

Understanding the Local Food Phenomenon: Academic Discourse, Analytical Concepts, and an Investigation of Local Food Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

The local food phenomenon has captured the attention of academics and has led to new theories and methods in food studies. Many local food initiatives, small-scale programs that aim to satisfy one or a few needs of a local food system, have been investigated by social scientists, but the overall impact of scholarship on local food initiatives has yet to be synthesized. Provided within this article is an in depth review of some of the core concepts of the local food discourse and an analysis of the scholarly literature on local food initiatives. Moreover, conclusions are offered about the state of scholarship on the local food phenomenon and recommendations for future research.

Introduction

The local food phenomenon has broken into the mainstream Western consciousness. When “locavore” was named the word of the year 2007 by the *Oxford American Dictionary*; when popular books like *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and *The 100-mile Diet* have appeared on best-seller lists; and when films like *Food, Inc.* are shown on thousands of silver screens internationally, the local food phenomenon – as a reaction against the conventional food ways promoted in mainstream Western culture and its industrial food production and distribution system – has surely impacted the landscape of our thoughts on food.

Popular discourse on industrial agro-food and its inverse, typically valorized local food, has enhanced the profile of food studies in the academic world. Alternative food systems such as organic, fair trade and local food are often put forward as the solutions to the problems generated by the industrial agro-food system. In response, a more critical and lively academic dialogue has developed. In academic discourses, the local food concept has featured in a number of different discussions about ecological sustainability, globalization,

food sovereignty and security, civil society, and the maintenance of traditional, cultural and ethnic food ways. Scholars in a number of disciplines have studied local food systems for at least twenty years. When considered collectively, their works provide the contemporary researcher with a variety of methods, theoretical stances, and analytical concepts with which to consider the local food phenomenon.

This paper provides an overview of some of the core concepts found in the scholarly literature on local food, including some major themes and areas of concern as well as analytical concepts that have gained prominence in the local food discourse. Beyond the review of popular themes and analytical concepts present in the literature, this article will detail the results of a study that synthesizes the scholarly literature on local food initiatives.

Industrial Agro-Food, Globalization, and Alternative Food Movements

The mainstream industrial agricultural model has been criticized by a number of scholars. The apprehensions that are raised in the literature are myriad, and include a number of issues such as food sovereignty (out-sourcing of food production, corporate control of food supplies, long-distance supply chains and “food miles”) (Phillips 2006; Welsh and MacRae 1998), human rights and food security (loss of agricultural skills and knowledge, food insecurity for rural and third world populations, consumer ignorance and disempowerment) (Mikulak 2009), and environmental sustainability (the risks of monoculture, petrochemical and pesticide use, and water and topsoil degradation) (Born and Purcell 2006; Hassanein 2003).

Alternative agricultural movements have flourished in reaction to the problems perceived with the dominant food production-consumption paradigm. Local food systems are typically constructed as adversaries of the industrial agro-food system. They are touted as sustainable, small-scale, moral-based, natural, democratic alternatives to the globalizing, inequitable, and technocratic dominant food system (Feagan et al. 2004). Resistance against the industrial agro-food system, such as the local food movement, is a foundational concept within academic discourses on alternative food systems. Within this discourse it is often asserted that local food systems can subvert the power and knowledge relationships inherent in the dominant food system by shortening the physical, social, and metaphorical distance between producers and consumers (Feagan 2007). It is argued that the local food phenomenon should, and does, focus on sustainable communities and farming practices rather than anti-global sentiments. In this way the local food movement emphasizes the protection of physical

resources and the environment, as well as community values of self-reliance and stewardship (Feagan et al. 2004).

However, the local food movement has the potential to be appropriated by the conventional food system. The organic food movement, for example, has changed significantly from its grassroots origins. The extensive availability and popularity of organic foods and the regulation of organic processes mirrors the growth of fast food production and consumption patterns (Guthman 2003). Learning from the fate of the organic food movement, it is entirely possible that the conventional food system could penetrate, regularize, and transform the local food concept to suit the modes of mass production-distribution (Delind 2006; Feagan 2007; Guthman 2004).

