun and Clarke’s 2006 publication on how to successfully use thematic analysis to guide my data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Although I searched for common themes in the responses of my interviewees, in choosing this method, I was mindful of what was left unsaid, in order to understand what themes proved to be the most important to my interviewees. In connecting these interviews to the broader literature and rhetoric of local food, I kept in mind the themes found in my interviews that resonate with the existing discourse, those that are divergent, and those that are not mentioned.

Analysis

1. I first did research to identify organizations and individuals to reach out to for an interview. Although I reached out to organizations throughout Wisconsin, the organizations that I ended up corresponding with were all located in the Milwaukee, Racine and Kenosha area. Interviews were solidified with seven individuals.
2. I conducted seven interviews over the phone. My conversations were varied, and driven by the experience and stories that my interviewees wanted to share. While the conversations all took different forms, they all eventually came back to the perceived importance, impacts, and motivators of producing local food.
3. After conducting interviews, I transcribed the interviews, and used these transcriptions to conduct thematic analysis. Transcribing my interviews was an important step, as I was able to familiarize myself with my data set.

4. I then went through my transcribed interviews looking for codes. In thematic analysis, codes are aspects of the data set that are interesting and prevalent to the research at hand.
5. With initial codes identified, I started looking for themes. To look for themes, I looked for similarities and differences between my identified codes, while searching for larger themes to tie my codes together. To do this step, I used the visual method of a concept map to identify themes from codes.
6. Once my themes were identified, I compared the themes found in my research to published literature surrounding the impact and importance of local food.

Results

After conducting my interviews, I was left with main themes that were prevalent throughout the interviews. These were the main themes that had the most overlap between interviews, and the most prevalence to my project.

Interviewees

Name	Title	Organization	Location
David Kozlowski	CSA Manager	Pinehold Gardens	Oak Creek, WI
Ron Doetch	Farmer, Agricultural Consultant	Solutions in the Land LLC	Kenosha, WI
Samson Srok	Greenspace Actions Coordinator	Groundwork MKE	Milwaukee, WI
Liz Lyon	Farmer	Gwynn Hill Farm	Waukesha, WI
Katie Flannery	Education Program Manager & Developer	EcoJustice Center	Racine, WI
Dawn DeMuyt	Racine Area Youth Farm Corps Program Manager	EcoJustice Center	Racine, WI
Terry Vlossak	CSA Manager	Full Harvest Farms	Hartford, WI

Table 1 shows all of my interviewees, their title, organization, and location

Four main themes around the worth of local food were identified through the process of interviews and thematic analysis. These themes were, *community, impact on youth, healthy food, and emotional connection to growing food*. Next, I will discuss each of these themes.

Community

“I think being in the gardens brings such a sense of resiliency because I know, at least in this moment, the people that I'm surrounded by really care for each other, and really care for the Earth. It brings this hope that we can live that vision and teach that vision... that everything could be a little better.” -Samson Srok

The first theme that I was able to identify through my research was community. This theme is broad, and encompasses multiple different aspects of local food's impact. Local food initiatives were discussed and framed as a space for building, nurturing, and maintaining community. I talked to Samsok Srok of Groundwork MKE, an organization that handles logistic and bureaucratic work between community garden plots and the city of Milwaukee. Srok described the community gardens as “a natural gathering place,” seeing community gardens as a place to combat division and segregation in the historically highly segregated city of Milwaukee. (Srok 2022) Srok even described the gardens as a “model of the future” (Srok 2022). Community-run greenspaces and food production within the community align with Srok's wishes for the future, and he feels as though he is able to enact these goals within his community through his work with community gardens.

David Kozlowski of Pinehold Gardens, a CSA in the Milwaukee area, noted that the community that was created around his CSA was one of the most significant factors that motivated him to continue his work. David said, “a few years into it, I got to know the people... I got to know the people who bought from us. And that is what really sold me on it then. I mean, I was committed. I was in it up to my ears, and nobody was pulling me out. I was loving it” (Kozlowski 2022). This fact was crucial for David. Running a CSA is extremely difficult work,

and David's community within and around his CSA gave him energy and momentum to continue this work.

