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Food Sovereignty in Everyday Life: A People-Centered Approach to Food Systems

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Abstract

This paper presents outlines of a theoretical approach to food systems that attempts to de-center “food” in food-related research, placing social life as the central point of departure for a critical analysis of food systems and the search for revolutionary alternatives. “Food,” in this framework, is conceived relationally, as a “nodal point of interconnection” (Massey 1994) through which multiple historical, spatial, and social processes intersect and articulate with one another. If “race...is the modality by which class is lived” (Hall 1980), then food is a modality by which capitalism is lived, and made tangible in everyday practice. Revisiting the concepts of primitive accumulation (Perelman 2000), articulation (Hall 1980), and everyday life (Lefebvre 1991), this approach examines the ways in which proletarianization is continually reproduced, increasingly partial or incomplete, and contested at multiple conjunctures. In these moments of contestation, and the spaces that partial primitive accumulation leaves behind, new articulations - visible in the everyday social experience of food - can contain certain potentialities for real alternatives to life under capitalism.

Introduction: The social lives of food systems

“So the sons and daughters of what used to be here in Pembroke – the largest black farming community north of the Mason-Dixon line – came here and did not want to know how to farm. They did not want to know anything to do with dealing with the land...Constantly, we kept meeting this experience of people being in a lot of pain with the earth. So we all said, ‘what’s going on here?’ The very thing that we need to heal is the thing that all of us have been taught to no longer value. And so we literally buried the pain here...not only did we put the pain back into the earth, we also picked up our power, of our relationship with the earth. We have here strawberries for love and forgiveness. And calendula, for wound healing...fellows came from Uganda and Kenya, and they shared in it...and maybe we can begin to do a global process where we’ll release our colonialization and our suffering, and regain our power again.”
 -- Dr. Jifunza Wright, co-founder, Healthy Food Hub

Over the last several years, the terms “sustainable food,” “food justice,” and “food sovereignty” have entered common parlance in academic and popular political discourse, deployed in multiple and often contested ways in very different social and political contexts. The “perfect storm” of converging economic, ecological, and agrarian crises has affected communities the world over, from peasants in the Global South to the decaying urban cores of the post-industrial United States, and protests against various aspects of the global capitalist “food

regime” (Mcmichael 2005) have animated some of the most high-profile social movements in recent memory.

While many of these movements, as well as the bodies of critical scholarship that inform them, have eloquently demonstrated the failings of the prevailing food system and their relationship to broader social and economic injustices, articulations of practical alternatives to the system, especially ones that can link the varied and seemingly disparate struggles of affected communities, have been somewhat less clear. In other words, we know quite well what food justice, food sovereignty, and sustainable food systems are not; what they are, and what transitions to more just and sustainable systems could look like, is a far more complex and difficult task to define in practice.

This paper is an attempt to look with a fresh perspective at the multifaceted nature of crises in the global food system, with the aim of formulating new methodological and political strategies that can address the environmental, social, and political dimensions of these crises – aspects, in fact, of the broader crisis of which problems in the food system are an integral part. While critical food scholarship and major discourses within food movements have often concentrated on the “food” in food systems – the technical, political economic, and social developments that surround food, as the saying goes, from the field to the dining table – this paper proposes a theoretical approach that de-centers “food” as an object of study, placing social life as the central point of departure for a critical analysis of the industrial capitalist food system and the search for alternatives.

Seen in their eminently social, historical, and relational contexts, everyday experiences of producing, obtaining, and consuming food are, quite literally, visceral manifestations of multiple and intersecting processes that continually seek to subordinate the lives of human beings to the logic of accumulation, competition, wage labor, and the market. Struggles over food, therefore, can be seen as struggles over proletarianization and alienation; of the material and meaningful ways in which capitalism produces and transforms everyday life. These processes, however, are never quite as totalizing as their boosters, or their critics, purport them to be.

Revisiting the concepts of primitive accumulation (Perelman 2000), articulation (Hall 1996), and everyday life (Lefebvre 2002), the theoretical approach outlined in this paper explores the ways in which proletarianization must continually be reproduced, is increasingly partial or incomplete, and is contested at multiple conjunctures – of which food, one of the primary means of subsistence, is a key arena for struggle. In the spaces where people resist, or are discarded by, the march of capitalist development, the diverse social networks, practices and

resources they have always marshaled for daily subsistence become salient building blocks for new social configurations of collective survival that – if recognized, cultivated, and defended by conscious political action – can potentially emerge as practically viable, culturally meaningful, and self-determined alternatives to life under capitalism.

