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# Can Consumer Demand Deliver Sustainable Food?: Recent Research in Sustainable Consumption Policy & Practice

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### ***Introduction***

Food has always played a central, mediating role in the relationship between humans and our environments. Anthropologists and historians, among others, have long illustrated how subsistence systems have helped to shape our societies, linking people and our views of the world to localized experiences of gathering, preparing and consuming food. Yet today, in the context of an increasingly standardized and industrial global food system, the separation of food as a social product from the economic and natural systems that produce it has inspired significant protest (Walter 2008, Wilk 2006). Food activists have contested the conditions that alienate us, physically and emotionally, from the human and natural systems that generate our sustenance, lamented the loss of control over our food supply, and advocated a return to safe, sustainable and healthy foods.

Certainly it can be argued that dominant forms of industrial agriculture are unsustainable in many ways, pushing human-natural systems to points that pose a fundamental threat to long-term human and environmental health. The environmental concerns associated with industrial agriculture are broad, ranging from the loss of biodiversity due to standardization, genetic engineering, and corporate consolidation (Manno 2002; Munro & Schurman 2008), to tropical deforestation linked to biofuel and cattle production (Dauvergne 2010), and the effects of agricultural chemicals in our food supply, ground waters, and living systems (Guthman 2004a). Indeed, as Johnston (2008) argues, environmental activism has focused on agriculture due to the industry's disproportionate responsibility for environmental destruction (Kimbrell 2002),

biodiversity loss (WCU 2011), energy use (Manno 2002) and greenhouse gas emissions (Heinberg and Bomford 2009).

Many concerns with the dominant food system are grounded in environmentalism but reflect a variety of other late-capitalist concerns including those associated with human rights, social justice, and unfair trade relations (Johnston 2008). The spread of corporate agriculture and the cheap, poor-quality food it produces has threatened many small scale farmers and the unique, localized production methods they employ (Dolan & Humphery 2000, Humphery 2010, Probyn 2011) These shifts have, over time, resulted in a significant loss of intellectual capital and have alienated many humans from the means of production. While privileged northern food activists often focus on the availability of high-quality, artisanal, and locally-produced organic foods, the UN estimates that 1 billion people live with chronic hunger and malnourishment (FAO 2011). This bifurcation has significant consequences for vulnerable populations whose sustenance -- due to the legacy of colonialism and unjust trade -- is simultaneously dependent on the demands of northern consumers and cheap industrial food imports. These vulnerable communities bear a disproportionate burden of the environmental and social costs of industrial food production, perpetuating global inequality (Jaffee et. al. 2004, Wright and Middendorf 2008, Wilk 2006, Dauvergne 2010).

Environmental and social concerns have led to the unprecedented growth of consumer-based food activism over the last several decades. From Slow Food and anti-GMO boycotts to ecolabelled foods, fair trade, organics, local food, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture and consumer buying cooperatives -- "contests over the future of food and agriculture are thriving" (Wright & Middendorf 2008:273).

Labeled by different disciplines and theoretical perspectives<sup>i</sup> as “ethical consumption” (e.g. Barnett et.al. 2010; Carrier and Leutchedford 2011; Harrison et. al. 2005; Lewis & Potter 2011), “political consumption” (e.g. Bostrom et. al. 2004; Micheletti 2003; Stolle et. al. 2005), “sustainable consumption” (e.g. Cohen & Murphy 2001; Dolan 2002; Isenhour 2010; Wilk 2004) and “anti-consumption,” (Black 2010, Binkley 2008, Lee et.a.2009, Varman & Belk 2009) the diverse consumer politics formed in opposition to industrial food production are part of a larger critique of globalization and capitalism.

There seems to be a popular consensus that we consumers have a considerable amount of power to make more sustainable food choices and drive systemic change (Beck 2000). Those of us concerned about the future of our food supply are told that “it is easy being green<sup>ii</sup>” and are encouraged by politicians, pop culture icons, best-selling novelists and fellow citizens to take “simple steps” to consume more responsibly. Yet despite an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of these consumer-based movements (e.g. Humphrey 2010; Brunori et. al. 2008; Micheletti & McFarland 2010; Johnston 2008; Wright & Middendorf 2008) and a significant amount of speculation, empirical studies on their ability to influence change are scarce and often contradictory. Focusing specifically on the ideologies of consumer responsibility, citizenship and neoliberal environmental governance, this paper critically reviews the recent literature on consumer-based alternative food movements in order to examine the promises and perils of the contemporary focus on consumer responsibility. The central question posed by this essay is, “can consumer demand deliver sustainable food?”

While focusing on one form of food activism (e.g. fair trade, local food, organics) would have been a more conventional, not to mention much more manageable, approach to answering this question -- I refer to all these variations as “consumer-based alternative food movements” to

reflect their shared focus on consumer responsibility and empowerment. It is an admittedly precarious endeavor to group these diverse strategies into a single category - given the differences between them in values, scope, aim, and goals (Littler 2009). Alternative consumption strategies, as Humphery (2010) points out, operate in different political realms ranging from the cultural (as with culture jamming groups like AdBusters) to the communal (as with local and cooperative initiatives), the civic (as with attempt to fulfill civic duties via the purchase of “ethical” goods on the market) and lifestyle politics (via simplification, reduction and self-provisioning). Efforts to group these myriad forms of consumer politics are further complicated by the fact that some of these consumer-based movements do not allow for the easy separation of producers and consumers as in community-based gardening initiatives. Finally, many of these movements have contrasting strategies and aims. Some, like the Slow Food movement are more clearly concerned with individual gratification and operate under the logic of consumer culture, while others, like local cooperative movements and culture jamming, are explicitly oriented in opposition to consumer logic and aim to influence political and economic reform of the structures that script for dominant modes of production and consumption.

Jo Littler is correct to argue that it is difficult to assess the political efficacy of these movements without consideration of their specific, localized practices in context. Unfortunately, it is not possible to detail these difference or the contrasting values and politics that underlie each of these unique strategies here, given the constraints of a journal length article and the already ambitious goal of reviewing such a broad and productive interdisciplinary literature (that seems to grow by the second). My aim is not to analyze these different forms of consumer activism or to compare them per se, but rather to examine the commonality between them -- the emphasis on consumer responsibility, “responsibilization” or “individualization” -- and how effective this

consumer turn has been generating alternative food networks. I argue, following Johnston (2008), Goodman & DuPuis (2002), and Gabriel & Lang (2006), that while specific alternative food strategies have received considerable attention, there is a need to theorize consumer politics as they relate to governance more broadly.

