Choosing a Food Future: Differentiating Among Alternative Food Options

Jeffrey R. Follett

Abstract This article examines the diversity of food networks that fit within the alternative food system of the United States. While farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture schemes, and corporate organic food markets all fit within the alternative food system, they differ greatly in the conventions and beliefs that they represent. The alternative food system has divided into two movements: corporate, weak alternative food networks; and local, strong alternative food networks. The weak corporate version focuses on protecting the environment; however, it neglects issues concerning labor standards, animal welfare, rural communities, small-scale farmers, and human health. Local, strong alternative food networks not only assure environmental protection, but they also address the issues that weak alternatives neglect. Using three case studies from the Washington, D.C. metro area, the author explains that strong alternative food networks are better suited to create social and political change because they challenge the foundations of the conventional food system: standardized and generic products, price-based competition, consolidated power, and global scale. To affect true social and political change in the United States, the author recommends supporting strong alternative food networks by creating the requisite cultural and political space for them to succeed.

Keywords Alternative · Conventions · Culture · Food networks · Food systems · Policy · Political change · Public space · Social movements

Introduction

Recent concerns about the safety and nutrition of food produced by the conventional, industrial agricultural system have led to questions regarding its true efficacy and merit. A quick Internet search provides many websites, books, blogs, and other sources that outline the environmental and social issues involved in this form of food production. As with the
identification of any problem, there is a general progression from the deconstruction of the issues to a search for solutions to the problem. An early solution to the environmental ills of food production led to an alternative food system based on organic foods. The organic movement quickly morphed and divided until *Time Magazine* demanded that consumers “Forget Organic. Eat Local.” What was once a simple decision between the conventional system and the alternative system has become a mind boggling moral dilemma every time a consumer reaches for a product at a large supermarket, at a small market, or from a local farmer.

Whether organic, industrial, or local, the United States agri-food system operates through food networks. These networks consist of producers and consumers trading food for money. In some of these networks, there are many intermediaries, such as processors, manufacturers, distributors, and retailers. As analysis of the United State’s agri-food system has expanded, the focus has shifted from the prominent industrial networks to those alternative networks that inhabit the margins (Murdoch et al. 2000). With this shift, researchers have sought new ways to analyze and categorize production systems.

Storper and Salais’s (1997) approach to categorizing production systems allows us to better understand food network participants’ decisions. They identify four Worlds of Production based on two scales. The first scale determines whether the product is generic or dedicated. The second scale determines whether the product is standardized or specialized. The intersection of these four characteristics creates the Industrial World (generic and standardized), the Intellectual Resources World (generic and specialized), the Market World (dedicated and standardized), and the Interpersonal World (dedicated and specialized) (Storper and Salais 1997). An example of an Industrial World product is Coca-Cola, an Intellectual Resources World product is a genetically modified crop such as corn, a Market World product is a mass-produced organic product such as Horizon milk, and an example of an Interpersonal World product is a localized, specialty product such as fresh-baked Struan bread purchased at the farmers’ market.

Each of the production worlds has a distinct set of conventions that actors use in determining their actions. These conventions explain how both the conventional and alternative food systems fit within the greater neo-liberal and moral economies (Morgan et al. 2006). These two economies are developing in tandem. The neo-liberal economy claims all of the conventional food system. Conventions pertaining to efficiency and price dominate this economic model. The moral economy on the other hand uses conventions of equality, fairness, values, welfare, and others to assess people’s economic decisions. Strong alternative food networks fit within the moral economy. Weak alternative food networks, such as large-scale industrial organic, incorporate the conventions of both the neo-liberal and moral economies.

As actors make decisions in an uncertain world, conventions are established (Morgan et al. 2006). These conventions are “practices, routines, agreements, and their associated informal and institutional forms which bind acts together through mutual expectations.” (Salais and Storper 1992, p. 174). Storper (1997) has explained that it is impossible for theory to predict which conventions individual actors will use to make economic decisions. However, one can group the conventions that actors have used to resolve similar economic situations and then explain how those particular conventions led to the specific resolution.

In this article, I use Storper and Salais’s (1997) concept of production worlds as well as conventions theory to assess which qualifications determine the “alternativeness” of food networks. One must determine whether or not the alternative food movement is simply a new market-based system similar to the conventional food system. This analysis is essential to evaluate supporters’ claims that the alternative food movement provides a
vehicle for social and political change in the United States. The case studies provide a farmer-level view of the suitability of alternative food networks to create social and political change and provide context for ways that our society can create space for these networks.

Alternative Food Networks

DuPuis and Goodman (2005) define the alternative food agenda by its rejection of the global, industrial, environmentally degrading conventional food system. Unfortunately, this only describes what an alternative food network is not, and does not shed light on the particular characteristics that make a food network alternative. Morgan et al. (2006) take the definition one step further by explaining that all alternative food networks share three common traits: (1) they redistribute value through the network in the opposite direction of the bulk commodity system; (2) they re-instill trust between the producer and the consumer; and (3) they articulate new forms of political association and market governance. As with many attempts to generalize about shared characteristics of complex systems such as food networks, these three characteristics lack sufficient detail to explain the totality of alternative food networks. For example, Pollan (2006a) outlines an alternative food network based on organic spring lettuce mixes from California. The producer scaled up to meet the demand of a niche market (Pollan 2006a). In the end, the producer lost control of his product because the purchasing corporation took over distribution, marketing, and retailing. The producer said, “We are part of the food industry now.” (Pollan 2006a, p. 159). Organic production is an alternative, but in cases such as this, the alternative may not fulfill the qualification for redistributing value in the opposite direction of the conventional system. Watts et al. (2005) describe this dilemma as maintaining the ecological integrity of the alternative food network while ignoring the economic and social components.

There is an assumption in Morgan et al.’s (2006) description of alternative food networks that trust is always beneficial in the system. DuPuis and Goodman (2005) suggest that it is essential to examine how participants build trust in the network to determine its true value. It is possible that the individual actor’s trust does not encourage equitable relationships or democratic processes, and may lead to an exclusive network and to myopic decisions about localism. Hinrichs and Allen (2008) documented this risk by examining the blinder effect of Buy Local Food campaigns and the resultant neglect of disadvantaged populations such as the poor.

