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Creating Alternatives: A Participant Observer's Reflections on the Emerging Local Food System in Kansas City

Mary Hendrickson
University of Missouri-Columbia

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**CREATING ALTERNATIVES: A PARTICIPANT OBSERVER'S
REFLECTIONS ON THE EMERGING LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM IN
KANSAS CITY***

MARY HENDRICKSON

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA

ABSTRACT

The Missouri School has been known for its study of the structure of agriculture and food, and what affects structural arrangements have on farmers, communities, and environments. A lesser known aspect of the Missouri School is its use of structural analyses to analyze and promote alternatives. As a participant observer of the Kansas City food system for more than 15 years, I highlight the continual evolution of alternatives in the region, documenting the long involvement of the Missouri School with the development of these alternatives, from providing structural analyses to extension programming. This case study shows the struggle that farmers, consumers and communities undergo as they seek to create sustainable food and agriculture alternatives within existing political, social and economic structures, concluding that everyday praxis can create and enlarge spaces for transformative food systems. However, the struggle for full realization of social change happens fitfully with no guarantee of success.

In the last 30 years, the sociology of agriculture and food has had two primary strands of research and analysis, which have lately begun to twine together. In the 1970s-1990s, examining the structural arrangements of the agriculture and food system, and the resulting impacts on labor, farmers and rural development was a dominant theme in the sociology of food and agriculture in the U.S. (Bonanno et al. 1994; Friedland, 1984; Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Goodman and Redclift 1991; Heffernan and Constance 1994). Understanding agency by many different actors in the food system was thriving in some European analyses (Long and Long 1992). In the past decade or more, these strands have intertwined both in the U.S. and other places (see Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Wilkinson 2006). As Marsden and Murdoch (2006) highlight in their edited book, *Between the Local and the Global*, the complexities of global processes and how they are played out at the local level provide some of the richest and most exciting areas for study in the sociology of agriculture and food.

The Missouri School has been positioned right in the middle of this debate and scholarship. Known in the literature for its examination of agrifood structure,

*Direct correspondence to: Mary Hendrickson, Ph.D., Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri, 200 Gentry Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, Telephone: 573-882-7463, Email: hendricksonm@missouri.edu.

particularly in the analysis of firms, their power and their strategies (Bonanno and Constance 2000, 2006; Heffernan 1998; Heffernan, Hendrickson, and Gronski 1999), it is less well-known for its attention to agency and interaction with advocates from across what Stevenson et al. (2008) call the Warrior, Builder, Weaver spectrum. From the beginning, Bill Heffernan and colleagues at the University of Missouri (particularly institutional economists like Harold Briemyer [1965]) were interested in how the structure of agriculture affected communities (e.g., the focus of Heffernan's [1972, 1984] classic studies of the broiler industry in Louisiana). In the 1980s Farm Crisis, Bill and Judy Heffernan were deeply involved in helping farmers and rural communities deal with the impacts of structural change in agriculture, particularly by providing a framework for understanding market concentration and consolidation that helped farmers see beyond their individual situations (and their perceived failures) to the larger changes taking place. In the 1990s, Doug Constance's involvement with rural resistance to changes in the hog production system, including the siting of large confined animal feed operations, garnered consternation and accompanying restrictions from University administrators (Constance, Kleiner, and Rikoon 2003). Simultaneously, the Heffernans, Constance, Alessandro Bonanno, economist John Ikerd, and others at Missouri maintained a healthy interest (both academically and pragmatically) in emerging alternatives such as sustainable and organic agriculture and the impacts such alternatives could have on farmers, communities, and environments (for examples see Albee, Rikoon, and Gilles 1996; Ikerd 1993; Ikerd et al. 1996; Seipel and Heffernan 1997).

My own work over the past fifteen years has been steeped in both the structural analysis that the Missouri School is known for, as well as the pragmatic extension approaches we have used to help create sustainable agriculture and community food systems alternatives.¹ In this paper, I will show how the very examination of

¹As I write this paper, I have struggled with the use of "I" and "we" both to represent who was involved and to provide clarity for the reader. In discussions of the Missouri School, "we" refers to the collectivity—the graduate students who are now at other institutions or organizations, the current and former faculty, the colleagues who helped shape ideas at Missouri. When I use "we" with extension programming, or work with farmer groups, it almost always refers to the work and ideas of Bill Heffernan and me, although both Judy Heffernan and Doug Constance were an important part of extension/outreach in the 1980s and 1990s. In the discussion of alternatives in Kansas City, the "we" becomes a group of actors changing the food system in Kansas City. It is difficult for me to use the pronoun "I" in describing work and ideas that are interconnected and intertwined with the knowledge and insights of all members of the Missouri School. Moreover, I consider the work that I do in Kansas City to be part of a larger collective effort seeking to change the food system and the pronoun "I" is too puny to represent such work.

