The Multiple Moral Economies of Capitalism: Imagining Local Food in Socioeconomically Marginal Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates and contextualizes the central claim of current local food movements and their discourse: that there is something wrong with the ways life is shaped by capitalist modernity, and that the pleasures of eating well can aid in the imagination of alternative, better futures, by informing criteria with which those alternatives can be judged. I highlight this claim because recent academic literature on contemporary ethical eating movements often ignores it, concentrating instead on critiquing such movements as racist, classist and otherwise ethically and politically suspect. Although these critiques are valid and necessary rejoinders to the often poorly evidenced, over-celebratory claims of local food promoters, in my own fieldwork I have found the situation substantially more complicated. Thus, after briefly discussing the discourse of the current local food movement and its predecessors, and then providing a selective overview of critiques thereof in the academic literature, this paper presents an ethnographic example of how aspects of current interest in local food, and imaginaries of a good life associated with it, are relevant in a context of socioeconomic and racial marginality on the periphery of downtown Toronto. Considering this ethnographic instance in concert with broader theoretical conversations about capitalist modernity in general, I argue that a reframing of debates over local food, particularly its ethics and politics, might allow both the public and academics to more fully account for the ambivalent promises and perils of the shifting ways we conceive of and satisfy our need and desire to eat.

“Local food” is on almost everybody’s lips these days. In Toronto, as in many North American urban centres, it appears in subway ads promoting regional produce; on the menus of new restaurants and cafés; on the cover of periodicals, ranging from free dailies like EYE Weekly to venerable standards like The New Yorker; and, in the promotional materials of myriad markets, trade shows and community food security programs. This is because, over the past five years, the term has become the central signifier uniting
the discourses of the wide variety of new social movements focused on food. Having risen to particular prominence over the last two decades, these movements call, for instance, for organic, fairly-traded or ‘slow’ alternatives to the industrialized, petrochemical intensive status quo of fast, cheap food. Doing so, they exemplify the modern idea that food and eating are about more than mere needs, such as those for sustenance and nutrition. Instead, proper procuring and consumption of food is more and more thought to be central to living well as a moral subject. The notion of local food, along with other, similar ideas about what I and others have called “ethical eating,” lies at the centre of a novel sort of positive ethics, which suggests that food and one’s relationships with it are primary means for understanding and actualizing a good life, guided by the shared pleasures of good eating (Bell and Valentine 1997; Gordon 2008).

This paper attempts to elaborate and contextualize the central claim behind this highly condensed symbol ‘local food’, one that also informs current popular interest in ethical eating in general: that there is something wrong with the ways life is shaped by capitalist modernity, and that the pleasures of eating well can aid in the imagination of alternative, better futures, by informing criteria with which those alternatives can be judged, and motivating the actualization of alternative ways of living. I highlight this claim because recent academic literature on contemporary ethical eating movements generally ignores it, concentrating instead on critiquing such movements as racist, classist and otherwise ethically and politically suspect. Although these critiques have a great deal of validity, and are a necessary rejoinder to the often poorly evidenced, over-celebratory claims of local food promoters, in my own fieldwork I have found that the situation on the ground is substantially more complicated. Thus, in what follows I first briefly discuss the discourse of the current local food movement and its predecessors, and then provide a selective overview of how this discourse and these movements have been critiqued in the academic literature. Next, I turn to an ethno
graphic example of how aspects of current interest in local food, and imaginaries of a good life associated with it, are relevant in a context of socioeconomic and racial marginality on the periphery of downtown Toronto. Considering this ethnographic instance in concert with broader theoretical conversations about capitalist modernity in general, I argue that a reframing of debates over local food, particularly its ethics and politics, might allow both the public and academics to more fully account for the ambivalent promise and perils of the shifting ways we conceive of and satisfy our need and desire to eat.

