The Antipolitics of Food in Middle-Class America

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THE ANTIPOLITICS OF FOOD IN MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICA

by

NERI DE KRAMER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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NERI DE KRAMER

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

THE ANTIPOLITICS OF FOOD IN MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICA

by

Neri de Kramer

Adviser: Professor Donald Robotham

This dissertation provides an ethnographic account of the food and parenting practices of a diverse group of middle-class families in the Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia. It starts from the basic premise that the economic pressures on the American middle classes find expression in family life around the socially reproductive work of choosing food and parenting.

The current economic climate marked with extreme and rising income inequality, low growth, high unemployment and stagnating wages has complicated the reproduction process for all parents in this study, regardless of income. Scholars have described how this concern for the future of the next generation is expressed in intensive parenting strategies and I show that this concern is also expressed in a preoccupation with food. This is because the task of choosing food in America today confronts consumers with many of the harmful excesses of the capitalist system that are also responsible for the middle-class squeeze and second, because food is connected to class status, and thus the future prospects of the next generation, in various ways.

The dissertation describes how parents’ strategies for eating and getting children to eat in a way that promotes class appropriate health and body size, taste preferences and the right politics vary among self-described middle-class families of different means. It describes the subsequent variations in the experience of middle-class family life, including the household division of labor by gender, and the different dilemmas and contradictions that emerge for
mothers and fathers in different middle-class fractions. Motivated by a desire to move beyond critical rejections of middle-class reproductive strategies as inherently neoliberal, self-centered, exclusionary and apolitical, the dissertation ends with a discussion of the hidden political potential of the visceral experience of precarity, in combination with broad middle-class critiques of the American food system and the commons-like social networks that emerge in response to the challenging conditions in the lives of middle-class parents in decline.
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This project would have been impossible without the selfless cooperation of the parents who participated in it. I am deeply grateful for the way they welcomed me, a perfect stranger, into the intimacy of their homes and allowed me to observe and record some of the most private and not always perfect moments of their lives with young children. I am also thankful for the time parents took out of their busy days to answer my interview questions as well as for the food they invariably offered me.

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I would not have reached this point without the guidance and interventions of my adviser, Donald Robotham, who not only helped me bring into focus the key theoretical objective of this dissertation but who patiently served as my trusted resource during my many years at the Graduate Center. I am thankful for his support, dependable responsiveness, humor and good cheer. I am greatly indebted, too, to Jeff Maskovsky for his quick, keen and original insights, for suggesting key terms and my title, introducing me to fascinating new bodies of work and keeping
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The topic of this dissertation is a personal one. As a former cook, food has long been an obvious way for me to understand and connect to people, and when I left the professional kitchen to return to the graduate study of anthropology I soon found myself most inspired by scholars who use food as a tool for the study of human relations and processes of social change (Bourdieu 1984; Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1996; Weismantel 1989; 1998; Counihan 1998; 1999, Counihan and Van Esterik 2012). When I became a mother, I noticed how the biologically and socially reproductive task of feeding children fills my peers with anxiety. Among the middle- and upper middle-class mothers in my social circle in Philadelphia, where I live, food is the number one topic of conversation. Mothers seem to be deeply concerned about the quality, quantity and nature of the food their children eat, tend to closely monitor the latest research on food as well as the effects foods have on children’s bodies and well-being and spent significant amounts of time procuring and preparing acceptable food. They are also concerned about the environmental implications of today’s food production system, critical about the various kinds of inequalities that exist in food production systems and around access to healthful food and are guilt-ridden about their own lack of agency in these domains. These concerns and insecurities about food strongly affect parents and children’s everyday interactions and have turned food into a problem in many middle-class families. When it became time to choose a dissertation topic, I decided to research this central role and new meaning of food in middle-class families, starting from the premise that the problematization of food in contemporary American middle-class families is connected to the problems of the middle class itself.

For the American middle class is in a precarious economic situation. Aggravated and brought into stark relief by the Great Recession, middle incomes (ranging from $46,960 to
$140,900 for a family of four according to a much-cited 2015 Pew Research Center report, though also dependent on cost of living in geographical location) have been flat, failing to keep up with inflation since at least 2000; the middle class possesses a smaller and shrinking percentage of American wealth; middle-class unemployment rates are high; and the price of key middle-class expenditures such as housing, college, and health care have risen faster than the rate of inflation, contributing to soaring middle-class debt (Reich 2014; Cohen 2015; Pew Research Center 2012). Stress on the middle class is further exacerbated by employment insecurity and longer work hours to compensate for the relative loss of income from stagnating wages and the growing difficulty of accumulating capital.

Middle-class income growth is virtually non-existent, too. While economists report recent economic growth in the United States (Leonhardt and Quealy 2014; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2014), the vast majority of this growth is accrued by the top 1% and funds fail to trickle down to the bottom 99% of American wage earners including those in the middle class. A report, released in January 2015 by the Economic Analysis and Research Network, revealed that Pennsylvania is one of 17 states where the top 1% of earners even accrued all income growth between 2009 and 2012 (Sommeiler and Price 2015: 15), which means the Philadelphia families who participated in my study have not received a penny of this relatively recent growth. Seven years after the subprime mortgage crisis and 2008 financial crisis and despite recent economic growth, the American middle class is smaller than it has ever been, continues to shrink and for the first time in a century the children of today’s middle class are not expected to surpass their parents’ economic status (Wright 2014).

Today’s newspapers are filled with report after report on middle-class decline, squeezing, and precarity and “middle-class economics” are at the forefront of the national political agenda,
President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union address during which he proposed multiple ways to provide help for middle-class families. But while middle class decline has been making headlines in recent years, also linked to the 2013 release of Thomas Piketty’s best-selling treatment of extreme and rising economic inequality in the United States, it is not a recent development and can be traced back to the transformation of twentieth-century capitalism in the post-Fordist era. The process started in the late 1970’s with the development of a neoliberal free market ideology, which meant the end of the living wage and an increasingly integrated and deregulated global financial system that allowed capital to accumulate at the top. This, paired with changes in corporate as well as government redistribution policies such as de-unionization, disinvestment from public goods, the abandonment of the social contract, changes in the tax structure, and erosion of social safety nets is what is behind our current reality of extreme inequality and increasing insecurity for American middle and working classes (Harvey 1991).

These long-term trends, in addition to the failure to let middle-class hourly wages keep pace with the rate of inflation, together explain the steady drop of middle-class median income, the shrinking middle-class share of national wealth since the 1970’s, and the growing difficulty for middle-class families to maintain their standard of living (Piketty 2013; Reich 2010; Saez and Zucman 2014; Pew Research Center 2012).

Despite extensive media attention to the plight of the middle classes, a large number of economic reports, the centrality of the middle class in political discourse and a thorough historical understanding of the processes that contributed to overall middle-class decline, ethnographic accounts of the experience of daily life in the American middle class, now a minority group (Pew Research Center 2015), are missing. In what follows, I provide one such account of middle-class life in America today. Focusing in particular on the increasingly
complicated and stressful process of social reproduction in “squeezed” middle class families, my dissertation paints an intimate picture of the daily struggles of a group of middle-class women and men that remains hidden behind the numbers, politics and historical analyses. I contrast this group with the reproductive work of another, wealthier group of parents who, while also anxious about their children’s future, are in a much more comfortable position to prepare them for future economic competition and insecurity and who experience fewer contradictions and constraints in their daily lives. In so doing, this dissertation brings to ethnographic life the fundamental distinction between the increasingly precarious middle class we are hearing so much about and a smaller upper-middle class who are quietly pulling away in an upward direction from the rest of society (Reeves 2015). A 2015 Pew report typifies this distinction as one between as “winners” and “losers”: middle-class groups which have either been able to remain economically stable and who seem likely to move themselves and their children up the income ladder into the upper classes, despite overall economic stagnation, or those acutely experiencing severe insecurity and at great risk for downward mobility (Pew Research Center 2015). This distinction, which I quickly noted among the on the surface rather similar research participants with similar education levels, politics, values, goals for their children and consumption preferences, constitutes one of the most interesting and unexpected outcomes of my study and makes a timely ethnographic contribution to economic and political debates.