Many of my interviewees commented on the fact that local food initiatives provide a welcome change of scenery from our day to day lives. In these spaces, people run into each other, get to know each other, learn from each other and rely on each other. These observations speak to a human desire for connection that is lost in our modern built environment. Dawn DeMuyt is the farm director at the EcoJustice Center in Racine, Wisconsin. She discussed local food projects in both Racine, Wisconsin and Detroit, Michigan. Her work specifically with community gardens in Detroit had a great observed impact on community health. DeMuyt described Detroit to me as sprawling, segregated and not easily always maneuvered by public transit. These conditions led to food deserts, and projects like the community gardens that DeMuyt worked with aimed to mitigate this. The community gardens worked to successfully provide contrast to the built environment: "even just meeting people or neighbors in your community, by whatever vehicle, and in this case, it's a community garden, it improves health because that individual may now not feel alone" (DeMuyt 2022). DeMuyt asserted that community, and individual's emotional and physical health were positively impacted by the presence of community gardens. These community gardens in Detroit did not eradicate the issues of food deserts, but DeMuyt identified the other impacts they had, and maintains hope that these projects may be paving the way for larger change. The opportunity for local food projects to connect people and improve community health makes local food worthwhile for DeMuyt.

Interviewees were also largely in agreement that the scope of impact of their work with local food remains within its direct community. When prompted to speak about the perceived impact of their work with local food, the answers my interviewees gave all pertained to their

local community. Being able to provide high-quality produce was an answer that resonated through many of my interviews, but in the scope of their practice, this high quality produce is only being distributed to people they are able to access in their immediate community. Doetch was very forthright about his view on the limit to the impact of local food saying, “I think people like myself that have been in this work for a long time, realize the limitations of working with community gardens, and how we're going to... effectively change the food system...CSAs, Farmers Markets, those things don't change the food system, they change the way consumers think about food” (Doetch 2022). Terry Volssak, a CSA manager in the Milwaukee area, was also quite outright, openly declaring, “I know my work isn’t changing the world” (Volssak 2022). These answers point to the fact that local food is able to have a multifaceted effect on the people who are engaging with it, but the effect remains situated in the local community, and does not necessarily permeate larger systems. My interviewees did not discuss concrete ways in which their work was changing the modern food system, but they could discuss the numerous impacts their work had on their community. Volssak noted that one of her great successes was inspiring her CSA members to start their own gardens, even if it meant that they no longer bought shares from her CSA. In these ways, local food works to serve its community, build connections, and mitigate disconnection that is present in modern-day communities.

Impact on Youth

“It's very rewarding to have known youth that have had potential and moved forward” (Doetch, 2022).

The importance of youth involvement with local food projects was a common theme throughout my interviews. Ron Doetch spoke of the tangible effect that he was able to witness on the youth involved in his community garden initiative in Milwaukee, WI. The Tetonia Urban Gardens were started on a city lot in Milwaukee. As the gardens grew, involvement with the garden built confidence, empathy and an ownership over the place in the young people that were involved. Doetch also expressed that working with young people is one of his chief motivating factors for continuing his work in small, local agriculture. Doetch holds hope that intentionally involving young people in local food initiatives will create the potential for new ways of thinking about and improving our food system: “I'm an eternal optimist...this is kind of a common theme with me, but I think we have to look to the youth” (Doetch, 2022). DeMuyt and Doetch both remarked on the positive impact that they witnessed in youth participating in community gardens. “[The garden] became a place where kids felt welcome. They wanted to participate, they wanted to taste things, they wanted to hang out, and they felt ownership and responsibility for protecting that space”, DeMuyt recounts about her days working with a community garden in Detroit (DeMuyt 2022). Doetch shared a similar sentiment: “It really is powerful in these young people. And it changes the way they treat each other. Once these fifth grade bullies had a relationship with plants, they treated their classmates differently” (Doetch 2022). Doetch cited the work of Andrea Taylor, a scientist who does research on “design of developmentally supportive outdoor environments for children” (Faber et al 2001, 1). Taylor’s research revolves

around the benefits of youth spending time in greenspaces, and specifically how contact with nature can support children with ADD.

Volssak shared a story of getting two teenagers involved with the activities of her CSA. She watched them become motivated and engaged with the CSA, and eventually with their own projects and pursuits. Among my interviews, there was a common theme that by getting young people involved with local food efforts, young people can be made to be empathetic, community-minded, and joyful. Many of my interviewees also noted that one of the reasons that they do the work that they do is because they are looking to young people. There is a hope that practicing local food will create interest in young people to help create a better world through community engagement.

Healthy Food

“And so it turns out that, you know, it's only the local food system that supports non chemical agriculture” (Doetch 2022).

