



Practicing food democracy: a pragmatic politics of transformation

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Abstract

There is a tension regarding the potential of the alternative agro-food movement to create meaningful change. From one perspective, individual and organizational actors working to change the dominant food system need to be engaged on a daily basis in political and social struggles and accomplish what is presently possible given existing opportunities and barriers. From an alternate view, such pragmatism is woefully inadequate for achieving the complete transformation of the food and agriculture system that many movement actors and academic analysts see as necessary. This paper examines some of the issues underlying this tension. It is argued that the “sustainability” of food and agriculture systems is understandably a contested concept because it inevitably involves both conflicts over values and uncertainty about outcomes. These same characteristics make democracy the method of choice for the alternative agro-food movement, and this paper discusses the emerging concept of “food democracy” in order to elaborate upon its practical utility with respect to collective action. The existing alternative agro-food movement is the main source of the pressure to democratize the agro-food system. While the movement in the United States (and elsewhere) is very diverse in terms of organizational forms and strategies, there are important opportunities for developing coalitions among various groups. Lastly, food democracy is discussed as a pragmatic method for transforming the agro-food system.

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1. Introduction

In *Hungry for Profit*, an edited collection of essays, contributor Henderson (2000) examines some of the current social activity opposing the excesses of industrialization, economic concentration, and globalization of agriculture and food systems. Henderson gives us a glimpse of organizations in the United States developing alternative farm practices, of farmers and eaters engaged in community supported agriculture, of groups working to guarantee the right to a nutritious and sufficient diet, and of policy advocates operating at the national and international levels. From this vista of the organizational landscape, Henderson (2000, p. 175) observes that: “sustainable agriculture is swelling into a significant social movement with a national network and an effective policy wing”. She sees rich potential in the ability of people to organize and build local food systems from the grassroots up. In this context, she concludes, “food becomes political,” and even a backyard garden becomes “a small piece of liberated territory in the struggle for a just and sustainable society” (Henderson, 2000, pp. 187–188).

The editors of *Hungry for Profit* apparently felt compelled to respond to Henderson in a note following her essay, the only such note in the volume (Magdoff et al., 2000, p. 188). The editors comment that most people “on the left” might resonate with the vision for an alternative agro-food system that Henderson paints, but those same people “may think that the key tactics chosen by activists at the grassroots are insufficient to mount a systematic critique of corporate agriculture and liberal capitalist economics as a whole” (Magdoff et al., 2000, p. 188). The editors concede that strategies such as farmers’ adding value to their produce by direct marketing and efforts to improve the access to nutritious food by the poor can help people confront immediate problems in their everyday lives. The editors maintain, however, that “a left analysis would question whether this pathway is really a solution to the problems or rather something that will produce only a minor irritant to corporate dominance of the food system. A complete transformation of the agriculture and food system, it might be argued, requires a complete transformation of the society” (Magdoff et al., 2000, p. 188).

The above exchange points to a tension regarding the potential of the alternative agro-food movement to create meaningful change. From one perspective,

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Pragmatic Politics Manual Guide

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