

A Tale Of Food Cities: Gastronomy and Community Identity in an Urban Work Environment

SAMUEL WHATLEY



Ever since the rise of urban Modernist ideology and mass domestic industrialization in the first half of the twentieth century, inner-city community identity has been at jeopardy. Reform efforts have generally targeted city council, highway agency, and public housing policies, all in an attempt to de-mechanize a city and reform existing developments. For this reason, very few efforts to reestablish urban community identities have been directed towards reforming existing industries. This paper briefly explores how the application of principles found in rural gastronomics can aid in the reestablishment of urban identity.

“A BLOCK OR TWO WEST of the new City of Man in Turtle Bay,” described E.B. White, one of the foremost essayists of twentieth century America, “there is an old willow tree...Whenever I look at it nowadays, and feel the cold shadow of the planes, I think, ‘This must be saved, this particular thing, this very tree.’ If it were to go, all would go—this city, this mischievous and marvelous monument which not to look upon would be like death.”¹ There is something fundamental that today’s urban world has lost, something that is rooted in what it means to be make a thriving city, a human community. Nearly 55% of the world’s population lives in an urban environment, a proportion that is set to rise to around 60-70% in the next few decades.² An increasingly pertinent question is how to best manage this immense growth, and make it sustainable. The food industry, of course, plays a major role in the sustainability of a city, both in terms of culinary culture and day-to-day accessibility of food. As of late, however, the question of inner city food accessibility and food culture has been, of necessity, joined by the question of the city’s adoption of the principles present within the food industry in more rural areas, to wit, the question of how to make the communities sustainable as well. In other words, a city is comprised of many different communities fighting to retain the unarticulated autonomy that defines each apart from the rest of the city,

1. E.B. White, “Here is New York” in *Essays of E.B. White*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), p. 168.

2. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs; Accessed through www.cnn.com, “Two-thirds of Global Population will Live in Cities by 2050”, Sam Meredith, May 17, 2018: Accessed September 18, 2019.

and an objectify-able self-sufficiency is key to the protection of their identity. The variables at play in a sustainable community must be comprehensible in order that, if the community is in jeopardy of losing its identity, the principles of its self-sufficiency can be isolated and acted upon. The vast majority of these principles are limited to the familial, local business, or infrastructural level. Only a handful bridge all three; the food industry is one of them. Urban farming, both on household and commercial levels, is a viable and sustainable answer to the dissolution of this crucial aspect of inner-city communal self-sufficiency and identity.

Before any argument can be made for how feasible a particular solution is for the impediment of community identity dissolution, or how a certain approach is correct or incorrect, one has to define what a community qualitatively is. For the purposes of this argument, it can be assumed that for a community to be classified as “inner-city” and be an entity capable of maintaining its own gastronomic system, it must have geographical borders and a corpus of those living within those bounds that at least contribute in some way to the area’s economy. With these two characteristics, an argument for economic self-sufficiency has very few hurdles to overcome; however, these are not sufficient to frame an argument that points towards the sense of that self-sufficiency as being a support for community growth. The other side of the idealistic coin describes a community that is knit solely together by a corpus of values rather than a corpus of physical attributes such as shared location or work place. Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern sociology, considered a set of collective ideals as a community *sui*

generis.^{3,4} German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, on the other hand, divided the larger sphere of “community” into two categories, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* is described as a group of people that have frequent social interactions, often in work environments (mechanical settings). *Gesellschaft* is a group of people set apart by indirect social interactions and values, often developing organically, much like what Durkheim describes. The separation of these two, however, as Tönnies puts it, is merely conceptual; communities really function as the combination of the two.⁵ An urban community illustrates this dichotomy in the modern social network by incorporating economics (gastronomy) and values (ideal self-sufficiency) equally. The issue raised by Durkheim’s point of view is isolated to the ideal communities that are defined by values only, and does not take into account, as he himself termed it, “sensations from the physical world,”⁶ which would include the institutions that shape the values he describes.

