

Multi-Issue Food Activism¹

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1. Introduction

Food activism sits at the intersection of many different social and political issues.² For example, you might get involved in food activism because you care about malnutrition, food deserts, food swamps, animal suffering, public health harms, environmental harms, and/or a host of other problems. 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/or a host of other solutions. 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,

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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. And I will use ‘alternative food’ in a broad sense that refers to any alternative to conventional industrial animal agriculture, such as local food, organic food, or vegan food.

and powerful enough to challenge the main obstacle to food security – the corporate food regime.³

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 tensions 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.⁴ 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, 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.

³ Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, “Synopsis,” 317.

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.

First, there are *parallels* among issues, identities, and oppressions. That is, there are respects in which different issues, identities, and oppressions are relevantly similar. For example, Iris Young argues that many oppressions share some or all of the following features: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.⁵ Many activists explore parallels between specific practices and traditions as well, sometimes in controversial ways. For example, some animal activists argue that current treatment of nonhuman animals in agriculture is similar in some respects to past treatment of Black people 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).⁶ 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 different issues as a result.

Second, there are *intersections* among issues, identities, and oppressions. That is, there are respects in which different issues, identities, and oppressions interact so as to make the whole different from the sum of its parts. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that 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

⁵ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 39-65.

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*.

marginalized identities in this context.⁷ Similarly, some food activists argue that, if we want to understand the challenges that undocumented workers face in agriculture, the challenges that single 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, some 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.⁸ In food movements, some 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.⁹ Of course, not everybody agrees 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 these problems as well as how to solve them.

A common idea in activist groups is that if the problems that we face are connected, then our solutions should be connected as well. 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 us to *work together* across movements. Others channel it into a call for *solidarity*, understood as a call for us to *work in harmony* across movements. Increasingly, 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

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.”

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*.

multiple movements and promotes understanding of connections across them. However, others use it in a more specific sense, to refer to activism that operates at the intersection of multiple movements and promotes understanding of intersectionality, in the sense Crenshaw discusses, in particular.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.

Having defined multi-issue activism, we can now examine considerations for and against this approach to activism, some of which are principled and some of which are pragmatic.

3. A Principled Argument for Multi-Issue Food Activism

First, consider a *principled argument* for multi-issue food activism. The general idea behind this argument is: Your reasons for supporting movement x commit you supporting movement y as well (including in your advocacy for movement x).

We can use this kind of argument in at least two ways. First, we can use it to get people to expand their moral concern. For example, it is common for people 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.”¹¹ We can also use this kind of

¹⁰ Thanks to Maryse Mitchell-Brody and Julinna Oxley for helpful discussion on this point.

¹¹ For the most well-known instance of this argument, see Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

argument to get people to expand their understanding of what moral concern requires. For example, it is common for people to argue as follows: “If you think that treating all humans as equal means, at the very least, not treating them as property or commodities, then you should think that treating all sentient beings as equal means, at the very least, not treating them as property or commodities as well.” We can represent all of these arguments as a simple syllogism:

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. First, we can accept the conclusion. For example, I became vegetarian, and then vegan, in part because I was persuaded that my reasons for caring about humans for their own sake extend to all sentient beings. Second, we can reject premise 1. For example, I initially resisted vegetarianism because I sensed that it would commit me to veganism, and I was reluctant to accept that further standard (or to open myself up to accusations of hypocrisy insofar as I fell short of it). Third, we can reject premise 2. For example, I am not fruitarian because I deny that my reasons for caring about sentient beings for their own sake extend to non-sentient beings. Finally, we can 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 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 just get on with my day).

How should we evaluate these responses to appeals to consistency? 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 what follows from a moral principle we accept, it sometimes makes

¹² We could also put this argument in terms of actions that are morally permissible or required.

sense to accept that implication and it sometimes makes sense to reject 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 accepting the conclusion conflicts with self-interest more often than not and that rejecting premises 1 and/or 2 coincides with self-interest more often than not, I think that we can expect ourselves to feel inclined to accept the conclusion less often than we should and to reject premises 1 and/or 2 more often than we should, and so we should discount our intuitive reactions to these arguments accordingly.

