

Local Food as Social Change: Food Sovereignty as a Radical New Ontology

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Abstract

Local food projects are steadily becoming a part of contemporary food systems and take on many forms. They are typically analyzed using an ethical, or socio-political, lens. Food focused initiatives can be understood as strategies to achieve ethical change in food systems and, as such, ethics play a guiding role. But local food is also a social movement and, thus social and political theories provide unique insights during analysis. This paper begins with the position that ontology should play a more prominent part in the analysis of local food movements, as this lens could provide unique insights into basic commitments guiding such initiatives. The paper presents the argument that ontological analyses are imperative for fully understanding local food movements. It then provides an overview of the justice frameworks and ontological orientations that guide two dominant types of initiatives: Those committed to increasing food security and those committed to food sovereignty. The paper ends with the argument that food sovereignty projects are revolutionary, not only because they challenge us to change industrial food practices, but also because they are built on a radical new political ontology, and co-constitutive food-focused orientation, that forms the foundation for alternative social and political structures.

Keywords: Philosophy of food, Food metaphysics, Local food, Food sovereignty, Food movements.

1. Introduction

Local food initiatives are steadily becoming a part of contemporary food systems and take on many forms, from school gardens to farmers markets (Holt-Gimenez *et al.* 2011; DeLind 2011; Martinez *et al.* 2010). This flexibility is due in part to the fact that local food projects can differ from region to region, as communities have a multiplicity of needs, food cultures vary, and environmental factors (such as climates, soil types, etc.) fluctuate. However, most researchers accept the following broad understanding of what constitutes local food: Local food is the attempt to minimize the distance between production, processing, and consumption of products in food systems, especially in relation to current industrial agricultural systems (Brain 2012; Peters *et al.* 2008). There are several

reasons to shorten the distance between food production and consumption, from increasing the range of food products available to reducing the environmental impacts of agriculture (Jungbluth *et al.* 2012). In addition, the push to limit distance is often accompanied by related goals, such as providing consumers with fresh produce, improving food security of the region, and increasing the food sovereignty of local populations (DeLind 2011). Within this broader local food landscape, a) justice frameworks (Noll and Murdock 2020) and b) conceptions of people, place, and food (Werkheiser and Noll 2014) play key roles in guiding local food strategies.

This paper begins by placing scholarship on local food in context, arguing that ontological analyses are imperative for fully understanding the revolutionary promise of these movements. It then provides an overview of the justice frameworks and ontological orientations that guide two dominant types of local food projects. Specifically, food security focused projects are guided by distributive justice frameworks, while food sovereignty groups accept more expansive justice frameworks. In addition, each of these justice frameworks are guided by specific ontological presuppositions. The paper ends with the argument that food sovereignty movements are revolutionary, not only because they challenge us to change industrial food practices, but because they are built on a radical new a) political ontology and b) food-focused orientation that forms the foundation for alternative social and political structures. In short, they push us to re-think our very relationship with food, society, and ourselves.

This paper adds to the literature on local food movements, as it highlights the importance that ontological commitments play guiding both food security and food sovereignty paradigms; separates these commitments for analytical clarity; and highlights potential strengths and weaknesses of each. Ontological analyses are not well represented in the philosophy of food literature but, as will be discussed, provide key insights. It should also be noted that this paper is not meant to be read as an endorsement of food sovereignty projects over food security initiatives, as both pursue important food-related goals, but to illustrate the strengths of each orientation. However, food sovereignty is given a more detailed analysis to highlight the transformative potential of its ontological framework. With this being said, this paper begins by situating the project in the wider food focused literature, as drawing connections between work in ethics, social and political philosophy, and ontology is important for the argument.¹

2. Why Ontology Is Important

Local food movements are typically analyzed from an ethical or a social and political standpoint. This focus is largely due to the structure and strategies of these initiatives. As DeLind (2011: 273) argues, “[local food] is at once a social movement, a diet, and an economic strategy—a popular solution—to a global

