

AN INVERTED MARKET: NICHE MARKET DYNAMICS OF THE LOCAL  
ORGANIC FOOD MOVEMENT

by

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## ABSTRACT

The market for local organic foods in the United States has grown tremendously in recent years. Compared to a meager existence just a decade ago, local organic options now flourish through the form of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), thousands of farmers markets, community cooperative grocery stores, and upscale restaurants. Interestingly, the greatest percentage of growth in farmers markets in the US has occurred in the last 2-3 years during the Great Recession despite economic downturn.<sup>1</sup> This changing nature of agriculture and new developments of alternative niche markets have captured the attention of scholars. Most studies tend to focus on economic, organizational, or even nutritional elements reflected in the food industry. Less emphasis, however, has been devoted to the roles of cultural consumption, values, and desires that have propagated the swift and substantial growth of this movement. Direct sales in local organic niche markets and the CSA model provide an atmosphere for repetitive interpersonal interaction between farmer and buyer around a product infused with shared meaning. I utilize ethnographic data from an extended case of a local organic farm in Southern Arizona and interviews with over 50 of their CSA members. This dissertation addresses how and why both producers and consumers co-produce alternative visions and meanings that sustain a viable local niche food economy. I argue that the members involved in this niche market sector hold unified reactions against the global expansionary aims of food corporations. Inverse to market forces, the cultural and economic ethos driving this movement originates from appreciation for craft production

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<sup>1</sup> USDA-AMS-Marketing Services Division, 2012

as an expression of commodity de-fetishization, personal investment and embeddedness in local economies, and desires for authenticity in community and consumption.

## INTRODUCTION

A strange thing happened in the world of local foods in 2010. Up until that point in time the local movement was quietly growing in communities around the country in a variety of alternative market settings hidden from the mainstream. In the year 2010, however, Wal-Mart decided it would begin to make substantial efforts to sell more local foods as part of its new policies for long-term environmental sustainability and support for small and local businesses (Clifford 2010). The idea was that both small-scale farmers and customers would benefit with an increase in the availability of popular locally sourced foods. For proponents, this initiative was a beacon of a hopeful blending of corporate greening with rural idealism. Shoppers at this retail giant could now have peace of mind knowing that their money went to help farmers near their homes instead of distant agri-business corporations who had little concern with the health of their community. The pride and support of local farmers could be upheld as consumers marched into the store to purchase toothpaste, toilet paper, and local tomatoes. Never had such a large retail chain made this type of substantial effort to identify agricultural sources within its regional settings. Wal-Mart's specific goal was to provide more options to their customers for foods grown closer to where they lived. National interest in local foods was surging at this point in time and it seemed entirely appropriate that the world's largest retailer would want to get in on the action and make a positive contribution. However, I couldn't find any information about how local farmers and ardent activists in the local food movement reacted to Wal-Mart's plan. Would local farmers and consumers welcome the initiative?

About a year before this corporate initiative I began to interview members of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program in Tucson, Arizona. I was fascinated by new ventures into local foods in both mainstream and niche markets and discovered CSA on the opposite end of the spectrum from Wal-Mart. The novelty and uniqueness of CSA caught my attentions and I was curious to discover more about what attracted its participants to local foods. As the interest in local foods was spreading in a variety of market settings and into the mainstream, I hoped making contact with the most serious and committed consumers would give me some insight into the meanings, expectations, and direction of local foods as a growing market in the future. My first plan was to locate hot spots where local foods were brought into the city and discover the primary actors who were making it a visible and accessible market. At this early stage, I was fairly unfamiliar with how Community Supported Agriculture worked and why it was so important to many local food enthusiasts. Luckily there were several potential food market venues for me to observe and participate in around Tucson, Arizona. After doing some online searching and meeting contacts at an alternative grocery store downtown, I ventured to a CSA gathering on a Tuesday afternoon in the Spring of 2008.

I started my hunt for serious local food devotees at this predetermined CSA pick-up location in the heart of the city. Upon entering an old outdoor courtyard I was surprised to find a relatively large crowd of people congregating around food tables. I was not a member of this group, nor did I come to pick up any food. Nonetheless, a young person about my age noticed my presence and came over to say 'hello'. She briefly explained the details about this particular CSA group and encouraged me to take a look

around at the produce on display. As I perused through the courtyard, I attempted to talk with various individuals who appeared to be the key actors of this particular market setting, i.e., farmers and vendors with shares to distribute or individuals filling up their bags with produce. It was evident that this was a central meeting spot where CSA members from all over town came together to display and acquire a very particular type of food. In this rather condensed market hub, there were at least a dozen people unpacking and adding food items on tables and in baskets along a long row. A constant, but slow line of people would move along and pick up foods, fill their bags with produce, and finally sign their name in a ledger. As people arrived, several began to gather around in clusters to chat about their food, the weather, and activities taking place around town. And so, I joined in.

It was fairly easy getting to know farmers and members affiliated with this CSA group. When casually approaching these individuals, I would inquire about their food items and hope for the beginning of a conversation. Lucky for me, members were receptive to my requests and often interested to talk about their experience with the local food movement. Indeed, consumption and its surrounding ethical considerations was an issue of great significance for many of these people. It didn't take long before I had repeatedly talked with several people who acquired foods on a weekly basis from a few farms in Southern Arizona.

In these initial conversations I began to learn about many unique features of CSA models. The basic concept is that consumers and producers merge to ensure a plentiful supply of local food. An early CSA guide explained, "Consumers interested in safe food

and farmers seeking stable market for their crops [join] together in economic partnerships (DeMuth 1993, 1)." Typically people of a neighborhood, town, or city band together to invest in a local farm. These farms are nearly always small-scale, rather new, family run, and organically operated. Money from CSA members is pooled together, given to the farm in advance to finance agriculture equipment and seeds, pay for land and labor, and cover any related farm costs for a season. In return, members receive a weekly share of the fresh produce or meat grown on the farm. During good weeks members get huge bags stuffed full of a variety of foods; but during poor weeks they might get a meager share. Members partake in direct risks and rewards with their local farmers through sustained financial and interpersonal support. There are no middlemen, distribution hubs, or barcodes. Often, there are no labels whatsoever, including organic certification markers. Instead, produce usually stands as a marker of distinction by itself. CSA farms typically grow heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables that look funky and even taste different from standard uniform strains grown for mass distribution (Feenstra 1997; Henderson and Van En 1999; Cone and Myhre 2000).

In my naivety, I assumed a growing market for local foods into places like Wal-Mart or other large grocery chains might be welcome news to CSA members. With greater market accessibility, not only could consumers buy directly from the farmers market, but also from nearby Wal-Mart stores if they needed anything extra at any hour of the day. Plus, with Wal-Mart's emphasis as a big box retailer on low prices, perhaps CSA members accustomed to paying local premiums would be excited about the opportunity to get local foods at a potentially more affordable price. From a utilitarian



perspective local foods at Wal-Mart competitively priced would make a product that CSA members loved widely available. After all, *Homo-economicus* should enthusiastically embrace the mass marketing of a desirable good or service.

As it turned out, the CSA members I met did not embody the economic rationalism that classical economic theory posits when it came to their consumption of food. Most people I spoke with were not interested in Wal-Mart's move to sell local foods. I knew I had entered peculiar economic and cultural territory when self-proclaimed "foodies" and vanguards of the local food movement were strongly voicing their concerns with a corporate giant getting involved with their cherished movement:

The CSA members I interviewed almost unanimously had a visceral response to my simple inquiry about whether or not they would purchase local foods from Wal-Mart.

"Are you kidding me? No way!," one middle-aged woman exclaimed.

"Yeah, that is just what we need...Wal-Mart getting involved in local organic agriculture. Problem solved." another older man sarcastically remarked.

Another women was blunt when she stated, "There is no way in hell I would purchase local foods from Wal-Mart. I don't know of any farmers around here who sell to them. Local, yeah right, they are probably getting their stuff from Yuma or Mexico from a giant industrial farm hundreds of miles away."

Even local organic farmers I eventually met and began working with voiced the same opinions. I asked Alex, a twenty-nine year old local organic farmer, if his farm would ever consider selling their produce to Wal-Mart.

"No, never." Alex abruptly stated.

"Never? Why?" I responded.

"Because they do not represent our principles and values. I would never want my hard work and produce associated with a place like Wal-Mart.," he concluded.

As I began meeting a growing number of farmers and local food enthusiasts, the general consensus was that they would neither sell to nor buy from a retailer like Wal-Mart, or any other large corporate chain. How, then, would a market like this survive if it was tightly constructed with so much exclusion? Why would local farmers and CSA members withhold or reject a product they liked and supported from a particular retail store? Were they being elitist snobs, or did they have genuine concerns hidden beneath the surface? In a *New York Times* article about Wal-Mart's decision, a skeptic put the CSA members' apprehension into perspective:

"The local-food movement has been, certainly, about taste and quality of food, about providing good incomes for farmers, and also about other things that have to do with building smaller economies so we as a society aren't dominated by

the more industrial complexes,” the author stated. “This initiative doesn’t necessarily address that.”<sup>2</sup>

What this skeptic and many of the CSA members summed up was that they were concerned with many factors in their food consumption beyond just price, availability, and even the locality. They wanted their "food dollars" to go to organizations and farmers they knew, admired, and trusted. Connections with farms and food brought a sense of deep social purpose, moral validation, and an experience of cultural authenticity with their consumption (Johnston 2007, 2010). In other words, Wal-Mart could not meet the social and cultural expectation these members valued in their economic lives. There was more to this food economy than just simple supply and demand and the fulfillment of a biological function. Underneath it all was a quest for meaning through shared values and alternative orientations to the global market paradigm. In the eyes of CSA farmers and members, the local organic movement was best organized as a mechanism through which joint producer and consumer control could redirect the market structures away from big business initiatives. CSA markets were designed specifically to be governed through community jurisdiction and provide autonomy from distant centralized corporate bodies. In short, the locality of foods was only one of many concerns CSA members and farmers expressed.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, they wanted farms and markets to be managed through independent local actors from the community.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/15/business/15walmart.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/15/business/15walmart.html?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> see Appendix C for an exhaustive list of production and consumption concerns surrounding local foods.

Still, it seemed to me that there were already plenty of outlets for quality food from alternative sources. Natural and alternative food stores have existed, although not prominently, around the United States for at least fifty years or more. Something entirely new, though, was happening behind the scenes at farmers markets and CSA programs I began visiting. A palpable sense of urgency and energy beckoned from charismatic farmers and followers in these markets. Their goals and messages evoked more than just a loose collection of "foodies" casually dabbling in this movement with empty gestures. These were devout food enthusiasts committed to pooling resources together to sustain an independent alternative local food market. Its success required a long-term vision that could draw disparate people together to share in the effort of securing economic and environmental health of community for posterity.

The appeal of this local food movement was not an isolated phenomenon, either. Budding interest for alternative and local foods appeared to be coalescing rather quickly not only in the market sites I was visiting, but also in cities all across the country. Interesting things were happening at a quick pace in both small and large local food markets around the United States. Farmers markets were popping up everywhere at an unprecedented rate and local organic sales were becoming the fastest growing segment of the food industry. Consider the following statistic. Before the year 2000, there were less than 3,000 farmers markets in the United States; by the beginning of the year 2013, there were 7,890 registered in a USDA national database with a current annual growth rate of approximately 10% (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, 2013).

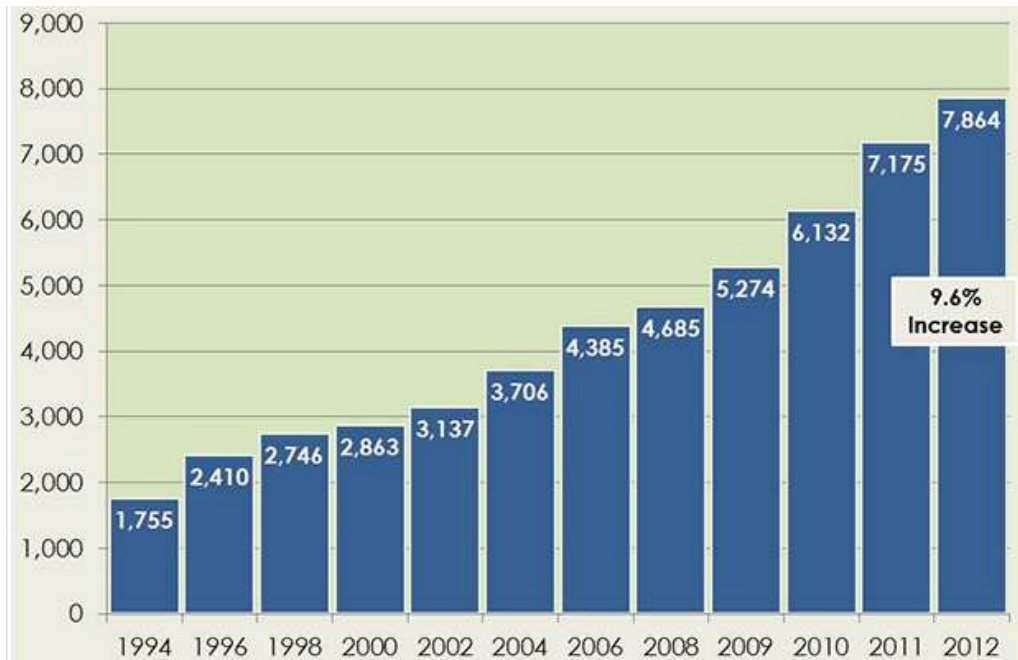


Figure 1: Bi-annual growth of farmers markets registered in the United States  
 Source: USDA-AMS-Marketing Services Division, 2012

Further, new small-scale organic farms are breaking soil around urban peripheries and jumping into these bustling farmers markets, restaurants, and cooperative grocery stores at breakneck speed. And once unconventional CSA programs, the first of which began in the United States in 1985, are now a widely popular method of connecting communities with farmers and food. Today, over 12,000 distinct documented CSA programs exist in locations nationwide.<sup>4</sup> This model has even extended into local art markets where, like the local food movement, the aim "is a deeper-than-commerce connection" between producers and consumers (Kennedy 2013). In regards to local foods, the graphic below shows the extent of the diffuseness of various types of

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.localharvest.org/csa/>

registered CSA's in America. Multiple, and sometimes hundreds, exist in every state and all entail direct marketing to some degree between a farm and customers.



Figure 2: Map of local organic food markets in the United States utilizing CSA model.  
Source: CSA Database, [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)

What can explain this resurgence of small local farming and consumer interest in local organic foods? The answer to this question was not immediately apparent to me and was a puzzle I sought to put together. Even more confusing was why it appeared that the most devoted people I met early on from a Tucson CSA group were rejecting its expansion into bigger national markets and chains. Wouldn't farmers and consumers want expanded availability and sales in larger more accessible market venues? As I became more familiar with the CSA model and some of its members I realized I needed to pursue their economic beliefs, strategies, and priorities in a systematic and organized manner. Members were the loyal and passionate niche market actors across the country who were pushing the local food movement forward by financing the vision of new agrarian farmers. Extended interviews with a targeted sample of CSA members could

help me understand why the local food movement was gaining traction in such significant ways while excluding traditional mass markets. Eventually, it became evident to me that CSA members and local farmers wanted to build something entirely new and independent peripheral to the confines of established food chains. Exactly what their ambitions were and how they choreographed the niche market dance in sync, though, eluded me in 2008.

The uniformly negative response from CSA members about Wal-Mart's plan to incorporate food from local sources soon began to cohere around abstract conceptions of *transparency* and *authenticity*. Several CSA members disputed Wal-Mart's notion of "local" altogether. Their skepticism revolved around contingent definitions of what could be constituted as *authentically* local. Did local to Wal-Mart mean it would be acquiring food from nearby farms, within the state, or just a region of the country? Other members I spoke with simply questioned Wal-Mart's sincerity toward economic and environmental sustainability. After all, the initiative reflected nothing in the way of amending growing standards, reducing farm size, or challenging mainstream practices of industrial agriculture. One CSA member concluded, "I think they (Wal-Mart) are just trying to jump on the bandwagon for marketing and profit, but are not really interested in contributing to the vision of small-scale farming that CSA farms and members value. I mean, I know my farmers well and I know exactly what their farm is like. That is something Wal-Mart can never replicate."

Conversations like this with the CSA members and farmers changed my perception of how the local food market operated. I found it necessary to disentangle the conceptualization of the movement because it existed in both large and niche scales. I

also began having doubts about the merits of Wal-Mart's local food initiative as I became more familiar with the details the store tried to keep veiled from the public. First, Wal-Mart's acceptable measure of local was a rather large geographic radius. Anything grown within the state shared by a retail store was considered "local" even if the origins were hundreds of miles away. The program also did not take into consideration the qualitative nature of the local farms; the acreage, growing methods, or ownership characteristics. Further, Wal-Mart's surge in sourcing and selling local foods failed to provide economic benefits to most of the local small-scale farmers as the initiative touted.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the primary beneficiaries of this newly implemented practice were the largest industrial growers who already made millions of dollars in annual profits. Huge industrial farms matched most appropriately with Wal-Mart's economy of scale distribution network because they could sell produce in bulk at a cheap price. In the end, Wal-Mart's distribution chain and stock of local foods deviated very little from their approach to acquiring conventional non-local foods. In the meantime, hundreds of new disparate local food markets grew independently in communities from coast to coast. Perhaps CSA's and small-scale local organic farms were doing so well because they prioritized one thing inverse to the bulk of the surrounding economies of scale: transparency and social connection between producers and consumers. If this were true, Wal-Mart disregarded a crucial foundation of the local food movement and was likely not going to win over many converts. It would also mean I would need to delve deep into the social field of a local organic market where producers and consumers share social space

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<sup>5</sup> For more, see: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2013/02/04/171051906/can-small-farms-benefit-from-wal-mart-s-push-into-local-foods>



The themes of transparency and authenticity each emerged as primary issues of concern for CSA members and farmers in the local food movement that I began to interact with regularly. In order to uncover these themes in action, I decided to look for new farms in the Tucson/Phoenix metro area that were going to utilize the CSA model as a financial kick-start. New small-scale farms were proliferating around the country, but I had not yet made any long-term contacts in Southern Arizona. This all changed when I found a flyer for a first time CSA that was being offered from a brand new farm called *Desert Sky* (a pseudonym for this study). Four young farmers in their 20's and 30's had acquired land, but needed investments to purchase the property and buy equipment. Instead of taking out huge loans to cover all of their expenses, they decided to try to receive a portion of the money up front from various food enthusiasts through the CSA model in the surrounding community. This was my opportunity to witness a market built exclusively upon direct connections form immediately before my eyes. I contacted *Desert Sky Farms* and explained my interest in learning more about local farming and their CSA. Within a matter of days, I was working in their fields and had signed on as a CSA member. This is how I entered the world of local organic farming and observed countless others help invest in a farm that eventually grew lush in the desert.

### *Plan of Dissertation*

This dissertation is not simply about a comparison or battle between small-scale local farming and Wal-Mart. It was the initial juxtaposition between the two, however, that got me interested in the local food movement and opened up an entirely new set of

questions for sociological and cultural inquiry. Therefore, I integrated into this world of local organic farming to better understand its goals and meanings as they existed through daily practice and interaction. Only through extended observation and participation would I be able to uncover what subtle desires, values, and meanings brought local farmers and consumers together in defiance of mainstream food markets. I set out to work within and interview key actors in the margins of the food economy to understand the central sociological themes that supported this form of alternative niche market. Before I describe my ethnographic experience on a farm, however, I must provide some context to the local organic movement from a historical and global perspective.

The contents of this dissertation are broken up into chapters, each subdivided into relevant corresponding topics. In the first section, consisting of chapters 1 - 3, I will conceptualize efforts of localization as a reaction against the global market ambitions of neoliberalism. Thousands of new local markets pop up every year that appear on the surface as a retrogression to market advancement. In a world of neoliberal overreach, however, efforts to localize markets make sense when considered as communal strategies for connecting meaning to economic life. Broad scale shifts in agricultural priorities and farming methods at the local level are one among many changes in the modern economy that are surfacing in a variety of interesting ways in resistance to neoliberalism. I will focus my attention on the local organic food market as an appropriate case study of localization embedded in globalized markets.

I will also give some background on the nature of economic transformation during the twentieth century in the United States. Here, I will provide an overview of how

neoliberalism has fundamentally restructured the organization of markets and the way Americans experience economic life. Technological advances and the globalization of economic life have radically transformed the production and consumption landscape that members of today's society enter into on a daily basis. With these advances, the expansion of commerce onto the national and global stage naturally created incentives to consolidate business production and distribution into economies of scale. While this neoliberal era has brought forth great wealth and consumer choice, it has also adjusted the collective experience with facets of economic life in unsettling ways. American society's unquestioned reliance upon neoliberalism over the last 40 years has dramatically restructured the way markets operate, but often at the expense of longstanding social and cultural priorities. Markets in overdrive have reoriented our human experience with goods and services in both subtle and profound ways. This transformation has had huge ramifications on the way our society expects provisions for life on both a local and global scale. I will make the argument that the ubiquitous process of economic rationalization best exemplified in neoliberalism has left a growing segment of the population feeling disenchanting and displaced by the "tyranny of the market" (Bourdieu 2003). Therefore, in the chapters of this first section I will address the short and long-term tradeoffs that occurred in the midst of this neoliberal market shift in order to provide context to social action in local organic food markets.

In the second section, comprised of chapters 4 - 6, I will make the argument that some culturally sensitive mass markets (particularly food markets) are bumping into thresholds of consolidation and are now experiencing reverberation back into local

economic spheres. Essentially, as corporations have gobbled up ever-greater control over and replacement of disparate production regimes, new opportunities have surfaced for entrepreneurs and consumers who desire unique cultural alternatives and the expression of authenticity. This development is conceptualized within the Organizational Ecology literature and I will use Resource Partitioning as a theoretical framework for understanding concerted efforts of local economic activity by producers and consumers. Resource Partitioning is a useful descriptive theory for how niche formations arise and stabilize in contemporary market society.

In order to bring tangibility to this abstract process, I will provide an account of shifts in American agriculture as a cultural and economic development that accurately captures the primary theme of rationalization and disenchantment in action (which, in this case study, unfold within the Resource Partitioning framework). I will hypothesize the connection of large-scale agribusiness transformations in both conventional and organic markets with corresponding reactionary movements against context specific economies of scale that are redirected inversely toward localization. Although Resource Partitioning describes *how* the segmenting process into niche formations works to support localization, it does relatively little to explain *why* producers and consumers are banding together to form alternative networks that circumvent mass markets. To understand this process, it is essential that I uncover the mutually constructed and tacit meanings carved out in this new local economic field. I will argue that Field Theory is a necessary counterpart to Resource Partitioning, and when the two are synthesized together they provide a more coherent and clear theoretical foundation for contemporary localization

movements. Within this broader theoretical framework, I will provide detailed accounts of my ethnographic experiences on a local organic farm and the primary themes common to its Community Supported Agriculture members. These customers form an integral dynamic to the farm's success and are the driving force behind direct food markets.

In the third section, chapters 7 - 10, I will provide extensive details from firsthand experience of the alternative practices and market anatomy of a local organic farm. I will utilize my ethnographic and interview data as a case study for how alternative local markets take root and succeed while embedded in a global economy. In order to give substantive weight to my data, I will continue to rely upon theoretical foundations from Resource Partitioning literature synthesized with Field Theory. The organizational dynamics and the anatomy of the local organic social field exist in relation to entrenched mainstream economic and organization structures. The formation of the field for local organic food is deeply influenced by, but ultimately subsists independently from, large-scale economic fields. The particular ways in which this niche field operates is unique. A composite sketch of the qualitative events that unfold within the confines of the field is necessary in order to gain an understand the meanings of corresponding actions, i.e., cultivation, harvesting, selling and buying, pricing, and interaction on the farm and at the market.

In the chapters of this third section I will also overview the cultural and political themes that underpin the local organic movement as an emergent and autonomous social field. The most important concerns expressed by local farmers and their customers in this case study revolved around perceptions of transparency and authenticity. These two

themes proved vital to the localization process and laid the foundation for expectations of quality standards, environmental justice, and community connection. Because localized economic fields are bordered by actual geographic space, transparent connections between producers and consumers also play a dominant role in identity formation and trust. As a result, I will make the argument that ideas of authenticity are mutually constructed through a process of commodity de-fetishism; thus allowing the back-story of social, cultural, and political elements of production to influence the valuation of local food commodities beyond utility or exchange value.

I will conclude with an assessment of the future viability and meanings of the local food movement and niche economies. Several questions remain to be answered about the long-term prospects for inward looking economic initiatives. Is local organic food simply a fad, or does it contain enough momentum to plant deep roots into our food system? Will corporations eventually appropriate disparate operations and wrangle control over local foods? And, perhaps most importantly, are the efforts and growth of the local organic food movement enough to counteract or redirect agricultural activity in a way that could promise enduring sustainability? I will tie together and address these questions in the conclusion of this dissertation and paint an optimistic picture for a vibrant and viable local food economy in the twenty-first century.

## CHAPTER 1: THE NEW AGRARIANS

I was lucky enough to witness the birth of a new biodynamic organic farm on the outskirts of Tucson in the year 2009. A budding interest in fresh local organic foods was flourishing through the region much as it was in other part of the United States. Farmers markets began taking root in various corners of Tucson for both affluent and average income families. The city's first Community Supported Agriculture program had just begun a couple years prior and was distributing produce from small farms south of Tucson and the Phoenix area. My fascination with the local food movement began when, in what felt like overnight, there were suddenly many advertisements both in papers and online for fresh local produce from various sources. The number of farmers markets that had originated in various parking lots and plazas throughout Tucson each week surprised me. Who was behind all of this, where did the interest come from, and most importantly, who were all of these farmers and CSA members? It was as if the entire local scene had been orchestrated spontaneously.

Critics might say that my perception of this quick growth is a bit exaggerated. After all, there have been food cooperatives, community gardens, and even various farmers markets around Tucson and the rest of the country for several decades. Agriculture is a huge part of Arizona's economy as well. However, there was something qualitatively different about the type of new markets I was observing compared to the typical specialty health food grocery store or alternative food market. It was evident that these markets were growing and that we were in the midst of a surge of public interest in supporting local foods. My suspicions about this fast growth occurring around me in the

city are backed up by USDA data on the growth of agricultural markets over the last decade. Not surprisingly, the demand for organic foods and the spread of farmers markets had risen dramatically from 2000 to 2010 (USDA Agricultural Marketing Services, 2013). What I was observing around me was part of a national trend toward demand for safer foods and small traditional agriculture in local communities everywhere.

My discovery of *Desert Sky Farms* began when I read an article in summer of 2009 in the local newspaper about a their farm and saw an advertisement for their new CSA. The story discussed the variety of fresh heirloom produce *Desert Sky* would be offering at a popular weekend farmers market. The farmers described their passion for working diligently and cooperatively with the land in order to be sustainable stewards of the environment. Instead of adding synthetic inputs and pesticides to the soil and plants, their farm was completely organic and a nearly closed system of biological inputs and outputs. All of the waste generated by their chickens was churned into the soil and the farmers followed the strictest measures of biodynamic organic techniques. At this point in my life I knew absolutely nothing about farming, or gardening, and was intrigued at statements in the story about the amazing taste and freshness of the fruits and vegetables. I was curious if their food really was objectively tastier and what was so special about their organic methods. Most fascinating of all they were local. The farmers grew food in the city and only sold their produce to the surrounding region.

On the surface there was nothing overtly strange about this particular type of agriculture. But the details of this farm, and many other new small-scale farms taking



root across the United States, were different from the typical agricultural setting most people would be accustomed to. My initial interest in local organic farming was less in the actual agricultural methods and farm structure, and more about the alternative niche markets associated with their resurgence. In many regards any market movement away from the corporate model of economizing for scale would resist the tendencies of modern economic trends. For most of the second half of the twentieth century the American landscape homogenized into a field of big business dominance manifested through corporate chains and centralized leverage over local commercial activity. One only has to stroll down the decaying main streets of cities large and small across America to recognize the forces against community economies. Any efforts to work within the parameters of alternative local markets reflect direct activity against the economic grain and trajectory of business as usual. Like all business, agriculture is not immune to the big business market forces; although, the shifts may not be as easily recognizable for those not directly involved in the food system. Indeed, agricultural zones in the United States have undergone some of the most transformative modifications of any economic sector. When it comes to size, productive capacity and output, or labor demographics, farming has had to either 'go big or go bust' more so than just about any other business (Gardner 2002). How, then, could a new and alternative farm bypass the demands of the mass markets of agri-business? The entire process of prioritizing small-scale local economic activity appeared reverse to the tide of economic tendencies and the requirements of modern market success. Something fundamentally different was happening under the surface that I did not understand but needed to investigate.

I decided to contact this farm reported on in the newspaper to get some more information. When I called, a younger sounding man named Alex was happy to answer any of my questions. Before getting too deep into conversation he simply encouraged me to come and visit *Desert Sky Farms*. Because I had not ever seen a small organic farm before, he said I should check it out. I decided to take him up on his offer and arranged to make the visit the next day. On my drive through the city to the farm I was having a hard time imagining how an agricultural venture like this would work. Among all of the roads and buildings it seemed impossible that people would be growing much food anywhere nearby, let alone in the desert. As I pulled up to the location of the farm I realized that Alex indeed was right. I had never seen a place like this before. In a relatively small parcel of land an enormous amount of produce was growing. Unlike all of the farms I had encountered growing up in the Midwest, *Desert Sky* had a variety of different fruits and vegetables all growing together in dense lush beds.

Alex came out to greet me with a warm smile and firm handshake. In every way imaginable, Alex embodied all of the rugged traits of a stereotypical alternative organic farmer. He was in his upper twenties and his hair was long in dreads nearly down to his waste. His skin was dark from years in the sun and his hands were gruff and dirty. The pair of pants he was wearing were filthy and had holes in the knees and his boots were covered in a thick crust of dried mud. Alex had been in the dirt for what looked like years of his life as I showed up in pristine clothes. He introduced me to his girlfriend, Jen, and his friend Tim who were both happy to have a visitor.<sup>6</sup> It was apparent they

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<sup>6</sup> Author's Note: All names are fabricated for this study to maintain the anonymity of the people involved.

were proud of their work and were glad to show it off to any curious onlookers. Jen was also in her twenties and had been milking goats when I arrived. In her overalls, bandana, and boots, she too immediately struck me as a balanced mixture of urban chic with rugged rural sensibility. Tim also had long hair, a scruffy beard, and simple but tough nondescript clothing appropriate for hours outdoors in the sun and dirt. He smiled warmly with a rolled-up cigarette in one hand as he extended the other. These three people were all young, vibrant, and eccentric, but also kind, happy, and full of energy. Although I was in a setting I had never experienced before, they made it clear that I was welcome to tour their small farm and get to know them.

*Desert Sky* was still in its infancy and operating on rented land on the outskirts of town at this point in time in 2009. They had cultivated about three acres of land into what looked like the largest garden I had ever seen. This farm was not like anything I was familiar with while driving alongside vast cornfields in the Midwest. It was a dense space full of different fruits and vegetables all growing together in a patchwork of interconnectivity. From the outside it appeared that the space had no order of uniformity. A cluster of fruits and vegetables all packed together and intertwined made it impossible for the untrained eye to discern the intricate planned system of integration. To me it looked like an unstructured mess reminiscent of an artist's studio with several projects going on at once. I had stepped into a world that required context and a perspective that included the complex history and goals of the farming operation. It was obvious, though, that these three farmers knew exactly what was happening in every corner of their field in very specific detail. They explained to me that these plants were mostly symbiotically

paired to provide natural deterrents and ward off pests for one another, provide shade, or reintroduce nitrogen into the soil. Their approach was to replicate the interconnectivity of nature and to create a microcosm of how larger natural ecological systems operate. There were no endless monocultural fields of corn or soybeans here; just rows and rows of an assortment of heirloom vegetables and fruits.

On this first visit to the farm I came with a set of preconceived expectations of how an agricultural venture (even a small one) would look like based on the dominant model of farming that now occupies most of the American landscape. Yet my experiences and the perceptions of so many other Americans are widely off the mark of how small-scale local organic farming operates. My perspective came from growing up in the heart of American agriculture, so I thought I had a pretty good understanding where food came from and how it was grown in most circumstances. In a small town in Indiana, fields surrounded my community where commodity crops and livestock were grown. These were among the most fertile soils in the world and generations of families had worked this endless flat land. The culture of agriculture is deeply ingrained within the life of the rural Midwest and many other regions of the country. However, an ever-growing percent of the population has a diminished interaction with rural life and the farming associated with it. Despite the enormous size and vast spaces of open land, the American population is rapidly urbanizing into cities, townships, and suburban hubs. Indeed, this is a process happening across the entire world where more people now live in cities than the countryside. The result is a widening disconnect with both our visual encounter with farming and an understanding of the basic foundations of human

sustenance. For the most part, Americans are either accustomed to vast uniform fields speckled with an intermittent barn, or (increasingly likely) have little to no perception of modern agriculture among the endless concrete of commercial and residential urban life.

While consumers have a tendency to romanticize the image of what they expect farms to look and feel like, farming operations are often bigger (even if organic) than the public may realize (Guthman 2004). More recently, they have become enormous plots of land that are used to specialize in just one or two crops or species of livestock. In the attempt to create ever-greater marginal yields, American agriculture has prioritized the mechanisms of Weberian rationalization for one central and necessary purpose: efficient maximization of productive output. Tethered to the requirements of any formal rational systems are calculated, predictable, and efficient techniques (often utilized through non-human technology) meant to increase control for streamlined productive capacity (Ritzer 2000). The adverse consequence of this formal rationalization process is that human concerns situated within substantive rationality tends to diminish as Weber's notion of rationalization expands and encompasses ever greater control over human activity. Disparate unique and small-scale enterprises in this competitive sphere are absorbed into standardized larger economies of scale with an appetite for efficiency. Among many industries and cultural ways of life within advanced free markets (which are ultimately driven by formal rationality), agriculture has succumbed to the same forces. Faced with the option of going big, or going bust, American farmers slowly adopted the industrial methods of agriculture to stay afloat.

Consumers, by and large, have not been entirely aware of the large changes in agriculture. Appeased by a growing selection of foods shipped in from all over the country (and globe) that were no longer tied to season, and in a wide variety of new processed forms, consumer's embraced their options with little notice of the changes behind the scenes. From a consumer's point of view it was a great deal. A variety of foods were cheap and plentiful. The chasm between farms and plate, however, continued to widen. Literally, food traveled thousands of miles over weeks or even months before humans consumed it. Figuratively, the social distance protracted as people generally had no idea who, where, when, and under what conditions food was grown. To fill in this vacuum, marketers and advertisers found clever ways to present their food brands with the holistic and nostalgic imagery the public associated with a pastoral romanticism (Cunningham 2011). I count myself among the majority of the American public who, at this point in my life, had lived on the far-end of the spectrum with little connection to the origins of the food I purchased and consumed. By the time I first visited *Desert Sky's* local organic farm, I had no experience or perspective that allowed me to understand the specific distinguishing attributes of this farm. I just knew they were small, local, organic, and different. Essentially, however, I did not know what that meant or looked like.

My first exposure to this farm, then, was one of orientation more than anything else. Alex gave me a detailed and personalized tour to help me compare and contrast both the obvious and nuanced traits of this farm from conventional farms in America. Needless to say, I was deeply uneducated and deluded in how I understood the characteristics of food systems, especially small-scale local organic food systems.

Perhaps the greatest divergence in my expectation and reality of modern farming was the limited options many farmers now face in the market. Essentially, most farms today go down one of two paths: intense specialization with high tech machinery or broad variation with low-tech manual labor. The numbers of farms functioning in the middle are declining every year. It simply is not economically feasible for many farmers to make a living unless they merge within the demands of industrial agribusiness. In the last decade, however, new alternative markets have emerged as a narrow slice of the consumer body has begun to coalesce around the themes of health, environmentalism, and localism. These new local niche markets have provided an arena in which small-scale farmers can succeed even with an implementation of more sustainable practices and smaller yields. *Desert Sky* embodied the character traits of this new agricultural movement with an emphasis on agrarian principles, environmental integrity, and community involvement.

Another noticeable difference about this farm compared to most farms across the country is the young age of everyone involved. One of the very first things I noticed about Alex, Jen, and Tim and their fourth co-owner Sean was their youthful look and energy. They were all about or under the age of 30. While the typical farmer in the United States today is a senior citizen, it is most common for new local organic farms to be owned and operated by a young cohort of farmers. Although they were wearing boots and rugged outdoor clothing, none of the farmers I met at *Desert Sky* looked like stereotypical farmers either. Instead, they looked like gritty hippies; pioneers of a cultural frontier. The organic movement, though, is rooted in a counter-culture suspect of

the ambitions of agribusiness; the merging of big business and big farming. The defining philosophies underlying organic approaches are based on resisting technologies that undermine and exploit land, labor, and community (Wirzba 2003). When considered from this angle, there was nothing all that surprising about the youthful or countercultural appearance of the farmers at *Desert Sky*.

The organic industry has grown tremendously over the last quarter century and in many places competes for a market share with the conventional food industry. In fact, the organic industry has become so large that in many ways it has come to mirror big conventional farming (Guthman 2004). There was nothing familiar or conventional about *Desert Sky*, however, upon my first visit. Alex explained to me that, although their food was completely grown using strict organic methods, they were not certified as an organic farm. In fact, Alex said they were "beyond organic"; they were biodynamic. What made this farm even more unique and all the more foreign to me was that I had never heard this term. I had entered a brand new categorical terrain. Alex explained to me that it was simply too expensive and cumbersome for *Desert Sky* to gain organic certification. More importantly, though, he told me that they did not exactly *believe in* or *agree with* many of the USDA standards of organic labeling. How could this be? Essentially Alex, Jen, and Tim had grievances with many of the recent practices allowed in big organic farming. Corporate firms lobbied for the agribusiness industry in the 1990's for the USDA to reduce many of the stringent requirements for farms to be able to label their food as "organic" (Guthman 2004). These compromises between the government and big agribusiness for the sake of increased profits in the organic industry



did not sit well with *Desert Sky*. The *Desert Sky* farmers wanted to farm with truly authentic organic methods, but in order to do so, they would have to bypass that system as well.

*Desert Sky* is not so unlike many local organic farms who have steadily begun to make headway in recent years. Common among local organic farms is an agricultural ethos based on agrarianism. These farms prioritize perma-cultural growing techniques, the integration of heirloom fruits and vegetables and/or free range livestock, strict adherence to the original organic principles, and perhaps most importantly, a commitment to exchange exclusively within their local community or economic region. Local organic farms like *Desert Sky* and others, therefore, are strikingly different from conventional farms. In my first visit to their farm, I learned about their practices of agrarianism, biodynamic farming, French intensive methods, and the ethos of permaculture. These terms are used to designate farming techniques representing the original heritage of the organic movement. Their methods are meant to utilize strict natural growing processes balanced with the environment. Many of these techniques have their roots in the philosophies of Rudolph Steiner and the Soil Association at the turn of the 20th century (Conford 2002). Generally, there were no classificatory or certification procedures in the early days of organic agriculture because for most of the century organic foods were grown on small farms and distributed through more informal networks. Historically, organic foods were mostly sold in alternative marketplaces such as farmers markets, health food stores, and cooperatives.

Consumer orientation to their food purchases began to transform, though, in the latter part of the 20th century. Beginning in the 1990's the supply and demand for organic foods changed dramatically. The public slowly became more interested in acquiring organics from larger grocery stores and supermarkets. Big business distributors needed official labels that helped consumers distinguish organic from conventional. The process of standardizing organic, in the opinion of Alex and Tim at *Desert Sky*, "shifted the principles away from organic origins and consented to more conventional practices of industrial farming". For example, USDA organic certification will still allow a percentage of pesticide and synthetic soil additives (Guthman 2004). Most importantly, USDA standards do nothing to counteract the *approach* to an agricultural philosophy, Alex told me. Many large industrial organic farms are, for all intents and purposes, hard to distinguish from large conventional farms. The differences are subtle. Common sentiments of die-hard organic activists are that big organic has sold out to the demands of big agribusiness. Incentives for profits are simply too great to pass up as an eager public wants more and more access to organic foods. The struggle that played out for who could claim ownership over the conditions of organic standards ended when the USDA acquiesced to the lobbying efforts of industrial farming (ibid).

The approach to agriculture for many large-scale organic farms simply mimics conventional practices with a few modified controls on inputs for pesticides and fertilizers. There are no regulations concerning size of farm, methods of cultivation, variations in produce, seasonal adherence, or distance of food miles that are stipulated within the USDA organic framework. Issues such as these and others neglected in

industrial organic farming accentuate the core polarizing distinctions between conventional agriculture and agrarianism. At the center is a division over the philosophy of how humanity should utilize the land and the earth's resources to nurture the growth of food. It is a question of how human activity is balanced with the health of the soil, surrounding ecology, and community integration.

The farmers at Desert Sky let me know that these were the underlying issues for the new agrarians who specialized in local organic farming today. If I wanted to understand how it worked and why it was growing, I would need to focus on these primary topics. They encouraged me to begin coming out to the farm to volunteer if I wanted "hands on" experience that would allow me to really understand the local organic movement and the meaning of this type farming. I would end up taking them up on their offer. This first encounter began one of hundreds of visits to Desert Sky to work and learn. Over the next 2 and half years, I would return frequently to participate in the farm's growth in size and sales. Often while working in the fields I would imagine the farming of generations past and the way economic and agricultural systems upon this very land have transformed over time. In order to explain the contemporary agro-economy that I encountered, first I must provide a backdrop of the underlying historical economic forces of neoliberalism that have radically transformed the economic landscape of the United States and the global economy. Farming today, even the most radical and unconventional, is tied to the entrenched history of neoliberal ideology and the accompanying growth of pervasive dense economies of scale. In the next chapter I offer a brief overview of this economic paradigm of our day.

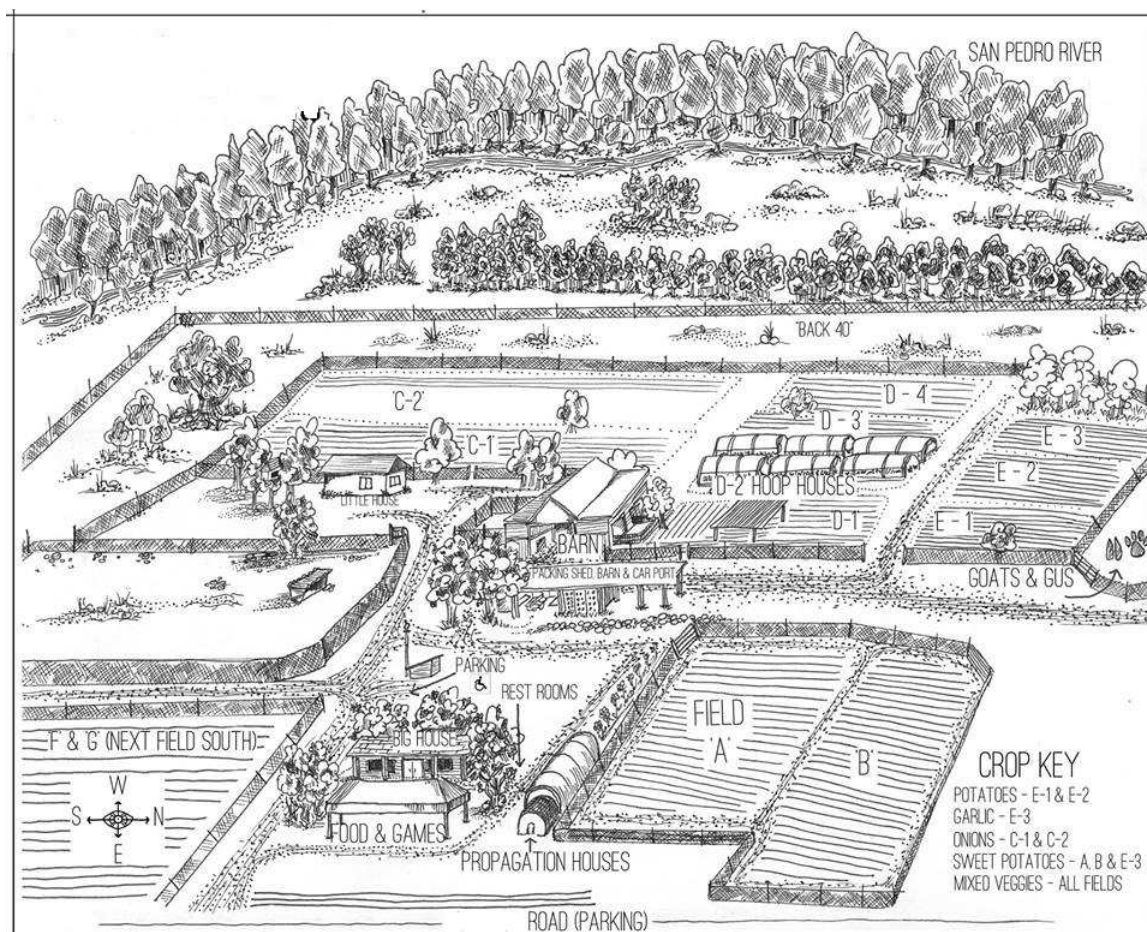


Figure 3: Diagram of *Desert Sky Farms* (not to scale).  
 Artwork by: Katherine Victoria

## CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE POSTMODERN EXPERIENCE

### *Reclaiming community*

Much of the American twentieth century is a story of spectacular innovations that have led to undeniably amazing transformations in the way and quality of life. Senior citizens have witnessed firsthand absolutely profound developments in technologies, economies, and culture. Older generations can also remember the challenges and despair of the Great Depression and the effects of a world embroiled in two wars. As America exited the first half of the century, though, it entered an era of relative peace and prosperity where the country's gains in affluence and global hegemony were unchallenged for well over a generation. America broke free and quickly became the wealthiest nation in world history. If there were a defining essence of the twentieth century, one could easily argue it was that American capitalism produced the greatest economic and cultural influence unmatched by any time or scale. America led the world in nearly every conceivable statistic that could be ranked. Not all of those statistics were positive. The United States also consumed the most energy and resources of any nation. Its incarceration rate outranked any other country by a long shot. The U.S. ended the century with one of the highest inequality rates of any economically advanced nation. Yet, despite these problems, Americans largely felt in control of their destiny. No problem was perceived as too big to tackle or goal too challenging to achieve. America led the pathway when it came to democratic governance, communication and transportation infrastructure, education, and even space exploration. It produced the

greatest ideas, inventions, and companies that transformed how nations and culture operate. And while the consequences of American hegemony can and should be debated, it is hard to deny that America has been the tip of the spear for good or bad, but always first out and on top after World War II.