A major contention with popular discourses, some academic discourses, and activism surrounding the local food phenomenon is the reification of the local-global binary, where local is a universal good and global is a universal evil (Blue 2009). The perpetuation of this dichotomy coincides with a failure to address crucial systemic problems concerning labour, inequality, migration, and social injustice (Blue 2009). The local-global binary enables a fetishization of the local that imagines an idyllic past when there were no global forces intruding on our daily lives (Johansen 2009). This concept is embodied by the notion of “defensive localism”, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Scholarship on local food initiatives is based in part on the positioning of the local food movement as an adversary of the global industrial agricultural model. In the final synthesis section of this article, the implications of positioning the local food movement as an adversary of global industrial agriculture will be examined as it is manifested within the scholarship concerning small-scale local food initiatives.

Consumption, Civil Society and Neo-Liberalism

Intimately related to the popular notion of “local food” is the trend toward ethical food choice in food movements. Since the 1960s, alternative food movements have emphasized the role of the ethical consumer. The organic, fair trade, slow food, and local food movements have all championed the characteristic of “conscious reflexivity” (Guthman 2003). Conscious consumers think about the wider implications of their food choices, and take stock in knowing how their food has come to be on their plates. In what Friedberg (2004) calls the “transparency revolution”, consumers have increasingly made food purchases based on the ethical food framework, demanding to know where food is originating and what production methods are being used. The place-less and face-less goods coming from the globalized industrial food system become problematic when new qualifications, aside from the bottom line, are added to the consumer’s

expectations (Goodman et al. 2009). Consumption is being deployed as a way of advocating what food production and distribution methods are acceptable and desirable, and this process expresses one's personal values and identity (Fiddes 1995).

While the "conscious consumer" is only one actor among many in alternative food systems, a disproportionate focus in the literature, and possibly in practice, has focused on the practices of consumption (Blue 2009; Guthman 2008). Considering new social movement theory, the people engaging in alternative food systems are struggling to create new social identities, make new spaces for personal social action in civil society, and change norms and institutions by transforming social values and lifestyles (Hassanein 2003; Scott 1990). Yet, a preoccupation with consumption, the ability to "vote with one's dollar" or "vote with one's fork", severely limits the transformative potential of the local food movement. Local food initiatives that lie outside of the production-consumption paradigm (e.g. community gardens) tend to fall by the wayside in theoretical discussions of the local food phenomenon because they do not comply with ideas about market rationality and self-interest. Market rationality, exchange, and the citizen consumer have been normalized as the basic premises of food systems theory (Vigneault 2009).

Blue (2009) warns "the locavore movement can easily slip into normative proclamations that situate responsibility onto individuals while effacing the complex changes that have occurred within systems of governance" (74). When individual consumption is the only identifiable pathway for engaging an embedded and connected food system, consumers are actually being duped with a "neoliberal value creation trick" that simplifies complex processes and values into product labels (Goodman et al. 2009:30). The commodification of food has narrowed the vision of possible actions available to challenge the industrial agro-food system. If people who are trying to engage in an alternative food system, for example a local food system, believe that their only avenue of action is to search for and collect "Product of Ontario" labels, real changes in the ways that we produce, distribute, and consume foods will not be possible.

This criticism of local food discourse resonates deeply with the results of the synthesis of scholarship on local food initiatives. As will be shown later in this article, local food initiatives are largely discussed within the context of consumption.

Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and Agency in the Food System

Many of the discussions on the newest developments in local food systems revolve around the notions of food security and food sovereignty. Food security is defined as the condition whereby all people always have access to nutritious and

culturally acceptable foods, without reliance on emergency sources or food aid (Feenstra 1997). If communities are to be food secure, they must be empowered in the food system. The food security movement generally assumes that the globalized industrial agriculture system cannot provide food security; yet local food systems cannot replace the global system. Therefore, cooperation between local-scale and global-scale actors and systems is considered the best way to attain food security (Feagan 2007).

Related to food security is food sovereignty, which is the political and economic right of a people to have control over their food and agricultural systems (Blue 2009). It is in the best interest of communities and nations to improve stability and sovereignty in their food systems. In this way they will be protected from the volatility of global food markets and will ensure that the basic food needs of all citizens are met (Norberg-Hodge et al. 2002). However, structural inequalities in the global food system and neoliberal models of food governance leave power in the hands of international bodies such as the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), and local food system alternatives are not supported (Phillips 2006).

