

DELIBERATIVE AND PRAGMATIST AGRICULTURE

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ABSTRACT: It is well known how stimulatingly John Dewey could write about gardens, in particular school gardens ('edible gardens', not flower gardens). Edible gardens provide children opportunities for the full development of social, cognitive and manual skills, which in his view are the most important skills that together bring something like republic attitudes.

I will first give a short introduction into Dewey's thoughts about edible gardens and then will try to construct his view on farming and industrial food processing on the basis of the scarce remarks that he made about these activities. Inspired by his thoughts, but also radically transforming them, I will elaborate a pragmatist view on agriculture, by outlining the current challenges on global and regional level. It turns out that edible gardens are important, but in general cannot be seen as an alternative for the food processing and retail sector and they cannot definitively deal with food security. It is therefore necessary to develop a deliberative pragmatist theory of the food processing and retail sector.

John Dewey about edible gardens and farming

Edible gardens

Dewey is eager to stress the contribution of gardening to personal and social development of children. With gardening he does not mean raising flowers but vegetable and fruits, edible things thus (Thompson 2000). While most of his comments on edible gardens are done in connection with war and crisis times in US and Canada (during which industry was dedicated to other products), he stresses that also in peaceful times gardening has great social, psychological and civil effects. Nevertheless the contribution of farming children can give relief to the war effort on the US (first world war). First, gardening implies an openness to experience and discovery. Manual work has a cognitive side and is not merely routine but should be open to learning (Dewey 1996, Middle Works 1899-1924 (=MW), Volume 8, 133). Gardening also has a community enhanced effect; social integration is learned by collectively taking care of local food (Ralston 2014). Dewey not only thought about schools as a place for

edible gardening but also about community garden projects. Communities giving opportunities to meet people from other backgrounds could also help them in communicating and organizing with each other. (Dewey 1996, MW 8, 269). In 'The School and Society' he outlines an even more ambitious idea:

"[W]hen the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious" (Dewey 1996, MW 1, 19-20).

Farming

His ideas have implications for the rural areas; here more attention should be paid to education: '... improvement of the intellectual and educational conditions in rural districts and the small villages.' (Later Works, 1925-1953, 7, p. 394). Again, he emphasizes that farmers should not stick to the some standardized way of farming:

'standardized farming, (is) unsuited to local conditions'. (MW 10, p. 128). 'Agriculture is the basic industry of our life, and that agriculture cannot suffer, the rural interest cannot suffer, without the whole nation suffering. The days have long gone by when our farming can be carried on in the hit and miss way of the past.'

In *Interpretation of the savage mind* (1902, MW), Dewey stresses that in agriculture the process of being busy with preparing the soil, seeding, taking care of the upcoming plants, harvesting implies a loose relationship with the final aim, proving food. All kind of 'intermediate terms' seemingly disconnects these activities and the final end process of consumption. A split occurs because of these activities necessary to have a successful harvest. Dewey perceives a relation between hunting and a direct, animistic relationship with animals and nature, and agriculture and more impersonal, abstract relationships and thinking.

Lots of his ideas about agriculture are quite time and context bound; mostly he is reacting to US agriculture in a time of economic and war crisis. For example, in his comments on the Farm Allotment Plan, he speaks out against speculation and in favor of a government Marketing Organization that buys agricultural products, processes and sells them.

So, Dewey conceives farming in accordance with his general philosophy, as a way of life, that is contextual and science-driven. Not standards and routine but learning and experiencing should be the main methods. Farming is a way of life, where labor incorporates both physical, cognitive and normative skills. He discerns a certain distance between farmers and city people, however, there are sufficient overlaps of interests between the two.

However, what I miss in his plea for edible gardens are two aspects: first, on the individual human level, the impact of being busy with agriculture on our respect for natural processes inside and outside ourselves. Gardening also means realizing that we as individuals are living organisms with all the vulnerabilities and capacities that the concrete living organisms we work with have as well. Secondly I miss on the translocal level, the impact of gardening on (and contribution of) a sustainable food production and nature friendly inclusive agriculture.

A peculiar naiveté can be discerned in his treatment of food processing industry. He signals historically a distance between farmers and large processing industry; which according to him is an inevitable development. He states: 'From the very necessities of machine industries, mass production and huge factories and other plants, the most effective methods and agents of production are enormous corporation controlling millions or even billions of capital and employing thousands of labourers.' (p. 387, *Later Works*, Volume 7, 1925 – 1953). As is clear from the illuminating study of Kloppenberg, *First the seed*, (1998), already in the thirties big business made farming an industry not in the general interest but in favour of particular interests. And didn't Dewey see that?

