

Article

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND ALTERNATIVE FOOD: ALIENATION, DIVISION OF LABOUR, AND THE PRODUCTION OF CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

This article takes food issues in both the advanced capitalist and developing worlds, as well as discourses and struggles that have developed in response to them, as a point of departure. The exposition begins with a description of food sovereignty movements and their successful struggles. Third-world campaigns for food security are inspiring cases of resistance, of struggle for disalienation. The focus then shifts to the problems with the contemporary North American diet, and the 'foodie' response to the epidemic of poor eating and resulting poor health. Foodie culture as it has developed in the advanced capitalist world has severe limitations, particularly in regards to its treatment of gender and class. Yet it also contains important messages about meaningful human interaction with nature in the form of food procurement and preparation. The analysis developed here strives to go further than a critique of the distribution and availability of foodstuffs in the contemporary capitalist economy. The aim is to understand contestations over both the production and consumption of food in terms of some key categories of Marxist philosophy. It is argued that using the concepts of alienation, division of labour, and *production of consumption* can strengthen the case for food sovereignty while also mounting a critique of foodie culture that nonetheless preserves its constructive insights. More specifically, this means that an exploration of the relationship between the division of labour and alienation can demonstrate the negative consequences of industrially produced foods, while affirming the necessity of alternative forms of food production and consumption. Everywhere and in different ways, capitalism alienates humans from their *species-being*. This article argues that this fact is particularly evident with regards to the industrial food system. However, just as food can be a site of oppression, so too can it be a locus of struggle against capital.

Keywords

Food sovereignty; foodie culture; alienation; division of labour; production; consumption; socialism; food systems

Introduction

In advanced capitalist countries, an abundance of cheap calories has led to epidemics of obesity, heart disease, and other degenerative conditions. In the developing world, the number of malnourished and underfed continues to rise, a process driven by capital accumulation and dispossession. These trends are internally related (Albritton 2009; Patel 2007). In recent years critical scholars have increasingly focused on food production as a site of struggle, especially in the global south. There are good reasons to believe that such struggles can be fruitful, as evidenced by the appreciable gains made by various movements for 'food sovereignty' (Bello 2009; Desmarais 2009; Sumner 2012). Meanwhile, in the advanced capitalist world attention to food issues tends to centre on the sphere of consumption: both the quality and quantity of available foodstuffs. There is a good deal of popular literature on such issues, overwhelmingly advocating healthy and sustainable eating: buying locally produced food, preparing meals from scratch -- broadly, this can be referred to as 'foodie' culture.

The present argument takes food issues in both the advanced capitalist and developing worlds, as well as discourses and struggles that have developed in response to them, as a point of departure. The exposition begins with a description of food sovereignty movements and their successful struggles. Third-world campaigns for food security are inspiring cases of resistance, of struggle for disalienation. The focus then shifts to the problems with the contemporary North American diet, and the 'foodie' response to the epidemic of poor eating and resulting poor health. Foodie culture as it has developed in the advanced capitalist world has severe limitations, particularly in regards to its treatment of gender and class. Yet it also contains important messages about meaningful human interaction with nature in the form of food procurement and preparation. The analysis developed here strives to go further than a critique of the distribution and availability of foodstuffs in the contemporary capitalist economy. The aim is to understand contestations over both the production and consumption of food in terms of some key categories of Marxist philosophy. It is argued that using the concepts of alienation, division of labour, and *production of consumption* can strengthen the case for food sovereignty while also mounting a critique of foodie culture that nonetheless preserves its constructive insights. More specifically, this means that an exploration of the relationship between the division of labour and alienation can demonstrate the negative consequences of industrially produced foods, while affirming the necessity of alternative forms of food production and consumption. Everywhere and in different ways, capitalism alienates humans from their *species-being*. This article argues that this fact is particularly evident with regard to the industrial food system. However, just as food can be a site of oppression, so too can it be a locus of struggle against capital.

Preliminary Theoretical Considerations

While Marxist analyses of alienation typically focus on the sphere of production, this article broadens the focus to include the problem of alienated consumption. It is important to distinguish from the outset two senses of the term ‘consumption’ that are used here. The first sense is simply consumption in its uncomplicated meaning as direct, physical consumption. Consuming calories and nutrients in the form of food items is necessary for humans to survive, although it is here argued that the source and quality of those food items determines to a great extent the life-sustaining qualities that they possess. The second sense includes the first, but is broader insofar as it includes the activities that surround consumption. It is a reference to the way individuals produce the food that they immediately consume. This sense might be termed the ‘production of consumption,’ and brings Marxist theory to bear on the act of consuming food (see also Albritton 2009, 9-10). The activities of production and consumption are closely intertwined. Indeed, in his *Grundrisse* Marx insists upon the interrelation between the two processes and uses the specific example of food to illustrate this point: “It is clear that in taking in food... which is a form of consumption, the human being produces his own body” (Marx 1978, 228). However, Marx distinguishes between an immediate unity of consumption and production (productive consumption), on the one hand, and “production proper” on the other (Marx 1978, 229). In other words, productive consumption, of which the preparation of food is an example, is different from production in the more general sense, in which the producer’s relation to the product is external (Marx 1978, 232). That is, the product of the direct producer is the property of the capitalist employer — it is alienated. Thus, productive consumption, or the *production of consumption*, differs from both *production* and *consumption* insofar as it is an immediate unity of the two sides. The analysis developed here pivots on this distinction.