It has been said that everyone with a backyard vegetable patch, every farmer selling produce to their neighbours, and even families who make and eat home-cooked meals together are engaging in acts of rebellion against the industrial agriculture system (Halweil 2004). As such, anyone participating in the local food system should be considered an agent of social change. Farmers, food processors, wholesalers, retailers, and consumers all contribute to the construction of alternative food systems (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Yet a disproportionate amount of the literature focuses on the agency of the farmer and the shopper as the dialectically opposed producers and consumers engaging in the local food system. Generally speaking, inadequate attention is paid to the kinds of impacts that can be effected by other community actors such as politicians, restaurant chefs, institution administrators, and educators.

One study conducted by Dahlberg (1994) analyzed the activities of food policy councils in five cities and one county, and it was found that a few factors contributed to the institutionalization of food policy councils. An influential and supportive mayor, strong relationships between the council organizers and local government staff, and broad reforms for system sustainability and equity all increased long-term success (Feenstra 1997). However, Dahlberg's study is somewhat of an anomaly within the academic literature. The local food discourse tends to ignore the regulatory and service-provider roles of the state, instead lauding consumer choice as the strongest influence on local food system development (Stoneman 2009).

An examination of the local food phenomenon at the scale of the local food initiative will give us a better understanding of the major and minor actors as

they are embodied within the academic literature. The concentration of this study on the levels of social interaction impacted by local food initiatives, and the role that these initiatives play in local food systems brings specific attention to how small-scale initiatives have been characterized by scholars. Coupled with the following evaluation of a few key analytical concepts, this study contributes a focused discussion of the academic discourse on local food initiatives.

Analytical Concepts: Defining Local, the Local Trap, Localism and (Re)Localization

In order to understand the local food phenomenon, scholars have developed a number of analytical concepts that help make sense of the variable social interactions and impacts that they have observed. For the sake of brevity this discussion only includes four conceptual tools that are both pervasive in the literature and could benefit from clarification¹: (1) local, (2) the local trap, (3) localism and (4) (re)localization.

In much of the scholarly literature, great attention is paid to the definition of the term *local*, both in what it means geographically and conceptually for local food systems. Local, in the context of the local food discourse, signifies the scale of a place (and the boundaries of that place) at which a food system must operate in order to be considered an example of the alternative food movement known as local food (Feagan 2007). Typically, local boundaries are defined by pre-existing administrative or natural boundaries (e.g. a county or a watershed) or an arbitrary mile-radius (e.g. the 100-mile challenge) (Morris and Buller 2003; Seyfang 2006).

Local is an inconsistent concept that varies over space and time, so it cannot be relied upon as a coherent analytical concept (Hinrichs 2003). Nevertheless, local is a recognized symbol for the related geographies, attitudes, and processes of the local food phenomenon (Morris and Buller 2003; Vigneault 2009). Academics, activists, and popular writers must be clear about what local implies for their specific writings. If not, they run the risk of falling into the local trap. The local trap is described by Born and Purcell as:

The tendency of food activists and researchers to assume something inherent about the local scale. The local is assumed to be desirable; it is preferred *a priori* to larger scales. What is desired varies and can include ecological sustainability, social justice, democracy, better nutrition, and food security, freshness, and quality... the local trap is misguided and poses significant intellectual and political dangers to food systems research... the local trap is the assumption that local is inherently good... [we argue] that there is nothing inherent about any scale. (2006:195)

In order to avoid the local trap, academics and activists alike must be clear about why the local scale is the scale at which they engage the food system. The local trap can be dangerous in that it can collapse the intellectual and political rigor of work on local food systems (Born and Purcell 2006). Moreover, the local trap reminds us that local is an arbitrary scale. It should not be a value-laden object of analysis, but a perspective from which we can examine space and social relations (Sonnino and Marsden 2006).

The terms localism, re-localization, and localization are often confounded and used interchangeably in the academic literature. A preference to use re-localization instead of localization appears to merely denote an author's belief that local food systems are not innovative but returning to an older agricultural paradigm, so this distinction is not especially problematicⁱⁱ. However, using localization and localism interchangeably *is* problematic because it confuses a process (localization) with the attitudes and motivations for engaging in that process (localism). As a number of theorists have developed their arguments about the local food phenomenon by interpreting processes and attitudes/motivations, it is an injustice to lump these separate concepts together.

