

PUTTING LOCAL IN ITS PLACE: AN AGRIFOOD SYSTEM IN CRISIS AND  
THE EMERGENCE OF AN ALTERNATIVE ECO-SUBJECTIVITY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis situates contemporary US agrifood localism within its social and historical context in order to bring to light the ways in which contemporary agrifood localism is forging an alternative eco-subjectivity. Relying on articles on local agriculture and food published in two widely read academic journals, *Agriculture and Human Values* (AHV) and *The Journal of Rural Studies* (JRS) as my case studies, I (re)-construct what I call ‘the localist discourse.’ Interrogating this discourse, I contend that advocates of agrifood localization, because they often do not theorize place and scale, make spatial assumptions that have problematic theoretical and political consequences. Specifically, I extend Maria Fonte’s two-part model of agrifood localism, to specify that the relocalization perspective on localism—which advocates increased proximity between producer and consumer—tends to make assumptions about scale. The form of localization that promotes the preservation of local foods—summarized under the term origin-of-food perspective—is inclined to make assumptions about place.

My work departs significantly from recent critics of agrifood localism, however, in that I engage with geographic theories of scale, place and space as a means to strengthen the concept of local, rather than to discard it. The act of historicizing substantive and theoretical localism in general and agrifood localism in particular, I argue, helps us perceive the potential the contemporary local agriculture and food movement has to usher in an alternative eco-subjectivity where social problems and their solutions are conceptualized as interrelated and as embedded in their ecological context.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Djahane Salehabadi was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 1978 in Munich, Germany. She attended Alexander von Humboldt Schule in Montreal, Canada and Ecole d'Humanité in Switzerland. In 2002, she obtained a BA in Earth Sciences from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. After college, Djahane was awarded a Lombard Fellowship which enabled her to work for a year at Communiterre, a grass-roots non-profit focused on building community food security and community solidarity through collective urban gardens in Montreal.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Interest in local agriculture and food among US academics, activists as well as the general public has boomed in the last ten to fifteen years. From the cover story in the March 12<sup>th</sup> 2007 edition of *Time Magazine* to Barbara Kingsolver's best-selling *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* published in 2007, the last decade and a half has seen the proliferation of hundreds of newspaper articles, television programs, internet sites, radio shows, as well as popular books celebrating the virtues of local agriculture and food (Kingsolver 2007, Smith and Mackinnon 2007, Pollan 2005, Nabhan 2002). Indeed, as Robert Feagan contends, when it comes to food and agriculture "an almost visceral urgency" exists today among US-Americans to go local (38).<sup>1</sup>

People are not only talking and thinking about local agriculture and food. They are also *doing* it. Whether farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), farm-to-school or farm-to-institution programs (FTS or FTI), urban gardens, u-pick operations or farm-stands, local food projects are springing up across the country. According to the USDA, farmers' markets alone have grown from 1,755 markets in 1996 to approximately 4,385 in 2006—an increase of 18.32% (USDA 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Additional books include: *The Real Food Revival* (2005), *Local Flavors: Cooking and Eating from America's Farmers' Markets* (2002), *Slow Food (The Case for Taste)* (2003), *Bringing the Food Economy Home: Local Alternatives to Global Agribusiness* (2002), *Food Finds: America's Best Local Foods and the People Who Produce Them* (2002). Some of these books, such as Norberg-Hodge et al's *Bringing the Food Economy Home*, focus on shortening food chains. Others, such as Engel and Engel's *Food Finds*, stress local agriculture and food as markers of identity and culture.

<sup>2</sup> CSAs have followed a similar rising trend (Local Harvest 2007, Groh and McFadden 1990, McFadden 2004). In 1990 approximately 60 CSAs existed in the US. By 2004 over 1,700 had been documented. At the same time, FTS and FTI programs have also flourished. FTS which originated in the 1990s by the USDA in Florida spread to the entire US. By 2003, 400 school districts in twenty-two states were participating in FTS programs (Vallianatos et al. 2004: 407).

At present, many social movements and organizations in the US and abroad place local agriculture and food at their center. These include the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil, Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in the Chiapas region of Mexico, global coalitions such as Via Campesina, Slow Food International, The Food Project and Red Tomato in Massachusetts, Just Food in New York, Local Harvest and the Edible Schoolyard Project in California. Each organization takes a different approach to local agriculture and food—for example, Red Tomato provides farmers with a fair price whereas the Edible Schoolyard teaches elementary school students how to grow vegetables. Yet all these initiatives agree on one point, local agriculture and food.

Scholars have not been immune to the local agrifood craze. Nutritionists, planners, geographers, economists, physicians, and historians have taken up the topic with gusto. Plugging the terms “local food” and “local agriculture” in popular social scientific databases such as *Web of Science* and *Sociological Abstracts* results in over 2000 articles, mostly published within the last ten years, that contained either one or both of these terms in their titles.

Not everyone who writes about local agriculture and food sings its praises. For instance, an article published in *The Economist* in late 2006—citing a study by DEFRA, the British ministry for farming and environment, as well as a report by New Zealand’s Lincoln University—declared that local food production is often less energy efficient and more ecologically invasive than large-scale industrial systems (*The Economist* December 2006). Narrowing in on the problematic concept of food miles, the article concluded that importing dairy products, lamb, apples and onions from New Zealand to England used less energy than producing these goods in Britain. In other words, *The Economist* concluded, advocates of localism are entirely misinformed; localization is not better for the environment.

Social scientists have also begun to challenge blind faith in localism. Among others, Patricia Allen and Julie Guthman have recently warned that many alternative agriculture projects in the US, which primarily promote a local approach to food production and consumption, are at best “nonreformist reforms” (Olin-Wright cited in Kloppenburg and Hassanein 2006). Specifically, the authors declare that localism not only often operates within the neoliberal discourse of self-help, but it enables the continued vigor of global capitalism by “filling in the gaps” produced by neoliberalism through devolution (2006: 4-5, 15, 412)<sup>3</sup>.

Whether local is good or bad, one cannot ignore the fact that localization is on the table. This thesis attempts to understand the factors that have led to the present popularity of local agriculture and food in the US. Specifically, the objective of this thesis is to reconcile and move beyond the recent and often highly polemical dispute in agrifood studies centered on the special assumptions underlying agrifood localism. I attempt to transcend this debate by making a case for a historicized understanding of local. Contextualizing localism in this way, I argue, helps us appreciate the unique potential present-day agrifood localism possesses. Specifically, in this thesis I ask: what factors have led to the rise in popularity of local agriculture and food among academics as well as the general public in the US during the last ten to fifteen years? I operate with two additional sub-questions. First, what are the theoretical pitfalls

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<sup>3</sup> These challenges have not gone unmet. In the same issue of *Agriculture and Human Values*, Jack Kloppenburg and Neva Hassanein—two advocates for local agri-food projects, including FTS initiatives, cite Martinez and Garcia (1997) to retort that devolution is a tactic used by neoliberals that is cautiously used to further the expansion of corporate globalization. To be sure, full-scale devolution would undermine the objective of concentrating power in transnational institutions and of privileging market relations (2). The authors also challenge, on empirical grounds, the notion that FTS projects are an example of the privatization of public resources because they rely on private streams of funding and a core of volunteers (3-4). FTS projects reliance on private funds and volunteers is limited at best.

Perhaps most importantly, though, Kloppenburg and Hassanein argue that Allen and Guthman, who rely on superficial sources of information such as “a review of FTS databases, programmatic literature, and some participant observation,” are guilty of “flattening the surface of the FTS landscape” (417). In doing this they miss the potentially subversive aspects of these local food initiatives. Indeed, Kloppenburg and Hassanein assert, “Allen and Guthman see local FTS initiatives as impotent tools of neoliberalism. We see new opportunities to create innovative practices and policies in the social and political and economic spaces that have opened up at the local level (419).”

associated with undertheorized localism at the epistemological-methodological as well as the practical level? Second, what potential does agrifood localism have to engender a new, ecologically embedded subjectivity, social theory and practice?

To answer my questions, I examine two widely-read academic journals, *Agriculture and Human Values* (AHV) and *The Journal of Rural Studies* (JRS). With these two journals as my case studies, I (re)construct what I call a ‘localist discourse’ within agrifood studies, which represents a distillation of academic as well as activist writing on agrifood localization. I interrogate this discourse in order to gain insight into the factors that have led to the contemporary, widespread interest in local agriculture and food. Through this I hope to expose the limitation of remaining too focused on an a-historical and a-geographical abstract debate on whether local good or bad.

In brief, I argue that the widespread attention to local agriculture and food has a long genealogy. What is unique about this particular iteration of agrifood localism, however, is that it latently articulates a new eco-subjectivity, where agriculture and food are conceptualized as central in shaping and remedying the relationship between humankind and the biophysical world. In other words, current local agriculture and food, a response to modernization and the present precarious ecological condition, is ushering in an alternative, ecologically embedded theory and practice. This positive aspect of agrifood localism has been largely ignored by critics and, to some extent, advocates of localism until now.

My argument is structured as follows: In chapter two I engage with localism at the most abstract level. Specifically, I review and extend scholarly literature on the potential theoretical and substantive pitfalls of localism in general and agrifood localism in particular. Like critics of localism, I critique the pro-local academic discourse for not adequately theorizing place, scale and space. The ability of a

relocalized agriculture and food system to facilitate increased social justice, food security and an ecologically embedded thinking and practice—a potential I discuss at length in chapter two and three— is limited by this theoretical ellipsis.

Chapters three and four build on my point that we must conceptualize concepts such as local as socially, culturally and historically specific. In chapter three, I conceptualize local agriculture and food as part of a larger localization movement. Localism in the general sense, I propose, is a reaction at substantive level, to the modern capitalist tendency to scale up, centralize resources and power, and to homogenize cultural and ecological difference. At the methodological level, localization arises in reaction to modernist theory's tendency to erase place, to obscure the interaction between subject and object of study and to represent small-scale social movements as impotent. I add that the substantive and epistemic-methodological cases for localism are inextricably intertwined.

Having situated agrifood localism within the general turn to the local—a turn that arises in response to modernity— I investigate what is unique about contemporary agrifood localism in chapter four. Closely following Colin Duncan's case for the 'centrality of agriculture,' I explain that by underscoring agriculture and food, this particular localist movement signals—however implicitly—a recognition that agriculture and food play a central role in shaping societies in general and humankind's relationship to the natural world specifically. Before I engage fully in my argument, however, I would like to briefly elaborate on my epistemological orientation and my methodological choices.

My methodological approach stands in contrast to the quest for objective truth and 'scientific' knowledge that has dominated sociology since its birth as a discipline (Law 16). In *The Rules of Sociological Method* Emile Durkheim argued that the 'truth' is attainable and that the separation of knower and that which is known is

not only possible but is a prerequisite to obtaining true knowledge (62). This founding father of sociology declared that the social scientist must emancipate himself from his *notions vulgares* and uncover social facts through an austere scientific methodology (66, 71-73)<sup>4</sup>.

In contrast to Durkheim and other modernist social theorists who perpetuate the myth of objective, universal and a-historical truth, I rely on feminist theories<sup>5</sup> as advanced by thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Dorothy Smith and Joan Scott and offer a historical sociological analysis, which is partial and situated. In other words, I do not propose to have found ‘the’ reason why local agrifood has become popular in the US right now. Rather, I offer one interpretation—one I recognize as partial and shaped by who I am in the sense of my social, historical, cultural, location.

In asserting that my understanding of social phenomena is partial and situated, I do not deny the possibility of knowing anything or that all knowledge is relative. My interpretation of the popularity of agrifood localism in the US since the mid 1990s is

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<sup>4</sup> The adoration of ‘scientific,’ ‘objective truth’ was problematized early on. Indeed, thinkers such as Max Weber and Karl Marx set much of the groundwork for the later epistemological challenges made by feminist scholars. Weber argued against the possibility of universal and objective knowledge. Although he insists on the separation between the political, ethical and the ‘empirical’ within the academy and the study of culture, he questions the possibility of this ideal in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (9). Not only are values not easily separated in the classroom, but it is also impossible for the social scientist to gain any ‘objective’ knowledge of society or culture asserts Weber (Weber 72). Similarly, in “Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation)” Marx insists on the socio-historical specificity of his social analysis. In his discussion of labor and production Marx repeatedly emphasizes that the terms labor and production are limited to labor and production within a capitalist society at a specific point in history. His concepts are far from universal and generalizable (Marx 1973: 85, 105). Weber and Marx’s questioning of an objectivity that separates values, culture, and the historical from the object of knowledge lays the foundation for feminist epistemology which further unsettles the notion of objectivity and which frames my epistemological orientation as I attempt to reconstruct a historical explanation for the increasing popularity of local agrifood in the US since the mid 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to stress that post-modern, post-colonial, post-structural theory as well as the historical, cultural and qualitative turns in sociology have made significant contributions in shaping feminist-epistemology and its critique of modernist thought as outline above. It is difficult to clearly demarcate the boundaries between these theoretical approaches. Subscribing to the belief that each school of thought has informed and been shaped by the other, I chose to summarize this large, diverse and contested set of social theories under the general category of ‘feminist critique.’ My epistemological orientation is guided by the specific feminist theorists I cite above, because their work is to be the most longstanding and coherent body that engages scientific positivistic notions of objectivity on the epistemic level that I am familiar with.

Additionally, I must add here that ‘feminism’ cannot be considered as a monolithic whole. There are many flavors of feminist epistemologies. While acknowledging the difference within feminist theoretical scholarship, I would argue that this body of critical thought has, as a whole, opened the door to debates concerning knowledge production. Specifically, feminist critique has problematized the notion of objectivity.

not arbitrary. Instead I rely on an alternative approach to social scientific inquiry—one that recognizes knowledge production as a social process/construct that is intimately related to history, culture, values, gender, power and ideology (Yeatman 1994).

My objective in this thesis is to understand the popularity of agrifood localism at this particular historical juncture. This involves understanding the meanings localism holds as well as unearthing the assumptions—in this case spatial — underlying this approach to food and agriculture. Discourse analysis, therefore, is a useful tool in light of my research objectives. The definition of discourse analysis remains highly contested. However, most theorists agree that this method stems from a ‘constructivist’ epistemology where knowledge is recognized as socially, culturally and historically produced and where language is instrumental in shaping reality. Discourse analysis is effective in helping researchers unsettle that which has become common and familiar and expose the common assumptions underlying key concepts (Gee 2005, Johnstone 2002, Brown & Yule 1983). It is both a ‘hermeneutic approach’ in the sense that it helps scholars find the underlying meaning(s) of concepts, and it is a useful tool that helps us understand the process by which the spoken and written word creates and recreates meaning (Idem).

My methodological choices have limitations. I recognize that relying on academic representations of local food advocates is problematic in that academic representations are never neutral but are shaped by biases and ideological standpoints (Dixon 2006). I also recognize that what I unify under the umbrella of localist discourse is comprised of multiple, different and often contesting voices. However, academic representations have the benefit of providing a condensed overview of a relatively large body of spoken and written language pertaining to local agriculture and food in the US. In addition, the act of generalizing enables me to better perceive trends. Limited by time and my ability to conduct primary research, I have concluded

that the benefits of the methodological choice to rely on secondary sources and to generalize/homogenize the localist discourse outweigh its disadvantages.

Having summarized my argument and having somewhat clarified my epistemological orientation as well as my methodological choices, I would like to make one last point about local agriculture and food—a point I hope will clarify how I conceptualize local as historical.

The argument that localization will lead to increased empowerment, justice, improved social organization as well as more efficient use of local resources and knowledges has a long intellectual genealogy dating back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, E. F. Schumacher not to mention numerous indigenous thinkers (Starr 174). Indeed, from anarchists to advocates of Ghandian development, localization has been viewed as a way to realize self sufficiency and challenge exploitation by the world market for over a century (Kumar 1996 in Starr 470-471).

Just as localization in general is nothing new, so does local food and agriculture have a long history. With the exception of farm-to-school and farm-to-institution programs, which were specifically created by the USDA in the 1990s, local food projects and initiatives such as farmers' markets, farm stands, urban agriculture ventures and U-pick operations have existed in the US for many years<sup>6</sup>.

Not only have local agriculture and food initiatives and projects such as farmers' markets existed for some time, but framing localization of the agrifood system as a solution to social, economic and political problems is nothing new.

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<sup>6</sup> Brown disputes the commonly held conviction that local food initiatives grew most rapidly during the 1990s—a point scholars such as Atkinson and Williams (1994) as well as Hinrichs (2000) make. This estimation is inaccurate at least when it comes to farmers' markets. Generally, farmers' markets have increased in size in the last thirty years. However, between 1976 and 1986, farmers' markets were estimated to have grown by 500 percent nationally (Brown 2001). This is a much higher rate than the 18.32% growth rate between 1994 and 2006 documented by the USDA.

Numerous historical periods embraced local agrifood as a way to improve ecological and human health as well as rural economic viability.

One of the most vocal advocates of such an approach to food production during WWII was activist and founder of the Rodale institute, J. I. Rodale. Rodale's interest in local and organic agriculture peaked during WWII when the military required large quantities of nitrogen to make bombs. Without nitrogen fertilizer the depleted nature of US soils quickly became apparent. Nitrogen fertilizers had, until then, masked the soils' dire condition. In response, Rodale zealously promoted local and organic practices which would, he argued, restore soil quality. As Rodale saw it, human health was tied to the soil's health. Thus, changing agricultural practices had the added benefit of improving human health. This realization led Rodale to promote local, organic and sustainable agriculture through his foundation and publications well before the 1990s.

Walter Goldschmidt's book *As you Sow* (1947) demonstrates that scholars have been interested in local agriculture and food for a long time. The sociological book focuses on two farming communities in California that had experienced varying degrees of industrialization. According to Goldschmidt the town of Dinuba, which had an average farm size of 57 acres, was much better off than Arvin with its large industrial farms. As Goldschmidt proclaimed: "the large industrial farming communities lack solidarity, leadership, prosperity, permanent settlement, adequate educational facilities, and in general, a life of their own (119)." In contrast, small farming communities had strong social ties and were better off both socially and economically. While Goldschmidt focused on the social and economic repercussions of industrialization on local communities, he was already then making a case for local agrifood systems. As opposed to Rodale whose ultimate concern was human health,

however, Goldschmidt emphasized relocalization to promote rural socio-economic viability and community welfare (Idem).

