Multi-Issue Food Activism

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1. Introduction

Food activism sits at the intersection of many different social and political issues. For example, you might get involved in food activism because you care about hunger, malnutrition, labor rights, animal rights, public health, the environment, and/or a host of other issues. You might also take many different approaches to food activism. For instance, you might advocate for local food, organic food, vegan food, food security, food justice, food sovereignty, and so on. The pluralistic nature of food activism has risks as well as benefits. On one hand, it can lead to conflict within and across food activist groups, since different individuals and groups have different beliefs, values, and priorities. On the other hand, it can also bring people together around a common cause so that we can learn how to help each other, or at least not harm each other, through our work. As a result, many people are now calling for unity in food activism. For example, Eric Holt-Giménez and Annie Shattuck write:

   Food sovereignty, food justice, and the right to food ultimately all depend on building a unified food movement diverse enough to address all aspects of the food system, and powerful enough to challenge the main obstacle to food security – the corporate food regime.

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2 For my purposes in this chapter, I will use ‘food activism’ in a broad sense that refers to any effort to bring about social, political, or economic change regarding food production and/or consumption.

However, it is not always clear what kind of unity people are calling for, or why. Moreover, while an aspiration to unity would have many benefits, it would also seem to have certain costs. For example, it would place many restrictions and demands on current approaches to food activism.

My aim in this chapter is to examine the debate between what I will call multi-issue food activism, which spans multiple movements and addresses multiple issues, and what I will call single-issue food activism, which does not. I will begin, in §2, by reviewing the kinds of connections across issues that will be relevant for our discussion. I will then, in §3-4, present and evaluate two arguments for multi-issue food activism – one principled and one pragmatic – as well as, in §5-7, three approaches to multi-issue food activism – unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding. Finally, in §8, I will close with a few general, preliminary conclusions about how we can do food activism in a thoughtful and strategic way in light of these considerations.

2. Parallels, Intersections, and Root Causes

There are many kinds of connection across issues, in particular across identities and oppressions, that present activists with challenges as well as opportunities. I begin by reviewing three kinds of connection that will be relevant here – parallels, intersections, and root causes – and by explaining how I understand the relationship between multi-issue activism, single-issue activism, and intersectional activism for my purposes in this chapter.

First, there are parallels across identities and oppressions. That is, there are respects in which different oppressions function in similar ways. For example, Iris Young argues that many oppressions share some or all of the following features: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness,

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4 Some people use ‘intersectional activism’ to refer to what I am calling ‘multi-issue activism.’ I explain how I understand the distinction between these categories in §2.
cultural imperialism, and violence. Many activists explore parallels between specific practices and traditions as well, sometimes in controversial ways. For example, many food activists argue that current treatment of nonhuman animals in agriculture is similar in some respects to past treatment of Black Africans during American slavery (for instance we separate them from their families and keep them in captivity so that we can extract economic value from them) as well as of Jewish people during the Holocaust (for instance we control breeding to “improve the herd” and slaughter them in industrialized killing centers). Of course, no two identities or oppressions are exactly alike, and some have much more in common than others. (We will explore the controversy surrounding parallel-oppression analyses involving historical atrocities such as slavery and the Holocaust in §7.) Still, if and when we explore certain parallels in nuanced, respectful ways, we can enrich our understanding of particular identities and oppressions as a result.

Second, there are intersections across identities and oppressions. That is, there are respects in which, when a particular individual has multiple marginalized identities, their identities interact in a way that makes the whole different from the sum of its parts. For example, as Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, if we want to understand the challenges that Black women face in the workplace, then it is not enough to simply think about the challenges that Black people and women face in the workplace, and add these thoughts together (especially if we have a tendency to think of Black people as male by default and/or to think of women as white by default). Instead, we need to examine the respects in which racism and sexism conspire to create new, distinctive challenges for individuals who hold both marginalized identities in this context. Similarly, many food activists argue that, if we want to understand the challenges that undocumented workers face in agriculture, the challenges that single

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6 For discussion of animal use and slavery, see Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison*, and for discussion of animal use and the Holocaust, see Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*.
7 See, for example, Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins”; Carastathis, “Basements and Intersections”; Carastathis, “The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory”; and Garry, “Intersectionality, Metaphors, and the Multiplicity of Gender.”
parents face in food deserts, the challenges that disabled people face at protests and demonstrations, and so on, then we need to examine the respects in which racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and more conspire to create new, distinctive challenges for these individuals in these contexts.

Third, many people think that there is a shared or root cause of some or all oppressions. For example, many activists identify capitalism as a shared or root cause of oppression, since capitalism leads us to objectify each other as we compete for dominance in the global marketplace. In food movements, many activists develop this idea in terms of our industrial food system and the neoliberal approach to food policy that informs the food security efforts of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO. Of course, many other activists dispute the idea that there is a single root cause of all oppression, or that this root cause is capitalism or neoliberalism. But even if we reject these ideas, we might still think that there are at least some common causes of at least some of the problems that we face. Insofar as we do, it will guide our thinking about the nature of oppression as well as how to end it.

Many activists believe that if there are connections across identities and oppressions, then there should also be connections across the movements that address them. This is especially true in food activism, given how many groups experience harm as a result of our global food system. Some people channel this call for connectedness into a call for unity, understood as a call for activists to work together across movements. Others channel it into a call for solidarity, understood as a call for activists to work in harmony across movements. Increasingly, many people are also channeling this idea into a call for intersectional activism. Some people use this term in a general sense, to refer to activism that operates at the intersection of multiple movements and promotes understanding of connections across them. However, other people use it in a more specific sense, to refer to activism

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8 For more, see Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 1-16 and Torres, “Property, Violence, and the Roots of Oppression.”
9 For more, see Counihan and Siniscalchi, *Food Activism* and Schanbacher, *The Politics of Food.*
that operates at the intersection of multiple movements and promotes understanding of intersectionality, in the sense Crenshaw discusses, in particular.\textsuperscript{10}

Since the term ‘intersectionality’ has a specific origin and usage that I want to preserve, I will use ‘multi-issue activism’ to refer to activism that addresses multiple issues (as opposed to single-issue activism, which does not), and I will use ‘intersectional activism’ to refer to multi-issue activism that promotes understanding of intersectionality in particular. Meanwhile, I will use ‘unity,’ ‘solidarity,’ and ‘mutual understanding’ to refer to different approaches to multi-issue and/or intersectional activism.