Localism has been qualified in a number of ways, and is a critical indicator of the reasoning behind the adoption of a local food system in any given area. A number of localisms have been defined in the literature, including "flexible localism," "competitive localism," and "defensive localism," (Hinrichs 2003; Morris and Buller 2003). The most commonly mentioned localism is defensive localism, because it represents a xenophobic, elitist, and reactionary attitude toward global outsiders. Defensive localism can be considered a form of "bourgeois regionalism" and would negate the progressive values typically associated with the localization process (Feagan et al. 2004; Feagan 2007).

Localization, on the other hand, is the process of embedding the economic and social interactions of a food system within a distinct, bounded place. The resulting local food system reduces unnecessary and redundant trade, strengthens and diversifies the local economy, and increases sustainability and food security (Feagan et al. 2004; Norberg-Hodge et al. 2002). A localized food system can respond to local tastes and food needs and increase local productive capacity (Goodman et al. 2009). Deeply rooted localization, where material, social, and moral dimensions are all considered, can be a transformative process that has the potential to represent a new rural development paradigm (Connell et al. 2008; Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Localization (or re-localization) is situated as an adversarial process that contradicts the conventional industrial agricultural system (Sonnino and Marsden 2006).

The notion of (re)localization is a useful analytical concept in the local food discourse. Whereas the symbolic "local" conjures a number of different interpretations and meanings, localization is a relatively straightforward

perspective from which to understand change in food systems. Furthermore, the tensions between the forces of de-localization and (re)localization help us to explain differences between conventional and alternative local food systems without invoking the local-global binary that has been rebuked.

As the local food phenomenon, and therefore the local food discourse, is relatively young, it is important to recognize the tools with which scholars have crafted their observations and conclusions. Moreover, it is critical to clarify related terms such as localism and (re)localization to ensure that future scholarship makes the best use possible of these analytical concepts.

A New Contribution to the Local Food Discourse: A Focus on Local Food Initiatives

Local food initiatives are the small-scale programs that aim to satisfy one or a few needs of the local food system. They may encourage the circulation of ideas about food, or facilitate the circulation of the food itself. Examples of local food initiatives include food policy councils, farmers' markets, and CSAs (community shared or supported agriculture) (Feenstra 1997). The various initiatives serve different purposes, and therefore have a number of different social effects on personal, interpersonal, and institutional scales. I suggest here that the scales of social effects can be distinguished by a number of features: (1) personal social effects, which include individuals' identities, values, and beliefs; (2) interpersonal social effects, which include relationships between people, group identities and associations, as well as economic exchanges; and (3) institutional social effects, which include food system level changes in practices, values, and beliefs vis-à-vis the industrial agro-food system.

The objective of this study was to synthesize the scholarly literature on local food initiatives, and present a meta-analysis of the qualities (social effects) and functions (sectors of the food system) that are described by scholars.

This analysis of academic literature on local food initiatives yielded 37 descriptions of initiatives and their possible or real social effects. Articles and book sections were sourced between January and March 2010, using keywords ("local food," "local food initiative," and "food movement") in Google Scholar, JSTOR, and library search engines. Additional sources were gathered from the references cited in previously found material. Eighteen journal articles and book sections provided descriptions of local food initiatives and their possible or actual social effects. Using the author's descriptions as a guide, initiatives were characterized as acting within one or more of the following food system sectors: food production, distribution, promotion, education, networking, policymaking, or general/composite. The general/composite category applied to descriptions that did not specify a certain initiative or described an initiative to include activities in

more than two sectors. Table 1 below provides a general outline of the results of this survey.