These values, whether originating from personal ethics or the general social milieu, are fostered on an individual level, then later manifest themselves the local business and infrastructural levels. This is very much the case within the traditional idea of gastronomy within a predominately agrarian culture. There are two human values in particular related to the psychological ramifications of growing one’s own food. *Naturalness* is the first, and describes an individual’s preferences toward what he consumes and takes part in. This value has been most clearly recognized in the rise in demands for organic foods that has been observed in recent years, something that is not particular to Western society. For example, in the early 2000s the city of Bangkok underwent a series of reforms within its gastronomic systems, led by local and national government initiatives, that targeted the import of rurally-grown foods into urban spaces. The reform had its origin from two roots, that of health concerns surrounding the produce coming in from rural areas, as well as economic implications the gastronomic system had for the city. Thailand had the reputation of an agriculturally fertile nation; however, Bangkok, the capital, did not wear the same mantle,

and so took no part in its country’s reputation,⁷ even though the city housed 10.4% of the nation’s population at the time.⁸ This idea taps into what Iryna Printezis, Clinical Assistant Professor at Arizona State University, termed as “perceived naturalness,”⁹ a demographically verifiable state of preference seen in the surveys and buying habits of consumers. Printezis conducted a study on the prevalence of this trait, developing a way to quantify her findings in what she later called the Perceived Naturalness Index. The study separated the terms urban farms and local farms, and found that consumers with a higher sense of awareness for natural foods were more likely to buy locally-sourced foods than imported foods. However, the author also states that “consumers have to prefer [local farming] as a source of produce over other retail outlets,”¹⁰ meaning that in a situation where the market is a key influence, it is hard for local grassroots to compete with more organized, reliable, and financially viable large-scale retailers.¹¹ The source of the food does not matter in this case; the only thing that matters is the economic ramifications of that source and the system surrounding it. In the case of Bangkok, local authorities were able, along with the general health concerns, to operate according to principle, i.e., the reputation of the city. Urban communities in the West are less likely to operate according to principle, and more likely to operate solely as a demographic in the eyes of a capitalist market. However, urban communities have a unique set of characteristics that sets them apart from being viewed as solely demographics in the capitalist sense, pushing into the realm of the second human value of community, perceived self-sufficiency.

This value is much harder to quantify than perceived

7. Piyapong Boosabong, “Collaborative Urban Farming Networks in Bangkok: Promoting Collective Gardens and Alternative Markets as Theatres of Social Action” in *Cities in Asia by and for the People*, Cabannes Yves, Douglass Mike, and Padawangi Rita, ed. (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp. 99-126.

8. Economic and Social Statistics Bureau, National Statistics Office, “Population and Housing Census 2000”, web.nso.go.th, Accessed 10/10/19.

9. Iryna Printezis, Carola Grebitus, and Antonios Printezis, “Importance of Perceived ‘Naturalness’ to the Success of Urban Farming” in *Choices*, Vol. 32, No. 1, (New York City, NY: Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, 2017), p. 3.

10. Printezis, Perceived ‘Naturalness’, p. 4.

11. Marvin T. Batte, “Consumer-Driven Changes in Food Marketing Channels: Organics and Sustainable Food Systems in the United States: Discussion” in *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 93, No. 2, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3. Latin, “of its own kind”; also “in and of itself”.

4. Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work, a Historical and Critical Study*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

5. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, Jose Harris, ed., (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

6. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, p. 25.

naturalness, and might be best understood if approached from the point of view of Dr. Michael Hamm, distinguished C.S. Mott Professor in the Department of Community Sustainability at Michigan State University. In a keynote address given in 2003, Dr. Hamm describes an overall shift in gastronomic preferences led by individual preferences and an increasingly “sophisticated knowledge of ecosystem farming.”¹² “With respect to the food system,” Dr. Hamm says as a preface to his address, “I would start by asking one simple question, one that all of us who eat should ask: what kind of a food system do we want?...[it is] critical that we extend beyond the confines of production agriculture to consider, among other things, the communities and regions in which that agriculture occurs...”¹³ What Dr. Hamm is describing is a pull at not principles, as the authorities in Bangkok were able to achieve, but at a unique *ethos* geared towards the preservation of current capital and community ties for future generations. This can be achieved by a greater knowledge of sustainable ecosystems allocated to the common man, which, ideally, would manifest itself directly in the form of small and medium-sized urban farms. At the end of the address, Dr. Hamm articulates the idea in this way, saying:

