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Practicing food democracy: a pragmatic politics of transformation

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Abstract

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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individual and organizational actors working to change the dominant agro-food system need to be engaged on a daily basis in political and social struggles and accomplish what is presently possible given existing opportunities and barriers. From an alternate view, such incrementalism and pragmatism are woefully inadequate for achieving the complete transformation of the food and agriculture system that many movement actors and academic analysts see as necessary.

Can pragmatic, incremental steps transform the dominant agro-food system so that it will be more sustainable in the long term? Of course, there are no easy answers to that question. In my attempt—both as an activist and as a student of social movements—to think about it, I find useful the emerging concept of “food democracy”. It is the purpose of this essay to discuss that concept and to elaborate upon its practical utility with respect to collective action within the alternative agro-food movement, with a primary focus on the United States.

If it is the job of a critical social scientist to go beyond surface impressions and uncover underlying social structures and conflicts as a way to empower people to improve society, it is the job of activists to execute strategies for social change and anchor that work in hope for a better world. I identify and have experience with both of these projects. As a result, I appreciate the value of an on-going cycle of inquiry—of action and reflection and then adjustment based on knowledge gained through experience. Such reflection suggests to me that the thoughtful practice of pragmatic politics and the development of a strong food democracy will be keys to transformation of agro-food systems in the long run.

2. The imperative of food democracy

In the 1980s, “sustainability” emerged as a powerful symbol and the goal of a social movement focused on food and agriculture in the United States. Ever since, the concept has been contested, and the term has eluded a consensus on its definition. In part, the question of definition results from the wide variety of interests—such as environmentalists, alternative farmers, food security advocates, farm worker unions, and consumer groups—that have a stake in building more sustainable agriculture and food systems. Although these actors are not unified on a political agenda and they pursue different strategies and approaches to change, there is a general sense of being on the same side of the social conflict over food and agriculture. Definitions of sustainability that are broad and inclusive are therefore useful because they can encompass this range of individual and organizational actors. For instance, Allen et al. (1991, p. 37) defined a sustainable agro-

food system as “one that equitably balances concerns for environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice among all sectors of society”.

While the above definition is useful because it embraces the range of interests that should be included in a vision for sustainability, it is difficult to apply this—or any—definition as a practical guide for action. What does it really mean *in practice* to equitably balance concerns for environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice among all sectors of society? How should each dimension be evaluated in relation to the others? How should society weigh, for example, the protection of water quality from agricultural runoff against the possibility that additional regulation of farming practices might make it even more difficult for small agricultural producers to operate in an economically viable manner? What should be done in the many cases where there is considerable scientific uncertainty and incomplete ecological and social data, such as in the realms of pesticides and genetic engineering? How do we make judgments about the needs, wants, and rights of current generations in light of considerations for future generations? Perhaps most importantly, who gets to decide where the “equitable balance” lies?

Definitions of sustainability cannot fully anticipate responses to these kinds of questions because at their core these matters are about conflicts over values. When values clash, there is no independent authority that society can *meaningfully* appeal to for a definitive resolution of disputes. For example, most proponents of sustainability would argue that agricultural science is incapable of guiding decisions about the food production and distribution system. Indeed, sustainability advocates have long challenged many of the knowledge claims generated by the dominant institutions of agricultural research and the privileged role of science in shaping agriculture (Hassanein, 1999). And, many of the technologies generated by public and private agricultural science are precisely at issue in contemporary food politics (e.g., genetically engineered crops). Surely, agronomists, geneticists, agricultural economists, and other scientists can and should contribute to the discussions; but ultimately “experts” cannot by themselves fairly make the decisions that impact the sustainability of agricultural production and the food system because those decisions involve choosing among values. In a pluralistic society, agreement on science (or religion) as an independent authority for making decisions about values is not likely, nor desirable.