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structural arrangements in food and agriculture has been used to analyze and promote food system alternatives across the state of Missouri. With the Kansas City food system, Bill Heffernan and I have used our special “standpoint” as land grant university researchers and extension educators working in a particular locale to explicate the ideals and realities of transformative food system movements. The first part of the paper reviews the structural analysis of firms, for which the Missouri School is well-known, as well as the introduction of a framework for analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of dominant food systems versus emerging alternatives. The second half of the paper is concentrated on telling the story of the emerging alternative food system in Kansas City from the standpoint of a participant observer. As the reader will see, a strong local food system is emerging in the region, but one that remains flawed and small compared with the conventional system. This narrative of food system alternatives highlights the agency that actors have used to both challenge and change the global food system in the Kansas City region.

THE MISSOURI SCHOOL: A REVIEW

As the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology (2008) makes clear in its analysis of agriculture and food around the world, business as usual is not an option in agriculture if we are to secure sustainable livelihoods and food security around the globe. Of course, these are not new ideas to those involved in the sociology of agriculture and food, which has often concluded that the structural arrangements in the agrifood system have negatively affected life chances of people around the globe. One of the Missouri School’s contributions has been to illustrate the size and scope of the corporations involved in this global food system and to help understand their strategies. In the mid-1980s, Bill Heffernan and Doug Constance began tracking the share of the market of the top four companies in various Midwestern commodities, producing “CR4 Tables” for distribution.² Current CR4s are represented in Table 1, and are available at <http://www.foodcircles.missouri.edu/consol.htm>.

² CR4 is concentration ratio of the top four firms in a particular market. If 40 percent or more of a particular market is controlled by four or fewer firms, that market acts like a monopolistic one. From small group theory, it is well-known that actors will base their own actions off the actions of the others in the group without any collusion. Extending this to the monopolistic markets means that dominant firms know what their competitors are doing simply by observation and not by collusion, a key necessity to prove violation of current anti-trust laws (Heffernan, 1998; Heffernan et al. 1999).

Table 1. CONCENTRATION IN THE U.S. FOOD INDUSTRY IN 2006.

COMMODITY	TOP FIRMS	CONCENTRATION
MARKET		RATIO
Beef Packing.	Tyson, Cargill Excel, Swift & Co., National Beef*	CR4 = 83.5%
Pork Packing.	Smithfield, Tyson, Swift & Co., Hormel	CR4 = 66%
Broilers.....	Tyson, Pilgrims' Pride, Gold Kist, Perdue	CR4 = 58.5%
Turkeys.....	Cargill, Hormel, ConAgra, Carolina Turkeys	CR4 = 55%
Corn Seed.	Dupont, Monsanto	CR2 = 58%
Flour Milling.....	Cargill/CHS, ADM, ConAgra, Cereal Food Processors	CR3 = 55%
Food Retailing.....	Wal-Mart, Kroger, Albertson's, Safeway, Ahold USA	CR5 = 48%
Ethanol.....	ADM, US Biofuels, VeraSun Energy, Hawkeye Renewables	CR4 = 31.5%

* JBS, a leading Brazilian meat packing firm, acquired Swift & Co. in mid-2007. They then proposed acquisitions with National Beef and #5 Smithfield Beef in the next year. At press, the Smithfield merger was allowed, but the US Justice Department had raised concerns with allowing the National Beef deal. This leads to more significant concentration in the beef packing industry. JBS also acquired the pork operations of Swift.

SOURCE: Hendrickson and Heffernan (2007)

By compiling secondary data available in trade journals and leading business newspapers, citizens, farmers and rural residents in particular could see the dominant players in the agrifood system and begin to understand their strategies and how that might affect their own businesses or circumstances. In the early days, the CR4 was more than 70 percent for soybean and beef processing, but for most commodities such as broilers, pork, flour milling, and food retailing, the CR4 was below 40 percent, indicating a competitive market. Over the years, all of the market sectors tracked have continued to concentrate market share. In fact, those that started with lower CR4s increased more rapidly than those with higher CR4s. Today the CR4 for all of the major market sectors traced is more than 40 percent except ethanol, for which the CR4 has actually declined. The latest incarnation of this research was completed in April 2007 and is represented in the table above.

