

Three Layers of History in Recurrent Social Movements: The Case of Food Reform

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Abstract:

Using the understudied genre of food reform movements for illustration, we advocate greater attention to recurrent social movements. Analysis of these movements calls for combining three levels of historical analysis. One links the incidence and character of mobilization to long-term, large-scale historical changes; the second shows how periods of activism are also animated and shaped by specific historical contexts; and the third tracks legacies from earlier to later periods, thus both tracing additional causal influences and connecting separate cases into coherent sequences. The social movements literature includes excellent examples of each type of historical account. Combining types is much less common. Doing so, we contend, offers methodological advantages for scholars comparing and sequencing mobilization around similar problems in different historical periods. We develop the argument from three eras of food protest: Grahamites in the 1830s and early 1840s, dietary reformers and food safety campaigners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and organic advocates who gained popular support beginning in the late 1960s.

Keywords: Social movements | historical methods | food | consumption | diffusion

Article:

As early as the 1830s, U.S. food reformers warned of 'unnatural' production methods, profit motives undermining the quality and nutritional value of food, and the contamination of soil by fertilizers. Activists have made comparable criticisms ever since. In this paper, we give an understudied genre of social movements more attention and advocate a particular historical approach to recurrent social movements like those devoted to change in the food system.

By 'food system' we mean the environmental, economic, and political frameworks for producing, processing, and distributing food. Although part of the larger capitalist economy, the food system has specific dynamics and periodically undermines trust in what we eat, making food reform movements a distinct field for recurrent contention. By 'historical approach' we

mean an account that *combines* three levels of analysis. One links the incidence and character of mobilization to long-term, large-scale historical changes; the second shows how periods of activism are animated and shaped by specific historical contexts; the third tracks legacies from earlier to later periods, thus both tracing additional causal influences and connecting separate cases into coherent sequences. Social movement scholars, commonly focused on the emergence of new movements or the dynamics of contention within protest cycles, often advance historical arguments of each of these three types. Combining them is rare, but doing so is especially important for recurrent social movements: those (such as labor, environmental, and women's movements) that contest comparable grievances (working conditions, environmental threats, gender inequality) in multiple time periods. We illustrate the argument from three eras of food protest: followers of Sylvester Graham in the 1830s and early 1840s, dietary reformers and food safety campaigners in the decades around 1900, and organic advocates who gained popular support in the late 1960s. We begin by more fully discussing the three layers of historical analysis and then turn to the illustrative case studies.

Systemic change, historical settings, and movement legacies

The first layer links movements to the long haul of social change. One example is new social movement theory's claim that the shift to post-industrial society changed both the agenda and the demographics of social movements (Melucci, 1996). On a shorter time scale, McAdam (1982) traces the deeper roots of the civil rights movement to the decline of King Cotton and the way this slowly expanded opportunities for change. There are also two examples from food studies. Friedmann (1995) argues that the increasing sway of large agricultural corporations made consumers rather than small farmers the main advocates for new regulations. McMichael (2009) adds that the shift toward neoliberal trade prompted new types of activism around food sovereignty.

In these examples, large-scale changes taking place over long stretches of time alter the tactics, agents, and goals of protest. Pierson's (2004) warning applies here: case studies with truncated temporal boundaries may overstate immediate influences and overlook the cumulative causation and threshold effects associated with long-term, slow-moving processes. Systemic changes can also pace protest's ebb and flow, as with nineteenth century capitalism's cycles of boom and bust and workers' propensity to strike. The long-term rise and fall in grievances and opportunities illustrated by business cycles may produce at least superficial similarities in the character of protest (e.g. strikes) across widely separated periods. The slow-moving causal forces described by Pierson, by contrast, may have singular effects – the civil rights movement, mobilization against neoliberal globalization – at specific times. As we will see, long-term shifts in the food system produce evidence of both recurrent and singular effects.

The second narrative layer details how the long haul combines with period-specific influences to both prompt and shape episodes of protest. The shaping occurs as generic grievances (over low wages, for example) get interpreted according to distinctive cultural idioms (affronting the dignity of the free-born Englishman [Thompson, 1964], for instance) or as activists follow models of framing and organization from other movements of the day (such as the maternalist language of Progressive-era movements [Skocpol, 1992]). The prompting reminds us that some long-term conditions for protest, such as the grievances generated by employment relations, only

lead to protest when combined with short-term gains in resources and opportunities or when given additional symbolic resonance through links to salient identities. Ganz (2009) shows how the UFW brought new resources to organizing farm workers and, more importantly, tied their long-standing grievances to religious and ethnic identities and to allies in other movements. Some students of contemporary locavorism and Fair Trade movements, too, include both the prompting and the shaping roles of historical settings. There is nothing new about sympathy with the economic plight of distant food producers. But this concern gets a boost from the recent expansion of lifestyle politics (Shah, Friedland, Wells, Kim, & Rojas, 2012) *and* is steered in particular strategic directions by the current neoliberal political climate (Allen, 2004).

Adding this second element to our historical perspective has more general methodological virtues. Placing movements in temporal context gives us further comparative leverage: juxtaposing cases from different periods may alert us to crucial influences hidden within a single case. Recognizing how similar movements take distinct shapes in different contexts also avoids the simplifications inherent in variable-based explanatory models. The volume of contentious events may rise and fall with independent variables cutting across periods and cases. But we should not let this obscure the equally important historical molding of protest, such that ostensibly similar events assume different forms and meanings from one time to another.