Morgan et al. (2006) state that alternative food networks present an opportunity to develop new forms of political association and market governance. However, DeLind (2003) and Goodman and Dupuis (2002) caution that alternative food networks have not fulfilled their role in changing society and the capitalist system in regards to food. DeLind (2003) uses the term “warrior work” to describe the type of networks that are overtly political with the purpose of shaping public opinion about the food system, whereas “builder work” is concentrated on consumer and lifestyle choices that seek to change the political system indirectly through consumers’ decisions (DeLind 2003). Therefore, while alternative food networks may share the goal of political change in the food system, they could differ greatly from one another in the way that they accomplish this goal.

The complexity of alternative food networks makes it difficult to generalize about their characteristics. Authors such as DuPuis and Goodman (2005) suggest that this may actually be beneficial. The creation of fixed norms for alternative food networks creates standards for alternative food practices and quality, which de-emphasizes the political
practices that provide for democratic processes of local decision-making (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). To avoid this pitfall in alternative food network analysis, DuPuis and Goodman (2005, p. 360) recommend creating “an open, continuous, and reflexive discourse” that brings a diverse group of people together to discuss how food networks, and society as a whole, can improve. The first part of this reflexive process is to examine how alternative food networks differ from one another, and yet, how they all remain classified as alternative.

Washington, D.C. Case Studies

This study uses three case studies to examine social movements and alternative food networks. I located the three case studies for this research through the web site Local Harvest. The site provided basic information such as the farms’ locations, products, and techniques as well as contact information. I chose Smithfield Farm, Potomac Vegetable Farms, and No Label Organic because they provided three examples of different approaches to alternative networks: a farm that is not certified organic; one that was certified organic and dropped the certification; and one that is currently certified organic, respectively. I focused on their status in relation to organic certification to gain an understanding of how well the federal government has supported one aspect of the alternative food system. I also used their location, distribution methods, and products in my decision as I attempted to get a broad geographic distribution for the D.C. metro area, and a cross sample of distribution methods and products.

I traveled to Smithfield Farm in Berryville, VA to interview Betsy Pritchard and to Potomac Vegetable Farms in Vienna, VA to interview Hiu Newcomb in March 2007. I conducted interviews with Jack Sneuce from No Label Organic of Potomac, MD by phone in March and April 2007. In each case, I interviewed the business’s owner or part owner because I believed that he/she would be the most knowledgeable about the business. I asked follow-up questions through email. I prepared twenty to thirty questions specific to the individual cases to guide the interviews; however, interviews were open ended to limit my influence on Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s responses. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to approximately 2 hours. I used open and focused coding to analyze transcripts from the interviews to identify the conventions that inspire participants in Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks.

The growers within 100 miles of Washington, D.C. are at the heart of the increasing prevalence of local food in restaurants, coops, farmers’ markets, and homes in the Washington, D.C. metro area. The case studies below share certain characteristics, which make them all an alternative to the conventional food system; however, each maintains individuality in their relationships, history, and structure.

Case Study 1: Smithfield Farm-Smith Meadows Meats

Smithfield Farm is located 70 miles west of Washington, D.C. in Berryville, Virginia. Betsy Pritchard’s family has raised livestock for eight generations on this farm. In addition

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1 The name Smithfield Farm was too similar to Smithfield Farms, which is an industrial producer of pork. The Pritchard’s chose to change the name of their meats to Smith Meadows to minimize consumer confusion about their products. They maintain the name Smithfield Farm for their bed and breakfast.
to livestock, they grew crops such as barley and rye, but livestock has always been the focus. After World War II, Betsy’s grandfather tried his hand in fruit production and made the transition to conventional farming with heavy use of chemicals and machinery. The remnants of this decision still line the driveway into the farm even though the farm’s land has alternative purposes today.

Betsy and her brother switched from their grandfather’s conventional production system to a chemical-free production system in 1989. They wanted to try to do something better with the land they inherited. A visit from another small-scale producer showed them that there were alternatives to conventional production and inspired them to change over to organic production. The Pritchard’s chose not to be certified organic. Betsy said that the government established the national organic standards with large-scale producers in mind, and that her farm and its products are actually better than organic. According to Betsy, organic production ensures chemical-free production, but it does not ensure that farmers treat animals fairly or that their products are healthy for consumption. Organic certification does not guarantee that an animal actually spends time outside, eats its natural diet, or its meat is free from contamination. Organic production also does not necessarily protect rural livelihoods and small-scale farmers, or guarantee that consumers have sufficient information about the products they buy.

For 8 years, the Pritchards raised their animals using this “beyond organic” approach, but they continued to sell their meats through the conventional distribution system. Giant and Safeway Supermarkets sold their meat but did not provide the farm’s brand name, nor any recognition of the Pritchards’ care of their animals, the environment, and their community. Betsy and her brother realized that they had to find a different way of selling their products if they wanted to pay their bills. Larger producers who sold high quantities to make up for low prices were squeezing them out.

To gain a greater portion of consumers’ dollars, in 1996 Betsy and her brother started selling directly to consumers at markets in Berryville and Middleburg, Virginia and Shepardstown, West Virginia. They did those three markets for about 3 years before their business had grown too large for these small markets. Through conversations with other vendors at those markets, they learned about opportunities in other areas. It was a process of trial and error to get to where they are today. Currently, they supply eight farmers’ markets, two health food stores, two restaurants, and their farm store.

Case Study 2: Potomac Vegetable Farms

Tony and Hiu Newcomb met in Ohio while they were attending school. In 1958, they moved to Washington, D.C. so Tony could work as a government economist. In the early 1960s, Tony’s family had eight acres in Fairfax County near what is now Tyson’s Corner, but Tony and Hiu did not think that the area was suitable for agricultural production. At the time, the area was rural, but pressure from urban development was beginning to take its toll. When Tony went knocking on doors asking to rent land for farming, many old timers were thrilled to rent him the land. They wanted to see the land used for agriculture, but very few people wanted that type of work.