The organizational structure of this article is simple, consisting of three parts. It may seem to the reader that its logic rides the momentum of a pendulum. Beginning with a section entitled “The Promise of Consumer Demand” - I review theoretical frameworks and studies which suggest there are reasons to be optimistic about the potential of consumer-based alternative food movements. The second section entitled “On the Perils of Consumer Demand” swings to the other extreme covering critiques which indicate that consumer-based food movements reproduce the very problems they claim to resist. In the third and final section the argument comes to rest in between these two polemics and attempts to reconcile unproductive and tired distinctions between the relative power of human agency and societal structures; between consumer sovereignty and regulation. However, the argument does not rest directly in the center of these contrasting perspectives. Readers will discover that much of the most recent literature and the current author have grown increasingly skeptical of the consumer responsibility discourse and neoliberal forms of environmental governance - in the absence of a complimentary focus on citizenship, rights and adequate political solutions. While extremely respectful of human agency and the generative power of social movements, this critical review suggests that polycentric solutions are necessary to move beyond the limited potential of consumer demand and toward those which encourage a renewed role for citizenship and the political and redistributive solutions necessary to deliver sustainable food to all global citizens.

### ***Part I: The Promise of Consumer Demand***

I imagine that nearly all readers have encountered a few of the - now ubiquitous - recommendations for sustainable eating. As Lyon (2006) points out, the last decade has been marked by an abundance of articles recommending the “small steps” that we as consumers can take to positively affect farmers, reduce our environmental impact, improve our communities, and increase personal satisfaction. In relation to food, these “small steps” nearly always include buying local, organic, and seasonal foods lower on the food chain (Dowler 2008). From Wendell Berry’s *Bringing it to the Table* (2009) and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2008) to Michael Pollen’s *In Defense of Food* (2009) and Gary Nabham’s *Coming Home to Eat* (2009), best-selling authors have echoed and amplified these calls for mindful eating.

It seems that a growing number of consumers have readily accepted this challenge. Growth in sales of “ethical” foods, including those with high animal welfare standards, organics, local produce, and fair trade certified goods have experienced significant growth in the last several decades (Dowler 2008). In 2010, 30% of shoppers in the UK reported buying local foods at least once a month, more than double the percentage who reported doing so in 2006 (IGD 2010). Similarly global fair trade sales continue to outpace conventional products with 22% growth in 2008 alone (FLO 2011). In the US the number of CSAs has grown from approximately 50 in 1990 to more than 2500 (Local Harvest 2011) and the number of farmers’ markets has grown from about 1700 in 1994 to more than 6,000 in 2010 (AMS 2010). While alternative consumption movements are certainly nothing new (Furlough & Stridwerka 1999; Hilton & Daunton 2001), these recent forms are remarkable in their depth and breadth – leading many scholars to theorize their unprecedented growth and speculate about their transformative potential.

*On knowledge and the promise of rational reflexivity...*

The most common, and perhaps optimistic, theorizations of these alternative food movements links the phenomenon to theories of “reflexive modernization” and “life politics” which suggest that individuals adapt and mold their futures as they learn about the “consequences of modernity” (Giddens 1991) and realize that the risks are quickly outpacing our capacity to manage them (Beck 1992). This perspective assumes that with this knowledge, consumers will become increasingly reflexive, altering their behaviors and lifestyles, (Halkier 1999, Wilk 2004, Connolly & Prothero 2008), individualizing risk, and demanding alternatives on the free market (Adams 2004, Hobson 2002, Matti 2009). Thus food choices constitute a new arena through which one can become a political actor to influence change. Information, education, and awareness become key because reflexivity is dependent upon and mediated by knowledge (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). As such many alternative food movements have focused on information dissemination and educational campaigns. As Guthman writes, “knowing where your food comes from has become one of the most prevalent idioms of the current agro-food movement” (2008: 1175).

Reflexive modernization thought is increasingly dominant in many parts of the world as is made evident by the number of states which aim to encourage consumer responsibility through educational and awareness campaigns. Examples of these campaigns are not difficult to find. Alfredson (2004), Isenhour (2010a) and Matti (2009) point to the Swedish case where several governmental agencies have supported the publication of reports and documents designed to encourage consumers to make more sustainable choices. Similarly Brunori et.al. (2008) point to the UK where the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable recently wrote a document entitled, “I Will if You Will” which emphasized the need to encourage mainstream consumers to “shop society’s way out of unsustainability”.



Kate Soper (1999) suggests that through increased knowledge about the origins of our foods and the associated social and environmental risks, we are witnessing a redefinition of needs that is highly reflective of “late-modernity” - within which consumers are presented with an abundance of choices in a globalized world. These choices give individuals increased power to participate in what Giddens refers to as “life politics” which he writes, “flow from processes of self-actualization in a post-traditional context, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies” (1991:214).

*On the promise of demystification...*

Through reflexivity, scholars have lauded the promise of alternative food movements to demystify commodities. While geographical distance and the conditions of urban and productive alienation have often been perceived as a barrier to knowledge and reflexivity - and therefore a roadblock to responsible action -- there is significant evidence to suggest that people are increasingly reconnecting with food by seeking knowledge about the conditions of production (Dowler 2008; Barnett et.al. 2005). These efforts to understand where one’s food comes from can be seen in the growing popularity of fair trade and direct marketing schemes like CSAs and farmers’ markets (Kneafsey et al. 2008). From this perspective it is essential to “defetishize” foods which, under conditions of global industrialized agriculture, take on a “mystical character” (Goss 2004, Marx 1978) and prevent a consideration of the labor and natural resources embodied within. In this way, and through labeling schemes and lifecycle audits, consumers gain “knowledge of chains of consequences” (Barnett et.al. 2005: 24) which enables the evaluation of products based on more adequate knowledge about their destructive qualities. Fair trade advocates have lauded the potential of certification to demystify commodities. In this way,

consumers of fair trade and direct marketed foods can express solidarity with producers, whether local or in the global south (Connolly & Prothero 2008, Sheppard 2002). There is also evidence to suggest that these connections have helped to open access to niche markets for struggling farmers (Shreck 2008), resulting in improved social and economic conditions for some producers (Lyon 2006, Jaffee et.al 2004:184). This “nourishing network” (Whatmore & Thorne 1997), “moral economy” (Luetchford 2008) or “ethics of care” (Bauman 2008, Featherstone 2011) forges connections between consumers who care about socially- and ecologically-sustainable production and producers who are seeking dependable market access as well as fair and stable prices - effectively redistributing income to help balance global inequalities (Conroy 2001). Global-justice movements, based on an increased awareness of these inequalities, are gaining momentum, reflecting a “general interest in reorienting economies away from an exclusive focus on commodification and profit maximization, and towards a more equitable and sustainable provisioning of human needs” (Johnston 2008:19).