Simply reporting this data without providing a framework to understand it (e.g., USDA has begun providing data on CR4 ratios in many commodities but omits

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company names) can disempower those who are directly affected. Members of the Missouri School offered a framework embedded in sociological theory for why this data mattered to farmers, consumers and rural communities. This helped citizens ask the important questions to distinguish between “what is” and “what could be.” Are these competitive markets? Who has the power to act if they are not competitive markets? How does this impact your life chances as a farmer, rural resident, farm worker or consumer? Agriculture and food groups have responded to this framework, and used the research in their advocacy efforts to improve their own situations (see Gronski in this volume).

Even with a framework embedded in critical theory, the analysis that we presented could often dishearten, and in a sense disempower, the very people we hoped could use it. The Heffernans challenged farmers and other audiences to understand that the agrifood structure they documented and explained was not the product of so-called “natural” market forces, but rather the outcomes of actions that powerful actors could take—it was humanly created, a very simple, but crucial concept. While some farmers and community members left presentations feeling the situation in agriculture and food was hopeless and were unable to engage in their own agency, others felt equipped to engage in “Warrior” work (Stevenson et al. 2008). For example, members of the Missouri Farmers Union have used the analysis to develop policies and extensive farmer networks focused on supporting the expansion of locally-grown food. By the early 1990s, members of the Missouri School began to use the accumulated knowledge from structural research as well as participation in sustainable agriculture initiatives and farm crisis advocacy to develop an outline of where alternatives can best position themselves. In Table 2, I present the idealized dichotomy of what Bill Heffernan and I call “Dominant Global Food System” and “Alternative Food Systems” to illustrate where the dominant food system has strengths and where weaknesses may exist.

Dominant Global Food Systems are represented by capital intensive, industrialized food systems that require vast synthetic inputs and are heavily reliant on fossil fuel. These are far-flung food systems that can source inputs from around the world wherever costs are cheapest, and sell into the highest-priced markets around the world (Heffernan and Constance 1994; McMichael 2007; Sanderson 1986). Alternative Food Systems are represented by the myriad of alternatives that have emerged that seek to balance the three legs of sustainability—economy, equity, and ecology. The Kellogg Foundation’s Food and Society program (2008) began calling these systems “Good Food,” to denote food that is healthy for people,

produced in sustainable ways, fair to farmers and workers, and affordable to all members of society.

Table 2. POSITIONS OF STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS FOR ALTERNATIVE FOOD SYSTEMS.

	Dominant Global Food System	Alternative Food Systems
Mass produce food on a scale to feed the mainstream.....	Strength	Weakness
Easy and cheap access to capital.....	Strength	Weakness
Long-range vision.....	Strength	Potential Weakness
Flexibility and response speed.....	Weakness	Strength
Connect to consumers through personalized relationships.....	Weakness	Strength
Providing organic, natural, humane, cage-free food.....	Potential Weakness	Strength
Providing fair and sustainable food.....	Weakness	Strength

If we look at Table 2, one position of strength for the industrialized food system is in mass producing food on a scale to feed the mainstream. This rests in the ability of large agrifood firms to produce undifferentiated commodities across the globe, sourcing cheap and selling products into the highest priced markets, wherever they exist. Another position of strength for large global firms rests on their ability to raise capital more efficiently and cheaply than small holders or start-up firms. In recent years, the financialization of all markets has meant that private equity has entered food and agriculture sectors (for a discussion see Burch 2007). Using vast sums of investor money, these private equity funds could buy agrifood firms (even well-managed ones like Albertson’s), lend money to firms (the method Smithfield used to finance their expansions in Europe and also into the beef industry), and generally help large agrifood firms outcompete small farms and food firms for capital. The recent freeze in capital markets has created problems for some of these firms (e.g., Pilgrim’s Pride), but the general premise remains sound. A final strength for global agrifood firms is the clarity of their vision. The honest mission of any corporation is to make money for their stockholders (and, dare I say, managers). This must guide their decision-making, even for those with an eye on the triple

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bottom line of profits, equity and environment, or the firm does not continue to exist.

Alternative food systems are often very weak in the three areas detailed above. Alternative food firms and small holders have difficulty obtaining capital and credit on favorable terms to finance their businesses.³ They cannot compete in producing undifferentiated commodities with those firms who have far-flung supply networks. Usually, their visions are messy and complicated. Balancing social, ecological and economic interests is very difficult, and thus one set of interests generally gets prioritized (e.g., see critical examinations of food system alternatives by Allen 2004; Hinrichs 2003, Winter 2003). Given that alternatives are embedded in existing economic and political structures (e.g., markets and legal frameworks), economic interests often dominate.

