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The compromised, colonized discourse of alternative food*

El discurso degradado y colonizado de
la alimentación alternativa

*O discurso degradado e colonizado
da alimentação alternativa*

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Artículo de revisión

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Abstract

This article examines how and to what extent the alternative food movement (AFM), in its various incarnations, has effectively disrupted a food discourse space dominated and ordered by the global-industrial food system. The movement has achieved many particular victories —school gardens here, healthier canteen lunches there; shorter food supply chains here, local-product labeling there; organic cultivation practices here, and at least a little composting there— and some people view the collection of these victories as the beginning of a larger, more general one. They will give testimony to how the food movement might have “succeeded.” This article, instead, is about how it has not. Though the AFM gathers very many members of diverse provenance and priority and earns widespread attention as an object of scholarship (see Ashe, 2013 for a review), I submit that it is profaned precisely by its alterity. The AFM’s celebrated achievements are bounded by and within an epistemology of blindness (Santos, 2009, 2014), and, blind to its philosophical intoxication, the movement’s successes only reinforce that which they move against. What I denounce here is not the entire alternative food movement story, to be sure, and the empirical base from which I draw its example, New York City’s institutionally rudderless “alterity,” is a pointer to that story’s substance rather than a total capture of it. Still, New York’s example and all that I denounce along with it comprise a major part of the AFM, a powerful part that emerges from within the epistemic centers of the world-system (Wallerstein, 2011) and is privileged —or burdened— with all the cognitive, political, social, and economic prerogative that this entails. Futility and failure, however, are not stories readily told or sold, and these are parts of the alternative food movement’s reality too little pronounced. In this paper, I pronounce them: the alternative food movement, or at least those parts of it bound to the epistemic promises of the modern world-system’s centers, is a Trojan horse.

Keywords: alternative food movement, critical discourse analysis, decoloniality, economization, epistemicide, transmodernity, world-system.

Descriptors: development, economic doctrines, food security, knowledge.

Resumen

El artículo examina cómo y hasta qué punto el Movimiento Alimentario Alternativo (AFM, por su sigla en inglés), en sus diversas versiones, ha impactado en un espacio discursivo alimentario dominado y ordenado por el sistema alimentario global-industrial. El movimiento ha logrado muchas victorias particulares: huertas escolares, almuerzos de cafetería más saludables, cadenas de suministro alimentarias más cortas, etiquetamiento de productos locales, prácticas orgánicas de cultivo y al menos un poco de compostaje. Algunas personas ven el conjunto de estos triunfos como el comienzo de uno más grande y más general y están listas para dar testimonio acerca de cómo el AFM podría haber sido “exitoso”. Por el contrario, este artículo argumenta cómo no lo ha sido. Aunque el AFM reúne partidarios de muy diverso origen y prioridad, y goza de amplia atención como objeto de estudio (Ashe, 2013), propongo que el movimiento se ve profanado precisamente por su alteridad. Los logros tan celebrados del AFM se hallan limitados por y al interior de una epistemología de la ceguera (Santos, 2009, 2014), y así, ciega a su intoxicación filosófica, los éxitos del movimiento solo refuerzan aquello que pretenden combatir. Ciertamente, lo que denuncio aquí no es la totalidad del relato del movimiento alimentario. La base empírica que tomo como ejemplo, la “alteridad” institucionalmente dirigida de la ciudad de Nueva York, más bien apunta a la sustancia del relato que la capte totalmente. Aun así, el ejemplo de Nueva York y todo lo que denuncio al respecto incluye a gran parte del AFM, una sección poderosa que surge desde el interior de los centros epistémicos del sistema-mundo (Wallerstein, 2011) y goza de —o se ve agobiada por— todas las prerrogativas cognitivas, políticas, sociales y económicas que esto implica. No obstante, las historias de futilidad y fracaso no se cuentan ni se venden fácilmente, y estas son las partes de la realidad del movimiento alimentario alternativo de las que poco se habla. En este trabajo me pronuncio al respecto: el movimiento alimentario alternativo es un caballo de Troya, o al menos aquellas partes suyas vinculadas a las promesas epistémicas de los centros del sistema-mundo moderno.

Palabras clave: análisis crítico del discurso, decolonialidad, economización, epistemicidio, movimiento alimentario alternativo, sistema-mundo, transmodernidad.