*On the promise of democratization...*

Ulrich Beck, whose ideas have inspired a significant and hopeful body of theory on the potential for consumer-based movements, has argued (as phrased by Sassatelli 2006: 223) “if modernity was a democracy oriented to producers, late modernity is a democracy oriented to consumers: a pragmatic and cosmopolitan democracy where the sleepy giant of the ‘sovereign citizen-consumer’ is becoming a counterweight to big transnational corporations.”

Consumers are envisioned not only as significant contributors to the contemporary challenges presented by our food systems, but they are also viewed as empowered political actors. Armed with knowledge and the ability to “vote with their dollars” (Micheletti 2003, Shaw et.al. 2006) they are seen as having the potential to challenge dominant economic and

political structures (Klein 2000) and affect a new form of “globalized democracy” (Dolan 2002). Trentmann has referred to this perspective as the “new orthodoxy of the ‘active consumer’” (2006: 3). According to Hobson this approach makes “perfect neoclassical sense” (2002:107) since it does not impinge on consumer freedoms and is, as Lyon (2006) points out, based on one of the foundational principles of liberal economics - that the common good is best be achieved if consumers are free to make their own rational choices without intervention or regulation (Carrier & Miller 2000, Johnston 2008). Some scholars have noted that government apathy and an erosion of public confidence in political institutions have prompted these movements, inspiring and empowering consumers and citizens to take action (Maneates 2002). This movement toward what Sassatelli refers to as “sub-politics” reflects a seemingly growing feeling that traditional forms of political participation are not working. From this perspective, the failings of the state have incited “individuals, families, communities [and] employees [to] take back to themselves the powers and responsibilities that have been acquired by states” (Rose 1999:2-3 cited in Lewis and Potter 2011:9). Alternative food activists thus hope that, by empowering individuals, power is relocated from the elite to the people. They blur the distinction between citizenship and consumerism, giving rise to what Micheletti (2003) refers to as “individualized collective action” -- through which citizens can express their values on the market and link to others with similar concerns. Alternative consumer proponents grasp the promise that a democratic movement of sovereign consumers, in aggregate, can force action and change the dominant paradigm, so that gratification and hedonism no longer need be in opposition to the common good or sustainable futures (Soper et.al. 2009).

*On the promise of inspiring shared responsibility...*

Market-based efforts thus rest on the premise that consumers can signal their values, and that these signals will be observed by peers as well as the political and industrial elite. Studies of alternative consumer intention indicate that many are inspired by the hope that they can “set a positive example for others” or that their actions will “inspire others to act” or “drive demand” for more alternative products (Isenhour 2010c). For these individuals the movement has to start somewhere and they hope their early adoption might help to push fellow citizens and policy makers to do their “fair share.” The intent for many consumers is thus to drive a collective spirit of shared responsibility. In some cases, consumer activism is designed to force producers to act. According to theories of liberal economics, corporations respond to consumer demand because it is in their best interests to remain competitive, protect the value of their brands, and avoid regulatory interventions (Locke 2006, Garsten 2009, Marsden et. al. 2000). Likewise, political leaders must stay tuned into significant market trends to keep a finger on the pulse of public opinion. As Clouder & Harrison (2006) suggest, well publicized consumer boycotts have achieved significant results – influencing powerful multinational corporations to institute more sustainable production standards and in some cases prompting governmental action and regulation. Munro & Schurman (2008) detail the effectiveness of a group of activists who were able to force significant regulatory constraints on biotechnology firms by engaging in a series of highly public challenges to genetically engineered foods. In 2000 several public interest groups worked together to test tacos for genetically engineered corn not yet approved by the USDA. After tests revealed contamination, the USDA was forced to institute a \$20 million (US) buyback and investigate the regulatory failure. Perhaps more importantly, instances like these have moved contests over the safety and sustainability of our food into the public consciousness forcing industry to respond to consumer concerns (Munro & Schurman 2008:149). Conroy

argues that in the context of a global trading system and increasing privatization and deregulation, efforts to place market pressure on firms constitute “powerful alternatives to simple invocations of corporate altruism and civic responsibility” and “may be the only alternative to the competitive downgrading of social and environmental practices by firms worldwide” (2001:18)<sup>iii</sup>.

*On the promise of new communities, moral subjectivities and spaces for engagement...*

For Carrier and Leuchford (2011) the movement to re-embed social values and relations in economic realm is the driving process behind the “ethical consumption” movement. From this vantage point, consumers have rejected economic logics which “reduce us to economic actors” and “strip us of other social roles” (Wright & Middendorf 2008: 278). The current system of commoditized agricultural production has indeed stripped many communities of social capital. Alternative food strategies (particularly the local food movement) can be seen as earnest attempts to rebuild community (Humphery 2010). In order to re-embed food in social relations, many consumers have turned to local food movements, which act on a shared ethic of responsibility to community and environment (Brunori et. al. 2008, Lyson et. al. 1995, Kloppenburg et al. 2000) and have the potential to achieve democracy and social justice through the development of community-based structures for cooperative provisioning and food distribution (Johnston 2008a). Food systems embedded in community and social relations, such as farmers’ markets and CSAs are thus often seen as alternatives to corporate control (Guthman 2004), successful means for strengthening community (Wright & Middendorf 2008, Hinrichs 2000, Lyson et.al. 1995) and as tools for reinforcing local norms linked to stewardship (DeLind, 2002). Slow Food provides another example of how imaginaries of community and place are

reinserted into the process of consuming food. In opposition to industrialized, standardized and depersonalized fast food, Slow Food emphasizes foods grounded in culture and community (Walter 2008; Kneafsy et. al. 2008). In these cases, consumption is about much more than the functional fulfillment of physical needs, it is also a project to fulfill political and social goals (Brunori 2007).

In resocializing food, consumers can also create alternative subjectivities (Guthman 2008, Connolly & Prothero 2008) - utilizing food to create ethical identities through sovereign consumer choice (Lyon 2006, Bauman 2008, Binkley 2008). Referred to as “moral selving” (Barnett et. al. 2005), this form of identity creation allows sustainable consumers to act on their desire to do the right thing, and to reflexively construct lives consistent with their values and beliefs. Further, through the purchase of “moral products” consumers are able to demonstrate their ability to care across both spatial and temporal distance (Bryant and Goodman 2004) and identify with a community of likeminded global citizens working toward both social and ecological sustainability (whether diffuse and imagined as is often the case with ecolabelled and fair trade consumers, or embedded in local spaces as is the case with slow food, CSAs, and farmers markets). As Kate Soper has pointed out, ethical consumerism can also be about “alternative hedonism” or the reimagination of the good life via the consumption of fresh, community produced foods with rich local histories and social meanings. The conviviality of alternative consumption can build relationships of cooperative support but also a space for enjoying the personal “sensual pleasures of consuming differently” (Soper 2009).