However, the alternatives that have emerged have particular strengths from which they can operate. Firms involved in alternative food systems are often small and agile, which means they can probably respond quickly to changing tastes and cultural shifts. Turning an aircraft carrier (*a.k.a.* a large, bureaucratic firm like Cargill) is much more difficult than turning a speedboat (*a.k.a.* alternative firms and networks). Alternative food movements have pioneered what “good” food is, and thus can provide the humanely raised, natural, organic or cage-free foods that “foodies” have been demanding for the past 15 years. However, this can be an opportunity for alternatives insofar as the industrialized food system does not define the agenda, as has happened with the advent of organic standards and labels that exist to protect the very consumers who demanded different types of foods (for a great discussion of standards in the global arena see Hatanaka, Bain, and Busch 2006). The most important strength that alternative food systems have is the ability to connect producers and consumers in personalized, authentic ways that expand beyond a market relationship (see DeLind 2006; Hendrickson 1997; Lind 2007; Lyson 2004). In doing so, they work toward their vision of providing food that is

³ As a state extension specialist, I commonly hear complaints about obtaining capital which sometimes results from the weak financial management skills of many agri-food innovators. There have been efforts to help farmers with business planning to better access capital, such as the USDA-SARE supported work “Building a Sustainable Business” (Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture 2003). Still, the lack of capital for alternative food businesses is serious enough that Investors Circle, a network of “angel investors, professional venture capitalists, foundations, family offices and others who are using private capital to promote the transition to a sustainable economy” has created food and agriculture tracks at recent investor conferences (see www.investorscircle.net).

fair to farmers, farm workers, and eaters while protecting and enhancing the environment.

The simple framework outlined in Table 2 offers itself easily to critique mostly because it is more pragmatic than theoretical. It is a framework that I use in working with farmer groups across Missouri and the Midwest to navigate between pragmatism and analysis. I should point out that many farmer-driven entities have ignored the strengths of the globalized, industrialized food system at their peril. One example is Farmland, one of the largest farmer cooperatives in the United States until their bankruptcy in 2002. As Hogeland (2006:71–2) states, cooperative managers adopted new industry norms such as “efficiency, being a low-cost provider, commodity specialization” to ‘out-Cargill Cargill.’ In Farmland’s case, this meant ignoring the strengths of their decentralized federation to pursue alternative markets for identity-preserved grains and meats. Many successful alternative firms (e.g., Muir Glen, Coleman Meats, and Niman Foods) have been bought out once their expansions stretched beyond their capital needs. In my extension program, I often advise groups to operate from their position of strength and to focus on remaining true to their early visions of making an adequate living providing good quality food to interested eaters.

Identifying strengths and operating from those positions does not mean giving the vast mainstream system over to globalized, industrialized systems. Just because large agrifood firms operate from some positions of strength does not mean they cannot be challenged on those very strengths (e.g., the “Warrior” work that Stevenson et al. [2008] identify). For instance, much of our consolidation research has been used by farm groups like National Farmers Union or Organization for Competitive Markets to advocate for enforcement of existing antitrust laws. Such research combined with advocacy efforts has led to the formation of the groups that Gronski discusses in this volume. Research on consolidation in the US, including the writings of legal scholars like Carstensen (2000, 2004) and McEowen, Carstensen and Harl (2002), led to the development of a Competition Title for the 2002 Farm Bill, an effort that finally succeeded in limited fashion in the 2008 Farm Bill. The documentation of agrifood structure from scholars across the world plays a prominent role in the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development reports (2008), and competition measures figure into the options for actions provided for decision-makers.

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BUILDING ALTERNATIVES IN KANSAS CITY

In 1994, I began my dissertation research as a participant observer with the Kansas City Food Circle, just as it started to form as an organization. Since finishing my dissertation, I have remained involved in the emerging local food system in the Kansas City area in several ways—mostly as an extension specialist doing programming around local foods, with the Kansas City metro area as a focus area for my work. The Kansas City Food Circle used the Missouri School's research on consolidation in the food system as a starting place for determining what was wrong with the current food system, and as a backdrop for creating a vision of what a "right" food system would look like.

