

**Understanding Democracy:
Concepts, practices, and the power of decision-making in the food system**

by

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USDA SARE	United States Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agricultural Research and Education Program
UC Davis SAREP	University California Davis Sustainable Agricultural Research and Education Program
FPC	Food Policy Council
WFM	Whole Foods Market
FCWA	Food Chain Workers Alliance
AFM	Alternative Food Movement
IFS	Integrated Farming Systems Initiative
CSA	Community-supported Agriculture
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
LVC	La Via Campesina
WTO	World Trade Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
DFPC	Detroit Food Policy Council
GFPP	Good Food Purchasing Program
HEAL	Health Environment Agriculture and Labor Alliance

This is dedicated to my Grandpa Moniz. You always believed in the beauty of my dreams.

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Abstract

This paper investigates decision-making power and democracy within the food system, emphasizing the benefits of participatory democratic action as a model for decision-making power of ordinary people. With less agency of an industrialized global food system, people are asking what we can do more for the health of our food and our planet, collectively, as a way to countervail the structures of power within the food system. Food movements call for democratic processes to be implemented in the creation of alternatives to the corporate food regime. However, what's clear is that what it means to *do* democracy varies, and there is no standard set of criteria for determining what participatory democracy should look like in practice. My main research question asks, how we can better address decision-making power in the food system? Using critical inquiry and a scoping review for my overall methodology, and employing discourse and thematic analysis as my methods, I also ask how the food movement conceptualizes democracy, and how the movement puts it into practice so that we can better understand how to better address decision-making in the food system. Most food movement actors agree that some form of inclusivity and participation of stakeholders, as well as support and participation from regional, national and global institutions, is necessary for the future health of our food system, people, and the planet. For decision-making power to be distributive, democratic principles must be a part of and guide organizational efforts for effective food system change. The Food Chain Workers Alliance and Food Policy Councils are two examples of democratic principles in action.

Keywords: food democracy, food justice, food sovereignty, policy, public power, food governance, public participation, food citizen, participatory democracy, decision-making power

Chapter One

Introduction: Tracing Participation in Democracy

In everyday life, we are faced with individual choices that to an extent, are influenced and affected by the decisions of others. Can I live in that neighborhood if I wanted to? Would my personal obligations allow me to relocate for an amazing work opportunity? Will I be able to get the care I need should I get sick? Is my work environment conducive for personal and professional growth and development? If I just put in the effort can I overcome the less than ideal circumstances I'm in? Can I make enough money to provide for me and my family's basic needs? Where should I send my kids to school? Can I afford to have kids? What am I going to eat today? Am I going to eat today? These and many other daily life interests and questions are often imbued with a sense that if only we work hard enough, we can find ways to live well.

Ideally, in our personal and working lives there would endure a sense of agency and ability to participate inclusively at some level or in some way in the discussions and decisions that affect our lives, at least in the ways that are the most meaningful and in how strongly those decisions might affect us. Here, to limit the scope of what 'affected' means, we can determine the focus of the definition to be on decisions and policies that considerably facilitate our considerations for action. So, let's consider food.

Food is essential to life, and when we are faced with choices about how we will get our food, a number of considerations come into play. Beyond our daily personal food choices, decisions are made as to how food is grown, processed, packaged, sold, consumed, wasted, as well as the working conditions of those who labor in the food chain. At times, we may sense a lack of agency in our personal and working life due to the limitations of our options to choose—for example whether or not we can eat out at a nice restaurant or if we must forgo our dinner so

that the kids can eat. The resulting spectrum of choices one is able to make can partially be attributed to how much or how little material resources one has, and some of it can be attributed to how much or how little access one has to decision-making processes and practices that allow them to not only have a choice at all, but also in determining what those choices are for everyone (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen 2004, 2010; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Cameron, Gibson-Graham, and Healy 2013; Coates 2014; Coplen and Cuneo 2014; Hamilton 2004; Harper, Shattuck, Holt-Giménez, Alkon, and Lambrick, 2009; Harvey 1996; Young 1990).

This research explores the idea that society faces injustice, unsustainability and inequity because of the limited ability in being agents of decision-making processes and practices that allow democratic ideals to be realized. The current food system is often characterized as the “corporate food regime,” dominated by industrial food monopolies and a powerful neoliberal market system. Our agricultural crops are becoming more and more homogenized under the illusion that we have thousands of food choices because of commodification; low-income and communities of color have less resources for and access to fresh food and face higher rates of chronic illness; food laborers contend with unsafe work conditions at poverty level wages; and the environment is being exploited beyond its capacity to regenerate, losing our ability to maintain a diversity of subsistence crops that provide us with the very essentials of life, our food.

What has grown out of the industrial food complex is a web of social movements dedicated to realizing a more just, equitable and sustainable food system. Food system scholars and activists believe that if we create and implement more democratic practices into the way we grow, process, pack, ship, and handle waste, then we could potentially transform the current structure of our food system. The idea that if people had more of a say in what their food system looked like then we might not face the disparities that currently exist and continue to grow. To

understand more fully how we can better address decision-making power in the food system, I ask, (i) how is democracy conceptualized in food movements? And, (ii) how is democracy practiced in food movements?

The importance in asking these questions rests on my belief that people find democracy valuable, and if we are to utilize it as a framework for change, we must understand it better both in how it is currently understood, how it is being conceptualized, and how it is being practiced. In a general understanding of democracy, there are important points of divergence that need examination within the context of the food system. Democracy is often tied to notions of justice, yet we continue to see institutional systems and structures reinforce and even create injustice.

In chapter two, I discuss key concepts of participatory democracy, food sovereignty (as a social movement), and neoliberalism to provide a roadmap of how democracy is conceptualized and practiced within the food system. In chapter three, I review the various methods and methodological approaches I used to conduct my research which is based in critical inquiry, examining prevailing ideas and social conditions and relying on qualitative inductive and deductive approaches. Chapter four goes over the results and analysis of each of my constitutive research questions of how democracy is conceptualized and practiced by the food movement; then on to how it has contributed to my knowledge and understanding of social justice in the food system. Finally, chapter five concludes with a reexamination of the purpose of my research, exploring the implications democracy has for social justice and social change in the food system.

Chapter Two

Background & Significance: Participation and Democracy Within the Food System

Introduction

This chapter introduces you to participatory democracy as the analytical framework I use to look at how democracy is conceptualized and practiced by the food movement. What is democracy? Simply put, democracy is a form of governance. It is a theoretical concept that has been explored for millennia, where government and citizen contest decision-making power between the intersects of politics, society, and economics, pushing its notions of justice, power and civic responsibility in ways that both converge and diverge that cause us to continue exploring its meaning and practical application in everyday life.

The current power structures within our food system infringe on people's ability to choose in several ways, including what and how often they can eat, what and how many choices they have within their means of survival, and in having their voices heard within the current political structure of a representative and liberal democracy. While efforts within the food system are being made to develop and implement solutions to many of these problems, it is unclear how conceptualizations of democracy—often cited by food system scholars as the best way to approach them—translate into effective and embodied democratic processes and practices that give agency and allow for broad-based decision-making to take place (Allen 2004, 2010; Carlson and Chappell 2015; Harper et al. 2009; Hassanein 2008; Holt-Giménez 2009; Levkoe 2006; Menser 2008; Packer 2014; Perret and Jackson 2015; Winne 2011, 2012).