Studies of the middle class have long been underrepresented in anthropology and the concept of the middle class remains analytically vague. Partially this has to do with the particular difficulties of recognizing and discussing class in the cultural context of the United States where people are more comfortable ascribing socio-economic difference to race, ethnicity and gender (Ortner 2006: 10; DeMott 1990) and partially this is attributable to the middle class’ ambiguous
place in class theory, which itself is complicated by the constantly shifting nature of capitalist
relations including the constantly changing nature of the state’s relation to capital (Jefferson
2015: 311). My own understanding of the middle class flows from the theoretical
conceptualization of social class as simultaneously an objective (though not static), structural
position within capitalist production relations made up of things such as job, income and wealth,
as well as a subjective construction that comes into being through people’s education, behaviors,
ideas and discourse. Taking a fundamentally materialist view, I consider these to be two sides of
the same coin, since behaviors, ideas and discourse emerge in the practice of daily life as
consequences of one’s structural position in society (which, again, is not fixed for life but
constantly shifting and also includes hierarchies of race and gender) (Bourdieu 1984; Haraway
and Harvey 1995). In turn, these particular practices, determined by the conditions of possibility
under which people live (Heiman et al. 2012: 9; Mintz 1985) have real, material effects and work
to reproduce structural position.

While I take this basic materialist conceptualization of social class as my theoretical
starting point, I am also influenced by Sherry Ortner’s idea that class is an ongoing “project”
propelled by imaginings that transcend the limits of any given structural position (2006: 13).
With respect to middle classes specifically, these projects often take the form of “a longing to
secure” (Heiman 2012) or a continuous striving to maintain or improve material position and life
outcomes for oneself and one’s children (Ehrenreich 1989; Davidson 2011). This understanding
of class as projects and “games” (Ortner 2003: 13) that people live and do rather than an
objective location in a hierarchical structure of “empty places” (Wright 1997: 42) that people
passively occupy Ortner (1991; 2003; 2006) makes ethnography a valuable tool for researching
and describing class as a fluid and continuous process. Food choice, eating habits, and
instructing children to eat properly are all part of this project of the construction of class and, I argue, part of this longing to secure a middle-class existence for the next generation during economically uncertain times.

Though internally split, the group of families that participated in my study can be considered middle class because of several shared traits and circumstances. First is that the parents with jobs outside of the home occupy comparable positions in the production system: though their incomes vary, they are all working skilled white-collar jobs with some autonomy but they are not members of the capitalist ruling class. Second, all are college-educated (whites) and most also have advanced degrees. Third, though a few have working-class roots, most of these parents had similar upbringings by well-educated, left-leaning, middle-class liberals which, along with their educational experiences, instilled a shared set of norms, values and dispositions among this group of people. This last point helps explain why all choose to live in the same well-regarded but expensive neighborhood, articulate a similar leftist political liberalism in explaining their opinions and life decisions and continue to self-identify as middle class, some despite earning working-class wages and experiencing severe financial struggles. Finally, what binds these people in their class position is the danger of downward mobility, either experienced as an abstract threat or experienced acutely, which flows into a shared set of anxieties for the children. This shared anxiety for the children in turn translates into the intensive parenting approach including the holy devotion to education, as well as the rather particular food and other consumption preferences I document in this dissertation.

Despite these similarities, this group is significantly financially differentiated and in light of my ethnographic findings I distinguish the two principal fractions I already mentioned above: one is a financially struggling, “squeezed” group where one or both parents work in the public
sector as teachers, in community organizations or in Philadelphia city government. The other is a relatively wealthy group that draws on modest funds of inherited wealth and/or has at least one of the parents working in the private sector such as in corporate law, finance, real estate or for-profit corporations. On the surface then, or when initially meeting these people, the two sets of families and their class projects and aspirations seem quite similar. Upon closer ethnographic inspection however, as I will show, the two groups live quite dramatically different daily lives, which is a function of the variation in wealth and income among these families, which in turn determines their respective abilities to accumulate capital, experience a degree of security and to enhance the life chances for the next generation (Weber 1978). From Wright’s (1997) discussion of the complexities of mapping current class structures, in which he makes a case for the conceptualization of classes as having similar material interests and similar lived experiences¹, it follows that I must distinguish between these two groups in a structural sense and I will thus refer to the latter group as upper middle class, even though my subjects themselves tend to reject this label and even though the two groups share similar politics, norms, values, and, crucially, ambiguities about the futures of their children.

With the detailed ethnographic account of the everyday lives at the household level of a group of 12 American families in various middle-class positions, one scholarly contribution my dissertation makes is to our understanding of the lived experience of class in the aftermath of the Great Recession, the widening income gap and growing precarity (Jefferson 2015; Leonhardt and Quealy 2014; Lesorogol 2015). For while living standard-growth has been blocked and declining for 90% of the American population, a process which began in the 1980’s (Piketty 2013), these economic realities do not affect all middle-class people in the same way. Families and also a shared capacity for collective action, which is a point I will return to towards the end of the dissertation.
whose incomes are mainly tied to wages, particularly in volatile sectors prone to budget cuts such as the government or non-profit sector are obviously worse off than families who can draw on funds of wealth to absorb some of the wage decline and job market fluctuations. I have observed and interviewed parents who struggle hard to maintain their previous living standard by enlisting multiple wage earners, working longer hours, depending on parents’ financial help and intensifying their productive activities in the home, and I have observed and interviewed parents who are much less affected by the ramifications of the increasing inequality and economic crisis, who are able to accumulate some capital and who have generally been able to maintain the comfortable lifestyle they grew up with. In what follows, I consider what this differentiation means for the experience and expected outcome of the reproductive process for the parents in my study and the power imbalances that exist among the two groups in that regard. In the last chapter, I discuss what these two divergent experiences of the current economic reality means for middle-class political awareness, engagement and potential for collective action.

**Food and the study of the American middle class**

Food and parenting preferences and practices are fruitful avenues from which to approach and examine middle classes for several reasons. First of all, and as I explain in more detail in Chapter 2, food is connected to social class in several ways, including via cost, taste, health, body size and politics. Because of these various connections between food and class, food allows Americans to discuss class without mentioning class itself. It offers what Ortner calls a “crypto class discourse” (2003), or code for the discussion of class. Whereas Ortner’s subjects in *New Jersey Dreaming* used luxury goods like pearls and cashmere sweaters to indicate status and to differentiate between people, mine use the visceral distinctions between “local”, “organic” or “artisanal” food on the one hand and “processed”, “shrink-wrapped” or “supermarket food” on
the other to discuss class identity, aspirations and differences (see also Johnston and Baumann 2010; Naccarato and Lebesco 2012).

A second reason for picking food and parenting as avenues for studying the middle class is that these subjects allow me to ethnographically explore related topics that contribute to an understanding of middle-class life more broadly such as gender relations and the organization and division of household labor and the processes by which consumption decisions are made. Food is also a major aspect of the practical work of parenting, especially the parenting of young children who depend on their parents for every meal and thus allows for the observation of many parent-child interactions.

Thirdly, and central to this dissertation, feeding and parenting are prime socially reproductive practices, which is an interesting topic in and of itself but which has renewed salience in our current economic climate. America’s rising income inequality with extreme concentration of wealth at the top now statistically lumps together struggling working and middle classes (Piketty 2013: 580), which raises questions about class identity and makes processes of distinction including the socially reproductive work of feeding and parenting dependent children more pressing than before. I argue that it is this shared concern for children whose futures are at stake which explains the comparable feeding and parenting strategies of these class fractions despite their differences in income and wealth. For even for those who continue to be able to live comfortably today, there is no firm guarantee their children will have a similar experience later on, and for those who are struggling, compromising on certain key markers of middle-class identity would only hasten their descent into the working classes. Given this, I have come to view social reproduction as an arena where the experience of middle-class precarity is shared.
A final reason for picking food and parenting practices as a vehicle for the study of middle-class life is that these topics are often politically charged and, I reasoned, might provide a window into emerging middle-class critical thought and transformative potential. In the relatively rare cases where middle-class Americans are the subject of anthropological inquiry, their socially reproductive behaviors have often been interpreted as apolitical and exclusionary, motivated by the threat of downward mobility and guided by neoliberal logics of personal responsibility which only work to support and reproduce the capitalist system and its inequalities (Harvey 2007: 61). With my research project I set out to document the behaviors, ideas and beliefs of middle and upper middle-class parents around the topic of food in an attempt to try to challenge these academic clichés. For while many consumption choices are undoubtedly made out of a narrow self-interest, issues of food and the health of children are also deeply political however and often alert parents to questions of social justice, inequality and the future. Viewing the American food system, with all of its problems, contradictions and inequalities as a microcosm of the larger capitalist political economic system within which it operates, one important objective of my dissertation is to link middle-class anxieties and critiques about food to a broader middle-class critique of the developments in global capitalism that problematized it.

