A quiet revolution? Beneath the surface of Ireland’s alternative food initiatives

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Getting food to our plates has become a highly complex, industrialised and globalised process. However, transformations in how our food is supplied are not without resistance. Initiatives are emerging that take a step back to simpler, alternative methods of food supply, bringing the producer and consumer closer together. Alternative food initiatives which are commonly found in Ireland include allotments, community gardens, farmers’ markets, farm shops and on-farm food enterprises. Understanding alternative food activities as a social movement can illuminate a fresh perspective on their nature and potential. While briefly considering the broad dynamics of alternative food activity in Ireland, this exploratory paper looks at the question of the nature of resistance and whether a collective vision may exist across initiatives, illustrated by two examples, a community garden and consumer food co-op. Finally some conclusions as to how alternative food initiatives may play a transformative role within the contemporary food system are discussed.

**Keywords:** alternative food initiatives; social movements; collective identity; boundaries; community gardens; consumer food co-operatives

Every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about ourselves, and about our place in the world. (Bell and Valentine 1997, p. 3)

Whether we are acutely aware or unconscious of it, what we eat says something about our place in the world. Choosing to eat the produce of, or participate in, an alternative food initiative represents such positioning. The concerns of alternative eaters and producers can be generalised around a set of binaries, working towards a different kind of food system which prioritises ‘the local over the global, fresh over processed foods, diversity over homogeneity, skills rather than deskilling, rights rather than acceptance’ (Lang 1999, pp. 169–170). However methods to realistically overcome issues of concern have been questioned. Some ask if ‘alternatives’ are trying to reshape the dominant food system completely or are just opposing the conventional, with limited potential to challenge and change it (Allen et al. 2003, Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Describing alternative food as if it exists separately, in binary opposition to conventional systems, does not adequately explain its dynamics (Caton Campbell 2004, Ilbery and Maye 2005). Before applying categorising terms and labelling activities decisively, it may be time to take a step back to allow us to understand alternative food at a more fundamental level. Adopting a social movement perspective is one way to begin to understand the nature, potential and

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future direction of alternative food initiatives. While alternative food activities have
been broadly described as a movement (Buttel 1997, Hassanein 2003, Blay Palmer
2008), few Irish studies have to date engaged with alternative food using social
movement theory. Tovey (2006) argues for the importance of understanding Ireland’s
alternative food activism in this way. Others identify the need to understand the form
and shape of its power dynamics (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). More broadly, in
overcoming some of the dualisms used in explaining rural politics (rural/urban, left/
right), Reed (2008) calls for a reorientation towards social movement theory.

Social movements, food and shared vision

Alternative food initiatives have been celebrated as agents of social change (Allen
et al. 2003) and social movement theory provides a framework to begin to
understand particular types of social change that ‘problematicise the ways in which
we live our lives...call for changes in our habits of thought, action and
interpretation’ (Crossley 2002, p. 8). Issues that concern new social movement
actors are described as the ‘personal and intimate aspects of human life’ such as
‘what we eat, wear and enjoy’ (Johnston et al. 1994, p. 8). Movements can promote a
particular vision or worldview, or oppose how change is taking shape. An ideological
drive for social change can strengthen civic life by representing the expansion of an
active civil society, moving away from traditional political forms, democratising
everyday life (Diani 1992, Johnston et al. 1994, Tovey 2006). Arguments are made for
alternative food initiatives providing motivation to others, inspiring a wider
movement of such practices, driven by their ideology (Hendrickson and Heffernan
2002, Kirwan 2004, Slocum 2006). It is often when mobilisation around ideological
issues occurs that social movement activity is studied. Formative movement phases,
when groups do not yet have a conscious master plan but nevertheless aim to
challenge dominant systems, can be overlooked (Polletta 1998, Geoghegan 2008).
Movement activity often begins as informal networks between individuals, eventually
held together by strong bonds or collective identity, and is central to the mobilisation
and maintenance of action (Johnston et al. 1994). Identification of a collective ‘we’
that share characteristics, vision and beliefs and an ‘other’, against which action is
mobilised, must occur (Taylor and Whittier 1992, Della Porta and Diani 2006).

