



The practice and politics of food system localization

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Abstract

As an apparent counterpoint to globalization, food system localization is often assumed to be a good, progressive and desirable process. Such thinking rests on a local–global binary that merits closer scrutiny. This paper examines the social construction of “local”, by analyzing the practice and politics of food system localization efforts in Iowa, USA. It argues that desirable social or environmental outcomes may not always map neatly onto the spatial content of “local”, which itself involves the social construction of scale. These contradictions in turn relate to differing political inflections discernible in food system localization. Localization can be approached defensively, emphasizing the boundaries and distinctions between a culturally and socially homogeneous locality needing protection from non-local “others”. But through the experience of new social and gustatory exchanges, localization can also promote increased receptivity to difference and diversity. More emergent, fluid and inclusive notions of the “local”, however, may challenge the very project of crafting and maintaining distinctive food identities for local places. These themes are explored through a case study of food system localization efforts and activities in Iowa, an American state that has been a stronghold of conventional commodity agriculture. Demographic and agricultural histories are drawn on to understand recent food system localization practice that has come to emphasize a definition of “local” that coincides with sub-national state boundaries. The emergence and popularization of the “Iowa-grown banquet meal” and the shifting meaning of “local Iowa food” further illustrate the potential tension between defensiveness and diversity in food system localization.

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1. Introduction

What is the transformative potential of current efforts to promote the production and consumption of foods earmarked by locality or region? Should such changing production and consumption relations be seen as a diffuse, but growing form of opposition to the apparent homogenization and evident harms of industrialization and concentration in the globalized food system? Is food system localization a liberatory project—or instead a reactionary response? The easy answer to all these questions is that food system localization is, of course, good, progressive and desirable. The less comfortable answer nudges us to reconsider the very idea of “local”. If we do, we may realize that “local” often serves as a talisman. But behind that pleasing magic, shapes shift. The term “local” appears to amalgamate these shifting shapes into a stable, coherent concept. When we look more closely, the actual scope and meaning of either “localization” or “local foods” are rarely transparent. Although the process of localization is often seen as neat

antithesis to globalization, this can be an overdrawn and problematic dichotomy. Similarly, as both matter and symbol, and one crucial marker of localization, “local food” can hold multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory meanings.

In this paper, I examine the practice and politics surrounding “local food” through an analysis of food system localization efforts in Iowa, USA. “Local food” has recently emerged as a banner under which people attempt to counteract trends of economic concentration, social disempowerment, and environmental degradation in the food and agricultural landscape, but it may differ from a bio-politics centered more explicitly on either organic or sustainable agriculture and food (Goodman, 2000). I first review academic and activist understandings of localization, which continue to reinforce the local–global binary, even as they call it into question. I show that the spatial relations of “local” may not always map in consistent ways onto specific social or environmental relations. As a recent incomer to Iowa, an eater of Iowa food, a participant in food system localization work, and also an academic, I analyze the sometimes contradictory politics of food system

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localization I have witnessed in a state still largely (although increasingly fitfully) defined by conventional commodity agriculture.

Researchers, particularly in Europe, have suggested that localization via niche and specialty agro-food markets holds particular promise for rural development of peripheral agricultural regions (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999; Kneafsey et al., 2001). Core sites of intensive commodity agriculture, so-called “agricultural hot-spots” (Murdoch, 2000), are presumed to offer little space, capacity or inclination for such development. In the US context, however, Iowa provides a contrasting and very instructive case. An unquestionable “agricultural hotspot”, it is dominated by and highly identified with conventional commodity agriculture centered on the grain–livestock–meat complex (i.e., corn, soybeans and hogs). Iowa prides itself on “feeding the world”. But whatever its past productivist accomplishments, Iowa agriculture now faces crisis, one bound up in the profound structural and technological changes facing the sector—including concentration, vertical integration, biotechnology and pressures to rectify alleged environmental transgressions.

Since the mid-1990s, this “agricultural hotspot” has become a crucible for innovation and vigorous practice in food system localization. Indeed, the legacy of conventional commodity agriculture has helped to shape how “local food” in Iowa is defined, produced and consumed. Tracing the initiation and development of interrelated food system localization initiatives in Iowa, and focusing on one distinctive recent practice—the Iowa-grown banquet meal—I show how the politics of food system localization can assume a complex flavor. On one hand, food system localization may involve defensive, perhaps subtly exclusionary protection of a region constructed as discrete, homogeneous, static and beleaguered. But on the other hand, the very experience of localization can foster social and gustatory exchanges that demand new receptivity to difference and diversity.

2. Framing the (re)localization of food systems

Through the 1990s, globalization provided a leitmotif for agro-food studies (see Buttel (2001) for a recent overview). However, due to their deterministic flavor, accounts focused on the rise and uniform reach of an industrial, capitalist, concentrated, and globally integrated agro-food system have recently lost much of their luster. They now share the stage with countervailing accounts exploring the emergence and revitalization of local difference in agro-food systems. As Ward and Almås (1997, p. 612) note, “Heterogeneity at the local level remains an obvious feature of the agro-food systems of capitalist economies by virtue of the continuing importance of local and national cultures

and histories”. Heterogeneity at the local level may also emerge as the result of formal projects deliberately fostering new forms of rural development (Ploeg et al., 2000). In Europe, a cultural economy approach to rural development now highlights the instrumental and normative deployment of heterogeneous cultural markers, such as regional foods (Bessi ere, 1998; Kneafsey et al., 2001; Ray, 1998). It involves both recovery of regional distinction and the “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).¹ In the US, a social movement approach underscores the diverse forms of mobilization contributing to common efforts to re-localize the food and agricultural system (Henderson, 2000). Here, the heterogeneity of sustainable food and agricultural movements corresponds to the objective of a more diversified food and agricultural system. Thus, local-level heterogeneity takes on an analytical and practical importance, alerting us to the catalytic role of agency anchored in local places and regions.

