Growing Local: Anthropological Reflections On Current Challenges Facing Central Florida Organic Farmers

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GROWING LOCAL: ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING CENTRAL FLORIDA ORGANIC FARMERS

by

CHENEY SARA SWEDLOW
B.A. Florida Gulf Coast University, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Anthropology in the College of Sciences at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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This thesis considers Central Florida’s emerging local food movement from an anthropological perspective. Area farmers and organizations spearheading this movement and the benefits of purchasing and consuming locally grown food are ethnographically explored. Interviews with natural and organic farmers highlight the challenges affected farmers face in creating a sustainable local food movement in the greater Orlando region. Their motivations for farming organically and the counter-hegemonic tendencies inherent in this mode of cultivating are critically analyzed. Taken as a whole, this work addresses the limitations and opportunities afforded to farmers amid the popularity of local food consumption as a social movement.

The farmers interviewed for this project are new to producing food for local consumption. They all share an interest in promoting financial and environmental sustainability for small farms. Key challenges they face include those grounded in access to arable land and agricultural policies that disproportionately favor large-scale producers. This research has significant implications for both those organizations and individuals building sustainable local food movements and those in local, state, and national government developing agricultural policy.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Concerns in Applied Anthropology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Development and Data Collection Experience</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis Strategy</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Implications</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: FOOD PRODUCTION IN THE US</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegemony and Agribusiness</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: LOCAL FOOD IN CENTRAL FLORIDA</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture in Florida</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Local Food in Central Florida</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX: CENTRAL FLORIDA FARMERS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank Saddler</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart Christ</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara Reed</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash Porter</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SEVEN: CHALLENGES FACED BY CENTRAL FLORIDA FARMERS</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a Financially Sustainable Small Farm</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Availability and Affordability</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Agricultural Policies and Regulations</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unequal Access to Healthy Foods in America</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is Local Food a Counter-Hegemonic Force?</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Future of Local Foods</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Food produced locally and sustainably outside of prevailing industrial agricultural systems is growing in popularity (Schmit 2008). This accelerating trend raises a number of relevant research questions that can benefit from applied anthropological consideration. Among other things, (1) what groups are promulgating this trend?; (2) what are the dominant discursive influences that shape prevailing food and nutritional perceptions in the United States and elsewhere?; (3) what challenges do local food producers and advocates face?; and, (4) what opportunities has the growing popularity of local foods provided for local farmers? All of these questions are addressed in my thesis to better understand how “local food” is variously understood in the Metropolitan Orlando area.

This thesis ethnographically considers the varied experiences of local food producers and elucidates the dearth of organic and locally grown food from an applied anthropological perspective. Specifically, it examines the challenges producers face in building a strong local alternative food system. Moreover, it strives to raise public awareness about the hegemonic tendencies of U.S. industrial agriculture and the complex counter-hegemonic trends rooted in diverse alternative local agriculture movements. Findings from this work have implications for those working to build alternative local food systems in Central Florida as well as for policymakers interested in promoting sustainable local food systems.
CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

In the US, the hegemony of industrial agriculture has changed the way we think about food. Supermarkets have replaced fields as the food ‘sources’ for most consumers. Procuring sustenance requires little more than money and a trip to a grocery store or restaurant. While this may be a welcome change to some, it has come with certain costs. According to sociologist Thomas Lyson (2005), global industrial agriculture is now considered a major source of public health problems. Although the industrial agricultural complex initially emerged to combat malnutrition, over time it has given rise to problems of overnutrition. Some call this abundance of nutrition the “standard American diet” (Nestle 2003) since the products and eating habits it promotes tends to be based on the consumption of calorically dense, high in fat, and nutritionally deficient foods. This dietary regime invariably contributes to serious health problems such as Type-2 diabetes, high cholesterol, and heart disease (ibid.). These non-infectious diseases are largely preventable through dietary changes, exercise, or a combination of both.

A movement promoting increased consumption of minimally processed fruits and vegetables has emerged along with awareness of the negative social and environmental impacts of industrial food production (Andreatta 2006). Currently, there is growing interest in organic food that is locally produced and distributed. Recognized by some as a “social movement” (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995), this trend challenges the hegemony of industrial agriculture (Kimbrell 2002), through better nutrition based on whole food consumption and informed awareness of the problems of standardized food production promoted by agribusiness. While local food movements are well-established as
alternative systems in many parts of the country, they are just now beginning to take root in Central Florida. Their recent emergence in greater Orlando can be explained by a number of factors; many of which I will discuss over subsequent chapters.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I began this project with limited experience and understanding of how to constructively apply my anthropological training to a local community organization. Advocating local food issues seems a natural choice for me as my interests variously overlap with those of groups promoting alternative food systems. The common interests that I share with such organizations include nutritious eating, environmental preservation, and the building of strong communities of healthy individuals. Considering that applied anthropological work emphasizes community participation, ideally in all phases of a project, I took the initial step of identifying a specific community within the local foods movement for collaboration.

I have previously studied alternative agriculture systems and attitudes toward local and organic foods in Central Florida. In June 2009, I presented findings at the joint meetings of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society and the Association for the Study of Food and Society from a pilot research project I conducted in March 2009. This work examines Central Florida consumer attitudes towards local and organic foods. Specifically, it investigates reported changes in consumption and purchasing habits for this style of food amid the 2008/9 economic crises. Notably, I found no reported decrease in the consumption of local or organic food products. In fact, most respondents report either no change or increasing consumption of these products.

In designing this thesis research, I utilize my pre-existing relationship with the Homegrown Co-Op, an organization promoting local food. My relationship with this organization began in August 2008 after moving to Central Florida. I had previously
been a community supported agriculture (CSA) farm member in Southwest Florida, receiving fresh produce each week through this arrangement. Seeking a similar produce source in Orlando, I soon discovered that there are no CSA farms in Central Florida. Like CSA farms, Homegrown purchases produce directly from local farmers. I became a Co-Op member in August 2009 and currently procure some of my groceries through them. I occasionally represent them at local events, including a health fair at the Orlando Science Center and the Baldwin Park Green Expo in spring 2009. In October 2009, I spoke about the Co-Op to UCF students at the school’s first annual Green Fair. I enjoy these public relations opportunities as they afford me chances to discuss the Co-Op and gauge community interest about local and organic food. The Co-Op considers working these kinds of duties as organizational service. Working with other Co-Op members at these off-premise events, however, does not really integrate me into the Co-Op community.

While representing the Co-Op may only seem indirectly related to my attempts to understand local food history and the challenges faced by local farmers, it does further my ultimate goal of increasing community awareness on these issues. Co-Op director Michael Tiner and others working in similar capacities have anecdotally noted that the more people learn about alternative food systems, the more likely they are to support local farmers. Though the Co-Op events that I have worked tend to attract a skewed sample of people – namely, those already interested in health and environmental issues – I have found that few of these “concerned” individuals are fully aware of Central Florida’s natural and organic farming community.
Theoretical Concerns in Applied Anthropology

As previously noted, this thesis considers Central Florida’s local food movement from an applied anthropological perspective. “Applying” anthropology represents something of a difficult undertaking as anthropologists traditionally strive to minimize their impact on studied communities. Applied anthropology is grounded in the recognition of anthropologists’ abilities to positively contribute to problem resolution through holistic approaches and focus on affected individuals (Ervin 2005). Discussing current practices in light of applied anthropology’s future, Michael Agar (2002) observes that globalization has created “contingencies and connections” between communities, institutions, and organizations, which complicate the practice of applied anthropology in today’s world. This high level of complexity limits anthropologists’ abilities to make accurate predictions about a future that is necessarily “nonlinear and episodic.”

