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Countervailing Market Responses to Corporate Co-optation and the Ideological Recruitment of Consumption Communities

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From a conventional theoretical standpoint, the corporatization of the organic food movement is an example of co-optation. Co-optation theory conceptualizes the commercial marketplace as an ideological force that assimilates the symbols and practices of a counterculture into dominant norms. Our alternative argument is that co-optation can generate a countervailing market response that actively promotes the oppositional aspects of a counterculture attenuated by the process of commercial mainstreaming. To develop this theoretical argument, we analyze community-supported agriculture, which has emerged in response to the corporate co-optation of the organic food movement. We conclude by discussing how tacit political ideologies structure consumption communities.

What a long strange trip it has been. Over the course of 3 decades, organic foods, once a totem of the 1960s antiestablishment, anticorporate, anticonformist, hippie counterculture, morphed into a cultural symbol of the cultural creative professional class (Brooks 2000; Florida 2002). No longer a province of unadorned, bulk-bin co-ops, organic foods have become staple items for trendy upscale retailers such as Whole Foods and widely distributed through an array of premium-priced brands. And now, Wal-Mart, the paragon of populist mass marketing (Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman 2001), is pushing organic food further into the consumer mainstream. As Pollan (2006, 16) reports, “Wal-Mart plans to roll out a complete selection of organic foods—food certified by the U.S.D.A. to have been grown without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers—in its nearly 4,000 stores. Just as significant, the company says it will price all this organic food at an eye-poppingly tiny premium over its already-cheap conventional food.”

The burgeoning multi-billion-dollar global market for organic food has inspired feverish corporate-branding activity (Warner 2005). In the United States, over 80% of all sales in the organic category hail from brands owned by corporate conglomerates such as Archer Daniels Midland, ConAgra, H. J. Heinz, Kellogg, and Mars (Sligh and Christman 2003). These multinational corporations have demonstrated a strategic affinity for leveraged buyouts of independent companies, such as Ben & Jerry’s (purchased by Unilever in 2001) and Cascadian Farms (purchased by General Mills in 1999), whose brands invoke images of small family farms and idealistic hippie entrepreneurs. These idyllic brand meanings leverage the cultural history that situates the organic food movement, and, in so doing, they place a marketable countercultural face on the corporatization and globalization of organic food production (Pollan 2001).

Organic foods have functioned, within the U.S. context, as a cultural vehicle (McCracken 1986) for social values and ideals that had become strongly associated with a prominent segment of the youth-oriented 1960s counterculture. Against the historical backdrop of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, and the genesis of the contemporary environmental movement, a generation of predominantly white, middle-class young adults rebelled against the military-industrial complex, suburban conformity, and the banality of mass consumer society (Braunstein and Doyle 2001). Their countercultural identity was characterized by an assiduous rejection of bourgeois norms and values, a stridently anticorporate outlook, and a back-to-nature style of living that diametrically opposed the perceived synthetic qualities of mainstream consumer culture (Reich 1970; Roszak 1969).

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During the 1970s, this countercultural segment, which had been galvanized by the generational cause of the ant_war movement, began to lose its sense of sociopolitical unity and fragmented into a diversity of political factions and lifestyle orientations (Diggins 1992; Gitlin 1995). From this ferment, the organic food movement emerged as one major splinter group. Prior to reaching its cultural tipping point (Gladdwell 1997) during the fin de millennium years, organic food symbolized an ideological antithesis to large-scale agribusiness and the corporate marketing of processed foods. Organic farming was widely heralded by environmentalists and food activists alike as the embodiment of Schumacher’s (1973) small-is-beautiful model of sustainability (Belasco 1989).

The contemporary mass-marketed meanings of organic have largely been divorced from the oppositional values that animated the organic food movement during its countercultural ascendancy (Guthman 2002; Pollan 2001). In the contemporary marketplace, organic has devolved into a codified and complex litany of agricultural dos and don’ts that are set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and that are gradually being adapted to the exigencies of large-scale corporate farming (Guthman 2002; Hyde and Wiegand 2005). While organic certification provides consumers with an easily recognized (if vaguely understood) quality assurance, this technocratic definition elides the anticorporate and utopian associations that once imbued the term “organic” with a radical political edge. Guthman (2004) critically posits that the legitimating stamp of organic certification has created an “unexpected complementarity between organic regulations and industrial agriculture” (173) and that this institutional emphasis on regulatory codification represents the “culmination of a more protracted process of evisceration” (172) of the organic food movement’s original goals and ideals.

Organic food had once been an economic haven for small farms that distributed their goods predominantly through local channels such as farmers’ markets and food co-ops. Furthermore, the support of small farms, which were ideologically canonized as beacons of sustainable production, biodiversity, and ethical accountability, stood as a key orienting principle of the organic food movement (Pollan 2001). In the contemporary marketplace, however, the vast majority of organic food production now occurs on large-scale, industrial farms whose goods flow through global supply chains (Hyde and Wiegand 2005). While globally distributed agricultural goods and exceedingly distal and anonymous relations between farmers and consumers are mundane features of contemporary consumer culture, they are an anathema to the vision of sustainability and communal connectedness pursued by the countercultural pioneers of the organic food movement.

From a conventional theoretical standpoint, the corporatization of the organic food movement is merely another chapter in the ongoing saga of countercultural co-optation at the hands of corporate capitalism (Rushkoff and Goodman 2001). A key premise of co-optation theory is that the capitalistic marketplace transforms the symbols and practices of countercultural opposition into a constellation of trendy commodities and depoliticized fashion styles that are readily assimilated into the societal mainstream (Clark 2003; Ewen 1988; Hebdige 1979). Writing in this theoretical vein, Clark (2003, 225) offers this postmortem on the punk subculture: “Even punk, when reduced to a neat mohawk hairstyle and a studded leather jacket, could be made into a cleaned-up spokesman for potato chips. . . . Like their subcultural predecessors, early punks were too dependent on music and fashion as modes for expression; these proved to be easy targets for corporate cooption . . . which mass produced and sterilized punk’s verve.”

However, co-optation theory ascribes little or no potential for members of a counterculture to reclaim and repoliticize their co-opted symbols and practices. For this reason, co-optation theory would not have predicted that the corporatization of organic food would have engendered a thriving countervailing market system—community-supported agriculture (CSA)—which has staked out a viable market niche for small, independent farmers by aggressively reasserting the countercultural values and ideals that originally animated the organic food movement. CSA widely promotes itself as an alternative to the organic foods now produced under the auspices of corporate conglomerates (Sharp, Imerman, and Peters 2002). The last 10 years have witnessed a significant increase in the number of farms operating under this model. Over 1,500 CSA farms are now in operation throughout North America, located mainly in the Northeast, the Pacific Coast, the upper Midwest, and Canada (Weise 2005).

In the following sections, we first review the leading conceptualizations of corporate co-optation and highlight their theoretical omissions regarding the dynamics of countervailing market responses. Next, we explore the ways in which CSA has turned the corporate co-optation of the organic food movement to its own ideological advantage and examine the alternative producer and consumer outlooks (and communal experiences) that are forged within these countervailing market-mediated relationships. We further explicate how this ideological inversion creates alignments between CSA farmers’ economic interests and CSA consumers’ perceptions of value.

These ideological alignments are particularly interesting in the CSA case because this market system is designed to favor farmers’ economic interests while placing constraints on many taken-for-granted forms of consumer sovereignty. Critics who contend that these countercultural values are merely a hip guise for bourgeois consumerism (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004) would likely conclude that CSA consumers are paying a premium to gain a vaunted status.
distinction over the latte-sipping, Whole Foods aesthetes or the cost-conscious shoppers who will stock up on organic foods at Wal-Mart superstores. Status seeking, indeed, may well play a role in some consumers’ affinity for CSA. However, this explanation is insufficient because it ignores the ways in which this countervailing market provides an experientially compelling ideological alternative to the disembedded consumption experiences engendered by the institutional structures of global corporate capitalism (Kelly 2001; Sassen 2005; Tomlinson 1999). This alternative ideological frame, and its corresponding mode of communal consumption experiences, enables CSA consumers to perceive the unconventional demands and transaction costs imposed by this countervailing market system as socially redeeming benefits.

CO-OPTATION THEORIES AND THE PROBLEM OF THE MARKET

A basic tenet of co-optation theory is that countercultures represent “symbolic challenges to a [dominant] symbolic order” (Hebdige 1979, 92). Through their defiance of hegemonic cultural codes, rebellious countercultures threaten to destabilize taken-for-granted modes of understanding and fundamentally breach the fragile consensus through which hegemony of the dominant classes is sustained. To contain and neutralize this threat, the dominant culture responds by converting these expressions of countercultural opposition into commodified forms that can be repositioned within dominant frameworks of meaning and denuded of their transgressive sociopolitical significations (Clark 2003; Marcus 1969).

