

COMMENTARY

From old school to reform school?

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Introduction

What is needed is what used to be called ‘nonreformist reforms,’ social changes that are feasible in the world as it is (thus they are reforms), but which prefigure in important ways more emancipatory possibilities.

Erik Olin Wright (in Kirby, 2001)

We hope that the work that we have undertaken over the past 5 years in farm-to-school (FTS) and farm-to-college initiatives in Wisconsin and Montana has indeed contributed to the development of emancipatory possibilities. In their essay, Allen and Guthman suggest that not only are those of us engaged in FTS programs not making nonreformist reforms, we aren’t even making reforms! Instead of building alternatives, we are actually strengthening the system we purport to oppose: “FTS advocates are essentially producing neoliberal forms and practices *de novo*” (Allen and Guthman, this issue).

Over the past decade, Patricia Allen and Julie Guthman have produced a substantial body of work that has provided a useful counterpoint to those of us who have enthusiastically embraced the wide range of initiatives and projects, often local in orientation, that comprise the alternative agrifood movement (e.g., Allen and Kovach, 2000; Guthman, 2002, 2004; Allen et al., 2003; Allen, 2004). Still, we have felt that their skepticism has not always been informed by an adequate recognition of the achievements and potentials of such approaches. In the present piece, their analysis of the FTS movement often departs significantly from our own experiences with and understanding of the initiatives in which we have been engaged. We welcome the opportunity to provide another perspective.

Where’s the beef?

Our comments here are based on five to seven years of leadership and management of FTS, farm-to-college, and other alternative food projects in Wisconsin and Montana. We also have participated in many regional and national FTS meetings and conferences. Although we have direct knowledge of many different FTS projects around the country and have interacted with a wide variety of participants, we are struck by the diversity of such projects and are reluctant to speak authoritatively about them as a group without more systematic study. In contrast, Allen and Guthman are satisfied that a review of FTS databases, a review of programmatic literature, some participant observation, and a focus on California allow them to extrapolate “to FTS programs in general” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). But their analysis makes no systematic use of this underlying data and references it only occasionally in the form of individual exemplars that they claim represent features common to all FTS programs. Our own experience is that FTS programs are very diverse and vary considerably on many dimensions. Ironically, Allen and Guthman do reference this heterogeneity, but only insofar as it serves their purpose of illustrating the operation of an overdetermining neoliberalism: “Idiosyncratic site specificity is reflective of neoliberal approaches to providing services” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). The result, we feel, is an essentialization of FTS programs that is misleading and inadequately supported by data.

This flattening of the FTS landscape is compounded by the narrow definition of FTS adopted by Allen and Guthman. Although they themselves admit that “FTS embraces a broader range of activities” (Allen and Guthman, this issue), they focus their research on “districts and schools

that have implemented farm-to-cafeteria programs” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). But FTS is also farmer-in-the-classroom and classroom-to-the-farm and frequently involves the transformation of pedagogical practice as a necessary precursor to transforming lunch. FTS programs also often involve cooperation with community groups in an effort to create food, wellness, and education policies at the school district, municipal, state, and federal levels. The unfortunate reductionism employed by Allen and Guthman materially distorts their analysis. Had they attended to the in-class educational programs associated with FTS programs, they would have had data to support (or, as we would anticipate, refute) the claim that “FTS advocates often emphasize developing children as consumers” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). Had they attended to the political work associated with FTS programs, they would have had data to support (or, as we would anticipate, refute) the claim that “FTS programs embrace consumer choice as a primary form of governance” (Allen and Guthman, this issue).