From this perspective, the act of creating an alternative consumer identity, and the efforts required to maintain it, can facilitate entry into more significant political participation and activism within the civic realm (Guthman, 2008, Barnett et al. 2005, Hartwick 2000, Sayer

2003). Indeed, many activists and scholars involved with alternative food movement feel that alternative forms of consumerism, even if they don't engage individuals more fully as citizens, serve as essential platforms for engagement, awareness and eventual entry into more substantive forms of opposition. Scholars, for example, have observed that the longer one buys organic foods, the greater the intensity of their actions and interest (Welsch & Kühling 2009), that farmers' markets help to elevate consumers' awareness of alternative agriculture and the likelihood that they will join sustainable purchasing groups (Brunori et. al. 2008), and that "broader" environmental ethics frequently begin with simple strategies like recycling (Hobson 2006). Finally, writing with Hill in 2011, Hobson found that participants in urban gardening projects, despite being the subjects of governmental attempts to modify behavior, interpreted the project's goals in ways that often surpassed the intention of the intervention. Thus perhaps there is potential for an "alternative hedonism" through which consumers move from individualist projects to create pleasurable lifestyles into more meaningful and effective political projects (Soper 2007)

These optimistic perspectives on consumer-based alternative food movements have certainly been effective in mobilizing consumers who hope that increased education, reflexivity and conscious decision making will lead to significant improvements in collective health, communities, natural environments and social justice. Certainly these "promises" of consumer demand indicate that there is potential for these consumer-based alternative food movements. However, as the following section demonstrates, many of these promises have not yet come to fruition (Connolly & Prothero 2008).

## **Part II: On the limits of Consumer Demand**

Despite the rapid growth of fair trade, organic and local products – these alternatives continue to make up a very small portion of food consumed by those of us living in wealthy – post industrial urban societies. Industrial agriculture is also growing and quickly gathering market share - even in alternative markets. Fast food chains are spreading rapidly and we continue to witness the proliferation of nutrient-poor processed foods. The low price and convenience of these foods come at the cost of environmental degradation and social injustice. Meanwhile, international food prices are soaring - leaving even more families to deal with chronic hunger and malnourishment (FAO 2011). In the face of these challenges many consumers are attempting to politicize the grocery checkout line. Yet theorists have noted – and lamented - a simultaneous decline in more traditional forms of direct political action and collective organization (Allen & Kovach 2000, Guthman 2008).

*On the decline of citizenship, individualization, and the neoliberal turn...*

Many scholars have provided evidence to suggest that traditional forms of political participation have decreased as citizens have withdrawn from the public sector in favor of participation as consumers in the private sphere (Halkier 1999). In the American case, Maniates writes, “Americans seem capable of understanding themselves almost solely as consumers who buy ‘environmentally-sound’ products rather than as citizens who might come together and develop political clout sufficient to alter institutional arrangements that drive pervasive consumption” (2002:51). Critics of alternative consumer movements distinguish our roles as citizens and consumers. For them “genuine civic engagement... is seen to take place only outside the market and beyond what we buy” (Humphery 2010).

The concept of the “citizen-consumer” is widely used in the academic and activist literature to describe individuals who exercise their civic duties through consumer decisions



(Johnston 2008), yet it fails to adequately conceptualize important distinctions. Gabriel & Lang point out that citizenship is largely a political concept “defining individuals standing within the state and a community, according rights and responsibilities” while our roles as consumers are defined in terms of individual economic actions with no responsibility or obligation to a community (1995:174-5). Combining these terms into the concept of the citizen-consumer implies that there is an easy relationship between our roles as consumers - oriented toward free choice and personal utility - and notions of citizenship which imply responsibility and a concern for the common good (Brunori et. al. 2008, Johnston 2008). Ulrich Beck (1992) refers to this as “divided citizenship,” part of the liberal project within which we are supposed to use our decisions to contribute to the common good while simultaneously pursuing private interests.

However, many authors have argued that such an easy relationship between individual and collective interests does not exist - that political consumerism is more often about the fulfillment of personal interest (via more healthful products or the construction of an “ethical” identity) than about saving the environment or a concern for others (Macnaughten 2002). Indeed, several authors have argued that alternative consumer choices, like buying organic fruits and vegetables or participating in slow food movements, are driven by a concern for personal health risks or individual gratification rather than the product’s impact on the environment or producer communities (Miller 1995, Connolly & Prothero 2008). Thus Hilton argues that the concept of the citizen-consumer has absolved consumers of civic duties while simultaneously diminishing the rights of citizens in the name of free choice.

Many authors have argued that the contemporary focus on consumer responsibility at the expense of rights (Sassatelli 2006) reflects the neoliberal turn in global and state politics (Guthman 2008, Hobson 2002, Lyon & Moberg 2010, Allen 2010) and represents a significant

reframing of the relationship between citizens and the state (Hobson 2002). Intimately linked to processes of market integration and liberalization, governments have increasingly dismantled regulations and institutions seen as barriers to free trade. As part of this process, responsibility for collective welfare has been devolved away from the state to the market, citizens and other non-governmental entities (Sto et.al.2008, Garsten & Hasselström 2003). Guthman writes,

“Agriculture and food sectors have been subject to some of the most intense attempts at neoliberalization – from the privatization of land and water rights, to the use of free trade agreements to dismantle national-level food safety regulations, to the protracted dismantling of food-oriented entitlement programs that exist in part to combat hunger in the US” (2008:1171).

Indeed the state’s traditional role as the regulator of both consumption and production processes has been in decline for several decades (Keiko & Ransom 2008). In this neoliberal context, Halkier writes, “it has become increasingly common to call upon so-called ordinary consumers to solve a range of societal and political problems. Environmental policies and food policies are no exception to this pattern” (2001a:205). Yet many scholars lament this “individualization” of responsibility which would seem to frame environmental and social problems in terms of individual inadequacies rather than the product of dismantled environmental protections and diminishing social safety nets (Maniates 2002:45)

However, as we have seen, many ethical consumers seem to accept this turn without questioning the governments’ devolution of responsibility and risk. According to critics, consumers have seemingly accepted (without critical examination) the government’s attempts to absolve itself of responsibility by “individualizing risk” (Connoley & Prothero 2008). Johnston writes, “While activists busy themselves with food drives, heirloom tomato sales, and garden

plots, the state surreptitiously diminishes its responsibility for basic needs like food and shelter” (2008:97). As argued by groups like the Center for a New American Dream, it may be that consumers have essentially given up on the state as an actor able to provide basic needs like healthy foods (CNAD 2011). In this context, consumer-based alternative food movements can be seen as filling in to “accomplish what governments aren’t allowed to (or don’t want to or haven’t got the courage to) do, and thereby release governments from domestic political pressures and nuisances” (Jacobsen & Dulsrud 2007: 475). Yet, ironically, while many food activists are essentially protesting the effects of privatization, devolution and dismantled agricultural regulations (poor working conditions, low prices for farmers, the poorly regulated use of industrial chemicals, food inequalities), the movements in which they participate are both a reaction to and the product of the neoliberal mentality of consumer choice and individual responsibility (Allen 2010). Contemporary alternative food movements have reproduced neoliberal subjectivities and reinforced neoliberal governmentality (Guthman 2008). As such, one could argue that they are the product of “advanced liberal governance” (Lewis & Potter 2011:17). Humphrey writes, “In many respects, the new politics of consumption, particularly in the USA, is hostage to its own liberal individualism.” (2010:73).

