

Dear Workshop Participants,

After spending too many years writing on the global justice movement, I'm trying to switch to another research object, namely food movements. This paper is a very first version of a text based on field work conducted in Brooklyn from March to June 2010. I spent a long time trying to define a way to approach the numerous issues at stake in food movements. The current text lacks a stronger theoretical perspective, additional data analysis and further field work. All suggestions, critical comments and remarks to improve this text or to reorient the research in another perspective are hence very welcome.

Thank you very much for your time! I look forward to seeing you again on Thursday!

Geoffrey

Food movements: From the consumption society to a consumers' society?

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“Everytime you eat, you make a choice”

The food justice movement has developed a wide array of activities, strategies and campaigns in their quest to promote healthier, sustainable and fair food. They address themselves to five categories of actors. They target “leading agro-food corporations” as their main adversaries. They lobby policy-makers to demand better regulation and to obtain resources for their movement. They connect with mainstream and alternative media, hoping to get their message relayed to a wider audience. They network with other movement organizations to build coalitions that will strengthen their movement, but may also dilute their message. And, finally, they try to reach out to citizens to convince them to adopt healthier, more sustainable and fairer food habits.

This paper focuses on their efforts to influence other consumers, taking the Brooklyn Food Coalition (BFC) as a case study. Convincing their neighbors to change their food consumption habits constitutes a major objective for many local food movements, including BFC. Interviews and field research suggest that BFC organizers and activists carry out three complementary strategies with that purpose in view: (1) “food education” that aims at informing their fellow citizens about the major consequences of food on health, the environment and working conditions along the food chain; (2) extending access to healthier, sustainable and fair food; (3) developing narratives that provide a positive and hedonistic image of better food and food movement activism (conviviality, self-fulfilling activism, social agency). This text focuses on activist discourses and narratives as central to reflexivity and as a bridge from collective culture to individual psychology (Poletta, 2006; Jackson, 2005). Drawing on D. Cefaï (2007),

the text will try to grasp the “practical creation of meanings”, both in the interviewed activists' head and in its public embodiments. It will therefore focus on discourses, code, moral visions and underlining values.

The hypothesis notably suggests that the underlying figure of the “consumer” refers to a strong faith in individual autonomy and freedom of choice. This isomorphism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999) with market ideology may come into tension with anti-consumerist values and the de-commodification projects demanded by some food movement activists.

In terms of market shares, alternative food networks largely remain limited to niche markets and epiphenomenon (Cochoy, 2008). P. Allen (2004) and E. Verhaegen (2011) hence consider that the scope of the food movement lies in the mobilizations dynamic around consumption through various paths, including advocacy and the construction of narratives that question dominant value and in particular hyper-consumerism (Allen, 2004; Verhaegen, 2010). While anti-consumerism discourses are mentioned in several interviews, this text suggests that the celebration of the consumer's freedom of choice is another major feature of the narrative underlining many food activists' discourses and arguments.

1. The Brooklyn Food Coalition

This analysis is based on the preliminary phase of a research on food movements in Brooklyn conducted between March and June 2010. Twenty-six interviews were conducted with both organizers and grassroots activists connected to the Brooklyn Food Coalition (BFC). Data were also collected through the observation of meetings, talks, and events organized by the BFC, its local chapters, and a few other food movements in Brooklyn and New York. Informal exchanges with activists have been among the most valuable materials. Activist tracts, books and documents have also been useful for understanding some aspects of the movement¹. Other material mentioned for comparison is drawn from research I have conducted on “responsible buying groups” in Belgium as well as similar case studies in Belgium, France, Canada and Italy by a group of researchers (see Pleyers, 2011).

The Brooklyn Food Coalition was chosen as the main case study for its outreach to a dozen neighborhoods in Brooklyn and for the variety of its activists, ranging from upper middle-class to lower middle class and working class minorities in neighborhoods such as Bed-Stuy and East Flatsbush.

The Brooklyn Food Coalition is a grassroots network organization aiming at fostering local food coalitions in Brooklyn neighborhoods to develop food education and to advocate for better food policy, essentially at the city level. They support their local chapters' activities or other local food movements' activities through active participation, providing meeting facilitation, spreading information, and connecting people. Activities directly organized by BFC's main team include activist training; food education (screening movies, hosting talks and evening workshops, talking in schools, etc.); organizing activist delegations to attend larger meetings (eg the US Social Forum) and taking part in advocacy campaigns at the city level, notably on school food (New York City schools prepare one million meals daily. Even a small change in that policy can have a big impact on local farmers and on people's health). During my three-month field research stint at the Brooklyn Food Coalition (BFC), eating was never the main purpose of a BFC organized activity or meeting². I never saw them cooking together³. Most BFC

¹ Unfortunately, at this stage of the research, these data have only been selectively analyzed. This paper is thus rather a first attempt to lay down some hypotheses and thought about the way BFC and other food movement activists connect to people in their neighborhoods.

² The Slow Food movement adopts a different approach, inviting their members to meet in bars serving some good food or

activists don't grow their own food and many buy them from alternative food networks that existed much before BFC was created, including food co-ops and community supported agriculture (CSA).

The Brooklyn Food Coalition was launched following the success “Brooklyn Food Conference” attended by 3,300 persons in May 2009. Over 2 500 members are now connected to the BFC website social network, out of which between 300 to 500 may be considered as active members and a few more hundreds attend some meetings. BFC central organization relies on a small paid staff (2 full time “community organizers” and a part time staffer who works on the website and communication. BFC has adopted a grassroots, decentralized approach of movement building that contrasts with other networks (in particular NYC Slow Food) and most non profit organization dealing with food issues in Brooklyn.