As for 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 individual and collective purity.¹³

However, it is important to qualify this point in two ways. First, as with rejecting premises 1 and 2, rejecting the aspiration to consistency in the first place coincides with self-interest more often than not, and therefore we should expect ourselves to feel inclined to do so more often than we should, and we should discount our intuitive reaction to this option accordingly. Second, while I agree that we should attempt to strike a balance between consistency, on one hand, and humility and

¹³ For more, see Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 227-56.

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.

4. A Pragmatic Argument for Multi-Issue Food Activism

Now consider a *pragmatic argument* for multi-issue food activism. The general idea behind this argument is: Your support for movement x will be more effective if you support movement y as well (including in your advocacy for movement x).

The argument for this conclusion is simple. Multi-issue activism benefits all involved. There are many different issues to work on and many different groups working on them. In the food movement, these groups have shared interests, including an interest in combating our global industrial food system, and they also have different 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 or root 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 this shared or root cause of our 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 in his discussion of food politics: “[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.”¹⁴

However, multi-issue activism has costs as well. First, it takes a lot of time, energy, and money to work together and in harmony across movements, which raises important questions about demandingness and scarce resource allocation, especially if we think that some issues are more important than others and/or that some groups have less capital than others (since, as we will see, a full commitment to multi-issue activism can easily become all-consuming). Moreover, many activists believe 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 encourage changes that seem reasonable to them, which means picking our battles rather than fighting every battle at once. For instance, some food security advocates 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, some animal welfare advocates think that we can get much more traction advocating for cage-free eggs and Meatless Mondays than by advocating for a fully liberated world.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.

If we grant that multi-issue activism has benefits as well as costs, what should we say about this pragmatic argument all things considered? As with the principled argument, I think that we have no choice but to evaluate it on a case by case basis, and to discount some of our intuitions about it as we do so. For example, I think that we should discount at least some of our intuitions in favor of

¹⁴ Schanbacher, *The Politics of Food*, 11.

¹⁵ For more, see Garner, “A Defense of Broad Animal Protectionism.”

single-issue activism and against multi-issue activism. Yes, some issues are more important than others, and yes, single-issue activism can be more effective than multi-issue activism in certain respects in the short term. But with that said, (a) it is easy to overestimate the importance of issues that we work on and to underestimate the importance of issues that others work on, since we tend to know more about the former issues than the latter. And (b) it is also easy to overestimate the value of single-issue activism and to underestimate the value of multi-issue activism, since the direct, individual benefits of single-issue activism are easier to measure than the indirect, structural benefits of multi-issue activism, and the direct, individual costs of multi-issue activism are easier to measure than the indirect, structural costs of single-issue activism. Thus, even if we accept that multi-issue activism has costs as well as benefits, we should allow for the possibility that our cost-benefit analyses are biased in favor of single-issue approaches, and we should discount our preference for single-issue approaches accordingly.¹⁶

Relatedly, I also think that we should discount at least some of our intuitions in favor of certain kinds of multi-issue activism and against certain other kinds. In particular, many activists have a tendency to focus more on what other groups can do for us than on what we can do for them. We also have a tendency to blame other groups for the ways in which they fall short more than we do ourselves. 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.¹⁷ Yet our resulting stance towards inconsistency is, itself, inconsistent, and an important step on the path towards ethical and effective food activism is coming to terms with that inconsistency. We should focus on “other-interested” approaches to multi-issue activism as much as we focus on “self-interested” approaches, and 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), be as patient

¹⁶ For more, see Sebo and Singer, “Activism”

¹⁷ Frye, *The Politics of Reality*. (Thanks to Lauren Townsend for this reference.)