¹ Concerning terminology, this paper uses local food “movements,” “sub-movements,” “initiatives,” and “projects” throughout the paper to discuss different understandings of the local food phenomena. This is due to the fact that local food can be understood as a moment (DeLind 2011), a set of sub-movements (Werkheiser and Noll 2014), a type of project or operation (Gray 2014), a food-system sector (Clendenning *et al.* 2016), and an ethical strategy (Gray 2014; Singer and Mason 2007), etc. For this reason, I struggled to determine the best terminology to use and ultimately decided on a set of signifiers that attempt to capture the diverse manifestations of local food.

food system in great distress”. Ethical frameworks help researchers tease out the various normative concerns guiding the development and goals of these organizations, as well as a person’s choice to eat locally. Food-focused actors (be they individuals or groups) are often committed to addressing some perceived wrong, such as the animal welfare (Rollin 1990; Singer and Mason 2007) and environmental harms associated with the industrial production of meat and dairy products (DeLind 2011; Thompson 2010). Additionally, ethicists have spilled a large amount of ink developing arguments that are designed to persuade eaters to adopt a more local or less ethically problematic diet (Gray 2014; Singer and Mason 2007).

But local food is more than an ethically motivated strategy. It is also a social movement and, as such, social and political theory play an important role in the analysis of these projects. Individuals who opt into eating locally, as well as movements, more generally, are often guided by wider socially focused concerns and goals. For example, programs aimed at improving food security in communities tend to accept a limited concept of justice, grounded in distributive justice (Noll and Murdock 2020). Here justice can be broadly understood as “what we owe to each other” (Miller 2017; Scanlon 1998) and distributive justice concerns focus on rectifying some wrong associated with the distribution of benefits (such as access to foodstuffs) and harms (such as the placement of industrial facilities near neighborhoods) at a societal level. In contrast, food sovereignty movements are driven by a more holistic justice framework that acknowledges the importance of recognition, participation, and restorative justice concerns (DeLind 2011; Noll and Murdock 2020). As illustrated, social and political analyses help researchers better understand the structure, social and political components of these projects, and the justice claims that guide their goals (Bernstein 2014; Schanbacher 2010).

Metaphysics and ontology also play an important role in the analysis of local food, as these fields help to clarify concepts (Noll 2015; Werkheiser and Noll 2014) and descriptors (Griffiths *et al.* 2016); determine what food is and how to distinguish between artificial and “natural” foodstuffs (Kaplan 2012); and to explore if types of modifications of seeds and breeds negatively impact “what it is” to be that being (Rollin 2015). While the term “ontology” will be primarily used in this paper, it is important to note that ontology is an incredibly rich sub-field of metaphysics.² Historically metaphysics was understood as a science that ex-

² It should be noted here that metaphysics, as a discipline, includes a rich and robust literature, with important contributions dating back to the birth of philosophy and continuing throughout the history of the discipline. Diverse philosophers, from René Descartes to Martin Heidegger, grapple with metaphysical questions that increasingly transcend ridged philosophical boundaries. The richness of contemporary literature is difficult to communicate. In recent feminist literature, for example, work in metaphysics has been expanding since Simone de Beauvoir’s classic work *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 1949). Susan Bordo and Iris Marion Young offer analyses of the mind and body, Judith Butler focuses on concepts of sex and sexuality, Donna Haraway and Karen Warren push back against ridged concepts of nature, while Maria Lugones and Linda Alcoff tarry with concepts of identity (Haslanger & Asta 2018). Due to the expansive nature of metaphysics, this paper intentionally utilizes a limited notion of metaphysics to ground the paper. This was intentionally done, as the essay’s aim is to illustrate how metaphysics and ontology can provide key insights in philosophy of food. As such, the essay is meant to be the beginning of a robust metaphysical conversation on food movements.