Increasingly, localization has become a catchword, often invoked as a counterpoint to globalization.² While academics see the agency in local places and resulting contingencies of change as unsettling the seeming structural predictability of globalization (Long, 1996), activists trumpet localization as “something done by people, not something done to them (Hines, 2000, p. 31). Practically, globalization is understood as “the ever-increasing integration of national economies into the global economy through trade and investment rules and privatization, aided by technological advances”, while localization is “a process which *reverses* the trend of globalization by *discriminating* in favour of the local” (Hines, 2000, p. 4) (my emphasis). Programmatic recommendations include strategies for localization in housing, economic development and commerce, resource use and agriculture, which together provide the “solution” to the “problem” of globalization (Hines, 2000; LaTrobe and Acott, 2000; Pacione, 1997; Pretty, 1998; Shuman, 1998). Thus, localization provides the antidote to globalization. However, this formulation betrays a potentially problematic mode of binary thinking.

Academics across disciplines offer perspectives that call into question the neat opposition of either “local” and “global”, or “localization” and “globalization”, pointing to the need for “more nuanced and interactionist approaches dealing with the *relations* between

¹Such an approach to development has been pursued more idiosyncratically in the U.S. See Hinrichs (1996) regarding political and cultural tensions surrounding the place-based marketing of the state of Vermont.

²Viewed historically, present-day “localization” can be seen as “re-localization”—a return to the greater regional food self-reliance of the past. I hope to make clear that the political content of localization turns, in part, on whether its gaze is directed more towards the past *or* towards the future.

global restructuring *and* local change” (Ward and Almås, 1997, p. 619). First, a systems-oriented approach to the study of food and agriculture, drawing inspiration from ecology, stresses the inter-relatedness of the entire domain and therefore resists the discrete bracketing of “global” and “local” (Dahlberg, 1993). Functional components or fields within an overall system may be different, in this view, but they connect and feedback in terms of structure and process, mutually conditioning one another. Therefore, what is “global” and what is “local”, as well as the processes of globalizing and localizing, are fundamentally related within an overall system. Second, cultural studies approaches underscore the simultaneity and interpenetration of global and local processes. Robertson (1994), for example, rejects an analytical emphasis on globalization, referring instead to “glocalization” to convey the dynamism and mutuality of global–local relationships. Watson’s (1997) volume exploring the organization and experience of the fast-food chain McDonald’s in various Asian countries similarly complicates the boundaries between “global” and “local” influence. Finally, actor network approaches dispense with the global–local distinction and implicit emphases on size or scale, stressing instead that actor-networks are simply the “product of network lengthening” (Whatmore and Thorne 1997, p. 291). Here, flows and performance replace surfaces or fixed categories. Taken together, it appears that academics have moved beyond static, binary assumptions about the constitution of “local” and “global”. Or have they???

3. Complicating the spatial: divergent facets of “local” in agriculture and food

“Globalization” and “localization” still tend to serve as conceptual shorthand for movement towards two opposed poles. Selected attributes generally pegged to “global” and “local” are summarized in Fig. 1.

The overarching assumption is that these various attributes map neatly and consistently onto “global” and “local”. But as with other binary oppositions peppering intellectual and public discourse (e.g., nature vs. culture; primitive vs. modern; real vs. ideal; art vs. science to name only a few), the sharp dichotomy proves misleading. Spatial relations are assumed to correspond to desirable forms of social and environmental relations, forcing considerable complexity under a simple spatial referent (Hinrichs et al., 1998). Making “local” a proxy for the “good” and “global” a proxy for the “bad” may overstate the value in proximity, which remains unspecified, and obscure more equivocal social and environmental outcomes.

Recognizing the conceptual compression in “local” certainly does not mean that proximity or distance is

unimportant in characterizing agro-food systems (Kloppenborg et al., 1996; Kneen, 1993; LaTrobe and Acott, 2000). Indeed, accounting for “food miles” reinforces the environmental logic of “local”. The energy use and impact of greenhouse gas emissions through transportation in the conventional food production and distribution system bolster the case for more “local” food (Pirog et al., 2001). However, fully evaluating the effects of distance and proximity in the food and agricultural system requires complex lifecycle assessment procedures (Heller and Keoleian, 2000), which are ultimately snapshots based on (presumably) the best scientific information currently available. The growing call for a “post-normal science” suggests that a fixed, universal understanding of complex, but uncertain environmental systems is inherently unattainable (Prugh et al., 2000), although working from emergent knowledge, adaptive management is possible. Technical and scientific appraisals thus require normative input and political deliberation to specify when and why particular physical distances are no longer acceptably “local” or “regional”. Is this distance uniform, regardless of food type, or different for basic (necessary) vs. more luxury (supplemental) foodstuffs? Under what circumstances should the spatial “local” be expanded to fulfill special nutritional or cultural needs of particular populations?

