

Occupy the Food Supply: Construction or Protest?

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This February 27 is “Occupy the Food Supply” day. It reflects a longstanding call from food activists nationwide to “fix our broken food system.” With 50 million food insecure people in the US, an epidemic of diet-related diseases, a “dead zone” the size of New Jersey in the Gulf of Mexico (caused by fertilizer runoff) and a steady stream of E.coli outbreaks from industrialized food, “fixing” the food system seems a reasonable—and urgent—demand.

But all of these problems have their roots in the inequitable foundations of the global food system. The power of this \$6 trillion a year industry was built on violently dispossessing entire peoples of their land, water and resources, as well as on indentured, coerced and slave labor. The continued dependence on cheap undocumented labor and the “food apartheid” that plagues underserved communities of color are not broken pieces of an otherwise benign system. They are integral to the market efficiencies of today’s corporate food regime.

This food regime functions precisely as a late capitalist food system would be expected to perform: it creates opportunities for speculative financial investments and concentrates resources, power and wealth in the hands of a few global monopolies (like Cargill, Monsanto, ADM and WalMart). The corporate agri-food giants are making record profits at a time of record hunger, record harvests and a global epidemic of diet-related diseases. For those who own it, the food system isn’t broken at all—it’s thriving.

The public institutions governing today’s corporate food regime (e.g. the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, USAID and the US Department of Agriculture), and the rules they enforce (structural adjustment, Free Trade Agreements, US Farm Bill) ensure a booming business for the monopolies controlling our food. While there is always wiggle room for mild reforms, at its core, there is very little to “fix” in the corporate food system. It needs to be transformed.

Great transformations come about during times of crisis through the power of great social movements. Our food systems are suffering major fuel, finance and climate crises. And while there is plenty of talk (and lots of good community work) coming from the “food movement,” it is still a long way from challenging the power of the corporate food regime. But it is growing fast.

Historically, successful movements for social change walk on two legs: construction and protest. The former builds the alternative world. The latter tries to make room for it by pulling down the old structures holding the new world back. Most movements start (and many finish) hopping on one leg. Finding the other leg—and then getting both to walk together—requires a sustained and concerted effort. However, as evidenced by the Civil Rights, Anti-apartheid and Indian Independence movements, there is no other way to travel the road of transformation.

The steady rise of food activism over the last 20 years (organic farming, community and urban gardens, Community Supported Agriculture, Farm to School, Food Policy Councils, Slow Food, etc.) and the more recent explosion of Occupy movements across the U.S. are textbook examples of

construction and protest. While both are expressions of profound dissatisfaction with the ravages of unbridled monopoly capitalism—specifically regarding the food and financial systems—from the perspective of transformation they are in many ways, separately “hopping on one leg.”

Occupy has made great (one-legged) strides by creating high-profile, liberated public spaces for dialogue, political protest and new forms of horizontal governance. Though its organizational history is a far cry from the decades of political organizing behind Tahrir Square, the U.S. Occupy movement has successfully shifted our national conversation. We are now able to openly “name and shame” not only the corporate giants profiting from the world’s multiple crises, but to openly question capitalism for producing these crises in the first place.

Food justice organizations working in underserved communities have painstakingly built practical, locally-controlled alternatives and associations to mitigate the ongoing damage caused by the corporate food regime. These communities are highly vulnerable, with more than their share of individual, institutional and structural violence. The possibility of provoking more violence through risky street actions does not inspire community mobilization. On the contrary, while sympathetic, many groups avoid becoming associated with Occupy for fear that violent incidents will jeopardize the gains they have made to regain control over their local food systems.

Many of the overworked community activists struggling for food justice do support Occupy and have taken part in street mobilizations—precisely because Occupy addresses the structural inequity that is affecting the communities they work in. However, the philanthropic foundations funding many food justice organizations frown on Occupy-style militancy. Much more importantly though, core relationships with churches, civic organizations, neighborhood groups and local governments—all of whom are desperately working to reduce violence in their communities—prevent many food justice organizations from openly linking to Occupy. Until Occupy actually appeals to the food justice movement’s community base, it is unlikely that community food justice organizations will openly join forces with the Occupy movement.

The goal of food justice activists is a sustainable and equitable food system. Their strategy is to actively construct this alternative. Tactics include community gardens, CSAs, organic farming, etc. The problem is that this combination of strategy and tactics only addresses individual and institutional inequities in the food system, leaving the structure of the corporate food regime intact. The food justice movement has no strategy to address the inter-institutional (i.e. structural) ways that inequity is produced in the food system. By openly protesting the excesses of capitalism, Occupy does address this structure. This is why the convergence of Occupy and the food justice movement is so potentially powerful—and why it is feared. The political alignment of these movements, however, is no small challenge.

For one thing, for many Occupiers, the direct action of occupying something has become an organizing strategy in itself. Why not? It has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people, nationwide. However, it also means that participation in the movement (and the movement’s participation in local issues) is often conditioned on participating in occupations. Because these are increasingly met with police violence, this diminishes the involvement of many food justice organizations and vulnerable communities from the onset. This is not because they are incapable of engaging in direct action. On the contrary, different forms of direct action have and are being used effectively by food justice movements—tactically. (Witness the recent victories of Florida’s immigrant farmworkers organized in the Coalition of Immokalee workers: Their strategy to improve the wages of tomato pickers is to boycott the fast food and grocery chains that buy from the growers employing the pickers. Their tactic is to publicly embarrass those chains by marching and picketing... i.e., by occupying public space.)

But it is highly unlikely that vulnerable communities will agree to any kind of direct action that threatens what precious control they have constructed over their food supply, their labor or their food dollar. If and when direct action is employed as a tactic to advance an established food justice strategy (rather than seen as a strategy in itself), and if and when communities know their concerns regarding violence will be respected and their community work will be valued, reservations regarding Occupy could quickly change. Strategic conversations between the construction efforts of food justice groups and the protest actions of Occupy could proceed in earnest. The first step towards this political convergence is to recognize the need to walk on two legs.

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P.S.

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