Rodale and Goldschmidt are but two examples—one activist, one academic—that promotion of local food and agriculture to address social, ecological, political and economic issues has a long history. In fact, interest in agriculture and food has ebbed and flowed throughout the past 150 years. However, increased interest in localization does not occur at random. As Alison Brown avers, during the last 150 years, farmers' markets became popular at four specific historical junctures: during and immediately after the great depression, during and after WWII in the 1970s and now since the mid-1990s.

Brown's article is most concerned with understanding the factors that lead to the turn to local agriculture and food during the 1970s. She explains that after WWII major structural changes had occurred which by the 1970s had marginalized a great number of producers, who until then had primarily relied on direct marketing to earn their living (668). The ability to irrigate produce and the strengthened interstate system made transportation of produce across long distances possible. These technological advances coupled with legislation that favored large-scale agricultural production, enabled large-scale producers to take over the niche for fresh produce—a niche dominated by regional farmers until then. Indeed, by 1970 an estimated 340 farmers' markets remained in the US.

The general consensus among social scientists was that as food production and marketing systems changed due to the above-mentioned technological advances and developments in infrastructure farmers' markets would eventually disappear. Indeed, it was during this time that Jane Pyle wrote "Farmers' Markets in the United States: Functional anachronisms" (1971), published in the *Geographical Review*. In this piece Pyle regretfully envisaged the demise of farmers' markets. However, contrary to

predictions, shortly after Pyle's article was published, the number of farmers' markets in the US began to increase again.

Brown explains the increasing popularity of farmers' markets during the 1970s partially by the context of the wider political and economic turmoil of that period in history. While the author does not go into much detail about the specific historical and social conditions of that point in space-time, we can deduce that she is referring to the economic crisis, the Cold War, and the crisis in political legitimacy in the US. Hence, during the 1970s farmers' markets, seen as a historical social form, were about independence and national security, about regaining control of ones food system in the face of a corrupt political system.

Brown's discussion of farmers' market is useful to my argument because she articulates a historicized understanding of the popularity of local agriculture and food. Because her data indicates that the 1970s saw the largest increase in farmers' markets, Brown details the historical circumstances surrounding this shift in greatest detail. However, she signals that each cycle of interest in farmers' markets, and—I would add, by extension each instance of interest in local agriculture and food—while related must be understood within a particular historical context.

The proliferation of scholarly and popular literature, as well as media attention to, local agriculture and food, the abundance of social movements and organizations centered on local agriculture and food coupled with as the present boom in number of farmers' markets, CSAs, FTS programs, urban agriculture projects and so on, suggest that the current era has seen a significant, if not *the* most significant, comprehensive rise in local agriculture and food. Due to a lack of data this assertion will have to remain in the realm of speculation. Nonetheless, whether interest in localization of the food system is higher at this particular historical period or not, Brown makes the important point that each 'cycle' of interest must be understood in its historical

context. To this I add that each cycle of agrifood localization must also be recognized as conditioned by larger and cumulative changes over time (Arrighi 2001:663-664). Put slightly differently, each cycle of localization was brought about by particular historical circumstances and yet each subsequent cycle of localism is inevitably related to the cycles preceding it. As I will argue below, conceptualizing local agrifood in this way will help us perceive the unique qualities of current localization movements—namely their ability to reconfigure our thinking in regards to human-nature interactions.

It is this understanding of localism—as historically particular while also part of a larger process—that guides my analysis. This thesis grapples with the turn towards localism since the 1990s in the US. Through my work, I hope to move beyond the current abstract debates within agrifood studies as to whether local is good or bad. What is local agriculture and food in the US about? How can we understand its popularity now? What potential does agrifood localism have? What are its limitations? I engage with these questions in the chapters below.

## CHAPTER 2

### SPATIALIZATION

#### *Introduction*

Does *The Economist* article I cited in the introduction, or Guthman and Allen's stigmatization of local agriculture and food projects as neoliberal, mean that we should abandon the idea of localization altogether? As we will see in greater detail below advocates of localism at the substantive level contend that localization addresses the problems of the contemporary large-scale food-system. These problems include ecological degradation, food insecurity, a sense of powerlessness, economic devastation of rural areas, unhealthy social relationships as well as loss of identities and cultures. But does localization help us solve these issues? In this chapter I engage with and extend recent critiques of agrifood localization. I highlight the theoretical limitations of the local agrifood discourse in order to formulate a more theoretically robust case for localization in subsequent chapters.

The idea that the localist agrifood discourse is replete with spatial assumptions is nothing new. As we will see below, a number of scholars—relying on geographic scholarship—have recently highlighted the limitations of the localist discourse (Allen 1999, Hinrichs 2000, 2003 DuPuis and Goodman 2005). In part, this chapter builds on and extends these observations. However, my argument differs from the scholars cited above in four ways. First, my discussion of the spatial assumptions underlying the US agrifood localist discourse is motivated by the possibility I see, and which I discuss in chapter three and four, for agrifood localism to forge an alternative eco-subjectivity and social theory where the ecological is no longer perceived as an externality. Unlike numerous critics of agrifood localism, I do not dismiss the project of localization altogether because this discourse can, at times, make problematic geographical

presuppositions. Instead, I suggest that buttressing the localist discourse with a robust theory of scale, place and inevitably space, will help us avert the temptation, metaphorically speaking, to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Secondly, I rely again on a two part understanding of localism. As I will clarify below, distinguishing between two forms of localism will help us more clearly perceive the spatial assumptions that often accompany discussions about local agriculture and food. A systematic review of the spatial assumptions underlying the localist discourse that differentiates between scale and place has not yet been made. This chapter attempts to fill this gap. Because I rely on Doreen Massey's concept of space-time, I make two additional points about localization. First, rethinking scale and place necessitates rethinking space. Second, geographic categories such as local must be understood within their geographical and historical context.

In brief, my argument is that the problem is not local in and of itself. Rather it is how we conceptualize this spatial concept. In simple terms there is 'good' local and 'bad' local. 'Bad' localism engages in the mistakes I outline below. 'Good' localism, on the other hand, draws attention to the tensions between the particular and the general, local and the global. Positive localism applied to agriculture and food, I argue, has the potential to lead to ecologically and socially emancipatory thinking and action.

This chapter is structured as follows. I begin by outlining my case for a two-part understanding of agrifood localism. Next, I briefly review geographic theories of scale, after which I discuss the scalar assumptions within the localist discourse. I end by considering the potential theoretical and political consequences of the spatial assumptions outlined in this section. Subsequently, I take the same steps for place. The last section of this paper engages with the recent call by Hinrichs and Allen—two vocal critics of localism—to abandon the concept of local. Hinrichs and Allen argue that local should be replaced by a concept that is less conducive to problematic spatial

assumptions (Hinrichs & Allen forthcoming). In contrast to these thinkers, I demonstrate how the very geographic theories mobilized to critique local can help us understand why we should not abandon the term.

***Two localisms: local as scale, local as place***

Besides being widespread, what does present agrifood localism look like? In a recently published article entitled “Local Food Production: A Comparative Report” (2006) Maria Fonte contends that the local food and agriculture movement refers to two related but separate movements. On the one hand, localism advocates for shorter food chains—that is, less distance between producers and consumers. In reaction to the “impersonal world of production,” where supermarkets reign supreme and local provisioning remains next to impossible, this branch of localism focuses on lessening the distance between farmers and consumers or even facilitating peoples’ ability to provision themselves (Morgan et al 2006 in Fonte). Fonte dubs this type of localism ‘the relocalization perspective’. The relocalization perspective has given rise to projects such as community supported agriculture (CSA), farmers’ markets, food policy councils (FPC), Farm-to-School programs (FTS) and so on. This perspective, argues Fonte, while like the ‘origin-of-food perspective,’ it has the ultimate goal of revitalizing rural economies, has two more immediate concerns: ecological and social sustainability.

On the other hand, localism that emphasizes “territory, tradition and pre-industrial production practices”, Fonte brands the ‘the origin-of-food perspective.’ Here local refers to identity and tradition and is less about shortening the distance between production and consumption (Fonte 2006). Indeed, according to this type of localism, where economic development is at the forefront, local products can and should be sold in distant markets. According to Fonte, this version of localism

originates from economically marginalized Mediterranean regions that, often backed by their regional and national governments, capitalize on their surviving pre-industrial practices by advertising their products as being local and traditional.

While Fonte's report primarily focuses on local agrifood projects in Europe, her model applies to the discourse surrounding local agriculture and food in the US. As we will see below, the US local agrifood movement operates with both the relocalization perspective and the origin-of-food perspective. However, the agrifood literature I examined often conflated these two forms of localism. While these two are ultimately related, the act of differentiating between them will assist me in producing a more nuanced analysis.

I extend Fonte's model to contend that each type of localism is associated with a different spatial category. The relocalization perspective concentrates on scalar issues whereas the origin-of-food perspective is about place. Because each form of localism is associated with a different spatial category each makes a different set of spatial assumptions; the former perspective tends to make assumptions about scale, whereas the later tends to make assumptions about place. Before I begin with the spatial assumptions underlying the relocalization perspective, I will first elaborate on geographical theories of scale.

## *Geographical Theories of Scale*

The Dictionary of Human Geography differentiates between three kinds of scale: cartographic, methodological and geographical<sup>7</sup>. The recent distinction between geographical and methodological scale has led economic and political geographers to make numerous observations about scales. In their recent article entitled “Avoiding the Local Trap: Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research,” Branden Born and Mark Purcell, summarize these recent propositions. First, geographical scales such as the nation-state are not eternal, universal and essential ways of dividing up space (Born and Purcell, 2006, Agnew 1994). Instead, scales, the nation-state being perhaps the most entrenched both materially and epistemologically (Brenner 1999), are specific to particular points in space-time. Scales, being products of social

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Dictionary, cartographic scale refers to “the level of abstraction at which a map is made” (DHG1). That is, if the cartographic scale of a map is 1:20, then 1cm on the map represents 20cm. Smaller cartographic scales capture more detail but can cover less terrain (Idem). Maps at larger scales can capture greater space but at the cost of detail. I do not refer to cartographic scale in this chapter. The second and third types of scale defined by geographers are methodological and geographic scale. The difference between these two scales is relatively nuanced. In fact, until the 1980s social scientists including geographers frequently conflated methodological and geographical scale. Either scholars assumed that the scale of the nation-state, for example, was given and real or they assumed that its existence was the product of a researchers methodological choice (Idem). During the 1980s Cliff and Ord (1981) along with Marxist geographers and social theorists such as Smith and Dennis (1987) argued that scales also had ‘real’ attributes—real in the sense that scales are something beyond abstract grids, as in the case of methodological scales, which the researcher imposes onto landscapes. Rather, geographical scales like the body, the community, the nation-state or the global scale refer to actual social and physical landscapes. Certainly, geographical scales are not only material, they are also conceptualized. However, conceptualization of geographical scale is, in contrast to abstract methodological scales, grounded by “specific processes in the physical and human landscape” (DHG 2). The example of the nation-state helps clarify the difference between methodological scale and geographical scale. Methodological scale refers to the scale at which research is conducted. For example, a social scientist who is interested in poverty might choose to conduct her research at the scale of the nation-state. Choosing the scale at which to conduct social scientific inquiry is often about finding a compromise between availability of data and time and cost constraints (DHG2). In other words, the researcher might choose to work at the scale of the nation-state because census data is readily available at that scale and because she does not have enough time or money to interview the entire population living below the poverty line. The choice of methodological scale is, nonetheless, not merely shaped by practical factors. That the researcher decides to do her research at the nation-state scale also reflects her assumptions regarding the nature of the problem at hand as well as her epistemological orientation. If the researcher thinks that poverty is a national issue, it would make sense for her to study it at this level. Furthermore, if she thinks that the world is ‘naturally’ divided into nation-states, she will likely select the nation-state as her unit of analysis. In contrast to methodological scale, which like cartographic scale refers to an abstract concept that is imposed onto space to organize one’s thinking, geographical scale refers to something ‘real’ in that it refers to a set of crystallized and institutionalized social relationships and processes. Thus in the case of my example of the nation-state as a geographical scale, this scale refers to is the set of relationships along with material realities that make up a nation-state.

relationships and political struggle, come and go, exist in some places and not in others. Scales have historical beginnings and ends. In addition, scales are culturally and socially specific. They are not universal. The scale of the nation-state arose from a particular place, that is Europe, and was imposed on other areas as late as the 1960s as in the case in many parts of Africa. The current global restructuring of political and economic relationships and processes that threaten the nation-state perhaps best elucidates the constructed nature of scales.

Because scales are a product of social, historical and cultural processes and relationships, geographers stress that we should concentrate not on what scales *are* but rather on how scales *are produced* and reproduced (Lefebvre 1990, Smith and Dennis 1987, Smith 1992 in DHG: Scale). In other words, scales do not have an inherent ontology. The conceptualization of scale as produced rather than given has led to a number of further propositions. Because scales are historically and socially contingent, or to put it slightly differently, because scales are social constructions, they cannot have inherent qualities. A small scale, such as a community, does not inherently lead to more trusting social relationships or increased democracy. Analogously, the global scale does not necessarily lead to undemocratic practices (Born and Purcell 197).

Second, while scales are social constructions and change with time across space, they are also not completely fluid. Or, to borrow Born and Purcell's words, "scalar arrangements, once produced, can become routinized into enduring and hegemonic structures for certain periods of time" (Idem 198). That in the contemporary scalar configuration social movements need to "scale up," in order to gain political legitimacy and power, implies that while scales are not natural or eternal, they do have some fixity to them (Smith 1993 in Born and Purcell 2006: 1998). Marxist geographers argue that the system of scales that exists today is shaped by capitalism. P.J. Taylor avers that capitalism requires and thus creates a specific scalar

hierarchy. This means that the present geographical differentiation of space into a hierarchy of scales, from the body, to the home, to the national to the global is shaped by the logic of capitalism and is to some extent fixed (Smith 1984).

Third, Born and Purcell argue that scales are relational. This means that scales cannot be understood as separate from other scales because they are mutually constitutive (Howitt 1998 , Kelly 1999 in Born and Purcell: 198). Actual social phenomena like economic crises demonstrate that social phenomena often occur at multiple scales at the same time. There is a flow between scales and hence they cannot be thought of as discrete ‘levels’ of spatial organization (Massey 1994). Scales are part of a “nested hierarchy” (Born and Purcell 1998). Because scales are embedded in each other, our focus should not be about one scale but about multiple scales and their relation to each other. Instead of thinking about scales we should think about “how the interrelationships among scales are fixed, unfixed, and refixed by particular social actors pursuing particular political, social, economic and ecological goals” (Idem 1998).

In brief, these three propositions about scale elude many social scientists including those interested in local food systems. This results in social scientific literature being replete with assumptions about scale. First, it is frequently assumed that scales are natural and given. Secondly, it is assumed that scales have inherent qualities that are conducive to particular types of social relationships and processes. And finally, social scientists have a tendency to assume that scales are isolated, discrete units.

### *The Local Trap*

Born and Purcell argue that advocates of local agrifood systems tend to fall into what they call ‘the local trap.’ The ‘local trap’ refers to instances where advocates of localization, operating with three common assumptions—that scales are essential, that scales are fixed and that scales are discrete units—presume that smaller geographic scales possess inherent qualities which inevitably lead to desired social relationships.

With a few notable exceptions<sup>8</sup>, the discourse assumes that rescaling has inherent abilities to shift social relationships and processes. Colin Duncan, whose work I engage with at length in chapter three, to some extent exemplifies falling into the ‘local trap.’ That is, he assumes a smaller scale of agricultural practice leads to more ecologically sound relationships. In his case for the centrality of agriculture, Duncan posits that size matters. In other words, the author makes an overtly scalar argument: We need to relocalize the food system. In an attempt to re-embed the economy in society, socialists have made a case for a world community. This is ineffective. The problem is that history has revealed the difficulties of conceptualizing community at such a large scale (41). We need to divide space into smaller, units that are more available to community control—units that are nonetheless embedded in

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<sup>8</sup> A few exceptions persist. DeLind and Allen, for example, are slightly more explicit about the mechanisms by which the act of rescaling of the agrifood system will lead to more environmental sustainability. For DeLind (2002) who argues that keeping small-farmers on the land will have “positive ecological consequences” (218), focusing on local production and consumption as well as establishing a sense of place will lead to increased “investment and concern for the natural environment” (1994:64; 2002: 230). Allen et al (2003) explain that proponents of localism argue that this approach is more environmentally sustainable because it enables “people to express their sense of responsibility to the natural world and themselves within it” as well as resist the ecologically unsound global food system (63).

While DeLind and Allen et al, unlike other advocates of localism, attempt to clarify how decrease in size leads to desired outcomes, they nevertheless fall short of establishing a clear causal relationship between rescaling the agrifood system and environmental benefits. They do not explain how local production, distribution and processing automatically lead to investment and concern for the natural environment” or how proximity to production facilitates increased sense of community. In general, the localist discourse assumes that a specific scale will lead to ecological, political, social and cultural outcomes.

multiple, larger scales—in order to facilitate ecological responsibility and an ecological subjectivity posits Duncan(42).

In addition, he avers that smaller-scales of social organization tend to foster more democratic relationships (Idem). Because the global scale is problematic in terms of its ability to foster an ecological and social sensitivity, the solution is to parcel up the world along ecological lines into “bundles of purpose.” These bundles already exist in the form of bioregions, for Duncan (41). In other words, nature gives us the scaffolding to create a more just and sustainable world.