It will be argued that socialist theory and politics should be interested in the issue of food for two principal reasons. First, the *production of the consumption* of food is a potential site of struggle against capital. Here, it is useful to mark the distinction between the sphere of labour that is productive for capital, on the one hand, and the sphere of reproductive labour, wherein human life is reproduced as an end in itself, on the other. Marxist theorizing has paid a great deal of attention to the immiseration of the worker (*qua* worker) in the former realm, while generally neglecting this phenomenon in the latter. A notable exception, Michael Lebowitz has stressed the demystification of “the process of struggle by which workers produce themselves as subjects capable of altering their world” (Lebowitz 2003, xi). Lebowitz holds that in striving to satisfy their needs, workers struggle against capital. He writes, “the struggles of workers to satisfy their

many-sided needs... are struggles against capital as mediator within society. [...] Rather than directed only against particular capitals, they are struggles against the power of capital as a whole and against the ruling principle of valorization (M-C-M')” (Lebowitz 2003, 186). The present analysis argues that the consumption of food is precisely one such need that can be understood as a site of struggle against capital. However, the potential for struggle at this site is not fully developed because of the limited nature of food options available to the worker and consumer as an output of capitalist production.

The second reason, not distinct from the first, concerns the transformation of the human relationship with nature in a post-capitalist future. If contemporary socialist politics is at all concerned with providing a *non-alienating* alternative to capitalism, a non-industrial, or post-industrial, model of food production and consumption could indeed be an important part of the socialist agenda. Furthermore, any progressive politics today must come to terms with the looming ecological catastrophe that is neoliberal capitalism. Capitalist forms of agriculture and food production have been devastating ecologically (Weis 2012; Albritton 2009, 146-64). By contrast, organically and bio-dynamically produced food is much better for human health (see, for example Maciel et al. 2011; Heimler et al. 2009; Carbonaro and Mattera 2001; Chassey et al. 2006; Mitchell et al. 2003). As well, alternative forms of agriculture, especially small farms, could be instrumental in the transition to a more ecologically sustainable society, and provide adequate food at the same time (Bello 2009, 139-144). Such a transition has the potential to overcome what has been called the ‘metabolic rift’ of capitalist production (Foster et al. 2010; Clow and McLaughlin 2008).

Food Sovereignty and Anti-Capitalist Struggle

The influx of capital into agriculture has had disastrous effects for food security. Where once food systems were locally controlled, they are now overwhelmingly integrated into the global capitalist food system. Peasant agriculture has been replaced by capitalist agriculture (Bello 2009, 19-38). Small-scale farmers throughout the world have lost control of their own production, and with it the security of being able to produce their own food. An adequate history of this political economic transformation is outside of the scope of this article. The key point is that this has severely limited the security of access to food for many people in the world today, the result of which has been unprecedented global hunger (Bello 2009, 1-18).

And yet there is great cause for optimism. In many parts of the globe mass movements have assembled with the aim of restoring food sovereignty. Using the platform of *La Vía Campesina* (The Peasant Way), one of the largest and most successful peasant organizations, Walden Bello describes several of the central elements of the food sovereignty paradigm. Food sovereignty encourages a return to non-capitalist, indigenous

and peasant forms of knowledge and production. First and foremost, it suggests that the aim of agricultural policy should be food self-sufficiency. This means that in any given region, the farmers from that region should produce the majority of the food consumed there. Rather than being subjected to the demands of the global market, people should have the right to decide how and what they will produce and consume, and this should occur in a way that benefits the direct producers rather than the owners of capital. Food sovereignty movements also emphasize producing ‘real’ and healthy food, which means growing a diversity of crops instead of monoculture. This likewise means rejecting genetically engineered food as much as possible, as well as chemically intensive (and environmentally damaging) agricultural techniques. Finally, this approach to food production and consumption aims to find a new balance between agriculture and industry, as well as between town (city) and country (rural), with the goal of the mutual improvement of both (Bello 2009, 135-137).

