

Sociology 929. The Social Economy
Reading Interrogations, Session 4, 9/22/2010
GROWING POWER

1. Lindsey Twin

I really like Kathleen's approach to examining exclusivity and participation in both the production and consumption processes of Green Power. She identifies many factors in production and consumption which inhibit the participation of working people and people of color in the Alternative Agricultural Movement (AAM).

Kathleen identifies income exclusivity and lack of racial diversity as two major limitations of Green Power. In other words, Green Power does not seem have connections to the community in which it is located and purportedly trying to serve.

Did the people who established Green Power bother to ask residents if they wanted Green Power? What ARE the residents' issues and concerns? People of color are cordoned off into "contaminated" neighborhoods which experience capital flight. As a result, they have a lack of access to jobs and capital. Cheap and sustainable food from outsiders may not attract their interest. They may want things like a means of making a living, which would also alleviate food insecurity.

Ninety percent of basket customers report that they buy baskets for social reasons. This emphasis on atmosphere and community is great for the people who currently patronize the basket program, but it may repel local residents because the place is dominated by people of a different race and class background from them. Where are the employees from? Are they from the neighborhood?

What is the difference between the work that employees do and the work that volunteers do?

Green Power offers fair prices to farmers and affordable prices to consumers – where are the costs absorbed?

2. Michael Billeaux

I think this piece is great for drawing attention to and taking seriously the criticisms leveled against typical AAM institutions. Growing Power does seem to be a better alternative to usual CSAs, farmers' markets, etc. The critique of Growing Power towards the end is also very important. I only have two related questions about Growing Power which I didn't feel were covered extensively in the essay: 1) What exactly is the employee relationship like? To extent to employees participate in democratic decision-making about the activities of Growing Power? And 2) Mention is made of the director,

Will Allen, and his role in the organization. The quotes which describe him (pg 45) suggest that there is a case of possible over-dependence on his leadership. In what ways can workers and customers participate in building the vision of the organization? Further, it seems like there is a tendency to trust in his motives (“we know he's not in it for himself”) rather than structurally ensure accountability. To what extent are these issues a problem for the organization, rather than, say, a misinterpretation on my end?

The first of these questions is particularly relevant to all the themes we've been discussing so far; ie, is social economy to be defined by what it does, how it does it, or both? More specifically, how democratic ought the governance of a firm be before we can regard it as substantially different from a typical firm? With respect to the second question, it seemed from our last session that most of us thought that intent of actors ought not be considered as a criterion for social economic or potentially transformative organizations. Still, there were a number of suggestions in previous readings that the goodwill of owners and/or directors indeed ought to be taken into account; is it safe to assume that we've rejected this at this point?

3. João Alexandre Peschanski

New Social Movements. I am not sure I agree with the depiction of Growing Power as a new social movement. On page 43, Doherty claims that Growing Power is part of a new social movement. On page 18, she defines new social movements as a wide range of organizations that do not focus on specific classes or groups and address a multiplicity of issues and goals without a singular unifying focus. According to the literature, new social movements emerge as a critique to the organizational rigidity of labor movement and as a response to the development of cultural forms of domination. Growing Power appears to emerge in a “void” -- food crisis in Milwaukee (page 7) -- that the market, the state and even the alternative agrifood movement cannot fill. Wouldn't the explaining of Growing Power through the literature on the social economy, that takes into account that idea of “void,” might be more useful?

Critique of AAM. To see Growing Power as a mediator between the conventional food system and the AAM is to look at it as an hybrid, to some extent. Neither the market system nor the alternative system were able to solve a fundamental problem of people in Milwaukee. In a context of economic crisis, market-oriented grocery stores were leaving town, generating a food desert. The alternative system was unable to meet the needs of African-American poor people. From that view, one would need to include the state in that picture to understand the building of that hybrid: What is the connection of Growing Power to the state? Of course, the state was unable to provide food for poor people, but what has been its impact when it comes to regulation and stimulating/inhibiting the expansion of Growing Power? Throughout the piece, Doherty shows how state actions can be contradictory to social alternatives: for instance, farmer's markets have been stimulated by a state law (page 23), but at the same time poor people are excluded from those markets because of the structure of federal subsidy (page 25). How did that kind of contradiction play with Growing Power?