amined “the first causes of things” or “things that do not change” (Van Inwagen and Sullivan 2020). It also grappled with explaining the world through “transcendental features” (Rose 2004) but, more recently, the field turned its attention to identifying basic conceptions of what something “is,” delineating “categories of being,” exploring how the mind is structured, and determining the relationship between concepts (van Inwagen and Sullivan 2020; Noll 2015). Similarly, ontology can roughly be understood as a branch of philosophy “which deals with the nature and structure of ‘reality’ [...] or the study of attributes that belong to things” (Guarino *et al.* 2009: 1). Later thinkers, such as Pettit (2005) and Rawls (1999) expanded this analysis to social and political structures, agents, and the social and political sphere. As such, ontology and metaphysics are deeply intertwined, with Quine arguing that “ontology is concerned with the question of what entities exist (a task that is often identified with that of drafting a ‘complete inventory’ of the universe) whereas metaphysics seeks to explain, of those entities, what they are” (Varzi 2011: 407). Drawing from the above definitions, the work presented in this paper falls within the realm of both ontology and metaphysics, as it identifies basic presuppositions or governing features of social life (Rose 2004), or specifically local food movements, and explains what those entities are. For clarity, however, this paper will be using the term “ontology” to signify both projects, as this terminology is currently accepted in the wider social and political literature (Pettit 2005; Rosenthal 2019; Rose 2014).

When compared to the monumental amount of work done in ethics and social and political philosophy, ontological analyses are currently underrepresented in the literature on food movements. While the ontological void is being addressed in contemporary journals, historically, this lack could be attributed to the deep divide concerning the role that ontology should play in political philosophy (Rosenthal 2019). The political theorist John Rawls famously contributed to this disagreement when he supported the position that “ontological claims, that is, presuppositions about the constitution of agents and the social world, need to be avoided in political thought” (Rosenthal 2019: 238). If one holds this view, then theoretical work concerning the workings of the polis and analyses of political and/or social institutions should not appeal to ontological claims. However, several theorists pushed back against this view, arguing that the ontological claims help to develop alternative “orientations” (Marchart 2007; Rosenthal 2019; White 2000), or alternative notions of social roles, the goals of systems, and the ends of our institutions, that form the foundation for radical change. As Rosenthal (2019) so eloquently writes, “the purpose of the ‘ontological turn’ is not to separate political thinking [or social movements] from ontological controversies altogether, but, rather, to develop alternative ontologies to more conventional political ontologies” (239). When applied to local food, as a social movement, the expanded ontological frameworks employed by a portion of these movements (Werkheiser and Noll 2014) gain increasing importance, as they could supply alternative ontological orientations—Ontologies that could form a foundation from which to build alternative food systems.

It is important to note here that the “ontological turn” in political thought also pushes back against the assumed separation between social change and ontological commitments, such as meanings that we ascribe to features of the world around us. Peoples’ desire to bring about change is often guided by lived experience and specific perspectives concerning features of this lived experience (Frye 1983; Hartsock 1983; Hill-Collins 2002). For example, according to Rose

(2014: 253), “the lived experiences of individuals facing homelessness [pushed these individuals] to explicitly and empirically question meanings of ‘nature’ and the regularly unquestioned systems of knowledge that produce(d) these meanings”. Feminist thinkers have also recognized the importance that standpoints play in helping traditionally marginalized communities gain knowledge of the social structures that enforce their marginalization and/or recognize features of these structures that are hidden from the privileged (Hill-Collins 2002; Hartssock 1983).

In this vein, environmental justice advocates have long recognized the connection between individual’s concepts of what constitutes personal identity, a community, a zoning ordinance or legal regulation, a state, a corporation and the relationships between these entities, and that these connections form a key component of justice claims (Taylor 2014; Walker 2012). To put it more succinctly, particular ontologies, developed through daily interactions, help to critically align social justice movements (Rose 2014). It is only by recognizing the inter-connections of these components, and the resulting impacts (such as systemic poverty, exclusion from decision-making, lack of access to social goods, etc.), that we can begin to formulate larger normative arguments concerning these interconnections.

Thus, movements working to bring about change, such as local food movements, rely on particular ontologies to support their justice claims and to align their goals. However, while these are connected, ontological commitments need to be separated from justice claims for analytical clarity. The next section of this paper focuses on this task. Specifically, it consists of a brief overview of the justice frameworks and ontological commitments that guide food security focused initiatives and food sovereignty projects. If food issues are framed as a distributive justice problem, then these projects are guided by a conventional political ontology and b) a narrow food-focused orientation. Those that accept an expansive justice framework, however, are guided by more inclusive political ontologies and food-focused orientations. The final section highlights the radical potential of these alternative ontological orientations and the role that they can play revolutionizing food systems.