Resumo

Este artigo examina como e até que ponto o Movimento Alimentar Alternativo (AFM, em inglês), em suas diversas versões, tem tido um impacto sobre um espaço discursivo alimentar dominado e organizado pelo sistema alimentar global-industrial. O movimento tem conquistado muitas vitórias particulares —hortas escolares, estabelecimentos com almoços mais saudáveis, cadeias de abastecimento alimentar mais curtas, rotulagem de produtos locais, práticas orgânicas de cultivo e, pelo menos, um pouco de compostagem. Algumas pessoas veem o conjunto dessas conquistas como o começo de uma maior e mais ampla, e estão prontas para testemunhar sobre como o AFM poderia ter sido “bem-sucedido”. Contudo, este artigo argumenta como não tem sido. Embora o AFM reúna partidários de diversas origens e prioridades, e goze de ampla atenção como objeto de estudo (Ashe, 2013), proponho que o movimento se vê profanado justamente por sua alteridade. Os triunfos tão celebrados pelo AFM encontram-se limitados por e no interior de uma epistemologia da cegueira (Santos, 2009, 2014), e assim cega sua intoxicação filosófica, os sucessos do movimento só reforçam aquilo que pretendem combater. Com certeza, o que denuncio aqui não é a totalidade do relato do movimento alimentar. A base empírica que tomo como exemplo, a “alteridade” institucionalmente dirigida da cidade de Nova York, aponta à substância do relato que a capte totalmente. Ainda assim, o exemplo de Nova York e tudo o que denuncio a respeito inclui grande parte do AFM, uma parte poderosa que surge do interior dos centros epistêmicos do sistema-mundo (Wallerstein, 2011) e goza de —ou se vê oprimido por— todas as prerrogativas cognitivas, políticas, sociais e econômicas que isso implica. No entanto, as histórias de futilidade e fracasso não se contam nem se vendem com facilidade, e estas são as partes da realidade do movimento alimentar alternativo das quais pouco se falam. Neste trabalho, pronuncio-me a respeito: o AFM, ou pelo menos aquelas partes suas vinculadas às promessas epistêmicas dos centros do sistema-mundo moderno, é um cavalo de Troia.

Palavras-chave: análise crítica do discurso, decolonialidade, economização, epistemicídio, Movimento Alimentar Alternativo, sistema-mundo, transmodernidade.

The swindler's story and the epistemic conquest of alternative food

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There is nothing so coherent as a swindler's story. So wrote Geertz in 1973 (p. 18), and there seems no better way to situate this argument now. Geertz was writing about the anthropologist's tricky task of sifting grains of reality from the sands of all too convincing narratives of evident reason and unmistakable logic. Even after decades of critique and deconstruction, the pillars of particular reason and particular progress that germinated from the violent ethics of modernity's institution still ground this epoch's regnant world order—and they continue to swindle its invested devotees.

Over the last several decades, Latin American decolonial thinkers (e.g., Dussel, 1994, 1998; Mignolo, 2000, 2009, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2008, 2009, 2013) have articulated the epistemic particularism and civilizational pathology that handicap the present in terms of a modernity/coloniality joiner, emphasizing three domains of constitutive coloniality that make possible modernity's fact and dispense its configuration: coloniality of power (Quijano, 1992; Quijano and Wallerstein), of knowledge (Lander, 2000), and of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). All three announce their presence in the foodworld, and all three intertwine in the web of cognitions and materialities that I refer to as man/food's¹ wholesale economization in the extremist neoliberal rationality that circumscribes modernity's contemporary logic.

In tandem with the last century's environmental movement and its globalized discursive commitment to development – and the critical response to it² – many people and groups have activated efforts to change a global food situation that they identify as unjust, anti-democratic, anti-ecological, and pathological in many ways more³. Still, in the past decade, the alternative food movement (AFM) has assumed novel forms and reanimated thrust

1. I write it this way, rather than as the more common and more constrained “food system” or “food economy” to emphasize the scope and discursive contingency of this relation, its constituents, and the activities and spaces comprised.
2. The alternative food movement has evolved in a context of growing critique to the development paradigm that defined the second half of the 20th Century. The nexus of failures —of ecology, equity, economy, and more— borne by the development paradigm makes its critics view development as, in short, “a ruin in the intellectual landscape” (Sachs, 2010, p. xv). Critiques to development originated in diverse permutations and have accordingly evolved; today it comprises a collection of discourses that are in particular ways post- or non-growth, -materialist, -economic, -capitalist, -human, -liberal, -capitalist, -biocentric, and/or -extractivist (Escobar, 2014). The body of related literature is immense: see, e.g., Escobar (1995), for a cornerstone early introduction; Escobar (2014), and Eschenhagen (2015), for more contemporary reviews; and Eschenhagen and Maldonado (2014), and Rojas-Mora and Eschenhagen (2014), for considerations of how we might understand alternatives to or of development.
3. See Allen (2004), Ashe and Sonnino (2013), and Holt Giménez and Shattuck (2011), for an extensive bibliography on the emergence and composition of the (alternative) food movement.