To his credit Duncan explains how proximity works to establish more ecologically sound practices. For example, he argues that a farmer who eats her own products is less likely to pollute (44). This is because the act of rescaling the food system shortens the feedback loop. The shorter the food chain, the more immediately farmers and those who eat their products will be subjected to the repercussions of their decisions. In addition, as far as his conceptualization of local is concerned, Duncan attempts to nuance his discussion by stating that the local scale needs to be embedded in larger scales. In this way he circumvents the trap of considering the local as a discrete unit. In adopting T. Sekine’s model of short loops and long loops, he recognizes that the local and local agriculture cannot exist in isolation. Some products are necessities and should be produced at the large scale, while others, that is, those that are personalized should be produced locally (here again, local refers to a bioregion). Finally, instead of assuming scale equals environmental responsibility, Duncan attempts an explanation of the mechanisms by which the process of rescaling leads to desired outcomes. Nonetheless, ultimately the author remains steadfast in claim that a smaller scale will automatically result in improved social and socio-ecological relationships.

Operating with the three outlined assumptions about scales, or put differently, falling into the ‘local trap’ has multiple theoretical and political consequences. At the theoretical level, by relegating the issue of an alternative food system to a matter of scale, advocates for local food systems run the risk of conflating the desired outcome with the scale of the food system. At the more practical level, by conflating scale and desired outcome, proponents of local agriculture and food can pursue localization to the point where it deflects attention away from or even exacerbates the very issues localization was intended to remedy. Allen’s (1999) critique of the Community Food Security (CFS) movement’s turn to local agriculture and food illustrates this point. Allen explains that the CFS movement has in the past pursued localization even when it directly impeded the movement’s ability to meet the needs of the hungry. Analogously, the quest of localization among environmentalists continues in cases where local production leads to environmental degradation or increased use of fossil fuels.

Third, by falling into the local trap individuals and groups who build an alternative food system can potentially advocate for localization so ardently that they turn a blind eye to opportunities at other scales (196). For example, a staunch advocate for localization might overlook the opportunity to work on a national anti-hunger campaign because it is not local. In addition, advocates of localization might not be able to perceive opportunities for building trust and democracy at the global scale.

### ***Local as Place***

As Robert Feagan (2007) argues, and as I will show below in terms of the localist discourse in AHV and JRS, the local food discourse, whether individual articles use the language of alternative food initiatives (Allen et al 2003), and

alternative agro-food networks and systems (Goodman, 2003; Watts et al. 2005), community food security (Anderson and Cook, 1999; 2000; Pelletier et al., 2000; Bellows and Hamm, 2001), civic and democratic agriculture (Bellows and Hamm 2001; DeLind, 2002; Hassanein, 2003), post-productivism (Whatmore et al., 2003), alternative or shortened food chains (Renting et al. 2003; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998; 2000; Morris and Young, 2000; Goodman, 2003), emphasizes the importance of thinking about the place as it pertains to food production. Certainly these various movements differ substantially and there is a danger in conflating their meanings (Dupuis and Goodman 2005 in Feagan 24). However, Feagan maintains that while the articles differ in the terms they use, they all underline the importance of the place of food production and consumption (Feagan 2007: 24).

Just as the localist discourse has a predisposition to make assumptions about scale, so too is it inclined to make assumptions about place. In the origin-of-food perspective, local agriculture and food tends to operate as a marker of difference—at the cultural and ecological level—rather than involve shortening the distance between producer and consumer. Before I examine the assumptions about place in the localist agrifood literature, I will give a brief overview of theories of place in geography. Next, drawing on the work of critical geographers David Harvey, Michael Watts and Doreen Massey I outline common assumptions about place. This is followed by a discussion of the general analytical and political consequences of these assumptions. Having clarified these points, I will examine how the localist agrifood discourse makes these assumptions. I end by discussing the potential consequences of operating with the above-mentioned assumptions about place.

### ***Geographic Theories of Place***

In an era when place-based identities appear to be proliferating as a reaction to globalization, modernity, capitalism and the perceived threat of placelessness, a number of social scientists have argued that we need to think critically about place now more than ever (Place, Dictionary of Human Geography: 1). These thinkers have relied on humanistic geographers who have theorized place since the mid 1970s. At the time, a focus on place was, in many ways, a reaction to positivist geography's nearly exclusive focus on space. Place became a way to resist the 'objective', universal and abstract approach associated with space. Instead, place signaled partiality, subjectivity and particularity (Idem).

Phenomenologists such as Relph, (1976) and Tuan (1977), by drawing attention to place, emphasized the importance of considering how places became attached with meaning and symbolism. Throughout the 1980s humanistic geographers such as Black, Kunze and Pickles (1989) continued to grapple with the concept of place. Some, like Entrikin (1991), Agnew (1987) and later Creswell (1996), tried to find a balance between the materiality of place and place as a subjective reality. Soon, economic geographers such as Massey and Allen (1984), historical geographers such as Pred (1984) and political geographers such as Agnew (1987) and Johnston (1991) contributed as well. These thinkers emphasized that how we conceptualized place had theoretical and political consequences (Place 1).

So what is place? Place is "a portion of geographic space" suggests the Dictionary of Human Geography (Place: 1). This vague definition of place embraces both a traditional as well as a more reflexive definition of the concept. The dominant tendency is to conceptualize places as bounded, homogenous and separate geographic entities (Idem). However, we can also conceptualize place as porous, heterogeneous

and relative. As I will argue below, the way we define and thus conceptualize place can lead to strikingly differing politics.

As humanistic geographers have pointed out, social scientists have a propensity towards three common presuppositions about place. First of all, one can assume that places have timeless and authentic identities (Massey 119, Harvey 1989). Second, that no differences, paradoxes or inequalities exist within them.<sup>9</sup> Third, one can work with conceptual dualisms and assume that places are entirely separate from that-which-is-not-place. That is, one can assume that places are discrete units that exist separate from other places as well from larger social processes and relationships.

Assumptions about place can have conceptual as well as ‘real-’ world consequences. Michael Watts warns that an absolute understanding of place, which has become popular in reaction to ‘global’ processes, leads to the analytical error of essentializing cultures and identities. These assumptions miss the fluid and contradictory condition of the cultural. They also lead to exclusionary practices (Castree, 140-141, Watts 1999). Watts illustrates the potential dangers of essentialized place-based identities through an analysis of the Ogoni, whose new social movement (NSM) is often celebrated by post-development thinkers such as Arturo Escobar. What Watts finds troubling is that the Ogoni construct a sense of place, a “historical geography” where history becomes territory. Mobilizing an essentialized identity helped the Ogoni successfully resist the Shell Oil Company. However, this practice also enabled them to engage in exclusionary practices and suppress internal differences (Watts 9, 15). The error is to assume that movements based on place-based identities are necessarily progressive. Watts reminds us “there is surely nothing

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<sup>9</sup> Feminist geographer Gilian Rose draws a parallel between this last assumption about place as homogenous with the masculinist tendency to associate home with repose and to ignore that ‘home’ is often a place of work on inequality (Rose 1993)

necessarily anti-capitalist or particularly progressive about cultural identity: calls to localism can produce Hindu fascism as easily as Andean Indian co-operatives” (91).

In her book, *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey furnishes another historical example of the dangers associated with mobilizing timelessness and authentic place-based identities. In the 1980s, in the Docklands area of London workers came together to resist gentrification of their neighborhood. The workers used arguments that the neighborhood had *always* been working class and that the neighborhood was *inherently* working class to inhibit yuppies from moving into their area. On this occasion, the left supported this resistance campaign. However, ten years prior, the same people, in the same neighborhood used the same arguments about the timeless and authentic identity of their neighborhood to stop non-white immigrants from moving in. In this case, the neighborhood had *always* and *essentially* been white. The left did not support this campaign because it was racist (Massey 122). Massey’s example, like Watts’, shows that there is nothing inherently progressive about resistance movements that rely on place-based identities. In fact reliance on such a strategy can have regressive consequences.

Not only can essentialized identities based on places lead to exclusionary practices and xenophobia, but a bounded and absolute understanding of place is methodologically restricted (Massey 123). It cannot capture the fluid condition of identity or how a locality is shaped by and shaped the global. This argument holds at the material as well as cultural level. The material conditions of a particular place need to be understood within the context of larger social forces such as capital accumulation, changing markets, and external ownership. Likewise, local culture and identity must be understood as shaped by the social context in which it is embedded and the larger social and cultural relations that shape it (Massey 1994). Local culture

and identity is a result of an ongoing process of interaction, contestation and hybridization.

A bounded and discrete notion of place, where larger processes, issues and arenas for action are ignored, also has political costs. Without an appreciation of how places are related to everything else, social movements are limited in their ability to connect with other movements. In isolating themselves they cannot capitalize on the political power they might obtain by building coalitions across space (Castree, 143-145, Massey 1999, Harvey 1996).<sup>10</sup> The origin-of-food perspective also makes spatial assumptions. These, however, tend to be assumptions about place—assumptions that also have limits. I will examine this segment of the localist discourse in the subsequent section

### ***The Limitations of Place***

In “The Social Life of the Tortilla: food, cultural politics, and contested commodification,” (2004), Lind and Barham propose that we protect ‘real food’. The authors rely on the following comment made by an Oxacan food vendor to define ‘real food’: “Real food is not frozen meat. Fast food’s unnatural. The people who make it are incompetent. And McDonald’s belongs to the United States, not our *zocalo*” (Cited in Winter, Lind and Barham: 58). Real food is food that comes from a particular *zocalo*, food that belongs in a “sacred boundaries of *comida*” (58). What makes food ‘real’ is that it belongs to a place. According to this logic, global restructuring of the food system and the homogenization of tastes has eroded place-specific food culture. Thus the act of recovering local food and relocalizing food production, processing and preparation is about identity and culture, about tying food back to place. This form of localism sets ‘real food,’ food that is conceptualized as more ‘life-giving’ and more

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<sup>10</sup> Harvey 1996:303 and Cameron and Palan 142 also make this argument.

culturally authentic, in opposition to industrial foods such as the McDonalds' hamburger vilified by the Oxacan food vendor.

Hinrichs' discussion of the local food campaign in Iowa can also highlight the problems associated with an undertheorized origin-of-food perspective. The campaign to eat local foods in Iowa in many instances was a means for Iowans to create an essentialized notion of 'traditional' local food. Suddenly, local food was "pork cutlets, sliced roast of beef, scalloped potatoes, glazed carrots, homemade rolls..." and so on. 'Other' foods were shunned and excluded (42). In fact eating Iowa-grown products became a *quasi* patriotic act among many advocates of localism leading to strong defensive boundaries in terms of what was appropriate and what was not (40). The protection of Iowan traditional food and Iowan local agriculture was often articulated in opposition to the vilified, often global Other (35). Slow Food International exemplifies another instance where emphasis on traditional agrifood identities can dovetail nicely with xenophobic, nativist agendas. The Terra Madre Slow Food conference, the inaugurating Slow Food event, was heavily subsidized by the right-wing National Alliance in Italy (Hooper 2004 in DuPuis and Goodman 2005). As Lind and Barham as well as the Eat Iowa campaign exemplify, the agrifood localist discourse, at times operates with a reified place. By arguing that there is a local agrifood identity, culture and tradition that needs to be preserved in the face of an often ill-defined globalization, the localist discourse runs the risk of essentializing place identities. This is not without consequence.

First, emphasis on the place of food can potentially lead to the assumption that particular localities have types of food and agricultural styles that are timeless and authentic. The example of Parmesan illustrates this. We can assume that Parmesan has always been produced in the Parma region and that this cheese is authentic to the area. However, Parmesan was created in the middle ages. In addition, producers of

Parmesan cheese learned how to make cheese from Arab merchants. By assuming that Parmesan is an authentic and timeless part of Parma's agrifood identity, we ignore the complex and historically contingent origins of this product. We run the risk of forgetting that 'authentic foods' are never authentic and that they are also far from timeless. Instead they emerge out of the mixing of always-changing, historically contingent cultures and processes of knowledge production and exchange. In fact, we forget that many 'regional' cuisines and culinary traditions, far from innocent, natural and timeless are cultural artifacts of a conscious nation building project (Ferguson 2004, Capatti & Montanari 2003, Horowitz 2006).

Advocates of local agrifood often exaggerate the timeless and authentic character of traditional culinary and agricultural practices. They can also be completely fabricated. The Italian food historian Montanari points out that the recent emphasis in Europe on a 'golden age' when hearty peasants used to eat fresh foods, for example, is misleading. According to this author, the peasant population in Europe did not generally eat fresh foods. Rather, because they spent most of their time preparing for the winter months, their diet consisted primarily of preserves (Montanari in Miele and Murdoch 316). Similarly, Allen discloses how the longing for the self-sustaining family farm among US-Americans is more fiction than anything else. From the start, US agriculture was based on an export model (Allen 120).

When the US localist discourse claims that agrifood traditions need to be preserved in the face of globalization it essentializes these customs and thus operates with reified notions of agrifood identities. When Lind and Barham talk about preserving 'real food' that belong to particular *zocaldos* they assume that these food traditions are authentic and timeless. As I mentioned above, operating with these fixed notions of identity can not only be theoretically weak but it can facilitate exclusionary practices.

The localist discourse can also assume that the places in which local agrifood projects are proposed to exist are internally coherent—that no difference, contestation or inequality exists within a particular location. Indeed, the scholarly literature remains relatively silent about differences within places. Neither segments of the localist discourse I examined dedicated much space to considering the cultural, gender, religious and racial diversity that exist within places as they pertain to food and agriculture. The branch of localization that thinks in terms of shortened distance between consumer and producer certainly addresses class differences within the local food system to some extent. However, more often than not these differences were minimized. The Iowa 'eat local campaign', for example, more often than not glossed over long-standing tensions and inequalities among farmers in the state. Suddenly, everyone was equally 'local' (37).

Through her analysis of the CFS's dual, and often conflicting, aims of localization of food production and feeding the hungry, Allen illustrates that even when localization activists acknowledge that there are those who cannot afford local foods, as in the case within the relocalization approach, the issue of meeting the needs of the food insecure is often trumped by the urge to localize the agrifood system in and of itself (Allen 1999). Because the population is conceptualized as homogenous in terms of class, the needs of those living in precarious social situations are often left at the sidelines.

The failure of the localist discourse to conceptualize the heterogeneity within places—that is, to ignore material inequality, racism, sexism, and homophobia that exist within specific locations—is politically troublesome. This omission can lead the localization movement to be an exclusive project. Indeed, local food projects tend to be run by and serve middle-class and white populations (Cohen in DuPuis and Goodman 364-366, Allen 125, Lyson 66, Hinrichs 2003:41). Communities of color,

religious communities, immigrants and ethnic minorities rarely participate in local food initiatives such as food policy councils (Bournhonesque 2007).

Finally, by conceptualizing localities as bounded and separated from that-which-is-not-local we can miss the larger processes and relationships that shape the local food system. In addition, a bounded notion of place can blind advocates of localization to the potential links between localization initiatives across the US as well as the rest of the world. The localist discourse is, obviously to some extent, cognizant of larger social processes that shape food systems in particular places. The discourse repeatedly situates itself in opposition to the global restructuring of the food system. However, the local agrifood discourse is virtually silent on agrifood localization initiatives in the rest of the world. Localization of the agrifood system is assumed to be a place by place matter. Authors like Bellows and Hamm highlight that this perspective is problematic. Citing Harvey, they contend that to focus on the empowerment of the local “eclipses the potential for activism across large geographical scales” (277). In sum, with few notable exceptions<sup>11</sup>, the localist discourse frequently glosses over the connection between places as well as the fluid, contested, and hybridized relationships and processes within them.

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<sup>11</sup> Some thinkers give concrete examples of the consequences of operating with these assumptions. DuPuis and Goodman point out that advocates of localism assume that localities have inherent identities. This leads to what they call “defensive localism”—the process of emphasizing a place’s food identity to reinforce and justify xenophobic customs (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). In addition, Hinrichs (2003), drawing on the example of the “Eat Iowa” campaign, signals that a that the shift towards local agrifood production and consumption in this case was less about environmental or social justice issues than about the desire to ‘protect’ a locality from outside contaminants (Hinrichs 2003). Hinrichs emphasizes that much of the localist discourse is infused with a longing for the past. It “reclaims a lost agricultural heritage often undergirds food system localization” (Hinrichs 2003: 9). Yet she reminds us, that this longing “is not many steps [...away...] from more problematic nativism, where the interests and priorities of long established residents holds sway” (41). These thinkers, however, are less explicit about the tendency within the localist discourse to conceptualize places as discrete units. This leads them to miss how the localist discourse often glosses over the specific processes and relationships that shape and reshape particular places as well as to the political slip of missing the opportunity for building coalitions across place.

### *Exorcize The Local Or Re-Spatialize Our Thinking?*

In a forthcoming article Hinrichs and Allen reason that the spatial term ‘local’ should be retired as a metaphor for the desired changes in the dominant food system. These thinkers argue that the idea of localization easily leads to mistaking an objective—in their case social justice—with a strategy—localization. Instead, the authors propose to use another concept of ‘domestic fair trade’ (Hinrichs & Allen forthcoming: 25). This concept, they argue, better captures desired objectives and is less apt to fall into the ‘local trap’ both in terms of its assumptions about scale and its assumptions about place (Allen and Hinrichs forthcoming).

Allen and Hinrichs are not alone. As of late, numerous scholars have picked up on the fact that localization—that is, the mere act of rescaling—need not automatically result in desired outcomes, be they ecological objectives (Hinrichs 2003: 35; Bellows and Hamm 2000: 274), democratic relations (Hinrichs 2003), rural economic development (Hinrichs 2000:297, Maggos 1987, Welsh 1997) or their ability to alleviate hunger and malnutrition (Dupuis and Goodman 2005, Allen 1999)<sup>12</sup>. The assumption that localization of the food system will result in ‘healthier’ social relationships—where healthier means more trusting, reciprocal and non-market mediated—has received the most critical attention. Specifically, thinkers such as DuPuis and Goodman, DeLind and Hinrichs recognize the limitations of assuming that small, proximal, and thus local food systems lead to more trusting, alternative, desired forms of social organization. For one, DuPuis and Goodman point out that trust is not always intrinsically positive. Using the example of the Fulton Fish Market in New York that was for a long time run by the Mafia, they contend that a trust-based system

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<sup>12</sup> While no article challenged the claim that localization leads to more nutritious, fresher and safer foods, Allen (1999), drawing on the CFS movement, problematizes the assumption that the local scale always integrates multiple social movements in an ideal manner. She contends that the emphasis on localization need not necessarily lead to an integration of multiple issues as much as it can subordinate one goal to another. In the case of CFS, Allen argues, localization of production tends to trump meeting the immediate needs of those who are hungry (1999).

might not necessarily, in and of itself, be a positive thing. Organized crime is based on a system of trust but this kind of trust does not lead to the kind of social relationships advocates of localization desire (365).