If the very real disputes over the consequences and direction of the agro-food system cannot be resolved by appealing to an independent authority for an objective answer, how then should they be resolved? Drawing heavily on Barber’s (1984) exploration of “strong democracy,” Prugh et al. (2000, p. 7) suggest an answer to this question about sustainability more generally, and

their observations certainly apply to food and agriculture as well. They argue that: “Because the conflict is about values, sustainability must be socially and politically defined”. Furthermore, solutions to the ecological, social, and economic problems associated with the excesses of industrialized, corporate-dominated, and globalized agriculture cannot all be prescribed in advance. Natural and social systems are neither static nor predictable. Because decision-making is usually shrouded in uncertainty, society must assume and plan for the reality that the agro-food system is temporally and geographically variable, that we cannot have complete knowledge in advance of the consequences of the choices that are made, and that notions of what is sustainable will evolve over time. Selecting sustainable solutions from various options means making choices that affect everyone, and in that context, conflict is inevitable. Politics is the arena in which we deal with disagreements over values. Such conflict is not something to shy away from; conflict leads to change. As the well-known organizer Alinsky (1972, p. 21) wrote: “Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict”. The best hope for finding workable solutions to conflicts about the character and direction of the agro-food system is through the active participation of the citizenry (in the broad, denizen sense of the word) and political engagement to work out our differences.

If solutions to problems in the agro-food system depend in a very fundamental way on participation, the emerging concept of food democracy serves as a constructive method for political practice because participation is a key feature of democracy. Lang (1999) has popularized the term food democracy and begun to develop it conceptually. He argues that the agro-food system is ultimately “both a symptom and a symbol of how we organize ourselves and our societies,” and it represents “a microcosm of wider social realities” (Lang, 1999, p. 218). Food reflects “a titanic struggle between the forces of control and the pressure to democratize”. The recognition that the agro-food system has been and continues to be contested terrain acknowledges an important space for individual and collective agency. Accordingly, Lang argues that, historically as well as today, “a set of demands from below” has bubbled up in many areas of the world. Specifically, he refers to political pressure to ensure “greater access and collective benefit from the food system” so that it provides “the means to eat adequately, affordably, safely, humanely, and in ways one considers civil and culturally appropriate” (Lang, 1999, p. 218). At the core of food democracy is the idea that people can and should be actively participating in shaping the food system, rather than remaining passive

spectators on the sidelines. In other words, food democracy is about citizens having the power to determine agro-food policies and practices locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

The force for food democracy confronts the control that powerful and highly concentrated economic interests exert on food and agriculture today (see McMichael, 2000). Significantly, the industrialization, concentration of economic power, and globalization of the agro-food sector are not immutable processes with a foregone conclusion. Whatmore and Thorne (1997, p. 289) have applied actor network theory to call for greater attention to social agency and the struggle to create alternative food networks, and to demonstrate that globalization is not a logical but “a socially contested process in which many spaces of resistance, alterity, and possibility become analytically discernible and politically meaningful”. Similarly, Gottlieb (2001, p. 258) argues that: “...the dominant food system, embedded as it may be in influencing how food is produced as well as consumed, is not immovable; its outcomes are not inevitable”. To speak of the pressure to democratize the food system is to recognize that there are spaces of resistance and creativity in which people themselves attempt to govern and shape their relationships with food and agriculture.

Food policy councils offer a concrete example of a deliberate attempt to develop the practice of food democracy. Established by a few North American cities and counties over the last decade, food policy councils dedicate resources and give validity to an arena that has not traditionally been part of local government: community food security and local, sustainable agriculture (Feenstra, 1997). Unlike most hunger intervention models, community food security puts emphasis on the community rather than individual level, looks for strategies for empowerment and food self-reliance, and stresses prevention with a focus on nutrition and sustainable food production (Gottlieb, 2001). Successfully implementing this integrated and coordinated approach requires bringing together representatives of a range of local food-system stakeholder groups from both the public and private sectors, groups that do not otherwise engage in regular dialogue and constructive, collaborative action.