As noted above, *La Vía Campesina* has become a remarkably successful food sovereignty movement (see Desmarais 2009). Founded in 1993, it has now grown to include member organizations in 69 different countries, which represent up to 100 million people worldwide. A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi claims it is the largest social movement in the contemporary world (Akram-Lodhi 2013, 150-151). One of *La Vía Campesina*’s member organizations, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST or Landless Workers’ Movement) is described by Bello as “probably the most dynamic agrarian mass movement in any country in the world today” (Bello 2009, 129). It has become a serious political force in Brazil and made tangible gains, such as advancing literacy and education for landless workers (Bello 2009, 129-131). In France, the *Confédération Paysanne* (Peasant Confederation) represents 45,000 people and has been at the forefront of many food struggles, including against McDonald’s (Bello 2009, 127-128). The list of food sovereignty organizations could go on, along with an inventory of successful struggles. As it concerns the present analysis, the movements for food sovereignty are of central importance because they can challenge the very logic of capital itself (Suschnigg 2012, 236). As Akram-Lodhi notes, they are advocating improved local control over *production* and *consumption* (Akram-Lodhi 2013, 25). But it is more than this: these movements are fighting for better control over the *production of consumption*. Peasants throughout the world are struggling to reclaim a sphere of production that is beneficial for the reproduction of human life as an end in itself, rather than for capital. They understand that what is at stake is not just more or better food on their plates; it is the ability to have genuine control and autonomy over their very means of physical sustenance and reproduction. The importance of Marxist theory for this type of struggle will be articulated below. First, the analysis turns to ‘foodie’ culture.

Eating Today: Health, Industrial Food, and the Rise of 'Foodie' Culture

It is certainly no understatement to say that North Americans have become a remarkably unhealthy population. Paradoxically, while living longer than ever, they are beset with a myriad of illnesses and health complaints. For example, rates of obesity are on the rise (see Sturm 2003; Hedley et al. 2004; Taubes 2014) and the number of Americans with diabetes has been predicted to increase 165% from 2000 to 2050 (Boyle et al. 2001). Modern medicine is developing increasingly sophisticated ways of managing and treating these ailments, mostly in the form of pharmaceutical drugs, and yet it has had little success identifying root causes (Taubes 2014). Furthermore, many of the medical community's lifestyle assertions — for example, concerning the negative effects of dietary fat — are increasingly being brought into question (Enig 2000; Taubes 2007 and 2001). One thing is quite obvious, however: the industrial diet is incredibly unhealthy. While the consumption of processed foods has steadily increased, so have rates of heart disease and obesity (Taubes 1998; Hennekens 1998). Nutritional science confirms that what are here called 'abstract foods,' a term that will be explained below, have considerable negative health consequences. High-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) in sodas, refined flours in wonder bread, and even the texturized soy protein in an ostensibly healthy veggie burger are all so-called 'foods' that the human body is not equipped to process and which in the long term are likely to make it sick (Bray et. al 2004; Monteiro et al. 2010).

Overwhelmingly, the contemporary popular 'foodie' writers tend to analyse the food system as an undifferentiated whole, and the effects of industrial food on individuals abstracted from their concrete and diverse conditions of existence. While this approach has limits, it is not without some merit. For example, Michael Pollan, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, offers a straightforward political economy of corn in the United States. He shows that massive federal subsidies have meant that corn-derived products (especially HFCS, dextrose, and other by-products) are in almost every food item at the grocery store and corn has even replaced grass in animal feed, drastically reducing the nutritional quality of industrially-produced meat (see also Hahn Niman 2014, 194-201). Meanwhile, the farmers themselves are left with crippling debt.¹ The essence of Pollan's exposition is that industrial food is bad for the soil, bad for farmers, bad for the environment, and terrible for those who consume it. His alternative has become the mantra of the foodie movement: 'eat food, mostly plants, not too much' (Pollan 2008, 146). It is perhaps the

¹ Pollan's critique of corn subsidies offer a useful starting point, although the picture is in fact much more complicated. In her *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice and the Limits of Capitalism*, Julie Guthman offers a much more rigorous explanation of farm policy (Guthman 2011, 116-39, 173). Additionally, Robert Albritton provides an analysis of corn production in the United States that focusses on its specifically capitalist origins (Albritton 2012, 96-100).

first part of this imperative that warrants the most explanation. By ‘food,’ Pollan means ‘real food.’ Essentially, this refers to items that, in his words, a person’s grandmother (or great-grandmother) would recognize as food (Pollan 2008, 148). Broccoli and carrots are food; the mono- and diglycerides, sucrose/fructose, monosodium glutamate, and partially hydrogenated palm oil that are in packaged and prepared products are not. The negative emphasis on prepared products is also important. Foodie culture encourages us to make our own meals from real ingredients. Organic is good, but locally-sourced vegetables and meats from a farmers’ market are better (Barber 2014; Kingsolver 2008; Smith and MacKinnon 2007).