Robert and Beverly Hackenberg (2004:386) feel that anthropologists’ energies are best spent devising new methods of inquiry and addressing issues of wider public concern. They delineate several best practices for applied anthropology. These approaches stress the importance of working “in partnership” (2004:386) with local communities, learning how to design and implement more rapid research plans, and applying postmodern frameworks to ensure that the identities of those studied are represented with the greatest possible accuracy. The concept of the anthropologists as partners in pursuing community defined goals is problematic for some scholars. Daniel Gross and Stuart Plattner argue (2002:387) that the applied approach essentially erases
“the role of training, expertise, theory, and methodology in anthropological research,”
and, therefore, compromises the quality of research conducted in this manner.

“Public anthropology,” a similar and, in many ways, overlapping approach to
applied anthropology, seeks to utilize the discipline’s unique perspectives and
methodologies to affect change in public spheres. Nancy Scheper-Hughes suggests that
“the goal of public anthropology is to make public issues, not simply to respond to them”
(2009:2). Public anthropologists strive to apply anthropological theory and practices to
real social problems (Barofsky, 2000). Despite shared goals of affecting positive social
change, practices significantly vary within both public and applied anthropology. Some
anthropologists may design and implement community based programs targeting specific
problems, while others may use traditional fieldwork to make policy recommendations.
The broad application of the terms means that both efforts in the above scenarios can be
considered “applied” and/or “public.”

Regardless of the labels, Hackenberg and Hackenberg argue that it is the role of
anthropologist to address the “natural hazards that will certainly influence the future”
(2004:386). Although they are speaking generally about applied anthropological
concerns, their advice is applicable to other issues. Given the holistic nature of the
discipline, anthropologists occupy a privileged position in addressing possible impending
dangers to society. Natural hazards rooted in industrial agriculture such as soil
degradation, water pollution, and the immediate and long-term risks to human health
invite anthropological critique and analysis. Within this context, advocacy for local and
organic food holds real potential for addressing problems facing communities worldwide in the near and distant future.

**Project Development and Data Collection Experience**

To devise this project, I met with Homegrown’s Tiner in fall 2009. Understanding applied anthropologists’ roles as defined by the needs of the organization, our meeting was approached with no set research agenda. Tiner is very interested in Florida’s agricultural history and the various policies and circumstances that have hindered Central Florida’s agricultural capacity over the years. He felt strongly that documenting this history is the most valuable contribution that outside researchers can currently provide the Co-Op.

Believing his vision of the project is more historical than anthropological, I asked him about interviewing local farmers. It is my contention that such interviews have limited value to the Co-Op notwithstanding Tiner’s enthusiasm about this idea. Tiner and I ultimately decide that my farmers interview tapes can be retained by the Co-Op at the project’s completion for informational web segments about local food producers. Since the Co-Op aims to promote awareness about where food comes from, these web clips can benefit farmers by allowing them to promote their local operations to the Co-Op community and beyond.

Data gathering for this project is pretty straightforward as most of my information is based on intensive interviews. The recorded interviews are semi-structured and typically last 40 to 60 minutes. The primary goals in my interviews are to understand how these non-agribusiness farmers perceive the dominant industrial
agricultural system, and why they are pursuing alternative paths. I also hope to understand the challenges they face and opportunities they seek within the local and organic food movement. I use an oral history approach that relies on open-ended questions so as to elicit meaning, rather than information about specific events (see Appendix A for sample interview protocol).

Alessandro Portelli, a scholar of language, argues that the key value of oral history is are interviewees’ factual recount of history, but instead their ability to recall events and attempt to contextualize them, which helps convey the creation of meaning. He considers oral history “a necessary (not a sufficient) condition for a history of the non-hegemonic classes” (1991:56). Interviewing non-agribusiness farmers is an important exercise for understanding why some choose to use alternative farming techniques.

My research is designated as “exempt” by UCF’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B). My sample is drawn from among the Homegrown Co-Op’s 30 local vendors. I choose to work with the Co-Op’s food producers because they are actively selling to local markets and involved in building alternative food systems. Eleven suppliers of unprocessed food products, including operators of a dairy, buffalo farm, cattle ranch, chicken farm, and seven vegetable farms represent the subset of Co-Op producers I chose to contact. Of these 11, only four are interviewed for this project. All of the farmers interviewed are given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

For this project, “local food” is conceived of as food products made or grown within the Greater Orlando area and sold under the designation “locally grown.” This
definition excludes nearby farms that are not selling their products in Orlando as locally grown. “Organic” is primarily used to identify the growing practices of farmers that do not rely on conventional techniques involving chemical fertilizers and insecticides. The term “certified organic” is also used to describe farmers who have attained a national certification from the USDA. As the term “organic” has become synonymous with “certified organic” to many Americans, a few of the farmers I interview prefer to talk about their growing practices in terms of “natural” and “sustainable” practices. Here “natural” mainly refers to the avoidance of chemical based fertilizers and insecticides, while “sustainable” describes growing techniques that preserve the soil’s health and avoid the depletion often caused by conventional agricultural practices.

**Analysis Strategy**

Interviews are transcribed and coded in QSR’s InVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, for content analysis and comparison. Specific attention focuses on what, if any, recurring themes emerge in this process.

**Limitations and Implications**

My study is limited in size and scope as presently there are few farmers growing naturally or organically in Central Florida. Demographic factors such as population growth and urban sprawl likely play a role in understanding the present dearth of local food producers, as many farmers chose to sell their land as land became more valuable. Research findings from this thesis may expedite Homegrown Co-Op’s current operations and help others working to build sustainable local food systems in Central Florida. If
anything, this work may benefit local farmers by making their situations more urgent to Central Florida consumers.
CHAPTER FOUR: FOOD PRODUCTION IN THE US

Food in the US is produced primarily through industrial agricultural systems that are highly efficient and characterized by large-scale cultivation and distribution. Food production has become highly globalized over recent years, with a large portion of the produce sold in the US imported from Mexico, the Caribbean, and other regions. In many ways, yesteryear’s “family farm” has been steadily transformed into a food production factory (Lyson 2005). Cultural anthropologist E. Paul Durrenberger notes in his study of CSAs in Central Pennsylvania (2002:42) a 49 percent decline in the number of small Pennsylvania farms between 1964 and 1997. During this same period, the number of farms larger than 500 acres increased by 51 percent (ibid.).

Often, these large industrial farms do not employ local workers or participate in community life. Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt’s 1978 study of California farms shows that “communities in which the economic base consisted of many small, locally owned farms manifest higher levels of social, economic and political welfare than communities where the economic base is dominated by a few large absentee-owned farms” (Lyson 2005:94)

Large factory farms typically practice monoculture, growing one commodity crop such as corn, soy, or wheat with considerable inputs of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. These chemicals’ negative environmental effects are well documented and include soil and fauna degradation (Kimbrell 2002). Agricultural runoff is the leading contributor to nonpoint source pollution of US waterways (EPA 1996), threatening fisheries and groundwater supplies.
Industrial scale agriculture is also energy intensive. Tractors and combines relying on fossil fuels are utilized on most farms for planting and harvesting. Chemical spraying is typically done aerially. Labor on large farms where produce is hand harvested is often supplied by undocumented migrant workers. These groups usually lack adequate compensation, basic health care, workers’ rights, and sometimes the freedom to leave. Additional problems are apparent within industrial agriculture’s distribution systems. Produce typically travels vast distances under refrigeration. Environmental anthropologist Carol Goland (2002) reports that the average US produce item travels between 1,129 and 2,146 miles from field to grocery store shelve.

Government subsidies and efficiency have long kept food prices extremely low in the US. This is especially true for commodities such as corn and soy, which are now found in most processed food, including sodas, cookies, and fast food hamburgers. These commodities are also ingredients in livestock feed, helping keep meat production costs low. Americans have come to expect a predictable year round array of uniform fruits and vegetables at local supermarkets. Seemingly paradoxical, Floridians often buy oranges imported from California, and New Yorkers purchase Washington apples, notwithstanding the large-scale in-state production of these fruits.

