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What Should We Eat?

This question, so simple and yet so profound, sits at the center of some of the most popular and widespread movements of the twenty-first century. Activists around the world argue for food localization, producing and consuming food closer to home. What is it that makes local food so attractive to so many different groups worldwide? What are the uses and limits of food localization movements?

Other contributors to this volume discuss food localization movements among producers, in Europe, and in the Global South. This essay will consider the drive for local food as a consumer movement in the wealthy North, and particularly in the United States. This essay asks: why do people want to eat locally?

Food has become a container into which desires for healthy, just, sustained, and happy lives can be poured. This seems like common sense. Food is after all the most elementary human need, and agriculture perhaps the defining element of modern human civilization. Work is life, and food work continues to dominate all work in the world. But can food bear so many hopes and dreams? Perhaps more than any other aspect of our lives, food shows the tension between desiring to act on behalf of all humanity and desiring to act on behalf of oneself.

Advocates for food localization mean many different things when they call for local food. The American scholar David Cleveland lists four distinct values for the term: strengthening local communities, social justice, environmental health, and improved nutrition.¹ To this list I would add “belonging.” Since the age of industrialization, with its many dislocations, many moderns feel out of place, divorced from community, disconnected. Psychologists have long noticed this connection between modernity and anxiety. In 1943, when Abraham Maslow created his hierarchy of human needs, he ranked the need to belong just below survival and safety.² Many of the writers who promote local food mention their desire to know and to connect with the people who grow their food. Eating locally is a way of making a group and building a community.

1 David Cleveland, *Balancing on a Planet: The Future of Food and Agriculture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 232–239.

2 Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50 (1943), 370–396.

This one word, local, offers a shared path to reach all these disparate ends. Eating locally offers something to farmer-activists in the Global South, and health campaigners and consumers in the Global North. The trouble with local is that it may paper over the very great differences between these groups, and it may distract and confuse consumers with the promise of one magic bullet to solve all ills.

Perhaps the best example is the hope that eating locally might reduce emissions of greenhouse gases that are warming the planet. This concept builds on the common sense idea of local as distance from producer to consumer, or “farm to table.” Biologist Gary Paul Nabhan inspired many others, including the creators of the concept of “locavore,” with his effort to eat only foods grown within a 250-mile radius of his home in the US state of Arizona.³ Nabhan was concerned with sustaining cultural traditions, not with reducing carbon. Others however have noted that food consumed within a few miles of its origin requires less fuel for transport and therefore, it seems, less carbon. More recently, scholars have analyzed food systems to ascertain just what percentage transportation and distribution consume of the total carbon budget of food systems.

These studies show that transportation is rarely a significant contributor to a food’s carbon budget. Much more significant are the fossil fuels used to produce, process, and store food. Large-scale growers are often more efficient at these steps of food production, making distance a poor proxy for carbon load. In one careful study of US diets, scholars found that 83 percent of emissions occurred before leaving the farm gate.⁴

If the goal is to reduce the contribution of greenhouse gases from the food system, it may make more sense to change diet. As two scholars found in a lifecycle assessment of US food, “Shifting less than one day per week’s worth of calories from red meat and dairy products to chicken, fish, eggs, or a vegetable-based diet achieves more greenhouse gas reduction than buying all locally sourced food.” But, as another leading local food researcher argues, these kinds of simple prescriptions can do more

3 Gary Paul Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

4 David Coley, Mark Howard and Mike Winter, “Local Food, Local Food Miles and Carbon Emissions: A Comparison of Farm Shop and Mass Distribution Approaches.” *Food Policy* 34, no. 2 (2009): 150–155; Sarah DeWeerd, “Is Local Food Better?” *Worldwatch Magazine* 22, no. 3 (2009), accessed 25 July 2014, <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6064>; Christopher Weber and H. Scott Matthews, “Food Miles and the Relative Climate Impacts of Food Choices in the United States,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 42, no. 10 (2008), 3508–3513.

harm than good. Removing meat and dairy from diets in the developing world might do great damage. Poor people have historically been unable to eat enough meat and dairy products.⁵

