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Beyond the Minimally Adequate Diet: Food Stamps and Food Sovereignty in the U.S.

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Abstract

Re-framing food sovereignty in the urban U.S. means grappling with the messy politics of consumption in ways that put poor consumers and urban poverty at the center of our analysis. I argue that focusing on the state, and food subsidies in particular, can help us ask more coherent questions around how principles of food sovereignty might be realized in an urban context in ways that build intra-class alliances between small-scale, sustainable producers, food justice activists and poor urban consumers. This paper draws on 18 months of ethnographic research in a North Brooklyn food pantry and food stamp outreach program.

Food sovereignty, as it has been articulated by Via Campesina and other transnational activist networks, posits a renewed emphasis on the rural and peasant control over productive resources. Activists in the United States attempting to apply the principles of food sovereignty in the urban context point to urban agriculture as one possible way to realize some control over land and resources in the city (Schiavoni 2009). Growing food in the city is valuable as a subsistence strategy to supplement low-incomes, but it is insufficient as a strategy for securing food security for the urban working classes. The limits of urban agriculture mean grappling with the creation of regional food-sheds. One of the challenges of these experiments with growing food in the city or with the creation of regional food-sheds based on direct farmer to consumer marketing through farmer's markets and CSA's is that they often exclude those who are most marginalized in the US food system, the poor and unemployed who often rely on emergency food and food stamps. (Alkon and Mares 2012; Guthman 2008).

While many commentators laud these efforts to operate outside of the dominant paradigm of agro-industrial food, there is also a growing awareness of just how 'anemic' and fragmented these efforts have been. Julie Guthman, an important critic of the food movement in the U.S. has argued that in order to make effective change, activists may have to shift focus from voluntary, market-based or philanthropy-driven projects – the kind that have dominated efforts to instantiate some degree of food sovereignty in the urban U.S. - to a renewed focus on the state (Guthman 2008).

I take up this critique by focusing on the federal food stamp program in the U.S., which is a federal entitlement that provides food aid to citizens living below 130% of the poverty level (\$19,090 annually for a family of three) and currently serves 47 million people, or 15% of the U.S. population. I argue that focusing on the state, and food subsidies in particular, can help us ask more coherent questions around how principles of food sovereignty might be realized in an urban context.

In doing so, this paper attempts to clarify some of the concerns that critics of the food movement in the U.S. have raised, particularly the limits of a theory of food system transformation that relies heavily on the creation of alternative, local markets that mainly contribute to what Raj Patel characterizes as ‘ethical hedonism’ for wealthy consumers and excludes working class consumers (Patel 2009). Food sovereignty is often put forward as an alternative framing for analyzing food system movements, and yet a certain level of reframing is necessary if food sovereignty is to appeal to Northerners whose primary connection to the food system is through consumption (Fairbairn 2012).

Many critics have expressed skepticism about consumer based food politics and this skepticism is well placed, particularly in the U.S. where consumer politics have contributed to a stratified food system, with ‘good food’ for the wealthy and regular food for everyone else. But a food movement that excludes poor urban consumers excludes the very people in the U.S. who have been most heavily impacted and disadvantaged by an agro-industrial food system. Re-framing food sovereignty in the urban North means grappling with the messy politics of consumption in ways that put poor consumers and urban poverty at the center of our analysis.

Critiques of industrially produced food are widespread and people across race and class lines understand the effects of cheap food, which disproportionately impact the poor and racial minorities. The ability to act on concerns about the quality and safety of food, however, are limited for those at the lower end of the economic spectrum and these limits are explicitly enforced by the structure of the food stamp program.

I argue that the critiques of agro-industrial food, particularly those put forth by food justice advocates who put racial health disparities at the center of their analysis, provide a basis for new claims on the state around the right to health. One way to shape these demands might be to re-define the way that benefit levels are determined in the federal food stamp program – that is, beyond a minimally adequate diet.

The Limits of Cheap Food and the Good Food Movement

Cheap food has long been a key tool in building hegemonic consent to various forms of capitalist development, both in the U.S. and globally (Friedmann 1982; Levenstein 1993). Innovations in the production of cheap food have accelerated the availability and ubiquity of industrially produced processed foods globally (Errington, et al. 2012; Goody 1997; Mintz 1995). But industrially produced food has also given rise to widespread anxieties about food health and safety (Levenstein 1988; Schlosser 2002; Sinclair 1906). Many consumers in the US have

begun to question whether these foods should be considered 'proper food' or 'good food' (Belasco 2007).

