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Understanding the Food Democracy Movement

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It is a paradox of the modern world that while humans have unprecedented access to food—a fact to which our waistlines will testify—much of society simmers with discontents. Jimmy Kimmel recently quipped that some are more scared of gluten than disease. An organic food advocate has likened our use of pesticides to Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons (Rodale, 2013), and France feels the declining carbon content of soils are threatening our climate (Climate Action, 2015). There is something of a Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in terms of food. Now that obtaining calories is possible for most we are holding food to higher standards. It should not only meet our physical needs, but also our nobler goals of environmental protection, sustainability, kindness to animals, and social justice. There is no one term encompassing these higher goals, but the term that comes closest is ‘Food Democracy’. To understand food in the modern world we must understand Food Democracy. The movement may seem to lack a unifying theme, but that is mistaken. At the core of its criticisms is a resentment of the role that large corporations play in food.

Although there is no need to adopt a single definition of Food Democracy, the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) North America organization provides one of the better descriptions. Does it seek healthy food for all? *Check*. A cleaner environment? *Check*. Does it have a fondness for local food? *Check*. Is the word ‘corporation’ used as a pejorative? *Check*. Does it include the term ‘social justice’, just in case a cause you champion has not already been listed? *Check*.

“Simply put, food democracy emphasizes fulfillment of the human right to safe, nutritious food that has been justly produced. It means ordinary people getting together to establish rules that encourage safeguarding the soil, water, and wildlife on which we all depend. It is also pragmatic politics built around the difficult lesson that food is too important to leave to market forces—that we all have a right and responsibility to participate in decisions that determine our access to safe, nutritious food.

This push to re-localize control over food and farming in the United States has an international equivalent in the “food sovereignty” movement. Both were born in the late 1990s, in response to the increasing corporate control over the global food system. As an international network, PAN works to advance and link these two movements, which hold a shared vision of the future of food and farming. That vision is rooted in regenerating autonomous food systems *with, for and by the people*” (PAN North America, 2015).

Another attribute of the term Food Democracy that makes it appealing to food activists is that it cannot—easily—be co-opted by large food corporations—excluding Whole Foods. The organic food movement was considered a revolution—then Walmart started selling it. The sustainability movement

began in opposition to the conventional method of food production—now ‘sustainability’ is repeated ad nauseam by the food industry. Yet it would be difficult for Walmart or the beef industry to claim it has much interest in Food Democracy, as the term itself refers to a handing over of power to the demos. The pork industry would prefer that they—not voters—decide on whether gestation crates should be used, and the Grocery Manufacturers Association is not keen in allowing Vermont citizens to decide how its food is labeled.

If there is one persistent theme in Food Democracy it is an opposition to large corporations. This opposition is manifested in five unconventional perspectives of the food activist, listed below. Learn these five perspectives and you can step inside the mind of a food activist—grasping the essence of Food Democracy.

Perspective 1: Behind “Free Markets”, Always Corruption

The failure of centrally planned economies seemed to prove that private property and markets were necessary for a full stomach. More than the presence of markets was important, though: the markets had to be free. This meant that market decisions—especially prices—had to be the result of negotiations between buyers and sellers, with minimum influence from government. Proponents of this view have sought for fewer agricultural subsidies, less trade restrictions, and minimum government regulations.

Food Democracy activists also like free markets, they just do not see any, and policies said to be in pursuit of free markets are thought to really stem from corruption. For instance, the Committee for Economic Development argued for the removal of farm subsidies in the 1960s, but food activists like Wenonah Hauter (2012) insist the committee was really a corporate conspiracy to reduce the price that big food companies paid for farm products. The move to reduce farm subsidies in the 1996 Farm Bill was really a conspiracy by the same corporations said to control the World Trade Organization (WTO). Can corporations control the WTO? According to many food activists, yes, and this hints at their take on international trade agreements.

Perspective 2: Trade is Never About Trade

There is a general-consensus among economists and policymakers that international trade encourages prosperity, and the ability to buy from and sell to foreigners is arguably an essential part of being a free person. International trade requires formal agreements to protect intellectual property. These agreements are political, and the Food Democracy movement argues they are written to benefit a few powerful corporations at the expense of the citizenry. Just consider the recent controversies regarding the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. No one is arguing we should not import or export, but some do contend that the trade deal that was negotiated in secret and under the influence of corporations. The Food Democracy Now! (2015) organization fears these clandestine negotiations will prohibit countries from writing their own food labeling laws. Public Citizen claims it would force us to accept imports of unsafe food. Such views extend beyond just trade agreements. Public Citizen (Wallach, 2011) has also claimed that recent Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) rulings are not meant to encourage trade but to allow businesses to sell “mystery meat” in the United States.

Perspective 3: Technology is Overrated

As the communist countries have replaced much of their central planning with market reforms, it is tempting to say that Karl Marx’s ideas and language are antiquated—this would be a mistake. There are still Marxist economists who view industrialization as exploitation. They tout Cuban agriculture as ideal and American agriculture as destructive. The philosophy of Karl Marx described how, before the proletarian revolt would begin, capitalism and industrialization would spread throughout an economy much like a contagious disease. Today’s Marxists see this as a prophecy already fulfilled, but not fully at

the farm level (Lewontin, 2000). This disease is difficult to infect farmers, so corporations instead attempt to exploit the farmers by making them reliant on corporate inputs. They see the advancement of modern technologies as a Marxian apocalypse, and technological change not as the birth-pangs of a prospering people but the blitzkrieg of corporate hegemony. The corporation is not depicted so much as an ordinary company seeking to sell a profitable product, but an organization committed to spreading the ideology of capitalism anywhere it does not exist. For Food Democracy, the private sector is not separate from politics, but is itself a political institution.