The third layer of historical explanation focuses on legacies – how each period of mobilization is shaped by its predecessors. The vehicles for and the impact of these legacies are many and varied. Martyrs and monuments sustain memories and identities over the years (Kimeldorf, 1988); activist communities and abeyance structures keep the flame alive through lean times (Taylor, 1989); organizations formed in one period institutionalize social boundaries for later struggles (Voss, 1993); inherited cultural frameworks define pressing problems and appropriate tactics (Clemens, 1997). Mechanisms such as these have been invoked by students of social movement diffusion to explain how one movement shapes others (Soule, 2004). But diffusion, as Whittier (2004) notes, may also occur over longer spans of time. Our cases show legacies conveyed over 70 or more years through entrenched vocabularies for evaluating food, personal ties across generations of activists, religious institutions sanctifying particular dietary ideals, and political institutions channeling the attention and limiting the options of later movements. These vehicles of diffusion differ from the ‘relational’ mechanisms (McAdam & Rucht, 1993) highlighted in studies of more contemporaneous diffusion; similarly, they may vary in the ways they select or inhibit the influence of past movements on later activism. (Space constraints limit our focus to legacies across food-related protest; we do not include cross-period influences of other movements.) And here too, there is a broader methodological payoff. Including legacies in the analysis highlights the ways in which different eras of protest are not only linked to large-scale changes, and are not only cases to compare and contrast, but are also parts of a single and cumulative historical sequence.

Combining these three elements follows the more general recommendations in historical sociology to pay closer attention to temporality and to make use of narrative more than variable-based explanation (Clemens, 2007; Pierson, 2004; Sewell, 1996). It also recognizes how, in narrative explanatory accounts, multiple causal influences can operate in quite different temporal rhythms (Haydu, 1998; Krinsky, 2011). McAdam and Sewell (2001) also call for social movement analysis to incorporate multiple temporalities. We second that general call, but we do

not share McAdam and Sewell's assumption that long- and short-term influences correspond to structures versus events or to determinism versus agency. Short-term influences can be no less constraining than long-term social changes; and legacies come in so many different forms that they may operate on multiple time scales and both limit and enable collective agency.

Social movement scholars rarely combine all three levels of historical analysis, in part because their usual focus is the emergence of protest or the dynamics of single cycles of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Recurrent social movements call for a different explanatory agenda. The clearest example comes from labor studies. Thanks in part to these studies' Marxist heritage, it is common to see labor activism as part of a larger history of class conflict, its ebb and flow driven in part by cycles of boom and bust and by shifts in the composition of industry. Accounts of the social movement unionism that emerged in the 1980s (Fantasia & Voss, 2004), in turn, see the growing reliance on broader alliances and innovative organizing tactics as a response to more vigorous anti-unionism on the part of employers and the state over the previous decade. And students of social movement unionism highlight the impact of legacies from past eras of union struggle, above all the constraints imposed by the New Deal framework for industrial relations.

Consider, by way of contrast, the work of the social movement scholar who helped bring historical perspective to sociological studies of protest. Tilly's account of changing repertoires of contention (1995, 2007) combines the overarching trends of state centralization and capitalist development with a specific kind of legacy: the conventional wisdom and organizational support for particular ways to 'do' protest. In three other respects, however, Tilly's model of contentious politics diverges from the explanatory approach called for by recurrent social movements. First, the key data consists of coded protest events. These are well suited to documenting change in the typical character of protest over time (Tilly, 1995). But that analysis also aggregates events across movements rather than attending to the interaction of structural change, historical settings, and legacies in any one arena of persistent contention. Second, when Tilly and his collaborators (2001, 2007) turn to contention within a narrower time period, the strategy is to identify generic 'mechanisms' as the basic units of comparison and explanation. These mechanisms (brokerage, certification, polarization, etc.), like the aggregation of events, cut across specific genres of protest. They also make it difficult to ground explanations in particular historical contexts. One can characterize a period of contention as involving some combination of brokerage and polarization. But explaining what set those mechanisms in motion calls for a closer look at the context and legacies at work in particular cases. Third, Tilly's repertoires are just one sort of legacy. Students of diffusion have emphasized that all sorts of things diffuse besides tactics, including organizational forms, identities, and frames (Soule, 2004; Whittier, 2004). In recurrent social movements, such diffusion operates over broader ranges of time, as actors in separate periods grapple with common issues under different conditions and with inheritances of many kinds from their activist predecessors.

Case selection and sources

Food reform movements include any collective challenges to the cost, fairness, safety, or healthfulness (personal and social) of the foods we eat. One recurrent problem animating these movements is that of mistrust in food; activists aim to restore trust by changing the food system

and dietary practices of their day. What counts as trustworthy, and how that lost trust can be regained, both vary tremendously. Some movements have directed demands to the state (e.g. for laws prohibiting food adulteration); others pursue their goals by changing consumer behavior (as in Fair Trade). In some, dedicated organizations marshal collective and public protest (e.g. to support sick leave and living wages for fast-food workers); in others, the collective action is of a more loosely coordinated and individualized sort (such as enrolling in a Community Supported Agriculture program). And a number of major cases, including the organic movement, include all these variants. Our selected cases come from the most important eras of food activism in the U.S. The three periods' distribution over 150 years makes it easier to see long-term continuities and change and the wide variety of vehicles conveying historical legacies. For the most recent period, finally, it makes sense to pick organic from among the potential case studies because we can see more of its trajectory. With other cases, such as locavorism, the jury is still out.

For each case, we rely on a mix of secondary literature and primary sources. A substantial historiography exists for all our movements. But we also aim to flesh out the discursive character of these movements, because this is where many of the key similarities, differences, and legacies can be found. For that purpose, we use primary sources on the central actors in each movement. These sources include testimony from movement leaders – Grahamites like William Alcott as well as Graham himself, pure food advocates such as John Kellogg and Harvey Wiley, and early champions of organic agriculture. Sources also include periodicals and organizational publications associated with the movements, especially the *Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, *What To Eat* (Progressive-era dietary reform periodical), the reports of the National Pure Food and Drug Congress, and *Organic Gardening and Farming*.