Anxiety about food is pervasive in the urban U.S., as the proliferation of labels advertising non-GMO, organic, grass fed, natural, fair-trade, low-fat, low-sodium, and gluten free products can attest. The proliferation of new products responding to these concerns and anxieties has a distinct spatial logic that tracks with race and class segregation in urban neighborhoods. Rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods are marked by new upscale grocery stores selling expensive organic fruits and vegetables, lush farmer's markets and CSA's while working class neighborhoods typically lack these resources and often lack stores serving even basic staples, like low-fat milk.

The proliferation of high priced products and high end grocery stores, like Whole Foods, aimed at easing a host of anxieties around food safety and sustainability is largely a corporate response to increasingly forceful critiques of the agro-industrial food system, which has been blamed for high rates of diet related chronic illness as well as contributing to global warming and industrial pollution. Through popular books and documentary films, like Food Inc. and King Corn, critics have shown how cheap food comes at a high price through the externalized costs to the environment, public health, and worker rights and safety.

Defining what we mean by 'adequate food' is both crucial and contested. There is a growing demand for safe, healthy, ethical and sustainably produced food. But, in the U.S., these political demands have been almost seamlessly transformed into market demands by the food industry and food entrepreneurs. One of the challenges (and failures) of food activism in the U.S. has been to resist the co-optation of emergent political demands by market forces.

Many of the people involved in articulating a version of ethical, sustainable consumption have left this problem aside, arguing instead that it is important for people who can afford to eat ethically to do so in order to develop alternatives to agro-industrial food (Pollan 2006). And yet, this is precisely the problem. These alternatives, co-existing side-by-side with a predominantly corporate controlled, agro-industrial food system produce the illusion of a real social movement that actually ends up buttressing a neoliberal response to falling profits in the food sector by opening up new markets for high-end, high-priced specialty foods. Instead of food system transformation, we get value-added products sold at a huge mark-up to those who can afford to pay.

This kind of high end, value-added consumption fits neatly with an emergent neoliberal urban development strategy aimed at cultivating ever-more expensive and elaborate ways for the

super rich to spend their money. But it does little for the poor and working classes, who are subject to falling wages, increasingly punitive welfare policies, policing, and pressure from gentrification and social service cuts.

The Discursive Power of Good Food

What people eat is the product of political-economic configurations as well as the mobilization of certain kinds of cultural and emotional labor to produce meaning and social continuity. Critiques of industrial food speak to widespread anxieties around degraded, dangerous, illness-producing foods. When people buy ethical, local or healthy foods, they are engaged in a process of self-construction that is simultaneously material and discursive. They are instantiating a particular kind of body along with a particular kind of worldview.

There are aspects of this worldview – that food should be produced locally and sustainably and that farmers should be adequately compensated for their labor – that dovetail with food sovereignty principles. But, where food sovereignty activists in the global south call for de-commodifying food and land, good food activists in the U.S. typically take a market-based approach that establishes ethical food as a high-value commodity. Like much in the fragmented food movement in the U.S., various projects and organizations straddle reformist, progressive and radical tendencies, often in messy and complicated ways.

Food justice activists in the U.S. articulate a critique of the food system that incorporates explicit demands for racial and economic justice. These efforts have produced “a host of locally-based initiatives linking access to healthy food to sustainable production ... including farm-to- school programs, urban gardens, corner store conversions, community markets, community-supported agriculture and the spread of farmers markets into under- served communities” (Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). But many of these projects are still dependent on local markets and consumers who can afford to pay for healthy and sustainably produced food.

Neoliberal reforms, both within the U.S. and internationally have been justified on the grounds that the market is the best possible mechanism for delivering not only goods and services, but also justice and freedom. As global food activists and scholars have shown, these reforms – from structural adjustment to deregulation of food corporations – have been disastrous for both the urban and rural poor, in both developing and developed nations. It is crucially important to begin to cultivate other forms of value production that can mobilize social actors.