Welsh and MacRae (1998) have drawn on their involvement with the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) to further elaborate the concept of food democracy and the associated idea of food citizenship. Formed in 1990, the TFPC challenged the traditional assumption that hunger, poor nutrition, and environmental problems associated with agriculture can be adequately addressed without significant redesign of the food system. The TFPC recognized that long-lasting, local solutions necessitate moving beyond the limiting notions of food as commodity, people as consumers,

and society as marketplace. Instead, Welsh and MacRae (1998, p. 241) stress that advocates need to focus on food citizenship and the recognition of both the rights and responsibilities that the term implies: “Food, like no other commodity, allows for a political reawakening, as it touches our lives in so many ways... . Food citizenship suggests both belonging and participating, at all levels of relationship from the intimacy of breastfeeding to the discussions at the World Trade Organization”.

Accordingly, the TFPC has pursued hundreds of community food projects and advocated for reinforcing policies that encourage food democracy. For example, rather than the disempowering charity model typical of anti-hunger advocacy, their Field to Table program sells food produced by area farmers at wholesale prices to organized groups of primarily low-income people, and trains these groups in food-related skills that have been lost with the food industry’s emphasis on convenience and the consequent “de-skilling” of consumers. In turn, trainees work in different parts of the Field to Table program, and some have started microbusinesses that sell products back into the distribution program. These and other innovative structures emerge from a holistic critique of the food system, and simultaneously unearth and celebrate the social and cultural role of food. For Welsh and MacRae, the transformative potential of food democracy lies in its significant challenge to the structures of capital because food democracy contests the commodification of food and transforms people from passive consumers into active, educated citizens.

3. Social movements and the pressure to democratize

The main source of the pressure to democratize the food system comes from the constellation of organizations in the alternative agro-food movement. By alternative agro-food movement, I refer to the social activity of sustainable agriculturalists, local food advocates, environmentalists, food security activists, and others who are working to bring about changes at a variety of different levels of the agro-food system. Buttel (1997, p. 352) observes that social movements are “the most important social forces that could provide a countervailing tide to global integration of the agro-food system, to the decline of household forms of agricultural commodity production, and to structural blockages to achievement of sustainability”. He maintains that environmental and related agricultural sustainability movements will most likely be the primary mechanism for bringing about significant, positive change in the agro-food system if it is to occur. Similarly, Gottlieb (2001) appreciates the numerous local efforts at building an alternative food regime because they provide valuable and rich examples of the potential for change. He maintains that the “new food

movements” have begun to build a pathway for necessary environmental and social change by “challenging the ways we think and talk about food” (Gottlieb, 2001, p. 271).

While recognizing the power and promise of social movements, both Buttel (1997) and Gottlieb (2001) raise important concerns that they feel must be addressed if a movement is to realize its full potential. Specifically, these analysts point out that the alternative agro-food movement is very diverse in terms of its organizational forms and strategies, and in terms of the locus of action. Buttel (1997, p. 353) states that there is no “underlying notion or strategy that can serve as a singular unifying focus for the movement,” and he worries that the divisions among the groups in terms of interests and worldviews limit the effectiveness of the movement. Similarly, Gottlieb (2001) is concerned that movement actors remain too disconnected from one another, their source of power is too dispersed, and their visions too focused on specific issues and goals. “The challenge to the movement itself,” he maintains, “is the need to shift the arguments about discourse to the arena of action where the sum of different actions, policy initiatives, and movement building activities—whether environmentally or socially defined—can become greater than any one of its individual parts” (Gottlieb, 2001, pp. 271–272). While the diverse organizational forms and strategies within the movement are potentially problematic in ways Buttel and Gottlieb identify, there are also positive aspects of this diversity that should be appreciated.

