

Shopping for change? Neoliberalizing activism and the limits to eating non-GMO

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Abstract. While the cultivation of genetically modified organisms (GMO) and the spread of genetically engineered (GE) foods has gone largely unnoticed by the majority of Americans, a growing number of vocal civil society groups are opposing the technology and with it the entire conventional system of food provision. As with other alternative food movements, non-GMO activists focus on changing individual consumption habits as the best means of altering the practices of food manufacturers and thereby what and how food is produced. In this paper I argue that the increasing use of consumerist tactics reflect the neoliberalization of food activism in the United States – a process that rather than heralding sustainable agricultural and economic futures may reinforce the status quo. Using the emerging non-GMO movement, and the associated market for non-GMO products, I challenge the assumptions that consumer sovereignty and freedom of choice will bring about the small-scale, localized alternatives espoused by activists and scholars in the field. Specifically, I explore three critical limitations of contemporary alternative food politics. First, the neoliberalization of activism shifts the responsibility for social reforms from the state and manufactures to individual consumers, bringing with it important social justice implications. Second, focusing on choice opens new spaces for the profit without seriously threatening contemporary market structures or agro-ecological practices. Third, contemporary consumerist politics focus on eating right not less and thereby provide few alternatives to the current trends towards convenience and processed foods.

Key words: Alternative food politics, Biotechnology, Neoliberalism, Non-GMO

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What's going on "behind the label" of the food on our supermarket shelves in the United States? A secret genetic experiment... and you should know that just because it's not listed on labels, doesn't mean it's not there. So what's an American consumer to do?" (The True Food Network, 2003).

Consumers of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but our chains! (Organic Consumers Association, 2006).

Introduction

A box of non-GMO¹ organic baby cereal seems an odd weapon to wield in the fight against commercial agribiotechnology and state-sponsored industrial food production. Yet this unpretentious commodity, with its brightly colored packaging and adorable, smiling infant

representatives, is often heralded by both scholars and activists as a key to progressive social change. With the increasing globalization, industrialization, and concentration of North America's food supply it is the consumer not the citizen who is often called upon to bring forth a more socially sustainable and environmentally just commodity system.

While changing where, what, and how we eat is an enduring tactic in American food politics (Levenstein, 2003; Belasco, 1993), in recent years it has taken on a different character, which may, in the long run, be contrary to the ultimate goals of many alternative food movements. Unlike the counter-culture food movement of the late 1960s, which strove to step out of the dominant system of food provision,² many current groups exhibit the tenets of neoliberal ideology³ and focus directly on the logics of the current market as the best route to alternative agri-futures. Today, prominent tactics include everything from establishing market initiatives, to promoting

supermarket boycotts, to encouraging individuals to “shop ethically.”

Of course, counter-culture businesses and campaigns to engage consumers are not new (Mungo, 1980; Belasco, 1993). However, many contemporary efforts in this domain have come with a problematic ideological shift. What was once an logic of doing more with less – that is, less processing, less convenience, fewer middlemen, lower on the food chain, and most importantly less stuff⁴ – has been transformed into what is ostensibly a logic of more – that is buy more “good” products, because the more you buy the more pressure is placed on manufactures to alter production practices and consequently the foodscape.

Even prominent agro-food scholars enthusiastically promote this neoliberal logic. Many participate in projects aimed at unveiling the commodity thereby providing consumers with the information necessary to make proper, socially responsible market decisions (Freidberg, 2004; Miller, 2003; Jackson, 1999; Buck et al., 1997; Cook and Crang, 1996). While this project has received a great deal of criticism in recent years, many of these critiques themselves remain fully entrenched in neoliberal doctrine. Most notably, Cook and Crang’s (1996) call to “get with the fetish” remains focused on what can be done at the level of the commodity. We are asked to “submit to the fetish-powers, and attempt to channel them in revolutionary directions,” to play with meanings and juxtapose life-moments thereby creating critical breaks in previously closed imaginaries (Taussig, 1992 in Cook and Crang, 1996: 147). Although this call to scholarly arms may help bring to light the contradictions hidden along the commodity chain, it also grants the market a deterministic role in bringing forth alternative social relations (e.g., shorter and more transparent supply chains, stricter environmental protections at the sites of production and consumption, true-cost pricing and payment for food goods and crops, equitable wages and safe working conditions for agricultural labor). Thus, the project of defetishization,⁵ even when approached creatively, does not seriously threaten neoliberal structures. Rather, it continues to assume that changing how we choose to fill our supermarket carts is what matters, not the supermarket itself.

The appraisal of current culinary trends is a second area in which agro-food scholars may have uncritically adopted neoliberal logic. Many have praised the power of consumers, highlighting effects of “ethicity,” and “reflexivity” on commodity forms (Guthman, 2002; DuPuis, 2000; Nygard and Storstad, 1998; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). For example, Murdoch et al. (2000) contend that emerging consumer sensitivities to the quality and “natural” content of consumables have pried production processes from the global and reembedded them in the local.