2 There are four levels of organic according to the United States Department of Agriculture. The first is “one hundred percent organic.” The second is “organic,” which has at least 95 percent organic ingredients. The third is “made with organic,” which has at least 70 percent organic ingredients. The fourth is “organic ingredients listed in ingredients panel.” Products in this last category cannot use the organic label. See http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Consumers/Consumerhome.html.
Although Tony and Hiu’s farm was small, their farm was part of the conventional food system. Hiu and Tony grew corn as a monoculture with the use of chemicals, and sold the crops through wholesalers. Tony and Hiu could not be sure of who was consuming their products and consumers had no sense of their corn’s origins. Wholesalers brought the crops to coops and supermarkets in the city. This situation was sub-optimal because Tony and Hiu had to drop the corn off at night and the product did not reach people’s dinner tables for at least a week. Tony and Hiu wanted to sell directly to consumers so they could get more of the consumers’ dollars, but people did not know Tony and Hiu, which made it difficult to compete with established roadside stands along the highway. A new system presented itself when Tony approached the roadside stands and asked if they would like to purchase Tony and Hiu’s corn. After a while, the roadside stand owners started asking for a variety of vegetables. They wanted beans, tomatoes, and squash in addition to the corn. At the same time, urban pressures on Tony and Hiu’s rented land became too intense, so they bought an 11-acre plot of land in Vienna, Virginia where they could establish themselves. This provided a headquarters as well as space for a farm stand. People who drove by the vegetable stand every day started to trust the Newcomb’s products. They continued to sell wholesale to the roadside stands and to a few restaurants, but the stand provided a new outlet for their products.

In 1990, the Virginia farmer’s organization certified the farm as organic and between 1991 and 2003; the state of Virginia certified the farms. The decision against certification after 2003 was difficult, but Hiu decided that the standards no longer met the needs of a small producer. The process of tracing individual items is too arduous and the paperwork has increased by at least a factor of twelve. Hiu does not think the loss of the ‘O’ word has affected her business because the growth in food markets has moved from organic to local. Potomac Vegetable Farms now uses the term “ecoganic,” which encompasses the ecological components of organic certification. Ecoganic is a sustainable agricultural production system that maintains soil fertility by retaining soil organic matter and microbes (Potomac Vegetable Farms 2007).

The network actually consists of two farms; one in Vienna that Hiu and her daughter Hana manage, and another in Loudoun County that a friend, Ellen, manages. The farm in Loudoun is much larger and produces larger quantities than the Vienna farm. Hiu divided the farmers’ market responsibilities evenly between the two farms and the Vienna farm is responsible for 300 of the network’s 360 Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) members. The first 50 CSA members were recruited from an original list that Hiu received from two farmers she had sold land to in the past. The CSA has simply grown from word of mouth and a little advertising at farmers’ markets. The CSA is in its 8th year now, and Hiu has to turn people away each year. Farmers’ market, farm stand, and CSA clients each represent one third of the business’s sales.

Case Study 3: No Label Organic

Not long after Jack Sneuce started tending his own gardens in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he got a bit lazy in the application of chemicals. Initially the plants suffered from damage, but with time, the plants developed a resistance to the pests and actually started to do well without the chemicals. Jack figured there was no reason to apply the chemicals

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3 Jack Sneuce and the No Label Organic Company are aliases for a real producer and farm in Potomac, Maryland.
if there was a natural balance between his garden and pests. Jack’s gardens expanded over
time, blurring the line between gardening and farming. By 1979, he was renting land and
considered himself a commercial organic farmer. Even over these larger areas, he con-
tinued to experiment with the use of compost rather than synthetic fertilizers and relied on
non-chemical control of pests. Certification was a natural step when the opportunity arose
in 1996.

As Jack’s business grew from its humble gardening roots, he became active in local,
state, and national agricultural issues. He realized that there were few alternative outlets for
agricultural products. Large processors, distributors, and retail stores were dictating the
structure of food networks. To counter this trend, he helped found two cooperatives that
distributed their products directly to consumers through CSAs. All of Jack’s sales outlets
are local. He does not believe in shipping his products because it does not build any loyalty
between producers and consumers. Ninety percent of Jack’s sales travel through direct
sales and his coops’ CSAs.

Alternatives

The case studies above meet Goodman and Dupuis’ (2002) criteria that alternative food
networks reject practices that are global, industrial, and environmentally degrading. Each
farmer only sells to consumers within approximately 125 miles of his/her farm, treats the
farm as a natural system rather than a factory, and maximizes the positive environmental
impacts of agricultural production. By maintaining their proximity to consumers, each of
the farmers has managed to maintain the economic and social components of alternative
food networks, as well as the ecological component (Watts et al. 2005). This stands in
contrast to the more industrial model of organic production seen in California and dis-
cussed in Omnivore’s Dilemma (Pollan 2006a), which only maintains the ecological
component.

Betsy, Hiu, and Jack also meet Morgan et al.’s (2006) three criteria for alternative
networks. First, they redistribute wealth back to farmers by selling products directly to
consumers. Second, they have re-instilled trust with consumers through transparency about
their production practices. Finally, they have created space for new forms of political
association and market governance by utilizing alternative distribution channels, which
inherently challenge the conventional system. However, the networks are not overtly
political. Instead, they are “builder work” networks, which concentrate on consumer
decisions that indirectly lead to political change through lifestyle changes (DeLind 2003).
Consumers who choose to spend more time and money on their food due to concerns about
freshness, safety, the environment, labor concerns, or animal treatment are inherently
questioning the foundations of the conventional system, which include efficiency, price,
convenience, technology, and manipulation of the environment.

Choice

Betsy, Hiu, and Jack focus on local direct sales that establish relationships with their
consumers, ensure sufficient farm gate prices, and provide food embedded with informa-
tion about its origins. They represent the portion of the United States food system that has
rejected the culture and practices of the conventional food system and its results: a
degraded environment, depopulated rural areas, consolidated power, and placeless food.
Even though alternative networks are the minority in the United States food system, they have the potential to change the production, distribution, and consumption of food in the United States. In this process, food becomes a medium to develop “collective social consciousness and social action” (Belasco 2007, p.17).

However, corporations have capitalized on those parts of the alternative agenda that suit them and have discarded the rest. Under these conditions, the alternative food system has divided into two movements: corporate, weak alternative food networks; and local, strong alternative food networks. The difficulty in using a continuum is that the ends of it represent caricatures of actual networks while most of reality fits somewhere between the two extremes. In the continuum of food networks, strong food networks represent the opposite end of the continuum from conventional food networks. Weaker alternative food networks fill the complex and diverse space between the two extremes. As one moves toward the stronger alternative end of the spectrum they find a direct relationship between producers and consumers, information regarding the origin and provenance of products, participation due to producer and consumer choice, less use of chemical inputs and technology, and greater concern for ecological and social sustainability.

