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FORGING FRESH FOOD CHAINS IN THE AMERICAS

Introduction: Food Fears

In recent years, food has come to forefront of public attention and scrutiny, both because of the deep problems in the existing food system and the broad-based efforts to fix it. The U.S. food system is huge, technologically sophisticated, and it feeds hundreds of millions of people. But, paradoxically, it is the size, scale, and industrial complexity that have provoked many of the doubts, worries, and even fears that people have over food today, and that have inspired initiatives to reform, rebuild, and fundamentally reimagine our food system. People across the country and throughout the world are creating new ways of doing food through politics—in their communities, in churches, as part of grassroots organizations, and in their gardens. People are finding their own local and regional solutions, based on different cultural preferences, economic conditions, social structures, and environmental possibilities.

Indeed, one thing which makes food activism so compelling is this local and regional scale of effort mustered to confront problems with national and international causes and complexities. As the project leaders of the Worldwatch Institute 2011 State of the World Report note, we are globally connected when it comes to food and agriculture. We are all in this together: healthy rural economies and green cities are fundamental to global sustainability and climatic stability. Even if we in temperate North America try to eat locally, we rely on producers elsewhere for such essentials as coffee, chocolate, and fruit, to name a few favorite commodities. Farmers cultivating the fields of South America and Africa maintain a large part of world's biodiversity. Finally, as people of conscience, we cannot forget that close to a billion people in the world do not get enough food to eat (Halweil and Nierenberg 2011). But just as the problems are deeply, inextricably global, so are the flows of social solidarity and creativity. Accordingly, agrifood activism, as an eclectic cluster of social movements, benefits from global cross-fertilization of strategies, information, and inspiration.

In this essay, I highlight some of the exciting alternative food work currently taking place in the Americas. There is an impressive cornucopia of stories and examples. So, I should disclose here that the examples I include emerge from my own anthropological fieldwork. I have worked with small farmers and ranchers in Andean South America since the 1980s and, for the past decade or so, have been engaged in activist-research close to home in Louisville, Kentucky. While my work has allowed me to learn a lot about different foods and, as a child of the rust-belt suburbs, to reduce my ignorance of farming and ranching, as a cultural anthropologist what I find most compelling are the social arrangements—interpersonal, organizational, and political—and the social visions that give rise to the construction of alternatives to the food-business-as-usual.

To begin, I offer a quick overview of the problems that have led people here in the United States to characterize our food system as broken.

Going Without. The rising number of people who go without regular, assured access to food both astonishes and appalls. As of 2009, the last year for which data are available from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), over 50 million people were living in food insecure households, which means that they had to worry, at least some of the time, about, as my students put it, “where their next meal was coming from.” That’s 33 million adults (14.5 percent of all adults and 17.2 million children, which is 23.2 percent of all children). Think about it: Nearly a quarter of the kids in the United States lack regular, secure access to decent meals. Within this population, 17.7 million people not only worried about having food, but at times suffered reduced food intake—for example, skipping meals because there was only enough food for their children to eat.

Contaminated Supplies. Problems of contamination beset the food system, affecting everything from scallions and ground beef to peanut butter and eggs. When such food scares occur, it often takes weeks to identify the sources of contamination because of the sheer enormity of our food production and distribution system. In, for example, the 2006 case of the *escherichia coli*-carrying California spinach, investigators finally determined that the responsible facility was 1 of the 2 plants in the United States

that process 75 percent of the greens for our precut salads, or over 26 million servings of salad a week. As Michael Pollan, in the *New York Times Magazine*, put it, “[I]n effect we’re washing the whole nation’s salad in one big sink.”

Miserable Meat. Reliance on raising and fattening livestock in confined animal feeding operations—feeding lots and huge poultry barns—has brought about environmental pollution and abuse of antibiotics and growth hormones. It is not only the animals that suffer in the “meatrix”; in 2005, Human Rights Watch called meatpacking the most dangerous factory job in America.

Faraway Food. Our food travels. It is estimated that the average plate of food puts on 1,500 miles (some estimates are as high as 2,300 miles). The long transport and cold-storage chain runs on fossil fuels and, as the spinach example indicates, can complicate efforts to maintain food safety. The travel itself and the exigencies of industrial-scale farming frequently result in the disappearance of flavor, and even nutrients, from fruits and vegetables.