The theme of producing and providing healthy, high-quality produce was a recurring theme in my interviews. My interviewees across the board discussed the importance of providing produce that was grown ethically, without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, and with practices that are environmentally sound. For some of my interviewees, the matter of high quality produce is what initially got them in the local food system. Doetch discussed his upbringing with conventional agriculture, and a switch to local food in his adult life by saying, “I have been really interested in organic foods, and methods to farm without using chemicals. And so it turns out that, you know, it's only the local food system that supports non chemical agriculture” (Doetch 2022). For Doetch, it was the opportunity to farm without harmful synthetic chemicals

that was a draw to practicing agriculture within the local food system. For Terry Volssak of Full Harvest Farms, she believes in the benefit and difference of providing produce that is fresh and close to the source, “the lettuce that people get in their boxes is a day old. It's not a week, or two weeks old. And it, I mean you can scientifically prove there's a higher nutritional count in fresh produce rather than older produce when cells are breaking down” (Volssak 2022). For many of my other interviewees, the opportunity to grow food outside of industrialized agriculture was a motivating factor. The farmers I talked to discussed feeling that it is necessary to grow food in small, regenerative agricultural settings. Even if their reach or scope or practice isn't necessarily large or sweeping, the act of growing in a food that they feel morally aligned with is important.

Connection to Growing Food

“That moment where the seed is germinated and it's a plant now..and you start thinking about that plant producing 50 pounds of tomatoes. It's incredible. It's a plant that's going to produce and give back to you. I never ever will get tired of that” (DeMuyt 2022).

My interviews all expressed a deep joy and love for what they are doing as a factor that propels them forward. They often discussed the joy that comes from their work when prompted to discuss their favorite part of their work, or the factors that motivate them to continue. Without fail, all of my interviewees mentioned their love of being outside, and being able to work with plants. Samson Srok described his experience being exposed to growing vegetables while studying at UW Madison. Srok was captivated by the ability of a single seed to become a vegetable. Having this experience has inspired him to work with local food systems. Some of my interviewees had more philosophical approaches to this concept. David Kozlowski of Pinehold gardens meditated on the fact that everything “just starts with a seed”, and that he never grows tired of the amazement that fact brings him (Kozlowski 2022). Other interviewees expressed a

love for being able to get their hands dirty, and really connect to the process of growing food. This suggested that working in local food allowed my interviewees to connect with something that feels natural, and important to note.

Comparison & Generalization

My results suggest local food initiatives are most impactful to the people they directly serve, rather than incite change to the greater system of modern agriculture. Community health, social relations, the happiness of those involved, and the positive presence that these projects maintain in their communities are all significant impacts that have been observed in my research. My results also suggest that one of the most impactful aspects of local food is its ability to mitigate the disconnection that is felt around food. My research shows that local food presents an opportunity for people to connect with each other and the process of food production. Themes of environmental sustainability and discontent with the practices of modern agriculture were also present in my interviews, although not easily quantifiable by my interviewees. The themes that emerged to be the most impactful, tangible and quantifiable for my interviewees were the themes surrounding local food and community. Comparing my results to studies that asked similar questions, there is resonance with these themes that emerged to be important.

I will first compare my research to a 2014 study of a local food hub in Santa Barbara, California. This study focused on a specific relationship between a local supplier and a school whose produce was supplied by the local food producer. The goals of this project were consistent with the goals of many local food projects: promote sustainability, reduce environmental impact, and provide high-quality, nutritious produce. Similar to the findings of my research, it was noted that the “biggest reward” of the project was being able to directly interact with the students who

were eating the fresh produce. Building and maintaining relationships with farmers was also a factor of the success of the implementation of the program (Cleveland et al 2014).

A 2020 study conducted in the UK investigated the ways in which labor practices on CSAs challenged Marx's theory of alienation. Watson suggests that the participatory structure of the labor in CSAs works to subvert the alienation present in the modern food system; building community and creating relationships with the products works against the issues of alienation and disconnection present in the modern food system. This study helps to contextualize my research, as issues of disconnection and alienation were prevalent in my interviews. Watson's study is resonant with my finding that issues surrounding community come to the forefront when discussing the potential impacts of local food initiatives (Watson 2020).

My findings from my situated context suggest that local food is worthwhile in ways that it departs from the established literature and conversations that exist presently around the importance of local food. A 1994 publication from Kenneth Dahlberg is a widely cited piece of literature that suggests that a transition from large scale agriculture to regenerative food systems will be found locally, specifically within households and neighborhoods. This sentiment has been carried through the local food movement, as people are urged to look to their backyard to find a morally just food system. DeLind anchors a 2010 critique of the local food movement around Dahlberg's assertions around local food, taking issue with the ways that the local food movement has become distorted: emphasis being placed on consumption i.e the "locavore emphasis," charismatic leaders of the movement, and the dilution of local efforts as local products are sold through large corporations. My research pushed against DeLind's concerns of the privileging of the individual and locavore emphasis, as my interviewees privileged the community and maintained connections with other individuals through local food (DeLind 2010). As well as

phishing against Dahlberg, as I can assert that a transition to regenerative systems will likely not be found through a collection of small local food projects.