3. The Principled Argument for Multi-Issue Food Activism

I will now present and evaluate two arguments for multi-issue food activism – one principled and one pragmatic. I begin with the \textit{principled argument} for multi-issue activism. The general form of this argument is: Your reasons for supporting movement \(x\) commit you supporting movement \(y\) as well.

People use this kind of argument in at least two ways. First, they use it to get people to expand their compassion. For example, it is common to argue as follows: “If you think that all humans are equal because we should consider the interests of everybody equally no matter what group they happen to be members of, and no matter how intelligent they happen to be, then you should think that all sentient beings are equal for the same reason.”\textsuperscript{11} People also use this kind of argument to get people to expand their understanding of what moral concern requires. For example, it is common to argue as follows: “If you think that driving an SUV is wrong for ecological reasons, then you should think that eating industrial food is wrong for ecological reasons as well.” We can represent all of these arguments as a simple syllogism:

\textsuperscript{10} Thanks to Nora Berenstain and Julinna Oxley for helpful discussion on this point.
\textsuperscript{11} For the most well-known instance of this argument, see Singer, \textit{Animal Liberation}. 
1. $x$ is morally wrong.

2. $y$ is relevantly similar to $x$.

3. Therefore, $y$ is morally wrong as well.\(^{12}\)

When confronted with this kind of argument, we can respond in at least four ways. Take my own case, for example. First, I sometimes accept the conclusion; for example, I became vegetarian, and then vegan, because I accepted that my reasons for thinking that all humans are equal extend to all sentient beings. Second, I sometimes reject premise 1; for example, I avoided vegetarianism for a long time because I sensed that it would commit me to veganism, and I was reluctant to open myself up to accusations of hypocrisy insofar as I fell short of that standard. Third, I sometimes reject premise 2; for example, I am not a fruitarian because I deny that my reasons for caring about sentient beings for their own sake extend to non-sentient beings. Finally, I sometimes reject the aspiration to consistency in the first place; for example, I wrote a draft of this chapter at a Starbucks, on an Apple product, while wearing clothes from Urban Outfitters, despite believing that a fully consistent approach to consumer activism would have ruled out at least some of these choices, because – well, because I really like this shirt and laptop and I was craving a soy chai latte (and because at some point I have to stop thinking about what to buy and what not to buy so I can get on with my day).

How should we evaluate these responses to appeals to consistency? I think that we have no choice but to evaluate them on a case by case basis. For example, the first three responses are clearly appropriate in some situations. When we see the full implications of a principle we accept, it sometimes makes sense to accept those implications and it sometimes makes sense to revise or replace that principle (e.g. because we realize that it requires the impossible). Moreover, even if two actions are relevantly similar in some respects, they might not be relevantly similar in all respects, and so we might have stronger moral reason to perform, or not to perform, one action more than another all things considered. With that said, given that the first response conflicts with self-interest

\(^{12}\) We could also put this argument in terms of actions that are morally permissible or required.
more often than not and that the second and third responses coincide with self-interest more often than not, I think that we can expect ourselves to feel inclined to reject the first response more often than we should and to accept the second and third responses more often than we should, and we should be prepared to discount our intuitive reactions to these arguments accordingly.

As for the fourth response – rejecting the aspiration to consistency in the first place – this response admits of two readings, one of which I think is more plausible than the other. On one hand, I think that it is a mistake for us to reject the aspiration to consistency in theory, i.e. to say that we do not have to treat like cases alike in principle. On the other hand, I do not think that it is always a mistake for us to reject, or at least restrict, the aspiration to consistency in practice, i.e. to say that we should sometimes allow virtues such as humility and toleration to trump virtues such as consistency in everyday life. This is true for epistemic reasons – e.g., if we aim for consistency at all costs, we will be more likely to accept simple, reductive, dogmatic worldviews – as well as for practical reasons – e.g., if we aim for consistency at all costs, we will be more likely to channel our efforts into an ineffective, counterproductive, and unsustainable obsession with personal purity.\textsuperscript{13}

However, it is important to qualify this point in two ways. First, as with the second and third responses, this fourth response coincides with self-interest more often than not, and therefore we should expect ourselves to feel inclined to accept it more often than we should, and we should be prepared to discount our intuitive reaction to it accordingly. Second, while I agree that we should attempt to strike a balance between consistency, on one hand, and humility and toleration, on the other hand, I also think that (a) most of us can cultivate much more consistency than we currently have compatibly with cultivating these other virtues, and (b) if and when these virtues conflict, we should not assume that the latter always trump the former any more than we should assume that the former always trumps the latter. Instead, I think that we should accept that this is a complex issue, and that different approaches will be appropriate for different people in different situations.

\textsuperscript{13} For more, see Thompson, \textit{From Field to Fork}, 227-56.
4. The Pragmatic Argument for Multi-Issue Food Activism

I now turn to the\textit{ pragmatic argument} for multi-issue food activism. The general idea behind this argument is: We will accomplish more if we support each other than if we do not.