The beauty of advocating for local food seems to be its simplicity and comprehensiveness. Yet as food miles and diet suggest, simple solutions are rarely so neat. Another major challenge is defining where local ends and regional, national or global begins. As Rachel Shindelar has already shown in her analysis in this volume, neither producers nor consumers seem to have a clear definition for the term “local.” For example, in one survey, half of North American shoppers defined local food as produced within 100 miles of the point of sale. Thirty-seven percent thought food grown within their home state was local. Small percentages considered food grown within a region (like the six American states of New England) or even the national borders as “local.” These are significant differences. The differences in scale between a 100-mile radius circle (81,000 km²) and the most populous American state, California (424,000 km²), make local nearly meaningless. Yet in recent years “local” has become a more popular and commonplace marketing slogan than “organic.” In the same survey of American consumers, more than half said they try to buy local food whenever possible while just 23 percent said the same of organic food. But calling food organic actually means something, while calling it local does not. In the United States, organic food is subject to inspection standards. “Local” food is not.⁶

Of course, these are *American* consumers. Their views do not represent the rest of the world. And even in the United States, local food movements are not only about improving the environment or searching for healthy food. They are also about control, self-sufficiency, authenticity, and personal empowerment. Local food has further meanings in other national contexts, such as in Mexico, France, Germany, or Switzerland with their deep histories of place. In those places, food localization often has less to do with environmental issues, such as climate change or toxins, and much more to do with social justice, food sovereignty, identity politics, and other goals.⁷

5 Weber and Matthews, “Food Miles,” 3508–13; Tara Garnett, “Where are the Best Opportunities for Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the Food System (Including the Food Chain)?” *Food Policy* 36, Supplement 1 (2011), S23–S32.

6 Julie Schmit, “‘Locally Grown’ Food Sounds Great, But What Does it Mean?” *USA Today*, 28 October 2008, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/economy/2008-10-27-local-grown-farms-produce_N.htm.

Here again though, food can look like a unifying flag under whose banner may walk contradictory desires. For instance, the founders of the Slow Food movement in Italy initially aimed to “defend regional traditions, good food, gastronomic pleasure and a slow pace of life.” Their 1986 protests against construction of a McDonald’s in Rome have since branched out to become a global movement for regional identity, one connecting activists in dozens of countries.⁸ But the desire to protect local traditions in an age of rapid globalization can be twisted toward very different political ends. The Italian nationalist organization Lega Nord has advocated protecting local food not to prevent the introduction of foreign foods but to prevent the immigration of foreign people. In 2010 Lega Nord used the slogan “*Si alla polenta, NO al cous cous. Orgogliosi delle nostre tradizioni*” [Yes to polenta, no to cous cous. Proud of our traditions]. This slogan, opposing the traditional Italian peasant dish of polenta to North African couscous, turned localism into xenophobia.⁹ Lega Nord connected pride of place with hatred of outsiders, an old and troubled tradition in the country that gave birth to fascism.

What should we eat? Turns out to be a complicated question in our own time. It is also a question with a history. This is not the first time in modern history that citizens have worried about their food and its origins. More than a century ago powerful technologies and organizational methods of industrial economies moved into agriculture and food processing, transforming fisheries, agriculture, and marketing. Food production and consumption linked concerns about the meaning and ownership of work, reflected anxieties about massive migrations from countryside to city and across oceans, and became the focus of fears about disease and health in an age of terrible urban epidemics. In the United States, the decades between 1880 and 1930 witnessed profound shifts that anticipate some of the concerns today. One of the biggest shifts was the rise of loss of local farmlands to urban growth and to more efficient industrial farms.

7 For example, the international organization Via Campesina, longtime advocates for diversified agriculture that produces food while sustaining small farmers. La Via Campesina, “Un Informe Mas de la ONU que Llama a Respaldar La Agricultura Campesina y la Agroecologia: Ahora es Tiempo Para la Accion,” 23 September 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/l663m6o>. Accessed 29 July 2014.