A primary response to agribusiness’ negative manifestations is the resurgence of organic farming. Organic farming is not new. In fact, it is the oldest form of cultivation, practiced worldwide since the beginning of agriculture. Its continuing revival comes largely in response to the “green revolution,” a post World War II initiative led by US agricultural research centers to convert the world’s farmers to monocultural production.
Rossett 2000). Among other things, this overarching effort championed “high-yield” seeds and growing techniques that incorporated chemical inputs and insecticides (ibid.).

In the US, the growth of organic farming is mainly rooted in J.I. Rodale’s 1945 publication of Organic Farming and Gardening. Steadily, this form of cultivation gained popularity as the environmental movement sparked by Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962) took root. Organic growing remained somewhat countercultural throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but became more mainstream in the early 1990s with a renewed national interest in environmentalism. As Americans continue to gain awareness of agribusiness’ negative consequences the demand for organically grown foods has correspondingly increased. In fact, the organic foods market has grown some 20 percent annually since the 1990s (Pollack 2009).

Growth in organics has forced conventional food producers and distributors to take notice. It also has led many to purchase smaller organic companies or introduce organic products of their own. Most major grocery firms including the local chain Publix now carry organic products. Notably, these supermarket operations hold some 44 percent of the national market for organic food and beverage sales in 2007 (OTA 2007). As organics have seemingly gone mainstream much of the organic movement’s original aims have become increasingly obscured. “Organic” now officially means that products are certified by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and produced without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. The USDA does not ensure that organic producers follow sustainable production techniques or contribute to community health. Similarly,
organic produce does not have to be cultivated locally as it is often shipped long
distances.

Today’s local food movement can in many ways be viewed as both a response to
agricultural commercialization and an attempt to regain the benefits envisioned by the
original organic food movement. “Locavores,” (Time 2006) those who choose to eat
locally grown food, believe that consuming food that is grown nearby fosters important
relationships with local farmers. Acquaintanceships with local cultivators promote
concern about farmers’ livelihoods and enhance understanding about the types of
cultivation techniques they utilize. Knowing where food is grown connects individuals to
their environments and communities in ways that buying supermarket produce never
readily can. Locavores believe that local food’s taste and nutrition not only is better since
it is fresher, they also maintain that it is more environmentally sound as it is not shipped
cross-country. Finally, locavores emphasize the fact that farmers are able to reduce their
operating costs and increase their profits when produce is either sold directly to
consumers or through an alternative distribution system.

These alternative distribution systems take various forms, but a few models
predominate. These include direct sales, which may occur via an on-farm produce stand
or through a local farmer’s market. Farms may operate under a CSA arrangement which
allows community members to subscribe to a local farm before the growing season
begins. These subscribers become entitled to portions of the harvested produce. They
also help insulate farmers by assuming some of the risks presented by severe weather or
other potentially devastating events. This consumer/producer agreement benefits farmers
by generating capital for supply procurement at the growing season’s outset. Sharing risks with consumers also protects them somewhat from the catastrophic losses that sometimes plague small farmers. This relationship has become increasingly popular within the local food movement. Currently, there are over 1,900 CSA farms operating in the US, up from 37 in 1990 (Brown and Miller, 2008).

Hegemony and Agribusiness

While hegemony is most simply defined as control or domination of one group by another (Encarta 2009), more nuanced anthropological understandings suggest that affected groups are somewhat complicit in their own domination by failing to question the normalcy of such inequitable arrangements (Johnston 2007). Hackenberg and Hackenberg (2004:386) discuss large international institutions’ “centralization of power” and counter-trends of localization. In this application of hegemony, the “power” is wielded by the industrial agribusiness companies, which largely control the markets for seeds, fertilizers, and insecticides, as well as food processing and distribution.

Consumers and small farmers are understood here as dominated groups. Consumers have little or no say in how their food is produced or what kinds of foods are available to them. Small farmers are also subject to regulatory policies influenced by industrial agribusiness. Additionally, consumers largely accept industrially produced food as normal, failing to question the influence of agribusiness. Those who have become informed have begun to organize alternative modes of food production and distribution, the aforementioned trend toward localization. In many ways, the local food
movement can be seen as a counter response to the dominant food system’s centralization into decreasing numbers of large-scale producers and distributors.

The hegemony of US agribusiness is deeply rooted in dominant discourses about their products’ superior quality and convenience. Political action committees (PACs) and other lobbyists give large scale producers a close relationship with the USDA, a governmental agency responsible for setting US agricultural policy and dietary guidelines (Nestle 2007). Until 1995, the USDA’s nutritional guidelines emphasized wheat and other commodity grains as essential components of healthy diets. Rising US obesity necessitated the food pyramid’s reformulation away from its hierarchical structure towards a more vertical one. Recommendations now advise Americans to maintain active lifestyles and enjoy varieties of foods from all basic groups (ibid).

The hegemony of agribusiness is also reflected in its substantial marketing budgets. Large US food corporations typically spend billions each year showcasing highly processed foods (Nestle 2007). These advertisements stress convenience and, increasingly, their products’ “nutritional” value (ibid.). Whole natural foods are currently not as profitable to food companies. Industry organizations representing fresh fruit and vegetable growers simply do not have the money or clout to sufficiently market their products (ibid.).

Besides controlling much of the national food dialogue, agribusiness also influences the structure of US farms. Increasingly, industrial agriculture drives the consolidation of small farms into larger enterprises. High cost seeds and other inputs decrease farmers’ profits. Since World War II, the number of US farms has decreased by
two-thirds while the average farm size has more than doubled. Given their size and scale economies, remaining “super farms” (Rossett 2000:5) are better positioned to influence tax and subsidy policies to their benefit.

Joel Salatin, a Virginian rancher who grew up on a traditional and non-industrial farm and is featured in books such as Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), has become an organic movement icon. Salatin’s *Everything I want to do is Illegal* (2007) recounts his problems adhering to government farming regulations. These policies prohibit him from slaughtering cattle, charging school children for tours, hiring neighborhood youths, or selling fresh non-pasteurized milk. Government regulations also prevent his selling neighboring farms’ surplus produce without a business license. Salatin argues that these policies unreasonably apply to small farms. The food safety issues that prompted such legislation stem mainly from the environmental problems of industrialized farming (Salatin 2007).

A recent summary report on US agricultural policy by the University of Tennessee’s Agricultural Policy Research Center concludes that “low price US farm policies benefit agribusinesses, integrated livestock producers [large-scale livestock farms], and importers, but are disastrous for the market incomes of crop farmers in the US and around the world” (2003:6). The report further notes that US farmers “continue to be forced off the land despite a massive infusion of government payments” (ibid.). Reductions in the worldwide supply of commodity food products did not lead to price increases, a phenomenon the report relates to the “extraordinary agribusiness consolidation now occurring” (2003:2). The US agricultural apparatus promotes large-
scale consolidated farming operations through policy, subsidies, taxation and regulation. While some small farmers remain operational, it is probably no exaggeration to suggest that only those who are extraordinarily determined or fortuitous have survived.

Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois (2006), working in the Puerto Rican community *El Barrio*, notes the complex relationship between structural constraints including poverty, racism, class exploitation, and sexism, and *El Barrio* residents’ production of a counterculture. This counterculture allows residents to negotiate many of these adversities. Donna Goldstein observes a similar shifting power relationship in her research on Brazilian *favella* [slum] residents, which she describes as living in conditions “embedded in structures of power that are often unpredictable and beyond their immediate control” (2003:2). Small US farmers face similar obstacles that constrain their freedom, namely, the aforementioned discriminatory regulatory policies, taxation, and subsidies. Utilizing their own agency, these cultivators have helped create a burgeoning social movement that emphasizes values that in many ways oppose those of Western consumerist society.