3. Local Food as Food Security

While local food projects are guided by various goals, two distinct justice paradigms have been identified in the current literature: a) distributive justice and b) food sovereignty, which includes a holistic or expanded justice framework (Noll and Murdock 2020). Initiatives aimed at increasing food security are largely guided by distributive justice frameworks, or those that support the claim that we have a duty to address problematic distributions of foodstuffs. Conversely, food sovereignty pushes for local control over food-systems and accepts a more holistic framework that connects food systems to a wide range of social goals, from supporting local farmers to mitigating the environmental impacts of food production. Additionally, it should be noted here that food sovereignty frameworks developed at least partially as a critique of industrial food-systems and thus tend to be committed to alternative methods of food production and processing (DeLind 2011; Dalhberg 1993; Schanbacher 2010). In contrast, focusing on improving the distribution of foodstuffs may push movements to make use of highly industrialized food systems, as local production systems are often less ef-

ficient than conventional large-scale agriculture. Local food programs guided by distributive justice do not push back against current industrial practices or, at least, do not support them. Each of these justice orientations will be discussed below.

With approximately 793 million people undernourished worldwide (Food and Agriculture Organization 2015), it is easy to understand how increasing food security became a priority for some local food projects. Community gardens and CSAs (community supported agriculture) typically focus on increasing local access to healthy and nutritious foodstuffs (Ostrom 2008). It is this focus that provides justification for the claim that some local food movements are guided by distributive justice commitments. The term “food security” was coined after World War II and originally signified the ability of nations to provide adequate food reserves and/or access to food related resource bundles (Sen 1987), though this term now also signifies reserves/access at the local community level, as well (Schanbacher 2010). According to the Food Agricultural Organization (FAO), a nation is food secure when “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (Food and Agriculture Organization 1996: n.p.). More generally, food security is often used as an umbrella term to describe the international push to eliminate malnutrition and hunger worldwide—a push partially justified by the recognition of a normative duty to help those in need, irrespective of distance (Singer 1972).

According to Noll and Murdock (2020: 3), “the initial push to create and run food security programs is guided by egalitarian conceptions of justice, or basic human rights claims where individuals are recognized to have what is often called a ‘positive right’ to food (or an entitlement strong enough to compel others to act on one’s behalf)”. The recognition of this positive right to foodstuffs is clearly supported by the FAO definition above. As such, food security related projects are driven by the goal of increasing access, as well as a host of other social goals designed to remove various distribution barriers, such as improving infrastructure, increasing public and private investments, and the creation of stable environments (Collier 2008; Sachs 2006). Similarly, three of the four determinate factors of food security, used by WHO (the World Health Organization) and UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund), concern access, while the fourth concerns increasing supply through the better utilization of foodstuffs. These factors or “pillars” of food security include: The pillar of economic access, food availability, stability of supply, and food utilization (Food and Agriculture Organization 2008).

I argue that conceiving hunger as an access issue is guided by two specific ontological orientations: a) A conventional political ontology (described below) and b) a narrow food-focused orientation. Pettit (2005) argues that every political theory aimed at bringing about larger political and social change, presupposes a specific ontology. These typically include “an account of the relationships and structure in virtue of which individuals in a polity constitute a people, a nation, and a state [or] a political ontology” (Pettit 2005: 157). In other words, commitments concerning the definitions of individuals and the relationships between individuals in society form the basic commitments necessary for identifying key changes and visioning a new future. Distributive justice frameworks, at their most basic level, conceive of the State as an entity that recognizes certain basic rights of citizens (dependent of the national context), as well as certain re-

sponsibilities or duties to perform some action for citizens, such as the duty to protect personal property or the body of the citizen from harm. In the context of food-focused programs, providing a safety-net or ensuring that aid is provided during a famine or another emergency fall within this category. Recognizing basic human rights can be included here, as well (Wonicki *et al.* 2016). Although, it should be noted that various other entities recognize the right to food, from individuals to community organizations. With this being said, concerning the state, the above ontological orientation can be understood as a conventional political ontology, as defined by Rosenthal (2019) above.