This hegemonizing strategy took on a very different institutional form during the 1960s. Owing to a confluence of historical forces, the cultural norms of social conformity, which drove mass consumption during the 1950s, gave way to a new ethos of creative self-expression and identity experimentation that carries on to this day (see Holt 2002). As a result, mainstream consumers began to seek out a diversity of cultural resources that they could use to fashion distinctive and dynamic self-identities. Hence, the previously conformist mass market evolved into a ready and receptive audience for co-opted countercultural styles, symbols, and values. This sociocultural development fostered a paradoxically symbiotic relationship between oppositional countercultures and the corporate quest for profits and market-driving innovations.

In a related conceptual vein, Frank (1997) and Heath and Potter (2004) argue that the antiestablishment, anticonformist values that permeated the countercultural zeitgeist of the 1960s were not just co-opted by corporations. Rather, these countercultural sensibilities became an ideological template for a new version of bourgeois consumerism in which consumers proclaim individuality and enlightened self-directed autonomy by ritualistically rebelling against a mythic notion of the conformist mainstream. According to Frank (1997), the ideal of countercultural rebellion is ideologically coded as hip (i.e., a step ahead of the conformist crowd), and “hip is the cultural life blood of consumer society” (Frank 1997, 234).

Building on this theme, Heath and Potter (2004) contend that countercultural rebellion is a postmodernized version of the Veblenian status competition that has long motivated conspicuous consumption. Under the ideological guise of fighting the system, self-styled countercultural rebels compete for social status and distinction through elitist cultural practices such as buying organic food and brandishing premium brands that carry an antiestablishment cachet. Rather than combating rampant consumerism (which Heath and Potter construe as a societal and environmental blight that desperately needs to be controlled), countercultural rebellion “simply feeds the flames, creating a whole new set of positional goods for these new rebel consumers to compete for” (Heath and Potter 2004, 322).

Classic co-optation theory portrays the founding members of a counterculture as self-producers who create their own fashion styles and who exchange art and other cultural artifacts through informal gift economy networks. Conversely, commercialism (even at the hands of small independent entrepreneurs) is viewed as the first step in the commodification of a counterculture and, thus, marks the beginning of its demise (Clark 2003; Ewen 1988; Gladwell 1997; Hebdige 1979; Rushkoff and Goodman 2001). This version of the co-optation thesis is a tale of creeping commercialism that steadily erodes a counterculture’s subversive distinctiveness and the sociopolitical force of its symbolic protests.

The hip consumer variation of co-optation theory readily accepts that countercultural identities never exist in isolation from the commercial marketplace, but this mutuality is deemed to be further evidence that countercultural rebellion is an inherently consumerist undertaking. From this theoretical viewpoint, a common ideological orientation (i.e., hip bourgeois consumerism) underlies the activities of both small countercultural entrepreneurs and multinational corporations who latter promote these aesthetic sensibilities to the commercial mainstream (Frank 1997). Thus, Heath and Potter (2004) point to the entrepreneurial spirit that infused the 1960s youth-oriented counterculture—such as the Whole Earth catalog, head shops, musical promoters, and many other merchandising forms—as proof that it was always complicit with the capitalist system: “That’s why the hippies didn’t need to sell out in order to become yuppies. It’s not that the system co-opted their dissent, it’s that they were never really dissenting. . . . Rejecting materialist values and mass society does not force you to reject consumer capitalism” (Heath and Potter 2004, 158).

However, treating all forms of commercial activity as manifestations of an undifferentiated global structure—consumer capitalism—is a very questionable theoretical move. For example, Wal-Mart and a small purveyor of indie music are both profit-seeking entities, and both are participating in the sphere of commercial exchange. Yet, their respective scales of operation and their corresponding degrees of socioeconomic influence, channel power, and media
penetration are dramatically different. By conceptualizing commercialism as a hegemon, social theorists will almost invariably reach the conclusion that a given counterculture has either been bought out (i.e., the classic co-optation thesis) or always been part of the system of capitalism (e.g., counterculture as hypocritical bourgeois affectation).

Building on Sassen (2005), we contend that more nuanced analyses are needed to advance understanding of the structural relations, dialectical tensions, and ideological disjunctions that exist among the different market systems (and corresponding consumer orientations) that are situated within the global circuits of corporate capitalism. In this spirit, we contend that the corporate co-optation of a counterculture can generate countervailing markets. These markets are countervailing in the specific sense that they amplify, implement, and actively promote the countercultural principles, meanings, and ideals that have been attenuated by corporate co-optation. In contradistinction to classic co-optation theory, our formulation holds that countercultural identifications are fundamentally dependent upon the marketplace systems through which their defining values and ideals are materially represented. In responding to corporate co-optation, agents with vested interests in preserving and commercially cultivating these reclaimed countercultural meanings play a pivotal role in building a countervailing market by recruiting consumers to the (commercial) cause through a variety of entrepreneurial and potentially indoctrinating activities.

In the following sections, we interrogate how CSA has ideologically reclaimed and reanimated the founding dispositions that can be made at a grocery store or a farmers' market—but not at a CSA. Rather, the weekly selection is determined by the farmer’s planting decisions and the quality and quantity of his/her crops. Furthermore, the CSA model makes conventional forms of price comparison among producers, such as would occur at a grocery store or farmers’ market, much less feasible. This truncation of consumer choice and higher transaction costs, however, are embedded in an explicit food politics agenda, as stated by one CSA advocate, “The heart of the [CSA] movement is not cheap food but communities taking responsibility for their own welfare” (quoted in Holtzman 1999, 6).

The CSA movement originated during the early 1960s in Germany, Switzerland, and Japan. In the North American context, CSA began on the East Coast, with two small New England farms breaking the cultural ground in the mid-1980s. The European CSA movement drew considerable inspiration from the writings of ecologist and educator Rudolph Steiner (2005), who espoused that well-being of the earth and the spiritual and physical well-being of humanity were intimately connected. In Asia, a parallel philosophical influence was exerted by the writings of Mokichi Okada, who similarly endorsed farming philosophies and agricultural practices that treated the earth as a living system (see Hyde and Wiegand 2005). These biodynamic approaches readily transferred to the United States, owing to lingering vestiges of 1960s countercultural food politics, which also espoused a holistic eco-philosophy (Belasco 1989).

In the American context, CSA advocates aspire to recapitulate the politicized meanings that formerly energized the organic foods movement and, in the process, to dramatically transform consumer outlooks and preferences. The CSA model portrays the consumption and production of locally grown food as a salubrious alternative to the industrialization and globalization of the food supply orchestrated by transnational corporations (Halweil 2002). Rather than simply promoting the health and taste benefits of organic food, the CSA model encourages consumers to understand their food choices in relation to a broader palette of concerns such as ecological sustainability, biodiversity, energy conservation, worker safety, living wages, and, most important, the preservation of small farms and a rural way of life (Sharp et al. 2002).

This project of reinscribing organic food in countercultural food politics is motivated by both ideological and economic rationales. Market studies have consistently shown that consumer purchases of organic foods are primarily driven by health concerns and perceptions of better taste (Hyde and Wiegand 2005; Pollan 2001). However, these individualistic motivations do not provide strong incentives for consumers to support local farms. Accordingly, the corporate appropriation of the organic niche is viewed by many farm activists as a looming threat that could plunge independent organic farmers into the pernicious cycle of escalating input costs and declining prices that has long plagued conventional small farms (Pollan 2006; Sligh and Christman 2003).

As a marketing discourse, this CSA positioning leverages

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

CSA is a model of direct marketing between farmers and consumers that operates on a principle of shared rewards and risks. To participate in a CSA program, a consumer buys a share in a specific farm, with the price typically ranging between $400 and $600 per season, or becomes a worker member, where labor is substituted for some portion of the share cost. In return, each member receives a weekly box of produce for 5–7 months (depending on the region) that is delivered to a centralized pickup point. CSA farmers invite their members to visit the farm, and they also host periodic gatherings—potlucks, watermelon-tasting events, and farm tours—that are designed to foster a sense of community among members. In contrast to the customized selections that can be made at a grocery store or a farmers’ market, however, CSA consumers do not have direct control over what specific goods go into their box. Rather, the
the most distinctive and inimitable asset of small organic farms: their localness.2 While large corporate farms can convert acreage to organic cultivation and gain significant cost advantages over small growers through their economies of scale, they cannot so easily replicate the sensory appeal of just-harvested produce, face-to-face personal relationships between farmers and consumers, and the sense of direct participation in a tightly knitted community network. For this reason, CSA pioneer Eliott Coleman extols small organic local farms to promote themselves as “authentic growers”: “The label ‘organic’ has lost the fluidity it used to hold for the growers more concerned with quality than the bottom line, and consumers more concerned with nutrition than a static set of standards for labeling. ‘Authentic’ is meant to be the flexible term ‘organic’ once was. It identifies fresh foods produced by local growers who want to focus on what they are doing, instead of what they aren’t doing. . . . With a definition that stresses local, seller-grown and fresh, there is little likelihood that large-scale marketers can steal this concept” (2001).