But if energy impacts can and should be reduced through more localized circuits in agriculture and food, the blanket assumption of broad environmental benefit through food system localization may still be problematic. Murdoch et al. (2000, p. 115) note that “quality has come to be seen as intrinsically linked to the supposed ‘localness’ of production”. Developing a theory of how food supply chains are embedded in natural relations, these authors nonetheless leave open the possibility that the link between local embeddedness and more “natural” or environmentally benign outcomes may be, in at least some cases, as much perception as reality. Small-scale, “local” farmers are not inherently better environmental stewards, although having fewer acres or stock to care for may make this more likely. Some small farmers do intensify their own management rather than increasing scale, capital investment or the use of deskilled labor. Their intensive management may include “best environmental practices”, based on current recommendations, their own on-farm experience or both. But other small-scale, “local” farmers, hampered by age, disability or growing economic marginality, may lack the awareness or means to follow more sustainable production practices. Pursuing local direct market opportunities would seem to encourage attention to environmental management practices by farmers who anticipate surveillance by concerned customers. Such farmers might then manage nutrient flows, soils, and pests in more environmentally

GLOBAL	LOCAL
Market economy	Moral economy
An economics of price	An economic sociology of quality
TNCs dominating	Independent artisan producers prevailing
Corporate profits	Community well-being
Intensification	Extensification
Large-scale production	Small-scale production
Industrial models	“Natural” models
Monoculture	Bio-diversity
Resource consumption and degradation	Resource protection and regeneration
Relations across distance	Relations of proximity
Commodities across space	Communities in place
Big structures	Voluntary actors
Technocratic rules	Democratic participation
Homogenization of foods	Regional palates

Fig. 1. Attributes associated with “Global” and “Local”. Sources: Hinrichs et al., 1998; Lang, 1999.

sound ways, but it is the social relation, rather than the spatial location, per se, that accounts for this outcome.

The pitfall in viewing simple spatial relations as the essence of “local” becomes further evident when considering the variable “localness” of “short food supply chains” (Marsden et al., 2000). Although united by the importance of locality or region in identifying the product, face-to-face, spatially proximate or spatially extended chains each structure different producer–consumer relations. Although not as long or complex as a conventional commodity chain, a “short food supply chain” marketing specialty jams from the Scottish Highlands via the Internet or telephone to customers worldwide offers a mixed demonstration of “local”. While producer–consumer links here are still relatively unmediated, they proceed across great distances and depend on large-scale communication and technology infrastructures. As Fairfax (2001, p. 624) notes regarding the Tomales Bay (California) Food Company, local specialty agro-food production can play an important role in local place-based conservation efforts, precisely because it *is* nested in wider regional, national and international networks, since “even in so rarefied a locality as Marin County, California, there is not enough of an artisanal cheese market to support the cheese or the farmers”. The same premise underlies current formal administrative approaches to geographical indications labeling in Europe, where the appeal of local and regional “terroir” specialty products *beyond* strictly local markets potentially serves local rural development (Barham, 2001).

Beyond these overlooked distances in “local”, more localized food systems are often assumed, by virtue of their social embeddedness, to be characterized by positive, respectful and non-instrumental social relations (Hinrichs, 2000). Atomized market relations are

seen as a defining, but negative feature of “global”, while the “local” will manifest high levels of social capital and relations of care—in short, a more moral or associative economy. The social embeddedness of “local” ensues from the possibility of face-to-face interactions and mutual knowledge, creating a “geography of regard” (Sage, 2001). On a practical level, then, consumers purchase local food, in part, to support “their” local farmers (Solan, 2002; Winter, 2001). However, while these quite positive aspects of social embeddedness can and do flow from local contexts, local social interactions are not absent of intolerance and unequal power relations. Local communities and organizations may have checkered histories, replete with provincial bias and social exclusion (Swanson, 2001), evidence of the “dark side of social capital” (Schulman and Anderson, 1999). Thus, while affect, trust and regard can flourish under conditions of spatial proximity, this is not automatically or necessarily the case.

4. Tendencies in the politics of localization

Local, then, is much more (or perhaps much less) than it seems. Specific social or environmental relations do not always map predictably and consistently onto the spatial relation. Indeed, fractures between the spatial, the environmental and the social feed into the sometimes contradictory politics of food system localization. The differing political inflections in food systems localization begin with the spatial referent for “local”, but vary in their assumptions about the boundaries between the “local” and “non-local”. Two broad tendencies—defensive localization and more diversity-receptive localization—merit elaboration.

A politics of defensive localization emphasizes the construction, relational positioning and protection of “local”. Resistance to external forces sometimes coalesces around assumptions about the homogeneity and common interests of local places and regions that need defending. The promotion of local community serves “an understandable dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort” (Young, 1990, p. 300). The privileging of local face-to-face relations here provides a bulwark against the tides of undesired or feared changes in the wider society. However, as Allen (1999, p. 122) cautions concerning the current enthusiasm for “local empowerment” in a context of devolution, “localism can be based on a category of ‘otherness’ that reduces the lens of who we care about”. In the food systems arena, defensive localization imposes rigid boundaries around the spatial “local” and minimizes internal difference in the name of some “local good”. In a more reactionary vein, defensive localization even suggests a separatist politics, where the challenges of local sustainability in a globalizing context can only be addressed by secession. Defensive localization seeks to reduce the undue flow of resources away from the spatial local and also to protect local members from the depredations and demands of “outsiders”. In this sense, defensive food system localization tends to stress the homogeneity and coherence of “local”, in patriotic opposition to heterogeneous and destabilizing outside forces, perhaps a global “other”. Predicated on such pat assumptions about the community or the heritage being preserved and promoted, localization becomes elitist and reactionary, appealing to narrow nativist sentiments.

Where defensive food system localization tends to reify the “local”, obscuring its more complex cultural, social, and environmental content, diversity-receptive food system localization demonstrates greater awareness and incorporation of these multiple meanings and struggles. It parallels the “politics of difference” advocated by Young (1990, p. 319), but without assuming that cities alone are the sites of “social inexhaustibility”. Boundaries between the local and non-local are now borders, rather than barricades. As borderlands, such boundaries constitute the rich edges between contiguous places permitted and expected to be different. In this way, diversity-receptive localization recognizes variation and difference both within and outside of the spatial local. However, this poses a conundrum, because the very distinction of “local” emerges from specifying essential features of places or regions. Therefore, acknowledging or encouraging internal diversity can seem fundamentally at odds with food system localization, to the extent that the latter proceeds through highlighting distinguishing, consistent and predictable attributes of place.