Discussions around the question of a collective vision existing among alternative
food initiatives present conflicting notions. Some argue that while there is an overlap
in values and a sense of being on the one side, there may not be a strong unifying
ethos between actors, nor a clear agenda (Buttel 1997, Hassanein 2003, Caton
Campbell 2004). However, some shared values have been identified. Kneafsey et al.
(2008) argue that ‘care ethics’ are central to creating identity and motivating action.
What is cared for varies, from people to environments, and subjects of concern may
be both close and distant, such as farmers who are local and those in a developing
country. Action has also been described as individualised, where the burden and
benefit is with the individual (Seyfang 2006). Patterns of earlier food movement
activity found in Ireland’s organic movement highlighted a ‘personal is political’
outlook (Tovey 2006). In the case of community-supported agriculture in the United
States, it was suggested that we are ‘dealing with individualised communities and not
dealing with communitised individuals’, and that involvement is a ‘highly individual
or personalised resistance – a resistance primarily of consumers – not of citizens’
(DeLind 1999, pp. 7–8). However, for a food social movement, a collective response aiming to create wider social change and to challenge the distribution of power in the food system would be necessary. Alternative food initiatives apparently share values, and understanding the nature of these values could go some way to appreciating whether they represent the beginnings of a movement.

**Shared vision and mobilisation**

A strong sense of collective identity draws a boundary between members of the movement and those who do not belong. It implies unity and boundedness, although while boundaries exist they can be ‘contested, blurred and shifting . . . and may exist at a variety of scales’ (Miller 2004, p. 230). One single collective vision may not exist, but rather there are multiple identities that are broadly compatible (Della Porta and Diani 2006). Identity is not static, but a process where movement participants construct an action system which includes the orientations of action and the opportunities and constraints in which action takes place (Melucci 1996).

The scale at which social movement activity occurs is argued to affect the potential for real social change. National activity is usually needed, but local scale action is also important (Miller 2001). Distinguishing identity types by the scale at which action occurs highlights how spatial patterns of interaction create specific identity types. Identifying with a collective identity and being part of a social movement occurs in different ways: ‘does ‘wearing a badge’ and ‘buying the T-shirt’ make one part of a social movement or must one attend monthly meetings and engage in protest?’ (Crossley 2002, p. 2). Miller (2004) draws on Tilly (2003) to classify movement activity distinguishing spatially-situated social sites of activity based on mobility and proximity. The scale of interaction effects the degree to which activities are embedded, which can ‘vary along a continuum whose poles we call embedded and detached’ (Tilly 2003, p. 222). Local fixed sites are the most embedded, while large-scale mobile activities are the least. On the local scale, collective identity can be based on infrequent but highly localised social interaction that produces a parochial and individualistic form of identity. Place-specific identity does not mean that disconnected actors do not identify with each other. Collective identity allows for connection between actors dislocated over time and across space as actor’s experiences have common meaning (Della Porta and Diani 2006). Spatially disconnected collective identities are seldom engaged through face to face interaction, creating a large-scale, low-interaction collective identity (Miller 2004).

The importance of understanding place-specific manifestations of alternative food activities has been highlighted and a similar argument has been made for the study of social movements (Miller 2000, Allen et al. 2003). This article draws on two cases in the same city, Dublin. Some are critical of taking a case study approach, with researchers selecting cases based on convenience or prior familiarity (Kirwan 2004). Apart from general trend reports showing growth in sectors such as organic or local food, figures on the constitution and size of alternative food networks are lacking, making representativeness in research problematic (Venn et al. 2006). Ireland is no exception. With no official statistics from which to draw, two pioneering initiatives were selected to conduct exploratory research around issues of shared vision, the nature of identity, and the potential for greater mobilisation. In a similar way Cox et al. (2008) use a community-supported agriculture initiative as an instrumental case
study, to open debate, rather than to make generalisations. The cases were constructed through participant observation and analysis of each initiative’s external (newsletters, website content) and internal narratives (e.g. member email communication, meeting minutes, reports) from the period mid-2005 to mid-2009.

