

## JAFSCD COMMENTARY

# Five practical strategies for those who work for food systems change

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Submitted August 19, 2022 / Accepted August 22, 2022 / Published online October 11, 2022

Citation: Roman-Alcalá, A. (2022). Five practical strategies for those who work for food systems change. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 12(1), 9–12. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2022.121.001>

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In 2021, I completed my Ph.D. dissertation research on Californian food movements (Roman-Alcalá, 2021b).<sup>1</sup> That participatory research process deepened my preexisting engagement in these movements as an organizer, urban farmer, policy advocate, educator, and writer. You can find

the 400 pages of details online, but the main thrust of the research concerned how various subsectors of food movements describe and manifest “emancipatory” politics, and how they do and do not work across various lines of difference. Secondarily, it concerned how food movements oppose—but also potentially intersect with—resurgent right-wing politics. Converging across differences is an essential challenge and task in order to fundamentally transform the food system, push back right-wing gains, and achieve a broader emancipatory political agenda. In this short commentary, I offer some insights on these topics from the research and my over 18 years of involvement in emancipatory (food) politics.

Movements in California are obviously diverse, and they describe and manifest emancipatory politics in differing ways. Importantly, though, I char-

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### Author Note

This commentary is adapted from my “dissertation-as-zine” (Roman-Alcalá, 2021a).

### Acknowledgments

Thanks go to my Ph.D. supervisors, my colleagues and comrades along the journey at International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) and elsewhere, and to all the movement organizers and activists with whom I have learned and sought change over the decades.

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<sup>1</sup> See the full dissertation (Roman-Alcalá, 2021b) at <http://hdl.handle.net/1765/137011>; the defense presentation at <https://eur.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=a3424b89-a700-4bcb-bdb4-adf700ebfcf6>; and the “dissertation-as-zine” (Roman-Alcalá, 2021a) from which this commentary is adapted at <https://www.iss.nl/en/media/2021-12-antonio-roman-alcala-diss-zine>

acterize recent movements in California as moving toward more radical positions regarding race, capitalism, and the state—perhaps because of the increasing influence of perspectives of people of color (POC). In short, POC influence has shifted white-dominated food movement spaces and has increased the prominence of racially aware, capitalism-critical, and state-skeptical trends.

Because right-wing power is rooted in racialization, capitalism, and state power, these radical positions are well-suited to address the deeper origins of right-wing power to the extent that they can be shared across differences and brought to bear on practical political decisions and investments. Instead of reinforcing problematic institutions that reproduce inequalities and Othering<sup>2</sup> (such as capitalist enterprises or colonial-racist state structures), these politics can create new institutions of production, distribution, moral economies, and political decision-making; build and deepen the relationships that are essential for any long-haul struggle; and through processes of open-hearted dialogue (outside the structures of policy and funder mandates), they can effectively connect the various forms and experiences of marginalization, including that based on race, ethnicity, geographic origin, economic class, gender, radical political views, sexual orientation, and age. Such processes of dialogue can create a larger sense of “We” that nonetheless recognizes differences internal to that “We.”

My research encourages us to value *non-state* positions in social movements, and not to dismiss these as inadequate (as much U.S.-focused literature on ‘neoliberalism’ in food movements does)—whether because they operate at a small scale, do not seek change primarily through the state, or use entrepreneurial strategies at times. This dissertation does encourage a cautious eye toward how and when groups involve themselves in state government and small business. This caution builds on previous criticisms of the “nonprofit industrial complex,” of seeking change merely through forming farm and food enterprises that are viable within existing capitalist relations, and of the de-radicalizing effects of reformist government processes. Still,

while engaging policy, nonprofit forms of organization, and social entrepreneurship can temper the transformative potential of food movement groups, the radical efforts I saw in fieldwork actively worked against this de-radicalization when they engaged in those strategies.

Knowing that the issues of addressing state power, creating viable food production units within the existing economy, and funding social change work will not simply go away because they are compromised and complicated, I propose five practical strategies for those who work for food systems change and want to advance the convergence of diverse movement sectors into a stronger, more unified political force. In brief, these strategies or approaches are: (1) doing the work of making change with humility (especially when the existing structures of power benefit you, at the expense of others), (2) starting work at the interpersonal level but always keeping in mind the structural conditions and issues, (3) sparking and advancing explicit dialogue on the relationships between dynamics of capitalism and Othering, (4) accompanying redistributive *talk* (which currently seems popular) with redistributive *action*, and (5) accepting and embracing the generative nature of conflict.

Let me offer more details on these.