Concentration and Consolidation. In general, fewer and fewer large firms control large horizontal and vertical swaths of the food system. This trend, most pronounced in the livestock and seed sectors, is also visible in food retail, as a dwindling number of supermarket chains control increasingly large segments of the market. And, sadly enough, this is also true in the organics sector. In consequence of this consolidation, a very few decision-makers hold enormous economic clout and influence over our food system.

Disappearing farmers. Related to increasing corporate control over the agrifood system is another trend: the disappearance of farms and farmers. Since the 1950s, farms, like food businesses, are fewer in number and larger in size. Farm loss contributes to a decline of small towns and economies and social hardships in rural America. Nonetheless, U.S. farm policy and major USDA financial support tilt toward large producers: as the Environmental Working Groups has documented, most farmers get no subsidies at all, while three quarters of subsidy payments (overwhelmingly in support of major commodity crops, like corn and soybeans) go to just 10 percent of all farmers.

To this handful of problems, can be added, at minimum, junk food, pesticides, eating disorders, obesity-related health problems, water pollution, food deserts, sinking water tables, transgenic crops, and the exploitation of farm workers.

* * *

One popular response to this set of food fears has been an interest in eating food raised locally by those endangered creatures: small farmers. This trend is perhaps most visible in the explosion of farmers' markets. Since 1994, when the USDA began its contemporary count of markets, the number has skyrocketed from 1,755 to 6,132 at the start of the 2011 growing season. A common complaint, one frequently voiced in the popular press as a critique of "affluent foodies," is that shopping in farmers' markets, and more generally, eating locally, is expensive, especially in light of the current recession. The critics have a point. Local foods do, generally, cost more than those found in supermarkets. This makes sense. Small and medium-sized family farms don't enjoy the advantages of Big Food: federal subsidies, large market share, and industrial scale economies of production. Paying farmers a fair price for the real cost of their food seems pretty expensive, at least in the short run.

Rectifying this tension—making good food accessible to everyone while ensuring that sustainable agriculture provides a sustainable livelihood—is the challenge at the heart of rebuilding our broken food system. So, what to do? Farmers' markets are a great starting place but they remain marginal in scope and dietary impact. In what ways can we scale up the meeting of eaters and producers so that everyone gets to eat good, fresh food? And more generally, how do we build food system linkages that improve the quality of peoples' lives in both rural and urban areas. Ultimately, how can we reconfigure the food system so that it contributes to the eradication of the conditions and inequalities that result in people eating badly or not at all? This is an ambitious agenda.

Farm Tours, North and South.

But, at this moment, we are not lacking for inspiration. There is a lot going on in the world of farm and food alternatives. In this brief reconnaissance, I recount the efforts of activists, farmers, entrepreneurs, and civic institutions in the Americas. My three North American snapshots show off the particular but complementary strategies for transforming the U.S. food system: reconnecting farm and city, greening and feeding urban centers, and renewing rural prosperity.

Louisville. As is appropriate for a Kentucky resident writing for a Kentucky-based publication, I begin with the local: an account from Louisville. Kentucky, thanks to the legacy of tobacco, has a lot of farms. According to the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, Kentucky has upwards of 85,000 farms, which places it fifth among all states. With the decline of tobacco, farmers have been experimenting with many different crops and seeking out and creating new local and regional markets. Much of the latter work has focused on building the connections between rural producers and urban consumer and, has been spearheaded in Louisville by the Kentucky Community Farm Alliance (CFA), a statewide grassroots organization that emerged during the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. Among CFA's many Louisville-based projects over the past decade has been the creation of Grasshoppers Distribution.

In 2005, farmers from around Kentucky came together to create a system that would market and distribute their locally produced meats, eggs, vegetables, fruits, and cheeses. The farmer business partners designed Grasshoppers as a kind of hub to get the products from a large number of small farmers, who may not be interested in marketing or have the time to sell at farmers' markets, to urban eaters. At the peak of the season, Grasshoppers buys food from about 70 farmers in Kentucky and southern Indiana (across the Ohio River from Louisville) and sells it to about 20 restaurants and shops. The company also operates a variant of community-supported agriculture in that it also sells subscriptions to boxes of produce, as well as optional eggs, meats, cheese, and mushrooms, all raised by local farmers. In 2010, Grasshoppers distributed these boxes to 600 households and looks to double that figure in coming years. They are also growing jobs and have tripled their staffing in the past few years.