Thinking about how to operate outside of a market paradigm and to work toward the de-commodification of food has proved to be a sticky problem for food activists in the U.S. It is more important than ever to de-commodify the very things which make social reproduction

possible – food, land, housing, education and healthcare – and to delegitimize market ideology – the common sense that upholds legal and political structures that impoverish and disempower both the rural and the urban poor.

It is important to note that I'm not arguing here for a simple return to Keynesian welfarism, which was premised on the idea of de-commodifying certain spheres in order to reproduce a compliant and productive labor force, with the ultimate goal being enhanced capital accumulation and profit maximization. Instead, I'm asking if food movements can develop demands that move toward de-commodified food on grounds that move beyond a narrow, productivist market logic.

The US food movement has done part of the work of delegitimizing market ideology – the belief that markets rationally allocate resources to produce the most good for the most people – by calling the environmental and health effects of the industrial food system into question. Food justice activists go further by pointing out that these health and environmental effects disproportionately impact poor communities of color and are linked to a legacy of racism and dispossession in the U.S. But, by offering a privatized solution through expanding individual consumer choices, the good food movement, and even the food justice movement, fail to offer a transformative vision and instead ends up reinforcing market ideologies by providing ethical, healthy and sustainable products to those who can afford to pay.

Social justice activists committed to realizing racial, gender and economic justice in the food movement struggle with the limits of market-based and philanthropic approaches (Alkon and Mares 2012). Connecting these local level projects to a broad-based politics that addresses 'neoliberalism writ large' remains a vexing problem for U.S. based food activists committed to principles of food justice and food sovereignty.

Shared Concerns, Limited Powers to Act

My findings, based on 18 months of ethnographic research in North Brooklyn, suggest that concerns about food safety and health that motivate upper-class consumers to change their eating patterns are not exclusively theirs, but that the means to act on them are. I spent a year and a half running a food stamp outreach program in a North Brooklyn food pantry. Through this advocacy work, I was able to interview 38 community residents who used the pantry, were enrolled in food stamps or used both programs. I also had countless interactions with pantry clients and community residents that were not part of this formal interview sample. My advocacy work allowed me to build relationships with many of my informants and to document their circumstances over long periods of time. I followed 22 of the 38 interview subjects for at

least six months and, in some cases, for over a year. Interviews and field notes focused on work histories, use of welfare programs and emergency food providers, ideas about eating well, and experiences of hunger and food insecurity. I also accompanied people to the welfare office, assisted them with benefit applications, and conducted three focus groups with front-line welfare workers. What emerged was a clear picture of the ways the urban food market, food subsidy programs, charitable food aid and the labor market all contribute towards limiting poor people's choice.

I met Martha, a twenty four year old African American woman who was a regular at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry, at the local public library for our first interview. She was reading cookbooks and told me that she loves to cook and try new recipes. She thought very carefully about her food purchases, sometimes acquiring ingredients over the course of several months. "You get a few ingredients this month and a few next month and then you can make the dish." She cooks for herself and her young son who has special needs and requires a special diet. Out of work, Martha managed to feed herself and her son exclusively on their food stamp budget and by regularly going to several food pantries and soup kitchens in the area. She was intimately aware of the relationship between eating and health, but financial constraints made it impossible for her to consistently act on this knowledge.

Sometimes I'll have to go for maybe the fattiest of the processed stuff because sometimes that's cheaper than the healthier foods. Like you would get, what's a good example? Sometimes we get those fruit snacks or those sweet pastries. Sometimes they'll be the cheapest. Sometimes you can get bacon at a cheap price or you could get cold cuts at a cheap price. You just get the sugary cereal sometimes. Now, I noticed they have dollar-pack. So if my budget is low, you would go for the dollar-pack. And I noticed they have a lot of stuff now that's a dollar-pack that I wouldn't otherwise buy. But to be able to like...we need something to eat.

Nelson, a forty-year-old Puerto Rican man who was also a regular at the food pantry put it more succinctly. Describing his shopping and eating habits, he told me "Its at the whim of the grocery store. Whatever's on sale, that's what I eat". He went on to explain:

Sometimes I have like six cans of spaghetti or beef a roni, but its one per day. I can't do two, no matter how hungry I get. I'm supposed to have a special diet. White meat and no preservatives, no added colors, no fat for the liver. All that. But it's so expensive. Before it was the food for poor people, now it's the food for rich people. Years ago in PR, the vegetables and the seafood, that was the food for the poor people and here in Manhattan, that's the food for the rich. They eat seafood and vegetables. I can't bring

that into my head (worry about health). When I'm hungry I need to eat whatever thing.