#### *On the illusion of choice...*

While ethical consumers certainly want to utilize their choice to influence positive change in our food systems, many critics argue that the emphasis on individual choice places a heavy and unrealistic burden on the shoulders of the consumer (Jacobsen & Dulsrud 2007, Isenhour 2010, Schwartz 2005) who is “consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser” (Appadurai 1990:307). In relation to eating, Probyn (2011) argues that the debate about healthful and responsible eating verges on problematic moralism that labels

individuals who consume cheap industrial foods as ignorant, unethical or simply in bad taste while simultaneously saddling the same individuals with responsibility for fixing the problems associated with unsustainable food systems. This “reification of choice”, she argues, mystifies the role that governmental policies and agricultural giants play in determining our choices. Illustrating the illusion of choice, Maniates argues that while consumers may be overwhelmed by choosing an automobile (size, color, make, and model), a real choice would be between a car and the ability to take public transportation -- a choice for which many cannot “vote with thier wallet” – because it doesn’t exist. There is a long-standing debate about the relative power of producers and consumers (e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer 2000, Galbraith 2000, Baudrillard 2000). While structuralists argue that consumer have little choice beyond packaging, many others laud the creativity with which consumers create new meanings through an array of goods. Regardless of the stance one takes in this tired debate, Guthman (2003) and many others – including proponents - questions whether the consumer’s personal decisions are sufficient to provide solutions on a scale adequate to address problems associated with a globally integrated food supply (2008). If our concerns are expressed in the private realm, rather than in public discourse and through collective participation, many authors fear that they will not be sufficient to produce change on an appropriate scale. Halkier (1999) has written that if our concerns continue to be expressed in such individualistic ways, they will not become part of the collective experience, but rather “silent routines” that only send signals to retailers and producers.

Numerous studies have revealed that consumers, despite feeling a sense of responsibility and obligation to choose ethically and sustainably produced foods, are often inconsistent, ambivalent, confused and conflicted as they make these choices (Connolly & Prothero 2008, Sassatelli 2006, Halkier 2002, Isenhour 2010). This literature points to a number of structural

barriers which prevent even the most aware, engaged and committed consumers from consistently exercising their choice in favour of alternative foods. First, as previously outlined, theories of reflexive modernization suggest that if given the proper knowledge, consumers will make rational and ethical decisions on the market. Adequate information and education are certainly key to build awareness and inspire alternative consumption; however, it seems that for informed alternative consumers, too much information is often part of the problem. In modern grocery store aisles, consumers are overwhelmed by an abundance of choice. One can choose from hundreds of breakfast cereals, countless flavours of yogurt with varying fat content and an overwhelming array of vegetables - local and exotic, organic and conventional. Wilk remarks on the “impossibility of making informed choices in a world glutted with information and difficult contradictions between different kinds of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ products” (2010: 8). In fact, there are all sorts of contradictions and difficult decisions when it comes to buying food. Is it better to buy a conventional apple from the local farmers market, grown only a few miles away or an apple produced 1,000 miles away but without agrochemicals or underpaid labor? Further, as Brunori and colleagues point out, even the best information available cannot help consumers to make tough choices between competing priorities like price and quality; convenience and sustainability; or locals and organics. Given this “debilitating excess of choice” (Humphery 2010) Schwartz has argued that the rhetoric of consumer freedom has actually resulted in exacerbated time poverty for already burdened citizens and rampant individualism at the expense of both sociality and freedom (2005). This is not to say that all choice is neoliberal or bad. Certainly consumers will always want choice, regardless of the economic structure and the relationship between the market and the state. However, it is to say that there are significant barriers for consumers, even those who hope that their choices can contribute to a better world.

As Humphrey argues, it is necessary to compliment consumer choice with regulations that can limit the choice of products that have been shown to cause significant damage to humans and the environments upon which we depend (2010).

It is simply unreasonable to assume that consumers, even the most committed, have the time and intellectual energy to evaluate the relative merits of all choices. Thus Jacobsen & Dulsrud argue, “non-reflective ordinary consumption will probably always comprise the larger bulk of practices we reasonably can call consumption. This severely restricts the validity of the active, ethically conscious consumer” (2007:477). These difficulties leave many scholars deeply sceptical of the push to make consumers responsible for complicated decisions in informed and consistent ways (Belk et.al. 2005). While reflexive modernization theories continue to operate on the assumption that consumers will make rational and moral decisions if provided with adequate information, repeated efforts to spread information and awareness in many international contexts have failed to inspire significant change (Hobson 2002). Wilk therefore argues that “giving consumers more information and trusting them to make good choices is another wishful strategy with limited practical utility” (2004:27).

While proponents of certification schemes have argued that the information provided by labels can help to ease this burden for consumers, critics argue that consumers often experience significant difficulties if they are presented with too little or too much information (Hoogland et.al.2007). In fact, Shreck (2008) has reported that both consumers and retailers are beginning to suffer from “label fatigue” (FAO 2000). As Carrier & Leuchford (2011) point out, forms of commercial deception are fairly common. Johnston’s analysis of Whole Foods Markets illustrates that corporate marketing strategies can often be misleading - even if not consciously deceptive. She notes that Whole Foods uses terms like “natural”, “organic” and “sustainable”

interchangeably and frequently displays photos and stories of local farmers above imported conventional produce (Johnston 2008, Maloney 2006). Similarly, Littler has found that “greenwashing is rapidly increasing both in terms of its sheer quantity and the degree of its complex permutations” (2011:32). Findings like these lead many to fear that alternative consumer movements have become little more than niche markets.