8 Slow Food International, “Our History.” <http://www.slowfood.com/international/7/history>. Accessed 27 June 2014.

9 Benedetta Grasso, “Polenta vs Couscous: Legally Banning Ethnic Food from Northern Italy,” *i-Italy Magazine*, 9 April 2010, <http://www.i-italy.org/13883/polenta-vs-cous-cous-legally-banning-ethnic-food-northern-italy>. The irony of this slogan appears to have escaped the Lega Nord. Polenta is made from New World maize while couscous is made from Old World wheat. Couscous, rather than polenta, has the deeper food tradition in the Mediterranean.

But did twentieth-century Americans care that they no longer ate locally? That is a hard question for historians to answer. There certainly were political movements around food in the early twentieth century. This era saw attempts to enforce a standard diet in the United States in the face of mass migration of poor white and Black Southerners into northern cities and immigration from Europe. Educated experts fought for some “American” foods and against “foreign” foods to promote assimilation into American culture, but also to promote health and reduce disease. But they were driven by middle class anxieties about persistent poverty and the passions of immigrant, urban workers. As food historian Harvey Levenstein found, middle class reformers sought to enforce conformity to a bland “American” diet they considered healthy and cheap. Those food activists cared what was eaten and who ate it, not how the food was grown.¹⁰

The poor on the other hand cared deeply about the price and quality of food. In 1900 half of a working class American household’s income went to purchase food. As industrial methods transformed US agriculture, prices dropped. In 1950 the national average was 22 percent. By 1998, food accounted for just seven percent of the average American household’s disposable income.¹¹ Cheap food is a rare advantage for the American poor, who face many of the risks of life alone, without the ample social safety net available in other industrialized countries.

To understand how turn of the century Americans felt about food, can we look to literature, art, and music? This is the age of novels about leaving the farm, most of it celebrating the escape from rural drudgery and the dull country life. Only in the 1930s after the transformation was complete did a new nostalgic literature appear. But even the most famous of these novels, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* series, depicted farm life with mixed emotions. One Christmas, young Laura receives the greatest treat imaginable—an orange from a thousand miles away. Her Ma and Pa reserved store-bought refined white sugar for guests, with the children allowed less-valued, locally made maple syrup.¹²

10 Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 98–108.

11 Katherine Leonard Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 1; Bruce L. Gardner, *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

12 Amy Lifson, “Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder is Not the Same When You’re A Parent,” *Humanities* 35, no. 4 (July/August 2014), <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2014/julyaugust/feature/reading-laura-ingalls-wilder-not-the-same-when-youre-parent>.

This past may seem irrelevant to local food activists today. Concerns about urban overcrowding and disease, about dangerous labor practices and transportation monopolies, rarely appear in our media. Nor is farm life even a memory for most Americans today. In 1930, farmers still accounted for more than one out of every five Americans. Today, less than one percent of the population are farmers.¹³ Despite these caveats, American history has some lessons for today. And it may have parallels in other settler colonies (Argentina, Australia, Canada) and industrializing nations in Asia and Africa. The dislocations we are seeing today in Mexico and Thailand are not so different from the exodus of farm families from the United States and Germany in the nineteenth century.

This past offers a few lessons for the present. As industrial food produced local food, it generally brought increased quantity and diversity and lower prices. Quality may have fallen with prices, but oranges in winter were a marvel. For the poorest consumers, cheap food may have been far more important than local food.

As an historian, it seems to me the trouble is that we want our environmental choices to be clean and simple. Very few of the readers of this journal are farmers. All are consumers. Consumers today yearn for a life in which they can do the right thing by buying the right thing. They want food that is socially just and environmentally sustainable, exotic and seasonal, authentic and affordable. But some of these things are at odds with others. Simple stories don't exist in the real world, past or present. Food localization speaks to real problems, but it must not become nostalgia or fantasy.

We all want to eat right, to do the right thing when we buy and consume food. But what does it mean to do the right thing? Is locally produced, conventionally grown food better than organic food grown hundreds or thousands of kilometers away? Are traces of pesticide residue worth the lower cost? Is it possible to be for local without being against global? Who wins and who loses when we make our food choices? Those are the tough questions facing local food advocates today.

13 United States Census data. Full US Census Records from 1790–1930 are available at https://archive.org/details/us_census.