Corporate, weak alternative food networks have focused on protecting the environment and have neglected issues concerning labor standards, animal welfare, rural communities, small-scale farmers, and human health. Local, strong alternative food networks such as Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s assure environmental protection, but they also address all the other issues listed above. Even after consumers opt out of the conventional food system, they face a decision about which alternative food networks they support. In What to Eat, Marion Nestle (2006, p. 66) stated this concept:

> When you choose organics, you are voting with your fork for a planet with fewer pesticides, richer soil, and cleaner water supplies—all better in the long run. When you choose locally grown produce, you are voting for conservation of fuel resources and the economic viability of local communities, along with freshness and better taste.

Although Nestle touches on the symbolism of food, she does not address the true complexity of alternative food network decisions. Her statement reflects the thoughts that have driven organic foods into the mainstream. People feel good about themselves and their decisions when they shop at Whole Foods Market or choose the “greener” version of laundry soap at Wal-Mart. However, as corporations have infringed upon the independence of the alternative food system, one must question the ability of weak corporate alternative food networks to create social and political change.

**Weak Versus Strong**

Weak alternative food networks fail to create social and political change for four reasons. First, they are a part of the Market World (Storper and Salais 1997). Products are dedicated as they are in the Interpersonal World; however, the products are also standardized. The narrow focus of organic foods has created a niche within the greater food system. Corporations compete with one another to sell to a small segment of society that appreciates the environmental quality of their food products. Competition is centered upon price and efficiency just as it is in the conventional system. Unlike the Interpersonal World, quality is secondary to price (Storper and Salais 1997). Companies do not produce organically because it fulfills the philosophy of the greater alternative movement, but instead because...
the organic niche provides large premiums and profits. If Chilean organic apples are cheaper than those from Maryland, retailers will sell apples from Chile. The effects of this decision on local communities do not matter in weak alternative food networks.

Second, weak alternative food networks cannot produce social and political change because they focus on the qualities of food rather than the network as a whole. As long as growers produce food according to the national organic standards and label food as “organic,” they have fulfilled their political and social goals. More organic acreage and sales equals success. However, this yardstick does not address concerns about animal welfare, labor welfare, rural communities, small-scale farmers, or sustainability. “Organic” does not necessarily ensure adequate protection for farmers, rural communities, laborers, animals, and society as a whole. Pollan (2006a, p. 132) addressed this issue while examining the industrial organic system he calls, “Big Organic.” He explains that in the industrial system: Rosie the free-range chicken never actually steps outside to take advantage of her “manicured lawn,” cows at Horizon are kept in confinement and fed grain, fields at Earthbound are monocultures, migrant workers’ availability maintains low wages, and large quantities of oil are used in the distribution of food over long distances (Pollan 2006a).

The third reason that weak alternative food networks cannot create social and political change is due to their distribution of power. As large companies such as Horizon or Earthbound farms consolidate the organic market and sell to large retailers such as Walmart, consumers and producers lose power. Producers cannot negotiate fair business deals and consumers cannot dictate what they would like to consume. As consolidation continues, they lose alternatives. Companies controlling weak alternative food networks have no incentive to challenge the status quo because they are currently benefiting from the system. For example, Earthbound Farms, grows 80 percent of all the lettuce sold in the United States (Pollan 2006a). Whole Foods Market and Wild Oats control 22 percent of organic sales in the United States (Organic Trade Association (OTA) 2006). Why would these companies change the system to promote equity?

The fourth reason weak alternative food networks cannot challenge the current food system in the United States is because they are often long food supply chains (Marsden et al. 2000). Food remains placeless in these networks. This results in a lack of relationships that would create trust between producers and consumers. The solution is labeling schemes, but pictures on the side of milk containers and stories of free-range chickens may differ from the actual values supporting weak networks (Pollan 2006a).

In comparison, strong alternative food networks such as those of Betsy, Hiu, and Jack, are well suited to create social and political change (Table 1). They participate in the Interpersonal World where price and efficiency come second to the other qualities that food represents in the system. These qualities extend beyond the ecological aspects of food, organic certification, and green conventions to include civic and domestic conventions. Due to the secondary nature of price, efficiency, and the market, producers deal with issues such as animal welfare, labor welfare, rural communities, small-scale farmers, and sustainability. The foundation of Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks is their interaction with the people purchasing and consuming their food. Therefore, unlike weak corporate versions, their networks focus on relationships, transparency, and trust. Participants examine the network as a whole and base decisions on more than a simple label of “organic” or “conventional.” In addition, many farmers and buyers participate in these markets, so no one can control the market and dictate the terms of participation and interaction. This distribution system is the antithesis of the consolidated nature of conventional and weak alternative food networks. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks are examples of short food
supply chains (Marsden et al. 2000). Food in these networks reach consumers embedded with information about its origins. This ensures that food has roots when it reaches consumers and creates a bond between producers and consumers that a label simply cannot ensure.

Weak and strong alternative food networks offer us two different versions of the future. Weak networks provide us with a food future dominated by corporations with a standardized and industrial system of production similar to what the conventional system currently offers us. This future reinforces a food system based on price, efficiency, and placeless food. It also limits the ability of producers and consumers to develop relationships built on trust. Animals, laborers, rural communities, the environment, and small-scale farmers are not likely to thrive in this future. On the other hand, strong alternative food networks such as Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s offer us a future with healthy rural communities and economically viable small-scale farmers. Food in this future reaches people embedded with information due to relationships built on trust and transparency. This future recognizes the natural foundations of farming and food consumption rather than the industrial and manufactured weak alternative food networks. Producers in this future cannot hide behind labels. Their food must actually fulfill social and political needs because consumers can go to the farms to see for themselves.

### Food as a Medium for Social Change

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin once said, “Tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you who you are” (Wikipedia 2007). He could easily have added, “and what you believe in.” It is a bold statement with, or without the addition. However, I am unsure of Brillat-Savarin’s ability to classify a person accurately without knowledge of how a person’s food was produced, distributed, and consumed. Only when information accompanies food, can it convey meaning. Pollan (2006a) studied the implications of food choices by researching four meals produced, distributed, and consumed in various ways. Singer and Mason (2006)

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<th>Weak alternative food networks</th>
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<td>Industrial</td>
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<td>Monoculture</td>
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<td>Global market</td>
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<td>Standardized and generic products</td>
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<td>Quantity and price first</td>
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<td>Declining farm prices</td>
<td>Higher farm gate prices</td>
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<td>Consolidated</td>
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<td>Placeless food</td>
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<td>Not transparent</td>
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<td>Extended relationships</td>
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<td>Reliant on third parties for verification</td>
<td>Knowledge and trust based</td>
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studied the eating habitats of three families, which they categorized as the Standard American Diet (aptly SAD), the Conscientious Omnivores, and the Vegans. Nestle (2006) researched what Americans’ food choices represent for current and future generations in regards to health. Young (2004) focused on the impacts of purchasing products through the conventional food system in the United Kingdom. Although each book is slightly different in its approach, they all share a common desire to determine whether participation in various forms of food networks actually represents social and political change and how that participation leads to change.