1. **Working with humility:** The unpredictability of how movement convergence and political change occur demands an openness and humility from movement participants who seek collaboration across differences. Simply said, we can not always know how social change will happen, and so we should not act so certain about our particular approach. This humility is extra important for those with status and privilege, as the playing field is already stacked against those from marginalized and Othered backgrounds, and is tilted against more radical political positions and tactics. Hence: if you work on policy, or on USDA-funded projects to train new farmers, and if you are white, or well-educated, or upwardly mobile, you should *especially* be humble about your preferred ‘the-

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<sup>2</sup> “Othering” is a process whereby certain social groups are dehumanized, often to enable their exploitation in society; it can be racialized and/or be based on gender, sexuality, or many other markers of human difference.

ory of change' with regard to the work being done by other groups.


2. **Combining the personal and structural:** In this humility, action is rooted in relational (individual and interpersonal) work, but must move 'up' from there, recognizing that social structures always weigh upon us. That is to say, we are most effective when we connect with people, work with people, and build real and reciprocal relationships. This is the deep work of organizing, in contrast to the light touch of advocacy that simply displays grievances (e.g., online petitions or performative marches). But only working locally, with people you know or build relationships with, is not enough: we must bring into our discussions, strategies, and activities thinking about the social structures that influence how this relational work advances. This includes considering the structural influences on us as individuals, on our organizations, on the political environment, and on our options to try something new. This can also include being a bit more generous of spirit to others with whom you might not be on the 'same page,' but may at least be in the same book. When we acknowledge that larger forces make our (radical) food movement work very difficult, we can be less critical of others around us for their supposed blame for 'our' (collective) lack of success.
3. **Explicit dialogue on Othering and capitalism:** It is essential to pursue *explicit* dialogue to surface beliefs, values, tensions, and alignments—particularly with regard to various axes of Othering and effects of capitalism. From pursuing this work myself, I know that too often movement groups and nonprofits are discouraged from projects of 'aimless talk.' Dialogue between groups that is not directed toward policy outcomes or 'win-win' solutions desired by elites are rare in *funded* food movement work. We must make radical questioning of our conditions and our solutions common, in organic farming training programs, in food-justice grocery stores, in food co-ops, in urban farms, and so on. As Fred Moten and Stefano

Harney (2013) describe it, we need to "renew our habits of assembly" and "study" together—this has *always* been the seedbed of movements for radical change.

4. **Redistributive action:** Lately, it has become more popular to call out injustice and to use the right words to describe it. A prominent example of this is the new prevalence of "land acknowledgments," where people introduce events at universities, think tanks, and the like by acknowledging that the event is taking place on unceded territories of this or that Native tribe. I call this "redistributive talk" because it redistributes (to some degree) the space of thought and discussion toward those who have been receiving very little for generations. This may be a good thing, but as many of my Indigenous sources told me, land acknowledgments are problematic when taken as a 'checkmark' to-do, unaccompanied by any action. Discourses to counter Othering must be accompanied by actions that redistribute resources, and language cannot serve as the main barometer of activist success. For land acknowledgments, these can be ended by pointing to active local Indigenous struggles and getting people to involve themselves. Action beyond words is especially needed that works against unequal relations *within* movement sectors *and between them*, and that builds in the here-and-now resources for collective action and community resilience. This is why mutual aid work, and the building of infrastructures of food and care outside the money economy (or at least, padded from it), are so important.
5. **Accepting conflict as generative:** Both dialogues about inequalities and injustices—and redistributive actions to rectify those—can elicit conflict, discomfort, and negative reactions. But these are necessary elements to transformative change, especially for the relatively privileged, and so movement participants should be less fearful of this generative conflict. Sometimes, they might even plan for it, and know that to the extent that the powerful are becoming uncomfortable, they are likely

doing their activism well.<sup>3</sup> Here I am inspired by the examples from a new book about scholar-activists against industrial agriculture in California. It is called *In the Struggle* (O'Connell & Peters, 2021), and I recommend it for those interested in how we can use knowledge, organizing, and institutional positions to bring down the empires of harm that characterize most of our contemporary food systems.

I hope that these five principles can help others navigate more effectively the uncertain, complex, and often emotionally taxing process of mak-

ing social change. While it may seem at times like we face worse conditions than ever before, this research reminded me of historic precedents for today's struggles: that we are not alone, and that this road has been traveled before. And in exploring food movements today, the research gave me a surprising sense of possibility. For as the food movements of today are perhaps more radical than they have been in decades, they also appear readier than ever to counter divisive right-wing politics of racism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism, and to construct a radically different world. While that task has never been easy, it remains essential. 

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<sup>3</sup> Not that in my use of 'powerful' here, I mean specifically structural power (like holding public office, being a boss in a firm, managing the labor of others, holding celebrity power), not simply being 'privileged' according to this or that group identification, which is too often the focus of conflict today. Movements are better off choosing enemies wisely, and not see(k)ing them everywhere (and especially not identifying enemies based primarily on externally vetted identity markers).