The argument for this conclusion is simple. There are many different issues and groups working on them. Especially in the food movement, these groups have many shared interests, including an interest in combating industrial animal agriculture, and they also have many complementary strengths, including different resources and constituencies. Thus, if food activists work together, or at least work in harmony with each other, then we will be much stronger overall. Moreover, if we think that there is a shared cause of some of the problems that we face, then that will only enhance this pragmatic argument, since it will support the idea that, if we want to bring about real change in the long run, then we must address the shared cause of multiple problems (which will involve working in harmony across groups) rather than merely treat the symptoms of our own problems (which might not). As William Schanbacher puts the point: “[A] simple band-aid will not work. We need to transform society. The whole debate over food, the environment, and property [is] a community question, and we have to consider this in order to form alliances.”\textsuperscript{14}

However, critics argue that multi-issue food activism has costs as well. First, it takes a lot of time, energy, and money to work together and in harmony with other movements, which raises important questions about priority setting, especially if we think that our cause is more important than other causes and/or that our group has less capital than other groups (since, as we will see, a full commitment to multi-issue activism can easily become all-consuming). Critics also argue that, if we want people to hear our message, then we have to meet them where they are at. We have to present our message in terms that they can relate to, and we have to encourage changes that seem reasonable.

\textsuperscript{14} Schanbacher, \textit{The Politics of Food}, 11.
to them, which means picking our battles rather than fighting every battle at once. For instance, many food security activists think that we can get much more traction advocating for taxes for food corporations and subsidies for family farmers than by advocating for radical redistribution of wealth and entitlements. Similarly, many animal welfare activists think that we can get much more traction advocating for cage-free eggs and Meatless Mondays than by advocating for a fully vegan world.\textsuperscript{15} If this is right, then we might think that, if we want to get support from the general public, to say nothing of from the business and political leaders who actually set food policy and/or from the nonprofits and foundations that actually support food advocacy, then we need to select concrete, measurable goals that they can identify with – a requirement that is usually not regarded as satisfied by an aspiration to, say, overthrow capitalism or neoliberalism.

Advocates for multi-issue food activism usually reply to these critiques as follows: Yes, some causes are more important than others and, yes, some groups have less capital than others (though we might disagree about which causes are most important, as well as about the degree to which we should engage in zero sum thinking about these issues). Moreover, yes, multi-issue activism might alienate some people in the short term, and yes, we might therefore have to accept that, as one book title puts it, “The revolution will not be microwaved”\textsuperscript{16}, and, as another book title puts it, “The revolution will not be funded.”\textsuperscript{17} But even with all that said, (a) many of the things that we can do to build connections are relatively costless, especially once we identify what they are. (b) It is easy to overestimate the importance of our own cause and to underestimate the importance of other causes, especially if we know more about our own cause than about other causes, as is more likely if we take a single-issue approach. And (c) it is also easy to overestimate the pragmatic value of single-issue approaches and to underestimate the pragmatic value of multi-issue approaches, since the direct, individual benefits of single-issue approaches are easier to measure than the indirect, structural

\textsuperscript{15} For more, see Garner, “A Defense of Broad Animal Protectionism.”

\textsuperscript{16} Katz, \textit{The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved}.

\textsuperscript{17} INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (ed.), \textit{The Revolution Will Not Be Funded}. 
benefits of multi-issue approaches (i.e. single-issue approaches treat the symptoms of particular oppressions in the short term, whereas multi-issue approaches attempt to address the shared or root causes of multiple oppressions in the long run). Thus, advocates for multi-issue activism argue, even if we accept that this approach has costs as well as benefits, we should also allow for the possibility that our cost-benefit analyses are biased in favor of single-issue approaches, and we should discount our pragmatic preference for single-issue approaches accordingly.\footnote{18}

In my view, both sides of this debate make good points, and the challenge is to figure out how to best strike a balance between multi-issue and single-issue approaches in practice. As we do this, it will also be important for us to keep in mind that (a) our evaluation of these arguments tends to change depending on how much we stand to gain or lose from multi-issue activism in particular cases, and (b) even if we are fully persuaded that multi-issue activism is good overall, we tend to focus more on what other groups can do for us than on what we can do for them. This tendency to, as Marilyn Frye puts it, “arrogantly perceive” others as here for us is deeply rooted in human psychology as well as, for many of us, reinforced by social, political, and economic privilege.\footnote{19} Yet our resulting stance towards inconsistency is, itself, inconsistent, and an important step on the path towards ethical food activism is coming to terms with that inconsistency. We should either be as angry with ourselves for the ways in which we fall short as we are with others (and resolve to do more as a result), or we should be as patient and compassionate with others for the ways in which they fall short as we are with ourselves (and resolve to demand less as a result) – or, more plausibly, we should attempt to strike a balance between these extremes.

5. Unity

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\footnote{18} For more, see Sebo, “Animal Advocacy and Systemic Change.”

\footnote{19} Frye, \textit{The Politics of Reality}. (Thanks to Lauren Townsend for this reference.)
I will now distinguish three approaches to multi-issue food activism – unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding – and consider the principled as well as pragmatic merits of each. First, we can promote *unity* by working together across movements, for example by working with multi-issue groups or on multi-group campaigns. This kind of approach can take different forms, and come in different degrees. Here are some examples.