Table 1. Local food initiatives in the academic literature and the food sectors within which those initiatives operate, according to author descriptions.

| Reference | Initiatives Described | Food Sector(s) |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Feenstra 1997 | Regional food guides | Education |
| | Marketing strategies | Promotion, distribution |
| | Grower cooperatives | Networking |
| | Urban gardens | Production |
| | Community/regional food policy | Policymaking |
| Roberts et al. 1999 | Marketing: labeling schemes | Promotion |
| Hinrichs 2000 | CSAs | General/composite |
| | Direct agriculture markets | Distribution |
| Lacy 2000 | Local food systems | General/composite |
| Norberg-Hodge et al. 2002 | “Buy local” schemes | Promotion |
| | Direct agriculture markets | Distribution |
| | Community banks and loans | Networking |
| Goodman 2003 | Farmers’ markets | Distribution |
| | California AFI | Distribution |
| | “Good food” networks | Distribution |
| Hendricks and Heffernan 2003 | Greater Kansas City Greens | Networking, education |
| | Food Circle | Networking |
| Morris and Buller 2003 | Farm sales, farmers’ markets | Distribution |
| Soots 2003 | Waterloo food policy coalition | Policymaking |
| Feagan et al. 2004 | Direct agriculture markets | Distribution |
| Delind 2006 | CSAs | Production, distribution |
| Seyfang 2006 | Oestre organics | General/composite |
| Sonnino and Marsden 2006 | Local food systems | General/composite |
| | Rhône gold dairy | Production |
| Feagan 2007 | Shortened food chains | Distribution |
| | Labels of origin | Promotion |
| | CSAs | Production |
| Connell et al. 2008 | Farmers’ markets | Distribution |
| Flammang 2009 | Community gardens | Production |
| | School gardens | Production, education |
| | Jail gardens | Production |
| | Farmers’ markets | Distribution |
| | Terra Firma – CSA | General/composite |
| | Victory Gardens – circa WWI in USA | Production |
| Mikulak 2009 | Community-owed gardens | Production |
| Vigneault 2009 | Quebec in your plate | Promotion |
| | Local food systems | General/composite |

Finally, each initiative's description was examined for explanations of what, if any, personal, interpersonal, and/or institutional social effects can come from local food initiatives. The full results of this aspect of the study are too extensive to present here in full. However, some key features are described below. Please see the Appendix for the full results of this study.

The findings from this study on local food initiatives and their social effects (as presented within the current academic literature) give us new insight into the circulation of ideas about the local food phenomenon. The most commonly described initiatives in the literature are those that target the food system's distribution and production sectors (n=12 and n=9, respectively). Common distribution initiatives include a variety of direct agricultural markets, farmers' markets, and CSAs. The personal social effects of these distribution initiatives are numerous and include diversity in food choices, regional cultural identities (especially with identification with high quality food products), feelings of familiarity, community, and commitment to place and the environment, healthier lifestyles for consumers and more economic stability and freedom for farmers. The interpersonal social effects of distribution initiatives prominently feature aspects such as the exchange of knowledge and values, reciprocity, and novel interactions and personal relationships between farmers and consumers. Finally, the institutional social effects of distribution initiatives include ecological sustainability, re-embedded regional production-consumption relations, expansion/protection of the local economy, mitigation of public uneasiness about the social and ecological impacts of their foods, and increased local tourism and small business development. Goodman (2003) insists that local food distribution initiatives do *not* necessarily challenge the dominant food system or ensure social justice. These examples of initiatives (in the distribution and production sectors) indicate that many different kinds of social effects can result from small-scale changes to a food system. When a number of initiatives are embraced in a local food system the effects of these initiatives are compounded and wider social change can become a reality.

Some exceptional initiatives in the food production sector include the variety of gardens described, such as the urban, circa-WWI victory, community, school, and jail gardens. Although only a few sources (Feenstra 1997; Flammang 2009; Mikulak 2009) cite these initiatives, the descriptions detailing them cite a wide variety of social effects, including food security for urban poor, education for children, skill development for disadvantaged and "at-risk" individuals, and the creation of a patriotic, American culture of gardeners. Gardening and preparing food from the garden is said to impact on the personal level (encouraging self-respect), the interpersonal level (encouraging sharing and cooperation), and at the institutional level (encouraging increased food security,

social justice, and food education). One poignant description of the powerful social impacts of garden projects comes from Flammang:

In 1982, [Catherine Sneed] began the Horticulture Project at the county jail in San Bruno, working with inmates on a ten-acre organic garden within the prison grounds and teaching them how to become gardeners. Their harvests were donated to soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and AIDS hospices... [For the Garden Project] she set up a garden [on donated land] and offered former inmates an opportunity to work as gardeners for a six-dollar-per-hour wage... Those that worked in the Garden Project had a recidivism rate of only 24 percent compared to nearly 55 percent for the average post-release population... Giving employees an opportunity to sell directly to customers at the market was Sneed's idea. She wanted former inmates to have an opportunity to interact with a larger public than they would normally see in their daily lives. (2009:196–197)

This description demonstrates that a small-scale local food initiative can have significant social effects at individual, interpersonal, and institutional scales.

