

Introduction

Beautiful Tomatoes and the Dance for Land

A friend and her little brother were left alone one day to eat their bowls of tomato soup. They soon discovered that although the soup looked pretty neat just sitting in the bowl, it looked even better splattered on the wall. Spoons, it turned out, made excellent catapults. Choosing beauty over appetite, they launched great dollops of the stuff onto the white walls. They admired the beautiful red splotches, no two alike. They enjoyed the tomato soup thoroughly until their mother came back to the room and they saw her face. Food is so much more than sustenance.

Food gathers meaning like an insatiable sponge. To paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, food is good to think with. Many listeners have delighted in my friend's story because, like spoons filled with soup, it is brimming over with meaning. The story ruminates about North American eating practices, the origins of rebellion, the beauty of food, alliances, and misunderstanding. From annual family gatherings to daily concerns over hunger, from anxiety over hidden ingredients in food to innovative co-operative businesses, from the fight for land to the fight for nature-friendly agriculture, food becomes not just the key to how we live our lives in this world, but a way in which we talk about the world. Food is an idiom that, like a language full of puns, is useful for talking about certain things because it is so hospitable to the multiplication of meaning. Food is also a catalyst for social change — as both an inspiration and ally. In the case of this book, food provides an especially useful tool for discussing the ambivalence and shifting communication invoked by the work of social change. Food dogs the progress of social change. Like a puppy it runs eagerly ahead, leads the way, then falls back again, distracted by a bug.

The ways in which people and societies change through food are myriad. The examples of this change are equally mind-boggling in their extent and colour. Food inspires actions in Canada and across the world — actions that redress inequities between North and South, between rich and poor. Whether through food banks and community kitchens, or consumer movements or agrarian reform, the ways in which people try to change the world through food are plentiful and diverse. Sometimes they celebrate together while at other times they seem to be shouting each other down.

Food protests were vivid and enthusiastic within the widespread movement that stopped the World Trade Organization (WTO) talks on free trade

in Seattle in 1999, hurled itself against the massive fence during the Free Trade of the Americas (FTAA) talks in Quebec City in 2001, and once again demonstrated and celebrated as world trade talks disintegrated in Cancun in 2003.¹ Reports from Cancun gave witness to the breakdown of a world trade plan controlled by a wealthy few. A key issue was agricultural subsidies: unfair subsidies united Southern nations against the selective protectionism that makes the transported product of U.S. farming cheaper than locally grown Mexican (or Canadian) products.²

Edible Action is concerned with two aspects of the relation of food and social change. First, what are the numerous ways in which food has inspired social change? And second, why is food such a successful catalyst for social change? These questions open the door for continued thoughtful practice and reflection. The answers will indicate which key issues are mobilized by food and agriculture, and provide a map for the alternatives that food engages.

That something is wrong with the food system is patently, heartbreakingly, true. Every day almost 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes (one every five seconds) (Bread for the World 2007). Across the globe small farmers fight to keep their land, to grow food for their communities, to keep their heads above the rising tide of debt. And, lest one associates these figures only with the images of famine in Africa that the media is addicted to, we must remember that 14.7 percent of Canadians live in food-insecure households (Pegg 2007), and about 7 percent are chronically hungry. In the United States the number is even higher: 11 percent of households each year experience or are at risk of hunger (Bread for the World 2007). This occurs in a country with immense food surpluses discarded by supermarkets, restaurants, agribusinesses, and institutions such as schools, or dumped as supercheap food on poor Southern nations, thereby destroying local food systems.

In Canada many farmers just don't see the point of continuing to work the land; they are at the losing end of a mathematical calculation about debt and economics that will never balance in their favour. As Brian Halweil (2000) points out, "Since 1950, the number of people employed in agriculture has plummeted in all industrial nations, in some regions by more than 80 percent." The National Farmers Union in Canada calculates that almost two out of three family farms have folded since World War II (National Farmers Union 2003). Many farmers decide to sell their land to developers because they can earn much more that way than they can make farming it. The developers remove and resell the topsoil, and plant homes made of ticky-tacky on the resulting desert. In an unspeakable tragedy in a wealthy country like Canada, growing numbers of farmers every year commit suicide rather than live through the experience of losing their land and livelihood. As researcher Christine Ahn (2003) notes, in Britain and Canada

farmers commit suicide at double the rate of the general population. It is a trend south of the border as well. Farmers in the United States — who are now relatively small in number — are five times more likely to commit suicide than they are to die from farm accidents. Ahn quotes Brian Halweil of World Watch: “The true number may be even higher, as suicide hotlines report that they often receive calls from farmers who want to know which sorts of accidents are least likely to be investigated by insurance companies that don’t pay claims for suicides.” Other countries show the same pattern. Between 1998 and 1999 in India, over 1,000 farmers committed suicide: “Three hundred of them killed themselves by swallowing the very same costly pesticides that they had gone into debt to purchase” (Ahn 2003).