and, importantly, also new cohorts of sympathizers and adherents. Some of these new actors have been institutional ones, particularly as global and national questions of economy, ecology, equity, energy, and demography have fused into ones of food security and food sustainability in ways touching even the richest countries. Britain called the contemporary global food scenario a “grand challenge” (Marsden, 2012, p. 139). Europe entered it as a strategic research priority, and the issue of “who will feed the world” became ready media candy (Brunori, Malandrin, and Rossi, 2013). Alternative food movements assimilated these cues into their own discourses, already more or less resonant, and the food movement became more or less recognizable in its present form – a form, of course, with an important span of colorations⁴.

Even a superficial reflection on the sorts of questions that underpin the AFM, however, already begins to reveal the limited, limiting discursive space at stake. That any “who” might “feed the world”, for example, seems at this juncture a posture of extraordinary arrogance, an enunciation from the same locus of responsible superiority and benevolent tutelage that have shaped several centuries with colonial and developmental civilizational essays to such extraordinary and—I reveal my ethics—violating effect. This matter is only the beginning, and it alone is as complicated as anyone might make it: *Who* constitutes the world’s *who*, and who or what constitutes *the world*? Why are *we* worried about feeding *them* or *it*, and is it an *it* or a *them* that this *we* are referring to? Why is whoever it is who will feed the world *feeding* anything or anyone? Do people—if indeed it is *persons* who comprise *the world* in question—not *eat* in agential, volitional acts of our own protagonism? I insist that *to feed* and *to eat* are two expressly different acts: the just so articulated construal of this great epochal challenge, one replicated eagerly by the AFM, evokes contents of disconcerting similarity to so many benevolent violences past. This is my point of departure, then: even a superficial critique and a gaze at the most preliminary postures of the AFM discourse reveal the movement’s (at least) suspect philosophical bases.

Digging only a little more deeply into the AFM discourse writ broadly supports this suspicion with more clues of the AFM’s epistemic particularity and manacled fastening to modern truth. Its reductive understanding of man/food, for example, filters the entire spectrum of the foodworld’s relational possibilities into that single one cognitively functional in the regnant cosmovision. Man-subject manipulates food-object in a wholly or preponderantly instrumental – indeed, as I will argue, wholly economized – way. That man/food might be configured in some way radically *other* – that

4. The alternative food movement is of course not, as the singular appellation might imply, a single, conjoined, unitary one but rather a “big-tent” amalgam of many movements (and their adherents and activities). In this article I propose a gesturing generalism about the prospects of this “big-tent” AFM on the back of empirical work contextualized in *one* of its many smaller partitions. I employ the generic noun throughout this paper, and I hope that my intentions of generality or specificity in each case will be clear enough.

the relation might be possible to imagine in its reverse, with food-subject and man-object (see Mol, 2008, for an interesting thought experiment in this direction); that man and food might co-relate as companions in a reciprocating existence of being; that food might transcend its materiality to visit transcendence upon man, to be spiritually communicant, or to become itself mystical or magical becomes an unthinkable impossibility. The expansive richness of man/food shrinks into a single notion of economic man and utilitarian food, an idea as concordant with neoliberal modern rationality as we can find.

Consider too the particular configuration that thinkers give to man/food when they invoke this relation in more common, and more rational still, terms. Scholarly publications refer more frequently to “alternative food *systems*” than to “alternative food *movements*”, and removing the adjectival modifier exponentializes the preponderance. We read and hear much of food’s “producers” and “consumers” but remarkably little of its eaters. And the vast literature on foodworld-reinventing and humanity-saving reincarnations of Green Revolution innovations readily invite Ellul’s (1962, 1965) critiques of modern rationality in its materialization as *la technique*.

Thus the AFM begins to reveal its entwinement with so many similarly sired discourses – and not least of all with that of the global-industrial food system it protests. The constricting reins of neoliberal modernity show their effect, an epistemic threshing that sends all that designated cognitive chaff into the wastelands of incomprehensibility. We might call it a particular form of epistemicidal violence, one that compels compliance with the dominator’s ethic. Dussel’s reframing of the American *descubrimiento* as instead an *encubrimiento* (1994), not a discovery of the American other but instead his covering-up and covering-over, is a good image to invoke here: for the alternative food movement, man/food’s imagination is limited to that single model of rationality that is protected under the guardianship of the modern-colonial-capitalist world-system (as per, e.g., Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002; Dussel and Fornazzari, 2002). It is the only model cognitively available: all others lie outside the boundary of thought, *encubiertos*. The AFM, of course, protests the profligacy, asymmetry, injustice, and very much else about the dominant global-industrial food system. What it fails to challenge, however, is its philosophical understructure. It is *that* logic, I claim, that is the problem, and the food system’s appraisable afflictions and ailments, only the picturesque excesses of the hypermodern logics that situate them⁵.