The buzz around local food, at least in Canada, is best traced back to the most successful popularizers of the concept, Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon. Although the idea of supporting local and regional food systems has been a mainstay of alternative food movements for some time, it was around their book, *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating*, that a popular and media sensation
arose, spawning 100-mile restaurants, stores and collective “challenges,” and even a Food Network series (2007). Thoroughly pastoral, this memoir paints a romantic picture of the authors’ twelve months spent eating only food produced within 100 miles of their Vancouver home, and calls upon readers to “eat local” in order to better themselves and the world. The website founded to promote this idea and the book sums it up well:

Locally raised and produced food has been called “the new organic”—better tasting, better for the environment, better for local economies, and better for your health. From reviving the family farm to reconnecting with the seasons, the local foods movement is turning good eating into a revolution. (100MileDiet.org 2009)

Note how this passage demonstrates that the ascendance of local food amongst its ethical eating brethren involves its co-optation of a notion they all share: this “new organic” promises a revolutionary “good eating” that rejuvenates ecology (“environment,” “seasons”), community (“local economies,” “family farm”) and self (“better tasting,” “your health”). It evokes an agrarian vision of long pedigree, calling for the revival of an almost-lost past of small-scale, close-knit communities, composed of families and their farms, and of humans connected with nature. As such, local food is suggested to be a negation of or retreat from the physical, social and economic effects of the global regime of capital- and petrochemical-intensive industrial agriculture, food production and trade (cf Berry 1977).

It is this oppositional stance against capitalist modernity and its costs that relates the current interest in local food to a long history of similar movements. Focused on food and agriculture, they contested the criteria by which existence should be lived and judged, taking particular aim at the development of capitalism, and especially the malevolent impacts of rampant commodification and industrialization. The hippie counter-culture that spawned today’s organic food movement, which local food self-consciously seeks to outdo, similarly pursued better health and well being, both individual and social, through small-scale, communitarian collectives and economies whose counter-culture bent included a critique of the ‘military industrial complex’ and a “great refusal” of the one-dimensionality of late industrial society (Belasco 2006; Marcuse 1964; Gordon 2008). This movement, in turn, had co-opted and supplanted the earlier health food and natural food movement, spawned in the pre-World War II era by Rodale-style agrarians (Belasco 2006:71–6), who were themselves preceded by other reformers targeting the same beast for similar enough ends, such as the Puritan and vegetarian reformers of the late (John Kellogg) and early (Sylvester Graham) 19th century (Belasco 2006:162). The concept also owes much to the proto-notion of local food and eating mobilized by the Diggers, agrarian socialists
of 17th-century England, who imagined an alternative “political and economic order to protect them from the dislocations of early capitalism” based on communal agriculture and feeding (Jendrysik 2007:34). Their leader, Gerrard Winstanley, argued that the solution to “the bondage the poor complain of, that they are kept poor by their brethren in a land where there is so much plenty for everyone,” could be found in a social rejuvenation anchored “where a man receives his nourishment and preservation...in the use of the earth” (1941:558, 519). Cultivating, planting and manuring to plant again the local commons lands struck them, as well as 20th-century historian Christopher Hill, as a superior alternative to the program of the powerful, which argued, echoing recent debates, that only large-scale, intensive cultivation by private landholders could possibly feed everyone (1975:130). Focusing on food and eating in attempting to confront, change or escape from the predations of capitalism has a long history.

Unlike these more radical movements of the past, however, today’s local food movement has gained wide-spread popular traction, perhaps because it takes for granted and would presumably preserve many of the key features of life under capitalism, above all a belief in the legitimacy or naturalness of private property, of the market economy, and of various inequities of class, race and gender. Indeed, Guthman argues that the romanticization of the rural and the natural by the mostly wealthy, mostly white élites who are among the few who can access and afford trendy local, organic, slow and/or fair trade food in the urban markets where it proliferates is more about the generation and mobilization of cultural and material privilege than it is about a truly ethical politics (2003). Meanwhile, the nostalgic concept of an idyllic past at play in the discourse on local food, at its limits a past imagined to be inhabited by a figure much like the noble savage, a natural environmentalist or traditionalist untouched by the disenchantments and corruptions of modernity, continues to be central in justifying the underdevelopment and exploitative labour and market conditions that oppress and exclude rural and Indigenous peoples, and central in legitimizing past and ongoing land alienation and biopiracy (Nygren 1999). It is no surprise, then, that much of the academic literature on such movements is rather suspicious of them and their aficionados, often arguing that, far from being ethical, such pursuits are more about the production and enjoyment of distinction: a delicious fantasy for the rich, one that ignores or distracts from the continued prevalence of food insecurity and innutrition, of bare material need and inequity. Laudan (2004), for instance, argues that alternative food movements are impossibly romantic—historically and scientifically suspect in their rejection of the benefits of industrialization and modernization of global food systems. Gaytán (2004)’s fieldwork demonstrates the truth behind the perception that, for all the talk about social and environmental justice, Slow Food “can come across as a trendy diet for yuppie types,” as one CBC interviewer put it (Giese 2007). Critiques like these
accord with my own experience of such movements, with my observations at farmers’ markets, my conversations with chefs and “foodies.” They hold a great deal of truth, and together deliver necessary rejoinders to what too often appear to be vapid celebrations of privilege, cloaked in the false veneer of moral superiority.