However, receptivity to internal diversity and change may flow from recognition of external diversity, as captured in McMichael’s (1996, p. 224) claim that “the assertion of diverse localism [is] a universal right”. Recognizing “the need to respect alternative cultural traditions [of other localities] as a matter of survival” (McMichael 1996, p. 224) should prompt greater reflexivity about inclusions and exclusions closer to home. Turning from the potential isolation of defensive localization, diversity-receptive localization sees the local embedded within a larger national or world community, recognizing that the content and interests of “local” are relational and open to change. Diversity-receptive localization echoes Wolfgang Sachs’ (1999, p. 107) notion of “cosmopolitan localism”, which seeks:

to amplify the richness of a place while keeping in mind the rights of a multi-faceted world. It cherishes a particular place, yet at the same time knows about the relativity of all places. It results from a broken globalism, as well as a broken localism.

As tendencies, rather than discrete types, defensive and diversity-receptive localization do not constitute a static binary. Both may be discernible to different degrees in efforts over time to localize food systems in specific settings. From this effort to uncover the divergent facets of the spatial local, and suggest connections to defensive and diversity-receptive tendencies in localization, we turn now to the agricultural and social background of Iowa.

5. The historical context of agriculture and food in Iowa

Situated between the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers, Iowa is seen by many Americans, and indeed proudly casts itself as the quintessential agricultural state in the US. Early white settlers to this region of tallgrass prairie were beguiled by the richness of its soils, the suitability of its climate, and hence the seemingly limitless potential for farming. They rapidly plowed up the prairies and drained the abundant wetlands. Historian Dorothy Schweider notes how natural characteristics of the region contributed to the eventual primacy of agriculture:

When compared to midwestern states to the east such as Ohio, Indiana or Illinois, or states to the west such as the Dakotas, Iowa has less diversity in its terrain and climatic features. The state, therefore, has greater uniformity in land appearance and resources than other mid-western states, thus allowing agriculture to be a dominant industry everywhere (Schweider, 1996, p. x).

Today despite the appearance of open space in vast fields of corn and beans, Iowa is arguably one of the

most developed states in the American union, with a history of radical land transformation in service to agricultural production.

This intensification of land use was facilitated by “scientific” improvements and mechanization, which solidified the family sized diversified farm (Ross, 1946). A strong agrarian social formation and culture developed with the settlement of small towns and rural plots in Iowa, by northern European and British immigrants. Yet by the 1920s, rural Iowa (then most of Iowa) manifested growing “agrarian ambiguity”—both eager *receptivity* to technological advances such as rural mail delivery, cars and radios, which lessened the rigors and isolation of farm life, and also *anxiety* about how such changes might erode a distinctive agrarian identity centered on the independence, self-sufficiency and presumed moral superiority of the Iowa farmer (Schwieder, 1996, p. 152).

Such cultural responses to change deepened alongside agronomic, technological and structural transformations in Iowa agriculture. From the early days of settlement, although diversified, Iowa agriculture was oriented towards non-local, then largely national markets. The state encouraged farmers to raise corn, rather than wheat, and it was quickly recognized that the most profitable use of corn was in feeding livestock, especially hogs (Schwieder, 1996). Beginning in the late 19th century, the land grant university began reinforcing the orientation to commodity agriculture. Iowa soon became the national leader in the production of both corn and hogs. By the middle of the 20th century, more labor-intensive horticultural crops were widely supplanted by readily mechanized corn and soybean production (Pirog, 2000; Pirog and Tyndall, 1999). Aside from the narrowing range of commodities produced, the second half of the 20th century saw dramatic changes in the structure of Iowa agriculture. The number of farms and farmers has declined precipitously, as agricultural production has increased. The industrialization of farming consolidated Iowa’s central position in the export-oriented grain–livestock–meat complex. It promoted the widespread ideology (within Iowa, at least) of “feeding the world”, even as an increasing range of foodstuffs for Iowans themselves was imported from elsewhere.

The structural transformation of Iowa agriculture has contributed to current demographic and social challenges facing the state. State population has increased only modestly, with major disjunctures between emptying rural areas and growing urban centers, and between concentration of the elderly and a dispersal of youth (The Economist, 2001). As a result, patterns of emigration and immigration have led to charged public debate. Beyond concerns about keeping young people from moving away and luring back those who have left emerges the larger question of bringing new immi-

grants—and *which* new immigrants—to Iowa. Since the 1980s, key industries such as meat-packing have relied more on “imported” labor—of Latinos, Sudanese, Bosnians and others (Fink, 1998). De-skilling of meat-packing work has restructured competition in these labor markets. However, even “skilled” jobs in the Iowa economy are competing for workers, reinforcing the state’s recent interest in immigration. Such efforts to incorporate different, often “non-native” populations into Iowa economy and society have not been universally welcomed, even though understood by many to be necessary. The regular resurfacing of “English-only” legislative proposals and local resistance to state government pilot projects promoting immigration to Iowa make clear that incorporation of diversity into future state identity is contested (The Economist, 2001).³

Such issues of agricultural restructuring and demographic change are common to other rural regions, but have permutations in Iowa that influence food system localization efforts. If geographically, Iowa is the “middle land” (Schwieder, 1996), to a bi-coastal America, Iowa often registers culturally as mere “flyover country”. Within the state, then, an updated “agrarian ambiguity” crystallizes from the continuing dominance of conventional agriculture, the growing evidence of its downside, and erosion of pride in what were once seen as signal achievements. This context underlies growing conflict in Iowa over the impacts of its industrializing hog industry on the economy and the environment (Page, 1997; Thu and Durrenberger, 1998). It has also engendered distinctively Iowan agriculture and food movements. Significantly, Iowa’s most influential sustainable agriculture group, the Practical Farmers of Iowa, formed in the mid-1980s, explicitly organizes itself not around “organic”, or even “sustainable”, but around a “practical” agriculture for Iowa. This legacy of conventional commodity agriculture, and a measured, “practical” response to change has shaped the course of food system localization—the actors, their strategies, and results.