Across a great divide from these deaths, immense profits are being made, raked in by corporate food giants such as Cargill, McDonald’s, and George Weston (Schlosser 2002; Kneen 1995). Around the globe the culture of globalization mangles and remakes economies everywhere. According to Halweil (2000), “In the United States, the share of the consumer’s food dollar that trickles back to the farmer has plunged from nearly 40 cents in 1910 to just above 7 cents in 1997.” In Mexico in the 1990s, the prices that farmers got for their corn and beans plummeted while the price of tortillas rose by 179 per cent (Desmarais 2007: 63). This story is retold in all corners of the globe. It is a tale fashioned by globe-trotting multinational corporations, and it ends in local hunger and despair.³

Talking with Your Mouth Full

If there’s something wrong with the food system, there’s something wrong with the economic system. (Lucien Royer, People’s Food Commission, 1979)

Whether from despair or anger, farmers seem increasingly ready to rise up, sometimes violently, against government, wealthy landholders, or agribusiness giants. (Halweil 2000)

All over the world, people are using food to change how they live: their society, politics, and economies. For instance, every week the farmers of Plan B Organic Farm near Toronto bring their organic produce to farmers’ markets all over the region. They also supply food to members of their Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, in which people pay early in the spring to receive a weekly share of the season’s harvest. One market that Plan B helped to start is the Dufferin Grove market, where farmers, bakers, and organic meat purveyors rub elbows with the community pizza oven and park community garden.

On Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, the first Canadian multistake-

holder co-op, Growing Circle, buys local foods to supply local people and puts everyone on the board. At the other end of Canada, over 200,000 people are members of the Co-op Atlantic network of food co-ops, co-op farm stores, and funeral and housing co-ops. Over the border in Maine, 50,000 to 60,000 people show up every year at the Common Ground Fair, a celebration of rural living put on by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. The Community Food Security Coalition in Venice, California, has taken its community food mapping process on the road across the United States, offering local people a way of viewing their community through food access and of taking charge of their food security. Consumer actions and boycotts have forced Starbucks, a giant coffee corporation, to offer fair trade coffee in its cafés. Dunkin' Donuts quickly followed suit.

In Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, Europe, Africa, Mexico, and beyond, community organizers, activists, farmers, environmentalists, scientists, and Southern producers have joined forces to keep genetically modified foods out of the fields and off the shelves. In the global South, landless people have begun to occupy and win unused land back from wealthy landowners. Across the world, rural producers have joined forces in La Vía Campesina, an international movement of peasants and small farmers that fights for more just and sustainable food and agriculture systems. As the people at SunRoot Organic Farm in Kennetcook, Nova Scotia, told me, food is a medium that people use to talk about politics and to take action. Steve Law, one of SunRoot's three farmer-activists, told me, "What we are doing here on the farm is part of trying to model a different world." Across North America and the world, people have joined together to create diverse food initiatives. They are using food to talk about politics, economic justice, and social change.

Edible Action explores the cultural responses that arise when the principles of globalization, structural adjustment, and consolidation are applied to food and agriculture. These principles include: consolidate production under huge transnational corporations, slash public spending, consolidate land-holdings, increase efficiency, reduce small-scale industry, open all doors to free trade, constrict the movement of organized labour, and curtail the protection of local production. How do cultures erupt in creative and popular protest around food and agriculture issues? Why do food issues bring people out to the streets, to their city councils, and even (in Brazil) to their national governments? Why do they also result in an extraordinary feast of workable alternatives — that is, edible action? Polls show widespread concern about food and environmental issues, but how does the step from knowledge or concern to action take place? Why does food have a significant ability to mobilize people, moving them readily from information to political action for change?

Food Is Good to Think With

We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen [as totems] not because they are “good to eat” but because they are “good to think.” (Lévi-Strauss 1962)

When we fight about food we are also fighting about social change. *Edible Action* explores this thesis through the stories of various key movements in food and agriculture. The book investigates the ways in which the narratives of change overlap and build to a realistic conversation about social change. Throughout the book, this conversation exemplifies the growth of food democracy, in the sense not of pure agreement (coincidence of thought) but of negotiated agreement (consensus). Such a democracy in Canada builds on the legacy of the People’s Food Commission (PFC) in the late 1970s, which set a historical context in Canada for the unfolding of social change through food. Like the “totemic species” that Lévi-Strauss describes, food is good to think with. The question that impels this book is: if food is good to think *with*, what do we use it to think *about*?