Whatever its methodological deficiencies, their essay explores a legitimate and important problematic. Embedded as they are in a robust and pervasive neoliberal integument, do the approaches and practices of FTS programs move us toward emancipatory possibility, or not? Allen and Guthman conclude that they do not, and that in fact FTS programs as currently constituted are even harmful inasmuch as they actually reproduce and elaborate processes of neoliberalization. According to Allen and Guthman, this occurs in two principal ways: (1) through the displacement of governance from higher levels to the local (devolution), and (2) through the marketization and privatization of public resources and spaces. Further, they allege that FTS proponents commonly employ “the rhetoric of neoliberal governance in ways that go against the grain of efforts to improve social equity” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). We deal with each of these three issues in turn.

The myths of locality

The position of Allen and Guthman on the nature of local approaches to alternative agrifood initiatives is well established, and they repeat it, paradigmatically, here:

The turn to the local rests on the presumption that social justice and ecological sustainability can be achieved by proximity (Kloppenbourg et al., 1996). It is also based on the idea that governance is most effective and accountable when done at the local level (Allen and Guthman, this issue).

The persistence of this canard needs to be dealt with at greater length, but for the moment, we shall be as clear and succinct as we can.

Kloppenbourg et al. (1996) do *not* propose that proximity inevitably or singularly leads to social justice and ecological sustainability, and they do *not* propose eschewing governance at any but a local level. To the contrary, Kloppenbourg et al. conceptualize locality first and foremost as a political space, “a place for organizing,” in which “the appropriate and necessary locus of both thought and action in the foodshed may sometimes be regional, national, and even global” (1996: 34, 40). The turn to locality is motivated not by some perceived virtue inherent to a particular location but by the prospect of fostering the engagement of citizens in an active *process* of change in which proximity literally grounds thought and action. But few (if any) activists we know would seriously maintain that proximity *guarantees* social justice, sustainability, or effective governance. Localities are sites of contestation at which “to *begin* the *global* task to which we are called” (Kloppenbourg et al. 1996: 41, emphasis added).

Allen and Guthman further suggest that the “populist localism” of FTS advocates “happens to resonate with the neoliberal devolution of responsibility and accountability to the local” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). But devolution is emphatically *not* a core principle of neoliberalism (Martinez and Garcia, 1997; Finnegan, 2003). Rather, devolution is a tactical device employed rather sparingly and in limited circumstances because it is in fact antithetical to the overall neoliberal project of ceding primacy to market relations and of centralizing effective power and control in transnational institutional structures. Though it cannot legitimately be said to mark them as neoliberals, FTS advocates do indeed act principally in their local school districts. This is less a matter of conscious policy than the consequence of concerned citizens acting to redress a problem through direct action.

But FTS advocates also understand clearly that local action is insufficient to achieve the far-reaching changes they think necessary. Accordingly, they have organized to work for change at state, regional, and national levels. Thus, the Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch program is cooperating with the State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to change state curriculum standards. It is working with a coalition of organizations to develop state purchasing standards. It is cooperating in a regional network of Midwestern FTS projects, and it is working with the Community Food Security Coalition and over 300 other organizations to create a national FTS movement and to prepare the legislative and political groundwork for inclusion of provisions in the 2007 Farm Bill that would extend FTS resources to *all* schools (Community Food Security Coalition, 2006). Other FTS programs across the nation are involved in similar sorts of coordinated action at multiple levels. In our experience, no one in the FTS movement takes the position, attributed to them by Allen and Guthman, that decision-

making “be only local” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). Surely the proper approach is not advocacy of *either* local *or* national action, but the advance of mutually reinforcing processes at multiple levels of initiative and governance.

Given deregulation as a core principle of neoliberalism (Martinez and Garcia, 1997; Finnegan, 2003), Allen and Guthman’s reliance on the federal government for change seems misplaced. They contend that federal policy governance of school food operations “if nothing else has guaranteed that these programs have been regulated with the broad public benefit in mind” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). Yet, the National School Lunch Program is seriously under-enrolled, and its benefits thus severely limited (e.g., in Missoula County, Montana, only 30% of eligible students are actually enrolled). Moreover, the national school food policy was designed, in large part, to dispose of surplus commodities (which now include French toast sticks and pop tarts as well as beef and milk) for the benefit of agribusiness firms (Nestle, 2002). Food entitlements have been under assault for more than a decade (Poppendieck, 1998). Had the federal government actually undertaken to educate and nourish children healthfully, there would be no need for the FTS movement today. State action in and of itself is hardly the guarantor of progressive outcomes or equal distribution of benefits. Allen and Guthman see local FTS initiatives as impotent tools of neoliberalism. We see new opportunities to create innovative practices and policies in the social and political and economic spaces that have opened up at the local level (Lash and Urry, 1987; Bonnano, 1998).