6. Food system localization in Iowa

In Iowa, the flowering of food system initiatives cast as alternatives to more conventional relations of food production and consumption is relatively recent. The number and variety have both increased rapidly since the mid-1990s. Such efforts have tended to emphasize the valorization of “local Iowa food”, more than explicit ecological and health quality markers, such as

³ Dykstra’s (1993) account of Black experience during and after the Civil War era suggests some historical precedent for racial-ethnic intolerance in Iowa.

“organic”.⁴ In this section, I examine the initiation and development of interrelated food system initiatives in Iowa to shed light on the politics of food system localization. From an initial emphasis on local direct marketing venues, such as farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture (CSA), food system organizers and activists in Iowa have expanded to focus also on institutional procurement of Iowa-sourced foods. While the former are predicated on face-to-face interactions between producers and consumers, the latter does not require this, and instead emphasizes the value in known place origins of the food product (Marsden et al., 2000).

As elsewhere, food system localization in Iowa began with direct marketing (LaTrobe and Acott, 2000). The hallmark and appeal of direct marketing is face-to-face contact between producer and consumer, in marked contrast to the experience of purchasing conventionally retailed food (Hinrichs, 2000). In Iowa, the first direct markets were producer, rather than consumer-oriented. Responding to the economic problems of commodity agriculture, which became painfully evident during the 1980s farm crisis, the state department of agriculture began to promote alternative farm markets. County extension offices and chambers of commerce started direct farmers’ markets to ameliorate at least some of the economic hardship experienced by Iowa farm households. From 50 to 60 markets in the early 1980s, farmers’ markets increased to some 120 by the mid-1990s, in a state with just under 3 million in population. Farmers’ markets in urban centers, tourist destinations and university towns have grown and thrived. However, many other markets, especially in Iowa’s numerous small, depopulating rural communities, offer more limited opportunities for local producers transitioning from conventional commodity agriculture, who need substantial alternative markets. Although farmers’ markets remain a focus of food system activists, especially those working on community food security, there is a growing disquiet about their limited ability to channel farm production flows and ensure the livelihoods of very many Iowa farmers.

Similarly, CSA offers a conceptually appealing, but sometimes limited direct market alternative. CSA is premised on a direct, ongoing partnership between the producer and local consumers in the immediate area. Consumer participants support the producer by paying for their shares of the yearly production in advance of the season, while the producer then commits to providing participants a weekly basket of high quality,

local farm foods (Pretty, 1998). Given its community overlay, CSA is often represented as a particularly transformative direct marketing institution (Hinrichs, 2000; Kloppenburg et al., 1996). There were no CSAs in Iowa in the early 1990s. Individuals inspired by such efforts in other states deliberately imported the concept and adapted it successfully to Iowa circumstances (Gradwell et al., 1999). By 1996, there were nine CSAs in Iowa; by 2000, this number had grown to about 50. Many of these are small, rural CSAs, sometimes collaborations between more than one farm (Wells and Gradwell, 2001). Some Iowa CSAs are economically precarious, or subsidized significantly by a conventional commodity enterprise or off-farm income and resources. Some struggle with social equity issues surrounding the comparatively elite constitution of CSA membership (Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002). Thus, while food system activists in Iowa continue to nurture CSAs as important alternative food institutions, many recognize that this form of food system localization emphasizing face-to-face relations between producers and consumers provides a viable market venue for a relatively small subset of either Iowa producers or consumers.

Arising from this sense that small, decentralized, face-to-face direct market initiatives alone cannot sustain very many Iowa producers, food system organizers and activists in Iowa have increasingly focused on changing the patterns of institutional food procurement, which typically rely on standardized streams of nationally sourced foods. A publicly funded demonstration project in 1997–1998 determined that it was possible for a university dining service, a hospital and a restaurant in northeast Iowa to purchase a significant proportion of their food needs locally. Subsequently, groups such as the Practical Farmers of Iowa have actively worked to develop other institutional markets, “under the assumption that the hotel, restaurant and institutional market in Iowa appears to hold great potential for small to medium scale Iowa farmers practicing sustainable agriculture” (Scanlan, 2000, p. 3). As with direct market initiatives, the intention is to increase the circulation and profile of “local foods”. However, the definition of “local foods” has subtly shifted from food raised in “this county or one nearby” to food raised “in Iowa”. The discourse on institutional food procurement mentions the nutritional and health benefits for Iowans eating “local foods”, but the driving theme is the creation of alternative markets for Iowa producers.

7. The practice and politics of the Iowa-grown banquet meal

To explore further the politics of food system localization, I discuss in detail a specific recent phenomenon—the Iowa-grown banquet meal. Consonant

⁴Organic production in Iowa, though small, has increased dramatically from 13,000 acres in 1995 to 150,000 in 1999 (Delate, n.d.). Most of the acres certified in the state are in grain crops (including soybeans for the Japanese and more recently the domestic soyfoods market).

with the strategic turn to institutional procurement, these dining events have developed a momentum that far exceeds their initial aim of generating a few more markets for struggling producers. As both promotional event and celebratory enactment of “local” Iowa foods, the Iowa-grown banquet meal illustrates the potential tension between defensiveness and diversity in food system localization.