#### *On Corporate Cooptation...*

Authors from Karl Marx (2000) to Malcom Gladwell (2000) have illustrated the unique ability of the capitalist system to convert all things into commodities, even “difference, dissent, resistance and opposition” (Schor & Holt 2000: xxi). Organic foods, for example, have experienced significant growth in production. Between 2000 and 2008 global sales grew by approximately 20% annually (Wright and Middendorf 2008) capturing the attention of industrial agriculture and corporate retail chains (Jaffee et. al. 2004). While many applaud the growing availability of organics and their movement into, for example, low-cost retail giants like Walmart, many scholars and food activists have expressed concerns that the fundamental nature and values of alternative movements are lost when translated and deployed by agribusiness and retail giants (Guthman 2004). US organic standards do not prohibit the use of all potentially harmful chemicals, energy intensive factory farming, and excessive packaging, nor do they dictate that supply chains should be any different than those used by industrial agriculture (Johnston 2008, Guthman 2004). Many long-time organic producers thus see corporate agriculture’s movement into the organic sector as greenwashing and a betrayal of the movement’s original intentions. Produced industrially, organics become much more about the technicalities of production than a movement toward comprehensive environmental stewardship (Vankeerberghen 2011).

Many thus fear that consumer-based ethical food movements have become little more than a niche marketing opportunity (Lyon & Moberg 2010) designed to attract the “savvy, reflective consumer-citizen...and exploit the cultural shift towards, ‘affirmative purchasing’ (Lewis and Potter 2011:8 citing Carrigan et al. 2004). Johnston writes, “From a critical perspective, ethical consumer strategies seem more like niche marketing opportunities allowing corporations to target privileged, conscientious consumers, than a substantive program for health, sustainability, and social justice at a global scale” (2008: 240).

*On consuming difference...*

Given that most consumers of alternative foods are members of the well-educated, white middle class living in wealthy post-industrial urban contexts (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; DuPuis & Goodman 2005; Ferrer and Fraile 2006; Raymond & Kondoh 2008), many critics have labeled alternative agrifood movements and their concern with high quality, specialty, artisanal and local foods “elitist” and reflective of “yuppy” market segments (e.g. Roseberry 1996, Donati 2005, Guthman 2003). Certainly many alternative foods are considerably more expensive than conventional and mass-produced products. As Johnston (2008) notes, a journalist found that a month’s food supply for a small family would cost \$232.00 (US) at Walmart and \$564.00 (US) at Whole Foods.

Given the privileged social position of most alternative consumers, critics argue that the consumption of “ethical” foods essentially enables the consumption of social status and class-based distinction. Douglas Holt found in his study of American consumers that - in the context of mass consumption - individuals with high levels of cultural capital distinguished themselves by way of aesthetic consumption that was “socially scarce” (2000:218). The emphasis on socially scarce, high quality, artisanal and “ethically” produced foods might thus be seen as a means to



distinguish oneself as having good “taste” and superior ethical credentials. Yet this focus on “taste” legitimizes and reproduces inequalities by failing to recognize that the ability to purchase high-quality foods is more likely dependent on income than taste. Thus Johnston argues that these elite consumption practices “create a hierarchy of moral stratification that maps onto class stratification” (2008:256). So while the state, corporations and activists encourage consumers to signal their values via consumer choice, this strategy is not democratic. The wealthier the consumer, the more power they have to choose freely (Connolly & Prothero 2008, Dolan 2002). In contrast, while there is ample evidence to suggest that low-income consumers desire more sustainable and healthy foods (Dowler 2008), “those with the greatest needs often have the least ability to exercise individual choice, as allocations of choice are shaped by the historical demographics of inequality” (Allen 2010:300).

While privileged consumers paint their own actions as ethical, those who cannot afford to join a CSA or buy fair trade and organic foods at the grocery are seen as unethical, unrefined, or simply as acting in bad taste. Elspeth Probyn (2011), Jo Littler (2009) and Julie Guthman (2007) have noted the problematic moralizing that accompanies alternative food movements. Probyn writes, “ideas about what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ are laid out in black and white terms, which often posits ‘us’ vs ‘them.’”(2011:103). Those who buy cheap, unhealthy foods are seen as ignorant and irresponsible. Drawing on Guthman’s work (2007) Probyn goes on to write, “Rather than considering how an amalgamation of bad government policy, global retail pressures and unequal distribution of funding is creating a situation whereby people ... are suffering from the medial consequences of obesity, the good food arguments individualize and damn the overweight, and more often than not the poor” (2011:109). Many low income families simply don’t have access

to sources for local food, adequate income to pay the price premiums for alternative foods, or the time and resources it takes to grow one's own food.

Similarly, Hinrichs warns that local food movements have the potential to become elitist and exclusionary by relying on privileged perspectives about what is and is not ethical (2003). DuPuis and Goodman argue that there is an “a-political, anti-democratic and anti-reflexive bent in current food localism discourse”- based in class and race based hegemonic politics – which universalizes, normalizes and elevates certain ways of eating (2005:362). It is important to remember that local communities are also marked by internal inequalities which can easily be reproduced by localized food systems that exclude certain members of the community. Like Daniel Miller (2001) who has argued that we must avoid the “poverty of morality” by exposing the elitist and class-based moral agendas at the root of many forms of activism – DuPuis and Goodman argue that it is “important to pay more attention to the ways in which our possessive investments in our privilege influences how we define problems and solutions” (2005: 362).

#### *On the neglect of social justice...*

While some consumer-based alternative food movements, are explicitly concerned with social justice (particularly fair trade), most rarely engage with issues of equity (Jaffee et.al. 2004, Goodman 2003, Dowler 2008). Patricia Allen and her colleagues (2003) found in their study of alternative food initiatives in California that their leaders rarely prioritize a concern with social justice, but rather focus their efforts on ecological sustainability. This is despite the fact that, “inequities in the agri-food system abound - low wages and poor working conditions for food system workers, hunger and starvation of impoverished people and maldistribution of resources” (Allen 2010:297). And while some alternative food movements do try to address issues of inequality, access, and hunger -- Allen argues that they are not particularly effective. She writes,

“While individual choices based on an ethic of care for others (Tronto 1993) can certainly be part of working toward social justice, a concatenation of individual choices to improve social equity does not address the basic political economic structures, resource allocations and cultural conditions that have created inequality in the first place. At its root, inequality is a social problem that requires social analysis and solutions...(it) will require public and extra-local investment and public policies rather than devolving the functions of the welfare state onto individuals or communities” (2010:300).