These developments include the rise of neoliberalism’s free market ideology which enabled the development of a very large, powerful and deregulated industrial food production system, which filled the American environment with cheap, low quality food. At the same time, post-Fordist deunionization, wage stagnation and erosion of social safety nets (Harvey 1991) made Americans of fewer means financially dependent on this food (and other cheap consumption goods). Disinvestment, another feature of post-Fordism, forced public schools and local governments to seek investments in the market, often from fast food companies,
contributing to the saturation of public schools and public spaces with this low quality food (Nestle 2007; Schlosser 2012). Finally, deregulation allowed agribusinesses and food companies not only to rapidly expand, but also to use and release into the environment the chemical pesticides and other toxins which scientists have started to link to obesity and to which American workers and residents are unevenly exposed (Baillie-Hamilton 2002; Brown and Gibbs 2007; Holtcamp 2012; Franks and Ling 2010; Grün, Felix and Blumberg 2009).

While these developments have turned food and feeding into stressful topics for all parents in the study, more affluent middle-class parents are to a large degree able to address their mistrust of the system by opting out of the conventional food system using their spending power in the market place. For mothers and fathers on tighter budgets, the task of stocking the house with appropriate, “safe” food has become considerably more complicated and time consuming. After describing the ideas, beliefs and diverse set of practices and strategies around the feeding of children I have documented, my dissertation ends with a discussion of the political potential of the squeezed middle class. I argue that the lived experience of precarity; the critical understanding of the dangerous excesses of our unregulated food production system; in combination with the adjusted and intensified socially reproductive strategies around food and childcare I document here; carried out collectively in several local commons-like networks, together could form the beginnings of a sustained political critique from the American middle class often dismissed as consumption-driven and motivated by private, rather than collective transformation.

I distinguish between the different but complimentary contributions from men and women in this socially reproductive work with political potential. While it is often in the role of mothers that women define and justify their social critique and political activism and the
majority of the increasingly difficult socially reproductive work still falls to the women in my study, the fathers are also very articulate and critical about the American food situation and have contributed to the politicization of the task of choosing food for children. The more squeezed men in my study in particular play an important role in the creation of local social networks organized around shared food production and consumption that support them and their families. This description of how middle-class women and men work both individually and together in the face of mounting inequality is another contribution my dissertation makes to the understanding of class as a set of gendered practices.

**Research design**

The dissertation is based on over 18 months of participant observation in 12 middle and upper middle-class families and open-ended interviews with an additional 20 local parents in various sectors of the middle class. I also conducted interviews with several other neighborhood residents who helped me better understand the neighborhood’s history and food culture including former neighborhood activists and restaurant-and business owners. I did additional participant observation during meetings of the local Food Justice Committee, which I joined, during tastings at the Wissahickon Brewers Guild, as well as in local stores, restaurants and cafés.

The site of the study is the Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia, where I live. While the neighborhood has several inherent characteristics that made it an interesting site for this project, which I will describe in Chapter 3, the immediate appeal was that living in the area would allow me to conduct the research flexibly and save time. Another was that I was already familiar with the food environment and had pre-established personal networks of middle-class families I planned to draw on.
However, even though I had had countless animated conversations with local mothers about food and parenting prior to the start of the study, recruiting families to participate in the project in a formal sense proved difficult. While invariably curious about the study, with the exception of one family who enthusiastically volunteered right away, the rest of the parents in my personal network were ultimately not comfortable with the idea of me observing them and their children in their homes around mealtimes. I believe the hesitation around this issue is significant and affirms the delicacy of this topic for many mothers, and to a lesser extent fathers. After a few weeks of fruitless tries I began asking parents for interviews only. This way, I figured I could at least get started gathering some data and I also thought that participating in an interview with me would give parents a better sense of the kind of information I was interested in and might help put them at ease. This worked, and several of the mothers who initially only consented to an interview wound up participating in the rest of the study, too. I also posted a recruitment message on the Mount Airy Parent’s Network list serve, to which over 1500 families subscribe. In the message, I asked for two kinds of informants: people who would only be interviewed and people who would be interviewed as well as repeatedly observed in their homes and accompanied on grocery shopping trips. While many more people consented to the interview part, I did finally manage to put together a group of 12 families for the more intensive observational part of the research.

I interviewed parents about household routines, ideas, beliefs and household rules about food, other consumption patterns, the gender division of labor in the house and how they thought they and their children compared to others in these respects. I also tried to elicit parent’s broader ideas about the neighborhood, the food system, the environment and any political ideas they might have about inequality and justice, which was harder. Many parents seemed to enjoy being
interviewed, many had expected me to be mainly interested in health and nutrition but were happy to be asked about other things, too. I tried to interview people in their homes wherever possible, for being in a person’s personal space gave further clues about the family and the organization of their lives. At times, this helped control or correct certain statements and assertions about food consumption habits. Food (and alcohol) consumption habits are notorious interview topics in the social sciences and medical field because people rarely admit how much they actually eat and drink and tend to make their consumption habits seem more wholesome than they in reality are. Being in a person’s house demonstrated this sometimes such as when a two-year old girl with a candy necklace in her mouth walked into the room where I was interviewing her mother who had just explained to me that her children never eat refined sugar.

Following Miller (1998) I accompanied all the mothers from my sample on grocery shopping trips, sometimes with their children in tow, to observe their routines and spending. In order to get a sense of mother’s decision-making process in the grocery store I asked them to think out loud when making their shopping decisions.

In my household observations, I followed the methods of ethnographer Lareau who did similar ethnographic work in households in her research on parenting styles (Lareau 2003: 259). I was interested in observing people in naturalistic fashion, busy with the activities of everyday life, especially around mealtimes. I was interested in parents’ food choices, routines and interactions around food between parents and children. Food is a topic around which parents and small children interact a lot, which allowed for plenty of observation. Typically, I would arrive at a house around 4:30 or 5 in the afternoon and leave by 7 or 8. Sometimes I’d stay longer. I always offered to help with food preparation and cleanup and was taken up on it about half of the time. I
preferred this since it made for more natural interactions than if I was just standing in the way. I was always offered food and would accept a small plate.

Obviously, it was quite awkward and uncomfortable to arrive at a stranger’s home and be part of an intimate family routine. The first visit was always most difficult but it became easier with subsequent visits. The children were a big help in this, too. More than once, young children’s disarming curiosity is what initially drew me into the social setting which then allowed me to bond with the parents. Oftentimes the children would ask me to play with them or read to them or to engage me in their activities some other way. Around meal times parents are often busy and do not have much time to interact with their children so I often got the impression that once everybody was used to the idea of me being there, both parents as well as children were happy with the attention I was able to pay to the children.

During the fieldwork, while meeting with mothers to discuss their ideas about food and their family’s food habits I frequently sensed impatience or maybe even slight hostility from other family members if they were around. One evening I was interviewing a mother of two very young children at around 7PM. The children, ages 2 and 3 were supposed to be in another room with their grandmother who lives with them. However, the grandmother did not keep the children from coming into the room where we were talking. The mother repeatedly asked her mother to keep the children with her, to start their bath and to get them up to bed. At one point, I heard the little boy asking his grandmother why he couldn’t go to mommy and she responded that: “mommy has to talk about food to that woman”. Another incident occurred one afternoon when I was about to accompany another mother of two young children to her bee hives which she keeps on her parents’ property just outside Philadelphia’s city limits. The whole family was at the property and her husband agreed to watch the children while she took me to examine the
hives. I had been instructed to wear long pants, we donned protective bee-keeper jackets, long gloves and veiled hats that cover the neck and set out towards the hives at the end of the property. Just as my informant pulled the first honeycomb out of the first hive and hundreds of bees came buzzing out, encircling us and landing on our protective clothing, her 3-year-old son came darting across the field, towards us and the bees, not being stopped or contained by his father who stood watching from a distance while holding their baby. While this could simply be an instance of a little child wanting to stay close to his mother with a father unaccustomed to saying “no”, I could not help but think of these as slightly passive-aggressive acts by family members not invested in and not supportive of mothers’ intensive, time-consuming food activities.