Paul Ehrlich's 1968 prediction of impending famines never came to fruition, and most agricultural scientists credit the Green Revolution. The technologies born of this revolution are not celebrated by the Food Democracy movement, though. Publications like *Mother Earth News* have questioned the Green Revolution's success (Welch, 2008), and accuse it of making the food system more vulnerable to pests, polluting the environment, degrading human health, and reducing the nutrient content of food. Such a view is gaining ground, as recent reports by the United Nations have been summarized as saying that the world can only be fed by small-scale organic farming (Meyer, 2013).

Perspective 4: New Systems, Not Marginal Changes

It would be nice if the large investments made in agricultural research could settle our food controversies, but this is rarely the case. Facts like 'chemical fertilizers increase yields' are rarely helpful because experiments test marginal changes in agriculture, while food activists are envisioning a completely new food system—and new social institutions.

Without pesticides, organic farmers must rely on plant and animal diversity. This means that, if organic must feed a large population, those consumers must be willing to eat a diverse set of foods—but that does not describe the American diet. Food Democrats thus urge us to change our diets, and to do this we must alter our cultural notions about food. This requires us to view foods like goat and buckwheat differently—not as inferior, but ethical.

Political institutions, also influence the success of an organic food sector,, an example is how waste is disposed of in a community. The city of Portland, Oregon has a system where citizens can dispose of yard debris and food scraps in a green bin, which is emptied weekly by the city and used to make compost. This compost can then be purchased by organic farms. The efficiency of organic food then depends critically on the systematic changes that consumers and governments are willing to accept, and so the success of alternative agriculture cannot be determined by field trials, but must be evaluated in the context of a much larger social system. This makes evaluating different food systems incredibly difficult, but the Food Democracy movement asks us to not only to acknowledge these difficulties, but to embrace them, because embracing them is to acknowledge reality.

Perspective 5: Replace Bad Politics with Good Politics

At the heart of the Food Democracy movement is the belief that powerful corporations have distorted the political process, allowing them to accumulate treasures at the expense of the citizenry. This is not just a liberal view, as conservatives and libertarians also lament the presence of crony-capitalism, though with less intensity. The difference is that the political-right believes this corruption would be best confronted by reducing the power of politicians, and the political-left believes you must replace the bad politicians with better ones. Rather than reducing the powers of government, the liberal view is for citizens to become more influential than corporations are.

The Toronto Food Policy Council—the utopia of Food Democracy—was created in the belief that active citizens could improve the world at the local level. It was an emergent manifestation of concerns from community groups and civil servants in response to the belief that hunger, environmental

pollution, and unhealthy food resulted from an oligopolistic food economy (MacRae, 1994). This is the ideal of Food Democracy, where people from diverse backgrounds but similar concerns reflect on the changes in agriculture and food, allowing new movements and new ideas to emerge.

Food activists believe that the private sector, governmental agencies, and universities were given a chance to construct an effective food system, but failed. All are said, to be controlled by corporate handlers. Yet Food Democracy activists are not opposed to the earning of an honest profit, they consistently support greater government power, and heartily endorse the idea of public research. What they believe is that these three institutions have great promise and can play a better role in society, so long as the citizenry takes a more active role.

Political activism is a method by which the future conscience of a nation is communicated to policymakers, they believe. Activists are perennially scouting all aspects of food production, eagerly seeking a problem they can reveal to the public in books, speeches, and documentaries. Though activists often seem extreme compared to ordinary Americans, the conscience of those Americans generally evolves to mimic the activist. Activism is the art of forcing people to behave in ways, then they will later thank you for it. It was activists who forced food manufacturers to provide nutrition labels for food, but virtually all consumers now agree it should remain mandatory. For a long time people showed little interest in the suffering of farm animals, but then food activists started rattling the animal cage, and in 2008 citizens of California voted to ban cramped cages. So just because food activists seem extreme compared to the attitudes of the average citizen does not mean they are 'out of tune' with the public. They are often just a few steps ahead of the public, and remember, it is the extreme numbers that move the average the most.

An Important Role

Because the Food Democracy movement seems to rebel against so many features of modern food production, it might be tempting to disregard them as activists who will always be yelling, or discontents who will never be satisfied. It is difficult to imagine them contributing to practical solutions when they are calling for a revolution, but they, nevertheless, play an important role in society. Despite their diversity, they have one unifying belief: excessive corporate influence on government has led to a number of problems—but who would unilaterally disagree? Those most satisfied with our food supply still believe that market power could pose a problem, companies should be prevented from polluting the environment, laws should protect the safety of food, and some people need help acquiring healthy food. The Food Democracy movement helps us identify these problems, and though they call for a food revolution, the rest of us can search for solutions that are more practical. By working together, we can employ the practical solutions when they exist, and perhaps, shout 'revolution' when they do not.

For More Information

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