Networking. I was just curious about the relations that Growing Power establish with social movements and initiatives that are part of the AAM. Are there connections between Growing Power and other social organizations in Milwaukee, that do not necessarily work with food? How do those connections work? What are the aims of those connections? Is there a political will to establish a well-grounded social economy sector in Milwaukee? Doherty, in her piece, and Growing Power, in practice, make a strong critique to how the AAM works: the AAM excludes populations that should be part of the alternative. What has been the impact of Growing Power's "success" in the AAM? Is it reproducible?

4. Matthew Kearney

This interrogation is oriented to providing feedback on Kathleen Doherty's thesis, since that is one purpose of our next seminar meeting. The overall claim that Growing Power successfully combines elements of both conventional and alternative agrifood movements does not emerge directly from the data. One option for a future article format is to present, one by one, the critiques of the AAM and how Growing Power responds to them. What are the elements that are conventional, what are alternative, and what are in between? (Lists of each of these might help the reader.)

Methodologically, the reader needs to know about how the staff interviewed compare with the overall staff, both numerically and in terms of the roles they have within the organization. Given the low survey response rate and the strong likelihood of response bias, a great deal of care is needed in making claims from the survey data.

It is not clear from the thesis what Growing Power's business model is; we need to know this in order to assess its sustainability as an organization, much less its replicability or expandability. Financial information is necessary background to any claim about possible repercussions for the overall agriculture industry. How much business does Growing Power conduct per year, in dollars? How many employees do they have, and how many volunteers? How are they able to sell Market Baskets at half the price of conventional organizations? What is the organizational structure? I was surprised when I read that much of their food comes from external farms. How much of what they distribute comes from themselves vs. these external providers? How much of their own food comes from the 2-acre urban farm in Milwaukee vs. the 30-acre farm in Burton? If most comes from Burton, which is on the Iowa border over three hours away, then is this really an urban farm?

5. Emanuel Ubert

I am interested in the internal and external limitations to the social and economic reproduction of Growing Power's activities and their respective interlinkages. In particular, I would like to discuss whether, in light of those limitations, GP could in

principle “scale up” its activities to an extent that it could serve as alternative food system and as a broader transformative model on a regional/ national scale, or whether it is only viable within its specific local context and on a smaller scale.

Specific to its internal constraints, I would like to clarify the precise ownership structure of Growing Power's assets (farm land, etc.), its internal organization (especially reliance on volunteers vs. paid employees), as well as its financing structure. Is Will Allen the sole owner of the farm, and if so, what would happen to the organization if he were no longer actively involved? GP seems very “personality driven. Is there an organizational structure in place, or has the civic and social grass root support sufficiently evolved, to guarantee the project's continuance without Will Allen? What share of workers is volunteer based? Also, how are GP's activities financed, and in what ways does this affect GP's operational and pricing policies, as well as its social mission? In short, what are the critical organizational bottlenecks that keep Growing Power from expanding its activities?

With respect to external constraints, is GP's survival self-sustainable through its market activities (selling of food) alone, or does it rely on donations, volunteering or any other outside support for its survival? What are the structural limitations that prevent its model from becoming a true alternative to the conventional food system?

6. Trevor Young-Hyman

How does GP manage the balance between pragmatism and adherence to ideals?

A big part of GP's growth and success seems to stem from its pragmatic approach to new opportunities. The organization is not overly dogmatic. It sells organic and non-organic products, it relies on both local and national farms, and it partners with both the public sector and the private sector. This openness to new opportunities spreads the impact of GP, to both sellers and consumers. Kathleen writes “GP is flexible with its purchasing power because its main interest is in food accessibility and ecological responsibility, not in rigidly adhering to one particular method.” (59) But how is decision-making made at GP? What does the governance structure look like? How does GP strike the balance between pragmatism and pursuit of social goals?

One key factor seems to be the leadership and the knowledge of Will Allen, the director. He seems to practically embody the values of the organization, and he seems very knowledgeable about farming, so that his judgement about the suitability of a strategy may serve to guide the organization. But, when conflicts between stakeholder interests (the organization inevitably has limited resources and it must decide what and who to prioritize) occur, how do they get resolved? Is there a governance structure? Is Will Allen's word sufficiently authoritative that he can resolve such conflicts? If so, how has the GP model played out in other cities without Allen's leadership?