Social and economic situation, as well as race⁴, are important factors in understanding social movement. Both economic and racial factors frame food issues in such a way that most food movements are divided on these cleavages. Going beyond the “elitist character” of food movements and reaching out beyond the white middle-class are constant preoccupations of BFC organizers. Local chapters have succeeded in getting people from various communities involved. Some distribute and translate their fliers to Spanish and Chinese, other take a special care in building on existing local initiatives, deferring to those formed by people of color rather than assuming leadership. The fact that the two BFC full time staff were African American women with a long experience in community organizing was another important factor. Moreover, food is widely considered as an issue that helps to cross social barriers. An African American community activist in Bed-Stuy summed it up: “Food is an equalizer. We all need it. We all eat everyday. It can open doors.”

On this basis, BFC managed to involve people of different communities in most of its meetings. Both the importance of the challenge and BFC’s relative success in that matter is acknowledged among its partner organizations:

“The food movement cannot be an elitist movement. It can't be only the people who can afford to buy the top-quality products. And that's what the Brooklyn Food Coalition has done successfully. Because they started at the grassroots level. They started with average people.” (a woman working at City Harvest, a non-profit organization).

Crossing social and cultural frontiers nevertheless remains as a permanent challenge. While Park Slope is considered by the New York Times magazine as the NYC neighborhood with the best standard of living, hunger remains a problem in nearby neighborhoods. The strong gentrification process represents both a problem for these neighborhoods’ native populations and an opportunity to get a mixed population among BFC local chapters.

Other major actors of the Brooklyn food movement scene include several “Food co-ops” that range from 20 families for some collective buying clubs to a collectively-owned supermarket with up to 16,000 members for the Park Slope Food Co-op. The later as well as the Flatbush food co-op have been active in “food education” since the 1970s and have provided both financial support and volunteers to build the BFC and to organize its activities. For instance, every member of the Park Slope food co-op has to volunteer for 2.5 hours a month in order to be allowed to purchase at the co-op store. While most

restaurants. (see Germov, Williams, & Freij, 2010)

³ A few neighborhood sections, including the “Hattie Carthan Community farmer market” (Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn), held cooking lessons next to their farmer market.

⁴ See for example Guthman, 2008.

volunteering is directly connected to the store and its food, organizing the screening on a food-related movie and working for some BFC project is sometimes taken into count in these volunteer hours. Several neighborhood food/environmental organizations are connected to the BFC. Among them, “Sustainable Flatbush”. It organizes food/environmental education and collective gardens as well as a wide range of activities, including garden tours, waste recycling and film screenings.

Brooklyn’s lively communities also host some 500 collective gardens⁵. While most of the gardeners I met don't see gardening as “food activism”, others have developed a very activist perspective. They then focus on gardening as a transformative learning experience: “The very fact to 'get their hand dirty' has a deep impact on their diet and of their vision of food. A study has shown that people who garden eat 2.5 more vegetable, even in the winter when they don't garden.” (an organizer of a tour of Brooklyn gardens, May 2010). “It is important for children to see that tomatoes don't grow in their plastic bags in supermarket” (Jen). Another activist perspective considers urban gardening as a way to “de-commodify” food and taking it out of the market and monetary exchanges.

Some NYC or local NGOs and charities against hunger and food deserts are also active in poorer (mostly African American) neighborhood in Brooklyn. Most are now connected with the BFC, with whom they built a mutual support relationship. This includes the “Brooklyn Rescue Mission” or “City Harvest”, an NGO that collects the food that restaurants and supermarkets are about to throw away and distributes it in poor neighborhoods. NYC NGO activists (mostly paid staff), don't necessarily live in Brooklyn and have often developed a top-down approach to food and health issues.

Another distinction among people taking part to BFC activities lies in the fact that some consider food-related activity as activism, or as a gateway towards an active and contentious concept of citizenship, while others only want healthier food, especially among newcomers and interviewees coming from poorer neighborhoods. The “activist” perspective is clearly dominant among BFC members and organizers, although less shared among newcomers from poorer neighborhoods, as reflected in some interviews.

2. Is the consumer also part of the problem?

Opposing the dominant political argument that food consumption is mostly a matter of individual choices, scholars (eg Nestle, 2007; Poppendieck, 2010) have shown the extent of power that agro-food corporations wield in influencing food policies and shaping individual tastes and choices. In a situation of quasi-oligopoly, conventional food markets are more oriented by supply than consumer demand. At the same time, food policies are often more a response to food producers' lobbies than to the needs of the population (Poppendieck, 1985). Drawing on various generations of the Frankfurt school (Benjamin, 1971; Marcuse, 1968), dozens of critical thinkers have also denounced the “domination of individuals in their desires and in their needs” (Gorz, 2008: 13-15) by the power of images and marketing that dominate the consumption society (Baudrillard, 1968).

The discourses, books and movies of food justice activists locate the roots of problems related to unappropriated food consumption in the domination of the industrial agro-food complex rather than in individual consumer responsibility. They however acknowledge that a part of the problem (and thus part of the solution) lies in the active contribution of consumers to the reproduction of the dominant system. In particular, they blame the lack of reflexion and consciousness about the consequences of

⁵ The NYC collective gardens movement also started in the 1970s. It became more “political” and contentious following Mayor Giuliani plan to sell some of these gardens that had been grown on free lots, many of which belonging to the city.

daily acts of consumption.

Current research in psychology suggests that much of human behavior is influenced by uncontrolled, unobserved processes in memory” (Bargh, 2002; Dijksterhuis, & Nordgren, 2006; Chartrand & Fitzsimons, 2011). Habits, routines and automaticity play a vital role in the cognitive effort required to function effectively. Their influence is particularly strong in matters of daily life choices, including food: “In daily life, the tendency to act on habits is compounded by everyday demands, including time pressures, distraction, and self-control depletion.” (Wooda & Neala, 2009). “In practice, many of our ordinary, everyday behaviours are carried out with very little conscious deliberation at all.” (Jackson, 2003). The sociologist of consumption B. Halkier (2001: 26) writes, “daily practices of consumption often depend more on habits and routine than on conscious reflection and choice”. This strengthens the influence of marketing as well as of built-in social structure, our identity and our social setting (Bourdieu, 1979; Sassatelli, 2006). Except as a more reflexive action, food consumption remains to a great extent “an unconscious expression of social structure” (Lévi-Strauss, 1968).