Additionally, there is a food-focused ontological orientation that holds for local food movements guided by distributive justice frameworks. Werkheiser and Noll (2014) separated local movements into three distinct sub-movements, each with unique ontological commitments. The most common sub-movement, the locavore trend, is built on the idea that individuals can change food systems primarily by altering personal behavior. In other words, we can change larger social structures one meal and one choice at a time. This sub-movement is built on specific ontological commitments, including the following: (1) food is a product that is purchased or that can be replaced by other products with similar nutritional content (i.e. canned salmon can substitute for another protein); (2) people are individual consumers of food; and (3) social change happens at the individual level. Here food is conceived as a product separate from the production methods that produced it, the environment, the communities that developed this foodstuff, and the personal identity of the growers and eaters. It is simply a commodity that can be exchanged for another commodity in the larger market. Similarly, in this orientation, the rich and complex understandings of what it means to be human is also distilled down into a single understanding—People are consumers of food.

Local food programs that adopt a distributive justice framework tend to accept at least two of these three commitments. For example, conceptualizing hunger as largely an issue of access to foodstuffs presupposes key ontological commitments concerning the concepts of food and people. In this view, food is a commodity that can be interchanged with other similar projects. Thus, a failure of rice crops in Indonesia, for example, could be replaced with emergency aid in the form of another grain, such as wheat, oats, corn, or barley. Access, availability, stability of supply, and utilization all presuppose the view that food is interchangeable and can be replaced by other similar products. Additionally, this framing conceptualizes people as individual consumers of these products who need to meet their minimum caloric intake. The point of increasing access to foodstuffs is to provide “food,” an exchangeable commodity, to people who consume food to survive. When connected to the distributive justice framework above, the “right” to food requires that food be provided—no more and no less. This constitutes a narrow food-focused ontology.

4. Local Food as Food Sovereignty

However, food movements are diverse and are concerned with several issues beyond the just distribution of foodstuffs. Local food is often conceptualized as providing “an alternative and challenge to the corporate-led, industrialized, global food system by reconnecting food with environmental health and sustainability, social justice concerns, and the importance of place” (Noll and

Werkheiser 2014: 112-13; Levoke 2011). Industrial food-systems enable corporations and governments to exercise increasing control over food choices, as they influence what food is available and reduce the wide range of choices down to shallow choices concerning brands on the supermarket shelves (DeLind2011). This removal of communities from the daily tasks associated with the production and processing of foodstuffs helps to ensure that people lose agriculture and food related knowledge. It also masks the larger environmental (Dalberg 1993), animal welfare (Rollin 1990), and social impacts of these systems (DeLind 2011; Singer and Mason 2007). Some local food initiatives are actively pushing back against this trend, as it “has been suggested [that one way] to address these issues is creating alternative food systems, such as those that focus on local production and distribution, those that utilize a shorter supply chain, or those that emphasize community control” (Noll and Werkheiser 2014: 113). In this way, local food is driven by critiques of corporate control and market-based strategies and connects food with other socially-relevant concerns.

While some local food programs focus on increasing “food security,” others embrace the above critique. These typically recognize a broader suite of rights claims, such as increasing local control of agricultural production, improving long-term sustainability, and providing for future generations. This variety is not surprising, as local food movements can be placed into various categories, each guided by distinct justice frameworks (Noll and Murdock 2020) and ontological commitments (Werkheiser and Noll 2014). In addition to the “locavore” trend, another prominent orientation for local food projects is food sovereignty or food justice. According to Clendenning *et al.* (2016: 166), “while many organizations do not use the language of food sovereignty explicitly, the motives behind urban food activism are similar across movements as local actors draw on elements of each in practice”. Initiatives guided by food sovereignty frameworks largely accept a more holistic justice paradigm that includes a plethora of social concerns. For example, the Declaration of Nyéléni (drafted by over 182 organizations from 81 countries) defines “food sovereignty” in the following way:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations [...] It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations (Via Campesina 2006: n.p.).

