

Feeding Our Affinities: Exploring Food-Sovereign Alternatives to Global-Industrial Agribusiness in Kingston, Ontario

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Introduction

One of the most exciting aspects of environmental sciences involves the possibilities for enacting social change. We have the knowledge and technologies, both new and old, to address many of the problems which humanity has created on this earth. What we need is a new set of attitudes, in order to re-evaluate our political, economic and social structures and their relationships with each other, as well as the development and application of various types of knowledge and technologies. Needless to say, this observation is by no means new to environmentalists. We need change, but what kind of change? This is the burning question. Do we need to replace the existing system of global capitalism with a new one? Should we use the mechanisms we have now—ones that are in place—to change this system and to make it more sustainable? Or should we try to break away from the existing system and work towards a sustainable world by building solely on our broad sets of commonalities with others?

As will be discussed in this article, these three questions highlight the different logics behind three broad types of social movements which have been used to bring about social change: old social movements (driven by the logic of hegemony), new social movements (driven by the logic of reform) and the newest social movements (driven by the logic of affinity) (Day, 2004, 719, 722-723). Given the enormous scope of environmentalism, the logics of the aforementioned social movements are at work in a multitude of issues. Yet, not everyone recognizes this phenomenon. However, by studying how and where these types of logic are being played out, we can perhaps achieve a greater degree of understanding of how and where the application of these types of logic may influence our relationships with the environment and contribute to more sustainable ways of life.

In this article, I will clarify these ideas so that they may help inform those engaged with the issues facing this planet. I will engage with these ideas by exploring their implications with regard to food sovereignty. Since the system of global-industrial agribusiness is very unsustainable, I will be exploring three food-sovereign alternatives in Kingston, Ontario, and the surrounding area: small-scale market involution, urban agriculture and food-sovereign, intentional communities. Small-scale market involution will cover local purchasing agreements between businesses and farmers, as well as local purchasing forums such as farmers' markets. Urban agriculture encompasses the culture of community gardening. Finally, I will study a local example of an intentional community based on food-sovereignty considerations.

I will begin with a brief background on food sovereignty and the state of the world's food production, which will be followed by an overview of the different types of social movements and the theory behind my research. This overview will be followed by a detailed account of the methods used during this research, including different types of sampling and semi-structured interviews. Three sections will then be devoted to the aforementioned types of social movements. The article will conclude with a brief summation and points of inquiry.

It must be stressed that the structure of this article in no way claims that there is only one path leading away from the problems posed by global-industrial agribusiness. Very few of the multiple, interconnected issues associated with the current state of the planet can be addressed in this type of analysis. My only goal is to help broaden our ways of understanding these issues by considering different types of social logic and the way food is produced, distributed and consumed. The case studies here, while situated in unique circumstances, can help inform the possibilities of other food-sovereign alternatives in other parts of the world.

Background

Since the beginning of the post-WWII industrial boom, most of the food produced, distributed and consumed in North America has declined in nutritional content. Crops have been bombarded with pesticides and have become heavily processed and prone to disease. Their genetic make-up reworked, they have been produced through unsustainable methods, often on land thousands of kilometres from the point of consumption (Pawlick, 2006, 5-8 and 33-77; Pollan, 2006a and 2006b). It is this conglomerate of planetary abuse, unhealthy production and unequal distribution which I define as global-industrial agribusiness, a conglomerate that has posed and continues to pose significant dangers to food sovereignty, in some cases leading to the eradication of food sovereignty in many parts of the world. It is for this reason that the pursuit of food-sovereign alternatives becomes imperative.

Food sovereignty, as defined by researcher Sinan Koont, is “the right of peoples and states to democratically decide their own food and agricultural policies and to produce needed foods in their own territories in a manner reinforcing the cultural values of the people while protecting the environment” (Koont, 2004, 11). I have chosen food sovereignty over food security because, since food security is only measured by the availability of geographically and economically available food (Koont, 2004, 11), it does not necessitate a break from global-industrial agribusiness.