However, the county jail garden example is quite distinct from the other initiatives that dominate the academic literature. Typically, the initiatives that are described by scholars mirror the thematic trends and issues that are popular in the literature. Initiatives that directly reflect the production-consumption paradigm fall into the production, distribution, promotion and general/composite sectors of the food system and these sectors are over-represented in the survey sample. These initiatives and their social implications are explained as affecting farmers and consumers, the two groups of agents in the food system who are omnipresent in the local food discourse. On the other hand, the policymaking and education sectors are underrepresented in the survey sample, which reflects the general neglect of government and public institutions as agents in the food system.

The local food discourse lacks “detailed empirical research into the extent and impact of local food initiatives or analysis of this evidence and the development of critique” (Morris and Buller 2003:560). Since 2003 much more empirical research on local food initiatives has been conducted, and as the survey results here suggest, academics have endeavoured to understand the social effects of the local food phenomenon at the level of the local food initiative. As the academic literature contains many accounts of the possible social effects of local food initiatives, and these initiatives, when combined, indicate the directions of local food systems, there is a good foundation of knowledge upon which to build better discussions on the reaching implications of the local food movement as a global force of change. However, it is critical to realize that the kinds of initiatives for which we possess the most information are also the initiatives that have suited

the local food discourse as it has manifested over the past twenty years (with a focus on production-consumption and food choice as a social and political act). As new questions are being asked about government involvement, food security, and food sovereignty, the local food discourse requires new empirical research on the social impacts of local food initiatives that address these issues.

Conclusions

Overall, this article has attempted to execute three tasks: (1) outline the major themes of interest and contestation within the local food literature; (2) identify and concisely explain the analytical concepts used by scholars in the local food discourse; and (3) contribute to the literature by synthesizing the scholarly literature on local food initiatives.

The major themes in the local food literature are variable, but all are undercut by a preoccupation with food systems in relation to consumption and neoliberal individualism. Unfortunately, the contextualization of local food as a consumptive and individualized choice means that more collective and non-market-oriented initiatives and strategies of analysis are largely missing from the discourse.

However, some analytical concepts used by local food scholars (the local trap, localism, and (re)localization) situate the local food phenomenon as a multi-faceted object of analysis. The local trap reminds us that the local scale is merely a tool for creating geographical and conceptual boundaries around food systems, as well as a perspective from which to gain context about a food system. Localism is the motivation or attitude encouraging change in a food system, and it can reflect a variety of values that may or may not be progressive when compared to the conventional food system. Likewise, (re)localization is the process of changing a food system, and it can be contrasted against de-localization processes which affect rural areas. These analytical concepts provide us with different perspectives and a language with which to discuss the various aspects of the local food phenomenon.

Finally, the synthesis of scholarship presented here on local food initiatives contributes new ideas to the local food discourse. As of yet, the published literature does not contain a compilation of the results of studies on initiatives. Found within this article is an analysis of the descriptions of local food initiatives, the food sectors those initiatives act within, and three levels of social effects related to these initiatives. Future research should utilize these results to further explore the local food initiatives that have yet to be researched and analyzed, and special attention should be paid to the more policy-oriented developments that consider the agents who fall outside of the production-consumption dialectic.

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Notes

ⁱ Many other influential tools have been developed, adopted, and contested. For discussions of “embeddedness” see Sonnino and Marsden (2006), Goodman (2003), and Hinrichs (2000). For an explanation of “good food” see Connell et al. (2008). For discussions of “glocalization” see Feagan (2007) and Gombay (2005).

ⁱⁱ While the distinction between localization and relocalization is not significant in terms of distinguishing (re)localization from localism (i.e. is not significant in the context of this article), a scholar’s position toward localization as a new social innovation versus relocalization as a return to traditional food ways may be significant in that context.

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