The theoretical reflections presented in the following sections are later examined in light of the real-world experiences of the Healthy Food Hub, a community-based cooperative market and “local food system” initiative based in the South Side of Chicago. In the face of deindustrialization, soaring levels of poverty and unemployment, and a growing urban food crisis, the predominantly African-American families that comprise the Healthy Food Hub are developing innovative forms of food praxis whose effectiveness stems directly from the revival of household practices carried over from rural origins, a “culture of collective working,”¹ contemporary connections to rural Black farming communities, and a fundamental commitment to self-determination. For the dispossessed former industrial workers of Black South Chicago, access to fresh and healthy food through the Healthy Food Hub is not about “chasing our piece of pie in the new green economy.”² It is, rather, a point of entry into a larger project: to build forms of “community wealth” that can provide them with autonomy and resilience against the market forces that continue to lay waste to urban communities of color.

Forks Over Justice: Limits and contradictions in ‘food-centric’ discourse

Stemming from a common critique of the industrial food system, critical food scholarship and major discourses within food movements have examined and elaborated the interconnecting processes that have transformed the food system from one end to the other. Many critiques have focused on the technical and spatial aspects of food production, documenting the environmental and health impacts of industrial agriculture, while calling attention to the ecological and nutritional benefits of alternative farming systems such as agroecology (Altieri 2009). Still others concentrate on the political economy of food production – economic impacts of Green Revolution technologies, the “pesticide treadmill” and high input costs on small farmers (Perfecto, Vandermeer, and Wright 2009), labor conditions for farm workers (Brown and Getz 2011), and the ways in which the dynamics of global “food regimes” adversely affect multiple aspects of smallholder production, while yielding the lion’s share of economic benefits to large agribusiness corporations (Mcmichael 2005).

On the other end of the supply chain, other domains of critical food scholarship focus on various issues relating to food consumption and the development of alternative food networks

¹ Remarks by Fred Carter, Healthy Food Hub Sustainability Address, 2/5/11.

² Black Oaks Community Center Newsletter, Vol. 1 No. 1,

(AFNs). Much of urban-based food scholarship falls within this area, addressing issues of fair trade, relocalization, urban agriculture, and access to healthy and adequate food, particularly in communities of color (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Studies (and critiques) of popular food movements abound, examining multiple facets of AFNs from farmers' markets and school-based food initiatives to community garden projects and municipal/regional food policy reform efforts (Goodman, Goodman, and Dupuis 2011).

While critical food studies has been absolutely crucial to contemporary understandings of food crises, as well as the development of a large and prominent social movement to reform an unequal and unsustainable food system, common responses to the problems they highlight have often been laden with contradictions. Food movements and the perspectives informing them, particularly in the United States, tend to share a common orientation toward the ethics and aesthetics of food consumption, a "narrative linking the production and consumption of local organic food to positive economic, environmental, and social changes" (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). This often leaves the concerned reader or activist with an impression that the best way to struggle against the market-based industrial food system is to "vote with your fork" – a market-based solution based on ethical consumption (Pollan 2006). Policy-oriented efforts, primarily in the institutional domain of governments and NGOs, advocate for various technocratic solutions that can be applied generally over a wide variety of local contexts (Pelletier et al. 2000).

While a critique of the global capitalist economy is often implicit, and sometimes even explicit, in some of these analyses, many of the solutions promoted by mainstream food movements have proven compatible with, and have even been adopted by, large food and agribusiness corporations whose practices contribute to the very problems the food movement purports to address. In this way, various currents of food movement scholarship and discourse "seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms, spaces of governance, and mentalities" (Guthman 2008).

In addition, questions of difference – race, class, gender, and the legacies of slavery and colonialism – are often elided in discourses around food. As Alkon and Agyeman note, this has been attributed to the positionality of the majority of advocates within mainstream food movements, as "the food movement narrative is largely created by, and resonates most deeply, with white and middle-class individuals" (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). As a result, popular approaches to solving food-related problems often reflect and reproduce the cultural sensibilities and economic privileges associated with a white, middle-class subjectivity.

Where mainstream food movements have addressed communities of color and the ways in which food issues intersect with other historical oppressions such as racism and poverty – for example, in the “food desert” discourse (Gallagher 2006) – those communities are often perceived through a “deficit” lens, requiring top-down educational, technocratic, aid-based solutions that rely on a high level of intervention on the part of outside actors. Even where grassroots approaches to food issues within urban communities proliferate, the utopian universalism as well as the “deficit thinking” (Valencia 1997) that pervades much of mainstream food movement discourse often ignores the specific histories and differential ways that structural inequalities affect minority and low-income communities in urban centers. In doing so, these efforts not only fail to engage the very communities they are trying to reach (Guthman 2008), but also fail to recognize potentially useful forms of knowledge and social practice that already exist within those communities.

In contrast, the discourse of food sovereignty – which asserts the “right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems – markets, production modes, food cultures and environments” (Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010), does place issues of power, difference, and democracy at the forefront of its critical perspective. The Nyeleni Declaration on Food Sovereignty “suggests that there are a range of conditions that are necessary for food sovereignty to obtain, such as a living wage, tenure security and security of housing, cultural rights, and an end to the dumping of goods below the cost of production, disaster capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), in the service of a future where, among other things, ‘agrarian reform revitalizes interdependence between consumers and producers’” (Patel 2009).