Another model of food distribution in Louisville is New Roots, which is not a business but rather a nonprofit organization that runs on a very few grants and a lot of volunteer labor. New Roots, established in 2009, works with about 50 volunteers and in cooperation with 2 churches and 2 community centers. In collaboration with the community institution, New Roots sets up food buying groups, called Fresh Stops, in low-income neighborhoods. The idea again is that people subscribe to purchase a box of local food, but in this case for very low prices, since volunteers handle the procurement and delivery. In the summer of 2010, New Roots served 120 families. In addition to training neighborhood leaders on how to procure fresh regional food, and facilitating the study of food justice, it promotes education on gardening, cooking, and healthy eating. New Roots, although still small, has attracted a great deal of attention and support among activists and civic officials, and several community groups and churches are pursuing the creation of their own Fresh Stops. Although creating alternative forms of distribution has been a priority among Louisville activists, food work of all sorts in the city is expanding rapidly, marked by civic and grassroots networking and collaboration.

Milwaukee. Heading north, we find another cluster of urban initiatives—in this case, associated with one individual, Will Allen, the founder of Milwaukee's Growing Power, a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation genius award, and a pioneer in urban agriculture (UA). Although UA initially sounds like an oxymoron, it is the main food source for about 800 million people the world over.

Growing Power provides a model for farming the city—indeed, the center city—in a poor Milwaukee neighborhood. Allen's farming operation, growing since 1993, is an inspiration to other urban food activists, not least because it touches on so many parts of the food system. The two-acre Community Food Center, located in a former food desert, houses vegetables and fruits, perch and tilapia (in an aquaponics system Allen designed), chickens, turkeys, goats, ducks, and bees, for a total of 159 varieties of food (Bybee 2009). In 14 green houses, Growing Power produces about a quarter-million dollars' worth of food, and serves some 10,000 Milwaukee residents (Royte 2009). The food is distributed in several ways: an on-site retail shop, through schools and restaurants, at area farmers' markets, and by subscription plan, including inexpensive food boxes made

available to hundreds of elderly in Milwaukee. Allen seems to take special pride in Growing Power's prowess at dealing with waste (Royte 2009). They use red wiggler worms to speed the composting of more than 6 million pounds of food waste a year. The worms transform farm waste and remains from local food businesses, including brewery grains and coffee shop grounds, into 400,000 pounds of rich compost a year (Bybee 2009; Royce 2009).

As perhaps the leading urban agricultural project in the United States, Growing Power does more than raise food. For them, growing healthy food is part of a larger vision of bringing about social justice. The organization, which participates in national networks striving to end racism in the food system with its vision of food justice, has helped set up projects in five other poor communities, including Chicago, where Allen's daughter has taken the lead in the creation of a half-acre park in the heart of the city. Some 3,000 people from around the world participate annually in Growing Power-hosted training programs; the organization also works with schools and youth groups in Milwaukee to engage young people in gardening (Bybee 2009). Finally, in an area of high unemployment, Growing Power provides 30 to 50 jobs (Royte 2009). And, as the *Milwaukee Courier* reported in April of 2011, Growing Power was awarded a federal grant to construct hoop house gardens on vacant land, a project aimed at creating 150 new jobs for unemployed Milwaukeeans.

Hardwick, VT. The Northeast Kingdom of Vermont would appear to share little with inner-city Milwaukee, but there as well dedicated agrifood activists are lowering unemployment as they raise delicious food. The hardscrabble town of Hardwick was once prosperous, but the declines of granite quarrying and commercial dairying left this community depressed, with boarded storefronts, dilapidated buildings, and the lowest average income levels in the state. Today, however, Hardwick and its surrounding villages have become something of a laboratory for the ways agriculture and food can revitalize a community and regional economy. This laboratory now offers monthly public tours, and in July of 2010, I happily signed up.