The effect this unmatched prosperity and power has had on American culture and its psyche is at once understandable and naive. Americans largely felt secure and determined in the face of global challenges. This assuredness served them well on a number of fronts. By the end of the twentieth century, however, Americans felt invincible and had the luxury of turning a blind eye to many global issues. The allure of American greatness left our culture tone-deaf to external harbingers of instability. After generations of global dominance, it was easy for Americans to convince themselves that their way of life was not only set in stone, but would forever extend into the future. Each grand transformation that led to abundance and satisfaction with the American way of life was, for the most part, warmly and passively embraced by its people. And why wouldn't they embrace transformative innovations? Few would deny or challenge the benefits associated with being an American citizen in the latter half of the twentieth century. It comes with great privileges and rewards (for most, at least, when considered on a global scale). Yet, unending success has benefited America, but also left the nation vulnerable to the rapid developments and forces of globalization. Two monumental events in the early twenty-first century have exposed how deeply unprepared and top heavy America has become looking forward to the next century: the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the

financial meltdown that set the stage for the Great Recession. Both have weakened America and proven that it is not indefinitely immune to global restructuring.

These moments have also forced Americans to confront the idea of what it means to be a superpower for the twenty-first century. For as long as any American has been alive, its economy and culture have been expanding and conquering the globe. While this process has been interrupted and challenged (for example, during the Cold War), it has never really dragged on American hegemony. The United States, from its very origins, has been a nation that pioneers, conquers frontiers, and leads the way for political, economic, and cultural expansion. But now, America faces two serious challenges that have slowed its inertia. It has been battling the fanaticism of terrorism in the Middle East and also overleveraged internal debt that led to the largest financial meltdown in global history. For the first time in U.S. history, per capita wealth through housing assets are declining as debt is increasing. Further, the U.S. is still in the midst of fighting the longest war of its nation's history in Afghanistan. Such profound crises have altered the cultural and economic ambitions of America to its core. The very ideas of the limits of American expansion are being debated at the national level at this moment.

The greatest achievements and progress of the twentieth century not only happened within the United States, but were delivered to the American people and exported around the globe through America's prosperous institutions. The way of life for both Americans and people the world over were transformed because of American achievements. It was as if a fountain of ingenuity burst up out of the American landscape and flooded innovations and advancement to Americans but also sprinkled them around

the world. This paradigm of innovative domestic and global production grounded Americans in the idea of national self-sufficiency, but also oriented them to externalize their ambitions. Ironically, the ethos of national self-sufficiency undermined the capacity of local and community self-sufficiency because it fostered an economic drive toward consolidation. A further layer of irony is that externalized national ambition actually muted Americans' perspective of diversity of the global lived experience. The American ambition was really a one way street seeking only to expand outward to the rest of the world without having to receive anything but profit and dependency in return. Even though the United States may be the most deeply embedded country in the international community, its citizens are surprisingly (generally speaking) non-cosmopolitan. After all, if one speaks, lives, and projects the lingua franca, why speak anything other than French?

The fulcrum of my argument in this dissertation, for all intents and purposes, is that for the first time Americans are confronting not just a halting of its global economic, political, and cultural inertia, but also experiencing a retraction. The United States is in a peculiar moment of contraction. I want to make it clear that contraction is different from decline. I am not arguing that America is evaporating on the global stage, that its economy will shrink indefinitely, or that its culture will not continue to be the envy of much of the world. What I argue is that American contraction is more psychological than anything due its relative position on the global economic stage. It is the cultural realization that America is vulnerable, contested, and faces uncertain outcomes. It is a constriction around the idea that large structural forces surrounding and sustaining the



American way of life can fail its people. Ultimately, it is the idea that people must take control of and safeguard their own lives and those directly around them in whatever ways possible. This shift in psychological inertia has real consequences upon how Americans see themselves in relation to place, community, and one another. Suddenly, guarantees from external sources are not accepted without reflection by a substantial portion of the public, but are instead cautiously considered with critical evaluation. Fundamentally, America and its citizens are wrestling with what this means, and how to respond to reversing much of our outward momentum with inward considerations.

For much of modern American history, the structural forces that tied together the country at both a local and national level encouraged its local segregated communities into integration with the national-macro economy. In other words, disparate local economies were absorbed into the ebb and flow of the larger surrounding commerce. Corporate influence over national and global markets undermined the competitive power of small businesses and economies. The positives associated with industrial and corporate shifts in America for much of the twentieth century far outweighed the negative outcomes. Middle class jobs were created in record numbers, wages rose, unemployment was low, and opportunity abounded. There was little to complain about when the corporations from far away planted in a community with the offer of long-term jobs and good pay. Even though corporate offering supplanted traditional ways of life of American workers and insulated communities, the offers were too good to pass up. Any tradeoffs associated with corporate takeover of American life were largely ignored, and with good reason. Their external influence brought great promise of fortune and gain to

local towns and cities all across America (Polanyi 2000 [1968]: 30). The country boomed, and the middle class boomed with it. But like all booms, the momentum of the great post-war expansion fizzled out in the mid 1970's. With economic growth comes the potential for political, social, and cultural harmony (Friedman 2005). During sustained periods of economic decline, however, the cohesive threads that hold political and culture coalitions together can easily unwind and result in political paralysis (Skocpol and Williams 2012; Lowrey 2013)

America finds itself in a very different position now than at the height of industrial dominance of the mid-twentieth century. The middle class is shrinking, wages are stagnant, unemployment is persistently high, rural communities are declining and becoming poorer, income and wealth inequality is at its greatest disparity in generations, and the list goes on (Smart 2003). The next frontiers America can wander into and firmly endure must be prioritized with more than market gains. Our new frontiers must preserve more than just economic opportunities, but also cultural, social, and environmental health. As Mark Bittman (2013) argues, "nothing reflects our moral core more accurately than the abuses we overlook in the names of convenience and economy." In short, a mentality that seeks to extract and exploit must be replaced with an orientation that appreciates balance, protection, and a broadened understanding of true wealth over the long run.

This dissertation will hone in on precisely these efforts to redirect economic activity away from global extraction and exploitation into local self-sufficiency and community integration. The economic field I entered into to observe and document such

efforts is the growing local organic food movement. Along with many disparate attempts to redirect and localize economic activity, the local organic food movement offers plenty of colorful and unorthodox examples of an anti-neoliberal agenda at the community level. Local chapters, each with unique regional flair and flavors, offer tangible alternatives to global neoliberalism. These alternatives are not reflective of an anti-capitalistic attitude per se, but have arisen because local food enthusiasts believe the food industry has overstepped economic, environmental, and cultural boundaries. Localization is one mechanism that allows community members to actively engage in efforts at the micro-level to redirect economic life away from potential market pitfalls. Therefore, I make the claim that ventures into localization operate as a frontier market landscapes based upon assuredness through the bonds of community and trust. In particular, I will discuss how the markets for local organic farming advance into new economic frontiers in order to reclaim and manage neglected or abandoned local infrastructure.

*From Local to Global to Local: The Resurgence of Localization in a Finite World*

In the context of global economic restructuring, the emphasis of this dissertation focuses on the recent soaring growth of local economic activity surrounding organic foods from small-scale farms in the United States. Communities all around America have begun looking inward to cultivate renewed efforts to procure safe and sustainable foods that reflect regional variety, season, and heritage. In the years after 2009 there has been a 60% increase in the number of local farmers who sell direct to their consumers through Community Support Agriculture programs or farmers markets 9 Press and

Arnould 2011). Staccato community forays into renewed local economic life are woven together by a broad unified disenchantment with mass-market capitalism. While dense economies of scale have provided an enormous variety of consumer goods and competitive cheap prices, this model of late-capitalism has also crowded out many diverse small local businesses and family farms. Few would argue that mass-market capitalism and its accompanying big box stores, all-in-one super shopping centers, chain retailers and restaurants, and massive grocery supermarkets have not fully saturated the American economic landscape. The economic lives of consumers and their market experiences are, for the most part, fully encompassed within vast international commodity chains run by huge distant consolidated corporations. There is nothing surprising about this because the nature of capitalism is to expand ever outward. To be sure, the project of neoliberalism is inherently a global ambition where economic growth is constructed through transnational bureaucratic networks (Major 2013). These networks operate beyond the scope of local economic actors and often are disconnected from political accountability. In the end, global monetary authorities increasingly hold the keys to stable economic growth. This process creates incentives for sovereign states and regional economic actors to relinquish control over the regulation of business affairs in order to tap into transnational capital investment flows (35-43). Businesses, including farms, have simply followed the lure and promises of neoliberal market growth.

Unfortunately, the modern market has abandoned a central truth about the healthy tensions between labor and capital: "America's emerging consumer economy required both the efficient manufacture of products and an employment picture sufficiently robust

- both in jobs and wages - to ensure the goods would actually be purchased (Ivey 2012, 91)." With stagnant wages and declining employment, consumerism continues unabated, but now in a debt fueled delusion. America's fixation with incessant market growth and acquisition has led to economic tunnel vision. Corporate dominated capitalism of today has suppressed the health of land, labor, and community by selling the idea that serving the bottom line of profit maximization will solve all human troubles. Their generation long campaign for laissez-faire economic environments have largely been won as our culture, businesses, and the state "deify the power of the markets in the name of economic efficiency (Bourdieu 1998: 100)."

The ambitions of corporations march on with little concern or obligation to communal needs. Economic correspondent for *The New York Times*, Eduardo Porter (2013), writes, "Our track record suggests that handing over responsibility for social goals to private enterprise is providing us with social goods of lower quality, distributed more inequitably and at a higher cost." Still, modern technology has only served to enable corporate takeover of economic life even further. Advances over the last century have made it possible to innovate, transport, and communicate on a global scale where no corner of the world is off limits to the forces of rationalization and commoditization. The global market frontier has largely been conquered and the developing world is quickly catching up with American economic hegemony. What direction, then, can economic life go from here? Where are the next frontiers of economic life? How does food play into the new local frontiers?

In an ironic turn of events, the exotic frontier for many communities dotted across the United States is now represented by an aspiration for the local. This inverted fixation is somewhat unexpected considering the deep historicity of the globalization process. Cultural and economic sociologists, however, should not be too surprised to discover producers and consumers in advanced economies actively reacting against the encroaching marketization of personal life (Hochschild 2012). Indeed, Weber (1978) ominously warned of the feelings of social disconnection and disenchantment formed in the wake of domineering structures of instrumental rationality. His writings from more than a century ago were a prescient admonition of the stark, yet inevitable, tradeoff people must accept as an outcome of the juggernaut of rationalization. And although rationalizing processes have marched on since the Industrial Revolution and further accelerated throughout the twentieth century, critical theorists have pointed out the undeniable peculiarity of our contemporary postmodern era (Agger 2006). Not only are the tenants of free market capitalism steadily advancing all across the world, but many theorists argue our society is in the midst of entering a new globalization phase of hyper-capitalism and consumption (Ritzer 2000). This paradigm shift in the world economic trajectory is fueled by a truly global labor market, the ease of access to infinite digitized information, and the literal and figurative distance members of affluent societies now experience and live from the necessary (and often brutal) conditions of subsistence. Where the conditions of economic life were once narrowly confined to the boundaries and topography of geography they have now been freed up and are subject to market forces on a global scales. Both producers and consumers are accustomed to, and even

somewhat reliant upon, "the products of distant lands and climes (Marx and Engels 1968: 84)."

It is this point in time and modern global social space that I have found ripe in my dissertation research for visionary charismatic individuals to rise up and offer alternative approaches to our social experience with economic life. Specifically, market actors enmeshed within advanced affluent societies, locally and globally, have had time to adjust to broad integration of specialized divisions of labor. In contemporary American society, a latent unassuming orientation toward rationalization of all facets of the economy is deeply baked into the fabric of social life. Yet, the ubiquity of rationalization tends to undermine its long-term applicability as it clashes with the essence of the human condition; its 'species being' and drive for un-alienated emotion and desire. Gray (1999) states, "The innermost contradiction of the free market is that it works to weaken the traditional social institutions on which it has depended in the past (29)." As the rational ethos of the market economy expands outward, it leaves a vacuum in the center of these traditional institutions with a hollowed out lived and experienced local economy. Barry Smart (2003) describes this process of chasing market outcomes in disconcerting terms:

"Pursuit through the logic of the market of effectiveness, efficiency and economy in respect of resource allocation, service delivery and commodity production has not been without cost for individuals and communities. Ways of life have been disrupted, disorganized and rendered insecure by the transformation of economic life from organized, standardized and mass forms of production to more globally

mobile, flexible, deregulated and, with the benefit of information technology, increasingly dematerialized forms of work and production (33)."

As a result, in the wake of contemporary globalization is an enormous ossified infrastructure on a national scale. Global capitalism forced a division "between the interests of capital and those of the nation-state. The *political space* (of states) and the *economic space* (of capitalist corporations) could no longer coincide (Gorz 1999: 13)." In other words, the economic insecurity communities all across the United States face are tied to the decline of economic nationalism (Smart 2003: 43). When capital fled its bounded architecture, the remnants of confined local self-sustenance were left waiting to be renewed. It is no wonder many market actors large and small are now fixated on local identity as capital was swept up under its feet into the global trade winds. Localism's new appeal is centered around the power of the unique and the valorization of authenticity in order to reclaim community dislocation at the hand of market forces (Karpik 2010).

This story of society's advance through modernity is one of great accomplishment and also undeniable destruction. Such dialectic and the corresponding tradeoffs force us to confront the ethical and philosophical ramifications of each life-changing advance. It is this junction of positive and negative and the hope that drives humanity forward that I attempt to underscore. For all the environmental degradation and social disintegration that can often follow economic development, there are inspiring stories of reclamation and renewal of the human spirit and community cohesion. Throughout this dissertation I



will primarily address and speak to theoretical frameworks in the organizational, economic, and cultural sociological literature. My discussion would not be complete, however, without also including elements of critical social theory. Making sense of the global economy and dimensions of postmodern social life coupled to it requires a critical appraisal of the promise and perils associated with modernity. Often, the narrative surrounding critical theory tends to focus solely on the negative structures of media, political, or cultural complexes that encumber the propensity and vibrancy of the individual. My use of critical theory is only meant to expose the enormity of global systems individuals and communities are woven into. I do not, however, proclaim the inevitability of a nihilistic future of total commoditization and marketization of social life. On the contrary, my ethnographic observations uncovered an energetic interplay of charisma with the status quo. Instead of forewarning of the iron cage, I seek to highlight the pathways of creative alternative local approaches in reaction to the rigidities of bureaucracy, plutocracy, and mass-market domination. My case study is an optimistic assessment of escape routes from mass capitalism through community ingenuity and enchantment.

### *Why Local Organic Food?*

While local business initiatives can be seen in a variety of sectors, perhaps one of the most visible manifestations of this growth is reflected in small-scale farming and food markets. Emphasis on buying and selling local produce at farmers markets, cooperatives, and restaurants has become chic in both rural and urban settings across the country

(Johnston 2010). In the last 10 years, cities and towns across this country have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture subscription programs. Moreover, from the years 2005-2007 alone, the number of CSA program exploded from an estimated 1,700 to a documented 12,549 (Press and Arnould 2011; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). This substantial acceleration in growth does not capture the potential unofficial 5,000 to 10,000 new CSA's that opened in the last 5 years. Many new CSA's operate under the radar within small insulated circles of neighbors, friends, and family and are often not documented in national registers. The most fascinating element of the local organic movement from an economic standpoint, whether surfacing through farmers markets, CSA's, or new agricultural ventures, is that it radically deviates from the business blueprint for today's mass markets. The movement's attributes are largely opposite from economies of scale in free market capitalism. In other words, the classical economic model for success must be thrown out the window in order to understand how localized food economies operate and thrive.

Who exactly, then, are these new producers and consumers of local organic niche market? Why are they generating and entering new markets? What meaning do they proscribe to their production and consumption? I sought to answer these broad questions by becoming one of them. Over a two-year period, I volunteered to work on a startup local organic farm owned and operated by four young individuals in Southern Arizona. The barriers to entry for acquiring land and risks associated with starting a farm are enormous. To finance the a move and purchase of 75 acres of land and equipment for

*Desert Sky* the four farmers I met ventured into Community Supported Agriculture. The essence of the CSA is a mutual investment model to bring together producers and consumers into direct and sustained economic coordination. This form of subscription farming allows farmers to receive cash up front from members before a growing season. In return, members own a stake in the farm output for the season and share both risks and rewards through bounty or bust. CSA members of the farm in this study came to the local farmers market on a weekly basis to fill their bags with a great variety of heirloom produce picked the night before, or sometimes even early that same morning. I interviewed over 50 CSA members of *Desert Sky* to gain a sense of the reasons they joined, their connection to the farm, and the goals and sentiments associated with their very deliberate consumption choices.

In general, CSA members express deep concerns about the structure and consequences of modern industrial agriculture. They see their investment in local farms as a small but necessary response to the inundation of easy "junk" food that pervades American life. But CSA members are not homogenous in their consumption patterns. Instead, they represent a diverse and dynamic market constituency who enter local food economies for several different reasons. In more affluent spheres of the local market, members and customers express their deep appreciation for superior taste and quality. Chefs swoon over the spectacular unique varieties and intense flavors of fresh local produce. Yet, nearly each of my interviews and interactions with this particular customer base tended to reduce their association with local farming generally, and CSA from *Desert Sky* in particular, as a way to reconnect with notions of an authentic and ethical

food system through their consumption (both economically and gastronomically).

Markets for local organic embody ethical concerns about the political, economic, and environmental consequences of consumption behavior. An overwhelming majority of the individuals I interviewed described personal processes of coming to a heightened awareness about significant environmental, health, and social issues surrounding industrial food production. Often, these individuals conveyed that they became enlightened to these concerns, which were never issues they thought about as recently as 5 or 10 years ago. Most CSA members are new arrivers to local food and are curious to experience opportunities to connect deeper with their food purchases. But why food?

In the broadest sense, this particular moment of consumer fixation on local food can be understood as a collective outpouring of nostalgia for an ideal agrarian past in the United States (Cunningham 2011). This country was built on the notions self-subsistence, vast abundance of unsettled tracts of frontier to be homesteaded, and intimate connections with the land (Turner 2013 [1963]). Although it can be debated whether an idealized sentiment of an agrarian past is a mere romantic notion of a fictional simpler time, one must consider the tremendous wholesale changes that have occurred in agriculture over the last century. The sizes of farms on average today are most often enormous monocultural operations integrated on an industrial scale. Yields of produce per acre for every conceivable crop have exploded. The amount of time necessary for animals to be brought from birth to slaughter has been reduced from years to months (Pollan 2007). Feedlots, not free range grazing, are now the standard approach to animal husbandry. In these lots, the natural diet of cattle, swine, and poultry has been substituted

for meal saturated in corn, growth hormones, and antibiotics. No longer is our food inhibited by regional or seasonal constraints. Grocery stores are fully stocked year-round with limitless exotic food items from around the globe. For example, it is no problem for a shopper to come by tomatoes in winter or fresh Atlantic salmon from Norway in most large grocery stores at any point during the year.

Perhaps more noticeable than any of the above developments is the extreme decline in the percentage of our national population now involved with agricultural labor. This decline has been steady and continuous from the post-war era to present day. The cleavage between our collective memory of agricultural lifestyle and the typical contemporary experience with farms could not be wider. Yet, Americans still ascribe much of their national identity to the noble idealism embodied in farming. Such incongruent perceptions reflect our country's deep agrarian roots and idealism associated with this history. No wonder our shared national psyche holds deep admiration for a way of life bygone for the vast majority of its population. Agriculture and a close relationship with the land was the prevailing way of life for most American's ancestors just a few generations back. How else is a culture to respond to a cherished foundation evaporated with the times? Today the American workforce is comprised of an incredibly small number of farmers. Less than two percent of Americans now farm or work directly with agricultural land (Gardner 2002). This percentage is the smallest in American history, while productive output per capita farmer is greater than ever. It is a mind-boggling statistic when one considers how many people (and animals) are sustained by so few involved with agricultural labor. All in all, farms today operate more like factories than

food cultivation integrated within the natural environment. The sheer magnitude of output resembles the rational structures of industrial models built upon replication and efficiency.

Is it any surprise that an ethos of localism is awakening within the margins of modern culture that valorizes notions of a disappearing natural world? When social and cultural space is carved up, packaged, and commoditized, it is only natural that it will be met with some resistance. The sense that the natural world - broadly in environmental conditions to more narrowly in social, cultural, and communal expressions - has been conquered, degraded, and reoriented for subjection to market demands has gradually diffused from the margins of thought into mainstream American conversation. Little by little, more people realize that the appetite of corporate capitalism can never be appeased and its metabolism grows indefinitely. "The industrially forced degradation of the ecological and natural foundations of life" is eroded for the sake of material progress and economic growth (Beck 1992: 80). Protection of the natural world is the first to go; followed by regional economic platforms, cultural customs, and finally the intimate bonds of social life. All are swallowed up in a pathology of market imperialism. As Marx presciently wrote, the perpetuation of market capitalism arises from "constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions and everlasting uncertainty and agitation (Marx and Engels [1848] 1968: 83)."

By nature, though, humans are torn between the security of traditions and the allure of the unknown advancements promised by market prosperity. It is not until society has collectively stepped into the realm of total marketization that it will begin to

experience a yearning for the ghosts of tradition and a realization of what was lost in the process. The post-modern cultural conditions of this era facilitate a romanticizing of the past and cynicism about our hyper-capitalism future. Roger Scruton (2005) captures this sentiment when he states,

"This complex attitude to the natural world has survived into our time, and lies at the heart of our culture. The natural beauty of the countryside, invoked and lamented by the poets, painters and composers of our century, resides precisely in those features that memorialize a vanished industry: the hedgerows, copses, bridleways, green lanes, stone walls, barns and cottages tell of small-scale farming, mixed crops and the warm proximity of dependent animals. We cannot, it seems, protect that way of life from modern agribusiness; but we strive nevertheless to conserve its visible record. The aesthetic gaze immortalizes, and sees in every change the threat of desecration (50)."

When the reality of America's agrarian past is replaced by an industrial food model that advertises itself with the image of a quaint but vanquished past - of style over substance - eventually the mismatch is incrementally exposed. Advertisers can only disguise the realities of industrial transformation for so long before the disparity between cultural sentiment and market veracity is revealed. What Scruton asserts in the above passage is this modern fixation of conserving the ideal aesthetic of the past as society simultaneously willingly indulges in contemporary commodity-induced lifestyles. I have

found, though, that this practical indifference is slowly being wiped away by ardent niche market rebels in the local organic food movement. The time has come, in their opinion, to move beyond stylized homage to an idealized past and to make their sentiment a reality. This reality must be systematically constructed, however, and requires a coalition of values and voices to come together and mold an idealized future based on historical nostalgia.

### *The Promises and Perils of Progress*

None of the stated above is meant to suggest that there is anything inherently wrong with such changes in piecemeal fashion. Change is the only constant as many ways of life and normal practices of the past have dissipated with technological developments and cultural progression. By and large, most adjustments of the last century have been undeniably miraculous. They have led to increased lifespan and greater health, made the daily rituals of life much easier, and connected people in very fulfilling and once unthinkable ways. Advancements in the economy made it possible for sons and daughters to leave family farms to enter a more urban educated workforce with specialized skills. Gradual progress makes it possible for more of the population to expand their ambitions and achieve their goals while tempting society with "an ever-more comfortable life for an ever-growing number of people (Marcuse 1968: 35)." It is creative destruction, though, that unfolds promises for the future at the expense of a romanticized past (Schumpeter 2008 [1942]). Barry Smart (2003) puts forth this idea when he asserts:



"The development of modern market societies has freed individuals from the constraints of traditional fixed social positions and seems to have given them an independently identity. In so far as this is the case it is argued that the free-market institutions have contributed to the constitutions of conditions in which forms of self-determination can be exercised. However, the dynamic character of modern capitalist market-oriented societies produces constant movement and a perpetual pursuit of innovation. [This] leads to uncertainty and agitation, not least in respect of identity and the sense individuals have of who they are, where they belong, where they are going and what it is that matters to them (100)."

Essentially, Smart's argument assumes that progress cuts into the future both ways but has the tendency to be sold as a solution without tradeoffs. Like most forms of progress it is much easier to make the pitch for short-term advancement and ask questions about long-term consequences later (Wright 2001). In its perpetual movement forward, technological advancement met with enthusiastic acceptance, or even ambivalence, often wins out against appeals to conservation of the status quo. What most people do not realize, though, is that capitalism is tethered to and expands its control over society lockstep with technological innovations. Technology veils the political intent of capitalistic expansion and seduces society into passive submission so that it gradually becomes the dominant force in modern life (Marcuse 1968).

Increasingly, however, the tradeoffs (and the potential infeasibility) of unlimited progress and growth of industrial agriculture are seeping into the mainstream American collective consciousness. Nutritional scientists, agronomist, environmentalists, and various scholars are uncovering a confluence of unintended destructive consequences to our current model for feeding the world (Berry 1996; Pretty 2002; Wirzba 2003; Diamond 2005; Myers 2005; Duram 2005; Pollan 2007; McKibben 2007; Rodale 2010; Reed 2010). As a society we produce more food cheaper than ever before; and still this bounty has not solved hunger or malnourishment at home or abroad. Obesity and diabetes are threatening to skyrocket into epidemic proportion as our nation's vital natural topsoil gets leaner every year. To be sure, there are real needs for better food distribution on a global scale. Over one billion people across the world are malnourished or go hungry every day (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2009). This is not, however, because the world does not produce enough food to prevent hunger and malnutrition. The problem is a result of consumer waste, bad food policy, and corporate food politics that prevent guaranteed access to an equitable food supply for many regions across the world. Further, every day enough food waste is thrown away in the United States alone to fill up the Rose Bowl Stadium to the brim (Bloom 2010). A statistic like this suggests that the contemporary agricultural industry has contributed to the manufacturing of widespread consumer wants that are not always in alignment with the actual needs of the American or global diet (Pollan 2007).

*Post-Consumer Malaise*

An accepted narrative that argues the world requires maximized output drives the paradigm of industrial food systems. As a result, today's globalized agricultural system bears little resemblance to its more modest origins. Further, the lure of escaping rural agricultural life for the modern workplace has not always led to better economic opportunities. Wages have stagnated over the last 45 years, unemployment is at its highest level in 70 years, and workers in service sectors often report dissatisfaction and unhappiness with their jobs (Sennet 2001). Instead of a growing fulfillment and integration within communities, a growing percentage of American workers have been left demoralized (Elliott and Atkinson 1999, Smart 2003: 44). Critical cultural theorists have noted that across the United States, an attitude of blasé indifference, lack of aspiration, and a fleeting sense of a grounded reality tends to encompass more and more of community and work life (Agger 2006). At the heart of the issue, cultural critics today have suggested that Americans experience difficulty in feeling like they are rooted in community in an increasingly atomized suburban environment (Putnam 2000). This apathy in much of contemporary American life is symptomatic of what Bill Ivey (2012) calls a "postconsumerist malaise (88)". The promises of material salvation, according to Ivey, have failed to appease our desires, deliver deep happiness, or promote a culture rich in meaning. In its wake material overindulgence has left Americans mired in debt, unsatisfied with work and home life, and distracted away from important economic and political issues (Schor 2010; Ivey 2012).

As the economy has shifted and communities have changed, one might wonder what is significant about local niche markets. After all, most business before World War II was primarily conducted on a small local scale and shielded from the global economy. The world economy today, however, has entered a new and unprecedented phase that has warranted the demise of countless locally constrained small businesses and forced many to consolidate. Even with their growing appeal, small local markets are rarely equipped to compete directly with corporate commodity giants, centralized wholesalers and chains, or online companies. Years ago customers were forced to shop local because they simply had no other options for convenient purchases outside their direct personal and geographic network. Economic life was, for all intents and purposes, constrained by natural limitations. The new market of hyper-capitalism and consumption has persistently chipped away at these limitations with accelerated forcefulness. How are businesses unwilling or unable to branch out and stay afloat in a world that demands unlimited variety of consumer goods at persistently cheap prices? What would motivate consumers to adjust their demand for locally sourced goods and services that are often more expensive and inconvenient to attain?

The total expansiveness of global market development has trickled down to the very local and transformed the way of life for nearly every inhabitant on the globe. As many countries have quickly developed their domestic manufacturing and consumption economies, the advanced economies of Europe and North America are facing a crisis in financing the neo-liberal experiment. The rapid pace of change in the American manufacturing system into a more service oriented economy and the accompanying shift

of our labor market has swiftly pulled the rug from beneath traditional work and altered expectations for dependable long term employment (Smart 2003: 32). Simply put, globalization and hyper-capitalism has corroded the foundations of middle and working class jobs leaving a vacuum for a disoriented workforce, declining wages, and uncertainty for many about the fundamental elements of the American Dream (Mander and Goldsmith 1996). Stability tethered to job and community security has slowly disintegrated leaving the workforce looking for a sense of continuity and meaning lost in their economic and social lives. Despite the idealism of its proponents, movements toward localization in our global economy cannot restore all that has been rendered archaic and tossed out with history. Indeed, modern sustenance requires smart investment in global trade. Localization, nevertheless, reinstates and refurbishes individuals to their place in the here and now with recognizable faces of friends, family, and neighbors. It embodies vital community forces with peoples' natural desire for embeddedness and familiarization with direct cultural structures of meaning. Critics might argue localization movements are nothing more than relics of the distant past or regressive quests for quaint and antiquated ideas of America in a bygone era. This viewpoint, however, disregards the nature of human sentiment and emotion. It neglects the reality that the steady hand of the mass marketplace has dissolved tangible elements of social life over the last several decades. Local histories rooted in community and commerce have been either uprooted or abandoned by corporate disinterest.

The significance of local markets and their steady recent growth, then, are that they offer a contrasting alternative to the status quo of global capitalism. Capitalism as it

exists today results in the "perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish (Berman 1983: 15)." This dialectical process allows individuals displaced and disoriented by economic restructuring to find stable ground in localization movements as they reclaim their regional economic identities. In essence, networks of local economic actors push to restore communal reliance to their internal interpersonal bonds for procuring reasonable economic provisions. Long after big business has siphoned off disparate local resources (both commodities and consumers) or packed up and left behind aging infrastructure, local visionaries utilize the patina of abandoned Americana as a blueprint for incorporating the historicity of the past into their dreams for the future. Efforts to gentrify the local vacuum seize upon the inertia of cultural renewal to revitalize from within. Creative actors attuned to the state of their local cultural economic field are able to fashion new shared perspectives as "institutional entrepreneurs" (DiMaggio 1988). By utilizing what Fligstein and McAdam (2012) call "social skill", a cultural entrepreneur with an appropriate orientation within the situated confines of a structured local field can harness others bounded within it to the "existential function of the social" (16). Their success in capturing displaced economic actors requires that these charismatic institutional entrepreneurs "possess a highly developed cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilizing people in the service of broader conceptions of the world and of themselves (ibid, 17; see also Fligstein 2001; Snow et al. 1986)." In other words, market visionaries must acquire an intimate and acute perspective of the historical trajectory of

the social space within their field if they want to garner a following for change in their established locale.

In many regions across the United States in the midst of local economic revitalization efforts, community members enter the future with constant reminders of past disappointments. Reclamation of the local means confronting the steady hand of a laissez-faire market rationality that has wiped away so many local histories rooted in both community and commerce. After decades of watching downtown business districts and social ties dissolve while urban cores were swapped for bulging peripheral suburban development, new community minded opportunists are beginning to take advantage of peoples' natural desire to be meaningfully connected with others in a shared sense of place. These cultural entrepreneurs sense among those they come in contact with on a day to day basis an undercurrent of loss and an urgency for solutions. The kernel of market transformation is just beneath the surface still waiting to be orchestrated. In order to set things into motion, it is essential that "market rebels" have a keen awareness to the nuances of the surrounding market settings and the circumstances that lend them ripe for change (Rao 2009). Using social skill to resonate with consumers, these leading actors of the localization movement motivate others in their community to jointly create new enduring economic bonds. An effective campaign for localization in market fields dominated by economies of scale, therefore, must channel disenchantment into an enthusiasm for the promise of a more rewarding and fulfilling economic experience.

*Uncertain Futures*

Much of the curiosity surrounding localization movements, as mentioned above, reflects deep uncertainty with the future promises of progress and development. The financial collapse of 2008 and the global sovereign debt crisis that has followed have laid the foundation of a diffuse anxiety over unreliable retirement and investments and a general lack of confidence in global capitalism to meet our long terms needs. Yet, not all have faced financial displacement in this unstable global economy. There are still plenty of affluent families who remain relatively insulated from this Great Recession. However, in interviews with a number of wealthy individuals for this study, many expressed a feeling of having lost returns on their social investments in their community over the preceding years. Despite their financial security they have witnessed local public space become vulnerable to external capital colonization. For those entrenched in their communities for many years, some have firsthand experience with the erosion of locally controlled infrastructure and civic health. After years of perennial disregard for local businesses in municipalities across the country, the entirety of the decline has finally begun to reach a tipping point. Nearly all CSA members in my research convey a depiction of local economic life that no longer feels balanced, natural, or sustainable. This sudden realization is deeply unsatisfying to these members and they feel compelled with a sense of urgency to alter their local landscape. As consumption from a wide variety of niche markets is gaining in popularity, we should inquire about underlying trendiness of local organic food in particular.



My interviews suggest that consumer interest and loyalty in local food markets is reflective of the simple fact that eating is a perpetual practice of daily life. In that sense, food purchases are a very personal and guaranteed form of consumption. Local food production is also directly tied to land and labor in proximate economic social spheres. Further, food is perishable and constantly reminds consumers of the ephemeral nature of the basic components that sustain life. When social movements gather around a market field based on fleeting goods, their shared cognizance of local food characteristics can build an enduring niche. And because food is consumed (economically and biologically) several times daily, this market field is upheld in part because of its frequent repetitive buyer/seller interaction. It is perhaps our most persistent and repetitive form of consumption.

When it comes to the qualitative elements underpinning this type of local niche market, the primary issues in the following chapters will revolve around shared producer and consumer meanings. I will touch upon some classical and contemporary conceptions of economic life and how they might help direct my inquiry of the surge in popularity of local organic foods. As local alternative markets gain in popularity, I will attempt to organize descriptions of stated motivations behind consumer interest as it plays out in CSA. Members of CSA express a variety of hopes and expectations for things they wish to gain from this unique farming model. In that regard, I will outline the features of local organic farming that are attractive to consumers and, vice versa, aspects of local niche markets that are attractive to farmers.

### CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ECONOMIC LIFE

The earliest social thinkers were fascinated by the burst of economic activity that defined modern societies. Industrial transformations in techniques and the capacity to produce commodities for entire nations captured the attention of sociology's three big classical theorist: Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Woven through the writings of each was the undeniable realization of the role of rationalization spreading throughout the framework of industrial societies and the economies that sustained them. Marx and Weber assumed fatalistic consequences and resigned to the juggernaut of formal rationality that would eventually come to completely encapsulate all of social life. In many regards their ominous predictions proved all too accurate.

Marx and Weber theorized that the influence and power of rationalization would spread outward and transform the nature of traditional social structures completely. According to both, the diffusion of rationalization would irreversibly establish itself without ceasing. Weber (2002 [1904]) gloomily warned that it would simply follow the path of teleological destiny until every human arrangement had become bureaucratized into an "iron cage" and "the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt (123)." Society would be consumed by a totally rationalized capitalism. To avert this onslaught, the grand visions of utopia in the nineteenth and twentieth century all called for an imminent overthrow of the oppressive structures of domination that were built up alongside rationalized procedures. It appears increasingly unlikely, however, that any major paradigm shift will work to undo these pervasive economic and political compositions. The formal

rationality best embodied economically today by neoliberalism is here to stay as it universally feeds into what Bourdieu (1998) calls the "new myths of our time". Homo-capitalisticus has become universal (Bourdieu 1993: 18).

While the meta-structures of society may continue onward toward various "iron cages", I argue that sociologists should look not for acts of resistance bound around a vast collective consciousness or uprisings in the Marxist vein of thought. Nor should sociologists expect state regulation, planning, or intervention at any large scale to subdue neoliberal market forces; for capitalism has persistently found clever ways to lure new cohorts of labor on a global scale with promises that veil exploitation and alienation. This persistence does not mean that there are no acts of resistance to the status quo of rationalization. Instead, sociology should change the focus of observation and peer into peripheral, local, and subtler forms of revolt that chip away at, rather than transform, the behemoth of neoliberalism.

If alive today, Marx and Weber would be surprised at the extent to which creative individuals and groups have formed niches of collective resistance to the forces of rationalization prevalent to the neoliberal paradigm of our day. Using the resources afforded through dense and intricate social connections, new local markets are emerging all across the United States that are constructed around human qualities that neoliberal mass markets tend to neglect. But exactly where and why can we see concerted efforts of resistance to rationalization (Kellner 1999)? It is in these less conspicuous peripheral regions of resistance that sociologists should also focus their analysis to uncover often hidden forms of social transformation. Moving forward, I will first overview the nature

of markets and describe why Marx, Weber, and other critical scholars have had good reason to be wary of the rationalization of markets that have culminated into neoliberalism today.

### *Market Imperatives*

The mass markets of capitalism function through social relations bounded to efficiency, quantity, and an ultimate deference to maximum profit. George Ritzer parsimoniously presents the Weberian foundations of rationalization as they apply in modern society and markets. In Ritzer's *McDonaldization* framework (2002), society is increasingly incorporating calculability, predictability, efficiency, and non-human technology into all ranges of economic life. Each of these rationalization components are put into service in order to appease a fixation of commodity production and exchange. These combined core foundations for modern markets have made it possible for mass-market production and consumption to dominate contemporary advanced economies. A greater portion of human activity and interaction now occurs through capitalist market than ever before. Weber and Marx identified market relationships, however, as the most impersonal of all forms of social interaction because of the paramount concern bestowed upon commodities. They asserted that markets focus on what transfers between hands and does not regard the personal characteristics imbued within them. As a result, the character of markets and the foundations that sustain them become ever more dehumanized along the spectrum of production, exchange, and final consumer utility. Weber (1978) describes the impersonal nature of markets in the following:

There are no obligations of brotherliness or reverence, and none of those spontaneous human relations that are sustained by personal unions. They would all just obstruct the free development of the bare market relationship, and its specific interests serve, in their turn, to weaken the sentiments on which these obstructions rest. Market behavior is influenced by rational, purposeful pursuit of interests (636)."

Society's adherence to market imperatives reflects the collective desire for a reliable and abundant stream of commodities and services. As a species, we also desire human connection and qualities that are not readily transferable in the market process. The forces of rationalization, though, have outpaced the collective will for human quality to be matched with quantitative output. In that sense, the very process of rationalization stripped from human governance can, paradoxically, lead to irrational outcomes (Smart 2003; Ritzer 2000).

With the modern attempt to satisfy human wants with direct material wealth, the measure of human satisfaction has in many regards shifted from quality assessment to quantity accumulation. This phenomenon is visible in both productive and consumptive capacities. The developing nature of production under capitalism shows a move toward consolidation and size. Advanced economies are now largely driven by multinational corporations and oligopolies, thus weeding out and reducing the competitive leverage of small-scale and/or local commerce. At the same time, Americans have steadily increased

their consumption at ever-greater rates. Even when wages have stagnated over a generation, Americans continue to buy (increasingly through credit) large quantities of goods. An outsider witnessing these trends would be forgiven for assuming that the dominant ethos of the American economy is that more is always better. What cost, though, comes with this cultural economic orientation? What is lost in the process? Can this trajectory change? If so, how? As I indicated above, sociology would be well served by extensive study into the nature of niche resistance.

Although there are no serious threats on the horizon to mass market capitalism, niche and alternative markets are making independent headway. A variety of new alternative markets have carved out economic space and are thriving. Among the most successful sectors in alternative growth are the varieties of local market ventures. Communities around the United States are working together and forming alliances to support local businesses. Perhaps no other alternative or local market is in the process of undergoing such significant transformations as the local organic food movement. Here one can witness tremendous rates of growth in both local farming and market sales over the last decade or so. In the proceeding sections I will argue and show how new local organic markets embody a dynamic and effective approach for resisting the core characteristics of Weberian rationalization. An overview of the logic of markets will help explain how local niche ventures have acquired more wiggle room to establish a foothold adjacent to today's mass market fields.

*The Logic of Markets and the Inevitability of Capitalism*

It goes without saying that the logic of the market plays a paramount role in American society today. Competition, individualism, and consumerism permeate all realms of social life. When the logic of the market comes to represent the logic of its people, social relations tend to mimic the principles of economic rationality (Bell 1996; Weber 1978; Smart 2003). This overriding market ethos is an outcome of human concerns that are ultimately subordinated to the profit motive in capitalistic societies. Production and consumption growth trump the concern for health, happiness, and fulfillment of actual people.

The human relationship with capitalism can be problematic because as a system it has no directional value system or purpose to guide it forward other than through pursuits that promise the accumulation of more capital (Marx 1999; Schumpeter 2008[1942]; Hayek 1976; Smart 2003). This system is the most effective way to acquire material and generate wealth, but it is not a guarantee of equality, stability, or public health and safety. The drive behind capitalism is quite narrow and can be summed up as follows: "The ultimate point of commercial enterprise within a capitalist economic system is capital accumulation, profiting from the circuits of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Individuals are involved as producers and consumers of goods and services in so far as they contribute effectively to that end (Smart 2003: 93)."

While the competitive market system is good at generating profit through implemented efficiencies, there are regions of society that are best separated from private capital interests. The neoliberal extension of markets and the reliance on greater

economies of scale may bring affluence, but this unimpeded progression also distorts the values and objectives of traditional social institutions in the public sphere. John O'Neill (1998) argues that the market ethos has crept into public and cultural institutions that needed to be guarded from the profit motive. Public institutions are "undermined if they are colonized by markets, either directly by being transformed into commodities that are subject to sale in the market, or indirectly by being subject to the norms and meanings of the market (70)." O'Neill's statements echo Habermas' descriptions of the "colonization of the lifeworld" from the perspective of marketization.

A central reason it is useful to maintain some distance between public and economic life is that private interests are often unaccountable; whereas public interests are implemented to uphold the dignity and humanized elements of social life. With markets that spread and creep into all public and personal life, the interference creates distorted social interaction and an eventual disregard displayed towards non-profitable sectors in contemporary society (Bellah et al. 1996). Accordingly, many contemporary scholars within the Marxist tradition have voiced their concern about social life under a capitalist market economy (Harvey 1989; Bourdieu 1998, 1999; Gray 1999; Jameson 1991). Each scholar, in one way or another, warns of the social vagaries associated with modern neo-liberalism and the "rhetoric of the market" disseminating into intimate corners of social life (Jameson 1991: 263). Their claims do not stray far from the original central premises Marx offered in the nineteenth century and echo many of one of the greatest critics of market capitalism, Karl Polanyi. Polanyi identified the character traits of industrial capitalism as wholly unique to all human history. In previous eras,



economies "as a rule, [were] submerged in...social relationships (Polanyi 1968: 46)", but today, "instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system (57)." Under these economic arrangements society becomes "an adjunct to the market [and] must be shaped in such a manner as to allow the system to function according to its own laws (57)." For the first time the free market could function free of the constraints concerning social cohesion. The expansive process of commodification eventually subordinated social and cultural life under the duress of the market system.

This great transformation has reduced traditional work that was once "under the protective covering of cultural institutions" into commoditized labor (73)." While this shift held negative impacts on wage labor, skilled craftsmanship, and expectations for work stability, the greatest problem Polanyi associated with market society was its obligation to self-interest and greed in economic interaction. Polanyi is not alone in his concerns about total commodification. A range of scholars and critics has underscored commodification's near total presence in contemporary life (Rifkin 2000; Kuttner 1997; Lane 2000; Hochschild 2012) that is attached with a price of ubiquitous rationalization detached from personal affect. A slow degradation of intimate bonds and social ties are weakened as a byproduct of the expansion of market logics.

Some scholars argue, however, that there are no credible alternatives to capitalistic markets. The only realistic option in the modern global era is to try to make capitalism work for people economically, socially, and culturally by "modernizing social democracy (Giddens 2000: 29)." Instead of designing grand structural changes to the

production of goods and allocation of wealth, only minor adjustments to the system could successfully be implemented (Gray 1999). Marcuse called this a stage of "political closure" where modern culture has resigned to an economic world with no real alternatives (Marcuse 1968). Even Bourdieu (1998) acknowledged the march of neo-liberalism as an "inevitability" of modern life (30). The ratcheting effect of rationalization has molded into the branches of capitalism. Once established, it is nearly impossible to reverse, undo, or prevent the process from proceeding (Weber 1978, 956-1002). In the midst of technical progress, "all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible (Marcuse 1968: 25)." Preventing the advances of rationalization becomes all the more unlikely. Instead, culture embraces market logics and moves lockstep with them as a guide (Jameson 1991). But with this passivity comes a tradeoff in broad cultural autonomy. "The consequences of such a process of incorporation are that cultural ideals are compromised and transformed as they are assimilated and materialized (Smart 2003: 52)." Each step forward:

"serves to close off alternative imaginary possibilities by incorporating them into the prevailing order of things. Cultural forms and practices no longer stand apart from societal reality and call it into question. Rather than serving as a critical reference point for the generation of possible alternative forms of social life, cultural forms and practices are increasingly required to accommodate to market mechanisms. Commodified and incorporated within the market, cultural forms and practices effectively become [commercialized] (51)."