Methodology

My fieldwork consisted of face-to-face interviews with local business people, community gardeners, social workers, community and student activists, academics in the Kingston area, and individuals involved with a local intentional community called the Marble Rock Cooperative Centre for Rural Living and Education. In order to find participants for my research, I used a combination of sound-plane and snow-ball sampling techniques, which involved looking for participants in a specific subsection of the area's population, often through word-of-mouth with people involved with the subject matter. I chose these sampling techniques because at 152,358 people (City of Kingston, no date), the potential pool of participants in the Kingston area is relatively small compared to cities with more established urban agricultural communities such as Toronto, Ontario, and Montreal, Quebec.

The interviews were semi-structured, with a core set of questions reflective of the participant's relation to my research. Follow-up questions were asked based on initial responses. The length of most interviews was around 25 minutes, although it varied between 15 and 75 minutes. All of the participants were assured anonymity and assigned a pseudonym for the research; each one was asked if they would

consent to have the interview audio-recorded. Interviews were conducted at locations of the participants' choosing and when necessary, follow-ups were conducted because of my inexperience with this technique. The fieldwork also involved studying local documents such as newspaper articles and websites, as well as personal participant involvement in local food sovereignty projects. Some of these projects include the farmers' market at Queen's University, the Queen's chapter of Oxfam Canada and an undergraduate course project aimed at converting an old building into a campus sustainability hub, to which I contributed a section on the possible implementation of a community garden.

Admittedly, because of the methodologies deployed in this study, subjective involvement and interpretation have informed the conclusions drawn from the research project. As a result, this article does not offer a comprehensive understanding of alternative forms of food sovereignty practices in the Kingston area. The purpose of this research is not to generalize objective results, but to explore the potential for different types of food-sovereign alternatives.

Theory

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's work in *A Thousand Plateaus* serves as an excellent way of understanding the multiplicity inherent in the environment through their conceptualization of the rhizome: any heavily interconnected, non-centralized and ever-changing network. Rhizomes can take place at many scales, such as bee and flower pollination network or an electronic banking scheme. Also worth noting is the ability for power structures to take on this dynamic form as a more effective means of control. Every element in the rhizome, be it a person, idea or physical object, is related to numerous other elements of the rhizome. The potential for striking away from this given assemblage is called a *line of flight*. When a taken line of flight lands and its potential is realized, it forms a new element of the rhizome called a *plateau* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 5 and 21). In his *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari explores the usefulness of applying the logic of the rhizome to environmental studies. Key to this work is his concept of *ecosophy*, a metaphysical orientation recognizing the relationships between the three disciplines he labels 'the three ecologies': psycho-analysis, socioeconomic relations, and environmental sciences (Guattari, 2001, 28). For example, myself, an axe, nails, and a tree are all part of an assemblage which can form part of a rhizome based on how the elements interact. When I take an axe and chop down a tree to build a bookshelf, I am taking a line of flight to establish a new plateau: the bookshelf. This bookshelf can then be used to store books and other objects. However, by taking wood to build this bookshelf, I have removed a buffer against erosion from the land, destroyed the habitat of certain bird and insect species, not to mention having caused other known and unknown effects on the immediate ecosystem, let alone the rest of the world (albeit in small ways). In a rhizomatic environment, a seemingly harmless action can have multiple consequences.

The second theoretical component of this research involves the social movements dimensions¹. *Old social movements* are defined as a revolution based

¹ It should be noted the categories of social movements are very broad categories and are operationalized according to Richard Day's work in *From Hegemony to Affinity: The Political Logic of the Newest Social Movements*.

on a single social axis. That is, they replace or substitute a current hegemonic order with a new one, most often represented by the state form (Day, 2004, 719, 722-723 and 729). While their practical nature is debated, these social movements have sometimes resulted in violence, social destruction, and a hegemonic order which is oppressive, thereby disrupting peaceful equilibrium. Viewed through the ecosophic lens, this logic can also be destructive for the environment. For instance, say a farmer is under considerable economic pressure to attain higher cornfield crop yields. One solution would be to start using chemical pesticides to eradicate some of the pests which eat away at his or her crops. However, such a solution would be devastating in the long-run because these pesticides would also eliminate creatures that are vital to the agroecosystem, thereby threatening the sustainability of the whole operation.