I was very interested in the part of the paper where Kathleen discussed Will's Roadside Stand and the decision to not expand, despite lines out the door. It was not clear, at least to me, how the decision process was made between the possibility of expansion, to the unmet need for education, to "I watched the store go under but then I watched something else blossom." (51) I would be interested to learn more about this experience, as it seems to be a perfect case with which to understand the formal and informal governance mechanisms which help to guide the SEO?

7. Nina Baron

As I read it, there can be identified at least three different focuses in the AAM movement. One of the focuses is health, like eating healthy food. An other focus is on the environment and finally the last focus is on an opposition to the for-profit conventional food system. I think it is interesting to look at how and why those three different fields have been a part of the same movement. Many other movements have focus on only one of those aspects. As I understand it, one of the main problems for AAM is that they have this many fields they want to focus on, and therefore need to constantly balance them. This situation will always make them vulnerable to criticism.

One of the problems of Growing Power is that they all the time have to choose which of these priorities they want to put first. Is it people's health? With this focus their main concern ought to be to provide cheap healthy food. If it is the environment, it is more important that the food they provide is ecological. If it is to make an alternative to the conventional food market, their focus should be on minimising transportation and try to get food more available in inner cities. As it is now they often have to choose between these different priorities. It sounds as if it is actually their greatest challenge.

What I therefore would like to discuss is: does Growing Power try to work with too many problems at once, or is Growing Power's way to do it actually the best solution. The conclusion in Doherty's thesis is that Growing Power shows a way to mediate the critique of AAM. But is there way to do an example to follow for all companies there want to work towards AAM's goals, or would choosing just one of the many focuses also be a solution?

8. Ayca Zayim

Firstly, this week's readings demonstrate how 'the Alternative Agrifood Movement' reproduces inequalities based on class, race and ethnicity in cases where the movement is not explicitly focused on these structural problems. One stark example is the case of local food campaigns that aim to support farmers while completely ignoring farm workers, most of whom are ethnic minorities. In this sense, notwithstanding the fact that the AAM has some potential for greater social justice, most often, it operates as a marker of class and, as Guthman puts it, "whiteness" (p.394). In her work, Kathleen presents Growing

Power as a special, if not unique, social economy organization that aims to address these issues both on the consumption and production front. The fact that Growing Power attempts to solve the problems of the conventional food system in an “economically accessible, ecologically sensitive and socially inclusive way” (p.iv) seems to make it different in every aspect from the majority of other food initiatives. Growing Power is posited to do this by “capitalizing on the strengths of the conventional food system” (affordability and abundance) (p.17). I would like to discuss more about Growing Power’s relationship with the conventional food system and its relations with companies within this system. Most importantly, I am curious whether/how this relationship alters Growing Power and its mission and the possibilities/constraints on expanding its reach. Secondly, this question brings forth a major structural issue: the role of the state in any food system. The AAM movement with its focus on the local has been posited by many to be insufficient to reduce inequality. In fact, more often than not, localization itself has been criticized to be more prone to resulting in bigotry and exclusion, ‘tyranny of the majority’, lack of political engagement and action. This is what seems to make the activities of Growing Power different from the rest as it embraces a more encompassing notion of the local. Despite any effort to expand the scope of what is defined as ‘local’, the AAM movement, by definition, is confined to some kind of locality. In this sense, does the focus on the local blur the broader role of the state in any food system? Specifically, can we say that the AAM movement implicitly assumes devolution of the functions of the state regarding food security to third parties? Doesn’t this bring a passive acceptance of the ‘established’ rules of the food system (i.e. profit making, food traveling long distances etc.)? Does the movement merely shoulder the responsibilities of the state? Can we say that because of its affordability and abundance, the existing rules governing our food system are upheld by the state? In that respect, it would also be interesting to think about the possible relationships between the state and organizations like Growing Power under different configurations.

9. Joo-hee Park

The concept of local food is often advocated in alternative food initiatives. As the author explains, promoting local food is based on several arguments: reducing food miles (i.e. reducing CO2 emission); providing fresh products (i.e. increasing consumer health); supporting community economy; preserving certain values, lifestyles, and cultures.

This paper introduces critics on localism and examines how Growing Power addresses the critics. The critics seem based on the local advocates’ exclusivity (e.g. to non-local small farmers); insensitivity in the existence of privilege and discrimination within local practice (e.g. predominantly white farm owners); and unreflexivity (e.g. equating local with good).