One of our “guides,” Tom Stearns, founder of the organic seed company High Mowing Seeds (itself a tour highlight), was asked “What happened here?” He explained that a lot of the groundwork had been laid 30 years before with the arrival of back-to-the-landers, interested in small-scale alternative agriculture and self-sufficiency. This was fertile, and cheap, ground for the initiatives of several young “agropreneurs,” who over the past decade started up a wealth of agrifood enterprises—including raising organic greens, manufacturing tofu and soy milk, cultivating organic seeds, fermenting honey and berry wine, and aging locally crafted cheeses. They started having conversations and helping one another. Tom stressed, as did the other agropreneurs, the importance of this sharing and mutual assistance, and the presence of someone to give encouragement, advice, a reference, a kick in the butt, and “the sense that maybe you weren’t crazy for taking risks.”

They also loaned each other money and, as their conversations expanded, they leveraged nonprofit funding to create The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE). The farmers, activists, and businesspeople work with researchers and consultants from the University of Vermont to develop connections between farmers and processors and to expand the value-adding activities, which over the past 3 years have generated well over 100 new jobs. A particularly delectable example of community food solidarity is Claire’s, a new Hardwick restaurant and gathering place capitalized with shares purchased by local residents, which showcases ingredients from nearby farms. Among the CAE’s many activities is the construction of a community agricultural center, envisioned to serve the area and further agrifood endeavors and linkages and to foment wider public involvement. Here again, agricultural production provides the basis for economic renewal, accompanied by an emphasis on scaling up and reaching out through the food system.

Other examples of alternative agrifood innovations abound across the United States and Canada. However, I want to turn to initiatives in Latin America, where a quarter of the population lives on less than two dollars a day (IAASTD 2009, 2) and the challenges confronting producers are even more daunting. Rather than attempting to review the agricultural economy of the region (for this, a superb starting point is the *Latin American and Caribbean Report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development* [IAASTD] prepared by an international consortium of stakeholders and topical experts), I offer some illustrations of how people are responding to the complexities of their own political, economic, and environmental circumstances.

Cuba. The first case highlights a combination of vulnerability to external forces and the mustering of domestic assets. What is perhaps the classic example of urban food innovation comes from a very small country, albeit one that has loomed large in the world's political imagination. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Cuba lost its very favorable trade relations with the Soviet Union, which brought on a time of economic crisis, known as the Special Period. Cuban agriculture, which specialized in sugar, was very conventional in its reliance on such industrial inputs as chemical fertilizers, petroleum, heavy machinery, and so forth. It also relied on often-inefficient large state farms. With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc trade, Cuba lost half its ability to import oil, as well as half of its wheat and other grain imports, precipitating a food crisis. By the early 1990s, the national average daily caloric intake had fallen by 30 percent (IAASTD 2009, 53).

What the Cubans had going for them was a well-educated workforce, with good technicians and scientists. Mobilizing these assets, Cuban state agencies started developing an alternative agriculture, based on sustainable practices—low inputs, high diversification, the use of biofertilizers (like Will Allen, the Cubans excelled in vermiculture), and bringing back the use of draft animals. The government also promoted local production, especially urban agriculture. In consequence, by the mid-1990s there were over 26,600 popular garden parcels scattered throughout Havana, ranging in size from several acres to a few square meters of vacant lot to the “patio gardens” residents

planted for their own use (French et al. 2010). For Havana, with its population of just over 2 million, urban agriculture has been a source of jobs, income generation—especially for gardeners working on the larger plots—and important supplements to household diets. Today, urban agriculture provides as much as 70 percent of the fresh vegetables consumed in Havana (Altieri and Funes-Monzote 2012). The Cuban experience suggests the role that strong city and state governments can play in facilitating food system transformation.

Peru. My next example is much more typical of Latin America during the past three decades, where, under the disastrous free-market experiment, the state as a social protagonist has largely been absent, leaving improvement in agrarian livelihoods largely to NGOs, individuals, and producer organizations. For many years I have worked in rural communities of Peru's southern Andean highlands. This story, however, opens in the country's capital, Lima, where a gastronomic boom is in full swing. Dubbed a new destination for culinary tourism, the city's restaurants have drawn acclaim (and customers) for introducing and integrating ingredients and cooking styles from the country's multiple agro-ecological zones, immigrant populations, and regional foodways. An important component of the new gastronomy is Andean foods, celebrated in a rediscovery and revalorization of what are colloquially known as the "Lost Crops of the Incas." The newfound popularity of such items as quinoa, native potatoes and tubers, and alpaca meat among affluent shoppers and diners not only counters historic, elite neglect or rejection of these items, but also presents significant market opportunities for small-holding, economically marginal highland producers. A broader demand for Andean foods can benefit producers and rural food elaborators who, by processing raw foods, add value to them and create manufacturing jobs. NGOs and other institutions have oriented efforts toward two linked markets for food products: the burgeoning tourist trade, and the national middle-class with its increasing discretionary income and heightened interest in eating well.