The disconnect between the act of buying and its social and environmental consequences constitutes both a central feature of the consumption society and an individual choice of each consumer. The limited success of ethical consumption and projects like fair trade, whose main products are limited to less than 5% of the market shares (Krier, 2007) almost everywhere provide a salient example. Organic food only represented 1.9% of the European food sector in 2009⁶. The economic explanation generally put forward (about the cost of fair trade products being too high), must be nuanced by the fact that diet only represents a limited part of household budgets, and can therefore, in many cases, be increased. In 2009, for example, American households spent only 9.6% of their expenses on diet, compared to 24% in 1930⁷. This figure also illustrates the limited importance accorded to diet, which has shown up as a constant trend since these statistics existed, but which food movements would like to overturn. Changing consumer attitudes about food choices is thus an enormous project. Brooklyn Food Coalition activists insist that it starts with oneself.

3. Changing oneself and changing the other

“The change lies in everyone. People should make this changes for themselves. (...) It is about changing oneself” (Alda, a mother of 2, 29 year-old).

In the interviews, food activists first underlined the importance of changing their own food and consumption habits. Speaking about their own “conversion” to food activism, they evoked both personal and social considerations.

Many talked about some early awareness of the connection between health and food; about health concerns for their children. Others cited some pleasant experience of tasty, organic food and, more commonly, the fact that meals were an important familial moment in their childhood. Many also referred to some awakening book or, for the younger, information found on a website⁸.

“I always had a certain concern about food coming from my mother . She had some health problems and she was always looking for alternative solutions, including food. So my mother led us to know

⁶ European Commission: “An analysis of the EU organic sector” (June 2010), ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/markets/organic_2010_en.pdf

⁷ <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/CPIFoodandExpenditures/Data/table7.htm>

⁸ Friendship and personal networks are probably other important factors. They were however not referred to in the interviews.

about the relation between health and food, a very long time ago, when it was not popular at all (...). Then, I remember reading “Diet for a small planet” by Sarah Lappe's book. Maybe I was a teenager. That was a very powerful idea.”

Those who mentioned social, environmental or political motivations emphasized an approach of “prefigurative activism”, based on consistency between one's practices and values:

“How can we, all together as activists, talking here about changing the world when many people here are still drinking Coca-Cola or wearing Nikes? We are people trying to change the world and then when you go back to the level of individual responsibility, why do we purchase things that we would not support, or is that what we want? I think it is always this kind of back and forward: what am I doing as an individual combines with what kind of activism I would like to do.” (Anne).

Prefigurative activism is neither new nor specific to food consumption movements, as some activists recalled by referring to Gandhi's famous slogan, “Be the change you want to see in the world”. The prefigurative character of commitment and the focus on the consistency between activists' values and their daily choices as consumers have however been fostered by influential social movements and projects in the last decade, including the green movement, fair trade networks and some trends of the global justice movement (Pleyers, 2010: part 2). The latter have notably underlined some of the global connections of daily food, both in their origins (“From the WTO to your daily plate”⁹) and in their consequences.

While they assert a responsible, reflexive behavior in food consumption, all the BFC activists I interviewed adopted a non-dogmatic approach, allowing some flexibility towards ideal behavior.

“I think that we should think about the choice that we make. And not necessarily always and for everything. I like sweets and I used to like caffeine ... But I try to be aware as far as I can, to think about what I buy.” (Mary, 39, Sustainable Flatbush and BFC)

While the focus on changing oneself constitutes a central dimension of food movements, activists claim that the movement is not only about changing one's own food and consumption habits: “And even I wouldn't consider the people who only seek better food as part of the movement, it is really a movement that goes beyond that” (Jean, 35, working in the non profit sector).

Shopping at a Wholefood organic supermarket is clearly not considered as (food justice) activism¹⁰. Food *activism* consists in combining a personal change with a commitment to changing the mainstream food supply and to engage with other people, convincing and enabling them to change their own food consumption habits. BFC activists actually consider that “the neighborhood is a very nice scale, because sometimes when you do the things alone, you don't feel very well about that.”

The will to influence someone else, however, enters into tension with the strong value given to individual autonomy and freedom of choice.

“It is about changing oneself, everyone should be convinced and take one's own decision, because no one likes people to tell you what you should do” (Alda)

An ideal way of dealing with this tension lies in the hope that, by changing their lifestyles and consumption patterns, by enjoying food activism, these activists show their neighbors that a change

⁹ Slogan of a campaign by a local alter-globalization network that initiated a collective buying club (Liège, Belgium).

¹⁰ A similar distinction is made by French “AMAP” activists to distinguish themselves from the clients of organic supermarkets.

towards healthier food habits and more sustainable consumption patterns is possible and that they may enjoy it. However, this contagion mostly works with people who are socially and culturally close (ref.). The aim of the Brooklyn Food Coalition and of neighborhood organizations such as Sustainable Flatbush is precisely to cross social divisions.

When it comes to encouraging their neighbors to adopt healthier and more sustainable food consumption patterns, the BFC and its activists adopt three strategies: providing information; offering access to healthier food; and introducing narratives that frame alternative food consumption patterns in an hedonistic, enjoyable way.