This definition connects food systems to a plethora of human rights and justice concerns (Noll and Werkheiser 2017; Flora 2011). Here defining agricultural policy and food systems is reframed as a *right* of local communities. Organizing food production according to the needs of specific communities, rather than global markets, is given priority (Schanbacher 2010). While access and distribution concerns are still recognized, a host of other issues beyond these are included, such as environmental sustainability, equal participation, land access, and gender equality. In short, food sovereignty attempts to capture the many ways

that food systems and eating are connected to human identity and the self-actualization of communities.

Like local food projects grounded in distributive justice, food sovereignty focused initiatives are also guided by two specific ontological orientations: a) An expansive political ontology and b) a co-constitutive food-focused orientation. The expansive nature of the above justice concerns can at least partially be attributed to food sovereignty's broadened conception of "ethical patient" to include ecosystems, future generations, and biotic communities. According to Noll and Murdock (2020: 5) "in contrast to food security initiatives, that are careful to limit positive rights claims to food access, food sovereignty places a wide range of social justice concerns under the umbrella of food justice *and* mandates that change be made at both the local and systems level". The political ontology accepted by food sovereignty is more expansive and thus the rights claims have expanded to align with the different presuppositions guiding justice claims.

This orientation also presupposes an account of the relationship between individuals and a polity (Pettit 2005). While conventional orientations conceive of the state as an entity that recognizes certain basic rights of citizens and duties to these citizens, food sovereignty places more emphasis on community responsibility. This framework also empowers local communities to make key decisions that determine the structure and goals of food systems. As such, while the state is still called to recognize certain rights, food sovereignty pushes a) individual communities to help ensure that these rights are met and b) demands that communities be a part of food-related decision-making processes. In short, they recognize the importance of improving a community's ability to make food choices and to determine the structure of their food systems, and such decisions are necessarily connected to the personal, social, and community levels (Werkeheiser and Noll 2014; Pimbert 2008; Desmarais *et al.* 2010). This ontological orientation demands that political structures be expanded to accommodate this process, if they do not already have the necessary infrastructure in place. As will be argued below, the ontological commitments guiding food sovereignty require that communities push back against institutions.

Due to this focus on community, one could argue that the political orientation guiding food sovereignty is at least partially communitarian, as it emphasizes the important role that community plays when determining what should be valued (Etzioni 2003). This makes sense, as communitarian ideals have a robust history, as they are found in diverse civilizations around the world and constitute elements of many historical and modern political systems (Etzioni 2014). As food sovereignty has grown out of peasant movements around the world, it is not surprising that these elements could have been incorporated into this orientation. For communitarian scholars, such as Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, the liberal emphasis on the individual undermines the important role that social context and tradition play in political and ethical reasoning, the creation of the self, and how we value communities (Bell 2020). To this end, Sandel argues the following:

To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments [...] is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth. For to have character is to know that I move in a history that I neither summon nor command, which carries consequences nonetheless for my choices and conduct (Sandel 1984: 90-91).

Food sovereignty projects are committed to a robust conception of community that emphasizes the important role that they play in the social orientation of individuals, the formation and reinforcement of food-ways, and in determining goals what should be pursued. As such, communitarian ideals form part of this framework's account of the relationship between individuals and a polity. However, with this being said, it is important to note that food sovereignty movements are not fully communitarian. Food sovereignty projects emphasize the importance of local control of food systems but do not necessarily accept the wholesale adoption of communitarian political commitments and structures beyond this limited scope. As food sovereignty initiatives are diverse and emphasize democratic self-governance, it is entirely possible for communities to adopt non-communitarian frameworks (Bonotti 2018). For example, Bonotti (2018) argues that we should adopt a republican conception of food sovereignty, where it is understood as "the freedom of people to make choices related to food production, distribution and consumption in a non-dominated way, that is, without being subject to the arbitrary or uncontrolled interference of governments, international bodies and multinational corporations" (Bonotti 2018: 390). Thus, while some commitments are community focused, conceiving of food sovereignty as a type of communitarianism would be a mistake.