We proceed next to a fuller overview of each case and a summary of key similarities and differences among them. Then we put these comparisons into historical perspective.

Three eras of food activism

1830–40s: the Grahamites

Beginning in the mid 1830s, Protestant minister and former temperance advocate Sylvester Graham began calling for fundamental change in the nation's diet (Nissenbaum, 1980; Sokolow, 1983; Whorton, 1982). Part of the problem, in Graham's view, was that Americans were eating the wrong foods, including meat and stimulants like coffee and spices, as well as drinking alcohol. Even the right foods, however, suffered from modern production methods. The worst offender was store-bought bread. 'Most people ... in cities and large towns' depended on commercial bakers, who acted for 'their own emolument [rather] than for the public good' and sold loaves with adulterants and unnaturally refined flour (*Graham Journal of Health and Longevity* May 2, 1837, p. 38). The results were dire. Those eating a conventional diet suffered from digestive ailments, diminished energy, and vulnerability to diseases like cholera. Perhaps worse, they were placed in moral peril as meat and spices stimulated their carnal impulses. Graham urged men and women to eat a more natural, unadorned vegetarian diet, as their bodies needed and as God intended. Pride of place at the dining table went to bread made from locally grown whole wheat, hand-crafted by loving wives and mothers. Community morality would benefit as well as physical health. 'A Vegetable Diet,' argued Graham's ally William Alcott,

‘lies at the basis of all Reform, whether Civil, Social, Moral, or Religious’ (quoted in Sokolow, 1983, p. 101).

Graham’s lectures and pamphlets brought him a considerable following among a rising and evangelical urban middle class. The movement depended on the tireless public speaking and writing of a few central figures. Complementing these personal efforts were a formal organization (the American Physiological Society) and a journal (*Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*) in which the faithful were encouraged to share their tales of culinary sin and redemption. Probably more important than these dedicated institutions was a supporting infrastructure of sympathetic churches that provided a bully pulpit, boarding houses to give travelers appropriate food when away from their loving wives, and a few grocery stores where Grahamites could buy natural foods. The movement gave some boost to vegetarianism as a legitimate option, without making a measurable dent in America’s heavily carnivorous diet. More importantly, it helped create the association, often noted by observers of American culinary history, between foods (good and bad) and morality.

1890s–1900s: pure food advocacy

Reformers in the late nineteenth century once again took up the problem of impure food. Many foods (bread, but also canned foods, beer, meat, spices, candy), they argued, were adulterated to fatten the profits of merchants, mislabeled to confuse consumers, and rendered unsafe by additives. Here too, the costs were personal and social, physical and moral. Different branches of food activism, however, took these basic critiques in different directions. For dietary reformers like John Harvey Kellogg, the physical threats and moral perils recalled those that alarmed Graham. Meats, spices, and stimulants could cause illnesses, sap vital energies, and corrupt morals – and thereby stain the community as a whole. ‘National decay,’ an affiliated journal warned in 1907, ‘begins in the individual’s stomach’ (*What to Eat*, February 1907, p. 45. S.a. Carson, 1976; Engs, 2003; Numbers, 1992). For more secular reformers, many of them upper-middle-class women, adulterated and unsafe food was a source of physical harm, most often to the poor, who had to buy the cheapest products. The moral hazard was more to the business community, insofar as the drive for competitive advantage led to unscrupulous practices and undercut the honorable merchant. According to Harvey Wiley, chief promoter of pure food legislation, ‘what we want is that the farmer may get an honest market and the innocent consumer may get what he thinks he is buying ... The object of this bill is to secure honesty’ (National Pure Food & Drug Congress [NPFDC], 1898, p. 16).

Pure food advocates’ strategies and goals diverged accordingly. Kellogg and his associates set out to reform the American diet, proscribing meat, alcohol, and other stimulants, and providing wholesome vegetarian alternatives. Progressives instead championed legislative measures to ban adulterants, require accurate labels, and monitor food additives. They sought, as well, to educate consumers to make their food purchases more wisely. The desired outcome from legislative action would be restored health for individuals and improved morality in market relations. Dietary reformers relied mainly on a network of nutritional experts, cooking instructors, and public campaigners like Kellogg and his wife. They used pamphlets, speeches, and pure food demonstrations at expositions to extol the virtues of culinary and moral purity. Legislative campaigners came together in a coalition of more formal organizations of women (the General

Federation of Women's Clubs, the Women's Christian Temperance Union), consumers (the National Consumers' League [NCL]), and professionals (especially the Association of Official Agricultural Chemists). Although they, too, sought to educate consumers, their primary efforts went into lobbying to win passage of a pure food law. As for the impact of these two branches, the dietary reformers fostered a distinctly American tendency to evaluate food on the basis of its nutritional components and functional benefits rather than its esthetic virtues (Mudry, 2006). The various business spinoffs from the Battle Creek Sanatorium also institutionalized some of Kellogg's dietary advice through such commercial products as whole grain breakfast cereal and mock meat for covetous vegetarians. State-centered pure food advocates helped create the Food and Drug Administration in 1906.

1960s-present: organic food

Six decades after the formation of the FDA, small farmers using 'organic' agricultural methods began to win a wider following among young, urban consumers and environmentalists (Belasco, 2007; Guthman, 2004). One familiar grievance concerned the healthfulness of conventional food, believed to carry chemical residues. But there were more than personal risks. Organic advocates raised the alarm over the ecological threats from widespread use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides, energy-intensive meat production, and crop monocultures. They extended this critique to food processing that turned fruits, vegetables, and many less recognizable ingredients into 'precooked, instantized [products that] can be taken right out of the box and eaten' (*Organic Gardening and Farming* July 1965, p. 20). And they saw a larger economic threat behind these violations of individual and environmental health: the big corporations that made irresponsible use of new technology and that increasingly dominated American agriculture at the expense of quality food and self-sufficient small farmers.