Current developments

This naiveté (with hindsight!) becomes clear in particular when one takes into account what has happened since Dewey wrote these words. In the course of the last sixty years, globalization of information and action sequences, expropriation of the national states, the rise of international companies, and neo liberal international regulation in favour of them stimulated a huge increase in large scale farming enterprises, food processing industries and retail industries (Bauman, 2005). Ecological problems are galore. Simultaneously, the distance between production and consumers that Dewey thought self-evident has become a systemic alienation of consumers from production and vice versa. In the West this system provided cheap, unhealthy (too much salt, sugar and bad fats) and tasteless food, in the South the system contributed to poverty, hunger and malnutrition by outcompeting small farms and businesses.

Small farmers oriented towards the global market are eaten up by bigger ones, and the bigger ones have to participate in the economical rollercoaster and eaten finally by the still bigger ones (the 'economic treadmill' according to Cochrane 1993). The same happens with retail and processing industries, with as consequence more industrialized ultra-processed food and its aftermath huge increase in food related chronic diseases.

Path dependencies and economic treadmills make it very difficult for farmers and small retailers to leave the system once they entered it. However, farmers who stayed outside the internal food production and started for example Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), or other types of multifunctional agriculture (like agritourism and health services) could have a stable income.

So, after the second world war, it became clearer that the food sector in hands of international corporations wasn't the most effective method (in Dewey's words) to deliver healthy, sustainable and tasteful food.

The other deficits as I may call them comprise problems that now are a lot more pressing than in Dewey's time. Many people don't have respect for organic processes, for example with respect to their bodies, bodily health and non-human nature. The gap between consumers and agriculture and food processing is huge. Modern farmers are seen as entrepreneurs that conceive their animals and land as commodities to empty as much as possible. Youngsters think that milk comes from the supermarket and lack connection with living organisms. People lack more and more *food capacities or capabilities* (Korthals 2017), like selecting the food items they want to use in preparing a good meal according to their own view of life. Industry encourages them to neglect these capacities with ready-made meals and fast food. Moreover, the ecological crisis (including global warming) requires a more respectful attitude to natural processes at large, and an understanding that even individual actions contribute to this crisis.

Food wars or food democracy? The divided agrifood system

The industrial food system

The developments in the West of on the one hand a very dominant global industrialized food system and on the other hand a much smaller section of local farm and food production are to be taken into account by a pragmatist and deliberative approach. It is clear that the industrialized food system has some advantages and many disadvantages. Among the advantages I reckon the huge production, the possibility of overall change in specific cases, and the possibility of monitoring standards of hygiene and safety. All these advantages have also their direct disadvantages, like, huge production means monocultures and risk of contagion by plagues (and landscape destruction); radical change to new challenges is impossible (the system is like a huge oil tanker: the internal disease management goes rather easy (killing all sick and healthy animals), changing the

course of the tanker is not so easy); the overall presence of uniform standards means that innovation and small case business are constantly hampered (UNCTAD 2013; IAASTD 2009). Other disadvantages are the effects on the environment (pollution, global warming, see Steinfeld 2006), no commitment to human rights, not health and taste driven but money driven, waste of people's (food) capacities, and a deeply anchored feeling of alienation and distrust from the side of consumers (De Schutter 2010). The science behind this regime is seed oriented (like via genetic modification) and oriented to devices like 3d food printing that in their emphasis on convenience of consumers risk the chance to take over more and more food capabilities of consumers.

Ethically seen, the modern industrialized food system scores far below the local approaches with short food chains connecting producers to consumers.

Agroecological food systems

Many local systems, especially the ones in the South, have a very different outlook, and are farmed from a very different worldview. When in South America, or Uganda, one suddenly can stumble upon compact food green areas, where from beneath the soil to ten meters above the soil plants, shrubs and trees show their edible fruits. Often you don't see black soils, because plants grow on every inch; no irrigation is necessary, because the intelligent designed systems itself regulates water supply; harvesting is done often manually, but in large quantities. This system is called in different areas differently, in South America it is called originally 'milpa' (Mann, 2005), in Europe and USA it is called permaculture or agroforestry (Crawford 2010; Shepard, 2013). For larger areas agroecology is an approach that upholds the same principles (Tittone 2013). The system is an example of a circular economy; it is sustainable, in the biological, social and economic sense. In adapting food production to sub soil and super soil metabolisms and communications systems of plants and organisms (Mancuso 2015) it produces big mass of fruits, nuts,

fresh leaves and vegetable-like food. It provides food for neighborhoods, stimulates cooperation between villagers and due to its harvest is economically feasible. The science needed for this type of agriculture is soil oriented and directed to enhancing food capabilities of consumers. Wherever there are small pockets of land, or vertical spaces, this type of farming can get started. So from an ethical point of view, the system scores very positive.