First, we can sort attempts at unity in terms of how *broad* the alliance is. For example, when people talk about food movements uniting, they might mean building alliances across all relevant groups. For instance, we might try to build a coalition of labor rights groups, animal rights groups, public health groups, environmental groups, and so on in order to protest industrial animal agriculture. Call this *global unity*. Alternatively, they might mean building alliances between or among a small number of natural allies. For example, a public health group might work with an environmental group in order to protest the waste produced by industrial animal agriculture. Call this *local unity*. Global and local unity have different virtues. On one hand, global unity allows us to find strength in numbers, as well as to learn from each other and improve our own work as a result. On the other hand, local unity allows us to work together on projects of shared interest with relatively little conflict or disagreement to navigate.\(^{20}\)

We can also sort attempts at unity in terms of how *formal* an alliance is. For example, when people talk about food movements uniting, they might mean that certain food groups should become a single food group or a broad organization with many chapters. Call this *formal unity*. Alternatively, they might mean that food groups should remain separate, but should work together on projects of shared interest. Call this *informal unity*. Formal and informal unity have similar virtues as global and local unity, respectively. On one hand, formal unity enables groups to build deeper alliances than

\(^{20}\) Examples of food groups that aspire to unity in one or more of these senses include Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Food Empowerment Project, Grassroots International, La Via Campesina, More and Better, the Landless Workers Movement, Roots of Change, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, US Food Sovereignty Alliance, and Why Hunger. For discussion of these and other examples of such groups, see Holt-Giménez, *Food Movements Unite!*
they otherwise might, and it also ensures that every group is accountable to every other group, as well as to the coalition as a whole. On the other hand, informal unity allows each group to maintain its own individuality and to act quickly and decisively without first having to achieve consensus with a wide range of groups that may disagree about important issues.\footnote{For more, see Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, 125-83 and Jasper, \textit{Protest}, 143-167.}

So should food movements unite, globally or locally, formally or informally? I doubt that anyone would say that all food groups should pursue full global and formal unity with each other. Indeed, many people believe that activist groups function best when they strike a balance between unity and difference. Why? Because while it is certainly important for us to work together, it is also important for us to work separately so that we can perform experiments in activism, establish a division of labor, compartmentalize harm, learn from each other, and generally speaking live and let live in the food movement (rather than spend all our time and energy denouncing each other within and across food groups).\footnote{For more, see Mill, \textit{On Liberty}, and Young, \textit{Justice and the Politics of Difference}.} These points are especially important for small, grassroots groups who would risk losing their identity and autonomy entirely if they were to join a formally and globally united food movement whose agenda was set primarily, if not entirely, by larger, more mainstream groups. So the question we have to ask is not how to achieve full unity, but rather how to strike a balance between unity and difference in particular cases.

With that said, I think it is safe to say that food groups have reason to unite more globally, as well as more formally, than many currently do. For example, suppose that your goal is to address obesity in food deserts and food swamps. In this case, it might seem natural to create ads that promote healthy eating in these communities or create policies that incentivize healthy eating in these communities, for example through taxes, subsidies, or bans on certain food products. But if you do this work without partnering with members of the relevant communities (and ensuring that they take the lead in these efforts) and without addressing the many other structural forces that motivate people...
to eat unhealthy food, then people in your intended audience will be likely to dismiss your work as hypocritical and paternalistic – and they may be right. Similarly, suppose that your goal is to address increasing adoption of North American and Western European industrial practices in Asia or Latin America. In this case, it might seem natural to create ads that promote alternatives to industrial food in these regions or create policies that incentivize adoption of alternatives to industrial foods in these regions. But, again, if you do this work without partnering with members of the relevant communities (and ensuring that they take the lead in these efforts) and without addressing the many other structural forces that motivate people to prefer industrial food, then people in your intended audience will be likely to dismiss your work as hypocritical and paternalistic – and, again, they may be right.

Of course, even if we accept that food groups should unite more than they currently do, we will still face difficult questions about what the scope of this united food movement should be. For instance, many food sovereignty activists pursue movement unity in a way that excludes animal rights as part of this coalition, despite the fact that animals are central to the public health and environmental harms of our global food system. I think that this omission is partly principled: Many food sovereignty activists accept ideologies, such as a kind of Marxist humanism, that they see as conflicting with animal rights. But I also think that this omission is partly pragmatic: They worry that, even if we accept animal rights in principle, incorporating this issue into our work will alienate potential allies and do more harm than good in practice. Meanwhile, many animal rights activists pursue movement unity in a way that excludes food sovereignty as part of this coalition, despite the fact that corporate control of food production is central to the animal welfare harms of our current food system. As before, I think that this omission is partly principled: Many animal rights activists accept ideologies, such as universal animal liberation, that they see as conflicting with food

23 For more, see Barnhill et al, “The Value of Unhealthy Eating and the Ethics of Healthy Eating Policies.”
sovereignty. But I also think that this omission is partly pragmatic: They worry that, even if we should accept food sovereignty in principle, incorporating this issue into our work will alienate potential allies and do more harm than good in practice.

Food activists disagree about many other issues as well. For example, they disagree about whether we should seek to *regulate* or *abolish* our current food system, e.g. whether we should aim for bigger cages or empty cages in the long run. They disagree about whether we should pursue *reform* or *revolution* as a means to this end, e.g. whether we should advocate for bigger cages or empty cages in the short term. They disagree about whether we should adopt *hierarchical* or *horizonal* organizational structures, e.g. whether we should adopt *voting-based* or *consensus-based* decision procedures within these organizations. They disagree about whether we should advocate for *individual* change or *structural* change, e.g. whether we should promote production and consumption of alternative food or promote social, political, economic changes that make such behavior more appealing. They disagree about whether we should engage in *conciliation* or *confrontation*, e.g. whether we should praise people for participating in Meatless Mondays or blame them for eating meat at all. They disagree about whether we should engage in *education* or *manipulation*, e.g. whether we should focus on promoting the welfare, health, and environmental benefits of alternative food or focus on product placements, celebrity endorsements, and so on. They disagree about whether we should engage in *civil disobedience* or *militant disobedience*, and, if the latter, if we should ever engage in *violence*. And so on. And of course, they disagree about many other, more particular issues as well, for example about whether or not a particular campaign is racist or sexist, whether or not a particular approach to conflict resolution is satisfactory, and so on.\(^{24}\)

These disagreements raise an important question: Should we aspire to unity with groups when we disagree about one or more of these issues? This question drives a partial wedge between the principled and pragmatic arguments for multi-issue food activism, since we might think that we

\(^{24}\) For more on these debates, see Schlottmann and Sebo, *Food, Animals, and the Environment.*
have stronger pragmatic than principled reason to pursue unity across these divisions. That is, we might think that, even if some approaches are right and others are wrong in our view, we should still support a pluralistic food movement that includes them all for many of the same reasons that we should support pluralism in society more generally. For example, we might think that a united food movement that includes radical as well as moderate approaches will be stronger overall than one that does not, since, epistemically, we can all learn from each other, and, practically, radical approaches can shift the center of debate and pave the way for moderate reform, and moderate reforms can shift the goalposts and paves the way for radical change.