Due to the limits of classical revolutionary logic, individuals and groups began, particularly during the twentieth century, engaging in *new social movements*. These social movements involved attempts to reform the then-current hegemon based on a single social axis, such as race or religion, as well as various streams of feminism. This type of social movement differentiates significantly from the old social movements because it involves reforming the current hegemonic system with the recognition that the axis of reform is one of many in a given political environment, instead of attempting a revolution based on a sole axis (Day, 2004, 719, 722-723 and 729). While such attempts have brought important gains, such as the right to vote for marginalized individuals and groups, their efficacy has been limited due to the ever-changing and decentralized nature of rhizomatic forms of control. Returning to the example of the cornfield, an example of an attempt at reform could involve the lobbying efforts by a group of environmental activists to ban the pesticide in question. While this measure would certainly relieve some of the stresses placed on the agroecosystem, it would not address other possible ecologically-stressful strategies introduced to increase crop yields, such as high water use resulting in high salt levels in the soil or engaging in an agricultural dependence on crop monocultures which jeopardize biodiversity. Within the scope of reform, a new pesticide, slightly different but still dangerous, could also be introduced to the agroecosystem and considered a valid solution.

Finally, *the newest social movements*, are based on the logic of affinity. This logic is displayed when individuals and groups work together based on the affinities they recognize between themselves, pursuing non-coercive, democratic relationships in order to achieve mutually-beneficial goals and expand their agencies. Instead of trying to topple the system or reform it, these projects take place *alongside* it (Day, 2004, 719, 722-723 and 729).

Obviously, such goals can be hard to achieve. Ecological processes place great restrictions on what can be accomplished, particularly when socio-economic processes are considered as part of the environment. Michel Foucault calls this phenomenon of subjective control *biopower*. In these societies of control in which biopower operates, many of the actions taken by individuals and groups are often in some ways linked to the processes which 'sustain' the current hegemonic order (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 22-27). Therefore, as I will argue in this article, reformist attempts at change are still often the only means of pursuing a specific project. However, it is also worth noting, as will also be argued, that methods of reform can still be useful when they are used in ways that make the environment more conducive to longer-lasting affinity projects.

Small-scale market involution

When markets are discussed in the media, images of the stock market or free-trade agreements often come to mind. However, markets need not be synonymous with the most regressive instruments of capitalism.

All markets favour certain products and modes of production over others through a combination of spending and taxation. For instance, in 1999, 99 percent of the Canadian government's agricultural research budget of \$292 million was spent on biotechnical innovation and export opportunities, with the remaining 1 percent put towards alternative and organic forms of agriculture (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006, 1914). As a result of these policies, Canadian food 'sovereignty' is heading in a direction similar to that of the United States, where 95 percent of food domestically produced is exported and 95 percent of food consumed is imported (Drummond, 2007, 19).

In response to the unsustainable nature of global-industrial agribusiness, a resurgence in the demand for local farmers' markets and local purchasing networks has appeared in many Canadian cities, strengthening both the social and geographic proximity between farmers and eaters, Kingston being no exception. One example of a local business engaging in local food procurement is the Sleepless Goat Café Workers Co-operative in downtown Kingston. As a co-op dedicated to the enrichment of the Kingston community and to social justice, co-op member Harry Cole says the café has gradually shifted towards local procurement over the past few years and this practice is expected to become even more significant in the near future. Strong affinities have developed between farmers and café workers as the individuals and groups have enjoyed positive and mutually-beneficial interactions. The café also procures food from the local farmers' market whenever possible (Cole, 2007).

Unfortunately, due to seasonal constraints, this practice is not year-round and some of the ingredients required for their recipes cannot be grown in Canada at any time of the year. Therefore, supermarkets still play a role in the day-to-day operations of the café. However, whenever a good cannot be grown in the Kingston area or anywhere in Canada but requires further refinement and labour processes, the product is procured from a supplier who conducts such processes locally whenever possible. For instance, the café's Fair Trade coffee is supplied by a company which does the bean roasting itself in Almonte, Ontario, a two-hour drive north-east of Kingston (Cole, 2007).