As for local agrifood systems leading to alternative forms of social organization, DeLind (2002) points out that emphasizing local food consumption might do little to unsettle the neoliberal tendency to equate citizenship with shopping (218). Focusing on civic agriculture, she warns “the logic of commercial marketplace predominates in most civic agriculture projects” (219). Civic agriculture farmers, she argues, “continue to think of themselves...primarily as entrepreneurs looking to grow for specialty markets, local or otherwise.....They (and we) are still relating to each other as one-dimensional abstractions—as producers and consumers, as buyers or sellers—no matter how pleasant our smiles or conscientious our purchases” (DeLind 222). DeLind supports her argument by citing Michael Shuman, a staunch advocate of local agrifood. Shuman advertises that a good thing about local agrifood systems “is that you can make a lot of money off them” (Shuman cited in DeLind 219). The shift to local need not result in alternative ways of relating. The problem, for DeLind, is the assumption that by relocalizing food, we can automatically, metaphorically speaking, change the rules of the game and produce another subjectivity. Our model for building an alternative food system based on localizing food production, distribution and consumption is simplistic. She explains,

Currently we talk about constructing local food systems with the same pragmatic zeal we apply to assembling bicycles. Snap farmer “A” into local market “B” insert seasonal food “C” into local kitchen “D” fasten value-added food product “E” to local economy “F” .....And there you have it—the green machinery to move the food system along an alternative

path (223). However, by thinking like this we underestimate how respatializing the food system can easily reproduce the exact same undesired social relationships—this time merely at another scale (Idem).

Hinrichs adds that ‘face-to-face’ need not automatically lead to a transcendence of market-mediated social relationships and the emergence of a non-market subjectivity (2000:297). She uses Block’s discussion of embeddedness to argue that local food projects, specifically farmers markets and CSAs continue to be infused with marketness and instrumentalism. In other words, it is incorrect to assume that just because local agrifood projects are more embedded, because they promote more familiarity and enable the creation of social ties between producer and consumer, that farmers who sell their produce in farmers markets or CSAs are not out to maximize their profits and that more desirable concerns always trump price considerations (Hinrichs 300).”

As I will discuss at greater length in subsequent chapters, these thinkers are right in pointing out that local, conceptualized as an a-historical spatial category, need not automatically result in desired outcomes, they tend to build straw enemies. In all likelihood very few advocates for localization will pursue localization so fervently that they commit the problematic acts outlined above. Agrifood localization—viewed as a historically and socially specific phenomenon where the term local stands in for a slew of alternative practices, relationships, politics and subjectivities—still holds many possibilities and should not be abandoned. In fact, as I will argue below, the present local agrifood movement is, in fact, heralding in an alternative non-market and ecologically embedded subjectivity. I rely on the debate regarding place and space in

geography during the 1980s to clarify why the concept of local need not be abandoned.

Human geographers outline the many methodological and political problems associated with the concept of place. In response, to colleagues who argue for the abandonment of the concept altogether, Doreen Massey has repeatedly defended the concept on the grounds that place helps us understand larger social relationships and processes and how they manifest in particular localities (Massey 1997a, 1997b). Well aware of the multiple conceptual pitfalls associated with thinking in terms of place, Massey clarifies that it is not place, in and of itself, that is inherently problematic. Rather, the issue is how we conceptualize it. According to Massey, the Marxist critique of place oriented research in the 1980s was pitted not against place in general but rather against a particular understanding of place—one that sees place as bounded, homogenous and essential. In *Space, Place and Gender* the author describes the Marxists conceptualization of place as “bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed, and unproblematized in its identity” (120). Instead, along with Young and Penrose, she proffers an alternative conceptualization of place—one that is both normative as well as descriptive. However, Massey adds: in order to reconceptualize place, we first need to rethink space.

Assumptions about scale and place stem from assumptions about space. Social scientists tend to conceptualize space as absolute or, put slightly differently, they think of space has a blank and flat surface upon which social processes play out. Indeed, we often think of space as static and as the “opposite of history” (Massey 4). Space, however, does not exist as some absolute, unchanging object outside of social relationships. Instead space and the social phenomena at hand are constructed through social relationships (2). And because social relations are always dynamic and changing, space is also always moving and shifting. To think of space as in motion,

that is, in terms of space-time, is “to raise the spatial out of the dead” reveals Massey (4).

The act of thinking about space as existing outside of social relationships is a decidedly political act. If we think of spaces as ‘real,’ natural things, existing somewhere ‘out there’ then we depoliticize the spatial. The act of thinking of space as being ‘real’ leads us to ignore the power relationships behind particular productions of spaces. If space is not a flat grid upon which social relationships take place; if space is not some ‘real’ or ‘natural’ thing, ‘out there,’ then what is space? The spatial is a construction. Social relationships across multiple scales “from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town” create and recreate the spatial (4). Since space is a product of social relationships, then, spaces need to be thought of as “an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (Idem). Also, if we think of space as absolute and ‘real’ we also do not investigate differences within spaces. We cannot see how “a multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism” make up the world (3). We cannot see how different people experience spaces differently and hold different positions of power within these spaces.

If we think of space-time as an always-changing product of social relationships at all scales, then place and scales become “a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings” (5). In other words, places and scales are not fixed coordinates but “particular envelopes of space-time” (Idem). Massey adds that while places and scales are articulations of relationships at an explicit moment in space-time, they are not separate from larger processes and relationships. She states

The particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself. Importantly, it includes relations which stretch beyond—the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested, and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that ‘beyond’. Places viewed this way are open and porous. (Massey 5)

In other words, places do not have solid boundaries. Relationships and processes within and across particular locations shape places, be they material, cultural or imagined. Places are thus always tied to other places and to larger processes and relationships. The identity of places is not created in opposition to other places as much as it is constituted by relationships to these other places (121). The boundaries of places are porous.

Places are also internally different, complex and contested. There are inequalities, cultural and racial, differences within specific places. Hence, each place’s identity is always changing, shifting, contested and paradoxical. As Ernesto Laclau puts it: ‘All articulation is partial and precarious’” (Laclau 1990 cited in Massey 121).

However, while places are porous, internally paradoxical and shaped by that-which-is-not-in-place, places exist. The world is not a homogenous flat surface! As Feagan summarizes, “that regions/places are imagined and constructed, and that they are dynamic and contingent upon both agency relations from below and structural relations from above (stable but impermanent) does not impede them from regaining both legitimacy and urgency in the face of global capitalist processes” (Angnew 2000 and Paasi 2002 in Feagan 3). To Feagan’s claim I add that places are also real in the ecological sense. Thus, a conceptualization of space results in another conceptualization of place, and—while these authors do not mention this—an alternative way to think about scale. Place and scale are porous, constructed, ever-changing, and shaped by all that is ‘in’ a place as well as by all that is ‘outside’. And still, places and scales matter as they are both crystallizations of social relationships as well as ecological realities.

In terms of the local I argue, much like Massey does for place, that the concept need not necessarily be abandoned. In other words, the problem with local is not local per se but rather how we conceptualize it. As Massey does with place, I contend that the concept of local—as a geographical and methodological scale as well as a place—has multiple strengths. For example, local—being a relatively ‘neutral’ spatial term has been useful in bringing multiple social movements together under one organizing principle. Local as a metaphor for an alternative agrifood system currently has, for reasons I will discuss below a particular currency today—more so than other concepts such as organic and sustainable, which have been mobilized in the past.

Critics of localism have rightly pointed out that the term can often lead to problematic assumptions about scale and place. However, as Jack Kloppenburg repeatedly argues, advocates of local agriculture and food are not as simple-minded and unaware of the potential pitfalls of unproblematically using the concept of local,

as thinkers such as Hinrichs, Allen, DuPuis and Goodman paint them out to be (Kloppenburg 2006).

For instance, in a response to Allen and Guthman's recent attack on Farm-to-School initiatives, Kloppenburg, along with Neva Hassanein, states: "The turn to locality is motivated not by some perceived virtue inherent to a particular location but by the prospect of fostering the engagement of citizens in an active *process* of change in which proximity literally grounds thought and action" (2006). This statement makes it abundantly clear that Kloppenburg and Hassanein operate with a nuanced understanding of localism as a process.

Likewise, Shuman exhibits a relatively refined understanding of the local. He asserts, "going local does not mean walling off the outside world. It means nurturing local business which use local resources sustainably, employ local workers at decent wages, and serve primarily local consumers. It means becoming more self-sufficient, and less dependent on imports. Control moves from the boardrooms of distant corporations, and back to the community, where it belongs" (cited in Norberg-Hodge 101).

Indeed, there is currently a danger in forgetting that the critique of the assumptions about place and scale in the localist discourse must be recognized as a *stylized* academic critic for the purposes of clarity. That is, it assumes the worst. Particularly it assumes stasis in praxis. In many cases the local food movement which mobilizes an essentialized, coherent and separated food identity does so as a temporary strategy. As we saw above, many advocates of localism acknowledge that localization is not inherently the solution. To the contrary, they engage in strategic

essentialism—that is, temporarily rely on essentialized identities—as a temporary political tactic (Spivak 1993:15, Castree 2003)<sup>13</sup>.

Thus to abandon the concept of local in general would be in many ways to miss the potential power present localism holds. Instead of abandoning local, we can buttress the concept with robust geographic theories of space, place and scale—theories that are both normative and descriptive. Once the present US local agrifood discourse seriously engages with Massey, Young, Penrose, Born and Purcell’s theories of space, place and scale respectively it will not only articulate a local that will withstand many of the criticisms currently pitted against but will enable us to appreciate how present-day localism is ushering in a new ecologically embedded subjectivity.

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<sup>13</sup> In his article entitled “Differential geographies: place, indigenous rights and ‘local’ resources” Noel Castree summarizes the potential consequences of operating with an absolute notion of place. Castree focuses on three scholars who, he argues, have contributed most substantially to theories of place: Michael Watts, David Harvey and Doreen Massey. Ultimately Castree challenges what he calls these “shibboleths” of thinking about place as relational. At times these relational thinkers might go too far. He contends that at some point an absolute understanding of place can be strategically useful (Castree 2003).

## CHAPTER 3

### LOCALIZATION

#### *Introduction*

This chapter situates agrifood localism within a long genealogy of what I call ‘localisms.’ While these localisms, which include the move for local government, local development, and so on, are each qualitatively different from the other, they share a common aim of downsizing and emphasizing the importance of place. In this chapter, I consider local agriculture and food as a concentration or an ‘instance’ of a larger critique of modernity which localisms on the whole extend. In other words, if my overall project grapples with the causes for the recent popularity of local agriculture and food today, this chapter narrows in on the ‘why local?’ portion of my overarching question.

Because theory and practice are always intertwined, I address the epistemological-methodological turn towards localism alongside the substantive one. That is, I investigate how the local scale and the recognition of place become important theoretically as well as practically. Two supplementary cases assist me in discussing the epistemic-methodological emphasis on the local: the turn to participation in development studies and sociology and J.K. Gibson-Graham’s book *The End of capitalism (As we knew it)*.

This chapter is structured as follows: I begin by briefly differentiating between the *term* local and the *practice* of agrifood localization. Next, I characterize the current move towards localism as it pertains to agriculture and food. Again, inspired by Fonte’s work, I stress the utility of separating agrifood localism into two segments—the relocalization perspective and the origin-of-food perspective. I then reconstruct the

rise in popularity of each type of agrifood localism separately. The former, I argue, concentrates on scaling down and is a reaction to the modern tendency to scale up and concentrate power. I characterize the latter, whose focal point is the erasure of the identity and culture of particular places, as a reaction to the modern tendency towards cultural and biological homogeneity.

The second half of this chapter focuses on epistemic-methodological localism. I begin with a brief overview of agrifood studies. Next, I discuss development studies and sociology. I end with J.K. Gibson-Graham. In this section, I propose that epistemic-methodological localism challenges modernist theories' tendency to erase the particularity of places, to perpetuate the myth of objectivity and to represent small-scale efforts at social change as marginal and impotent. In sum, I propose that localism in general and as it pertains to agriculture and food specifically, is a reaction to particular trends at the substantive and the theoretical level that have been present in modern societies and which have accelerated during the era of globalization.

### ***From Sustainable and Organic to Local***

Understanding the rise in popularity of local agriculture and food at this particular historical period requires that we first briefly differentiate between local as a term and local as a practice. A number of activists and scholars tie the salience of the term local to the co-optation of organic by big business and the ambiguity of the concept of sustainability. As Duncan Hilchey, a research associate at Cornell University and a long-time actor in the New York as well as national local agrifood movement explains:

The term local has become a way for farmers to 'wink' to their customers. It used to be that organic meant something. Since the establishment of the national organic standards and the

organic certification program, small farmers committed to an alliterative food system have been less and less able to sell their products as organic. Either they cannot afford to get certified or they resist what organic has become. By selling their produce as local, the farmer says to the consumer: I am not some big organic carrot grower from Israel. I'm the *real* deal (Hilchey 2007).

Much like Hilchey, Starr et al (2003) clarify,

As organic agriculture has gained market share for health and ecologically-conscious consumers, it has become a corporate agro-industrial product (Imhoff 1998). Its corporatization has caused organic to diverge from principles of sustainability in multiple ways. The definition of "organic" as free of petroleum-based chemicals does not necessarily lead to a sustainable reliance on hear-farm inputs but can mean import of a different set of chemicals approved for fertilizer, pest, and weed control within the "organic" certification framework.... For these reasons, some activists have insisted that agricultural sustainability should not be defined according to production method, but primarily according to locality and secondarily to farm size" (303).

During the 1970s until the mid 1990s organic had a holistic meaning (Friedman forthcoming, Pollan 2006:242, 257-258). The term stood for ecological responsibility, self sufficiency as well as social justice (Friedmann, Forthcoming:

252). However, with the adoption of the USDA national organic standards during the 1990s and the ensuing national certification process, organic became narrowly defined. It no longer represented a longing for ecological stewardship of the land and an alternative relationship to food and agriculture. Instead, it increasingly denoted the absence of specific chemical inputs.

As Julie Guthman points out for organic milk, during the late 1990s organic became centered on a 'not in my body' (NIMB) politics rather than on a politics that challenged the agrifood system more holistically (Guthman 1998, Buck et al. 1997). This narrow definition, fashioned by big business intervention, enabled large corporations to quickly dominate the organic market share and permitted monocultural, industrial agriculture to continue relatively unaltered. In fact, for the price of switching a few inputs, the newly defined organic opened up a whole new niche market for big business (Idem).

Whereas big business appropriated organic, the term sustainable proved to be too ambiguous and confined to be useful. During the 1980s the term, which arose out of the 1970s 'small is beautiful' movement, stood for a desired alternative food-system where self-sufficiency, decentralization and democratization reigned (Feagan 2001). However, the concept quickly came under scrutiny for two reasons. First, sustainable was criticized for being too vague. Could a farm only be sustainable if it relied on zero outside inputs? If certain inputs were allowed, then which ones, when and how many of them? Second, critics asserted that sustainable rarely addressed issues beyond the farm-gate. A farmer could engage in sustainable production practices but if, once her product left the farm, it was processed and distributed in an unsustainable manner then many of the problems associated with the contemporary food system could be easily glossed over. Of particular concern was how easily talk of sustainability neglected issues pertaining to social inequality (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Feagan 2007).

Dissatisfaction with other terms such as sustainable and organic can partially explain the popularity of the word local. Nonetheless, the turn towards local agriculture and food also constituted a shift in practice. As I argued above, because local constitutes a relational term, understanding the shift towards localization as a practice at this particular point in history requires that we explore what contemporary, US agrifood localism reacts against.

### ***The Relocalization Perspective***

In light of my bifurcated conceptualization of localism, I consider the relocalization and the origin-of-food perspectives separately. Beginning with the former, I offer a close examination of the localist discourse pertaining to this perspective subdivided into thematic categories. This is followed by a more comprehensive discussion of this form of agrifood localism as a historically and geographically specific phenomenon. A similar process for the origin-of-food perspective follows.

#### *On ecology*

Ecological sustainability was the most frequently cited reason for localization of the agrifood system. With the exception of one article, every piece I read on localism in AHV and JRS mentioned environmental issues to a greater or lesser extent. The three main concerns mentioned were fossil fuel conservation, the pollution through fossil fuel consumption and use of pesticides. A small number mentioned preservation of the local ecosystem.

Pelletier et al (2000), for example, argue for a local food system because of its “environmental benefits” (401). Starr et al (2003) focus on how links between local farmers and local restaurants and supermarkets can strengthen local agrifood infrastructure expressly using the language of environmental sustainability (302).

Likewise, in her 2005 presidential address to the Agriculture and Human Values society, Wilkins stresses the environmentally responsible nature of local food systems. Citing Gail Feenstra (2002). She argues for a sustainable food system that enhances the environmental health of particular places (Wilkins 2005:270). Neva Hassanein mentions environmental sustainability as a central goal of the alternative agriculture movement/practice (78, 79, 80) Hassanein deals with alternative agriculture but she emphasizes that alternative agriculture is mostly local. Webb et al. (1998) represent localism foremost as an environmental issue (66). Specifically, she mentions, “the preserv[ation] of fragile local ecosystems” (71). Similarly, Selfa and Qazi (2004) argue that alternative food movements tend to be local, due to “concerns about environmental health” (452). Gottlieb and Fisher (1996) state that local agrifood improves environmental conditions.