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, attempt to strike a balance between these extremes. Either way, if we want to achieve this balance in practice, then we will have to allow for the possibility that our cost-benefit analyses are biased in favor of self-interested approaches, and we will have to discount our emphasis on self-interested approaches accordingly.

With these considerations in mind, we can now consider three approaches to multi-issue food activism – unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding – and examine the principled and pragmatic merits of each.

5. Unity

First, we can promote *unity* by working together across movements, for example by working in multi-issue groups or on multi-group campaigns.

This kind of approach can take different forms, and come in different degrees. First, we can sort attempts at unity in terms of how *broad* the alliance is. At one end of the spectrum, 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, food security groups, and so on in order to protest industrial animal agriculture. Call this *global unity*. At the other end of the spectrum, 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 a particular farm. 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.¹⁸

We can also sort attempts at unity in terms of how *formal* an alliance is. At one end of the spectrum, when people talk about food movements uniting, they might mean that certain food groups should become a single food group or an integrated network with multiple chapters. Call this *formal unity*. At the other end of the spectrum, 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 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 act quickly and decisively without first having to achieve consensus with a wide range of groups that may disagree about important issues.¹⁹

So should food movements unite, globally or locally, formally or informally? As far as I can tell, nobody thinks that all food groups should pursue full global and formal unity with each other. Instead, most people think, plausibly, that activist groups function best when they strike a balance between unity and separation. 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 across movements and approaches (within certain limits of course).²⁰ 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

¹⁸ 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!*

¹⁹ For more, see Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 125-83 and Jasper, *Protest*, 143-167.

²⁰ For more, see Mill, *On Liberty*, and Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

was set primarily, if not entirely, by larger, more mainstream groups.²¹ 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 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 parentalistic, 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 or create policies that incentivize adoption of alternatives to industrial food 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 practices, then people in your intended audience will be likely to dismiss your work as hypocritical and colonialist, and, again, they may be right.²²

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

²¹ For more, see INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*

²² For more on these issues, see Barnhill et al, “The Value of Unhealthy Eating and the Ethics of Healthy Eating Policies.”

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 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 distract us from our need to help animals as much as possible, and so will do more harm than good in practice.

Many other conflicts and disagreements stand in the way of unity in the food movement too. For example, food activists disagree about whether we should seek to *regulate* or *abolish* production methods that they oppose, e.g. industrial agriculture, animal agriculture, genetically modified agriculture, and so on. They disagree about whether we should pursue *reform* or *revolution* as a means to this end, e.g. whether we should bring about an environmentally sustainable food system by revising or replacing our current, deeply environmentally unsustainable food system. They disagree about whether we should adopt *hierarchical* or *horizontal* organizational structures, e.g. whether we should adopt *voting-based* or *consensus-based* decision procedures within food groups. 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 only promoting the welfare, health, and environmental benefits of alternative foods or focus on celebrity endorsements and product placements as well. They disagree about whether we should engage in *civil disobedience* or *uncivil 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.²³

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 have stronger pragmatic than principled reason to pursue unity across some of these divisions. In particular, we might think that some of these approaches are right and others are wrong (for example, we might think that abolition is right and regulation is wrong, or that revolution is right and reform is wrong), and therefore we might think that we do not have principled reason to work together across these divisions. However, we might also think that formal or informal coordination across moderate and radical groups can be mutually beneficial, 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 goal posts and paves the way for radical change. And if so, then we might think that we have pragmatic reason to support activists across these divisions despite not having principled reason to do so, in the same kind of way that we have pragmatic reason to support reasonable pluralism in society despite disagreeing with each other more generally.²⁴

Of course, even if we accept this policy of liberal toleration in the food movement, we still have to decide where to draw the line between tolerable and intolerable disagreement in certain hard

²³ For more on these debates, see Schlottmann and Sebo, *Food, Animals, and the Environment*.