CSA organizes a plethora of localized consumption communities, each linked to a particular farm through a model of shared risk and infused by discourses espousing the inherent value of locally produced and consumed organic foods. However, public discourses do not necessarily correspond in a direct fashion to the actual experiences and understandings of those who participate in a cultural system. As we show in our hermeneutic analysis, consumers accept and value the unconventional terms of CSA exchange relationships because they experience this countervailing market as an emotionally and existentially engaging communal project.

**RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

To explicate the ideological meanings that circulate in CSA communities, we conducted in-depth interviews with CSA farmers and consumers (see table 1) and also engaged in observation and participant observation at a number of CSA-sponsored events that were held on farms and other community gathering spaces, such as food co-ops. The interviews and fieldwork were carried out in Madison, Wisconsin, which has a significant concentration of CSA farms. We were able to gather insights on the operations of five farms that varied in size, years in operation, and proximity to the major metropolitan area that provided their respective customer bases. All participants in the study were assigned pseudonyms.

Our five farmer informants hailed from different class backgrounds. Two of the farmers (Dennis and Tracy) came from agrarian families, whereas the others had nonagrarian working-class (Caitlin and Simon) and middle-class (Rick) upbringings. All the farmer participants were college graduates, and all (with the exception of Rick) were the first in their families to attain postsecondary educational degrees.3 Our consumer sample drew from members of different CSA farms and ranged from those who have recently become

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2As a point of clarification, local food activists do not demand that consumers restrict their diets only to locally grown produce. Rather, they encourage consumers to buy local alternatives whenever available; to reorient their diets to take greater advantage of locally grown foods; and, last but not least, to practice lost arts, like home canning, which allow the consumption of local foods to extend beyond seasonal availability (see Halweil 2002).

3National surveys indicate that CSA farmers are on average about 10 years younger than other farmers and have a much higher percentage of college graduates in their ranks. Over 70% of CSA farmers have college degrees, with 25% holding graduate degrees. Approximately 40% of primary CSA farm operators are women, which compares to a national average of 10% for other types of farms (Stevenson and Hendrickson 2004).
CSA members to those who have been involved in CSA for many years. Like the farmers, our 12 consumer informants had diverse backgrounds—rural, working, and middle class. With one exception, they all had college degrees, and, again, many were the first in their families to attain a college degree. Our informants also varied in terms of income levels, with some reporting quite limited budgets. Some of these (Gail, Betsy, and Kelly) have chosen to be worker members in part because they want to be directly involved in the world of organic farming but also to make their shares more affordable.

Interviews were conducted by the authors at each participant’s home. The interviews began with a set of “grand tour” questions (McCracken 1988) about participants’ personal backgrounds and interests and then turned to their personal histories, experiences, and beliefs regarding CSA. In keeping with the conventions of phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), participants primarily set the course of the conversation, with the interviewer taking a more reflective role, while ensuring that key topic areas related to CSA—conventional farming and food distribution systems—and outlooks toward food (and organic food) were covered during the interview. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, although several follow-up conversations with farmer participants were documented through field notes.

We interpreted this body of qualitative data using a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997). This hermeneutic mode of interpretation is premised on the idea that a given consumer is not expressing a strictly subjective viewpoint. Instead, he or she is articulating a system of cultural meanings that have been selectively and creatively adapted to fit his or her specific life goals and circumstances (see Thompson 1997). A methodological implication of this hermeneutic view is that the underlying meaning system is the focus of analysis rather than the particularities of a given participant’s life world.

The interpretation of the data set unfolds through a process of dialectical tacking in which provisiononal understandings are formed, challenged, revised, and further developed through an iterative movement between individual transcripts and the emerging understanding of the entire set of textual data. Thus, each interview is initially treated as a separate idiographic case whereby we sought to uncover the salient meanings and identity projects pursued by each participant. As our interpretation unfolded, we identified thematic and narrative commonalities that emerged across the data set. Our aim was to identify the most recurrent and robust patterns of underlying cultural meanings that contextualized these identified commonalities. We then broadened the interpretive frame by teasing out the historical antecedents to these identified patterns. At this point, historical analyses of the organic food movement and its genealogical connections to environmentalism and the countercultural ferment of the 1960s were integrated into the interpretation via an iterative process known as grounded reading in data (cf. Straus and Corbin 1990; see also Belk and Coon 1993). As a final step, we compared the reflective narratives and behavioral rationales respectively expressed by our farmer and consumer participants to evaluate further the extent and nature of the ideological alignments fostered through the CSA market system.

IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENTS IN THE CSA MARKET SYSTEM

In this section, we analyze how CSA’s constituent discourses, practices, and marketplace relationships function as an ideology that coordinates the actions and viewpoints of CSA farmers and consumers. CSA’s ideology promotes a shared belief among farmers and consumers that they are revitalizing an atavistic market system that offers a haven from the unintended consequences of global food production and that operates on a localized, comprehensible, and human scale. In the context of these countervailing market relationships, CSA’s ideology is concretely enacted and experienced as a collective project oriented around three modes of praxis: (1) reconstituting rooted connections, (2) engaging in practices of decommodification, and (3) working toward an artisan food culture.

Collectively Reconstituting Rooted Connections

In a postmodern consumer culture characterized by social fragmentation, extensive specialization across social tasks, and the compartmentalization of life spheres and interests (such as when individuals engage very different social worlds and identity positions in their work and leisure lives), the metaphor of connection can acquire considerable resonance (Martin 1999; Thompson and Troester 2002). CSA’s market ideology put this metaphoric ideal into social practice through its synthesis of the local food movement’s political mantras and Steiner’s (2005) biodynamic vision of ecological holism. The local food discourse holds that experiences of disconnectedness and disempowerment are often hidden costs of contemporary global channels of food distribution. These costs are deemed to equally plague consumers shopping at supermarkets (who have little knowledge about where their food comes from or the conditions under which it was produced) and farmers who are selling through conventional wholesale channels and whose livelihoods depend upon the vagaries of supply and demand cycles beyond their control (Watts and Goodman 1997). The biodynamic narrative espouses the idea that connections to the land are a primordial source of spiritual sustenance and a foundation of social and personal well-being and, conversely, that psychological and societal unrest are precipitated by technological forces that separate humanity from its roots in nature (Steiner 2005).

In the following passage, Dennis, a CSA farmer, draws from this CSA worldview when discussing his personal attraction and commitment to this agricultural approach:

Dennis: Well that’s what farming actually is [a connection
to the earth]. So it’s [CSA] part of the whole system. You are working with a living world. It’s the connection you give people to the farm; speaking broadly, that’s one of the reasons I felt the system would work; it’s about permanence; people want to have the connection with their food, to their country, to a farm; we’re not that many generations separated yet. It’s getting really close, but it’s not totally separated yet. Most people, their grandparents, maybe not the newest generation, but at least my area, most people’s grandparents had a really close connection. They were at their uncle’s farm, so if people really want that connection they can have it, but there has to be a system in place to allow them to have it, and not that people want to come out and eat carrots with us, but some people do. This system, the CSA model, gives this opportunity, and that’s why I thought people would respond to it. It is the connection with the earth being out here, seeing it; people don’t talk about it in spiritual words, but really what’s going on is people are getting a connection, it’s way more than the vegetables, and it isn’t really about the vegetables; it’s about everything else that is going on with the CSA model. It gives people the opportunity to have that real connection. There aren’t too many other models that do.

CSA’s market ideology reproduces many nostalgic ideals of preindustrial agrarian life. This ideological frame heightens awareness of the drawbacks attributed to corporate farming. Reciprocally, it portrays CSA as a means for consumers to reconstitute enlivening connections to their material, historical, and spiritual roots. CSA’s biodynamic rhetoric of unmediated connections with nature further facilitates this market positioning by rhetorically masking the extent to which organic farming is ultimately a process of controlling nature via techniques and technology. Through newsletters, farm gatherings, and interpersonal interactions, CSA farmers reinforce these ideals of connectedness and idyllic harmony and thereby tacitly socialize their consumers in this ideological outlook, as illustrated in this passage from CSA farmer Tracy:

Tracy: Well, I do want them [CSA members] to make bigger connections, and I think that is on several levels. First of all, I want them to connect the good food with me. I think it is important, and I think this is a good part of the CSA movement that people know their farmer by name. I think the more connection that you have between people who eat food and grow the food, the better it is. I also want them to make the connection between organic and what that means environmentally. What it means in terms of what I am/am not doing with the land and the water underneath it, which is actually the more important thing to me. What is happening to our water is where we get more of the pesticide and contamination problems. I think these are important connections. Through the CSA, we get to connect to a bigger community of people who are doing all of this together. Community is pretty important to me.