The concept of food sovereignty originated, and is most resonant and powerful, among rural peasant movements such as Via Campesina that are primarily based in the Global South. While a number of food justice activists and organizations in the United States have attempted to adapt the ideas of food sovereignty to urban contexts, many have had difficulty gaining traction, in part due to the problematic assumptions in mainstream food movement discourse previously discussed. Various attempts to build food sovereignty movements in these urban spaces have found themselves “constrained by broader forces of neoliberalism that remained unrecognized by local activists” (Alkon and Mares 2011).

Food sovereignty’s radical imperative is to consider social justice not simply as an additive property to a sustainable food system, but the very foundation from which such a food system must be built; corrections to historical and structural injustices are among the essential “preconditions before food sovereignty can be achieved” (Patel 2009). The primacy of the social in the ideas and goals of food sovereignty, therefore, seems to suggest a reorientation in

the critique of food systems towards the social, and the organization of society as a whole. It compels us not only to interrogate the juridical, economic, and legislative structures governing the production and consumption of food, but to consider food systems first and foremost in terms of their social lives. It requires an examination of the transformations that capitalism has wrought on every level, from global macroeconomic structures to the most intimate spaces of everyday life. From that vantage point, it becomes possible to see how banal acts of daily subsistence reflect and reproduce capitalist social relations, express their contradictions, and contain the seeds of their overcoming.

Land Grabs and Big Macs: Food as a modality of living in capitalism

An approach that starts with people at the center of a food system takes into account how space, power, and meaning are implicated within the system, engages with the particular struggles and histories of a community, and identifies the ways in which social transformations affect, and are affected by, the lived experience of food. It suggests a reconceptualization of food itself: from a discrete “object” of research (for example, as a commodity in commodity chain analysis, or as a biological actor in agronomic or ecological studies) towards a relational conception in which food – and the experience of food – appears as a kind of nexus in and through which social processes converge and interact. This dialectical reformulation replaces “the common-sense notion of ‘thing’...with notions of ‘process’ and ‘relation’” (Ollman 2003).

The key dimensions of this relational conception are spatial and temporal; seen as processes in motion, any given social phenomena contains both “the further unfolding of an already existing process” and “a coming-to-be of what potentially is” (Ollman 2003). The spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre builds upon the “generative aspect” of this kind of “process thinking,” considering spatial-temporal relations as *actively produced* in and through concrete action as well as the conceptualizations and representations on which those actions are based: “If space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production...thus production process and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects, not as two separable ideas” (Lefebvre 1991). Doreen Massey, in talking about place, describes it relationally as a “nodal point of interconnection,” a conjunctural space which contains “the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global...in the negotiation of relations within multiplicities, the social is constructed” (Massey 1994).

Thinking about food relationally is useful not only for an analysis of what went into its physical production, but also for the production of meaning through food practices, and their capacity to produce and reproduce social relations through the lived experience of obtaining, preparing, and consuming food. For example, corn – a common staple at many summer barbecues in the United States – secured its prominence in American food culture not only because it is

delicious, but also because corn has been a central figure in a number of momentous processes that fundamentally shaped the U.S. and global economy (Warman 2003). These include: its domestication in Precolumbian times, transforming indigenous food systems throughout the Americas (Staller, Tykot, and Benz 2006); its introduction to Europeans via the Columbian Exchange, and the land conflicts and dispossession that followed it from colonial times to the present day (Crosby 2003); the Green Revolution, social and environmental changes resulting from industrial monoculture, and the implications of state power and the authority of science in its modern cultivation (Friedmann 2005; Woolf 2007); the biotech industry and the development of intellectual property laws governing its DNA (Ewens 1999); its subsidized overproduction, the push for free trade and the dumping of surplus crops in the Global South (Pimentel et al. 2009; McMichael 2005); and how its abundance of cheap and sugary calories made it a cornerstone of working-class diets around the world (Warman 2003). These processes, and their attendant social relations, are all imbricated in producing the simple, sensuous experience of buying, grilling, and eating an ear of corn on the Fourth of July.

With an understanding of food as a historically and socially produced ensemble of interconnected processes, there now appears the question of *how* to connect larger-scale processes (such as global political economy, or historical oppressions) to the direct lived experience of food. What does racism, or land grabs, have to do with last night's dinner? How can we make a clear and credible account of these connections? And how can we use such an analysis to advance food sovereignty in a way that can speak to the linkages amongst the diverse and seemingly unrelated ways that people are affected by these processes, up and down the food chain, in localities that seem worlds away from one another?