The Food Circle organization that got its start in November 1994 is the latest inception of a group that has existed since the early 1980s. Its roots go back to the early 1980s when a group of Kansas Citians began to seek alternative political expressions in response to the election of Ronald Reagan and the changes in politics that heralded. The group was interested in sustainable futures, and food was a critical component. By the late 1980s, this group had embraced the "Green" political philosophy emerging from Europe as well as the organic food movement, which represented a way of expressing their political philosophy in their everyday life (see Hendrickson [1997] for a more thorough explication of the Kansas City Food Circle development).⁴

While the understanding of what constitutes a workable alternative has changed over time, core members of the Food Circle have long tried to develop local sources of sustainable food. Early conferences of the group focused on the vulnerabilities of a food system heavily dependent on oil, and discussed the true costs of such agriculture. (Concern over "peak oil" and energy use in the food system has returned in force in the last few years.) Members of the Greater Kansas City Greens in the mid-1980s tried to provide networking opportunities for producers and consumers of organic produce to meet and understand each other, and even tried to organize marketing cooperatives as a better way to make connections. Since 1994, the Food Circle in Kansas City has tried to educate the public about the consequences of our industrial agricultural system and persuade more people to participate in a local, sustainable alternative. They have published directories of local organic farmers, promoted Community Supported Agriculture Farms, sought

⁴Green political philosophy as embraced by the Green group in Kansas City is a systems approach that requires balancing the core principles of ecological wisdom, decentralization/participation, non-violence, and social justice in both the political and personal spheres (Bookchin 1990).

to educate the general population about the benefits of local and organic foods, and built strong relationships between consumers, farmers and others in the food system.

However, a very significant contribution of the group was the development of an alternative *vision* of what the food system could be (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002). This vision prioritized relationships, as well as making those relationships as direct and personal as possible. It incorporated a different form of trust, one that was personal because it was rooted in a community relationship, instead of the impersonal trust that permeates the global food system with its sets of government and private standards (Giddens 1990; Hatanaka et al. 2006; Hendrickson 1997). Instead of a food system where farmers were distanced from consumers, with the middle controlled by a few large agrifood firms, this group envisioned a system where farmers and eaters were directly connected at farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), roadside stands, and delivery services. They saw connections between farmers and restaurants, farmers and grocery stores, farmers and processors—relationships that could be embedded in the local community.

In this way, they were “making the personal political”—food as a personal decision, embedded in relationships at the family and community level, but political in that they sought to reorganize the food system totally as an example of what could happen politically if processes were decentralized and re-localized. While they were contributing an alternative, cohesive vision (which we have deemed a strength of the global food system), they were also building on their own strengths of connecting to consumers through personalized relationships, and providing fair and sustainable food (see bottom three rows on Table 2).

Dismissing the role of such a small group, operating in a particular locale, in affecting the larger food system is easy. However, this group challenged the existing economic and political structures of late modernity by focusing on creating authentic relationships between producers and consumers, or as Habermas (1987) might say, by protecting the personal sphere from the intrusion of the exchange relationship (for an explanation of this in Kansas City see Hendrickson 1997). By deepening and strengthening consumer-farmer relationships in the Kansas City area through their promotions of local farmers and education of local consumers, the group began to provide a space for action on many levels including within economic, social, and political systems. They protected that small but important space for action (see Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002).

While working hard to create a powerful vision and connect farmers and consumers, the all-volunteer group struggled with funding and with growing their

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membership. Shortly after completing my dissertation on the Food Circle, the USDA North Central Region Center for Rural Development provided funding for Bill Heffernan and I to establish a small extension program modeled on the Food Circle. The next year, members of the Kansas City Food Circle, the rural sociology department at the University of Missouri, faith groups, and farm organizations met to discuss how the Food Circle's vision could be supported statewide. This culminated with funding in 1998 for the University of Missouri Extension's Food Circles Networking Project (FCNP), an outreach program that initially focused on helping low income consumers grow their own food and market surplus, assisted farmers in finding alternative markets for their products by recruiting consumers into the idea of what an alternative food system could be, and supported community-based processing activities. Although state budget cuts in the early part of this decade gutted state funding for the project, it still exists through University of Missouri Extension, lately supported by a Kellogg Foundation grant. While the program has retained a focus on networking farmers and consumers together, goals have simplified to increasing the amount of sustainably and locally-grown food produced and consumed in Missouri.

Growing Growers and Markets

The Kansas City area mirrored and accelerated national food trends toward local, seasonal, and organic food. Farmers' markets were expanding and more markets wanted farmers than there were farmers. With a thriving restaurant scene, chefs were seeking local produce and becoming frustrated with the quantity and quality of products as well as existing distribution systems. Some grocery stores were buying produce at local farmers' markets, a haphazard method they hoped to change to take advantage of demand for local food by expanding their offerings. The FCNP helped farmers to access markets and to figure out product variety, packaging, distribution and all the other things that go into selling locally-produced food. By the early part of this decade, there were not enough local farm products for the markets that were emerging.