Statement of Key Social Problem

Food—an essential part of living—touches the lives of everyday people through necessity, yet millions of people lack proper nutrition and adequate access to healthful foods. The results of this reality can be seen to disproportionately affect low-income and communities of color in food security and hunger, diet-related disease, and poor wages and working conditions within food system sectors (Allen 2004; Allen and Melcarek 2013; Allen and Sachs 2007; Hardoon 2017; [USDA](#) 2016). It is common to overlook the root causes of these conditions.

Under the current paradigm of our food system the daily choice of *what* you will eat or whether *you can* eat is contained within market mechanisms of neoliberalism, making the outlined choices a matter of the resources you do or do not have to participate in that neoliberal system. While food is essential, the ‘rules’ of a neoliberal capitalist society are written by a select few and as a whole, fail to treat food as an inherent human right, further creating and perpetuating the conditions and circumstances of food insecurity, chronic illness, and poor working conditions for many. The result of this lack of choice and decision-making can be seen to contribute to the increasing social, economic, and environmental predicaments that can no longer be ignored. When children go to bed hungry or families must sacrifice time with each other in order to work two or three jobs to make ends meet, we must ask ourselves if there is a better way. Considering that food is necessary for life, we must also look at how these choices are being constructed and by whom, and how we can better address decision-making power within our food system.

The social problems I want my research to address are inequity, injustice, and unsustainability imbedded in the current structures of our food system. Alessio (2011) asserts that, “If there are conditions and circumstances under which individuals cannot be held responsible for their negative predicament, however undesirable or seemingly isolated that

predicament, it would seem to be important to recognize such predicaments as part of what constitutes a social problem” (3). I use this definition of a social problem because it implies that the personal is political and as a society, we must embody a shared sense of fate, explicitly placing ownership of what many views as individual or personal problems squarely on the shoulders of society. Many people’s circumstances are undesirable and no fault of their own, but rather largely determined by outside influences that shape their ability to be agents of change within their own lives.

Equity

According to Allen (2010), equity can be viewed as “both material equity (that is, the distribution of resources), and process equity (that is, inclusion and democratic participation)” (295). Allen’s (2010) definition of process equity advocates inclusivity and democratic participation as a way forward, where non-dominant groups are empowered to engage in political, economic, and civic life. I use Allen’s (2010) conceptual framework of process equity as the basis for my definition of equity where the parameters set forth in her article consist of inclusivity and democratic participation. While resource equity is an important issue in and of itself, for the purpose of this exploration I will focus on process equity when I discuss equity as one of the social problems my research is meant to address. Inclusivity and participation by engaged citizens is crucial in working toward transforming the power structures that currently control how decisions are made.

Justice

In Cadieux and Slocum’s (2015) view, “food justice aims to transform control of the food system through institutionalizing equity with the goal of eliminating disparities” (3). Here,

justice within the food system is closely tied to notions of equity and implies that justice can only be achieved once equity is institutionalized through structural systems of power. For justice to take place within the food system, people must challenge the powerholders and society as a whole to restore fundamental social values. This includes challenging our political, economic, education, and social structures to embrace different ways of institutionalizing process equity. I use Cadieux and Slocum's (2015) definition of food justice because it compels scholar activists and food movement actors to approach the change of power structures through transformation rather than merely through reformation of the current normative values of a corporatized food system. It implies that the way things are structured now is not enough to create spaces where justice can be realized for those who suffer inequity and injustice in the food system.

Sustainability

As Allen and Melcarek (2013) put it, the term 'sustainable' has often been associated with an environmental agenda, however social issues are being added to this framework because "sustainability problems arise not only from how humans interact with the environment, but also from how people interact with each other" and "social issues are the result of choices and decisions made through history that are now often embodied in policies and institutions" (1). Diversity, food security, working conditions, and their relationship to human health are markers of the progress made in sustainability discourse over the last three decades, expanding the definition of sustainability to include meeting human physical, emotional and social needs (Allen 2004; [UC Davis SARE](#) nd). Inevitably, equity, justice and sustainability are linked within the multidisciplinary contexts of politics, economics, environmentalism, and the social sciences. Here, I use the term sustainability set forth by Allen and Melcarek (2013) because of the defining criteria that includes social aspects of human beings.

Statement of Research Problem

In a discourse that aims to restore balance of inclusive decision-making power both laterally and vertically to create a healthier, more just and equitable food system, food system stakeholders and scholar activists are increasingly calling for more democratic processes to be built within food system sectors specifically, and across multiple disciplines more broadly, (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen 2010; Fox 2010; Held 2006; Moyer et al 2001; Packer 2014; Young 1990). Many of these food system actors regard participatory democracy specifically as a model from which equity can be realized (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen 2004, 2010; Fox 2010; Held 2006; Moyer, McAllister, Finley, and Soifer 2012; Packer 2014; Young 1990). The standard way of thinking about democracy in the food system has it that when there is access to opportunities for participation and engagement, and when engagement and participation are broad, then the necessary conditions for developing social equity are present and can achieve social justice and sustainability within food system. Conceptually, participatory democracy epitomizes an active and engaged citizenry capable of making decisions for themselves. In practice, it's not clear how concepts of democracy as a decision-making model are being implemented, nor is it clear how the impact of these practices is measured. This research focuses on the topic of democracy because I want to understand how democracy is conceptualized and practiced by food movement actors so that we can better address decision-making power in the food system.

Key Concepts

Participatory Democracy

When it comes to the topic of democracy, most of us will readily agree that it is a necessary tool for social change to take place. Where the agreement usually ends, however, is on

the question of *what democracy looks like in action* as an effective model for transformational change and as a tool to institutionalize equity, justice and social sustainability. Whereas some are convinced that the ‘vote’ is the ultimate measure of democratic practice, others maintain that democratic practice must include institutional processes that are inclusive, deliberative, and create power equity that is distributed broadly; created by and for those whom are most affected by the outcomes of those processes and practices (Allen 2004, 2010; Bonomelli and Eggen 2017; Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2005; Cameron et al. 2013; Carlson and Chappell 2015; DeSchutter 2014; DuPuis, Harrison and Goodman 2011; Held 2006; Holt-Giménez 2009; Hamilton 2004; Hassanein 2008; Harper, Shattuck, Holt-Giménez, Alkon and Lambrick 2009; Levkoe 2006; Moyer, McAllister, Finley and Soifer 2001; Packer 2104; Perret and Jackson 2015). While too much has been written about democracy to review here, my research will focus on exploring the framework of participatory democracy. Several notions include criteria where “participatory democracy fosters human development, enhances a sense of political efficacy, reduces a sense of estrangement from power centres, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more acute interest in government affairs” (Held 2006, 212). In other words, participatory democracy has the potential to create a broad-based coalition of engaged citizens who are interested in the politics of their everyday life.

Participatory democracy is the analytical framework I use to explore the central research question of, how can we better address decision-making power in the food system? It promotes the expectation for processes and practices to involve people in the decision-making process of public life, “continually interrogating what constitutes ‘good governance’ in a way that includes both participatory democracy and responsive government” (Allen 2010, 304). Compared to other

forms of democratic practice, participatory democracy is a beneficial framework for understanding and framing broad inclusivity toward civic engagement at local and hyper-local levels because it aligns with many AFM ideals that food is personal, political, and situated within the knowledge of space and place (Alkon and Agyeman 2014; Cameron et al. 2015; Hanisch 1970; Harvey 1996; Nicholls 2007, 2009; Sonnino, Mardsen and Moragues-Faus 2016). Democracy, however, is not considered a panacea for all social problems as “democracy is not an all or nothing affair, but a matter of degree” (Young 2000, 5). For the sake of this research, I utilize the analytical framework of participatory democracy as outlined above to consider the concepts and practices of the alternative food movement and its ability to address social problems of equity, justice and sustainability through decision-making processes.