Knowledge of what food symbolizes gives an indication of the ends that a society seeks. Participants in the United States food system may or may not be conscious of the future that their food choices dictate. The food in Pollan’s (2006a) industrial meal and the diet of Singer and Mason’s (2006) SAD family represent a different future than that of the pastoral meal and the conscientious omnivores. In the same way, the alternative food system provides a future different from that of the conventional system. In addition, food choices within the alternative food system dictate which future participants seek. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks provide insight into what food represents to strong alternative food network participants and the ends that they seek.

The end that participants seek in the local D.C. networks is change. Initially, Betsy, Hiu, and Jack each spoke of the economic gains made by switching to organic products and direct sales. They said they could not last in the United States agricultural system without the premium prices they gained through their networks. There is a concern that an economic basis for their networks will simply lead to another market-based system very similar to the current conventional system. The question is whether Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks are weak or strong; a part of the Market World, or the Interpersonal World; a long or short food supply chain. Initially, they seemed more concerned about their welfare than about social change. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s self-concern was logical, since they have to pay their bills and take care of their families. However, their economic focus is reminiscent of the downfall of the countercuisine and raises concerns about the resurgence of alternative food networks.

There is a tendency for strong alternative networks to slip into the Market World and become weak networks such as Cascadian Farm and Earthbound Farm in California (Pollan 2006a). Gene Kahn, founder of Cascadian Farm, has described this process as, “how everything morphs into the way the world is” (Pollan 2006a, p. 152). Although the shift of strong networks to weak networks is a serious concern for the expansion of strong alternative food networks, one must recognize that there will always be a pull effect from the Market World and its basis in profits, but this should not be seen as an obstacle to strong alternative networks. Instead, the constant pull should be viewed favorably for two reasons. First, even though there is a constant pull, strong alternative networks persist in the United States food system. If weak alternative food networks were fulfilling people’s needs, there would be no need for strong alternative networks. This either means that some producers and consumers choose to remain in the Interpersonal World, or there is a constant renewal of strong alternative networks. Second, the Market World’s incorporation of ex-strong alternative networks could have its own pull effect on the Market World toward the Interpersonal World. Some traditional distributional systems such as supermarkets have begun to carry items from the Interpersonal World (e.g., locally grown heirloom tomatoes). The promise of corporations and weak alternative networks shifting toward the Interpersonal World is documented by authors such as Hawken et al. (1999). Although their focus is on resource productivity and environmental sustainability and not specifically on food networks, they suggest that corporations will be forced to choose
practices that address “global inequities of income and material well-being” in order to attain economic and environmental sustainability (Hawken et al. 1999, p. 9). History has not substantiated their claim. However, it is possible that former participants of strong alternative networks may influence the system as a whole by maintaining their beliefs in the importance of welfare, sustainability, and choice even while allowing market forces and price to dictate their decisions.

Food in Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks represents choice. Their networks provide consumers with an option, the power to choose a food future. The responsibility for choosing does not lie with Betsy, Hiu, and Jack. They are doing their part by providing options. Their networks provide every participant with information about the way they produce food and an ability to verify the information in person by visiting the farms. Consumers can make conscious decisions, and in doing so, create social change by choosing strong alternative food networks and the values that they represent. A main element in this form of social change is transparency, which creates trust between producers and consumers. Trust is dependent on accountability. Participants involved in the network feel they have recourse when someone treats them unfairly. They have recourse because they are involved in a short food supply chain and have access to the people who are providing their food. At the very least, someone will listen and consider their input. Food, therefore, represents a fair and equal relationship.

In strong alternative food networks, food represents sustainability in two ways: environmentally, and socially. Environmentally, producers grow food in a way that does not jeopardize future food production or the habitat of the rest of the world’s inhabitants. Strong alternative food networks are the very definition of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic (Leopold 1966). They fulfill the requirement that, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 1966, p. 262). Socially, strong alternative food networks ensure the sustainability of rural communities and provide livelihoods for small-scale farmers (Goldschmidt 1978; Norberg-Hodge et al. 2002). The sustainability of rural communities is a concern because the number of farms has decreased from a peak of 7 million in 1934 to only 1.9 million in 1997 (United States Department of Agriculture 2003). At the same time, the amount of farm acreage has remained nearly the same, thus leading to larger and more industrial farms (United States Department of Agriculture 2003). MacCannell (1998) suggests that there is a correlation between the industrialization of agriculture and the social degradation of rural communities. Social degradation is visible in increasing rates of suicide in rural communities and in poverty rates of 25–35 percent in California communities based on high value fruit and vegetable crops grown in industrial systems (Ramírez-Ferrero 2005). In contrast, Lappé (2006) estimates that a dollar spent at a local business can generate three times as much economic activity in a community than the same dollar spent at a corporate chain. The money spent at Hiu’s farm stand or Betsy’s farmers’ market stand goes right back into the community allowing other local businesses such as diners, bait shops, and mechanics to stay in business.

By choosing to participate in strong alternative food networks, consumers choose knowledge, choice, relationships, transparency, community, and sustainability. People make food choices every day, which represents a powerful opportunity to participate in change and shape the future. In this way, food is a means to achieve social change. However, there is a risk in allowing food to represent all of the change that we require in the United States food system. Corporations have usurped portions of the alternative food network by stepping into organic production. They fulfill the ecological tenets of alternative production while they leave aside issues of rural livelihoods, animal welfare, power,
labor, choice, place, etc. To compete in this system, farmers are encouraged to create niche products customized for a consumer educated on the benefits of the products (DeLind 2006). In this system, food networks are mainly dependent on economics with producers chasing consumers with specialized products. Suddenly, the relationship among network participants changes; people are only producers and consumers. Relationships are based on consumption and people lose their sense of community and place. In this scenario, food represents the status quo. Change in the food system requires that we maintain an “emotional, a spiritual, and a physical glue” not to the food itself, but to what it represents (DeLind 2006, p. 126).