The neoliberal imaginary

A second principal dimension of what Allen and Guthman regard as the neoliberal character of FTS programs are the interlinked tendencies toward privatization and marketization. Across the United States, the great majority of public school food services are constituted as stand-alone financial units that are uncoupled from the revenue-based allocation of funds to the educational function of schools. School food services must almost always pay for themselves. These semi-privatized structural conditions produce a race to the bottom in which food quality continuously degenerates as food services, in an effort to retain student customers, are forced to mimic commercial fast food competitors even as they try to cut costs while embracing USDA commodity foods and pre-packaged meal items that are (literally) assembled rather than cooked

FTS advocates are *not* looking to reinforce such quasi-privatized arrangements, nor do they intend to undermine entitlement programs. To the contrary, school food pro-

grams are exciting terrain for reform because they offer the prospect of re-socializing at least one modality of food provision. The objective of many FTS programs is to re-embed school food programs in the larger context of education and to establish the principle that, as the Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch program has proposed as policy for the Madison Metropolitan School District, “all children deserve nutritious, safe, and deliciously prepared food” (Wubben et al., 2006). Schools are public institutions that are subject to decisions made not by the market but through the public policy process. Local school boards, state departments of education, and federal agencies all can play a role in expanding the role of food in the health, education, and welfare of our children as a matter of entitlement if they are compelled to do so by citizen action.

We wish that persuading these governance institutions that all children are entitled to quality food *was* the discursive “slam dunk” imagined by Allen and Guthman (this issue). Alas, it is not. In an era of straitened or declining budgets many parents, school boards, and state departments of education tend to see FTS programs as potential drains on resources that would best be directed to supporting performance in core academics (or sports). Incipient FTS initiatives face the dual challenge of providing a persuasive rationale for their programs and of securing material resources for their work. As Allen and Guthman point out, FTS projects often depend upon grant funds to inaugurate their efforts. Such monies are frequently provided by private foundations, but also are supplied by public agencies (e.g., the USDA’s SARE program, federal “farm-to-cafeteria” legislation). Such funding is understood by donors and recipients alike to underwrite the start up of projects that otherwise would never be initiated. Such opportunities are used to demonstrate the benefits of FTS and to begin processes that it is hoped will over time result in the institutionalization of FTS programs within school systems. In our experience no FTS advocates desire or anticipate a permanently privatized funding stream of the sort that Allen and Guthman suggest constitutes a form of neoliberal privatization.

Similarly, volunteers are often a useful component of FTS programs. Such participation is arranged to support teachers and food service staff as they try out new and unaccustomed roles and activities. It is not intended to be, nor can it be, a permanent displacement of paid labor by the “contingent labor” of volunteers. And while “volunteerism” can sometimes be used to justify cuts in state services, it is also evidence of citizen engagement. In our own FTS programs we have worked to be attentive to the perspectives of teachers, food service staff, and custodial workers. Nevertheless, in any complex social environment,

conflicts may arise when serious reforms are proposed. This is no less true of FTS programs than of any other movement. But to extrapolate, as do Allen and Guthman, from a single instance of an FTS program being “complicated by union objections” (Allen and Guthman, this issue) to an indictment of “the labor practices of FTS programs” generally as “seeming to align with the flexible labor practices of neoliberal efforts to de-fang unions and roll back pay and benefits” is unwarranted.