To help address this problem, a partnership consisting of two land grant universities (Kansas State University and the University of Missouri), the Kansas City Food Circle and the Kansas Rural Center created the Growing Growers program in 2003 (Carey et al. 2006). This program provides workshop training in the core competencies necessary to be a market farmer (e.g., production skills such as soil management, pest control and labor management; financial skills that focus on understanding cash flows and profit and loss statements; and marketing skills

such as sales ability and merchandizing) as well as an apprenticeship with local market farmers to put theory into practice (for a description of the program see www.growinggrowers.org). The ideals of the Kansas City Food Circle to establish direct links between farmers and eaters relies on the idea that producers and consumers are knowledgeable about food production and consumption. However, real skills in producing, processing, handling, distributing, storing, and cooking food are necessary and often need to be learned or relearned (for a discussion on the consumer side see Jaffe and Gertler 2006).

Farmers were, and continue to be, able to take advantage of market opportunities in the Kansas City area because of limited supply. However, chefs and grocery buyers still want local and seasonal food on their own terms—at the price, with the packaging and the delivery options that work for their own businesses. This is where “scaling up”—which may conflict with the strengths of “Alternative Food Systems” from Table 2—becomes important in maintaining the momentum of the local foods movement. Many farmers we were trying to reach in our extension program were too large or too established to change to an entirely different way of farming. Their farming systems—equipment, storage facilities, and knowledge—were oriented to different markets and were difficult to change. However, these farmers were also being left out of the emerging global food system because they were often too small to participate in far-flung global chains. These farmers “of the middle” (see Kirshenmann et al. 2003; Lyson, Stevenson and Welsh 2008) had the potential to provide the quantity and kinds of food—differentiated for organic, sustainably produced, family-farmed raised etc.—that are represented in the lower third of Table 2. The question then became—how to help these farmers out of the increasingly consolidated global markets and into alternative food systems?

The FCNP worked with Good Natured Family Farms (GNFF), an alliance of farms in eastern Kansas and western Missouri, as they continued building a strong relationship with a local grocery chain, Ball’s Foods.⁵ In the early days, I and other project staff helped Ball’s management identify more local producers, recognize the potential supply they had, and shared research on consolidation in the grocery industry. We developed a close working relationship with Diana Endicott, founder of GNFF, and have provided information to help develop a new marketing

⁵Good Natured Family Farms is a marketing alliance of several different farmer “pods” which produce eggs, processed chickens, vegetables, beef, pork and bison. Ball’s Foods is a local grocery chain of about 30 different stores operating under Price Chopper and Hen House banners with a long history in the grocery business in Kansas City.

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campaign as well as provided information and seminars on food safety and quality issues.⁶ GNFF and Ball's work hard to keep food system relationships as personal as possible. Farmers who market to the grocery chain are required to attend at least one summer Saturday event that showcases the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" products, and to participate in training in food safety or marketing. From my work with this group and others that I will detail below, we know that expanding alternatives into the mainstream can highlight tensions between positioning Alternative Food Systems on their strengths and the demands of operating in the existing economic structures of the food system. For instance, the expansion of the grocery market described above required significant investments from both GNFF who invested in and developed infrastructures such as meat processing, distribution, and marketing, and from Ball's Foods who decided to create a central warehouse to store and distribute local products, and developed significant employee education to thoroughly implement their Buy Fresh, Buy Local marketing plan. (See the Wallace Center's Good Food Network at www.wallacecenter.org for a more in-depth discussion.)

Many similar issues involved in creating alternative food systems were playing out with other groups we were working with, particularly a Mid-Missouri pork cooperative that now markets some pork through GNFF in Kansas City. The farmers from Osage County who initiated work on the cooperative understood the direction the global food system was moving because of involvement with Bill Heffernan, and were worried about their place in the emerging system. With the assistance of University of Missouri rural sociologists and economists, they explored marketing options for sustainably raised pork in the St. Louis area, but processing costs and distribution proved difficult (see Constance and Russell 1999; Hendrickson 2003). In 2001, these hog farmers joined with others from Northeast Missouri who were also reeling from a consolidating and low-profit pork industry to form Ozark Mountain Pork Cooperative, an entity with which we were strongly involved in helping to create marketing concepts and to access grant funds. The

⁶The marketing campaign was "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" which I had discovered at national meetings and showed the materials to Diana Endicott and Lou Malaponti. Endicott pursued using the materials as a marketing strategy with Ball's, a smart move as it has helped the store expand the sales of local products 35 percent per year from 2003 to 2006 (Endicott, Jonas, and Silva 2007) with several million dollars of local products moving through the chain. Moreover, with six-figure investments in the marketing campaign by GNFF and Ball's, the ideas of local food have reached thousands of consumers in the Kansas City area, further raising consciousness about local, sustainable food systems.

group purchased a defunct state of the art packing plant in southern Missouri and began operating with the intent of marketing a family-farmed raised, naturally produced, humanely treated, no-antibiotics used pork product in the metro areas of Missouri (Anderson 2003; Hinman 2008). The group is still operating, even after encountering several bumps along the road, having combined forces with National Farmers (formerly National Farmers Organization) to become the largest farmer-owned natural pork marketer in the U.S.