Stuart Hall's conception of *articulation* "has the considerable advantage of enabling us to think of how specific practices articulated around contradictions which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment, can nevertheless be thought together" (Slack 1996). In writing about the relation between race and class, Hall emphasizes the historically specific ways in which these social divisions are interlinked and come into being in and through one another; it is not adequate, nor accurate, to posit racism as having "a common and universal structure...which remains essentially the same, outside of its specific historical location" (Hall 1996). Rather, "it needs to be shown *how* race comes to be inserted historically, and the relations and practices that have tended to erode and transform – or to preserve – these distinctions through time, not simply as residues or holdovers, but as active structuring principles of society" (Hart 2007). The articulation between race and class, or among any other social phenomena, is conceived as a dynamic link, constructed in myriad ways through concrete social practices in historical time. Articulation is the product and arena of struggle, as Hall asserts in his central thesis: "Race is...the modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through

which class relations are experienced, the form in which is appropriated and ‘fought through’” (Hall 1996).

For a subject such as food systems - with its global scope, multiple mechanisms and diversity of local effects, Hall’s “concept of articulation in its extended sense...is useful not only in clarifying diverse and interrelated trajectories of sociospatial change but also in suggesting how struggles in different sociospatial arenas and across spatial scales might link with one another” (Hart 2007). The bond between dispossessed peasants in the Global South and unemployed workers in South Chicago may not be readily apparent; their experiences, while both related to the global political economy of food, seem vastly different from one another. However, their articulations into a global “food regime” (McMichael 2009) – whose hunger for land on one continent, and markets for cheap fast-food concoctions on another, swell the ranks of the poor and malnourished on both shores – could shed some light on how their situations can be linked together in a common struggle.

Subsistence on the Side: Primitive accumulation and alienation in everyday life

If “race...is the modality by which class is lived” (Hall 1996), perhaps it can also be said that food is a modality by which capitalism is lived, and made tangible in everyday experience. Throughout the roughly 500 years of its existence, the dynamics of capitalist development have engendered deep transformations in social life, which has, as a consequence, transformed the ways people encounter and experience food. Aspects of everyday life that are structured by the demands of wage labor and the market – long work hours and/or strict time discipline (Thompson 1967), pressures of market competition on small artisan producers (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981), spatial dislocations such as migration to urban centers or long work commutes (Coleman-Jensen 2009), and even the transformation of rural communities through the growth of remittance economies (Hecht 2010) can qualitatively affect and constrain people’s options for the kinds of food they obtain on a daily basis.

For example, a study of low-wage women workers living in the Northeast United States found that a majority of them “made ‘quick stuff’ or bought fast food because they did not have energy or time to cook” (Jabs et al. 2007). Often working two or three jobs to make ends meet, many workers do not have the time to obtain and prepare food at home, making them more dependent on cheap, unhealthy convenience foods. In urban communities of color – where the deleterious effects of deindustrialization and economic crisis are compounded by long histories of racial discrimination, redlining, and, more recently, epic rates of foreclosure – the strained relationship between economic circumstances, spatial-temporal production of deleterious environments, and everyday food choices is even more pronounced (Block et al. 2012).

Capitalism's subordination of human beings to the logic of the commodity – turning living labor into labor-power – produces particular kinds of social reality. Henri Lefebvre, in his *Critique of Everyday Life* (2002), saw capitalist modernity as characterized primarily by the domination of abstractions over everyday life. The subordination of life to the “brutally objective power” of the abstract logic of capitalism, which produces and reproduces itself through everyday social practice, is profoundly material as well as ideological; “a practical illusion, with its basis in everyday life and the way everyday life is organized” (Lefebvre 2002). Thus humanity, in all its fullness, becomes transformed through its subordination to abstract economic categories and functions into something not quite human: “a tool to be used by other tools (the means of production), a thing to be used by another thing (money), and an object to be used by a class, a mass of individuals who are themselves ‘deprived’ of reality and truth (the capitalists)” (Lefebvre 2002). As any good Marxist would have recognized by now, Lefebvre notes that “there is a name for this fixing of human activity within an alien reality which is at one and the same time crudely material and yet abstract: *alienation*” (Lefebvre 2002).

The historical precondition for alienated labor, of course, is the separation of the producer from the means of subsistence, which forces the dispossessed into a dependent relationship with capital in order to survive. The capacity to produce food, or at least to gain access to adequate sources of food, is an essential means of subsistence for human beings; one that is ripped away from the producer in the violent course of capitalism's “original sin” (Marx 1992). In his famed chapter at the end of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx defined primitive accumulation as “a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital; on the other, the immediate producers into wage-labourers” (Marx 1968).