This story of commodification may accurately describe the lion's share of economic transformations over the last century. But what about pockets of activists who refuse to go along with the mainstream flow of capitalism? How might the market be subverted through local coalitions that make the marketplace serve community interests over distant corporate interests? Instead of a teleological dead end of market rationalization into the total Iron Cage, there surely must be a constituency of jaded citizens cynical of the promises of unfettered capitalism. Even in the most callous economic structures comprised of cold instrumental bureaucracy, intimate ties between individuals defiant against rigid market dominance are likely to take root (Zelizer 2011, 314-316). Within the impersonal boundaries of market structures, intimate relationships and transactions can and do emerge that transcend economic logic to form distinctive independent social dynamics.

In some instances ardent activists within dense market arenas will construct peripheral or insulated niche markets. The establishments of “alternative moral communities” around commercial activity explicitly serve to provide opportunities of unique cultural representation through production and consumption for people disenchanted with mainstream market commoditization (Thrift and Leyshon 1999). Challengers to mass marketing enter into economic arrangements oriented around notions of cultural preservation, ideological purity, or goals of distinction. Members of these alternative markets celebrate the more fixed social values and tacit meanings inherent in an interpersonal space over the exchange value of commodities in a fluid economic

space. Nonetheless, even alternative markets are formed and sustained around the transaction of goods and services at the end of the day. Economic life cannot be escaped, but only constructed and entered into with deliberate choices around differing social arrangements, values, and prioritizations. How one qualitatively chooses to produce and consume, with whom, and in what context are factors that can be controlled, but never eradicated in modern society. Therefore, the fear of complete social disintegration because of expanded commoditization is likely unfounded due to the perpetual nature of people to carve out boundaries and delegate spaces of meaning. In our world of ceaseless economic activity, it is more likely that cultural arbiters and economic entrepreneurs will hybridize the aims of markets with changing cultural ideas spreading through social circuits. As always, pathways for alternatives to pure unfettered commoditization will emerge to either counteract or redirect the channels of capitalism.

Importantly, sociologists should recognize the complex and multifaceted nature of economic life. It encompasses society from the largest institutions to the smallest exchange between two people. And while economies of scale have emerged as the dominant paradigm of life under capitalism today, the micro worlds that comprise capitalism perpetuate, recreate, and/or challenge its tenets on a daily basis. The economic worlds that people inhabit are not situated in fixed sites, but are navigated on several fronts where people "coordinat[e] only certain activities and social ties within each of them (Zelizer 2011, 305)." Such activities emerge as circuits where individuals merge along coordinated pathways contingent to the circumstance. The repetition of these

segregated activities manifests into taxonomies of production and consumption market exchanges.

*Market Transformations and Expansion of Production and Consumption*

Whether it is mainstream or alternative market structures that individuals find themselves inhabiting and maneuvering through, the constant to all economic activity takes place through consumption of one form or another. Markets depend upon sustained interdependence with consumption. A steady supply of goods and services would be rendered mute without its flows. As obvious as this dynamic might be, early economic sociology literature tended to neglect the role of consumption as part of the architecture of markets. However, present day society is distinguished from its earlier industrial capitalism forms by being a true "consumer society". Global production cannot be sustained without robust consumption of goods and services along the entire continuum of micro and macro life.

The ethos of consumerism has become a constitutive element of modern life. Corporations now allocate enormous percentages of their budget to marketing firms and advertising agencies to promote both product visibility and meaning. At its core, consumption is about fulfilling a need or want. Increasingly, though, consumer choice has come to represent a prioritization of the aesthetic (Harvey 1989; Lash and Urry 1994; Featherstone 1991). Purchases on a market stuffed with limitless variety reflect formations of fragmented identities and nuanced distinction among social groups. In many ways what we buy has become one of the greatest symbolic markers of who we

are. For example, data points on just a few basic consumer preferences can now be used to fairly accurately predict the idiosyncratic buying habits and lifestyle characteristics of individuals (Duhigg 2012). The variable and changing signals that consumers send to marketers allow producers to tailor new items for the marketplace. The two are intertwined and this perpetual interdependent dialectic results in an ongoing synthesis of inquisitiveness and innovation.

Production under capitalism must perpetually transform "the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society (Marx and Engels 1968: 83)." Constant development of technological innovations are "pressed into the service of capital (Marx 1973: 704)", leading to its synergistic incorporation within economic activity. Technical progress feeds the exponential gains in the scope and magnitude of productive output. Therefore, capitalism cannot linger in a static state, but must expand its tentacles outward to persist indefinitely (Marx 1999; Gray 1999; Hutton and Giddens 2001). Its metabolic rate either grows or faces a crisis of production. By necessary correspondence, consumption must remain pegged to the expansion of production to prevent glut and collapse of the system. Surprisingly, scholarly analysis in economic sociology has mainly been fixated upon the politics and structures of production while neglecting investigation of the role of consumption (Sayer 1991; Baudrillard 1998; Bauman 1992; Glickman 2009, 155). The story of economic life is only partially explained, however, without a full consideration of these dynamics and the balance of production with consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). A continuous revolutionizing of production cannot be sustained without a

corollary revolution in consumer behavior. By extension, the globalization of production and trade is met with an equal "cosmopolitan character [of] production and consumption in every country (Marx and Engels 1968: 83)."

The prominence of consumption in modern society is associated with broader expectations of fulfillment, status, and identity determined through the consumption process. What people buy is, to a large extent, reflective of how people visualize their identity and want it projected to the public. This image conscious form of consumption and the differing identity signals sent out from taste and purchase patterns helps promulgate emergent forms of unique market activity. The quest for distinction continuously pushes creativity in style and design by producers; while consumers mirror this process by seeking goods and services that reflect their values and social standing. When producers and consumers come into contact in these circumstances and mix their offerings with shared expectations, a series of harmonious encounters can result into new niche markets.

*Mass Market Disenchantment and the Co-construction of Niche markets.*

The development and establishment of any new niche market requires calibration of values and identities communicated from producers and consumers. Eventually these matched signals are stabilized into a coherent field for repeated exchange. The inputs of signals and signs from constituents of both parties are tested until they align with each other. In other words, the development of niche markets are not unidirectional, but are negotiated until they accurately represent the envisioned desired features of an alternative

market. As with all economic movements, the foundations of markets are built upon innovative ideas that can meet a need or want. The ideas that fuel alternative niche markets perform the same way but consist of different blends of goals for innovation. Their purpose is to offer a wholly novel or unconventional product or service to a well-defined set of potential buyers outside of the mainstream. In this regard, alternative niche markets are more reactionary to perceived shortcomings of mass markets. However, an agreement upon the specific limitations of mass markets requires a shared understanding from both producers and consumers before any niche market activity can take off and move forward. This process does not materialize spontaneously but is instead built off of a mutual and somewhat diffuse latent dissatisfaction with dominant market options. Before niche formation takes root these dispersed constitutive desires derived from discontent are scattered among the market system. A catalyst is necessary in order for disparate market actors to converge around a coherent theme that allows producers the clarity to satisfy new needs and wants. "Needs do not emerge as discrete singular phenomena, rather they constitute a system and it is in this sense that they are the product of the system of production (Smart 64)." Once clear channels of communication form in an alternative system derived from alternative goals, a niche market design can begin to remedy the shortcomings consumers sense in contiguous mass markets.

The movement of any market is built upon incremental advances through the art of innovation and seduction (Sudjic 2008). Consumers are perpetually enticed by new and exciting goods and services that become widely available and stimulate curiosity. As any capitalist economy expands outward, the productive capacity must be met with equal



consumptive desires. Consumers must be continually agitated to make more purchases in order to digest (and prevent glut of) the ever-increasing supply of items flowing into the market. During the formation of industrial capital, the management of production had to build compliance of labor power. Of equal importance in modern economic life, however, markets must now socialize the masses into a perpetual mode of "consumption power" (Baudrillard 1998, 82). The structure and perpetuation of capital economies obliges consumers in an unending cycle of acquiring new things. A vocation of productive activity is, by implication, extended to the realm of consumer activity (Smart 2003: 68). Once meanings accorded through both production and consumption were fully encoded into economic life, identity and values were gradually conditioned through consumer options and choices.

The consumerizing process through mass markets shows little sign of abating because it is an efficient "system which secure[s] the ordering of signs and the integration of the group" around a set of "coded values (Baudrillard 1998: 78)." Much of personal identity is constructed around what we own, how we consume, and what we are likely to acquire in the future. In the absence of exponential commodification, though, consumers are likely to feel disenchanted by their marginal purchases. Eventually, the dominance of broad commodification and mass consumption becomes so saturated that objects for sale obscure many of the traditional sources of meaning and identity. If capitalism is able to constantly reinvent itself through infinite market opportunities, then theoretically the mass commodifying process could persist indefinitely. But there are actual finite limits to the global economy humans are approaching. At a certain point the widespread

availability of goods and services are met with declining returns on health, wealth, and happiness. The promises of tomorrow feels less fantastic as real global climate, environmental, and labor degradation correspond with capital advances. In a world of actual boundaries and limits, mass market capitalism is eventually bound to lose its luster absent any substantial breakthrough that will allow continued exponential rises in consumption power. Theorists of postmodern culture and economy have anticipated this erosion and disappointment with commodity capitalism (Featherstone 1991; Jameson 1999; Ritzer 2004). These scholars speculate that a broad sense of disenchantment with mass-market options is an inevitable byproduct of the globalization of goods, services, and images. Each step forward in global capitalism makes the future of consumption appear less mysterious and provocative as cultural and commercial distinctions fade. This blending and the accompanying disenchantment is one of the primary cultural perspectives that feeds demand (foolhardy or not) for niche market solutions operating separately from the mainstream.

Still, identity and status are largely dependent upon the style, tastes, and projection of consumption patterns. To reclaim identity in differentiated and novel ways, niche consumers look to regions of the market based on uniqueness and often disconnected from global branding. Despite the expansion of global brands and the quantity of product and services available for purchase, popular items increasingly resemble one another. The mimesis of institutions and products in mass markets reflects the replication of proscribed and contrived formulas for market success adopted by corporate giants (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Ritzer 2000). As a result, identity formed

through consumption in mass-market arenas is more likely to be broadly proscribed from the top down rather than unique expression of individuality or local culture.

An economic landscape in which identity and meaning is dependent upon mass markets blurs substantive differentiation among consumer typologies. If humans were not obsessed with forming boundaries of difference around symbolic markers of in and out-group categories, the forces of status and distinction would be impotent in economic life. Without the demand for innovation and differentiation, capitalism could not exist as a dynamic system and facilitate social closure. But the constructed divisions between social groups is among the most common and basic of human behavior (Durkheim and Mauss 1967; Zerubavel 1991; Martin 2011). The extreme implementation of symbolic boundaries in social life and ability to manipulate the environment is what separates humans from every other species. Our symbolic nature to establish differences and likenesses of groups operates in every facet of social action (Martin 2011). Therefore, identity through consumption requires an understanding and perception of distinction. In today's hyper-consumer society, how and what one consumes becomes ever more important in the classification of identity, meaning, and status (Bourdieu 1984). Even early thinkers of urban social life contemplated the key role of differentiation in driving forward the development of consumer economies (Simmel 1964; Veblen 2007 [1899]). Simply put, as the lower classes adopt the trends and styles of the upper class, the rich and privileged seek to separate themselves by acquiring new tastes and fashions. The cycle repeats endlessly.

The global market for goods and services is hitting a ceiling to some extent now and is reducing the capacity of symbolic differentiation in the traditional cycle of trends. The mimeses of mass markets makes it increasingly difficult for people to project individuality or difference through consumption. Excluding luxury products, the average consumer is now able to acquire just about any good or service (increasingly through credit) and join the quick succession of changing tastes and styles. Mass markets have passed an inflection point, however, and are offering declining marginal returns on investments for distinction; thus shifting how many consumers purchase meaning and identity. Still foundational to the construction of identity is the need to forge likeness and difference among and between an individual's surrounding social networks. One strong element of the paradigm shift of consumer life in contemporary late-capitalism society now operates through the search for novelty and uniqueness. This search is foraged in alternative market spheres, niche sectors, or local zones. It is in these regions where the production of goods and services reflect idiosyncrasies of place and culture that are not commodified and appropriated for the mass market. Access and availability of unique goods and services in these alternative markets is limited by either productive capacity or informational diffusivity. These limitations, whether imposed artificially or by natural thresholds, generate the key ingredients for consumer distinction: symbolic markers of exclusion, authenticity, and uniqueness (Karpik 2010).

*Culture Drives the Economy*

In the grand and abstract experiences most people associate with the economy, it is easy to lose sight of the cultural grounding all market transactions are rooted within. Consumers see prices fluctuate in stores and on the roadside, or observe the chaotic spike and decline of stock values. In a complex and specialized economy, though, it is difficult to understand aggregate variations in supply and demand or perceive how collective expectations are met with either confidence or apprehension. For an omnipresent system that society is deeply embedded within, our personal experiences with the economy are often detached and dehumanized. In many instances, economic functioning is incongruent with any moral compass and rarely resembles human characteristics. Even though the economy is directly present in some form in nearly all modern social activity, it is hard to detect its anthropic genesis. Yet, the deep historical and institutional framework that structures its architecture all originated out of deliberate human planning, desires, and ambitions. While the system operates on the surface in a cold and calculated manner, the core of the economy is sustained through the culture it was born out of and the social environment it operates within. Without culture, the economy would not only have no direction, but also no reason to reproduce or innovate for any social field. Any sociological analysis of the economy must take into account not only questions of how it operates, but why and for what human purpose. Otherwise, scholarly efforts to understand economic transformations will only interpret behavior from the surface while all of the hidden meaningful action takes place beneath.

Durkheim was fond of articulating the many ways in which human communities formed and maintained social cohesion. When it came to the division of labor he understood the importance of economic activity upon social life. However, Durkheim was also well aware of the limits of economic theory when he wrote, "Classical economics fashioned a world that does not exist. [It has created] a world in isolation, everywhere uniform, in which the clash of purely individual forces would be resolved according to ineluctable economic laws (1982: 197)." Economic life needed the binding of social meanings shared through culture, symbol, and ritual in order to function smoothly. Georg Simmel (1990) echoed this sentiment when he argued that the relationship between the economy and cultural "develop in infinite reciprocity (Simmel 56)."

Contrary to this balanced approach to assessing the mutual interdependence of culture and economy, classical economic theory tends to disregard the role of culture. Instead, it quite narrowly assumes economic behavior is based upon rational action and driven by abstract principles of supply and demand and perfect information. In this school of thought, products and services are competitively offered through a market to solve human need or appease wants and preferences while consumers act to optimize gains and minimize costs. On the broadest scale, this paradigm of classical economic theories offers a correct depiction of the barter or trade of goods and services. But this standard economic perspective does not question how or why these needs, wants, and preferences exist in the first place. It also naively assumes that most human behavior is based solely upon rational calculation of utility and competitive advantage.

This rather utilitarian view of economic life is understandable, however, when we consider the impersonal nature of money in the streams of commerce. Simmel (1990) discusses the corroding power of money as it flows through "non-economic values and relationship (54)." As a mediating common denominator for exchange value, money becomes "conducive to the removal of the personal element from human nature through its indifferent and objective nature (297)." Marx (1973) also understood how goods and services exchanged through a "cash nexus" had a tendency to dissolve interpersonal evaluation in market settings. In summary, Barry Smart (2003) argues that "where formerly individuals were ruled through relations of personal dependence, now they are subject to, and indeed subjects of, abstractions (103)."

Classical economic theory, however, is still problematic for a few reasons. First, it does not take into account how exploitation and alienation are central to the reproduction of capitalism itself. Both arise from economic rationalization and detach personal, social, and cultural elements of labor from modes of production. Further, and even more problematic from an analytic standpoint, classical economic theory does not consider the particular sets of meanings and interpretations people attribute to economic life in different ways over time, place, and social arrangements (Wherry 2012: 103). Instead, classical economic theory is comprised of static "theoretically oriented mathematical models of rational individual maximization" (Davern and Eitzen 1995: 79). Smelser and Swedberg (1994) go so far as to argue that classical economic theories offer "unrealistic assumptions" that are built upon the simple notion of an actor's rational pursuit of constant preferences (91).

I propose that the best efforts to understand and articulate the fundamental questions surrounding economic life must attribute such behavior as a product not of rational action, but meaningful social action (Fligstein and McAdams 2012). The primary rationale for economic behavior is based upon the values, meanings, and identity reinforced through material existence. Indeed, the efforts people make to attain or sustain meaningful action must weigh competing choices and requires a rational evaluation of options. Humans are among the most social of species whose livelihood depends on complex and extended social cooperation because of the vast specialized systems their societies have built up over time. Social cooperation provides not just the inertia for systems, but also meanings associated in the experience of interacting with others. People engage in economic activity with others not just for individual ends, but also for the purpose, identity, and assurance afforded through interpersonal collaboration. While classical economic theory asserts the need for perfect information it neglects the notion that meanings, values, identities, and culture *are* the corresponding information to price and choice that hold together the economic system. Without values and meanings built through social ties in the market as a whole, an economy simply cannot function properly and/or directionally. Profit would be rudderless and, therefore, fleeting without a culture to define the motivations and intentions of market movement.

A number of scholars within economic sociology have built upon these perspectives and patched together a research program with the goal of filling the holes of classical economic theory. A sociology highlighting the culture of markets insists on reestablishing the social roles imbued within economic life. Several studies have



sketched together a composite of the human face inscribed into market relations. What scholars have discovered is culture works as glue holding together disparate actors and paves connections for people to spread ideas, meanings, and tastes through economic networks.

Viviana Zelizer (2011) is a pioneer in the economic sociology literature and has analogized the economic landscape as a vast social circuit. The way she describes social circuits is that they operate as a type of network, but are unique in that they are constructed with malleable social configurations. Nodes of meaning are embodied within both clusters of groups and individuals that share filament pathways in an enormous web of other nodes. Zelizer conceptualizes circuits as the frameworks that form out of concerted efforts of likeminded individuals to establish collective understandings of trust and value in the face of adversity and uncertainty. Information, ambitions, goals, goods, and services are sent out and received through the circuit. Some sections of the social circuit act as switches allowing an uninterrupted flow. Others constrict what can move back and forth and break the connection depending on the contextual capacities and output of the system.

In modern society it has become more difficult for people to form stable bonds of trust because social worlds continue to expand outward. Historically, family and neighborhood friends remained in relatively close proximity and constituted a stable majority of an individual's network. Today our social worlds are much bigger, extensive, and broken apart. Therefore, "when relations become more intermittent or contingent, people often elaborated those relations into commercial circuits (Zelizer 2011, 307)."

The social circuits that emerge in market settings around production and consumption have in many regards come to replace the way meanings and ideas transfer between individuals. Taste and trust are more readily formed through the bonds of commercial circuits compared to economic life of recent history. The effect commercial circuitry has had on identity and social cohesion through the market cannot be overstated. Zelizer's notion of social circuits in commercial settings insinuates two key issues. First, it implies that foundationally, economic lives are social and organized from the ground up. Second, social circuits are not static, but dynamic in content and meaning based upon surrounding market context. When it comes to commercial activity, circuits provide the switches along market channels for producers and consumers to direct and orient meaning to their economic behavior.

According to Wherry (2012), although quantitative network studies are useful in mapping out how economic landscapes are structured, "circuits require qualitative investigation into meanings" that are often overlooked by economists (21). Traditional economic methods of research do not attempt to uncover "distinctive cultural materials, particular forms of economic transactions and media, [or] crucial relational work involved in the constant negotiation and maintenance of relations. Circuits therefore are not simply a culturally sensitive version of networks. Thinking about circuits raises questions about meaning and relational work that remain invisible to strictly network analysis (*ibid*, 307)." When economic sociologists zoom into an intricate social circuit and focus their analysis on particular exchange lines, though, they have noticed some interesting nuances and tendencies exhibited in economic life not captured in quantitative

analysis. In the proceeding review of literature, we will see that a number of important studies display the imperative of qualitative investigation around the cultural meanings threaded within economic fabric. In considering acts of resistance to the paradigm of free market neoliberalism, the concept of social and commercial circuits that Zelizer has coined becomes a useful tool for qualitatively understanding how and why economic life is fluid and adaptive to structures of market society.

As mentioned, the social connections people form is crucial in determining the type of development and sustenance of all economic activity. People look to one another for ideas of what and from where to consume. In particular, people gather information and mimic the consumer styles and trends of other people from similar social standing (DiMaggio 1990; Zukin 2004). In essence, consumers envision how the acquisition of goods will provide them with the proper identity that matches individuals in their network whom they idealize. DiMaggio and Louch (1998) show how people regularly utilize established social ties when they seek out information for pending purchases. When making decisions potential purchases, consumers often talk to their trusted friends, neighbors, or family as a way of bringing in some certainty to unfamiliar markets. Discussions with members of a social network who have had previous experience with various products or brokers help to bring clarity and confidence within vague market parameters. Markets as various as those for used cars, antiques, lawyers, or maintenance, for example, are built around restricted or limited information. Entering a contract or transaction in scenarios such as these can be laden with unknown risks for a buyer. Anytime there is vague or concealed information surrounding the integrity of a product or

service, potential buyers are likely to refer to others close in their network who may have had previous experience in these particular markets. Therefore, "informal social ties rank along side of brand names and warranties as devices on which consumers rely to protect themselves while making transactions, for they minimize the cost of information and thereby reduce the likelihood of malfeasance on the part of the seller (Wherry 2012: 18)." It is through the trust of established social connections that buyers decide to enter and proceed with exchanges of this nature.

Social ties in the market not only help prospective buyers minimize risk, but also help shape tastes among disparate individuals. Omar Lizardo (2006) found that taste preferences diffuse throughout a network when members share agreed upon meanings of symbols. The spread of tacit symbolic understanding is formed when trendsetting insiders of exclusive networks spend their cultural capital to persuade others within their network of symbols of desirability. These cultural entrepreneurs are well versed in what Fligstein and McAdam (2012) call "social skill" and understand how to utilize strong social ties to promote not only taste preferences, but also the articulation and cultivations of prestige distinctions among an array of symbols. The network cultivation of meanings and tastes associated with symbols eventually translates into economic niches. Symbols with highly specific and nuanced features require an extended depth of narrow appreciation. The ability to articulate distinctive information about subtle differences in the quality of goods or services is something that must be acquired through the process of learning. Strong network ties are optimal in transmitting the codes for symbols of distinction and, thus, are important in maintaining the exclusionary link forged between

economic and cultural capital (Lizardo 2006). Weaker ties are useful in spreading taste information for items with low asset specificity and comprised with broadly understandable symbolic meaning. While Lizardo's demonstration of network ties helps explain taste variations, it also gives economic sociologists insights into the foundational importance of social ties for assigning meaning to the endless amounts of goods and services in the marketplace.

Another way of thinking about the cultural foundation of economic activity is that consumer demand can be generated through Interaction Ritual Chains (Collins 2004) of various market settings. Cultural meanings attributed through symbols and boundaries can be connected with emotions through interaction. Over time, particular meanings, values, and emotions can be attributed to specific types of goods and services. Sustained interaction over time helps build and solidify these affinities with products available through markets; as well as proscribe in and out group lines. Eventually collective perceptions of sacred and profane qualities are assigned to different goods and services depending on group dynamics and context of the market. The way groups attribute meaning and distinction to various market items is not an abstract byproduct of supply and demand, but is instead a concerted and constructed social formation around a set of shared ideas and values defining groups. Frederick Wherry (2012) concisely applies this logic into the economic sphere when he states, "Rituals bring consumers together, helping consumers realize the benefits to brand loyalty, and drawing them closer to people like themselves, while at the same time enabling them to define themselves as unlike a set of undesirable people. As individuals engage one another in their social

networks, their circuits of commercial (and non-commercial) exchange, and in their ritual-like patterns of interaction, they generate and maintain their tastes for goods (26)." Therefore, demand itself, according to Interaction Ritual Chain theory, is the result of mutually understood and repeated patterned interaction.

The takeaway point of this chapter is that the nature of the cultural norms economic enterprises are embedded within will inform economic perceptions, affect the organization of markets, and influence the way business communities materialize (Granovetter 1985; Dobbin 1994; Jackall 1998; Spillman 1999, 2011; Bourdieu 2000, 2005; Cohen 2003; Bandelj 2008; Zelizer 2010; Akerlof and Kranton 2010; Zavisca 2012). What is economically feasible largely depends on what a culture will allow. In that sense, Nina Bandelj (2008) argues that, "Culture is consequential because shared collective understandings and meaning shape economic strategies and goals, and affect the interpretations of economic situations (4)." In the neoliberal era where economic expansion has surged forward as the most important and central facet of advanced societies, however, in many instances cultural heritage has taken a back seat to the direction of commerce. Although culture may have been pushed to the side to some degree, it has never relinquished its capacity to draw community members inward to form sustained meaningful action. In regions or industries that have overextended their economic leverage, independent culture has quietly maneuvered to reclaim a sense of control over niche economic affairs. Emerging niche markets of the last decade or so have found them wedged between the demands of both idealism and economic pragmatism to counteract the bulwark of mass-market hegemony. In this middle ground

the promise of profit can fuse with alternative cultural conceptions to form highly specific and unique markets outside the grasp of corporate influence. The more independent a niche market the stronger the identity of its members will be. This basic dialectical tension between cultural and economic priorities tends to play out in market settings and has prominently surfaced in contemporary alternative niches. The table below provides the simple distinctions between these competing market frameworks.

Table 1: Competing Economic and Cultural Intentions of Market Frameworks

<b>Market Issue</b>	<b>Markets as Economic Intentions</b>	<b>Markets as Cultural Intentions</b>
<i>Model of economic actor</i>	Rational, utility function.	Pragmatic, emotional, habitual.
<i>Goals of economic actor</i>	Optimization problem (allocations efficiency, maximized profits, minimize costs)	Multiple goals, some material, others symbolic; optimization problem as a cultural intention.
<i>Strategy of action</i>	Means-end, purposive, instrumental rationality.	Substantive, meaningfully ordered.
<i>View of Market</i>	Buyers - Sellers; supply - demand nexus.	Fields, social performances, dramaturgically managed impressions, boundary work.

Source: Wherry (2012, 131), adapted from Spillman (2011).

A tangible example of culture working to counterbalance the instrumental rationalization of economic life can be seen in the beef industry. Klaus Weber et al. (2008) outlined how grass-fed beef farmers worked together to build a social movement against the dominant practices of the enormous beef industry to form a very successful niche market. The cultural foundations of the grass-fed movement began as a small and

unprofitable effort, but the strength of its tightly bound alternative identities, values, and goals eventually transferred into a successful widespread niche market. The market for grass-fed beef products slowly built a cultural coalition of likeminded producers and consumers who came to passionately support a movement for the culture it represented and the detached economic practices it rebuffed. The movement against the beef industry was premised on the idea that it had brazenly rejected the traditions of ranching methods for unnatural and unhealthy feedlot production. By prioritizing the heritage of pasture grazing, grass-fed cattle farmers and consumers asserted the delicate balance of culture and economy. The story of this niche market's emergence from obscurity to success is a healthy reminder for business entrepreneurs to maintain intimate contact and alliances with their surrounding cultural community. The next chapter will provide an account of how a focus on community oriented business practices have led to dramatic shifts in the agro-economy toward local organic foods.



## **CHAPTER 4: AGRICULTURE, AGRARIANISM, AND THE LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT**

Modern corporate agriculture is the story of technological domination, monocultural specialization, and market consolidation (Heffernan 2000). Like most industries, its history is one driven by goals of efficiency, specialization, and expanded output. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nearly 40% of the population in the United States labored in agriculture. This number has declined drastically throughout the years to the point where now farming occupations only comprise less than 2% of the total population (Gardner 2002; Hochschild 2012). Inversely, the size of farms by acreage has grown substantially. Farms have increased in size by 67% since 1900 while the total number of farms has declined by 63% (Dimitri et al. 2005, 2). Such transformations have brought qualitative changes in the type of agriculture practiced on a typical farm. What was once largely a small family enterprise based on crop and livestock diversification has now become a landscape of narrow and intense specialization (Berry 1973; Pollan 2007). As a result, agriculture in the United States has made massive gains in production output of commodity crops.

These agricultural transformations in America have been driven largely by three key developments: technological improvement, changing consumer influence and spending power, and a true commodity chain for widespread trade in global food markets (Goodman et al. 1987; Cochran 1993; Gardner 2002; Dimitri et al. 2005, 6). Farming in general has noticeably shifted from manual labor that occurred close to land, to mechanized techniques with massive equipment. As with industry of any kind,

mechanization is the first major change in the rationalization and standardization of labor. Rationalization reduces and displaces the need for hands and skilled physical work. It also represents a "change in the character of the basic productive forces (Marcuse 1968, 43)", which alters the meaning of work and identities attached to it. Perhaps most noteworthy in the case of industrial farming, new synthetic chemical inputs for soil fertilization and pesticides combined with mechanized farming practices yielded tremendous gains in output. Because of these two factors, between 1948 and 1999 agricultural output in the United States grew on average by 1.9% annually (Dimitri et al. 2005, 6). During this same measure of time consumers in America found themselves making more money on average than in any other era in history. Wages increased rapidly and new disposable incomes led to the development of a truly domestic consumer oriented economy. As more consumers made their living outside of agricultural settings, new urban food demands began to take shape. The industry responded with more vertically oriented production in agriculture. Thus began a steady increased reliance on commodity crops grown in the United States to be used for the mass production and distribution of specialized and processed foods. Corporate agri-business is now well positioned in its domination of food markets from cultivation to consumption.

Despite the changing nature of farming in the United States, agricultural production is still ubiquitous and a major component of both the domestic and global economy. Agriculture exists in one form or another in every state, county, and town in America. It encompasses both endless uninterrupted landscapes through the broad middle of the country and tiny plots in backyard gardens. Our national history and

identity is rooted in an idea of robust sustenance from the land. With these enduring ever-present bonds with agriculture it would seem that some familiarity with farming or agricultural work would be prevalent among the public. Yet, the percentage of Americans who have any experience in agriculture is at the lowest point in our living history (Gardner 2002). The American agricultural system is out of balance now as it produces more output with a smaller percentage of input from the population. And for most Americans food is virtually a mystery in its origins, conditions of growth, mode of distribution, and composition. Our relationship with food could not be more polar. It is intimate because we consume it (literally) multiple times on a daily basis; yet it is distant because we usually know very little about it. In that regard, our holistic connection to one of the most intimate things we persistently purchase is increasingly disconnected from us on a personal level.

The American interest with food culture, however, is increasing in popularity. We are a nation obsessed with new diets, easy and convenient fast food, eating out, unlimited refills, cooking shows, grilling, and even healthy eating; all in super-sized quantities (Schlosser 2005). Unsurprisingly, America is the fattest nation on earth with the most diet plans. We have enormous rates of weight related diabetes and heart disease. But segments of our population have taken an interest in active lifestyles and healthy eating that is diffusing throughout popular culture. Slowly our media has begun to pick up on the fact that America must make changes in its eating and dieting habits to avoid long term health crises.

The elastic return to an interest and concern for sustainable agriculture is a result of producers' and consumers' attempts to create equilibrium in a system that is massively out of balance. People are beginning to quickly recognize the extent to which the public has lost visibility and control of the process of food growth, processing, and distribution. Only a decade ago, the markets for local organic produce were virtually nonexistent in many regions of the country. How, then, were these markets even born? Development of local organic options required these markets to be constructed from scratch. Both producers and consumers had to identify their concerns, merge their interests and values together, and forge new independent market outlets. However, there were no central coordinating schemas for establishing small community farms and local investment. Instead, local organic markets popped up independently amongst each other around already dense urban networks of friends and families pushing for alternative means to food security.

### *Defining Organic: Growth, Transformations, and Meanings*

The basic principles of organic farming have origins in counter-cultural roots. When industrial agriculture became more pronounced in the early twentieth century, diversified small-scale farms began to dwindle. At the height of industrial agriculture critics began to uncover many of the associated risks and problems (environmental, cultural, rural, health, etc.). Concerns slowly diffused into mainstream discourse and new awareness of food issues were brought to public attention. Naturally grown foods slowly increased in desirability as options alternative to the industrial model became more

prevalent. Demand for organic food arose out of the margins of alternative markets that eventually settled into the mainstream. Now, the organic sector is one of the largest in the food industry and are available from nearly any grocery store. By and large, disparate organic practices have coalesced into standardized methods through certification agencies and helped propel sales (Lynggard 2006; Dabbert et. al. 2004). The figure below displays this growth for a variety of food categories.

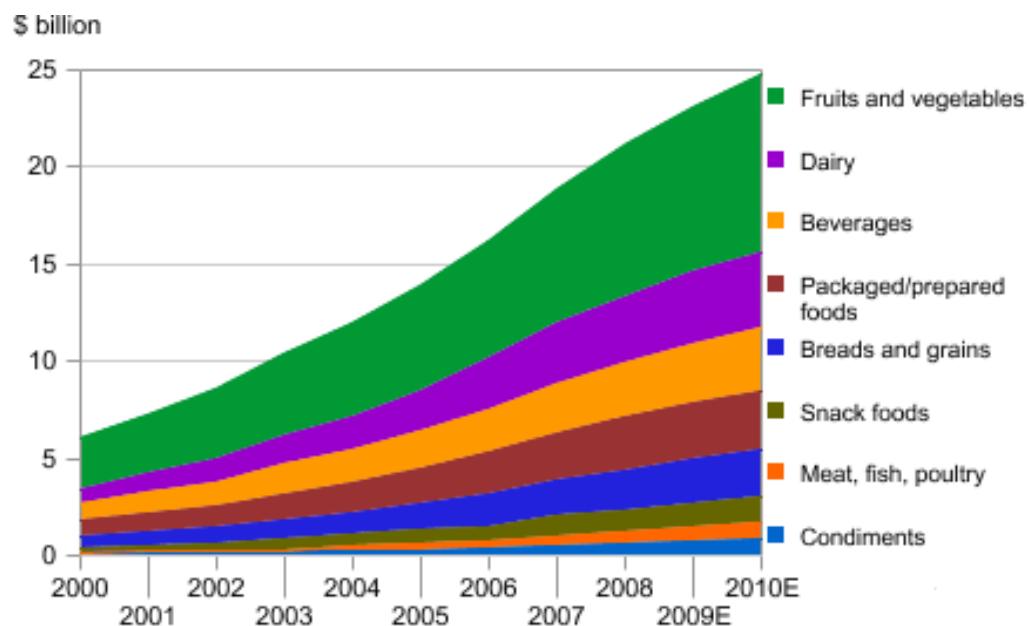


Figure 4: Growth of organic food sales 2000 – 2008.

Source: United States Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service.  
[www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Organic/Demand.htm](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Organic/Demand.htm)

Despite extensive market growth, there are several competing ideas about what the term "organic" means. For a concept that has become so popular and widespread, there are many misconceptions about what constitutes organic food and distinguishes it from conventional foods. As a buzzword for the twenty-first century, it may also be one

of the most vague in common parlance. Nevertheless, there are real concrete standards and definitions of "organic" based on some original precepts that have not changed in generations. In its truest essence, organic farming attempts to establish a holistic approach to agriculture (Duram 2005; Wirzba 2003). Methods of cultivation and harvesting within an organic framework take into account the integrative features and natural capacities of food production environments. Much of how the public perceives of organic, however, is based upon ideas antithetical to conventional farming (Tamm 2001). Instead of envisioning what organic is, organic is often framed by what it is not in comparison to industrial agricultural practices. This framing by negation gives corporate agri-business companies an enormous amount of leeway in marketing loose ideas of organic for mainstream consumption (Guthman 1998, 2004). Many large food companies have taken advantage of the ambiguity of "organic" and strayed far from the original tenets of the organic movement. They have been successful at appropriating and codifying this term for their singular interests in making profit. Without the public's accurate understanding of the original organic philosophy (and the authentic practices which manifest out of this philosophy), the industrial food system has been able to perpetuate a fraudulent image of organic farming.

So what are some of the original features of organic? The genesis of organic was derived from the agrarian movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Pioneering organizations like the Soil Association began to standardize certain agrarian practices in response to the rapid changes that occurred in farming technologies (Conford 2001). The original precepts of organic were implemented to identify and protect growing techniques

that were beneficial to the land and quality of produce. For example, early agrarians identified plants with symbiotic features that helped mutually strengthen crop growth and naturally deter pests (Lampkin 1990). Naturally, many early pioneers in the organic movement found that it is best to diversify both crops and livestock to maintain an overall health of the soil, plants, and animals (Newton 2002). By extension, the diverse character of agrarian farms often required multiple pathways to diverse markets. An underlying independent character of organic farming meant there was a lot of ingenuity and trial by error for farmers working in the margins of the market.

The way modern farms are delegated "organic" status is through accreditation from a professional certifying organization. There are many different agencies that regulate organic farming, but the most substantial is managed by the United States Department of Agriculture. Each agency upholds the primary attributes of the original organic philosophy to some degree. Some prioritize strict interpretation while others aspire to a looser adherence of the original principles. Not surprisingly, contestation over the authority to define and grant "organic" certification has become amplified over the last two decades for one very simple reason: there is a lot of money to be made from the organic label (Guthman 2004).

Industrial agriculture expanded with little resistance because it could effectively meet the demands of growing populations and global commodity chains. In pre-modern eras a large percentage of the global population labored in agriculture. Without motorized tractors, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, high calorie feedlots, and antibiotics, societies had no recourse but to employ a significant number of hands for

harvesting foods and tending livestock. Farms were comprised by diversity of rotated crops and animals on a very limited scale. If farmers relied too extensively on any particular crop or livestock they faced increased risks of disease, pest, or weather calamity that could wipe out their entire livelihood in one fell swoop. Natural integration of diverse endeavors provided a cushion against the potential perils of collapse. The story of traditional agriculture was one of defined limits in output, diversity of inputs, and of reliance on many people performing manual labor. Like many other modes of traditional life, agriculture was radically restructured during the second half of the twentieth century as new labor saving technologies shifted the modes of labor and the organization of production. The economy as a whole began to consolidate disparate production networks into dense economies of scale. By and large, agriculture emulated this corporate production strategy and radically boosted productivity.

Chemical and mechanical technologies have allowed conventional industrial farms of today to produce enormously high yields of monocultural crops. Foods of all varieties are easily incorporated into vast transportation chains to be dispersed all over the world. Further, preservation technologies allow agri-businesses to store massive amounts of foods for extended periods of time. Food companies can now store, freeze, or preserve foods with chemicals for long hauls around the globe. Upon arrival many foods can sit on shelves for indefinite periods of time without the threat of expiring before being purchased and consumed. All of this is accomplished with a relatively small percentage of the overall population involved in the growth and distribution of food. The engineers and scientists who discovered how to bypass the natural limits nature imposed



on growing food and the companies who adopted these technologies early on became incredibly rich and powerful.

The methods required to produce organic food involve intensive human labor, expensive natural inputs, and additional time for maturation compared to conventional farming. Essential differences of this degree mean that organic growing techniques are more costly and cumbersome. These inhibitions create little incentive for farmers to enter into organic production unless costs and inconveniences can be passed onto willing consumers. Still, big farms and food companies have gradually found loyal supporters through premium markets and, therefore, successfully pushed organic into the mainstream (Nature 2004). As an indication of consumer interest in paying for these additional expenses, markets for organic foods had grown at nearly 20% annually for 10 years in a row at the turn of the twenty-first century (Dimitri and Greene 2002). The surge in organic sales continues to expand and has not abated over the last decade. Even today, yearly market growth yields are still approximately 10% (USDA AMS-Marketing Services Division 2012). Farmers and food companies have received consumer signals and are more than willing to accommodate demand for greener and more sustainable growing practices.

On the flipside of this burgeoning consumer interest in organic foods are the economic realities within which agri-businesses compete. The fact remains that agribusiness has become very good at producing a bountiful supply of very cheap food. Today the average American consumer spends 6.8% of their annual income on food; whereas before the Green Revolution a family might spend upwards of 14% of their

income on food (Duram 2005). It is easy for consumers to accept lower prices on staple goods, but their expectations for the inexpensive become locked in. In other words, once people are accustomed to lower prices they have a harder time adjusting to price increases. Organic foods, however, generally cost between 10-30% more than their conventional counterparts (Sok and Glaser 2001). Therefore, consumers face inverse interests in organic markets: a desire to maintain the low prices they are used to, but also easy availability of a premium product. Large food companies have responded to these market demands the way any smart competitor would. They have made extensive efforts to make organic produce available at very low prices. In order to accomplish this they must cut the costs of production to the greatest extent possible.

Management might approach the reduction of production costs from a variety of angles. Typically they might try to convince labor to take a cut in wages or boost productivity. Sometimes they will lay off workers and consolidate business contracts to integrate the flow of production stages. In the food industry large agri-business firms have responded to the increased demand for organic foods by attempting to work around the strict methods of organic growing. True organic farming is antithetical to the model of large industrial farming, but agri-business has found ways to get around limitations codified in organic standards. Instead of adhering to all organic principles, giants in the food industry have lobbied hard to augment the regulatory standards. By reducing the stringency and environmental standards associated with organic production, farmers and food corporations are able to minimize costs of growing, maintain many industrial methods of cultivation, and draw larger yields of produce (Guthman 2004). Companies

who are not principally engaged with organic philosophy, but are enticed by the economic payoff, have successfully rewritten many statutes in organic certification bodies that are of benefit to their economic interests (Goodman 1999; Guthman 2004b; Scholten 2006; Vos 2000). For example, some organic certifying agencies now allow a certain percentage of municipal waste into soil, the use of irradiation, and even some genetic modification into the growing methods while still classifying the food as "organic". As a result, the largest organic producers today are more of a hybrid version between industrial and organic farming that appears increasingly conventional with each passing year. Julie Guthman has described this process as the "conventionalization thesis". Essentially, growers are incentivized to sell foods with organic labels that are grown in as close to conventional methods as possible. Of course, this subversion and redefinition of organic principles has been met with resistance from many purists in the organic movement (Lockie et. al. 2006; Pollan 2007).

What specifically, then, are the fixed definitions of authentic organic farming when it comes to plants? Uncompromising organic methods that hold true to the original standards must include crop rotation by maintaining bio-waste churned into soil for compost, the intentional integration of symbiotic plants, no genetically modified plants or organisms, and no synthetic chemicals added into the soil or sprayed on crops (Duram 2005). Perhaps one of the greatest innovations of the Green Revolution was the development of synthetic nitrogen fixing into the soil (Pollan 2007). This process, however, is enormously energy inefficient and terribly polluting for soil and estuaries from water runoff. In contrast, authentic organic farming contributes nitrogen into the

crop soil by incorporating legumes or other natural inputs rich in nitrogen and nutrients, such as chicken dropping or bat guano. It is difficult, though, for these and other strict organic methods to be established on a large scale for a few reasons. First, these methods are difficult to manage as operations scale up and are not conducive to the paradigm of monocultural crop farming. Second, the absence of industrial strength fertilizers and pesticides requires intimate monitoring and perpetual protective methods to prevent the ravaging of crops. The only way to do this is to closely inspect crops every day. This process, however, requires that acreage be limited to the scope of what is manageable for those directly overseeing the farm. Otherwise, an additional employment of many more laborers who can constantly work in fields is necessary to keep issues in check. The trend of industrial farming, though, is larger farms worked by a smaller workforce built around a reliance on machinery and chemical inputs. As the gulf between industrial methods and the original organic grow ever wider it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile the two. And while new local organic farming appears radical in the sense that it utilizes the most unconventional of techniques, in reality, the principles of local organic have deviated the least from traditional agrarian practices. In this regard, local organic farming today is the most conservative of all agricultural. Because local organic is most closely aligned with the original precepts of the organic movement, I will now spend some time discussing the ways it embodies the ideas and values of authentic agrarianism. I use this term in order to provide a clear distinction between the loose definitions associated with "organic" and the more strict principles associated with "agrarianism".

### *Agrarianism*

The agrarian movement is a reaction to and resistance against industrialized agriculture processes that accelerated in the latter half of the twentieth century. This movement advocates local organic foods, subscription farming, direct marketing, and crop diversification. Perhaps the most coherent belief that has spawned action and growth from agrarianism is a growing recognition that the natural environment's limits are being encroached upon by modern industrial practices (Wirzba 2003). Organic proponent Philip Conford (2001) describes this concern as an acknowledgment of a “natural order whose laws cannot be flouted with impunity (16-17).”

So what exactly is agrarianism in the twenty-first century? According to Norman Wirzba (2003):

“Agrarianism is this compelling and coherent alternative to the modern industrial/technological/economic paradigm. It is a deliberate and intentional way of living and thinking that takes seriously the failures and successes of the past. It is the sustained attempt to live faithfully and responsibly in a world of limits and possibilities (4).” He goes on to state, “[It] is a comprehensive worldview that holds together in a synoptic vision the health of land and culture. We are inextricably tied to the land through our bodies, and so our culture must always be sympathetic to the responsibilities of agriculture (ibid. 5).”

Within the movement, successful agrarianism is measured by accounting for the broad health of the systems of environment, economy, and culture. Its goals are to build deep and responsible connections with land and immediate surrounding communities.

Therefore, with the unprecedented environmental, economic, and health issues communities all across the United States face the agrarian movement offers an alternative to both perceived and objective negative consequences of modern agriculture. The goal of both agrarian farmers and their consumers is to reverse the tide of industrial agriculture's degradation of the land and those who work with it. They seek to enrich the health of soil through sustainable cultivation, the quality and freshness of fruits and vegetables, maintain food dollars within local economies, and build interpersonal relationships that sustain community (Wirzba 2003). These goals are informed by an awareness that the health of humanity and animals ultimately depends upon and is inseparable from soil fertility and sustainable land use. By extension, individual and family health should not be considered separately from community.