One cannot deny that consumers matter. Indeed, past consumer action has brought tremendous change to agro-food systems. For example, consumer boycotts of table grapes and wine were integral in improving working conditions and organizing California farms labor in the 1970s (Wells, 1996). Similarly, fear of consumer boycotts spurred McDonald’s to refuse Monsanto’s genetically engineered potatoes, a move, which led directly to the product’s failure and eventual de-commercialization (Killman, 2000). However, in the place of large-scale protests and sensational demonstrations much contemporary scholarship and food activism is geared towards changing the *daily* practices of *individuals* and in this way making the alternative foods “market friendly.”

Presented in this way, claims that consumption can instigate revolution in the foodscape are tenuous, not least because of the evidence suggesting the conspicuousness of alternative eating practices (Barnett et al., 2005; Guthman, 2003) and the on-going debate over the extent to which demand is perceived or produced by upstream decision-makers (Dixon, 2002; Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1944]; Lockie, 2002; Baudrillard, 1981). More importantly, such claims leave unquestioned the critical transition in food-based politics: the shift in focus from the public to the private spheres and the associated emergence of discourses of individualism and consumer freedom.

So significant is this break from past activism, that Schweikhardt and Browne (2001) have termed current methods a “new politics of food” (NPF) – one in which capitalism is to be fought with baby food, local apples, and fax machines, not unions, political parties, and citizen organization. NPF echoes the broader strategic shift away from the state as an arena of political bargaining noted by scholars of “new social movements” (NSM) (Norris, 2002; Hunter, 1995; Scott, 1990). However, at the same time, NPF is strikingly different. NSM foster new identities and empower individuals to act in solidarity as a means of changing the socio-cultural landscape. NPF, on the other hand, is focused intently on extant political economies and does not ask participants to develop new understandings of social interaction. Instead, the dominant consumer identity, which is based on individualism, is used to accomplish movement goals.

In the following, I draw on interviews with members of the US anti-agribiotechnology movement and leading non-GMO food companies,⁶ as well as a review of recent campaign materials from a broad selection of groups, to argue that NPF reflects the neoliberalization of North American food activism – a process that, rather than heralding sustainable agricultural and economic futures, may reinforce the status quo. Using what are widely seen as significant successes of the anti-agribiotechnology movement in the United States – the adoption of non-GMO policies by supermarkets and manufacturers⁷ – I argue that the optimism of activists and scholars may be

misplaced. I suggest that, while the successes are in no sense unimportant, market-based activism and its goals of “ethical consumption” and “freedom of choice” present openings for structural changes, which are antithetical to movement’s progressive goals. Specifically, neoliberal tactics provide a space for the rent-seeking practices of food manufactures and reinforce current trends towards processed and pre-fabricated meals. Thus, consumerism in no way guarantees the alternative sociologies, economies, and agricultures espoused by contemporary food movements.

The non-GMO movement

Relatively little has been written within the academic literature about the development of the organized non-GMO movement in the United States. Some scholars place its inception in the mid-1980s with the establishment of Jeremy Rifkin’s *Pure Food Campaign* (Lambrecht, 2002) while others argue that real action did not appear until almost a decade later (Cummings and Lilliston, 2000). It is clear, however, that organized opposition has burgeoned over the last five years. Today, more than 60 groups actively pursue anti-agribiotechnology mandates and many more are tangentially concerned with the issue. These organizations run the gamut from single-issue groups such as SOS Foods New York and the Genetic Engineering Action Network, to multi-issue and multinational groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. They include representatives of the organic movement, the small farms movement, consumer’s rights organizations, the environmental and scientific communities, and food policy, health, and nutrition advocates.

Despite the common goal of, at least temporarily, eliminating genetically engineered foods from the foodscape, the strategies and practices of American movement differ between national and local groups. At the *national scale* groups are centrally concerned with a lack of information, regulatory transparency, and public participation. These groups frame the agribiotechnology problem as a violation of personal freedoms and democratic rights. Those at the local scale employ a somewhat different discourse, focusing primarily on farmers’ rights, environmental protection, and local jurisdictional autonomy. In addition to seeking better control of emerging biotechnologies, these groups work to exclude GE crops from distinct spaces.

In the United States anti-agribiotechnology activism seeks not only to prevent the proliferation of genetically engineered products but also to instigate a more fundamental revolution in agricultural and socio-economic structures. The end goal of such movements is to replace industrial food production and large-scale monocultures with small farms and organic polycultures; supermarkets

and big-box retailers with direct marketing mechanisms like farmers markets, buying clubs, and community supported agriculture (CSA) allowing “consumers to meet and interact with the farmers on a personal level” (SOS Food New York, n.d). These movements also aim to end the intrusion of the colossal “life-science companies” such as Monsanto, Bayer, and Dow Chemicals into food production.