In this paper I suggest that the alternative food movement, or at least that portion of it epistemically bound to the centers of the world-system, is a sterile offshoot of the same philosophical root as the dominant global-industrial food system it opposes. Moreover, its cognitive compliance with the reductive reason and epistemic exclusivity that make possible and operative the global-industrial food system pervert the movement

5. In precisely this vein, see Eschenhagen (2015) and Gomez Hernandez (2014).

into a steward *of that system*. More seriously still, the movement does not apprehend its philosophical bases – its compliance – and operates from within an epistemology of blindness (Santos, 2009, 2014); it fails to recognize the suppositions it assumes as prior truths, the same ones that determine the dominant system, and closes itself to the radically different –*better*– possibilities that might be discovered in thinking from radically different foundations.

Understanding something: Alternative food from the epistemic centers

To this point my argument is so big as to be indefensible, all the more so in a neoliberalized intellectual world obliged by what Castro-Gomez points to as the reductive “hegemony of the paper” (2017). So I will carve off a very small piece of my critical claim to pursue here and prepare a smaller still empirical palette from which to paint.

First, as I try to show how the AFM is fettered, like its adversary, to the philosophical patrimony of a particular modernity, I will focus on a single of its telltale characteristics: the wholesale economization of human existence that defines neoliberal rationality. Second, as I have already hinted, I do not extend my critique to the totality of the AFM but only to that part of it *epistemically bound to the centers of the regnant (modern-colonial-capitalist) world-system* –that is, to the universalist truths that situate the modern cosmovision and the world order that this makes possible—. This is a carve of necessity—exhaustiveness is impossible, in any case, and the delimited essay I make here is no more than a gesture— and yet one that still, I think, comprehends a large partition of the AFM. All but the most radical fringes of the movement act from a similar epistemic stance, wherever these originate in senses geographic, political, or social, and whatever their priorities and foci. Exceptions to this characterization of epistemic complicity and inertness do exist at scales both collective (e.g., sumac kawsay and Via Campesina, both more movements of cosmovision than of food per se) and individual and personal (irrespective of geographic and social positions⁶); and I exclude these from my analysis here. Such exceptions, precisely for their epistemic exceptionality, are more correctly captured as radical than as alternative, and—I will arrive here— should be the locus of any hope we might dare to retain.

The empirical palette

My empirical palette draws from research I carried out between 2011 and 2016 as part of the Purefood research network and on the basis of which I prepared my Ph.D. dissertation. Riding a wave of social and scholarly enthusiasm at the food/cities juncture, I became interested in the food policy discourses levied by and in big cities; here I consider the movements of alternative food policy, practice, and activism in New York City (NYC),

6. See Grosfoguel (2009) on the importance of distinguishing between social and epistemic positions

one of the metropolises lauded widely among activists and academics (e.g., Freudenberg, McDonough and Tsui, 2011) as icons of virtuous food policy reform and municipally led change-making promise (Ashe, 2016).

Since I was interested in understanding the change-making prospects for *cities as institutions*, I began studying the food system reform discourses activated by and within the city's *formal, authorized organs of government*. These proved to be bound and ever interlocuting with many alternative food discourses (led by informal activist networks, communities of scholarship, formal government agencies at different levels of government and in different places, and so on); hence I widened my analytical gaze to comprehend (some) of those discourses, as well.

Of course, the very idea of what I refer to as *institutional alterity*—those discourses of formally authorized and juridically installed institutions that deviate in important ways from the regnant world-system norm—might seem an unintelligible delimitation, the very idea of institutional alterity, incongruous. The incoherency is *not* obvious, however, or in any case not widely appreciated, and many AFM activists and their credentialed academic endorsers (and *their* cohorts of even more importantly credentialed financiers) argue just the contrary. Indeed, many proponents argue that it is *precisely* institutions' institutionalism that endows them with impressive motive potential and change-making force (e.g., Blay-Palmer, 2009; Reynolds, 2009; Rocha and Lessa, 2009). Institutional alterity is at least, then, recognized as part of the alternative food movement, and some argue that it is an important one; whatever its gravity, it seems a part of the AFM worthy of some reflection, and of a reflection that attends carefully to the interlocutions between institutional and informal alterities⁷.