Food Sovereignty

The Food Sovereignty movement is an agrarian-based movement that aims to institutionalize equity and control over the food system through democratic participation at local and global levels (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). Cadieux and Slocum (2015) argue that food sovereignty “become(s) engaged through the situated knowledge of those involved in their use,” operating from the framework of democratic capacity building (ibid.). One of the main connotations of the Food Sovereignty movement is autonomy vis-à-vis the state, taking a more radical approach toward a sustainable and just food system. This framework is useful because its mission squarely rests upon democratic participation in resisting the global food regime. As I will discuss, democratic theory is often critical in democratic participation to successfully exist at large scales. The Food Sovereignty movement challenges this notion as it “transcends the boundaries of local” to consider the impact of globalized food economies on local food systems through citizen agency and the effective response of government.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism as a conceptual framework that helps us understand how market-based solutions are used for addressing social problems, maintaining that people are personally responsible for their economic realities and individual choice is a mechanism for exercising their freedom in decision-making. The lack of decision-making power by ordinary people is perpetuated through the uneven corporatized structural relationship of power and privilege in the food system (Allen 2010, 2016; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Hardoon 2017; Mantsios 2016; Nesheim, Oria and Yih eds. 2015; Parenti 1978; Schumpeter 1950; Thoma 2016; Young 1990). Neoliberal economics, characterized by individual choice, privatization, liberalization, deregulation, fiscal austerity, and globalized corporations, contribute to ideals and norms that leave many at a competitive disadvantage (Alkon and Mares 2011, 2012; Cameron et al. 2013; Cheah 2011; Hardoon 2017). The social costs of economic neoliberalism far outweigh the social benefits when—as in the case of food systems—economics is treated only as a deliverer of efficiency and growth and not also as a tool for equity and social policy. The economic needs of people to have decision-making power in the market is only one facet of the bigger picture of our food system, where we must also account for power within the social and political structures that only a few are privileged to be a part of.

Research Questions

To understand more fully how we can better address decision-making power in the food system, I ask, how is democracy conceptualized in food movements? And, how is democracy practiced in food movements?

Conclusion

My research aims to explore how democracy is conceptualized and where it is being practiced in food movements and examines research in how justice, equity and sustainability are being achieved through this framework so that I can make further recommendations in needed research. There is discursive authority behind participatory democracy as the model for transformative change to take place in the food system, however it's unclear what it looks like when it is being practiced, and how successful it is in affecting change. First, I explore how democracy is conceptualized in the food system, analyzing how it is defined and where it is applied in its consideration to increase equity, justice and sustainability. From here, I then examine the practices of two units of analysis—Food Policy Councils and the Food Chain Workers Alliance—against conceptualizations of participatory democracy. In my next chapter, I will be outlining the mixed methods and methodologies I will use to answer my research questions, which include critical inquiry, scoping review, systematic review, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis.

Chapter Three

Methodology & Method: Approach to Assessing Democracy in the Food System

Introduction

This chapter will explain the methodologies and methods I utilize to conduct my research. To understand the relationship between democracy as a decision-making model within the food system and the social problems of inequity, injustice, and unsustainability, I utilize a mixed approach of critical inquiry, scoping review and discourse analysis. Critical inquiry looks beyond the appearance of established normative societal values to question underlying “causes and effects of social structures and power relations” (FSS Thesis 2017). The foundation of critical inquiry is appropriate for conducting this research as my research questions aim to add to a body of knowledge about ways democracy can improve upon the social conditions for those who experience injustice and inequity as part of institutional ideologies and perspectives of the corporate food regime. A scoping review will allow me to understand how social problems of inequity, injustice, and unsustainability in the food system are perceived by food movement actors and what has done about it. Lastly, the study of discourse, or discourse analysis, views language as a form of social practice and can reinforce or establish societal relations of power using language. Therefore, it is important to understand the discourse of democracy so that I can speak to the insights of how it is either reproducing or resisting social inequity, injustice, and unsustainability in the food system.

Methodology

As a former employee who served five years at what some consider to be *America's Healthiest Grocery Store*[®], Whole Foods Market[®] (WFM), I have had the opportunity to witness

inequities within the food system from a distinct vantage point. I was first hired on as an in-store health educator, conducting plant-based cooking demos, providing store tours to adults and children, developing recipes and meal plans for customers and Team Members, and working with my Team Leader on community engagement opportunities to do the same kind of work in the community. My interest in working for WFM began with my own inquiries into food as medicine (to contend with personal health issues). I was hired into this position because of what I had learned in my personal experience and was subsequently able to expand my knowledge through additional training and share it with others as a key requirement of my job.

I spent the first three months on the job becoming versed and trained in the narrative of Michael Pollan's (2007) privileged positionality of "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" and, "Pay more. Eat less" in advocating for a plant-based diet of healthful foods. Looking back, I didn't realize the privileged viewpoint of this message (despite growing up poor and living on food stamps, charitable food programs, and often went hungry) and began to question the broader implications of our food system when Team Members would share with me that they could not afford the healthful food I promoted. Even more than that, Team Members also lamented at not being able to shop at our stores despite having a baseline discount of 20%. The head chef worked 2 full-time jobs to provide for his family, and often came to work for his shift with food bought at other establishments. Furthermore, I observed shocking health and economic disparities despite living and working in one of the wealthiest and coveted parts of the United States. I couldn't understand how employees working at one of the best natural grocery stores in the country couldn't afford to shop where they worked, nonetheless for one of our most necessary survival needs, food. What I witnessed had less to do about access and more about the

illusion of choice. Beyond the illusion of choice, I wanted to understand how decisions were made within our food system and by whom, and to understand the structural inequities at play.

In performing my research, I utilized critical inquiry as the foundation from which I examined food movements and the social structures that shape power relations. I then conducted a scoping review to explore how democracy is discussed and presented by food movement actors. By conducting a scoping review, I was able to determine the ways in which democracy is cited and conceptualized by scholar activists and food movement stakeholders as a method for achieving social justice. I also used a scoping review to better understand how democratic practice is being used to address decision-making power in the food system.

Methods

Constitutive Research Question One

How is democracy conceptualized in food movements?

I will utilize participatory democracy as a central analytical framework, orienting my research toward understanding how food system actors (scholars, activists, organizations and/or institutions) conceptualize democracy at both local and global scales. For this constitutive research question, I will use deductive inquiry and systematic review of literature by starting with data on participatory democracy and look for how it exists in food system discourses.

To start, I will gather data from books, and scholarly research and journal articles on democratic theory and social movements. In addition, I will look at scholarly work specifically written about democracy in the food system to see how it is conceptualized there. This data will be gathered from academic databases, web searches, books searches, research/journal articles provided by instructors, and through combing bibliographies and reference lists as secondary sources of information. Because democracy has a long a nuanced history with multiple theories

and meanings, it will be important for me to gather credible sources of information on democratic theory. Books and scholarly work will be the most appropriate sources for this.