Of course, even if we accept this policy of liberal toleration, we still have to decide where to draw the line between tolerable and intolerable disagreement in certain hard cases. For example, we might think that even if we should tolerate disagreement about, say, regulation and abolition in the food movement, we should not tolerate disagreement about, say, non-violence and violence in the food movement, since, we might think, violence is clearly unacceptable for principled as well as pragmatic reasons. In borderline cases, we face difficult questions about how on best strike a balance between (a) building a pluralistic movement in which we can agree to disagree about many issues and (b) building a united movement in which we can uphold certain core values and hold each other accountable for choices that we see as bad. I will not attempt to say exactly how we should answer these questions in the abstract. But I will say that, insofar as we think that we should be open to expanding our conception of unity in the food movement, we will have to be open to supporting other groups more than many of us have in the past, as well as to challenging the beliefs, values, practices, and power structures that dominate in our own groups – which will mean engaging in the other two kinds of multi-issue activism: solidarity and mutual understanding.

25 For more, see Ahmadi, “Racism and Food Justice,” Best and Nocella, Terrorists or Freedom Fighters, and Holt-Giménez, “Food Security, Food Justice, or Food Sovereignty?”
6. Solidarity

Second, we can promote solidarity by working in harmony across movements, for example by helping each other or at least not harming each other through our work. This kind of approach can take different forms and come in different degrees as well.

As with unity, we can sort attempts at solidarity in terms of how broad the support is. Specifically, we can distinguish global solidarity, which aspires to support all relevant movements and approaches, and local solidarity, which aspires to support particular relevant movements or approaches. Global and local solidarity have similar virtues as global and local unity, respectively. We can also sort attempts at solidarity in terms of how active the support is. For example, when people call for solidarity across groups, they might mean that we should actively help other groups, for instance by participating in their work or by promoting their work within our own group (and doing so on their terms rather than on ours). Call this active solidarity. Alternatively, they might mean that we should at least not actively harm other groups, as we would, for instance, if we used fat shaming to advocate for healthy eating. Call this passive solidarity. These approaches have different virtues as well. On one hand, active solidarity provides real support for people who need it and builds real community across groups. On the other hand, passive solidarity addresses the deeply entrenched patterns of harmful behavior that currently exist within and across groups, thereby paving the way for active solidarity as well as formal and informal unity in the long run.

So should food movements stand in solidarity with each other, globally or locally, actively or passively? As with unity, I doubt that anyone would say that all food groups should show solidarity in all of these ways all the time. After all, a commitment to full solidarity would be all-consuming, especially for small grassroots groups. So as before, the question we have to ask is not how to achieve full solidarity, but rather how to strike a principled and pragmatic balance between global, local, active, and passive solidarity in particular cases.
Start with global and local solidarity. As with unity, many food activists tend to favor local solidarity with natural allies. But also as with unity, we might think that we have reason to resist this tendency. For example, many philosophers believe that if one group has a history of harming another, then the former group has a stronger duty to support the latter group than they otherwise would. Why do they think this? A deontologist, who thinks that morality is at least partly backward-looking, might say that we should take responsibility for past harms for its own sake, whereas a consequentialist, who thinks that morality is entirely forward-looking, might say that we should do so in order to heal old wounds. Either way, if we accept this argument, then it has direct implications for food activism. In particular, it implies that if the food movement has a history of racism, sexism, and more – as many think it does, not only in food campaigns that use oppressive language and images but also in food communities that center white culture, maintain patriarchal “divisions in labor, leadership, and legitimacy,” and more – then food activists have a stronger obligation to support the relevant communities than they otherwise would. Granted, we might think that we have a duty to support the communities that we care about too. Yet insofar as our duty to support the communities that we care about conflicts with our duty to take responsibility for harms to other communities (to say nothing of values such as equality or utility), we might also think that the latter duty has at least as much, if not more, weight than the former in many cases. In fact, we might even think that, if these duties conflict as much as they do, then we also have a more general duty to try to expand our sense of community so as to reduce these conflicts – especially insofar as our current, narrow sense of community is part of what perpetuates the very harms that we should be taking responsibility for.

Now consider active and passive solidarity. Our thinking about this issue will depend heavily on what kind of moral theory we accept. For example, many deontologists think that there is a moral difference between helping and avoiding harming, namely, they think that we are sometimes but not

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always morally required to help others (this is known as an *imperfect duty of beneficence*), whereas we are always morally required to avoid harming others (this is known as a *perfect duty of nonmaleficence*). Granted, many deontologists make exceptions to this latter duty, for example in cases where our end is very important, we cannot pursue this end without harming others, and we harm others only as a byproduct of our action. But even given this complication, many deontologists still think that our duty to avoid harm is stronger than our duty to help, and therefore they would still think that our duty to stand in passive solidarity with other movements and approaches is stronger than our duty to stand in active solidarity with them, all else equal.