There is something especially worthwhile, too, in reflecting upon the AFM's activation in New York, this paragon of Western wealth, power, and civilizational advance. An "anthropology of modernity" (Escobar, 1995), one that probes the particularism of modern Western institutions in light of their cultural-historical specificity, seems never more appropriate and nowhere better realized.

7. The *food movement* or *alternative food movement* comprehends so many different actors, actions, objectives, priorities, and interests that it remains questionable whether or not this should be considered a movement at all and, if so, whether it should be considered such in its wholeness or in only some declinations. Moreover, if it *can* be conceived of as a movement, it has several important particularities. Among these are the one I broach in this article: that it deviates from ordinary sociological understanding of a *movement* in that among its primary actors it counts—some—(mostly sub-national) government *institutions*, abstracted, formal, and non-personal but nonetheless real agents of food system change that more or less align with popularly instantiated activations. (For a review of related debates and a developed bibliography, see Ashe and Sonnino, 2013). This is to say, in any case, that New York's example of "institutional alterity", as I describe it here, belongs at least tentatively to the big tent that is the *alternative food movement*.

Postdevelopment and decolonial thinkers have issued ample critique to the alternative development movements deployed unto poor countries in the midst and in the wake of a half-century's "pauperizing" (Rahnema, 1991) missiological work in promotion of globalized modernization. Such alternative projects were (and are), as Escobar (1995, 2005) writes, more alternatives *of* development and modernity than alternatives *to* them; and of its voguest exemplar, Esteva (2010, p. 13) writes that sustainable development is nothing more than "a strategy for sustaining 'development'". It is in exactly this sense that I issue my critique of the AFM: its actions, grounded in blindly compliant and conventionally modern philosophical foundation, do little more than recolor the superficial articulations of the global-industrial food system – and, worse, in their compliance, only act to consolidate that foundation and the dominant system that builds its empire upon it.

A dominated discourse: The economization of human existence

Recall Foucault's "big" understanding of discourse: it is the set of "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). To form objects, in the case of interest here, is to form the spaces of possibility in which food and people and the world exist, relate, and interact, and what those existences and relations can look like. Discourse makes cognitively available – or not – the spaces of our intellection: it "produce[s] permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible" (Escobar, 1995, p. 5); it imposes the "unconscious structures that set boundaries on the thinking of our epoch" (Sachs, 2010, p. XIX); it circumscribes the possibilities for "what [can] be said, thought, [...] practiced, even imagined" (Peet and Hartwick, 2009, p. 224).

Here, then, I hold a critical lens upon New York City's AFM discourse to make visible those antecedent inputs that have crystallized in its particular articulations of alterity. The manacles of the modern cosmovision appear: a collection of dualist ontologies that produce the thinkable spaces and permissible modes of knowing and being to which Escobar refers. With the naturalized separations of self from other, of humankind from nature, and of people from things, Illich's I who derives from we (1980), *ayni*, and the sacredness of coca all turn cognitively unintelligible. But this modern metaphysics arrived hand in hand with a coeval companion that continues to shape the contemporary foodworld just as profoundly: an economic system, capitalism. In modernity, man/food reduces its scope of possibility from the cosmic to the corporal, from the mystical to the mundane, from communion, communicant, and communicator to calorie. In the hands of the economy, food becomes first a *thing*, and subsequently a necessity, a unit of trade, a product, and finally a commodity.

Though it is capitalism specifically that emerged and has grown hand in hand with modernity, it is not capitalism per se against which I issue this critique; rather it is the concomitant *economization of human existence* that

emerged with it and has blossomed now in a monstrous neoliberal baroque. Wendy Brown (2015) captures the totalizing effect of the phenomenon:

As a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. *In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere homo economicus* (p. 10). (Italics added.)

Pinnacled as homo economicus, then, all of man's other possibilities for identity as a self —perhaps in capacity *faber*, *poetica*, *amans*, *viator*, *socialis*— and as a being-*with* shrink into the margins of cognition. In the handful of empirical examples from New York City's alternative food discourse that follow, I pursue only this last point to show how the baroque economization of existence, like and in tandem with other metaphysical and epistemic posits of modernity, draws tight boundaries around the thoughtspace of and for foodworld (re)imagination.