The problems that we face require attention to social justice and inequality, particularly on a global scale. More than 1.2 billion people do not have adequate access to clean drinking water (Wilk 2006) and more than a billion people live with persistent hunger (FAO 2011). Legacies of colonialism and capitalist exploitation have created a world with vast differences in power and wealth (Allen 2010), one in which the historically exploited peoples of the developing world find themselves dependent on the exportation of primary products yet, ironically, only able to afford cheap imported foods. Small scale farmers in these contexts often can’t compete with industrial giants in a global marketplace (Lyon & Moberg 2010). Meanwhile industrial agriculture continues to externalize the environmental and social costs which are, unfortunately, nearly always absorbed by relatively powerless producer communities (Dauvergne 2010, Morgen et. al. 2006). The stratification of the global food system is reproducing global inequalities, yet as Johnston argues, “public attention seems to be diverted elsewhere – to the health benefits of flaxseed” (2008:94).

Fairtrade advocates have argued that through the purchase of fair trade goods consumers can ensure market access and price premiums to disadvantaged producers and thus diminish inequalities. However, as a number of scholars have shown, fair trade may not always work as

consumers assume. Jaffee et.al. (2004), Shreck (2008) and Raynolds (2000) have all observed that the fair trade agenda has been determined almost entirely by northern activists and implemented via a top-down approach. Certification standards are rarely developed in cooperation with producer associations and thus often seem arbitrary and punitive (Raynolds 2002). Tad Muttersbaugh (2002) has used the term “ecological neo-colonialism” to describe the rigorous standards evaluations, controls and surveillance that coffee producers must endure in exchange for certification. Freidberg (2003) documents how southern African farmers must endure guarded surveillance while Lyon (2006) observes that such inspections are often carried out by foreigners with very little knowledge about agricultural production or local culture. It is no surprise then that many fair trade and certified organic farmers have come to resent inspections and ask who is certifying the north (Shreck 2008, citing Gereffi 2000).

From this viewpoint, and despite its good intentions, attempts to alleviate global inequalities in the food chain have actually worked in some cases to reproduce unequal power relationships and the dependence of impoverished producers on the whims of privileged consumers. Rick Wilk writes, “There is no balance in the global food system”...“The producers are dependent on rich consumers in a way that we are never dependent on them” (2006:2). Further, Lyon argues that the consumption of fair trade goods “normalizes global inequities, serving to further legitimize the basic premise of the post-industrial economy – the idea that some populations should manufacture products according to the whims and desires of other populations” (2006: 388). So while many fair trade advocates and consumers are hopeful that they can “save the world” with their purchase of shade grown, fair-trade certified coffee, it seems that in reality – and ironically - “the emancipator discourses of fair trade entail systems of governance” that reproduce power inequalities (Lyon & Moberg 2010:16). Alf Hornborg, in

similar fashion, argues that this idea we can save the world is “likely a fallacy that allows the privileged North to reproduce narratives about superiority when in fact it is unequal exchange and inequality that created the conditions from which we feel we must save third world others.” What is most ironic, he writes, is that the “exploited are led to believe they should be grateful to the exploiters” (2008:1). It does seem rather naïve that consumers concerned with social justice would believe that their choices, even in aggregate, could result in a redistribution of resources adequate to ensure social and environmental justice (Littler 2009).

*On the defense of choice and the reproduction of consumer culture ...*

Most scholars agree that, despite some successes and continued growth and development, consumer-based alternative food movements have, thus far, not altered the basic structures of the global economy or challenged the dominance of industrial agriculture (Sassatelli 2009, Humphrey 2010). Further, while alternative food movements are certainly promising in many regards, Humphrey writes that we have very little information about how the “performance of virtuous personhood can actually translate into both a care for others and a remaking of social, cultural and economic life” (2010:173). Part of the problem is that these movements have played into and, at times, even worked to reproduce the same ideologies they portend to resist. Lyon and Moberg argue that there is a “deep paradox” within consumer-based alternative food movements because they “pursue market-based solutions to the very problems developing from free markets” (2010:7). By relying on the neoliberal logic of the market, the personalization of risk and the devolution of decision-making and responsibility to individuals, these movements have inadvertently legitimized the conditions to which they are ultimately opposed. Local food movements, DuPuis & Goodman (2005) argue, legitimize the devolution of responsibility and

compromise remaining state regulations designed to protect the welfare of citizens and our ecosystems.

Perhaps the root of the problem is that these movements have not adequately explored or questioned the logic of consumerism. Defined as a “set of beliefs and practices that persuade people that consumption...is, literally, at the center of a meaningful existence and that the best organized societies are those that place consumer satisfaction at the center of all major institutions” (Sklair 2001:5) – consumerism is indeed a powerful force. Central to this ideology is the notion of consumer sovereignty and choice.

Yet ironically, the centrality of consumer choice in alternative food movements legitimizes the very practice and effectively “strengthens the significance of consumption practice” (Dolan 2002:177). Playing upon what Johnston calls the “cornucopian ideal of nature” the logic of choice does not question consumption but rather solidifies the view of nature as boundless and human innovation as a sufficient means to overcome natural limitations (2008:259). Rather than encouraging individual consumers to reduce their demands on the environment and consume according to their needs but not beyond, the logic of choice neglects any discussion of the limitations implied by ecological responsibility in favor of alternative choices. Yet as Wilk (2010), Connolly & Prothero (2003), and Alfredson (2004) have demonstrated, the consumption of alternative or “green” goods does not always result in environmental benefits. In his study of more than 1,000 Swedish households, Alfredson found that the adoption of a “partly green” lifestyle actually increased household carbon emissions when overall levels of consumption were not reduced (2004). Studies like these have led a growing number of scholars to argue that alternative food movements must also bring discussions of over consumption, waste and reduction into focus if they are to become more effective. Otherwise, alternative food

movements fail to disembed themselves from “consumer culture” and thus have little hope of reforming industrial food systems (Dolan 2002: 177). Consumption – ethical or not - according to many Marxist critiques, ultimately legitimizes the existing capitalist system and its view of nature as commodity.

Yet today’s consumers have come to expect the freedom to choose and often resent any attempts to regulate choice. Richard Wilk writes that notions of consumer freedoms are so engrained in consumer societies that “limitation of choice or the notion of sacrifice is not likely to go over very well” (2010: 10). Indeed, studies suggest that while committed ethical consumers support additional regulation to limit the availability of dangerous products (Isenhour 2010), or limit carbon emissions (Featherstone 2011), the majority of US consumers are not in favor of hard regulations and attribute their attitude to the potential loss of personal freedoms (Attari et. al 2009). Indeed, as Johnston argues, the ideology of consumer sovereignty is so strong that it has been prioritized over collective action (2008:102).

The current neoliberal emphasis on consumer choice can be seen, in many ways, as a defense of contemporary global structures of inequality. While the world’s most privileged defend their ability to choose, unfortunately, they often choose products or practices that are extremely harmful for the world’s most vulnerable communities. These communities do not have the luxury to choose if, for example, their waters are used for the production of goods which will be shipped to Europe, their rainforests should be felled to make room for beef production destined for America, or their neighborhood will become a dumping ground for industrial wastes. Arguing that consumers should be able to choose whether or not to buy organic foods is essentially like saying that those families who cannot afford non-toxic products do not have the

right to feed their children clean foods or that agricultural laborers are not entitled to safe working conditions.