However, there is a complication here, which is that even passive solidarity takes a lot of active work, and therefore it is not clear how to draw the line between helping and not harming in this area. For example, suppose that in order to avoid causing harm through my work, I need to spend a lot of time, energy, and capital discovering and addressing my own biases as well as encouraging my colleagues to do the same. In this case, am I helping or not harming people through this work? This is a challenging question, since, on one hand, I am clearly doing active work, yet on the other hand, I am also clearly doing this work with the aim of preventing myself (and my colleagues) from causing harm. Moreover, if we classify me as “helping” (and if we accept that I have an imperfect duty of beneficence), then it follows that I am not always morally required to do this work, which means that I am sometimes morally permitted to (allow myself and my colleagues to) harm people. Yet if we classify me as “avoiding harm” (and if we accept that I have a perfect duty of nonmaleficence), then it follows that I *am* always morally required to do this, which implies that morality is much more demanding than many deontologists might have expected.

Meanwhile, many consequentialists deny that there is a moral difference between helping and not harming in principle. They think that we should do the most good we can – whether we do that good through actions, omissions, or (in the case of passive solidarity) actions in the service of omissions. Many consequentialists deny that there is always a moral difference between helping and
harming in practice too: Sometimes we can do the most good by helping people, and sometimes we can do the most good by not harming people. Ideally we can do both at once, but in some cases helping the many might require harming the few, and in other cases declining to harm the many might require declining to help the few. In these cases, most consequentialists will say that we need to think about this issue contextually, and be open to different solutions in different situations.

With that said, I do think that consequentialists should value solidarity in general more than they sometimes do. Many consequentialists think that we should proceed by identifying the cause areas in which we can do the most good and then focusing all our time, energy, and capital on those cause areas to maximize our impact. Yet while I certainly endorse the pragmatic spirit of this decision procedure, I worry that it makes it easy to overlook the many ways in which we can help or avoid harming other groups in real, relatively costless ways. (And if we think there is a root cause of many of the problems that we face, then we might also worry that this decision procedure makes it easy to overlook this root cause and what we need to do in order to address it). Thus, I think a consequentialist should say that even if we should focus most of our time, energy, and capital on, say, alternative food advocacy, we should also focus much more of our time, energy, and capital on, say, anti-racist and anti-sexist solidarity work than many of us do (especially when it comes to combating these biases in the food movement), since this decision procedure will still allow us to engage in strategic priority setting, yet it will also allow us to do real good for other groups in the short term, build a broad alliance of food groups in the long run, and correct for biases in favor of our own cause areas along the way, so that our cost-benefit analysis will be more accurate and objective overall.

What is the upshot for food activism? That will differ from theory to theory. But if my discussion here is correct, then the upshot for many deontologists is that we should always show global passive solidarity, and that we should sometimes but not always show local active solidarity. Whereas the upshot for many consequentialists is that we should adopt a strong presumption in favor

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27 See, for example, MacAskill, Doing Good Better, and Singer, The Most Good You Can Do.
of solidarity – active as well as passive – but we should also be prepared to make exceptions if we can clearly do the most good by harming one group in order to help another.

Either way, then, ethical solidarity is a restrictive and demanding standard. First, it is restrictive since it problematizes much of what food activists currently do. For example, as we have seen, it problematizes harming some groups as a means to helping others, as happens, for example, when we use racism, sexism, or speciesism to sell alternative food. It also problematizes harming some groups as an unnecessary byproduct of helping others. For example, it implies that we should not campaign against conventional food in a way that stigmatizes people who cannot access or afford alternative food, that we should not campaign against animal abuse in factory farms in a way that supports the incarceration of workers who experience exploitation and marginalization as well, and so on. Second, ethical solidarity is demanding since it requires us to do real work in order to meet it. In particular, as Lori Gruen writes, we need to actively research other issues and pay “critical attention to the ways in which power may be operating to marginalize cultural ‘others,’” so that we can be fully informed about how to help and not harm others through our work. We also, as Anthony Nocella writes, need to actively participate in other movements, listen to others without “taking up space,” take directions without “telling others what to do and controlling the agenda,” and more, so that we can build respect, support, and understanding across movements over time.

Needless to say, this standard is difficult, if not impossible, to fully live up to all the time. Thus, as we have seen, the challenge for deontologists and consequentialists alike is not to stand in full solidarity with all groups in all situations (and to expect the same in return), but rather to stand in as much solidarity with as many groups in as many situations as possible, keeping in mind everything

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28 For my purposes in this chapter, I take ‘alternative food’ to refer to options such as local, organic, and/or vegan food.
29 For more, see Viertel, “Beyond Eating with Your Fork.”
30 For more, see Smith, Governing Animals, Chapter 5.
31 Gruen, Ethics and Animals, 94.
that we have discussed here when thinking about priority-setting. Still, if this discussion is right, then we need to consider how our work impacts other groups much more than we currently do, which, in turn, will mean engaging in the third kind of multi-issue activism: mutual understanding.

7. Mutual Understanding

Third, we can promote mutual understanding by sharing information and arguments across movements. In particular, many activists find it useful to share information and arguments about the kinds of connections across identities and oppressions that we considered above, including parallel oppression analyses, intersectional analyses, and root cause analyses. In what follows, I will use ‘critical analyses’ as a general term that covers all three of these categories.

People can, and do, present critical analyses in many different ways in food activism. For example, Carol Adams writes about parallels between sexism and speciesism, as well as about sexism in the animal rights movement, in The Sexual Politics of Meat, and Emily Gaarder does the same in Women in the Animal Rights Movement. A. Breeze Harper writes about her identity as a Black feminist vegan, as well as about racism and sexism in the animal rights movement, in Sistah Vegan, and Aph Ko and Syl Ko do the same in Aphro-ism. Marjorie Spiegel examines parallels between animal agriculture as slavery in The Dreaded Comparison, and Charles Patterson does the same with the Holocaust in Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust. Will Tuttle brings together a variety of authors to examine links among animal rights, disability rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and more in Circles of Compassion. And of course, many academics and activists then attempt to distill these complex critical analyses into simple, pithy messages that they can present to the public through ads, social media posts, op-eds, protests, and more.