4. Food education and reflexivity

When asked about the most important thing that would change their neighbors' behavior, many interviewees offered a similar reply:

“Everything lies in education. (...) They don't know how to cook. They don't make the connection between health problems and bad food. (...) Give information about breast-feeding, which is not common at all among young mothers because they receive free milk.”

Alexandra (25, a nurse, working and living in East Flatbush, a newcomer at the BFC)

“Information is crucial. People have been ignorant for years. In the US, they really tried in the 1970s, with the organic movement that started from there. I have seen many more people *aware* now than ever before. (...) that's part of creating a sustainable food system.(...)”

People need more than a meal, they need education. And we try to help them.”

Dez (34, working in a NGO, former journalist)

Educating people about food is actually often considered the core purpose of the food justice movement:

“To me, it is one food movement that manifests itself in different ways. With the farmers market in L.A. and then in San Francisco, and here with the food co-op, *it is always about educating people about good food.*” (Mary, 62, Food Co-op)

Food education is the core activity of the Brooklyn Food Coalition. Through talks, film screenings, and convivial meetings, it tries to raise people's awareness about food and the impact of food choices. Some of these initiatives have been successful far beyond their expectation. This was particularly true of the 2009 "Food Conference". Several other civil society organizations are active in the same sector, including the NYC chapter of Just Food, whose recent CSA conference was attended by over 500 people on March 4, 2011.

Both Just Food and the BFC have very lively websites and online social networks. BFC's mailing list gets 10 to 15 new members every week. However, electronic communication connects activists in a selective way (Tilly, 2004: 105) and is mostly useful to keep people who are already connected informed. Dozens of books authored by American food activists are published every year. Some journalists and essayists also had a major influence in the early stages of the movement.

Community gardens are seen by BFC organizers as spaces to strengthen the community and to educate people about food. Garden tours are organized at least twice a month by some food movement groups. Gardeners are particularly keen on showing their vegetables as well as their compost systems, which

are often open to neighbors.

While food education is the main objective of the BFC, it has not yet developed as a proper space of expertise and produces little information of its own, contrary to more institutionalized organizations such as Just Food and NGOs. For instance, City Harvest has produced several reports about food problems in less wealthy NYC neighborhoods, including Brooklyn.

Health, the environment and the producers

When they seek to underline the importance of food, BFC activists mostly appeal to three sets of arguments: impact on health, on the environment and on food producers¹¹.

Health . most frequently cited argument is the contribution of a better diet to health. Food-related health issues are framed differently in wealthier and less wealthy neighborhoods; both by local people referring to their own experiences and by BFC activists coming into these neighborhoods. In East Flatbush or in Bed-Stuy (poorer neighborhoods), both local people and other BFC organizers focus on obesity and related illnesses. They recall that .7% of the US population (ie, over 72 million people) suffered from obesity in the United States in 2009¹². Middle-class people seem to focus their health concerns and anxiety on the impact of industrially processed food; for instance, the effect of pesticides or the virtue of organic food.

Environmental concerns. Global warming became a rising concern among BFC “middle-class” activists and organizers in 2010, following both the publication of Brooklynite Anna Lappe's book “Diet for a Hot Planet” and the participation of half a dozen BFC activists in the “World People's Climate Summit” in Bolivia in April 2010. Both the book and the activists' reports from the Summit have been widely read and discussed among BFC organizers and educated activists. Anna Lappe (2010:xv) claims that the food chain (production, distribution, consumption and waste) accounts for 31% of human emissions of global warming gases. Livestock alone is responsible for 18% (Henning et al., 2006)¹³.

Supporting local farmers and the working conditions of food producers. Competition for ever lower food prices works largely to the detriment of remuneration and work conditions along the entire chain of production and distribution, from agricultural workers to cashiers in supermarkets. On the other hand, the concentration of land tied to the agro-exporter model has a devastating impact on peasant farmers (De Schutter, 2010). The use of chemical products in intensive agriculture has serious consequences for farm workers as well as people who live in the area. As Sandro Ellix Katz (2009:6) emphasizes, “products that travel thousands of miles have a story to tell; few of them pretty”. Deborah Barndt (2008) shows this by following the journey of a tomato from Mexico to the plate of an American consumer. The situation is hardly better for clandestine Moroccan migrants whose exhausting labour in the greenhouses of southern Spain supplies western Europe with fruit and vegetables at a good price.

A few activists cited animal welfare in the story of their own conversion to vegetarianism and their rising interest about the way food is produced. This argument was, however, only used in reference to personal experience.

¹¹ Besides references to the sensual experience of enjoying the taste of organic food (see part 3).

¹² 2010 report of the Centre for disease control and prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/VitalSigns/AdultObesity/http://www.cdc.gov/Features/VitalSigns/AdultObesity/>

¹³ Also local pollution due to industrial food, but this doesn't directly concern Brooklyn.

The importance given to each of these arguments and the way they are developed vary considerably according to the listeners' social background. Health is usually used as the central argument in poorer neighborhoods while concerns about the environment and food producers seem less appealing to these populations.

Food education in a risk society

In our risk society (Beck, 1986), concern about food occupies a greater place than it has in the past. A series of scandals (mad cow, hormones in beef, dioxine, etc) have exposed the risks and pitfalls of the industrial system of food production and its consequences for public health (Sassatelli et Scott, 2001; Morgan et al., 2006). As Ulrich Beck explains, the current importance accorded to risk and concern is not necessarily tied to the multiplication or scope of the problems in the food supply. Rather, Claude Fishler (2001) has shown the structural nature of fears about food in the contemporary food system, combining an absence of regulation and stable norms (see also Nestle 2007), a pronounced individualism linked to strong freedom of choice, and highly mediatized "food scandals". Consumers thus seek information to alleviate their anxiety and enable them to better choose the food they eat.