As Clifford (1997) observes, the disembedding forces of globalization create cultural routes while eroding cultural roots. CSA, however, plays on the archaic notion of communities rooted in the land. Consumers can then use this ideological frame to interpret their CSA experiences as a means to reconstitute a more basic and historically rooted way of life:

Kelly: I’m more and more amazed that people hang in there and farm, just anywhere, and the farmers I met, they’re like salt of the earth; they work hard; they care; again, they are honest; they’d give you the shirt off their back because if you’re a farmer next to them, you’d do the same. I think many of us have lost touch with that, and I think the CSA is a good way to find out. I have a friend, and I took her out to CSA a few years ago, and it had never dawned on her how brussels sprouts grew because she’d always bought them in New York, and I had to laugh, but I felt the same way because I never saw a whole stock of brussels sprouts. We don’t realize sometimes, so I think being back in touch with nature. CSA is kind of back to the land where small farms used to be where people did go to the farmers market every so often or like they do in Europe and say, “Oh you’ve got good chickens today” or, “Oh, how are the peas.” We’re kind of going back to our roots, and I think it [CSA] also helps farmers realize that they are not out there alone. That’s the neat part; we’re all in this together.

Kelly’s wonderment over encountering brussels sprouts in their natural, unprocessed state exemplifies the sense of personal enrichment that our CSA consumer participants reap from being privy to the backstage activities of agricultural production and by gaining experience-based knowledge about their food’s cultivation. This sentiment is particularly strong for worker members, who personally invest their labor in the farm and feel a sense of direct responsibility for its success:

Betsy: You work for 20 weeks, so it’s not very much an hour. But it seems like nothing because you have such a good time, you’re learning so much and meeting really great people. The time goes by so fast it’s like I can’t believe it. If you are working at a job you don’t like, it’s drudgery, but this is just like being outside having a good time, except on rainy days and then it kind of sucks. But it’s still worth it.

Interviewer: How so?

Betsy: Well, just being outside and seeing the abundance of all the food growing and knowing that there’s nothing chemical in there; you can really feed people; we feed 500 or 600 families. That’s a lot of people, and that’s a lot of boxes that we pack every week, and there’s still tons left over. Last year we had such an abundance, it was just incredible. But to me it just feels good to be in the dirt. I love to see things grow. And organic is really important; all the pesticides and stuff they are putting on soil is just killing the soil. It doesn’t keep it alive. Organic turns out to be cost effective because you’re not spending all that money on chemicals; you’re not tied to the big corporate companies like Monsanto and all the chemical companies. You’re not tied to them for your life; you actually are free.
Over the course of her tenure as a worker member, Betsy has developed an acute sense of personal vestment in this CSA farm, and she expresses considerable pride in the abundance of its organically grown crops. Although she does not own this farm in any conventional sense, the cooperative and collaborative ethos of CSA enables her to experience it as part of her extended self (Belk 1988). As this passage evinces, Betty’s personal interests have become closely aligned with outcomes that she deems essential to the well-being of this farm. Indeed, her narrative expresses a viewpoint that would be more expectable from a CSA farmer.

For example, she personally identifies with the CSA goal of maintaining operational independence from agribusiness corporations such as Monsanto (a recurrent CSA metonym that stands for all the ills attributed to corporate farming). Through this ideological alignment, Betty’s sense of autonomy and personal sovereignty is also enhanced through activities that she believes help to keep this CSA farm free from corporate dependencies.

More typically, our nonworker members venerate the lifestyle impositions posed by the CSA model as opportunities for invention, discovery, and the deepening of familial and communal bonds. In the following quote, CSA consumer Gail frames the various “challenges” of participating in a CSA program as a worthwhile investment in her self-development and as an opportunity to build a spirit of community in her neighborhood:

Gail: I will tell you what the challenges are. I like all of them, and the first time I ended up with way more than I could eat, and I had to learn how to eat all those things, and I had to accept the first year that I was wasting some money as far as my consumption was concerned. This was my gift to tutoring myself and to community support because that was part of the bargain. And then what would come out of it, I would find connections with neighbors to share it with, and so the first year I shared away what I had next year. We came in, and we shared the initial money purchase as well, and that meant sharing the pickup duties and covering for each other if we were on vacation, and that brings you to a connection with friends or neighbors.

Gail’s narrative highlights that some of the inconveniences associated with CSA are predominantly a function of individualistic, as opposed to communal, consumption practices. For example, the dilemmas posed by an overabundance of perishable or disliked produce are substantially reduced if a CSA box can be shared among a number of households. Few of our CSA consumers went as far down this collaborative path as Gail. However, it was commonplace for our consumers to make arrangements with friends to pick up and use their box of goods when they were away on vacation or to share excess or unwanted produce with neighbors.

These forms of sharing may seem inconsequential, but, as a comparison point, consider the likelihood that a consumer would, on a regular basis, purchase excess produce at the grocery store so that these goods could be freely distributed to neighbors and acquaintances. For CSA consumers, these cooperative actions have become naturalized as commonsense adaptations to an unconventional distribution system. This aspect of CSA diverges from status quo consumption norms and tacitly reinforces its countervailing market ethos. Over the course of the twentieth century, the geographic and social dynamics of suburbanization and the diffusion of household appliances, automobiles, and other taken-for-granted consumer technologies have functioned to transform neighborhoods into aggregations of functionally autonomous households (Cohen 2003). In contrast, CSA provides structural incentives for consumers to create cooperative networks that pragmatically function to allocate certain risks and inconveniences across a broader array of households. These cooperative consumption practices also ideologically signal differences to more convenience-oriented and individuated corporate alternatives.

Engaging in Collective Practices of Decommodification

Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) have documented that consumers ascribe sacred meanings in their special possessions and will sometimes go to dramatic lengths to demarcate these symbolically redolent objects from the profane sphere of commercialism. On a related note, they also posit that many standard gift-giving rituals, such as removing price tags, wrapping, and ceremoniously bestowing, are a means for consumers to decommodify commercial goods and reposition them more squarely in the sacred domain of interpersonal intimacy (Belk et al. 1989, 27; see also Belk and Coon 1993). Building on this insight, Arnould and Wallendorf (1991) report that consumers, owing to a lack of time or cooking skill, routinely incorporate premade, store-bought goods into their Thanksgiving meals. However, these consumers often feel compelled to undertake fairly elaborate rituals to decommodify these dishes so that they seem more symbolically akin to traditional homemade fare. In these accounts, consumers interpret overt signs of commercialism and capitalist profit seeking as contaminants that threaten the integrity of sacred places and occasions (also see Kozinets 2002).

Although manifested in slightly different terms, CSA farmers and consumers are jointly engaged in a collective project of decommodifying the food products that, in terms of the CSA ideology, they have cocreated. These practices of decommodification imbue CSA food with romanticized meanings, transforming it into a symbol of natural splendor and ecological harmony. In the CSA context, however, practices of decommodification are also situated in a broader ideological agenda: defying the commodity fetishism that has become institutionalized in many quarters of agribusiness and fast food industries. Whether in the form of an unblemished, perfectly symmetrical potato sold in the grocery store or an extra large order of french fries doled out at a fast food chain, the U.S. marketplace in myriad subtle ways encourages consumers to covet the end product (often
at a bargain price), with little consideration for its means of production or its full costs of production (Ritzer 1998; Schlosser 2001; Watts and Goodman 1997). For these fetishized culinary commodities, price, appearance, taste, and perceived health benefits drive consumers’ rational, utility-maximizing choices.

CSA seeks to overturn the logic of commodity fetishism by making consumers’ relationships to a specific farm and farmer the most salient and valorized aspect of the choice scenario. For example, our consumer participants effusively praised CSA for rectifying the depersonalization, emotional detachment, and ignorance about farm life wrought by the separation of food production and consumption:

Linda: People know that some of their food comes from farms, but they don’t get the opportunity to talk to farmers and to know them, and they think they’re farmers, they’re different or something, and the wonderful thing about being in Wisconsin is that you can have these relationships, and it seems very natural once you’re out there. It doesn’t seem odd, everybody is friendly; again, you know exactly what you’re getting. And you know exactly what you’re going to be cooking with, and the farmers that I met around here are just so open and so happy to share their land with people and involve people in getting the food and just explaining. They’re all very proud of their crops and, you know, in letting you know about the good things and also the difficulty, whether it’s bugs, obviously organic farms have bugs, or bad weather, and how that affects the crops. It’s wonderful to learn that, and it’s wonderful to have the opportunity to bring kids out so they learn early on because we’re not in a rural setting here. It’s a small city, but it’s still city, and it’s very much the kind of place where you get your packaged foods from the supermarket. But they have an opportunity to really be involved, and when people go, it always ends up kind of as a little party. People often bring something to drink or to eat, and it turns into a potluck; it’s very nice that way too. . . . I like that it’s fresh, that it’s organic, and I really like the fact that you get to know the people who are growing it and that you can have a relationship with, that I can call them up, that I can see them, that I can visit the farm. I can go out to the farm almost any time, not just when they’re having an event, and they’re very forthcoming, and they’re very enthusiastic about teaching you what they’re doing and why they’re doing it.