3.1. Diverse organizational forms and strategies

In considering the diversity of approaches to social change that exists within the alternative agro-food movement, it is important to acknowledge that diversity is a feature of the so-called “new social movements.” The “new” movements (like feminism, ecology, and peace) are often contrasted with the “old” (workers’) movements which tended to be more coherent forces for change. New social movement theory stresses that what distinguishes the new movements is that their actors struggle to create new social identities, to open up democratic spaces for autonomous social action in civil society, and to reinterpret norms and develop new institutions (Scott, 1990). The new movements are understood to be trying to bring about changes in civil society by transforming values, lifestyles, and symbols (Melucci, 1985). The alternative agro-food movement—as a kind of new social movement—is dynamic and multi-dimensional, involving various groups of people situated in particular places, who create and implement assorted strategies, participate in diverse forms of action, and encounter a variety of obstacles and opportunities.

There are at least three positive aspects of this diversity of organizational approaches that should be acknowledged. First, different social movement organizations address specific problems and thereby fill different functions within the movement. For example, I served from 1997 to 2000 as coordinator of a statewide coalition campaign, the goal of which was to establish a law requiring the comprehensive reporting of pesticide use in the state of Oregon, US. Although this pesticide right-to-know campaign involved a broad coalition (discussed in more detail below), three organizations had significant resources in terms of staff time, member mobilization, and money dedicated to the achievement of very specific, achievable, and measurable objectives designed to meet our goal over a 3-year period. There were other pesticide or agricultural issues we *might* have chosen to work on during that time, but we had to leave those issues to others to address and instead fulfill our particular niche in the movement. To be effective, an organization must focus its resources. A powerful social movement can result from multiple organizations each effectively filling specific niches.

A second reason the diversity of organizational approaches can be seen as a strength of the movement is that different groups give their members an opportunity to participate in different ways. There are many people who have real or potential grievances with the agro-food system, and their participation in social movements is crucial if meaningful change is going to occur. These grievances, however, do not automatically translate into action, as social scientists using resource mobilization theory to understand social movements have long recognized (Zald, 1992). An individual or organization may care about an issue, but lack the capacity to act. A major challenge for organizers is how to effectively mobilize people out of their routines of social life, work, and leisure, and get people to participate in social change activities. The reality for the organizer is that people will choose to participate in particular ways; the existence of a variety of organizational allows for that choice.

Opportunities for movement participation are crucial because a high level of mobilization needs to occur if the alternative agro-food movement is going to effect transformational change. The *organizing* processes that lead to greater mobilization must be well understood and implemented by movement activists. Organizing is about understanding a community's resources, and working on issues that people care about and that are easily understood and communicated. An issue is a solution or partial solution to a particular problem. A problem may exist for a long time, but it is the work of organizations to make it into an issue to be solved. For instance, in the pesticide right-to-know campaign referred to above, the problems created by the lack of reliable and accurate data about which pesticides are

used, where, when, and in what amounts had been recognized for a long time (e.g., National Research Council, 1975). But it was not until the 1990s that activists in Oregon made the problem into a public issue that decision makers had to address by calling for a comprehensive and mandatory pesticide use reporting law. This required a series of steps to frame the issue such that large numbers of people agreed that the policy proposal was a solution to a real problem—a problem that had, for instance, hampered society's ability to understand how pesticides affect children's health or to develop meaningful remedies to the problems of non-point source water pollution. The campaign also focused on the basic democratic right to know about the use of toxic chemicals. Having a variety of organizations involved in the campaign made it easier to articulate multiple reasons why the issue needed to be solved and thus to attract a greater number of supporters.

Third, the different organizational approaches foster an essential vitality that can lead to new insights and practices, as is characteristic of the so-called new social movements. Actors in social movements often articulate ideas that challenge not only established arrangements, but also the ideas of others in the movement. This ongoing struggle to integrate goals, beliefs and strategies *within movements* is part of the process of social change (Melucci, 1985). Through struggles among individual and organizational movement actors, new social movements can be understood as social laboratories in which people experiment with new practices, ideas, and organizational principles (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Wainwright, 1994). In short, movements move.