Generally understood, historical and ongoing processes of primitive accumulation are associated with the separation of peasants from the land that provides their immediate means of subsistence. But Marx's definition, as outlined above, alludes to a second dimension, in which primitive accumulation entailed much more than separation from the land. It was also a radical attempt to close off all possibilities for non-capitalist forms of life; the violent erasure of the myriad forms by which peasants obtained their subsistence, in order to present wage labor as the only survival strategy available to human beings. As Michael Perelman observes, “Primitive accumulation cut through traditional lifeways like scissors. The first blade served to undermine the ability of people to provide for themselves. The other blade was a system of stern measures required to keep people from finding alternative survival strategies outside the system of wage labor” (Perelman 2000).

Thinking about primitive accumulation in terms of its twofold character – the physical separation of the laborer from the land and means of production, and the conversion of

peasants to proletarians by means of closing down all other possibilities except for waged work – helps to move beyond crude teleological readings of Marx that treat primitive accumulation as a monolithic historical movement, an event relegated to the pre-history of capitalism (Lenin 1967; De Angelis 2000). Many Marxist scholars now regard primitive accumulation as a continuous process, necessary to the expansion of capitalism (Luxemburg 2003; De Angelis 2004; Perelman 2000), and literature on the recent wave of accelerated land consolidation has characterized land grabs in the Global South as the “new enclosures” (White et al. 2012). As Silvia Federici notes, “A return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women are the necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism in all times” (Federici 2004).

While ongoing and intensifying processes of primitive accumulation often accomplish its first “cut” of separating producers from their lands, whether it actually completes its second task of “colonizing all life” (De Angelis 2004) – where capitalist development “breaks down all resistance,” leaving the “labourer...to the ‘natural laws of production’, i.e. to his dependence on capital” (Marx 1973) – is far less certain. The process of creating proletarians is, in actuality, nothing like a “law of Nature”; it proceeds in fragmented ways, must continually be reproduced, and is, to varying degrees in different historical moments, partial and incomplete. Historical accounts of the original enclosure movement in England show how state enforcers of the incipient capitalist order had to constantly chase down and brutally suppress forms of direct resistance, as well as stamp out alternative social forms of self-reliance that presented challenges to the absolute primacy of wage labor (Thompson 1975). Even in the fully integrated spaces of the industrialized world, mass culture and ideological practices must still be mobilized through schools and other institutions of “civil society” in order to reproduce a willing workforce from generation to generation (Willis 1977; Gramsci 1971).

Theorists since Rosa Luxemburg have noted that the continued existence of non-capitalist spaces was, in fact, essential for the expanded reproduction of capital. Perelman, building upon the feminist work of Dalla Costa and James (Dalla Costa and James 1972), notes that non-capitalist forms of self-provisioning at the household level provide essential subsidies to the cost of labor’s reproduction: “All-out primitive accumulation would not be in the best interests of capital. Instead, capital would manipulate the extent to which workers relied on self-provisioning in order to maximize its advantage” (Perelman 2000). Massimo De Angelis notes that

if primitive accumulation is defined in terms of the preconditions it satisfies for the accumulation of capital, its temporal dimension includes in principle both

the period of the establishment of a capitalist mode of production *and* the preservation and expansion of the capitalist mode of production *any time the producers set themselves as an obstacle to the reproduction of their separation to the means of production*" (De Angelis 2004).

For Lefebvre, non-capitalist social practices continued to survive not merely as a function of the needs of capital, but because of the inimitably creative and untameable nature of everyday life. Central to Lefebvre's analysis is the relationship between the real world, experienced and lived as a totality, and the necessary but limited abstractions we use to make sense of it:

Everyday life, in a sense residual, defined by what is 'left over' after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis, must be defined as a totality...[these] activities leave a 'technical vacuum' between one another which is filled up by everyday life. Everyday life is profoundly related to *all* activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human – and every human being – a whole takes its shape and its form. (Lefebvre 2002)

This, he believed, was at the core of a fundamental contradiction in capitalist life: because it is necessarily limited by the categories it seeks to impose, the abstract logic of capitalism can never encompass the totality constituted by everyday life. Everyday life as an ongoing, living process is continually "leaking out the sides," so to speak, of capitalist structures; its "residue" falling beyond the attempts of abstraction and alienation to contain it. In the residue, one could catch glimpses of fragments and possibilities for a life not dominated by alienated social relations: the "substance of everyday life – 'human raw material' in its simplicity and richness – pierces through all alienation and establishes 'disalienation'" (Lefebvre 2002). In a sense, then, real life is always running one step ahead of capitalism; with primitive accumulation chasing after it, constantly pursuing, but never fully achieving, its goal of colonizing all life.