Those wishing to support small farmers and consume outside of the prevailing industrial food system must also exhibit agency. Besides educating themselves about available alternatives, consumers must make more concerted efforts to adopt and follow this lifestyle. Consumers must be able to locate organic farmers or CSA programs, and sometimes travel far distances to procure locally grown food. In the kitchen, consumers must be willing to invest more time and work for preparation.
Paul Farmer, an anthropologist and physician, discusses the interplay between medicine and social justice. He identifies possible reasons why Westerners fail to recognize the need for greater equality and concern for those directly and indirectly suffering from certain political and fiscal policies. Farmer compares Western popular culture to anesthesia, noting that “many posit a soul-numbing equation between conspicuous consumption and modern existence [which is] a formula said to lead millions to intellectual and moral oblivion” (2005: 176). Fresh fruit and vegetable consumption coupled with minimal support for small farmers may seem trivial relative to the suffering of the devastatingly poor with whom Farmer works. Yet, his perspective may help elucidate why there is neither widespread consumer outrage about current agribusiness practices nor support for finding alternative modes of subsistence.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I review some of the problems underlying the prevailing US industrial agriculture system. Taken as a whole, these elements work to constrain the ability of non-agribusiness entrepreneurs to expand their markets. Similarly, they deleteriously affect consumer health and adversely impact the natural environment.
CHAPTER FIVE: LOCAL FOOD IN CENTRAL FLORIDA

In this chapter, I consider Florida’s agricultural industry and the general state of local food production in Central Florida. I also explore Homegrown Co-Op’s efforts towards developing a strong local food system in the Greater Orlando area.

Agriculture in Florida

Florida’s warm climate and abundant rainfall contribute to its agricultural suitability. The state is well-known for its citrus industry, producing 73 percent of the total US value for oranges and 65 percent of grapefruits in 2006 (FDACS 2008). Other major Florida agricultural products include snap beans, sugarcane, tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, and watermelon.

Florida experienced a 5,000 farm decrease from 1998 to 2007. The averaged size of the 40,000 operational commercial farms in 2007 was 250 acres (ibid.). The metropolitan Orlando area is among the state’s main citrus-growing regions. The four counties region of Lake, Orange, Osceola, and Seminole has 850 citrus growers with over 21,000 acres of groves (USDA 2007). The USDA Agricultural census lists 52 vegetable farms in the four counties with 32 certified organic enterprises. These latter operations include citrus groves, food processing plants, and vegetable farms. The Florida Organic Growers association recognizes just two certified organic vegetable growers in the region, one of whom does not produce for market (FOG 2008).
Promoting Local Food in Central Florida

Currently few Central Florida venues exist for the purchase of locally grown organic foods. Elsewhere across Florida, small organic farms produce fruits and vegetables that are sold through a direct-to-consumer model – either at farmers’ markets, farm stands, or through CSA subscriptions. Florida’s major cities are typically served by at least two CSA farms and several farmers’ markets (LocalHarvest.org 2009). Although Orlando has no CSA farms, farmers’ markets abound. Most local farmers’ markets have only one grower utilizing organic and sustainable techniques. The vast majority sell imported produce.

Central Florida’s only alternative source for locally grown organic produce is the Homegrown Co-Op, which is affiliated with the Florida School of Holistic Living, a local 501c3 non-profit organization. The Co-Op works with local farmers to distribute produce to area consumers. By posting available produce through an online ordering system each week and coordinating produce transport from farms to central pick-up locations, the Co-Op can effectively serve its customer base. The Co-Op began in 2008 with a vision of supporting local farmers and helping to create a “vibrant, sustainable regional food network in Central Florida” (Homegrown 2009).

Homegrown seeks to remain true to the principles of the organic and local food movements. Their guiding tenets include the promotion of “ethically produced” foods and the support of “local, high-quality agricultural practices.” They conceive of ethical production as a system that “preserves the cultural heritage, landscape, water, soil and air vital to a sustainable community” and “encourage[s] producers to enhance the native
biodiversity of their land and to continually improve their land stewardship and conservation practices” (Homegrown 2009:1). Homegrown also strives to operate sustainably, using renewable energy and serving consumers of all income levels.

Homegrown is involved in all aspects of building local food systems in Central Florida. One of their main objectives is supporting and developing area organic farmers. They currently do this by purchasing farmers’ produce at fair prices and handling product marketing and distribution. In the future, they hope to offer farmer loans to help cultivators defray the costs associated with planting or implementing sustainable technologies.

Chapter Summary

This chapter briefly reviews agriculture in Florida with specific focus on the Central Florida region. It also examines the work of the Homegrown Co-Op’s efforts in selling and promoting local farmers’ produce. The specific challenges the Co-Op faces are considered in more detail in subsequent sections.
CHAPTER SIX: CENTRAL FLORIDA FARMERS

In this chapter, I explore the varied experiences and circumstances of four local non-agribusiness farmers affiliated with the Homegrown Co-Op. These individuals represent the core of my informant pool. Their various successes and setbacks provide some idea of what it is like operating outside of the dominant industrial agriculture paradigm.

Hank Saddler

Hank Saddler has been involved in Central Florida agriculture for over 60 years. His family started in citrus at the turn of the 20th century. An Emory University graduate and US Navy veteran, Saddler earned a Masters of Science degree in Plant Physiology at the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied the de-greening of oranges, a process that turns green oranges the bright orange color that consumers now expect.

After completing his degree in 1949, Saddler returned to Florida to help build and operate Winter Garden Citrus Products and Processing plant. The company was operational for nearly 50 years. In the 1970s, he purchased another processing plant in Brooksville that manufactured orange juice concentrate and later, “single strength” [ready to drink] chilled orange juice. Saddler first and ultimately unsuccessful attempt at growing oranges organically was in 1992:

We spent three years attempting to grow with Sarasota sludge and they were not making good sludge because we couldn't make an orange grove live, so we started over in 1995 and actually got certified in 1998. We've been [a] certified [organic] citrus grower for 11 years now. [interview with Mr. Saddler, November 2009]
The organic citrus he now produces is locally processed and packaged as juice. It is sold through Organic Valley, a Wisconsin-based national cooperative. This business arrangement benefits Saddler since Organic Valley handles the product marketing, allowing him to focus on the Winter Garden citrus grower’s co-operative and developing other projects.

Saddler’s newest endeavor reflects his concern for the dwindling water resources and the fossil fuel dependency promoted by industrial agriculture. Saddler tells me that California’s limited water supply has jeopardized 900,000 acres of farmland and that intensive use of fossil fuels is dependent on their affordability:

The price of fossil fuels, if it gets to over 5 or 6 dollars a gallon, which, may or may not ever happen, but if it does the transportation of produce 3000 miles from California to Florida would present a risk. So I thought if we could grow the same products here that they can grow in California year-round than it would be a good market and, you know, certainly very environmentally friendly. Less water and hopefully less carbon footprint. [interview with Mr. Saddler, November 2009]

Saddler is experimenting with hydroponic growing techniques for year-round greenhouse production of lettuces, cucumbers, and herbs. Recently, his plans to build a three acre greenhouse on his property were derailed. He states:

The neighbors just decided they didn't think that was good. I wanted three acres of greenhouse and 12 acres of cows and they didn't want the cows, some of them, so they went to the orange county planning and zoning and got them to turn down my applications, so I put the greenhouse on top of the three-story building in downtown winter garden. [interview with Mr. Saddler, November 2009]

This new location actually worked out well for Saddler as he constructed a rainwater catchment system utilizing a neighboring building’s roof. A 15,000 gallon underground
tank stores captured rainwater, allowing Saddler to grow his produce using ten percent of the water used in traditional agriculture.

Besides hydroponic vegetables, Saddler is also producing tilapia in his greenhouses. He calls the system “aquaponics” and is currently developing a sustainable source of food for the fish. Two promising ideas relate to (1) vermiculture, or the cultivation of worms in composted vegetable waste, and (2) algaculture, the farming of algae. Once an operational food source is secured, Saddler hopes to implement a self-contained growing system with “bare minimum pollution.”