This is all fine advice, but it misses crucial points about the intersection of eating patterns and social categories. Social class undeniably plays a role in contemporary eating habits and ideas about food (see Beagan and Chapman 2012, 146-47). Unprocessed foods cost more than processed and refined foods (Hill and Peters 1998), meaning that those who are economically disadvantaged simply cannot afford to eat well. An often-cited example concerns what have been called ‘food deserts’ in the cores of urban centres; these are vast areas in which the only nourishment to be purchased is convenience store ‘junk food.’ Making a trip to a supermarket is not economically feasible for residents of these areas (Patel 2007; Hendrickson et. al. 2006; Inagami et. al. 2006; Caraher et. al. 1998). As a consequence, it is the socio-economically advantaged who have the time and financial means to eat properly. Julie Guthman makes a strong case that it is not merely the differing features of various built environments (food deserts vs. parks and farmers’ markets) that determine health. That is, it is more complicated than the argument that poor access to fresh fruit and vegetable causes some to be obese, while access to green-space causes others to be thin. Those built environments are themselves products of a classed system (Guthman 2011, 87-90). Moving beyond the issue of access, one British study showed that members of lower income groups are generally less concerned with healthy eating than their higher class counterparts. Those in lower classes were perfectly aware of the importance of proper eating, but were not able to make it a priority (Caraher et al. 1998, 193). Declines in basic cooking skills and food literacy act as another barrier to healthy eating. Caraher and Lang write, “If homes lack the opportunity to experiment with, and diversify, their diet in more healthy directions, their occupants are locked into a less healthy way of life” (Caraher and Lang 1999, 94). Essential to such experimentation and diversity are cooking skills and confidence, which Caraher and Lang show are correlated to social class. Furthermore, this lack of skills may serve to reinforce a sense of social exclusion (Caraher and Lang 1999, 93-97). In the end it is undeniable that members of socio-economically disadvantaged classes are left to consume nutritionally void packaged and prepared meals, which, like capitalist labour, degrade their bodies (Winson 2013, 285-293; Albritton 2009, 91-95).

A distinctly conservative current that runs through foodie culture can be detected in its constant invocation of past ways of producing and consuming food. Pollan’s advice

to eat as our grandparents did is a prime example. Relating to the preparation of food within the household, there are concrete gender dynamics that require attention. Several popular foodie writers have tackled gender directly, but in a way that is woefully inadequate. For instance, Pollan argues that more time needs to be spent making healthy meals at home, but he has trouble reconciling this with the fact that transcending the immanence of the private sphere was one of the hard-won accomplishments of feminism in the twentieth century (Matchar 2013). Of course, the labour required to sustain households is still predominantly performed by unpaid women, even after their integration into the sphere of capitalist labour (Luxton 2006, 33). At one point, Pollan points his finger at feminism, blaming the movement for the decline of home-prepared meals (Pollan 2009). He does, however, adopt a more nuanced gender analysis in his latest book (Pollan 2013, 10-11). Barbara Kingsolver, in her *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (another key book in the foodie movement) calls feminism “the great hoodwink of my generation” for removing women from the home (Kingsolver 2008, 127). Bearing the burden of the social reproduction of the household and confinement to the private sphere has been a key aspect of the oppression of women. Although this arrangement is often represented and understood as natural, feminist analysis has clearly shown otherwise (see Federici 1975; Luxton and Rosenberg 1986, 9-13). As Caraher and Lang succinctly remark: “It is important not to advocate a return to an oppressive past, where individuals (women) slave over hot stoves preparing meals from basics” (Caraher and Lang 1999, 90).

While popular foodie writers have at best dealt with gender in a dubious manner, those who have put the foodie ethos to work in their own kitchens seem to have fared only slightly better. In an insightful study on foodie culture, Cairns et. al. begin from the well-established observation that “social and cultural meanings attached to food serve to perpetuate unequal gender relations” (Cairns et. al. 2010, 592). Women continue to do the majority of unpaid food work and this ties them to the necessity of the private sphere (see also Brady et. al. 2012, 126-132). Men’s relationship to food, on the other hand, has been predominantly as a hobby, or as professional chefs (Cairns et. al. 2010, 593). Cairns et. al. carried out a qualitative study that investigated gendered relationships to food amongst self-described foodies in terms of three main themes: pleasure, care work, and knowledge and expertise. It is only the first theme, pleasure, at which a gender parity was observed; both men and women described their relationship to food as one that is animated by the pleasure of preparing and consuming food (Cairns et. al. 2010, 598-599). Cairns et. al. emphasize the historical importance of this: “Because femininity has historically been associated with restraint of, or a pathological relationship to, food’s pleasures, it is noteworthy that the women in our study actively embraced the pleasurable aspects of eating” (Cairns et. al. 2010, 599; c.f. Donner 2008). However, they are also careful to note that the type of ‘selective’ food consumption that enables such pleasure is made possible by class privilege. Therefore, this achievement of gender parity may

reinforce class divisions (Cairns et. al. 2010, 599). On the theme of care work, the women respondents overwhelmingly identified a sense of feminine responsibility related to nourishing the family and cooking for others (see also Caraher and Lang 1999, 90). Men also described enjoying cooking for others, but from a standpoint of leisure rather than responsibility (Cairns et. al. 2010, 600-605). Finally, the knowledge and expertise about food that is a defining characteristic of foodie culture also seems to have a strong gendered dimension. Simply put:

