
Neoliberalism, Food, and the Politics of the Possible

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**Presented at the Center for Justice, Tolerance, and Community, UCSC
May 9th, 2006**

An anomaly:

- How it is that current arenas of activism around food and agriculture seem to produce and reproduce neo-liberal forms and spaces of governance, at the same time that it challenges the global landscape of neoliberalism?
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Talk outline:

- Neoliberalism, neoliberalization, neoliberal governmentality
 - Case study: farm-to-school
 - Other examples of neoliberal food projects
 - Toward explanation
 - The political economy of activist projects
 - Food politics as progenitor of neoliberal governmentalities
 - The politics of the possible?
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Neoliberalism (Harvey 2005)

- Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.
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Neoliberalization (Peck and Tickell 2002)

- Proto (1970s): Hayek/Friedman
 - Roll-back (1980s): Reagan/Thatcher
 - Deregulation, privatization, cuts in services and entitlements, union-busting
 - Roll-out (1990s): Clinton/Blair
 - Securitization, penalization
 - Devolution, private regulations, voluntarism
 - Push back
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Neoliberal Governmentality (Rose 1996)

- Government through the rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand
 - “it” does not seek to govern through ‘society’ but through the regulated choices of individual citizens, now construed as subjects of choices and aspirations to self-actualization and self-fulfillment
 - ‘community’ emerges as a new way of conceptualizing and administering moral relations among persons
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Case study: farm to school programs

- What is farm to school
- What makes FTS interesting
- What makes FTS neoliberal

"The farmers are able to sell fresh produce for local schools for use in their meal programs, and children get the benefit of adding fresh fruits and vegetables to their diets. It is a win-win situation for everyone involved." Shirley Watings, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA (USDA/FNS 2000)

Some comparisons of traditional and farm-to-school programs

	Traditional school food programs	Farm-to-school programs
Motivating concerns	<p>market for farmers' products (surplus commodities)</p> <p>poor nutrition of school children (hunger; nutrient deficiencies)</p>	<p>market for farmers' products (local farmers)</p> <p>poor nutrition of school children (obesity; type-2 diabetes; excess fat and sugar; nutrient deficiencies)</p>
Financial support	secure, federally funded; foods donated or subsidized	variable, often dependent on private funding; usually food is not discounted or donated
Who does the work	food service staff	food service staff, NGO staff, volunteers
Who benefits	Commodity farmers children at nutritional risk due to low incomes	Entrepreneurial farmers Children at schools with FTS programs; often in relatively affluent areas

Neoliberal mentalities of farm-to-school

- Individual performance and accountability
(improvement in test scores)
 - Penalization; biopolitics
(obesity discourse and weigh-ins)
 - Producing choice-making consumers
 - The local as the sphere of caring
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Other examples of programs and mentalities

Programs/projects	Neoliberal mentalities	Effects/critiques
Labels (from organic to fair trade)	Privatization Consumer choice	Requires exclusion/barriers to entry to work; consumers decide who/what is protected
“alternative” food networks (CSAs, farmers markets)	Entrepreneurial localism	Unleashes competitive logics Doesn't address issues of labor or low income consumers
GE free zones	Devolution, Local control	Scale not commensurable to problem
Community gardens	Making better subjects	Social control?

Toward explanation

- The political economy of activist projects
 - Filling in the gaps
 - Appealing to funders
 - Food politics as the progenitor of neoliberal governmentalities
 - Organics
 - Agrarianism/localism
 - Health food and other “eat right” movements
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