Scaling Up, Maintaining Integrity and the Local Food System

As new opportunities for expansion of the supply of local foods opened in Kansas City, the local food movement in Kansas City started to move beyond the vision of personalized relationships between farmers and eaters originally outlined by the Kansas City Food Circle. By creating new relationships in the mainstream food system, more people were exposed to local and seasonal foods, and markets continued to expand. However, venturing into the mainstream has forced farmers and eaters to create these relationships within existing economic, political and social structures. Farmers, grocery operators, restaurateurs, and even consumers find it difficult to de-link from the existing system. Locally-based food systems require reorientation of storage, transportation, processing, and distribution systems. To reorient these systems, infusions of capital and management are necessary. Those who have the management experience necessary to navigate the existing food system often do not embrace or fully understand the vision of the alternatives, and as indicated previously securing capital for businesses that are very different from traditional agrifood businesses can be difficult.

The tensions that emerge as the local food movement enters the mainstream have provided much fodder for academic research. From my experience on the ground in Kansas City, it has required deviations from the vision the Food Circle developed and we embraced in our extension project. Alternatives across the nation have struggled with similar issues and have been critiqued by social scientists and others concerned with creating alternative food systems that are fair and sustainable (e.g., Allen and Guthman 2006; DeLind and Bingen 2008; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2003; Kloppenburg and Hassanein 2006). The issues of social justice and societal transformation raised by these critics are very real concerns. On the other hand, if alternatives have not completely abandoned their principles—and I would argue that the majority in Kansas City have not, particularly because of the continued work of the Kansas City Food Circle—then

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we should look at their work as attempts to enlarge the space for action for creating Good Food systems.

The Policy Arena

Many initiatives started by eaters and farmers in the Kansas City region are now being drawn together in a coalition advocating for a Food Policy Council for the metro area. Food Policy Councils have been around for the last 20 years in some form or another in North America (Dahlberg 1994; Schiff 2008). They have been slower to emerge in the Midwest. Both Kansas and Iowa had state level food policy councils that made recommendations to create more sustainable food systems, but do not have responsibility to make sure those recommendations are implemented. There was significant interest in food policy councils for the Kansas City metro area. I and other project staff of the FCNP discussed the idea with stakeholders several times, but there seemed to never be enough time or money. The advisory council of the Growing Growers program even applied for a grant from the Kaufman Foundation to fund food system planning, but the process was abandoned when the grant was rejected. Since the concept of food policy councils was not new and there was interest in a food policy council, why did it take until 2008 to allow for the formation of such a coalition in the Kansas City area?

The answer is the advent of a relatively new player in the food system in the Kansas City area, combined with emerging societal concerns about obesity, childhood obesity in particular. In 2005, because of my work on local foods, I was invited to present an agricultural perspective at a North Central Region extension conference on obesity. I argued that healthy foods come from healthy food systems and that food coming from farmers' markets and CSAs often had superior taste to fruits and vegetables sold in conventional formats (supermarkets, school lunches, etc.). The presentation sparked interest from a well-placed advocate in the Kansas City area who researched the idea and decided to form KC Healthy Kids, an advocacy group dedicated to uniting Kansas City around fit and healthy kids. This advocacy group had strong connections with schools, nutritionists, and the medical community all of whom were focused on reducing childhood obesity but with little understanding of the larger food system, particularly the production arena. Despite lacking a strong background in food systems or food policy, KC Healthy Kids worked with our extension program to organize a policy forum in early 2007 on the importance of the U.S. Farm Bill to their mission of fit and healthy kids (for more information see <http://kchealthykids.org/Initiative-HealthyFoodPolicy/Index.htm>).