It was more often the men we interviewed who drew heavily upon ideals of knowledge and expertise to articulate their personal relationship to food. For these men, continually refining their food knowledge, seeking out new sources of information, and sharing their expertise with others constituted the defining features of their foodie identity (Cairns et. al. 2010, 606).

Women, conversely, did not share this relationship to food. In the end, the practitioners of foodie culture may challenge gender binaries in a few select ways. However, there seem to be many more levels on which prevailing norms are actually being reinforced, and there is good evidence for the reversal of important feminist achievements.

Foodie culture's questionable record on gender roles may in part stem from its lack of a strong and coherent gender analysis and critique of patriarchy. This an area in which foodie culture can learn from food sovereignty movements. As Desmarais et. al. have remarked, many food sovereignty organizations have dealt directly with the issue of gender (Desmarais et. al. 2011, 59). Again, *La Vía Campesina* provides a striking example. It has made women's struggles, including but not limited to those related to food production, one of its key areas of focus. In addition, it has worked to achieve gender parity on its governing body (Bello 2009, 133). Whereas the main foodie culture voices have been conspicuously silent on it, food sovereignty movements have explicitly adopted positions on gender equality. Food is a locus of both oppression and resistance, and, as Brady et. al. note, this is especially true for women (Brady et. al. 2012, 132). The coalition of food sovereignty struggles and the fight for gender equality, then, is to the benefit of both.

Returning to foodie culture, a final point of criticism concerns its frequent appraisal of farming traditions that are romanticized and parochial. For example, Pollan has been an advocate of the practices of bio-dynamic farmer Joel Salatin of Virginia. Salatin's approach, often called 'beyond organic,' has been touted by environmentalists. He turned 550 acres of badly degraded farmland into a sustainable and productive operation in a generation (Pollan 2006, 205-209). According to Pollan, by carefully managing when and how his animals graze, and using technology such as a mobile chicken coop to distribute evenly the nitrogen rich droppings, Salatin guarantees that nutrients will stay in the soil and his farm will have very few negative ecological effects

(Pollan 2006, 192-199). However, Salatin's work is motivated by a deep religious fundamentalism. He advocates a strict gendered division of labour, and women are not invited to work on his farm, a fact that Pollan conveniently forgets in his celebration of Salatin's eco-friendly practices. Furthermore, Salatin has uttered some decidedly unsavoury comments about immigrants in the United States (Salatin 2008). None of this should be taken as a total condemnation of agricultural practices undertaken by Salatin and others like him. However, it does highlight the importance of separating the good from the bad. Salatin's politics are clearly sexist, xenophobic and reactionary. However, his food production techniques are sustainable and worthy of serious consideration. Pollan is likely correct that Salatin's chickens, eggs and pork taste better, and are better for the environment and soil than their industrially produced counterparts. However, rather than Salatin's religious conservatism, or Pollan's foodie-ism, I argue that the case against the industrial food system is stronger when grounded in a historical materialist framework.

Foodie-ism to Marxism: Towards a Materialist Analysis of Industrial Food

As a point of entry into Marxist theory, it is useful to consider industrially produced food items as commodities. The composition of capital that inheres in food items in neoliberal capitalism is much like so many other commodities. The labour contained in practically any item on the grocery store shelves is exceedingly dead and abstract. A loaf of wonder bread, a box of packaged cookies, or a container of margarine are all 'real' food insofar as they are material items and have a concrete existence. As Anthony Winson writes, though, they are better described as "edible commodities" than as food (Winson 2013, 1). It is virtually impossible for any person — producer or consumer — to confront these products and see the actualization of any form of unique labour. The food items themselves are the results of extremely technologically mediated chains of production. As a result they are stripped of all uniqueness and particularity. The labour of thousands of workers might inhere in a single slice of refined bread. The meat from hundreds of different cows can be contained in a single frozen beef patty. From the point of view of the producer, these products are abstract equivalents from the beginning, useful only as bearers of value in the process of capital's self-valorization. From the consumer's view, they also represent the real, material sustenance on the basis of which life is reproduced. In the industrial capitalist system of food production, however, the products are so processed and refined that they appear to the consumer more as abstract equivalents than concrete, particular, use values. There is nothing unique or particular to be said about any given industrial food item. Industrially-produced foods, like other commodities, are 'abstract.'