The answer to this question lies in the resistance that food activists, innovators, farmers, and store owners pose to the logic of conventional food economics. For instance, in the Maritime provinces, managers of the 200,000-member co-op network actively consider ways of building social capital. They have created an economic system in which the concatenation of overlapping interests guarantees that the standard rift between producers and consumers, which has built to crisis proportions in the food system, is almost impossible to maintain in all seriousness. Elsewhere, natural food stores have developed highly successful strategies based on a non-conventional understanding of customer behaviour. Price takes a back seat to the negotiations of needs, desires, plans for the planet, and care for other people. Food security organizations, such as the Stop Community Food Centre, FoodShare in Toronto, and the Food Project in Boston, focus on fairness and a right for all to feed themselves before profit. Fair trade organizations and localization initiatives seek to reduce the dangerous distance between producer and consumer that infects our food system. Out of this welter of alternatives, practices, and hope, the elements of true democracy become visible: participatory, constantly negotiated, constantly in process. These organizations have redefined financial success. They have eschewed the single-minded pursuit of growth and profit for the subtler goals of environmental health, democracy, and a world without hunger. An alternative economics rises from the stories of their everyday strategies, visions, and practical solutions.

Alternative Economics

From the viewpoint of human reality that which is restored by the disestablishment of the commodity fiction [which separates the economic from the social] lies in all directions of the social compass (Polanyi 1944).

The practice of these food innovators is not just something dreamed up from a distance, but is clearly an elaborated working model for operation. On the way to changing the food system, food initiatives have necessarily created alternative economic systems, which are not mere parasites on systems of capitalism but are whole and internally consistent. Contrary to popular belief, these innovative organizations succeed at least as well as do conventional organizations. In the case of co-ops, they can even boast on average greater longevity and a much improved quality of working life. They have given people who might otherwise consider themselves unqualified to talk about economics an idiom in which to resist the depredations of the dominant economic system.

Edible Action builds on my own experience: over ten years of work experience in the natural and organic food sectors, with organic farmers, processors, and consumers, in retail, wholesale, and co-ops. The analysis and research strategies have developed partly from my work for the Ph.D. in anthropology on storytelling in Nepal (Cornell University, 1992). The approach I take relies on a journalistic approach to the interviews, although it is certainly informed by my readings of ethnographic method; and I have offered considerable opportunity for interviewees to change or adjust the direction of the research, to tell me what they consider most important for the book and to steer me towards other key people to interview.

My approach to stories derives from a conviction that our approach to the world, as part of the function of a culture, is rhetorical; that is, we are constantly shaping our experience and determining our actions by the way in which we narrate events to ourselves and to each other. To look at widespread actions around food (in some cases global action) is to explore functioning mythologies. In this analysis, a cultural mythology is a patterned construction of reality that is shared and laboured over by numerous participants. This “mythology” is not fiction but the cultural work that we use to make sense of the world and to establish beliefs and rules for action and change. The progress in social movements is a study in a dialogue among storytellers, as each of us offers up our realities, and compares and discusses them. The resulting cacophony is both chaotic and purposeful. As we begin to repeat each other’s stories, or to tell them together in a counterpoint, cultures begin to take new shapes, and different directions are taken by members of a society.

Part of the challenge in writing this book has been the enormous number of stories about people using food to change the world. The choice of which stories to tell in-depth has been a little like living with a baby monitor, trying to decipher the point at which the babbling becomes pointed and moves uniformly towards a clear demand for change.

The final chapter explores the next step: what kind of food education and organizing would bring all of these stories and idioms of food into one conversation? How can food, with which we delight to talk about economics, give people everywhere strategies for challenging an economic system that is increasingly failing larger and larger sectors of society, as the gap between rich and poor widens every day and more people, both North and South, gaze into a hungry and poisoned future?

My hope is that the landscape and vision of social change offered in this book will be both an inspiration and a kind of mnemonic device that will trigger memories and thoughts of personal experience and action that will further people the landscape with extraordinary moments and initiatives.

I was once told during my doctoral research in Nepal that there was part of a religious holiday when women could keep all the land they could dance across that day. The earth is starting to shake with the spirit and the strength of dancers and food protesters everywhere, and the land they are reclaiming is enough to feed us all.

Notes

1. The food issues that brought people to these anti-globalization protests are numerous. Some prominent ones include local food and agriculture, genetically engineered food, and corporate control of food and trade regulations.
2. The resistance to genetically engineered corn was also instrumental in the disintegration of the talks (Deborah Barndt, personal communication).
3. The details of this growing global inequity (which I will return to in chapter 4) have been carefully documented by numerous scholars and journalists. For progressive economists, the gap is a given, a product of social change since about 1970 in North America. For Canada, see Yalnizyan (1998); for a global perspective see the work of Susan George (1984), David Korten (2001), and others.