Once I have collected this data, I will organize it by key concepts and catalog any terms that arise related to the conceptualization of democracy in the food system, no matter how the terms are worded. I will then draw on the data by analyzing how often participatory democracy came up as a conceptualization of democracy in the food system to narrow in on my units of analysis for constitutive question two. To understand how democracy is practiced in food movements, I must have examples of how democratic practice is occurring in the food system.

Constitutive Research Question Two

How is democracy practiced in food movements?

The research for this question will focus on organizations that span local as well as national (and potentially global) scales of operation. Based on the data gathered for how democracy is conceptualized in the food movement, I will research the practice of democracy within the food system by utilizing two units of analysis; Food Policy Councils (FPC) at local, regional and national levels, and the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA), a member-based organization spanning the food chain across the United States. Food Policy Councils have been conceptualized by food movement scholars as platforms for democratic participation, and I will need to collect data on how these practices are discussed by FPCs and what specific practices are put in place to engage citizens in participatory democracy. Lastly, I will also look at the outcomes of these organizations in addressing social problems of inequity, injustice, and unsustainability, and how their use of democratic practice helps to achieve those outcomes.

For this constitutive question I will be looking at academic studies on FPCs and their organizational structure and business models to see how democratic practices are being

institutionalized. Additionally, I will read several mission/value statements from websites to determine whether they conceptualize themselves as platforms for democracy, and whether they explicitly state that they employ democratic principles within their operations. I will gather this data by searching academic databases, referencing bibliographies and reference lists, and doing a web search for specific FPC websites. This data will be analyzed against conceptualizations of democracy in the food system found in research question one.

Conclusion

By utilizing critical inquiry as the basis for this research, and in applying multiple methodologies/methods to explore concepts and practices of participatory democracy, I can better understand how the concepts and practices of democracy advance equity, justice and sustainability within our food system through decision-making practices that are broad and inclusive. The next chapter will explain the results, analysis, and contributions of my research.

Chapter Four

Results, Analysis, And Contribution: Democracy—Toward Inclusivity or Deliverance?

Introduction

This research focuses on the topic of democracy because I want to understand how democracy is conceptualized and practiced by food movement actors so that we can better address decision-making power in the food system. Food system stakeholders and scholar activists are increasingly calling for more democratic processes to be built within food system sectors specifically, and across multiple disciplines more broadly, as part of a discourse that aims to restore balance of inclusive decision-making power both laterally and vertically in order to create a healthier, more just and equitable food system (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen 2010; Fox 2010; Held 2006; Moyer et al 2001; Packer 2014; Young 1990). Conceptually, democracy in the food system seems promising as it embodies notions of inclusivity and equity in autonomous and decentralized decision-making processes for communities of practice. However, in practice it's less clear whether applied concepts of democracy achieve the intended goals of equity, justice, and sustainability as a model of inclusive, broad-based decision-making power. This chapter will review the results of my research and how it has contributed to my understanding of social change and social justice within the food system.

To answer my central research question of, how can we better address decision-making power in the food system? I ask, “how is democracy conceptualized in the food movement?”, and, “how is democracy practiced in the food movement?” These questions are important ones to ask because of the increasing disparities that exist within structural and institutional power centers and the resulting inequities, injustice and unsustainability that society is facing. My goal

in asking these questions is that in doing so, it can help us better understand how to bring our visions of a more socially just, equitable, and sustainable food system closer to reality through better addressing decision-making power for ordinary people. My research addresses these problems through analyzing two differing organizational approaches in which democracy is practiced by food movement actors. I compare the structure and function of each organization to the definition and intended outcomes of democracy set forth in this research and suggest ways to better address decision-making power through this model.

For my first constitutive question, “how is democracy conceptualized in the food movement?” I examined the discourse of democracy in the food system. Through an investigation of various literature and web searches, I discovered points of both convergence and divergence on the ways in which democracy is conceptualized by food movement scholars and experts to achieve socially just outcomes. The most commonly used conceptual frameworks of democracy within the AFM include terms such as “food democracy,” “direct democracy,” “grassroots democracy,” “participatory democracy,” “food sovereignty,” and “food justice” (Allen 2010; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Carlson and Chappell 2015; De Schutter 2014; DuPuis et al 2011; Hamilton 2004; Hassanein 2008; Halweil 2005; Holt-Giménez 2009, 2011; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011; Johnston, Biro and MacKendrick 2009; Lang 1998; Lappe 1990; Levkoe 2006; Lozano-Cabedo and Gómez-Benito 2017; Perrett and Jackson 2015; Winne 2011). Although there are many ways in which democracy is conceptualized by the AFM, there remains a common thread, that of participatory democracy. For this reason, I use participatory democracy as the analytical framework for my research.

Through an initial investigation of how democracy is conceptualized in the food movement, I discovered that Food Policy Councils consistently showed up in my research as an

organizational structure that in concept, promotes a platform for democracy. Food Policy Councils emerged from the desire of citizens to have a space where democratic practices in decision-making around food policy are in place, and was cited in several instances as experiments in democratic governance (Bonomelli and Eggen 2015; Holt-Giménez 2009; Harper et al. 2009; Winne 2011). Because of the prevalence of discourse around Food Policy Councils and its potential to promote democratic practice, I include this as a unit of analysis for my second constitutive research question. Through this research, I also was made aware of an organization called, The Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA), which is a membership-based organization that explicitly declares in its mission statement that they envision a food system that is democratically controlled and is part of the larger international Food Sovereignty Movement ([FCWA 2018](#)). This is my second unit of analysis for my second constitutive research question.

Constitutive Research Question One

My first constitutive research question is, what are the ways in which democracy is conceptualized within the food movement?

Results and Analysis

Democracy and Social Movements

Academics and food system experts assert that as a conceptual framework, democracy has the potential to serve as a process by which citizens are directly involved in decision-making practices when values come into conflict (Allen 2010; De Schutter 2014; Gunderson 2014; Hamilton 2004; Hassanein 2008; Held 2006; Holt-Giménez 2009; Lang 1998; Lappe 1990; Levkoe 2006; Menser 2008; Moyer, McAllister, Finley and Soifer 2001; Perrett and Jackson 2015). I believe people value democracy because ideally it confronts injustice. This connection

of justice and democracy theoretically supports the ideal that policy and program creation will create the most just outcomes. Conventional wisdom has it that in reality, this is not always the case. It has become common today to dismiss adverse outcomes to what we assume are the outcomes of a just process of democracy. Policies and programs are complex, nuanced, and require a certain degree of knowledge of how the process of policy creation works, and what criteria are needed for the process to be inclusive and equitable.

Over the past several decades, programs, projects and institutions have been developed in response to a host of environmental and social concerns. These range from national and regional level institutions, such as the United States Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agriculture Research Education (USDA SARE) Program, UC SAREP (a California statewide Program of UC Agriculture and Natural Resources), the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Integrated Farming Systems (IFS) Initiative, and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition; to community-based, local and hyperlocal programs and projects such as food policy councils (FPCs), community-supported agriculture (CSAs), cooperatives, farmers markets, mobile pantries, and community gardens; some scholars would include "ethical consumerism" as an approach to democratic action, which operates on an individual level and with varying degrees of necessary knowledge and resources (Allen 2004, 2010; Fairbairn 2012; Gunderson 2014; Holt-Giménez 2009). While many of these organizations have positive intentions for a healthy and thriving food system, it's hard to say whether they are structured to successfully implement democratic processes and practices as a way to address many of the problematic outcomes of the current corporate food regime, specifically the processes by which decisions are made—that is, what decisions are being made and by whom.