City of dreams and dollars: Economized man in New York City

New York City's much lauded institutional alterity turns out to be, in this sense, unexceptional in every way. Even with its real progressive policy achievements and symbolic city-leader celebrity, the city's alternative food discourse is so replete with man's economization that the degree of neoliberalism's cognitive traction approaches caricatured exaggeration. Food is an object, a utilitarian tool, a *something* to be produced and consumed; people are its producers and consumers; it must be known and managed rationally and scientifically; and it must be consumed so as to generate functionally (and productively) optimal corporal specimens. In all cases of food's consideration, related dollars must be calculated and related actions must sponsor economic growth.

This economizing denominator materializes perspicuously in two logics that actuate throughout the city's food discourse —a discourse that, it bears repeating, earns regular recognition as efficaciously divergent from the dominant global-industrial template—. First, the city's policy professes a supreme faith in market mechanisms as (the) solution to food system problems and, in a corresponding sense, an understanding of the food system itself as an economic generator; the requisite binder between these two means also that good outcomes in either domain are expected to symbiotically invoke (also) benefit in the other. Second, where policy articulation and program deployment regard intuitively extra-economic domains —social life or ecological vitality, for example— these carry at least implication and more commonly explication of a posterior economic finality. Policy does not altogether neglect people or their (extra-economic) problems —that

would be both inaccurate and politically untenable— but such appraisals generally carry little empathic charge and act to reinscribe the situations in more rationally modulated terms. People and their problems are framed and understood as quantifiable, mensurable, manageable objects of study and intervention: in a word, they are economized.

The city's two most important food policy-related documents, *FoodWorks* (Brannen, 2010)⁸ and *PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York* (City of New York, 2011)⁹ offer good examples, both pronouncing salably palatable narratives of care and responsibility as they conscript ostensibly extra-economic matters into a discursive frame of economic primacy. *PlaNYC*—and it is pertinent and not incidental here to observe that we can read in its five-word subtitle the consummation of Esteva's appraisal of sustainable development— addresses planning challenges that affect many different dimensions of residents' lives (such as transportation, housing, health, etc.). But it is clear throughout that one dimension runs transversally across all the others and is, in a sense, their finality. If that point remains confused to the reader, the report's closure makes matters clear: "Of course, everything we do should contribute to our residents' financial well-being" (City of New York, 2011, p. 160). Economic progress is the primary and ultimate interest here, and if any action has no economic benefit, it interests neither the administration nor the city residents it serves.

In *FoodWorks*, hunger—whose suffering is no less real for its sorry mediatic exploitation— does manage to win the standard post-productivist concession that rich countries have been obliged to make in an era of nationally aggregated market superabundance, and it receives recognition in New York as something more complicated than a dearth of aggregate food supply. But it (still) does not and cannot transcend economy: it is recast now as "the inability of people to *purchase* enough food". My point of course is not that hunger's cause is *not* this, the possibility a person has to purchase food; it is that it is *reduced* to this, only and only possibly this. Purchasing food: it is one imaginary where, in the economized world, we discover the boundaries of our possibilities for thought.

The city's hunger interventions operate in response to this formulation of the problem, and they act largely via the powers of the market itself. Its Health Bucks program, for example, incentivizes poor people to purchase so-designated healthy foods by providing an additional \$2 in spending power for each \$5 of (federally funded) SNAP¹⁰ allocations they use – to *purchase*

8. The *FoodWorks* (Brannen, 2010) plan is a "vision to improve New York City's food system". The report "outlines a plan for key legislative changes, public and private investments, infrastructure improvements, and partnerships to improve [NYC's] food system" (p. 2).

9. *PlaNYC* is a holistic city plan that, while not strictly a *development* plan, serves much the same purposes. Important to note in the context of this text is that the plan's 2011 update expressly recognizes the importance of food systems to the city's prosperity.

10. *SNAP*, the United States' federally administered *Supplemental Nutrition Assis-*

food – at farmers markets. I want to first emphasize how such policies entail the wholesale replacement of the person by the more tamable formulation of the *consumer*. Indeed *FoodWorks* rarely refers to *people* in cases outside the recitation of statistics or as a placeholder noun, and the word *person* appears only four times total in the ninety-page document (once in a stock phrase, once as a statistical unit, and twice in bibliographic entries). As subjects and agents, people are *consumers*. They *consume* or *intake* food more frequently than they *eat* it, and they are never *eaters*¹¹. In these re-formations and re-formulations of the person and of his encounters with the foodworld, that enormous spectrum of possibilities that I have sketchily collected as man/food, we can at least begin to see the economizing ethos, man's visible lexical containment tracing his preceding ideational one. This is economic man.