In this respect, CSA also differs considerably from another localized form of food producer-consumer exchange: the farmers’ market. While farmers’ markets are quite conducive to face-to-face interactions between farmers and consumers, they are also exchange contexts where price haggling and competitive discounting are deeply entrenched norms (McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993). Our CSA farmers are adamant in their conviction that bargain-hunting practices are antithetical to the communal and collaborative spirit they are seeking to create. They inveigh mightily against consumers who seek out the lowest-cost providers:

Dennis: Part of it is whether people make a connection.

That’s why I think the CSA model is the way go. If you’re just in a commodity world for organics, what’s the difference in a commodity world of organic products versus a commodity world of nonorganic products? You don’t buy the whole farm when you go to the store; you’re buying a product, a commodity, shipped from who knows where. And the farmer’s market is way, way different [from the CSA model]. They [one hypothetical seller at a farmers’ market] have a carrot at that booth; they [another hypothetical seller at a farmers’ market] have a carrot at that booth, and it’s a buck fifty cents; people shop the market. People who try at the Jones’ Gardens event [an annual CSA convention where consumers can meet with different farmers and buy shares] can’t do it. You just can’t do it; you don’t know what you’re going to get; you don’t know how much you are going to get. Different farms offer different things; what do you want? You’re buying the whole farm. That’s why the CSA is really different than any other market because you are buying a package.

Interviewer: Are there customers that come in and ask questions about your farm, that you want to discourage? Where you say this isn’t the right person for a CSA?

Dennis: Yeah, the bargain hunters, because you can also perceive something as being cheaper, whether it is or not, double-triple coupons, you know. So if price is your driving factor, if all you are looking at is price, price, price, you’re not going to be happy with this because you can’t compare. And if you do you’re going to come up with some cheaper way to get food. We’re not about cheap.

In CSA parlance, being “not about cheap” is a refusal to accept the commodity logic of the conventional agricultural marketplace that puts a downward pressure on prices and hence discounts the farmers’ value-added efforts. To maintain this ideological position, which is central to the economic advantages of the CSA model, farmers have to resist temptations to engage in price competition (which could quickly create a competitive spiral) and to inculcate consumers in the rationales used to justify their unconventional pricing system and promote its ostensible benefits:

Tracy: I think part of it is that people just compare dollars to dollars. In the summer when I am selling green beans and I grow the fancy French beans, I am selling them for $3.00 a pound. You can go to the supermarket and buy beans for $0.60 a pound. You know if you were just looking at dollars, why wouldn’t you buy that $0.60 a pound? Yet when you think about organic and the cost, this farmer growing the $0.60 beans, how much did the farmer actually get of that $0.60? Probably, a minuscule amount. How much did they pay their workers? How much pesticide was used? How much were they subsidized? Organic farmers do not get much in the way of subsidies. You know, those are all questions. I think people only look at the question of, “What is coming out of my pocket today?” I mean just like when you were talking about buying potato chips. How much is a can of soda these days? Something like $1.20 a can now. It is in-
credible, and yet people had a fit this summer when I put a bunch of radishes up to $1.50, and it is like "these are good things." I do not haggle anymore. I do not change my prices. I do not do any kind of lowering my prices at a certain time [near the market's end]. I learned very early on that when I did that, people started waiting for me to make the changes and then they would offer absurdly low prices. For example, if I were selling lettuce for $1.00/head, they would offer me $1.00 for 10 heads. I felt like they wanted me to just give it to them. If I cannot sell that item, then I will either take it home and put it in my own refrigerator or give it to the Food Pantry. That is how I feel about it now.

Tracy also sells her produce at a conventional farmers’ market. Over time, her approach to farmers’ market pricing has been shaped by the conventions of the CSA model. For Tracy, the price paid for her produce has become linked to her own sense of self-worth, and it signals whether customers value her labor, investments in sustainability, and the rich legacy of independent farmers. From her perspective, CSA’s pricing model better serves her desire to be treated as a socially responsible organic farmer, rather than a purveyor of low-cost commodities. Her visceral sense of personal commitment and indeed moral conviction also helps to reinforce the legitimacy, credibility, and ethical merits of this unconventional pricing structure to her customers.

Our consumer participants generally embrace the CSA shibboleth that locally grown, organic produce is embedded in a virtuous and redemptive market system and accordingly should be treated as something more than a mere commodity. However, breaches in this ideological viewpoint can periodically arise, such as when consumers reflect on the disjunctures between their lifestyle routines and the practical demands associated with CSA:

Greg: I think it’s very practical for the farmer; I don’t know how practical it is for two working people to come home and have a hard time making a dinner together in the first place. I think my wife is a little exceptional in that she had experience working in a health food deli; she knows what to do. If you can eat vegetables raw, you’re okay. You can just grab it out of the box and start eating, but a lot of people don’t eat vegetables like that, so I think the vegetables spoil, but they’re helping the farmer, so they’re happy. Another huge thing is remembering to pick up the box, and they make it the customer’s responsibility to pick up the box. When Kate [his wife] is not here, I always forget, so we lose $25.

Despite reservations over practicality and cost effectiveness, Greg has been a long-term CSA consumer, and he plans on continuing this market relationship. As illustrated in the following passage, Greg has internalized many of CSA’s politicized arguments about the value of local food production and consumption. CSA’s participatory ethos greatly facilitated this internalization. Greg’s past experiences as a worker member left an indelible personal impression that has predisposed him to identify with the economic plight of CSA farmers.

Greg: It was a good experience [working on a CSA farm]. I know how hard those farmers are working. I am happy to be supporting this farmer because I know he’s doing right for future generations. But between profit and the food on your plate there is a dangerous balance. I am all for business, but I think there is a kind of business that pollutes and a kind of business that brings life to soils, better health to animals, all of those sorts of things. Business can be very shortsighted. Soil erosion is a national tragedy, and it’s the secret natural tragedy because people don’t see it. I honestly believe it takes more skill to make the profit in an organic way, and those skilled farmers should make a ton more money. They deserve it, and they are paying more labor, which is a big problem because organic farming is labor dependent, and chemicals can free you of the labor, but you’re killing soils.

Greg’s distinction between polluting and life-giving businesses and his references to the dangerous balance between shortsighted profit making and skilled farming foreshadow another prevalent ideological motif in our interviews: CSA farms embody the aesthetic and moral virtues of artisanship, while corporate farms are associated with the putative ills of mass market commodification.

Collectively Working toward an Artisan Food Culture

The fin de siècle arts-and-crafts movement was one of the first critical responses to the emerging order of corporate capitalism. Drawing inspiration from the writings of the Luddite polemicists John Rushkin and William Morris, the arts-and-crafts movement preached a gospel of handicraft, aesthetic refinement in everyday objects, the societal importance of valuing skilled work, and the importance of transforming labor into a socially beneficial mode of creative expression. For arts-and-crafts proponents, these emancipatory ideals were antithetical to the profit-maximizing, machine-dominated world of industrial production (see Lears [1981] for a more extensive historical analysis).

Significant parallels exist between the rhetoric of the arts-and-crafts movement and the ideology of CSA. In CSA discourses, the farmer is depicted as an artisan who creates unique and sensually superior goods and, in so doing, helps to foster a greater societal appreciation for the value of food and eating. Whereas the arts-and-crafts movement sought to revitalize work and transform the aesthetic sensibilities of consumers, CSA aims to revitalize local farm economies and to transform America’s food culture, one household at a time. Just as the arts-and-crafts movement articulated cultural concerns over the dehumanizing consequences of industrialization (i.e., William Blake’s dark satanic mills), CSA’s ideology echoes more general indictments of the processed and fast food industries that increasingly circulate in the broader media landscape (see, e.g., Schlosser 2001; Spurlock 2005).