To create a stark opposition out of the matter, however, and respond to claims that local food and ethical eating movements offer compelling alternatives with counter-claims that local food and other ethical eating movements are necessarily thoroughly corrupt is also troublesome, and seems to me to go too far, eliding and effacing the positive potentials and real gains such movements also involve. This oppositional attitude has also been critiqued in the literature, if rarely: for instance Sidney Mintz diagnoses the pitfalls and potentials of both regimes of food production and trade, modern (i.e. fast) and otherwise (i.e. slow or local), and takes the middle ground arguing for a more nuanced and realistic conception of “Food at Moderate Speeds” (2006). One might even suggest that the most bald-faced critiques of local food and other ethical eating movements, those rejecting their ethical or political potentials out of hand, share something important with the attitudes of the élite foodies who are the objects of their criticism: an effacement of the ways food and enjoyment of it might, in actual fact, be useful in informing imaginations of a good or better life, including amongst those on the margins, whether economically, racially, or otherwise. I suggest, in other words, that one consider this drama over local food as part of our broader, and perhaps less immediately suspect, collective responses to the price and profits of capitalist modernity in general. In the anthropological literature on capitalism and its others, if not in that on food and food movements in capitalist societies, one can find a variety of theoretical moves which allow one to do more about the dualistic framing of ethical eating as either suspect or not than simply come down on one side or the other, or issue calls for a moderate middle.

Consider that, as Mintz does in terms of the fast food/slow food dichotomy, Taussig did in terms of the modern/traditional dichotomy, discussing transitions to capitalism in The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America (1980). Looking to what others consider two polarized domains, one capitalist, the other not-capitalist, somehow, both Mintz and Taussig move to consideration of how the poles of this opposition in fact interrelate, interacting with and moderating one another. But as Snodgrass (2002) argued in critiquing and extending Taussig’s work, it is more productive to look to the ways in which multiple and proliferating discourses and practices pertaining to capitalism, as well as a variety of other social and cultural formations, interact in the projects of those living at their confluences. Interested in how those almost outside of capitalism advance toward an imagination of a future within it, Snodgrass (2002) turns to the question of how a subject’s desires and projects are articulated out of
parts of the multiple resources these intersections present. This informs my asking of the converse question: how and why do those within capitalist centres plot their imagination toward a future outside it, or in its past? In other words, what possibilities do the discourses and desires circulating around local food provide for a subject and a self?

In order to address these questions, I now turn to an ethnographic example, cohering around a conversation I had last spring with a neighbour, Peter, who I came to know while living in a socioeconomically marginal community located at the periphery of inner-city Toronto, referred to by locals as Vaughan and Oakwood. Like many in this neighbourhood, Peter’s recent life history involved a prolonged period without a steady job, or even much temporary work. Fifty-six years old, he didn’t even really have a home, staying on and off with his sister and his sister’s three boys, who lived in the apartment beside mine. Some days she would tell me that the social assistance cheque had run out, none of them had worked in a week and the kids were hungry. Concomitant with the economic marginality of Peter and his friends and family came social marginalization as well. Notably, many of our interactions involved epithet-laden tales of the latest injustices the local police had doled out: for instance, stopping Peter’s sister while she rode home from the discount grocery store with her purchases precariously attached to her bicycle, demanding she prove she hadn’t stolen her ride. This request all involved knew to be an impossible and outrageous one, merely a pretext for harassment; for reasons like these a presumption of innocence, rather than guilt, is guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as are rights not to be arbitrarily detained, and to be secure against unreasonable search. Such principles were regularly violated by the police when it came to those who lived in my neighbourhood: they regularly told of being stopped, searched, and detained, sometimes for hours, for no known, legitimate cause.