From an economic perspective, agrarianism regards itself as an alternative to the model of commodity capitalism. Culturally, it positions labor with the elements of the land as a fundamental and sacred human activity that must be revered and show respect for the earth. Symbolically, it values the interconnectivity of soil and sustenance. Socially, it seeks to reduce the distance between communities and the processes and people involved with cultivation. In essence, agrarianism is about reconnecting people to the sources, meanings, and methods of food growth in a sustainable conscientious way. It is a re-prioritization of human and ecological health over economic growth. And in

many ways agrarianism is a return to the more simple and traditional farming lifestyle familiar to previous generations.

This orientation to agrarianism was the overall emphasis expressed to me during my inaugural visit to *Desert Sky Farms*. Although Alex was happy to show me the different fruits and vegetables they were growing, his priority in farming was in exemplifying the attributes of agrarianism in every aspect. It was not good enough for them to simply grow foods in a manner that met the minimum requirements of organic. Adherence to the tenets of agrarian philosophy was about upholding the values they believed in passionately. Their motivation and goals were to not to sell organic foods in label only, but to remain true to the original principles the government and corporations had watered down. As we strolled along beds of peppers, spinach, and tomatoes, I was puzzled as to how *Desert Sky* would sell their produce as organic without certification:

"If you are not certified," I asked, "How will you be able to sell your food as organic?"

"We won't," Alex responded. "Our customers in the metro area want clean, fresh, and safe local foods. They want organic. We can offer all of that to them, but we are asking them to trust us without the labels."

This proposition was an intriguing request.

I followed up, "How will you get your customers to trust you?"

"We invite them to our farm, talk with them at our farmers market booth, hold conversations with them just like we are doing with you now," Tim chimed in. "We

want to provide transparency so people in Tucson can know what they are truly getting when they buy food. So they can have confidence that they are purchasing organic food of the highest possible quality, even if it is not officially labeled or certified organic by the government or another accredited organization."

Alex added, "Our farm is about community and everything we do is an extension of that. With trust and transparency, we do not need an outside agency inspecting our farm."

What Alex and Tim were conveying to me was that by being deeply embedded and integrated within their local community and its various food markets, they were able to establish a level of intimacy and trust among customers that allowed them to bypass cumbersome mass-market procedures. Producing specifically for only their local markets afforded *Desert Sky* the opportunity to forge enduring interpersonal bonds. Through repeated interaction with the same faces and a high level of transparency through farm visitations, this farm was able to convince their patrons that it was an honest and true organic farm.

As simple of a story this may sound, an ever-expanding proportion of modern economic life is undergoing substantial declines in market transparencies. Increasingly, the production conditions invisibly built-in the things we buy are veiled through the opacity of global commodity chains. One only needs to consider the launching of omnipresent labeling mechanisms (such as sweatshop free, free trade, post-consumer content, etc.) intended to appease shopper's concern over hidden exploitation or



degradation to comprehend the extent to which market opacity bewilders the modern consumer. In this context, an inverse turn to local transparency as an economic strategy as exemplified by *Desert Sky* is both atypical and surprising to some degree.

In order for the organic market to expand at a significant market scale, institutional channels of corporate capital, size, and trade networks had to be utilized. With increased organic demand, the food industry took advantage of established big agribusiness' efficient flows in economic circuits in order to deliver large quantities of food from farm to plate. The only possible way agribusiness could provide an enormous amount of organic food to a growing customer base in traditional spheres was to couple itself to the industrial supply chain and emulate its methods of efficiency. Simply put, organic had to go big and weaken (or outright eliminate) many of original principles to merge into conventional global market arenas. Changing the standards of 'organic' for marketing reasons, however, does not retroactively undo the original staple features, intent, or philosophy of organic as it was understood by its pioneering founders. If anything, redefining 'organic' only enraged proponents of the local agrarian movement and strengthened their resolve to create an insulated alternative outlet for indisputable organic foods. In the absence of established trade channels for genuine local organic options, advocates were determined to construct niche zones by mobilizing the values, codes, and expectations of the local agrarian movement. Ardent producers and consumers directed the momentum of mobilized codes into a market platform mirroring the authentic constitutive elements of early organic techniques (Weber et al. 2008).

## CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Field Theory (and the homology of producers and consumers)*

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) offer a synthesized Theory of Fields in order to establish a contemporary account of scholarly understanding of the nature of fields as the primary organizing templates for social life. Their theory builds upon disparate sub-disciplinary perspectives with the goal of providing a wide-ranging research agenda across methodological approaches that include both positivist and realist theoretical orientations. The authors express a certain amount of vindication in their work as they cite numerous historical and recent studies from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds that all appear to be converging around the basic themes regarding social fields (Fligstein 2009).

While the origin and American adoption of Field Theory can in many ways be attributed to the diffusion of Bourdieu's writings (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007), emanations of field conceptions were generated independently by a variety of scholars (see Meyer and Scott 1977; White 1981; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). A basic form a field can be thought of as an encompassing social force the surrounds and orients actors' identities, understandings, and actions (Fligstein and McAdams 2012; Martin 2003, Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In this regard, field dynamics manifest their presence as a mesolevel order between the micro and macro foundations of social life (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 210). Social fields are comprised of dynamic "objective relations between positions" among actors who compete with and expend various forms of capital

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). Similar to a gravitational or magnetic field, actors who stray in and out of various social fields are pushed and pulled by dominant social currents inherent to the field. The ease or difficulty with which actors experience their presence in a social field depend on an their relative standing and the larger historical and cultural context the field itself is embedded within. These flows are made apparent through the observation of relational interaction and the social resonance or resistance that emerges between field actors. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) assert that a field has materialized when the following conditions exist: "a common understanding of what is at stake in the field, a set of player with known positions in the field, a common understanding of the rules in the field, and a way for actors to interpret the actions of others and frame their own as the 'game' is being played (170)."

Fligstein and McAdam's conception of social skill is that it bridges the gap between what individuals are doing and the structures and logics that result from their efforts. The theorists argue that social skill is a result of field expertise and "the ability to empathetically understand situations and what others need and want and to figure out how to use this information to get what you want (178)." If executed successfully, it can lead to the aligned actions between field members and result in collective action and shared expectations for future behavior. When alignment occurs, fields, like institutions, can quickly solidify into enduring reproducible structures. Actors integrated within a particular field may eventually negotiate relatively stable roles as they jockey for internal positions of esteem.

Fligstein and McAdam are adamant, however, that fields are not static templates, but instead are perpetually re-established through both tacit and overt games that are played out between strategic actors. Further, ongoing cooperation and contention, as well as exogenous shocks, assure that social fields are dynamic. Indeed, field theorists reject much of neo-institutionalism's rigid theoretical framework as too rigid to account for social transformation, collective movements, and actor agency. Field theory seeks to offer a middle ground between individual and institutional reproduction of social life by taking into account larger cultural and historical contexts that influence the nature of fields themselves. This global perspective gives field theory the theoretical power to understand social action as a joint venture in relational based agency and abstract determining structural factors. Both are constantly in motion but eventually approach equilibrium (albeit temporary) where meanings and expectations are settled. In this mesolevel, actors are constantly exercising some degree of agency within the constraints of established fields. The structure of these fields "determines which kinds of action makes sense. The position we occupy in a field has a huge effect on how we enact our capacity for agency (180)." Therefore, both agency and structure are integrated and mutually dependent through the field theoretical approach to explaining social organization. Fligstein and McAdams theorize, "Action depends on the structural position and the opportunities it affords a given actor as well as her ability to read the situation and mobilize others in the service of a strategy tailored to the constraints of the situation (203)."

### *Defining Features of Fields*

Central to Field Theory are the internal understandings and performances of meaning and charisma. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) label these concepts, respectively, as the "Existential Function of the Social" and "Social Skill". Both are critical elements that give fields their human character and trajectory. According to the authors, "the essence of human sociability is collaborative meaning making (49)" and the "need for meaning and membership [is at] the core for understanding how people create and sustain [their] social worlds (49)." Intrinsic to all social fields, therefore, is a foundation of shared meanings between strategic actors. Unlike objective social markers, meanings are subjective and have a restricted broadcast that might only be received clearly by members within the same field. Isolated meaning within a field may not transfer beyond its boundaries, but internal to the field tacit agreement upon positions and the meanings associated with relations are what give the field life and structured interaction. How meanings are generated and interpreted, however, requires that actors have sufficient familiarity with the dynamics of the field.

This familiarity and the orientations that flow out of it lead to bounded social skills, allowing actors to maneuver through the field with a natural disposition. It is this social skill that "induce[s] cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities (46)." When employed by successful social entrepreneurs, social skill can sustain intersubjective understanding (49). Skilled actors acquire a firm sense of the realities and possibilities for creative movement in the field's cooperative ventures. In the end, actors with social skill are gifted in their ability to

persuade others to follow their lead and adopt their perspective by appealing to a strong collective identity.

Much of a talented social entrepreneur's social skill is something that they have either perfected through practice or is a natural inherited personality trait. A substantial portion of social skill can be attributed to position relative to other people within a field. Because positioning within a field is largely reflective of an individual's standing on a hierarchy of prestige and power, the effectiveness of social skill will depend upon various social constraints that a strategic actor must confront. Social skill's purchasing power, therefore, is contingent upon the ability to share specific understandings between other field members who "get" one another. Similarly, those with social skill are also keen to the limitations of their charisma to corral the interests of others. Some situations require an actor to adopt a more active role in garnering shared interests, while other situations are best maneuvered in more passive displays of deference (51-52). In summary, within in any field something is always at stake and competed for between actors (216). Because humans are intrinsically at their core social creatures, the interests and actions shared among field actors are motivated by the desires to maintain esteem and status in a variety of contingent circumstances (218). Who gets what and how these measures of social regard are divvied out are the primary stakes of any field. Within the parameters of this dissertation I will provide documentation from observation and interview data that describes how stakes and outcomes in the field for locally produced and consumed organic foods manifest in a shared expectation of authenticity. The socially conferred

verification of authenticity is among the most important measure of value that is vied for among buyers and sellers in this particular field.

*Justification for Ethnographic Study of a Social Field*

Research and analysis of social fields can be approached both quantitatively and qualitatively. Each can provide specific insights into their individual nature, strategies, and patterns. While quantitative methods can uncover comparative fluctuations and clustering among many fields, qualitative analysis is best served for gleaning the fine details internal to one or a small number of fields. In this study I utilize ethnographic and interview data to compose a detailed portrait of the shared values and meanings among identified key actors who maintain key roles in just one field. The advantage of a qualitative approach for this type of study, according to Fligstein and McAdam, is that it can "provide us with dense accounts of how individual fields evolve. They provide a grounds for directly observing the role of the state and law, the use of resources and position, and the ability to identify critical actors in the formation of strategic action fields (199)." Because this study focuses in upon primary strategic actors in a field for local organic foods, it is important to specify their approaches to building coalitions of identity and meaning (Bourdieu 1977; Goffman 1959). Skilled actors who can bring together a diverse array of individuals around a core set of shared values are able to satisfy a central pillar of any field's foundation: the "existential function of the social" built upon sustained "collaborative meaning making" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 49). By producing a compelling narrative and effectively framing field objectives, skilled field

actors induce unity by building meaningful goals and also defining the opposition. A qualitative approach is best suited to capture these internal social dynamics.

The institutionalization and flow of fields is based upon a realist understanding of social life that forms through "historically and culturally contingent meanings (194)." Often, these social forces are not immediately recognizable or even directly observable. They can be detected, however, through relational observation and shared participation between key members of field who occupy various hierarchical roles. In this study, I had the opportunity to interact extensively with a series of primary actors in the local organic food movement who varied in their positioning within the field. The core actors I worked with most of the time were the actual farmers at *Desert Sky* and their labor team, the WWOOFing interns. Secondary members I interacted with were the CSA members who provided the crucial financial means to the overall field's success. Other occasional actors I would encounter were peripheral, but nonetheless still very important players in this market field. These actors included the highly regarded chefs who came to the farm to harvest food for their restaurants and their patrons. *Desert Sky's* food would be prominently displayed in the menus of 6-10 restaurants in the Tucson metro area at any given time. Other peripheral actors were members of the local food cooperative and the grocers who had established a 5-year CSA-type contract with *Desert Sky* to sell their food in the store. Members of the media also served a peripheral role in gathering information about *Desert Sky* and other local food issues and exposing them in various media outlets. Finally, over the course of two years I came in contact with thousands of casual shoppers at the farmers market who would stop by the booth to look around and inquire about



*Desert Sky Farms* and the available produce. Over time, I began to understand how these quick interactions with market patrons were equally important to the local organic food market because they comprised the largest number of actors (what we might call "extras") who filled the stage with energy, background noise, and diffuse discussion about the larger tentacles of the movement extending outward into the economy. Combined, this niche market field had a rich tapestry of primary and peripheral strategic actors who each embodied to some degree the ethos and understandings of the field.

Finally, it would be shortsighted to limit the theory and analysis of field dynamics without considering external field relations. Fields are embedded within larger surrounding social structures. Therefore, broad events that occur outside of fields affect the possibilities and direction of field movement as well as the internal meanings that emerge. Any research of field dynamics should take into account the external contexts in order to make sense of field formation and motivations. In order to provide theoretical and contextual clarification for how and why the field for local organic foods took shape, I will offer a secondary theoretical framework that emphasizes the overall ecology of economic organization.

### *Organizational Ecology Theory and Resource Partitioning*

Theoretical frameworks from the organizational ecology literature on resource partitioning are central in explaining the dynamics of niche market field development because they offer comprehensive consideration of global organizing factors external to any one field (Carroll et al., 2002; Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000; Hsu and Hannon,

2005). Within the organizational ecology literature, Resource Partitioning is a particularly useful theoretical framework for this study. Resource Partitioning can succinctly be summarized as the “segmentation of a niche into a portion held by specialists and another held by generalists” (Aldrich, 1999: 280). It “explains the rise of late-stage specialist segments within an industry as an (unexpected) outcome of the consolidation occurring among large generalist organizations as they compete for the largest consumer resource bases of the mass market (Carroll 2000, 718).” This theory describes how specialist niche organizations adapted to dense mass-market economies tailor their high quality products and services to pocketed homogenous subgroups; whereas large traditional corporations and chains accustomed to economies of scale and routinized mass production attempt to satisfy large heterogeneous segments (Carroll et al., 2002; Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, 719; Aldrich, 1999: 281-285). In this partitioned market, it is the sphere outside the heterogeneous targeted areas where more cultural resources are likely to be available. It is also in these marginal regions of the market where specialist organizations have an easier time avoiding intense competition with large generalist organizations that mainly rely upon entirely differentiated segments of the resource base through economies of scale (Carroll, 1985). Thus, in a market where routinization is ubiquitous and concentrated, the specialized and esoteric networks enabled through peripheral regions flourish (Carroll 2000, 724). Even though large generalist organizations consume the lion’s share of resources in the center of the market, attempts to expand their market share into peripheral regions can result in diminished returns. Organizations accustomed to economies of scale may find that the costs of

entering niche markets are more than the profits they would receive otherwise, and the tradeoff may simply be too great (Peli & Noteboom, 1999). Further, a generalist's image or identity tends not to mesh well with niche audiences. Consumers with discriminatingly narrow tastes seek out distinguished goods and consciously indulge in these marginal sectors of the market.

*Desert Sky Farms* operates in the periphery of the food production market. Their organizational structure, agricultural methods, and distribution of produce are confined within a very narrow niche market. The structure of their farming business design is based on rigid methods adopted from original agrarianism. Therefore, *Desert Sky* exists more as craft agriculture based on purely traditional growing techniques and describe themselves as "producers engaged in diverse ecologically conscious agriculture". Part of their appeal to their customers is that they are not willing to deviate from agrarian growing techniques. This adherence is interesting because industrial farms try to incorporate new technologies and products to increase the yield per acre of food. *Desert Sky* actually uses many technologies that are mostly indistinguishable from those of 100 years ago. Most work is done by hand, and there is very little machinery on the farm. They own one very small old tractor and two motorized tillers for working on the soil. In fact, the only other modern technologies Alex, Jen, Tim and Sean use at *Desert Sky Farms* are enhanced microbial probiotics; a liquid supplement that is added to the soil to aid in fertility. Essentially, implemented probiotics help create a lively eco-system within the soil that is friendly to natural microbe growth. This process maintains nutrients in the soil, which in turn strengthens and enhances plant growth and nutrition. Also, unlike

petro-chemicals and fertilizers added to soils on industrial farms, enhanced microbial probiotics are completely organic and beneficial to plants without harming the environment. It is a win-win solution as far as environmental growers are concerned because there are zero environmental trade-offs to this type of soil cultivation.

The fact that one can visit *Desert Sky* and see very little signs of modernized agriculture is part of its appeal to customers. Farming communities in the United States were characteristically much like *Desert Sky* throughout the past but have declined substantially over the last 50 years. Since World War II there has been a substantial reduction in small family owned farms that thrived on small-scale diversity. A major reason for this change is that large agri-business corporations like Monsanto, Cargill, and Archer Daniels Midland have essentially swallowed up the market during that time. In turn, agri-business corporations have steadily absorbed thousands of farms and redesigned land for large-scale monoculture production. Most farms in the United States now are under contract with a large corporation and only grow a rotation of two crops bi-annually. Food production is organized at such a large-scale that the agribusiness industry mostly controls the entire market chain in extent well beyond the farm. A few concentrated corporations now vertically manage and dominate most operations of food growth and distribution in the United States. This control ranges from the supply of seeds and chemicals (including pesticides, fertilizers, to herbicides), food processing, storage, transportation and distribution, and marketing and sales (Pollan 2007). Such massive scale business has all but wiped out the small family farms that were so ubiquitous in recent American history.

Under such circumstances, I attribute much of the success of *Desert Sky* and the entire local organic movement to the widespread reaction against corporate food on behalf of consumer groups who have emerged over the last several years. What has led to consumer disenchantment with industrial food and a growing interest in local organics? As mentioned earlier, the theory of Resource Partitioning can help explain this growing trend. If we look at the overall market in terms of organizations competing for resources (in this situation the competition over farms, produce, distribution, and sales), it is apparent that agri-business corporations have dominated the dense center of the market that is now concentrated by only a few entities. Organizational ecologists would define these huge corporations as generalists that hold broad control of multiple market segments. Because they are so broad, it becomes possible for many smaller specialized niche organizations (in this case local organic farms) to emerge, depending on the level of market concentration in general. “As concentration increases, generalists engage in fierce competition for the center of the market, whereas specialists exploit peripheral niches and avoid direct competition with generalists” (Aldrich 1999, 282). Essentially, the market splits into segmented positions.

The Microbrew movement that started in the 1980's is a highly visible manifestation of precisely this partitioning process. In the 19th century and early part of the 20th century, it was common to find small breweries and distilleries scattered all over the country that served the needs of particular communities. In the middle part of the 20th century, however, large brewing corporations consolidated and undercut the market for local craft beers. For several decades only a few major corporations controlled most

of the national beer market. The microbrew movement today, though, has dramatically changed the market landscape. Compared to just a handful of small breweries in existence at the beginning of the 80's, now literally thousands are in operation serving very particular niches and local markets (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, 716). A few huge firms such as Budweiser, Miller, and Coors still compete for the mass-market share. Nevertheless, enormous amounts of brew pubs and microbreweries have opened and thrived at the periphery of the beer industry. Large beer distributors and microbrews are not necessarily competing directly against one another. The market has simply been divided up with resources available to specialists to make a name for them.

One might ask why large corporations do not just mimic the specialists or just absorb the niche market. Indeed, large beer companies have made such attempts. As the microbrew market grew substantially, the large mass beer producing companies responded by introducing their own specialty beers in an effort to get in on the profitability. However, "despite their vast resources and immeasurable technical expertise, these efforts have, for the most part, met with limited success (725 – 726)." Carroll and Swaminathan argue that it is the organizational form itself that consumers are most interested in when searching for the right type of meaningful beer. Customers take into account the intentions, goals, and depth of structural rationalization allowing microbreweries to thrive outside the market sphere of mass-produced beer.

Why would a consumer be just as interested in the organizational form of the production process as the actual product itself? Perhaps the quality of the product is enhanced when created under more traditional methods. However, if it is expected that

under certain circumstances ubiquity spawns disenchantment, then discriminating consumers may resist products from mass producers simply because they are using rationalized and routinized methods of production (729). Such consumers may want to come in contact with “pure” goods and services from a traditional labor process that has not been degraded (Braverman, 1974; Lamla, 2009: 175-176). The products and services from organizations with extreme routinized methods are often framed more negatively and devalued. The growth of the microbrew industry serves as an excellent example of how beer connoisseurs disapprovingly perceive large breweries. “Identity problems of the kind faced by mass-production and contract brewers emanate from questions of *legitimation*: aspects of these organizational forms conflict with specialty brewers' claims about tradition and *authenticity*, which accord with consumers' and others' normative notions about how specialty beers should be made and marketed [as a craft-style of production] (Carroll and Swaminathan 733).”

Try as they might, large beer companies were largely unsuccessful in their attempts emulate the microbrews. Their strategies to market their own specialty beers were ineffective because it was difficult to incorporate marketing for microbrews within their established economies of scale. Howard Aldrich puts it this way: “A generalist could try producing [specialized products], but that becomes increasingly costly as differences grow between segments. Generalists benefit from economies of scale, and producing [specialized products] rather than a single product robs them of their advantage (283).” In essence, “successful generalists create the conditions which promote

successful specialists. The very success of generalists undermines their own position (Aldrich 1999 283-284)."

The microbrew market, however, is very lucrative. Therefore, large beer companies have now settled by forging alliances and investing heavily into microbreweries, contracting them as subsidiaries to their organization (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, 732). Mass producers will sometimes strike a deal with a brewer of a fashionable product to gentrify and incorporate it into their organization, all the while keeping a safe marketed distance between their brand identity and the microbrew itself. They reap the rewards of the investment without tarnishing the "authentic" microbrew. Because of their capital investment, they are able to play on the desires of disenchanted consumers searching for a product unaffiliated with rationalized mechanisms. Cunning corporations, therefore, are sometimes able to trick consumers into satisfying their desires for perceived authenticity. This is one way to expand into new market territory without having to completely adapt to consumer demands of authenticity in an increasing post-Fordist economic environment and postmodern cultural setting.

Do consumers fall for this type of production and marketing campaign? Carroll describes how, "a crestfallen look comes on the perfectly content beer drinker when told that the specialty beer being consumed actually comes from a major brewing corporation or a company without a brewery at all (729)." How then is rationalization disguised and avoided? Where else is this process employed? Several other studies in organizational ecology have noted this same trend of resource partitioning in winemaking (Swaminathan 1995), newspapers (Olzak and West 1991), craft labor unions (Hannan and Freeman



1989), healthcare (Ruef 2000), energy (Sine and Lee 2009), as well as music recording, book publishing, and microprocessor industries (Aldrich, 1999: 284). I argue the growth of the local organic movement could be lumped in with these industries as well. Organic foods have become ubiquitous and can be purchased from nearly any chain grocery store nationwide (see Table 4). As the market for organic produce has grown and been appropriated by corporations, resource space has freed up for local organic farms. These farms have found success within their own peripheral networks through farmers markets, co-ops, and local restaurants without directly competing for the center of the market share.

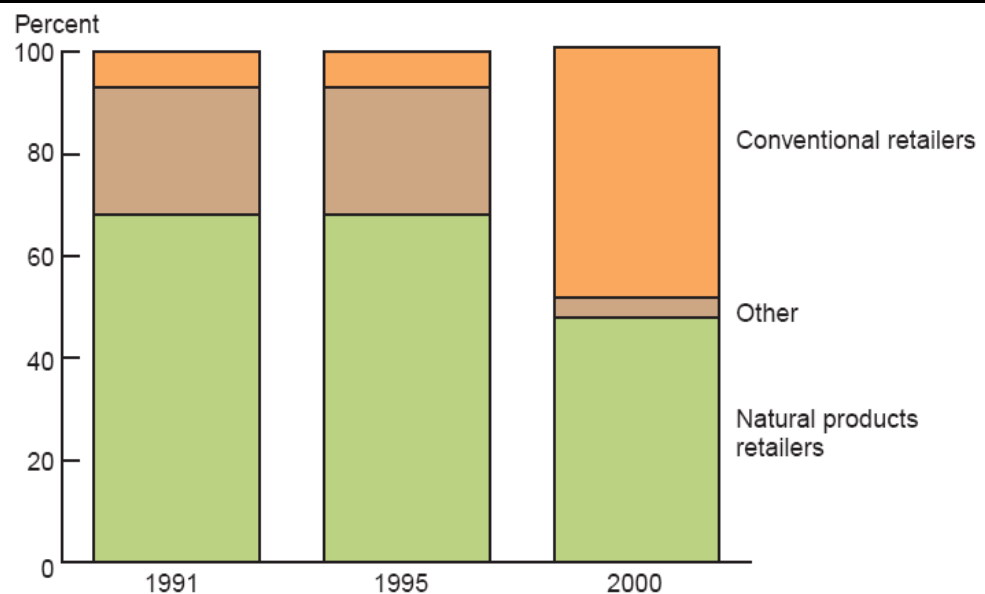


Figure 5: Share of organic sales by retailer type

Source: (Dimitri and Green 2002)

*Resource Partitioning in Various Industries and Local Organic Farming*

Resource partitioning has been documented in several other markets besides brewing as well including music, books, and microprocessor industries (Carroll, 1984). In fact, nearly any industry that is characterized by economies of scale in production is bound to experience the growth of specialized niches at some point. For example, “In the American wine industry between 1941 and 1990, Swaminathan (1995) found strong evidence that increasing concentration raised the founding rates of specialist farm wineries. Farm wineries created premium wine on a small scale and marketed their products as locally rather than mass-produced. Their emergence as a sub-population reversed a long term trend toward declining numbers of producers and increasing concentration of sales in the wine industry” (285). At the end of 1990, “1,099 farm wineries were in operation, all except 30 having been founded over the period 1969-1990” (Swaminathan, 1995: 657).

There are good arguments to be made that the resurgence and growth of specialized small-scale local organic farms can be positioned as a product of resource partitioning. Obviously there are a variety of reasons that consumers may be interested in local organics that will increase demand, just as consumers have had a growing an interest in microbrews. Possible reasons can range from consumers desiring higher quality, a perceived status of authenticity, issues of environment and sustainability, as well as sentiment in the actual organizational form and production processes. I argue that all of these reasons are valid and worth incorporating into this study. However, the fact that massive agri-businesses have concentrated their control in the center of the market is what has freed up organizational resources for specialized niches at the periphery. For

one reason or another, consumers (whether they are savvy or disenchanted) have come to appreciate, demand, and identify with organizations on the margins.

Local organic farms, almost by necessity, are completely on the periphery of such concentrated markets because they are not tied to any one centralized organizational structure. Further, there is no hierarchy in the production and distribution of their produce. These small-scale agricultural operations are wholly independent, relying only on co-ops and external certification agencies (which are not requirements, but can help with the image of the farm and their sales). Further, they operate under what the corporate food industry would consider non-rationalized and inefficient conditions. They purchase seeds from heirloom sources, plant in soil without petro-chemicals (not following developments of the Green Revolution), and cultivate amongst a large variety of other plant species to create an eco-friendly symbiotic environment. These crops are cared for by a small number of tentative hands, continually harvested depending on the changing nature of the season, and personally distributed within a small radial distance to local or community markets (such as farmers markets, CSA's, co-ops, and local chefs). All of these processes completely bypass any middleman or agri-business personnel. The growing brands of local organic farms are generally self-sufficient and operate with little debt (in machinery, land, or seeds) or government subsidies. Since they do not compete directly with large agri-business on economies of scale, there is little chance that they will be absorbed or threatened, as long as consumer demand for alternative sources of foods persists. For these reasons, I predict we will continue to see local organic farming existing in the margins of the economy for many years to come with steady growth.

What interest would a large corporation have in a business model that is fundamentally resistant to technological change, efficiency, and maximum profit? To be sure, if the locally grown movement actually continues to grow at a steady rate, it is possible that sales could actually begin to cut into profits from industrial food processors. At this point we might see large agri-businesses begin to attempt to incorporate the locally grown model into their marketing platforms. This has already happened to some extent, as organic food is no longer a radical concept. Major grocery stores and retailers now all carry some form of organic foods. Whole-Foods has built an entire business model off of the organic movement and even sells a small portion of locally grown foods. However, from my field notes and interactions with local organic farmers, it has become apparent to me that the organic foods we are familiar with at the grocery store in many ways stray from the original philosophy of “true organics.” In fact, USDA certified organic standards still allows a certain percentage of petro-chemicals and pesticides to be used in agricultural production (Guthman 2004; Wirzba 2003). A strictly local organic farmer would not allow such practices to be used on their land, and in fact do not consider the USDA organics label as a legitimate marker of “organic”. As a point of contrast, *Desert Sky Farms*, like many other farms in this type of niche farming, only use compost and completely natural inputs for fertilizer. This farm utilizes absolutely zero synthetic substances. Also, CSA’s (Community Supported Agriculture) usually do not contract with farmers that use petro-chemicals even if they are USDA certified (Cone and Myhre 2000).

Large agri-business could at some point in the future reverse their practices and begin contracting with local organic farmers in order to expand their market share. Would consumers consider a local farm, however, “local” if it were tied to external corporate forces thousands of miles away? A huge reason that consumers of local organic farms buy from these sources is because they don’t want their money going to large corporations when they have the option to buy local. Corporate involvement in the local organic business would be risky because niche consumers are likely to dismiss such business strategies altogether. The entire structure of consumer sentiment would be undermined if corporations got their hands in local farming economies. Many local organic farms would instantly lose their customer base with motivated purchases in reaction against corporate farming.

Interestingly, centralized companies that dominate other types of market have noticed the growth of specialized niche markets and naturally want a piece of the business. For example, large beer producers have noticed the success of microbrews and have attempted to develop their own microbrews. They have put out specialty beers that mimic many of the successful types of microbrewed pale-ales or lagers. Despite many attempts, most large beer companies have not been able to break into the microbrew market. A Budweiser microbrew (if such a thing can exist) simply has not been able to sell well. Carroll and Swaminathan (2000) argue the reason for these unsuccessful attempts is not because of quality but consumer sentiment. In blind taste tests, many consumers of microbrews cannot taste the difference between a small-scale craft beer and a mass produced specialty beer. However, consumers still prefer to purchase from the

microbrewery because they are interested in the organizational form that is based on more traditional craft-like methods instead of industrial mass produced processes. Therefore, if corporate agri-business were to infiltrate the local organic food market, I argue they would likely meet the same type of resistance that has been observed from microbrew consumers. When purchasing from a local farmer, consumers are able to connect a face and identity to the product for sale. This is unlike purchasing food from a grocery store where food origin is usually unknown. Because of this interpersonal social dynamic at play in local food markets, it makes sense that consumers might be just as interested in the transparency and traditional way their food is grown than the actual taste.

*Organizational Identity: Authenticity and the "Really Real"*

The importance of organizational identity is central in resource partitioning and consumer perceptions of authenticity. Hsu and Hannon define organizational identity as “social codes, or sets of rules, specifying the features that an organization is expected to possess. These codes represent default expectations held by audiences about organizational properties and constraints over properties” (Hsu and Hannon, 2005; 475). It would seem that an organization, in particular specialists, would have narrow identities within a niche market. However, Hsu and Hannon note that organizations usually have a diverse demographic of consumers, which can lead to an ambiguous or uncertain identity among their audiences. Multiple or uncertain identities may make it difficult for an organization to simultaneously meet all the expectations of their various audiences (Hsu

and Hannon, 2005; Zuckerman et al, 2003). Other scholars have noted that in certain contexts, however, an ambiguous identity can be advantageous because an organization can then fall back on many options if one identity context diminishes in value (Padgett and Ansell, 1993).

Interestingly, *Desert Sky Farms* seems to bridge both aspects of organizational identity concurrently. As an organization they project one identity: that of a local farm that produces “authentic” or “real fruits and vegetables” under a strict observance of “Biodynamic Farming” generally and to the “French Intensive Organic Method” more specifically. This overarching identity of “realness” or “meaningfulness” that they project is interpreted or understood differently by their consumers depending on the context from which they consume (This includes possible avenues such as a farmers market, the co-op, a high end restaurant, or memberships through Community Supported Agriculture). This does not contradict Hsu and Hannon’s conception of organizational identity, though, which views the organization itself and various different audiences’ interpretations as constructing identity. The development of organizational identity is largely a collective process dictated by the perceptions of audiences and consumers of the particular organization (Hsu and Hannon, 2005). When discussing authenticity and identity, Vannini and Williams (2009) echo this sentiment by stating, “Authenticity is a form of interaction work: a practical, mundane matter that concerns the construction, exchange, consumption, and interpretation of public claims to genuineness, truth, and self-congruency” (2009: 8). Hsu and Hannon also affirm that even specialist organizations can have multiple identities because “each audience might hold a different

set of codes for an organization” (Hsu and Hannon, 2005; 477). Similar conclusions have also been found in the global market for local arts and crafts. Frederick Wherry found that local street artists in Thailand intentionally create their art to be perceived as authentic in multiple ways for tourists seeking local traditional crafts. These artists create fluid identities of authenticity for their customers to “accommodate, modify, and at times resist, the effects of globalization on local culture and local economic life” (Wherry, 2006; 5). What is most important for any organization that has multiple perceived identities, such as *Desert Sky*, is that they maintain legitimation among their diverse audiences. Without coherent legitimation among key evaluators from each primary audience, the regard for the organization and its authenticity will suffer and diminish (Zuckerman, 1999).

The issue of complexity versus simplicity in identity is of importance to organizations because it will have “consequences for the perceptions and reactions of evaluative audiences” (480). Hsu and Hannan write:

“Having a simple identity (in the eyes of an audience) restricts the range of opportunities available to actors because evaluators are likely to perceive such actors as suitable for a relatively narrow range of legitimate activities. A complex identity, on the other hand, helps an actor to escape these constraints by decreasing the likelihood that audiences form a clear allegiance to any given category and thereby subject the focal organization to tight restrictions on legitimate activity. This increased flexibility, however, comes with a cost.



Complexity makes it harder for audiences to perceive enough similarity among organizations to sustain the process of category formation. The lack of an established (codified) category membership lowers an actor's chances of gaining the attention of audiences in the first place (480)."

Although *Desert Sky* projects a simple unified identity, consumers' interpretations are complex and contextual. Different customers purchase produce from them for a variety of reasons; most of which fall under the umbrella rubric of authenticity or subjectively meaningful consumption. For example, some customers at the farmers market have vocalized their belief that their produce tastes better, is of better quality, and they appreciate how the food is grown under *real* conditions (that is, plants are cultivated without synthetic chemicals, herbicides, and pesticides). At the same time, some consumers at the co-op or CSA have mentioned that they believe the produce is more meaningful to them because it is local, fresh, green, and sustainable. From a completely different perspective, a chef I had a brief interview with noted the demand his patrons have for local organic foods, and purchasing from *Desert Sky* was a way for him to distinguish himself as an entrepreneur in the market as having an authentic local cuisine. Therefore, it has actually worked to *Desert Sky's* advantage to project a simple and singular identity that is vague and abstract enough to be interpreted in a variety of unique but complementary ways by their audience. This practical outlook follows their guiding philosophy of permaculture through an integrative systems approach to cultivation and marketing. Diversified systems - the exact opposite of routinized, rationalized, or

industrial monoculture systems - are held by *Desert Sky Farms* as the paramount model for sustainable *agriculture* and local *market growth*. Therefore, not only do they seek to produce and offer a large range of agricultural produce, but they also seek out a diversity of consumer types in the local economic market as a whole.

Hsu and Hannon conclude their article by encouraging future research into the strategic trade-offs an organization must face when promoting simple versus complex identities. They ask, “When does it prove advantageous to develop a sharp and focused identity versus an identity that is complex in that different constituencies see different facets but cannot see through to others? What conditions make the adoption of an identity that falls along culturally resonant or authentic dimensions more or less advantageous for organizational success” (487)? These are precisely the questions I answer in this dissertation by using *Desert Sky Farms* as a case study and understanding how they manage such difficult trade-offs. I have documented how the farm manages its identity in the process of a growing local market where an increasing number of new consumers may be entering. In the section ahead, I have qualitative examples of how this farm has maintained an identity that is open and flexible as well as “culturally resonant” to the local niche market.

In theory, an organization’s identity should not only be determined by the markets they are integrated within, but also by the markets an organization rejects (Hsu and Hannon, 2005). Boundaries dictate identity that helps determine conceptions of similarity and difference in the construction of insider and outsider status (Zerubavel 1991; Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Therefore,

identity is not only a projection of activity and affiliation, but inactivity and rejection. As *Desert Sky* expanded, their association and penetration of markets from the periphery could have been received as either an identity boost or moral threat depending on the perceptions of their consuming audience. As we will see, by bypassing traditional corporate trade routes, *Desert Sky* cleared a path of direct transaction exclusively in an economy dominated by local actors. The traditional mass food markets they rejected signaled interests and values to their local customers of an ethos of anti-mass consumer sentiment. Part of my ethnography, therefore, addresses which opportunities for markets were actively accepted and rejected by *Desert Sky* as they expanded and further integrated within the local economy. How they navigated and chose where to expand, who they imagined as their future market in that process, and the affect this process had on the perception of their identity and produce are some of the questions I attend to in the proceeding sections.

## **CHAPTER 6: METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND DESCRIPTION OF FIELD SITE**

### *An Oasis in the Desert*

I was definitely not accustomed to being exposed directly in the sun hour after hour, day after day. Often, the farmers and I would start out the morning with jackets and coats in early hours because the desert can be frigid at night. Once the sun was perched and beaming its incessant energy around 8:00AM the jackets would slowly come off. Then the long-sleeve shirts lay scattered out in the fields. By 10:00, everyone would be in T-shirts wiping sweat from their brow. For the next several hours we would get hot, dirty, and stinky and bake in the dirt and manure. "Where am I?" I found myself asking time and again. "This is totally insane."

I was deep in the parched Sonoran desert. Along the narrow San Pedro River that provided a vital source of sustenance for the region, a small community farm began its journey and I was going to be part of that process. If you, like many Americans, grew up in a city or suburb it is likely you have limited experience working in agriculture or on a farm. Indeed, farms big and small (but mostly big) extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but an ever-dwindling number of Americans work on farmland each year. Large agri-business firms increasingly dominate agriculture in the United States. Relatively little is known about the energy and growth behind the market success of small local organic farms, though. To discover the inner workings of this fast growing movement I volunteered at a farm to see what it was all about. I became a participant observer of the

movement as a whole with a group of people who, initially, I did not quite understand. Overtime I became accustomed to agrarian farm life and developed close relationships with many of the core actors in this field. Through my extensive interactions and conversations, I was able to collect fine nuanced details of daily life on a local organic farm and their customers with whom farmers built a new market network. It was, in short, nothing I expected, nor what most people expect when they think of a farm. Yet, this agrarian model is surging in inconspicuous ways all across the country. It isn't that they are hiding, but the public is simply less familiar with their approach. At first everything felt very odd and then gradually came into focus.

My ethnographic fieldwork at *Desert Sky* began in late summer of 2010. On this particular day, it was a hot and very early September morning deep in the Sonoran desert. The sun blazed and felt as if it would never set. To my unfamiliar eye this place looked like a wasteland and late summer in this part of the desert is one of the hottest places on earth. The wind was arid, and the ground hot and parched scattered with baked cracks. This land is an unforgiving and gritty terrain full of prickly plants and jagged mountains. Javelinas (a wild peccary) and coyotes roam the foothills and are not afraid to make their presence known. This is a place where people must be careful not to disturb coiled rattlesnakes or stinging millipedes as they lay unassuming along spiny shrub pathways. Even an occasional mountain lion and jaguar is spotted taking advantage of shade under mesquite trees. Each and every plant and animal is finely tuned into an orchestra of harsh desert climate. The desert, after all, requires an edgy determination from its inhabitants. But with grit, vigilance, and, of course, a little water, the great deserts of the southwestern

United States have offered prosperity and abundance to those who work persistently and wisely within it. But I still could not get over how barren and uninviting the Sonoran desert terrain appeared upon first glance. Nevertheless, I would be spending the better part of the next two years working outdoors in this harsh environment. It was an altogether harsh but captivating and majestic place.

Located 65 miles from a large urban economic hub of Southern Arizona, this farm had begun growing food exclusively for the nearby city-dwellers, farmers markets, restaurants, and grocery cooperatives. Slowly it was becoming popular with the community. Their approach to distributing produce for surrounding markets was distinctive in that it was based upon sustained direct interpersonal connections. *Desert Sky Farms* was also, itself, a distinctive landmark in the desert. They had built a thriving and unique oasis deep in the dry desert with lush beds of green produce. I had identified this specific farm as an ideal case study in new agrarian agriculture after reading a series of press articles describing their high quality foods and success in integrating widely in various local food markets. The farmers at this location were riding the momentum of surging national interest in local organic farming and pushing it forward in exciting new ways. I wanted to be part of this process and experience firsthand the trendy but still very unique production and consumption of alternative foods. As a cultural and economic field, the local organic movement is comprised of fascinating idiosyncratic market actors who practice a radically unique form of agriculture in the twenty-first century.

The movement toward an increasing number of local organic farms across the United States is a story of values-driven production and consumption. Identities on both

ends are displayed front and center that are both reactive against the character of corporate agri-business, but also proactive through manifested alternative agrarian methods. Every day new farms that wish to broaden the interest and marketability of local organic produce must walk a fine line between the idealism of alternative agriculture and the rough reality of capitalism. Maneuvering this hostile terrain (both literally and figuratively) can be a tedious, anxiety inducing, and ultimately exhausting enterprise.

In my first few days working at *Desert Sky Farms* I began to pick up on stirrings of this new food movement. Conversations about promoting environmental awareness, ethical consumption, and a respect for the natural limits and thresholds of regional ecosystems began to take root all around me. Outside of farming, these new trends are surfacing in a variety of interesting ways as well. New markets with emphases on sustainability (whether it be natural or green methods of production, ethical labor practices, fair trade, or local investment) have all made huge headway into the mainstream. It was here where physical labor and soil met that new approaches to local organic farming were providing opportunities for reoriented food production and consumption. I quickly noted many ways in which *Desert Sky Farms* was a striking alternative to industrial agriculture. This farm utilized some of the most innovative yet simplistic permacultural and marketing techniques available. An energetic groups of young new agrarians were growing organically in the desert with minimal water and environmental impact, zero synthetic inputs or sprays, all with direct funds from Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) investments.

*Desert Sky Farms* is situated on a tract of river basin land alongside one of the great life-giving riparian corridors of the Sonoran desert. Just as the earliest humans in North America had settled along rivers and washes, farmers continue to this day to inhabit the same land and water sources to grow food and maintain a living. In fact, some archeologists have claimed that the San Pedro River is among the oldest continuously inhabited tracts of land in North America.<sup>7</sup> Coming from the Midwest, it took me awhile to understand the vital properties that made this area so attractive to people working with the land. But my preconceived notions were eventually shattered when I saw how generous the soil and sun were for growing food at this site in the desert. As tribes and farmers had settled on this spot for millennia to work the land, I settled into a working relationship with a farm perched against the San Pedro River.

My field site embodied some very interesting characteristics about a farm that I wanted to understand. They were part of the new agrarian movement and one of thousands of relatively new farms to build direct local markets with a community customer base. I was curious both how and why new interest in local organic foods was surging in the last decade and what type of culture was informing this alternative economy. Why, after years of steady decline in agricultural work were young Americans beginning to reclaim farming as a career? How does a market like this start and how do producers and consumers mutually sustain it? In a nation awash with foods from every corner of the globe in our grocery stores, why would consumers even demand new local options? Who were these new farmers selling to and why were their customers

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<sup>7</sup> Nagel, Dutch and Chris Long. "San Pedro River: An Anthology of Articles. Volume 1." *Friends of the San Pedro River*. [http://www.sanpedroriver.org/anthology/SPR\\_Article\\_Anthology\\_Vol\\_1.pdf](http://www.sanpedroriver.org/anthology/SPR_Article_Anthology_Vol_1.pdf)



supporting this movement? All of these questions required that I spend extended time collecting qualitative data on both a farm as a case study, and also with the loyal customers who were providing the financial means of growth of the local organic movement. As a sociologist and ethnographer, it was appropriate that I engage with central players of this field by working at a farm myself. I needed to gather the lived experience and unfolding practices of those producing the food and carrying the movement forward.

*A Brief History of Economic and Agricultural Growth in the Sonoran Desert*

It would be useful for me to provide some historical context of agricultural life in the desert where my field site was situated. During the course of time I spent working at this farm I gathered information on the backdrop of natural environment and human events for this region. *Desert Sky Farms* is a product of a long lineage of agricultural transformation in the Sonoran desert, yet part of an effort to return to more traditional methods of cultivation and sales in the very middle of the Sonoran desert. This desert extends along a broad swath of the Southern half of Arizona and New Mexico, and dips into the Mexican state of Sonora. Intense as the Sonoran desert might be, it has attracted millions of Americans to relocate and populate its vast open spaces along the Sunbelt corridor. It is a mysterious region with some of the most inconspicuously diverse and tightly symbiotic ecosystems in North America. Winters are mild and dry and the sun shines nearly every day of the year. The refreshing comfort of walking around in a t-shirt and sunscreen to enjoy spectacular vistas on a warm January days was probably enough

to lull millions of retirees and families across the nation to move to the southwestern deserts. Fueled by a rugged frontier cultural history, entrepreneurs and real estate investors saw endless tracts of desert land that promised opportunity for development. The only crucial thing lacking was a guaranteed supply of water.