The value of food items may be reduced through the rising organic composition of capital, but this comes at the expense of the uniqueness of the products. While an insistence on there being something unique about every individual product may be open to the criticism of romanticism, a demand for healthy, nourishing food seems less so. Here, the analysis of food in particular brings to light another hidden cost of the extreme division of labour. In short, the technologically intensive chains of production that deliver food items to consumers seriously deplete the nutritional value of the food, that is, its use value. Advertisements are often successful in convincing consumers that processed foods, especially those which have been ‘fortified’ to replace nutrients lost in the production process, are part of a perfectly healthy diet. But the human body knows differently, and increasingly, so too does nutritional science. The human body, in short, is not adapted for this type of diet (Winson 2013, 76-92, 167-183).

One of Marx’s exhortations, in *Capital*, is to look differently at commodities, to try to see them as something unusual, as things that are not natural or normal. In the present analysis, this appeal comes together with the foodie encouragement to eat ‘real food’ and to be skeptical about whether hyper-refined ‘edible commodities’ actually are food. However, a further injection of Marxist theory can deepen the investigation. The argument comes to pivot on the contrast between food as a use value (which is necessary for the sustenance of human life and a locus for the expression of creativity) and food as a mere exchange value (where it is reduced to a commodity, which has been referred to as ‘abstract food’). When the essential use value that is food is reduced to exchange value (at the levels of production, distribution and consumption), a fundamental facet of the human being-in-the-world is alienated. To articulate this point, the analysis must go beyond a conception of food simply as direct physical *consumption*, to understand it as the *production of consumption*. The nutritional inadequacies of ‘abstract’ foods, while clearly a matter of concern, are simply the marker of a deeper pathology of capitalist production and consumption: alienation. As the production of consumption, food can be experienced as a satisfying unity; both the process and products of the creative manipulation of nature can be experienced together with other individuals as un-alienated social labour. Under the capitalist food system, however, the moments are divorced and the individual’s relationship to the production processes and products of consumption are experienced as essentially ‘other.’ Historical materialism, which delves beyond the levels of *consumption* and *production*, reveals the deeper structures and processes of capitalist society, and shows that the *production of the consumption* of food is a key site for understanding alienation, as well as realizing disalienation through struggle.

Basic and Excess Denaturation, Alienation, and the Division of Labour

Incorporating a more complex understanding of food into progressive politics is of clear importance. It is necessary that we re-imagine our relationship with food and begin to see food production and consumption as a site of both struggle and possible non-alienation within alienated social relations. The successes of food sovereignty movements, along with the critique of Pollan, Salatin, and others, shows that what is required is a way of thinking about the human relationship with nature, as well as the characteristics of production and consumption, that opens the path to a more humane alternative to the contemporary capitalist model, while avoiding romanticizing past ways of life.

With respect to the latter, it is of critical importance to avoid fallacious appeals to outdated and backwards social relations (such as those upheld by Salatin) and modes of production. In this regard it is useful to begin with the distinction between basic and surplus denaturation. This theoretical apparatus has its origins in Rousseau, is taken up by Freud, and is further elaborated by Herbert Marcuse (Biro 2005, 160). The concept of basic alienation, or of necessary denaturation, suggests that there is a separation from nature that is simply existential to human being. Indeed, it is this quality that makes history and sociality possible and sets humans apart from other animals. Conversely, the concept of excess denaturation, or surplus repression, implies that alienation can vary in quality and quantity depending on the particular socio-economic formation. The reality of a basic level of denaturation forecloses romantic appeals to *completely* 'natural' ways of being. According to Biro, the formula as it is expressed in Marcuse's Freudian study, *Eros and Civilization*, can be applied directly to analyses of the human relationship with nature. Biro writes, "We can thus extend Marcuse's distinction between basic and surplus repression to include a distinction between alienation from nature that is biologically necessary for human life, and alienation from nature that is only made necessary by particular forms of social organization" (Biro 2005, 168; see also Marcuse 1966, 35). As it concerns the critique of the reactionary current that runs in some foodie literature, the notion of basic denaturation should encourage caution and skepticism about appeals to 'perfectly' or 'completely' natural ways of producing and consuming food. Human activity in the world is a complex interpenetration of the natural and the social, and therefore what we eat will always be in some way the product of social labour.