Fortunately, in Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks, economics have not come to dominate. Each of the producers has land that is not in production because that is what is best for the environment and the community. Betsy and Jack maintain herds that are less than the maximum yield for their land. Each of the farmers has chosen limited outlets for their products that guarantee that they maintain a relationship with their consumers. They all make decisions that do not fit economic logic because they believe that their food represents more than the bottom line. Their food represents the glue that maintains relationships, a sense of place, and community values.

Supporting Strong Alternative Food Networks

Local alternative food networks offer a path to transform the way that we approach agricultural production and food consumption. Yet, given their significance, local alternative food networks represent a small share of the United States food system (Farmers Market Coalition 2007). Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s experiences developing and maintaining alternative food networks provide insight into the reasons for the near absence of alternatives in the food system. Government policies limit alternative network participants by favoring conventional agricultural networks that reduce small producer and consumer’s power, by providing commodity subsidies that skew competition, and by enacting national policies that lack consideration of diversity within the food system. They also face an American food culture built on price and convenience rather than the qualities described in the case studies. This creates a market based on economics rather than greater considerations of choice, welfare, and sustainability.

Even with all of these challenges, alternative food networks persist. The movement benefits from a well-developed dialogue. In an article in *The Nation*, American Chef Alice Waters (2006) brought together twelve influential minds ranging from author Michael Pollan to farmer-philosopher Wendell Berry to discuss the one thing that will trigger a revolution in the United States’ food system. Table 2 summarizes their ideas along with those of Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s, and juxtaposes them with a scheme for change in the United States’ food system. Obviously, Betsy, Hiu, and Jack identified areas for improvement that would benefit alternative food networks. Interestingly, so did all of the participants in Waters’s article. With their diverse production systems, Betsy, Hiu, and Jack try to correct the causes of environmental harm and rural decline rather than treat symptoms with the introduction of new synthetic chemicals and expanded scale. The Farm Bill is essential to the health of alternative food networks; provisions pertaining to conservation and subsidies have a direct impact on Betsy, Hiu, and Jack. Advertising has allowed companies peddling unhealthy processed foods to infiltrate young minds, making it difficult for growers who offer healthy, unprocessed foods to compete (Lappé 2006). In Waters’s (2006) article, Tony Duster and Elizabeth Ransom identify schools as a space
where children should learn about the benefits of consuming quality foods. Schools, as a
distribution channel, open another extensive market for alternative food producers and
provide a way to develop relationships with people early in their lives. Concern about the
United State’s ability to grow food in a degraded environment is one of the reasons that
people participate in alternative food networks and is of great concern to Wendell Berry
and Hiu Newcomb. Knowledge, cultural considerations, and the centrality of food in our
lives are all concerns for the sources in Table 2, and they are dominant issues in alternative
food networks. Peter Singer’s call to boycott factory farm products is a forthright accep-
tance of alternative food networks, and Jim Hightower’s belief that people like Betsy, Hiu,
and Jack should be creating agricultural policy shows that he, directly or indirectly, sup-
ports alternative food networks.

Since alternative food networks represent the change that people seek for the United
States food system, and for society as a whole in some cases, people should strive to
develop an environment that promotes these networks. There are two ways that people can
offer greater opportunities for alternative food networks. First, the government should
create policies that benefit strong alternative food networks. This starts with local, state,
and federal government leadership in the areas of research, education, and conservation
(Jack Sneuce, personal communication). While organic production has obvious benefits for
the environment and human health, only 0.35 percent of the Agricultural Research Service

Table 2  Solutions for the United States food system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities for alternative food networks</th>
<th>Idea</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Address advertising aimed at children</td>
<td>Marion Nestle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get involved with the 2007 Farm Bill</td>
<td>Michael Pollan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Address quality of food in schools</td>
<td>Troy Duster and Elizabeth Ransom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Return to diverse cropping systems rather than monocultures</td>
<td>Betsy Pritchard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Try to correct causes of problems rather than treat symptoms (e.g., tail cropping)</td>
<td>Eliot Coleman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop agricultural policies at the state or local level</td>
<td>Jack Sneuce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Federal leadership in research, education, and conservation</td>
<td>Jack Sneuce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eliminate commodity subsidies</td>
<td>Hiu Newcomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public awareness</td>
<td>Hiu Newcomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss future hunger related to an inability to produce food in a degraded environment</td>
<td>Wendell Berry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase knowledge of how to grow food sustainably</td>
<td>Wendell Berry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintain the culture contained in food</td>
<td>Winona LaDuke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not buy factory farmed food</td>
<td>Peter Singer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bring food back to the center of our lives</td>
<td>Carlo Petrini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Become policy makers</td>
<td>Jim Hightower</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All sources other than Betsy Pritchard, Hiu Newcomb, and Jack Sneuce discussed their ideas in, Alice Waters, “One Thing to Do About Food,” The Nation, September 11 2006, 14–22
Budget goes to research on organic production (Imhoff 2007). Educational services such as agricultural extension should focus on alternative production systems and modes of distribution. This will be difficult since the Congress mandates the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to promote conventional agriculture, but perhaps this is where we start. Maybe the mission of the USDA needs to change. Government leadership in conservation programs is also essential. Programs such as the Conservation Security Program, which reward farmers for best practices, should be fully funded contrary to the Bush administration’s actions, which have flat funded and capped the program below promised levels (Imhoff 2007).

The federal government has skewed the food system toward cheap commodity production with its subsidy program that rewards farmers for maximum short-term production rather than for long-term health of the environment, people, animals, and rural communities. A system that supports farmers based on actual production costs—including the social and environmental costs—should replace the commodity subsidy program. In the new system, there are two options for a farmer who has crops whose price has dropped below the federal price threshold (Pollan 2006b). First, the farmer can take a non-recourse loan, which is paid back when the price of the crop increases and the farmer sells the crops. Second, if the price of the crop does not improve, the farmer can give his crop to the government as payment for the loan. The government then holds the crop in its ever-normal granary to be used when crop prices spike due to future shortages. This system was in place during the New Deal, but the Nixon administration phased it out to maximize yields during the latter stages of the rationalization of American agriculture (Imhoff 2007).