The idea of an undisciplinable universe of subsistence practices that falls, partially or completely, outside the purview of capitalist logics gains particular relevance in the current era of mass dispossessions and the proliferation of "wageless life" (Denning 2010). The sheer scale of unemployed, superfluous labor in urban peripheries the world over has created vast spaces where self-reliance has become a vital necessity; as African urbanist Abdoumalig Simone notes, "Self-responsibility for urban survival has opened up spaces for different ways of organizing activities" (Simone 2004). These not-quite-proletarians are engaging, inventing, and jerry-

rigging an untold number of experiments and strategies for survival and resistance within the liminal spaces in which partial processes of primitive accumulation has left them. These could include rediscovering long-forgotten practices that reveal deep connections to rural places of origin, and learning new ones from people and groups they encounter. Political movements for land, rights, and urban citizenship can also be products of this conjuncture (Holston 2008). In other words, in the spaces that capitalist development has not yet reached, or has left behind, people are forging new articulations with the system and each other out of whatever resources, skills, and social networks are available to them. These everyday social forms of subsistence, especially as they relate to food, could be fertile ground for building the kinds of self-determined food systems that food sovereignty seeks to champion.

Building an Ark: Resilience and re-articulation in South Chicago

“Those who control food production and human reproduction have real power, have control over life and death. And we need to further our control, and build upon the foundation of our history and our ancestors, so that we make sure that we survive and come through this crisis, the way we came through the holocaust of the Slave Trade, slavery, Jim Crow, migration to the cities, the decline of industrial capitalism, and what the planet and society have in store for us in the future.” –Healthy Food Hub member

Seeing food systems in terms of their social lives – as sets of relations, articulations, and conveyors of meaning – helps food analysts and activists to avoid the universalisms that, often unconsciously, attach food movement discourse and practice to a particular set of people and their particular subjectivity, while alienating others (Guthman 2008). This approach, when applied to the empirical case study of the predominantly African-American community of Chicago’s Healthy Food Hub, reveals the very different and vexed relationship many Black folks have with mainstream food and environmental sustainability discourses. It also helps us to more fully appreciate what they have built, and why it resonates so powerfully with the community members that come into its orbit.

Located in an area once defined as a “food desert” (Gallagher 2006) and an “urban sacrifice zone” (Gottesdiener 2013), the Healthy Food Hub was established in 2009 with the aim of pooling the resources of its members and surrounding communities to “bring home healthier, tastier, fresher food for less.”³ This is mainly achieved through collective purchasing of wholesale organic produce, as well as food production on rural farms in the historic Black farming community of Pembroke Township, Illinois, located about 60 miles south of the city. It

³ Healthy Food Hub website, <http://www.healthyfoodhub.org>

is a membership-based organization, serving around 500 families in several South Chicago neighborhoods. The Hub holds a Market Day every other Saturday at the Betty Shabazz Charter School, where members can pick up their orders, shop for additional food items, buy other sundries and gift items from vendors, and attend talks, workshops and organizational meetings.

Pre-orders are the main mechanism by which the Hub obtains its food products; they also reinforce the cooperative and participatory culture that supports the Hub's aims for community building. There are two "rounds" to the pre-order process. Members submit the first round of orders on the Monday before Market Day, over the website and over the phone. An email is then sent to members a couple of days later with details on what has been ordered, and how much more for each item must be acquired to receive the greatest bulk discount. Members can then choose to buy more, or recruit family and friends to add to their original order, so that everyone can receive the lowest possible price for their food. One of the Hub's volunteers described the collective buying process as a "reverse CSA": "It's not one farmer selling memberships, it's the eaters determining what they want to eat. And they're creating a system to support that...I know what you need, that way I only have to get what it is that my community recognizes they need."⁴

Market days, in contrast to a typical supermarket or flea market, are regarded as social events, fostering relationships among community members and bringing together the diverse array of knowledge and resources they bring to the space. It is not unusual to spend the better part of an hour in the checkout line in conversation with fellow members and volunteers. Various presentations and workshops are held on diverse topics ranging from healthy cooking, herbal medicine, aquaponics (integrated fish and plant cultivation), disaster preparedness, and food growing techniques that stem from old farming traditions as well as newer forms of permaculture. This space allows members to share knowledge and ideas with each other, while also enhancing the scope of goods and services the Hub is able to provide.

The Healthy Food Hub also maintains a 40-acre production center and "eco-campus" at the Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living, located in Pembroke Township. At Black Oaks, organizers grow food, host school trips, and hold weekend seminars in ecology and permaculture for urban youth from the South Side. They have also launched a Rotating Apprentice Farmers' Training Program, an intensive agroecology summer course in which participants serve as apprentices to various Black farmers in the Pembroke community. By 2014, the program will have trained 40 mostly young new farmers in methods of crop and livestock cultivation.

⁴ Interview with Healthy Food Hub volunteer, 6/26/11.

The Healthy Food Hub's relative success stems not only from the goods and services it provides and the commitment of its membership, but also from an acute recognition of the material needs and cultural dilemmas faced by Black communities on the South Side. The neighborhoods from which the Hub derives its main membership are among the hardest hit by deindustrialization and the economic crisis: youth unemployment for Black males approaches fifty percent, foreclosures have depopulated wide swaths of these neighborhoods, and in recent years, the area has endured unprecedented levels of gun violence (Malooley 2013). The last Black-owned grocery store on the South Side closed down in 1995, and the lack of access to fresh, healthy food in those neighborhoods was the initial impetus for the creation of the Hub.