He explains it this way:

If we ever perfect growing worms and algae to feed the tilapia, we’ll then have a closed food supply chain where the fish make the fertilizer for the plants and the plants produce the clean water for the fish and the refuse from the restaurants is used to grow the worms and the worms feed the fish. So we would have a [closed] system whereas now we’re actually using soybeans out of the Midwest to feed the fish. [interview with Mr. Saddler, November 2009]

While his greenhouse project is still small and experimental, Saddler is producing vegetables and herbs to sell through the Homegrown Co-Op. Asked about the overall impact of alternative agricultural practices in the dominant industrial agricultural paradigm, Saddler notes that viability lies in their small scale and relative lack of environmental impact. He emphasizes the importance of research and development of agricultural alternatives as a sort of insurance plan against future risks. “In theory,” he states, “we can take what we’re learning in our little greenhouse and go macro with it and, presumably, we could supply a big part of the Central Florida market by scaling up.”
Stuart Christ

Stuart Christ makes cheese. Although he produces local food, he sees the impact of the natural and organic food movement as peripheral, at best, to his experience. During our interview he emphasizes the “realities of our culture,” namely, that local food is expensive and industrial food is cheap. Because of this, he says, Americans will always go back to the industrial food system when they get hungry. Christ’s roots in Central Florida stretch back long enough for him to remember when there were more farms and fewer people. Referring to his property, a parcel in unincorporated Seminole County that is now sandwiched between residential subdivisions, he says: “I’ve been here forever. I grew up here, all that. This is what is left, a little bitty piece in the middle of all this.” His location outside of the city exempts him from municipal building and odor ordinances. Christ feels that today’s agricultural laws allow him a good deal of freedom.

While Christ’s family previously owned and operated orange groves, he was not always personally involved in agriculture. After earning a Masters Degree in Health Services Administration from UCF, he ran an Alzheimer’s and Dementia Assisted Living Facility for many years. Now middle-aged, his dairy has been operational for two years. Five years in the planning, the dairy represents a way to work from home and secure the tax benefits of agricultural zoning.

Christ studied cheese making at the University of Vermont and brought a master cheese maker to his dairy to teach him the trade. His product, Bleu Sunshine Cheese, is a bleu cheese which is produced in wheels and aged for 60 days before it is sold for $22 a pound. Christ uses raw milk from Jersey cows, a breed he selected for its butterfat-rich
milk. He emphasizes that his cheese is not really organic and recounts his problem with raising “organic” livestock:

Organic’s a bunch of crap because the federal government took it over, and Whole Foods took it over, and everybody else, because, you can’t even have an organic dairy, because it’s inhumane. Guess what? If a cow gets sick – what if you got sick? Would you have penicillin? ...Of course, why wouldn’t you do that for your animal?  [interview with Mr. Christ, January 2010]

Thus, Christ views the national organic standards that limit the use of antibiotics in animals on certified organic farms as problematic. For small farmers like Christ, the inability to use cow milk for 12 months after antibiotic treatment, as the national organic standards prescribe (Collins 2006), represents a substantial financial loss.

His dissatisfaction is also apparent when discussing industrial agriculture’s modes of distribution. He believes that “farmers need to educate themselves” and “take control of their own supply chain,” as farmers get paid less than food distributors and retailers. “Everybody else in the food supply chain is taking the profit and they don’t do anything.” He feels that Homegrown offers greater transparency. The Co-Op’s distribution system, combined with direct sales to higher volume restaurants and hotels, can vastly improve farmers’ ability to earn decent livings. Such sentiments are essential to his understanding of sustainability. To him, sustainable means staying in business. Christ remains profitable through his direct sales to the local hospitality industry:

A lot of it here in Orlando is, we get to sell to the hotels. They don't bitch about price, they buy it regularly, and in large enough quantities to make it feasible for us to create it. Farmers market, we take it there, that's a feel good, a little cash in the pocket, but that's maybe more marketing than sales, because I might meet a chef there, that's gonna be buying regularly from me, not the quarter pound of cheese I just sold to the housewife. Fine, I'm glad you like my cheese, we’ll get to
talk about it, you can look at the cows, see all that, it feels good but it's not business. [interview with Mr. Christ, January 2010]

The recent economic downturn has not really affected Christ. He claims there is much more demand for his cheese than he can fulfill. Recognizing that the local food movement has benefited his business, he states, “definitely the whole local movement has helped, just, fortuitously. Not by any plan I had. It’s like, okay, everyone wants their local product, wants to support their local farmer, and that’s all good,” but, he continues, “only a certain number of people can afford it.” This is another matter about which Christ is strongly opinionated. He refers to the local food movement as “elitist,” in more of an economic than ideological sense. He feels that as long as industrial food is cheap, there is little incentive to produce food in alternative ways. According to Christ, the supply of locally grown food will, therefore, remain limited. Basic economics, he tells me repeatedly, dictate that the scarcity of locally grown food makes it the most expensive option. In his view, then, the exclusivity of local food necessitates the existence of the industrial alternatives.

Kara Reed

Having alternatives is part of what attracts Kara Reed to farming. “Choice,” she says, is “just the American way.” Though her family has always operated citrus groves, farming represents a new venture for her. Reed’s parents sent her to law school so she would not have to work on the farm. Although she chose to leave the farm, but states that since high school she has been a “survivalist” and her law career gave her the ability to lead a green lifestyle. Since organic food and cotton clothing are more expensive than
their conventional counterparts, she notes that “on anything less than a lawyer’s salary you can’t have [them].” She chose to become an organic producer over time as she gradually realized that making environmentally conscious consumer choices is insufficient. After her family agreed to let her convert their orange groves to organic production, she used the opportunity to make a major lifestyle change. She quit her job and began creating a financially sustainable small farm. Reed feels that her background in business allows her to treat the farm like an investment portfolio. Conceptualizing the farm similarly to financial dealings she says:

You have a balanced portfolio, you diversify, you have low risk, you have high risk, you have short term, you have long term, so I treat the farm the same way as a financial portfolio. So I’m trying to get all the different short term and long term projects going, and the low risk and high risk projects, exactly like the financial marketplace. [interview with Ms. Reed, January 2010]

Reed shares information about three of her current projects. Her family grove is like a long-term bond: it is valuable but there is substantial risk from pests and disease. A local organic citrus co-operative, Uncle Matt’s, now manages the grove, handling the organic certification process and fruit harvesting and processing.

Another project involves pastured poultry. This short-term farm venture also carries substantial risk for a newcomer like Reed. She prefers heritage to hybrid chicken breeds, but found that birds purchased from Iowa and Oregon farms “were dying in the heat” of Florida summers. She also experienced setbacks related to the birds’ vulnerability to natural predators. For instance, the birds she purchased:

Were incubated in artificial incubators, not by a mother hen, so they had no sense of self-preservation. And so my whole first year, I bought all these chickens and ducks and put them out to free range, and predators got them all, because they
had no mother to teach them how to run and hide… The more I read the more I’m starting to learn and say, oh, okay, it’s the mother that teaches them, when the hawk comes you run underneath the trees. So even though I have these heritage breeds, they have no mother, [so] they have no instincts. And so it sounds crazy… well, some of the hybrid turkeys, they don’t even know how to breed anymore. You put the male and the female together and they just look at each other. [interview with Ms. Reed, January 2010]

Part of fostering her poultry operation’s sustainability involves acclimatizing birds to local weather, and breeding new birds. In 2010 she plans on growing her own feed to reduce her dependency on outside sources.