We believe there is good reason for optimism that community-based food systems can be developed... in which greater connectivity occurs between farmers and consumers such that value chains are at least as important as supply chains. On the agricultural side, as we move to a production system that maximizes its capacity to deliver ecosystem services while retaining productive capacity for future generations, it is equally important to embed this development within a social framework valuing and honoring these activities.¹⁴

The idea is simple: a set of values espoused in a reasonable manner by a localized community, geared towards its own future preservation, both economically and as regards posterity and community identity. As individuals learn about and innovate within the field of agriculture and gastronomic systems, they become more apt to apply what they learn to their day-to-day life. As a result of taking their own initiatives on solving social problems, community members become more willing to sacrifice the immediate gratifications of commercial food supplies for

12. Michael W. Hamm, “Community-Based Food Systems: Components and Potential for Michigan” in *Michigan Sociological Review*, Vol. 18, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan Sociological Association, 2004), p. 2.

13. Hamm, “Community-Based Food Systems”, pp. 1, 2.

14. Hamm, “Community-Based Food Systems”, pp. 19, 20.

the preservation of local supplies. Once this value has been adopted, the economy itself shifts to accommodate it. This in turn gives that community an overall sense of self-worth, identity, and sufficiency.^{15,16} But what entices a community, especially one in the urban West, to prioritize *ethos* above economic and market-driven *logos* in the first place?

The answer can be found in many examples of urban life. Carlo Rotella, *New York Times* columnist and professor at Boston College, gives one detailed example in his book titled *The World is Always Coming to an End*, an epitaph of the South Shore community (or communities) of Chicago. In this work the author describes the silent tension between bungalow culture, the immaculate green lawns and quaint houses listed on the historical register, and the insecurity of stagnant wages, “declining confidence in public institutions, and a fraying sense of civil community.”¹⁷ “And always at some *sub rosa*¹⁸ mental level,” Rotella says, describing his young adult self living in the South Shore community, “I expect the incursion of piratical boarding parties who must be repelled by householders without assistance from neighbors or government. I am a product of a landscape and process that can be traced back at least as far as the network of trails that ran along the dry ridges between wet sloughs in postglacial South Shore,...one that, as has apparently always been the case in South Shore, lasted until the next crew, pushed and pulled by the forces of history, showed up and decided that this looked like a nice place to live.”¹⁹ South Shore, like so many urban and suburban communities, continually faces class struggles, the decline of internal economic vitality, and external forces eroding the power structures that would be implicit in the autonomy of a thriving community. The ebb and flow of corporate business causes major wage instability, especially for the blue collar class in a postindustrial environment. Increasing means of access and transportation disconnect work place ties within

15. A.C. Bellows and M.W. Hamm, “Local Autonomy and Sustainable Development Testing Import Substitution in Local Food Systems” in *Agriculture and Human Values*, Vol. 18, (Clinton, SC: Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, 2001), pp. 217-224.

16. Susan Parham, *Food and Urbanism: The Convivial City and a Sustainable Future*, First Edition, (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

17. Carlo Rotella, *The World Is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 173.

18. Latin, “in secret”; lit. “under the rose”.

19. Rotella, *The World is Always Coming to an End*, p. 176.

a geographic region and connect them elsewhere with non-local communities. Consistent failures on the part of government and non-local institutions cause a general sense of distrust in the efficacy of those institutions, which include food systems and production. In short, urban communities have been effaced of every characteristic specific to them in particular, and have instead been veiled in an importune history of struggle and division where the only lifeline for the people living in those communities seems to be individual financial freedom.²⁰ This struggle is what drives communal ethos above economic idealism, and allows for the prioritization of critical engagement, environmental stewardship, and ecosystem and agriculture knowledge.²¹

In the summer of 2019, an independent group of scientists in varying disciplines appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General drafted the *Global Sustainable Development Report* for the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. This document is an evaluation of the world's progress toward sustainable communities and global economic systems, taking a broad view of global urban development. At its close, the report states "that understanding the interconnections between the individual [Sustainable Development Goals] and the concrete systems that define society today will be essential to devise policies that manage difficult tradeoffs."²² In other words, the principles that define what efforts are taken by social initiatives are derived from the correct view of the human values of community (Sustainable Development Goals) alongside economically valid solutions (concrete systems). Economist Dr. Robert Biel gives an example of this paradigm in his book *Sustainable Food Systems*, where he describes the synthesis between community crisis and adaptation. His case is a sociological one, harkening on the unrest caused by fluctuating food prices, food deserts, and local disillusionment in the face of corporate interference.²³ This was to expound on an idea Biel had first proposed in his book titled *The Entropy of Capitalism*, that the systems theory

of gastronomy was directly tied to its political economy.²⁴ In other words, if urban farming can be defined within the limits of a social construct, then the market, instead of incentivizing a departure from that state, will foster the innovation required to create an economically viable system.

