

Alternative Food Movements:

A Look at Socioeconomic and Racial Barriers

Anna McKay: Johnson City, TN (2017)

ABSTRACT

In a food culture dominated by white faces and upper class ideals, the pursuit of effective agricultural engagement within low socioeconomic communities struggling with food insecurity becomes increasingly difficult to achieve. Historically, those in positions of privilege have entered low-socioeconomic communities bearing empty promises and large smiles, leaving such communities largely resistant to and skeptical of the intentions and motives of those offering relief. Studies and personal stories provide evidence that the only truly effective way to combat unequal food access is by developing the trust and respect of the communities who directly experience the consequences of food insecurity.

More inclusive language and practices surrounding local food movements must be adopted in order for effective community engagement and dialogue to take place. This will be achieved by listening to the stories and concerns of those most deeply affected by current systems, and by relying on these same voices to guide the steps moving forward. Until the racial and socioeconomic factors of local food movements are recognized and acknowledged, reconstructing food system practices is impossible. This paper explores the current state of the local food movement, and possibilities for future improvement.

HISTORY

Alternative food movements date back to between 30 and 40 years ago as the transition between family owned small-scale farms and large-scale farm factories occurred. In the pursuit of higher yields and lower input costs, agricultural practices morphed into more mechanical and chemical methods causing “concerns about the health – of humans, other animals, and the

environment – as well as the ethics and risk of contemporary food production practices” (Grauerholz & Owens, 2015). On the contrary, alternative food movements emphasize local and seasonal food and reject conventional agricultural practices on the bases of environmental, ethical, and social values. Farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture models, and community gardens are all practical examples of alternative food movements.

Although different variations and tastes emerge within each individual alternative food movement setting, a common theme amongst them is the desire to shorten the distance between consumer and producer. Conventional agriculture products often travel hundreds, even thousands of miles before reaching the consumer, leaving a disconnect with great affects on food perception. Murdoch and Miele suggest that an intentional “reconnecting” must occur in order for consumer trust to be built back up, and alternative food movements provide opportunities for this reconnection to occur (Murdoch & Miele, 2004).

Despite a perceived universal need to connect with food, historically, alternative food movements favor the participation of white, upper-class individuals vis-à-vis poor and/or culturally diverse individuals. Alternative food movements, while important and necessary for environmental, social, and community health, present a unique set of racial and socioeconomic barriers. Many alternative food movement practices and systems “contain whitened discourses...shaped by a set of white cultural practices” making it difficult for people of color to find their place within (Alkon & McCullen, 2010). Historically the alternative food movement holds ideals of inclusivity and a wide range of diverse voices. However, it may unintentionally weaken, or even ruin, the very platform upon which it stands through this “whitened discourse.”

WHITENED DISCOURSE: FARMERS MARKETS

In order to discuss the implications of “whitened discourse,” it is necessary to establish what is meant by “white.” According to Ruth Frankenberg’s work, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, “whiteness carries with it a set of ways of being in the world, a set of cultural practices often not named as ‘white’ by white folks, but looked upon instead as ‘American’ or ‘normal’” (Frankenberg 1993). As soon as a practice or a way of being is labeled as normal, everything falling outside that norm is looked upon critically, making individuals on the outside feel excluded and unwanted. Whether this is caused intentionally or not has little to do with a need for improvement.

Frankenberg asserts race as a social designation, much like gender. Although race is usually thought of as something outside of “white” because white, for centuries, has been designated the “norm,” “whiteness” is also a social construct – one that holds an abundance of power and privilege (Frankenberg, 1993). Because of the automatic racialization of people, Alkon and McCullen speak about the racialization of *space* by stating “...white bodies cluster around property and privilege, *as happens in farmers markets*, and code these spaces as white” (Alkon & McCullen, 2010; emphasis mine). According to their study, after a space is racialized, those outside the coded race feel hesitant to participate at best, and unwanted at worst. Once a body feels unwelcome, cultural neutrality, if it ever existed in the first place, becomes obsolete.