The audience of food movement also relies on the fact that they provide information and expertise at a time where consumers have lost their trust in government agencies to provide independent information on food. Food is not the only sector affected by the general decline of citizen trust in institutions (Dubet, 2003), but it is especially affected both because of the structural anxiety referred to above and because the press regularly reveals links between experts on the boards of these institutions and agro-food lobbies. The power of agro-industrial lobbies over food policies is asserted in numerous studies (eg Poppendieck 1985; Robin, 2008; Rastoin, 2008). Marion Nestle (2007: 95-110) shows how they shape the activities of the Food and Drug Administration, including subsidies, food safety controls and even food education campaigns. Influence groups have long since managed to block awareness campaigns urging community members to "eat less" and officials of this body are regularly recruited from agro-food industry pressure groups. Conversely, many elected officials become lobbyists at various stages of their careers. Similarly, the chair of the European Agency for Food Security (EFSA), Hungarian scholar Diana Banati, is also a board member of the European chapter of the International Life Sciences Institute¹⁴, which brings together all major global agro-food corporations.

Information and reflexivity against marketing and habits¹⁵

"That's the only way that it succeeds. Empowering people, make they think about it. You can make them think that it matters to them, to their health, to their family and that it has value. You have to have people realize how it affects them."

(Barbara, about 55 years old, in a conversation after an evening talk at the BFC)

Providing information may help consumers to make better choices. However, information alone may not be sufficient to bring some sustainable change in consumer behavior. Most people have actually

¹⁴ *Le Monde*, Sept. 29 2010.

¹⁵ The focus on the food movements strategies to influence consumers adopted in this article should not undermine the importance of other strategies developed by activists towards other actors. Their "battle for information" also leads to lobby policy makers in order to oblige food producers to provide more information about the production process or to inform potential consumers about the use of pesticides (*right-to-know campaign*). Mass media are other key players in shaping consumers desire and reflecting the consuming culture.

sufficient information to improve their food habits. They know that vegetables are healthy and that consuming fast food regularly is not.

By providing information on food and increasing consumers' awareness of the consequences of their choices, food activists pursue a deeper aim: to enhance a reflexive process.¹⁶ As framed by sustainable development scholar-activists Tim Jackson and Laurie Michaelis (2003: 7), "*One of the main sources of hope for a shift towards a sustainable society is the growth in reflexivity.*"

In practice, most of everyday behaviors are carried out with very little conscious deliberation at all. Social psychology widely asserts that "In daily life, the tendency to act on habits is compounded by everyday demands, including time pressures, distraction, and self-control depletion. (...) [However] habits are not immune to deliberative processes. Habits are learned largely as people pursue goals in daily life, and habits are broken through the strategic deployment of effortful self-control." (Wooda & Neala, 2009). Moreover, recent research in social psychology (Gordy Pleyers, 2007) show that a higher degree of rational information has a significant influence in reducing the impact of affective conditioning techniques used in the marketing, and thus improve consumers' self-control over their choices.

Moreover, recent research in social psychology shows that a higher degree of rational information has a significant influence in reducing the impact of affective conditioning techniques used in marketing (Gordy Pleyers, 2007), and thus improves consumers' self-control over their choices. Making people more aware of the impact of their choices when buying and eating food and stressing the possibility for people to use their freedom as consumer to make responsible choices hence represent an efficient mechanism to foster a change in their attitude, its implementation by concrete change when purchasing food.

This strategy adopted by food movement activists relies on their faith in people's reflexivity, in the idea that (1) providing people information and "food education" will bring them to adopt a more thoughtful attitude towards food and that (2) this attitude will transform their consumption patterns. This belief is based on an expectancy value model that assumes that behavior is the result of deliberative, cognitive processes. Social psychology reminds us that there is a lengthy process from transforming attitudes and perceptions into concrete behaviors (Ajzen, 1985), which is notably illustrated by the paradox of fair trade. "The avalanche of studies attesting to the near unanimity of good intentions among consumers, always extremely ready in word to buy this kind of [ethical] product even if it means paying more (...) contrasts sharply with the hard reality of actual sales figures" (Cochoy, 2008: 112). Despite considerable growth over the last 15 years, the market share of fair trade coffee remains at less than 5% in France¹⁷ just as 2009 business figures for organic food (broadly defined) represent only 1.9% of the food market.¹⁸

While providing people information about food and raising their awareness about the consequences of their choices may enhance their reflexivity, question the habits that dominate their food consumption, and decrease the impact of marketing, it remains often insufficient to change consumer behavior.

¹⁶ This hypothesis may be reflected by interviewees' extensive use of the expression "people need to be aware".

¹⁷ Selon Max Havelaar www.novethic.fr/novethic/planete/economie/commerce_equitable/10_ans_quinzaine_commerce_equitable_bilan.jsp

¹⁸ Selon "L'agence bio". www.agencebio.org/upload/5_Developpement_Conso_mation.pdf
Pour une perspective européenne du secteur, voir le rapport publié par la Commission Européenne "An analysis of the EU organic sector" (juin 2010), ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/markets/organic_2010_en.pdf

3. Access to food: giving people a choice

“The problem is: people don't have access to quality food. They lack alternative choices and they lack information. (...) If they had access to better information on food and to good food, they would choose it”.

Biola, 20, African American, student at the Brooklyn College.

While Park Slope enjoys a wide access to healthy and responsible food, thanks to Community Supported Agriculture networks, its 16 000-member food co-op, farmers markets and organic food sold in shops and supermarkets, the lack of access to healthy food is a major concern in other neighborhoods. Both local activists and BFC organizers focus on economic, cultural and spatial discrimination in access to healthier food.

Economic, cultural and spatial discrimination

Wealth and health

“But not everyone can do that, not everyone can pay that money upfront [to join a CSA]. And we try to make it affordable. We do, for example, a work exchange, where people who can't afford these products can have it in exchange for some work.”