Rotella and Biel both described robust social and emotive influencers, bolstered by importune inhibitors that impeded on food and financial security. As long as members of a community felt comfortable and at rest, they cared less about communal autonomy and focused more on their corporate and global atmosphere; but, as soon its comfort, identity, or rest was jeopardized, the community, then with a new banner to unite under, suddenly prioritized autonomy and self-sufficiency. Commercial urban farming provides a long-term solution, offering both economic vitality as well as a framework on which to build lost social constructs. It is in a unique position to bridge familiar, local business, and infrastructural relations, integral parts of sustainable urbanism. This objectify-able self-sufficiency is key to the protection of community identity, something shown in many urban communities to be in dire need of restitution. As for economic vitality, the understanding of agriculture has grown drastically during the past century, and even in the past few years. What once was only possible in rural areas is now becoming increasingly possible in urban settings.²⁵ The gestalt of these principles work towards a greater sense of identity and perceived community self-sufficiency, which is critical for the life of a thriving city. For these reasons, Urban farming, both on household and commercial levels, is a viable and sustainable answer to the dissolution of inner-city community self-sufficiency and identity.

Works Cited

- Batte, Marvin T., "Consumer-Driven Changes in Food Marketing Channels: Organics and Sustainable Food Systems in the United States: Discussion" in *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 93, No. 2, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- Bellows, A.C. and M.W. Hamm, "Local Autonomy and Sustainable Development Testing Import Substitution in Local Food Systems" in *Agriculture and Human Values*, Vol. 18, (Clinton, SC: Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, 2001), pp. 217-224.
- Biel, Robert, "Built Systems, Biomimicry, and Urban Food-Growing" in *Sustainable Food Systems: The Role of the City*, (London, UK: UCL Press, 2016), pp. 90-107.
24. Robert Biel, *The Entropy of Capitalism*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2012).
25. Hamm, "Community-Based Food Systems".

20. Rotella, *The World is Always Coming to an End*.

21. Hamm, "Community-Based Food Systems," p. 4.

22. Peter Messerli, Endah Murniningtyas, et al., "Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now—Science for Achieving Sustainable Development," (New York City, NY: UN Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).

23. Robert Biel, "Built Systems, Biomimicry, and Urban Food-Growing" in *Sustainable Food Systems: The Role of the City*, (London, UK: UCL Press, 2016), pp. 90-107.

- Boossabong, Piyapong, “Collaborative Urban Farming Networks in Bangkok: Promoting Collective Gardens and Alternative Markets as Theatres of Social Action” in *Cities in Asia by and for the People*, Cabannes Yves, Douglass Mike, and Padawangi Rita, ed. (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp. 99-126.
- Hamm, Michael W., “Community-Based Food Systems: Components and Potential for Michigan” in *Michigan Sociological Review*, Vol. 18, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan Sociological Association, 2004).
- Lukes, Steven, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work, a Historical and Critical Study*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).
- Messerli, Peter, Endah Murniningtyas, et al., “Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now—Science for Achieving Sustainable Development,” (New York City, NY: UN Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).
- Parham, Susan, *Food and Urbanism: The Convivial City and a Sustainable Future*, First Edition (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).
- Printezis, Iryna, Carola Grebitus, and Antonios Printezis, “Importance of Perceived ‘Naturalness’ to the Success of Urban Farming” in *Choices*, Vol. 32, No. 1, (New York City, NY: Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, 2017).
- Rotella, Carlo, *The World Is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
- Tönnies, Ferdinand, *Community and Civil Society*, Jose Harris, ed., (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- White, E.B., “Here is New York” in *Essays of E.B. White*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999).