The federal government also has a responsibility to maintain a competitive agricultural market. Economists figure that markets lose competitiveness once four companies control 40 percent of a market (Lappe 2006). Currently, four beef processors control 84 percent of their market; four pork processors control 64 percent of theirs; four chicken processors control 56 percent; and four companies process 63 percent of flour and 80 percent of soybeans (Lappe 2006). In economists’ terms, none of these markets is competitive.

Leadership at the federal level could be as simple as setting goals. Laura L. Jackson (2006) suggests the following: (1) At least 80 percent of farms should make a profit eight out of 10 years, (2) reduce farm sector consumption of fossil fuels by 50 percent, (3) reduce nitrates and sediments at the mouth of the Mississippi River by 10 percent every year, and (4) leave enough grassland and forest to protect significant carnivores such as the bobcat. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack probably already meet all of these criteria, so it would be up to the large industrial growers to figure out how to compete with small farmers. This would be an excellent turn on current affairs.

Currently, the federal government creates most agricultural policy. That is why much of the discussion above has focused on the role of the federal government. The situation is unfortunate, but it is a starting point for change. There is danger in allocating a leadership position to the federal government. The abuse of the national organic certification system by corporations is an example of what can happen when the federal government is in charge. National organic certification has contributed to the standardization and industrialization visible in the Big Organic industry. The current debate over the United States Farm Bill reflects the limited view that the federal government has the sole ability to create agricultural policy and exhibits the flaw of creating national policies for an activity that is inherently local. Large corporations and large farms dominated the discussions and therefore the resulting Farm Bill did not meet the high expectations of small farmers’ associations, environmentalists, and everyday citizens who eat the result of the Farm Bill. Social movements have raised concerns about issues such as commodity subsidies,
consolidation, and conservation funding. However, no one has asked that the USDA decentralize decision-making and policy creation to the state or local level.

The risk of standardization is the main reason that the federal government should only provide a structure in which a democratic process of local decision-making takes place. The greatest success for the alternative food system is a complete independence from the federal government; however, this is a long-term goal. If each state makes individual decisions regarding agricultural practices, it will be more difficult for corporate interests to influence the system. Instead of a focused effort on one government, agribusiness would have to develop fifty strategies. In a state-based system, decision makers could adapt policies to reflect local social, environmental, and economic conditions. No longer should one policy overlook the complexity of agriculture in the United States.

The second way to create greater opportunities for alternative food networks is to create space. Here the author extends Morgan et al.’s (2006) spatial considerations of relocalizing food to include the actual physical space where alternative network participants interact. Interactions among Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s alternative network participants take place on the property of those involved or in a public space such as a farmers’ market. These spaces uniquely allow participants to set the rules of interaction (within American law). No one has to check with corporate sponsors before making statements that question the status quo of American society. Coca-Cola cannot dictate which flyers people hand out in a market that takes place in a public space. In these spaces, people are free to question the conventional food system and what it represents. They are also free to discuss ways in which politics and society should change. When debate about issues takes place in the public sphere, anyone can participate; we have the opportunity to hear the voice of people not represented in traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio (Bollier 2003).

Due to the importance of these spaces for public discourse, people should strive to create more. Trusts are one way that people can create and conserve these spaces for the future. Trusts are designed to protect the commons, which are defined as any tangible or intangible assets that are passed on from generation to generation (Bollier 2003). These are things we own collectively—public parks, community gardens, and farmers’ markets. Trusts are a centuries old system where a trustee holds and manages property for the trust’s beneficiaries (Barnes 2006). They are enforceable by law, so it is possible to punish any indiscretion by a trustee through lawsuits or imprisonment.

Two specific types of trusts will benefit alternative food networks. First, agricultural land trusts will ensure that land is available for future food production. These lands would be available to anyone, but there would be a permit system to ensure that a “tragedy of the commons” does not take place. People could only use the lands for agricultural purposes, so there would be no pressure from urban developers as there is now for Betsy, Hiu, and Jack. People could also conduct research on sustainable agricultural practices, or establish community farms or gardens where people could learn more about how food grows. Donahue (1999) suggests that community farms are essential to the adoption of alternative agricultural networks because they help people redefine what is valuable. The trusts would be independent of the federal and state governments, so they would remain free from a campaign finance system that seems to corrupt many aspects of society today. A second type of trust would be set up for public spaces. These spaces would provide society with a venue for public discourse independent from corporate influences. The spaces should have a requirement for a farmers’ market because food has the ability to draw people together.

Physical space that encourages community interaction and public discussion will create the cultural space needed for strong alternative food networks to gain a greater portion of the United States food system. The presence of information in the form of brochures and
posters like those of Betsy and Hiu’s will make people question the legitimacy of the conventional food system. A lack of information in the conventional food system is evident in a 2004 survey that showed that 70 percent of Americans thought they had never eaten genetically modified organisms (GMOs) (Lappe 2006). This seems nearly impossible considering that most of the soybeans and 38 percent of the corn grown in the United States are genetically modified (Lappe 2006). The federal government has refused GMO labeling even though 94 percent of Americans favor labeling (Lappe 2006). Completely ignoring consumers’ wishes is not possible in strong alternative food networks. Information about products is readily available and direct interaction between producers and consumers would make continued obliviousness to consumer concerns impossible.

**Social Movements and Strong Alternative Food Networks**

Change is something that many people and organizations seek for the United States. Environmentalists want more conservation. Labor activists want higher wages and better treatment of workers. Protesters of globalization want the power of corporations reduced and the power of people amplified. Church leaders want traditional values such as caring for one another reinforced. Each of these movements has worked on its own agenda with occasional cooperation on particular issues. Food, specifically strong alternative food networks, provides one issue that can bring all of these groups together for a sustained effort to create social and political change in the United States. Table 3 illustrates the themes that hold all of these movements together in support of strong alternative food networks. The first theme is choice and accessibility of information. The anti-corporate, pro-democracy, food safety, and health movements all would like to develop a more transparent society in which people have information to make educated decisions about food. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks provide participants with full disclosure of how food is produced, distributed, and consumed. Direct relationships between producers and consumers assure the transmission of this information.