The initial critiques came from long-time organic advocates like J. I. Rodale and his son Robert, editors of *Organic Gardening and Farming*, and from 'organic clubs' of small producers around the country. Through *OGF* and at frequent conferences of enthusiasts, they sought to refine and publicize alternative agricultural techniques for managing soil fertility and pests without artificial inputs. They also tried to educate food *consumers* about the dangers of conventional production and the personal and environmental benefits of more natural foods. In 1969, for example, Robert Rodale added an 'Organic Foods Shopping Guide' to his journal, helping readers find organic foods when they were unable to grow their own (*Organic Gardening and Farming* May 1969). Some of the journal's writers went further, envisioning a fundamentally decentralized and democratized food system, with agribusiness displaced by yeoman farmers, rural communes, and cooperative food stores. By the 1970s, these goals were picked up by clubs on college campuses that blended organic, environmental, and consumer advocacy. But organic farmers, in particular, also had a more practical goal: to have state and federal governments set standards and support labeling for organic food, thus enabling consumers to make informed choices and preventing unscrupulous producers from selling fraudulent organic goods. Some insisted that certification and marketing should be done on a 'grass roots, regional basis' (*Organic Gardening and Farming* April 1973, p. 89), but the trend was in the opposite direction. Producers organized on a wider scale (e.g., California Certified Organic Farmers, founded in 1973), mounted more conventional political campaigns, and forged alliances with national environmental and consumer associations. Their efforts paid off. The political victory of the 1990 passage of the

Organic Food Production Act, combined with effective educational outreach, produced a second movement success, namely a dramatic increase in the market for organic food. What was lost, most observers agree, was the more radical vision of an alternative, sustainable, *and* democratic agricultural system.

Some similarities and differences among cases

Given these movements' very different historical contexts, they bear some surprising similarities. Activists in all three periods were preoccupied with food risks. They had lost trust in the basic safety of the food they purchased and warned others to be similarly suspicious. They attributed these risks to commercial pressures that made producers – bakers, meat processors, agribusiness – put profits before the health of consumers. The general goal, accordingly, was to make food products safer and healthier to eat. Critics of adulterated and unsafe food in the 1890s–1900s advocated a statist solution: the passage of a federal law mandating pure food, accurately labeled. Grahamites, Progressive-era dietary reformers, and organic food advocates, by contrast, championed 'natural' food. Consumers should seek out foods that were less corrupted by modern methods (refined, artificially fertilized, processed by machinery) (Graham, 1839; Gusfield, 1992; *Mother Earth News* January, May 1970; *Organic Gardening and Farming* December 1965; *What to Eat* November 1907; Whorton, 1982). Natural food was more than safe. It also provided an array of health benefits, from curing specific ailments to imparting general fitness and energy.

In each period, too, these claims defied mainstream scientific opinion; and in each, reformers cast doubt on the competence and integrity of medical experts. In contrast to the health benefits of a proper diet, Kellogg argued that 'a great many medicines are worse than useless; [and the] physicians who employ strong drugs for every human affliction are the worst menaces [of the] present day' (*What to Eat* November 1907, pp. 186–87). Graham and the Rodales expressed similar contempt (*Organic Gardening and Farming* April 1962; Sokolow, 1983). Finally, the virtues of a reformed diet went beyond individual health. In all cases (including the campaign for legislative remedies), purifying food led to social betterment – more virtuous communities, more ethical commerce, a more democratic food system (National Pure Food & Drug Congress [NPFDC], 1898; *Organic Gardening and Farming* April 1973; *What to Eat* February 1907; Young, 1989)

A closer look turns up distinctions in social movement framing, activist identities, and strategies. In the framing of food system problems, there are different portrayals of risk, of 'nature,' and of social betterment, both across periods and between the two Progressive-era cases. Grahamites and Progressive-era dietary reformers believed that impure food fed impure thoughts, with Graham and Kellogg both campaigning to expose the relationship between over-stimulating foods and the sin of masturbation (Engs, 2003; Kellogg & Kellogg, 1889). Advocates for pure food legislation and organic food stressed moral benefits of a less personal sort. The perceived threat for the former was to the moral integrity of markets, and it came from unscrupulous businessmen. Sixty years later, the threat was to the small farmer and the environment, and large-scale capitalist production was to blame (National Pure Food and Drug Congress [NPFDC], 1898, 1899; *Organic Gardening and Farming* July 1965).

Behind these assessments were different activist identities. Dietary reformers of the 1830s and 1890s were primarily Christians defending religious propriety and, in some cases, God's Dietary Word. Although early participants in the organic movement were often gardeners and small farmers, the primary identity constructed in *Organic Gardening and Farming* and enacted by followers from the late 1960s was that of the consumer, standing up for the right to safe and healthy food in defiance of conventional producers (Belasco, 2007; Guthman, 2004). That consumer identity can be found as well among Progressive advocates of pure food legislation. They called for government action to protect buyers from the depredations of sellers. But this consumer identity blended with that of the citizen, defending the *public* good from the shortsighted behavior of grasping businessmen and unthinking shoppers (Goodwin, 1999).