The overwhelming breadth and depth of social problems within the food system has thrust into question the form and scope of democratic decision-making power as an urgent matter (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen 2004, 2010; Cameron et al. 2013; Fox 2010; Menser 2008; Packer 2014). In recent history, much of the response to the people's inability to feed themselves and their families (whether through unjust circumstance, inequity of resources and inclusion, etc.) has been through market-based solutions disguised as charitable giving or social safety net programs. For example, large corporations like Walmart that employ millions of people below a livable wage create a workforce who is then reliant on various government programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps). This workforce then spends their government subsidized nutrition benefits at Walmart, effectively using taxpayer-funded money to make a profit. It is estimated that food stamp sales in 2013 for Walmart accounted for \$13.5 billion in revenue for the company, equaling roughly 18% of the SNAP market (Americans for Tax Fairness 2014). While this is an egregious example of how market-based solutions are used to address food security, many other forms of neoliberal mechanisms are in place to counteract the growing injustices within the food system that leave people at a disadvantage. It is like putting a wolf in sheep's clothes. The declining ability for people to have the means necessary to access and accumulate enough resources for fresh, healthy food paints a dismal reality for many. This reality has caused food system scholars and activists to sound the call for more democratic processes and practices to be created and implemented within existing institutions and organizations, as well as building coalitions to reimagine what the future of food should look like.

The birth of democratic participation within the food system stems from the desire to advance a healthy food system and transform it from the entrenched neoliberal framework it now

sits. Many notions of democracy have arisen from the variety of social sub-movements that comprise the AFM and include such campaigns as “good food,” “fair trade,” “organic,” “food justice,” “food sovereignty,” “food policy,” and “community food security,” to name a handful (Allen 2004; DuPuis et al. 2011; Harper et al. 2009; Holt-Giménez 2011; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011; Mares and Alkon 2011; Packer 2014). It’s true that a multitude of these groups celebrate conceptual ideas of democracy and over time, have infused them into dominant narratives of the food movement with the goal of making progress toward a more inclusive, equitable, and just food system. Nonetheless, as the idea of democracy becomes a dominant narrative of these sub-movements they must grapple with balancing what Allen (2010) terms as material equity (in other words, resource distribution) with decision-making equity (think, process equity) and confront the structural and institutional designs that allow process equity to take place.

Democracy is conceptualized and defined broadly. There are many variations of how democracy is used within food system research, utilizing terms such as direct democracy, grassroots democracy, food democracy, participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. These terms are often used interchangeably among scholars. It is noteworthy to say here that participatory democracy, specifically, is conceptualized as the backbone of social movements—including those within the Alternative Food Movement (Allen 2004, 2010, 2016; Bonomelli and Eggen 2017; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Carlson and Chappell 2015; DeSchutter 2014; DuPuis et al., 2011; Fairbairn 2012; Hamilton 2004; Halweil 2005; Harper et al. 2009; Hassanein 2008; Held 2006; Johnston, Biro and MacKendrick 2009; Levkoe 2006; Lacy 2000; Lang 1998; Lappe 1990; Levkoe 2006; Menser 2008; Moyer et al., 2001; Perrett and Jackson 2015; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005; Winne 2011). Throughout much of recent human history, engaged citizens have

organized in order to change undesirable social conditions that they found themselves in. Examples include the abolition of slavery, voting rights of African Americans and women, and gay and lesbian rights, to name a few. In order to fully understand the conceptualization of participatory democracy within the food movement, we must first examine what social movements are.

Although scholars and social critics have defined social movements throughout history in a multitude of ways, through my research I pull the definition of a social movement from Moyer et al. (2001) where they define social movements as “collective actions in which the populace is alerted, educated, and mobilized, sometimes over years and decades, to challenge the *powerholders* and the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values” (2). The keyword here is ‘action’. Furthermore, Moyer et al. (2001) go on to assert that “social movements *promote participatory democracy*. They raise expectations that people can and should be involved in the *decision-making process* in all aspects of public life” (italics added, 10). My main research question rests on this very notion, that “*people can and should be involved in the decision-making process*,” (ibid.) where I ask, how can we better address decision-making power within our food system?

Over the last several decades, powerful corporations and political organizations have become so ominous so as to skew the distribution of decision-making power among the people in relationship to their food. As I will explain, these structures and institutions are supported by a traditional liberal (or representative) democracy and are upheld by a neoliberal framework that favors the power of market capitalism (in the form of property ownership, market power, contracts, bankruptcy and liability, and enforcement mechanisms)¹. Because the current iteration

¹ For a discussion of the five building blocks of capitalism (property ownership, market power, contracts, bankruptcy and liability, and enforcement mechanisms), see Reich (2015, 9).

of our food system is characterized as a corporate food regime and is subsequently dominated by commercial conglomerates that control many aspects of the value chain (from growing, processing, packing, distribution, wholesale and retail, and waste), there comes with this reality huge implications on the creation and acceptance of normative social, environmental, and political processes, policies, and practices at every level, and in everyday life.

This is problematic under the framework of participatory democracy because instead of broad-based inclusion on decision-making within the food system (of which we are all a part of), a small minority of powerful people and organizations make a majority of the decisions around our food—not just how things are done but also who gets a say in it. Democracy is conceptualized as a model for transformative change, yet *how* democracy is put into practice and *who* is involved in democratic decision-making models to address social problems is less clear and needs to be explored further. Social movements within the food system have the potential to challenge and transform the current structural powers through collaborated efforts geared toward institutional design and development that includes inclusive democratic practices.

I first explored the concept of democracy both within and outside of the food movement (more broadly, as part of social movements) in order to gain a historical perspective of what democracy means in the context of decision-making power. Because my research question asks about decision-making power, I considered two views of power—that of social power (or people power) and the power elite (or powerholders). These contrasting models of power are important to note because through history, progressive social movements typically need to challenge the differential distribution of political and economic power that the power elite hold in order to promote democracy, justice, and social welfare. In this sense, social movements can be viewed as democracy in action. The traditional view of democracy aligns along mainstream political and

social theories and uphold a more liberal, or representative democracy, where the only way people are expected to participate is through the vote. Within the food movement, participatory democracy is conceptualized as working to challenge the mainstream normative political and social constructs that perpetuate and reinforce systems of inequity, injustice and unsustainability, and provide arenas for active engagement beyond the poll.

As previously explained, the notion of participatory democracy repeatedly surfaced as I read through various literature created by food system scholars and activists. The idea was that because average citizens did not have much of a role in shaping the many policies coming out of the vast food system, bringing together an array of community food system experts and activists at local and hyperlocal levels would help to construct a system where their values could be reflected (Harper et al. 2009; Winne 2012). While I found many instances of the term ‘democracy’ in food system discourse, avenues for creating and implementing processes and practices for greater participation fell within a few arenas of the alternative food movement’s purview. First, Food Policy Councils were consistently cited as organizational structures having the most potential to deepen democracy that was inclusive and increased participation within the food system. Second, the international Food Sovereignty Movement was often cited as a movement focused on agrarian communities working to gain back control of food production and consumption within democratic processes. While they are recognized as an international movement, their efforts are rooted in localized food systems promoting alternatives to neoliberal policies that reinforce poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Participation and inclusivity are key tenets of how democracy is conceptualized in each of these realms of coordinated food system action.