In some cases the desire is overt. As, for example, when the SOS Food New York encourages members to use alternative food sources:

As we struggle against genetic engineering and all the dangers it poses to our food and environment, it is critical that we build alternatives that can guide us out of this morass of industrial agriculture. One alternative that is fast growing in support and popularity is Community Supported Agriculture...Through the CSA model, small and medium size organic farms can survive and even flourish outside the “agribusiness” paradigm (SOS Food New York, n.d.).

In other cases the imagined future is subtler. The majority of anti-agribiotechnology groups are simultaneously active in the family farm movement, the organic movement, and the community/school gardens movement. In this way, the elimination of genetically engineered food is intimately tied to the re-envisioned agro-ecological and political-economic futures that form the core of contemporary alternative food politics.

The neoliberalization of food activism

Over the last decade, critical scholars from across the social sciences have focused intently on unearthing the political, social, and environmental effects of the neoliberal paradigm. Although complex, the term generally refers to a concerted effort in recent years to transform political economies according to classical liberal tenets. Accordingly, McCarthy (2006: 87, 98) notes four pillars of the ideal neoliberal paradigm: (1) a faith that a self-regulating market will forge optimal social forms; (2) a focus on the individual as the primary social and economic agent; (3) an overt hostility towards state intervention, particularly interventions aimed at regulating goods and services; and (4) a reliance on civil society to redress market failures when they occur.

Although these elements certainly describe the broader neoliberal worldview, McCarthy (2006), following Larner (2003) and Tickell and Peck (2003), also stresses the constant becoming of neoliberal structures and the hybridity of their real-world forms. Thus, we must recognize the multiple, partial, and incomplete effects of such projects and look for *neoliberalizations* not an overarching neoliberalism.

Such a perspective has provided important insight into how, and on what terms, activist groups are now engaging with socio-environmental problems. To date, scholars have noted the novel social problems and the associated proliferate advocacy groups arising from neoliberalizations (McKenna, 2000), the ways in which neoliberal solutions can disempower advocacy groups (Wolford, 2005), and how changes in the terrain on which governance works out has privileged “moderate” groups at the expense of truly radical politics (Guldbrandsen and Holland, 2001). One important area, which lacks attention, however, is how activism itself is being neoliberalized. How, for example, have neoliberal ideologies reoriented the tactics and strategies employed in socio-environmental conflict? What impact does the internalization of neoliberal ideologies have on the ways solutions are sought?

Over the last two decades counter-culture food movements have moved ever closer to McCarthy’s criteria. For example, in their review of California food movements, Allen et al. (2003) note the increasing erosion of state-targeted opposition and its replacement by both a desire for, and use of, alternative markets. They argue that this shift has been followed by an emphasis on individual rationality and responsibility, and a new focus on establishing novel market initiatives.

With respect to the non-GMO movement itself, we can see three important moments of neoliberalization. First, there is a strong market focus in current activism. Although most of the more than 60 non-GMO groups target the state in some way or another (at the local, national, or international level),⁸ a more common and pervasive tactic is to ask consumers to vote with their dollars (i.e., to buy non-GMO foods) and target food producers through letter writing campaigns and boycotts. This logic suggests that real change comes from the marketplace not the legislature. When targeting legislators and the state, citizens are asked to demand action from their position as critical economic agents – that is as consumers. For example, the True Food Network – a close affiliate of the Center for Food Safety – provides consumers with a “True Food Shopping List” cataloging companies from which consumers can purchase non-GMO products. Similar lists are available from the Institute for Responsible Technology (Smith, 2006), Greenpeace (2005), and Mothers for Natural Law (2001) as well as in countless anti-agribiotechnology monographs (e.g., Cummings and Lilliston, 2000; Jack, 2000). Other groups, such as SOS Foods New York and Californians for GE-Free Agriculture, suggest that individuals purchase only organic products (which are by definition non-GMO) and shop at farmers markets and through Community Supported Agriculture initiatives (the relation to non-GMO commodities here is uncertain). To facilitate this, groups direct consumers to their own food outlets and provide links to databases through which to track down a local organic restaurant and grocers. Other important

tactics include online forms and electronic letters to supermarkets and congressional representatives, organizing supermarket campaigns to boycott brands, and speaking directly with customers as they shop.

Changing what goes on in supermarket aisles and onto supermarket shelves is a particularly common tactic. Campaigns have already been waged against Trader Joe’s, Safeway, Shaw’s, and HEB, and groups are now gearing up to confront Albertson’s. To date success has been limited: only Trader Joe’s and HEB have succumbed to consumer pressure.⁹ Yet groups continue to rally around, and in front of, the big-box grocers. For example, the True Food Network provides members with an “Activist Kit” which informs readers of the “strategic importance” of supermarket activism. The Kit reworks the ubiquitous supermarket checkout line as a “magical point of sale” and advises members to use the power afforded by this space wisely.