**Research participants**

With the exception of one African father, all the parents and children in my core group of 12 families are white. This is partly a function of the fact that, even though Mount Airy is famous for its history of racial integration, black middle-class families remain in minority as well as of the snowball method by which I recruited several of the participating families. Though all families in my study say to appreciate diversity and deliberately picked Mount Airy because it is not as homogeneous and white as they perceive the suburbs to be, close friendships and community relationships between white and black families are not very common. Black families also historically chose the neighborhood for reasons of economic stability and safety and are therefore probably not as tuned into the community networks I relied on to recruit my sample.

The education level of my participants is high: all parents in my sample have at least a college degree, 13 of the 24 parents also have master’s degrees, one father has an MD, one has a JD, two mothers have social science PhD’s and one mother is still working towards one as a full
time graduate student. The internal stratification within the sample is significant and the 12 core families in my study can be subdivided into 6 squeezed or low-income families, 5 more affluent families and one which falls somewhere in between. With the exception of the medical doctor and the lawyer who are both part of the more affluent group, the education levels were evenly divided between the two groups.

The parents in the financially struggling group were generally more comfortable discussing their financial situation than my more affluent informants. Part of it is simply that money constantly came up in order to explain their choices, decisions and constraints and several participants even regularly made jokes about the difficulty of their situation. Those families lived in modest row– or twin homes with either no or a small garden in the eastern part of the neighborhood, which, as I will explain in Chapter 3, has lower real estate prices than West Mount Airy. In their homes, obvious cost-saving measures and evidence of tight budgets were in place: the heat would typically be turned down low and family members would wear several layers of clothing, kept shoes on in the house and had blankets laying around to help get comfortable; I noticed several stalled or abandoned home repair projects such as water damaged walls, unfinished floors or painting jobs and one house even had tarps spread out over a leaky part of the roof; generally there was only one, older, small car and many fathers would commute to work by bike or by bus; their wardrobes included many thrift-store finds; appliances were out of date; and it was evident that not all parents had time to do much cleaning or could afford a cleaning service. Several fathers in this group worked in IT as technical support or systems administrators in non-profit organizations, two worked as administrators at the University of Pennsylvania, one worked for the Philadelphia water department and one held odd jobs ranging from adjuncting at a local college to taking care of the horses at one of the local stables. Four out
of the six mothers in this group had paid jobs outside of the home, one as a junior academic, one as a librarian in the Philadelphia library system, one worked from home as a sales person for a landscape company and one worked as an administrative assistant. One of the mothers in this group was a stay-at-home mother and the last one was in graduate school. Only one family’s children attended public school (the second they tried in the neighborhood), one family’s three children attended a Catholic school and one family’s two children attended a private Quaker school 30 minutes north of Mount Airy in Plymouth Meeting, where tuitions are lower than at the two nationally ranked more exclusive Quaker schools in the neighborhood itself. The rest of the children were too young for school and in private daycare or at home with their mothers.

The more affluent group lived more comfortably in large homes on larger properties, all but one in West Mount Airy. These homes were typically “nicer” (and warmer and cleaner) with remodeled kitchens and bathrooms and no apparent wear, tear or damage. From conversations about food choice including taste preferences, shopping routines and restaurant experiences both at home and while traveling; education including school choice and after school activities; and hobbies and leisure activities, the higher spending power of this group became apparent. One father worked as a corporate lawyer, another father owned a real estate company, one was a professor, doctor and chief of his medical division at the University of Pennsylvania, one worked as an engineer for a large defense contractor, and one has a corporate photography business. Three of the moms in the more affluent group worked outside of the home: one mother worked as a teacher in a low-income Philadelphia school district, one was a salesperson at Tesla, and the last working mother was a contractor. The children of these families all attended private Quaker schools, three families were enrolled in the elite institutions in the neighborhood, Germantown
Friends School or William Penn Charter School where kindergarten tuitions start at $22,000, the other two family’s children were students at less expensive private Quaker schools in the area.

The one set of parents I consider conceptually to be in between these two groups jointly own a hugely popular local children’s consignment store that also sells high quality baby items and expensive European wooden toys. They did quite well which allowed them to open up an additional two stores in other parts of the Philadelphia area during the course of the study. This family lives modestly in a twin and their three children attend public school but they are constantly improving and remodeling their house, spend large amounts of money on sustainably raised organic food and never brought up money as an issue.

The additional 18 mothers and 2 fathers I interviewed were in terms of income diversity very similar to the core group of participating families and not much more racially diverse. This group did include one single, divorced mother, as well as two lesbian mothers raising children with their female partners. One of the 2 fathers in this interview group was Dominican. The food and parenting practices, experiences, concerns and routines of this group of people who consented to the interviews only were very similar to those of the families who allowed me to study them in a more immersive way. This was an encouraging realization because it begins to suggest that the findings I gleaned from my modestly-sized group of core informants might indeed be applicable to a broader swath of people. In the dissertation I have tried to use mainly quotes and descriptive illustrations from the core group to provide as coherent a picture as possible, but in some instances one of the additional interviewees phrased something in such an apt way, that I have used their wording instead.

The remaining group of people I interviewed were a diverse group of neighborhood residents whose insights I deemed useful for various aspects of my study. The included a local
restaurant owner, the owner of the home brew shop where the Wissahickon Brewers Guild meets, the general manager and the buying manager of Weavers Way Co-op, a neighbor who has taught a course on food justice in the community, a long time neighborhood mom who teaches at one of the private schools several of the children in my study attend, a former neighborhood activist who participated in Mount Airy’s integration efforts in the 60’s, as well as two academics studying the area; a sociology student from Penn conducting an ethnography of Mount Airy and a local historian whose book on the historic integration efforts was just about to come out. All these people provided valuable context and background information which found its way into the dissertation.

Dissertation outline

The dissertation is organized as follows: Chapter 2, the literature review, discusses anthropological scholarship on food and gender, as well as the recent debate on the post-political and the renewed scholarly interest in the commons. Chapter 3 describes the setting of the research project and explains why Mount Airy was a good location for this study. I pay specific attention to the neighborhood’s history of deliberate racial integration and lasting image of tolerance and inclusivity. This is a great source of pride for the parents in my study but, I argue, contributes to the dilemmas faced by the white middle-class parents in my study who want to simultaneously distinguish from as well as align with local families from different racial and socio-economic groups. Chapter 4 examines local dominant middle-class norms around food, parenting and politics in more detail and outlines the diverse strategies mothers employ to live according to these norms. I systematically describe the various food practices I observed and participated in among different middle class fractions as well as the contradictions and pressures that emerge for mothers who try to follow these local norms. I argue that the strategies
undertaken by the middle class in their attempts to fend off downward mobility both on the structural as well as symbolic level together create a set of almost untenable contradictions for middle-class mothers, particularly in the realm of food and feeding and particularly for those on the most limited budget. A main argument is that mothers in the squeezed middle work what approximates a “third shift” because parenting intensively while feeding the family local, organic, alternative food is much more time consuming on a budget than when this food can simply be bought in an upscale supermarket. Other contradictions emerge, too and create significant stress.