The first self-consciously styled, full course Iowa-grown banquet meal took place in July, 1997, at the 10th anniversary celebration of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, a research and education organization based at the state land grant university and funded through a state tax on agrochemical sales. For this gathering, the Center’s director of education set some ambitious menu goals—to source two lunches and one dinner for 400 exclusively with Iowa food products. Never having been confronted with such a request, the university’s conference center initially balked about any departure from its familiar conventional supply streams. They only agreed to the scheme, with the proviso that the Center help them to identify local food producers and suppliers. This was done, drawing on several Iowa farmers known through the state’s sustainable agriculture networks.

That first Iowa-grown banquet meal proved successful beyond all expectations, launching a new ritual that showcased and redefined “local” Iowa food. It set a precedent demonstrating that Iowa food *could* be sourced for a large dining event.⁵ Both chefs and attendees *liked* the pork and the fresh, early summer vegetables. The first few Iowa-grown banquet meals thereby sowed sturdy seeds of “food patriotism” (Bell and Valentine, 1997), as suggested in a commentary a half year later by Iowa lawyer and food policy analyst Neil Hamilton:

These efforts [requesting Iowa-grown meals] will do more to create opportunities for Iowa farmers and add more “value” to our food system than any TV commercial. This is something each of us can do. The next time you dine out, ask if anything on the menu was raised in Iowa. If the answer is “no” or “I don’t know, why do you care?” tell them you want to support local farmers and processors (Hamilton, 1998, p. 7A)

Eating Iowa food is cast here as a patriotic act, not dissimilar to “buying American” when most consumer goods are made overseas. Yet it also suggests a defensive politics of localization, one invoking regional boundaries against the market power of more globalized agro-food streams. The appeal to support “Iowa producers”

constructs a regional identity and interest around food. At the same time, however, it potentially erases the fragmentation and disjunctures that are also evident in contemporary Iowa. The accent on “Iowa producers” evades direct discussion of the painful restructuring of Iowa agriculture and the differences it has created among farmers and, as important, between farmers and non-farmers. Although organizers of Iowa-grown meals try to source their product from farmers in “alternative” networks, referring to “Iowa farmers” avoids divisiveness and glosses the variation in how Iowa farmers actually ecologize their farming—whether they are “organic”, “sustainable”, agro-chemical or something else.

Since 1997, the Iowa-grown banquet meal has spread far beyond the stronghold of the university conference center and sustainable agriculture advocates. By 2000, the Practical Farmers of Iowa, which established a grant-supported brokering office, helped coordinate 54 Iowa-grown meals at 47 different events drawing on a loose network of 23 Iowa farmers. About half of these meals took place at the university’s conference center, but the rest occurred at restaurants and hotels elsewhere in the central region of the state. With little formal promotion, the idea has taken hold and many other groups have also elected to serve Iowa-grown meals at their events. These include the Institute for Public Leadership, the National Governors Association, the Iowa Environmental Council, the Iowa Institute for Cooperatives, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, the National Motorcoach Association and the ill-fated 2000 US presidential campaign of Elizabeth Dole, among others. These venues convey the wide dissemination and popular appeal of the Iowa-grown theme as dining experience and social statement within Iowa.

More recently, Iowa-grown meals have taken a different turn, beyond the straight conference circuit. The Practical Farmers of Iowa, for example, organized a fundraising dinner (“Harvesting the Best from Iowa’s Farms and Chefs”) for their own organization, which they held at an elegant, historic hotel in Perry, Iowa in October, 2001. The actual billing of chefs alongside producers represents a subtle shift in the emphasis of the Iowa-grown banquet meal. The cachet of “Iowa local food”, thus, begins to depend on food work beyond farming.

Despite the development of a rudimentary infrastructure, sourcing local Iowa food for special events and banquet meals remains cumbersome work. So far the banquet meal market is episodic and supplemental for any individual Iowa producer. And an Iowa-grown dining event represents only a minor material alteration in any given consumer’s diet. However, there is a potentially wider ideological and symbolic impact of

⁵The university conference center went on to develop an all-Iowa foods option for its conference clients, with the assistance of local NGOs.

these “local food” meals. The decision to eat Iowa-grown foods and recognize the link to specific producers represents a self-conscious departure from the anonymity and taken-for-grantedness of mainstream, large-scale food provisioning (Hamilton, 2000). Iowa conference goers’ material subsistence may not turn on whether the banquet serves an industrial Tyson chicken breast or the hoop house pork of Vic Madsen in Audubon County, Iowa. But the matter of cultural subsistence has begun to resonate for more Iowa eaters. As Sidney Mintz (1996) reminds us in *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, aside from the physical nourishment provided, eating certain foods prepared and served in particular ways consolidates cultural identity and social power.

What may be increasingly important about the Iowa-grown banquet meal is how the common table begins to melt producer–consumer distinctions. Conventional food retailing creates the sharpest division between producer and consumer, whose interests are not directly or mutually known. Producer and consumer are here strictly compartmentalized and formally insulated. Direct marketing initiatives, such as farmers’ markets and CSAs, foster greater mutuality, by bringing producers and consumers together through face-to-face contact. However, Iowa-grown banquet meals, though based on a bigger definition of “local”, often go further than this. Producers may be present at such meals (in the case of the PFI fundraiser noted above, according to the invitation, “some of Iowa’s most talented farmers will provide your entertainment”). At the least, producers’ names appear on “table tents” alongside a specific description of what they contributed to the menu. They are introduced and applauded. They may offer stories about how they raised the pigs or the green beans. The chefs who prepared their products may also stand and speak and eat. In creating space for relations that are literally commensal—a shared place at the table—the distinction between who grows and who eats is momentarily erased (Kloppenborg et al., 1996). Under these circumstances, a politics of food system localization that transcends the producer–consumer divide may come into view.