The cases differ, finally, in movement strategies. Dietary reformers of the 1830s and 1890s aimed to alter individual food choices. Through public speeches, books, and advertisements, they provided guidelines for proper food to buy and eat; through an infrastructure of boarding houses, stores, and facilities to manufacture meat substitutes, they hoped to make those foods more widely available (Carson, 1976; Kellogg, 1897; Nissenbaum, 1980). Advocates of a pure food law, by contrast, offered little dietary advice and created few alternative institutions through which consumers could make better choices. Their strategic efforts focused, instead, on lobbying political representatives to take legislative action (Young, 1989). In effect, Graham and Kellogg modeled lifestyle politics, urging followers to act out certain moral principles through their individual food choices. Most supporters of a Food and Drug Act, by contrast, practiced more conventional collective political action. Within this coalition of legislative reformers, it was only the NCL that systematically combined political lobbying with ethical consumerism. Among champions of organic food, this combination of strategies became the norm. They embraced alternative agriculture by either growing their own food organically or buying it from health food stores and co-ops. For this purpose, the movement's main journal collected and circulated information on growing techniques and sources of organic goods. But organic farmers also sought state action to codify standards and protect the fledgling market with labeling laws and government monitoring (Guthman, 2004). Table 1 summarizes the major similarities and differences across our cases.

To make sense of these comparisons, we should treat the cases as historically situated responses to recurring challenges posed by the food system, responses influenced by outcomes from previous food reform efforts as well as by political opportunities, cultural resources, and movement allies in each era. The short story is this. All of these movements were fostered by some combination of large-scale, long-term changes in the food system, including the commercialization of food provisioning, the industrialization and delocalization of food production, and the more recent post-Fordist shift toward niche marketing. These changes spurred mobilization by temporarily undermining institutional mechanisms supporting popular trust in food supplies. They also account for some of the commonalities in the general language used to frame grievances over the food system. But each movement also acquired more idiosyncratic characteristics from the cultural setting of its time and from the larger movements on which it piggy-backed – evangelical reform, Progressivism, and the counterculture. What it meant to 'trust' food, and the resources available for doing so, differed significantly among these cases. The movements of the 1900s and 1970s were shaped, too, by legacies from prior activism, legacies carried by cultural vocabularies, religious groups, food businesses, and government

policies. Such legacies also help explain important similarities and differences across cases. We elaborate on these arguments below.

Table 1. Main similarities and differences across cases

	1830s–40s Grahamites	1890s–1900s Health food	Pure food	1960s–70s Organic
<i>Threats to trust</i>	Commercialized food, causing ill health and immorality	Unhealthy food, causing ill health and immorality	Adulterated food; unsafe food	Pesticides & chemicals in food; environmental damage; corporate agriculture
<i>Activist identities</i>	Christian	Christian	Progressive citizen; responsible consumer	Countercultural and/or politicized consumer
<i>Framing</i>				
‘good’ food	Natural: as God intended	Natural: as God intended	Safe; accurately labeled	Natural: uncorrupted by technology
Individual benefits	Physical health; improved morals & self-discipline	Physical health; improved morals & self-discipline	Physical safety; consumer confidence	Physical health; personal liberation
Social benefits	Community morality	Community morality	Moral markets	Environmental sustainability; freedom from corporate control
Sources of legitimacy	God; alternative medicine	God; alternative medicine	Public authority; scientific expertise	Counter experts
<i>Strategies</i>	Change individual food choices through dietary evangelism, alternative stores & boarding houses	Change individual food choices through dietary education, commercial provision	Change food politics and markets through government regulation, ethical consumerism	Change food economy through small-scale organic production, state certification, consumer mobilization
<i>Outcomes</i> (intended or not)	Linking food and morality	Commercializing healthy and virtuous food; functional foods	FDA; separation of food from labor issues	Organic industry

Making sense of similarities and differences across recurrent cases

Connecting cases to the Long Haul

A first layer of historical interpretation connects these three eras of food activism to more encompassing changes in the food system. There are other long-term dynamics that could enter into the narrative, such as cycles of religious revival or the twentieth-century decline in political class discourse. We focus on changes in the food system because they are less familiar factors in social movements and because they are most relevant to some of the key similarities and differences across the cases. Three basic structural trends are of particular importance. One is the commodification of food. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most Americans produced rather than purchased the food they ate; one hundred years later, food was overwhelmingly something to buy on the market. From the late nineteenth century, a second large-scale change was toward a ‘delocalized’ food system, with consumers separated from producers by multiple intermediaries and many miles. And over the same period, food production industrialized. At first, this involved speeding and scaling up familiar home cooking tasks like canning and baking. By the 1950s, it was common for manufacturers to assemble components – flavorings, colorings,

preservatives, and certain ‘real’ ingredients like refined flour – into new products on a mass production basis (Grey, 2000).

These changes help account for some broad similarities across cases and for more specific attributes of each. The similarities reflect a recurrent pattern of food system changes subverting consumer trust. Kjaernes, Harvey, and Warde (2007) argue that our confidence in the foods we eat is mediated by other institutional actors. When it comes to safety, quality, or nutritional value, we generally do not evaluate the food itself. Instead, we trust or distrust the retailers who sell it, the purported experts and consumer advocates who vouch for it, and the government agencies that monitor it. Our confidence that a piece of meat is nutritious and safe to eat will depend in large part on our faith in the personal honesty of the butcher or the commercial probity of the supermarket, the competence and integrity of the USDA’s inspectors, and the disinterested expertise of nutritionists who tell us that leaner is better. In all three periods, advances in commercialization, delocalization, and industrialization, often keynoted by food scandals, outran institutions of trust, with reformers blaming food producers for pursuing profits at the expense of safe and wholesome food. The specific advances and violations of trust varied, thus also helping explain differences across cases. In the 1830s, for example, it was particularly the novelty of buying staples like bread from urban bakers rather than making such items at home that set the stage for broader anxieties over the healthfulness of commercial food. In all three periods, too, one sees how delocalization (at different scales at different times) can erode trust. Consumers could once have hoped that personal ties and community networks would keep the local butcher or baker honest. Those controls were ineffective with the larger, more anonymous cities developing in Jacksonian American, or with the slaughterhouses in far-off Chicago during the Progressive Era, or with the remote farms of the 1960s. And the application of new industrial techniques to produce familiar – and eventually unfamiliar – foods created, in each era, concerns about the safety and healthfulness of food. The products that were most questionable, too, varied from one era to another. For Grahamites, one source of alarm was flour refined in new ways and shipped all the way from Ohio. For Progressive-era food reformers, the novelties included canned fruits and vegetables, prepared in unaccustomed ways and preserved with strange additives. And for organic consumers, it was the application of factory methods to farming itself, including the intensive application of artificial fertilizers and pesticides.