Initiatives toward expanding the scale and scope of the production and processing of indigenous food range from regions to the household level. On the former end is Papa Andina, a project sponsored by the International Potato Center and numerous institutional

partners. More than 3,000 potato varieties are cultivated in Peru; however, most shoppers are familiar with no more than five varieties. Papa Andina seeks to preserve the tremendous biodiversity of Andean potato cultivation by helping Andean farmers find new markets and better prices for their ancestral crops. The staff works collaboratively with producers in the central highlands, and with food processors and retailers, to identify market possibilities and develop products appropriate for upscale supermarkets. These have included bags of fresh potatoes and delicious native potato chips (which, it must be noted, are healthier than conventional ones: native chips absorb up to 25 percent less oil when fried and since they do not need to be peeled, they furnish more fiber and nutrients).

Other, much smaller-scale endeavors are found on the western slopes of the Andes. At an elevation of over 12,000 feet, above a river valley terraced with a patchwork of small plots, is the village of Tuti, where resident farmers have formed a quinoa producers' organization. (Quinoa, a native chenopod, is not only featured in Lima restaurants but has become a popular "alternative" grain in Europe and the United States). With the support of a large Peruvian NGO, the 60 active members are acquiring organic certification for their crops and hope to sell these collectively. But first they must locate or create markets. Exporters are interested; as the co-op president recounted, he got a call from a Lima buyer looking to purchase a ton or two a month. The problem, he ruefully explained, is that two tons is their total *annual* production. In this case, although the organic certification guarantees quality and also differentiates the product from other quinoa, the small co-op must hunt for appropriately sized domestic markets. As they search, they are developing new ways to add value to their quinoa, as well as barley and beans, by milling them for sale as flours and breakfast cereals.

Farther up the valley, alpacas are the primary source of farm livelihood. Alpaca meat is perhaps the poster child for disparaged "Indian" foods. Its consumption was considered "unimaginable" by most middle-class urbanites until the 1990s, and it remains scarce in urban markets. Currently, however, chefs seek fine loin cuts and steaks for fusion dishes and health-conscious upper-middle class shoppers regard it as an alternative to fattier red meats. In the provincial capital, the town of Chivay, a young butcher buys

meat directly from local ranchers, and sells fine cuts to a few high-end restaurants in the southern city of Arequipa. He also specializes in the elaboration of alpaca cold cuts and sausages, a craft he is imparting to members of a dozen ranching families, who joined forces initially to upgrade the quality of their pastures and who now sell about 150 kilograms of meet each week. Elaboration of the meat, both as coldcuts and the traditional jerky (the word “jerky” is in fact derived from the Quechua *ch'arki*) in solar dryers, supplied by an NGO, adds value and expands the pool of potential buyers. As these rural examples suggest, even before value can be added to foods, food products themselves must be valued by the wider Peruvian society. Thus, the producers and processors must develop markets as they develop products. Reminiscent of Hardwick, here again, local initiative and collaboration are crucial in efforts to engender rural prosperity.

Brazil. Brazil is huge, the fifth largest country and the eighth largest economy in the world. It is also one of the most unequal in terms of income distribution, and most Brazilians live in poverty. There, appropriately enough, the social movements to eradicate hunger and to create a more just society are themselves huge in scope.