The logic underlying this document, which is quite overtly expressed throughout the non-GMO movement, constructs retailers as the central pivot around which the food system moves. Although, recent works by Dixon (2002) and Lang and Heaseman (2004) lend force to the centrality of retailers in agro-food markets, this power is derived from, and thus contingent on, the extant neoliberal political-economy. Thus, by adopting this logic not only do groups empower the (super)market, not the state (and by extension voting citizens), as the ultimate arbiter of socio-environmental quality, but in doing so they accept the ideologies of competitive advantage and free market rationality, concepts that have led to disastrous agro-ecological problems, many of which, ironically, are the very problems around which the non-GMO movement has mobilized (Kloppenborg, 2005; Berry, 1986; Goodman and Redclift, 1991).

Closely associated with these tactics is a commitment to the rights and power of the *individual* consumer. Not only do phrases such as “freedom of choice” and “a consumer’s right to know” circulate freely and widely, but the movement rallies support by highlighting the threats to the individual rather than through some sort of shared hardship. Take, for example, the two quotations that foreground this paper. In the first, not only is the True Food Network telling YOU, the solitary consumer, to take action, but that little “an” speaks volumes about whom and what is the target. For instance, the message would be quite different if phrased:

What’s going on “behind the label” of the food on our supermarket shelves in the United States? A secret genetic experiment... and *we* should know that just because it’s not on labels, doesn’t mean it’s not there. So what *are* American consumers to do?

And still better if rendered: ... So what are American *citizens* to do?

Juxtaposing these three seemingly similar phrasings highlights their diverging assumptions. The first isolates the reader and positions her/him as the singular victim of genetically engineered foods and consequently the source of the solution. Although continuing to frame the problem as one of consumption, the second phrasing, by replacing “an” with “are” and “you” with “we,” draws attention to the shared effect of the problem and the communal responsibility for its solution. The third phrasing departs most radically. By replacing “consumer” with “citizen” not only does the problem suddenly become political-economic not just economic, but a wealth of solutions and counter movements become imaginable. The space of opposition is no longer restricted to the domain of the market, but now encompasses the full breadth of structures and social relations. The idea of the market and consumption can themselves become targets of critique.

Unfortunately, the standard solution proffered by the non-GMO movement, exemplified by the second quotation, is to choose products in a socially responsible manner. Here, consumers may be asked to unite, but this unity is not a communal bond based on a contextualized interest – as in a labour union – rather individuals are to unite only superficially through individuated purchasing moments and thus the unity requires no group solidarity. Instead of a sense of community, such actions reinforce the importance of the solitary decision-maker; the single shopping unit.

The third and final moment of neoliberalization is a distinct distrust of the state to adequately govern the food system. It appears that the non-GMO movement has all but given up on the state as a potential ally. Characterizing the current regulatory structure as “Government by the Industry, For the Industry,” Jeffrey Smith (2003: 127), founder of the Institute for Responsible Technology and author of *Seeds of Deception*, perhaps the most widely read and influential text of the American non-GMO movement, asks rhetorically:

How does the biotech industry do it? How do they continue to virtually dictate policy to the US regulatory agencies in spite of such serious and blatant past transgressions? (Smith, 2003: 148).

A similar distrust and disheartenment is evident among those groups with specifically state-focused tactics, such as The Campaign and the Center for Food Safety.¹⁰ While for these groups regulatory change may be the goal, the majority of actions (and resources) are dedicated to preventing what is perceived to be the inevitable pro-biotechnology decisions of state agencies. For example, CFS urges members to “Take Action” to overturn recent FDA, USDA, and EPA decisions regarding genetically engineered foods, many of which they argue are made “informally,” and against the public interest (CFS, n.d.).

While the current wave of preemptive legislation aimed at preventing municipal and state food regulation appears to justify this distrust at the moment, it is coupled with a conviction that civil society groups and individual consumers are the best watchdogs of industrial food production. As a result, efforts to enforce and change regulatory oversight are outnumbered by efforts to provide consumers with food labels or lists of non-GMO companies so that they may “change their diet” (Smith, 2003: 231) and be the final arbiter of which agro-food framework succeeds.

GE-free activism and the problem of settling for choice

As manufacturers and retailers remove genetically engineered ingredients from their products and their shelves, the American anti-agribiotechnology movement triumphantly declares success. Yet, if the entrance of Wal-Mart and other big-box retailers into the alternative foods market is to tell us anything, it is that consumption is not the hammer that will free consumers from the chains of capitalist political economies. There is too much money to be made in niche markets. So it is with non-GMO. The structural changes occurring at the moment are indeed significant, however, we need to ask if they signal a movement towards a more socially and environmentally just agricultural economy, or simply the further nichefication of the American foodscape?