In turn, typical movement strategies represented collective efforts to reestablish trust, once again in distinctive ways from one movement to another. Graham and Alcott sought to do so by bringing food production back into the traditional family, reversing commodification by making mothers again responsible for baking bread. Dietary reformers of the Progressive Era sought to do so by establishing their own credibility as a new profession with the expertise to guide consumers in proper nutrition (Spiekermann, 2011). In both the Progressive Era and the 1960s, reformers also developed civic organizations to certify the trustworthy provenance of foods. In the 1890s and 1900s, these included ‘pure food fairs’ to display ‘hygienic’ products (*Table Talk*, November 1891; Weigley, 1977). In the 1960s and 1970s, before state regulation, associations of farmers and Rodale’s *Organic Gardening and Farming* provided labels and lists of sources for organic food (*Organic Gardening and Farming* July 1969, August 1970, July 1973). And in both movements, activists came to see government regulation as indispensable for restoring trust, either through an agency to set and enforce standards of purity (the FDA) or through the USDA’s definition and labeling of organic food. Large-scale processes of

commodification, delocalization, and industrialization in the food system thus help account for the timing of mobilization, for a preoccupation with the trustworthiness of food producers that runs through all three eras, and for the more specific targets of protest in each period.

One other trend in the food system is particularly relevant to our third period. The industrialization of food production that began in the late nineteenth century is associated with increasing standardization of food. A more recent trend, however, tilts in the opposite direction, toward the proliferation of niche markets. Companies large and small seek to capture the higher profit margins that come with specialized markets – for gluten-free food, for exotic ethnic food, for fairly traded food (Goodman & Goodman, 2007; Grey, 2000). Consumers, or at least affluent ones, meet producers half way. Scholars have pointed to an increasing reliance on consumption choices to construct identities and act out political convictions (Shah et al., 2012). This genre of lifestyle politics is clear among food consumers. For many, food choices are political statements (as in purchases of Fair Trade coffee or cruelty-free meat) and demonstrations of cultural capital (showing off knowledge of authentic and exotic foods) (Johnston, Szabo, & Rodney, 2011).

This shift in marketing and consumption practices fueled the expansion of the organic sector, turning it from movement to market. As the sales potential of organic became clear, larger companies got into the game and smaller ones scaled up, devoting increasing resources to advertising the virtues of organic food. Affluent consumers, for their part, used their purchase of organic food to demonstrate their culinary sophistication and their commitment to environmental values (Belasco, 2007; Guthman, 2003). Arguably, dietary reformers of the Progressive Era anticipated this move. Most prominently, the Kelloggs turned their nutritional alternatives into commercial products (meat substitutes, breakfast cereal), and middle-class consumers embraced the dietary fad. In this case, what began as a niche market soon became a major industry (Carson, 1976). The more recent post-Fordist turn in the food industry concentrates on quick exploitation of shifting, often narrowly defined, consumer tastes. And by allying capitalist marketing and middle-class cultural capital, niche production helps explain not only the growth of the organic movement but also the tremendous expansion in the scale and the variety of food activism from the 1990s on (Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2012).

Connecting cases to their times

The second layer of our account connects each case, not to recurring systemic changes, but to period-specific settings and allies. Doing so serves two broad purposes. First, it shows how mobilization in response to comparable problems takes different cultural forms, as those problems are framed in distinct ways, attacked in line with distinct models of activism, and solved according to particular ways of defining and institutionalizing trust. Second, it helps clarify causes of mobilization. Recurrent grievances related to food (such as periodic price spikes) are more likely to prompt collective action to the extent that they are linked to particular identities (the cost of kosher meat or tortillas, for example) or piggy-back on concurrent struggles by other organizations (as when labor unions backed wartime consumer efforts in order to protect workers from rapid inflation).

Consider, first, the Grahamites. Their repudiation of commercialized food and their campaign to improve national dietary morals was part of a broader cycle of contention, the Second Great

Awakening. The period saw a wide array of reform movements rooted in evangelical revival, including efforts to enforce observance of the Sabbath, limit alcohol consumption, and abolish slavery (Walters, 1997; Young, 2006). The explosion of activism benefited from greatly improved national communication, thanks to more roads, better postal service, and cheaper printing. More importantly, a common framework of evangelical revival – mobilizing *as* evangelical Christians – shaped the ways in which dissatisfaction with commercial food translated into protest. Graham applied to food reform the basic organizational model of the larger temperance movement, including its strategies of public lecturing, public confessions, and alternative boarding houses (Whorton, 1982). The pervasive model of evangelical revival also favored interpretation of food risks in particular ways, as threats not just to physical health but to personal morality, with ‘stimulating’ food a metaphor for the perils and stresses of a rapidly commercializing society (Nissenbaum, 1980). Graham’s attack on mainstream medical advice on nutrition and disease followed another script: the evangelical challenge to established hierarchies of expertise and authority in multiple spheres, from Protestant churches to party politics (Walters, 1997). And in tying a disciplined individual diet to social betterment, Graham both applied a more general evangelical script to food and made nutritional reform part of a broader project of self-improvement by a new, upwardly mobile urban middle class (Gusfield, 1963; Johnson, 1978).