On the other hand, though, the consumption of foods that are so processed and refined, that are mediated through so many layers of technology that their nutritional value is essentially erased, indicates the commodification of vital life processes and represents a particularly deleterious form of surplus alienation. In the search for ways to reduce this excessive alienation, there is a rational kernel to be found within the ideology of the foodie movement. Procuring, or even growing, real ingredients and preparing

wholesome meals, if undertaken freely and deliberately, are activities that are far less alienating than capitalist labour: people can actually see themselves in what they produce and create. To be sure, within capitalism, many of the commodity chains that furnish the raw products to the person making the meal from scratch still embody vast quantities of exploited labour. Nonetheless, a less alienating approach to food is better for the environment, much healthier for those who consume this food, and can serve as an important consciousness-raising activity, encouraging people to think about where their food comes from and to develop a critical understanding of capitalist production and one's relationship with the natural environment. The growing popularity of food sovereignty movements, farmer's markets, organic and biodynamic foods, and foodie culture suggest that alternatives to industrial food are possible (see Suschnigg 2012, 235; Winson 2013, 252-280; Sumner 2012). Socialists ought to pay attention to these alternatives. To be sure, they should not accept uncritically these agendas, which have substantial theoretical and practical shortcomings. For example, current levels of ecological degradation mean that universal food sovereignty would be impossible in the near future. Shopping at farmers' markets may be a good personal choice, but in the absence of widespread economic transformation, is a luxury available only to the affluent. Nonetheless, these movements deserve further consideration because they challenge the capitalist degradation of food and contribute to important discussions about alternative approaches to this essential life activity.

Marcuse's theory of basic and excess denaturation is a useful point of departure in the critique of industrial food and the search for alternatives. However, to push the analysis to a deeper level, it is necessary to turn to Marx and his exposition of alienation and the division of labour. In his *1844 Manuscripts* Marx specifies four types of alienation caused by capitalist production: alienation from the product of labour, from the process of labour, from other human beings, as well as alienation from the human *species-being*, or the essence of human being (Marx 1992, 327-330). Taking control of the *production of consumption* of food offers one way to overcome these forms of alienation. In what follows it will be argued that the socially shared unity of the production and consumption of food can overcome estrangement from the products and processes of labour. Furthermore, this renewed relationship to food represents a liberating transformation of the material dialectic between humans and nature, which can become a locus of the expression of the essence of human being: the capacity to transform nature freely, deliberately and creatively.

To begin, it will be demonstrated that the *logic* of disalienation is consistent with a transformation of not only the *social*, but also the *technical* division of labour. Marx asserts that the division of labour occurs at several levels, most importantly at the levels of society and production. In *Capital* he describes the former as the "restriction of individuals to particular vocations or callings..." (Marx 1990, 471). On the other hand,

the latter form is characterized by “The fact that the specialized worker produces no commodities. It is only the common product of all the specialized workers that becomes a commodity” (Marx 1990, 475). The societal division of labour is a feature of many economic formations, while the division within a singular production process, thought Marx, is unique to capitalism, (Marx 1990, 480). “Some crippling of the mind and body” results from the societal partitioning of labour, he writes, but when the division extends to manufacture it “attacks the individual at the very roots of his life...” (Marx 1990, 484). This is important: Marx is here explicitly critical of an intense *technical* division of labour, and furthermore sees it as interconnected with alienation. Much like in his early writings, in *Capital* Marx describes industrial labour as something that divides the worker herself and confronts her as something externally imposed (Marx 1990, 482-482). For example, Marx holds, “It is a result of the division of labour in manufacture that the worker is brought face to face with the intellectual potentialities [*geistige Potenzen*] of the material process of production as the property of another and as a power which rules over him” (Marx 1990, 482). The word ‘alienation’ is absent from this passage, but its meaning is unmistakably present. Furthermore, Marx declares unambiguously that the worker confronts manufacture as an alien force partly because it is divided.

Marx’s concept of *species-being* helps bring into focus why divided and alienated labour is a phenomenon to be transcended. Alienation from human *species-being* is different from — and yet interconnected with — alienation from the product of labour and *self-estrangement*. Adding substantially to the notions of free human subjectivity developed by Rousseau and Hegel, Marx describes the essence of human existence. In contrast to other animals, Marx holds, humans produce freely and self-consciously. He writes, “The whole character of a species, its species-character, resides in the nature of its life activity, and free conscious activity constitutes the species-character of man” (Marx 1992, 328). In other words, humans are able to choose freely how they interact with nature, and therefore, how they produce and reproduce themselves. Immediately it is obvious that the forced nature of labour in capitalism is a violation of this human essence (Marx 1992, 329). Furthermore, a result of the capacity for self-conscious activity is that humans produce universally, rather than one-sidedly. Thus, “Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species...” (Marx 1992, 329). Humans are rich, complicated beings, and their relationship with nature is governed by a complex interpenetration of freedom and necessity. However, capitalist social relations alienate humans from their real essence. This occurs in two ways: first, by imposing too much necessity on how humans make themselves and, second, by forcing them to produce in ways that are one-sided and particular. Another important facet of the capacity to labour freely is that it permits what Rousseau calls ‘perfectibility,’ or the potential for self-change (Rousseau 1987, 45). But Marx makes it clear that divided labour

suppresses this potentiality. He writes, “The simplification of machinery and of labour is used to make workers out of human beings who are still growing, who are completely immature, out of *children*, while the worker himself becomes a neglected child” (Marx 1992, 360). This represents another manner in which alienated and divided labour estranges humans from their essence: it constrains their capacity for free self-development.