The lack of an abundant water source never precluded humans from inhabiting and transforming the desert landscape to meet their needs. As desiccated as the Sonoran desert terrain may be, there are several riparian water routes that channel throughout the Southern regions of Arizona and into Mexico. These rivers and creeks (although declining in vitality each year) are encompassed within hundreds of miles of dry rocky terrain, but provide narrow slices of sustenance to an enormous variety of plants, animals, and even humans. The first pioneers of this landscape were bands of Native Americans who worked their way south along these waterways. All along riparian zones of the Southwest archeologists have discovered evidence of extensive human activity from more than 12,000 years ago (Mann 2006). Just add water in nearly any inhospitable climate and people will eventually settle to make a life.

The riparian oasis in the desert must have appeared as a gift from the gods to the first wanderers who traversed this landscape. To be sure, for thousands of years this water in the desert gave life to an otherwise Martian world. However, the human life sustained along these delicate waterways was limited in their density and population. Archeological ruins along riverbanks in the Sonoran desert show that bands of only a couple dozen people could be supported by the limited water and food sources they relied upon. But for generations of vast epochs of time, humans lived in a fragile balance.

Their land use was restricted, population growth restrained, and their diet was limited. Of course, this brittle balance between humans and their desert habitat would be dramatically altered. When the first Spaniards arrived it was difficult for them to even perceive that civilization had taken root in the desert over the preceding 10,000 years. And so, the opportunities of the Wild West were wide open to the Western world. After pioneers reported back east that there were huge quantities of minerals and money to be made in this region, the Sonoran desert would be transformed forever.

The first non-native population boom in the Sonoran desert took place in the 1880's. Thousands of people made the trek out west to cowboy country in hopes of finding gold, acquiring land, or starting over at the edge of the American frontier. Naturally, the riparian waterways in the desert were attractive to settlers. They too needed this precious resource to water the crops and livestock they escorted into the new terrain. Western pioneers simply needed to drive off the native population and annex the territory from Mexico to truly conquer and control this land. With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed, Geronimo captured, and Billy the Kid killed, the long "civilizing" process could begin its "manifest destiny" in taming the prickly Sonoran desert. Along the Santa Cruz and San Pedro rivers early European pioneers and Mormon settlers tilled up the riverbanks to grow crops and build ranches in a rather short period of time. Military outposts maintained their presence after the conclusion of the Mexican-American War and a railroad was laid through the southern region of the new Arizona territory. All in all, the great deserts of the southwest, and the Sonoran desert in

particular, were well on their way to becoming incorporated into the cultural, economic, and political systems of the expanding federal United States of America.

One crucial factor remained elusive to the desert pioneers. As huge and promising the desert may have been, it was persistently dry and new water sources were a mirage. Pioneers began to bump into the limits of agricultural expansion because of a very real limit to their water supply. At its most basic level, sustained activities in such an arid climate necessitated access to a steady supply of regionally scarce water resources. Rainfall averages in much of the Sonoran desert, however, only hover around ten inches per year. Such a low amount is not nearly enough to satisfy the growth of non-native crops or the thirst of large desert dwellings. Naturally, the great Sonoran desert of the southwest remained an outpost with a comparatively small population comprised mainly of disparate ranches. But the growing interest in southwestern desert climates created huge incentives to lay the foundations for economic growth. A crucial variable would be for engineers to find ways to access and deliver more water deep into the desert. Therefore, the solution for much of the twentieth century was to construct enormous dams and canal systems that diverted Colorado River water into the southernmost reaches of the Sonoran desert.

But could modern farms take root in this environment? The answer, in short, is an emphatic yes because of innovations in advanced hydrology technologies. When it comes to agriculture in the arid Sonoran desert, access to water has always been the first priority. The way water was acquired and used throughout the second half of the twentieth century up until present day, however, is radically different compared to

previous generations. Water usage increased exponentially after lakes Mead and Powell, and the Salt River Reservoirs in Arizona were dammed in the 1920's and 30's. These new huge manmade lakes insured perennial flows of water to irrigate vast acreage of crops. Non-native crops that required extensive water could be grown on enormous scales previously unimaginable for this region. Further, today there is a massive canal running the length of Arizona. Turbines push 1.5 million acre-feet of water along a 336-mile route to the southern reaches of the United States border.<sup>8</sup> The construction of the Central Arizona Project canal is the largest and most expensive ever constructed in America and directly supplies water for municipalities all across the Sonoran desert. Most of this water, however, is used for irrigation in agriculture; diverting much of the Colorado River and utilizing the largest proportion of electricity of any source in the state of Arizona to power the turbines. In return, agriculture has become a huge industry in Arizona over the last half century.

Combined with this steady supply of water delivered by the canal, there are several ideal factors for growing crops in the Sonoran desert. Unlike the thick fertile soils of the Midwest, the desert consists of tough sandy and salty dirt. In certain areas, however, silt is common and provides good conditions for plant growth. Modern machinery can break up tough caliche soil into a manageable consistency for planting crops. Once this tough soil is churned and nutrients are added (natural or synthetic) a substantial number of commodity crop strains can thrive. Further, crops can grow in this desert climate year-round because the winter months usually do not experience sustained

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<sup>8</sup> Central Arizona Project: <http://www.cap-az.com/aboutus/faq.aspx>

drops in temperatures below freezing. Therefore, instead of breaking from crop activities in winter months like many farms in the northwest, Midwest, and northeast are forced to do, agriculture can continue uninterrupted in the warmer zones of the southwest. The ability to work the land for year-round harvests gives farmers a financial cushion in the winter season that are unavailable in other parts of the country. Today farming in the desert has truly blossomed and is a core staple of the regional and even national economy

Water abundance from the canal has brought undeniable benefits to life in the desert and in many regards allowed for a prolonged economic boom. Urban hubs, mining, and agriculture all require enormous quantities of water and for much of the twentieth century it was available, for all intents and purposes, in limitless supply. However, along with perceived assurance of long-term water security farmers, city planners, and citizens became complacent with the status quo. The way of life in the desert simply came to be expected that water would always be provided easily and cheaply. But, like a house of cards built up with an unstable framework, an agricultural and municipal economy built around the squandering of a scarce resource must surely restructure or face potential collapse. The curse of our day, then, is that inhabitants of the arid southwest live in an economic and agricultural system dependent upon this precious and non-renewable resource with few large-scale alternatives on the horizon. Even more, it is the consensus of many hydrology and climate experts that most of the southwest, and the Sonoran desert in particular, will very likely face prolonged draught midway through the twenty-first century. Climatologists expect this drought to be combined with a steep decline in Rocky Mountain snowpack melt that feeds into the Colorado River (Reisner

1993; deBuys 2013). Indeed, some of the biggest political and environmental battles to be waged across the globe and states in the American west in the next few decades will likely revolve around the distribution of water rights amidst a dwindling supply (Powell 2011). Any long term agricultural planning in the western region of the United States must heed these warnings or face imminent hardship.

The preferred methods for watering fields in the desert are unsustainable for long-term large-scale agriculture in Sonoran desert. Currently, a process of "flood irrigation" or the use of circular spraying systems is the standard techniques for watering crops in southern Arizona. Both of these methods are terribly inefficient and wasteful, but are the easiest way of quenching the thirst of millions of plants in immense fields.



Figure 6: Irrigating the West. Classic irrigation circles in the desert (left). Typical flood irrigation (right).

Photographs by: Jim Wark, AgStock Images/Corbis (left) and Jeff Vanuga, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (right).

Combined with warm sunny weather nearly every day of the year, flood irrigation has become the most economical way for farmers to maintain persistently high yields in the short term. Municipalities also continue to drill ever deeper each year to tap the declining water table. During much of the economic expansion of the American southwest,

however, it appeared that there would be an indefinite plentiful supply of water as long as experts could continue to utilize new hydrology technologies. It is becoming clear, though, that using water this way cannot persist throughout the twenty-first century. As growing percentage of the population becomes aware of this inconvenient fact many are starting to ask what practical steps our society can take to make adjustments for the long-term sustainable health of our economies and environments. *Desert Sky* was attempting to take the lead in the Tucson community in pursuit of a sustainable agricultural economy at the local level. My intent would be to pursue their aspirations, strategies, and coordination with market actors as they endeavored to survive as so many generations before in this harsh and ancient desert landscape.

### *Ethnography and Participant Observation*

Extensive participation with the daily life of a local organic farm allowed me to observe the values, ambitions, identity, and underlying drivers of a successful alternative food movement as it is situated in place and time. The first thing I learned, however, is that farming of any variety, organic or not, is exhausting. Working the land, regardless of one's orientation to it is tough labor. It is an outdoors job that requires constant exposure to the elements. After a long day it is impossible not to end filthy and stinky after dealing with dirt and excrement for hours on end. Some days are exceedingly hot and others uncomfortably cold. For a newcomer, muscles ache, blisters form, and expectations for comfort quickly dwindle away. On any farm work never really ends either, but persists with one task blending into another. It isn't that farmers want to work all the time but this



life demands it. Daylight hours are a precious natural clock that shine down for a finite amount time to be spent working in a field. There are simply too many jobs to complete in one day to put off starting any later than 5:30 in the morning. And so, I began laboring at *Desert Sky* with my hands in the dirt at obscenely early hours and anticipating ten hours of blazing sun on my back. "How did I get myself into this situation," I often thought.

Like many other curious individuals, I had opted in voluntarily. Partaking in the daily grind of agrarian farm labor illuminated an entirely new orientation to the human relationship with land. A strong ethos guided the methodology of cultivation and harvest on both large and small scales. Central to all local organic farming and the market counterparts is a tacit belief system that orients field actors in how they believe agriculture should and should not operate. This ethnographic experience exposed me to this ethos and its accompanying practices that played out in fields and marketplaces.

Ethnography is an interesting method to gather data about the social world because it requires the researcher to become fully engulfed into the ebbs and flows of a field site. There is an intimacy ethnographers share with field participants. Often ethnographers gradually feel as though they have become accepted members of the social group they are studying which gives them special insight into nuances of group dynamics (Emerson et al. 1995). Indeed, I had this experience and was warmly embraced by the farmers and CSA members I came to know very personally over two years. Without this closeness I would have had a difficult time understanding the latent meanings so natural to the farmers and their associates, but unfamiliar and ambiguous to those outside of the

field. While interviews allowed me to construct a narrative for what consumption entailed in this local market, the ethnography of farm life itself was the core of this social field in which all meaning emanated outward. In short, my ethnographic participation brought substance to the more hidden realities enacted and shared just below the surface that a more casual observer might not perceive.

I participated in all work activities that arose on any given day. Some mornings I would arrive at the start of the day and stay until dusk. Other days after it got dark I would sleep on a couch to spend off-hour time with the farmers and WWOOFers. Whether it be planting and harvesting by day, or cooking and cleaning by night, work never completely ceased. Fortunately for me this meant that I would always have a chance to be involved with the bustle on the farm. During small breaks or quiet moments at the end of the day I would find a quiet place to collect my jottings and quickly write them up into more cohesive fieldnotes. Daily fieldnotes would comprise the core of my participant observation data. At a later stage near the end of the week I would consolidate disparate fieldnotes into a more uniform memo around the emergent key themes and members' meanings (Emerson et al. 1995, 157-162). After several months I was able to decipher the various roles different members adopted as well as the symbolic meanings and practices reproduced on a daily or weekly basis.

In this budding market movement I would constantly interact with a variety of interesting characters positioned along its economic spectrum. While the bulk of my ethnographic work took place in the dirt at a farm, it also brought me into contact with other field members at various locations in the community. I would shuttle along with

farmers to farmers markets and also help make deliveries to the kitchens where high-end chefs served gourmet foods at luxurious restaurants. These opportunities brought me into interesting polar worlds; some humble and others ostentatious. When working at the farmers market booth I would meet and converse with a range of customers young and old, rich and poor. In other circumstances we would deliver to restaurants of gastronomic prestige where I witnessed chefs using *Desert Sky's* produce for its culinary appeal. Patrons explored their newfound love for local food and chefs would proudly present *Desert Sky* fruits and vegetables on the menu as markers of cultural distinction. In these settings a combination of affluence and a taste for all things local resulted in a display of rustic indulgence where the past and present, local and global, swirled together into an aura of nostalgia overdrive. An atmosphere of celebration blanketed these expensive restaurants because of their homage to local cuisine and idiosyncrasy on the menu.

An ethnographic account of this particular social field was ideal because I could simply follow the farmers' lead down the market trail. Each new setting provided a unique twist on the nature of the local food community. The details of each place would vary but the underlying themes would persist. Niche market members of all types were looking for some type of distinguishable quality in the local organic food that signaled authenticity in cultivation and commitment to responsible growth. Further, each constituency to this local niche market expressed strong admiration for local organic farmers for providing foods to their community they could trust and value. The various ways different members described these views took shape in diverse illustrations, but all

centered on a moral interpretation of the superiority of local organic over any other form of agricultural production.

### *Interviews with Community Supported Agriculture*

*Desert Sky Farms* utilized the Community Supported Agriculture model to finance its growing operation. The novelty of CSA is that it directly connects nearby community members with local farmers who are in need of investments to expand their agricultural activities and sales. A CSA share usually last just one season (12-15 weeks) and can be renewed accordingly at the beginning of new seasons. This type of arrangement allows farmers to receive funds at the start of a growing season, engage in direct interpersonal contact with their customers, and through transparency and close economic proximity, share the risks and rewards with their investors. Of course, a successful CSA program requires two things: 1) the ability of a local farm to produce enough varieties of foods for customers throughout a season, and 2) a large enough community body interested and willing to invest in a local farm.

In the course of my ethnographic participation with *Desert Sky*, I observed the crucial role that CSA played in allowing the farm take off and integrate fully with the local organic market. In less than one year's time, this farm had secured more than 50 individuals or households in the greater Tucson region who had invested \$325 at the beginning of each season in return for fresh produce. CSA represented the core and most durable financial support for this type of farming. *Desert Sky's* members offered a particularly interesting window of insight into how and why this economic framework

held together as the local market expanded in activity and sales. I knew that if I wanted to accurately understand the full anatomy of this market, I would need to conduct extensive in-depth interviews with as many of these members as possible.

After my second season working with *Desert Sky* and selling produce at their booth, I attained a list of their most current CSA roster. This list contained the name, number, and email address of every current CSA member with the farm. In total, there were 50 names of people in this 2010 autumn season share. My goal would be to contact and set up interviews with as many of them as possible. Each held valuable information pertaining to this local market and could potentially contribute a piece of the puzzle in exposing the latent cultural and economic meanings supporting its development. By opting into this unconventional program that requires a substantial sum of money invested up front, these members were the ideal individuals to interview. I hoped to elicit from CSA members their motivations for taking part in this unique form of consumerism.

My method for making contact with CSA members from *Desert Sky* was not complicated. Every Sunday at the farmers market *Desert Sky* set up a double tent booth that served as both a stand to display produce and a pick-up location for reserved CSA produce. Their layout allowed casual shoppers to peruse the available foods for the week but also had a separate section behind the table where CSA food was organized by respective produce items and sorted in labeled container bins. A sign-in sheet lay adjacent to the row of bins where members could check off their name prior to gathering their share. From there members would proceed to collect the designated allotment of foods that had been harvested during the previous week. For example, in any given week

a CSA share might include 6-9 different items (rainbow chard, spinach, carrots, eggs, etc.) arranged vertically along the length of two tables. Members would move down the row to fill their bags or baskets with collected produce that changed on a weekly basis. Because this pick-up routine occurred every Sunday, I began to recognize faces, remember names, and build simple relationships with the members. After a couple months, I was on a first name basis with many of the members who came to pick up their share every week at the farmers market.

This repetitive interpersonal interaction and the social connection that emerged out of it allowed me to very easily inquire with CSA members about their receptivity to doing an interview with me. Week after week I would help the same people identify which produce to pick up, share some tips I had learned about prepping and cooking the food, and even discuss recent events that had happened at *Desert Sky Farms*. Our ongoing conversations served to strengthen my acquaintances with CSA members and made it easier to establish an interview. Often, while I was working at the farmers market booth, I would help sell produce and restock items. As CSA members arrived throughout the morning, I would make a concerted effort to greet them and see if they needed any help. Once members acquired all of the items for the share, I would tell them about my interest in CSA as a method for consuming local food and ask if they would be interested in telling me more about their experience with the program. Of the 57 people I approached for interviews in this manner, 53 agreed.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> An interviewee profile, including age, income, occupation, political affiliation, and educational attainment can be found in Appendix B.

The timeline for these interviews began in January of 2011 and ended in March of 2012. During the course of one year, *Desert Sky* would offer four seasonal CSA shares with 50 available slots. Therefore, this timeline encompassed five separate CSA seasons with a potential for 250 separate individuals or families. However, *Desert Sky* maintained a fairly high rollover rate of members from one season to the next. Somewhere between 60%-80% of members would usually renew their CSA share into the succession of the proceeding season. At the end of these five particular seasons I estimate the CSA pool from which I sampled for interviews consisted of approximately 90 individuals. Towards the end of my ethnographic work with *Desert Sky*, it became difficult to build the same type of relationships with new CSA member replacements compared to others who I had gotten to know over the course of 15 months. Nonetheless, a significant amount of my interviewees were long-time shareholders and many were from the first cohort of the farm's initial year. These members ended up providing very detailed and valuable information about their long-standing investment and economic interaction with *Desert Sky Farms* and comprised the lion's share of my interviewee sample population.

Most interviews took place in a courtyard at the farmers market. I had a list of about 18-20 questions I would ask to all respondents, as well as more infrequent and informal questions depending on the flow of our conversation.<sup>10</sup> Each interview was iterative and semi-structured in order to capture essential pathways of conversation as well as open-ended thoughts and perspectives the interviewees were willing to share

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<sup>10</sup> A list of scheduled interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

without probing. For example, I wanted to know some of the primary motivations CSA members attributed to their investment in a local farm without alluding to any of my preconceived hypotheses or biases. Therefore, I would open with a series of innocuous questions about the member's background and what they were willing to tell me about their involvement with Community Supported Agriculture. Often, this simple invitation to share wide-open reflections from interviewees about their involvement with the program was enough to capture significant cultural and economic themes latent to the local food movement. When some interviews would become stale or interviewees were slow to divulge their thoughts, I would then refer to a pre-set list of probing questions that addressed themes that typically surfaced during my conversation with most other interview respondents. This strategy worked well and with few exceptions elicited quality responses.

The average interview would take about 45 minutes to complete and sometimes could last more than 1 hour depending on the verbosity of particular members. As my interviews progressed over a series of months, patterned themes began to emerge. Eventually, this grounded iterative processes allowed me to inductively tailor new questions. Primary themes revolved around issues of transparency and trust and their impact on subjective sentimental consumer emotions. CSA members constantly alluded to perceptions of authenticity and valorization through this type of market, but often in ambiguous terms. Before I restructured my interview questions to take into account these themes, early interview conversations revolving around emergent topics of authenticity and transparency tended to be amorphous.



After the first series of interviews I was also able to eliminate impertinent questions and restructure the interview schedule with more effective and relevant questions. These replacement questions proved to be easier for CSA members to contemplate and respond with concise formulated answers. My inclusion of a series of discreet probing questions about their understanding of values, identity, and authenticity that permeated through the local food markets allowed me to extract a coherent narrative of the primary meanings behind this field. Further, from these inductively designed questions, I was able to more precisely gauge the extent to which the economic model and social field CSA embodied was able to pull disparate actors inward to build density around a local market. After spending months working with the farmers and WWOOFers at *Desert Sky*, I also began to draw connections to shared meanings between the producers and consumers in this market. I ended up reformulating a series of questions for CSA members about their mutual expectations and priorities with the farmers. Once I implemented these questions, I was surprised at the level of homologies between producer and consumer in this market setting. In the end, many of the primary themes that surfaced from my extended semi-structured interviews also shared an ethnographic counterpart of a production habitus at *Desert Sky Farms*. It is the systematic merging of my ethnographic data with interview themes that I jointly organize. My analytic objective is to display the affinity of meanings within this field as a whole as it is enacted by producers and received by a variety of consumers.

## CHAPTER 7: THE LOCAL ORGANIC SOCIAL FIELD

The most effective way to analyze the development of the local organic food movement is by mapping out the structural relations through which primary actors engage with one another. Over the course of my participant observation with *Desert Sky Farms*, I began to document patterns of social interaction. These interactions occurred in specific locations with a rotating cast of individuals and groups who would shuffle in and out of various markets and farm related social settings. Some locations and actors appeared more frequently than others, but the full cast cycled through in one stage or another approximately every two months. Some field events took place daily, others weekly, and still some only bi-monthly. In my fieldnotes, I noted sets of field cycles and events comprised by both primary and peripheral strategic actors. What emerged was a well-organized coalition of disparate individuals and groups who occupied various roles. These roles were not very exclusive or hierarchical in nature, but they did provide some specialized structure to this particular field. After just a few months, it became apparent who the leaders were directing the field forward and influencing its style.

At the heart of any field there are highly regarded central strategic actors who help orient the actions of other field members. These central actors serve as prominent guides and set the agenda for the field through either hierarchical or coalitional organization. Field members base and assess their own actions in comparison with these key players in the field. The stability of this dynamic is likely to persist so long as no severe internal contentions or exogenous shock unduly challenge the unity within it. Central actors are rich in social and cultural (and perhaps, but not necessarily, economic)

capital that serves to secure their leadership position and their interests in advancing the state of the field as a whole. Further, central actors in the field can be effective persuaders and garner a loyal following if they exude a charisma that is contagious amongst others. A leader's charismatic social skill helps to foster solidarity within the field by projecting unifying themes that members strongly identify with and uphold.

In the field for local organic farming that I worked within, the farmers at *Desert Sky* served as the de facto central actors. Their backgrounds, identities, and interests for making headway into the local organic food market all converged at a very opportune time. They were able to establish the farm and project their identity in a visible way to the nearby niche markets precisely when interest in local food was quickly accruing a foothold nationwide. In some ways, the *Desert Sky* farmers were just the tip of an economic iceberg that surfaced with a long history hidden beneath the water. As vanguards of the new agrarians, these farmers had amassed a composite identity that served them very well and was appealing to others in their cultural and economic vicinity. The immediately recognizable exterior aesthetic of the farmers was that of rugged hippies. I never saw any of the four farmers without tan skin, dirt under their fingernails, long hair, plain work clothes with dirt stains, and boots. These were "authentic" agrarian farmers on the local scene and it was notable from first glance.

While style can be effective by sending quick symbolic signals to would be observers, external aesthetics does not suffice when leading a social field for the long run. The *Desert Sky* farmers, however, were also highly sophisticated cultural and political entrepreneurs. Their strident "back to the land" mentality, environmental

conscientiousness, progressive politics, and hard-work ethos gave them broad appeal within the local organic food movement already established in the Tucson region. Deep roots and social ties in Southern Arizona also gave them a stable network to work within. With these two features combined they became highly adept at pulling together disparate people in a seamless manner.

Field leaders are also usually distinguishable from others in that they usually possess unique skills or character traits that are difficult to replicate. In my two years making observations at *Desert Sky* and their markets I was constantly surprised at the depth of knowledge, both broad and detailed, the farmers could casually convey in any circumstance. Their understanding of land and soil, plant varieties, and cultivation techniques were reflective of years of expertise. This type of substantial body of knowledge is not acquired easily or obtainable from conventional sources; making their expertise all the more remarkable. I felt myself absorbing core facets of this knowledge about various farming practices and plant characteristics through daily shared experiences with the farmers. For example, I now know the pithy texture of a ripe radish and the proper way to thin a bed of lettuce to ensure prolonged growth. Still, the more I learned, the more I became aware of the complete limitations of my knowledge compared to the expertise of these farmers who could easily manage overlapping tasks on several acres of diverse cropland. Their expertise was simultaneously broad but also highly specific to the complex details of a diverse farming and marketing operation. Ultimately, this display of expertise worked to their advantage within this particular strategic action field. For leaders, the acquisition of skills and the display of acute comprehension to details

within a field are important factor in setting them apart from others in the field.

Possession of scarce knowledge allows these leaders to cash in on cultural capital. Most importantly, it establishes legitimacy and allows them to successfully negotiate within field boundaries.

Within any field, particularly those that include markets, economic capital always ends up playing a significant role. Sometimes money is on prominent display and brandished in order to secure positioning. In other field settings, the flow of money is less overt and positioning is settled more so through cultural displays and social ties. As a conduit for power and prestige, actors with economic, cultural, or social assets have an easier time setting the agenda and advancing their interests within a field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Bourdieu 1984). As I expected, various forms of capital surfaced and influenced internal dynamics in the local organic food field in a rather typical fashion. However, I did observe some rather unusual flows of capital that I did not initially anticipate. A large proportion of *Desert Sky's* capital is continuously raised directly through community funds. Through interest generated by word-of-mouth, the farm began amassing a cluster of local supporters who expressed a desire to invest in the farm through Community Supported Agriculture. This investment model would end up being very different from traditional financing. Instead of receiving in kind monetary returns, CSA investments would be repaid with a share of the farm's productive output on a weekly basis. The return would either be abundant or sparse depending upon the environmental and growing conditions occurring at the farm from the previous week.

In their initial push to organize a CSA program that would bring together the surrounding community with the farm, *Desert Sky* was able to package and sell over 50 investment shares into the farm itself in return for weekly produce. At a rate of \$325 per share, *Desert Sky* collected approximately \$65,000 in CSA funds their first year of operating. The farmers used these investments to build a sound infrastructure and purchase equipment for future expansion. Therefore, CSA members became the primary financiers of the farming operation in this field. Through CSA economic engagement in the form of an up-front investment, *Desert Sky* was able to scale up their agricultural operation and make greater headway into the market field.

Other players who entered into this market ended up contributing to the financing of the farm as well. High-end chefs began building contact with the farm and slowly selected produce to incorporate into restaurant menus. Over the seasons, these chefs would begin to scale up their usage of farm fresh foods and were regularly buying boxes of different produce from *Desert Sky* on a weekly basis. Once the farm and different chefs in town formed a stable business relationship, *Desert Sky* began to design special CSA shares for restaurants. Some chefs were interested in securing a steady inventory of micro-greens or lettuce. Others chefs were in need of micro greens, spinach, carrots, or eggplant. Depending on the goals of the different chefs, *Desert Sky* would build a tailored CSA share that functioned the same as it did for any other member. Some chefs would invest in seasonal or yearly shares up front and would receive a weekly delivery of their requested foods to their restaurants. Because of the enormous amount of community cultural capital and prestige associated with their culinary style, these

celebrated chefs were the most prominent individuals bankrolling farms within the field. It became evident through my conversations with chefs and food reviews in the newspaper that they were admired for creating a regional cuisine by fusing the tastes peculiar to the Southwest with the ethos of local farming. Conspicuous display of local foods from *Desert Sky* elevated their field standing all the more as chefs sought to design their restaurants with a patina of authenticity. Incorporation and display of local food on menus around town was emblematic of a legitimate field movement endorsed by cultural gatekeepers.

A third set of market actors who helped to finance the local organic market field in general, and *Desert Sky* in particular, were various organizations in the Tucson metro area. For example, an elementary school and a cooperatively owned grocery store both invested in *Desert Sky* with CSA shares that fit the respective dynamics of their organizations. The cooperative grocery paid up front to secure five years of produce from *Desert Sky* that would be continuously sold in their store. In all, the cooperative's CSA enabled funds of approximately \$25,000 to be available to *Desert Sky* for immediate use. This direct capital for agricultural operations was a much-needed boost that gave the farm additional financial security to expand their localized economic ambitions and meet the growing demands from the community.

Another organization that became involved with this field was an elementary on the eastern edge of Tucson. This school had begun an interesting lunch program for their students in 2010. Students were to begin learning how to prepare certain foods in the cafeteria as part of the school curriculum. The program would give children hands on

experience with different types of unprocessed foods and teach them several cooking techniques. Parents and teachers involved with the school program contacted *Desert Sky* about acquiring a specialized CSA share for the cafeteria. The farmers agreed and upon receiving the up-front direct funds, *Desert Sky* began to plan weekly cultivation and Wednesday deliveries to the elementary school. The food was stored in the cafeteria refrigerators and then incorporated onto the menu for lunches throughout the proceeding week. Parents of the school also invited the farmers to set up a farmers market booth on the playground where parents and teachers could buy produce after school hours.

A final group of market actors who contributed to the financing of *Desert Sky* were the numerous casual shoppers who purchased food from the farmers market booth on weekends. While these purchases were not guaranteed like the CSA shares, this type of consumption was a vital component of the financial security for the farm. Each week *Desert Sky* came to the market prepared with a truck full of food based on an estimation of what could be sold. Because their entire operation was designed around the procurement of fresh food, *Desert Sky* could not store their inventory indefinitely like many other businesses. It was imperative that their food be sold within a short time frame lest it expire within a matter of days. Frequent and casual shoppers, however, lined up each and every week to purchase produce à la carte until the booth was nearly stripped bare. Although booth sales did not comprise the majority of the farm's market share, price points were set a little higher because these items were not sold in bulk and, therefore, provided the largest profit margin of any type of sales distribution. This



invaluable customer base helped make *Desert Sky* a visible presence at the market and generated advertising by word of mouth among shoppers.

In the end a number of key and peripheral market actors and organizations emerged to form a market coalition backing *Desert Sky* and other local food initiatives. This combination resulted in a widespread investment portfolio that guaranteed *Desert Sky* with an immediate flow of cash. These interest free community investments would be difficult to acquire through other traditional lending mechanisms. Further, *Desert Sky* was not expected to make in-kind repayments. Instead, CSA shares to individuals, families, chefs, and organizations were always reciprocated with fresh food directly from the farm on a weekly basis. In summary, the financing model of this field accomplished two very important outcomes for *Desert Sky*; a) money is made available immediately to the farm, and b) the share contract guarantees purchase throughput of a rather substantial amount of weekly fresh foods, thus preventing uncertainty, glut, and waste. Overall, this program offers an efficient exchange of money for desirable goods between producer and consumers on a small scale. Below is a diagram of the field space for this particular market for local organic foods.

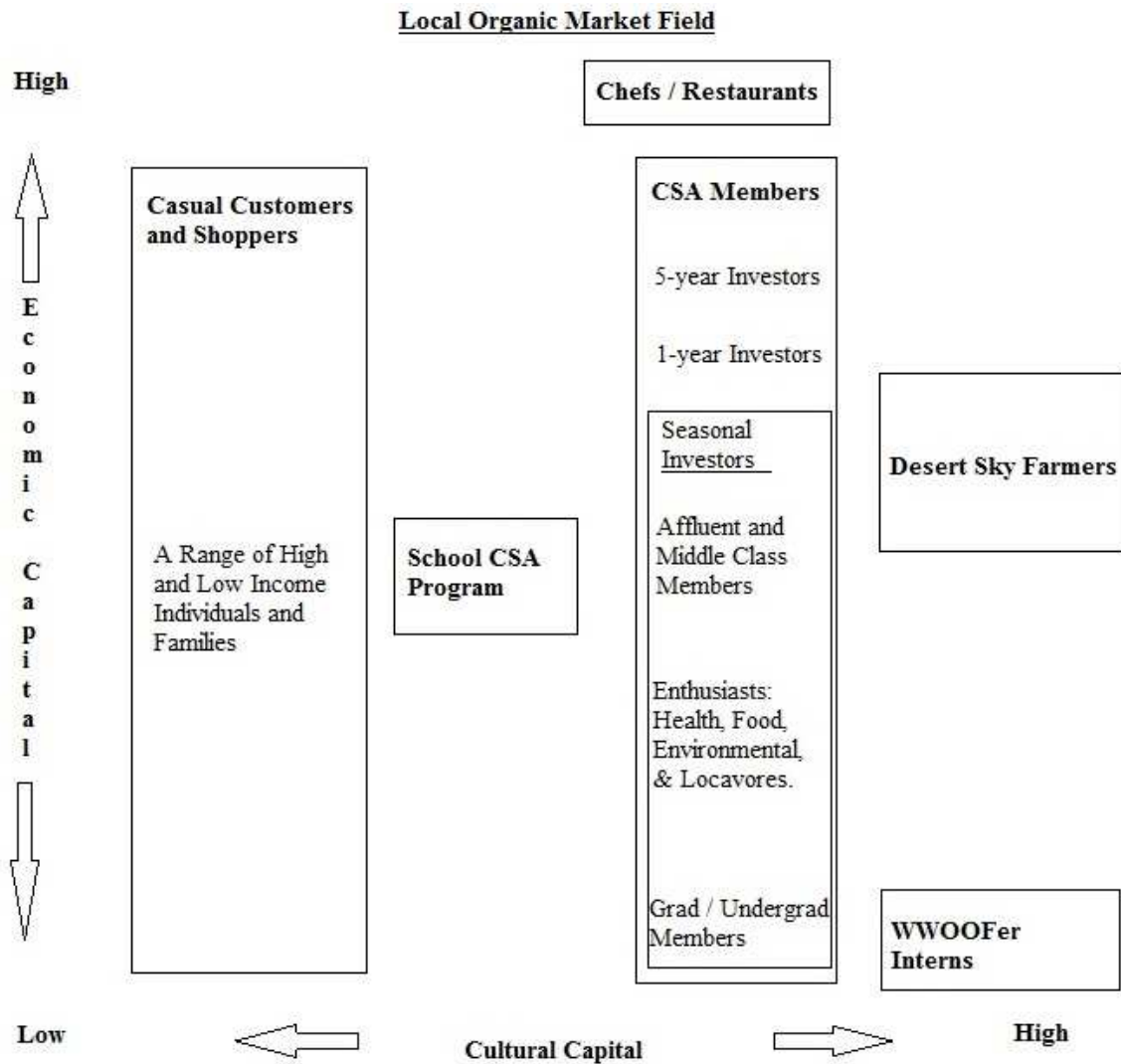


Figure 7: Field space for the local organic market.

### *Chefs and Restaurant Settings*

It became increasingly common to find both trendy and established high-end restaurants using a variety of local food ingredients as part of an attempt to stay relevant with the new interests of “foodie” culture. During my duration working with the farm a number of restaurants in the Tucson metro area quickly began incorporating *Desert Sky*

produce into their kitchens for entrées. Menus and greeting boards would often times prominently display a variant of a phrase such as, “Now proudly serving fresh vegetables from *Desert Sky Farms*” or “Spring Mix Salad with greens from *Desert Sky Farms*”. Sometimes there would be information about the location and distance of the farm from the restaurant for guests to read. It was obvious that these chefs wanted attention directed toward the fact that fresh local foods were now a priority in their restaurants and that *Desert Sky* represented the proper orientation to local agriculture.

On occasion I would make deliveries from the farm to various restaurants around town. I would make my way back to the kitchens and help unload boxes of produce into refrigerators. The chefs would usually meet me and take a look at the foods to make sure they were getting what had been ordered. This became the easiest way to make contact with chefs and eventually establish a rapport. During deliveries I would ask questions about what they were looking for in the foods they cooked with and their connection to local farms. In every conversation I had with the chefs each would gush with admiration for local produce and the farmers with whom they did business. For example, the head chef at an independently operated wine and bistro eatery in the central region of the city claimed that the vegetables he purchased from *Desert Sky* were “unparalleled in quality and taste because of the freshness and integrity of local organic farming”. From a purely utilitarian standpoint this chef had made a conscientious decision to transition toward local organic food suppliers because the ingredients were “simply better to cook with and have superior taste”. In his opinion, if his customers were going to be paying for high quality food he needed to find the best foods possible.

For other chefs I met and interviewed, their connection to *Desert Sky* and the larger local organic movement was more philosophical in nature. During one delivery I had the opportunity to conduct a 30-minute interview with the most respected and award-winning chef in the entire city. In a quiet section of his restaurant I sat down with Enzo and we talked casually about his career as a chef. He told me about his experiences cooking around the world and motivations for using local organic foods as much as possible. Enzo is a lifelong chef and had spent much of his early career in France. He wanted to start a French restaurant in the United States, but found the food system supply was very different than he was accustomed to. There were practical elements to how food was grown and supplied for French chefs that he had difficulty replicating here. He told me that in France chefs would wander to the nearby markets and buy foods on a daily or weekly basis. Their menus would change depending on the region, season, and availability at any particular time. Enzo found this practicality to be smart and useful to the type of restaurant he wanted to operate in America.

In 1983 Enzo started procuring local foods from farmers and gardeners. Like the previous chef I had interviewed, Enzo said his main motivation for buying local organic produce was that it is “super fresh, which means it tastes good and is better for you”. He went on to say:

“It just makes practical sense. Why purchase something that has been harvested and packed to be shipped across the country or world when you can get something better straight from the source the day before and support someone local? As a chef

you are always looking for good ingredients that can be utilized in a way that reflects the growing season, regional variety, and local palette. Here in the desert we have a lot of squash, chilies, peppers, tomatoes, greens...It makes sense to get those foods local and fresh at the peak of ripeness for our rotating menu if we want it to be the best of this region.”

His affinity for local foods went deeper than this, though. For Enzo local foods in his restaurant reflected a celebration of place and identity. When I asked him how his patrons received local foods on the menu, he said the response had been nothing but positive. In his opinion it creates an added layer of personalization to the menu that allows him to converse with customers about the food source and why it is special to him.

“Customers express an interest and curiosity in the local foods on the menu. It makes them feel connected to their food in a different and personal social way”, Enzo said.

I asked how local foods had changed the nature of his restaurant and he replied,

“It has been really neat for our kitchen and wait staff to see where the food they are cooking and serving comes from. It makes them feel connected to the place they live and work. People grew this food and they know their faces and lives...not like a giant box of food that gets shipped in from who knows where. You just have no connection to that, and building something personal is really what this is all about.”

Finally, I asked Enzo about his relationship to the farmers at *Desert Sky*. He said he knew right off the bat they were the real deal.

“They were walking the walk, not cutting corners, doing everything with a passion that I could feel”, he said. He continued, “I have been in this business for a long time and they are so very passionate about what they do. It is just evident to me. They are looking at their job with a broad perspective, using the right types of microbial and composting for total soil building and health. They are building a diverse and integrative farm and, in the process, growing some very wonderful foods. They know what they are doing and they do it very well.”

I was struck by how committed this celebrated chef was to the local organic food movement. His loyalty not only served a business interest but was also an attempt to generate a more solid social food system devoted to quality, responsible growing, and community. By utilizing the economic and cultural capital he had accumulated over years as a chef, Enzo contributed to the growth of this social field in a unique manner. His history and public stature allowed him to assume the role as a type of cultural gatekeeper in the high-end spectrum of this field. Further, his strong support of nearby farmers also helped to establish legitimacy for local organic farming into an exclusive sector of the market.

The role Enzo and other chefs played as strategic actors underscored the wide range of vested interests encompassed within this field. While all of the chefs expressed satisfaction in purchasing quality local organics from farmers they admired, their

integration with this niche market served to further their economic interests. Chefs were able to utilize the imagery and hype surrounding local foods to carve out and display distinction. The result is that they gratified affluent patrons who valorized locally sourced foods. This was a great deal for the farmers at *Desert Sky*. It extended their sales into high-end sectors of the market that would otherwise be difficult to enter into. However, one critique of local foods is that it is largely insulated from the masses because of price. When chefs appropriate local organic foods into their expensive restaurants it further reinforces the already rigid economic boundaries that separate it from more traditional market outlets.

Despite this concern, *Desert Sky* and the chefs all spoke of the limited role local organics play in the restaurant industry. As Enzo told me, “This is just a start.” For everyone I encountered the main goal was to see the availability of local organic foods increase in appeal and sales while eventually decrease in price. Restaurants were just one of many branches that this niche market could extend into. Sale in high-end restaurants also helped provide *Desert Sky* with a boost of income to expand their production for other market sectors like schools and local grocery stores. The tough reality for any nontraditional niche market is that capital must be accumulated by traditional means. Even if the goals are progressive and the ambitions are lofty, niche markets must compete and make a profit if they want to survive. Selling to affluent sectors was an option the farm was willing to accept in order to make possible their overall vision for a sustainable local food economy.

*Field Reproduction: Labor and Education on a Local Organic Farm*

Physical and creative energy from field members is a necessary element in sustaining field activity. Without actors engaged in specific roles of production or consumption, a market field cannot operate indefinitely. Money is the crucial lifeblood but the reproduction of a field requires more than economic support alone. Securing money from the surrounding community is one thing, but making good on a promise to provide a variety of fresh crops over the upcoming months is quite another. *Desert Sky* needed to garner enough trust from their members so they could hold up their end of the bargain with a hefty breadth of unique heirloom foods. Of course, this trust required more than just idealism and determination on the part of Alex, Jen, Tim, and Sean. They were going to need a large and steady supply of help. Demand was building and in the passing months I worked the farm needed more land and hands to bring a continuous stream of diverse foods to excited customers. It was common to see people from the community visit the farm for a day or two and help with some big projects, but *Desert Sky* was going to need more reliable labor. When they made the initial big push to increase production I was unsure how they would acquire dependable work they could afford. One day the farmers told me about their experience with a program that facilitated their initial foray into agrarian farming methods and marketing. Alex, Jen, and Tim had worked and met each other as interns on a local organic farm in the previous years. Their internships were coordinated through an international organization called Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). Based on their common experience with this program the farmers decided to create their own WWOOFing



program at *Desert Sky*. Each of the farmers spoke highly of the practical and personal value they received from WWOOFing in the past. It was a model they admired and wanted to offer to other passionate young agrarians. Plus, beginning an internship program on their farm would provide the constant supply of labor needed to boost cultivation and production if they were to expand for the local market.

Like most farms in the United States, *Desert Sky's* growing operations would require additional help throughout the year to complete its jobs. Unlike conventional farms, though, *Desert Sky* accomplished all of its planting, cultivating, and harvesting by hand. This is rather typical of small-scale local organic farms but makes even medium sized operations too unwieldy for just a few family members or workers. Any type of agriculture that is practiced with manual laborers using only hands and simple machinery to do the bulk of the work will need a relatively large workforce per acre to keep up with tasks. As the local organic farming movement accelerated and spread out in disparate communities all across America, new farmers quickly found they needed additional labor. Many of these new farms, however, did not have the financial resources to pay for labor on the scale required to operate a functioning agricultural enterprise.

The WWOOF program is an interesting and relatively obscure movement that originated in the 1970's. It began to emerge rapidly in the late 1990's in a way that helped local organic farmers solve their shortage in labor and finances. In the year 2000, WWOOF's network was launched online in order to "link people who want to volunteer on organic farms or small holdings with people who are looking for volunteer help."<sup>11</sup> In

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<sup>11</sup> WWOOF website: <http://www.woof.org/>

a short duration of time suddenly thousands of people who yearned to learn more about and experience organic farming had contact information at their fingertips about joining organic farms across the world. WWOOF served as the first and most popular social networking website for young local organic farms that is still widely used today. Farms from 99 countries utilize the networking interface with farm profiles, work expectations, and room and board details. Anyone with Internet access can browse through different types of farms listed by location. If a particular farm piques someone's interest that individual can then proceed to communicate with that farm and inquire about making arrangements for volunteer work. Most people volunteer for 3-month intervals and currently thousands of people around the country are working as WWOOFers in return for food, housing, and free agricultural education in organic growing methods.

Benefits from the WWOOFing program are mutual for both farms and the interns. Alex explained to me “many of the skills necessary to successfully operate an alternative farm are no longer taught in agricultural schools in colleges and universities.” Instead, local organic methods are handed down through an apprenticeship style of education. Agrarian farmers are either raised into the lifestyle through family and friends or attain the skills and know-how through alternative programs or internship programs. Either way, the educational process for this type of farming is not something that can be attained through standard procedures. Instead, skills and knowledge are transferred more informally through a network of alternative farms and organizations. Therefore, if an individual is interested in learning how to start a local organic farm or work within its new markets, they will need to become familiar with the methods from unconventional

sources. The WWOOFing model is ideal in this regard. Farmers are able to pass on years of wisdom and knowledge about authentic organic growing procedures directly on their farm side by side with interns. Through working a variety of tasks, interns become familiar with agrarian and other organic methods of growing that they can eventually transfer into their own agricultural ventures. On the flipside, a crucial component of WWOOF for the farms is the ability to utilize free or cheap labor to help expand operations and meet the demands of growing local markets. This process is how three of *Desert Sky's* farmers entered the movement and it was the method of practice they would adopt to expand their capacity to grow and distribute local produce.



Figure 8: Organizing a list of daily tasks for WWOOFers to complete.

When the farm decided to implement their own WWOOFing program, I asked Alex to tell me a little bit about the farm's motivations and what they hoped to achieve through it. His response focused not on the benefit to the farm, but on his ability to pass on scarce knowledge of alternative farming in the contemporary world:

Alex: "I credit this type of program for my training in agriculture. I knew that I didn't want to pay anything for school, but I also knew I wasn't going to learn anything like this through reading a book or a classroom type setting. I just wanted to get my hands dirty, do the work, find out and see if I was cut out for it. You know, I could go study it from the outside, but how would I know if I had what it takes? So this program, personally, was huge for me. And here I am years later with my own farm. So we look at this program as a way to pass this knowledge on. And as agriculture has become more concentrated, as far as hands involved or the control by larger farms...this knowledge of how to manage of small farm, large garden, or market farm, that knowledge has gone away. So for those who want to learn about it, this is the way."

Author: "So you see yourself as holding onto a unique understanding of agriculture that you need to teach?"

Alex: "And that isn't to say that we are doing just some old thing, because we have to evolve too, with technologies and the markets. But yeah, I do feel that we have

something to teach. Something like this isn't really a strong economic pursuit, so I don't think it is something that you are going to easily learn at the university level or through text books, because it is just not seen, by many, as something viable.”

Not only is this type of farming unconventional, there is also no formal accrediting body to institutionalize the necessary education or skills. Alex, therefore, felt it was his duty to pass on his knowledge just as he had received it from his own internships in the past. Further, Alex alluded to the fact that in the absence of a bureaucratic body that could administer education in return for credentials, the farmers, interns, and loyal customers had to rely on informal networks to propagate production within their niche field. Because the mainstream agricultural and educational industry did not appear interested in incorporating local organic and agrarian methods into their economic repertoire, small farms like *Desert Sky* would take advantage of, and train for free, an abundant supply of young volunteers who exuded passion and idealism. As a result, education programs that operate in the margins such as WWOOF reinforce the independent character and exclusive nature of reproduction in a field.