Within the alternative agro-food movement, this kind of contestation that leads to innovation is evident in the recent debates about organic food. Over the last decade, the organic industry has grown tremendously in terms of volume, variety of products, and sales (Klonsky, 2000). The US Department of Agriculture released the final National Organic Standards in extensively revised form after it received a record number of over 275,000 public comments opposing the agency's draft rules that would have implemented weak organic standards (Allen and Kovach, 2000). By most measures the above observations are all signs of movement success. Within the movement, however, some groups are raising critical questions about the meaning of this success and exploring new avenues that they hope will achieve broader goals. For example, the Land Stewardship Project is developing a labeling program called the Midwest Food Alliance. The group's associate director Dana Jackson says: "The new National Organic Standards will essentially be a list of do's and don'ts for production, but they will not necessarily address the social context: Did family sized farms produce this? Were people paid well? Do the farmers have a connection to their community? How far did this food

travel? What we're promoting is beyond organic, it's a regional food system" (quoted in Maas, 2001, p. 24). Thus, the Midwest Food Alliance label tries to unmask the social context of agricultural production. The proliferation of such eco-labels is the result of debates that are occurring within the movement, and that is because the actors are diverse and they challenge one another in ways that at least potentially can lead to further positive change.

3.2. *Coalition building*

Even if one recognizes the value of the multiplicity of interests, organizations, and strategies within the alternative agro-food movement, there are still important opportunities for a greater level of convergence and the creation of strategic alliances among various groups. Building coalitions to work on particular issues increases citizen power and enables organizations to effect change that they could not achieve on their own. These are usually temporary alliances built around a particular issue. For example, in the pesticide right-to-know campaign referred to above, the creation of a broad coalition made a tremendous difference in increasing our power to move legislation in a tough political climate. Initially, three organizations essentially designed and coordinated the overall strategy, and each group brought different and complementary strengths to the effort. One group has expertise in the scientific and policy aspects of pesticides and a membership dedicated to the issue; another group has a strong legislative presence and access to key decision makers; and a third group has a strong ability to mobilize large numbers of people at the grassroots through their canvass. In turn, these environmental and public interest organizations made a deliberate attempt to reach out to a broad range of organizations that conceivably had an interest in securing better data on pesticides. Our coalition building targeted non-traditional allies who would be effective messengers with the public and policy makers, such as public health advocates, public drinking water providers, commercial fishing organizations, watershed councils, children's advocates, and labor unions. Of course, coalition building required a variety of approaches to appeal to the varying interests of the groups of potential allies. Eventually over 70 groups endorsed the policy proposal, and the broad-based coalition strengthened the effort considerably.

Buttel (1997, p. 352) argues for the creation of an "omnibus coalitional agro-food system movement that contests deregulation, globalization, and agro-ecosystem degradation". While an omnibus coalition that functions on a permanent basis may remain elusive, there are signs of important coalition-building efforts among organizations protesting unbridled globalization at international trade meetings. In an unprecedented

move, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) recently called for the creation of a "civil-society delegation" to the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization held in Qatar in November of 2001 (Longworth, 2001). After the battle in Seattle in 1999, the WTO selected the isolated peninsula as the site for the next meeting in hopes of thwarting protestors. As a result of Qatar's limited facilities, the WTO severely cut the number of unofficial observers, and restricted each nongovernmental organization (NGO) seeking accreditation to one delegate, for a total of 647. The number stands in stark contrast to the tens of thousands who showed up at Seattle and subsequent anti-globalization protests. Mark Ritchie of IATP was concerned that the 647 delegates could amount to as many different versions of ineffectiveness. Therefore, he issued a plea to the NGOs that they pool their individual accreditations and that each group get a vote to elect a committee of trusted leaders who would then pick a technical support staff and a unified, balanced delegation that would represent the many interests of the organizations, including food and agriculture issues. While this creative approach is borne out of necessity, it may signal a transcendence of single-issue advocacy and a move toward the implementation of a joint, cooperative strategy that Ritchie and others hope will be "the wave of the future" (Longworth, 2001, p. A1). This practical obstacle created by the WTO thus turns into an opportunity for coalition building on a scale hitherto unseen.