Framing alternative food as a social movement

Alternative food activities are a response by a range of actors to a set of dissatisfactions around how their food is supplied. Actors who respond include farmers and consumers, as well groups with more specific agendas such as preserving food culture, environmental protection, food security and local food sourcing (Hassanein 2003). Within the broader field of food movements, vegetarianism can be understood as an individual level response (Allen and Kovach 2000), while other activities are a collective response, such as the agrarian movement, La Via Campesina (Desmarais 2007). In a similar way, alternative food activities can be described as occurring on the individual and collective level. Individual farmers and consumers opt out, in full or part, of engaging with dominant food supply mechanisms. They may also simultaneously become part of a wider group, where farmers participate in producer groups, co-operatives, farmers’ markets and consumers participate in community gardens, allotments, consumer co-operatives and growers’ groups. Activities operate on a number of spatial scales, with strategic action often localised. Actor’s overall ethos may be part of a broader regional or global network, such as the organic movement or Slow Food. Existing food movements have also been critiqued and evidence of internal shifts is evidenced. For example the organic movement is critiqued for becoming industrialised and bureaucratised (Tovey 1999, Guthman 2004). Moore (2006a, b) argues that a ‘postorganic’ element exists amongst Irish organic farmers, where organic principles are adhered to, but farmers avoid the bureaucracy of regulation and sell produce as ‘chemical free’. In this context, Tovey (1999), p. 57) suggested over a decade ago ‘those who want a ‘real alternative’ may have to withdraw, regroup and start all over again’. Subsequently, new forms of resistance to dominant systems that attempt to reconstruct food circulation emerge (Allen et al. 2003).

Ireland: the rumblings of movement?

Irish country markets, the co-operative and organic movements provide a backdrop for Ireland’s current food resistance. Emerging in the late nineteenth century, the co-operative movement aimed to support the economic survival of small producers, to protect them from the unfair commercial activities of middlemen (Ward 2000, Tovey 2001, Jenkins 2004). The Irish country markets co-operative, operating now for over 60 years, demonstrates the importance of home production to the domestic economy, selling only home produced goods (Sage 2003). A small movement of people in the 1960s, linked to the origins of the organic movement in Ireland, worked towards self-sufficiency and marked the beginnings of artisan and organic food production (Tovey 1997, Sage 2003). Rural agricultural households also produced for their own use and a minority of urban dwellers did the same in back gardens or allotments (Sexton 1998, Fox 2006). More recently, Tovey (2006) includes a range of food initiatives under the umbrella ‘alternative’, such as Slow Food, organic and local
Two broad areas within Ireland’s alternative food initiatives can be identified. The first, alternative food retailing through, for example, farmers’ markets, farm shops and independent retailers, and the second, community food growing, through allotments, community gardens, growers’ groups and home growing. Farmers’ markets blossomed in the mid 1990s, when primary and secondary food producers began to carry their produce from production to market, such as artisan food producers, farmers and growers. Such markets increased from a handful to approximately 80 in 2006 and to 130 in 2009 (Moore 2006b, Bord Bia 2009). A surge in food growing is also occurring with consumers producing food themselves, in back-gardens, allotments or collectively in community gardens. Increasing demand for urban food-growing spaces emerged during the Celtic Tiger years, and has gathered pace more recently with economic decline (Powers 2004, Viney 2006, Monaghan 2008, Fallon 2009). Home growers have also begun to come together in growers’ groups, such as Grow It Yourself² to share knowledge, skills and resources.

Two alternative food communities

The two cases focused on here, the South Circular Road (SCR) Community Garden and the Dublin Food Co-op (DFC) represent two sections within Ireland’s alternative food initiatives: one, alternative food retailing, the other, community food growing. Adopting a comparative approach allows exploration of the nature of the identity across different types of initiatives. They can be described as collective-level activities, where individuals act in groups to change how food is circulated. Both are also directly linked to each other through sharing some of the same member base. Locally and nationally, a network of food and environmental groups that link both cases also exists, including the Cultivate Centre for Sustainable Living, Irish Seed Savers and Slow Food Ireland.