²⁴ 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?"

cases. For example, many activists think that, even if we should tolerate disagreement about, say, regulation and abolition, we should not tolerate disagreement about, say, non-violence and violence, since violence is clearly unacceptable for principled as well as pragmatic reasons. In borderline cases, it can be hard to know how to best strike a balance between building a pluralistic movement in which we can agree to disagree about many issues, on one hand, and building a united movement in which we can uphold certain core values and hold each other accountable for choices that we see as bad, on the other hand. 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 expand our conception of unity in the food movement, we will have to be willing to tolerate disagreement about deeply important issues, as well as challenge the beliefs, values, practices, and power structures that dominate within our own groups – which will mean engaging in the other two kinds of multi-issue activism: solidarity and mutual understanding.

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 help other groups, for instance by participating in their work or by promoting their work within our own groups (and doing so on their terms rather than on ours).

Call this *active solidarity*. Alternatively, they might mean that we should at least not harm other groups, as we would, for instance, if we used sexism to sell animal rights or if we used fat shaming to sell healthy food (and, as we will see, this kind of collateral damage is unfortunately extremely common in the food movement).²⁵ 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 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 smaller 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, food activists have a tendency to favor local solidarity with natural allies. But also as with unity, we might think that we should resist this tendency. Consider two reasons why (there are others as well, including, of course, the objective importance of certain issues). First, as we discussed in §5, there are currently many conflicts and disagreements in the food movement. Some of these conflicts and disagreements would likely persist whether or not we aspire to help each other and not harm each other through our work. But not all of them would. If food activists make an effort to stand in solidarity with groups that they know less about, and if they do so in the right kind of way – for example, as Southerners On New Ground (SONG) puts it, by being “honest about where we are coming from,” accepting that we are not “more knowledgeable about the communities and cultures of others than we are,” accepting “that people are

²⁵ For more, see Gaarder, *Women and the Animal Rights Movement*.

experts on their own lives and are the best leaders in the struggle for their own liberation,” and making a commitment to “listen . . . not just once” and “not just today” – then we can learn more about each other, show more support for each other, and ease at least some of the tensions that currently exist across movements and approaches as a result.²⁶

Second, and relatedly, many people believe that alternative food groups have a history not only of conflict and disagreement, but also of racism, sexism, classism, and more, for example in campaigns that use oppressive words and images (about which more in §7) and in communities that center white culture, maintain patriarchal “divisions in labor, leadership, and legitimacy,” and more.²⁷ Insofar as this is true, we should accept that alternative food activists have an even stronger obligation to stand in the relevant kinds of solidarity than we otherwise would. Why should we accept this? Some people think that we should take responsibility for past harms for its own sake, whereas others think we should do so to promote equality or utility in the world.²⁸ (We might also accept both ideas.) Either way, the upshot is that if alternative food groups have a history of harming people, then we have not only epistemic and practical but also moral reason to expand the scope of our solidarity. Granted, one could argue that we have a right to focus on the issues that we care about too. Yet insofar as our duty to take responsibility for past harms conflicts with our right to focus on the issues that we care about, I think that the former duty has at least as much, if not more, weight than the latter right in many cases. I also think that, if these values conflict as much as they do, then we have a more general duty to try to expand the scope of what we care about so as to reduce these conflicts – especially if our current, narrow set of interests is part of what perpetuates the very harms that we should be taking responsibility for in the first place.

²⁶ SONG, “Being an Ally/Building Solidarity.”

²⁷ Gaarder, *Women and the Animal Rights Movement*, p. 87. See also Harper, *Sistah Vegan*, Guthman, “If Only They Knew,” and Tuttle, *Circles of Compassion*.

²⁸ For discussion of this obligation in the context of Black reparations, see Boxill, “Black Reparations.” And, for discussion of this obligation in the context of climate justice, see Shue, “Global Environment and International Inequality.”