Another obstacle faced by the café is the financial tension generated by the café's social goals, such as supplying free bread and soup to the needy and pursuing local, organic purchasing: in other words, balancing its balance sheet. After all, if the café cannot stay in the black, it will go out of business. Therefore, some of the social goals are often curbed, at least temporarily. For instance, if the café were to use locally and organically grown eggs in its breakfast meals, the breakfast could cost nearly \$8: hardly an affordable meal. Nevertheless, considerable progress has been made over the past few years towards the procurement of local, organic food and Harry anticipates that the relationship between the café and local farmers will continue to grow (Cole, 2007).

A more visible example of local farm to fork networks is the aforementioned popularity of farmers' markets. The Kingston farmers' market, which takes place downtown four days a week, is an example of such a network. The market features a variety of vendors selling everything from fresh produce and baked goods to flowers

and crafts (What's on Kingston, no date). In the fall of 2006, another farmers' market was established on the Queen's University campus.

The latter project was spearheaded by Molly Johnson, an employee of a local food supplier called Brown's Fine Foods. Due to the business relationships between Brown's and some of the food services at Queen's University, Molly has a seat on the Queen's Food and Beverages Committee, which has given her the opportunity to lobby for the establishment of a farmers' market on campus. She explains that some members of the Queen's administration were not very enthusiastic about the idea at first, so, while she was allowed to pursue the project, it was up to her to make it happen. She decided to share this idea with Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer, an Assistant Professor with the Queen's School of Environmental Studies. As a result, during one of her night courses, Blay-Palmer frequently began to allude to the possibility of developing a farmers' market on campus as a means of improving local food security. A few of her students expressed interest in the project, and so she put them into contact with Molly. With student and faculty support, Molly was given permission to have the first farmers' market in the main student union building on October 26th, 2006. Given Molly's involvement in the Kingston agricultural community, she had no problem finding vendors for the market (Johnson, 2007).

The market was a rousing success, running once a month during the 2006-2007 school year. The vendors were provided with free parking and tables to set up shop; a group of students, informally led by Winnie Kennedy, carried out the advertising as well as helped with the logistics of the project. Some intermediaries/distributors were allowed to sell food, but only so long as the food was produced locally. Given the success of the market, many once sceptical members now proudly support the project (Johnson, 2007).

Molly and Winnie both remark that one of the market's greatest strengths is its educational value. When people buy their food from farmers' markets, they can interact with the farmers themselves, getting a sense of where their food comes from and how it is produced. This phenomenon is commonly called 'putting a face on food.' In order to further enhance the educational atmosphere, environmental organisations in the community are allowed to set up displays nearby. Molly hopes that by emphasising the educational component of the market, students will carry with them what they have learned and apply it in whatever endeavours they pursue, both during and after their time at university (Johnson, 2007; Kennedy, 2007).

These examples of local farm-to-fork networks are characterized largely by the logic of reform, since they involve re-arranging both the relationships between producers and consumers of global-industrial agribusiness. However, while these efforts have their limits, such as limited affordability due to higher prices of local and organic food and the reliance on a state body to host a farmers' market, they can result in an environment more accommodating to food sovereignty-related projects. For instance, the success of the farmers' markets provides a boost to a farming population which has plummeted from 200,000 to 60,000 during the past 80 years across Ontario (Blay-Palmer et al, 2006, 5 and 7). Furthermore, many of the affinities between individuals and groups in Kingston have formed a social network capable of pursuing further food-sovereignty-related projects. As an example, many of those involved with the campus farmers' market have been able to lay the foundation for a community garden on campus. Also worth noting is that the development of a campus-wide sustainability office is currently underway due to the increased popularity and recognized importance of sustainability-related initiatives. While this project may bring certain projects into the control of the university, new projects

which have not been possible before may be able to take flight.

While the efforts in this section are reformist on the surface, there are strong affinities being realized beneath as well, which demonstrates that these logics are not mutually-exclusive and can be followed to pursue various food-sovereign alternatives.

Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture goes a step further toward food sovereignty because it involves eaters in the growing process themselves. It is estimated that one seventh of the planet's food is grown by approximately 800 million urban farmers (Wijngaarden, 2001, 105) and this flourishing practice in urban centres around the world is a testament to its efficacy.

One of the most popular forms of urban agriculture in Kingston is community gardening, a practice whereby individuals and groups come together to garden on a plot of land that they have legal permission to use. Instances of community gardens in Canada date back over a century. They have been especially prominent during times of war and recession when food is in short supply and have also served to beautify neglected areas of cities (Dow, 2006, 8-12). I studied six community gardens in my research, two of which are detailed here: the Elmwood community garden and the Friends Revitalizing Industrial Land Lovingly (FRILL) garden.

The Elmwood Community Garden is arguably the oldest community garden in Kingston, having been run on a large piece of municipal land for nearly four decades and which now encompasses nearly 65 5x8 foot beds. Each plot is rented out at \$22 per year, with the money going towards gardening tools and insurance. There is a waiting list for the plots, which is usually between five to ten people at any time; returning gardeners are given preference. However, all of the gardeners rotate from plot to plot each year in order to increase the diversity of the soil and prevent some gardeners from being stuck on the less productive land. Since this garden is not run by a formal organization with groundskeeping staff, maintenance chores are divided up between the gardeners, with some of the larger tasks, such as the collection of woody debris and water supply, being handled by the city (Fisher, 2006).

Given the large number of plots, there is no shortage of gardeners who are willing and able to teach newcomers the tricks of the trade, thereby ensuring that gardening skills are constantly being passed on. Any legal agricultural product can be grown and the use of artificial fertilizers is strongly discouraged. All of the decisions pertaining to garden operations are made by consensus, although there is an annually-elected executive made up of a president, secretary and treasurer to deal with issues such as money-collection, spending, and liaisons with the city (Fisher, 2006). While gardeners are still dependent on the city for the use of the land, the ongoing practice of gardening at this location, with a minimum level of hierarchy, demonstrates the usefulness of the logic of affinity, not just among human beings, but among many elements of this urban ecosystem.

The FRILL garden is run by a group of local residents on a vacant piece of land owned by the neighbouring No Frills grocery store. The garden was started by Sarah Heatley. Upon moving to Kingston, she asked the municipal government about the ownership of this piece of land, which is across the street from her house and which, at the time, was covered in garbage. When she was informed that No Frills was the owner of the land, she contacted the head office about restoring the

land to a healthier state. No Frills agreed by way of an agreement waiving all liability. Sarah approached members of the administration of the local school where she taught and pitched the FRILL garden as an environment fulfilment of her students' curriculum. The idea was accepted, and with her students Sarah managed to clean up the site, bring in some soil and mulch (courtesy of the City of Kingston) and plant a few flower beds (Heatley, 2006).

The garden was tremendously successful, and consequently Sarah began brainstorming about the possibility of turning the garden into a community outreach project. She planned a May Day party at the garden for the following spring. The party had a big turnout and the attendees agreed to start meeting once a month in order to plan out the growing season. There was a steep learning curve at first, but eventually the project got off the ground with gardeners participating from all around the neighbourhood. Donations such as soil, rain barrels, and other gardening materials began arriving from local stores and environmental organizations. However, this level of activity on corporate land became somewhat of a nuisance for No Frills, which eventually asked the gardeners to leave the land. This dealt a huge blow to the gardeners, who had invested so much time and effort in a project only to see it potentially taken away (Heatley, 2006).

Fortunately, the garden had a great deal of community support, and considerable public pressure was placed on No Frills through local media outlets CKWS and KROCK. No Frills gave in, but only on the condition that the gardeners raise enough money for insurance coverage of up to two million dollars. Thankfully, the gardeners were able to raise enough money for the insurance through a fundraiser at a local pub (Heatley, 2006).

The garden itself is composed of two large communal plots and a dozen individual plots, which are rented out at \$20 a year. The rules are pretty standard: no illegal crops, pesticides or fertilizers. Also, because the garden is on formerly industrial (hence polluted) land, there are raised beds, which are just six inches to a foot high. There is, however, one garden bed on top of a table in order to keep the garden accessible to those in wheelchairs. Lastly, there is a core planning team, which anyone can join, that meets throughout the year to set out the growing schedule. However, even with this informal committee, the garden is run with a very non-hierarchical, consensus-based decision-making process (Heatley, 2006).