The first WWOOFer I met was a young twenty-year-old man named Jeremy. He rode his motorcycle across the country from New Jersey to work, roam, and discover. Jeremy had long wavy hair, and constantly wore torn up clothing and a huge smile on his face. He was one of the nicest people I had ever met and always had an interesting story about his life to tell. His family owned and operated a liquor store back in New Jersey and his background was about as opposite as possible from the agricultural routine at

*Desert Sky*. But Jeremy fit in immediately with the daily culture on the farm. He didn't mind waking up early and getting dirty. He would work hard and break hard, usually with a cigarette in his mouth. It was all an interesting experiment for him and he loved meeting new people. And so, Jeremy became a fast fixture of the early WWOOFing days. Soon thereafter, new interns would arrive. A couple college-aged girls from Wisconsin and Seattle joined the farm. Then, another from Alberta, and two brothers from California moved out to the farm. Suddenly, *Desert Sky* was a crowded place both in the fields and in the living quarters.

It became necessary to expand the housing for a growing number of WWOOFer interns after just a few months of starting the program. *Desert Sky's* land included two houses on the property. The main house already had 3 bedrooms but would need more to accommodate a growing number of interns. Within a couple weeks of initiating the program, Tim had arranged for a friend to convert the largest living space in the house into sleeping quarters. Quickly, the friend managed to put up drywall and wire several additional simple rooms. Once all of the beds and furniture were brought in the main house had enough space to sleep Tim and Sean and 6-10 WWOOFer interns.

WWOOFers were thirsty for change and novel experiences and *Desert Sky* was prepared to share the process with them. The many WWOOFers I met at this farm were the very people who were sacrificing the most energy to push forward and reproduce the field of local organic farming. For most, however, this sacrifice was not experienced as exploitation, but instead embraced as a special opportunity for learning valuable

specialized agricultural skills appropriate for this particular market field. Annie (27), a long time WWOOFer put it this way:

“Being directly involved in [WWOOFing] some way felt like a really important thing to be doing, something that would give me a solid education. That’s one of the benefits, all that we’re learning. I feel really lucky. I joke that we’re such cheap labor, but I don’t really feel that way. I feel like we’re getting so much out of it.”

Annie's sentiments were commonly shared among the WWOOF interns I had worked with. It was not a job that many outsiders might be enthusiastic about, but for those who had made the commitment and were interested in learning about novel crafts at the forefront of this field, they reported WWOOFing as one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives.

Once *Desert Sky* initiated an online profile of the farm on the WWOOF website, they were immediately bombarded with dozens of requests. People from around the world were sending profiles and resumes to be hired on as interns for 3-month durations. Suddenly, the farm was awash in labor potential. Many mornings during work breaks I would find Jen alone on her computer in the kitchen going through a series of applications. She had the arduous task of selectively choosing candidates she felt were the most promising fits for *Desert Sky's* style of farming. So many people started showing interest in working at the farm that she had to turn away the vast majority. Every once in awhile a particular profile would stick out and the farmers would

collectively invite a new volunteer to come live and work with them. Quickly, new faces began to pop up out in the fields at *Desert Sky*. The rumble of a distant vehicle could be heard barreling down the country roads one day after another and young interns would arrive with most of their belongings for an extended stay. They would hop out of their cars with a huge smile and a curious sense of adventure; ready to begin an experience into the unknown. Indeed, their first impressions were often a mixture of shock and joy. Many of the interns arrived from urban east-coast cities and colleges. The thrust from urban life to rural gritty desert was about as opposite an environmental transition imaginable. Yet, the mutual affinity between the inhabitants of this farm and the larger national movement was strong. WWOOFers often immediately felt at home amongst their peers and the farmers.

In the course of my ethnographic fieldwork I found myself working side by side with the farmers and a constantly rotating group of incoming and outgoing WWOOFers. I spent a great deal of time hunched over in fields cultivating and harvesting food crops with random volunteers from all over the country on a frequent basis for the better part of two years. My initial expectation was that I would focus most of my energy on learning the importance of agrarian techniques at the farm. I quickly discovered that the act of collectively working together with farmers and WWOOFers would become the defining feature of life on the farm. After hours of working in the fields it was not the digging or harvesting that I remembered most, but the stories and laughter shared with my fellow coworkers. These were the people who embodied the vision of agrarianism and were making tremendous efforts to see its philosophy put into action and grow. Agrarian



farming was not just an orientation to the land and a method of growing. It was also a way of life with a deeply rich social fabric. We labored together on hundreds of tasks, told stories about past experiences with farming and traveling, and shared meals and house responsibilities. Evenings were often spent cooking together and sitting around for a collective dinner for 5-10 people. Music, books, politics, and relationships were discussed between one another as a way of constantly reminding each other of the greater world outside of the farm that needed changed. Quickly, new faces became close friends, and old faces would quickly disappear on to the next farm or adventure just as fast as a fresh bunch of volunteers would show up. Despite the transient nature of the farm, the farmers and WWOOFers formed incredibly tight bonds and referred to each other as family.

WWOOFers all lived together in the same house at *Desert Sky Farms* and some even bunked in rooms together. A large living area opened up with a giant kitchen and pantry where stocks of bulk provisions were stored for volunteers to access as needed. The big house for WWOOFers also housed Tim, a veteran farmer and co-owner of *Desert Sky*. Alex and Jen lived in another smaller house on the property adjacent to the barn with their two young sons. Despite the enormity of the big house for the "interns" (the term the farmers sometimes use to refer to WWOOFer volunteers) and Tim, personal living space was quite limited. The WWOOFing lifestyle was intimate in that multiple people often occupied the same small space at all hours. The density of this arrangement would test the patience of people on the farm from time to time, but I was surprised how infrequently disputes arose between everyone in such tight living quarters. An occasional

argument would surface between these WWOOFers, but these spats rarely escalated to the point of hostility. Instead, the attitude of most people who came and went through this program at *Desert Sky* usually began as exuberance and excitement to be in a new mountainous rural desert location. WWOOFers all tended to be likeminded individuals in many ways and proved to be natural friends in most circumstances.

It became evident to me after the two years I worked at *Desert Sky* that this program drew a very particular type of personality. Volunteer interns shared many of the same interests, identities, and sense of adventure with one another. Further, every single WWOOFer I met for the duration of my fieldwork was relatively young, unmarried, and without children. Of the more than 60 individuals who moved through this program on the farm during my stint, nearly all were between the ages of 21-27. The ratio of men and women was about even but the vast majority of WWOOFers were white. Most had college degrees and expressed an interest in traveling and doing something unconventional before they entered the mainstream labor force. A sizeable minority, however, had no college experience and had opted for alternative work experiences and eventual careers in agriculture. Regardless of background, though, all were very bright and animated. Each brought a distinctive personality or character trait that fit in uniquely with the social dynamics of farm life. Together, the volunteers I worked with exuded a free spirit and a positive energy I had rarely experienced in my own previous jobs or public interaction. Part of this positive energetic dynamic had to do with location in a rural desert setting. When we would work with our hands from dawn to dusk in this isolated place, the monotony of a task could become overwhelming. But with

spontaneous jokes, games, or songs interspersed throughout the day, any job could become a fun experience to share. And because nearly all of the WWOOFers had limited or no previous farm work experience, they would approach the daily tasks with open minds and enthusiasm. WWOOFers entered the farm with valorized expectations of an alternative reality from the world they were coming from to some degree. Life was simply so different at *Desert Sky* that the doldrums of farm work were enthusiastically embraced by my coworkers as they came in search of an authentic rural utopia.

Upon arrival, these interns and I quickly acclimated to the daily structure of farm operations. Work began at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning and ended when it was too dark to see anymore. Needless to say this was not the schedule most newcomers were accustomed to following. The early and long hours of manual work could be a shock for the first few days. Eventually, though, the routine settled in and activities fit together throughout the day like clockwork. *Desert Sky's* jobs operated in cycles, both short and long, and once we became familiarized with this process and integrated within it, the initial shock of long hot outdoor work hours dissipated. Further, the fact that all the farmers and WWOOFers were in the same boat on a daily basis made the grueling work feel like a collective experience. Everyone woke up, worked, ate food, and went to bed at the same time. Experiences of work and play were always shared and the bonds of friendship that formed out of this work camaraderie resulted in an enjoyable time no matter how long and tiring the day.



Figure 9: Cyclical farm activities - Laying irrigation lines along a produce bed (left). Harvesting beats from same irrigation bed weeks later (right).

*Work on a Local Organic Farm: The Practice of Growing Produce and Reproducing a Field*

On a typical morning, all of the workers on the farm would slowly make their way near the kitchen. Coffee was essential and dripped incessantly. We would slip on boots and a jacket as our eyes adjusted. After emerging from the silent house into the dawn, everyone would gather near the barn to discuss an organized plan of activities for the day. On a morning in autumn much like any other, we had just dispersed from our casual start of the day round up to begin working on designated jobs for the next two hours. There were about five in my group and we scuttled out with tools and produce boxes to begin a harvesting shift.

"Zach, why don't you help harvest and bring lettuce in for the market with Jesse and Erin" Alex kindly directed me. "The rest of us will work on some fencing this morning, and Michael will collect eggs. Same as usual."

This early, nothing really sounds good and everyone sort of shifted around like zombies. But we all had coffee thermoses in hand and were ready to partake in the daily grind on a farm.

This autumn day in 2010 would be much like the days before and after. It would not be boring, but saturated to capacity with as much as two hands can accomplish in twelve hours. For the first three to four hours I would be on the ground knelt over a narrow five-foot lettuce bed the length of a football field. Luckily, a handful of other young farm volunteers would be with me side by side for the duration of this job and I very much appreciated their company. Our sleepiness thawed into laughter and our silence gradually erupted into storytelling. Within the hour we were feeling fresh and reveling at the beauty of life around us.

Our goal on this particular day would be to collect over nineteen pounds of lettuce. Nineteen pounds does not sound like a significant amount, but all of it would be clipped by hand. Each of us had a basket that we placed only the finest and ripest leaves. There were no machines on this line to harvest the produce. All we had were our hands, scissors, and patience to slowly move down the length of the bed on our knees. Every once in awhile we would stop, munch on a couple leaves, admire the explosion of flavor, and stand up to stretch. But then it was right back to work because we were on a tight

deadline. This afternoon Tim would be hauling several items including our lettuce to a nearby market in the city. Time was of the essence in this timeless spot in the desert.



Figure 10: Daily harvest of lettuce greens by hand with scissors.

In the midst of any one task among the hundreds of ongoing jobs at *Desert Sky*, it was easy for me to lose sight of the larger goals of this farm and the field it was positioned within. The moment one job was completed it was time to begin a new one and move on patching loose ends throughout the day. Like most social and economic life, though, farm life is cyclical. Each task unfolds into another and is part of a giant wheel of repetition. It was a matter of months before I could truly comprehend the

interconnected complexity of this farm as a production unit that meshed with an even more diverse marketplace. A systematic overview of my field notes allowed me to see how everything on the farm and within the field cohered into a rather finely tuned organizational ecology. The WWOOFers began to pick up on this long-cycle organization as well. Rote tasks became more interesting when WWOOFers and I learned how all our work complemented the larger objectives of both the farm and the market we were supporting. Sometimes after hours of weeding or pruning beds we would simply feel like our labor was pointless. Yet, when we attended to the same bed a few days later, it became evident that our rote work of previous days had made a huge difference in the outcome of our present day cultivation or harvesting.

The farmers and WWOOFers also brought a deep existential connection between their labor on the farm and their mission within the local food movement. When members of a field admire and strongly support a cause, the very people responsible for fulfilling the field objectives cannot help but feel an intersubjective meaningful pride in their work. I, too, came to understand this feeling after seeing the worth of my labor from start to finish. Pulling together weeks of ethnographic data, I could begin to make connections between my various rote tasks and the end result of sharing the product of my labor with CSA members and customers at the farmers market. Sharing food one has planted, attended to, and then harvested is a satisfying feeling. Bringing together the long history of each fruit or vegetable with customers makes the long hours in the dirt rewarding. Slowly, I could piece the larger picture of this field together into a comprehensive perspective and uncover core meanings understood by nearly all members

of the field. For growers and buyers it was all about nurturing a healthy connection between people and the earth.

WWOOFers were reliable sources who would freely share their existential enthusiasm. I often found myself asking why these people would volunteer for such an unconventional and exhausting job. What was it about working on a local organic farm that was so appealing to them and why were they so exuberant about it? While collecting eggs, harvesting lettuce, or making repairs on a greenhouse, I would record interviews with WWOOFers about their experiences and reasons for joining this movement as volunteers. One of the youngest I met at the farm was a man named Jimmy (18). He volunteered with *Desert Sky* immediately after graduating from high school and continued to work there for an entire year. When I asked Jimmy what motivated him to join *Desert Sky* as a WWOOFer, he responded:

"I am interested in organic farming. I am interested in the kind of people that are doing this. It's the young people that are kind of starting this movement in creating this kind of new system of living, which is an old system, you know, it's going back to the roots."

Discovering an alternative way of life and more about the people driving it was something Jimmy desired. He was curious about unconventional approaches to methods of food production in modern society. No school, however, would be able to expose him



to such radical agricultural methods or networks and so he felt it was necessary to do something out of the ordinary to get a clear understanding of this movement.

Other established WWOOFers at *Desert Sky* conveyed similar thoughts about their motivations for joining. In one conversation with Annie (22), she expressed concern about the state of society and the potential for economic and environmental collapse:

"I started getting really disturbed by how unsustainable our whole system is," she said. "And it just got me thinking about what I would do if the way our system worked collapsed, and I realized I wouldn't be able to support myself."

The agricultural skills Annie was picking up from her work at this farm served as a stepping-stone to knowing how to be more self-sufficient. She viewed local organic farming and its agrarian ethos as a dependable alternative to the industrial model of food production and distribution. It was her belief that the type of farming practiced at *Desert Sky* could persist even in the face of major exogenous shocks in society. Likewise, another WWOOFER, Mary (24) echoed these feelings when she stated:

"I want to be involved because organic food is very important to me. Health and fitness is very important to me. I wanted to see it from the inside, as far as if we do want to take back our food supply."

WWOOFers would often quickly reveal their sincere philosophical beliefs and perspectives during our conversations. Routinely they would communicate alarm about the destabilized state of contemporary society in general, and agriculture specifically. At some point in their lives each had decided that, as individuals, they would need to take a radical step to help mitigate the problems they identified with society. Any discussion of food politics always touched upon deeply held convictions from WWOOFers and conjured up a strong emotional response. For example, a common argument I would hear is that "industrial food is only about making profit for rich corporations" or "we, as a society, have forgotten our agricultural roots." The insinuation was always that modern agriculture was corrupted by big business and was now ruled by corporations, pollution, and exploitation.

Much to my surprise, this type of dialogue rarely veered into negative rants. Instead of complaining, they would usually discuss different ways the local organic food movement and the lifestyle at *Desert Sky* were directly combating problems with consumer society and the industrial food system. This realization and experience gave the farmers and WWOOFers great joy. Farmers and interns would speak very optimistically about having the opportunity of hands on impact in mitigating environmental degradation and contributing to sustainable agriculture. In this regard, they would often invoke almost spiritual connotations to the bonds they shared with each other and the earth. In another conversation I had with Jimmy during a lunch break, I quickly learned about the profound level of commitment and intensity he felt for this type of farming and the people involved:

Jimmy: You know, [everyone out here is] really enthusiastic about life...enthusiastic about living a healthy life, healthy community life, and creating a way to live a life through meaningful eyes. To say, you know, we are not just here to walk around and waste our time with money or school. And there is so much that people do with their time. And these people have decided to invest in growing food...getting closer to the earth, closer to mother nature. And also, at the same time, creating an opportunity for people to be a part of that too.

Author: You feel like while you are out here, you are a part of something that is bringing you closer to community and the earth?

Jimmy: Yeah, totally. Um, I mean, because we are all here with the same understanding. It is so much easier to be in sync with what people are thinking or feeling. When you go out and you see a bed that's just prime, just full of whatever it is, whether great okra, or just early this morning, this beautiful lettuce that's in this huge bed...everyone's mind can be a part of this same thing. Just like, holy shit, this is beautiful, what we are part of here...it is just amazing. So, seeing that, and people so excited about what the earth can do, the same thing that has been happening for thousands of years. That we are still just completely awe struck and blown away creates this subculture of people who are always willing to just like, you know, nurture the earth to see what it gives.

Conversations like this were revealing illuminations of formative experiences situated around a search for meaning and hope. My time and interviews spent with WWOOFers all gravitated toward shared variations of a theme regarding the basic infrastructure of our society and economy. In essence, this theme was that agriculture must dramatically change into a sustainable and more natural human enterprise that no longer degrades the environment. The reproduction of this field for local organic foods was viewed as both a necessary and rewarding human endeavor that must be carried with humility and appreciation.

Working alongside the farmers and WWOOFers always brought me great joy. Their enthusiasm and passion was contagious and I found their hard work humbling. Shared labor and a sense of proud accomplishment provided the social backdrop whether it be working in the fields, washing and packing produce, or selling at the farmers markets. The energy behind their mission to provide abundant local organic food sustained their momentum and forged a constant expanding network of new loyal supporters in the community. The excitement of working on a unique organic farm and the expressed admiration of our labor from customers was a gratifying feeling.

Much of the excitement I and the other workers felt in our experiences with this farm was reflective of the dynamic nature of the daily activities. Our tasks in one day might range from collecting hundreds of eggs, assisting in the delivery of a baby goat, harvesting carrots, and then covering crop beds with Agribon material to protect them from the elements. In all, the reproduction of this farm was not monocultural or static. It

was a biodynamic environment sustained through diversity in the fields, work activities, and markets.



Figure 11: Dynamic work on a local organic farm. Produce beds covered with Agribon material to protect against nighttime cold (left). Jen helping deliver a baby goat on a spring morning (middle). Tim and Sean triple washing produce before delivery to markets (right).

### *Utilizing Community Supported Agriculture in the Local Organic Food Market Field*

*Desert Sky Farms* found itself quickly gaining attention from a variety of local media outlets. The regional newspaper, the alternative weekly, and the local PBS station had all run stories about the growth of local food markets in general and the role *Desert Sky* was playing as a new local organic farm in its first few months of growing. Although they had built up a nice operation on three acres of rented land, they ran out of space to meet the accelerated demand. New opportunities continually opened up around town where the farm could sell a range of fruits and vegetables. A steady stream of gourmet chefs began contacting Alex and Tim about visiting the farm and incorporating its produce in their restaurants. A downtown grocery cooperative had also expressed

interests in stocking their produce section with *Desert Sky's* foods. New farmers markets continued to form around the city where they could begin selling fresh fruits and vegetables. The largest and longest running farmers market in Tucson was *Desert Sky's* primary venue for sales, and it too continued to grow in vendors and visitors. It was a good time to be in the business of local organic farming if you had the right resources and connections. As newly minted and respected purveyors of organics in this specialty local niche market, *Desert Sky* could not keep up with the growing demand for what they had to offer. They would either need to limit their sales or acquire more land.

This juncture in the road offered no simple resolution. However, Alex, Tim, and Jen began ruminating on the idea of expanding their farm by purchasing land on the perimeter of the city. Ideally, this plan sounded good in theory, but realistically was full of several practical constraints. The barriers to entry associated with purchasing land, equipment, and facilities for a brand new farm are daunting and would require an enormous amount of additional financing that *Desert Sky* did not have at their immediate disposal. Buying land would mean amassing huge debt through loans and further underscore the uncertainty associated with any agricultural enterprise. Without inherited land, skills, or established trade networks, broadening the risks inherent in farming through acquired land requires a significant match in long-term market guarantees. But how can market certainty be attained in a world of declining returns from small local businesses? From where could *Desert Sky* obtain a reliable market base in a challenging economy?

The answer from the beginning for *Desert Sky* was in the fabric of the local economy it was embedded within. Their prospects for a dependable market lay in the enduring bonds they had formed and were cultivating in their surrounding community. A lot of their confidence in the local economy derived from their own social trajectories. Alex was raised in Tucson and had established roots through friends and family. He believed in the community for support because the community had believed in him throughout his adolescence. He explained this to me one day early on in my interaction with him, "I have had so many wonderful people invest in me. I want to give back and invest in this community." This two-way commitment was something that Alex, Jen, and Tim talked about freely and often. It was simply a given part of their identity and expectation for their farm. To manifest this expectation, *Desert Sky* would have to get creative with the way it integrated with the local community as a business. They would have to accumulate durable ties and trust in charismatic and unconventional ways.

The route *Desert Sky* would take to launch their ambitions would come through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). A few months after I first met these farmers, they began to seriously look into purchasing land to expand their ability to grow a larger variety and quantity of produce. CSA was an ideal model for providing the needed financing for start-up costs because it connects farmers to community members through up-front investment. Incentives run both ways as producers receive cash at the beginning of a season from bundled customers, and members receive assurance of fresh produce throughout the months ahead. This model of direct investment helps farmers with limited capital secure access to land in an interest free lump sum. It also allows farmers the

peace of mind knowing that the fruits of their labor will have guaranteed buyers on a weekly basis for a set time period. The personal commitment between the farmer and customer frees up the farm from worrying about the weekly whims of buyers and provides a level of certainty for small operations working through the margins in alternative markets.

In the very beginning of *Desert Sky's* days as an infant farm, Adam, Jen, and Tim would bring their harvest to the main farmers market and sell whatever they could to both familiar and new faces. For the first few months they sought to establish connections in their surrounding community and name recognition within the local organic field. Often I would witness people at the market stroll by the booth and stop to evaluate the different produce items. Curious window shoppers would inquire about the farm, their location, and ask questions about the different varieties. Not only was this an opportunity for the farm to sell their goods, but it also planted their identity and image into the minds many people in the local food market. Over the course of 3 or 4 months, hundreds of random strangers would linger around the booth from time to time chatting with one of the farmers. When given the opportunity, I would help sell produce at the booth and answer questions. After a few weeks of listening in on the flow and cadence of conversation I became somewhat versed at holding an informative conversation with both passerby and regular customers. All of this initial time spent building up recognition and regard at the farmers market was essentially an intimate and free advertising campaign for their own eventual CSA program. By the time *Desert Sky* was running out of space on their 3-acre



plot of rented land and with an excess of demand, they were ready to start bouncing the idea of an inaugural CSA program with customers at the farmers market.

In hindsight, *Desert Sky* made the jump from itemized sales to CSA membership sales look quite seamless. Adam, Jen, and Tim utilized their name recognition and newly formed acquaintances at the market to open up dialogue about how a CSA could work and benefit both the farm and customers. The first steps toward offering a CSA worked through word of mouth. Whenever interacting with customers who appeared interested in the farm and its inner-workings the farmers would make sure to mention the idea of a future CSA program that customers could join. If they wanted more information customers were encouraged to write their name down and include an email address to be contacted about future slots. *Desert Sky* also began to print some informative material that they would hand out to people in the crowd as they strolled by the booth. Week by week, more people were exposed to the idea of joining a *Desert Sky* CSA. After tossing the proposal around for a month or two, Adam finally informed me one day when I was visiting the farm that they had gathered enough interest and would most likely start a very small CSA in the upcoming weeks. Essentially, they would contact between 15-30 people who appeared enthusiastic about investing in the farm and hope for the best. Indeed, the plan worked. Although it started through humble beginnings, *Desert Sky* managed to gather a couple dozen membership shares and the payment for service up front.

Because *Desert Sky* is located in the southwest, they are able to take advantage of year-round sunny and warm weather. Therefore, they decided to offer CSA memberships

in quarterly installments in each of the 4 growing seasons. Each CSA share would last 12 to 14 consecutive weeks and could be purchased initially for \$300 a month before the beginning of the season. By collecting the money up front from 25 members, *Desert Sky* was able to secure around \$15,000 before the planting, cultivating, and harvesting even began. This money, no small sum for a relatively tiny operation, was injected directly into the farm in ways that guaranteed they would be able to buy all of the necessary equipment, pay rent, and make plans for expansion. Little by little through community economic support, this farm was able to fully utilize their rented plot and slowly make feasible plans for growth in the future. The CSA model turned out to be the single most important marketing strategy adopted by *Desert Sky* and allowed the farm to make great advances in their operation.

### *The Promotion of Community Supported Agriculture*

In their efforts to build a broader audience and advertise information to supporters, *Desert Sky* launched a website and started an email list. Weekly updates online and through email helped keep their members and interested customers informed of developments in the farm's expansion. In many emails Jen would promote the virtues of CSA and encourage people who had expressed curiosity with local food to purchase a seasonal share. An example of an email expounding on these perks provides a background to CSA and a list of compelling reasons to join:

*“Developed in the 1960s in Japan, CSAs are a way for communities to share the risks and the bounty of the harvest with the farmer. CSAs offer a positive alternative to the conventional agricultural system and works to create a viable economic model in which farmers receive 100 percent of the food dollar. In a CSA, consumers buy shares in a farm’s output before the growing season starts, and then reap the benefits of the harvest each week as the season progresses. CSA members agree to share in the fluctuation and variations inherent in farming, and understand that their produce will be grown with sound sustainable farming practices. Members are, in essence, shareholders in the farm, thus becoming invested in its successes and failures.*

*Our CSA members can look forward to:*

- *A weekly box of fresh-picked, seasonal fruits, vegetables, and herbs totaling an average retail value of \$25-35.*
- *Weekly newsletters and recipes from your Desert Sky farmers.*
- *Farm volunteer opportunities and special CSA-member farm tours.*
- *A convenient pick-up location at the Farmers Market (we are also considering additional pick-up locations).*
- *Discounts and purchase priority on non-CSA items.*
- *The guarantee that your produce has been grown locally, using environmentally sound and desert-conscious farming practices,*

*thus having a far lower carbon footprint than grocery store produce.*

- *Since your veggies have been grown, harvested, and processed by the very same smiling folks you see every week at the farmers market, you have the unique opportunity to get to know your farmers, ask questions, and make suggestions.*
- *The eager anticipation of your weekly share.*
- *The opportunity to get involved in your food and to truly eat what is in season—and license to get creative in the kitchen!*
- *A chance to defy the industrial food system, say “no!” to conventional agribusiness, and vote with your dollar. CSAs offer you—the consumer—the ability to participate in your local food system, which supports local farmers, the local economy, and contributes to the overall health of your community.”*

Several interesting points are raised in this email. Especially prominent, however, are environmental, political, and social arguments for becoming a member of *Desert Sky's* CSA. Much of the emphasis is placed on not only connecting with local food, but additionally the people who grow it. This connection is also described as an opportunity to take a consumer stand against industrial agriculture and strengthen internal community in the process.

During my ethnographic work with *Desert Sky* I was fortunate enough to participate in several of the CSA farm volunteer opportunities of the type mentioned in the above email. In these workdays and tours of the farm, CSA members would spend time together planting and harvesting in the fields or working on various farm projects. At the end of the day the members and farmers would usually share conversation and a potluck style meal outdoors. It was evident that the opportunity for the CSA members to experience the farm and participate with the daily operations was a very special occasion for everyone involved. Working next to a member I would hear comments such as the following that I wrote down in my fieldnotes:

While shucking garlic out of their shells and planting them just beneath the surface every six inches, the woman working next to me shared her excitement in learning about this process. “I really did not know that this is how garlic is grown,” she said. “I would have never guessed it was like this. I’ll have to try this at home.” A little later I chatted with another visiting CSA member and he spoke about his admiration for this farm. “This is a phenomenal place. These beds are truly remarkable. I could never grow something like this at my garden at home. It just makes me want to learn and get more involved.” The ability for these CSA members and visiting volunteers to see firsthand the way their food was grown and build a relationship with the farmers was usually described as a sentimental enlightening experience. “I just love these guys!” an older gentleman

exclaimed. “They are so determined and I admire all of their passion and effort. I have learned so much about this place and my food.”

By hosting a gathering at the farm *Desert Sky* made their agricultural methods and lifestyle completely transparent to local consumers. When members witnessed crops being cultivated and harvested, or even partook in these tasks themselves, they acquired direct understanding that strengthened their trust in these local farmers. This trust was compounded by working side by side with the farmers at *Desert Sky*, as well as the weekly interaction they sustained through local market settings.



Figure 12: CSA workday and potluck. CSA members shucking garlic at *Desert Sky Farms* (left). Members gathering for dinner on farm at the end of a workday (right).

What were the undercurrent meanings flowing among CSA members and the farmers at *Desert Sky* in social gatherings like these? What substantive outcomes arose out of this strengthened transparency and trust between farmers and community

supporters in this local market? In the next two chapters I take up these questions and discuss the role of commodity de-fetishism and the experience of authenticity elucidated from my ethnography and interviews. Both of these concepts ended up surfacing as primary cohering forces within this field structure.

## **CHAPTER 8: COMMODITY DE-FETISHISM AND TRANSPARENCY**

The widespread success of big organic after its weakened and amended standards for certification represents one of the biggest philosophical schisms in organic farming. Small local organic farms all across the United States have not only rejected the lenient governmental protocols, but have begun to initiate alternative markers of legitimacy that challenge the dominant industrial approach. Independent collective farming bodies in the last 10 to 15 years have created several strict regional and state level certification boards to institute a faithful and accurate reclamation of the initial organic principles. Instead of directly challenging the might of the mass market and centralized authorities, small local organic farms and their customers have united to form peripheral community supported ventures. These community farm/market networks center on the belief that a valid organic enterprise must stay true and adhere to the original agrarian principles. In other words, the congruence of producer and consumer sentiment against mainstream industrial farming is a social movement of affiliation that demands authenticity.

A reliance on the core philosophy of agrarianism over the contentious definitions of organic has allowed the local organic movement to pivot away from mainstream constraints and reposition their pursuits in ways more reflective of community concerns. Unencumbered by top-down bureaucratic stipulations, local organic farms have carved out a distinctive identity based upon shared values with people in their immediate vicinity. Visibility of the farm and direct sales provide a level of accountability to shared expectations that are not feasible in other settings of the food industry. It also allows local organic farms to tailor their growing methods and produce to the rigid specifications



requested by customers they interact with on a frequent basis. In niche markets such as these, authority is inversely delegated to community members through transparency and the ongoing renditions of authenticity. This narrative surrounding the role of transparency and authenticity became central themes in the local organic food movement and is the topic I turn to next both theoretically and empirically.

### *Market Homologies and Transparency*

While resource partitioning might explain how producer organizations fill niche market space and why local organic sales are growing, it offers little insight into the actual reasons why consumers desire the organizational form of producers in niche markets. It is in this section that I draw the connection between local markets and consumer sentiments. The viability of local niche markets requires an affinity between both producers and consumers. Bourdieu argued that homologies of cultural capital in production and taste exist in social fields and that when producers and consumers come together with shared cultural capital and market experiences, their affinity can lead to sustained social and economic bonds (Bourdieu 1984; 2005). This homologous affinity rests on a shared set of values for transparency in market transactions that take into account the social relations of production. A common motivation expressed by CSA members for joining *Desert Sky* is reflected in their ability to acquire access to background information about their food from this particular farm. The value and sentiment associated with their food extends beyond just the produce and into the process of cultivation and very identity of *Desert Sky Farms*.

As organizational ecology literature suggests, through resource partitioning niche producers and consumers are likely merging together to accommodate each other's values in moving away from massive consolidated centralized food producers that rely on veiled methods of rationalized production. Scholars of contemporary food politics have suggested that the growth of organic foods reflects a strong desire among consumers to rebuild connections with land and community and support environmental and social justice (Raynolds 2000; Allan and Kovach 2000; Allan and Wilson 2008; Leclair 2002; Kerton and Sinclair 2010). My ethnographic experience and in-depth interviews echo these assertions. What is different about local organic farming and CSA programs from conventional organic foods, however, is the interpersonal directness of market transactions. The continual face-to-face contact in direct sales of local food with farmers is quite unique to modern agriculture because it gives consumers transparency, the ability to see directly where their food comes from, and how it is grown.

Classical economic theory has displayed little interest in how transparency operates in market interaction. Of course, trust and accuracy are valued factors in production chains and ultimately depend on transparency to some degree. But transparency has been relegated in economic functioning with a marginal role compared to the more prominent themes of supply and demand, pricing, and wages that keep business activity flowing. The mechanics of the economy do not function on cold hard quantifiable procedures alone, however. Economic sociologists have developed a convincing research program showing the variety of subtle cultural and social factors that are of equal importance to the existence and evolution of economic activity. Among

many factors, transparency and trust operate just below the surface to lubricate the motion of markets.

It wasn't before long that I discovered transparency was one of, if not the most, valuable elements of local economic activity. The easy ebb and flow of most market movement necessitates to some degree tacit understandings of intentions, values, and performance between producers and consumers. Protocols of exchange usually take into account more than just the transfer of cash for goods and services. Often hidden in every economic transaction is the latent awareness that a deep social network filled with agendas, emotions, and experiences have played out sequentially over time. The moment of transaction is simply the tangible tip of the iceberg where all of the concealed social circumstances imbued in production and distribution culminate into commodity exchange. Transparency in local markets is a vital component to exchange because it shines light on the internal culture of a local economy and allows for consumer reassurance. Therefore, local markets in general, and local food markets in particular, rely upon shared homologous understandings between buyers and sellers on the nature and meaning of the products circulating within the insular market. Transparency is the means by which shared meanings are sustained and is ultimately what allows trust to emerge between parties.

Still, what was so unappealing about local foods available from other larger retail sources like Wal-Mart? It is entirely possible for a large retail store to become more transparent with customers in their sourcing, supply chain, and distribution. For example, labels from certifying agencies have become a critical way for distant brands and

corporations to convey signals of trust and accountability to potential buyers. When full-scale transparency is lacking, which is often the case in today's global economy, these agencies act as arbiters between producers and consumers. These certifying bodies are expected to be neutral observers to production and trade procedures. In the absence of a profit motive, their labeling has become a prominent method that large production and retail firms have adopted in order to pass along guarantees of either ethical behavior or shared values. Certifications from agencies such as "Free Trade", "Quality Assurance International (QAI)", or "USDA Organic" are among the most recognized labels that consumers refer to as substitutions for direct transparency or full disclosure in the food industry. With corporations' growing reliance on labeling techniques as a way to provide more transparency and trust, would local food enthusiasts feel more comfortable with Wal-Mart's initiative? If not, why would CSA members continue to scoff at the very idea? I would come to find that ardent local food activists have a much more complicated understanding of transparency. While transparent information provided by certification labels is important, the individuals I had frequent contact with demanded more. They wanted a transparency forged through direct social connection and experience. In other words, if given the opportunity, they wanted to judge for themselves the qualities and integrity of the local foods they would be buying without any corporate intermediaries.

In the early stages of my conversations with CSA members, I met a 55 year-old physician named Clark who shared his thoughts with me on transparency. He explained that he looks for labels when he does go shopping at traditional food stores. His

preference, however, is to gain transparency through interpersonal contact with farmers.

He stated:

“I look for USDA organic at a store or supermarket. At a farmers market or a smaller venue, I ask the producer. I don’t need to have it certified as organic where I can talk to the producer, or at least a very closely related middle person. I think the issues with being certified for a small producer are substantial. So from my standpoint, I don’t really need to have that if I can talk to the person who did the work.”

Clark's remarks capture the limited confidence he places in certification labels. Although these labels are utilized when necessary, his first choice when shopping for food is to communicate with the very people who grew or raised the food. I found this to be a common sentiment among a variety of CSA members. This distinction in transparency was curious to me because it is not something ordinarily expressed in most market venues. At CSA forums, restaurants, and co-operative grocery stores, however, I started to notice it as a dominant theme among many of the members.

In later sections of this study I will provide more details about how direct transparency is critical to understanding the nature of the local organic food movement. When it comes to the livelihood of a completely local food market and its key players, nothing substitutes for direct interpersonal contact in establishing and maintaining trust. The experience of shared transparency between producers and consumers ends up

providing the social foundations for sustained local market transactions. No matter how many local foods Wal-Mart adds into their inventory, their stores will not bring producers and consumers into contact with one another. A large retail business like Wal-Mart simply cannot appropriate and standardize interpersonal transparency within their distribution network. This limitation intrinsic to economies of scale ends up being an enormously important point of departure for vibrant local economies and is something I would spend a lot of time talking about with local farmers and CSA members.



Figure 13: Farm transparency and visibility in the community. In this illustration, the *Desert Sky* farmers participating in a Q/A at a community film screening about their farming operations.

*Commodity De-Fetishism and Social Value in Local Transactions*

There was a time in history when technological and transportation constraints on trade limited widespread commodity expansion. However, as the distance between farm and dinner plate has increased in today's global food economy, transparency has decreased. Today's near total separation between farmers and consumers diminishes the amount of background visibility and information pertaining to food available to people. According to Marx (1978) and Polanyi (1957), this veiling is simply built-in to capitalism. Like all products, food is derived from social economic processes. Capitalistic markets and far reaching trade routes tend to minimize exposure of production methods and origins of food, though. The social and economic relations of food production are now largely stripped from the actual trade and consumption of food items; a process that reflects Marx's notion of 'commodity fetishism' (Marx 1978). Commodity fetishism reigns supreme as all products become interchangeable and subordinated to utility and price. Needless to say, it is easier for distant producers to rely upon exploitation of labor and degradation of land when these processes are hidden from consumers.

Reversing the process of commodity fetishism in food markets requires an inversion of the vast social and economic distance that separates farmers from customers (Raynolds 2000; Friedmann 1993). Re-embedding agro-food production in natural and social processes thus appears to necessitate the creation of new consumer/producer links as well as alternative products. For many CSA members in my interviews, part of the appeal and success of local organic food markets is that they work against this shrouded

process. While commodity fetishism “[masks] the social relations under which commodities are produced” (Guthman 2009), the transparency operating in this local market works to unveil the backstory of the social and environmental dynamics of production and cultivation (Guthman 2009; Hudson and Hudson 2003; Zukin 2008). Because *Desert Sky Farms* relies only on regional markets and the transparency afforded by local connection, their identity is not only wrapped up in the produce they sell but also in the visibility of their growing methods and the values they employ on site.

Therefore, I argue that the agrarian and local organic food movement is propped up on an inverse process that I call *Commodity De-fetishization*. This process requires transparency, honest information, and an affinity between producers to consumers. For economies with distant trade networks and several commodity chains, labeling or certification is necessary to bring forth consumer trust (Raynolds 2000). Theoretically, localized economic exchange should provide more direct guarantees that food is grown and cultivated with strict organic standards. It also provides assurance that food dollars are going to an enterprise trusted and supported by community members. Interviews with *Desert Sky's* CSA members suggest that trust and shared values are formed through local transparency. One member, a 35-year-old male entomologist commented:

“We know what they're doing, we know what they're trying to do and what they stand for and so we want them to succeed in what they're doing and, you know...whatever we can do to try and support them in their success, we're going to try to do.”



This type of statement about transparency and shared expectations was similar to several other members. Here is another statement by a 28-year-old female nurse who discusses the importance of having a personal connection to the farmers at *Desert Sky*:

“They have such high ideals. I think it's about knowing them. I know [these farmers] would never put chemicals on anything that they would give me to eat. And they would never waste water. You know if something happened and that happened by accident they would repair it immediately. They are very conscientious people and I think what it is about CSA is that you know the farmer. You know that they're going to make those decisions for you. And when you're buying stuff at the grocery store you don't know what kinds of decisions those people have made. We get their eggs and I've seen their chickens. Their chickens aren't in a tiny little box being fed corn all day. They're eating the leftover stuff from the farm, which is awesome!”

The above interview excerpts are good examples of the subtle transformation in values and desires of this niche consumer body. In-depth interviews with CSA members of this local farm suggest a movement away from Marx's commodity fetishism and a revival or reclaiming of craft and artisanal appreciation visible and witnessed in their local communities. In other words, this is a form of *Commodity De-fetishism* that not only values the food product, but also the visibility of the *craft* elements of production made

possible by local proximity. With craft appreciation, consumer meanings and sentiments are not congealed or frozen in the final product. In its place, meanings are connected and extended to the story of the social labor relations of production that are transparent to consumers. Counter to Marx's claims of commodities in capitalism, the foremost concerns of CSA members and consumers of local foods are the transparent visible artisanal skills and methods insulated and preserved within the specific process of food cultivation and land use.

I argue that local economies are best suited at protecting and preserving craft and artisanal forms of agricultural production from commodity fetishism because of their intrinsic nature of internal and non-expansionary transaction chains. Unlike the market for conventional organic foods, consumers of local organic have the luxury of proximity that allows them to build connections directly with their farmers. Trust and transparency are attained through local contact and not certification or labels. Localization is important to CSA members because it allows them to know who the producers of their food are and build enduring connections in an embedded market. It gives them the ability to evaluate farmers' performance and judge if they are doing the type of enterprise they support and value. Agrarianism and local organic are about reinstating the ability to do economic business that supports community and not a faceless corporation. In this particular case study, CSA members want to transact with people they know and like, whenever possible, in order to support a shared vision. Another interview statement below from a 33-year-old male graphic designer illuminates this desire.

“In terms of why I’m involved with [*Desert Sky*], per say, is because I know my farmer. I connect with the people who produce the farm, I see them as a part for the community, I see them as a part of my family in some sense and so my participation in what they’re doing is key for their success. And understanding that in a general exchange they will see that what I’m doing, as a part of their community, in producing exchange and promoting exchange is going to manifest into their success. So that is, and it’s not just *Desert Sky*, that’s my ideology in terms of working with all types of community groups. It’s the building of a different sense of community versus living in the traditional capitalism that we’ve been told we should.”

The above quote displays a shared affinity between farmer and member made possible through local relationships. The importance of buying local organic food from *Desert Sky* for this individual is rooted in supporting a business with common economic values. Another male CSA member who was 60 years old and retired expressed this type of sentiment as well:

“They (*Desert Sky* farmers) have a value judgment about their food and that's why they're willing to put in the extra time and effort and work to do it. Whereas the way the capitalistic system works, a lot of farmers want to be as efficient as possible; and monocultures are efficient. And it takes a lot more work and time on [*Desert Sky*’s] part. I think it's admirable that they're willing to do it. I mean, they talk

about all the work they're putting into this and that they have people coming in and helping at times and I mean it's clear that they work hard but they do it because they feel that it's important. It's not just about their livelihoods; it's about all of these other values that they hold.”

A statement like this provides an interesting perspective on the importance many consumers place on the overall character of the farmers. Who these farmers are and what they value matters. It would be difficult for CSA members such as this man to purchase their produce if they did not hold the proper orientation to an agrarian agricultural philosophy. Without the transparency and interpersonal connection made possible through local market networks, it would be impossible for customers to make the judgment calls distinguishing honest from opportunistic farmers; the sincere from those cutting corners. In short, local connections allow the judgment of authenticity to operate and the value placed on connection to be exchanged. The following excerpt again shows the value another CSA member places on her personal relationship with the farmers. This 48-year-old management consultant’s relationship is contrasted to other types of market relationships:

“I like having a relationship with the people who grow my food and just being able to see them and meet them instead of going to the grocery store and having a bag of potatoes and I don't know where they came from, I don't know who grew them, I don't know what sort of labor practices or wages were provided for that. I guess in

that sense I really appreciate it. It's not just an exchange of money for goods or even just come pick up your goods and leave. It's 'hello, how are you, how's the season been'--there's a relationship there that you don't have buying your food at the grocery store.”

Each of the above quotes reveals consumer desires to support economies where their values are transparent and shared with producers. Scholars have noted this process in other market realms as well. The reversal of commodity fetishism has taken root in alternative markets that depend on certification. Sweatshop free clothing and fair trade coffee are two prominent examples of attempts by industry to provide consumers with more exposure to the environment of production (Raynolds 2000; Hudson and Hudson 2003). Such marketing claims provide guarantees and build trust with consumers that the production process was not reliant on undue environmental degradation or social exploitation. With foods, organic certification from third party agencies is utilized to provide consumers with more information on the historical backgrounds and safety of food production. These developments are positive steps in the right direction, but the actual conditions of production are still invisible at the time of purchase. The consumer can only hope that production processes are upholding the social and environmental standards set by an intermediary certification process. Many of my CSA interviewees expressed concern, however, that they do not trust organic labels at grocery stores. An example of such concern is depicted from this conversation with a male 70-year-old retired teacher

“I’m less inclined to trust those big, organic producers. I know that when you have a large farm and large-scale organic productions they can also be very mechanized. At least in the US the organic certifying program allows a few things to qualify as organic that they probably shouldn’t.”

Distrust in organic labels reflects a belief among some consumers that as the organic industry grew quickly, many of the standards were watered down to appease profit opportunities. Indeed, many USDA standards have compromised some of the original rigid rules of agrarianism that have led some local organic consumers to distrust certification labels (Guthman 2004). For example, as more and more organic foods become available they tend to mimic conventional foods (Lockie et al. 2006). The availability of organic frozen meals, organic processed foods, and organic junk food result in some critical consumers to perceive that ‘organic’ has become nothing more than a marketing gimmick for large corporations (Strom 2012). Under such circumstances, individuals serious about food quality flock to local organic sources to buy foods that are more true or authentic in meeting strict organic standards. Another member who was 21-year-old nanny echoed these concerns by discussing the recent ubiquity of organic foods:

“A lot of people when they buy organic, say at Whole Foods, they sort of tend to assume that it’s local and that it’s a small farm production, which isn’t always the

case especially as organic food has gotten a lot more popular. You know, Wal-Mart has organic food now and its mass produced and its more ubiquitous.”

Similarly, another member (male graduate student, 28) simply commented:

“It is hard to know when you see something in a grocery store that says organic what that means? [With *Desert Sky*,] we know them. We've been to the farm. We know what they think about. They don't have to, you know, put a sticker on their vegetables.”