Coalitions not only increase citizen power to effect change on a particular issue, but also serve as important mechanisms by which groups can learn about one another and facilitate the broadening of participation of larger numbers of people. As Rose (2000, pp. 213–214) observes:

Movements are schools for democracy where citizens learn what they can never understand from formal civics classes or from armchair infusions of media sound bites. But movements working in isolation are not enough. They require coalitions, democratic schools for community building, to bring people another critical step closer to a democratic society.

In this way, coalition building among groups working to transform the agro-food system—and even globalization and trade liberalization overall—is a step toward food democracy.

4. **The pragmatics of food democracy**

Several scholars have argued that democracy—especially a stronger form than is practiced today in the United States—offers the best chance for achieving sustainability (Morrison, 1995; Prugh et al., 2000).

Certainly, an oligarchy ruled by a handful of multinational corporations—the obvious tendency in the agro-food system that dominates at present—does not engender much hope for achieving sustainability. Food democracy seeks to expose and challenge the anti-democratic forces of control, and claims the rights and responsibilities of citizens to participate in decision-making. Food democracy ideally means that all members of an agro-food system have equal and effective opportunities for participation in shaping that system, as well as knowledge about the relevant alternative ways of designing and operating the system.

Conceived of in this way, food democracy is a *method* for making choices when values and interests come into conflict and when the consequences of decisions are uncertain. Therefore, food democracy is essentially a pragmatic device for moving toward sustainability of agriculture and food systems. If food democracy is pragmatic, it is important to recognize that pragmatism has two sets of meanings—politically and philosophically. Both connotations can inform our understanding of the practice of food democracy.

4.1. Political pragmatism

Commonly understood by the proverbial phrase, politics is the art of the possible, pragmatism is considered to be at the heart of democratic politics in the United States. Narrowly construed, political pragmatism refers to a willingness to negotiate differences—that is, to compromise—and to be satisfied with the achievement of incremental results rather than standing firm for inflexible absolutes. Those who take a pragmatic approach to policy—by crafting legislation or striking political deals—pride themselves on being goal-oriented and able to get something done.

Others criticize this approach as lacking a moral anchor. Consider, for instance, the comments of Michael Colby (1997, p. 9) of Food & Water, an organization that he describes as “radical” in the sense that it approaches the problems of our culture by “trying to get at the root of the problem and not settling for anything short of fundamental change”. The root he identifies is “corporate control of a centralized and industrialized food supply”. Colby (1997, p. 9) is frustrated with “a movement far too often fixated on legislative or regulatory gimmicks and far too willing to accept health-threatening compromises that do little other than merely tinker with a rotten system... When the issues we’re working on involve life-and-death decisions, how can we accept crumbs when we deserve the full loaf of bread?”

Perhaps sustainability advocates need not be limited to crumbs if they recognize that creating social change, like making bread, requires the right ingredients, the proper skills, and sufficient patience for the bread to rise

and bake. Perhaps a pragmatic approach to change need not mean that actions are based on expediency and lack integrity. Perhaps with the right ingredients and skills, our actions can move us in incremental steps toward true transformation. I emphasize the importance of having the right ingredients and skills because not every compromise leads down a transformative path. Citizen power and the skills to use one’s power are especially crucial.