Carlson and Chappell (2015) argue that “food policy councils can play a unique role...for being inclusive, transparent, and intentional spaces for dialogue” allowing “residents who are impacted by food and health policies [to] define their own priorities and discuss contentious food issues of the day”—the goal being that they may have more control and autonomy in food decisions (15). Similarly, Holt-Giménez (2009) asserts that “Food Policy Councils have the potential to democratize the food system” and “can amplify the voices of underserved communities that have traditionally had limited access to power” (3). In Mark Winne’s perspective, “food policy councils are food democracy in action” (Nourish 2011). This is due in part to the idea that FPCs are characterized by robust citizen participation with the goals of equity and sustainability embedded within their practices. What began as grassroots initiatives that were interested in working across sectors to engage with governments, businesses, policy, and non-profit projects and programs reflecting all five sectors of the food system, has grown to serve as a forum and platform for discussing food issues more broadly, emerging “as one of the AFM’s more civically engaged activities—democratic, community-based organizations that work to rejuvenate their respective food systems from the ground up” (Packer 2014). Some scholars argue that Food Policy Councils are an experiment in democratic governance.

Food Sovereignty

The Food Sovereignty movement is a movement where participatory democracy is at the heart of their mission to create an equitable food system, using various strategies to organize and act in creating autonomy vis-à-vis the state (Alkon and Mares 2012; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Fairbairn 2012; Holt-Giménez 2011; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). The movement is internationally recognized yet operates at local levels. According to Mares and Alkon (2011), “Food sovereignty declares the rights of local peoples to define their own agro-food systems

rather than remain subject of the consequences and demands of global trade policies” (69). In other words, the populace defines and demands the changes they wish to see rather than waiting for the willingness or inclination of established institutions to change on their own accord. La Vía Campesina (LVC) developed the food sovereignty concept in the 1990s. They describe themselves as the International Peasants Movement who bring together peasants, small and medium size farmers, landless and indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the globe to fight for food sovereignty, climate and environmental justice, peasant’s rights, land, water and territories, and dignity for migrant and wage workers in the food system (La Via Campesina 2018). To date, worldwide they span 81 countries with 182 membership organizations and over 200 million peasants (ibid.). Each year they organize campaigns and hold summits all over the world to discuss and set agendas for political and social policies.

Food Sovereignty is discussed at length in many literatures of food system scholars as a potential avenue for creating a more democratically controlled food system. It is often encompassed within the food justice narrative and categorized as a more radical approach to social justice issues². Cadieux and Slocum (2015) assert that both “food justice and food sovereignty aim to institutionalize equity in and control over the food system” (3). It is explored and researched within the US context by Alkon and Mares (2012) where the food sovereignty framework is being adopted by low-income communities of color in urban America. Furthermore, Holt-Gimenez (2009, 2011, 2017) writes extensively on radical and progressive trends within the food movement, highlighting the potential for transformation through an approach that embodies democratic control and autonomy of the state.

² For a discussion of Radical and Progressive trends of the food movement, see Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(1), January 2011, ‘Food crises, food regimes and food movements: rumblings of reform or tides of transformation?’.

Although LVC is the leader of the Food Sovereignty Movement, my research and analysis focus on participatory democracy within the United States. Because of the goals of the Food Sovereignty Movement to facilitate the active participation of its members, I examined the membership base of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance because of their principle to “strive and create an inclusive and efficient decision-making process” (USFoodSovereigntyAlliance.org 2018). Among its members is the Food Chain Workers Alliance, a coalition of worker-based organizations across all sectors of the food chain who explicitly state that they believe in “truly sustainable food system” that is “democratically controlled by communities” (Food Chain Workers Alliance 2018). For this purpose, I utilize them as a unit of analysis for my second constitutive question and examine how they practice democracy in the food system.

Neoliberal Notions

Resistance to neoliberalism can be viewed as a motivation and characteristic of many AFMs, abating inequalities and injustices against those who lack decision-making power, entitlement to land, and control over natural resources (Alkon and Mares 2012; Hardoon 2017; Gunderson 2014; Menser 2008). Extreme concentrations of wealth and extreme poverty can be attributed to the neoliberal mechanisms put in place as solutions to social problems, at local and global scales. There is a huge voiceless labor force within the food system that is structurally exploited and oppressed, leaving them powerless to make decisions about the condition of their personal and working lives (Hardoon 2017; Young 1990). Through my research, neoliberal market-based solutions and mechanism were cited as sites of resistance for those taking democratic action in the progressive and radical alternative food movements. Alkon and Mares (2012) highlight three aspects of neoliberalism that are most pertinent to food movements: the liberalization of agricultural commodity trade, the privatization of functions once reserved for

the state, and the notion of individual self-responsibility within subjectivities that privilege the primacy of the market (348-9). Moreover, they insist that “a broad understanding of and response to neoliberalism is characteristic of the food sovereignty discourse” (Mares and Alkon 2011, 77).

You might be asking how neoliberalism relates to democracy. As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, corporations now dominate a globalized food system, characterized by increased industrial production, unregulated monopolies, liberal markets, and monocultures that are supported and held in place by global mainstream institutions like the World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Under this framework the discourse revolves around food as an enterprise. The prevailing view of capitalism is that “whatever inequality or insecurity the market generates is assumed to be the natural and inevitable consequence of impersonal “market forces”” (Reich 2015, 3). In this sense, then, the rules about how the market works (and who creates them) separate us from our food in profound and meaningful ways. Market logic has taken over much of the decision-making that once resided in public spheres. Under the current liberal-democratic norm, we operate as a body governed by representatives of the people, or the power elite, and in recent years are seeing more and more the ways in which the integrity of our political system is hinged on relationships between government and private business. Social movements use participatory democracy as a tool for restoring countervailing power to the people when faced with worsening social conditions that are left out of their control.

Philosophers, scholars, and political theorists, of course, may want to question whether participatory democracy is realistic at a large scale. It is often deemed impractical and even impossible when held against the current mainstream political and social understanding of democracy. Young’s (2000) nuanced and detailed theory of inclusion and democracy is

extremely useful to consider here because it sheds light on the difficult problem of identifying the various polities of democracy at local and global scales. She asserts that public discussion and decision-making must successfully cross structural differences (racism, sexism, ableism, etc.) and agitate for transformation of the status quo, no matter what level it occurs on.

Furthermore, Young (2000) insists that we must shift from the ontology of civil society toward analyzing how social activities do in fact affect change across the state, economy, and society itself due to the limits of associated activities for democratization and social justice (163). Her view is that ideals of inclusion and democracy can be found in experiences within existing democratic practice where “participatory civic activity [is] linked to authoritative state action” (10). What she offers in her view of democracy is that representation is inevitable and in fact necessary in modern politics, which isn’t far off from what food system scholars imagine participatory democracy entailing. Where her model of democracy differs from proponents of participatory democracy within alternative food movement is in her argument against those who advocate “that civil society serves as a preferred alternative to the state today for promoting democracy and social justice” (Young 2000, 156). The motivation for the growing food movement is its perception that the state is failing the people, and that alternatives must be created to countervail the power elite and create spaces where justice, equity and sustainability can be realized.

The results of my research in asking, “how is democracy conceptualized in the food movement?” uncover areas of opportunity for clarification of how democracy is defined and conceptualized within the food movement. In several instances, varying terms were used to describe food movement coordinated action, such as food democracy, direct democracy, grassroots democracy, and participatory democracy. Often, they were identified as a tool to

achieve similar goals of justice, equity and sustainability by engaging citizens in the processes that allowed them decision-making access. Participation and inclusion were cited as essential criteria for democratic practice to take place in the food system. In the next section, I will discuss the results and analysis of my second constitutive research question addressing democratic practice in the food system.