Reed’s other project is developing a pre-washed and bagged “lettuce-free salad” to sell through the Co-Op. This project stems from her longtime interest in nutritious eating; a practice that keeps her healthy while many of her friends suffer from various ailments. She is excited about “all the different [health enhancing] properties of all the different lettuce-type plants that I’m going to be growing.” Concerns for the environment and her own health are the primary motivating factors behind Reed’s goals and accomplishments. She says that after reaching a certain age, she “can see cycles now,” understanding that “what works in the short term doesn’t necessarily work in the long term.” Putting this into perspective, she explains that growing up on Lake Minehaha:

We could put the fishing hook down into the water, without bait, and catch fish… and they were just like, biting, the fish were just… it was incredible. Now you don’t see fish… but so many people, they just don’t care. Cause they never knew what it was like… they didn’t have that experience, so they don’t know what they’re missing. [interview with Ms. Reed, January 2010]

Those new to the area, and especially younger residents like Reed’s 14 year old son, lack the long-term perspective in comprehending chemical pesticides’ negative effects. According to Reed, years of agricultural runoff have decimated Lake Minehaha’s
wildlife. While chemical pesticides and industrial agricultural practices may seem cheaper and easier in the short term, the long term costs, according to her, are too great. She feels that making people aware of what is at stake with industrial agriculture and engaging them in the solutions is imperative for the survival of ecosystems and small farms alike.

Ash Porter

Ash Porter is a self-described “soil fanatic,” with a deep reverence for farming sustainably. His parents’ belief in ”self sufficiency” is manifested in their always having a garden and growing much of their own food. Over time, Porter became more interested in gardens and growing techniques, especially in sustainable food cultivation through a closed systems’ approach. He explains that this method involves “grow[ing] all of the stuff that goes back into the soil.” Some crops are grown exclusively for compost. These are combined with chicken manure and household food waste to produce a rich fertilizer that feeds the microorganisms and makes the soil healthy. This system is not yet perfected.

Porter’s father only recently began using organic techniques. Porter had to “learn a whole bunch and convince his father that, you know, that’s not the right way to do it, if we want our soil to be healthy.” Now, Kolokee Farms, the family organic operation, only relies on organic and sustainable farming techniques.

One problem Porter sees with the prevailing agricultural paradigm is that “nobody knows who their farmer is, how their food is grown or where it comes from.” He wishes
that farmers would emphasize sustainability, and identifies problems with the national organic standards:

The USDA organic program, I think had, at one time, a good direction. I think it has gotten off from what it should be. It’s gotten away from sustainability. Farmers can grow what they call organic produce on land while they’re still stripping the land and aren’t putting anything back to it. They’re still using practices that aren’t giving to the soil. The USDA doesn’t really make them use sustainable practices. [interview with Mr. Porter, November 2009]

Soil preservation is also important to Porter, as he sees it as a limited resource:

Sustainability, I feel like, is the biggest thing we need to focus on. Because in the Midwest, we’re losing topsoil from growing corn and soybeans and we’re losing it. There was like five feet of topsoil when they first started farming it, and now there’s less than a foot. You know it just can’t, it can’t go on like that. We’ve got to figure out a way to break that pattern, but that’s another thing, it’s hard to do that on a large scale. [interview with Mr. Porter, November 2009]

Porter recognizes that many farmers are dependent on commodity agriculture for their livelihood. He explains that for traditional farmers, transitioning to sustainable techniques “basically [requires] changing everything that they’ve learned, and initially they probably aren’t going to make that much money.”

For those able to make the transition, however, Porter sees abundant opportunities. Becoming involved with the Homegrown Co-Op “opened his eyes” to such possibilities. Notably, as a Co-Op farmer, he can’t keep up with consumer demand. He notes that even though “people are practically begging and knocking down the door,” he cannot expand fast enough because of time and property constraints. While he hopes that growing vegetables will one day provide his primary income, Porter currently works as a fire fighter and attends community college. Talking about plans for a farm he hopes to purchase one day, he says that he hasn’t decided whether he would prefer to have a
farm stand or to operate as a CSA. “Property prices are just unaffordable, especially for someone young who wants to start out farming.” Despite these challenges, Porter is optimistic that more and more people will come to understand the importance of good food. This demand, he feels, will provide entrepreneurial opportunities for those farmers willing to assume the risks.

Chapter Summary

As the four farmer profiles presented in the previous sections demonstrate, Central Florida farmers are addressing the challenges of building a local food movement in unique ways. Their differing approaches suggest that there is not just one established way of operating non-agribusiness enterprises at the local level.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CHALLENGES FACED BY CENTRAL FLORIDA FARMERS

In this chapter, I synthesize findings from the previous four farmer profiles in an effort to identify the common challenges and opportunities they all confront. Although my pool of interview informants is small, their divergent approaches, ages, and levels of experience and expertise help tease out the (dis)similarities underlying their concerns and hopes for the future. Creating financial sustainability appears to be a primary issue facing these and other farmers. US agricultural policies and regulations including the national organic standards, access to land, and the challenge of making good food accessible to all Americans are also issues which variously impact local farmers’ ability to achieve financial sustainability.

Creating a Financially Sustainable Small Farm

Perhaps the most pressing issue facing the farmers interviewed is achieving financial sustainability for their small farms. Reed explains to me that many see their alternative farms as a hobby they must support with a full time non-agricultural job, as in Porter’s case. A small hobby farm may help to provide fresh food for their family, but producing sufficient quantity for market is a much more time consuming undertaking.

For farming to be a viable profession, cultivators must be able to financially support themselves and their families. This requires them to become competitive in our late-Capitalist society where material consumption is a central goal. As historian Greg Cross notes, in the 20th century, “consumption gradually became the channel for dreams,
a means of counting time, the blueprint for progress and the embodiment of success” (Wilk 2000:253). Pursuit of consumer goods has led many Americans to spend long hours at work, compelling many industries to design goods and services that are both “convenient” and fitting within the harried pace of modern life. Food is not exempt from these efforts, as Wilk argues:

the pursuit of convenience through fast-food meals, besides fueling an epidemic of obesity, has driven the complete reorganization of agriculture in the United States… concentrating ownership in corporate hands, disempowering labor, increasing pollution, and compromising the quality of the entire food chain (2000:256).

Alternative farmers hoping to succeed today must not only overcome the challenges Wilk identifies, but they must also face the dual challenge of supporting their own consumer needs and selling to Americans who live fast-paced lives driven by consumer choice.

Recognizing this problem, Saddler explains that “farming is not like manufacturing,” in that “you can’t turn [the factory] off and turn it on [according to consumer whim], you’ve got to plant your crops and grow them.” Reed makes similar observations, noting that every product farmers develops takes at least three months to grow or to reach maturity before it can go to market. Reed additionally comments that while abundant choice makes for fickle consumers, farms typically shoulder considerable risk as they deal in perishable products. She sees shared risk such as the “subscription farming” practiced within the CSA model as a possible solution, She considers this a viable framework: “people buy stocks in companies, and it would be the same, you know you buy subscriptions to magazines, so [you’d] get a subscription to the farm.” She believes this arrangement would help farmers in planning what to grow.
Christ takes another approach towards attaining financial sustainability for his farm. As previously mentioned, he exploits the popularity of local food by marketing his product to high-end hotels and restaurants. These venues often pay premium prices and purchase large quantities to take advantage of highlighting a local farm on their menus. Restaurants are eager to showcase local products as they are sure to sell more of cheese plates if they feature “locally made Sunshine Bleu Cheese” rather than generic brands. Selling to more affluent clients is a viable model that allows Christ’s farm to be financially sustainable.

Land Availability and Affordability

Land is a primary problem for Central Florida farmers. Prices are now so high that farmers are unable to afford many agricultural properties. Porter states that “land really is the biggest thing [obstacle].” Property prices are effectively out of reach for many farmers, especially for novice organic cultivators. Even leasing arable land is problematic, he feels, because of competition with highly capitalized residential and commercial developers. For farmers already with land, zoning represents another obstacle. Saddler’s plan to build a sizable greenhouse on 15 acres of his own property was derailed after petitioning neighbors pressured the county officials to deny his rezoning request.

Country commissioners may also hesitate to assign agricultural zoning to land, as this designation lowers the county’s potential tax revenue. Commercial and residential properties contribute substantially larger revenues, so these land uses are favored.
Perhaps significantly, all of the farmers interviewed for this study are farming on land they had previously owned or which had been in their families for generations.