Chapter 5 describes the socially reproductive work of the fathers in my study. While all but one of the families in my study are organized around a fairly traditional division of labor, fathers in both groups do perform reproductive and household work, particularly food-related activities and caring for children. In this chapter I discuss my findings on the household division of labor and explain why food and parenting responsibilities do not tend to turn into a third shift for fathers the way they do for mothers. In addition, I discuss the particular emphasis fathers place on three interconnected aspects of their parenting: to expose, to model and to teach, and explain how especially for fathers of the fewest means, these parenting goals are often in subtle conflict with one another. This is an arena in which the experience of fatherhood differs for fathers in different fractions of the middle class and constitutes a significant form of inequality between these two groups of men. The chapter ends with a discussion of the role men play in the construction and maintenance of community networks, which is an additional form of socially reproductive work the most squeezed fathers in my study regularly perform. I pay specific attention to the meaning and function of the Wissahickon Brewers Guild, or the brew club as the members refer to it: a local organization of mostly male home brewers to which several of the
less well-off fathers in my study belong. Whereas membership in this brew club has clear personal benefits for the men in my study, their efforts towards the success of the club, as well as other local networks organized around the sharing of food and childcare, also support their families in various ways.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, reiterates the central idea that the pressures on the American middle class find expression in family life around issues of food and parenting. Drawing on scholarship on sensory politics and the commons, I discuss the political implications and activist potential of the diverse food strategies of the middle-class families in my study, in particular the potential value of the local support networks around food and childcare I discovered among the most squeezed families in my study. This final chapter presents food as a fruitful field in which middle-class parents organize on behalf of themselves, the future and health of their children, as well as the well-being of the wider community and challenges commonplace interpretations of middle-class reproductive behavior as self-centered, consumption-driven, inherently exclusionary and lacking in political motivation.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

My focus, in this dissertation, on the food and parenting practices of middle-class parents is motivated by an overarching concern with understanding how social class is produced at the household level and in particular how these socially reproductive practices change and intensify as the pressures on middle-class Americans increase. This dissertation describes the resulting variations and inequalities in the daily experience of motherhood and fatherhood in different sections of the middle class experiencing different degrees of economic squeezing. I am also concerned with understanding the political implications of the middle-class critiques and alternative forms of social organization that emerge in response to the changing conditions in the lives of these middle-class parents in decline.

The dissertation starts from the basic premise that food is a good tool for the study of social class and this literature review begins with a discussion of the relations between the two. The work by Sidney Mintz and Pierre Bourdieu are most foundational in that respect but I also discuss a few more recent books on this topic. I then move on to a discussion of work on processes of social reproduction at the household level. Here, again, the work of Pierre Bourdieu is instrumental albeit limited in the extent to which he explains the gendered nature of these processes. For that, I turn to feminist work on social reproduction and household labor in particular. The review then turns to a discussion of sociological and anthropological literature on modern middle and upper class parenting practices, in particular the description and evaluation of the practice of intensive mothering. Some have critiqued intensive parenting practices as well as the choice for high-status “alternative food” for being guided by neoliberal logics of personal responsibility which work to reproduce inequality, and have linked the practice to other (often white) middle-class practices that are similarly exclusionary, some of which I mention briefly. I
then link these interpretations of middle-class reproductive behavior to the broader critique of what scholars on the left have called the post-political. Because one theoretical motivation of this dissertation is to move beyond critical, narrow interpretations of middle-class reproductive practices as inherently exclusionary and apolitical, I then discuss feminist work on the reemergence of the commons, a concept on which I rely towards the ends of this dissertation to reimagine middle-class food and parenting practices as critical, anti-market and oriented towards a collective instead.

**Food and social class**

Thinkers like Max Weber (2010 [1920]), Thorsten Veblen (1994 [1899]), and George Simmel (1972) have long posed that cultural consumption of any kind, including food, is inevitably wrapped up with class and social status. In the first place and obviously, food and class are linked because structural position determines the ability to access and afford certain foods, but also because particular foods and food preferences can signal distinction from other groups in a more symbolic sense. In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) pays special attention to the ways in which consumption processes serve to make and remake social inequality through the tastes they instill in childhood. Taste, according to Bourdieu, allows groups within a stratification system to establish, maintain or enhance their position in the social order: “Tastes are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes” (1984: 56). Taste is shaped by the habitus: a set of unconscious dispositions children begin to acquire in the home through class-specific socializing practices which instill a sense of what is comfortable or “right” and which work to naturalize and affirm their position within a given social structure. Structural position including education and profession, together with social and cultural background, lie at
the base of a person’s habitus, which besides taste also consists of thoughts, beliefs, interests and our understanding of the world around us (and include, as I argue in Chapter 3, politics) (Bourdieu 1984: 101-102, 170).

Food as a reflection of good or proper taste is a powerful signaler of status and legitimacy (and again, to an extent in a material sense, because class-specific food-preferences are rooted in practice and thus constrained by matters of economic power and access). Food and food processes can also be constitutive of class status. In *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz (1985) traces the role of sugar in the establishment of the global capitalist system and links historic developments in the production and consumption of sugar to the formation of the class system on which world capitalism was built. He describes how sugar, along with the other “proletarian hunger killers” coffee, cocoa and tea, was inextricably bound up with the creation of a plantation class in the Caribbean and a metropolitan proletariat in Britain as its production was transformed, its availability and consumption increased and sugars’ meaning changed from a rarified luxury item for the elites to an everyday mass consumption good for the working classes. Mintz argues that because of foods’ power to unite people within a class group as well as to distinguish between separate groups, processes of human food socialization ought to be key areas of anthropological inquiry (1985; 1996). William Roseberry takes a similar though more modest and small-scale historical, political economy approach in his article on the rise of specialty coffees in the U.S. (1996). Here, he describes the shaping of a taste for “yuppie coffees” among certain market segments by coffee producers and distributors. Like Mintz, he uses food to expose the inseparable links between processes of production, consumption and class formation, showing how the emergence of new class identities around consumptive practices are directly connected to changes in the capitalist production system.
Mintz and Roseberry clearly show that the type of food or eating style that is most distinctive in a given time or place is subject to constant change, a function of historical, cultural and political-economic circumstances. Other scholars writing about food as a marker of class status and distinction also describe such changes and the circulation of what is considered good or fashionable food or eating styles throughout history. Charlotte Biltekoff (2013), for example, in her history of domestic nutritional science, describes how, at the turn of the previous century, middle-class status first became linked to eating “right” which was understood to instill moral valence and constitute good citizenship. During the Great Depression, the class status of middle-class families could be in part preserved through the ingenious survival strategies of the women (Ziegelman and Coe 2016), which thus gained some social status and some of which have been re-discovered on mom-blogs as well as by some of the precariously situated women in my study. In the fifties, white middle-class suburban housewives distinguished themselves by turning into “citizen consumers” (Cohen 2003) and embracing and incorporating the products of a new economy, followed quickly by Julia Child’s culturally transformative introduction of French food and cooking techniques to the American culinary repertoire in the 1960’s.

More recently, Margaret Visser (1991) explains how in the context of our contemporary highly rationalized food system and broad availability of any food we could imagine, certain specialty foodstuffs lose some of their exalted status and that what takes their place is conspicuous culinary expertise or the knowledge and skills to cook well instead. “Local” and “authentic” become other highly valued and distinctive food qualities in the current context of a global, rationalized food production system (even though “local” and “authentic” foods are often produced in systems that run parallel, rather than in opposition to, the conventional food system (Pratt 2007)). Johnston and Baumann (2010) as well as Naccarato and Lebesco (2012) describe
the recent diversification of high status food practices and discourse in the U.S. and argue that in response to economic stalling, haute cuisine is in decline, food snobbery is now frowned upon and a democratization of taste has taken place. Naccarato and Lebesco describe the simultaneous existence of two, seemingly contradictory major high-status culinary discourses: that of “selectivity and omnivorousness” (2012: 11) and Johnston and Baumann also point to the practice of omnivorousness among foodies to indicate a general trend towards cultural eclecticism by higher-status cultural groups. Though theirs is not a new argument: food historian Ray Tannahil (1973) long ago remarked that food flexibility or omnivorousness tends to be a characteristic of affluent communities and associated with middle- or upper-class status for only if resources are abundant can people afford to try new and unfamiliar things and run the risk of wasting food. Having omnivorous children is a particularly strong status symbol among parents in America today and very hard to achieve, as I will describe in Chapter 4 (see also Daniel 2016).