Farmer Rick’s reflections on the societal value of his farm merge this arts-and-crafts ethos with a biodynamic discourse
that emphasizes unprocessed foods’ natural vitality and the socially enriching experiences that accrue to families who prepare their own meals using fresh organic ingredients:

Rick: Hopefully they’ll benefit from it [the CSA produce] in a lot of ways. Qualitatively, they’ll be excited to cook with it, to serve it to their family and friends, to create new things with it. I hope it benefits them healthwise. And kind of philosophically and politically thinking more about what is really behind this food? What does this really represent? But um, I think equally important is to experience the food. Like I was saying before, you’ve got this great fresh, best tasting, best looking, uh well, not always the best looking because sometimes it can be kind of ugly, but hopefully they’ve got the best tasting ingredients, and they’ll just experience the excitement. They’ll hopefully enjoy opening up their senses when they’re cooking with the food. They’re gonna look at it; they’re gonna smell it; they’re gonna taste it and feel it; they’re gonna hear it. You know, crack open a squash or tear apart lettuce to wash it, you know, just all the senses get involved. Which is so different than just, “What’s for supper?” “Oh, home style cooked macaroni and cheese that we’re gonna heat in the microwave, take it out of the freezer, heat it in the microwave, and in 8 minutes, bam, we have dinner.” It’s so much different than that. It’s real food that’s alive. Not only that, but to get your kids, your spouse involved with the cooking with this, it is an experience that will hopefully be passed on to the next generation. Instead of just thinking that the frozen macaroni and cheese comes from aisle 9 in the grocery store, it’s, “Yeah, this is what you do with this ugly thing called celeriac. I saw my mom do it.”

Hopefully the kids are gonna show their kids 20 years from now.

The artisan ideals and meanings that circulate in CSA are potent ones that precipitate a congruency between producer goals and consumer preferences that would be the envy of any customer relation management program. For example, Linda’s discussion of her family’s dining patterns is remarkably consistent with Rick’s ideal case. Both espouse the moralistic belief that these experiences of fresh, locally grown organic food and meals prepared from scratch will have a lasting impact upon the younger generation, making them more resistant to the enticements of the fast food industry:

Linda: We don’t eat fast food; we don’t go through drive-ins; we don’t eat at McDonalds; we don’t eat at Kentucky Fried Chicken. . . . And our kids are pretty good about knowing that we don’t like that food, but nothing is off limits. We’ve never told our kids that we won’t allow you to eat that; we’ve allowed them to make their own choices. If there is food they decide they would rather not eat, we’re not going to say we absolutely forbid you to do it. They’re getting to be teenagers, so they may want to go with their friends to McDonalds, but being part of the farms, and Slow Food and CSAs, and us talking about it and learning about the cuisine and fresh food, and we eat together almost all of the time, and we make things from scratch most of the time, so they already know that and know a lot of those foods aren’t good for you and that it’s fun to make things from scratch, and they’ve gotten involved in cooking. Sure, we occasionally open a can or stick something in the microwave, but most of the time we make pasta, and it’s store bought, but occasionally on a Sunday we will make the dough and make lasagna from scratch. They watch me make the sauce; they help make the dough; we make the lasagna from scratch, you know. We rarely would use the jarred sauce, things like that; they’re exposed to that. We don’t really have to say we’re forbidding; there’s no food that’s off limits in this house.

They kind of already prefer the taste of those fresher foods and the organic foods and from-scratch foods. They’re not begging us to take them to McDonalds.

Another key pillar of the artisan discourse is the imperative to acknowledge, celebrate, and appropriately reward the skill, artistry, and effort of the crafts-person. In this ideological vein, our CSA farmers describe organic farming, on the relatively small scale of the CSA model, in terms that clearly invoked the artisan ideal. A recurrent metaphor is that CSA farming is a puzzle-solving process that necessitates a close, intuitive connection with the land and a skillful decoding of the subtle signs encoded in plants and soil. This artisan portrayal is routinely buttressed through invidious comparison to conventional farming:

Dennis: When you are in the chemical world, the system is real easy, really a no-brainer; you don’t even have to understand how a lot of these other chemicals were subject to rainfall applications, all sorts of different things that maybe made them work better than other times, how they get some weeds coming through, and how that was terrible. So this system from a chemical farming perspective, it works better, it’s easier, it may cost a little more, but spray is spray; it’s a no-brainer. I think organic is very subtle and harder to do. There is a lot more work in organic because there were days last summer when I looked at the weeds and thought how easy it would be to walk out here with a sprayer and just kill everything that way? Organics is a system where you sort of have to look at the whole, and it’s one where your management has to be better, you have to be a better farmer to farm organically. It’s a system where you have to be aware of your fertility, your crops, the cycles of insects and diseases; you really need to understand whatever you’re growing plus whatever is impacting it. You have to be a better farmer; chemicals just make it easy. They take away the need for knowledge, but they also have their long-term impact on the environment, and on the farming operation too; it’s negative.

Interviewer: How do you stay abreast of all that, all those changes, the dynamics of the weather and pest changes and all that?

Dennis: You just have to get smart and get knowledgeable about it, and it’s a lot of work and just part of the system year in and year out. You’re observant, you’re doing a lot of the inspection, and you just have to develop a knowledge,
so you know it, you’re not out there wandering; you know what you’re looking for when you’re looking for it. You know the signs; you’re just on top of it. It’s sort of like you have to be an expert in a crop, where if you are doing the chemical you don’t. I could send you out and have you grow successful soybeans using a chemical system.

Dennis construes conventional chemical farming as a McDonaldized process (Ritzer 1998) that only requires a rather mindless adherence to technocratic rules and procedures. Aside from amplifying the artisan qualities of CSA farming, Dennis’s narrative also invokes an appeal to ecoholism that suggests a kind of moral superiority over conventional farmers who lack this experienced-earned knowledge of nature’s signs. The following vignette from CSA farmer Simon offers another spin on this moralizing viewpoint. Echoing a key theme of CSA’s ideology, Simon opines that conventional farmers have become trapped in a bigger-is-better status competition. In symbolic distinction to his artisan ideal, he posits that this system is sustained by a dependency on government price supports and technological systems:

Simon: Well, it’s a tough transition [to organic]. I think it’s mostly inertia. The fact is that it’s just too much change, for a [conventional] farmer to do that. Somebody that’s used to using Roundup-ready soybeans and herbicides [a genetically modified organism seed and pest management system marketed by Monsanto], they can just plant a field and come out and spray it once, and they really don’t have to do anything more to those fields until harvest time. And so they can work thousands of acres, and that’s why farmers are growing so many acres now. And that’s what they’re into. It’s kind of a status thing, you know, like, “I’m the biggest farmer in the county.” On paper you can look pretty good, and you hardly get your hands dirty. I think conventional farmers are doing OK if you look at the money they’re getting from the government supports. But without the supports, they’re not doing very well at all. You know, there are more employees in farming than there used to be and fewer actual independent farmers. Some of these farms have gotten so big that you can’t maintain that size and switch to organics anymore. Organic farms have to be smaller. It’s true that out in California, there are some large, very large, vegetable farms, but in many CSA farms have to be smaller. It’s true that out in California, there are more employees in farming than there used to be and fewer actual independent farmers. Some of these farms have gotten so big that you can’t maintain that size and switch to organics anymore. Organic farms have to be smaller. It’s true that out in California, there are some large, very large, vegetable farms, but in general organic farms need to be smaller because they needed tighter, more hands-on management.

The artisan ideal is closely associated with celebrated cultural meanings of inner-directed autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic constrications (Rotundo 1993). The virtuous artisan stands as a cultural antithesis to the stigmatized image of the obsequious organizational man who relinquishes his autonomy in return for material rewards. Simon’s narrative invokes this aspect of the artisan ideal in his construal of conventional farming techniques as seductive shortcuts that mire farmers in a system of disempowering dependencies.

This artisan motif is further reinforced by market factors that encourage CSA farmers to experiment and to push the limits of their comparatively small farms (and their own skill) in ways that would not likely occur on a larger-scale operation that relies on standardized inputs. For example, many CSA farmers devote some portion of their growing acreage to highly coveted but fragile crops. If weather and other factors cooperate, CSA consumers enjoy an unexpected bounty of hard-to-find delicacies such as rare heirloom tomatoes or antique variety apples. On the farmer’s side, growing these loyalty-building customer perks requires a significant investment of time and attention. However, CSA farmers report a profound sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from successfully cultivating these risky crops. In some cases, these extraordinary efforts are also invested in more conventional but popular crops when their farm conditions pose unusual challenges.