I am not discounting the importance of the companies, which proclaim to be non-GMO, nor am I claiming that choice is not a laudable objective. Indeed, as Schweikhardt and Browne (2001) point out, neoliberal tactics may be the best means to short-term goals given the current structure of North American governance. However, as strategic goals freedom of choice and super-market shelf-space introduce three critical problems that weaken their ability to achieve the agricultural, economic, and social revolutions the non-GMO movement espouses.

Problem 1: Devolving responsibility

As prerequisites of any market solution, the majority of non-GMO groups have adopted a discourse focusing on “freedom of choice” and a “consumer’s right to know.” Although the goals of informed consent and freedom of choice are laudable, the work done by this language is equally important. It vests responsibility in the individual and focuses attention on consumption as the new arena of citizenship. Rather than seeing society as a collective project governed by a body of individuals for the benefit of all, neoliberal consumerism devolves community sensibilities and frames society as the emergent property

of a complex interaction of millions of individual decisions. Therefore, any problems that arise are our faults – that is we, as consumers, have not put our money in the right places. In this way the state and manufacturers are absolved of responsibility because they are simply responding to what we want.

Consumers should not be so willing to take on this responsibility. To do so inaccurately depicts the proliferation of such things as sugar-laden, nutritionally vacuous processed foods as resulting from some burning desire among the American population. As has been widely documented, “junk foods” result from a complex and global political economy (Levenstien, 2003; Schlosser, 2001; Mintz, 1985). Additionally, in a very material way, most consumers do not have a choice in the food system. Access to safe, healthy, and fresh foods is uneven across the urban and rural landscapes, with socio-economically under-privileged areas often lacking the basic retailers from which such foods could be procured (Wrigley, 2002). Even when such stores exist, “good” food – especially organic and fresh products – is often priced beyond the means of all but the affluent classes (Lockie, 2002; Guthman, 2003).

Not only is the idea of the autonomous consumer largely fictitious, but it also brings with it important implications for social justice. Linking progressive social action with the consumption of niche commodities excludes the voices of those who cannot afford such products. Food activism of this type reinforces moral judgments on those who do not participate in alternative markets (Guthman, 2003). We must be careful how we re-imagine those who, for whatever reason, do not purchase the “right” foods. Choice is not comparable across the social landscape. More importantly, as long as alternative food movements rely on shopping to change the world, they will be confronted by a large and powerful opposition inadvertently created by those who cannot afford the 40–100% premiums on non-conventional foods (Roberts, 2006).

In sum, individual consumers may have a responsibility to themselves and to the larger socio-biological community, but they cannot (and should not) shoulder all the responsibility for what products exist on supermarket shelves.

Problem 2: Commodifying revolution

The second problem with neoliberal strategies is that they open a space for the commodification of radical politics and thus may reinforce rather than weaken the current food production regime. In the increasingly crowded and fragmented marketplace social and environmental certifications such as organic, fair-trade, and non-GMO are now the latest weapon in the battle over consumers’ stomachs. Recent works by Guthman (2004) and Barnett et al. (2005) highlight the problems associated with the

mainstreaming of organic, ethical, and natural products. The combined insight of these works provides striking evidence that there is no necessary correlation between the *perceived* meaning of an “alternative” label and the ways in which food is *actually* produced. Indeed, they highlight the tremendous ability of food manufacturers to adopt alternative food lines without significantly altering their practices.¹¹

With the rise of consumer concern over the health and environmental implications of biotechnology, non-GMO status is quickly becoming the hot new marketing ploy. Today, more than 90 companies maintain some sort of anti-biotechnology policy and, more importantly, of the 25 companies that dominate the American foodscape, 7 have claimed to avoid GE ingredients.

While the total numbers may seem impressive, the market is dominated by organic manufacturers. Approximately two-thirds of the companies currently claiming to be non-GMO have at least one line of certified organic products. From a practical perspective this is not surprising. Organic companies do not have to contend with the obstacles presented by going non-GMO because genetically engineered ingredients are precluded from the National Organic Program. Thus, they are *already* non-GMO and always have been.

However, the organic-non-GMO commodity is a stark reminder that reflexive, “ethical” consumption neither necessarily follows nor is contingent on an understanding of production regimes; rather meaning must be stamped onto food. An additional non-GMO label is superfluous, yet, it is not uncommon to see commodities proudly brandishing both significations. The organic-non-GMO commodity also reminds us that protest itself can be easily commodified and that alternative manufacturers are no less apt to appropriate these profitable significations. Ultimately, however, it tells us that a new label may in no way signal a revolution in agro-ecological practice.