The specific articulations by which deindustrialization, economic marginalization, and the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow are implicated in food and everyday life on the South Side also help to explain the unique nature of the Hub's project, its particular difficulties, and its ultimate goals. Most of the older generation of the Hub's members are first- and second- generation migrants from four counties in the Mississippi Delta; the children of sharecroppers, they fled the region with their families in the 1950s and 60s to escape the racial violence following the murder of Emmett Till. Thus, the experience of farming and producing food, in the collective memories of many of these urban transplants, was less a transcendental connection to the land than that of being bound to a landscape of fear and oppression. One woman, venting her frustration at the well-intentioned but naïve efforts of food and environmental activists doing outreach in her neighborhood, expressed it thus:

You want me to go plant a tree, but you hung us from a tree. A tree is not a symbol of life; you hung our brothers from it, took our lives with it. No. I won't dig my own grave; that's what nature is to us, a grave.⁵

The legacy of slavery has perhaps been the most powerful influence shaping the difficult relationship between food, land, and the Hub's Black constituency. Land – a key means of subsistence, and a material symbol of autonomy and freedom for agrarian communities around the world – carries painful and traumatic connotations for those who fled to the cities to escape bondage from the land. Fred Carter, co-founder of the Healthy Food Hub and the Black Oaks Center, highlights the contradictory relationship between food and slavery when considered in the context of its deep history:

It's a challenge not just confined to Pembroke, it's a challenge for us as a group, as a race of people, in this country and in the world. We entered slavery because of our ability to grow food, and because of our capacity to grow food and feed

⁵ Radio interview with Kellen Marshall, Practically Speaking Radio Episode 11: Blacks in Green. 5/20/13.

people, we were enslaved. That was one of the driving factors why they were importing us over here; we knew how to grow rice, we knew about this land...we were the powerhouse, we fed the planet. And because we were violated, enslaved and beat to serve whites, to feed them, it's a painful memory.”⁶

Just as poverty and oppression followed Black populations from the rural South into South Chicago, however, so did many ways of surviving and coping, as a community, with the multiple forms of crisis imposed upon them. Along with the pain of their experience and social conditions in the rural South, positive and creative forms of collective endurance and resistance to those conditions also came with them, deeply embedded in social memory. These everyday food practices, also derived from agrarian pasts, became essential parts of the Hub's toolkit in building conscious and collective means of community empowerment.

Collective purchasing – pivotal to the Hub's community project – is an old but important form of food practice, carried over from Mississippi by the Hub's founders as children. As Fred Carter recalls:

We always had a food buying club, that's how we ate as a family...when we got to Chicago, our whole extended family, or people from our hometown, would all live together on a block. And we would all put our money together to buy a cow, and divide it up amongst ourselves. It was just cheaper that way...I guess maybe that is where the Healthy Food Hub came out of.”⁷

Collective food buying practices in Mississippi has its historical roots in the complex and largely forgotten history of Black farmers' resistance to white capitalism. In the first few years of Reconstruction, one in ten African-Americans settled in the Delta region hoping to climb the “agricultural ladder” to the “poor man's promised land” (Willis 2000; Woods 1998). These new Black yeoman farmers pursued a number of individual and collective strategies for utilizing the advantages of land ownership, including efforts to build new kinds of agrarian society based on solidarity, self-reliance, and collective uplift.

As the encroaching power of white creditors began to subordinate the nascent Black farming class into the “second slavery” of sharecropping, Populist organizations such as the Colored Farmers' Alliance formed buying cooperatives in the region, imploring Black farmers to “discover how the united purchasing power of Black agrarians can reduce your debts and end your reliance on white creditors” (Willis 2000). By the 20th century, the efforts of the Colored

⁶ Television interview with Fred Carter, PCC Network Forum, 4/11/12.

⁷ Interview with Fred Carter, 6/16/11.

Farmers' Alliance had been crushed by the Klan and Jim Crow, and largely forgotten in the minds of Delta farmers and their descendants. But the idea of pooling resources to acquire basic necessities at lower prices continued; it simply made good economic sense to large rural households struggling to make ends meet.

Collective buying, born in a moment of economic resistance, thus found its way to Chicago, tucked away in memories and households until, in another time of crisis, it became the keystone for the development of a new articulation between food and community power. How this strategy has been redeployed by the Healthy Food Hub in a postindustrial urban context may look rather different, in practice, from its agrarian antecedent. The mechanisms for pooling and using resources are articulated through modern technologies, its infrastructure is extended over rural and urban space, and – importantly – it does not isolate itself, spatially or economically, from the larger system in which it operates. But the ultimate objectives of this practice – to build social formations based on solidarity, self-reliance, and collective uplift, to avoid and replace relations of dependency on forces that are oppressive and exploitative of them – are more than simply reminiscent of the “blues development tradition” (Woods 1998) advanced by Black agrarians in Reconstruction-era Mississippi. It is a continuation of that tradition, of a century and a half in which African Americans “have continuously experimented with creating sustainable, equitable, and just social, economic, political, and cultural structures...the constant reestablishment of collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks by the plantation bloc and its allies” (Woods 1998).