Eating in ways that they knew were unhealthy and would contribute to poor health in the long-term was a fact of many people's lives. The correlation between poverty, obesity and diet-related disease is often attributed to lack of education. But people were both aware and anxious about their lack of choice. Their inability to act on this knowledge because, as Martha plaintively put it "we need something to eat" was a source of worry that they couldn't "bring into their heads". Thinking about the long-term health effects of cheap food was a luxury that many of my informants could not afford.

The cheap, processed foods Martha and Nelson describe could be characterized as contemporary 'proletarian hunger killers'(Mintz 1995). They are cheap, easy to make, sometimes filling and almost never nutritious. The structure of food subsidy programs in the US significantly reduce hunger, but do so by providing poor Americans with a minimally adequate diet, codified in the thrifty food plan (TFP). The USDA has four food plans that the agency uses to make recommendations about food budgets for a range of circumstances – the thrifty food plan, the low-cost food plan, the moderate cost plan and the liberal plan. The thrifty food plan is the least expensive and "serves as a national standard for a nutritious diet at a minimal cost and is used as the basis for maximum food stamp allotments."(USDA 2007)

The thrifty food plan embeds certain cultural assumptions about the poor and how they should eat into its design (Fitchen 1988). This definition excludes concerns about how food is produced or the well being of the people and the land that produce food. Containing cost is the paramount concern in formulating the TFP and that cost is reckoned exclusively in market terms.

The cheapest foods in the supermarket are the most heavily subsidized. In the US, corn, wheat, rice, soy and dairy are all heavily subsidized, with feed grains – primarily corn – accounting for the largest percentage of subsidy payments. The food stamp program is designed in such a way to make these cheap foods the only foods available, particularly to families and individuals who do not also have access to other income. These 'bottom of the pyramid' foods(Errington, et al. 2012) are then doubly subsidized, once in the form of direct subsidies to the industrial farmers who grow them and once again through the structure of the food stamp program, which essentially forces poor consumers to rely on these products.

The domestic, urban population is currently a source of cheap, easily exploited labor in the US and an important market for heavily subsidized, highly processed foods and surplus food. Like most Americans, poor people in the US are intimately aware of the health affects of diets high

in sugar, salt and processed foods, and worry about the impact of pesticides and the industrial production of food. But the current configuration of food subsidies and the growing prominence of low-wage service sector jobs means that addressing these worries by changing their consumption habits – as progressive middle class and wealthy Americans increasingly have – is not a realistic possibility. Instead, poor Americans are increasingly forced to make a devil’s bargain and willfully ignore the impact of cheap food on their bodies in order to simply have something to eat.

In order for progressive trends around regional agriculture to grow and to become more democratic, it is important to include poor people as consumers who can afford to spend more on regionally produced foods that compete with agro-industrial foods. Food Stamps and emergency food, in their current forms, do little to further this goal. The minimally adequate diet, enforced by the thrifty food plan and a labor market that provides below subsistence wages to a large swath of the working class, actively undermines consumers’ abilities to act on their concerns about food and health.

Connecting Poor Consumers to Food Justice Projects

Gimenez and Shattuck have argued that, “it is the balance of forces within the food movements that will likely determine the nature and the extent of reform or transformation possible within the double movement of the corporate food regime”(Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). They identify Food Justice projects in the urban North as the fastest growing segment of the progressive trend in urban food movements. Further, they argue that aligning these progressive tendencies in the food movement with the more radical trends represented by food sovereignty are crucial to push an agenda of food system transformation capable of challenging corporate control of the global food system.

Food justice projects – farmers markets and CSA’s, grocery stores in underserved areas and healthy bodega initiatives – are quite compatible with a reformist agenda so long as the terrain of food politics remains squarely market-based. Increasing the number of grocery stores, farmers markets and CSA’s in urban areas is not only compatible with a reformist agenda that does not fundamentally challenge corporate control of the food system, these efforts can also exacerbate displacement due to gentrification and neoliberal urban development.