In addition, the authors highlight the importance of localism by reflecting on what they are against. Koc and Dahlberg (1999) discuss the “increasing exploitation of the natural environment, which manifests in increasing pollution, resource losses and degradation, and loss of biodiversity (112).” These authors are concerned with how globalization has heightened the “lack of ecological sustainability” and has “had an ever increasing impact on the natural environment” (Idem). They are concerned about global warming and the “high environmental cost of current industrial trends” (113).

#### *On hunger and food insecurity*

Proponents of local agrifood represent localism as more than an environmental issue. Local is better because it enables increased food security and the lessening of hunger. Most of the articles I examined operate with the community food security definition of food security which suggests that food security is a community issue (as opposed to an individual matter) and that food security exists when communities have

access to nutritional, quality and culturally appropriate foods through acceptable means (CFS 2007).

Wilkins (2005), for example, reasons that an alternative and local system will lead to a situation where “food is a right” (271). Pelletier et al (1999) maintain that local agrifood will “strength[en] anti-hunger efforts” (9). Webb et al. (1998) summarize the stance taken by many food policy councils where local is assumed to “alleviate problems such as ‘community food security’” (66). Starr et al are of the same mind (2003). Likewise, Allen (1999) suggests that the Community Food Security movement emphasizes local food systems as a means for the food insecure to regain food security. “Locally based solutions are seen as essential for people to improve the conditions that will enable them to become food secure” (119). Guptill and Wilkins also associate local food production with food security. They state, “Increasing local food production in both commercial and non-commercial contexts has become an important element in [the effort to create community food security] (39). Authors also outline the limitations of the current, non-local dominant food system to stress the superiority of localism. Feenstra (2002) deploys this strategy. She argues that the contemporary food system results in problems for, among others, “community residents who do not have access to an adequate, healthful food supply” (100).

#### *On local empowerment and increased democracy*

A third dominant argument within the localist discourse proposes that local agrifood systems lead to increased local power and democratic relationships. For example, Pelletier et al (2000) suggest that localization enables groups—groups they view as categorically undifferentiated—to “regain control of agricultural production and marketing” (402). DeLind (2002) argues that local food leads to more democratic

systems of food production, distribution, and consumption (217). Correspondingly, Feenstra (2002) avers that local food systems “invite the democratic participation of community residents in their food systems” (100).

More often than with ecological concerns or food security, the case for localism as enabling democracy and empowerment relies on an oppositional argument. Dahlberg, for instance, explicitly pits relocalization efforts against the “increasing loss of national, state, and local political power as concentrations of economic and corporate power increase, with a corresponding reduction of democratic power and social controls” (112). Wilkins, (2005) argues that local leads to autonomy in the face of “the increasing corporatization of the food system (272).” Likewise, Selfa and Qazi (2004) cite Hendrickson and Heffernan to suggest that local facilitates the possibility of “disengaging from the power of distant actors to shape their local food system” (452). Hassanein (2003) depicts the turn toward local as a resistance to the “industrialization, economic concentration, and globalization” of the current food system (77). For this author localism confronts “an oligarchy ruled by a handful of multinational corporations” (85). Starr (2003) also directly positions localization against “concentration of power in food retailing, which enables corporate buyers to drive down farm prices” among other things (304). Guptill and Wilkins do the same, claiming that local food projects “challenge [...] the dominance of large corporations in American society and the world as a whole have contributed to local food effort” (1-2). Allen et al 2003 perhaps summarize it best when they state that “locally situated and decentralized agrifood initiatives are framed as counter-movements that challenge the control of corporations and other national and global institutions” (63).

*On additional benefits of rescaling*

While ecological sustainability, food security and local empowerment and democracy are the three most frequently given reasons for why local agriculture and food are desirable, the localist discourse perpetuates the idea that the rescaling of the agrifood system will have additional positive outcomes. These positive outcomes are improved food quality (freshness, nutritional value and safety), economic viability and heightened trust between individuals. In addition, the localist discourse implies that the process of rescaling of the food system helps multiple social movements to come together.

On heightened nutritional value, nutritionists Pelletier et al (1999) stress that local food systems increase “access to healthy foods” (407). Webb et al (1998) mention that increased interest in local foods can partially be attributed to concerns regarding the nutritional value of foods (65). Starr et al (2003) concur. In addition, these authors represent proponents of local food systems as advocating localization as a means of effectively dealing with food quality and safety (302). Bellows and Hamm (2001) mention that local can lead to increased food freshness and food safety (272). Guptill and Wilkins stress food safety as a benefit of localization (45, 48, 49). Economic viability is another proposed benefit of local agrifood systems. Nearly every article claimed that local agrifood initiatives help or are perceived to help the rural economy. Pelletier (2000) states that local has “potential economic benefits” (401) because it “enables re-gaining control over agricultural production and marketing” (402). Webb et al (1998) attribute the rising popularity of agrifood system localization to economic issues (66). Starr (2003), as well as Bellows and Hamm (2001), mobilize the term ‘economic health’ (Starr: 304; Bellows and Hamm: 273). Gottlieb and Fisher (1996) propose that through local projects “farmers can earn more” (27). Likewise Koc and Dahlberg aver that local agrifood leads to de-

concentration of economic power (112). DeLind (1994) proposes that local projects “recycle value” back into local economy” (218). In fact, civic agriculture desires “greater economic stability, with greater income equity and with a more robust community infrastructure” (Goldschmidt, 1978; Tolbert et al, 1998; Ikherd, 2001; Schuman, 1998 in DeLind 218). Wilkins (2005) uses the phrase “recirculation of financial capital” (270). According to Allen et al (2003), advocates of localization argue that it will economically revitalize communities (63). As with the other proposed benefits of localization, the case for the economic benefit mobilizes an oppositional rhetoric. Feenstra (2002), for example, argues that the global food system leads to “economic disaster” for “scores of small family farmers, community processors, and other local businesses tied to food and fiber production” (100). Local food systems are the answer because “they are more economically viable for a larger percentage of community members” (100).

Third, the localist discourse maintains that local agriculture and food facilitates higher levels of trust and sense of community. For example Wilkins (2005) avers that local agriculture and food systems lead to increased “connection between consumers and producers” (432). Hinrichs adds that local food systems are preferred because they are “immediate [and] personal” (295). For Feenstra (2002) local food and agriculture counteracts “disintegration of social and spiritual fabric... that are part of a community’s food system.” She inserts, “[Local food systems] encourage more direct and authentic connections between all parties in the food system, particularly between farmers and those who enjoy the fruits of their labor—consumers or eaters” (100).

The present-day localist discourse, as I reconstruct it through an analysis of *AHV* and *JRS*, focuses on the contemporary scaling up of the dominant agrifood system. Rescaling the food system to the local level—in this instance local can mean anything ranging from community to the nation-state—will solve the ecological, social

and political issues identified above, claims a large segment of the scholarly and activist literature.

Present-day US-American advocates of localization perceive the emphasis on the nation-state and global scale as threatening particular localities and communities by centralizing power away from them. Local communities that once had power over themselves are not only rendered impotent and unimportant but are stripped of their resources and wealth. In response, throughout the last 150 years, in reaction to specific political and economic as well as cultural changes, the local scale has repeatedly been emphasized as a point of departure for the recapturing of political power and remedying social and economic inequality in multiple arenas. In this way the contemporary emphasis on the local scale in the agriculture and food system aligns with a larger movement in that it emphasizes downscaling as a strategy to re-empower the marginalized and counteract the social, economic and political limitations associated with the structure of contemporary society.

Second, the contemporary emphasis on agrifood localization extends beyond emphasis on political power and social equality. By utilizing agriculture and food as its point of entry, this form of localism brings in something new. It positions the ecological issues facing contemporary society front and center. It calls for an epistemic reorientation where we begin to conceptualize ourselves, our social relationships and social processes as embedded in an ecological reality. In other words, this form of localism, which through its emphasis on agriculture and food calls for social change alongside ecological change, arises as a response to humankind's unhealthy relationship to the ecological.

Before I discuss the unique contribution the localist agrifood literature makes, however, I will elaborate on the historical reasons for the rise of the origin-of-food perspective. To recall, the origin-of-food perspective constitutes the second form of

localism outlined by Fonte. As for the relocalization perspective, we must situate this type of agrifood localism in its historical context to uncover its unique attributes. As above, I begin with close reading of the localist discourse, followed by a discussion of my findings.

### ***The Origin of Food Perspective***

I found that the US discourse on agrifood localization emphasized place and identity less than the distance between producer and consumer. This corresponds with DuPuis and Goodman's assertion that European localism, which has a different historical and institutional trajectory, tends to emphasize the identity aspect of localization more than its US counterpart. In Europe, localization is more often framed as a means to resist the perceived loss of culture, tradition, knowledge and food quality in the face of American-style capitalism that homogenizes everything and produces low-quality foods (Dupuis and Goodman 2005:361, Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000 , Winter 2003 , Feagan 2007 ). While I found that the theme of local food as identity marker was less explicitly present, notions of erasure of difference and culture subtly pervaded the US localist discourse.

Direct mention of local agriculture and food as a marker of identity and culture was limited to Lind and Barham (2004) and Hinrichs (2003). Indirect mention of respatialization of agrifood systems to protect local culture and identity, however, permeated the localist discourse. Most often, the topic was framed in reaction to globalization: local agrifood traditions that are distinct and unique to specific places must be reserved through local agrifood initiatives. Feenstra argues that local food projects “tend to be place-based, drawing on the unique attributes of a particular bioregion and its population to define and support themselves” (100). Likewise DeLind (1994) states that “[A localized food system] is enabled through revitalizing

and revalidating relationships among people within the context of a particular social, physical and biological place” (65). These assertions reveal that localization is about seeing difference—cultural and ecological—and about resisting “the homogenizing tendency of conformity” (Idem). Eight years later, DeLind (2002) once again underscores the place of food as central to proponents of localization. The alternative agriculture movement which, within the text, is assumed to be mostly local, helps to “nurture a sense of belonging to a place and an organic sense of citizenship” (217). Similarly, for Selfa and Qazi local food provides protection against the dominant perception of “faceless and nameless” food production and consumption (452). DuPuis and Goodman suggest that local is a reaction against the sense of placelessness caused by globalization (363). Allen (1999) reminds us that the contention that ‘place matters’ is nothing new, argues that the newest iteration of localization is “a defensive position against the homogenizing effects of globalization” (Allen 119). Food from somewhere reflects the particular cultural and ecological attributes of specific localities.

As the examples above illustrate, the US local agrifood discourse, however subtly, refers to localization of agriculture and food as a means to resist the erasure of place-specific agrifood identities—identities that are embedded in the characteristics of particular cultural and ecological places. Lind and Barham are most explicit about how local foods are markers of identity and culture. However, other articles indirectly connect local agrifood with place-specific identities and cultures in their discussion of the homogenizing effects of globalization. These findings support Robert Feagan’s contention that, while particularly strong in the European labeling/territoire movement (27), the US agrifood movement considers localization as a powerful means to resist globalizations tendency to erase place (2007: 29).

The literature promotes agrifood localism as a means to resist the homogenizing effects of globalization. In other words, the forces of modernity, renamed in their intensified form as globalization, are erasing “the various meanings inscribed in our lived worlds—world *lived in place* (Entrikin 1989:41 in Feagan 30). Emphasis on the place of food should be understood within the larger context of the widespread importance of place-based identity. Since the 1990s, individuals and groups faced with the threat of homogenization have progressively stressed that difference matters. Difference—be it in terms of language, cultural traditions, religions, production techniques, and food and agriculture practices—is important and should be preserved.

Much like the notion of “real food”, geographers offer various metaphors to help us understand how the changes they summarize under the term modernity erase the identity of places. Modernity results in “placelessness” or “dried out lifeworlds” (Casey 2001). Another common way geographers describe how modernity is changing places is the notion of “thin” and “thick” places. As opposed to “thick places”—which are imbued with meaning, diversity and that cultivate a sense of place, modernity creates “thin places.” These places are devoid of the above-mentioned qualities. To illustrate, an area with buildings that have historically and architecturally distinctive attributes constitutes a “thick place.” On the other hand, a suburban area with malls, fast-food chains and prefab housing, is “thin<sup>14</sup>.”

What causes the rise of the origin-of-food perspective? In response to the threat of homogenization, advocates of localization argue that localization protects the

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<sup>14</sup> As we saw in chapter one, the emphasis on place needs to be accompanied by a set of robust spatial theories. Without such theories, such place-based movements run the risk of operating with reified notion of place. Discussions of “thick vs. thin” notions of places, for example, are often accompanied by two problematic assumptions. First, it can lead to the assumption that certain places have a fixed identity. Second, Massey reminds us that operating with these problematic assumptions about place can have analytical as well as ‘real world’ consequences. Indeed, it can lead to nativist sentiments and exclusionary practices as well as analytical inaccuracies. The challenge is to emphasize place and yet always think of place as in a state of movement (Massey 1994).

particular tradition, culture, identity as well as the ecology of particular places; a focus on food and agriculture is particularly salient because food and agriculture are powerful markers of identity, culture and ecological difference (Kingsolver 2003 in Feagan 33). As with the scalar argument, relocalization of agriculture and food represents an attempt to counteract particular aspects of modern societies.

### ***The Epistemic Shift to the Local***

The popularity of localization as it pertains to the agrifood system is intertwined with the turn towards the particular at the methodological-epistemic level within the social sciences. At the political and substantive level, agrifood localization is about resisting as well as finding an alternative to the centralizing and mono-cultural tendencies of the contemporary increasingly globalized food system.

The epistemic-methodological turn towards localism in the social sciences challenges the dominant tendency to erase place through the use of universalizing grand theories, its tendency to promote the myth of objectivity and its disempowering representation of small-scale social movements. Substantive localism and epistemic-methodological localism align in their assertion that place matters and that local scales possess favorable attributes. In this section I address the methodological-epistemic turn towards localism in the social sciences in general as a means to situate contemporary agrifood localism in its larger intellectual context.

To characterize the epistemic and methodological shift towards localism in the social sciences I draw on two examples. My discussion of development studies and sociology is intended to illustrate how localization is simultaneously a theoretical and practical matter. J.K. Gibson-Graham's book *The End of capitalism (As we knew it)* enables me to further illustrate why local becomes important theoretically. As with the substantive turn towards localism I attempt to understand why localism becomes an

attractive proposition and practice by exploring what theoretical emphasis on the local is positioned against. In both cases, I begin by reviewing the arguments made by pro-local theorists. By looking at what proponents of epistemic localism are arguing for and against, I seek to situate this theoretical shift, much like I did for the substantive turn towards localism, within its socio-historical context.

### ***Local in Development Studies and Sociology***

During the 1980s development studies and sociology saw amplified concern with epistemic-methodological localism, which coincided with a proliferation of local development projects. Development studies and sociology had reached an ‘impasse’ at the time. The academic approach to development, which relied heavily on modernist, Marxist and neo-Marxist conceptual frameworks, was heavily criticized for producing meta-theories that were lacking in relevance and applicability (Booth 4-5). It was becoming apparent that countries develop at different speeds and in different ways. Dependency theorists in particular pointed out that a general theory of development could not capture this diversity. Thinkers such as Cardoso and Gunder-Frank reasoned that, not only did places vary in terms of how quickly they developed, but that the specific histories and institutions of each place shaped what development looked like (Booth 8, Cardoso 1972, Gunder-Frank 1966).

Advocates of a local methodological-epistemic approach also criticized how grand theories failed to recognize difference within places. For example, theoretical interest in gender opened the door to critiques of meta/functional theories. Women and men experienced development differently (Booth 8). These specifics needed to be taken into account. Similarly, the study of class led to the recognition that there was not just a uniform proletariat (9). Within each place, various class formations and relationships existed. Thus the one-size-fits-all model of class, which was frequently used as a measuring stick, proved inadequate.

Not only were modernist theories analytically weak in that they could not account for differences between and within places, but they were also politically debilitating. Advocates of methodological-epistemic localism argued that an (orthodox) Marxist approach rendered local attempts at social change impotent and marginal. During the time, increasing number of grass roots resistance movements and “single-issue campaigns” were gaining momentum (Booth 7). These movements were often unique to particular places and peoples and had specific demands and goals. Broad, general theories proved ineffective in explaining them. In addition, the universal theories used tended to represent place-based social movements as marginal and ineffective. This is because these movements did not call for a systematic revolution of the entire system.

Additionally, advocates of localism at the methodological-epistemic level challenged the lack of reflexivity regarding the role of the researcher. While many remained steadfast in their adherence to structural theories, broader questions about the relationship between power, cultural dominance, language and knowledge were taking development studies and sociology by force. Who were (mostly white, Western) social scientists to develop grand-narratives and meta-theories about the way the world was and should be? Based on the work of Schultz and Barth as well as deconstructionists, feminists and post-structuralists, numerous social scientists challenged the authority of the academic as well as ‘his’ large-scale explanations (12). In other words, the localist epistemic discourse in development studies and sociology contested modernist theory’s tendency to erase the particularities of place, to render place-specific social movements as impotent and finally to reproduce a false separation between object and subject of study.

The shift towards research focused on the local was not a result of theoretical problems alone. A number of top-down infrastructural development projects were

failing and NGO workers and policy makers were dissatisfied with general recipes for development (Booth 23-24, Chambers 16). Looking for guidance on how to go about their development work, NGO workers and policy makers were frustrated by the chasm that existed between what intellectuals were talking about and what was happening on the ground. In addition, some development workers publicly questioned theories which did not take the needs and knowledge of local populations into account<sup>15</sup>

It was during this time that Robert Chambers, now considered by many to be the spokesperson for local development, began to argue for a change in development practice. Chambers proclaimed that development was “in the middle of a quiet but hugely exciting revolution in learning and action (xvii).” Large-scale development projects of the 1950s and 60s had not only failed but they were patronizing and unjust. Citing the example of environmental work in Kenya, West Africa and Nepal, Chambers argued that in order for development projects to work and be equitable, we must recognize the specifics of place and local knowledge (28). Thus Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was born. This newer breed of development was not only more efficient and equitable but it proclaimed to recognize the particularities of places including local knowledge and expertise (216).