But what are we to make of the non-organic non-GMO companies? Do they not suggest an important move to undermine biotechnology in the United States? Of these only seven are not already part of the natural foods sector. The anti-agribiotechnology movement trumpets these “big seven” – which include Coca Cola, Bestfoods, Dean Company, Heinz, Dole, Frito-Lay, and Gerber – as evidence that not only does consumer demand matter, but it can send revolutionary ripples through the chain of production.

On the surface, the mainstreaming of non-GMO should be celebrated. There is evidence that increasing demand for identity preserved (IP) products has increased the sale of organic soy and corn (Roseboro, 2005). But we should not be too quick to revel in our success on three accounts. First, there are currently not enough organic sources to go around and the gap between supply and demand is being easily

filled by conventional non-GE varieties at a much cheaper price. In fact, even a cursory review of the non-GMO Report, the leading source for market information reveals that many IP companies do not source organically or from small-scale farms but rather simply continue to rely on conventional varieties. If this trend continues we may see the retraction of biotechnology followed simply by standard varieties and farming methods. Second, even if the organic path is taken, increasing demand for large acreage crops such as corn and soy may increase the pressure on the USDA to weaken standards and thus hasten the exiting trends away from the agro-ecological ideals of organics.

Third and most critically, the development of non-GMO food products by conventional manufacturers has, to date, not significantly impacted their demand for GE corn, soy, cotton, and canola, the four major biotech crops. While McDonald's refusal of GE potatoes and Budweiser's threat to boycott Missouri rice if the state permitted Ventria LifeScience to plant its pharmaceutical GE rice did shape the destinies of these two crops, by and large dominant food companies have adopted non-GMO food lines opportunistically. Most continue to produce GE products along side their conventional counterparts, generally exporting the latter to Europe and maintaining the former for the North American market. The limits and ironies of the non-GMO market are exemplified Gerber. In addition to being one of the first and most ardent non-GMO companies it is a wholly owned subsidiary of Novartis, one of the world's leading biotechnology firms. This shows that not only are biotech companies capitalizing on their own opposition but that the demand for biotech crops remains strong in the United States, despite seemingly beneficial developments in the market.

The existence of non-GMO commodities on supermarket shelves and the freedom to choose these products should not be read as evidence of a revolution in agricultural production, but rather as evidence of the further fragmentation of the American foodscape.

Problem 3: Processed alternatives?

Although counter-culture food activism originally espoused the principles of "living lightly" and "doing without," the recent neoliberal turn has shed this anti-consumerist discourse for a more satisfying focus on eating right, not less. Although this may garner more support, it also leaves unquestioned current levels of resource use that are by many accounts unsustainable and unnecessary.

One must ask, what food are we choosing when we eat non-GMO? The logics of food marketing in the twenty-first century dictate that successful products must not only be politically astute (or at least appear to be), but more importantly they must be convenient, good tasting, and visually appealing (Hughes, 2006; McEvoy, 2006). Therefore, the market produces highly processed,

packaged, and "attractive" commodities – not the whole foods of the small-scale alternative economy envisioned by food activists. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of non-GMO. Because commodity crops dominate the current generation of commercially available GE products, only foods containing corn, soy, canola, or cotton byproducts are subject to concern. Thus, the vast majority of products designated as non-GMO come out of intensive production processes that differ little from their conventional counterparts. The majority of products in this market fall into three categories: snack foods (e.g., cookies, energy bars, and chips), soymilk and meat substitutes, and condiments. Moreover, the supply of non-GMO ingredients is so limited in the United States that most manufacturers must source corn, soy, and cotton internationally. This embeds these products in extended commodity chains that run counter to the direct marketing and "eat local" ideals espoused by the anti-agribiotechnology movement. We seem to be simply recreating what goes into the machine not the machine itself.

This may not seem to be all that significant since changing what goes into the machine – that is eliminating agribiotechnology – is the non-GMO movement's primary purpose. However, this is not all that is desired. Rather, as discussed above, the discourses engaged by the non-GMO movement suggest that the ultimate goal is not simply a return to pre-1990s conventional agriculture, but the elimination of industrial, large-scale production and its replacement with small farms and local production.

Consequently "victories" in the marketplace may be insignificant. These energy intensive, highly processed products (albeit non-GMO) are feeding the giants they wish to vanquish. Unlike organics, which at the very least prohibits conventional agricultural chemicals, there is nothing inherent in non-GMO that guarantees a move towards these small-scale ideals. Indeed, it seems that the non-GMO market may only perpetuate our dependence on processing, supermarkets, and complex distribution networks.

Conclusion

Your goal at the supermarket is to engage customers, wake them up as active consumers and give them the information, tools and inspiration necessary to make their consumer dollars count toward something they believe in.