The SCR Garden was established in 2005 and was among Dublin’s first community gardens. The gardeners began by squatting on land along Dublin’s Grand Canal. Moved on from their original site in 2007, they sought and were granted temporary permission to use another local site, which they still occupy. Their contract was initially for one month, which was renewed and extended periodically. After the garden was in existence for two years, many of its founding members had departed from Dublin, however it had mobilised enough support since its inception to continue. The SCR Garden attempts to play a part in strengthening the cohesion of the local community, by promoting the project in its locality and interacting with local schools. The garden site has planning permission for a block of flats, meaning that a permanent threat exists of the garden being uprooted.

In existence since the 1980s, the DFC is unique in the Irish context as a consumer food co-operative. It began when a group of friends pooled money to buy bulk quantities of organic wholefoods, and evolved to become a formal consumer food co-operative, now with over 1000 members. It operates to a defined sourcing strategy, selling only vegetarian foods that are organic and Irish where possible, in addition to trading only ecologically acceptable products and with countries where basic human rights are upheld. The DFC itself trades wholefoods and eco-products, while a number of trader-members sell produce such as organic fruit and vegetables, dairy produce, bread and baked goods. The co-op employs a small number of paid staff and is governed by an elected coordinating body.
Us and them: ourselves and the other
Both case studies have broadly compatible shared value systems around care for environment, health and humanity. A ‘personal is political’ outlook is demonstrated where rules governing, or general principles underlying their practices around set values are displayed. The SCR Gardeners’ concerns, for example, include the following:

We have largely lost our connection with our food … The nutritional value of this modern diet has decreased as people are more likely to eat processed food, and food that is less likely to be fresh or in season. We do not know where our food has come from, how far it has travelled, the conditions of employment of those who produced it, and whether it was treated with pesticides or genetically modified. (Baynes 2005b)

They work towards a vision of a different kind of city, where the garden facilitates cohesion among a like-minded community that is dislocated by the impersonal nature of modern city life, with food production as the hinge. Activities highlight how those without land are seeking to reconnect with food production, using vacant urban green space to realise their aims:

there are several of us involved, each for our own reasons, the idea is centred around the two ideas of environment and community … We are using the garden to grow food. We intend to engage with the local community. The garden is also a social space, giving us a chance to engage with other like-minded people. Some of us have a vision of an unbroken greenway through Dublin City. (Baynes 2005a)

Consumer members of the DFC are using their food consumption to work towards creating a fairer and more environmentally benign existence:

A great community of people … come to sell their wares and to shop, many are visionaries, idealists, spiritual seekers and others just like the place! Many come because they are concerned about health, the environment, justice, or because they like the sense of community. (DFC 2006b)

These principles are embedded in the co-op rules, to discriminate in favour of ecologically acceptable products and countries which uphold basic human rights (DFC 2010). In reality this is practised in a number of ways, for example, while all plastic packaging emanating from the co-op’s retailing is recycled, an organic farmer trader-member composts the co-op’s cardboard packaging. The co-op also has a food policy working group monitoring how principles are practised.

The cases display an opposition towards the impersonal nature of modern food retailing and their own value system is more clearly articulated than the ‘other’. When threats to the ‘self’ present themselves, the ‘other’ is asserted. This is seen in the DFC during a period of transition. The DFC sought to expand its operations in 2007, and moved premises from its original location to larger premises in another part of the city. Expansion was viewed by some as necessary to expand the co-op’s services to a wider membership community. However other members feared this change might leave some of the co-op’s vital difference behind. The move raised concerns in member’s minds of it going ‘all corporate’ with the DFC crucially seen as an alternative to conventional retailing opposing ‘mundane, boring, over-priced
convenience stores taking over the world’ (DFC 2006a, DFC 2009). Similarly, the SCR Gardeners debate over where they should source seeds and plants, avoiding multinationals and making preference for organic or local suppliers:

Not every seed is sacred . . . what type of Eden do we want to create? Is it to be an extension of Tesco’s finest, Lidl’s cheapest, Sutton’s best? If that is the case, fine, so we work hard at creating another multinational garden. Our garden will be like the high street, the same old bland mediocre stuff that is all over the place, no individuality. (Member email communication)