**US Agricultural Policies and Regulations**

Although Christ’s example of marketing produce to high-end outlets may seem ideal, for Reed and other farmers, such practices are prohibited by USDA agricultural policies. Poultry processing regulations are strict, catering mainly to large industrial producers. Seeking ways to diversify, Porter is similarly frustrated by the USDA’s regulatory guidelines for producing chickens:

“I’ve looked into grass-fed poultry, but the laws behind that are just unbelievable…it’s absolutely unfathomable to me that I could be expected to construct a processing center that meets the same requirements as [one designed for] someone processing 1,000 birds a day… I have to sell it as pet food. [interview with Mr. Porter, November 2009]

Laws which require that facilities conform to various regulations make it difficult, if not impossible, for small-scale farmers to operate as they would traditionally. While Porter remains hopeful that the laws will improve as people become more informed about the benefits of small polycropped farms, Reed views the regulations as seriously limiting. Her home raised chickens cannot be sold to restaurants or hotels. When they are sold through the Co-Op they must be labeled “for Pet Use only.” Such characterization may raise false safety concerns amongst consumers.

Another area of concern for interviewed farmers is the USDA’s national organic standards. These regulatory guidelines, which are rooted in 1990’s Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) and formally enacted in 2003 (Schatz-Alton 2007), are a part of the national organic program (NOP). This program develops, implements, and
administers national production, handling, and labeling standards for organic agricultural products. The NOP also accredits certifying agents who inspect organic operations to verify that they properly meet USDA standards. Certification can be expensive and organic farmers must wait three years after converting from conventional agricultural methods for this accreditation (OTA 2006). Among other things, NOP standards outline acceptable practices for organic farms including lists of fertilizers and insecticides considered sufficiently “organic.”

In Saddler’s case, the NOP guidelines present problems for the maintenance of his orange groves. He explains that traditionally, if you lose three trees in your grove one year, you can pull those trees out and “reset” the grove. That is, replant trees where the dead ones had been. In Florida, he notes, setting out new trees is effectively impossible without insecticides. The alternate method of hand-hoeing is cost prohibitive. The USDA organic standards forbid him from using insecticides, even in the small areas surrounding trees which will not produce for years. Under these circumstances, he must let half a grove die, bulldoze the rest, start fresh, and wait five years for the trees to mature. Organic growing by these standards, he believes, requires greater capital investments of time and money than more conventional methods.

As previously discussed, Porter faults the NOP standards for failing to prescribe any level of conservation for small farmers. He looks to the traditional closed system agricultural practices of “the Orient” as models. “They’ve been using the same land for hundreds of years,” he says. The other farmers also feel that organic standards should prescribe some level of conservation. Similarly, while most believe that reducing
chemical pesticide use is a positive step, none are happy with the way the organic standards are currently written. Christ is particularly adamant that NOP guidelines have become extremely burdensome for those raising animals.

As evidenced by these farmers’ experiences, structural barriers such as accessible land and regulatory policies continue to adversely affect small-scale cultivators. Many of these farmers value organic cultivation methods but eschew organic certification because of the expense or other related issues. These successful small farmers are seemingly united by a commitment to positively impact their communities by pioneering new farming methods, increasing sustainability, growing nutritious food for local consumption, and preserving arable land and biodiversity. The essence of this movement towards local and sustainable food systems, then, emphasizes holistically creating healthy communities. It follows that this healthy food should be accessible to all segments of the community. As the next section suggests, this is often not the case.

Unequal Access to Healthy Foods in America

“Organic” food is often conceived as only affordable to the affluent or moderately well off (Johnston 2007). Though this stereotype is persuasive, it bears remembering that even conventional produce remains unaffordable to many poor and working poor families. Epidemiologists Pablo Monsivais and Adam Drewnowski examine the relative costs of nutritious but lower-energy-density foods (fruits, vegetables, and meats) in comparison to nutritionally deficient and high-energy-density foods (oils, peanuts, candies, chips, and crackers). They find that between 2004 and 2006, high-energy-density foods decreased in price by 1.8 percent, while healthy lower-energy-density foods
increased by 19.5 percent (2007). Government corn, soy, and wheat subsidies help keep the prices of processed junk foods low, contributing to many health problems for Americans.

One way to promote local food and increase community health is accepting food stamps at farmers’ markets. While Florida does this through the state’s Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, there are currently no participating markets in Greater Orlando (FL Dept. of Agriculture 2010). In Florida, reformulating policies that favorably support small-scale farming can foster more community involvement and increase the availability of healthy produce to the population-at-large.

The limited impact of organic and local food movements in the US effectively means that natural foods are not readily available to less affluent households. While the urgency of safe local food may not seem as pressing as accessible and affordable health care, they are in many ways quite similar. Consuming nutritious food has the aggregate effects of promoting better health and preventing many diseases. It may not be an overstatement to suggest that the hegemonic industrial agricultural system that emphasizes subsidized corn, soy, and wheat, along with minimal support or subsidization for healthier green vegetables and fruits, constitutes a form of structural violence (Farmer 2005:227). Promoting tenets of liberation theology, anthropologist Paul Farmer asserts that health care providers should give “preferential treatment to the poor” as the less affluent are highly vulnerable with limited access to healthcare. Furthermore, he contends that they should have favored consideration to preventative treatments. In this
way, increased access to healthy foods can dramatically and positively impact American public health.

The farmers interviewed in this study recognize the challenges of increasing accessibility, but struggle to conceptualize solutions that will allow them to attain financial sustainability. Reed comments on this paradox: “I couldn’t afford to buy my chickens for what they sell for at the Co-Op.” Homegrown’s mission statement outlines their commitment to serve all income levels and segments of the community. The Co-Op also strives to pay farmers fair wages for their produce, making many of their products more expensive than those at available supermarkets.

Additionally, to access the Co-Op’s services, individuals must be able to travel to food distribution locations at sometimes inconveniently scheduled times. These kinds of logistical issues highlight another key problem facing the Co-Op. Each week, they must process member orders, arrange food shipments with their vendors, sort fruits and vegetables, and distribute the produce to members. Such duties are complicated by the fact that the organization is a non-profit, staffed primarily by volunteers, and variously involved in numerous educational activities. Saddler observes that coordinating delivery for low volume programs will always be a hard. “Economies of scale are what's difficult, and distribution... [When] you got four squash and a dozen eggs and you get it moving around the logistics of it, of Homegrown, are a challenge.”

Is Local Food a Counter-Hegemonic Force?

While the hegemonic forces that come to bear on small farmers and American consumers have been previously considered, the impact of the local food movement as a
counter-hegemonic movement has not yet been addressed. Johnston (2007) examines this aspect of local food movements, when he states that “multiple points of contact” are necessary for resisting hegemony, since power is typically diffuse among several institutions. It also requires:

Projects that seek to problematize, or ‘de-normalize,’ the exploitative relationships we have grown accustomed to in consumer capitalist societies. One example is the ‘normal’ idea for most Americans that food should be a bargain price, a belief that relies on labor exploitation and environmental exhaustion at multiple points along the commodity chain” (Johnston 2007: 4).

The “bargain” price of US food is dependent on subsidies and ultimately on US taxpayer dollars. The farmers that I interviewed view this arrangement as unsustainable. Addressing this issue, Reed comments:

we need something more, I don’t know the right label, you know, free-marketist or something, anyway, we want to do something more independent.. personal, there you go, something more on a personal level where there’s a relationship between a consumer and a farm. Small farmers know that this is never going to be mainstream and don’t want it to be mainstream because it’s not a commodity, it’s a very personal thing.  [interview with Ms. Reed, January 2010]

Her observations speak to the fulfillment of post-consumer desires, one of Johnston’s criteria for a counter-hegemonic movement (2007). Johnston argues that this fulfillment, coupled with a reclamation of the commons, are the key facets of counter-hegemonic movements (ibid.).