Now consider active and passive solidarity. Our thinking about this issue will depend heavily on what we think about the moral difference between helping and not harming. On one hand, many deontologists, who deny that morality is entirely a matter of consequences, accept that there is a moral difference between helping and not harming in principle. In particular, they think that we are sometimes but not 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 within certain limits (this is known as a *perfect duty of nonmaleficence*). Granted, most deontologists do set limits to this latter duty, for example in cases where our goal is very important, we cannot pursue this goal without harming others, and we harm others only as a byproduct of our action (rather than harming them as a means to our end). But even given this complication, many deontologists still think that our duty not to harm is more universal than our duty to help. As a result, they will likely also think that our duty to stand in passive solidarity with other movements and approaches is more universal than our duty to stand in active solidarity with other movements and approaches.²⁹

However, there is a complication here, which is that even passive solidarity takes a lot of active work, and so 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 harming others through my work, I need to spend a lot of time and energy identifying and addressing my own biases as well as encouraging other people in my community to do the same, for instance by organizing and attending trainings, facilitations, and other such events. 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 others) 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

²⁹ For an argument in favor of a moral difference between actions and omissions, see Foot, “Killing and Letting Die,” and Foot, “Morality, Action, and Outcome.”

morally permitted to (allow myself and others 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 work, which implies that ethical activism is much more restrictive, as well as much more demanding, than some deontologists might have expected.³⁰

On the other hand, consequentialists, who accept that morality is entirely a matter of consequences, deny that there is a moral difference between helping and not harming in principle. Instead, they think that we should do the most good we can, regardless of whether we do so through actions, omissions, or (in the case of passive solidarity) actions in the service of omissions. Most consequentialists also deny that there is always a moral difference between helping and not harming in practice. Granted, if we can do more good in everyday life by following a general policy of not harming anyone than we can by following a general policy of helping everyone (which is plausible, given that the former policy is much easier to follow than the latter, notwithstanding the complications mentioned above), then consequentialists will say that we have stronger reason to follow the former policy than the latter in practice. However, in cases where we can clearly do more good by helping someone than by not harming anyone, many consequentialists will say that we should set this policy aside and perform the action that will have the best consequences overall.³¹

With that said, I do think that consequentialists should value solidarity in general more than they sometimes do. It is common for consequentialists to say 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.³² Yet while I endorse the pragmatic spirit of this decision procedure, I worry that it makes it easy for us to overlook the biases that we discussed in §3-4, as well as the many opportunities that we have for helping or not harming other cause areas in real,

³⁰ For related discussion, see Persson, *From Morality to the End of Reason*.

³¹ For an argument against a moral difference between actions and omissions, see Rachels, “Active and Passive Euthanasia.”

³² See, for example, MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, and Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*.

relatively costless ways. Relatedly, if we think there is a shared or root cause of many of the problems that we face, we might also worry that this decision procedure makes it easy to overlook this shared or root cause and what we need to do 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 oppressions in alternative food movements), 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 across movements and approaches 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 overall.

What is the upshot for food activism? That will differ from theory to theory. But if this discussion is correct, then the upshot for many deontologists is that we should always show global passive solidarity (perhaps even if doing so requires active work) and we should sometimes but not always show local active solidarity (perhaps giving priority to movements and approaches that we have not supported as much in the past all else equal). Whereas the upshot for many consequentialists is that we should adopt a strong presumption in favor of global passive solidarity (again, perhaps even if doing so requires active work) as well as a strong presumption in favor of local active solidarity (again, perhaps giving priority to movements and approaches that we have not supported as much in the past all else equal), and we should make exceptions to these policies if and only if we can clearly do the most good by harming one group in order to help another (keeping in mind, as we have seen, that our cost-benefit analyses about these issues might not always be fully reliable).