The second theme is welfare. The animal welfare and labor movements have focused on agricultural practices that have brought harm to farm animals and laborers. Betsy and Jack do not condone unethical practices such as tail and beak clipping and provide their animals with healthy diets and plenty of space. Laborers on all of the farms have relationships with the farmers. This is apparent in Betsy’s requirement for farmers’ market employees to visit her farm to understand her philosophy. It is also evident in local community members taking positions as laborers on Hiu’s farm. The bond between farm owners and their laborers in these networks lessens the chance of abuse or unfair treatment. The food safety/security and health/nutrition movements are concerned about recent food scares and the increased prevalence of diet-based diseases in the United States. Food in each of the case study networks is easy to trace and the farms’ scale is much smaller than in the industrial systems, which reduces the likelihood of large-scale food contamination issues. A system of many small-scale producers increases food security for the country as a whole because there are more producers to rely on if for some reason some of them fail to produce. The absence of highly processed foods and food additives in Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s products should encourage health and nutrition activists due to the link between these foods and human health issues (Imhoff 2007). The small-scale farmers and rural prosperity movements are concerned about the disappearance of small family farms in the United States and the resulting collapse of rural communities. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks are based on small farms, which have brought economic returns to rural communities. The religious
Table 3 Rationale for various social and political movements’ support for alternative food networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Reasons for supporting alternative food networks similar to the case studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animal Welfare</td>
<td>Fair treatment of animals; no animal mutilation (beak, tail clipping); natural animal diets (e.g., grass-fed beef); animal access to outdoors; small-scale processing; minimal animal transport (stress)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-corporate</td>
<td>Alternative network undermines distribution system that supports corporate agricultural production; provides choices for consumers; no corporate payouts in form of subsidies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmentalists</td>
<td>Habitat conservation; diversity conservation (wild and domestic); sustainable use of resources; no use of synthetic chemicals; less food miles (green house gas emissions); no GMOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food safety/security</td>
<td>Traceable food; producer accountability; information rich food; diverse and decentralized food system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/nutrition</td>
<td>Unprocessed foods; fresh foods; no synthetic chemicals used in production; no synthetic chemicals added to food; obvious nutritional information (no hidden sugars, salts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>More owners of capital; less mechanization; more jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-democracy</td>
<td>Choice; civic participation; information; fair representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Reestablish personal relationships; accountability for actions; equality; care of God’s creations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural prosperity</td>
<td>Money stays in local communities; provides jobs in rural areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small-scale farmers</td>
<td>Provides economic reason to continue farming; rejection of industrial logic in farming; provides a way to compete with large farms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and pro-democracy movements are concerned about the welfare of United States society as a whole. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks provide information for people to make knowledgeable decisions about which values they want to support with their food consumption and thus address concerns about the loss of democratic and community values in society.

The final theme is environmental sustainability. Everyone has a stake in the sustainability of our food supply; however, the environmental movement has been most vocal in stating their concerns about sustainability. Its concerns include the environmental impacts of chemical use, soil erosion, water pollution, habitat destruction, and more. Environmentalists now understand that conservation cannot rely on parks and reserves to address all of the issues above because conservation areas represent a small share of land in the United States. In addition, causes of environmental degradation do not conform to park and reserve boundaries. Alternative food networks such as Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s provide a way for the United States to continue its agricultural history without damaging—and in some cases, improving—the environment.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed the qualifications used to determine the “alternativeness” of food networks in the United States. Three case studies in the Washington, D.C. region provided a farmer-level view of the morals and ethics that lead to alternative food network participation. The purpose of this analysis was to determine the ability of alternative food networks to produce social and political change in the United States. By using Storper and Salais’s (1997) concept of Production Worlds as a framework in which the conventional,
weak alternative, and strong alternative food networks fit, I determined that only strong alternative networks such as those of local producers Betsy, Hiu, and Jack, have the capability to produce social and political change in the United States.

As I have shown, Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks are alternative due to their rejection of the conventional system, their redistribution of wealth back to farmers, the inclusion of trust and transparency, and the creation of new forms of political association and market governance (Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Morgan et al. 2006). The discussion of food networks is incomplete when left at this dualism of conventional versus alternative. The alternative food system is a heterogeneous mix of networks vastly different from one another in their ability to address issues of welfare, sustainability, choice, and power distribution. Strong alternative networks are a part of the Interpersonal World where relationships and trust create a cooperative atmosphere for equal participation in short food supply chains. Direct interaction among participants maintains the specific qualities that they seek in food, society, and the environment.

Authors such as DeLind (2003), DuPuis and Goodman (2005), and Hinrichs and Allen (2008) have all cautioned that alternative food networks are not inherently beneficial. Alternative networks can lead to myopic and exclusive decision-making that only benefit the most educated and elite members of society. Therefore, it is essential to maintain an open and continuous dialogue about the alternative food network traits that lead to beneficial social and political change. Otherwise, we may find that underrepresented members of society, such as the poor, do not benefit any more from the alternative food system than they do in the current conventional food system. An incomplete analysis of alternative networks also allows individuals and corporations to make questionable claims about their benefits, as seen in work by Young (2004), Nestle (2006), Pollan (2006a), and Singer and Mason (2006).

Some may argue that this study is an incomplete analysis because it only examines strong alternative networks, and therefore, that conclusions cannot be drawn. However, only strong alternative networks were chosen for a reason. Authors such as Morgan et al. (2006), Nestle (2006), Singer and Mason (2006), Pollan (2006a), and Belasco (2007) have all examined the ability of corporations and weak alternative networks to usurp ideas from strong alternative networks and twist the true intentions of the original alternative food movement. What is needed is the reflexive discourse that Dupuis and Goodman (2005) called for on the true ability of strong alternative networks to affect change in our society.

Change is what people seek in strong alternative food networks. Concerns regarding the true effects of the conventional food system have led people to seek information about their food and its production. As people educate themselves about food, they seek options, and Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s networks provide a choice. The future success of these networks and their ability to change society is dependent on our commitment to provide the space for them to succeed. Social movements as varied as animal welfare, pro-democracy, and rural welfare should support actions to create physical spaces for community interaction where people can question the status quo of the food system. Betsy, Hiu, and Jack’s alternative food networks represent the persistent minority in the United States food system. They provide us with food that symbolizes knowledge, choice, personal relationships, transparency, sustainability, and welfare.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Hiu Newcomb, Betsy Pritchard and Jack Sneuce who met with me at a time of year when farmers have too much to do and not enough daylight to do it. I owe a large debt of gratitude to Kelly Feltault for her insight and comments. I would also like to thank the four anonymous reviewers who provided helpful comments.
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