The rise and appeal of the Iowa-grown banquet meal are directly related to people’s sense of disjuncture living in a major agricultural state that imports most of the food it consumes. The current crisis in commodity-based agriculture has made this all the more acute. Indeed, in response to current Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack’s repeated calls to make Iowa the “Food Capital of the World”, food system localization advocates retort that making Iowa the food capital of Iowa should come first (Hamilton, 2001). As both matter and meaning, Iowa-grown banquet meals re-link food to place and symbolize recovery of some small measure of self-reliance. To the extent, that every participant at a conference or meeting serving an Iowa-grown meal now

thinks about the provenance of their grocery or restaurant purchases, such meals engender a wider impact. The effortless expansion of the Iowa-grown banquet meal stems partly from people sharing the experience they have had, possibly sowing the seed for more such meals in a widening circle of organizations and groups.

In this sense, the Iowa-grown banquet meal represents a comparatively gentle and arguably genteel form of opposition to an agricultural and food system that is seen by many people in Iowa as working against the true interests of both farmers and consumers. But its politics need to be probed. The banquet meal itself tends to be a perk of the upper-middle, educated classes—the movers and shakers in local politics and the regional economy. Generally, those requesting and eating such banquet meals are neither poor nor particularly marginalized. The safe public display of the Iowa-grown banquet meal valorizes region in the form of the sub-national state, while glossing more exacting social and environmental criteria and begging the questions of scale. In this sense, the Iowa-grown banquet meal’s effort to promote and celebrate Iowa food—both of which have been very successful—involves some measure of reaction, a defensiveness bent on restoring some imagined harmonious past. Local food advocates in Iowa note the historical diversity and self-reliance of Iowa agriculture. Recent case studies on the Iowa apple and grape industries forcefully point out the importance and vitality of such industries prior to World War II (Pirog, 2000; Pirog and Tyndall, 1999). Reclaiming a lost agricultural heritage often undergirds food system localization. Yet it is not many steps from healthy nostalgia to a more problematic nativism, where the interests and priorities of long established residents hold sway. As one defense against problems posed by the conventional, globalized food system, the Iowa-grown banquet meal began with a vision for the future that has strong roots in beliefs about a less complicated, self-reliant past.

8. The matter and meaning of local Iowa food

This discussion of the politics of food system localization through the Iowa-grown banquet meal still begs several important questions. What exactly *is* authentic local Iowa food? Who decides? How does the matter and meaning of Iowa-grown food influence the politics of food system localization? In the gastronomic landscape of fast foods and homogenized diets, “local food” is sometimes reduced to mere quirky exotica, to be sampled when traveling or ordered by mail (Engel and Engel, 2000).⁶ Yet food system

⁶The “wacky specialty” version of “local food” is epitomized by the pie shake: discussed at length in a *New York Times* Sunday travel

localization implies something more than capricious novelty. To localize food is to produce so that a distinctive, but coherent local cuisine can be eaten and savored. Regional specialty foods now generate renewed enthusiasm through gourmet magazines and television programs and the Slow Food movement salutes the sensuous pleasures of regional culinary diversity (Kummer, 1999). These social trends and social movements suggest that local food distinguishes itself through tradition and history, by achieving some measure of cultural and agricultural distinction. How does this proceed in the case of Iowa? The contradictions and tensions surrounding food provenance and its role in regional identity are evident in the Iowa-grown banquet meal.

When initiated, Iowa-grown banquet meals typically offered a hearty, but somewhat more healthful recreation of the classic Midwest farmhouse meal (Canter et al., n.d.). Walking down the buffet line, you might choose from pork cutlets, sliced roast of beef, scalloped potatoes, glazed carrots, homemade rolls (both white and wheat), salad (in season), perhaps pie, with milk, iced tea or coffee to drink. Such meals draw their inspiration from the Machine Shed, a very popular Iowa farm-style restaurant, and plainly invoke the northern European (German and Scandinavian) heritage of those who settled the prairies and began farming in the region. They may be historically representative meals. But do the dishes of such a meal—in either matter or meaning—correspond to present-day realities and relations? At least three variations on this meal have become evident, expanding the material practice and potential meanings of “local Iowa food”. These variations suggest a more diverse localization of food systems, where the boundary as to what is “local” and what is not is becoming more elastic.

First, Iowa-grown banquet meals have begun to reflect what might be considered general national concerns about the nutritional and health implications of food. Dessert might include tofu brownies. A vegetarian entrée might be offered in lieu of the ubiquitous beef or pork. The quantity and selection of vegetables and fruits often surpass current consumption patterns by “average” Iowans (although not necessarily current federal dietary recommendations). In this sense, there is a subtle departure from the meat and starch-centered fare constituting “traditional” Iowa food (as well as the present diets of many Iowans). Second, although at some remove from the experimental sophistication of coastal American cuisine, Iowa-grown banquet meals increasingly show the tell-tale signs of a *Chez Panisse* (California) or *Nora’s* (Washington, DC)

sensibility. Unusual, locally grown foods might be combined; larded gravy is much less in evidence; freshness is paramount. Foreign travel and exposure to food writers have brought the products and performance of other “good food” networks into view (Sage, 2001). But does the gradual emergence of a parallel form of chef-driven culinary innovation make Iowa food *more* or *less* distinctively Iowan? Finally, Iowa-grown banquet meals have begun to incorporate explicitly non-northern European dishes and flavors, as where Iowa free-range chicken might appear in enchiladas or okra forms the base of a (somewhat spicy) vegetable stew. Does this represent a dilution of the state’s historical cuisine, further erosion of any lingering stable regional food identity? Perhaps, but it also signifies a promising opening, where “local” foodstuffs are combined in new ways reflecting the changing diversity of producers and consumers now living in the region. Indeed, these very cross-fertilizations and culinary hybridities would seem to support a more forward-looking localization politics that makes history the springboard to a more diverse future.