In the Oregon pesticide right-to-know campaign discussed above, our coalition came face-to-face with the question of when and whether to compromise. After building political power and considerable public support for comprehensive, mandatory pesticide use reporting through a multi-faceted campaign, the coalition had a bill introduced into the state legislature. If the legislative effort failed, we were prepared to use Oregon’s ballot initiative process, which allows for passage of laws through an electoral vote. Governor John Kitzhaber, a popular Democrat, was an important ally, but his support alone was insufficient. A Republican and anti-environmental majority has controlled the state legislature for most of the last decade, and one of the most powerful lobby groups in Oregon represents pesticide users, sellers, and manufacturers. However, polls indicated strong voter support for mandatory pesticide use reporting, which was essential if the question was to go to a ballot measure. The coalition’s preference was to pass the bill through the legislature because of the tremendous costs of a ballot initiative campaign. Working in our favor was the fact that the chemical and agricultural industry groups opposing the legislation had recently spent millions of dollars fighting (and crushing) other environmental ballot measures, and they were wary of spending even more, especially when the majority of voters believes they have a right to know about pesticide use. Eventually, these dynamics more or less equalized the power of both the proponents and opponents of the pesticide reporting legislation. Each side confronted and weighed strategic questions about the risks and benefits of compromise in the legislative arena and about the possibility of winning or losing completely in a ballot initiative campaign. The result was that, after months of opposition from the chemical and agricultural industries, the coalition negotiated and passed compromise legislation, which achieved many but not all of our policy goals.

The story is like many others in the adversarial political system, where competing interests face the possibility of compromise, a word that wrongly carries with it shades of weakness and surrender. As Alinsky (1972, p. 59), one of the foremost architects of “radical pragmatism,” wrote in his *Rules for Radicals*: “...to the organizer, compromise is a key and beautiful word. It is always present in the pragmatics of operation. It is making the deal, getting that vital breather, usually the

victory. If you start with nothing, demand 100%, then compromise for 30%, you're 30% ahead." Carter (1996) argues that a compromise can possess integrity if it moves you toward your goal rather than away from it, and integrity *requires* that at times we take what we can get because achieving our moral ends perfectly or all at once is extremely rare, if not impossible. In other words, a compromise must "be part of the strategy for attaining the end that discernment has taught to be good and right... And the individual of integrity, having agreed to compromise, must not pretend that the compromise is itself the end. Instead he or she must be forthright in announcing that this is but one step along the road and that the journey will continue" (Carter, 1996, p. 46). Accordingly, while the 1999 passage of Oregon's pesticide use reporting law constituted a "victory," it was admittedly partial, marking the conclusion of one campaign and the start of another (i.e., achieving strong implementation of the new law). In the case of food democracy, the "end" toward which any incremental steps must move us is the vision of an ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially just system of food and agriculture.

4.2. *Philosophical pragmatism*

At first blush, the political pragmatism described above does not seem to share much with the branch of philosophy known as pragmatism. Originally developed from the 1890s through the 1930s by William James, John Dewey and others, pragmatism has recently sparked a revival of interest and debate among contemporary philosophers. Pragmatist philosophy emerged as a critique of theoretical abstractions and absolutes, and embraced the idea that theory must ultimately be tested by practical experience (Dickstein, 1998). Practical experience refers to critical reflection on our experience and then modification of our subsequent actions accordingly (Dickstein, 1998; Hilde and Thompson, 2000). In the spirit of James and Dewey, pragmatism emphasizes open-ended inquiry into particular real-life problems, and is thus contextual and dynamic.

Hickman (2000) has suggested one link between pragmatism and contemporary efforts to revitalize local food systems. Specifically, he observes that the edible schoolyard recently created by Alice Waters—the restaurateur and advocate of local, organic foods—at the King Junior High School in Oakland shares a close resemblance to John Dewey's experiments in education at the University of Chicago's Primary School a century earlier. Both Dewey and Waters sought to engage students in terms of their own needs and interests, and to do so with gardening and the preparation of foods. Dewey's edible schoolyard was a tool to encourage students to explore a whole range of related subjects that

involved increasing levels of abstraction. Waters uses gardening to introduce students to an appetizing and nutritious diet that can enhance their ability to learn and their pride in the school that might serve as a springboard for further improvements. Despite the century that spans the two promoters of the edible schoolyard, the growing and preparing of food is "a kind of metaphor for the cultivation of intelligence" (Hickman, 2000, p. 205).