The defense of unlimited consumer choice can thus be seen as a defense of power and privilege. Protecting our families from dangerous and toxic products or services associated with high energy consumption and emissions should not be a question of consumer choice. It should be a question of sound policy and governance. Yet the contemporary focus on sustainable lifestyles and consumerism places the onus for sustainability on consumers and the “culture of consumption” - as if “consumer culture” were independent of historical and contemporary political and economic structures.

All consumers are embedded in social relations and immersed in societies with social norms which help to structure individual choices. To assume that all consumers are free in their choices, to consume as they please, and in a manner consistent with their own individual utilities and self-interests, is naive. As Dolan argues, seemingly individual acts of consumption are, in fact, macro processes at work. He writes, “Consumer practices are cultural and social practices that have historically developed and are manifestations of both local and global linkages of social interdependencies. To continually look at the consumer as the cause of the ecological problem effectively decontextualizes consumption acts from such interdependencies” (2002:171). It is imperative that we recognize that “consumer culture” is more complex than aggregated individual choice. Our cultures are products of history and context. They rise out of, reflect, and simultaneously structure our material realities, productive systems, methods of exchange, social organizations and political structures. To assume that consumer education and behavior modification can alter the culture of consumption without a simultaneous change in these deeply embedded structures is at best overly optimistic and at worse simply naïve.



### ***III. Conclusion: Complimenting the Promise of Consumer Demand***

It is important not to undermine the sincere efforts of individual consumers to affect change. Many people around the world have invested significant emotional, psychological and intellectual energy in their efforts to support alternative foods systems. Yet as the critiques above suggest, despite their best intentions, consumers are confronted with barriers that prevent the achievement of more significant change. Individuals can buy organic foods at the local farmers' markets, reduce meat consumption and boycott foods produced with palm oil. But as Wright and Middendorf (2008) argue, mindful eating cannot dismantle historically embedded social structures. The achievement of wider structural changes requires collective action (Brunori et.al. 2008) and a "renewed ideological debate on private vs. public responsibilities" (Jacobsen & Dulsrud 2007:479). Princen and his colleagues (2002) propose that our examinations of both consumption and environmental problems have for too long been dominated by a production perspective. Instead the authors advocate viewing these problems from a consumption perspective since consumption occurs all along the chain of production: from extraction to disposal. All along that chain there are consumers: individual human beings who make decisions about the consumption of resources. This perspective has important implications. By diffusing the sole emphasis of consumption study away from the point of purchase and distributing it all along the chain, we can essentially view all humans along the chain as consumers, including business owners, politicians, and individual citizens. This allows us to reimagine shared responsibility and diffuses the tired debate about the relative power of structure and agency – given that the existing political and economic structures are also populated by consumers of natural resources and human labor.

Refocusing on collective responsibilities and effective government would allow us to move away from the problematic moralization of consumer choice (Miller 2001) and toward a more effective configuration of polycentric solutions involving consumers, citizens, producers, and the state (Wright & Middendorf 2008). It is simply not realistic or reasonable to expect consumers to carry the burden for ensuring the health and sustainability of our food systems alone. Further, historical analyses suggests that we are much more effective at forcing change when we cooperate with one another and express our values in the public realm (Gabriel & Lang 2005; Hilton 2003).

Allen writes, that we “need to move beyond a discourse of choice and realize that no social advances have ever been made without a combination of social movements and legislation” (2010:306). Without public policies and programs designed to create sustainable food systems and ensure a more equitable distribution of natural resources and environmental risks, significant long-term change is not likely. Policies are necessary to ensure that all citizens, not just the privileged, are able to eat in sustainable and healthful ways (Miller 2001, Wilk 2004). This is certainly not to say that all our contemporary human structures must be dismantled, or that change is not possible without revolution. It is at least to argue that public participation is necessary. Manno (2002) suggests that efforts to prevent the commodification of our food networks might include: increased public investment in R&D and the subsidization of sustainable agricultural methods; policies that ensuring pricing reflects the external costs of products; a shift in tax policy away from labor (since jobs are scarce and workers plentiful) and towards natural resource and energy use (inputs we need to conserve); and investments in natural capital (2002:98).

However, policy solutions that require the regulation or limitation of consumer choice, “are dependent on public democratic legitimacy” (Halkier 1999:37). This, Halkier argues, is the greatest contribution of consumer-based alternative food movements – the creation of “cultural codes” that can help to enhance the potential for significant political change (1999:37). So while alternative food movements are certainly not a panacea for the problems associated with the global dominance of industrialized agriculture and capitalist expansion, it would be simplistic to dismiss these movements without considering “the complexity of the social change process, the urgent need for innovative approaches and the possibilities for empowerment they offer” (Johnston 2008:98). It is difficult to declare the success or failure of consumer-based alternative food movements because, as I hope I’ve demonstrated, they show signs of both promise and disappointment. Further, success is relative. If we look at the alternatives created by these movements relative to the state of today’s dominant food systems, we can observe significant success and improvements. As Littler writes, consumer cooperatives can help to distribute healthy food and support alternative production methods while boycotts and buycotts pressure companies to consider the environmental and social impacts of their practices and fair trade products bring attention to issues of global inequalities and social justice (2011:36). However, if we compare current alternative food movements to common aspirations for the global foods system – based on rights rather than markets, health rather than convenience, stewardship rather than exploitation, and sustainability rather than growth – then it seems that these movements have not lived up to their promise. As Humphery notes, however, consumer movements are very much a “politics in the making” (2010:157). There is significant hope and human labor invested in these movements that should not be discounted as a significant “lever for change” (Barnett & Soper 2005). The relative merits of consumer-based alternative food movements will certainly

continue to be debated, but I believe the literature reviewed here suggests that it is possible to answer the central question raised by this essay. Consumer demand cannot deliver sustainable foods – at least not alone and without complimentary political and economic reforms to ensure that all humans are able to eat healthful foods that do not destroy the natural resources upon which we depend.

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<sup>i</sup> For an excellent survey of different disciplinary approaches to alternative consumerism, see Lewis and Potter's *Ethical Consumption* (2011).

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<sup>ii</sup> Simplesteps.org and easybeinggreen.com are only two of the uncountable websites, blogs and twitter streams dedicated to encouraging more sustainable living and food choices.

<sup>iii</sup> It must be noted that these efforts are often enacted in the public sphere, rather than through the consumer's private role on the market. This is an important distinction that I discuss further in the third section of the paper.