In sum, a new development research program, which was concerned with how development occurred in specific localities, replaced the older focus on meta-narratives during the 1980s (3). The rise of a localist approach was in response to the analytical as well as practical problems with modernist development theory and the ensuing practices. Modernist theory, which had dominated development studies and sociology, was accused of being both analytically less accurate as well as politically

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Edwards’ piece entitled “Rethinking Social Development: the search for ‘relevance’ in Booth 1994 summarized this point well.

disempowering. Armed with feminist, deconstructive, and post-modern theories, critical thinkers within development studies and sociology, questioned the very possibility of knowing for all places and all times and thus unsettled the possibility of creating development theories that were universal both spatially as well as temporally. Similarly, development practice took the local as the new norm during the 1980s and 1990s. A number of historical circumstances enabled this change. These ranged from the weakening of the state, to the failure of large-scale development projects, to large-scale displacements both internal and external. Local development, theoretically and practically, was advertised as more efficient, more just and generally better for everyone involved.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Gibson-Graham: Local as Antidote to Big Bad Capitalism***

J.K. Gibson-Graham's critique of political economy draws an even clearer picture of why a local approach becomes theoretically-methodologically attractive<sup>17</sup>. Through her critique of dominant social scientific representations of capitalism, the author makes a case for a local epistemic-methodological orientation. Gibson-Graham accuses the dominant social scientific and popular economic discourse, particularly classical and contemporary Marxism and political economy, of reproducing and entrenching a unified and monolithic conceptualization of capitalism (4). Marxist and political economic universalizing theories represent capitalism as a singular and total entity. The representation of Capitalism (which she denotes with a big "C") as this 'big, bad other' that is everywhere and all-encompassing, while deeply entrenched

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<sup>16</sup> See Cooke and Kothari's *Participation: The New Tyranny?* for a salient critique of local development (as well as action research) as an extension of neo-liberalism.

<sup>17</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham is an amalgamation of two post-structuralist feminist political-economists: Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham who choose to write as one author. The decision to write in one voice is motivated by the desire to celebrate how academics can complement each other's strengths through collaboration. Gibson and Graham contend that such positive collaboration is rare in the academy where authors often prey on their colleagues' weaknesses in order to buttress their individual standing. In accordance with their preferences, I use the personal pronoun 'she' when I refer to these authors.

among social scientists as well as the general public, is not only analytically inaccurate but is also politically debilitating.

Capitalism, according to Gibson-Graham—as a socially, culturally and historically contingent set of social practices and relationships—exists among many other forms of economic activity. The author draws on queer theorist Sedgwick to propose an alternative conceptualization of capitalism. In her book *Tendencies* (1993), Sedgwick explores a process she dubs “the Christmas effect”. The Christmas effect refers to the process by which social and political institutions such as churches, schools, the media, families all come together to “speak with one voice” about Christmas. By speaking in a unified voice, these multiple discourses overlap to create the illusion of something ‘real’ and singular: Christmas as it should be (Sedgwick in Gibson-Graham 1996:80-81). This unified story of Christmas marginalizes and at times erases all differing experiences and practices. Sedgwick uses this example to illustrate how multiple discourses come together to create the reality of gender. This unified, monolithic notion of gender is, along with the expectations that come with it, is continually imposed onto individuals, whose sexual and gender experiences rarely correspond to these stereotypical molds and results in lifetimes of oppression and constraint (Gibson-Graham 1996: viii).

The same discursive process occurs with capitalism, contends the author. That is, the modernist social scientific discourse, while comprised of multiple and highly contesting voices, in many ways tells a relatively unified story about capitalism (22). Theorists such as Aglietta, Harvey, Mandel and Wallerstein talk about capitalism differently. Yet their representations share three common traits: they portray capitalism as unified, singular and total (253). Capitalism is unified in that it is conceptualized as a self-regulating organism or ‘system’ that garners its momentum from internal processes such as capital accumulation and grows relatively

unencumbered despite being contested and resisted. Even those that emphasize capitalism's tendency towards crisis, argues Gibson-Graham, still depict capitalism as systemic and unified in its tendency towards crisis (255-256).

Social scientists also represent capitalism as singular, that is, they argue that capitalism has no equivalent. Capitalism is robust and entrenched like no other social system. Nothing is as strong, healthy, vigorous and extensive as this set of social relations; capitalism reproduces itself “as a natural outcome of an internally driven growth process” (257). Finally, Marxists are inclined to represent capitalism as total. That is, all spaces that are not capitalist have not *yet* been penetrated. Newly established non-capitalist spaces are either conceptualized as below capitalism or at its margins. They are always perceived in relation to hegemonic capitalism (Idem).

The analytical consequence of operating with such a notion of capitalism is that non-capitalist activities and the research and theory about them are often marginalized if not erased. To illustrate her point, the author recounts listening to a panel of scholars discuss the link between industrial restructuring and family life. While the scholars gave lip service to the mutually constitutive relationship between the household and industrial restructuring, the picture they painted was that of industrial restructuring occurring and of the household adapting or coping. How family life shaped and conditioned industrial restructuring—such as increasing non-capitalist and non-industrial economic activity—was marginalized as an anomaly. This is because these activities lay outside of the explanatory power of the universal theories these scholars employed.

In addition, political economists often trivialize research focused on non-capitalist activity. This is the case even when these supposedly ‘random’ and ‘marginal’ phenomena and activities are, in fact, of central importance to ‘capitalist’ activities. For instance, Folbre (1993) and Fraad et al. (1994) contend that the

household economy is not secondary or marginal to the market at all. In fact, processes and relationships within the household shape the workings of the market. This is because household activity involves more people than the ‘capitalist’ sector and is the site of significant production of value as well as social reproduction (261).

Not only does Gibson-Graham critique the dominant, modernist conceptualization of capitalism on the grounds that it cannot accurately capture what is actually going on but she criticizes it for its lack of sophistication in regards to theorizing the role of the researcher. The dominant theories of capitalism enable social scientists to ignore their role as social scientists in shaping the very phenomena they attempt to report on. Using herself as an example, Gibson-Graham admits that as a political economist in the 1970s, she too participated, though perhaps not to the same extent as her colleagues, in the act of reinforcing and entrenching the idea of a monolithic and hegemonic capitalism (ix). Like her contemporaries, her intention had been to study capitalism in order to find ways to move past this particularly harmful form of social organization. Yet, by writing about capitalism as this big bad monster she reinforced the illusion of said monster.

The act of recognizing that by studying capitalism she reinforced its existence, led her to recognize that social-scientists, far from being objective outsiders, in fact help to shape the social phenomena they represent. Gibson-Graham began to recognize the “performativity of social representations” (x). That is, how her very representations played a part in creating the reality she was reporting on. She explains, “I wasn’t thinking about the social representation I was creating as *constitutive* of the world in which I would have to live. Yet the image of global capitalism that I was producing was actively participating in consolidating a new phase of capitalist hegemony” (ix). In brief, Gibson-Graham critiques modernist discourse’s tendency to promote the myth of objectivity.

The consequence of operating with the dominant conceptualization of capitalism is analytical weakness; social scientists who use these theories have a hard time depicting what is actually going on—both in terms of the phenomena researched as well as in terms of understanding the process of knowledge production. Another consequence, one that Gibson-Graham concentrates on most ardently, is that the universalizing modernist conceptualization of capitalism is disempowering. To those who conceptualize capitalism as unified, singular and total, the task of social change becomes gargantuan, daunting and nearly impossible. Indeed, “It is the way capitalism has been ‘thought’ that has made it so difficult for people to imagine its supersession” (4). While Marxist theories’ *raison d’etre* in many ways is to facilitate social change, ironically enough, the way they conceptualize capitalism renders social change nearly impossible (1). If capitalism is a unified system or whole, then attempts at change are often absorbed by the system and are often futile. Minor resistance or reformations are a possibility but only total revolution can replace it—a revolution that is all but improbable (256). If capitalism is singular, then no equivalent or alternative to it exists. All alternatives are related to capitalism and are subsumed by it. And third, if capitalism is total then alternative class relations appear futile (258).

Because social scientists play a part in creating the very phenomena which they study, in this case capitalism, they can help affect change by helping to reconceptualize the issue at hand. In the case of capitalism, an alternative conceptualization where capitalism is no longer a solid, unified, hegemonic formation is needed. This does not mean that capitalism does not exist or that it is not dominant. The authors merely want to emphasize that capitalism is not *total*. This requires social scientists to stop, metaphorically speaking, brushing empirical observations that contradict their grand theories about capitalism under the rug or forcefully shoehorning them into their conceptual molds. Instead of thinking about capitalism as

a unified omnipresent organism that is propelled by its own logic and is currently penetrating all 'empty' spaces, we can develop theories that recognize the particularity of specific places, the difference that occurs within them and recognize the contested and partial nature of capitalism. Like postmodernists, post-structural feminists and other anti-essentializing schools of thought have done for identity, society and hegemony, we need to reconceptualize capitalism as partial, contested, fragmented and one among many, albeit mutually conditioning, historically specific existing forms of economic activity (11).

Recognizing capitalism for the 'discursive artifact' that it is, will open up space for more accurate social theories. In addition, recognizing the variation in economic practices at any specific point in space-time makes room for imagining new potential avenues for social change. Gibson-Graham names this new epistemic space "a heterospace of both capitalist and non-capitalist economic existence" (5). Here the reality of social life is seen for the mixture of capitalist and non-capitalist activities and relationships that it is (xi). If capitalism is not a solid, unified, coherent thing, if "there is no underlying commonality among capitalist instances, no essence of capitalism like expansionism or property ownership or power or profitability or capital accumulation, then capitalism must adapt to (be constituted by) other forms of economy just as they must adapt to (be constituted by) it" (15). This kind of contingent capitalism, avers Gibson-Graham, is pregnant spaces of hope for social change.

How do we go about changing the dominant conceptualization of capitalism? Gibson-Graham turns to feminist theory for solutions. Much orthodox Marxist and political economic social scientific theory implicitly operates with a binary of

capitalism and that-which-is-not capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Non-capitalism, because it is defined in opposition to capitalism, becomes defined as a lack or as an absence. In addition, because it is juxtaposed with a unified and monolithic entity, non-Capitalism becomes similarly uniform. Difference is ignored, or even worse, it is erased. Because Gibson-Graham argues that the binary of capitalism/non-capitalism is analogous to the Male/Female binary she invokes poststructural feminist theory to unsettle this theoretically problematic and politically stiffening binary; feminist theorists argue that to unsettle the essentialized notion of woman is to upset the monolithic image of man. In other words, the way to get out of the suffocating binary of gender is to operate with a plural understanding of the male *and* female gender (14). “If man himself is different from himself, then woman cannot be singularly defined as non-man. If there is no singular figure, there can be no singular other” (Idem). In the case of capitalism, this approach consists of unsettling the unified, homogenous and coherent notion of this particular form of social organization through research that exposes its complex, multivariied and contested nature.

Universalizing theories of capitalism are both analytically inaccurate—multiple forms of non-capitalist economic activity not only exist but at times outnumber or out-trump capitalist ones—as well as politically debilitating. These theories leave little possibilities for social change. Drawing on postmodern social theory, poststructural feminist theory and other anti-essentializing schools of thought, Gibson-Graham attempts to make room for another kind of theorization of capitalism

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<sup>18</sup> It is crucial to differentiate between ‘orthodox’ Marxism and the Marxism that is inspired by Marx’s critique of fetishism. Gibson-Graham critique is in response to orthodox Marxism. This form of Marxism is in many ways a modernist reading of the theorist. Marx’s argument against the fetishism of the commodity, in contrast, in many ways aligns with Gibson-Graham’s case. In “On the Fetishism of the Commodity” Marx attempts to demystify objectification. He does not perpetuate the myth of big, bad capitalism that is omnipresent and timeless. Instead he represents capitalism as historically and socially contingent.

where economic difference is recognized as well as cultivated alongside a recognition that larger forces are at play (3). This new theoretical approach does not assume capitalism's dominance. Nor does it ignore capitalism altogether. Instead it highlights the particularities of place, of differences and contestation within place. Such an approach will enable social scientists to better perceive contemporary economic activity which possibly consists not just of capitalist social relations but also "feudalisms, primitive communisms, socialisms, as well as hitherto unspecified forms of exploitation" (262).

Gibson-Graham's argument extends beyond a discussion of capitalism. Her book exemplifies the turn towards local at the epistemic-methodological level in which agrifood localism is ultimately embedded. Instead of grand, universalizing theories, which gloss over particularities of place and time, she makes a case for an epistemic approach that recognizes difference, contestation, and challenges the 'objectivity' of the social scientist. For Gibson-Graham the shift to local theorizing arises in part from dissatisfaction with the analytical purchase of modernist universalizing theories. These frequently render the experiences and practices of the socially marginalized invisible. In addition, universalizing modernist theories disempower individuals. Social change is theorized as difficult, complex and nearly impossible. Alternative practices, relationships and spaces are interpreted as inconsequential or worse, as facilitating the very processes they attempt to resist.

The act of replacing a universalizing theory with one that appreciates specificities of particular segments of space-time, because it recognizes internal heterogeneity and the partial and fluid nature of social reality, creates room for imagining avenues for social change. Capitalism is partial, fragmented, contested. While dominant, it is one among multiple forms of economic activity that exist in any particular point in space-time. In this case it is no longer the insurmountable big, bad,

omnipotent monster. Suddenly, capitalism is deflated and little steps toward change are not only possible but they are also significant.

Gibson-Graham's critique of the dominant conceptualization of capitalism is part of a larger critique of how social scientific theory tends to erase particularities of place, to reproduce the illusion of objectivity and to represent small-scale social movements as useless and ineffective. For the reasons outlined above, Gibson-Graham, much like development theorists in the 1970s and 1980s, propose an epistemological-methodological reorientation where the particularities of place, the interaction between subject and object and the emancipatory potential of small-scale social movements are recognized. These specificities are appreciated without the exclusion of large scale-structural forces and processes. Instead, they are brought in to illustrate the contested and contingent nature of these structural factors. In other words, criticizing the universalizing theories of orthodox Marxism, Gibson-Graham makes a case for an epistemology-methodology that, through privileging the local scale, attempts to draw attention to the need to recognize the particular and the general as always already existing in each other.

In conclusion, I would like to clarify that my intention in probing what I call the case for epistemological- methodological localism made by Gibson-Graham specifically and within the social sciences more generally has not been to represent these thinkers as reifying the local. In many ways, calling their work methodological-epistemological localism implies that they uncritically privilege the local. As I discussed in chapter one, depending on the underlying spatial assumptions, the emphasis on the 'local' can be done well and it can be done poorly. Positive localism, as advocated by Gibson-Graham for instance, by emphasizing the local, attempts to point attention to the *tension* between particularities and generalities. In contrast, regressive localism reifies scales and reproduces unhelpful binaries. As I attempted to

show in chapter one, what differentiates these two forms of theoretical localism, and by association practical localism, is the spatial assumptions underlying them.

### ***Local in Context***

In brief, my discussion of Gibson-Graham as well as development sociology was intended to show that localism is always already practical as well as theoretical. We can find clues on why interest in and emphasis on localities and places become important at particular points in space-time by examining the agrifood discourse. So what threatens the local right now? While the localist discourse tends to blame an ill-defined globalization for nearly all the problems associated with the contemporary food system, geographers such as Agnew, Duncan, Pascual-de-Sans, Harvey and Massey, contend that emphasis on place and the local scale, both at the methodological-epistemic and substantive level, is not so much a reaction to globalization as it is to modernization—where globalization figures as an accelerated form of modernization (Agnew and Duncan 1989, Pascual-de-Sans 2004 in Feagan 2007, Relph 1976). It is modernization that erases place and the local scale on the methodological-epistemic plane by emphasizing universal grand narratives and by naturalizing the scale of the nation-state as the ideal unit of analysis. It is modernization that leads to concentration of power and resources at ever larger scales and erasure of place.

As we saw in this chapter, the localist discourse contends that globalization restructures the agrifood system. It associates the rescaling of the agrifood system with numerous social, political, economic and ecological issues. In addition, globalization homogenizes tastes and erases culinary and agricultural difference. More and more people—that is, people who can afford it—are eating McDonalds and instant noodles. They are eating ‘food from nowhere’ (McMichael 1993, Campbell forthcoming 2007). Likewise, traditional agricultural practices are disappearing. People are losing the

ability (and the seeds) to grow their own food (Kloppenburger 1988; Kloppenburger and Kleinman 1987; Pollan 2001; Norberg-Hodge 2002; Shiva 1993, 2000). Increasingly, farmers—again, those who can afford them—are relying on agricultural products and techniques that are not related to the ecology of particular places. Put slightly differently, seeds and technologies from nowhere are spreading, alongside food from nowhere over the world.

Thus threats to the local as scale and place—both material as well as cultural—explain why localization becomes so important now. On the one hand, local has become popular among activists and academics as a means to counteract the rapid scaling-up of the food system and the ensuing concentration of power. On the other hand, the place of food, is emphasized as a means to resist a homogenizing agrifood system that is rapidly spreading across the globe.

I now turn my attention to ‘why agriculture and food’? In other words, in this chapter I have represented local agriculture and food fitting into long line of localisms. The next step is to recognize that the contemporary local agriculture and food movement is unique. Namely, it places agriculture and food at its center.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CENTRALITY OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

#### *Introduction*

In chapter three, I argued that the relocalization perspective emerges in response to the tendency for modern societies to scale up and concentrate power. The origin-of-food perspective responds to the threat of homogenization. If localism in general arises in response to the material, cultural and epistemological-methodological problems associated with modernity—that is, to scale up, concentrate power and erase place—then how can we understand the present popularity of agrifood localism specifically? In brief, the preceding chapter concentrated on ‘why local now?’ This chapter focuses on ‘why agriculture and food now?’