Although philosophers debate the relationship between traditional pragmatist epistemology and democracy, a number of scholars emphasize that democracy is the form of social life most consistent with pragmatism, which in turn suggests that it is consistent with the idea of food democracy as discussed here (Kloppenber, 1998). Dewey envisioned democracy or "experimental politics" as an ongoing method requiring gradual, participatory, intelligent action on the part of educated and informed publics (Hickman, 2000; Prugh et al., 2000). Like food democracy, a pragmatist perspective calls for a deeper engagement by ordinary citizens, including recognizing and identifying social problems in need of attention, setting the agenda, and staging the debate. This kind of pragmatism runs through the food democracy created by the Toronto Food Policy Council, as described by Welsh and MacRae (1998). Sustainable farming networks where farmers share their own personal, local knowledge in their attempts to adopt alternative farming practices are another example (Hassanein, 1999). The pragmatic practice that is food democracy seems ideally suited to the pursuit of agro-food sustainability, because we cannot answer with certainty the question "how should we live sustainably?" Therefore, continuing inquiry and engagement are needed. Food democracy facilitates and encourages making choices that creatively and constructively involve all the voices of a food system.

5. Conclusion

Coming full circle to the question I raised at the beginning: Can pragmatic, incremental steps truly transform the dominant agro-food system so that it will be more sustainable in the long term? An option for answering the question is simply to declare it a ruse; after all, the outcomes of collective action around agro-food sustainability are not assured or predictable—whether we are conjecturing about the prospects for success or for failure. My inclination, however, is to answer in the affirmative. One reason, of course, is that there are no clear, practical alternatives to incremental change at this time. Calls for fundamental change and complete transformation of the agro-food system are rarely—if ever—accompanied by specific suggestions on how to achieve such a total makeover. But I see a more

important reason for embracing pragmatic, incremental change, and that is because in the form of food democracy it could result in transformative change.

The above analysis suggests that food democracy is necessary because achieving sustainability involves conflicts over values, and there is no independent authority, such as science or religion, to which we can appeal for resolution of these conflicts. Therefore, sustainability *must* be defined socially and politically, and our collective understanding of it will evolve over time as conditions change. In turn, active participation and political engagement—broadly defined—are prerequisites, if solutions to the ecological, economic, and social justice consequences of the dominant food system are to be achieved. The concept of food democracy rests on the belief that every citizen has a contribution to make to the solution of our common problems.

Food citizenship eschews the passive and confining roles of “consumer” or “producer” or “worker.” By contesting the commodification of food in this way, the pressure by social movements to democratize the dominant food system challenges the forces seeking control of the system and the very structure of capital itself. Therein lies the transformative potential of the alternative agro-food movement. The consequences of collective action are not only the product of strategic interactions between movements and their targets, however. The outcomes are also a product of movement actors’ negotiations with one another and their integration of aims, beliefs, and strategic decisions. In the contemporary movement, actors pursue a wide range of approaches to social change and operate at various levels—from the local to the global. This diversity is a source of power in that different organizations can fill different niches, there are increased opportunities for citizen participation, and the multiplicity of thought and activism creates a vibrancy that leads to new forms of innovation and new ideas. Still, there are times when organizations must enter into strategic coalitions to build citizen power that they cannot achieve on their own. Thankfully, the prospects for and attention to forming such alliances now appear to be greater than ever before. Coalitions create new democratic spaces in which different social groups can learn about one another, broadening both participation and understanding. Analysis of the interactions (1) within movements, (2) among allied movements, and (3) between movements and their opponents can inform theory and action, and deserves more critical attention.

Food democracy is a method for making choices when values come into conflict and when the consequences of decisions are uncertain. That method embraces the pragmatic, that is, the achievement of what is presently possible coupled with ongoing inquiry by an active and informed citizenry. Of course, food democracy is not *only* a method; establishing a strong

food democracy will itself constitute a genuine transformation of societal values and practices. Food democracy thus appears to offer some hope for achieving the transformation many seek to a sustainable agro-food system. As such, food democracy provides fertile ground for further work by both theoreticians and activists.

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