Hunger remains a problem in several neighborhoods. The Brooklyn Rescue Mission distributes free food and has seen the number of its users grow since the economic crisis. Their organizers' interest in healthy food led them to develop various initiatives, including a collective garden and a few joint projects with the Brooklyn Food Coalition. City Harvest and other NYC NGOs also distribute meals in these neighborhoods.

A cultural gap

Cost is, however, not the only problem that prevents the inhabitants from accessing healthier food¹⁹. Aside from a lack of “food education” and information, cultural factors also matter, either because the traditional meals of some minorities are less healthy (ref.) or because of a strong association of the organic movement with white middle-class activists. Framing the movement's aims in a way that appeals to each population is a key factor to reaching out beyond the white middle-class.

[Another problem is] “also the price difference between a cheap meal and a healthy produced meal... There is a prestige cost as well. You say the word 'organic' and people say “Oh no...”. It could be the same price, but it is the prestige in fact. So you have to be able to find ways for people to get access to organic products so that they can feel... that they can have access in a way that is not that intimidating. Because people will close up if they think that it is a condescending thing, that they see that people are not respecting that they have choices. It is about meeting people wherever they are, in terms of education, from a equal level.” (Dez, 34, working in the non-profit sector)

Food deserts

Although not as salient as in cities like Detroit (Zenk et al., 2005), spatial discrimination is another concern as areas in some neighborhoods have become “food deserts” (Winne, 2009). Their inhabitants lack access to (healthy) food within a certain area. Supermarket chains are reluctant to open a store in neighborhoods considered insufficiently profitable or, in a few cases, too dangerous. The few corner

¹⁹ only small parts of the budget

stores don't usually provide proper access to healthy food and vegetables²⁰. Fast food outlets are often the only sources of food in such neighborhoods, which are also the ones with higher obesity rates and related illnesses (City Harvest, 2009).

The fact that health problems related to food are significantly higher in less healthy neighborhoods, among minority people and in food deserts (Winne, 2009) illustrates that economic, cultural and spatial inequalities matter. BFC activists try to lower the impact of these inequalities while focusing on food.

BFC campaigns

BFC and its local chapters have developed four types of campaigns to counter food deserts and improve the access of less wealthy families to better food:

1. BFC local chapters have initiated and sponsored collective gardens. W. Winne (2009: chapter 4) presents them as a particularly efficient solution to food deserts. However, and with a few exceptions (that are actually considered as farms rather than gardens), the small individual plots of Brooklyn gardens only provide a limited number of vegetables every year, far from sufficient to feed a family all year long²¹.
2. BFC has also organized or co-sponsored farmers markets in poorer neighborhoods; notably, an 8-week farmers market a few blocks away from the Brooklyn Rescue Mission. While the latter organization supported the initiative, BFC played a central role by connecting with farmers and convincing them to open a stand in these less profitable neighborhoods, as well as by actively promoting the market to ensure a sufficient number of customers. To this end, they used strategies as diverse as distribution of flyers, the organization of afternoon concerts and activities for kids. BFC also considered the market to be an opportunity to reach out to a new population and had their own stand dedicated to food education.

Other BFC local chapters support or organize alternative food networks (CSAs) that allow consumers to buy their fresh vegetables directly from local producers (including the Mimomex and the East New York farms in Brooklyn). The lack of intermediary decreases the cost. Moreover, some of these CSAs have specific programs providing cheaper or free weekly vegetable baskets for a few families.

Both local chapters and the BFC coordination collaborate with city programs against food deserts. For instance, one or two civil servants from the “Healthy bodegas” program attend the Bed-Stuy food council monthly meetings, with whom they have developed relations of mutual support. This program was initiated by the city in 2007 to foster and help local shop owners to sell fresh vegetables. BFC has also been active in a city-wide campaign to allow the use of food stamps at farmers markets. In food movements even less than in other sectors, “we can no longer simply pit 'movement' against 'state'” (Jasper, 2010:15)²². Some public policies are closely connected with food movements organization, while civil servants and teachers may become active relay and expertise provider for social movements. However, in other case, activists confront rigid administrations and disregarding policy makers.

The problem of access to quality food is, however, not limited to poorer neighborhoods. The BFC

²⁰ “Shops dedicate much more space to alcohol than to food, and there is usually no fresh food available”

²¹ Their main impact is in fact to educate people about good food.

²² The school food campaigns provide another example (cf. Poppendieck, 2010).

coordination and local chapters implement many initiatives to ease access to better food all over Brooklyn, including the promotion of new CSA groups. BFC also has a special “mapping commission” dedicated to map the shops and restaurants that sell organic food and meat from “humanely raised” animals. At the city level, two small companies have even made a business out of mapping places which sell healthier or vegetarian food²³.

Giving people a choice

The way in which several middle class interviewees framed the issue of access to food shows an underlying shared belief in food-consumer rationality:

“Once they have learned about how food is important, and if they can afford it, they will buy better food for their family.” Aki

If the consumer is considered a rational actor, the problem lies in the conditions of access to the food market. Reducing discrimination thus becomes crucial and the aim of the food movement can be framed as a defense of individual choice:

“There are so many different avenues. Is it just food justice? Is it equality? Is it health? Is it environment? It depends what avenue you take ... I don't know. I just know that I care about people having the choice to make decisions and having the ability to make choices and the information to make good choices.” (Dez, 34, working in the non profit sector)

These interviews assert a strong faith in the rationality of the consumer. It hence brings the main scope of the struggle to giving the consumer a choice, in a remarkable isomorphism (Boltanski & Chiapelo, 1999) with free market ideology is striking. The food movement presents itself as a better defender of the free choice of the consumer (the central value promoted by the market ideology) than the current food market, where the rules are distorted by giant agro-food corporations and where consumers lack access to information and freedom of choice, notably due to unfair discrimination.