The above statement offers a nice example of how intermediary organic certification bodies are not necessary in order to establish trust between this member and the farm. By knowing the farmers, visiting the farm, and actually seeing how it operates, this individual has confidence that *Desert Sky* provides legitimate safe and reliable organic produce. For this member, transparency eliminates the need for certification labels. They trust that the food is organic because they have developed a trust and bond with the farmers themselves. The following quote from a 60-year-old female writer provides the same type of rationale. For this person, trust is established through feelings of integrity and accountability associated with *Desert Sky* Farms:

“I support the independence of [*Desert Sky*], and I just think that there is more integrity and accountability. Knowing where they are and how far it is to get here

and all the things that they do is important. When your food is coming from far away you don't know how many steps it has taken to get to you, and what has happened during that time...I just feel better about [*Desert Sky's* food].”

The local organic food movement seeks to reverse the trend of commodity fetishism in a more direct way than labels or certification to provide tangible food security. Local proximity to the farm and repetitive close contact with the actual farmers helps the community build priorities upon valuing the social and environmental processes of production and cultivation as much as the actual food they purchase. Woven within the principles of agrarianism are concerns and values that promote transparency and connection with production. In other words, the more direct contact and connection consumers have with the origins of their food and the people that grow it, the more likely they will value methods of cultivation that both benefit the community and their local environment. As long as social and environmental degradation can be outsourced, consumers will have little incentive to demand social and environmental justice from their food systems. Transparency made possible through local production and economic transactions help support the primary goal and vision of the agrarian movement in providing access to clean, healthy, and sustainable, foods to the local community. Because of this, some CSA members also view their support of this type of local farming as a way of reducing the hidden exploitation of both land and labor, as the following statement from a 29 year-old-male graduate student suggests:



“Obviously there's something weird going on if you can get a pound of raspberries for \$2.99 on sale. Someone had to pick those, they had to package them, they had to ship them, there's no way [they could be that inexpensive], without short-changing someone along the way. And that usually translates to screwing over a picker. The actual workers at the guts end of the operation are probably getting screwed in some way. It's just hidden and you don't know what has happened.”

These statements imply a growth of mutual values and desires of both producers and consumers in the local food niche market to obtain deeper and personal information about foods sold and purchased. As these values become embedded within the peripheral niche corridors of the food landscape, transparency becomes ever more vital and necessary. The immediacy of such transparency through local settings allows for trust in strict organic standards and social justice in labor practice to be shared and valued by both farmer and buyer. In an unexpected and inverted fashion, commodity de-fetishism refocuses the consumer's attention onto the culture of production as a way of assessing commodity value.

## CHAPTER 9: AFFILIATION OF AUTHENTICITY

How and why were so many people in this economic region so interested in buying into an unconventional and, until recently, obscure market method for obtaining fresh food? The answer, I discovered, had everything to do with perceptions of authenticity. In short, CSA members expressed feelings of inauthenticity associated with the production and consumption of commodified foods from mass-market sources. By and large CSA members argued that they acquired "real foods" from honest farmers who grew with natural methods.

### *Authenticity and Boundaries in Niche Market Consumption*

Another theme that played out prominently on the farm was the idea of authenticity in regards to agricultural integrity. *Desert Sky* welcomed volunteers, neighbors, and CSA members to their farm not only to help out with tasks, but also to provide them with an authentic experience with a local organic farm. For WWOOFers the farm was a landscape where they could learn authentic agrarian farming methods firsthand. Their larger existential quest sought the building of enduring relationships around an honest understanding of how people should interact with the land and the ways food economies should operate. Local organic farms and their supporters held ideas about what constitutes healthy and sustainable agricultural practices and made it known it was important for farms to align their operations with these expectations in order to project authenticity within community markets.

Off the farm, chefs, CSA member, and casual shoppers would commonly describe *Desert Sky* as a place where they were “doing everything right” when it came to growing food. What customers meant when they used this type of statement was that *Desert Sky* embodied an authentic congruity in their adherence to the principles of local organic production. I captured this assessment in fieldnotes:

In the different market settings around town where *Desert Sky*'s produce is sold the mood is often nostalgic and progressive. Romanticized notions of farming and food culture are usually emblemized on banners, chalkboards, menus, and even attire. Each appear to be referring back to a perception of an idealized past. *Desert Sky* is recognized as a modern farm that stands as a symbol of authentic operation, structure, and identity when it comes to sustainable local agriculture. For example, restaurants that regularly use *Desert Sky* produce for their entrées have put information about the farm on signs or menus. One sign I saw today said, “Today’s special: Southwestern vegetable fare with greens from our local organic partner *Desert Sky* Farms.” The vibe of the restaurant is modern and trendy with a rustic pastiche. There are black and white photos on the wall with photographs of Tucson and surrounding desert from over 100 years ago. The layout suggests a homage to a celebrated past in this growing city. During a stop at the cooperative grocery store I also noticed a sign about *Desert Sky* in the produce section boasting that the food items were freshly picked only 67 miles from the store. Another restaurant listed *Desert Sky* in bold chalk letters with a tractor next to the name on a chalkboard

immediately at the entrance. The sign very clearly was positioned to capture guests' attention and stated gratitude to a list of local farms supplying "fresh sustainable local foods to our restaurant." It appeared that each place I stopped by today wanted to be distinguished as being authentic members of the local organic movement and that *Desert Sky* was one of the references as a central actor.

These local stores, vendors, or restaurants were projecting the image that by joining forces with local farms they were more ethical than the status quo. The association was built around expectations of authenticity in order to garner admiration from customers and, ultimately, more sales.

What exactly, then, is authenticity and why is it such a substantial element of the local organic food movement? To answer this question we can look at other niche markets where ideas of authenticity are prominent. When it comes to microbreweries:

"Authenticity has played a large role in the success of microbreweries. Consumers often choose microbrewery products as a form of self-expression or as a reaction against mass production and the dominance of large corporations. The allure of authenticity has also contributed to the development of a strong, tight-knit community of actors devoted to traditional techniques of beer production and to ferreting out those organizational actors who deceptively claim the microbrewer identity. Resonance and authenticity increase the likelihood of gaining recognition from potential evaluators (Hsu and Hannon, 482)."

Hsu and Hannon's description here paints a nice picture of consumer desires for authenticity from microbreweries. Could these same relationships apply to the local organic farms? Perhaps the increasing amount of highly visible specialist organizations creates buzz that drives consumer sentiment of niche goods. Or it could be a completely exogenous process where consumers create a demand for authenticity, thus providing fertile ground for opportunistic entrepreneurs to meet consumer desire? To address these questions properly I will bridge theories of authenticity in cultural literature with organizational ecology ideas of niche space and identity in order to lay out a coherent theoretical foundation.

Carroll, Dobrev, and Swaminathan (2002) have expanded theories of resource partitioning by including a discussion of the roles customization, anti-mass-production cultural sentiment, and conspicuous status consumption play in the expanding nature of peripheral niche markets. Organizations have found that tailoring their products with customized demands, what some economic sociologists call "tastespaces," has allowed consumers to perceive their self-identities in congruence or homologous to the identity of an organization. (Lewis and Bridger, 2000) As consumers are exposed to a larger variety of customized and niche goods, certain products that resonate strongly within the unique individuality of a consumer may begin to have heightened appeal. Customization also allows consumers to project differentiation among other consumers and may help maintain status boundaries. Bourdieu also argues that homologues of cultural capital in production and taste exist in social fields (Bourdieu, 1984; 2005). When producers and

consumers come together with shared cultural capital, their cultural affinity can lead to sustained social and economic bonds.

Theories of authenticity are also highly tied to anti-mass production sentiment that Carroll et al. (2002) discuss as a reactionary and inverting process. Many scholars have argued that this sentiment is a product of late industrialization and postmodernity (Ferrara 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Taylor 1991; Lamla, 2009). “Individuals celebrate authenticity in order to balance the extreme dislocation that characterizes life in the postmodern world, in which traditional concepts of self, community and space have collapsed. This collapse has led to a widespread internalization of doubt and an obsession with distinguishing the real from the fake” (Allan, 1998). In postmodern culture, Allan argues that searching for authenticity seems to be an attempt to stabilize reality and find meaning. Further, the pursuit of authentic goods in modern times might reflect internal yearnings of nostalgia for the past in a rapidly changing economic and cultural environment (Outka, 2009). Entrepreneurs who want to take advantage of consumer nostalgia have entered or created new markets by simply commodifying nostalgia as an "authentic" product (Frank, 1997). Lamla also argues that the emergence of new peripheral markets is not only about nostalgia, but also a result of a growing desire for “market-free communication” as western society has become immersed in consumer culture (Lamla, 2009: 182). In his words, many have “a growing distrust in, and disappointment with, the promises of the field of consumption” (182). As a result of these economic and cultural developments, seeking out authenticity from a variety of avenues such as food and cuisine (Lu and Fine, 1995), art and crafts (Fine, 2004), or

music (Grazian, 2006) has become a major ambition for many consumers as they search for the “really real” outside of the central and more popular market space (Geertz 1973).

### *Social Fields and Authenticity*

In contemporary society, perhaps no other experience is as valuable, and yet as elusive, as that of the authentic. In a world of expanding markets for the production and consumption of global goods, capitalism has brought both opportunities and impediments (depending on one's perspective) for access to more authentic goods and services. Today it is possible with relative ease to acquire authentic commodities from regions from all across the globe. Communication and transportation technologies have allowed people to travel and experience authentic cultures in every corner of the world. Cultural and economic landscapes appear limitless. At the same time, critical scholars have warned about the homogenization of regional culture and the routinization of all social life (Ritzer 2000). This critique assumes that the globalization process moves forward at the expense of authentic culture and consumption as corporate run mass markets consolidate media and economic life. No doubt, contemporary capitalism has substantially altered cultures and economies. Is the human experience with authenticity really in jeopardy, though, or could it be thriving in new ways? To answer this question, we must overview the nature of authenticity and highlight some of the philosophical debates surrounding its characteristics.

The debate over authenticity is an old one. It is unsettled, and likely never will be, because it gets to the root of philosophical and sociological divisions over the role of

individual and society. The question of how social order is possible in a world of independent individuals still plagues the social sciences. Is it even possible to live an authentic life or experience authentic objects in a social world that requires individuals to conform to so many latent institutional norms? Does authenticity emerge out of this antagonism, or do integrative social forces suppress it? Any philosophical foundation for authenticity will depend upon one's theoretical orientation when it comes to individual agency and structural social forces. Because authenticity is symbolic in nature, an added abstract cultural layer prevents easy verifiable scientific consensus of the actual meaning of authenticity itself. Nonetheless, human perceptions of authenticity are manifested in a variety of forms that are ubiquitous in all cultures and cannot be dismissed as an artifact of misguided thinking.

In their assessment of authenticity as lived experience, philosophers throughout the ages have tended to gravitate toward a line of thought that assumes some degree of self-autonomy and unique expression from individuals. From this perspective, authentic experience and action is the outcome of a unique disposition that is able to maintain difference through the successful rejection of exploitation and alienation (Marx 1978 [1867] 66-125; Simmel 1964). This perspective, however, assumes rather critically that mass culture is built around constant power struggles where the dominating forces limit individual affirmation. At the core of this perspective, the philosopher posits the question, "Is the individual able to be true to him or herself in action?" A response in the affirmative would mean that an individual is living in harmony with their desired and actual identity.



It becomes more difficult to establish a valid measure of authenticity when it comes to objects and ideas. And yet, the human experience with authenticity (as an object, practice, or idea) often feels intuitive and objective. After all, if something is perceived as authentic, it must to some extent feel genuinely real both subjectively and objectively for an observer (Martin 2003). Social confirmation reinforces the perception that characteristics and meanings emanating out of "authentic" objects are objective to all. In other words, the establishment of "authentic" cultural objects requires consensus. What this means is that authenticity is a relational concept that exists in the social world only intersubjectively (Ferrara 1998). A community must socially construct "authentic" meaning and transpose it into objects. These meanings are not absorbed, but instilled. Imbued authenticity can take place through a number of sufficient pathways, but in the end must satisfy a collectively agreed upon set of assumptions exclusive to a particular field. If these fundamental assumptions are met, it is possible members of a field community will perceive authenticity as an objective reality. I argue that these perceptions are epiphenomenal from relative assumptions within the confines of individual social fields. The process of acquiring perceptions of authenticity that emanate from within fields is nearly equivalent to the formation of the judgment of taste (Bourdieu 1984). When articulating this point, Alessandro Ferrara (1998) states, "the nature of identity, its need for recognition and the nature of the judgment of taste define the intersubjective quality of the view of authenticity (54-55)."

I offer a simple and concise summation of the philosophical underpinnings of the nature of authenticity. Authentic expressions of any form encompassed within a social

field resemble a bounded understanding of purity. Such expressions must remain quarantined or purged from "symbolic pollution" (Douglas 1966). Purity requires that "authentic" objects are free of manipulations that can occur in a number of ways. Sometime pollution transpires through power imbalances and domination in the form of exploitation or coercion. Deceptive manipulations can also occur through forgery by misrepresenting either the authorship or intentions of a creator. Imagine the fallout that would occur if it were discovered that someone other than Da Vinci painted 'Mona Lisa'. The beauty of the art would remain unchanged, but the appeal of its story of creation would be polluted. Other more innocuous manipulations emerge through a process of routinization or unauthorized standardization. Even objects or expressions that get replicated can be tainted by symbolical pollution if the constitutive methods of origin manipulate the perceived uniqueness of an expression. For example, an original patented drug will remain authentic regardless of the availability of replicated generic compounds. The valuation, both monetarily and symbolically, may decline based on the sheer fact that other objects have emulated its nature and compete for its attention. Indeed, branded objects or trademarked expression are designed to retain ownership of authenticity by restricting the protocol of production and maintaining sole rights of replication itself. Any replication outside the bounds of a brand field would be a manipulation of the object or expression and would constitute fraud. In short, if the tacit or tangible claims of an object or expression are in verified alignment with its composition, origination, and history, we can call that object or expression "authentic" to some degree.

There are three primary premises involved in settled judgments of authenticity within a field. The first premise is descriptive in nature. This premise holds that authenticity is the manifestation of a true or accurate likeness to some *a priori* ideal embodiment. This likeness can materialize through form, function, or fidelity to a particular origin or method of creation that is regarded as natural or original in its genesis. If there is good evidence that an idea, process, or object accurately reflects shared notions of an honest subscription to romanticized *a priori* principles (whatever they may be), then members of a respective field are likely to confer authenticity onto it. The second premise is logical in nature. By virtue of its binary logic, authenticity must have an inauthentic counterpart (abstract or tangible). Inauthentic counterparts constantly threaten to corrupt the pure nature of authenticity. We can think of authenticity, therefore, as a conceptual boundary that allows people to distinguish between what seems to be real or fake. The third premise of authenticity is cultural (and the most ambiguous) in nature. Authenticity, as humans understand it, reflects a value for uncovering and maintaining true intentions, originality, and specifications. Under this premise, authenticity is experienced as the preservation of something genuine and protection against deceptive fabrication. One final point I will make in regard to perceptions of authenticity is that they tends to be experienced as isolated islands among seas of surrounding inauthenticity. Our human understanding of authenticity as a concept is colored by the fact that we cognitively associate it as something in the minority and constantly threatened by the degrading forces of the mundane. In short, "authenticity" is a more secular and innocuous term for "sacred" that faces similar corroding forces

associated with modernity. It does not exist in any intrinsic form, but instead is merely a reflection of values collectively instilled into cultural objects. In that sense, the authentic is an idea or expectation ascribed onto an object, and not an inherent quality contained within it.

Perceptions of “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” are boundaries generated much like the construction of “sacred” and “profane” as categories in religious life and the development of group formation. (Durkheim 1995). In essence, sacred objects are set apart and infused with social value. Within the parameters of the particular social group, boundaries act as reinforcement and create solidarity. Lamont defines boundaries as “tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications. Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (Lamont and Molnar 2002; 168). They serve as a buffer to external social forces and, therefore, stabilize groups and give them internal meaning. It has also been argued that humans intrinsically constitute self and identity through boundary work. People naturally create categories of “us” versus “them” based on perceived similarities and differences through cognitive classification faculties (Lakoff 1990).

Part of maintaining group distinction requires constant boundary work. By patrolling boundaries “communities [reinforce] collective norms [and] reinstate order within.” Boundaries also “develop group membership, bonds based on shared emotions,

similar conceptions of the sacred and profane, and similar reactions to symbolic violators. More generally, boundaries constitute a system of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in social acts” (Lamont 1992, 11-12). Further, boundary work is a common, yet somewhat abstract, routine of day-to-day life. In an effort to avoid ambiguity people are in the constant process slicing up the world around them into classifications and symbols to be placed within mental compartments. Attempts are made to keep the content within these boundaries separate in order to uphold mental clarity, consistency, and differentiation while symbolic pollution is avoided (Douglas 1966; Zerubavel 1991; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont 1994; Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996). Boundaries of a group encapsulate rituals and emblems to sustain the defining characteristics, values, and qualities of the group separate from others. Within these bounded spaces, symbolic tastes and practices are enacted through such rituals and have a tendency to diffuse and be self-reproducing. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu (1999) discusses this internal reproduction of group traits. “In the vein of Durkheim, social solidarity is dependent on the sharing of a symbolic system. Symbols are the instruments of social integration, as instruments of knowledge and communication, they make it possible for there to be consensus on the meaning of the social world, a consensus which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of the social order” (166). This consensus of meaning and reproduction of social order is based on the continuation of boundaries that separate those outside of the group from within.

These embedded boundaries within society are static in nature. Although what is defined as “sacred” versus “profane” is fluid and changes into new forms over time,

symbolic boundaries constantly exist rewrapping themselves around new definitions of inclusion and exclusion. It is precisely the existence of these social boundaries that are worth examining, and not so much the content within the boundaries. Robert Wuthnow (1987) makes a poignant statement when commenting on Mary Douglas' work on symbolic pollution and purity. "[She] provides reasons to infer that the boundary itself may often be regarded with greater sacredness than what is on either side. Moral order is reinterpreted to be a concept that is essentially about culture, consisting of implicit categories that define proper relations among individuals and groups. Rituals serve as models of moral order and suggest analogous ways in which other types of symbols may clarify and communicate messages about moral order" (58). The ability to make social distinctions and demarcations allows us to perceive how things are related and, therefore, keep order even as their relationships change over time (69). These conceptual distinctions are a fundamental way in which people make interpretations of the world around them. It is also a continual process of categorization that takes place through constant interaction with others.

Therefore, if we are to understand authenticity properly, it is important to first make the assertion that authenticity itself is fabricated with boundaries and exists in relation to some other fabricated opposite of inauthenticity that exists outside of its boundaries. It seems likely that anti-mass consumer sentiment and a disdain for commodified goods allows niche consumers to cognitively separate with mental boundaries the authentic (traditional, unique, craft-made goods) from the inauthentic (mass produced); even though there might be nothing intrinsic or static in their quality

differences, in many cases. However, in the local organic food market, many farms argue that their produce is indeed of superior quality because of the intense personal tending and incredibly strict methods used in cultivation.

Scholars of postmodern culture have argued that the search for meaning in consumption is an emotional response to living in a very rationalized and inauthentic world (Erickson 1994; Ritzer, 2000, 2005). In fact, our economic world has become so rationalized that some scholars have even argued that consuming authenticity is mostly impossible in free market commodity capitalism (Lamla, 2009). I agree with Zuckerman and Hsu that the identity attributed to a specialist organization is of paramount importance for their success. Identity and authenticity go hand in hand because they are largely collective processes dictated by the perceptions of audiences and consumers of the particular organization. Therefore, authenticity is not something with intrinsic meaning, but must be continually created and acted out as it is situated in relation to the past and other people. Holden and Schrock similarly state that authenticity is the “outcome of social interaction, as an emergent product of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, and as a cultural trait that is indeterminate, fluid, “invented” and shared (and also contested, resisted, and commodified) by social agents” (Vannini and Williams, 2009: 11-12). In order for a commodity to be considered authentic in a marketplace, groups of people must collectively designate the identity of the organization and its offerings with a quality different from what is collectively considered inauthentic. Even though consumer desire for authenticity is very real and transformative in the market, it is

still a socially constructed measure of value that depends on boundaries (Peterson, 1997; Vannini and Williams, 2009).

As stated earlier, producers and consumers in niche markets both construct organizational identities and consumer meanings. Meanings in niche markets include “authenticity” in various forms (taste, quality, craft production, nostalgia, etc.) and consumers vary in the types of meanings that they construct. Connoisseurs of this market field have the cultural capital necessary to be familiar with the meanings and tastes associated with authenticity, which is the subjective value of sentiment infused into a cultural object based on some perceived intrinsic quality manifested in the object or experience. Carroll provides conceptual clarity to the disparate underpinnings of this market by combining theories of authenticity, identity, and resource partitioning into four primary reasons why consumers may hold anti-mass production sentiment. First, consumers may believe in superior quality inherent in peripheral organizations, regardless of whether there really does exist such a difference in quality. Second, consumers’ self image may not resonate with that of the identity of large corporate organizations (Peterson, 1997; Inglehardt, 1997; Vannini and Williams, 2009; Bourdieu, 2005; Weber et al., 2008). Third, and highly connected to the previous reason, is that it is possible that products intentionally consumed from peripheral organizations serve as a tactic for differentiation and individualistic self-expression. Finally, anti-mass production sentiment may stem from a desire to elevate their status as a discerning consumer through conspicuous consumption. Obscure or esoteric niche goods in some instances may require specialized knowledge from the consumer in order for them to be



properly appreciated or displayed. That is, consumption from peripheral regions of the market can connote to others in a social group the appearance of the refined and cultured tastes of a connoisseur, which can confer social approval and status elevation (Carroll et al., 2002, 21-26; Bourdieu 1984; Murphy 1988; Lindholm 2008; Outka 2009). Although Park and Podolny (2000) claimed that resource partitioning might be fueled because organizations gain status for existing in peripheral regions of the market, Carroll et al. (2002) argue from a different point of view. Instead, it is more likely the consumers of niche markets strive for conspicuous status consumption, which in turn helps to further partition markets. “The appeal of certain products may derive more from public displays of consumption by consumers and the status conferrals of others arising from these displays rather than from the deference acts of producers. In this alternative view, organizational status is socially constructed directly by the consumption patterns of consumers rather than by producers” (Carroll, et al., 2002; 25).

In a wide variety of industries peripheral niche organizations have begun to classify their specialized products as differentiated from large centralized mass-producing organizations and of higher cultural status. These actions are tactics and strategies for projecting a narrow identity and authenticity in organizational form (Carroll 2000; Swaminathan 1995; Hsu and Hannon 2005; Rao 2009; Weber et al., 2008). Niche consumers observe, react, and judge such identity projections. Those with anti-mass production sentiment are usually keen in discerning the true organizational form of a producer and how congruent their identities match their products. “Misinformation, such as deceptive or inauthentic identity, eventually gets discovered and ferreted out through

ridicule, boycott, and other normatively imposed sanctions. Consequently, the robust identity (Padgett & Ansell 1993) strategies attempted by the [centralized generalists and mass producers] are only ephemerally effective (Carroll et al., 2002; 23).



Figure 14: Planting strawberry starters in a bed using traditional techniques. – Photography by Author

### *The Local Imperative*

At the most fundamental level, the enactment of authenticity at both the farm and the markets was made possible because of the local space shared between producers and consumers in this social field. Both producers and consumers coalesce unified symbols of value in the niche market sphere. They perform embodied authenticity in the local organic food community in distinct but reciprocal manners. As a whole, the market field comes together around an idea of authenticity that is manifested through close physical and geographic proximities. The localism of the economy is what makes possible the unmediated processes and flows between individuals and their connection to one another and the land. For instance, *Desert Sky* and their members and customers had uninhibited direct access to each other. All of the decisions about the exchange of goods were handled directly in person between parties. There were no economic middlemen, brokers, or distributors who interrupted the contact between the farm and the community; meaning all issues were settled face to face.

The obvious distinction between local organic and conventional store bought organic is that average distance in which the food had traveled to get from farm to plate. Just beneath the surface of the local organic food movement, though, are more abstract elements that sustain the activity within the local niche markets. Within the parameters of a market field such as this one based upon a limited geographic radius, the free flow of information, identity, and values between producers and consumers is often elevated so that clear signals of expectations about what authenticity means can be interpreted. The market psychology in the local organic movement (and in many other niche sectors) is

based upon tacit understandings of intentions and objectives of what the market should accomplish. Importantly, it is the imperative of the local connections that allow small agrarian farms to operate with more community accountability than external centralized governing bodies or certification agencies. In exchange for auditing and oversight, farms extend honesty in return for the trust from the community in their business. This trust requires a great deal of transparency, embeddedness, interconnectivity, and repeated interpersonal activity among both buyers and sellers in a marketplace. Indeed, the smooth functioning of any market necessitates some degree of trust between all parties involved in transactions. Complicated, advanced, and risky economic transactions must broker trust through formal mechanisms designed to keep all parties' intentions and actions accounted for. In a small-scale local economic market, however, the formal credentialed checks that assure trust in other market environments can be reduced and replaced by direct relationships among well-known bargaining partners (DiMaggio and Louch 1998).

Of course, this model can and has been taken advantage of by dishonest food purveyors who have deceived customers. Although the occurrence of deception in local markets among agrarian operations is virtually nonexistent, it does take place in local bazaars where vendors of all varieties share space. I encountered this example firsthand in a few different farmers markets around the city from time to time. The vast majority of booths were filled with foods stocked from legitimate local organic sources. Every once in awhile, however, less familiar vendors would arrive with boxes of fruits and vegetables from unknown sources. Alex informed me that sometimes sellers would

arrive with food nonorganic from Mexico or even a supermarket and try to sell it as something they had grown organically in their garden. In these instances, dishonest merchants hope to capitalize off of customers at the market who might assume that they grew their produce in a genuine organic process. However, their plans rarely worked and more trusted and established farmers at the market often exposed them as fraudulent. Further, if a customer were persistent, they could ask to see pictures of the farm if they suspected the food was brought to the market under false pretenses. Asking questions about the farm, methods, location would usually be enough to bring to the surface any doubts about the claims to the foods origins. Still, this is not to say that fraud or deception never takes place in local organic markets. The tighter the community and relations among vendors with each other and their customers, though, has a tendency to weed out any sellers with vague or insincere intentions. Conversations about the people and their food take place in open and visible public space among many surveying eyes. And crowds passionate about the integrity of what is being bought and sold in highly regarded local open market settings are good at collectively identifying authentic representations from fraudulent intrusions. If dishonesty is identified, word spreads quickly of violations to protect the overall reliability of the local market built on collective community self-accountability. *Desert Sky's* adherence to authentic agrarian practices and sales, therefore, were made clear and maintained largely because of a high level of visibility afforded through local proximity.

### *Renditions of Authenticity*

Subtle themes would gradually emerge as I participated in a variety of farming activities at *Desert Sky*. Their practices began to cohere into a comprehensive narrative I could understand and appreciate. The dominant theme I uncovered over the course of two years working directly with these farmers and their CSA members in this field was the paramount collective interest in respecting an idealized natural aesthetic. It was through a strict adherence to the original tenets of organic agrarianism that enactments of authenticity were perpetuated in a number of ways. These renditions of authenticity that I observed in the local organic food market and at *Desert Sky Farms* played out intersubjectively along well-defined field relations.

*Desert Sky* was an overwhelmingly complex and diverse place. The farm's dynamic entailed a constant rotation of many unique heirlooms that I had never seen before. New crops were planted and harvested on a daily basis and the specific details never quite looked the same. This diverse interconnectivity aligned nicely with the natural aesthetic associated with local organic agriculture. Proper utilization of alternative farming procedures that respected the basic tenets of agrarianism was also important an important symbol of an authentic aesthetic. A rugged style and traditional approach to cultivation techniques were all about establishing a harmonious connection to the land while honoring the craft of a more bucolic past. By upholding the labor techniques used in early agrarianism, *Desert Sky* hoped to distinguish itself in a stark contrast from modern industrial farming in both practice and output.



Figure 15: The mobile chicken units at *Desert Sky*. Nighttime housing in converted camper and egg boxes for daytime roosting (left). Alex collecting eggs (right).

Whether it be housing chickens in a mobile unit, building soil with compost and microbial probiotics, or diversifying crops in a symbiotic arrangement, *Desert Sky's* approaches to farming practices were always unconventional. Their methods were built upon trial-by-error personal experiences and informed by the accumulated wisdom of previous generations of agrarian farmers. Adherence to time-honored growing techniques reflected *Desert Sky's* wholesale conviction in soundness and viability of local organic. It also exhibited to their markets an aesthetic of authenticity in regards to pastoral nostalgia. Beyond this authentic aesthetic, however, their traditional methods simply felt like very intuitive ways to grow food in a responsible and fulfilling manner. An example can be seen in *Desert Sky's* method for planting seeds using classic farming technology with vintage equipment. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes after a day seeding carrots:

Adam decides that it would be a good time to plant purple carrot seeds in a bed and a couple varieties of lettuce in another. The seeds are in a box from previous seasons and are heirloom varieties that work best for this climate and season. This task requires using an old mechanical seeder and he shows me how to load and operate it. This device resembles something from the early nineteenth century. It has two wheels connected to a spinning shaft that dumps seeds in a channeled groove in the ground. The back wheel then moves and packs dirt over the seed. This device is called a “Planet Junior” and the technology hasn’t changed with this thing in probably 100 years. Adam describes it as “rustic” and is obviously enamored with it; even claiming it is his favorite thing to operate on the farm.

Once we load the bucket and set the lever, I begin pushing as closely as possible along the irrigation drip tape the length of the bed. There are three lines of drip tape, so we set six rows of seeds for each bed. It is definitely a fun job and enjoyable for me because I can stand the entire time. It is also aesthetically pleasing to operate such a simple but very helpful machine. To plant by hand would take days, but the Planet Junior reduced the time to just one hour or so. Because it is such a simple contraption, I have total control and feel close to the whole process. I can actually see the seeds moving into the ground and everything is powered with just my push. It is reminiscent of farming practices my great-grandparents might have used. Seeding starts the very beginning of a new bed and while pushing I know that soon hundreds of new beautiful plants will burst out of



the ground. Someone will soon receive the harvest and enjoy it. With each row, I am setting in motion a slow but beautiful process.

The general sentiment contained in this excerpt was fairly common in most of the jobs at the farm, monotonous or not. In fact, many of the WWOOFers joined this farm specifically to learn about unconventional organic methods and relished the opportunity to be part of such tasks. Sharing work activities with excited interns gave the atmosphere an electric quality and it appeared that everyone felt like they were part of something special. The use of agrarian craft methods combined with this social element made work alluring because of its powerful rendition of authentic organic agriculture.



Figure 16: Planting carrot seeds with a "Planet Jr." cultivator.

### *Heirlooms and Authentic Traditions*

Another primary rendition of authenticity at *Desert Sky* was their exclusive cultivation of unique heirlooms varieties of fruits and vegetables. Heirlooms are different from standard strains in that they have not been standardized for mass commercial use. It is highly unlikely that a consumer would find heirloom varieties in a conventional grocery store. Procurement of heirlooms can only be accomplished through home gardening or from farmers at a local market. Often fruits and vegetables would be harvested that looked so foreign or peculiar to me that I would need help deciphering their identity and use.

Customers and CSA members prized strange heirlooms, however, precisely because they were out of the ordinary. As with many goods and services, unique or one-of-a-kind items were touted for embodying authentic attributes (Karpik 2010). The aura of authenticity surrounding unique items lends well to higher prices and sales in niche markets where consumers are likely dabbling for eccentric purchases. The appeal of heirlooms is that they are both region and seasonal specific making them ideal for local markets. The differing histories and features of each heirloom give them a character reflective of the natural variation found in nature. The aura of authenticity surrounding heirlooms derives from the fact that they are difficult to replicate on a large scale and specific to time and place.

Further, because heirlooms are uncommon from traditional market sources they tend to taste different from related better-known varieties. Distinguishing flavors in heirlooms are sometimes subtle and other times robust. For example, I could detect very

little difference in the taste of the heirloom lettuce, okra, or grown at *Desert Sky*. The French breakfast radishes, Jimmy Nardello sweet peppers, Thai eggplant, and tomatoes, however, all had the most distinctive piquancy I had ever experienced in any vegetable. Upon reflection of these wonderful flavors, many CSA members commented to me that “this is what real food tastes like.” In their eyes (or rather taste buds), the idiosyncratic and unusual tastes gave them great pleasure and they relished the novelty of fresh local organic heirlooms.

The farmers and WWOOFers at *Desert Sky* also appeared to savor finding and growing interesting heirloom varieties. At lunchtime Jen would sometime casually flip through a seed catalogue and point out new fruits or vegetables that intrigued her. “Ooh, I want to try this type of carrot in the spring! Don’t they look neat?” We would pass around the catalogue and admire the weird shapes and colors of many different types of fruits and vegetables. As a category of food I recognized these plants and their produce but there was always something different about their features that would not show up in a typical grocery store. And we always were curious to plant a new variety of heirloom seeds and watch them produce unusual crops for harvest. Something about it felt adventurous and special. It was as if the farmers and their customers were both exploring new food terrains in search of hidden gems and new flavors for recipes. After a season Jen would reflect on the heirlooms she thought grew best on their land and which ones they would probably discontinue. Some CSA members and customers unanimously loved new varieties like the Jimmy Nardello sweet peppers; other strains turned out to grow poorly or taste bland. Slowly, *Desert Sky* honed in on 30+ heirlooms that fit well

with their fields and markets. After a couple years they had the finest and most unusual heirlooms available at the farmers market on Sundays.

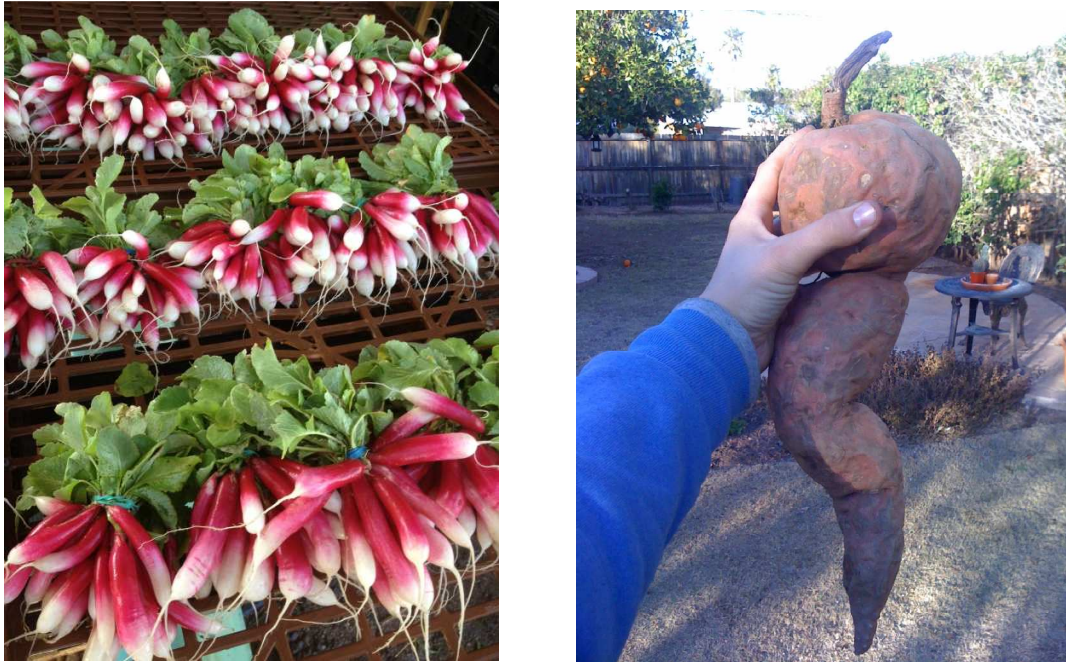


Figure 17: Unique heirloom varieties. Freshly harvested and washed heirloom French breakfast radishes (left). An heirloom sweet potato (right).

*Desert Sky's* reliance upon heirlooms complemented their agricultural and market strategy. In their pursuit for procuring the freshest and cleanest foods possible for the local market, heirlooms were a vital aesthetic that projected an honest devotion to the agrarian ethos. Quality in this market field was all about being close to the source of agrarian production both literally and symbolically. Heirlooms were the tangible symbol of artisanal-like growing methods. By striving for self-sufficiency, uniqueness, and direct sales, *Desert Sky Farms* “produced” an abstract of authenticity on the farm that was then enacted at their markets.

One day while working in the field I asked Tim what constitutes authentic or “real” fruits and vegetables from their farm. He discussed the type of labor and methods that go into cultivation, not the fruits and vegetables:

“What makes it real? Well, it is fresh and grown real. By that I mean everything that went into growing this food was in mind from the moment of soil preparation and seeding, to cultivation and harvesting, and even selling and explaining to our members how to cook it. This food is never gassed, processed, or treated with synthetic chemicals. Its local, tastes great, fresh, and superior in every way and we explain to our customers exactly how and why.”

I asked him to further explain the reasons he considers this process of cultivation to be a more real way of growing food.

“The way fruits and vegetables are grown under industrial farming are unreal, unnatural, and unsustainable. It is a selfish way for us to expect food because modern agriculture is bolstered with hormones and chemical sprays. The earth, not us, absorbs the costs. This is not a reliable way to grow because if those techniques were stopped the entire food system for the planet would now fail. Harmful runoff full of chemicals and salts bleed out of the soil and into our waterways and the government backs that process; it’s wrong. Authentic farming must take into account the natural microbes in the soil and the pre-existing science of the earth. Real farming must combine aspects of biodynamic agriculture, permaculture, and native techniques.”

Tim's statements uncover the farmers' belief that staying true to traditional agrarian organic principles of cultivation is what makes their produce "real" and differentiated. It is not that their produce is intrinsically more real than other foods, but instead no synthetic processes or additives were implemented in the production process. Authenticity in any product, according to the farmers, must take into account the process from start to finish, not just in the final form. What is granted authentic value changes through time as the scale of production and variety of economic goods perpetually grows. It is the transparency into the story behind the local produce that yields authentic perceptions of connection to community, economy, and the environment itself. Awareness to, and even personal contribution into, the creation of the local food is what conjure perceptions of authenticity from the farm to local consumers and CSA members.

### *Buying Authenticity*

The agrarian movement and demand for local organic food is growing in the United States for a variety of reasons. The broad individual motives range from big issues surrounding environment concerns, health and nutritional impact to more immediate matters of taste, freshness, and desires to support a local economy. Combined, local organic farmers have been able to fuse disparate concerns into a unifying identity broadly constructed through agrarian and organic principles. The outcome, I argue, is both a deliberate construction and search for perceived authentic

modes of production and consumption outside of the industrialized and rationalized methods that pervade the corporate agriculture industry today.

Although subjective, the interpretation of meanings surrounding authenticity, the ways it is perceived and invoked, and the contexts in which it is constructed can all be described and analyzed from in-depth interviews. From a local market context it is described as encountered in the figurative distance from commodification, and the literal proximity to the actual people and social relations of cultivation. Within the parameters of the local organic movement itself, authenticity is reflective of how true and faithful purveyors of fruits and vegetables are to the principles of the agrarian vision and early organic movement. Local organic farmers attempt to embody the original precepts as they build a viable ‘back to the land’ movement. *Desert Sky*’s CSA members express experiencing unique and authentic connections with both their food and relationships with *Desert Sky Farms*, as depicted in the below statements from two different CSA members:

“I feel there is something authentic about this because I know where it's coming from and know the farmers and I think that's kind of a cool thing. I mean you can visit the farm. Things can be labeled authentic and organic in the store. Should I take their word for it? I don't know. But I can go to the farm and I can see their practices and I can say, ‘yeah, you're growing organic.’ And yeah I can stand there and make sure that you didn't spray pesticides on it all night. But, generally

speaking, you can see that they're following general organic practices. You know, I think that makes it more authentic in that way.” – *Social Worker, female (39)*

Another female CSA member stated these perceptions:

“I think on some level maybe it’s a little bit comforting that your carrot looks like a carrot, and they don’t all look the same. This sounds ridiculous, but maybe your broccoli has some blemishes, and you’re paying extra for those blemishes. But it looks more like what comes out when I grow stuff and in that sense it does feel more like, ‘okay, this is real food’. It’s not kind of some sort of glossy, waxed apple that looks the same as all the other apples.” – *Graduate Student (31)*

Other members describe taking satisfaction in buying local because it makes them feel that they are rooted somewhere meaningful and unique. Their pursuit of artisanal local foods appears connected to a growing desire to know the impact of consumer behavior as people become increasingly distant from the sources of what they purchase. The appeal of local food purchases to CSA members is that they are able to build truly sustained and valued interpersonal relationships beyond simply cash nexus transactions. As these members maneuver through a global economic landscape, authentic and enduring connections are formed around foods and interactions that feel less commoditized:



“Here at the farmers market when you go up to a fruit stand and you look at the guy who made the cheese or grew the crops and picked them or whatever, you know even if you don't ask a question or interact, it is a completely different interaction that you have than when you go to Trader Joe's and buy the plastic tub of tomatoes. And I think it does definitely make it feel more authentic...this whole farmers market thing, it's definitely unique.” – *Lawyer, male (71)*

Another member simply stated:

“It kind of feels like you're just stopping by at a neighbor's family farm to pick up food. It doesn't feel like a business.” - *Stay-at-home mother (35)*

CSA members provide personal narratives of seeking out and feeling satisfaction in finding food that is honest in its origins, unique in its character, superior in its quality, and not manipulated or standardized by an industrial process. Such distinguishing qualities of local organic foods remind them of what fruits and vegetables naturally look like. These members feel part of something natural and, therefore, genuine. An example of this can be displayed from the following conversation with two of *Desert Sky's* members:

Ann: In a way this food feels more real because if you buy an apple at a grocery store that is not organic you rarely ever find one that isn't sweet and perfect.

Granted, it is sweet and perfect, but they always pump some kind of non-organic chemical into it to make it come out that way.

Beth: And they put wax all over it to make it preserved.

Ann: Here, if you buy an apple [from a local farmer], you get a bushel of 20 apples, and 5 might be sweet, or all 20 might be sweet. You don't really know, and that's really how nature intended it.

Beth: And most will be ugly.

Author: So you are talking about the natural variation that nature provides?

Ann: I think so. I think the imperfection is what makes it real.

Beth: I love it when we get the carrots that still have the leaves on them, and they are just covered in dirt. I love it, I don't know. It makes it feel more natural.

Ann: It's the sense that it just came out of the dirt, versus being processed, waxed, preserved somehow, and it is this weird, always perfect product.

Each of these interview quotes captures a variation on the theme of the quest for and meaningful interpretation of authenticity. The food economy allows for interesting scholarly insight into assessments of authenticity because it is rich in diversity, central in culture, and one of the most intimate forms of daily consumption. It is a necessary functional commodity that creates and is created by the culture surrounded by it. In that cyclical process, food economies have mimicked the flow of commodity chains across the globe. Some meanings associated with food culture have been lost in these currents, but new ones are constantly being rediscovered. The CSA interviewees in this study

provide insight into new values and expectations of the fastest growing sector of the contemporary food economy. This niche market for local foods and CSA's has made headway as large food corporations and their economies of scale continue to contract around a narrow mass-market formula. Though this strategy has successfully led to increased food production and consumer selection it has also been met with disenchantment by a growing body of concerned consumers. It is difficult to tease out whether this disenchantment is endemic of displeasure with corporate plutocracy or a more diffuse blasé response to postmodern culture in late-capitalism. Either way, a new consumer society is growing along the fringes of mass-markets. Producers and consumers in many of these niche sectors are grasping for connections that feel tethered to their values and identities. These values and identities are not uniform in all niche markets, but tend to gravitate toward expressions of individualism, self-sufficiency, enlightenment, and expressions of uniqueness. In the local organic food movement these values and identities are manifested through renditions of authenticity in ways reflective of growing and consuming foods in accordance with agrarian principles. By revering the pureness of the past these modern day agrarians hope to recalibrate social and economic connections in a more humanly recognizable form. Underlying the entire social structure of this field is the latent attempt to evade corruptible influences due to the corporate takeover of every facet of the modern food production and consumption system. Therein lies the nature of authenticity for this field.

## CHAPTER 10: MARKET RITUAL



Figure 18: The weekly farmers market. Images from autumn (left) and winter (right) harvests at the *Desert Sky's* booth.

Each week the farm would gather up its assortment of fruits and vegetables it had harvested and haul them to the primary farmers market in the city. In a matter of hours, the parking lot between shops and restaurants was transformed from a silent and barren slab of concrete, into a colorful, loud, and busy bazaar. Smells sifted through the air among dense crowds and booths. Dozens of tents and tables would emerge to serve thousands of people over a series of hours. It regularly became a scene of intense energy and artistic display as customers strolled from one booth to the next. Some came prepared with a list of exact items to be purchased, while others would simply gaze and graze on whatever they stumbled upon.

One thing for sure is that the ambiance of this farmers market was a stage of sorts where merchants and shoppers were on display to one another. Although the ultimate purpose for the market was the sale of foods and crafts (after all, without an exchange of money for goods it really wouldn't be a market), it was constructed with a rich tapestry of both social and epicurean entertainment. Half of the enjoyment of a farmers market was the experience customers have in finding interesting foods and conversing with the farmers. Free samples of goodies, demonstrations of cooking, and hugs, handshakes, and laughter emanated throughout the market grounds. All of this activity was in the name of commerce, yet the aura and atmosphere was so very different from the shopping experiences in more typical market settings. The appearance of this farmers market is so jovial and pleasant that it was easy to forget that farming operations and livelihoods were at stake. It is where the rubber meets the road for many vendors. For some, the chance to sell produce at the weekend market is a hobby and opportunity to make some additional income. For others, it is their primary source of income from week to week.