9. Local: the social construction of scale

The practice and politics of food system localization in Iowa have been distinguished by a growing discursive focus on Iowa as the context for “local”. A recent appraisal in the state’s most prominent newspaper makes this clear:

Perhaps the most exciting trend in Iowa’s food system is the growing local food movement. Five years ago, you would have been hard-pressed to find “Iowa-grown” food on a menu or in a store. But that is changing. The proliferation of farmers’ markets, the producers diversifying what they raise and how they sell it are indicators of the change. Menus featuring Iowa-grown food and institutions promoting “all-Iowa” meals are important signs of this trend. We are slowly, but steadily changing the food culture of Iowa. (Hamilton, 2001, p. 9A)

It is not accidental that “local” has been equated with the territorial boundaries of the state of Iowa, even though those boundaries happen to mark the sizable expanse of some 56,000 square miles.⁷ In other contexts, “local” refers to small places or towns, formal county jurisdictions or specific cultural or political regions within sub-national or national states. Therefore, the assumption here that a sub-national state itself can be “local” merits further attention.

(footnote continued)

section feature on Iowa (Lee, 2000), and elsewhere debunked as apocryphal (Simon, 2001).

⁷For an approximate (and non-metric) comparison, England is roughly 50,320 square miles in area.

The framing of Iowa as “local” has its roots both in the general history of American agrarian development and the particularities of the Iowa experience. The state-based land grant university system in the US provided a research–teaching–extension apparatus where states defined and pursued their own agricultural and rural development, within a generalized national model. This was complemented by the institutional importance of state-level departments of agriculture, charged with inspection, regulation and promotion of state agricultures, and much of the on-the-ground implementation of United States Department of Agriculture mandates. Many traditional farm and commodity organizations are also organized on a state basis. In short, American agrarian development has long had a strong sub-national state emphasis, which predates globalizing trends in agriculture, even as it contributes to them, and not surprisingly also shapes localization practice and politics.

In Iowa, however, a definition of “local” as Iowa itself has been particularly salient. Much of the first institutional support and funding in Iowa for local food system development came from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, an organization whose mission specifically centers on promoting interest in and use of sustainable farming practices *in Iowa*. And because some rural parts of Iowa are now so sparsely populated, designations of “local” markets more spatially delimited than all of Iowa are not always viable, as evident in the uncertainties facing some farmers’ markets and CSAs. But beyond this, the present rise of “food patriotism” (Bell and Valentine, 1997) where Iowa stands for “local” stems from a particular discursive turn, highlighting the grounds for producer and consumer frustration about the structure and outcomes of conventional agricultural and food markets in Iowa. Iowa’s increasingly debated “achievement” in developing a modern, industrialized, largely export-oriented agriculture, centered on undifferentiated commodities, has been linked to the state’s current high levels of food import dependence (Pirog, 2000; Pirog and Tyndall, 1999). The irony evident in this disjuncture between the state’s agricultural production and the state’s food consumption now makes the provenance of food in Iowa culturally and politically relevant and helps to explain the popularity of the Iowa-grown banquet meal.

Although “local Iowa food” has also been opportunistically trumpeted by state officials, and could run the risk of being co-opted by agri-business interests, it cannot be dismissed as a simple instance of state boosterism. For many food system localization activists and organizers, making Iowa food “local food” represents a small, thoughtful return to regional food self-reliance by an agricultural state too long focused on “feeding the world” without due consideration of the complex consequences both for distant places and for

Iowa. Yet for all the logic of the sub-national state as “local”, it remains important to recognize what this formulation obscures. Focusing on “local Iowa food” avoids the hard questions about exactly which producers engaged in which production practices have produced the food. Are they independent family farmers, extended family corporations, or vertically integrated firms operating in Iowa? Are they certified organic, loosely sustainable, or conventional farmers? The question of how “local” is constructed in other settings, and especially at what scale, suggests a promising line of future inquiry.

10. Conclusions

In this paper, I have examined the practice and politics surrounding local food, by focusing on various initiatives in Iowa which together contribute to a process of food system localization. Despite some recognition that globalization and localization are related and mutually conditioning, many analysts continue to compartmentalize the two. This becomes particularly evident when examining conceptualization of the term “local”. I argue that the spatial content of “local” in particular contexts needs to be more critically examined, both to take account of how scale is socially constructed and to understand how social and environmental relations are themselves spatialized. As I show through the case of Iowa and particularly the Iowa-grown banquet meal, the underlying complexity of “local” feeds into a sometimes contradictory politics of food system localization. Localization can proceed from a defensive, exclusionary impulse on the part of beleaguered agricultural producers and wary consumers. However, it can also prompt something seemingly very different: a greater receptivity towards and incorporation of diversity, on the part of both producers and consumers. Food system localization in Iowa began with defensive tendencies. While these have not vanished altogether, the progression of initiatives, their growing interconnections, and reflexivity about localization itself have also created new possibilities for receptivity to diversity and difference.

This returns us then to the questions posed at the outset of this paper concerning the transformative potential of food system localization. Localizing and re-localizing food systems do not readily create enormous progressive societal changes. However, they do represent modest socio-economic, cultural and environmental shifts in encouraging directions. Ultimately, these shifts depend on the meeting and melding of producer and consumer interests, which takes place at a variety of scales and with differing outcomes even in “local” food systems. Calling all such encounters “local” obscures how the scales nest and for whose

benefit. Nonetheless, in its broad contours food system localization may remake our troubled world in modest and valuable ways. Recognizing the power—and the perilous trap—of the local is a crucial start.

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