Activism on behalf of pure food in the Progressive Era came as part of another formidable wave of contention, ranging from resurgent labor unionism through women’s suffrage to protests against ‘white slavery.’ Campaigns for dietary reform and federal food protection, however, moved in different directions, following templates that distinguished them both from each other and from the food activism of other eras. Dietary reformers like Kellogg and Horace Fletcher were tied most closely to religiously inspired ‘purity campaigns’ of the time. Kellogg, for example, sought to end prostitution and masturbation; his wife was a leading temperance advocate. For them, as for Graham, impure food corrupted the bodies and the morals of consumers. The main solution followed the same religious script. Individuals needed to be educated to recognize the peril that eating bad foods posed to their spiritual as well as physical health. Social betterment would certainly follow from improved diets, but as for Graham, the improvement would come from the cumulative effects of individual moral uplift, not from the action of public authorities.

By contrast, organizations like the NCL and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs followed a different cultural script, applying the wider framework of Progressivism. Food adulteration, like poverty or child labor, was defined as a public menace rather than as an individual moral hazard, and as a social problem rather than as an individual moral lapse. Systematic investigation was necessary to inform consumers, but the more important solution would be passage of a federal pure food act, not widespread spiritual awakening. Progressives’ insistence on scientific research and expertise as guides for reform also meant that, in contrast to Graham or Kellogg, professional authority was regularly invoked rather than pilloried (Dirks, 1996). And the campaign for pure food legislation drew social boundaries along different lines from those of dietary reformers. Advocates such as Harvey Wiley and the NCL’s Maud Nathan, like Progressives involved in other causes, saw themselves as public-spirited citizens, standing above the fray of self-interested private interests like capital and labor (Nathan, 1986; Young, 1989). In addressing problems of impure food, some reformers (notably NCL leader Florence Kelley)

recognized that food risks were connected to labor exploitation. Bacterial contamination, for example, was more likely when food was made by poorly paid employees or in tenement houses. But as citizens above class, pure food advocates ultimately detached food safety (among other social issues) from labor reform, repudiating alliances with organized labor to improve *both* the diet and the living standards of the poor (Wiedenhof, 2002).

As a popular campaign combining agricultural producers and urban consumers, the organic movement was very much part of the widespread social unrest of the 1960s. Above all, its critique of conventional food and food production mirrored the larger counterculture (Belasco, 2007; Guthman, 2004; Haydu, 2011). That period-specific influence took the movement in different directions from either the pure food or the Grahamite protests. We noted that in all three periods, activists held up ‘natural’ food as a virtuous alternative to the products of the conventional food system. Organic advocates, however, attached to ‘natural’ connotations typical of the counterculture. Where for Graham ‘natural’ meant ‘as intended by God,’ 130 years later it celebrated a secularized Mother Nature, from which we have been alienated by ‘our increasingly industrialized existence’ (*Mother Earth News* January 1975, p. 12). And while Grahamites and organic enthusiasts would agree that natural food makes you healthier, in the first case the spiritual benefits involve a disciplining of sinful bodily impulses; proponents of organic food believed it could instead help liberate natural impulses, including sexual potency (Gusfield, 1992).

The organic movement also echoed the counterculture in its critique of technocracy. Grahamites and pure food lobbyists attributed food risks in part to the self-interested pursuit of profit by certain businesses. But these were individual bad actors. Leaders of the organic movement, by contrast, saw unhealthy and unnatural food as the inevitable product of large-scale corporate agriculture and of a scientific establishment captive to corporate priorities. Only by putting food production on an entirely different economic basis – decentralized, small scale, tied to local ecological dynamics, technologically simplified – could agriculture produce food healthy for the consumer, for the environment, and for society. In this, agribusiness was symptomatic of a larger problem identified by the counterculture, such that ‘organic could be the only alternative to a technological concentration-camp style of life’ (Rodale in *Organic Gardening and Farming* September 1971, p. 33. S. a. Haedicke, 2008; *Organic Gardening and Farming* December 1965, January 1970). The consumer wing of the movement, too, displayed hallmarks of the counterculture, particularly the conviction that ‘political’ change could be achieved by transforming personal lifestyles. That commitment informed the strategy of the movement, as organic advocates sought to use purchasing power as a lever for subverting agribusiness (McGrath, 2005). And to the extent that the counterculture fostered forms of cultural capital that relied on the conspicuous display of politically correct consumption choices (Frank, 1997), the consumer wing of the organic movement came to practice a form of boundary work characteristic of the counterculture, distinguishing the elect from the rabble on the basis of economic resources and political tastes, not religious piety (Guthman, 2003).

Connecting cases through legacies

A final layer of historical interpretation traces not the independent effects on each case of structural changes or of distinct times, but mutual influence among cases over time. For the

purposes of this paper, we focus mainly on legacies from earlier food reform movements, not from prior movements in other fields. Such influences are particularly clear with the dietary reform wing of the pure food movement, carried largely through religious intermediaries. Progressive-era campaigns against the evils of intemperance, masturbation, and prostitution certainly belonged to the era's larger quest for social purity (Engs, 2003). But the more specific claims that moral failings flow from the consumption of improper foods, and the specific recommendations for dietary uplift, can only be understood as legacies from the 1830s. Graham's critique and recommendations for change were taken up after his death by the Adventists, particularly the prophet Ellen White. So, too, was the view that dietary reform led to moral improvement. These principles were then institutionalized in the Adventist sanitarium in Battle Creek and embodied in the sanitarium's first superintendent, John Harvey Kellogg. The heritage is reflected not only in Kellogg's dietary nostrums, but also in the religiously themed names given to early cereals – Elijah's Manna, Food of Eden – before cereal companies came to their marketing senses (Elijah's Manna being rebranded as Post Toasties) (Carson, 1976; Numbers, 1992). More broadly, Graham's celebration of 'natural' food as both healthier and more virtuous became part of the enduring vocabulary of food reformers, even if they differed in their precise definitions of 'natural' or the exact criteria for virtue. The political wing of the pure food movement departed from Graham in its largely secular character and its focus on legislative reform. But its strategic repertoire drew on legacies from the broader cycle of contention in Graham's day. Some organizations within the pure food movement complemented state-centered efforts with market leverage, identifying foods made under salutary conditions and encouraging members to put their political commitments into their consumer practices. The leading champion of this strategy of ethical consumerism was Florence Kelley of the NCL, and her thinking was influenced by the precedent of the abolitionist movement's 'free sugar' campaign and by a predecessor in that movement, Kelley's great-aunt, Sarah Pugh (Goldmark, 1953).