4. Meanings: Challenging codes?

Consumption is far more than a rational choice calculated on the basis of cost, quality, available information and accessible goods. It connects the satisfaction of personal needs with expressions of values and identity (Halkier, 2001; Veblen, 1998). It provides shared meanings (Sahlins, 1978) and collective identities as well as “material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991:81). Consumption is not simply a space dominated by impulses and marketing. It is a space to express who we are, or who we would like to be, following our ideals and values but also our incorporated social status and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). One's relation to consumption contributes to the construction of the self; not only by providing the framework for its tastes but also, through the choices it allows, as an actor²⁴. If consumerism in part delivers identity, meanings, pleasure, emotions, narratives, a space for expressiveness and the construction of oneself, then countering consumerism means building new avenues for meaning.

²³ “Practical” information provided by these projects may be distinguish from “food education” information.

²⁴ Social psychologists Amanda Mattos and Lucia Castro (2008), for example, have shown the extent to which the relationship to consumption contributed to the construction of some adolescents' personalities, whether through belonging to a sub-culture or by resisting consumption society.

Some activist networks have adopted an approach based on constraints and frugality. For instance, the Italian de-growth activist network “Justice balances” brings together families that, for ethical reasons, have chosen to adopt a “constraining” lifestyle: they discuss publicly their consumption “balances” and have to continually re-evaluate their needs in order to reduce consumption. “They are hence compelled to constantly monitor and think about their habits and to experiment with new practices to manage food, childcare and free time.” (Rebughini, 2011).

BFC organizers and activists have chosen an opposite and non-constraining approach. They stress they don't want to play on guilt and instead emphasize the hedonistic and rewarding dimensions of food movement activism: the pleasure of good food and of activism, more authentic ways to celebrate and enjoy life and the rewarding feeling of social agency. My hypothesis is that these discourses reflect both the activists' own experiences and the narratives they use strategically to convince others to join the movement.

“I don't want to be seen as the woman that makes people feel bad. I never had these conversations with people, about “You shouldn't have been doing that”. I don't think it is my place and I don't think it is appropriate nor efficient. And I don't want to be the person watching what everyone does. (...) There are choices. I don't think about them as constraints. And I don't think it works to work on the constraints. You can try to make people feel guilty about the fact that they drive three blocks. But it doesn't work. Because obviously, they have already done it. And they may feel guilty about it for 10 minutes, but that feeling is not a sustainable attitude. And they may want to disregard the whole thing or to run away when they see you because you are the woman that make them feel guilty.” (Keka, Sustainable Flatbush).

This posture is consistent with the claim that individual responsibility shouldn't be over-emphasized as it is structured by the economic, social and cultural context, dominated by major corporations and consumerism. It may however come into tension with the demand for a shift towards greater consumer responsibility.

The pleasure of food experience and the joy of activism

“I enjoy eating food that has been grown with love and to know where it has been grown.” Athena, 23, Bed Stuy.

“I didn't like tomatoes, but once I ate an organic tomato, I really liked it. It was so colorful and so tasty. It is a whole different quality of experience!”

“Food is above all a sensual experience. I love the smells, flavors, textures, and colors of food, and how satisfied it can make me feel. (...) The food-related political activism is an extension of those sensual pursuits in that it seeks to revive local food production and exchange, and to redevelop community food sovereignty. There is no sacrifice required for this agenda, because, generally speaking, the food closest at hand is the freshest, most delicious and most nutritious.” (Ellix Katz²⁵, 2009: xvi).

An important dimension of food activism consists in a struggle to defend this “quality of experience”; the authenticity and the autonomy of this daily act (De Certeau, 1990) against standardization and poor quality industrially processed food²⁶.

²⁵ An American food movement activist.

²⁶ It is the core of the worldwide Slow Food movement (cf. Petrini, 2007).

While adopting a more sustainable consumption requires some sacrifices and is constraining, food justice activists frame it as an alternative way to enjoy and celebrate food, based on more authentic experience.

“One of the ways to get over that [bringing fruits here to make it accessible in all seasons] in a positive way is by celebrating seasonal food, having people back to know when foods are really at their best. They are at their best when it is the season. That's the way to enjoy food. It is the opposite of the mentality of whatever I want whenever I want to. (...) The mainstream message is that celebrate is to buy. When you've worked really hard or when you want to reward someone, you buy something, when you celebrate father's day, mother's day, birthdays, even when a kid is working well at school, when you celebrate something, you have to buy something. That's the message. And I think that the thing that is related to food, to celebrate brings back to something much more experiential. Like that tasty tomato, that's the satisfying experience. That's something that tastes good and you feel good on your own. You just put it into your mouth and experience that.” (Anne)

To be involved in food movements is not about self-abnegation or sacrificing part of one's life for a cause. On the contrary, food activists insist they live “more intensely”. By joining the BFC or buying at a farmers market, people feel they access a better quality of life, characterized by hedonistic experience with quality food and convivial social relations with fellow activists and in their neighborhood. Intimate experiences of taste, joy and self-fulfillment are central to food activism. It is also adopted as an argument for organizers to convince people to join:

“It is important to explain to people that it is not a sacrifice. On the contrary, they will enjoy better things, like tomatoes that really have a flavor, that their life will actually become better.” (Keka, 34, *Sustainable Flatbush*).

The pleasure of activism

To eat is a sensual experience. Food is a social object profoundly shaped by this sensual experience and culturally associated with the conviviality around meals. Food activism is deeply shaped by these hedonistic and convivial values associated with food. The way food activists connect and relate to each other, the way they build their organizations and networks are strongly influenced by these cultural and social dimensions of food. While pleasure and conviviality accompany most forms of activism, these dimensions seem to be accentuated in food movements. Pleasure is integral to food activism, whether through a festive atmosphere, conviviality or self-fulfillment in community organizing and movement building. The cost of activism and its benefits cannot be distinguished: “the fact of working for public good and the fact of enjoying it. These activities bring their own reward. . . . In fact, the efforts of struggle, which should count among its costs, prove to be an integral part of its benefits” (Hirschman, 1983: 148–9).