(True Food Network, 2006)

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the neoliberalization of the non-GMO, and by extension broader food-based social movements, is unlikely to bring about

sustainable agro-ecological and social systems. Despite my critique, I am not suggesting that activism should abandon consumerist tactics altogether. Making our “consumer dollars count” *is* an important step in bringing about a better social and political-economic future. Yet, using the market cannot change the way the market operates and by uncritically adopting neoliberal ideologies current movements risk reproducing the structures they seek to change. The existence of non-GMO commodities on supermarket shelves infers nothing about the long-term structure of food production and in many cases “non-GMO” is simply another marketing label implying only minor, if any, changes in agro-ecological practice. Furthermore, consumerism perpetuates the individualization of responsibility and may reinforce current social injustices. Thus, consumption is not a practice that will eliminate the chains that maintain current food systems.

If the new politics of food cannot guarantee the revolutions we desire, what can we do? In her recent book, Guthman (2004) goes a long way to answering this question. Running through her suggestions is a focus on reengaging with the state and promoting non-market solutions to market problems. Of particular import to the current discussion, she stresses the need to strengthen existing agro-ecological regulation and to develop technology-forcing food legislation. In the case of agribiotechnology, regulatory oversight is woefully lacking. Despite the urgings of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS, 2000, 2002), the Union of Concerned Scientists (Mellon, 1992; UCS, 1995, 1997, 2002), and the Pew Initiative on Biotechnology (PIFB, 2004) to coordinate federal regulation and improve testing and containment requirements, the thrust of state action continues to be “to speed up and simplify the process” (Quayle, 1992 in Smith, 2003: 130). Much more could be done to strengthen the barriers to commercialization, including but not limited to requiring adequate buffer zones, limiting open-air field testing, requiring public notification of local field tests, and instituting transparent scientific assessments. Grassroots movements have begun to mobilize around these issues (e.g., GE-Free Sonoma, Californians for GE-Free Agriculture) and it would seem, given the resources demanded of biotechnology companies by such regulatory changes, these would be good steps in preventing the proliferation of genetically engineered foods. Let us not wait until they reach supermarket shelves!

Equally important points of engagement are the seemingly unrelated policies and practices that deskill labor, undercut living-wages, and lengthen the work-day (e.g., suburban sprawl, shifting from hourly to salaried pay-scales, real estate speculation which is driving the monumental increases in the cost of living, etc.). Shopping at farmers markets or CSAs, preparing meals from scratch, and ferreting out local, small-scale alternatives to conventional products is simply beyond the resources of

most individuals. So long as people are short on time and money, economically cheap but socially and environmentally expensive foods will remain the norm. The “Walmartization” of alternative foods will not correct current agro-economic problems. Michael Pollan (2006) perceptively reveals that the entry of big-box retailers into organics and the lower prices they promise will only drive agro-ecological practices further from the standards and philosophies underlying visions of alternative foodscapes. Perhaps the solution is not to make “good” food cheaper, but rather to promote new policies that make our time more expensive (and more abundant).

Yet, the state is not an open arena for non-GMO activists or for the broader alternative foods movement. Many significant hurdles complicate non-market action and have led directly to the evolution of the new politics of food (Schweikhardt and Browne, 2001). One is the institutional structure, which provides unequal access to decision-makers – the balance of which is granted to corporate interests who have the financial resources to make their voices heard. It is this structure that reinforces the biased funding for conventional agriculture. As Guthman (2004) notes, changing the structure of subsidies and technical supports would go a long way to promoting alternative means of food production. At a more fundamental level, the structures of governance (which rely heavily on lobbying and private funding) and the ideologies that underlie them must be challenged. In this light, the inadequate regulation of genetically engineered food is simply another symptom of larger problems inherent in the adoption of neoliberal tenets: competitive business should be privileged and given free reign as they are the key players in socio-economies, and “free” markets will “naturally” settle on the social optimum.

The second problem is that for the most part the general public feels disempowered. This is both manifest in and produced by a lack of understanding of basic political processes and in the shift in identities from public citizens to private consumers. A private consumer can do nothing without financial clout and, as I argued above, focusing on such actions perpetuates many of the structures the movements seek to oppose. A citizen, however, can engage in acts outside the market and even question the political-economic structure itself. Therefore, a critical challenge facing alternative food movements is how to forge new identities that allow people to see themselves as more than individuals but as members of a collective society. It is a tall order. Such a project might begin by questioning the fundamental assumptions of the neoliberal paradigm, providing education and information about the political process, and “unveiling” the broader social relations and institutional arrangements driving the current food system. It is here that “getting with the fetish” might be applied (Cook and Crang, 1996). Anecdotal evidence suggests that when coupled with the opportunity to engage

in political action (e.g., letter writing, voting, petitioning state legislators), juxtaposing broader concepts, such as freedom and democracy, with the realities of preemptive legislation, “the revolving door” between corporate headquarters and government offices (Smith, 2003), and Technology Use Agreements,¹² can help mobilize a previously passive public (Personal Communication, GE-Free Sonoma, 2006).