The organic movement, too, reproduces the language of 'natural' food first valorized by Graham and reinforced by dietary reformers of the 1890s and 1900s. The organic movement built on another legacy from Progressive-era food protest in its consumerism. Graham had appealed to his audience as good Christians; advocates for a pure food law had done so in part as good citizens. But one key organization within the pure food campaign, the NCL, also helped popularize 'the consumer' as a new sort of public actor, having distinct interests and deserving government solicitude (Glickman, 2009). For the NCL, moreover, consumer and citizen were – or should be – closely connected. The ideal consumer made purchases with an eye to social betterment. A consumer identity, infused with social responsibility and backed by dedicated organizations, left important legacies for the organic movement. Activists like the Rodales appealed to the wider public as consumers whose interests were at risk from agribusiness and who could serve both their own interests and those of the larger environment through organic production. And organizations explicitly designating themselves organic *consumers* came to play key roles in educational outreach and in campaigns for organic labeling (*Organic Gardening and Farming* August, September 1970; April 1972)

One final legacy is less fortunate. The quest for a pure food law constructed food reform as distinct from labor reform; only the NCL sought to improve labor conditions along with safety in food production, and even the NCL declined to make union standards part of its requirement for a 'white label' seal of approval (Wiedenhof, 2002). Upton Sinclair's famous complaint that his

indictment of labor conditions in meat packing (*The Jungle*) had been misread as an exposé of dangers to consumers ('I aimed at the public's heart and by accident hit its stomach') is another reminder of this constructed separation between consumer and labor issues. The separation came to be institutionalized in the federal government. The FDA and the Department of Agriculture deal with food production and safety; employee interests are a matter for the Labor Department. The organic movement followed this inherited cultural and institutional template for reforming agricultural practices. When activists turned to the government to recognize an organic alternative, the relevant federal agencies were those ostensibly responsible for defending consumer interests, not labor needs, in the food system.

Conclusion

Our argument for a multi-layered historical analysis of recurrent social movements is best summarized by looking backwards from organic food advocacy. A first layer of the account was to link that movement to larger dynamics of the food system. One such dynamic, the expansion of niche production, enables consumers to demonstrate their personal politics (and their cultural capital) through their culinary choices. Organic food is one such niche. Other dynamics – commercialization, delocalization, industrialization – have periodically sparked protest when they undermined social bases of trust in food. The organic movement, in this view, appears as but one recent example in the larger rhythm of subverting and rebuilding trust. Links such as these between long-term structural dynamics and recurrent protest are easy to miss when the scholarly focus is on single cases or the dynamics of contention in single time periods. Those long-term continuities within a field of activism are also hidden by an emphasis on generic mechanisms and event codes that cut across movements of different kinds.

If our cases can be interpreted as driven by generic dynamics in the food system, they can also be treated as cases for comparative analysis. A second layer of the account takes up that comparison in part by *contrasting* the ways in which comparable mobilizations around food grievances were shaped by the cultural settings and ambient cycles of contention of their times. That historical contextualizing sheds light on differences in fundamental aspects of movement framing, goals, and strategies, including how each movement defined the deficiencies of conventional food, how they connected better food to social betterment, and how they balanced consumerist and state-centered tactics. The point is not just to identify differences across temporal cases, but also to explain them. We saw, for example, that the organic movement's framing of *unnatural* food as symptomatic of corporate power and technocratic domination owes much to the movement piggy-backing on the counterculture of its day. Here too, the move from recurrent movement to period-specific explanation is a historicist alternative to mechanisms of contention. We can still see 'brokerage,' for example, but it is the specific roles of countercultural brokers that do the causal heavy lifting.

A final layer reflects the fact that these are not independent cases. The organic movement can be treated as one in a long line of responses to systemic changes in the food system. It can be interpreted, too, as a creature of its time. But it also rests on legacies from food movements of the past. Its valorization of 'natural' food goes back to Graham. Its mixing of social movement and capitalist market was pioneered by an earlier generation of dietary reformers who discovered the money to be made in wholesome breakfast cereal. Its strategy of certifying and labeling

virtuous foods is one popularized by Progressive-era consumer activists. This long-term diffusion of social movement framing and strategy, finally, was channeled through the structure of political opportunities: organic advocates adapted themselves to regulatory institutions constructed in large part by their early-twentieth-century ancestors. The larger lesson here is for students of diffusion, typically concerned with the influence of movements on one another within a relatively narrow swath of time. Tracking recurrent movements over decades or centuries makes it easier to see other channels of diffusion at work, and working in different ways than those of personal ties and social networks among living activists.

Our focus has been on food reform movements, in part because this is a genre of protest less familiar to social movement scholars. But there are other fields of activism that can be treated as temporal cases of mobilization to deal with recurrent social problems – those of labor exploitation, patriarchy, environmental degradation, and welfare provision, for instance. In these fields, too, a focus limited to generic mechanisms underlying contentious politics will give short shrift to each case's place in a distinct historical trajectory, its roots in a distinct cultural setting, and its inheritance of distinct movement legacies.

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