Constitutive Research Question Two

My second constitutive question is, what are the ways in which democracy is practiced within the food system?

Results and Analysis

Food Policy Councils

Democracy as a framework for decision-making power of ordinary people within the food system is practiced in a variety of ways and by a variety of differing organizations. Democratic practice spans international organizations and alliances fighting for food justice and food sovereignty, all the way down to local and hyper-local groups and alliances advocating for good food and good jobs. In my investigation to better understand how democracy is conceptualized within the food movement, what stood out most is the specific organizations that were perceived as exemplars of democratic practice. Food Policy Councils and membership organizations of the Food Sovereignty Movement were consistently hailed in their ability to create a more democratic food system based in participation and inclusivity (Allen 2010; Barling, Lang and Caraher 2002; Bonomelli and Eggen 2017; Clayton, Frattaroli, Palmer, and Pollack 2015; Harper et al. 2009; Holt-Giménez 2009, 2011; Packer 2014; Spear 2013; Winne 2011, 2012).

For this constitutive research question, I examined Food Policy Councils and their demonstration of participatory democratic practices where “participatory democracy fosters human development, enhances a sense of political efficacy, reduces a sense of estrangement from power centres, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more acute interest in government affairs” (Held 2006, 212). In my research, I looked at what motivated the creation of Food Policy Councils as well as how they have been structured as an organization to meet the aforementioned goals. This was important to assess because of the notion that citizen engagement and inclusivity—key tenants of participatory democracy—in key decision-making processes should be observable in some form.

Food Policy Councils started as a way to address the food system as a whole by connecting stakeholders from diverse sections of the food system sectors at local, county and state levels. FPCs can be categorized as either public (through legislation or executive order), nonprofit (either as a nonprofit entity or as a project of a nonprofit organization), or (informal) grassroots organizations (Siddiki, Carboni, Koski and Sadiq 2015; Harper et al. 2009). As such, depending on where they are housed they may take on the form of a governmental agency, nonprofit organization, grassroots body, or citizen advisory board (Harper et al. 2009). Few FPCs have paid staff and depend on volunteer time due to lack of funding. Each of these structures impact the kind of engagement they are able participate in, from leadership and decision-making capabilities to staffing and selection of members. Typically, membership is diverse and can include farmers, food processors, wholesalers/distributors, grocers, restauranters, food justice advocates, school, community and religious leaders, scholars, legal advocates, government representatives, and concerned citizens. Studies of the effectiveness of

FPCs have shown that the more diverse the stakeholder group, the more successful and diverse the outcomes.

What I found early on in my research about FPC organizational structures was that they are typically characterized as advocates and/or relationship builders where their membership structure is typified by community ‘experts’ rather than a coalition of the broader community members. This is an important point to bear in mind when thinking about participatory democratic practice. Fox (2010) conducted a study of four Food Policy Councils for the Los Angeles Food Policy Task Force to look at democratic governance structures of FPCs for sustainable and equitable food systems. In her overview of FPCs, she insists that “the process of a Food Policy Council is what embodies and activated democracy” (Fox 2010, 10). Measuring the intangible success of democratic decision-making is challenging when there is the identified need to assess whether a FPCs process matches the complexity of the needs and desires of its specific constituencies. Where success can be measured is in the transparency and openness to various community stakeholders in the organizations mission and goals.

Of the four FPCs that Fox (2010) evaluated, the Detroit Food Policy Council (DFPC) was deemed a more successful example of “democratizing” the food system in that it “[will] provide leadership and coordination to a grassroots movement for a sustainable and equitable food system” (41). Their accomplishments stem from a strong foundation and awareness of a FPCs ability to “change decision-making power in the food system” where they take conscientious steps to safeguard “inclusivity and transparency” (31). In the structure and function of the organization, the founders felt that maintaining autonomy from city government would allow them to hold the local government accountable as necessary while maintaining the trust of the community. Conversely, they also recognized the value of gaining legitimacy as a Council by

having the official endorsement of the government. The challenge here was to strike a balance. Given these concerns and the vision of the founding members, the city council played a role in shaping the DFPC by having three seats reserved in helping draft by-laws and job descriptions for staff and helped to identify possible streams of funding. In seeing through their formation in 2009, they consist of twenty-one members: (13) representatives from various sectors of the food system (one from each sector: sustainable agriculture, retail food stores, wholesale food distributors, food processors, farmers markets, environmental justice, nutrition and wellbeing (non-governmental), food industry workers, colleges and universities, K-12 schools, emergency food providers, urban Planning (non-governmental); (4) “at-large” representatives; (1) youth representative; and (3) governmental representatives (one each from the Mayor’s Office, City Council, and The Department of Health and Wellness Promotion) ([DFPC 2018](#)).

While Fox’s (2010) case study of the DFPC emphasized participatory democratic governance, upon further investigation of the DFPCs website, nowhere did it explicitly state “participatory democracy” or “democracy” as a strategy for citizen engagement and inclusion. I did discover, however, that they use a consensus decision-making model to ensure all voices at the table are willing to fully endorse and support the implementation of the decisions being made (DFPC 2018). Their mission and vision statement reflect the following:

DFPC is committed to nurturing the development and maintenance of a sustainable, localized food system and a food-secure City of Detroit in which all of its residents are hunger-free, healthy, and benefit economically from the food system that impacts their lives.

We envision a city of Detroit with a healthy, vibrant, hunger-free populace that has easy access to fresh produce and other healthy food choices; a city in which the residents are educated about healthy food choices, and understand their relationship to the food system; a city in which urban agriculture, composting and other sustainable practices contribute to its economic vitality; and a city

in which all of its residents, workers, guests and visitors are treated with respect, justice and dignity by those from whom they obtain food.

The DFPC has a clear conceptualization of an inclusive and diverse membership. Participation is integral in the operation of their organization and in pursuit of their goals. I wanted to understand how the structure and conceptualization of their organizational goals and mission translated into effective participatory democracy as defined in the beginning of this research. My next step was to visit the DFPC website and look for further documentation and reports that would clarify this for me.

Upon reviewing their meeting minutes in 2017 – April 2018, the rosters indicate that most meetings had roughly half of the listed members in attendance ([DFPC 2018](#)). There was no information to explain if council member positions were not filled during this time and could account for the lack of attendance numbers. Despite lower attendance of council members, many of the public comments on the meeting minutes indicate that there is consistent public participation from food system stakeholders and that community activities were happening alongside other government and socially focused organizations and nonprofits. In their 2017 annual report, the DFPC indicated that it used surveys, community listening sessions, public meetings, and key informants to impart the community's thoughts, concerns, and reactions to their Food Security Policy as outlined in the report³. Although I cannot draw definitive conclusions about the breadth of democratic practice from one case study, this particular case study shows the complex nature of hybrid organizational structures whose aim is to be inclusive

³ “While we were pleased to discover that there was widespread support of both the Food Security Policy and the DFPC, we learned that we must continue to educate residents about food security and the work of DFPC” (2017 Creating a Food Secure Detroit: Policy Review and Update).

and have high levels of citizen and stakeholder participation while also accounting for the limitations or tentative nature of a government partnership.

In conclusion, while Food Policy Councils seek to create and build partnerships with various community and policy stakeholders, their aim is in policy creation that support specific initiatives or legislations, typically at a local level.