With this being said, similarly to communitarianism, food sovereignty largely accepts a conception of the self that is connected to social context. The acceptance of such expanded ontological commitments critically aligns these projects (Rose 2014) and expand their justice commitments. While those guided by distributive justice largely conceptualize food as an interchangeable commodity and people as autonomous consumers who either do or do not have access to these foodstuffs, food sovereignty paradigms are directly critical of myopic definitions of foodstuffs, as interchangeable products, and individuals, as entities that are distinct from the social contexts and communities. In contrast to the locavore trend, food sovereignty guided local food programs accept the following basic conceptions:

- (1) food is an essential part of culture and is co-constitutive of community and personal identity; (2) people are members of their community, co-constituted with their community and its practices, particularly those around food; and (3) change happens when communities resist larger institutions oppressing them and build alternatives to those institutions through solidarity and mutual aid with other individuals and communities (Noll and Werkheiser 2014: 127).

In contrast to local food programs driven by a distributive justice framework, the above basic commitments expand conceptions of food and people. Rather than viewing food as an interchangeable product, it is a concept that is interconnected with communities and the personal identities of eaters. Likewise, people are connected to their communities and food-practices. In this context, local food programs committed to supporting local food traditions and passing these on to future generations gain special significance. Connecting food-ways to personal identity and cultural histories also come to the forefront. When faced with food scarcities, different products with similar nutritional value cannot be equally substituted. Something important is lost when traditional foods are replaced by those not connected to the local community practices and traditions. This position pushes back against the view that food is interchangeable and can be re-

placed by other similar products and that access, availability, stability of supply, and utilization should drive food-related projects. It also runs counter to the myopic understanding of people as consumers of food.

5. Co-Constitutive Food Ontologies as Transformation

If you accept this ontological orientation, the rich and complex understandings of what it means to be human and the role that food plays reinforcing personal and community identity come to the forefront. Here food is more than just a commodity that we need to increase access to—food is intertwined with identity, culture, place, and political action. In addition, these concepts are not static or independent, but are co-constitutive. This means that personal identity, food-ways, and community are essential to the existence of each other. They mutually constitute each other, and change in one can influence the others in fundamental ways. The above expansive political ontology coupled with a food-focused ontological orientation that is co-constitutive requires a more holistic justice paradigm. First, this orientation pushes communities to recognize a broadened conception of “ethical patient” to include ecosystems, future generations, and human communities (Noll and Murdock 2020). When personal identity is bound up with culture, place, and food-ways, this expanded definition of what constitutes an ethical patient makes sense. Individuals will be irreconcilably changed by impacts to community, place, and food-ways. If food co-constitutes identity and community, it is not something that can be separated from environmental sustainability, participation and recognition, land access, and even racial and gender equality.

Turning again to the Declaration of Nyéléni (Via Campesina 2006), food sovereignty rights claims include the following: The right to healthy and culturally appropriate food; ecologically safe & sustainable agriculture; a healthy and biodiverse environment; participation in food decision-making; the right to use & manage lands, waters, seeds, livestock, and biodiversity; and social relations free of oppression and inequality, based on gender, race, class, and age. According to Miller (2017), justice at the most basic level can be understood as “the constant and perpetual will to render to each [their] due” (n.p.). As such, the ontological orientation guiding food sovereignty requires us to recognize what is due to ourselves and others in a multiplicity of ways. Specifically, the above rights claims utilize several justice frameworks: a) distributive justice, b) environmental justice; c) social justice; d) participatory or justice as recognition, e) intergenerational justice, and f) restorative justice.

In this way the expanded ontological frameworks employed by food sovereignty projects supply an alternative ontological orientation—one that is designed to form the foundation from which to build alternative food systems. These commitments not only help to critically align social justice movements (Rose 2014), but they constitute a new ontological framework that pushes back against the conventional political ontology and food-focused orientation guiding food security. However, it should be noted that food security is also not without its strengths. Food security’s ontological orientation enables these projects to easily work within industrial food-systems and liberal governmental structures. In contrast, however, food sovereignty’s framework runs counterpoint to dominant paradigms and thus may have difficulty working within current systems.