FoodWorks gives notable attention to other problems that might be intuitively understood primarily as ones of human suffering – most centrally, to food-related health grievances. As it does with hunger, however, it generally communicates that these are problems not primarily because of the sufferings they invoke but rather because they create an avoidable economic burden for the city and its taxpayers. Its scientized, rationalized, and finally and ultimately economized recognition of people's poor health comes with lots of numbers and only a little sympathy:

As paradoxical as it seems to the problem of food insecurity, three of the five leading causes of mortality in New York City can be linked to diet and are mostly preventable: heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Each of these is strongly rooted in the problem of obesity. Over the past 20 years, obesity among children and adults has doubled and is now considered epidemic. The economic costs of these health problems are also considerable. Obesity-related medical expenditures in New York State are over \$6 billion, 81 per cent of which are paid by Medicare and Medicaid. Currently, Medicaid comprises 30 percent of all state revenues. New York City alone spends an estimated \$2.65 billion on health care each year, at a cost of roughly \$315 per resident. (Brannen, 2010, p. 7)

Moving beyond the city's *institutional* alterity and into the interweaving discourses that emerge from other cohorts of the city's flourishing AFM, economized man remains an imposing presence. The cohort at the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College comprises scholar-activists who – the center's mission statement already reveals its neoliberal situation – “develop intersectorial, innovative and evidence-based solutions

tance Program, disburses food-purchasing assistance to low-income citizens. It was formerly known as the *Food Stamp Program*.

11. Note well that neither this essay nor my dissertation is a quantitative study; I recur to numbers such as these here only to lend another layer of color to the economic picture I am trying to draw.

to preventing diet-related diseases and promoting food security in New York and other cities”. The Center’s major *Good Food Jobs* report (NYCFPC, 2013) bills itself, at least in part, as an advocacy for new *good* food jobs in the face of a food industry norm characterized by unlivably low wages and dangerous, precarious, and generally poor working conditions. The bulk of the report, however, attends to the task and promise of economic generation by way of such jobs, and it launches its argument with a demonstration of the magnitude and growth of the food sector. In other words, it implies, the reader should attend to the report’s argument not necessarily because the circumstances inherent to the food sector’s *bad jobs* do not make possible anything construable as a dignified human existence, but rather – *first* – because the related economic sector is large and growing.

More impressive still is the transformation *Good Food Jobs* applies in its descriptions of people’s experiences and sufferings. Its section on food-related health is a good example, arguing that creating good food jobs would help people to be healthier. A superficial reader might surmise that *that* would be a good end because people enjoy good health; but the report makes it clear from beginning to end that there is a different priority at stake. It is not that good health makes people feel well, but rather that “making healthier food more available and affordable can help to reduce the growing health and economic burden that diet-related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and some forms of cancer impose on New York City” (p. 19). The report’s depersonalizing effectivity is appraisable, too: the burdens described affect “New York City”, the abstract, faceless geopolitical entity rather than the warm-bodied, unfungible persons who comprise it. Even its reinscription of “good health” as “good health outcomes” is telling.

One of the report’s summary tables lists a collection of veritably *bad* human health “outcomes”, presenting these not in terms of personal sufferings but in terms of economic burden to the abstracted city. One entry counts the number of people suffering from diabetes “who required dialysis” and “diabetes-related amputations requiring hospitalization” before making explicit its central message: “In NYC, Medicaid spends more than \$3 billion dollars a year to treat diet-related illness” (NYCFPC, 2013). Another entry describes the “health and economic costs” related to the city’s “high rates of hunger and food insecurity”, again reporting human sufferings primarily as economic and productivist burdens: “poorly nourished children”, for example, “have lower school test scores and require more costly health care”, and “hunger reduces the productivity of workers, which reduces their earnings, which, in turn, reduces their ability to purchase nutritious food for their children” (p. 20). That the most remarkable concern related to hungry children is their “more costly health care” and that hungry workers realize, first and foremost, “reduced productivity” testify – here too – to the presence of economized man.

New York City’s food activist groups still more informally placed retain this central figure of economized man in *their* versions of the alternative food discourse. Prior to the 2012 congressional vote on the U.S. “Farm

Bill”, a major piece of legislation that regulated (among much else) the nation’s food assistance program for low-income people (“food stamps”) and specifying how much money the government would allocate and who would be eligible to receive the benefit, alternative food movement supporters across the country rallied their support. Activists in New York led a public information session at one of the city’s farmer’s markets; as a discussion of man’s desert developed, I intervened to clarify the group’s emerging position on merit and entitlement to food:

[Participant 1] Food stamp money is taxpayer money. Social Security is taxpayer money. And when we retire, whatever age we retire, we’re the first in line to get our Social Security because we feel like we’ve earned it. Our taxpayer money has gone to it. Why do we have this sort of different double-sided approach for people getting food stamps? It’s still taxpayer money and they’ve still earned it.

