The Power of an Image: The Local Food Movement and Farmworker Labor in New York State

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My summer research concentrated on the growing local, sustainable food movement in New York State and its intersection with various conceptions of labor and workers’ rights. With its idyllic farmland and a surging interest in local food, the Hudson Valley region has a long history of small, family-run farms, many of which are now transitioning to organics and specialty crops with a new generation of farmers. This region poses a unique case study due to its proximity to New York City, where the primary consumer base is made up of the urban, upper middle class and elite communities. Like most of the farms in the country, those in the Hudson Valley are dependent on seasonal workers from Mexico and Central America to keep them running, especially as demand grows for locally produced food.

My research concentrated on the unique dynamic between farmworkers, farmers, consumers, and proponents of the local and sustainable food movement. Early on in my research process, I discovered that the market value for direct-to-consumer sales in New York is exceeded only by California nationwide. However, unlike in California, farmworkers are excluded from certain protections under labor law such as a mandatory day of rest, disability insurance, overtime pay, and collective bargaining rights. In addition, most farmworkers are undocumented, leaving them even more susceptible to violations. I found a profound juxtaposition between the beautiful working landscapes and strong farm-community relations found in the Hudson Valley, and some of the underlying labor contentions that often go unnoticed or unseen. I set out to answer the following questions: Which actors dominate and which actors are left out of this complex agricultural network? Is the relationship between the producer and the consumer strengthened through the purchase of locally produced foods? Are certain members of this production system left out or erased in this relationship? Is there a changing view of the importance of labor and food justice in the local food movement? How do the roles of race and class play into this system?

I interviewed farmers and farmworkers, as well as members of farmworker advocacy groups and larger non-profits working within the regional food system. I found that farmers in New York, especially those who are running smaller-scale operations, are faced with incredible economic hardship. The growing season in the Northeast is significantly shorter compared to the year-round seasons in the West, and this combined with the current market dynamics that prioritize large industrial farms in states like California, or produce shipped from overseas has made surviving as a farmer in the Northeast extremely difficult. When it comes to labor, these economic restrictions have generally positioned farmers against any provision to grant workers the labor protections they are exempt from. In addition, because a smaller workforce on farms has fostered a more intimate relationship between employer and employee, the quality of treatment of workers varies greatly from farm to farm. These elements have created tensions between farmers and advocacy groups, all of which makes the conversation about labor an extremely complex one. However, I found that the growing demand on the part of consumer for local food, the bourgeoing young farmer community in the region, and the various victories by farmworker groups across the country - especially the success of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida - could pave the way forward in discussing labor in agriculture. I hope to continue this research as an Honors Project in Anthropology, in order to further analyze the ways in which agricultural labor has been thought of historically, and what these new trends in the local and sustainable food system could mean for the agricultural industry in the Northeast as a whole.

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