From this initial forum, which focused mainly on the ideas of the Farm and Food Policy Project, KC Healthy Kids secured funding to provide opportunities for conference attendees to continue to meet to work on policy changes in the Kansas City area.⁷ The first necessary step was dialogue between the different entities represented—farmers, urban agriculturalists, school food service directors, reducing childhood obesity advocates, local food advocates, grocery store owners, anti-hunger advocates, extension personnel, the faith community, and eaters—to really understand the challenges to creating a healthy, sustainable food system from production, distribution, institutional, and consumption standpoints. Over the next year, these dialogues took place over lunch at Lidia's, one of Kansas City's premier restaurants with a long history of supporting local food production. Common interests, challenges and opportunities were recognized, and trust between different players began to emerge.

In early 2008, KC Healthy Kids, at my recommendation, brought Mark Winne to Kansas City to discuss the formation of a food policy council, and has over the last year developed a food policy coalition involving all the stakeholders mentioned above. A Greater Kansas City Food Policy Coalition now exists committed to ensuring “a healthy, sustainable and affordable food system for Greater Kansas City” by promoting food policies that “positively impact the nutritional, economic, social and environmental health” of the area (see <http://www.kchealthykids.org/Initiative-HealthyFoodPolicy/Index.htm> for more information). Because of the diverse nature of this coalition, I believe that it will function as the strategic basis for expanding a sustainable food system in Kansas City.

CONCLUSION: TENSIONS, SPACES, AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

The Kansas City Food Circle helped establish a new vision of what the food system in the Kansas City area could be by focusing on “eaters” (consumers) and highlighting the importance of establishing personal relationships between themselves and other people in the food system. As with other social movements, the Food Circle looked to consumption and exposing eaters to the big changes they could make in the food system simply by changing their consumption patterns, which included building new social relationships in the food system. While focused

⁷ This was a coalition of sustainable agriculture, environmental, and anti-hunger groups that the Kellogg foundation funded to come up with clear policy goals on sustainable food systems for the 2008 Farm Bill.

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on the praxis of everyday life—everyone eats, every day if they can—this was an explicitly political vision in that it tried to create strong social relationships in the personal sphere that could resist the dominant economic and political forces in the food system. These were personal habits and relationships that eaters were asked to change, with the idea that such changes could have large impacts outside the personal sphere.

On the other hand, farmer groups like Ozark Mountain Pork cooperative and Good Natured Family Farms started in the economic arena by trying new business models. However, they relied on the informed eaters created by the Kansas City Food Circle and other movements for a market for their products, a market based on the belief that supporting these farmers was good for the local economy, the local environment and local communities. With their livelihoods at stake, farmer groups are under more pressure from the current economic arena to pursue a business model that makes money, and are less able to venture into the social and political arenas.

With the creation of the local food policy coalition under the auspices of KC Healthy Kids, actors in the food system in Kansas City are again explicitly in the political arena because we are pursuing policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels that could change the structure of agriculture and food systems. This partnership brings together (and is spearheaded by) eaters, including a focus on institutional consumers, farmers, policy makers, academics, and advocates. The subtle influences of the Missouri School can be seen here in that advocates grasp the larger picture—just as the Kansas City Food Circle did—that the agrifood system as currently organized has been harmful to the land, the environment and farmers, and by extension to eaters (children and families), workers, and the communities, rural and urban, in which we live. Because we have used the framework of the organization of the global agrifood system, we can help explain the changes taking place and what kinds of interventions may be necessary.

In the end, there are many cracks, many vulnerabilities and spaces within the current structure of the agrifood system in which to locate and position alternatives. The pragmatic approach that Bill Heffernan and I have adopted demands that we help farmers, workers, and eaters find the opportunities that are apparent in Table 2, and help them achieve those opportunities. As we move toward Alternative Food Systems that are personal, fair, and sustainable, the movement will hit some bumps. Eaters will buy locally-produced food from farmers who are not out to change the structure of agriculture; some consumers will decide to buy local or organic food simply because it tastes better or because they believe it is healthier rather than

because it is a political statement. However, there are opportunities here to help farmers, eaters, and workers to move from the idea of what makes money or is convenient to the explicit political and economic ideas of change. Because food is something that we engage with every day, people around the world are creating something different in the food system simply by their acts of everyday praxis.

Every new relationship created in these spaces may not lead to change. Creating these new relationships and using our agency to change the food system may fail. The cracks and spaces that we see for action may be overwhelmed by the power accumulated by dominant actors in the food system over the last few decades. The point is that in Kansas City, like many places across the world, we are moving in fits and starts toward something that could be transformational—socially, economically, and ecologically. It is not guaranteed this transformation will happen, but the essence of the Missouri School is the belief that change is possible. To paraphrase Cornel West, we may not be optimistic that change in the food system will happen in the next five years, but we hope real transformation will come because hope is about being part of the struggle, about working toward change.

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