In the following passage, farmer Caitlin discusses carrots, which are her favorite crop to grow and her farm’s signature crop. She details the difficulties her farm’s clay soil posed to growing marketable carrots and the creative problem solving she used to devise a system that converted this liability into an asset:

Caitlin: Well, I wanted to do carrots because pretty much everybody likes them, even kids. You can eat them raw; you don’t have to do much to them. They are delicious. But growing carrots in the soil out here is tricky. The carrots are good from all those micronutrients being held in that clay was translated into high flavor value in the carrots. But the heavy clay soil also means that they get deformed really easily, so it is difficult to grow them in that soil. But if you could it was a big payoff, so we changed our growing methods, and we made hills for all our carrots and planted them on raised hills and had beautiful carrots that also had that great flavor. I thought it was a lot of work to make all those hills, but it was a really great success. We had a problem, and we solved it.

Our consumers’ narratives paralleled CSA farmers’ veneration of recondite agrarian knowledge and labor-intensive techniques. Among these CSA consumers, the artisan motif primarily manifested itself through the ideals of developing new cooking skills and becoming more creative in their meal planning. On any given week, CSA members receive a box of produce containing vegetables that they would not normally choose and may have never before prepared. Rather than being a source of exasperation or annoyance, CSA provides an ideological frame of reference from which consumers can interpret these seemingly practical drawbacks as an impetus for palate-expanding experimentation:

Allison: I’ve been introduced to a lot of strange vegetables I didn’t really know. Really been forced to learn how to cook different things, really quickly, when you get a box every week, and you need to go through that box or it just sits and rots. There are so many things to cook with, things you’re not used to cooking with, tomatoes, peppers and onions and carrots and potatoes, and then you’ve got kohlrabi, and turnips and like irregular greens and all these things that normally you don’t get a chance to try.
As discussed by Ritzer (1998), corporate marketers, in their ceaseless quest to satisfy customers by meeting their expectations and enhancing their convenience, have created a highly rationalized system of customer experiences organized by the principles of consistency and efficiency. A paradoxical outcome of this rationalization is that consumers are placed in a fairly passive, de-skilled, and disengaging position that affords limited opportunity for innovative, autonomous actions. The CSA model deviates from these marketplace norms by structurally encouraging consumers to modify their usual preferences, choice patterns, and cooking routines. Given the right ideological mind-set, these countervailing market characteristics interject an element of play and self-discovery into acts of domestic labor. Importantly, the absence of predictability can also afford experiences of challenge and surprise, which Arnould and Price (1993) have shown to be integral to consumers’ satisfaction with extended service relationships.

SOCIAL CONSENSUS AND THE IDEOLOGICAL RECRUITMENT OF CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES

We have analyzed CSA as a countervailing market system that has arisen in response to the corporate co-optation of the countercultural organic food movement. Through participation in this alternative system of exchange relationships, the actions and perceptions of CSA farmers and consumers become ideologically aligned through ideas of rooted communities, morally and socially redemptive artisanship, and the refutation of commodity fetishism: the last of these ideals maps onto the nostalgically tinged metagoal of protecting a sacrosanct social institution (the small independent farm) from economic extinction.

These ideological alignments can also be viewed as a form of social consensus building. As Deighton and Grayson (1995) argue, the cultivation of social consensus plays an essential role in the conduct and consummation of exchange relationships. A primary goal of Deighton and Grayson’s conceptualization is to identify criteria that distinguish marketing activities from seduction, which in turn correspond to different strategies for inducing consumers to make an economic transaction. We suggest that the type of social consensus fostered by CSA, as an exemplar of a countervailing market system, exists in a gray area between marketing and seduction, and, hence, it unfolds through a hybrid process of consensus building.

Deighton and Grayson (1995) tease out the defining differences between marketing and seduction through a series of analytic questions, two of which are most relevant to our discussion. First, are the terms of the transaction ambiguous? Deighton and Grayson (1995) contend that ambiguous transaction terms are necessary conditions for both marketing and seduction. CSA exchanges are ambiguous due to the inherent uncertainty about the variety of produce, as well as the quantity and quality of goods, which will be contained in members’ weekly boxes over the course of the season. This structural characteristic of CSA exchange relationships also precludes conventional forms of comparison shopping. At this juncture, CSA meets the basic condition for both marketing and seduction.

Second, does the consumer enter into a new social consensus? Deighton and Grayson (1995) propose that the marketing tactic of persuasion occurs when marketers can justify an ambiguous transaction’s value by invoking a social consensus to which the consumer already ascribes. In contrast, seduction entails the creation of a new consensus through a deliberate, stepwise process that garners incremental agreements and commitments from consumers. CSA exchanges present a case where the categorical line between consensus by persuasion and consensus by seduction cannot be clearly drawn.

CSA’s ideological values are consistent with culturally prevalent consumer concerns regarding the societal consequences of globalization and the ever-expanding influence that corporations exert over everyday life (see Holt, Quelch, and Taylor 2004). They also cohere with a cluster of well-established cultural discourses that revere traditional rural folkways and the small family farm. For environmentally oriented consumers, CSA’s appeals to sustainability are also likely to have strong resonance. However, the practical inconveniences posed by CSA participation, its noncompetitive pricing structure, its model of shared risk, and its truncation of consumer choice are all seriously at odds with standard norms that govern marketplace relationships.

Owing to this schism in the terms of CSA exchange, consumers must be convinced that joining a CSA farm is a rewarding and worthwhile means for them to enact its celebrated cultural values and, reciprocally, to interpret the practical drawbacks of CSA participation as rewarding virtues. This dialectical process of consensus building does not quite fit Deighton and Grayson’s (1995) conceptualization of marketing persuasion because a new consensus has to be reached about the unconventional terms of CSA transactions. Furthermore, CSA actively involves consumers in the construction of this social consensus through farm-hosted, participatory events and direct and indirect interactions (via newsletters) with CSA farmers, not to mention the structural incentives to invest more time and effort in cooking and culinary experimentation. Yet, CSA consensus-building activities draw so heavily from established cultural frames of reference that they cannot accurately be described as a form of seduction that involves the resolution of transaction ambiguity through a “private social consensus” (Deighton and Grayson 1995, 668).

Accordingly, we suggest that the social consensus that underlies the CSA market system emerges from a process of ideological recruitment. This process encompasses experiences that Deighton and Grayson (1995) attribute to seduction (i.e., collaborative participation and play) and to marketing (i.e., persuasion and socialization). Semantically, the construct of ideological recruitment conveys that consumers are proactively integrated into a social network linked by a common ideological outlook and goal system.
and, conversely, that its members develop an enduring sense of commitment toward the community and its core values. In the CSA case, the specific kind of communal experiences that this countervailing market facilitates is quite integral to consumers’ receptiveness to its strategies of ideological recruitment.

The Political Ideology of (Imagined) Consumption Communities

The communal aspects of consumption have been a prominent research topic over the past decade (see Arnould and Thompson [2005] for a review). The general tenor of these studies is consistent with Bauman’s (2000) and Sennett’s (2006) arguments that contemporary quests for community are undertaken primarily for therapeutic reasons, as consumers seek to circumvent the forms of social isolation that are precipitated by the structural conditions of postmodern societies. One of the most comprehensive statements of this position is offered by Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) and O’Guinn and Muniz’s (2005) influential theorization of brand communities. As they write, “Brand communities are a response to the postindustrial age. Consumers seek communal affiliation and are likely to foster it wherever they can” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, 426). Muniz and O’Guinn further document that brand communities are liberated from the constraints of geographic locale; this liberation has been greatly facilitated by the Internet and digital communication networks (2001, 426).

According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), brand communities, like most other kinds of consumption communities, are imagined communities (cf. Anderson 1983); that is, members’ feelings of collective identity and common purpose (i.e., consciousness of kind) are dependent upon imagined commonalities to others sharing their consumer passion (also see Kozinets 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). One key implication of the imagined community construct is that face-to-face interaction and physical proximity are not necessary for authentic experiences of community. Hence, members of a brand community can be spread across the globe and socially linked through Internet interactions and common experiences of the product, brand image, and advertisements (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn and Muniz 2005).

In these consumer research applications, imagined community would appear to be an apolitical construct. However, Anderson (1983) argued that the imagined community is a political formulation that is integrally related to the modern project of nation building and the genesis of national identity (e.g., the community of American citizens). In Anderson’s conceptualization, imagined does not imply a visage that is idiosyncratically conjured in the mind of an individual. Rather, these imagined commonalities are inculcated through public discourses and rituals that create a sense of common cause and identity. Implicit to the imagined community is a model of sovereign citizenship in which individuals give their allegiance to an envisioned national interest (and attendant conceptions of the public good) rather than to the parochial ties of kinship, fidelity to religious or ethnic traditions, or local factionalism. Thus, an imagined fraternity among rational citizens trumps other potential sources of social division (Anderson 1983).