The argument presented here is premised on the notion that re-imagining the consumptive act of food production and preparation represents an important step towards disalienation, because it permits an alternative — if only in one sphere of life — to divided capitalist labour. By understanding the *production of the consumption* of food as a form of production, Marx’s analysis of production processes can be brought to bear on the production of food and the preparation of meals. In this way food, as a site of production, can also be considered a site of struggle. Of course, Marx’s writings focus primarily on the nature of alienation and division of labour in capitalist *manufacture*. However, the key theoretical observation — that to be free and fully developed humans must see their own creativity manifested in the products of their labour — is easily applicable to the much smaller scale in which the *production of consumption* of food occurs.

Marx’s critique of the forms that labour takes in capitalism is seldom applied to the production and consumption of food and meals. The foregoing has shown, however, that Marx is deeply concerned with the processes through which humans produce and reproduce themselves. It is by means of these activities of production and reproduction that humans ultimately make themselves free or unfree, fulfilled or stultified. Food is merely one window into this complex problem. The present analysis has demonstrated that in the abstract foods dispensed by technologically intensive production chains there exists little possibility for individuals to realize themselves or their own creativity. This engenders adverse effects for both the physical and spiritual being of those who produce and consume this ‘food.’ Conversely, in the real and far less mediated relationships with those who produce food, as well as in the activity of infusing one’s own labour into the preparation of meals, there exists the potential of unalienated and satisfying creativity. This is the case because producing real food and making real meals are far less divided forms of labour. They involve a vast series of techniques, with countless possible inputs and outputs. Although Marx argues that in the domain of paid labour, work is exceptionally divided and one-sided, this does not need to be the case in all spheres of life.

As a site of capitalist production, and therefore of alienated and divided labour, food becomes *ipso facto* a site of struggle. There are two sides to this, one negative, the other positive. When it confronts the labourer/consumer as excessively divided (in the form of heavily refined products, or as severe alienation in the relations of production) food contributes to their degradation. As another form of one-sided labour —

pre-prepared meals, for example, require no creativity or complicated input — refined food products make the individual one-sided and abstract in the same way that capitalist labour does. In other words, refined food and its preparation and consumption is alienated, and reproduces the alienated processes of production. However, most individuals in neoliberal capitalism have at least some agency to take control of the production of the food they consume. This is an unalienated and undivided form of labour that can serve as a counter-hegemonic activity. Real food and its preparation is a possible and potent school for socialism that offers the worker an example of what proper unalienated living (and working) is like. Workers can begin to use this model to demand the same involvement and satisfaction at work. Preparing meals from real ingredients at home will not bring about revolution. Nonetheless it does challenge capitalist hegemony in one sphere of life and encourages such challenges in other spheres.

Conclusion

The analysis developed here insists that as both *production* and *consumption*, food is part of the challenge that socialists face today. The industrial apparatus that, through exploitation, produces refined edible commodities and delivers them to the majority of the world is obviously pathological. The transformation of peasant into capitalist agriculture has created widespread food insecurity and hunger. Industrially produced, abstract foods play a direct role in the pacification of the groups whose resistance to capitalism is necessary for successful socialist struggle; in other words, oppressed classes are disproportionately affected by the negative consequences of the capitalist food system. In a variety of ways, this burden prevents their participation in anti-capitalist struggle. Additionally, entrenched gender norms mean that in many cases women experience their relationship to food as one of repressive necessity rather than creative freedom. Nonetheless, just as it is locus of oppression, so too can it be a site of resistance against capital and patriarchy. Above all, the present argument is an exhortation to remember that the socialist alternative is not merely the inheritance of the capitalist project — it is a qualitatively different organization of society and a qualitatively different way of interacting with nature. If it is to be true to its humanist goals, this alternative will require new and different ways of producing, distributing and consuming food. It has been argued here that taking control of the *production of consumption* of food, and thereby transforming the prevailing division of labour, presents of the possibility of disalienation. Food sovereignty movements understand this imperative and have been working toward it for some time. The popular ‘foodie’ writers discussed in this article have serious theoretical shortcomings: they have failed to address class and gender divisions in any meaningful way. Yet, like their food sovereignty counterparts, their analysis points toward a deep truth about the expression of the human *species-being*. The foregoing

exposition of Marxist philosophy validates the notion that becoming directly involved in the social and material processes through which humans physically sustain themselves offers the possibility for individuals to participate in non-alienating activity and to reclaim the part of their being that is genuinely human.

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