Similar exclusions were also part of the attitude the rest of the city had (and has) about this neighbourhood, with its reputation for gang activity and gun violence. This reputation was associated with the fact that almost all of its residents were identified as “black,” and arose despite the fact that gun violence also regularly occurs in affluent, mostly “white” areas in the core of the city (Ezeonu 2008a, 2008b, 2010). When I was first intending to move to the neighbourhood and gave notice to my landlords at the time, a left-leaning white couple in their fifties who lived about eight blocks south from my new home-to-be, they repeatedly attempted to convince me that it was a dangerous place, rife with crime, and when they saw I was not dissuaded implored me to visit the local police station to have their claims confirmed. I did visit the station, where the white duty officer claimed that releasing crime statistics was prohibited, and then, as I was leaving, told me that based on his personal experience, he would not live there himself, nor recommend that I live there. Not giving his report much
credence, I found after moving in that, as in the past when I have moved to disparaged, marginal neighbourhoods, my neighbours turned out to be friendly and generous, more so than those I had had while living in supposedly more secure and trustworthy environments. Others have also noted this fact in online comments on media articles discussing the neighbourhood and its “problems”: “I have never met more friendly people in any other area. People who live in this area meet and greet all people as they pass on the street with smiles or at least a head nod while the ‘good’ areas of the city are full of neighbours whom have never even met or said hello” (Lisa 2010). Still, in both the actions of law enforcement and the talk of the city at large, the status of people living in this community, as citizens and persons, is less-than-complete.

Still, last spring, on one of those first, balmy days that herald all of the season to come, I sat outside in the new sun with Peter, watching movers clear out a freshly vacated retail space on the other side of the road. He soon gestured across to it, and began regaling me with a plan for his future. After asking me if I’d ever had a cheesesteak sandwich (“Yes”) and if I liked them (“Sure”), and after briefly bemoaning how long it had been since he had been to Philadelphia and eaten a good one, then describing what’s involved in a good cheesesteak, and finally noting that it is impossible to find such a thing in Toronto, he told me he’d like to open a take-out operation in the vacant space, selling cheesesteak sandwiches. Real simple, he said: he’d have a rotary slicer, a grill, a cooler, counter and a few seats for customers to wait, and all he would make would be cheesesteaks. It would be easy and cheap and delicious. Police officers, firefighters and construction workers would all come to get their lunch from him over and again, and tell and bring their friends, in an avalanche of business. He’d get some real good cheese and meat from some local farmers, who could use the business, and that way he could sell his sandwiches cheaply: cheaper than the food at McDonald’s, and tastier and healthier, too. He’d make the most delicious cheesesteak in Toronto, and, in this city with no dedicated cheesesteak establishment, the only one properly done. He would make these delicious cheesesteaks and his nephew would run the register, receiving the weekly take-out order for thirty-five sandwiches from the Fairmont Royal York hotel downtown.

Peter’s imagined future, in light of the marginalization, oppression and stigma that make up his recent life history, provides an opening into understanding the possibilities inherent in the discourses and desires circulating around local food: how local food becomes a resource that people living within and on the margins of capitalism use to inform the terms of a better life, and imagine a way to get there. In this narrative, Peter outlines the criteria by which a possible future can be judged, evaluating it in terms of the injustice and marginalization that make up his past and present, in terms ranging from the exploitations and sufferings found in his own life, to the costs—economic, social,
environmental and physiological—of food from transnational corporate agribusiness, like that found at McDonald’s. On this guideline, he highlights certain aspects of discourses and practices of a variety of moral economies: those typical of capitalist enterprise, as well as those embedded in the discourse on the alternative of local food production. Drawing upon various aspects of these multiple resources, articulating some and abandoning others, he conjures a new set of possibilities for the future.

First, note that, despite what critiques of the class and race-bound nature of ethical eating imply about bare need and the economic imperatives of bare subsistence, Peter does not dream, like either the mythical *homo oeconomicus* or the mythical subject of hunger, in terms of simple quantification and calculation, of just any food to fill an empty stomach, or just any job to fill an empty wallet. Instead, he evokes specific affective qualities and turns them into moral valuations: a *good* food and a *good* job, proprietor-chef at a popular cheesesteak counter serving delicious cheesesteaks to the grateful local community. In Peter’s narrative, it is the deliciousness of the cheesesteak, its promise of pleasure, which provides a way to reach a profitable existence—and not just a profitable one, unlike at McDonald’s. In fact, Peter is willing to trade some profit for the benefits of offering a fair price and a good relationship, for the numerous other goods that an easy, cheap, delicious and nutritious cheesesteak promises: happy customers who become regulars, even friends; a good reputation; camaraderie and commensality. There is respectability and pride, a social status, in doing things well and justly, and in being recognized for it.