Most regional food-shed projects in the urban U.S. connect small-scale or sustainable producers with middle or upper class consumers(Alkon and Mares 2012; Guthman, et al. 2006). Food justice projects, like environmental justice campaigns, have to navigate the tricky space between demanding resources and remediation for historically underserved communities and

unintentionally opening these communities up to redevelopment efforts that exacerbate gentrification and displacement (Checker 2011). One anti-poverty activist referred to the placing of new grocery stores in under-served areas as “a tease and a Trojan horse for accelerated gentrification and the displacement of the most vulnerable New Yorkers.” (Harper 2009)

Progressive trends in the U.S. food movement, catalyzed around the idea of food justice, are growing and have significant resonance among young people and communities of color. But these projects walk a tenuous political line so long as they remain focused on small scale, neighborhood-based projects that are easily co-opted by market interests. Intra-class alliances are important – that is, alliances between small-scale and sustainable growers and poor urban consumers - in order to engage more fully in transformative politics. One way to build these alliances would be through demands for increased welfare protections in order to address the disparities in health and food access that are already the focus of much food justice work.

Poor urban consumers will continue to be caught by the trap of cheap food as long as they are forced to eat ‘at the whim of the grocery store’. Food justice activists, with a critique of the food system’s impact on the health and well-being of poor communities of color, already implicitly offer a critique of cheap food. These embodied forms of discrimination can and should give rise to new kinds of claims on the state. Increased welfare protections that address these health disparities by allowing people to participate in local, alternative markets and to connect with sustainable food producers are one such demand.

Proposals for increasing the benefit amounts from the thrifty food plan to the low-cost food plan and further subsidizing food stamp purchases at farmers markets have been put forth in Congress during the most recent Farm Bill debates. These proposals envision a food stamp program that does more than provide a minimally adequate diet. Gimenez and Shattuck argue that, “as a political demand, food sovereignty invokes the sovereign power of the state for the implementation of re-distributive land reform, social protections and safety nets” (Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). These safety nets, however, must also transcend the reformist logic of capital, which regulates the poor by extending minimal social protections in order to maintain legitimacy and social control. Moving beyond minimal social protections – or a minimally adequate diet – needs to be included in a vision of food sovereignty that can meaningfully connect with progressive food justice trends in the U.S.

Expanding food subsidies would serve the dual purpose of increasing access to healthy and sustainable food and helping food justice projects to maintain some independence from both elite urban consumers and philanthropy capitalism. Expanding food stamp subsidies beyond

the minimally adequate diet means opening up space for people like Martha and Nelson, who are forced to eat 'at the whim of the grocery store', to think and to act differently in relationship to food and eating and to grow connections between poor urban consumers and food justice projects.

What I have tried to outline in this paper are some of the key critiques of cheap food in the U.S. as well as public policy that enforces reliance on cheap food for low-income U.S. residents. Re-valuing food is central to the work of realizing food sovereignty. In the U.S. this revaluing has taken place primarily through the market. This form of 'added-value' production sidesteps the political questions of poverty, health and even environmental degradation, which continues apace so long as the vast majority are forced into reliance on the cheapest foods – those that are most damaging to health, to the workers who produce them, to the environment and to global peasants who are displaced when they cannot compete with these industrially produced foods.

There is broad nascent support for building alliances around a demand for increased food stamp benefits and to move away from forced reliance on cheap food, including environmental groups, school food reformers, welfare rights advocates, community food security activists and groups and individuals concerned with public health. What is urgently needed are new articulations of progressive localism that are not dependent on producing a productive labor force for capital accumulation, but are focused on health and sustainability apart from narrow productivist market concerns. It is in this vein that moving an agenda for a guarantee to more than a minimal right to food constitutes an important contribution towards the long, difficult problem of transforming the corporate food system in the US.

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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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Maggie Dickinson](#) is a PhD Candidate in Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her dissertation, “Re-Calibrating the Welfare State: Food and the New Politics of Poverty”, funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, uses the messy politics around food, poverty and welfare as a lens to explore larger concepts such as emergent articulations of the political, urban class formation, neoliberalization and the state. She has published on food and protest at Occupy Wall Street, women, welfare and food insecurity and graffiti, race and the urban commons.