Two other important pieces of research I studied elaborate on the importance of having a clearly defined organizational structures with a clear focus on whether or not the foci are policy creation and advising, or whether or not the foci is working on capacity building and citizen engagement for the movement as a whole (through projects and programs) (Coplen and Cuneo 2014; Harper et al. 2009). There seems to be a consensus that the FPC is more effective when focusing on one or the other, as long as they have clearly defined roles and responsibilities within the organization. After ten years of conducting food policy and advocacy work, the Portland Multnomah Food Policy Council dissolved “after local government agencies expressed that the council was losing relevancy” (Coplen and Cuneo 2014, 1). Like many public partnerships, strategies for public engagement can vary as well as their efficacy, leading to differing outcomes depending on the level of decision-making power given to citizens. The line between policy, projects and programs can become blurred leading to a perceived lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the community and the local government.

Finally, a 2009 report on FPCs emphasize the many *potentials* they have as forums for food system issues and platforms for collaboration and partnerships. Like much of the other research I examined, their conclusion illuminates the need for a clear organizational structure for efficacy, more diversity, proper balance between policy, projects and programs, funding, tools to

measure impact, and the ability to work in a complex and changing political climate (Harper et al. 2009).

Food Chain Workers Alliance

The Food Chain Workers Alliance is a national social labor movement comprised of worker-based organizations whose members represent all sectors of the food chain. Founded in 2009, they seek to countervail the economic powerholders of the food system through democratic practices. Their program scope focuses on three areas of work to help build a healthier, more sustainable food system, where each of its members work in at least one area: (1) Growth and Learning, (2) Campaigns and Messages, and (3) Movement Building (FCWA 2018). Through coordinated collaboration, the Growth and Learning Committee works to create solidarity and leadership through an annual worker leaders' summit and a Justice in the Food Chain training series. The FCWA also supports campaigns that are organized by its members, principally focusing on the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP)—working to end the exploitation of workers. The purpose of the GFPP “is to increase access to and demand for high-quality jobs and healthy, sustainably-produced food by using the purchasing power of major institutions” (FCWA 2018). Finally, the Alliance believes in capacity building that is broad and deep and therefore play in leadership roles across various national formations including the HEAL (Health Environment Agriculture and Labor) Alliance and the Domestic Fair-Trade Association.

Looking at participatory democracy where its tenets “fosters human development, enhances a sense of political efficacy, reduces a sense of estrangement from power centres, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more acute interest in government affairs” (Held

2006, 212), the Alliances' practices align well with this conceptualization of democracy. They explicitly state in their vision statement that "Our food system should: 1. Be democratically controlled" (FCWA 2018) and their organizational structure supports the criteria often cited of participatory democracy in that it should be broad-based, inclusive, and effective.

As part of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, their mission—while locally focused in many regards—connects to an international movement and aims to institutionalize equity and justice and parallels existing power structures in an effort to move away from the corporatized food regime. Their work is grounded in grassroots organizing, alliance building, increasing political power, and transforming the structures of power across the United States and abroad. The US Food Sovereignty Alliance lists 47 members, many of which are also alliances, associations or coalitions conducting similar work in their respective communities or regions. The FCWA lists 30 members on their website, many of them food justice and labor union groups representing all aspects of the food chain.

Contribution

This research helps to clarify the connection between the conceptualization and practices of participatory democracy within the food system, highlighting important points of convergence and divergence depending on organizational structures, funding, capacity-building, legitimacy, and relationships. While Food Policy Councils and Food Justice and Food Sovereignty movement actors are conceptualized by food system scholars as having the most potential for participatory democratic practice, in truth, practices may be harder to implement or measure in their effectiveness depending on how the organization is structured to function, who the stakeholder groups are, and what the stated goals and missions are of those respective organizations.

It is important to recognize the differences between policy, projects and programs as they require different levels of expertise, experience, and participation. The goal of this research then, is to shed light on further areas of research needed into democratic theory related to the social movements within the food system.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Introduction

This research focuses on exploring democracy within the food system to understand more fully how we can better address decision-making power in the food system. In order to do so I ask, how is democracy conceptualized in food movements? And, how is democracy practiced in food movements? The current iteration of our food system is characterized by a corporate food regime where industrial food monopolies and neoliberal policies have created a dire landscape for the health of the environment and our communities. Many of the institutional structures that support a skewed distribution of power fail to address or mitigate the many injustices and inequities society is subject to because of this reality. In many ways, ordinary people are left out of the discussions and decision-making processes of how our food is grown, processed, packaged, sold, and discarded, suppling the public with a false sense of choice when it comes to when, how, and what we are able to eat. Food is essential for life and must be treated with the sacredness that is inherent in its subsistence.

Summary of Key Findings

With the emergence of the Alternative Food Movement, many food system stakeholders are experimenting with alternatives to the status quo of commodified food and lessening resources to obtain healthful foods. These span national and international scales as well as local and hyper-local foci. Despite the scales of difference on which food justice is being fought, a common thread runs through the discourse of food system scholars and activists, and that is that participatory democracy has the potential to help transform the food system through the creation and implementation of democratic practices. Specifically, Food Policy Councils and

organizations within the Food Sovereignty Movement have been conceptualized as the most promising avenues toward this vision of a more sustainable, just, and equitable food system. Through policy creation and movement building, many see a path forward.

Food Policy Councils are lauded as experiments in democratic governance where they provide a forum for food issues and offer a platform for coordinated action. However, due to the complex nature of policy work and the fact that there are multiple ways to organize an FPC, success is hard to measure when the lines between policy, projects and programs become blurred. The unique challenges for FPCs continue to be clearly defined organizational structure, roles and responsibilities, funding, relevancy and legitimacy, and inclusivity and diversity. In spite of a vision for FPCs to have potential in making impactful outcomes through these stated values, the limitations often outweigh the potential. Democratic practices are not always realized, and in many instances FPCs can contribute to the continuation of a neoliberal framework to support solutions for social problems in the food system.

On the other hand, the Food Chain Workers Alliance—a member of the US Food Sovereignty Movement—relies heavily on a strong network of activists and alliances in movement building, campaigning, and educational leadership development to resist and create a strong grassroots movement to countervail the power elite. They explicitly state that they want a food system that is democratically controlled, and strategically implement and practice participatory democracy as a way to fight injustice, unsustainability and inequity on many fronts. Their work spans the entire food chain and their campaigns fight for the right of human beings to work in dignity, have access to and the rights to productive land, seeds, and water, advocate for safe working conditions, and collaborate to ensure better wages for workers across all sectors of the food system.

Many food movement actors are building action networks and coalitions to combat the everyday constraints of decision-making around one's personal and working lives, yet areas of research need to be conducted to learn more about models that effectively produce the outcomes of these stated goals. While there is certain convergence around ideals of democracy, areas of divergence exist where there is a lack of a clear definition of what democracy is and the practices that will support a thriving, mobilized, engaged and knowledgeable citizenry. Young (2000) offers some important insights into inclusion and democracy that considers the strengths and weaknesses of civil society and the current structure of our democratic government. Other concepts that have yet to be explored in the context of food yet have the potential to create synergy with FPCs is that of Participatory Budgeting, a democratic process being practiced all over the world where different ways to manage public money and engage people in government allow people to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. More research is needed to enhance the ideals of democracy that are already infused into the structure and function of food movement actors.

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