As evidenced by the No Frills episode, community gardening often falls within the confines of reform, being bound by property rights enforced by the state. Nevertheless, as with the Elmwood community garden, the shared affinities between the gardeners have emerged as important plateaus for improving the relationships between the residents and the land. Furthermore, these affinities can form a strong social network for launching future projects such the Marble Rock Cooperative Centre for Rural Living and Education.

Intentional Communities

Intentional communities can be imagined as "groups of people who have chosen to live (and sometimes work) together for some common purpose" (Sargisson and Sargent, 2004, 6). During my research, I was fortunate enough to come across an intentional community steeped in food sovereignty concerns called the Marble Rock Cooperative Centre for Rural Living and Education. Marble Rock is a piece of land approximately 50 kilometres outside Kingston owned by a couple

seeking to use the land as the site of an agricultural cooperative. This project had been going on for three years as of the fall of 2006 (Smith, 2006).

Two of the co-op members I interviewed, Lauren Smith and her partner Jack Shearer, met the owners of the land through their interactions with various community activists in Kingston when they first moved to town. They were both searching for a more communal lifestyle as opposed to the heavily individualist norm of the 'West' and for people sharing this interest. This type of affinity-networking is how most, if not all, of the Marble Rock members have come into contact with each other (Smith, 2006).

There are a few buildings on the land such as an arts studio, a garden shed, a workshop and a main dwelling where the co-op members can rest. The agriculture field itself is approximately 200 meters by 300 meters and is enough to supply the members with most of their vegetable nutrition throughout the growing seasons. Vegetables grown include tomatoes, lettuce, spinach, squash, zucchini, cucumber, cantaloupe, chickpeas, garlic, onions, potatoes and many more. As a co-op, the dozen or so members are greatly committed to running on a consensus decision-making model (Smith, 2006).

Unfortunately, because the land is on the edge of the Canadian Shield, the soil is heavy in clay and therefore does not yield large amounts of crops. Adam Thornton, another member of the co-op, says that these yield levels are very frustrating for him and others who have worked on higher quality land because the return on the labour they are putting into this land is limited compared to previous agricultural experiences. Therefore, those like Adam who have previous agricultural experience have attempted to educate other members on sustainable yet efficient agricultural methods. For instance, instead of planting crops in rows, Adam has stressed the importance of planting in beds because the latter method results in a more efficient use of land space and leaves less soil exposed to water loss through evaporation, and therefore prevents the soil from getting hard, dry and cracked (Thornton, 2007).

While Marble Rock is not without its problems, particularly with regard to different expectations about commitment levels and the direction of the co-op, it is an inspiring example of what can be accomplished when individuals and groups recognize and work from the affinities they share with others.

Discussion

Throughout this article I have attempted to demonstrate how different types of social logic are present in three alternative forms of food sovereignty. The logic of reform, while limited, has been useful in connecting local growers to eaters through local procurement agreements, as has been done by the Sleepless Goat and through farmers' market such as those in downtown Kingston and on the Queen's Campus. Also, these efforts have been useful, insofar as they have helped shape an environment more conducive to affinity projects, such as the establishment of more community gardens. Under certain circumstances, longer-lasting projects such as Marble Rock can become possible.

While the aforementioned movements may not fit into the classic paradigm of old social movements, the revolutionary aspect of this logic is present at a *meta*-level of analysis when individuals and groups recognize possibilities for change which do not involve toppling or appealing to the present hegemon (Day, 2006). Nevertheless,

the state remains a necessary ally in some of these case studies. No definite solutions have been proposed here, but hopefully my explorations of food-sovereign alternatives can contribute to broader understanding of projects that recognize and effectively embrace the rhizomatic nature of the environment, both human and non-human. In a time of global-industrial agribusiness and a plethora of other environmental challenges, this kind of attitude is invaluable to conceptualizing and creating more sustainable relationships between human beings and their environments.

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