If we truly want a socially and environmentally equitable food system then we cannot continue to rely so heavily on the mechanisms that created the one we currently have. Instead, scholarship and activism needs to renew older strategies aimed at changing the ideologies and mechanisms that underlie neoliberal capitalism. The new politics of food needs to learn from the old politics of new social movements.

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Notes

1. Although not technically accurate, the label GMO (genetically modified organism) has become the popular signification of genetically engineered food and thus the movement against them. The terms anti-agribiotechnology and non-GMO are used interchangeably in this paper to denote the growing movement against the development and commercialization of genetically engineered agricultural products and their use in food production.
2. Beginning with San Francisco’s Digger Movement, whose goal was to distribute surplus or stolen food to anyone who desired it, the 1960s counter-cuisine was largely grounded in the belief that corporate and industrial farming were detrimental to both the environment and the American sense of community. Finding alternative means of food provision, and different foods, was thus a founding purpose of many of the era’s leading initiatives. Important strategies included gardening, intentional community farms, buying clubs, and later coops. When commercial means were necessary the foods available differed dramatically from those available in the mainstream – they were raw, unprocessed, and generally available in bulk (Belasco, 1993).
3. “Neoliberal ideology” encompasses the fundamental tenets underlying the recent wave of trade liberalization, privatization, and the development of new markets for common “goods” such as clean air, education, and health care. Although the specifics are debated (see Harvey, 2005 for an excellent overview of historical and contemporary variants), it is generally agreed to rest firstly on the belief that private market exchange will produce superior social, environmental, and economic environments to government regulation. Secondly, neoliberal ideology posits that *individuals*, acting in self-preserving and self-interested ways, are the key determinants of social structures. Thus, individual market decisions are what matter. Lastly, owing to its overt hostility to government intervention, neoliberal ideology conceives that private groups within civil society (e.g., non-profit organizations, community and religious groups) are best positioned to resolve the social and environmental consequences of free markets.
4. An often overlooked component of counter-culture cuisine, eating less food, and especially less meat and highly processed, technologically derived foods, was a critical tactic not only for the “survivalists,” who sought simplicity as a means of surviving the coming ecological apocalypse, but for the broader radical food movement of the 1960s and 70s. Excellent descriptions of such dietary tactics can be found in Francis Moore Lappe’s *Diet for a Small Planet* and *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* (various editions from 1968–1972). For a broad overview of the history, goals, and strategies of the 1960s culinary counter-culture see Belasco (1993).
5. The concept of commodity fetishism is developed in Volume 1 of Marx’s critic of political economy, *Capital*. According to Marx, under the capitalist market system we encounter commodities as distinct from the social relations, particularly the labor relations, of their production. As a result, a commodity’s value is perceived to be independent from the people, places, and things necessary for its existence. This concept has since been widely used to critique contemporary manufacturing networks in which distance and advertising further alienate individuals from the relations of production thereby allowing exploitation to continue. Projects aimed at defetishizing food highlight the processes, both positive and negative, occurring along the commodity chain, often in an effort to redress social and environmental harms.
6. See note 1.
7. The term “non-GMO” or the phrase “does not contain genetically engineered ingredients” are standard among manufacturers. I thus use non-GMO here for ease of communication, but it must be noted that the actual policies concern the elimination of genetically

- engineered ingredients (GEI) not genetically modified organisms (GMO).
8. Consumerist tactics have become a pervasive and universal tactic but they are by no means the only efforts underway. Many groups continue to lobby legislators and senators, work diligently on campaigns to get progressives representatives elected, and develop and sponsor local ballot measures and ordinances, while at the same time employing market tactics. For excellent examples see the work of the Organic Consumers Association (www.organicconsumers.org), Californians for GE-Free Agriculture (www.calgefree.org), and The Campaign (to Label Genetically Engineered Foods) (www.thecampaign.org).
 9. Whole Foods and Wild Oats have also adopted non-GMO policies, however these were implemented without direct consumer protest. For a listing of other natural foods retailers who have gone non-GMO see the non-GMO Project (www.thenongmoproject.org).
 10. See www.thecampaign.org and www.thecenterforfoodsafety.org.
 11. This was recently and shockingly revealed by the use of Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) on organic dairy farms despite the widespread belief that such animals were to be kept more humanely than their conventional counterparts (Pollan, 2006).
 12. Developed by Monsanto to protect patented genetic material, Technology Use Agreements (TUA) limit a farmer's right to save, sell, or in any way distribute seeds from genetically engineered varieties. TUAs also grant Monsanto the right to inspect fields for up to three years after the final purchase of GE seeds and require that only the proprietary herbicide Round-Up be used. TUAs have been strongly criticized by many food and agricultural organizations for their potential effects on the global south, where seed saving and subsistence farming are the norm, and for the perpetuating agricultural consolidation in North America (Rifkin, 1998).
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