33 I will focus here on examples involving human and nonhuman animals, since these tend to be the most controversial kind of critical analysis in the food movement.
As we have seen, critical analyses can be useful for many reasons. They can invite people to expand their compassion as well as their understanding of what compassion requires. But they can also, if not done carefully, come across as simple and reductive and appropriative, with the result that they do more harm than good overall. For example, when animal advocates such as Gary Francione, Tom Regan, and Peter Singer argue that we should not kill animals for food if we would not be willing to kill relevantly similar humans for food, all else equal, disability advocates such as Eva Kittay reply that these arguments erase the many relevant differences between animality and disability in practice. Similarly, when animal groups such as PETA promote animal rights by juxtaposing images of cruelty to nonhumans with images of cruelty to humans (including images of lynched Black men and Jewish people in concentration camps), many people, especially people who experience intergenerational trauma around slavery or the Holocaust, see them as simply exploiting one tragedy to draw attention to another. Finally (though there are many other examples as well), when animal activists attend, say, a Pride Parade so that they can distribute vegan literature, many people see them as simply co-opting this event for their own purposes. As a result, in these and many other cases, attempts at critical analysis can have the exact opposite of the intended effect: Instead of persuading people to accept connections across movements and expand their compassion as a result, they can persuade people to reject these connections and restrict their compassion as a result.

The fact that these latter, harmful impacts are always a risk is predictable in light of some basic facts about how social movements work. First of all, even if the people creating critical analyses are members of the relevant communities who are attempting to do real justice to all relevant issues in books or talks that allow for rigorous, systematic discussion, the people popularizing them are often outsiders with respect to the relevant communities who are attempting to use one issue to promote another in ad campaigns that require simple, pithy messaging. As a result, many people understandably – and accurately – experience these analyses, as presented in these campaigns, as exploitative and reductive.

34 See, for example, Kittay, “At the Margins of Moral Personhood.”
campaigns, as offensive. For example, as A. Breeze Harper writes with respect to the PETA exhibit comparing animal use to slavery and the Holocaust (among other atrocities):

Spiegel and Patterson provided sensitive, scholarly explorations of these topics, whereas the PETA exhibit, and the ensuing controversy, were handled insensitively. The lack of sociohistorical context by PETA is perhaps what is upsetting to many racial minorities, for whom such images and textual references trigger trauma and deep emotional pain.\(^{35}\)

Moreover, even when people do, in fact, present critical analyses in respectful and responsible ways, many people still experience these analyses as offensive, since they still, at least to a degree, hold the kinds of prejudice that these analyses are attempting to challenge. For example, it is easy to imagine someone seeing a book that connects racism, sexism, and speciesism and thinking, “How dare you compare my people to mere animals!” Of course, we might disagree with this reaction. But even if we do, the fact remains that, if enough people have this reaction, then our attempt at critical analysis will have done more harm than good. As a result, many activists believe that, in this kind of case, we should accept that \textit{impact matters more than intent}. That is, we should accept that, no matter how good our intention is and no matter how accurate our message is, insofar as people experience our message as offensive, our message will be harmful and we will be responsible for that harm (at least within certain limits). Thus, it is not enough to insist that the people who experience our message as offensive are wrong (“When I compared racism, sexism, and speciesism, I was saying that these issues are relevantly similar and that we should treat nonhuman animals better, not that these issues are exactly the same or that we should treat people of color or women worse!”). Instead, we each have the burden of presenting our message in an accurate and effective way – which, of course, is not always easy, or even possible, to do.

When we put these facts together, the upshot is that critical analysis is very difficult to do well, especially when presented by outsiders and within the limits of a simple, pithy ad campaign. Which raises the question: Should we ever attempt to use critical analyses in these circumstances? First, if I am not a member of community $x$, should I ever attempt to use critical analyses involving issue $x$ in my activism? This is a complicated question. On one hand, many people think that, if I am not a member of community $x$ (and especially if I have privilege with respect to issue $x$), then I can usually do much more good, and much less harm, overall if I create space for members of community $x$ to speak and write about these issues than if I attempt to do so myself – epistemically, because members of community $x$ have evidence about these issues that I lack, and practically, because members of community $x$ have an authority to speak about these issues that I lack (at least in community $x$). As Ruby Hamad writes with respect to vegan advocacy:

> The acceptance of veganism into the broader social justice movement hinges on bridging [the gap between animal rights and other movements]. And no one is better placed to do so than those vegans who are most marginalised in society – people of colour, women, LGBTI, fat people, disabled people.\(^{36}\)

On the other hand, we might also think that there are at least some cases where, even if I am not a member of community $x$ (and even if I have privilege with respect to issue $x$), I can still use critical analyses involving issue $x$ in an accurate and effective way provided that I proceed with great care. Indeed, we might even think that my privilege can be an asset in some cases, since it can help me to draw mainstream attention to issues that would otherwise remain marginalized. But we should be clear about what this would involve. If I want to use, say, parallel-oppression or intersectional analyses involving issue $x$ without appearing to be (or actually being) appropriative, then, as Christopher Sebastian McJetters writes, I will have to (a) “employ sensitivity and discernment when approaching these discussions,” (b) “amplify the voices of marginalized people who talk about these

\(^{36}\) Hamad, “When Is Being Vegan No Longer About Ethical Living?”
issues,” and (c) “make an attempt to understand how layered oppressions impact different groups to maximize our impact and build a broader, more inclusive community.”