Considering these studies, I am able to ground my results in a family of scholarship that identifies the ways in which local food works to connect people to each other, the product, and the process of production. I am encouraged to find that other studies focus on the themes of community and connection that are present in local food, rather than inciting large change within the food system.

Relevance to Framing Question

My initial framing question was, “*Is local food worthwhile?*” I identified that themes surrounding community health and happiness of producers and consumers were the most prevalent. My findings suggest that while there are worthwhile aspects to producing food at this local level, there is no clear sign that these activities will prompt a transition away from large agriculture. This leaves my framing question partially answered, but also begs more questions. My findings create confusion as to what exactly the role of local food should be in the struggle towards a reformed agricultural system.

Next Steps

The next steps of applying my research will be to work to understand and reframe cultural understandings of the importance and impact of local food. Local food is positioned as a viable alternative to the entrenched system of large-scale industrialized agriculture. Based on my research, I argue that local food does beneficial work within its community, but is not a viable

alternative or challenge to modern industrialized agriculture. Without being realistic about the potential and scope of local food, we could be “hitching our wagons to the wrong stars”, as DeLind writes in her 2010 critique of the local food movement (DeLind 2010, 1). In saying this, DeLind ponders the idea that a focus on local food systems may not take us where we want to go; leaving us blind to the shortcomings, or the potentials beyond the horizon of local food. A thoughtful reimagining of the goals of local food, and distinction between positively affecting a specific community and altering the food system is essential. Without this critical reframing, disconnected local food efforts could stagnate and become, as DeLind fears, the “status quo” (DeLind 2010, 1). In order to conceptualize a reframing of local food systems, I look to the work of Jack Kloppenberg, Ron Doetch, and Murray Bookchin.

My research suggests that the potential, scope, and horizon of local food should be reimagined. I will be drawing from Jack Kloppenberg’s work around foodsheds, situated in the Midwest. In “Coming into the Foodshed”, a call is made for imagining food systems in the same way that watersheds are understood—as smaller tributaries that eventually converge. Citing radical academics like Murray Bookchin, as well as pulling from personal research and foodshed analysis, Kloppenberg attempts to properly contextualize the distancing that is present in the modern food system. He recalls that this distancing is present throughout our market economy, and that food is not exempt. Kloppenberg concludes with a call for “radical reformism”, which, he acknowledges, will require a global shift and he argues for starting that transformation through food (Kloppenber 1996,12). Through restructuring community relations around food, offering the “foodshed” to “encompass the physical, biological, social, and intellectual components of the multidimensional space in which we live and eat” Kloppenberg hopes to start this transformation (Kloppenber 1996,12). Understanding the foodshed as “a framework for

both thought and action,” Kloppenberg suggests a myriad of processes and ideas to incite food system reform (Kloppenber 1996,13-14).

He raises the idea of succession as a path that Kloppenberg brings to address the process for “fundamental transformation” (Kloppenber 1996, 8). Succession is defined as “‘slowly hollowing out’ (Orr, 1992:73) the structures of the global food system by reorganizing our own social and productive capacities” (Kloppenber 1996, 9). Indeed, Kloppenberg views an eventual transformation of the food system as a necessity, given that “simple reform” will not be sufficient (Kloppenber 1996, 8). Kloppenberg wishes to build upon existing systems in order to usher in new ones through succession, writing “neither people nor institutions are generally willing or prepared to embrace radical change... The succession principle finds expression in a strategy of "slowly moving over" from the food system to the foodshed” (Kloppenber 1996, 9). It is tempting to apply these tenants of succession to the local food movement presently. Alas, there are other key components of Kloppenberg’s foodshed ideal that challenge the way in which local food initiatives exist currently.

There is a certain interconnectedness implied in Kloppenberg’s foodshed that is absent in the current organization, or disorganization, of local food projects. Not self-sufficient, Kloppenberg sees the foodshed as being self-reliant, implying less reliance on outside factors, but welcomes the opportunity for outside collaboration. To illustrate interconnectedness, Kloppenberg uses the ecological term “commensalism”. Commensal relationships are those in which one organism is able to obtain food from the other without harming it. For Kloppenberg, to create commensal relationships in our food systems, we must, “establish or recover social linkages beyond atomistic market relationships through the production, exchange, processing, and consumption of food. Such social construction will occur among producers, between

producers and consumers, and among consumers” (Kloppenber 1996, 7). Kloppenberg discusses the emergence of CSAs as being an encouraging start to a food system interwoven with human relations and community, but they do not go far enough. Local food movements as they stand are too “farm-centric”, and do not substantially approach issues of race, gender and inequality; the issues that must be acknowledged in order to build robust and resilient communities. In order to transform into the foodshed from a network of dispersed local food projects, Kloppenberg wishes for food producers to think far beyond food and farms.