“Regardless, Nancy Romer, Rev. Robert Jackson, Jessica Walker Beaumont and other BFC activists want to underscore the fun they're having. 'Organizing gives people who do it a lot of joy,' Romer says. And so do happy and healthy stomachs.”

E. Bader, “Brooklyn Food Coalition Helps Gardens Grow”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2010.

While observation leaves no doubt about the fact that many activists experience and enjoy this convivial and joyful aspect of food activism, the purposeful insistence on this dimension of activism by several of the organizers (even in press article not directly connected to this question), suggests it is also part of a strategy to attract new people. When a dozen BFC and other food movement activists met to talk about the 8-week farmers market close to the Brooklyn Rescue Mission, they first addressed ways

of making local people aware of the importance of the healthy food that the farmers market would bring into their neighborhood. One of the organizers then raised another point: “We need to get the idea out, “Go to the [farmers] market, it is fun!” The rest of the meeting was entirely focused on ways of making the farmers market more fun; from inviting musical bands to decorations and games for kids. While dozens of critics have denounced the superficial pleasures of the consumption society, these activists were less interested in such critiques than in finding ways to associate alternative consumption with different forms of pleasure.

Agency: the myth of omnipotent consumers?

“I feel better about myself. I feel proud to buy food that does not contribute to a worse environment.”. *Athena, 23 years old, African American, Bed-Stuy.*

Food movement activists from different social and cultural backgrounds have mentioned the pleasure they experience in social agency and the relief to be able to do something about important concerns.

“All the day long, you only hear about huge problems. People feel so small and ask themselves what they could do about it.” (Jeff, BFC, an engineer, 54 years-old)

“If you only denounce problems that are as huge as mountains, most of the time, people will be discouraged and won't be willing to do something against it. The task seems insuperable. You can't do anything against a problem at the level of the whole planet. What we need to do is to refocus the debate, the struggle, in order to make it accessible, so that people understand by themselves that they are struggling against something huge but it doesn't mean that struggling at the local level is useless. It is useful for your self-esteem, for be coherent. And not necessarily to shut down a dinosaur. That won't happen so soon!” (an activist at a food coop in Liege, Belgium).

Alternative food consumption constitutes a powerful framing resource to downsize the scope of some global problems and allow ordinary citizens to have an impact on global issues that seems far out of reach. By changing your food consumption habits, you engage with issues as huge as global warming or social justice. While even global institutions may only have a limited impact on the global warming, food movement activists frame it in such a way that everyone can contribute to reduce it. Considering Frances Fox's argument that ordinary people mostly mobilize around local targets, the food movement provides a powerful symbolic media to mobilize participation on local, national and global issues.

Food movement organizers and activists offer a particularly empowering narrative to their neighbors, placing the possibility of becoming actors and confront global challenges “at the end of [their]fork”, to quote A. Lappe books' subtitle.

“That little choice, it makes the difference. Every little hurt helps out. It makes a difference in who you are supporting. Every time you buy, it makes a difference. If you buy 6 local and organic apples, you are putting a little bit more in these partners, you are helping them to be able to supply it.” (Dez, working in the non-profit sector.)

While food movement questions some values of today consumption society, some isomorphism with the free market ideology is striking, notably in the celebration of individual freedom of choice. A figure of the omnipotent consumer appears in their concept of the world and of social change:

“In a sense, we are creating our own world with how we are spending our dollars, with what we are supporting or what we are not supporting.” (Anne).

This figure may enter in tension (rather than in contradiction) with the anti-consumerism narrative. Moreover, previous and ongoing experiments (such as Fair Trade) emphasize the limits of social change potential of the consumer as a central figure.

Conclusion

Workers access to mass consumption constitute the main realization of Fordist modernity (De Munck, 2010). Consumption desires make people work hard, sell, migrate and dream. Rather than adopting constraining attitudes to oppose consumption society and to cope with environmental concerns, BFC activists bet that it is more efficient (and more enjoyable) to refocus this desire on better food and pleasant activism. Rather than focusing the constrains of healthy, sustainable and fair food consumption, members of the Brooklyn Food Coalition assert another positive subjectivity. They propose a subjectivity based on the pleasure of food experience, self-fulfilling activism. They provide a counter-model of celebration²⁷ and narratives that empower the individual consumer while promoting the feeling that, by changing his/her food habits, he/she accesses a better life. They pretend to offer a more authentic experience and the possibility of becoming actor of ones life and of ones world “at the end of their fork”. Their concept of social change is based in the belief that if educated about food issues and enabled to access better food, the consumer would become more reflexive and take full advantage of his freedom of choice to contribute to social change. The historical and contemporaneous success of mass consumption may however question this premise. To provide an alternative vision of the consumer freedom is a considerable task at a time when the power of attraction of the consumer society populate the dreams of more people than ever before, notably in emerging country.

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²⁷

This form of activism is not without its links to those used in the counter-cultural movements of the 1970s. However, it can be differentiated in certain crucial respects. For instance, contemporary food movements are less marked by the will to escape from urban life and the attraction of neo-ruralism, as was the case, for example, on the Larzac plateau in the counter-cultural experiments and “intentional communities” of the 1970s. Today, on the contrary, it is within “global cities” that food movement appear particularly dynamic. In addition to the defense of “post-materialist” values (conviviality, quality of life, etc.), social issues are prominent in these networks, especially the question of access to a quality food in poor neighborhoods.

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