Identity, scale and potential mobilisation

The identities that emerge here present aspects described by Miller (2004), identifying with actors on a larger scale, showing elements of a large-scale collective identity but with low personal interaction. The DFC recognises the need to develop links with other like-minded organisations, having connections with the Vegetarian Society of Ireland and Amnesty International. However, being the only consumer food co-op in Ireland, international connections also exist, with groups such as Sustain and the Plunkett Foundation and other wholesale co-ops like Suma and Essential Trading. The SCR Gardeners identify with a broader network of community food activists on a local, national and international scale. Locally, SCR are linked with other community gardens in Dublin and are also part of a wider movement of community food, the Dublin Food Growing Network. Nationally connections exist between SCR and other community gardens. In the initial stages of formation, SCR received advice from the Cork Mandala of Community Gardens. Internationally they identify with a movement of guerrilla gardeners and view the Cuban experience as a success in urban food production. Neither limits membership or participation on any scale. Rather this is limited by like-mindedness, rather than any geographic boundary. The DFC members describe themselves as a ‘like-minded community’ (DFC 2007) and SCR welcome participants who share values and are interested in local, urban food production as an alternative to food characterised by the three ‘P’s: pesticides, preservatives and excess packaging’ (member email communication). While this large-scale, low interaction, collective identity exists, it operates in tandem with a more engaged high interaction identity, through participation in the initiative, some with ‘higher’ interaction than others. Both strategies aim to directly involve participants. By the nature of the size of both groups, the co-op members are less directly connected than the gardeners. The garden involves a small core group who regularly participate in the garden’s collective workdays. The co-op facilitates the creation of community cohesion and participation. Regular social events and non-food markets are held to facilitate social connections. Participation in co-op governance is also facilitated, with members invited to informal monthly meetings to discuss governance and operational issues. Referring back to DeLind (1999), while action can be read as occurring in individualised communities, they also simultaneously try to create communitised individuals. The SCR Garden is sustained by the commitment of all of its members, but some are more transient than others. A core group of committed activists has been central to sustaining the garden throughout its existence. Their identity is more embedded than the many garden participants who come and go. Similarly, only a small proportion of the co-op’s members are directly engaged -through sitting on the board, volunteering, selling their
produce or participating in events – and the need to mobilise greater member participation is frequently raised.

A ricochet effect?
Clarifying the identity of an alternative food actor is central to understanding what kind of social change their activities seek to create. The case studies illustrate differing types of identity, suggesting that a smaller number of core participants act as communitised individuals while those who are less directly involved represent a more personalised form of resistance as consumers identifying with a shared value system. While not all participants will engage deeply, the more active member mobilises the participation of individuals who identify with the movement in a more detached way. This would suggest that a growing body of committed activists could potentially mobilise participation and expand a movement. Committed activists who share a vision are central to social movement formation and their message must reach beyond this core for wider mobilisation, given that ‘most people who share affinities with social movements never participate in them’ (Miller 2004, p. 225). Allen et al. (2003, p. 61) question the dynamics of alternative food, using a plate tectonics analogy, asking:

To what degree do they seek to create a new structural configuration – a shifting of plates in the agrifood landscape – and to what degree are their efforts limited to incremental erosion at the edges of the political-economic structures that currently constitute those plates?

Understanding the identity and potential for wider mobilisation may go some way to answering this. Taking the analogy a step further, one might suggest that beneath the plates, even before they begin to move, are forces that effect their direction and thrust. Current alternative food activity may represent the ‘seeds of social change’ and must be ‘understood as works in progress’ (Allen et al. 2003, p. 62). Rather than representing radical movement, the plates may not collide with force but quietly and slowly effect change in an alternative direction. Greater mobilisation and engagement may therefore support more continuous incremental erosion around the edges of the agri-food landscape.

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Notes
1. This article is part of the preliminary stages of research for a PhD on Ireland’s alternative food sector. Instead of focusing on specific case studies, the overall study attempts to move beyond this approach. The two case studies focused on here were chosen to begin to engage with social movement theory that could feed into the study in its later stages. A database cataloguing information on initiatives in Ireland was constructed, from which four
area-based comparisons were selected. The four areas are where the bulk of empirical data for the study was collected, which is composed of narratives, participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

2. Grow it Yourself (GIY) Ireland is a national not for profit organisation which aims to inspire people to grow food and develop food growing skills. Nationally, a network of 70 local groups exists, with each group meeting monthly.

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