Furthermore, the majority of farmers markets present white small-scale farmers as heroic workers who providing consumers with fresh and local produce. However, not seen are the hundreds of Latino laborers working behind them (Alkon & McCullen, 2010). This provides a false sense of connecting consumer to farmer, and merely hides the cultural disconnect still in existence. Until these cultural divisions are acknowledged, farmers market customers will

continue the false assumption that the gap between producer and consumer has come full-circle, leading to continued ignorance and cultural exclusion.

Perhaps one of the most harmful ideologies created by farmers markets lies in the principle that food choice is a moral act. When one posits farmers market shopping as an ethical imperative yet does not acknowledge the apparent class exclusivity, “farmers market participants reinforce... [the] ‘moral inferiority of the poor’ and by extension, the moral superiority of affluent whites” (Alkon & McCullen, 2010). Therefore, presenting local food choice as a moral imperative creates huge obstacles for the poor, only exacerbating feelings of inadequacy already experienced amidst a socioeconomic hierarchy in which the poor find themselves at the bottom. Even so, farmers markets provide an effective place of engagement for those who seek more ethical places of food consumption. Complete eradication would be a misguided suggestion as farmers markets offer spaces for political dialogue surrounding food and meaningful connection for community members.

COMMUNITY GARDENS: WORKING WITH OR FOR?

Community gardens, much like farmers markets, have their fair share of class and racial exclusivity. Even when placed directly in communities where access to fresh and local food is scarce, because of their approach, they are often limiting as well. Imagine for a moment that someone walks into your kitchen, critiques everything you are doing, and then hands you unfamiliar and distasteful (to you) ingredients with an unfamiliar recipe. Even if the food is high quality, the imposition itself ruins whatever else may have been good about the exchange. This is essentially what white upper class individuals have been doing in lower class neighborhoods for years; only instead of a figurative kitchen, it is a literal backyard.

Michael Pollan – famous for his slogan “Don’t eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food” – created a food culture favoring food of the past vis-à-vis the current gimmicks and trends used to distract from poor food production (Pollan, 2009).

However, as Tiarachristie points out, Pollan “ignores the fact that ‘our’ great-grandmother in this nation did not share the same socio-historic and economic contexts that may have impacted their access to and informed their perceptions of food” (Tiarachristie, 2013). When cultural and socioeconomic heritage is ignored, miscommunication is a small worry, overshadowed by blatant disrespect and exclusionary practices often found in community gardens.

Nonetheless, the importance of an effective community garden model remains. Communities of lower socioeconomic status are “particularly at risk of consuming diets that are less than optimal, including fewer vegetables, fruits and high fiber foods” (Ball, Timperio, & Crawford, 2009). A study in Philadelphia found that community members who actively participated in their community garden “were more likely than matched controls to eat more vegetables and consume fewer sweet foods and drinks” (Alaimo, Packnett, Miles, & Kruger, 2008). Community gardens provide a practical way of combatting poor food access and high prices, making them a highly desirable model for community health and engagement.

An example of effective community gardening is seen at Urban Tree Connection, based out of West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Founder Skip Wiener, has worked since 1989, building meaningful connections within the neighborhood he grew up. One of Wiener’s main methods of connection is seeking “captains” of the community and discussing effective community engagement methods with them (Mann, 2010). “Captains” are members of the community possessing strong social capital and power, making community engagement meaningful and possible. Although Wiener is white, his role as liaison allows local, black community members

to maintain their status and power, allowing change to come from within the community instead of from afar. Urban Tree Connection provides hope that alternative food movements actually do have the power to effectively engage communities and reach a common goal of food access and vitality.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Alternative food movements possess the ability to stand in opposition to destructive and unethical food systems. While many possess their own set of racial and socioeconomic barriers, effective dialogue and acknowledgement improves the likelihood of true and honest growth occurring in the future. Continued criticism and conversation must continue if alternative food movements truly intend to become “culturally neutral” spaces where all may feel welcome. To use the words of Wendell Berry:

“We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.”

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