I will also, as Aph Ko writes, have to learn to “speak to issues that intersect in a way that honors each issue as its own manifestation of a problematic system” rather than in a way that, say, “use[s] imagery from historical black oppression only … to draw sympathy to animal oppression without meaningfully analyzing contemporary manifestations of racism.” Needless to say, these conditions are hard to satisfy in practice (and we tend to overestimate the degree to which we have satisfied them in particular cases). Still, we can observe that, insofar as we do this work, our attempts at critical analysis will likely become more accurate and effective as a result – confirming once again that unity, solidarity, and analysis are themselves linked and mutually reinforcing.

Second, and relatedly, should we ever try to present critical analyses within the limits of a simple, pithy ad campaign? It depends. On one hand, we might think that some comparisons, such as general comparisons between factory farming and slavery or the Holocaust, are simply impossible to present in an accurate and effective way within these limits, and therefore we should never try to do that (especially if we are not members of the relevant communities). On the other hand, we might think that other comparisons, such as specific, partial comparisons across race, gender, and/or species, are possible to present in an accurate and effective way within these limits, and therefore we can sometimes try to do that, provided that we do so with great care (and especially if we are members of the relevant communities). For instance, consider a cartoon image by Natalie Peragine in which a pregnant cow asks a pregnant woman, “Do they let you keep yours?”. In pointing to a specific connection between these individuals (a capacity for maternal love that transcends species), this image conveys the idea that veganism is, in part, a feminist issue without at all risking the appearance of “demoting” women to the status of “mere animals.”

38 Ko, “Public Facebook Post.”
39 Peragine, “Do They Let You Keep Yours?”
Of course, many other cases will require more nuanced evaluation. For example, consider an animal activist who attends a Pride Parade with a sign that reads “Vegans for LGBTQ+ rights” or “No one is free when others are oppressed” along with a Mercy for Animals logo. Should we say that this approach is bad, since instead of showing up fully for one cause, they are also attempting to draw attention to another? Or should we say that this approach is good, since in addition to showing up fully for one cause, they are indicating how broad the support for this cause is? Similarly, consider an animal activist who argues that, instead of talking in terms of “human rights” and saying that “all humans are equal,” we should talk in terms of “animal rights” and say that “all animals are equal.” Should we say that this approach is bad, since it functions to erase the particularity of human rights struggles, as when people respond to “Black Lives Matter” with “All Lives Matter”? Or should we say that this approach is good, since it functions to make our moral discourse more inclusive, as when people respond to “all men are equal” with “all humans are equal”? In these and other cases, our overall evaluation will likely depend on further considerations, such as the power dynamics across these movements and the identities and experiences of all involved.

8. Conclusion

I think that my discussion here supports a few general, preliminary conclusions about how to do food activism in an ethical and effective way.

First, insofar as we think that we ought to take an multi-issue approach to food activism, we should adopt a strong presumption in favor of (a) pursuing unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding simultaneously rather than one at a time, (b) expanding these efforts beyond natural alliances, and (c) ensuring that currently marginalized people are empowered to play a central role in these efforts. If we pursue these aims in a sustained way, then I think we will find that many currently problematic food campaigns naturally become less problematic over time, either because
the internal circumstances that made them that way will no longer be present (e.g. a white male leadership that is not sufficiently aware of the harm they can cause to other communities), or because the external circumstances that made them that way will no longer be present (e.g. suspicion of alternative food in some non-white communities because of the ways in which these foods are coded as white).  

Second, we should keep in mind that our interpretation and evaluation of the arguments that we have considered here tend to change depending on whether or not we stand to benefit from multi-issue activism in particular cases. How can we correct for this tendency? First, we can make sure that we demand the same sacrifice from ourselves that we demand from others and that we extend the same patience and compassion to others that we extend to ourselves (with the likely upshot that we will move a bit closer to the center in each case). Second, we can be proactive about expanding our sense of community, not only by pursuing unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding with other movements and approaches but also by engaging in what Maria Lugones calls “world traveling,” i.e., by spending real time in other communities (for example by spending real time working with other movements and approaches) so that we can achieve what Claire Jean Kim calls “multi-optic vision,” i.e. “seeing from within various perspectives, moving from one vantage point to another, inhabiting them in turn, holding them in the mind’s eye at once.”

Finally, and relatedly, we should keep in mind that multi-issue food activism is both more demanding and restrictive, and less demanding and restrictive, than we might have thought in particular cases. On one hand, we have seen that many, if not most, food campaigns currently fall short of its demands by either (a) failing to partner with potential allies even when doing so would have many benefits and few costs, (b) failing to help potential allies in real, relatively costless ways or harming them in real, relatively avoidable ways, or (c) either not drawing connections across

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40 For more, see Guthman, “If Only They Knew.”
41 Lugones, Pilgrimages, 78. (Thanks to Macy Salzberger for this reference.)
42 Kim, Dangerous Crossings, 19. For related discussion, see Gruen, Entangled Empathy.
movements or drawing those connections in simplistic, reductive, and appropriative ways. On the other hand, we have also seen that multi-issue food activism can sometimes, on some views, be compatible with not partnering with, not helping, or even harming potential allies. For a deontologist, this might mean harming the few as an unavoidable byproduct of helping the many, and for a consequentialist, it might mean harming the few for the sake of helping the many. Either way, the upshot is that multi-issue food activism is a very challenging moral standard to live up to in practice.

This kind of careful, deliberate approach to food activism is hard to carry out. These problems are all so urgent: Our food system is arguably responsible for more harm than any other industry, and so it is tempting to advocate against it by any means necessary. But if the arguments that we have considered here are correct, then we have good reason to resist that temptation. As Aziz Choudry observes, “This is difficult, non-glamorous movement building work that, incrementally, is creating spaces where power can be challenged. We rarely hear about these struggles, but they are where hope for the future lies.”

9. References


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43 Choudry, “Twenty Years of Fighting for Seeds and Food Sovereignty,” 8.


----- The Most Good You Can Do, Yale University Press, 2015