The culture adopted and enacted in this farmers market is similar in many regards to the nature of bazaars famously investigated by Clifford Geertz (1973) and the symbolic interactionism described by Erving Goffman (1959, 1974). Geertz's thick descriptions of the inhabited and negotiated interaction within vibrant traditional markets in Indonesia brought to the surface deep cultural patterns undergirding the mechanical elements of economy. At play were personal projections of nuanced roles with the purpose of signaling particular contextual images that Geertz understood as a manifested "system of patterns of shared symbols and/or meaning (89)." Depending on the

connection, lines of communication, and established expectations between buyers and sellers, representatives of either party that Geertz observed might want to give off various appearances relevant to the market circumstances in order to help them make sense of the scenarios encountered. Character attributes such as deference, prestige, authority, or even poverty would be communicated (depending on context) to conjure up a range of reciprocal emotions on behalf of opposite party. So, for example, depending on the relative standing of the buyer or seller, either might strategically assume a role in hopes of winning over sentiment, camaraderie, trust, or even sympathy to settle on an uncertain monetary agreement. All of the posturing must take into account the time of day, the supply and demand at market, past interaction, and expectations around the bend.

Essentially, buyers and sellers assume a variety of context specific roles in hopes of attaining cultural openings in the market. Erving Goffman (1974) developed frame analysis as a method for understanding how symbolic interaction in all social settings (including markets) work to organize cultural behavior. Participants within a social setting enact a repertoire of prefigured gestures, tropes, or communication strategies to reflect their standing and goals within various social situations. By documenting and categorizing observable interactions between individuals and groups into ontological patterns, Goffman attempted to explain why people communicated and engaged with one another in diverse arrays. This framing uncovered various cultural schemas that channeled interaction into organized compartments. Most importantly, this analysis allowed Goffman to conjecture meanings participants projected and interpreted within the confines of the frames. While every social circumstance is comprised of unique

circumstances, the agency of each actor involved both utilizes prescribed cultural frames, but also enacts idiosyncratic culture in the process. Culture is both adopted and created cyclically as it unfolds in the spiral dance of symbolic interaction. By extension, meaning is both derived from and attributed to the multiple frames participants enter into and negotiate. I had the opportunity to observe the specific repetitive forms of symbolic interaction that occurred weekly at *Desert Sky's* farmers market booth where I helped arrange and sell their produce.

The largest farmers market in the city commences rain or shine on Sundays at a shopping plaza in the central part of town. *Desert Sky* always arrived before dawn to set up their tables and canopy. Merchants and farmers organized in roughly the same spot each week so the overall feel of the market was a fairly routine arrangement. For many regular shoppers this relatively structured layout was welcomed. They would show up and create a routine of their own; habitually doting from one booth to the next acquiring a variety of foods from many different sources. Customers began their morning empty handed but would head back to their cars or bikes with bags overflowing with leafy greens. Of course, not all of those in the crowd were regulars or even purchased anything. The experience of the farmers market was as much social as economical. People came to graze, people watch, walk their dogs, and strike up conversation with farmers or their friends. Some came to eat breakfast and drink coffee while others listened to music. Children played in the water fountain on hot mornings or rolled around in the grass with each other. A casual observation of the social dynamics at this market revealed a weekend ritual for many filled with commerce and leisure. The lively

engagement between farmers and patrons was always warm and friendly. Though this market was a welcome transition from the field for me, it was very serious business for the farmers. A wet weekend might deter shoppers from the market and mean thousands of dollars of loss for the farm. Of opposite concern, if a farmer miscalculated a bustling weekend, they might not bring enough produce to satisfy demand and miss out on a jump in profits. For a place of a lot of surface level routine and ritual, the uncertainty from week to week was definitely stressful for a small-scale farmer. There were simply no guarantees that shoppers would show up or buy their foods.

Luckily for most local farmers in America today there is not a shortage in the demand for local produce. Farmers markets from coast to coast are either popping up in new places each year or growing exponentially in size and sales. This surge in activity means that farmers must be careful not to underestimate demand. Finding the right network of interested buyers and establishing a regular balance in sales can be difficult to prepare for, though. Compared to the uniformity of supermarkets and the certainty afforded through contracts, most local farmers can only hope that their week-to-week operations are met with perpetual enthusiasm. How do local farmers convince members of their community that it is worth showing up to the farmers market frequently to purchase their foods then?

After volunteering at *Desert Sky's* booth at the farmers market on weekends for a couple of years, I pieced together some essential features unique to their market experience that helped build and sustain enthusiasm with customers over time. The first thing that was striking to me when working at their booth was the extent and depth of



constant interpersonal activity between the farmers and customers. Most economic exchange of any sort requires some level of contact and communication between people, but social exchange at this farm booth was altogether different from commercial activity I had experienced before. Tim, Alex, Jen, and their additional partner Sean had mastered the art of conversation with both friends and strangers. They were all adept at piquing the curiosities and interests of people passing by with or without the intent to make a purchase. While their focus was always on selling produce, exuding a demeanor of genuine enthusiasm about their farming and building enduring relationships was always projected to customers. The ability for shoppers from the community meet the people who labored on local land to grow their food was a privilege that the farmers at *Desert Sky* always wanted to nurture. They were on a first name basis with well over one hundred different shoppers and members during any given weekend market.

After a few weeks I too started to notice many of the same faces repeatedly showing up to buy an assortment of fruits and vegetables. Eventually I was able to remember names with faces and establish a running weekly dialogue with various customers. We could discuss previous purchases, how they used their foods in recipes, and almost always how life on the farm was coming along throughout the season. Conversations revolved around the foods on the table and how the particulars of farming life were embodied within the produce. As I would bag foods and make change, Tim, Alex, Sean, or Jen could be overheard commenting on the finer details of all the work that went into growing and harvesting their foods. They could specify any issue or concern about their produce from the moment it was seeded to when it was packed up

and brought to the market. Often they would find themselves in long conversations about how certain foods could be prepared in interesting ways or how they implemented compost into their soil. Essentially, the interpersonal nature of the links forged between the farmers and their customers at the market allowed *Desert Sky* to extend their connection with their land into the kitchens of their community. Their produce was a representation of their labor, love, and personalities. Along with cash payment, buyers would receive a story, instructions, or a follow up about previous purchases.

Unlike increasingly common stages of consumption where salespersons are required to enter into scripts for performance interaction, the farmers market booth was anything but synthetic. There were no distinctions between front or backstage behavior because the farm's objective at the market was to be as transparent and authentic as possible. After weeks of selling *Desert Sky's* produce side-by-side with the farmers, I was able to pick up on subtle changes in their demeanor during selling hours. Each was very affable and smiley the entire duration of their public engagement. They juggled several tasks while simultaneously carrying on a conversation with customers entering and exiting the booth. Each farmer would briskly, yet casually, entertain questions while restocking and organizing produce displays even though they were constantly busy attending to the needs of shoppers. Through it all, never once did I get the impression that any of the farmers from *Desert Sky* were putting on an act. Each might embellish in conversation or flatter their customers, but never in a way that seemed anything but sincere.

The art of selling goods and services requires a governance of behavioral interaction. One must suppress certain emotions or expressions for the sake of coming to an interpersonal and economic agreement during the moments of transaction. The scale and degree to which modern businesses sometimes enforce their employees or representatives to manage prefabricated scripts of interaction are extensive and, to an extent, dehumanizing. In a growing service economy, management of feelings on the job and emotional labor are common ways that centralized corporations seek to create uniformity and harmony with clientele (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993). Scholarly documentation of the management of human emotions during working hours often tells of the strain this puts on workers. Emotional management is indeed an invasive feature of corporate control over employees, but justified as a necessary response to the increasing contact between buyers and sellers in service markets. Is it possible, however, that this practice has gone too far? Could it be that employees who are required to engage through scripted and suppressed interaction are also disengaged on a human level with their customers? And if so, would not this reliance on emotional management be experienced as dehumanizing for the worker and alienating for shoppers.

Certain market scenarios are indeed well suited for emotional management and bureaucratic controls over buyer and seller interaction. Most people likely prefer keeping some personal distance between themselves and exchange partners in common settings (i.e. gas stations, fast food restaurants, or big box retailers). For the most part, consumption in highly bureaucratic spheres is likely to revolve around the quick and efficient transactions of finely standardized goods and services. Anonymity or superficial

contact can help buyers and sellers attain a primary goal of simply transferring a good or service for cash. The problem with this model of exchange, according to some critics, is that it reduces the humanness of economic life and is also spreading rapidly across the market spectrum. George Ritzer's (2000) diagnosis for this trend is the "McDonaldization of society" where the interpersonal interaction between people in a growing majority of economic encounters is coming to resemble the type of total instrumental rationality Weber feared over a century ago. Ritzer has noted that Weberian rationalization has trickled out and now encompasses nearly all facets of modern life. In the place of traditional economic structures, modern routinized markets are comprised and directed by mechanisms that insure efficiency, predictability, calculability, and increased control by nonhuman technologies (Ritzer 2000). The consequences of this rationalization are full of tradeoffs depending on one's value orientation and the merits of bureaucratic control are still debated. One thing that is certain, however, is that Weberian rationalization is here to stay and is assured to gradually broaden in our highly complex and technical society.

Not all market exchanges, however, are best suited for the efficiencies provided by McDonaldized interactions. Market settings that have recently formed around the soaring interest in local agriculture are in many regards constituted with inverse cultural and organizational logics that comprise McDonaldized systems. When wandering through a contemporary large farmers market it is apparent that the culture and politics informing these particular peripheral economies are in many ways foundationally opposite to Ritzer's concern of the McDonaldization juggernaut. The resistance

displayed in such alternative niches like farmers markets is not surprising in and of itself until one considers the staggering growth of new local farms engaged in direct markets over the last decade. As a sociologist interested in the ethnographical experiences, practices, and meanings embodied through grounded interaction, I noted an overwhelming conspicuous resistance to mainstream structures of production and consumption. In other words, supporters of this market challenged the core ethos of McDonaldized rationality in a variety of ways. My acute interest in *Desert Sky's* farmers market booth emerged out of their incongruent and uncommon market strategies in comparison to the tacit norms of mainstream economies. Their practices and goals appeared to me as an aberration in the trajectory of status quo American business. In my first encounter with their booth at the main farmers market I found buyers and sellers engaging in the exact opposite mode of behavior I was accustomed to observing in popular economic exchange. Both parties sought out and intentionally engaged in very unpredictable patterns of dialogue that were anything but efficient. Alternative economic practices make sense, however, when they operate deep within the margins of society. But my observation and participation with *Desert Sky* and their network soon enlightened me to the fact that the countercultural origins of local organic were now part of a rather substantial wave of a pseudo-mainstream trend.

Local agriculture and farmers markets are so common across all of America that the Department of Agriculture is now offering loans of up to \$35,000 to help new small-scale local farmers start up or expand their operations into direct markets in their

respective surrounding communities.<sup>12</sup> This first time program through the USDA highlights how important the government believes it is to strengthen disparate food security for consumers and market access for farmers. Further, large corporations around the country have made very big recent marketing and distribution directives to stock a much larger percentage of fresh local foods onto their shelves. National grocery chains like Whole Foods have led the effort in implementing local foods into all of their stores. Other larger national retailing giants such as Wal-Mart and Safeway have also recently begun offering local options. According to Phil Lempert (2013), an analyst of the food industry, "It used to be a rule of thumb that major chain stores would want to sell the same products at every store. The small manufacturer couldn't just make its product for one store." Eventually stores around the country noted changes in consumer demand and have responded by contracting with farmers near grocery stores.

The heart of local organic food sales does not do business in a mainstream fashion, though. The bulk of local organic sales still take place through direct market venues. As the trend of local shopping strengthens the original sources from which community members could buy local organics have seen the greatest increase in activity. A farmers market or CSA pick up location simply emanate entirely different and idiosyncratic shopping experiences compared to traditional chain stores. No matter how many varieties or percentages of local foods a Safeway or Whole Foods introduces into their inventory, the shopping experience at these locations is exactly the same from store to store. Corporate middlemen, though, cannot replicate the social structure, dramaturgy,

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<sup>12</sup> "Seed money: USDA offers small loans to farmers who grow for local customers, farmers markets." *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2013.

and intimacy of social ties exemplified in a direct local market. Grocery stores simply serve as an interface for the exchange of products. But try as they might to appropriate the appeal of local goods, the transparency and extended connection between actual farmers and consumers are limited in supermarket aisles. In other words, the dynamics of shopping at a grocery store stocked with local items are more utilitarian than that of purchases from a farmers market or CSA. What, then, are the additional dynamics at play from these markets that are unaccounted in traditional grocery outlets?

My participation and observation of selling farm produce from a stand at the city's largest farmers market on Sunday mornings revealed nuanced patterns of social interaction and display. Typical of market settings, farmers set up their foods for sale along long tables. Items were usually stacked up and organized with signs indicating variety and price. Farmers almost always stood directly behind the table facing out toward the visitors passing by. The arrangement was similar to a clerk behind a counter or a butcher behind a glass case. The farmers at their booths would busily balanced holding conversations and answering questions with the exchange of money for food. Replacement foods were constantly restocked to maintain a full and bountiful table. Early in the morning, a full table would give the appearance of a large and healthy harvest. It also indicated to shoppers that the farm is both a very serious operation and capable of growing many varieties. Lush leafy greens and colorful stacks of squash, tomatoes, and carrots were an effective way to communicate to the public that the farmers had a green thumb and were tentative to their crops. Conversely, sparse tables had a difficult time attracting the same market audiences. Often backyard gardeners or

small time growers would bring a scant picking on a weekend and set up with a rather dismal and bare display. The majority of shoppers simply passed by such tables in search of farm booths that were stocked with a wide variety of hearty and overflowing harvests. In this regard the signals are clear:

"We grow full time. We are very good at what we do. Look at all of the things we have to offer."

Simply getting someone to stop and peruse is the first step in establishing a market connection.

The dynamics changed a bit as the hours ticked by toward the close of the market. In the final hour of business on a successful day a farm booth might face a shortage of foods. Popular items like fresh farm eggs, for example, usually were sold out early in the market. By noon tables may begin to look bare and sometimes farmers even begin to pack up. Oddly, a sparse table near the end of market hours can actually help sales. It can indicate to late coming shoppers that this particular farm has desirable foods in high demand, whereas richly stocked tables can give off the perception to customers that the farm must have low quality items passed over by previous shoppers. Each booth, therefore, must strategically operate within a fine balance of display while taking into account time of the day. If done right, potential customers might feel encouraged to arrive earlier on proceeding weekend market days to take advantage of the greater offerings during early hours of operation. Such an outcome is very advantageous for



farms because it helps them to establish an aura of curiosity, anticipation, and enthusiasm from shoppers with their particular booth. The more people who are convinced to arrive early for revered items, the greater the density and buzz surrounding the first fresh choice pickings. Essentially demand can be generated if customers are convinced that high quality and desirable foods are scarcely available within the limits of time.

I watched as this process unfolded on a weekly basis. The best example of excitement and demand generated for a fresh local organic food item took place when *Desert Sky* first began selling eggs at the market. The regular foodies were completely enamored with fresh farm eggs, which have garnered a rather celebrated reputation in recent years. Unlike common store bought eggs, these were extremely viscous with deep orange yolks. The chickens were cage free, free-range, and given an exclusive organic feed mixed with greens and vegetables discarded from the farm. Indeed, these eggs did have a rich taste that could not be found in grocery stores. The combination of brown speckled shells and unique taste all symbolized the idea of the local movement and made them a high demand item.

When it came to more atypical items, such as Romanseco (fractal) broccoli or purple beans, shoppers and members would tend to ask many questions. For these peculiar vegetables the most common question was always, “What is this?” But often the questions turned into comments such as, “Wow, how beautiful” and “Oh, this looks so interesting and delicious”. Part of the dialogue in many instances was simply the customer making a gesture of admiration for the unique aesthetic qualities or expressing anticipation for trying these unfamiliar food items. Veteran farmers market customers or

CSA members, however, would approach the buying ritual with more nonchalance. This dispassion was not necessarily reflective of indifference. On the contrary, their cool approach to the fine fruits and vegetables presented before them on the table exuded an appreciation of that of a connoisseur. The familiarity and expertise some market shoppers had accumulated over years in the local food field was made apparent by their smooth understanding of the nuanced distinctions between myriads of seasonal tomatoes or peppers and their knowledge on how to effortlessly prepare unique foods. Distinctive foods had become part of their culinary and communicative repertoire. Being well versed in the subtle qualities of such foods was shared in a particular vocabulary with the farmers usually through a tacit boast about being adept at using a particular food item in exquisite fashion. These veterans would share how they had tediously implemented a produce item such as Thai eggplant into a homemade babaganoush, fermented heirloom cabbage into Kim chi, or incorporated dandelion greens without the bitterness into a fusion stir-fry. By describing their experience cooking with rare and local farmers market items with ease, customers and farmers constructed a food world that was both simple and natural, but also esoteric to an outsider.

A regular approached the farm booth and eyed the various offering for this week. Once Jen had helped a few other customers she made her way over to say hello to the regular. He had his fabric bag, already stuffed with foods from other booths, and was ready to pick up some zucchini from *Desert Sky*. “You would not believe how wonderful our Acorn squash were from last week,” he said. I baked and then

pureed them with a roux into a soup. Unbelievably delicious.” Jen responds excitedly, “That is great you found something interesting to do with the squash! It makes me happy to know it turned out well for your soup.” The customer says he had never had squash that tasted so good. He sums it up to the fact that Jen and the other farmers grew it. “Well, I could tell it was grown with love,” he said.

The farmers would chitchat back and forth like this many times during the market. For those who they conversed with weekly and were loyal customers they would give discounts or throw in extra produce. Some conversations were long and complex about recipes and food preparation. Others would be detailed shared instructions for gardening tips and pest management. Whomever the farmers were speaking with, however, they engaged them at their level and served as both providers and instructors for familiarization and cooking with local foods. In this way, they adopted the role of agrarian visionaries and farming sages for a population who were seeking a closer connection with their food. And at a local market like this the farmers who could portray the most authentic display and knowledge of the regional foods and cuisine would win the customers’ weekly business.

## CONCLUSION

The recent growth of local organic farming has hitched a ride on the coattails of the organic industry's successful integration within the larger agricultural economy. Over the last decade, organics went from being a fringe commodity to a household name and available from nearly any large grocery store in the country. However, the niche market for local organics is different from traditional organics in many aspects. First, it endeavors to limit distribution of foods within a tight radius from its point of origin, usually no more than 30-75 miles. Second, it is premised on both seasonality and freshness of heirloom produce. Third, it seeks to bypass to as much extent as possible any middlemen in the economic exchange of produce. In other words, face-to-face direct interaction between farmer and buyer at all times possible is preferred. Finally, local organic farming is all about full transparency in the entire growing process. From start to finish, seeding to cultivation to harvesting, local organic farms want to provide their customers with as much access to information about their purchase as possible. This transparency means that consumers are encouraged to visit the farm and actually witness the origins of their food. It also means that customers can form emergent and expressive ties to their farmer beyond a simple business interaction.

The organic business as a whole seeks to reduce environmental impact and promote sustainability in production. It also seeks to promote healthier foods free of pesticides, residues, or petrochemicals. What the large organic agribusiness does not seek to do, however, is change the infrastructure of the industrial food system. Here is where

the heart of industrial organics and local organics diverge. Local organics is all about pure unadulterated methods of cultivation and distribution to the local community. Marketing, packaging, and branding are limited. In a sense, local organic farming is an attempt to invert the expansionary nature of capitalist markets and avoid corporate control in the neoliberal era. Instead of providing a barcode or a label for their produce, local organic farmers seek to provide a personal face and location to the food. The meaning of the produce is not communicated in branding, but is bound up in the place and craft behind its growth. Broader impacts of local organic farming are, therefore, its paramount focus on cultivating the health and identity of the local community and its micro-economy, not the external economy. The environmental and economic activism behind this movement seeks to define consumption beyond a simple transaction. Its efforts are to establish sustainability in the locality of food. Therefore, this local organic movement is connected to a broader effort to promote inward looking community support as a way of insulating itself from the ebb and flow of the global economy. This idea follows the assertion that monocultures, whether they are agricultural or economic, are prone to disease, disruptions, and collapse. By nature, this mentality extends beyond food and into the surrounding craft trades and businesses of the community. Just as local organics builds its farm on integrative symbiotic ecological systems, so it seeks to integrate itself symbiotically into the local economy.

A synthesis of sociological theories is needed to explain and understand the developing nature of local organic farming and the larger movement of environmental localization it is embedded within. Theories of organizational ecology, identity

formation, pricing, consumption and authenticity, and economic homologies of producers and consumers are all individual pieces that can help explain the multifaceted nature of this agricultural movement and the social practices in local economics. The theoretical contributions of my dissertation have attempted to weave together these disparate theories into a unified sociological quilt to more accurately understand the formation and expansion of alternative niche markets that are not only economically viable, but ecologically sound.

### *Critiques and considerations*

This case study would not be complete without some considerations of potential critiques of the claims I have made from the sources of my data. The tone of my descriptions and analysis of *Desert Sky Farms* and the local organic field they are situated within is overwhelmingly positive. My review of neoliberalism and the cultural response to economies of scale tends to be critical. In no way do I assume that I can purge myself of bias in firsthand participant observation as I document an evolving market situated alongside a vast corporate food system. I met and became close to many people during my time working on the farm and conducting interviews. Generally speaking, these were fun, animated, and highly idealistic people. Their energy and positive thinking was contagious. I found myself immersed in their way of life and understood their hopes and aspirations. Yet, I was simultaneously aware of the criticisms of this movement that were easy to dismiss from the inside.

The most common criticism leveled at the local organic food movement is usually with reference to the enormous global needs for food quantity. Critics are usually fine with the notion of organic but make an argument along the lines of "you cannot feed the world with organic", let alone local organic. Under the parameters of our current food system massive synthetic inputs and outputs are needed to simply meet the needs of an over-inhabited globe with a significant malnourished and hungry population. The result of this industrial food strategy, however, has vastly deteriorated many indicators of quality in the food system. When one critically considers soil health and erosion, water runoff, pesticide and fertilizer residue, the abundance of processed foods, and a variety of other serious consequences to prioritizing quantity over quality in agricultural production, the tradeoffs appear in stark terms.

As agriculture has become more consolidated into the hands of large agribusiness firms, the dominant methods for how food is grown or raised for a rising population have predictably shifted into the formula of necessary conditions of any formal rational system. While the needs of food security for people all across the country and world are indeed significant, food producers and consumers must also consider the variety of long-term harmful outcomes associated with industrial methods. Critiques of industrial agriculture, processing, and distribution within the last decade are beginning to make headway in the popular culture narrative. Books such as Eric Schlosser's (2005) "Fast Food Nation" and Michael Pollan's (2007) "Omnivores Dilemma", and documentaries such as "Super Size Me" and "Food Inc." have garnered critical acclaim; redirecting the discussion over food politics in America in a relatively short period of time.

The general argument critiquing the industrial food system is that in its drive for ever-increasing efficient output in the name of solving hunger, agribusiness corporations have provided additional food quantity security at the expense of quality assurance and food safety security. The society-wide reliance upon industrial food over the last half-century opened a Pandora's box that unleashed a myriad of negative corollary health, ecological, and environmental side effects. In simple terms, food critics argue that the security of health, environments, and communities around the United States have been jeopardized or neglected because of industrial food production and consumption practices. Hidden behind the 'noble' endeavors of agribusiness corporations to provide more global commodity crops is the convenient access to an enormous amount of profit. The money to be made in industrial agriculture today (if you are not actually a farmer or laborer responsible for growing, harvesting, or slaughtering food) is truly staggering (Pollan 2007). All the while the western world's steady reliance on processed foods and high fructose corn syrup has allowed agribusiness corporations to increase consumption of calorie rich food for the average citizen well above the recommendations of dieticians and nutritionists and has begun to impoverish our health in countless ways.

Still, perhaps the most difficult element for local organic farming to reconcile is the clear non-diversity in the demographic of its primary consumers. Quite simply, the strongest supporters of local organic farming are prevalently affluent white liberals who are highly educated. An overview of profile descriptions for my interviewees from *Desert Sky's* CSA program can attest to the stunning lack of diversity in the roster.<sup>13</sup> Of

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix B



the 58 CSA members I interviewed only four were non-white. While this movement seeks to revive sustainable farming for local communities, it risks undermining broad goals if the primary market base is largely exclusive to rich whites. Could the members of this market field be deluding themselves by misrecognizing narcissism for ethical consumption and reaffirming rigid class boundaries in the process? Is it all a façade?

Local organic food is also expensive compared to conventional foods. High prices in this market field end up marginalizing consumers on a tight budget who are given little options other than low priced and unhealthy foods. It is not cheap to shop at the farmers market, cooperative grocery store, or eat at the restaurants where *Desert Sky's* produce is sold. Additionally, cooking fresh foods takes a significant amount of time for overworked and exhausted families. In the end, local organic foods can be prohibitively expensive and time consuming for people who lack the means or knowledge required for purchasing this food. These were not problems most of my interviewees confronted, however. The majority had adequate financial resources to pay premium prices for local organic products. Several individuals in the lower end of the income distribution also tended to have high earnings potential as they pursued graduate and professional degree. In these regards local foods have come to resemble luxury items reserved for the fortunate few who have disposable income and time on their side.

Operating in premium markets today is not necessarily a bad thing for local organics and the movement in the long run, though. All newly minted niche markets require initial capital flows from affluent investors looking to establish themselves as pioneers in the early days of a movement. Getting off the ground and making headway is

often established by attracting high-end customers. If the market becomes attractive over time to a wider customer base, the early premium investments can help local farmers and vendors stabilize operations and eventually offer lower prices. A prime example of this process can be seen in green conversion technologies in the solar panel electric car industries.

The farmers at *Desert Sky* and their CSA members clearly understood the dynamics of this luxury market, but defended it as a necessary means to an end. By circumventing the mass market and building connections through affluent niche sectors, *Desert Sky* and their members saw their economic activity as accomplishing two key objectives: 1) operating in a transparent market where the true costs of production were not obscured by environmental or labor exploitation, and 2) laying the foundations for a stable long-term market for local small-scale organic farmers that the future community could access. With artificially low food prices of today, CSA members overwhelmingly said they wanted to put their money toward a farm and produce that matched their environmental, economic, and cultural values. This group of people was willing to spend more to push their vision forward. The following statements concisely captured the sentiment shared by nearly all CSA members I interviewed:

"Well, they're more expensive. But, as far as the value proposition is concerned, my feeling is food in this country is cheap. Calories are extremely cheap. Most people are fat as a testament to that. As far as the value is concerned, eating things that are good for us... no I don't think they're expensive." - *Physician, female (55)*

"Things are different today than when even I was a kid. Food comes in from around the world, which is amazing that we can get food cheaply, and get it into stores, but it raises the questions, 'Where did the food come from? How did it get here? Who grew it? Were they fairly compensated?' And we now have these questions, but we didn't have them before. I think it is worth paying a little more to know the answers to these questions." - *Computer Consultant, female (39)*

"I don't know exactly if it's a 'fair price' or not, but in general, if you're buying vegetables from a big box store it's heavily subsidized. Even there's the gas from just shipping it around everywhere. If it weren't for the subsidies on the gas prices I expect that that would be more expensive and that's aside from subsidies on massive scale agriculture. So even if it's immediate, is it cheap? I don't think about that. For me the value is in how it's produced." - *Unemployed, male (32)*

"I figure I'm a 'do-gooder', so it makes me feel good about myself to do this sort of thing. My wife and I both feel like we're helping this develop in the community." - *Professor, male (55)*

"I feel like the costs, the price that they ask, is fair and represents the true cost of what they're trying to do. Especially since they're a new farm, they have a lot of

start up costs as far as investing in a new infrastructure, so I agree that what they have is all very fair." - *Graduate Student, male (29)*

Each of these statements expose ways in which CSA members rationalize and defend paying more for local foods from *Desert Sky Farms*. Their considerations reflect a wide variety of concerns in their purchases beyond what is most economical. Higher prices, in their estimation, are worth it when prioritizing health, community, and securing peace of mind afforded through transparency. Value, it appears, is measured and judged in this market field in many ways extending beyond utility. At the same time, there is no denying that local foods have become fashionable in elite circles and are consumed to display cultural capital and the appreciation of distinctive tastes. After all, supporting high-end ethical markets can make a consumer look dignified and savvy. Such is the reality of vanguard niche markets.

The *Desert Sky* farmers were well aware of the concerns surrounding the high prices of local organic foods. It was an issue they had little room to maneuver around as new farmers. When discussing the topic with Jen she stated, "As young farmers ourselves, we know this story all too well...access to land and capital are by far the biggest obstacles for first generation small-scale food producers." The very act of acquiring land and reclaiming local farming was an extremely expensive process. Success in these early stages depended upon loyal customers who shared the goals of local agrarianism and were willing to pay premium costs to support it. However, *Desert Sky* and their CSA members were not satisfied with the future of local organics

indefinitely confined within the affluent sphere. Eventually they would like to see locally sourced foods become readily available and affordable for customers of all socioeconomic statuses. "What we would like," Alex explained to me during a drive to the farmers market, "is to someday soon grow big enough to reach parity in our produce prices with large grocery stores. We are already getting close and are involved in some new exciting projects with schools that widen our market reach. But the fact of the matter is that growing in this way is more expensive. We don't cut corners."

For the time being, *Desert Sky* and many other small-scale local farms are forced to do business within the premium corridors of food markets if they want to expand their capacity. Financial security through these markets provides the farm with freedom to pursue agrarian ambitions without having to compromise their values or identity. If sales from the local organic food movement continue to grow at anywhere near the present rate, though, mass demand in the coming years could bring prices down. It remains to be seen how consumers outside of the cluster from my interview population will respond to less expensive local foods. It is entirely possible that the current meanings associated with local organic foods could change dramatically as the market alters to embrace the movement. In the meantime *Desert Sky* will take what it can get, invest in operations where sustainable farming will become ever more important in the future, and hope for enduring support from the nearby community along the way.

*A Bird's Eye View*

Toward the end of my ethnographic field experience at *Desert Sky Farms*, I had one final opportunity for observation that gave me an excellent large-scale perspective of this farm and the surrounding terrain. I had met a neighbor about 10 miles down the road from the farm who flew small planes from his own private landing strip. After a series of encounters, he volunteered to give take me for a short flight so that I could see with a bird's eye view the region and ranches that are scattered along the San Pedro River at the base of the mountains. Simply put, the view was spectacular. The landscape in this region is rugged and desolate, but punctuated with canyons full of water and life. It became immediately apparent how narrow the San Pedro River basin is from just a few hundred feet off the ground. From the sky, an observer can see a history of settlement and bygone scars of extinct ranching and agriculture. Many of the fields have ghostly outlines of old tilled land that has been vacant and unused for generations. However, the reminder of this region's past is obvious. As far north and south as I can see, the narrow strip of land is sparsely settled with what is and was a riparian agricultural region. It is an oasis in the vast desert surrounded by dirt and craggy mountains. The peaks and valleys, the purple and red hues, the long winding canyons and crevices in the earth, all project a magnificent landscape. The earth is hot and dry, though, while *Desert Sky* is fresh agricultural face in a terrain that looks long forgotten or cursed on an oven-baked landscape. They are the new generation of farmers with grand visions and alternative ideas. From above, the farm looks petite and well organized. The rows of vegetable beds are neatly lined along the fields. Different colors show the variety of fruits and

vegetables that are in stark contrast to every other farm in the region where solid colors of monocultural crops are growing.



Figure 19: *Desert Sky Farms* from 1000ft.

This region has largely been preserved and set apart from the encroachment of surrounding Tucson sprawl. The mountains and rugged landscape have acted as a natural barrier to spreading development. Narrow slices of land that runs for miles and miles are filled with sparsely populated ranches, cowboys, farmers, or hippies. In the air I quickly realized that the beauty and preciousness of the surrounding landscape is unlike any place I have ever seen. Long corridors of canyons and washes run from the distant mountains

to the east and bring year round streams of water into the basin. These corridors are populated with cottonwoods and other plants rarely seen in the desert. They serve as a migration pathway for a diverse variety of animals and provide sustenance in a harsh ecosystem. The stream sparkles in the sunlight surrounded by a red crust earth that looks barren with the occasional saguaro cactus or shrub. The pilot explained that development just wouldn't work for the natural system out here. It would destroy the small pockets of green and cut off the necessary corridors of life for many of its native species.

What does this have to do with farming? In a more abstract way, the fragile but hostile landscape of this region is a reminder that some things are worth preserving. The specifics of that are up for debate, but the consequences of altering our land and environment are very real. From the sky, it became apparent that respecting the natural balance of the environment is a practice that humanity cannot ignore. Often, however, society rationalizes its wants, needs, and advancements at the expense of the natural environment. Over the headset on the plane the pilot told me, though, the community's efforts in the San Pedro River basin region have sought to preserve this wild area. Land had been donated to the Nature Conservancy and meetings were held to discuss how to prevent interstate and power line development that would destroy the fragile terrain. The goal was simply to preserve the natural system of the valley.

After flying, I drove to *Desert Sky Farms* with a new perspective of the area from the ground. From above, everything looks grand and perfectly situated, small, and exposed. From the ground, foothills and bluffs obstructed the landscape and the endless terrain is hidden behind every bend. When I arrived I looked up and around and thought



hard about the *place* I was standing. I was a dot, on a dot on the map. The mission of this farm, however, is to both realize our smallness, but our connectivity to the much larger world around us in new sustainable ways. The efforts and toil on the field, which feel so grand and exhausting as we continuously labored throughout the days, looks like specks of nothingness from the air. In the end, I ask myself, “is it worth it all?” But the vibrancy of the farm up close reminds me that their efforts were to reinstate and preserve something very intimate: a heritage and a way of life in the face of the postmodern paradigm of perpetual economic expansion. The small farm of the past has all but disappeared in our modern economy. What is left has been, or is about to be, gobbled up by large agricultural corporations that work to produce specialized economies of scale. It doesn’t seem to me that there is anything intrinsically wrong with large corporate agribusiness (although there are plenty of negative consequences that have resulted from it), but its growth appears to be at the expense of small-scale diversified farming. Industrial farms have expanded their output at the expense of environmental, soil, and community health as well. Despite feeling so small back on the ground, *Desert Sky* is, much like the surrounding wilderness protected by the nature conservancy, attempting to preserve a way of life, an ethos, and a connection with the land that has been slowly, but monumentally stripped from the hands of small farmers and into the behemoth of the corporate profit machine. How does a farm preserve the preciousness of growing food without undermining the health of the land, soil, food, and those they feed? This farm yearns to reclaim the natural balance of integrative systems through biodynamic methods that eventually use resources in a closed loop much like the natural ecosystems that

surround it. From an agricultural perspective this farm is a microcosm of the environmental movement. It attempts to nurture the balance of the earth that, when respected, can indefinitely take care of those who work it. The intent is to grow the soil, add microbial life within the roots of the plants, pack natural fertilizers into the ground and cultivate fresh, natural, nutritious, organic foods that can be shared immediately with friends, family, and community. The farm is a bold adventure in reminding their community that people, process, and place matter. No matter how hard we try, humanity can never completely cut itself off from the sources of its sustenance; the soil, water, and human labor that go into converting solar energy into food energy. *Desert Sky Farms* reminds us that this task can be done close to home in a way that not only minimizes negative effects on the environment, but also enriches the soil and strengthens the social fabric of community in very authentic ways.

## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CSA MEMBERS**

- What is your age?
- How many children do you have?
- What is your political affiliation?
- Are you working full-time, part-time, going to school, keeping house, retired, or something else?
- If working, what do you do for a living?
- What race do you consider yourself?
- What is your highest level of education?
- Please indicate roughly your family's total income as of last year?
- How long have you been buying organic foods?
- How would you define organic?
- Do you believe there is a difference between "organic" and "local organic"? If so, what do you believe the difference is?
- What qualities of local organic produce do you like most? Least?
- Is CSA a cumbersome program?
- Are you able to make use of all the CSA food every week? Does it ever go to waste?
- Do you think local organic foods are becoming more popular?
- From where/whom else do you get your food?
- Is the price for local organic produce comparable to grocery store prices?

- How do you determine what is a good price for the food you buy at a grocery store or farmers market?
- Do you meet with the farmers personally who supply your produce?
- Do you shop at the farmers market?
- When did you begin implementing local organic foods into your food purchases?
- What influenced your decision to start buying local organic?
- Why from *Desert Sky Farms*?
- Do you think you will keep buying local organic produce through CSA, or discontinue?
- Why do you think you will (continue or discontinue)?
- Have you ever visited *Desert Sky Farms*?
- Where else do you shop for your primary goods?
- *Desert Sky's* banner describes them as purveyors of "real fruits and vegetables." What does that mean to you?

## APPENDIX B: CSA MEMBER INTERVIEWEE PROFILES

#	Age	Kids	Political Affiliation	Occupation	Education	Household Income	Race
1	31	1	Ind	Fundraiser	Masters	52,000	White
2	55	2	Ind	Physician	Doctorate		Asian
3	19	0	Lib Dem	Student	Some Coll		Latino
4	30		Libertarian	Professor	Ph.D.		White
5	36	0	None	Self-Employed	High School	80,000	White
6	45	0	Democrat	Adjunct Prof.	Ph.D.	22,000	Black
7	61	2	Liberal	Dental Hygienist	BA	250,000	White
8	26	0	Liberal	Graduate Student	BA	85,000	White
9	21	0	LibDem	Nanny	BA	12,000	White
10	28	0	Lib Dem	Graduate Student	BA	50,000	White
11	28	0	Lib Dem	Nurse	Masters	50,000	White
12	62	2	Democrat	Lawyer	J.D.		White
13	24	0	Independent	Graduate Student	BA	16,000	White
14	31	0	Ind	Software Engineer	BA		White
15	30	0	Ind	Software Engineer	BA		White
16	52	2	Democrat	Professor	Ph.D.	200,000	White
17	29	0	Democrat	University employee	Masters		White
18	39	3	Democrat	Social Worker	Masters	40,000	White
19	47	2	Ind	Landscape Designer	Masters		White
20	28	0	Ind	Conservation leader	BA	8,000	White
21	51	2	Republican	Rancher	High School	52,000	White
22	51	0	Lib Dem	Animal Welfare Dir	High School	28,000	White
23	44	0	Lib Dem	Assistant	Masters	40,000	White
24	30	1	Independent	Self-Employed	BA	50,000	White
25	32	0	Liberal	Graduate Student	Masters	18,000	White
26	24	0	None	Graduate Student	BA	12,000	White
27	33	2	Liberal	EMT	BA	45,000	White
28	29	0	Liberal	Graduate Student		60,000	White
29	31	0	Liberal	Food Bank Farmer		60,000	White
30	48	0	Ind	Management Consult			White
31	37	0	Ind	University employee	BA	65,000	White
32	35	0	Liberal	Entomologist	BA	65,000	White
33	45	0	Democrat	Graphic Designer	Masters		White
34	42	4	Ind	Unemployed	Masters		White
35	49	4	Republican	Unemployed	Ph.D.		White
36	71	0	None	Lawyer	J.D.		White

37	63	2	None	Retired	BA	100,000	White
38	30	0	None	Researcher	Ph.D.		White
39	62		Democrat	Retired	BA	80,000	White
40	29	0	Liberal	Graduate Student	BA	17,000	White
41	28	0	Liberal	Caterer	BA		White
42	60	2	Liberal	Writer	BA		White
43	39	0	None	Self-Employed	Masters	60,000	White
44	57	0	Republican	Tax Accountant	BA		White
45	54	3	Democrat	Ret. Wall St Banker	BA		White
46	31	1	Liberal	Self-Employed	BA	45,000	White
47	39	0	Republican	Computer Consulting	Masters	150,000	White
48	70	1	Liberal	Retired Teacher	Masters	50,000	White
49	28	0	Democrat	Graduate Student	Masters	40,000	White
50	29	0	Democrat	Teacher	BA	40,000	White
51	31	0	None	Graduate Student	BA		White
52	36	0	Republican	Student	Associates	40,000	White
53	30	0	None	Self-Employed	BA	40,000	White
54	31	0	Lib Dem	Post-Doc	Ph.D.	80,000	Other
55	29	0	Mod Dem	Graduate Student		22,000	White
56	31	0	Democrat	Non-Profit		16,000	White
57	33	0	Liberal	Graphic Designer	BA	20,000	Asian
58	32	0	Green	Unemployed	Masters		White

## **APPENDIX C: PRIMARY MEANINGS, CONCERNS, AND MOTIVATIONS EXPRESSED BY CSA MEMBERS FOR BUYING LOCAL ORGANIC**

### **Quality Concerns**

*Health:* Fruits and vegetables on local organic farms are not processed, have no residue chemicals, fertilizers, or preservatives. Farmers, nutritionists, ecologists, and consumers claim that truly organic produce is more nutritious than industrial foods because of the soil quality and cultivation practices.<sup>14</sup> A previous study on local organic farms found that every farm sampled (55) that ran a CSA operation said they provided “high quality, fresh, and healthy food” to their customers (Tegtmeier and Duffy, 2005).

*Regional/Location:* All food is grown and sold locally in select markets. Foods are grown with regional character and in accordance to season (unlike the endless multitude of foods that are available year round at grocery stores).

*Freshness:* All food is picked on and delivered to the market within 24 hours at its peak of ripeness.

*Taste:* Chefs and customers claim the taste is better. Although this may be a subjective statement, I heard this remark often from chefs who order produce for their restaurants and customers at the farmers market.

*Quality:* As measured by taste, freshness, and amount of time fruits and vegetables will stay good once picked. Chefs make this argument and claim the foods are superior for more fine cuisines.

### **Environmental Concerns**

*Sustainability:* Local organic farming can be one of the greenest ways of practicing agriculture. There are no petrochemicals, herbicides, or pesticides used in cultivation. The soil is strengthened and full of healthy microbial activity instead of eroded and degraded typical of industrial operations. Water use is minimal (compared to industrial standards) with drip tape hose for desert growing. Food is transported from a very short distance between grower and buyer, minimizing energy (oil) use in transportation.

*Integrative Systems:* All fruits and vegetables grown are part of an integrative agricultural system as opposed to monoculture practices used on large industrial scale food production farms. Integrative systems rely on the natural symbiotic relationship among plant varieties and farm animals.

### **Economic Concerns**

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<sup>14</sup> Reganold JP, Andrews PK, Reeve JR, Carpenter-Boggs L, Schadt CW, et al. (2010) Fruit and Soil Quality of Organic and Conventional Strawberry Agroecosystems. *PLoS ONE* 5(9): 1-14.

*Support of Local Business/Economy:* Communities are pushing for increased support of local businesses and economies as local small businesses are increasingly encroached upon and taken over by large corporations (Wal-Mart, Chain Restaurants, etc.)

*Face to Face/Direct interaction of producer/consumer at point of transaction:*

Customers of local organic farms are forced to purchase their foods from more direct settings where contact with the actual farmer is common. Most transactions of any sort take place through intimate settings such as farmers markets, or restaurants pioneered by entrepreneurial chefs with local ties. Further, interaction is genuine with no corporate emotion labor or effacement standards (Sallaz 2009, Hochschild 1983, Liedner 1993)

*Economic and Production Transparency:* Cultivation practices are not hidden in local organic farming. Customers are free to come to the farms and see how their food is grown and what methods are used in cultivation. Further, consumers are more aware of where their money ends up when they purchase their food. All money goes directly back into the local farm and into the hands of these local growers. Transparency seeks to unveil the social and environmental nature of production that commodity fetishism masks.

### **Cultural, Identity, and Marketing Concerns**

*Disenchantment* (and disapproval with large agri-business): Books like Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* (2007), Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2005), and films like *Food Inc.* have heightened the public's awareness to the methods of processed and junk food production as established in the 1950's to present day.

*Nostalgia:* Some consumers are yearning for a way of life or mode of agricultural production from an earlier time period or "the way it always was" or "used to be" (Berry, 1973). Romanticism or gentrification of the past could spur a general renewal of interest in modes of production in the past.

*Authenticity:* *Desert Sky Farms* advertises growing "real" fruits and vegetables. I interpret this claim as a statement that their food is not commodified and marketed by agri-business or corporations and is 100% organic. In fact, even though authenticity is purely a social construction, one could argue that all aspects of the local organic market strive for "authenticity" whether it is in the product or in the method of production and type of interaction in transaction.

*Heirloom Fruits and Vegetables:* Similar to notions of authenticity and a romanticism of the past, *Desert Sky* grows predominantly heirloom fruits and vegetables. Heirlooms were more common in agriculture in the past, but are relatively rare in modern large-scale agri-business. Traits of heirloom plants have been maintained through open pollination or grafting and cuttings typical of practices before the industrialization of agriculture. In the past, farmers grew a very wide variety of fruits and vegetables with different appearances and tastes. Now, most crops are grown with a very select few strains for monocultures. This rationalizing procedure allows for more consistency, efficiency,



productivity, and stability in a crop. However, the abundance of heirloom varieties has become largely shut off from the dominant food market. Access to such produce is usually restricted to family gardens and farmers markets. There may be good reason to grow heirloom vegetables, though, because they are often well adapted for local weather and pests. Therefore, choosing a well suited heirloom for regional climate is often a common decision in organic farming since there are no use of pesticides and fertilizers to aid growth.<sup>15</sup>

*Appreciation of Artisanal/Craft Methods and Anti-Mass Production Sentiment:* Organizational Ecology and consumer research has suggested that a primary reason that niche and specialized markets are booming is due to heightened appreciation by consumers for craft methods in production. (Microbreweries, Music, Art)

*Conspicuous Consumption, Status Elevation, and Exclusivity:* The Green and Environmental movement has made a strong entrance into advertisement and marketing. Perhaps now more than ever, marketers and consumers appear to express concern for the environment, global climate change, and green lifestyles. Consumption through a more exclusive local organic market may be an attempt by customers to distinguish themselves from the masses. Further, as the organic market has become ubiquitous, the local organic market appears to reject corporatism and commodification.

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<sup>15</sup> O'Donnell, Nancy. Heirlooms spice up the garden, and life itself. *San Francisco Chronicle*. 23 Sept. 2006.

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