Furthermore, through Peter’s action, the pathological social relations that are part of his past and present are transformed and renewed into an ideal form. Most notably and incredibly to me, formerly despised authorities that enact his submission and exclusion, the police, here become guarantors of the goodness of his vision, specifically embodied in the quality of his cheesesteak. Enjoying the product of his labour, they become connected to him in a relation of care, dependent on and thus respectful to him, enemies turned friends. Similarly, it is hard to imagine a more complete symbolic inversion of Peter’s current positioning in space, in social class and in the economy than that represented by his evocation of the Fairmont Royal York hotel, like most of the other hotels in the Fairmont chain an exclusive luxury property that was “the tallest building in the British Commonwealth” at the time of its construction and is today “one of the most luxurious hotels in Toronto…where the rich and famous walk,” carefully protected from the entry of ‘undesirables’ like Peter (Fairmont Hotels and Resorts 2011). In light of the racist stereotypes of violence that make up the privileged classes’ understandings of my neighbourhood, neither do the denizens of the Fairmont Royal York feel able or want to enter Peter’s community. But, somehow, the deliciousness of Peter’s cheesesteaks has the power to connect
these disparate people and places, for a common good. He will be proud; they will be impressed, and grateful. In fact, it is hard not to note in current restaurant reviews, and in Internet discussion forums and promotional literature on food and eating, that élites do, indeed, seem to have a lust for food that is cheap, local and low (Goodyear 2009). Perhaps it seems more authentic: an ambivalent state of affairs, no doubt, but one that Peter and others like him might prefer to have considered rather than dismissed; one that offers possibilities, as well as pitfalls.

Although one might suggest that this vision of local food production, and its imbrication with a revival of self, community and local economy, is just as romantic as that put forth by élite foodies, I do not think this is quite so simply the case. Given his own and his sister’s success, albeit seasonal, with operating a casual small construction business, and the presence of small business supports such as mentorship and investment programs, start-up seems feasible. Given the lack of other convenient and tasty food options in the area, and the frequent police presence ensured by the community’s reputation and the proximity of the station house, this aspect of the fantasy could come to pass, too. Peter’s narrative of his possible future encapsulates at least somewhat realistic aspirations for a renewal of identity and selfhood, for increased economic and social status, and for reintegration of and with a community. Moreover, it clearly highlights the perils and possibilities of life under contemporary capitalism, developing a set of criteria and responses through which one can come to better understand the moral tenor of our times. Drawing upon both the possibilities of capitalist enterprise and the moral economy embedded in the discourse on local food, Peter imagines a good future, outlining the criteria by which that future and this present can be judged.

These criteria relate directly to the suffering and injustice Peter experiences every day: police harassment; attempts by municipal officers to prevent him and his sister from operating their business; the stigmatization of his community; the lack of steady jobs that pay a living wage at his end of the class and qualification hierarchy. This vision is not simply a fantasy of success, but an imagination of an alternative to the present which identifies and reconfigures aspects of that present into a form in which life can become good. The symbol of his local cheesesteak counter, like that of local food more generally, is a key concept in contesting the forms of life engendered by capitalism, for those in positions of privilege as well as those on the margins; and this, perhaps, hearkens towards forms of solidarity across difference, new political and ethical alliances perhaps as yet undeveloped, but demanding nurture rather than the relentless negativity of critique. His vision is of a good life, with a good job, and good food, and a good community around him, and all three hinge upon the “good eating” of a delicious cheesesteak, his tending of an embodiment of the best of what is possible. Around that delicious cheesesteak and Peter’s local food counter cohere moral claims about how and why one might prefer respect to exploitation,
concern to apathy and freedom to domination, as well as practical claims about how to enact such a life and economy.

What I suggest is that the suspiciously ideal discourse of local food in fact encourages, with some slippage, a range of subjective and affective orientations that may be as or more pertinent to understand and critique than the questionable oppositions that both those who celebrate and those who critique local food and other ethical eating movements often engage in—oppositions of élitist or not, modern or not, and capitalist or not. I am inspired by Zaloom (2004)’s discussion of similar disjunctures in the work of futures traders: pursuing the ideal of an efficient, calculable and rational capitalist marketplace, they enact an affective economy featuring a personal testing and refashioning of the limits of the self. Emptying themselves out and becoming the market, both in the execution of trades and corporeally, in their sense of physically being fully the moment and stuff of the market’s existence, traders aim at other goals that have little to do with the ideals of the market despite being impelled by an attempt to realize them. These include the pleasurable physical intensity and excitement of attempting to generate successful trades; the greater presence and status in the trading pit that results from such successes; and, the felt moral achievement of managing the contingency of risk in order to make space for the prosperity and continuity of society. A simplistic theoretical opposition of capitalist and not can elide and efface the possibilities engendered by actual practice in the context of commodities trading and local food alike. To aim simply at the exploitation inherent in capitalist economies, at the impossibility or absence of equitable exchange, would entirely overlook this whole other range of effects, which are both meaningful and productive for particular individuals and communities.