The collective aspect of the Hub's economic operations – derived from the African socialist concept of *ujamaa*, or cooperative economics – serves as a powerful basis for re-inscribing understandings of community, sustainability, self-reliance, and resilience in and through cultural and material practice. In a city where the competitive, predatory dynamics and ideologies of neoliberal capitalism have left communities devastated, fragmented and vulnerable, Healthy Food Hub members are struggling to rethink and redefine concepts of wealth and exchange along collective and self-determined lines. The members who contribute their money, material resources, time, skills, and knowledge to the Hub all do so with the intention of building, maintaining, and most importantly, retaining control over their “community wealth.” As a Healthy Food Hub core organizer describes it, “We introduce economic opportunity, and then we try to circulate and grow that opportunity so that everyone can benefit from it.”⁸

This commitment to collective self-reliance and self-determination has become all the more salient in the face of external pressures – not only from larger economic processes but also

⁸ Michael Tekhen Strode, Healthy Food Hub promotional video. Posted at <http://livesharelearn.com/our-stories>.

powerful nonprofit and political interests within the city who seek to impose their own models of sustainable development on the “food deserts” of South Chicago. Healthy Food Hub members are “literally determined to hold their ground...to be able to transform the food deserts from within themselves, not from external inputs from people who don’t live in their communities and carry the majority of the wealth out of their communities. Our standing commitment for all of us has been to keep the wealth in our community, on every level – whether it’s social, intellectual, natural, political – we literally can create something different and new.”⁹

Conclusion: Burying the pain, picking up power

If the city is a huge intersection of bodies in need...how can permutations in the intersection of their given physical existence, their stories, networks, and inclinations, produce specific value and capacity? (Simone 2004)

In the interplay of ideas, debates, and movements struggling to define the “big tent” (Patel 2009) of food sovereignty, critique of the prevailing food system remains a dominant mode through which aspirations for a better food system – and by extension, a better world – is expressed. This is absolutely crucial: we must be clear about what we are against before we can proclaim what we are for. But critique, as such, places food sovereignty movements in an essentially defensive position. For urban dwellers in the heart of the industrialized world – primarily food consumers whose histories and articulations with advanced capitalism have produced a far more alienated relationship with food production, land, and nature – a proactive route to building and advocating for alternatives is far more difficult to imagine. What we are often left with, then, is a host of utopian visions, constructed around the quality and value of food as a commodity; abstract models of “sustainability” which, in practice, often end up reinforcing the social divisions and structures of alienated capitalist life.

Shifting the lens of analysis from food to people and everyday life at the heart of food systems suggests, perhaps, new strategies for research and action. It encourages a shift away from “deficit thinking” in community-based research, towards a renewed focus on the resourcefulness and oppositional sensibilities that people sustain and develop in conditions of adversity. In terms of building and advancing alternatives through action, a “people-centered” approach not only illuminates the power relations and injustices that lie at the heart of the food system, but also shows how the infinite array of relationships, resources, histories, struggles, and aspirations that express themselves in the everyday experience of food are the raw material from which many possible paths to a just and sustainable food system can be built.

⁹ Radio interview with Dr. Jifunza Wright, Practically Speaking Radio, 5/20/13.

The Healthy Food Hub is an example of one such path, a pragmatic reconfiguration of the memories, histories, resources, and knowledge of their members to build culturally grounded, self-determined, and resilient infrastructures for community survival and independence from the economic forces that have enslaved, exploited, and ultimately left them behind. The act of re-articulating the relations of subsistence, to create and “own the pathways to healthy living,” thus becomes an act of building community power; a form of sovereignty collectively developed from the intimate spaces of everyday life.

Lefebvre, in the *Critique of Everyday Life*, wrote that “once the philosopher is committed to life, he will watch over its meaning and development from within...at the very heart of the everyday, he will discover what is hindering or blocking the march forward. He will remain a witness to alienations, and their judge. Keeping his vigil by night and day, the philosopher will not be satisfied simply to study the development of ‘human nature,’ he will want to help it, negatively at least – but the negative is also positive – by removing whatever may obstruct its fragile seeds.” A perspective committed to life, to the people and social relationships at the heart of food systems allows us, as communities in resistance, to find and wield power not only through the struggle against collective deprivation, but through the resources, skills, histories, and consciousness we have always possessed – and use these assets as building blocks for our own unique, dynamic and self-determined paths to social transformation.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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