Some authors argue that this local system of for instance food forests, edible gardens and CSA can replace or at least reduce considerably the role of the industrialized food system. So Ralston proposes a tentative pragmatist model for understanding how gardens can make our food system more secure—a model inspired by John Dewey's writings on school gardening (Ralston 2014). Carlo Petrini, Founder and President of the Slow Food movement leader argues in his book *Terra Madre* (Petrini 2010) that consumers must transform themselves from passive buyers in "coproducers" in localized but globally networked, or glocalized "food communities". However, they are unclear how consumers can become coproducers, and moreover, what should be done with mainstream food production. Should all consumers spend sufficient time to produce collectively their own food? This would for many require an enormous shift in daily activities and many activities that are now quite normal to do, like watching tv or gaming, should be reduced in time spent. Next, can coproduction fully replace industrial production? Should it be totally dismantled? What about the people now employed in this sector? What about the financial losses (in the Netherlands the industrialized system is approximately good for 5% employment and 70 billion budget)? Certainly, this intensive systems produces material and immaterial costs (in the Netherlands these are estimated a little less than 70 billion) (www.louisbolk.org). Nevertheless, the organized interests of industrial agriculture are very powerful. How to organize such a revolution in a peaceful and fully legal way?

Food democracy: challenges

In the current governance system, consumers and farmers have no control over the priorities what to produce and to invest in and therefore no control over the relation of society with nature and agriculture. This lack of control and involvement makes of citizen-consumers a debilitating force. Democracy cannot be realized when citizens are fully dependent on industrial food production. For citizenship to be realized it is not only necessary to maintain positively public conditions like health, education, and mass media that offer interesting facts about important social issues (and not only about careers of soccer players or film stars).¹ Democratic citizenship cannot thrive on the basis of a regime of an anonymous and distantiated agro-food system that increases the gap between producers and consumers due to the economic value of profits and comparative advantage.² Free from democratic input and motivation, this regime is stimulating individualistic greed, creating a poor and malnourished underclass and is more and more insensitive to judgments, worldviews, fears and emotions from its end-users.

Food democracy as a function of food sovereignty mixes social justice and communitarian ideas. The concepts tries to connect traditional political methods of representation with participation, inclusion, involvement and cooperation. In the West this would mean a mix of a sustainable form of large scale, international agriculture and small scale, local production. Moreover, it stands for new bridges between food production and consumption and consumer oriented science.

The issue is not, do we need intensive farming systems and food processing, or the industrial agro-food regime, but in what form and measure. Therefore, the question of either reforming the current dominant industrial regime to a sustainable system or starting

¹ John Dewey develops in his *The Public and its problems* a theory of media still relevant for today's media.

² Against Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, p. 546

localized alternatives is not an important issue; both are necessary. The pressing issue is to organize the fair representation of food and farming styles, which means to deal with the different food and farming styles in a constructive way that gives *opportunities to all in a fair and just process* (Sen 2009, 228). Food democracy from table to soil and from soil to table starts with the idea that 'there may not indeed exist any identifiable perfectly just social arrangement on which impartial agreement would emerge' (Sen 2009, 15). Food and farming styles will differ, and it is meaningless to try to overcome these differences by an appeal on mostly controversial facts or some other rock-bottom. Deliberation about deeply felt frictions between styles and cooperation are more fruitful strategies as is looking for common ground.

With respect to food production and consumption, it means that the deliberative approach cannot stand on its own. Sure, it needs tools like scenario building, and looking for positive matches between technologies and deliberative openings, and deliberations about uncertainties, fears and new ideas and opinions.³ But more is necessary. Cooperation, working together and collective action with regard to food give meanings and experiences to democratic control and formation of beliefs. In bringing together eating, cooking and farming personal and social identity activities are affirmed, maintained and renovated. It is this connection of food production, of the *soil*, with the life world where philosophy can make a difference, because it shows that what is made according to current industrial agricultural definition of efficiency is not the best for having a good life. Cooking and eating are not simply activities that keep our day-to-day life going but they are identity-achieving activities: they contribute to what we are and how we appreciate ourselves.

Local food production is challenged by both ecological and social factors. Some biologists warn that

when the local ecosystems do not respect biodiversity and only concentrate on crops that deliver fast and usual products, other partners of the ecosystem, like bees and birds, will suffer (Anzelone 2013). The ecosystem approach requires that the interests of all partners in an ecosystem are taken into account, not only men's short term interest.