To address this question I rely on Colin Duncan’s case for the centrality of agriculture. I propose that the threat of annihilation through ecological disaster coupled with problems directly associated with the global food system—specifically, the immediate risk of ‘unsafe’ foods—exposes the centrality of agriculture and food to academics, activists and the general population. In other words, the demystification of the industrial agrifood system through environmental and health crises unearths the pivotal role agriculture and food play in shaping our thinking, social relationships as well as societies’ relationship to the natural world. Thus, the movement to rescale the agrifood system at present differs from localism in general and other forms of environmentalism as it calls for a new eco-socio-subjectivity, one where ecological issues not only come to the forefront, but where we conceptualize ourselves, our relationships, social processes and institutions, as well as alternatives to them, as inextricable from the ecological context in which they are situated (Feagan 2007: 32).

I suggest the localist agrifood discourse as of yet does not explicitly recognize the centrality of agriculture. I use the word ‘implicit’ because the contemporary localist discourse, in its attempt to account for the present salience of local agrifood, hints but does not fully articulate the pivotal role food and agriculture play in shaping the human-nature relationship and ultimately the character of societies. As I will attempt to show below, with a few notable exceptions, the discourse attributes the widespread interest in (local) agriculture and food to the direct problems associated with the dominant agrifood system. Alternately, emphasis rests on agriculture and food as powerful points of entry to wider critiques of contemporary social, economic and political realities. While these explanations are certainly valid and are echoed in my discussion of the localist discourse above, they neglect to articulate what is unique about agrifood localism as opposed to other forms of environmentalisms such as clean air or water conservation movements for example. This literature often overlooks the potential agrifood localism, at this particular socio-geo-historical conjuncture, has to engender a new agro-ecological subjectivity that not only challenges the present industrialized, dominant agrifood system but the very foundations of both modernist as well as socialist theory and practice. In other words, these thinkers gloss over the fact that agriculture and food—beyond being about agriculture and food, and besides being a window on to larger issues—are the point themselves.

Through a critical evaluation of the localist discourse—which I supplement with additional texts by a sample of prominent thinkers on food and agriculture such as Helena Norberg-Hodge, Eric Schlosser, Deborah Barndt, Francis Moore Lappé as well as Amory Starr and Philip McMichael—I attempt to unearth and articulate the implied recognition that food and agriculture are pivotal in constituting social relationships as well as human-nature interactions. Specifically, I examine the reasons the localist discourse gives for why it focuses on agriculture and food. For the sake of

analytical clarity, I artificially separate these reasons into two categories: direct problems with the agrifood system and agrifood as a point of entry for dealing with broader social, political and economic matters. In actuality, these two perspectives are often simultaneously present in the individual texts I examined. As I will argue below, while these two arguments are certainly valid, they overlook the unique, historically specific attributes of contemporary agrifood localism.

### ***Problems with the Agrifood System***

As noted above, a common argument is that present interest in agriculture and food in general and local agriculture and food in particular constitute a response to the numerous, social, economic, political and ecological problems directly associated with the contemporary food system. While many continue to celebrate technical innovation and industrial, mechanized agriculture, faith in these ‘modern’ forms of food production is gradually waning. Increasingly, individuals and groups highlight various ways in which the dominant agrifood system either does not live up to its promises or has led to social and ecological crises.

The localist discourse I construct in chapters two and three concentrates on the immediate problems associated with the food system, citing ecological troubles as its primary concern. From loss of biodiversity, to the excessive burning of fossil fuels to the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers to the rapid loss of topsoil, the environment constitutes a pivotal motivation for localization (Allen 1999, Lind and Barham 2003, Pelletier et al 2000, Starr et al 2003, Wilkins 2005, Webb 1998, Selfa and Qazi 2004, Koc and Dahlberg 1999, and Gottlieb & Fisher 1996). Beyond the ecological, worries include food insecurity, the anti-democratic structure of the food system, food quality, rural economic degradation (Idem). A brief survey of additional writers on food and agriculture reveals preoccupation with similar themes. In *Bringing*

*the Food Economy Home*, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Todd Merrifield and Steven Gorelick, for instance, draw attention to the ecological, social and economic problems that the dominant food system engenders. These are:

Food that is neither very flavorful nor nutritious, at a price that includes depleted soil, poisoned air and water, and a destabilized global climate. [The dominant food system] is destroying rural livelihoods and hollowing out communities in both North and South. And it is enabling control over food to become dangerously concentrated within large corporations, which by their nature subordinate all other concerns to the economic bottom line. Perhaps worst of all, people everywhere are being encouraged to rely on a single model of food production—one that is dangerously lacking in diversity—thereby jeopardizing food security worldwide (116).

Feelings of distrust and discomfort with the industrialized, ‘modern’ and ‘globalized’ food system are voiced now more than ever. In fact, Timothy Lang and Michael Heasman, authors of *Food Wars*, characterize the present era as being one where “the sustainability of food production systems and the quality of foodstuffs in the developed and developing worlds are being challenged as never before (3). Lang and Heasman explain that the food system, continually faced with food-health scares such as Mad Cow’s Disease, E-Coli contaminations, Genetically Modified Foods, increased rates of food-related illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity that coexist with widespread famine and ecological scandals such as overfishing have led to food system to appear to “lurch from crisis to crisis” (3). These crises are awakening people to the conflicts, inequalities and lack of sustainability inherent to

the industrial food system. Whereas the promises of modern agriculture were initially embraced wholeheartedly, confrontation with food crises after food crises has unsettled faith in the industrial productivist model. In other words, at present the ‘luxury’ of “being physically, socially as well as mentally and spiritually disconnected from the earth and its fruits” is no longer affordable (Norberg-Hodge et al. 2).

Problems directly associated with the contemporary food system, particularly the food crises, explain the rising interest in local agriculture and food and the ensuing distrust of the dominant, productivist agrifood system. Local agriculture and food, as an alternative, creates another, more transparent and safer way to put food on the table. While problems associated with the food system, however, certainly partially explain the increased interest in food and the rising popularity of local food and agriculture as an alternative to the status quo, numerous thinkers extend this argument, proposing that food and agriculture become salient topics of interest because they function as a window onto larger relations in which the food system is embedded and which are increasingly problematic.

### ***Entrée, Entrance, Vehicle or Window***

Mad Cow Disease, outbreaks of food poisoning, pollution of land and water by agricultural chemicals, the decline of rural livelihoods in both North and South—these are but a few of the reasons why people are beginning to question the entire global food system *and the premises on which it is based* (Norberg-Hodge 3, *my emphasis*).

In this way, the localist discourse I examined in chapters two and three also frames challenges to the dominant food system as a point of entry for, or a

condensation of, a more comprehensive critique of multiple social, economic and political issues facing contemporary society. As Norberg-Hodge et al. illustrate above, another proposition is that agriculture and food operate as powerful avenues through which to critique large-scale processes such as globalization, modernization or capitalism. A more overt articulation of this stance can be found in the world of Deborah Barndt and Eric Schlosser. In *Tangled Routes: Women, Work and Globalization*, Barndt explains why she focused on the tomato for her work on gender and globalization. She asserts,

The tomato seemed a perfect “entrée” to a process of cross-border research and popular education around the complex phenomenon and often confusing concept of globalization, “Entrée” is used in two senses: it could be the content, or main course, of an educational process, as well as an entry point into both the personal experience of eating and the globalized process of food production, as one slice of the globalization pie.

Later, Barndt describes her work on the tomato as a “concrete entry point for exploring processes that move beyond the particularity of the tomato” (3). Proposing that fast food today “is the culmination of [...]larger social and economic trends” (261), which include “adulation of the ‘free market’ and technology, the rise of monopolies, totalitarian regimes of state power and corporate power” (Idem). Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, concurs with Barndt. Food is a remarkable point of entry for grappling with contemporary socio-economic configurations, suggests Schlosser. Relying on the age-old adage of ‘you are what you eat’ he argues that “a nation’s diet can be more revealing than its art of literature” since “what

people eat has always been determined by a complex interplay of social, economic, and technological forces” (3).

“Eating is something we all have in common. It’s something we all have to do every day and it’s something we can all share” declares Alice Waters, founder of Chez Panisse and renowned advocate of agrifood localization concurs (Waters in Petrini 2003: xii). Likewise Schlosser highlights the fact food that enters the body as a reason why food is an ideal point of entry for discussing larger social issues (10). “Unlike other commodities, [...] fast food isn’t viewed, read, played or worn. It enters the body and becomes part of the consumer. No other industry offers, both literally and figuratively, so much insight into the nature of mass consumption” (10). Finally, Lang and Heasman maintain “food is an intimate part of our lives. It is a biological necessity but it also shapes and is a vehicle for the way we interact with friends, family, work colleagues and ourselves. It is associated with pleasure, seduction, pain, power and caring” (2).

Like Barndt, Schlosser and Waters, Lang and Heasman maintain that food is a powerful point of entry into broader social issues. Their assertion that food is not only a vehicle but also “shapes” the way “we interact with friends, family, work colleagues and ourselves,” however, implies recognition that food and agriculture are more than windows. These authors insinuate that food and agriculture actively mold social relationships. While this line of reasoning figures marginal in their overall argument, it should not go unnoticed. The idea that food and agriculture do more than act as windows onto larger social issues and that they involve more than agriculture and food alone, I argue, helps us understand the rising interest in agriculture and food in the US right now. In addition, a re-conceptualization of agriculture and food as central in shaping social relationships as well as relationships to the natural world makes space

for us to see the potential agrifood localism has for initiating a poignant critique of and providing an alternative to an-ecological, modernist thinking and action.

### ***The whole enchilada!***

What if food was not so much a point of departure but the point itself? Francis Moore Lappé, author of *Hope's Edge*—a book about agrifood-based social movements—proposes that food [and agriculture] might hold the key to shaping society as well as humankind's relationship to the natural world. On the one hand Lappé aligns with Waters, Barndt and Schlosser. She justifies concentrating on food by stating that it is “a great awakener” (14), because it is so universal and intimate. However, much like Lang and Heasman her writing insinuates that food [and agriculture] are more than just points of entry.

...food opens a path like no other to new possibilities, and I don't mean just new possibilities for feeding ourselves. I mean the whole enchilada—I mean that if we look at food, *really look*, our world can shift: We might just not only grasp for the first time the biggest ideas limiting our lives, but also discover for the first time whole new ways of seeing the world that release US from our march towards planetary destruction (Lappé 14).

It certainly seems plausible that agrifood is a powerful mobilizing tool for a wider critique of society because it is such an intimate and universal thing. However, as Lappé suggests, perhaps food and agriculture are more than compelling points of entry. To borrow her phrase, maybe food and agriculture together comprise *the whole enchilada!*

An implicit understanding of food and agriculture as central in shaping humankind's relationship to the natural world infuses the localist discourse. That is, the literature on local agriculture and food hints that there is something more at work—that agriculture and food hold the key to an alternative episteme, social theory and practice. For instance Norberg-Hodge et al. proclaim,

People are also beginning to realize that relying more on locally grown, organic foods can help solve a whole range of social and environmental problems at the same time....Shortening links between farmers and consumers may in fact be the most strategic and enjoyable way to bring about fundamental change for the better. *A world in which everyone is well fed with local, fresh foods would be a world where everyone has more power, community, and contact with nature.* For many years now, colonialism and economic development have taken the world in exactly the *opposite* direction—separating not only producers from consumers, but all of US from the natural world. The question now is: Do we continue down the path of global monocultures, or do we start to shift direction? (Norberg-Hodge et al. 3, my emphasis).

With the assertion that “a world in which everyone is well fed with local, fresh foods would be a world where everyone has more power, community, and contact with nature,” Norberg-Hodge et al. associate a shift in the agrifood system with a change in the very organization of society. However, what is the relationship between a shift in the agrifood system and the organization of society, let alone the way we think? This connection remains relatively unexplored in the book.

A reexamination of the localist discourse I reconstructed in chapter one reveals a similar proposition. As we saw, the localist discourse makes the overall argument that local agriculture and food will lead to an alternative epistemology where social problems are conceptualized holistically as well as embedded in an ecological reality.

A number of authors explicitly mention that agrifood localization engenders an increasingly holistic conceptualization of social problems. Starr (2003) explains that localism enables us to not only more easily build coalitions, but to also better conceptualize social problems as interrelated. She explains “a number of movements and ideas have converged around the idea that a ‘local’ food system can address the interrelated concerns about environmental sustainability, agricultural sustainability, food quality and safety, and economic health” (302, 304). Feenstra (2002) suggests that localism is about the integration of multiple social movements. It is an “attempt to integrate the environmental, economic and social health of their food systems in particular places” (100). Pelletier et al (2000) also emphasizes that local is powerful because of its ability to facilitate what they call “a convergence of interests” that is, it encompasses other social movements of community economic development, alternative agriculture, sustainable agriculture, environmental movement as well as social justice: anti-hunger, and empowerment (402). Guptill and Wilkins stress that what is different about localism is that it brings multiple movements together (40).

Webb et al. (1998) put forward that the local scale enables multiple movements to come together. In this case they focus on the anti-hunger and sustainable agriculture movements, stating, “in some locations, these two movements are now merging into coalitions whose concerns are more broadly directed to policies and programs dealing with a range of components of the local food and nutrition system, including production (urban and rural), food processing, distribution (wholesaling, retailing, food service and food assistance), consumption, and food waste (Koc and Dahlberg

1993: 66).” Framed in this way, (local) agriculture and food challenges the modernist tendency to separate and categorize social problems and their solutions.

Secondly, and perhaps more critically, the localist discourse signals the emergence of a unique brand of localist epistemology-methodology that not only emphasizes that place matters in terms of identity and culture but also in terms of the ecological. That is, we must recognize social, cultural, political and economic difference *alongside* ecological difference. The origin-of-food perspective’s case for the preservation of the cultural is never far removed from the case for the conservation of biological diversity. The Slow Food campaign—perhaps one of the most widespread and vocal proponents of agrifood localization—underscores the correlation between the cultural, social and ecological. Slow Food’s emphasis on the territory of food articulates that the cultural and biological components of place are intimately entangled. *Terroir*, a guiding concept in the movement that refers to the place of food, is defined as “the combination of natural factors (soil, water, slope, elevation above sea level, vegetation, microclimate) and human ones (tradition and practice of cultivation) that gives a unique character to each small agricultural locality and the food grown, raised, made, and cooked there (Petrini: Slow Food Book 8).

By highlighting that a local food system facilitates the re-conceptualization of social problems as interrelated and embedded in an ecological reality, the localist discourse hints that there is something qualitatively different about localization—as a form of contesting the status quo—that has agriculture and food at its center. As opposed to other forms of localism this one forces us to not only keep the ecological in mind but to conceptualize social problems and formulate their solutions in holistic and ecological terms.

Whereas within the US localist discourse, the potential for a new form of agriculture and food to engender another, more holistic and ecologically embedded

subjectivity is not addressed directly, scholars who engage with the Food Sovereignty Movement, such as Amory Starr and Philip McMichael, recognize how the call to localize agrifood systems is associated with a radically alternative epistemic orientation and corresponding mode of social intervention.

In her book, *Naming the Enemy*, Amory Starr describes emerging third and fourth-world social movements,

These movements say more than “No.” They propose a quite radical vision, one that has already demonstrated its ability to meet needs while protecting what we call ‘diversity.’ This vision can best be summarized as agricultural, encompassing first world farmers seeking market protection, farmers resisting genetic engineering, indigenous sovereignty movements reacting to the failures of urbanization and neoliberalism by insisting on rights to land and subsistence. These movements have a variety of relationships to political economy, formal democracy and existing nations. But none imagines that growth, modernization or technology provide answers to their problems; indeed they see corporate technology as economically and ecologically dangerous. The emergence of a social movement centered on agricultural issues, rather old technology and rurality may come as a surprise to cosmopolitan theorists, particularly when the urban poor organize their politics around rural land rights and self-sufficiency. Such motion is neither postmodern nor socialist nor ‘identity-based’, but it is a radical political economy (223).

There is something unique about agrifood movements, proclaims Starr. Juxtaposing ‘agricultural’ and ‘pop culture’ movements, the author contends that the

latter fails to provide substantive knowledge on “physical, social and spiritual survival [and]...does not help the next generation understand how to live” (170). In addition, agricultural-based social movements—here she used the example of the Community Food Security movement—not only challenge corporate power, and the submission of quality of life to the market but also provide an alternative perspective altogether (Idem).

McMichael, whose object of inquiry is the food sovereignty movement, likewise maintains that peasant-based social movements such as the MST or Via Campesina fundamentally challenge the rules of the neoliberal game. Moving beyond a demand for “rights” (16) and land distribution (10), these agrifood movements contest neoliberalism’s very ontology. McMichael explains, “ instead of defending a world lost, transnational movements such as Via Campesina advocate a world to gain—a world beyond the catastrophe of the corporate market regime, in which agrarianism is revalued as central to social and ecological sustainability” (6). Put differently, these movements call for an ecologically conscious and holistic alternative to the neoliberal order.

Much like Barndt, Schlosser and others, McMichael uses the metaphor of the window. He writes, “in the current agrarian question posed by the food sovereignty movement, food embodies a broader set of relations, becoming a window on the catastrophe of neoliberalism” (8). These movements focus on agriculture and food but through this highlight the hypocrisies and injustices endemic to the larger uneven social, political and economic complex (9).

However, McMichael extends his argument beyond the assertion that agriculture and food provide a salient point of entry. These agrifood social movements not only give a savage critique of globalization, but they also offer us “a new world cosmology” with an “agrarian identity based in a value complex weaving together

environmental cosmology/subjectivity and stewardship as a condition for social and ecological sustainability” (10). Through re-centering agriculture these social movements present an epistemology that re-embeds the social, the political, the economic within the ecological, where the “relationship of respect and harmony with Mother Earth and the oceans” figures central to the desired alternative approach (Via Campesina cited in McMichael 10). Place—culturally, socially as well as ecologically speaking—matters and social problems must be re-contextualized within the ecological. Thus McMichael comments, “in creating space for an alternative ontology, the food sovereignty movement not only occupies a pivotal perspective challenging neoliberal capitalism (cf. Starr 2001:224), but also reasserts the ‘centrality of agriculture’ in a post-capitalist modernity (Duncan 1996).”