Given their preoccupation with neoliberalism, Allen and Guthman tend to find it wherever they look. This is nowhere clearer than in their discussion of the manner in which FTS programs’ discursive use of “individual measurement and performance and an embrace of consumerism and choice endorse and may further ways of producing people as neoliberal subjects” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). A visit to the web site of the Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch project (www.reapfoodgroup.org/farmentoschool) will turn up no mention of academic performance or consumer choice as justifications for the work described there. We do not agree that these are prominent features of FTS discourse generally. It is not clear what body of data Allen and Guthman relied on, or what sort of observations they undertook, to come to their very broad conclusions. In any case, it is hard to understand why simple reference to the well established relationship between nutrition and academic performance (which is a very different thing from “standardized test scores”) or obesity is ipso facto to participate in or consent to an exclusively neoliberal frame of reference. Discursive frames are constructed and contested, and to recognize only one possibility of interpretation is to cede freely to capital what it should have to struggle over.

Allen and Guthman also contend that “FTS programs embrace consumer choice as a primary form of governance” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). We are not sure what that means, but it appears to be that “FTS advocates look to choice as a mechanism for creating change, framing their program in terms of the rights of children to have choices rather than in terms of their rights to nutritious food” (p. 32). They have it exactly backwards. As FTS advocates, we look to the mandates of public policy to create change, framing our program to *restrict* the choices that children have in order to foster the development of a critical, alimentary consciousness that will allow them to make healthful, and sustainable and socially just choices as they mature. That is, in Madison and Missoula and around the nation, FTS advocates are working to put in place school food and federally mandated “wellness” policies that restrict or eliminate student access to low nutrient, high calorie candies, foods and beverages and mandate provision of nutrient dense foods

such as whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables to *all* students. Had Allen and Guthman examined the *educational* programs associated with many FTS initiatives, they would perhaps have understood how much effort is being placed on reforming not just the lunch room but reforming public education in order to stop creating food consumers and to start fostering the emergence of “food citizenship” (Welsh and McRae, 1998).

What is to be done?

We agree with Allen and Guthman that we are embedded in an overarching neoliberal structure that shapes and constrains action in various ways. At issue is what we decide to do within those confines. For Allen and Guthman there appear to be few options worth pursuing. The power of capital is such that the actions of activists and advocates rebound to the “almost inevitable production of neoliberal forms” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). Convinced that “neoliberalization itself constrains the imagining of alternatives and the politics of the possible” (Allen and Guthman, this issue), their analysis of farm-to-school initiatives is reduced to mere tautology: “the reason that FTS programs look like neoliberalism is because they are neoliberalism” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). Perhaps because they can see no plausible alternatives themselves, they offer no concrete proposals for what might be done to change things. They end their essay with a formulaic paragraph calling for realization of the usual range of decontextualized abstractions: “resistance,” “critical thinking,” “political action,” “equity,” “public funding,” and “state support” (Allen and Guthman, this issue).

We believe that those who are engaged in the over 400 FTS programs nation-wide are now undertaking, however imperfectly, resistance and critical thinking and political action and that they are endeavoring to achieve equity, public funding, and state support for their proposed reforms. Most of those who are engaged in this work know very well what the obstacles are and how difficult it is to enact a reform, much less a non-reformist reform. Allen and Guthman hypothesize that “the constant struggle and fire fighting needed to establish FTS programs obscure the presence of alternatives to neoliberalism” (Allen and Guthman, this issue). Again, we believe that they are mistaken. Engagement with and action in the world is how we learn. The struggle illuminates more than it obscures. The FTS movement, like other progressive and emancipatory movements, does need to think more creatively about how to conceptualize the alternative institutional designs that will provide the vehicle for truly non-reformist reforms. But if what some call “real utopias” (Wright, 2005; Burawoy, 2003) are to

be achieved, it is the actions we actually *take* now that must refigure and engender those possibilities.

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