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. That is, not only does it problematize harming other groups or movements as a means to our ends, but it also problematizes

harming other groups and movements as an unnecessary byproduct of our pursuit of our ends. 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;³³ that we should not campaign against animal abuse in factory farms in a way that supports incarceration of workers who experience exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness as well;³⁴ that we should not campaign against food practices in other nations in ways that perpetuate racism, xenophobia, or colonialism;³⁵ and more. 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.³⁶ We also, as Anthony Nocella writes, need to actively participate in other movements, listen to other people 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.³⁷

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 is not to stand in full solidarity with all groups in all situations (or, as we discussed in §3-4, 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 that we have discussed here when thinking about priority-setting. Still, if this discussion is right, then we should consider our obligations to other movements and approaches more than many activists do, which, in turn, will mean engaging in the third kind of multi-issue activism: mutual understanding.

³³ For more, see Viertel, “Beyond Eating with Your Fork.”

³⁴ For more, see Smith, *Governing Animals*, Chapter 5.

³⁵ See, for example, annual controversy about whether and how Westerners should protest the Yulin dog meat festival in China.

³⁶ Gruen, *Ethics and Animals*, 94.

³⁷ Nocella, “Building an Animal Advocacy Movement for Racial and Disability Justice,” 168.

7. Mutual Understanding

Third, we can promote *mutual understanding* by sharing information and arguments across movements. In particular, activists often find it useful to share information and arguments about the kinds of connections across issues, 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.³⁸ 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 Right 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.

As we have seen, critical analyses can be useful for many reasons. They can invite people to expand their moral concern as well as their understanding of what moral concern 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

³⁸ 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.

Francione, Tom Regan, and Peter Singer argue that we should not kill animals for food if we would not be willing to kill cognitively 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.³⁹ 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), some 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, some 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 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 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.

³⁹ See, for example, Kittay, “At the Margins of Moral Personhood.”

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.⁴⁰

Moreover, even when people do, in fact, present critical analyses in respectful and responsible ways, some people *still* experience them 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 *animals!*” Of course, we might think that this reaction rests on a mistake. 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 now think that, in this kind of case, *impact matters more than intent*.⁴¹ That is, no matter how good our intentions are 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). On this view, then, 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 ideas 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 a particular community, should I ever attempt to use critical analyses

⁴⁰ Harper, *Sistah Vegan*, xiv.

⁴¹ For representative discussion, see Utt, “Intent vs. Impact.”

involving this community in my activism? This is a complicated question. On one hand, we might think that, if I am not a member of a particular community (and especially if I have privilege with respect to the relevant issues), then I can usually do more good, and less harm, overall if I create space for members of this community to speak about these issues than if I attempt to do so myself – epistemically, because members of this community have evidence about these issues that I lack, and practically, because members of this community have an authority to speak about these issues that I lack (at least in certain social contexts). 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.⁴²

On the other hand, we might also think that there are at least some cases where, even if I am not a member of a particular community (and even if I have privilege with respect to the relevant issues), I can still use critical analyses involving these issues 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 a particular issue without appearing to be (or actually being) appropriative, then, as Christopher-Sebastian McJeters 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 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.”⁴³ I will also, as Aph Ko writes, have to learn to “speak to issues that intersect

⁴² Hamad, “When Is Being Vegan No Longer About Ethical Living?”

⁴³ McJeters, “Animal Rights and the Language of Slavery.”

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.”⁴⁴ 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 mutual understanding 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 difficult if not impossible to present in an accurate and effective way within these limits, and therefore we should adopt a strong presumption if not prohibition against attempting them, 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 not as difficult to present in an accurate and effective way within these limits, and therefore we do not need to adopt as strong a presumption against attempting them, 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?”⁴⁵ 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.”

⁴⁴ Ko, “Public Facebook Post.”

⁴⁵ 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 a 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 harmful food campaigns naturally become less harmful 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).⁴⁶

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 over time, 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 cultures and communities more generally⁴⁷ so that we can achieve, or at least better approximate, 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.”⁴⁸

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

⁴⁶ For more, see Guthman, “‘If Only They Knew.’”

⁴⁷ Lugones, *Pilgrimages*, 78. (Thanks to Macy Salzberger for this reference.)

⁴⁸ 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 as a means to 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.”⁴⁹

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