Similar disjunctures are afoot in Peter’s case and, I suggest, perhaps in the case of local food in general. The manifold meanings of these imaginaries, whether of perfect markets or of sustainable, nutritious, pleasurable and good local food for all, suggest that critiques of them that ignore their polyvalence run the risk of missing important aspects of their meaning, value and use. At issue are not only objective criteria about better taste, health, environment or community, or the historical or scientific possibility of futures in which these come to be, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the resources with which to work on and refashion the terms and forms of a good life, a way of living and acting. The romantic and highly idealized, even impossible, discourse on local food, like that of the perfected market, mobilizes action not only in its own terms but also in terms of what else it allows one to imagine. By encouraging engagement with the limits of possibility, which one might see as the point and justification of such impossible fantasies in the first place, one propels the imagination of a self and community with limitations and exclusions undone.
In his daydream Peter is, in fact, not so much selling a product, the delicious cheesesteak, but producing and selling a certain performance of social reality: a performance of good eating, of better taste leading to a better community and better economy. Even if it does not come to pass that his imagination is realized, it still does work as a social action. What perhaps seems the most ludicrous and overblown of all the claims made by local food proponents, that the movement is “turning good eating into a revolution,” makes a lot more sense in this light (100MileDiet.org 2009). On that spring day, inspired by the thought of a delicious cheesesteak, Peter elaborated good eating into a central, motivating and pragmatic signifier of the terms for a revolution in himself and his community, defining a better future. Both on the level of his discourse and, if this future became an actual present, the level of his practice of cheesesteak supply, he is what Paulo Virno calls a virtuoso, crafting a new social reality out of the discrete, multiple assemblages of communicative and practical resources: choosing pieces of capitalist and ‘alternative’ discourses alike, drawing upon a habitus in which delicious cheesesteak production, a certain stylization of social interaction with customers, and so forth, is possible (2004). Peter’s action is not defined as much by his crafting of a delicious cheesesteak as by the political praxis his imagination involves: his use of the idea of that product and its production as a guideline for understanding his community and his position in it, and the ways in which these might be improved. What is crucial here is not really the objective fact of the “good eating,” the product produced in and of itself, but instead Peter’s production and mediation of all that is required to enact and perform it to himself and to his customers. The product, in fact, like all food, does not endure for long beyond production before it disappears, eaten up and embodied in another thing, a body. Its brief presence as a discrete object is but a moment in its general existence. But between the first growing and the final eating, a process marked by constant differentiation and reincorporation, a certain set of social and ecological relations—a good life—is produced through in pursuit of this local food item, a delicious cheesesteak sandwich.

In an ethnographic study of investment bankers, Ho (2009) finds that their greatest pride is the fact that they are the market, embodying it and its values; in his vision of the future Peter is, in a sense, himself become “good eating”: through him flow various powers that he conjures and articulates into the form of something wonderful, valuable and necessary. Like élite foodies who dream of a hundred-mile diet, and perhaps sometimes even begin to make it an actuality, Peter is selling a way of life, an affect, a new relationality. If we see food movements and the idea of local food in this light, as compelling attention to and creativity within the conditions and performance of our social being, rather than as programmatic and objectively valid or invalid alternatives to capitalism, perhaps the effort appears more laudable. As Maurer suggests in discussing
'alternative' currencies and banking, to critique the disjuncture between the idealized discourses of local currency (or local food) and the possibilities of its actual practices, as if they must be adequate to one another, or to point out that such alternatives, like perhaps all resistances, partake of and at times reproduce or blur into the hegemonies they contest, would be missing the point (2005). Such slippage, and the contingency it injects into our imaginations of the future, is in fact the productive force of the idea. Those halcyon evocations of pastoral bliss are not the whole: the future utopia that arises out of an impossible past is, like the impossibility of a perfect market, a limit at which to aim, and in so aiming to create, anew, something more desirable than what one finds in the present.
References

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