While Starr and McMichael emphasize that agrifood movements proffer not only a fierce critique of that which is, but a radically alternative vision of what could and should be, they do not clearly overtly explain *why* it is that agriculture and food, specifically the aim to delocalize agriculture and food, provide the opportunity or base for such an alternative vision. In citing Duncan, McMichael acknowledges that agriculture and food possess unique qualities. Nonetheless, he fails to clearly spell what these attributes are.

Colin Duncan’s case for the centrality of agriculture, while, as we saw in chapter one, is prone to making problematic spatial assumptions, helps us answer the question of why local agriculture and food become salient today. Below I will argue that the present interest in localizing the food system signals an emerging recognition—however subtle—that agriculture and food play a major role in not only shaping humankind’s relationship to the ecological but also in shaping society and contemporary thinking. In other words, the emphasis on agriculture as the avenue through which to not only critique the workings of modern—or to use contemporary

terminology, global—society but also as the point of departure for envisioning a better, more just world emerges as agriculture and food's centrality becomes increasingly apparent. In brief, the age-old adage is truer than we might think; we are—and I would add, think and relate to—what we eat and grow.

Prior to embarking on a discussion of why local agriculture and food are popular now, I must first briefly clarify how I chose to conceptualize 'the present'. In this chapter I characterize the present as a time of significant ecological change accompanied by heightened awareness of this change. In other words, I frame the present in terms of new ways of thinking as well as new material realities as they pertain to the ecological. Materially, the world is facing ecological problems it has not faced before. Global warming, the rapid loss of plant and animal biodiversity, the widespread pollution of water and the accelerated loss of topsoil, has led to palpable—and likely irreversible—changes in our natural environment.

I hold that the world is changing ecologically for the worst. However, material changes alone do not sufficiently describe the current period. Changes in communications technology have also heightened awareness of these ecological issues. The abundance of information and the speed at which this information is able to travel has amplified interest in and awareness of ecological matters now more than ever. Currently, issues pertaining to the ecological, particularly global warming, pepper the US media. Films such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* as well as the worldwide *Live Earth* concert series, for example, assure that most, if not all, have been in some way confronted with ecological issues such as global warming. In brief, I portray the present here as a time of material ecological changes as well as a time of elevated awareness of these changes. That humankind is now facing its potential annihilation and, thanks to communication technology, is aware of it more than ever, has resulted in the recognition that we need to rethink how we conceptualize the

natural world and our relationship to it. We must understand agrifood localism in this context. Below I will summarize Duncan's case for the centrality of agriculture and subsequently explain how his argument can help us better understand the present saliency of local agriculture and food in the US.

### ***Colin Duncan And The Centrality of Agriculture***

Duncan traces a long history of ecological blindness in social scientific thinking. The social sciences—that is, those on the right as well as those on the left—have been conceptually limited due to their ecological (or lack thereof) assumptions. Using Marx and Locke as *quasi* archetypes for the larger school of thought they belong to, Duncan argues that both tend *not* to see the limits of nature (5). Instead these social scientists conceptualize nature as an unending well of resources for production. In addition, both Marx and Locke, assume that production is unidirectional (31). In other words, their theories cannot account for the production of waste and the need to deal with it<sup>19</sup> (29). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this argument, these thinkers fail to appreciate the importance of place (39).

Social theory on the natural world, based on the work of these founding fathers has a tendency not to see, ecologically speaking, place and time<sup>20</sup>. Places become homogenous. We fail to appreciate that places are different and that some places are more ecologically significant than others. Not only do we not “see” differences in places but operating within the dominant an-ecological paradigm we fail to appreciate

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<sup>19</sup> This particular critique of Marx is suspect as Marx does, in fact, discuss the metabolic rupture between town and country. For more on this see Jason W. Moore. 2000. “Environmental Crises and the Metabolic Rift in World-Historical Perspective,” *Organization and Environment* 13: 2.

<sup>20</sup> Duncan's thoughts regarding the erasure of time are less developed. The dominant epistemology, something both socialists and the right adhere to, does not conceptualize future generations as full human beings. This is what allows US to devastate the natural environment and uninhibitedly pillage natural resource reserves. We cannot think beyond the present. “A system of morality in which members of future generations were regarded as full human beings would be hard at first for US to digest. It would disrupt traditional socialists as much as their opponents” (48—see footnote)

that places exist and that some places are, when it comes to ecology, more important than others (Idem). For example, places such as wetlands, if disrupted, can have global consequences (38). This dominant conceptualization of nature—where ecological place is not seen and where social issues are rarely perceived as embedded in an ecological reality—plays a significant part in creating the potentially catastrophic ecological problems we face today.

Duncan adds that agriculture is the root cause of our unhealthy relationship to the natural world. This makes significant break with the story most social scientists tell. However, it is precisely this argument that can help us understand the present popularity of agrifood localism. We can trace the widely held conviction that the destruction of nature starts with capitalism and modernity to Marx and Engels. For these thinkers, humankind's relationship to the ecological changed most significantly with the emergence of capitalism and modernity. Suddenly we no longer conceptualized nature as an extension of the human body (8).

To explain why capitalism and modernity are not to blame in and of themselves Duncan elaborates how he defines each term respectively (9). Modernity, which is qualitatively different from capitalism and industrialization, refers to the intensified level of interdependence (26). "A society is modern to the extent that its households consume little of what they themselves produce and produce little of what they themselves consume" (26). Indeed, it is possible to have "a highly modern society engaged in agriculture in the fullest interventionist sense and yet benign in its environmental influence" (13). England until the end of the nineteenth century is an example that this is possible. According to this 'neutral'—albeit problematically a-historical and universalizing—definition, modernity can coincide with an ecologically sustainable outlook and practice. Modernity can even counter "intellectual parochialism," contends Duncan (26).

Just as modernity does not necessarily lead to ecological devastation, so is capitalism not inherently environmentally problematic proposes Duncan. Capitalism is merely a social system “that accelerated the modernization of the world in the sense of causing an increase in human interdependence” (25). As with modernity, in and of itself, this social system cannot be what causes a shift in the human-nature relationship. What is, however, different is industrialism, which signals an entirely novel form of “human-natural metabolism (Idem).” But while industrialism signifies a significant change, it does not mark the initial rupture. This crucial break occurs much earlier. It arises with the advent of agriculture. As Duncan avers, “it is when agriculture became common that the relationship between humankind and nature underwent its single most radical change.” (8).

Hence the ecological problems facing contemporary society cannot be explained by the emergence of capitalism or modernity. Nor can we blame Christianity or the scientific revolution for the epistemological and practical shift that has resulted in our problematic conceptualization of the ecological. Instead, the actual problem is agriculture. Agriculture is inherently destructive. It continually disrupts nature’s efforts to attain equilibrium through the process of succession (14). By its biological definition, agriculture is the practice of continuously inhibiting nature from reaching a state of climax, balance and thus resilience. Ecosystems, left to their own devices, go through what biologists call ‘succession.’ That is, they systematically work towards stability. In temperate zones, an ecosystem that is at an advanced stage of succession and is at a heightened point of equilibrium, is, more or less, a thick forest. At its most vulnerable point— a point an ecosystem finds itself in as a result of a natural disaster such as a fire or a landslide—a successively young ecosystem is covered in minimal vegetation such as grass. Agriculture, by continually removing vegetation such as bushes and trees, perpetually stunts the process of succession. It

acts like a persistent natural disaster, continuously keeping nature in its most vulnerable state (14-16).

A clear link exists between destructive practices and a particular attitude towards the natural world. Indeed, the shift from nomadic to sedentary societies led to a different consciousness—from one where nature is a provider to one where nature is ‘used’ and manipulated (17). This way of thinking, inspired by living in an agriculturally based society, is what has inspired an ecologically disruptive society.

Agriculture is inherently physically disruptive. But the ecological problems we face today are certainly not brought about by agriculture alone (11). Mechanized and industrial agriculture further intensifies ecological devastation and intensifies the rupture from an ecological consciousness and practice. Non-industrial agriculture still has some semblance of ecological consciousness by virtue of having to consider the natural environment in its production practices. Industrial agriculture, on the other hand, is in many ways able to gloss over the ecological particularities of place (29). Armed with technology that increasingly enables us to grow food with near complete disregard for local soils, microclimatic conditions as well as traditional genetic resources and knowledges, we can, at least in the short run, afford to ignore ecological realities. Industrial agriculture thus leads to both a heightened level of ecological disruption as well as an intensified absence of ecological thinking.

Duncan concludes, since the problem is agriculture and food—both practically as well as in terms of our thinking—the solution is to put agriculture and food in the center of society (12). In other words, seeing as agriculture is at the heart of our disruptive relationship to the ecological, the act of placing agriculture at the center of our thinking and acting will enable us to reshape our relationship to the natural world and avert ecological disaster (39). The act of bringing agriculture and food to the center of practice and thinking will not only lead to an ecologically more sensitive

society but also to a social theory that conceptualizes the world in terms of society, economy *as well as* the ecological.

Re-centering agriculture does not mean going back to pre-modern practices. Indeed, Duncan repeatedly reminds us that modernity does not necessitate the marginalization of agriculture (49). “The key point is the need to monitor the environmental effects of industry and to limit them, by making ecologically sensitive agriculture the central element in an economy embedded both in nature and society” (12).

In light of Duncan’s argument for the centrality of (local) agriculture then, I propose that the current interest in agriculture and food among academics as well as the general public, in a time of perceived and real ecological crises, signals an implicit recognition that agriculture and food are central in shaping human-nature interactions. In addition, I attribute the saliency of agriculture and food to a recognition that place matters and that social problems need to be conceptualized as interrelated and as embedded in an ecological reality. In other words, the turn to local agrifood in the US signals an implicit recognition of the centrality of agriculture and food in shaping how we relate, think and the possibilities we envision for social change.

### ***A New Eco-Subjectivity***

I propose that the agrifood localist discourse embodies a reformulated, holistic and ecologically embedded subjectivity. I have parsed out the reasons the localist discourse gives for why local agrifood systems are better. I did this as a means to gain some conceptual clarity in terms of what the turn towards local agrifood is about and to later be better able to unearth the spatial assumptions upon which the relocalization perspective strand of localism rests. However, perhaps the most striking aspect of the localist discourse I examined is the implicit argument that that the rescaling of the

food system will lead to the integration of multiple desired outcomes. Proponents of local agrifood argue that the act of rescaling the food system will result in more food security, increased democracy, rural economic development, more trusting social relationships and improved health. Local is about the environment, food security and nutrition. Local is about democracy, health and the viability of small farms. Indeed, every article I read, while placing ecological factors front and center, either explicitly or implicitly suggested that local agriculture and food has the capacity to integrate multiple objectives—objectives that are always already conceptualized as inextricable from ecological realities. While environmental concerns were central to each case for agrifood localization, no article claimed that local agrifood was about only the environment alone. Instead each case for localization emphasized that localization was about multiple issues.

What is unique in the present agrifood localization movement is that it meshes ecological objectives with cultural, economic, political and social as well as cultural ones. This form of localism implicitly places the ecological at the center of its call for social change. It suggests that attempts to create another world need to simultaneously address issues of food security, trusting social relationships, economic vitality and democracy, while embedding these issues within an ecological reality.

Placing agriculture and food at the center, as the local agrifood movement does, is not merely about recognizing ecological realities and thus circumventing ecological disaster alone. Rather it is also about extending socialist thinking. It is about recognizing that social problems are deeply interrelated as well as connected to the ecological—that issues such as food security, democracy, health for example—issues social critics have been attempting to understand and socialists have sought to remedy through the embedding of the economy in social institutions—cannot occur in isolation from each other nor from the ecological. The agrifood localization movement

is, in this way, proposing that the economy needs to not only be embedded in society but also, and perhaps more importantly, within the ecological. According to Duncan, for too long social critics and socialists have either ignored the ecological or have treated ecological issues as one of long line of problems facing contemporary society (3, 11).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Conflict and crises often have the uncanny ability to unveil our underlying assumptions and expose the contradictions we normally take for granted. This thesis has focused on two such instances: the controversy within agrifood studies regarding localization and the present-day crisis of the agrifood system. I examine these two points of contention and concern not only because I appreciate what they can tell me about the present but also because, to the extent that these conflicts and crises exhume the conceptual and ideological ground upon which we stand, they shed light on alternative future possibilities.

Focusing on what I call ‘the localist discourse’ in agrifood studies—a discourse I reconstruct by examining two academic journals, *AHV* and *JRS*—I begin by unearthing the spatial assumptions underlying the case for and against local agrifood. I also highlight the potential theoretical and political consequences associated with these presuppositions. In brief—relying on Maria Fonte’s two-part model of agrifood localism—the relocalization perspective and the origin-of-food perspective—I explain that the relocalization perspective makes assumptions about scale whereas the origin-of-food perspective makes assumptions about place. Pertaining to scale, the discourse assumes that the act of rescaling the food system will automatically lead to the desired outcomes such as environmental sustainability, food security and social justice. Operating with these assumptions often leads pro-localists to, borrowing Born and Purcell’s terminology, to fall into the ‘local trap’.

Spatial assumptions underlie much of the origin-of-food perspective as well. I explore three of these: that places have a timeless and authentic identity, that places are internally coherent and that places are bounded and separate from other places as

well as larger social processes and relationships. As with scale, the uninvestigated assumptions about place have methodological and political consequences. Methodologically, these assumptions lead researchers to gloss over the paradoxical, fluid and hybridized aspects of identity and the cultural. Second, this understanding of place also leads researchers to gloss over differences and inequalities within places. Finally, a bounded notion of place conceals how social processes and relationships create and recreate places. Unreflexive localism can lead to a reified notion of authenticity and identity, which in turn can offer a pretext to exclusionary and repressive practices. In addition, a bounded notion of place can inhibit place-based social movements from gaining political leverage by building coalitions across space.

The newly articulated critique of localism within agrifood studies not only unearths the problematic spatial assumptions present in much of the agrifood localist discourse, but it also sensitizes us to the overall lack of in-depth spatial theorizing within the social sciences. In this thesis I have argued that a reconceptualization of space as well as scale and place as historically and geographically specific can lead to more robust form of agrifood localization. A historicized understanding of the local, not only transcends the static debate within agrifood studies on whether local is good or bad, but renders visible the unique contribution present day agrifood localism makes—namely the forging a new eco-subjectivity where social theory and action are conceptualized as embedded in their ecological context.

In chapter three, I begin my task of historicizing agrifood localism by situating local agriculture and food within a long genealogy of localisms. These localisms, I propose, constitute an instance or condensation of a larger critique of modernity. The relocalization perspective, I argue, which fits into a long line of localisms concentrates on scaling down, is a reaction to the modern tendency to scale up and concentrate power. In contradistinction, I characterize the origin-of-food perspective, which seeks

to preserve the identity and culture of particular places, as a reaction to the modern tendency towards cultural and biological homogeneity.

Because theory and practice are intertwined, I address the epistemological-methodological turn towards localism alongside the substantive one. What factors have led to the epistemic-methodological emphasis on the local? I engage with the turn towards local in development studies and the other J.K. Gibson-Graham's book *The End of capitalism (As we knew it)* to begin addressing this question. I contend that the epistemic-methodological form of localism challenges modernist theories' tendency to erase the particularity of places, to perpetuate the myth of objectivity and to represent small-scale efforts at social change as marginal and impotent. Localism in general and as it pertains to agriculture and food specifically, is a reaction to particular trends at the substantive and the theoretical level that have been present in modern society and which have of late accelerated during the era of globalization.

In chapter four I suggest that contemporary localization, which places agrifood at its center, is inextricably bound with the current ecological crisis and is particularly potent in its transformative capabilities. Specifically, this form of localism articulates an alternative eco-subjectivity. I began this chapter by examining the arguments for local agriculture and food. Through a critical evaluation of the localist discourse—which I supplement with additional texts by prominent thinkers on food and agriculture such as Helena Norberg-Hodge, Eric Schlosser, Deborah Barndt, Francis Moore Lappé as well as Amory Starr and Philip McMichael—I attempt to bring the recognition, implicit in the agrifood localist discourse, that food and agriculture are pivotal in constituting social relationships as well as human-nature interactions.

I rely on Colin Duncan's case for the centrality of agriculture to support my case. I propose that the possibility of annihilation through ecological disaster coupled with the immediate risk of 'unsafe' foods reveals the centrality of agriculture and food

to academics, activists and the general population. In other words, these crises unearth the fact that not only do agriculture and food shape social relationships as well as human-nature interactions, but that they hold the key to an alternative, ecologically embedded thinking and action.

The acknowledgement of the centrality of agriculture remains latent in much of the localist discourse. Instead, agrifood localism is habitually framed in terms of problems directly associated with the agrifood system or as a window onto larger social issues. While these explanations are certainly valid and are echoed in my discussion of the localist discourse in chapter two, they neglect the potential present-day agrifood localism has to engender a new agro-ecological subjectivity that challenges not only the present industrialized, dominant agrifood system but the very foundations of both modernist as well as socialist an-ecological theory and practice. In other words, these thinkers gloss over the fact that agriculture and food—beyond being about agriculture and food, and besides being a window on to larger issues—are the point in and of themselves.

As mechanized, high-input and export-oriented farming and diets rich in mass-produced, processed foods are expeditiously diffusing across space, something else is taking place in the margins. That is, more and more local agrifood projects, ranging from farmers' markets to urban gardens to local food banquets are springing up. In this thesis I have sought to understand the factors that have led to the present popularity of local agriculture and food among academics, activists and the general public in the US. I have argued that current debates within the scholarly agrifood literature on the spatial assumptions underlying the localist discourse, while immensely useful in unearthing the limitations of an unreflexive localism, run the risk of overlooking the unique contribution agrifood localization holds to make by forging an alternative eco-subjectivity. In engaging with geographical theories of scale, place and space, I have

attempted to formulate a reflexive theory of the local for the agrifood localization movement. I have undertaken this task because of the potential I see in contemporary agrifood localism to bring the ecological into social theory and action. It is my hope that a well theorized agrifood localism will help create just and more food-secure world.

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