Food is also connected to class via the body, in contemporary American society in particular in terms of health and body size. Bourdieu’s theory of practice and work on the habitus is helpful in understanding this notion of the body as a product, signal and reproducer of class. He explains how practice, including class-specific labor and educational practices, leisure practices and consumptive practices often have physical effects on the body, which thus become visible representations of class and normalized as part of the habitus. Examples of the ways class can be inscribed onto a body could include the stooped mine worker, the graceful ballerina or the upright posture of those who attended finishing school. Food practices, too, come to be inscribed onto the body, thus constituting a visible marker of class reflecting material realities as well as taste:

Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps the shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation,
choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. It does this first in the seemingly most natural features of the body, the dimensions (volume, height, weight) and shapes (round or square, stiff or supple, straight or curved) of its visible forms, which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e., a way of treating it, caring for it, feeding it, maintaining it, which reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus. It is in fact through preferences with regard to food which may be perpetuated beyond their social conditions of production …and also, of course, through the uses of the body in work and leisure which are bound up with them, that the class distribution of bodily properties is determined. (Bourdieu 1984: 190)

In the United States, overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes have been markers of low class status since around the early 1980’s. This is when America’s high rates of overweight and obesity first started rising and disproportionately affecting blacks, Hispanics and other low-income groups, especially women (Davison and Birch 2001; Ogden et al. 2012; Surgeon General 2013). Obesity rates among the poor have been ascribed to low-income groups’ concentration in food deserts, their lack of access to healthful food, to funds to buy it, to time to cook it and so on. But the most thorough and critical explanation comes from geographer Julie Guthman (2011) who firmly ties obesity and its association with low-income groups to the development of neoliberal capitalism, set in motion beginning in the late 1970’s, directly before public health officials started calling attention to America’s “obesity epidemic”.

Guthman describes how post-Fordist corporatization, automation and deregulation led to the rise of our current industrial food production system which fills the American food environment with cheap food. She then explains how this excess, low quality food, chemically produced by an unregulated, profit-driven American food system, gets absorbed in the bodies of those Americans with the fewest alternatives: those most affected by wage stagnation, privatization, deunionization and disinvestment by the state, turning obesity into a new way in which social class is embodied. And going a step further, she concludes that obesity has become
crucial to the survival of the capitalist food system. Drawing on Harvey (1998) Guthman shows that obesity functions as a “spatial fix” for capitalisms periodic crises of overaccumulation, which it experiences when capital accumulation exceeds demand and investments are no longer profitable. A “fix” absorbs the excess capital that was accumulated and temporarily solves a crisis. Expansion via development, colonialism, or globalization are more conventional examples of “spatial fixes” that create or enlarge markets so that investments may become profitable again.

Using the bodies of vulnerable Americans to absorb the excesses of the rationalized food system and then making the solution to obesity purchasable in the form of for example diet foods helps to keep the American food sector viable.

In addition to low-class status, stigma and moral panics accompany overweight, obesity and the consumption style thought to cause it. Authors who have written about common Western associations between food habits, body size and morality include feminist writers who have paid special attention to the subjection of women to moralizing about consumption habits, food and body size (Bordo 1993; Counihan 1992; Lupton 1996). Mintz (1985; 1996) focuses in particular on moralizing discourses about sugar which has been considered sinful for its association with slavery and also for its sweetness, which represents luxury, excess and lack of virtuous self-restraint in the consumer society (see also Rozin 1987). And Maskovsky (2015) shows how sweetness and in particular soda consumption are linked to “moral, political and governmental ideas about proper urban citizenship and subjectivity, and to race and class politics” (2015: 5) and how these ideas were put to technocratic use, informing the formulation of the soda ban initiative in New York in 2012 which disproportionally targeted low-income and minority groups.
Foods’ connection to class via cost, taste, expertise, health, body size and proper consumptive politics makes it a central tool in the maintenance and reproduction of class status. A fundamental premise of this dissertation is that as the class status of the squeezed American middle classes is threatened, socially reproductive practices including food practices intensify. At the household level, these are gendered projects typically undertaken by women, a fact which Bourdieu has not paid much attention to, and I begin the next section by reviewing some feminist scholarship on reproductive work. I pay special attention to work on the practice of intensive parenting by scholars of motherhood which many have clearly linked to the middle-class threat of downward mobility (Ehrenreich 1990; Ortner 1991; 2003; Davidson 2011; Katz 2008). Less attention has been paid to socially reproductive food processes in their own right (an exception is DeVault 1991), though some authors have tried to understand the struggle to impart middle and upper middle-class children with the right taste in toys and other consumption goods (Pugh 2009; Williams 2006) and some have taken note of the frequent arguments and negotiations that take place around the dinner tables of middle-class families (Namie 2008; Ochs and Shohet 2006; Paugh and Izquierdo 2009).

Reproductive work and intensive parenting

My understanding of social reproduction as the everyday practices that sustain and differentiate relations of production (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) is further shaped by feminist scholars who have expanded this classic Marxist meaning of the concept to explicitly include the life-sustaining work of caring for the next generation typically performed by women (Laslett and Brenner 1989; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Federici 2012). The feminist argument is that gender inequality and the unequal gender division of household labor ties women to the home, compromising their earning potential and upward mobility, which has consequences for their and
their family’s class position. In this view, the two kinds of labor needed for the social
reproduction of the labor force, one paid and valued the other unpaid and undervalued, together
thus reproduce inequalities of both class and gender at the same time. There is a long tradition of
work, particularly in sociology, that describes inequalities in the gender division of household
labor and how these expectations and responsibilities shapes the lives of women including their
professional lives, their prospects and their independence. Feminist scholars have also paid
attention to the structural developments that transformed the nature of both paid and unpaid work
after neoliberalism’s destruction of the social wage and simultaneous cutting of child care funds
and described how this impacted women and the practice of mothering (Berk 1985; Gerson
1986; Kaplan Daniels 1987; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Susser 1997; Hochschild and
Machung 1989; 2012; Stone 2007). My own data on the household division of labor of the young
families in my study do not fundamentally challenge any of their findings.

Within the scholarship on reproductive work, parenting styles, especially the American
middle and upper class practice of intensive parenting has received special attention in recent
years. Intensive parenting practices have been characterized by an empowering, enabling,
encouraging and permissive attitude towards children. Sociologist Sharon Hays defines it as a
method for child rearing that is: “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor
intensive and financially expensive” (1996: 8). Lareau (2003) has called it “concerted
cultivation”: an approach to parenting which views a child as a “project” that needs to be
“developed” and the role of parents to actively foster and assess its talents, opinions and skills
(2003: 1–2). She contrasts the concerted cultivation parenting style with a more traditional
parenting approach associated with working class families, which is based on the idea that
children will develop naturally, without special efforts on the part of parents, and consists to a
large extent of giving directives, enforcing discipline and instilling a respect for authority.

Scholars have critically described how the intensive parenting practice complicates and intensifies the demands of parenthood, motherhood in particular (Warner 2005; Fox 2006; Nelson 2012; Druckerman 2014) and the ways in which it contributes to the social reproduction of inequality on different levels.

Parenting is understood to be socially constructed (Glenn 1994) and that what is considered good or proper parenting to vary according to the political economic and historical context. Given this, scholars have linked the contemporary practice of intensive parenting firmly to the contemporary regime of neoliberal capitalism with its widespread disinvestment from public schools and spaces as well as other traditionally government-provided services, and the acceptance of the idea that it is up to individual parents to prepare children to compete in increasingly competitive and educational and professional environments. Lareau, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984) finding that individuals of different social positions are socialized differently and in ways that affirm and reproduce structural social inequality, demonstrates well how the intensive parenting practices of middle and upper class Americans better connect to the standards and workings of social institutions such as schools or work environments that are instrumental in a person’s future success and social standing: “cultural training in the home is awarded unequal value in dominant institutions because of the close compatibility between the standards of child rearing in privileged homes and the (arbitrary) standards proposed by these institutions” (Lareau 2003: 276). Anthropologists Elsa Davidson (2008) has dubbed parents’ (and exclusive schools’) intensive efforts towards the preparation of the next generation “aspiration management” and geographer Cindi Katz (2008) has referred to this race as the “spectacle of childhood”, in which
middle-class children are viewed as an accumulation strategy; packed with goods, services and resources to help them compete and succeed in the future.