Over the course of the twentieth century, this imagined national interest has become increasingly associated with the efficient operation of the free market, the expansion of consumer choice, and the attendant belief that the market is the most efficient and effective adjudicator of societal value (Cohen 2003). Proponents of economic globalization and neoliberal market reforms push these marketized bounds of imagined community even further. They encourage identification with the global marketplace and a cosmopolitan model of the civic good that is not provincially tied to any single national identity (see Noble 2002; Sassen 1998). This cosmopolitan spin on imagined community resituates citizenship within the context of transnational political and socioeconomic concerns. Advocates of this neoliberal viewpoint contend that their ideological vision of a globalized commonweal can help to transcend the nationalistic rifts that have triggered so many geopolitical conflicts (Friedman 2000, 2005).

Brand communities, fan communities (Jenkins 1992; Kozinets 2001), and other globally dispersed consumption communities (Cova 1997) exemplify this cosmopolitan reformulation of imagined community. This circumstance does not mean that consumers consciously place their ties to the Apple Mac community and their political citizenship on the same plane of significance. However, consumption communities are one practical means through which individuals can construct some aspects of their identities in relation to social networks that transcend geographic particularities and can participate in transnational dialogues grounded in shared connections to global consumer culture. In this way, the ideological logic of global corporate capitalism becomes naturalized in the practices of everyday life.

On the other side of the globalization debate, however, stand a vocal cadre of social critics who charge that the neoliberal celebration of cosmopolitan citizenship elides the asymmetrical power relations that permeate the global economy and the long history of economic exploitation foisted upon nations and populations who hold subordinate positions in transnational power structures (Sassen 1998). These critics warn that local environmental and economic interests and workers and consumer rights will likely be trampled by the juggernaut of transnational capital unless there is an aggressive push back against the current trajectories of globalization (Black 2001; Falk 2000; Kelly 2001; Klein 2002). Given the market hegemony of these transnational circuits of corporate capital (and their supporting institutions such as hard-core skydivers (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993) and cyclists, are linked together by a shared body of common (embodied) experiences, technical vocabularies, product specifications and innovations, iconic figures and events (i.e., the Tour de France), specialty media, and, of course, global communication networks.

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4For example, activity-based consumption communities, such as hard-core skydivers (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993) and cyclists, are linked together by a shared body of common (embodied) experiences, technical vocabularies, product specifications and innovations, iconic figures and events (i.e., the Tour de France), specialty media, and, of course, global communication networks.
as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank), some leading antiglobalization activists advise that such a countermovement can only succeed by integrating market-reforming consumption activities, such as by buying Fair Trade Certified goods and anti-sweatshop brands, that reward socially responsible forms of economic globalization (Schor 2000).

However, this reformist strategy raises a disconcerting question. What if many of these presumably progressive brands are merely using the rhetoric of social responsibility as a cynical gambit to garner investor capital and profits (see Entine 2003)? Espousing this viewpoint, Heath and Potter (2004) dismiss fair-trade initiatives as symbolic window dressing that allows affluent first-world consumers to assuage guilt over their consumerist lifestyles. Similarly, they proclaim that the anti-sweatshop/antistatus brand Blackspot, marketed by the stridently anticonsumerist, antiglobalization organization Adbusters, is a watershed moment after which “no rational person could possibly believe that there is any tension between mainstream and alternative culture” and which proves that “the type of [cultural rebellion] epitomized by Adbusters is not a threat to the system—it is the system” (Heath and Potter 2004, 1).

O’Guinn and Muniz (2004, 2005) address this same politics of consumption paradox in their discussion of polit-brands, such as Apple, Ben & Jerry’s, Tom’s of Maine, Diesel, and Blackspot. According to O’Guinn and Muniz (2005), polit-brand communities are the cultural progeny of the leftist vanguard, which reached its zenith during the 1960s and early 1970s. In the contemporary political milieu, “The new revolutionary leftist strikes blows against the capitalist empire by buying things” (O’Guinn and Muniz 2005, 226). Polit-brand communities sanctify designated brands as shining beacons of socially responsible capitalism and construe their brand loyalties and acts of brand advocacy as pragmatic means to advance their political agenda: “Revolutionary politics are enacted not through choices of consuming or not consuming, but in identification, group sanctioning, and community championing of brands that are deemed by the collective to be the best vessels of the group’s ‘alternative’ politics” (O’Guinn and Muniz 2005, 266).

Heath and Potter’s (2004) and O’Guinn and Muniz’s (2004, 2005) respective discussions presuppose that civic-minded consumers remain content to bask in the politically correct glow of their favored brands. However, consumers can become quite wary of global brands that promote themselves as agents of progressive social change and, instead, direct their politicized consumption choices toward non-corporate, local alternatives (see Holt et al. 2004; Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004). Countervailing markets can actively mobilize these consumer suspicions as a way of insulating themselves from the economic threats posed by corporate co-optation. In the CSA case, this ideological rallying point gains experiential credibility by offering consumers a different form of communal experience than polit-brands.

The Ideological Allure of Simple Choices and Human-Scale Market Systems

Polit-brand communities are ideologically constituted as a global network of socially responsible cosmopolitan consumers who are using their buying power to create a more socially just form of global capitalism. However, these imagined ties are divorced from any specific connections to place or local interests. Instead, these relationships are disembodied; that is, they are redistributed across space and time via complex institutional networks and abstract symbolic systems (such as brands or imported produce sorted, priced, and displayed on grocers’ shelves; Giddens 1991). Disembodied market relationships are ubiquitous features of the global economy that provide many well-documented economic and societal benefits (Friedman 2000). However, they are also conducive to existential doubts that arise from heightened consumer sensitivities toward the unintended consequences and systemic risks that almost inevitably plague complex systems (Beck 1999).

For example, Ben & Jerry’s well-intended Rainforest Crunch–Amazon preservation initiative (ca. 1990–95) illustrates how the complex institutional structure of the global economy and the popular appeal of countercultural branding can lead to disconcerting unintended consequences. In brief, Ben Cohen promoted this brand extension as a project to save the South American rainforest from continued profit-driven deforestation by creating a sustainable market for its native fruits and nuts. However, the indigenous Xapuri cooperative that was slated to provide the nuts quickly proved unable to meet demand. Ben & Jerry’s had to rely on large commercial suppliers for the nuts. As more large producers entered this market, however, supply began to outstrip demand, which in turn lowered the market price the indigenous cooperative could receive for its modest harvests. As nut prices plummeted, indigenous groups began to sell off more land rights to miners and foresters to compensate for this decline in their tribal incomes (Glasser 1995; Welles 1998).

The Red Cross’s recent “saving the world isn’t easy; saving a life is” advertising campaign directly appeals to these kinds of existential uncertainties (http://www.bloodsaves.com). In one ad from this campaign, “Julie,” a well-intentioned, idealistic, twenty-something consumer citizen, recounts how she successfully organized a movement to shut down a corporate factory that was polluting the town’s river and making its children sick. Alas, she then laments that half the town is now unemployed and that the children she sought to help are sicker than ever before because their parents no longer have health-care coverage. The coda of the ads is that donating blood offers a way to save the world one person at a time without running the risk of instigating a damaging cycle of unintended consequences. Advertising

Further seeding consumer skepticism, a recent journalistic exposé has called into question whether fair-trade initiatives actually deliver their promised economic and social justice benefits to indigenous workers (see Thompson 2005).

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critic Seth Stevenson (2006) aptly summarizes the theme of the campaign: “Giving blood is easy, it’s over before you know it, and it’s a tangible way to help people. However, social agitation (staging protests, organizing boycotts, writing letters to big corporations) can have complicated consequences and the results can be difficult to quantify. Seems like a simple choice!”

The ideological appeal of CSA similarly flows from what appears to be a simpler (and more indubitable) choice of a very specific form. CSA consumption communities provide their members with a reassuring feeling of participating in an intimate and human-scaled market structure, whose benefits and consequences can be directly gauged and which does not seem destined to engender a vast series of unintended consequences. This ideological view, shared by CSA farmers and consumers alike, of course, does not mean that this countervailing market is structurally independent from the global economic system. In the larger socioeconomic and ecological scheme, CSA remains a by-product of the multifaceted infrastructure that supports global consumer culture and that provides consumers ready access to a broad spectrum of goods (see Appadurai 1990; Ger and Belk 1996).

However, such macrolevel considerations have little bearing on CSA consumers’ ideologically framed emic perspectives. For these consumers, CSA’s ideology and constellation of marketplace-consumption practices sufficiently diverge from the disembedding modalities of corporate global capitalism so that they can credibly believe that it is redressing some of the ecological and socioeconomic problems fostered by economic globalization. As a reembedded consumption community, CSA also affords consumers with reaffirming experiences of emotional immediacy, confidence in outcomes, direct participatory involvement, and personal engagement that are difficult to replicate in a disembedded, polit-brand community, whose relational networks and re-alpolitik consequences are diffused across the vast expanse of the globalized economy.

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