Growing Power addresses the critics while still utilizing the concept of local food. They provide customers with local food when it is possible; but this is not prioritized over providing accessible price food. Thus, they are flexible to balance between local and national sources.

I am wondering what you think about the critics on localism. Do you think the concept of local is still useful to be embraced in alternative food initiative? If so, in what sense? Or do you think that the concept of local require too many cautions to be embraced? “Supporting local economy” is often emphasized not only in alternative food initiatives but also in many other social economy organizations. I am wondering how to understand these practices.

10. Nate Ela

Is the Agrifood Social Economy Different?

Are any particular areas of inquiry especially relevant to understanding the social economy in the context of the ag/food sector? I think this could help clarify areas that Kathleen might focus on in revising her thesis, should she choose to discuss Growing Power in the context of the social economy; I also have a personal interest, since I'm also curious about the sector.

Governance: how are decisions made at Growing Power (GP)? Are governance dynamics in the agricultural social economy -- where work is often seasonal and labor intensive -- different from those in other areas of the social economy?

Funding: Growing Power is a non-profit, and we've talked in class about its ties to private firms and funders. How does it generate funds, both from revenue and from private and public support, and how does that affect its operations?

Labor: who works at GP? What are their contractual or non-contractual relations to GP? How are they paid? Does anyone have a stake in the revenue/profits (I assume not)? Are workers unionized (I assume not)? Do they receive benefits? Are they seasonal?

Relation of producers to consumers: Does the fact that the market basket program generally provides food to people outside of the black and latino community, or the fact that it provides food for people outside of Milwaukee, affect our understanding of it as a social enterprise that seeks to reduce exclusion? Are white upper-middle class consumers effectively subsidizing GP's operations? In doing so, are they also reaping the benefits of low-wage/minority laborer?

Scaling up: How do the dynamics of scaling up a social agrifood enterprise compare to scaling up a “normal” social enterprise, or an “asocial” enterprise? Can one imagine a 1000- or 10,000-acre social food enterprise? How would it look different than Growing Power, a conventional farm, a big organic farm, or Mondragon?

Social Economy v. Sustainable Economy

How is a social economy similar to or different from a sustainable economy? I have the feeling that a social enterprise is not inherently sustainable, nor vice versa. Are there potential contradictions between basing production and distribution on social power and also seeking sustainability? Does the notion of “social” imply an understanding of human (sociable) versus non-human (non-sociable) nature, with consequences for the relation between the two?

Rights-Based Approaches and the Social Economy

I'd be interested in what others thought of the "RBFS" proposal. Are rights frameworks a useful way of thinking about and negotiating the social economy, whether in the food sector or elsewhere?

11. Taylan Acar

I like the way that Kathleen raised the critical points raised against farmers' market, local food and CSAs with regards to affordability, access and participatory practices. More so, I like the critical language and word-selection such as 'mediating the critiques of AAM.' Furthermore, the paper clearly points to the necessity of the need of capitalizing on the merits of two systems; conventional and alternative; in order to create economically accessible, ecologically sensitive, and socially inclusive food organizations.

I wonder how is that possible to make these alternative systems more accessible rather than sustainable given today's agricultural economy, which to my knowledge receives great amounts of subsidies from the state in relation to the other countries, but questionably make its products accessible to the low-income populations. Here, I sense a dichotomous relationship between access and affordability as against the notion of sustainability of the alternative food organizations, which is not necessarily case for the social economy organizations in general. On the one hand there is the possible aspect of making the food more accessible and affordable, and keeping the income scale of the consumers high, which contributes to sustainability of the organizations. What are the ways, which would make to transcend the dichotomy between the two notions possible? Also the latter option might lead to a very lucrative enterprise as well, which has been the case for organic agriculture in Turkey recently. It is almost exclusively aimed at middle/upper classes; sometimes forming 'organic' villages in the middle of an extremely beautiful natural atmosphere, where people go for their vacations and 'leave the hectic metropolitan life behind'. In the context of a developing country, of which agricultural system is in a severe crisis, is it possible to create alternative food systems for wider public?

The readings also reminded me the hot discussion around Michael Pollan's recent *In Defense of Food*, which was severely criticized by professors and graduate students in Community and Environmental Soc department for being extremely elitist. I am not really familiar with that discussion, however I asked a friend who gave a commentary on the after it got published at the Societas brownbag.