[Participant 2] Most people think that they didn’t earn it.

[LMA] When you say that they’ve earned it, essentially you’re saying that, *by virtue of being human*, [they have earned it]?

[Participant 1] [No!] By virtue of being a taxpaying citizen of the United States! (Two adult women, 2012)

Economized man deserves food because he has earned it – only because he has earned it, and only because he has (already) paid for it.

It is the same discourse that emerged from among food system reform supporters in the controversy that followed the announcement of New York’s “soda ban”. One of the city’s mayor-led reforms invoked a maximum serving size limit for sugary beverages sold at takeaway stores and restaurants, a progressive move of minor separation from the global-industrial food system that became known by disapprovers as the “soda ban”. A New York Times oped in support of the ban (Bittman, 2012, December 25) received more than a thousand reader responses, very many expressing their support for the new legislation in terms underlining the salience of economized man in the surrounding discourse space. One commenter sustained his position thus:

At the end of the day, we pay for SNAP benefits [...] That entitles us to decide what people eat, especially since we pay again when they raise unhealthy children who are prone to chronic diseases, can’t function in school and ultimately can’t go to work and support others in need [...] If [as a taxpayer], I’m paying I get to call the shots.

Another wrote:

As a society we will pay for these people, either through “entitlement” programs or through prisons. But a better option would be to step in and be the parents of these kids...and I know there will be howls of disbelief and derision when I say this.... but this is a matter of national productivity, economic prosperity for the Middle- and Upper-classes as well, and of national security.

Again, all of these examples are only to suggest that the alternative food discourse space is as much subject to the dicta of modern truth as any other centric discourse. Man's economization here is as present as it is in the dominant global-industrial food system – and as it is in the neoliberal order that constitutes the modern-colonial-capitalist world-system in which all of these exist.

Is there any place for hope?

These snapshots of New York City's AFM discourse at least *suggest* the catastrophic limits of alterity writ more broadly. Even if so delimiting my argument confines its empirical content importantly, attending reflexively to these particularities might, even if it cannot hope to *capture* a larger reality, at least *give us insight* to it. New York's example tells us *something*, I insist, and it seems to me that this is something more than circumstantial. Geertz (1973) wrote that "it is not necessary to know *everything* in order to understand *something*" (p. 20) – and this is the gesturing spirit in which I offer this paper.

With an example so disheartening on the table, is there any room to hope for something better? If there is, it must lie, I think, outside the spaces of alterity altogether. Dussel (1998) writes that whatever real, virtuous change might come must arrive on the wings of a philosophy of liberation that takes as its project an "overcoming of the world-system itself": the problem at hand is the exhaustion of a "civilizing system that has come to its end" (p. 19). The problem with the alternative food movement, like that of all "alternative" formulations, is that it remains bound to that toxic civilizing system. *Everyone* thinking from within an "intra-modern perspective" (Dussel, 1998) – alternative food movers included – only extend and propagate that toxicity.

Hence the pluriversally oriented epistemic project of *transmodernity* (Escobar, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2009, 2011; Mignolo, 2009) offers the only hopeful possibility I can see from here: "Could it be that it is possible to think about, and to think differently from, an 'exteriority' to the modern world-system [...] [to] envision alternatives to the totality imputed to modernity?" (Escobar, 2007, p. 183).

"Intra-modern" thinking, and an "intra-modern" alternative food movement along with it, are intoxicated. If there might be any hope for something better, it must come from the radical alterities that emerge *outside* the epistemopolitics of modernity. The sources of those epistemopolitics might come from anywhere, anywhere people "marginalized because they [do] not conform [...] to the imperialist [...] objectives prevailing after the convergence of capitalism" (Santos, 2009, p. 106) celebrate and pursue their nonconformance.

How can the alternative food movement *be*, then, if it aspires to be something more than the Trojan horse that it is? Perhaps Santos's (2014) committed uncertainty can give some orientation:

The reasons to reject what exists ethically, politically, and epistemologically are far more convincing than those invoked to define alternatives. Fully to assume our time means to acknowledge this disproportion and act from there [...] to radicalize rejection and look for alternatives while recognizing their radical uncertainty. (p. 107)

That is where I land, too: radically rejecting what is and radically uncertain of what might be or how it might become.

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