In this dissertation I argue that instilling and maintaining class-appropriate food habits are a key part of this socially reproductive parenting strategy, similarly motivated by a concern for the future and a desire to prevent downward mobility (and greatly contributing to the complication of parenthood and implicated in the rise of new forms of inequality). Not much attention has been paid to these processes by social scientists interested in food, though Guthman (2011) does share some ideas about the practices by which middle and upper middle-class Americans manage to preserve health and thinness and thus a class-appropriate body. Guthman argues that the middle classes have adopted a doctrine of neoliberal self-governance called “healthism” (Crawford 2006, quoted in Guthman 2011: 52-56). Healthism refers to the moralization of health and the market-based practices to achieve it including gym memberships, weight loss aides and the adoption of “alternative” or “yuppie” food not produced by the industrial food system (Guthman 2003).

Healthism constitutes an example of neoliberal governmentality thinkers like Dean (1999) and Rose (2007) have discussed. Rose in particular has addressed the strong connections between governance and ideas about health, explaining how the rhetoric of the healthy citizen has become a powerful one in contemporary U.S. society. He uses the term “biological citizenship” to highlight the ways that proper citizenship has come to mean specific human physical characteristics, bodily practices and consumption styles. Taking an historical approach, he describes how certain populations have been subject to medical regulatory practices and projects aimed to instill proper hygiene techniques in the West since at least the eighteenth century. Today, the ethic of the healthy citizen is spread not only through the explicit regulation
of certain populations by the state, but also through market campaigns and dominant modes of understanding which, the argument goes, lead to the internalization of neoliberal logics of personal responsibility and self-control such as healthism.

As an internalized set of contemporary middle and upper class practices of the self (and family), healthism can be understood as an example of the same type of market-based, apolitical, expert-guided self-management techniques which are also at play in intensive parenting. Both have been critiqued. Katz, for example, critiques the intense middle-class parenting styles that are meant to prepare children for an insecure future because they consume parents and distract them from the political-economic and structural reasons for these very insecurities (2012: 179). Guthman critiques healthism because it similarly distracts from the capitalist, state-supported origins of our unhealthy food environment and obesity crisis. Both writers are also critical of the neoliberal embrace of personal responsibilities like these because they create new forms of inequality between those who are able to adopt consumption-based practices of the self, such as intensive parenting or healthism and those who, for various reasons, are not. Katz speaks of a new inequality in childhood with “fetishized” middle-class children on the one hand and at-risk children who are a “waste” on the other (2012: 181). Guthman describes a new form of inequality between low-status, discriminated-against obese Americans on one side and thin, self-satisfied consumers of alternative food on the other (2011: 142).

There are additional middle or upper class reproductive strategies and consumptive behaviors, motivated by a fear of downward mobility, that have been similarly critiqued for being guided by anti-social, exclusionary neoliberal logics which ultimately only work to support and reproduce the capitalist system and its inequalities (Harvey 2005: 61). These critiques have come from scholars writing about for example the American middle-class preference for a
suburban or gated way of life (Cohen 2003; Fishman 1989; Gans 1982; Low 2004; Putnam 2001) or for certain (private or exclusive public) schools (Ball et al. 1996; Neild 2005; Sikkink and Emerson 2008). Heiman, Liechty and Freeman sum up this middle-class approach as follows:

Whether as a form of self-identification or aspiration, middle-class subjectivity shifts consumerist longing and political action away from social transformation (for the public good) to private transformation (for oneself, one’s family, or one’s own small social group), vesting subjects in state commercial agendas (free trade, market access, privatization, individual responsibility etc.) rather than in the protection and social welfare of the state. In some extreme cases, the new middle-class subject can even be politically valorized as embodying a new (neoliberal) freedom (usually vis-à-vis a demonized “old” socialist subject) in which individual entrepreneurship is cast as heroic resistance to the “failed economic policies of the past” (2012: 19).

The post-political context

What Heiman et al. are describing without explicitly mentioning it is the contemporary, depoliticized subjectivity much critiqued by leftist scholars on the post-political. While fragmented and contested, this scholarship is based on the foundational idea that “the political” retreated from public life with the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the end of a long struggle between the competing ideologies of capitalism and socialism and meant that a viable alternative to capitalism had ceased to exist. It meant that liberal democracy and the market economy had proved to be the best possible basis for social organization, which took the wind out of the sails of established anti-capitalist critiques and enabled capitalism to spread across the globe and affix itself in the minds of people as the inevitable way of the world and a growing inability to see beyond or outside of it (the internalization of neoliberal ideology). Different European leftist thinkers have conceptualized and named the process differently: Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1997) have referred to this as the retreat of the political, Mouffé (2005)

Despite differences in terminology and disagreements on what the ramifications of the process are, theorists of the post-political all make the same fundamental distinction between politics (some call this the police or democracy) and the political. Politics refers to today’s limited “rituals of resistance” by which contemporary subjects are able to express dissatisfaction, for example by voting somebody new into office (Maskovsky 2015: 23). Ultimately however, because contemporary government’s primary purpose is to preserve the functioning of the capitalist market it has been reduced to a managerial role and politics do not transcend these techno-managerial institutions and regulations. The political is harder to explain in ontological terms but refers to real, open-ended contestation. The political represents forms of dissent that challenge the public to think about equality (Rancière 2005) and democracy beyond narrow functional policies and “technocratic fixes” (Swyngedouw 2007). As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it: “the political marks the antagonistic differences that cut through the social” (1997: 373).

The reasoning further goes that politics have replaced the political, which is a problem because only the political can bring into play previously ignored or unimagined political actors and reopen the possibility for the formation of new class alliances and the reemergence of class struggle (Žižek 1999). If there were a way to bring the political back, it would thus consist of a truly diverse group of people, including people currently excluded from politics, represented equally. Politics, by contrast, are consensual and never challenged on an existential level by a diverse group of actors because those who would object are not politically represented in today’s depoliticized societies. In short, the post-political (or post-democracy or post-politics) is best
characterized by the reduction of the political to the economic, or the delegation of social and political choices to the market, to the point where:

[W]e—the West and its allies—will now forever live happily in the complacent knowledge that democracy has been finetuned to assure the efficient management of a liberal and pluralist society under the uncontested aegis of a naturalized market-based configuration of the production and distribution of a cornucopia of goods and services. Any remaining problems and issues will be dealt with in the appropriate manner, through consensual forms of techno-managerial negotiation (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015: 3).

This situation, in turn, renders entire sets of social problems, groups of people and forms of inequality invisible and beyond political intervention.

Though not everybody is ready to adopt this rather bleak view of contemporary political life, this body of work does offer a compelling philosophical explanation for the triumph of neoliberalism, including the apparent intensification of individualization and techniques of the self among all members of society (including, as I will show in the next chapter, among the liberal intelligentsia who may have been sympathetic to socialism before) as well as the frustrating lack of politically impactful collective action in this current historic juncture. Though the turn to neoliberal capitalism predates and enabled the establishment of the post-political climate, this climate, in turn, protects and further entrenches the consensual neoliberal order which politically inures the population. Because politics have been reduced to economics, any “political” action is in fact an economic action and never offers a fundamental challenge to the status quo:

By seeking to render the political a technical rationality, a calculated and strategic behaviour, post-politics seeks to suppress not only the political but also the ability to debate and critique. It produces a vision of society in which conflict and antagonism are replaced with economic evaluations and measurement. Post-politics is, in short, hostile to politicisation and radical social change (Taşkale 2016: 1-2).

At the same time, the disappearance of real alternatives to capitalism in the contemporary political and economic world and of established avenues for political contestation has also led to
interesting social developments that certain scholars of the post-political, with different degrees of optimism, have interpreted as examples of possible re-politicizations or re-inscriptions of the political. Examples include the spread of (often violent) insurgent uprisings in cities all over the world such as in Cairo, Instanbul and Tunesia’s Sidi Bouzid, among other places. International and domestic protest movements that have sprung up such as Greece’s anti-austerity movement, Spain’s 15M movement, Occupy, Black Lives Matter and the Tea Party have also been explained as examples of challenges to the post-political consensus as has the widespread emergence of various forms of populism in Europe and the United States. Many of these protests by diverse groups of marginalized members of society were organized via social media and expressed in urban public squares, which in turn contributed to the rediscovery of the concept of the commons in leftist academic thought.