A common critique of food sovereignty movements highlights this weakness, as well as the strengths of food security. Specifically, one could argue that this ontological orientation is problematic precisely because it pushes us to accept an expanded justice framework—one that is too inclusive. Framing a multiplicity of social issues as justice concerns makes it difficult to identify specific issues that should be addressed or to determine which should be prioritized. It also asks more of those involved and, by pushing back against established social structures, makes these goals more difficult to achieve. As Werkheiser and Noll (2017: 130) argue, “including such a wide array of issues under the umbrella of food sovereignty often make it difficult to determine exactly what specific changes need to be made to the existing food structure beyond its dismantling”. This is a concern, especially when food sovereignty frameworks are compared to food security projects, which are grounded in conventional political ontologies. If this critique is accepted, then one could argue that local food movements should adopt food security orientations, as the potential weaknesses of food sovereignty could harm initiatives on the ground.

However, in defense of this approach, one could argue that the point of developing alternative ontologies is to help critically align social justice movements (Rose 2014) and to form the foundation for alternative social and political structures. Due to its expansive ontological orientation, food sovereignty pushes eaters to re-conceive food systems, reconceptualize the connection between place and citizens, and fundamentally change a community’s ability to shape itself and its future. In short, this framework pushes us to rethink our relationship with food, society, and ourselves. Pushing back against established social and political structures can be understood as a strength, as food sovereignty provides us with a vision of new possibilities for the future. Additionally, as food sovereignty is also an international movement made up of organizations around the world, one could argue that it has a track-record of successfully critically aligning social justice movements. The Us Food Sovereignty Alliance alone includes more than 600 organizations in 90 countries (USFSA.org). However, depending on their goals and commitments, local food projects may be guided by either food security or food sovereignty orientations, as they work to bring about different social visions.

However, there is still the question of how policymakers should proceed when there are different approaches available. The answer to this question largely depends on the individual context and needs of the community, as well as the model of change adopted by the project—i.e. whether the food project is committed to top-down or bottom-up change. However, very broadly, local ordinance and policy changes in the United States could be used as a potential blueprint for answering this question. Urban based local food initiatives in the U.S. largely emerged in a policy vacuum that resulted in their unlawful operation (Meenar *et al.* 2017), as several state and municipal regulations made food production illegal in cities (Heckler 2012). This issue is being addressed by local governments, as they utilize their broad powers to create new laws (Witt 2013) that sets parameters for land to be used for agricultural purposes. These changes have made it easier for a wide range of local food initiatives, committed to different goals, to take root in neighborhoods. Here policy makers are not remaining neutral on the question of whether local food production is valuable or good. The reason why they are creating new laws and changing ordinances is to nurture food production in cities. However, they are often careful to not endorse

particular types of operations. In this way, the changes create spaces for local communities to democratically determine the structure, goals, and operation of the individual projects. In short, self-governance has been made acceptable within specific parameters. These changes have been beneficial for both food security and food sovereignty grounded operations. With this being said, more research needs to be done on the policy and governmental implications of food movements guided by different ontological assumptions.

6. Conclusion

Local food movements are steadily becoming a part of contemporary food systems and take on many forms. These projects are typically analyzed from an ethical or a social and political standpoint. This stance is largely due to the structure and strategies of these initiatives. Local food can be understood as a strategy for bringing about ethical change in food systems and, as such, ethics play an important role. But local food is also a social movement and, thus social and political theories provide unique insights during analysis. This paper argued that ontology should play a more prominent role in the analysis of local food movements, as it could provide unique insights into basic commitments guiding these initiatives. In this vein, the paper presented the argument that ontological analyses are imperative for fully understanding the revolutionary promise of local food movements. It went on to provide a detailed overview of the justice frameworks and ontological orientations that guide two dominant types of local food projects. In particular, food security focused projects tend to be guided by distributive justice frameworks, while food sovereignty groups accept more expansive justice frameworks. And each of these justice frameworks are guided by specific ontological presuppositions. When placed in this context, the revolutionary nature of food sovereignty become clear. This is not only because they challenge us to change industrial food practices, but because they are built on a radical new a) political ontology and b) co-constitutive food-focused orientation—orientations that form the foundation for alternative social and political structures. In short, they push us to rethink our very relationship with food, society, and ourselves.

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