In rural Brazil, where poverty and levels of illiteracy are highest, inequality is expressed in the control of land: three percent of land owners hold two thirds of the country's arable land (IAASTD 2009, 18). One response to this historically rooted problem of land tenure has been the creation of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST). The MST, the largest social movement in the Americas, has a strategy of forcing the government to enforce the law, inscribed in the Brazilian constitution, that land must serve a “social function.” In short, the MST uses peaceful protest to occupy unused lands and establish farms on them. Since the early 1980s, MST actions have propelled state redistribution of about 20 million acres of cropland to some 350,000 families. The MST, which numbers 1.5 million members, and hundreds of thousands of supporters, has literally created 2,000 new farming settlements with schools and community centers—and many of these communities have set up different marketing coops and food-processing operations (ibid). In 2003, I was able to visit one such settlement in the state of Rio Grande do Sul,

and was impressed by what the residents had accomplished in just a few years: acres of pasture and cultivated land surrounded an oval of snug cottages, which in turn rimmed a green with a school, playground, and social center. Landless people now have homes and farms and participate in the regional economy. None of this has come easily—land occupations and the wait for legal titles can last for years—but the gains are real.

A second Brazilian example highlights urban activism and the leadership of elected officials. In 2009, the World Future Council presented its Future Policy award to Belo Horizonte. This city of 2.5 million people, the country's fourth largest, once had 11 percent of its population living in absolute poverty, and almost 20 percent of its children going hungry. Then in 1993, a newly elected administration declared food a right of citizenship. It created a Secretariat for Food Policy and Supply with a 20-person citizen council, and went to work designing and implementing a new food system. The aims were “to increase access to healthy food for all as measure of social justice” (Gopel 2009: 4).

The city developed a suite of innovations to assure everyone the right to food, especially by weaving together the interests of farmers and consumers. As Frances Moore Lappe and Ana Lappe (2002) chronicle, authorities offered local family farmers choice public market space in exchange for keeping prices low and setting up weekend stands in poor neighborhoods. Direct sales eliminated the intermediaries and their cut, and farmers also benefitted from higher volumes of sales. The city made sure to purchase food from nearby farmers for food assistance programs. One of these, directed to populations most vulnerable to food insecurity, offered free health assessments and food supplements to nursing mothers, children, and the elderly (Gopal 2009, 5). Another set of highlights in the reinvention of Belo Horizonte's food system were the Popular Restaurants, where good meals could be cheaply purchased—lunch, the main meal of the day, cost just 47 cents. These pleasant and universally accessible venues serve over 12,000 meals a day, mostly to poor people but also to students and professionals attracted by the high quality and low cost. Although the restaurants receive federal and municipal subsidies, their wide appeal removes the stigma of poverty (IAASTD 2009, 19). The complementary and mutually reinforcing initiatives span the food system from production to distribution to

consumption to waste recycling. As a result, in Belo Horizonte hunger has almost been eliminated for the cost of less than 10 million dollars per year, just 2 percent of the city's annual budget (Gopal 2009).

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This small tour of Latin America is meant to showcase innovative food work that has increased the number of small farms, eradicated hunger, widened and improved peoples' diets, generated income, and promoted and preserved biodiversity. The projects reflect, like most food practices, the realities of local culture, economics, and natural environment. Some efforts are strongly state supported, while others are carried out by social movements and initiatives of local government, as well as some NGOs, community groups, and by individual farmers or entrepreneurs. What's striking is that these agrifood initiatives have as outcomes and goals broad-based impacts, which, like the North American projects, counter the idea that eating well and locally is something elitist or impractical. Many of the projects are grounded in broad visions of social justice as well. The immediate emphasis may be on raising and expanding access to good food, hardly negligible ends in themselves, but for many participants, the work, cooperation, community building, and experimentation are all themselves something more: a means for building a healthier and more equitable society.

As I've tried to show, there is no one-size-fits-all-solution for fixing a broken food system. The wide range of problems inspires a wide range of responses: agrifood activists bring diverse, sometimes contending, agendas, understandings, and starting points to the table. At a local level, I've seen that effective collaboration takes time and involves listening, building relationships, and finding paths of complementary action. Facilitating such searches for viable local and regional strategies is the expanding toolkit for food system change created by the innovation and commitment of farmers, scientists, cooks, planners, and social movement activists across continents. Because the interconnections between environment, economy, and agriculture are global, it is heartening that the quest for solutions is as well. Just as we celebrate the diversity of food in the world, we can sample and savor the cornucopia of emergent and rediscovered social visions and arrangements that ultimately serve as the seeds for its renewal.

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