In advanced capitalist societies, Johnston states, consumption and individual commodity production are the primary modes of meeting human needs. Working in concert, these elements undermine “collective, non-commodified modes of need-provisioning” (2007:11) such as those pursued by small local farmers. Consuming in this
way increases market dependency and its accompanying messages about food quality and convenience. Johnston argues that to combat this trend, markets must be “re-embedded in social structures that ensure that nutritious, sustainable food does not go only to those who can afford it, and that alternate modes of provisioning are equally developed” (2007:12). One suggested approach is the “building of accessible connections between farm folk and city folk” (2007:13), which I would argue is one of Homegrown’s primary strengths.

Homegrown’s educational efforts help to inform consumers about the problems of commodified food and establish relationships between farmers and mostly urban Co-Op members. Attempts to satisfy post-consumer desires such as community participation are articulated through pot-lucks and other social engagements. Farm tours and lectures by local cultivators are regularly scheduled, and classes delving deeply into the problems of the US industrial food system are offered. While equal access is still a problem, building agricultural capacity is also imperative. Homegrown is somewhat succeeding in this aim by providing farmers opportunities to focus on operational development while the Co-Op handles the tricky businesses of marketing and distribution. Such efforts may not qualify as truly counter-hegemonic by Johnston’s definition, but they are nevertheless requisite in building a movement that resists the prevailing influence of agribusiness.

The Future of Local Foods

The cultural cachet surrounding local food has increased dramatically over recent years, prompting the publication of several books (Pollan 2007, Kingsolver 2008, McKibben 2007, Honore 2004) and even a Food Network television series challenging
Americans to eat more locally grown food. This growing popularity has led some of the interviewed farmers to worry that consumer interest is “just a fad,” as Porter expresses it. That said, he is optimistic that raising awareness about the associated problems of agribusiness can foster lasting and meaningful change in society’s eating and consumption habits. “If we could convince people right now when their minds are a bit open, if we could convince them that sustainable farming practices are what we need to do and that is the way of the future, and that’s the way we need to go,” it is possible that they will make permanent lifestyle changes, Porter believes.

Prevailing arguments against scaling up local food movements and reducing the harmful practices of industrial agriculture often center on assertions that traditional agriculture will never be able to adequately feed the world’s 7 billion inhabitants. However, researchers at the Institute for Food and Policy Research (IFPR) believe that this reasoning is fallacious (Rosset 2000). They argue that increased food production has not led to a corresponding reduction in hunger. Hunger problems can only be effectively resolved by “addressing unequal access to food and food-producing resources” instead of by growing more food (Rosset 2000:3). IFPR researchers note that after initial increases in productivity from green revolution methods and technologies, yields have continually fallen as productive soils become increasingly depleted. Like the Homegrown farmers, they believe that soil health is of utmost importance.

A similar study by the National Research Council found that “alternative farmers often produce high per acre yields with significant reductions in costs per unit of crop harvested,” despite the fact that “many federal policies discourage adoption of alternative
practices” (Rossett 2000:4). The council concludes that “Federal commodity programs must be restructured to help farmers realize the full benefits of the productivity gains possible through alternative practices” (ibid.). They also cite examples, such as that of Cuba, which dramatically changed its government policies towards favoring small farmers and alternative practices when faced with the deprivations of the US trade embargo. Their experiment was successful demonstrating that agricultural systems can remake themselves given specific urgencies and government support.

Chapter Summary

This chapter highlights the many challenges faced by small farmers and others attempting to build local food systems. Significantly, some of the practices mentioned, such as Reed’s approach to building a diversified farm, may prove beneficial if more widely adopted. While many of the problems facing Central Florida farmers may possibly require years to resolve, the concerted efforts of non-agribusiness producers may enhance this probability.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

The anthropological perspective is useful in addressing systemic problems in the US food system. Yet, elusive in this approach is what Farmer calls a “more fine-grained, more systemic analyses of power and privilege in discussions about who is likely to have their rights violated and in what ways” (2005:47). I have attempted to elucidate this in the context of the rights of alternative food producers and consumers.

This research suggests that Central Florida consumers can only procure limited amount of produce that is locally grown. Few small farms remain operational today despite the region’s strong agricultural history in producing citrus. Many of those now growing naturally and organically are new to the business. In fact, none of the four farmers interviewed for this project has been selling their products for more than two years. All of the cultivators have strong local roots. Though differently understood and executed; all four are motivated by a conservation ethic. They are working along with the Homegrown Co-Op to improve Central Florida food security by increasing local food production. Despite farmers’ abilities to positively impact their own outcomes, “the greater power of the agro-industrial food system weighs down on this [effort], limiting both its agency, and its capacity to promote counter-hegemonic values and behavior in a more substantial sense” (Johnston 2007:6).

Discourses about the superior safety and convenience of industrial food products and necessity of industrial agriculture challenge the local food movement ideologically. This is complicated by the fact that local farmers must also deal with high-priced land
and regulatory policies designed to support industrial-scale agriculture. These obstacles all contribute to the primary problem of small farms achieving financial sustainability.

In order to build local food systems that equally serve all segments of the community, the aforementioned problems must be overcome or adequately mitigated. Farmers interviewed for this study are taking different approaches to creating financially sustainable modes of production. Saddler’s aquaponic greenhouse tests the feasibility of growing for market year-round. Christ exploits the popularity of local food, carving out a market among the area’s high-end eateries to support his dairy. Reed utilizes her financial expertise to operate a farm that is as diversified as a well-planned financial portfolio. Finally, Porter is learning soil conservation and selling his family garden’s surplus produce while educating himself to broaden his future opportunities.

The Homegrown Co-Op provides farmers with opportunities to take advantage of local food’s popularity by marketing, selling, and distributing their produce. The Co-Op additionally strives to increase consumer awareness about the farmers and their produce’s overall quality. The organization is enlisting the support of community of members to develop programs that help local farmers overcome various challenges, such as raising capital to diversify their operations.

While no single approach in creating local food systems will work for all communities, as Neill wrote of health care, efforts must be grounded in culturally appropriate methods to help such efforts (2000). This thesis presents an overview of the current structural challenges facing non-agribusiness farmers. Similarly, it outlines some possible solutions that are beginning to take root. Further research would necessarily
examine state and national agricultural policy in greater depth and include a larger sample of food producers. Archival and oral history research on the history of Central Florida agriculture would help enhance perspective on the low numbers of organic farmers in the area, and expand the study’s geographical scope to include all of Central Florida, thus improving the applicability of this research. Finally, a comparative study with a demographically similar region could demonstrate whether the challenges identified in this thesis are unique to this area or can be more widely applied.

As globalization scholar Vandana Shiva (2004) states, whomever controls the food controls the people. It is up to consumers to ensure that they retain influence over these basic necessities. Suffice it to say, anthropologists must concern themselves with examining the workings of agribusiness, advocating small farmers’ rights of producing what they wish and freely selling to their communities. Equally, anthropologists must advocate consumers’ rights for access to nutritious, wholesome, fresh, and locally grown food.
APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Sample Interview Protocol

1. What do you feel are the main problems in the American food system?

2. How do you think we might address these problems?

3. What do the terms local, sustainable and organic mean to you?

4. How long have you been producing food?

5. Tell me about how you became a food producer?

6. Have you always used organic/natural production methods? How did you come to this / why?

7. Have you observed changes in demand recently?

8. If so, can you speculate why?

9. Have you faced any economic challenges?

10. What are your future plans?

11. How do you feel about the local/organic foods movement?

12. How do alternative farming practices fit into the current agricultural paradigm?
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000581, IRB00001138

To: Cheney S. Swedlow

Date: November 19, 2009

Dear Researcher:

On 11/19/2009, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

- **Type of Review:** Exempt Determination
- **Project Title:** Growing Local: Impacts of Social Trends on Central Florida Organic Farmers.
- **Investigator:** Cheney S. Swedlow
- **IRB Number:** SBE-09-06538
- **Funding Agency:** N/A
- **Grant Title:** N/A
- **Research ID:** N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Biedelzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 11/19/2009 09:37:18 AM EST

IIRB Coordinator
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