Deliberation about food is only fruitful when participants actually do in the agriculture and food sector: cooking, farming, producing some food or organizing some process or product. This practical knowledge is an inspirational basis of being able to remain connected and to acquire new insights and to put forward fruitful opinions. Deliberations on food enhance their quality when fed by embodied knowledge. This knowledge improves when it is daily exercised and it deteriorates when not exercised, just like a bodily condition needs exercises to remain in good shape. Shared internalized norms are helpful, but they are not necessary, cooperation and exercise does.

Food democracy: requirements

The governance of food should be a polycentric affair, where civil society actions and movements together with governmental policies implement the right to adequate food and where governments organize this public good and provide a regulatory frame work for food companies and other private enterprises to do their work on markets (Ostrom 2009). Ostrom remarks: 'We need to ask how diverse polycentric institutions help or hinder the innovativeness, learning, adapting, trustworthiness, levels of cooperation of participants, and the achievement of more effective, equitable, and sustainable outcomes at multiple scales.' She discovered that 'local incorporated communities can contract with larger producers and change contracts if not satisfied with the services provided, while neighborhoods inside a large city have no voice.' Life sciences in close cooperation with social sciences can encounter a lot of opportunities on the basis of this governance structure.

³ These are the main ethical tools that Dewey in his *The Public and its problems* recommends and which Habermas has updated.

Science and technology can work in both ways, either reducing the labor force by focusing on monocultural plantations or encouraging social and biological biodiversity by improving the quality of labor and food by making farming more pleasant, more productive, and less tiresome.

Food democracy can balance more equally the attention, money streams and governmental support that until now goes to industrial agriculture. In particular the permaculture, agro ecological approaches can have a more representative part of these streams (Tittonell 2013). Urban agriculture can have more prominence on health, environmental and food policies. In the Netherlands this would mean that the numerous initiatives on local production should get a boost.

Education and continuous training for both adolescents and adults is moreover also necessary.

Food capabilities need practices to stay in good order; they are like muscles that are in need of maintenance. Edible gardens with an integrated curriculum that integrates chemistry, biology, sociology and psychology focused on food gardening is a good device for children. Adults should be offered cooking workshops, food processing workshops (brewery, making sausages, bread and pizza). Media should pay much more attention to these trainings.

Entrepreneurship start-ups involved in local food provision, consultancy and communication should be facilitated and honored. Public spaces to discuss food issues in particular innovations, platforms in new media should be facilitated. Very important is also that research in plant-plant and plant-organisms interaction should be stimulated for small scale farming and urban farming. Quantity of production should be coupled with quality of production.

A relevant requirement for food democracy is the stimulation of small farmers. The trend towards larger and larger farms should be discouraged. The trend means that more people lose their job and migrate to slums in cities which often provide them no livable opportunities. The huge cities in the South are traps:

without assistance from outside people in the slums cannot escape poverty, deskilling, crime and corruption. Respecting and supporting small farmers is a better solution by establishing democracy in the sense of food sovereignty. *Food sovereignty* is a concept that originated with small and medium farmers in Latin America, and it covers 'the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production' (Desmarais, 2010; De Schutter 2010; IAASTD 2009). This pro-poor, pro-rural and pro-small farmers approach is already a success in south-western China (Donaldson 2011).

Finally, international developments should always be connected with local developments: This implies for international organisations like WO, WHO, and FAO that their agencies should take into account the local implications of their worlds wide action for local contexts, in particular the weakest part of the population. Food and the processes that produce food are intrinsically connected with the identity of people (Korthals 2004).

Conclusion

Pragmatists like Dewey started to encourage the idea of edible gardens by stressing the civil, political and economic meaning of gardening. However, they neglected the huge power of agro food industry and its detrimental influence on climate, nature and food capacities of people.

It is now to time to reconsider the pragmatist meaning of gardening an local agriculture, in particular with respect to stimulating ecological agriculture, individual self-respect, self-knowledge and love for nature and to strengthening the translocal impact of democratic governance of the food system. Agroecology and agroforestry are forms of food production that don't have the negative ecological impact of intensive, large scale agriculture. Moreover they can be implemented in a community friendly way, that close the gap between consumption and production and stimulates food capabilities. The device should be from farm to table and from table to farm.

Not all food can be produced locally. National and international developments require a new steering model of agriculture not only on the local level, but also on national and international level. Deliberative, pragmatist democracy can offer some instruments to realize these ideas. Bridging the gap between production and consumption by all kinds of less radical and more radical types of participation and CSA is one; they encourage the development and maintenance of food capabilities. Another is the use of worldwide communication systems.

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