Kloppenber sees a path forward for radical change starting in the transformation towards the foodshed. Indeed, there is overlap between aspects of Kloppenberg’s arguments and the tenets of present local food systems that were observed in my research, but Kloppenberg pushes further. Through arguing for interconnectedness, Kloppenberg challenges local food efforts to change. I argue that applying these principles to local food efforts, in order to connect them to a larger, more focused goal could be effective.

What might local food projects organized with each other, to create something that resembles a “foodshed” look like? My interviewee, Ron Doetch, put forth. He describes creating networks of farmers producing sustainably for a specific region. He argues that creating a “regional” food system of food producers of different scopes and sizes working together to provide food for a specific region. Doetch’s vision of a regional food system is area specific, and accounts for seasonality, and transportation. This vision of a food system does not necessarily look beyond local food, but looks to recontextualize local food projects as part of a new system.

Writing from his vantage point as a self-described eco-socialist, Murray Bookchin envisions a path towards “radical agriculture”, an agricultural model in which humans live in

ecologically harmonious communities with the land. Bookchin asserts that this will not be possible without a dismantling of capitalist systems. Bookchin writes, “modern capitalism is inherently anti ecological: the nuclear relationship from which it is constituted—the buyer-seller relationship—pits individual against individual and, on the larger scale, humanity against nature” (Bookchin 1976, 5). The view that the ecological harm of modern agriculture, as well as many other ecological issues, are intertwined with the presence of capitalism persists in radical agricultural discourse. More broadly, envisioning the food system through an eco-socialist lens would be to envision a radically different food system, echoing what Kloppneberg alluded to; a food system that works beyond market relations. The eco-socialist vantage point is one in which the food system is inextricable from other structural forces in society. To take action as Bookchin might envision, is to completely rebuild structures of society with social ecology as the guiding principle, in turn, transforming our food system.

Both Kloppneberg, Doetch and Bookchin offer paths for the reframing of local food. One potentially more radical than the others, but all argue that local food needs to evolve in order to become more effective. These authors offer paths forward from our current food system.

Further Research

For further research, I would wish to recreate this study in different regions of the United States to see if the found themes are consistent. I would also like to use larger sample sizes with more diverse individuals and organizations. All of my interviewees were either involved with community gardens or CSAs, and I would like to bring in actors from different local food initiatives. I think that recreating this study would bring forth even more insight on the ways in which local food acts, and has the potential to act as a tool that dismantles the ambiguity,

isolation, and disconnection present in the modern food system. I also would like to talk to participants and consumers who are actively involved with local food initiatives. I am interested to hear how this population perceives local food to be worthwhile. I expect that this would differ from the view of producers.

I am also interested in learning about instances of radical change stemming from local food initiatives. Have communities been able to radically change their food system through the production and distribution of local food?

Conclusion

My case study of local food in Southeastern Wisconsin begins to answer the question, “*is local food worthwhile?*”. In observing how impactful the connections between local food initiatives and their community are in this situated context, I am able to argue that local food is worthwhile in the communities it serves. Local food offers individuals a different environment to spend their time in. Worker-shared at CSAs or taking part in community gardens offer individuals new opportunities to connect with each other, and the source of their food. What was not, however, evident in my research is local food’s ability to substantially impact the food system on a whole. Given this as being true, I am inclined to wonder whether local food is in fact a worthwhile pursuit if it is unable to penetrate the larger systems that it aims to oppose.

My findings are significant because they emphasize the social benefits of local food and de-emphasize the positioning of the local food movement as a political project in opposition to the negative societal and environmental effects of industrialized agriculture. I propose two paths forward for the existence of local food projects within the global food system. The first is that

local food can be reframed and reimagined in the public consciousness to more accurately reflect the impact that it has. Local food projects are extremely effective within their communities, and they can be seen as such. If local food was to be understood as a means for community development and education, efforts could be made elsewhere to create substantial and meaningful change to the broader food system. This could also redirect efforts towards large food system reform. The second, is for local food to evolve to become a part of the transformation of the global food system. This could look like something akin to Kloppenberg's ideas about the foodshed. Local food projects interconnected and working together in a specific region could redefine food systems in a sustainable, resilient way. Regardless of the future of local food, local food projects are able to add vibrancy, happiness, and connection to their communities; providing citizens with a place to be involved with food production, and connect with the people and place around them.

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