**Beyond a critique of neoliberalism: the rediscovery of the commons**

The commons is an old concept brought back to academic thinking by political scientist Elinor Ostrom in 1990. At its essence, it refers to a system of collective ownership and governance for resources that people own in common such as land or water. Over the past couple of decades, anthropologists and other social scientists interested in locating alternative, more democratic forms of economic organization and subjectivities to neoliberal capitalism have called attention to the often old ways in which groups of people in various parts of the world have successfully managed their agricultural land, forests and fisheries as commons (Nonini 2007; Donahue 1999; Lu 2007; Burger et al. 2013; Carlsson 2008; Shiva 2015). Scholars have also turned attention to modern forms of commoning such as the digital commons, or open
source free software movements, or the ways in which modern city dwellers can be understood to create commons: “Through their daily activities and struggles, individuals and social groups create the social world of the city, and thereby create something common as a framework within which all can dwell” (Harvey 2012: 74).

The commons could be conceptualized as a tool for re-politicization, most obviously in the urban context because urban public space (along with the internet and social media) constitutes the physical site for the logistical organization and expression of challenges to government and capital (such as in Taksim and Tahrir squares or Zucotti park for example). In addition, these urban social spaces facilitate exposure to diverse social groups (Susser and Tonnelat 2013: 112), which helps instill the right set of mind for a collective challenge. Partially through urban social practices or, as Harvey puts it the “social process of *commoning*” (2012: 73; italics in original) new forms of understanding can emerge in the commons which can serve as a counter conceptualization to the individualistic, exclusionary, consumption-driven neoliberal actor and, perhaps, motivate new social movements. One area of urban life where anti-market collective forms of governance and new forms of sociality have emerged is in urban gardening projects (Nonini 2014; Fernandez 2003; Eizenberg 2012; Lawson 2005; Schmelzkopf 1995; Black 2013; Müller 2011). These urban gardening projects, often started by initiatives from immigrant communities from Africa, the Caribbean or the Southern United States, strengthen community cohesion among diverse groups of actors and challenge the capitalist market in that they produce for neighborhood consumption, rather than for commercial purposes (Federici 2012).

Though there is no scarcity of empirical work on inspiring examples of commoning on small scales, real difficulties emerge when scholars try to “jump scales” (Harvey 2012: 69) to
imagine how these local practices could turn into large commons that constitute a real existential challenge to global capitalism (though Ostrom (1990) makes some suggestions for how to go about organizing such a thing). More has been written about the important first step towards the goal of establishing a post-capitalist politics, which is to expose the potential political power of the commons: to open up ideas by developing a vision and a language that helps groups of people now excluded from political life because they are considered superfluous to the capitalist production system see their social and economic activities for their political and transformative potential. Formulating that counter-hegemonic discourse is a contribution that scholars can and have made.

Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias and Pickles (2014: 465) for example, discuss the attempts by some of the above-mentioned European theorists of the post-political to establish a different way of thinking that strives to recognize the “common in the commons” by re-appropriating “the term “communism” from its state-centric and its homogenizing and universalist past, rearticulating it towards a politics of communing”. Their goal is to move potential social activists away from a static, unimaginative reliance on old binary oppositions such as diversity/hegemony; private/public; individual/collective; state/social… (Hardt 2011, quoted in Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias and Pickles 2014: 466) and to instead focus on the common in the diverse forms of social and economic organization that these actors are engaged in. Such a redirected focus may help open up ways to envision alternatives which remain undiscovered if we would continue to accept the dogmatic old terms which cloud our vision and reproduce hegemonic thinking.

For Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006) too, key to the project of re-politicizing society is to expose the obscured and denied interdependence of people who are engaged in alternative (including common) economic arrangements that are distinguished from the more visible
economic interdependence of people who are engaged in capitalist markets such as for example those working in a company for a wage (2006: 69-70). Their central concept is that of the “community economy” or “diverse economies”, which recognizes the economic nature of a multitude of non-capitalist activities ranging from hunting and gathering and self-provisioning, to forms of reciprocal labor, bartering, volunteering, non-profit work and others, often organized and performed by women (2006: 76). Making these alternative or diverse forms of economic interdependence visible establishes the people who are engaged in them as a class of economic actors and instills a sense of autonomy which can then also be politically expressed. For my purposes, their work has been helpful for its feminist recognition of the fundamentally economic nature and value of women’s reproductive activities in their households and communities:

The richness of individual subjects’ economic lives is something that is rarely appreciated, especially when theorizing political projects. When it comes to economic identity in contemporary society, there are a limited number of subject positions to occupy and identify with—consumer, worker, self-employed, unemployed, capitalist entrepreneur, investor, to mention the most obvious. The language of the diverse economy can be used to explore the multidimensional nature of economic existence and the possibilities this creates for political acts of economic transformation. … the work of parents setting up a baby-sitting club might rarely be seen as a form of economic activism, especially as this organization could include people from very different income and occupational groups who identify differently with one or more of the above subject positions. Yet … this act of recognizing and creating interdependence can be an important contribution to a counterhegemonic politics of strengthening the community economy. This kind of “work” can also be seen as an important dynamic of self-organization that has multiple effects, even on the so-called “center” of the economy, the capitalist workplace (Gibson-Graham 2006: 77).

Feminist scholar Sylvia Federici has likewise argued that a successful anti-capitalist commons must begin with collectivizing the material and affective labor performed by women, because this would be the first step towards reducing the dependence on waged labor and an orientation away from the capitalist market system (De Angelis 2012). I must add however that she also acknowledges that local commoning initiatives ultimately cannot stand on their own as a
movement and must be accompanied by “broader anti-privatization campaigns and the
reclamation of our common wealth” (Federici 2012: 145).

If the house is the oikos on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the
house workers and house prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a
center of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of cooperation,
providing safety without isolation and fixation, allowing for the sharing and circulation of
community possessions, and, above all, providing the foundation for collective forms of
reproduction.
(Federici 2012: 147)

While the collective reproduction of human beings is the norm in most parts of the world
and throughout most of history, the West, beginning around the 17th century, saw the increasing
privatization of this reproductive work, especially among the well situated, along with the
emergence of individualized bourgeois notions of home, childhood and the family (Aries 1962;
Hobsbawm 1997 [1975]; Donzelot 1979). Feminist scholars have described how women-led
forms of collective reproduction emerge or re-emerge during economic crises that threaten
individual households of workers with poverty or state violence (Fisher 1993; Andreas 1986;
Hayden 1986) and how these collectivized home spheres can come to function as sites of
resistance in these contexts (hooks 1991).

It is this foundational form of commoning, the collectivization of the everyday work of
reproduction in response to an economic threat, that I have documented in modest, emerging
form among those middle-class families in my study most at risk of decline. In what follows in
the subsequent chapters, I describe the variations in the organization of reproductive work among
middle-class families of different means, as well as the different forms of consciousness and
politics that accompany their strategies. In the conclusion, I return to this idea of the commons,
not so much for its practical potential as an anti-capitalist organizational principle, but to argue
that a particular kind of collectively oriented, re-politicized subjectivity develops along with
these cooperative reproductive strategies. I argue that food sharing, collective gardening, beer brewing and cooperative parenting might help reorient middle-class consciousness away from neoliberal competition-oriented individualism and towards a more socially engaged sense of collective responsibility, especially among members of the next generation who are being raised in this cooperative Mount Airy context. Interestingly, little attention has been paid to the question of whether a collectivized upbringing has lasting effects on the future social orientation and engagement of the children who are being raised this way. Little attention, too, has been paid to the role of fathers in the construction of critical social networks around childcare and food production. In the chapters to follow I address both those things. Before doing so, I offer in the next chapter first a description and political history of the Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
CHAPTER 3: MOUNT AIRY: THE BERKELEY OF THE EAST

I have heard some people say, Mount Airy is the Berkeley of the East. I tell people it’s family friendly, a lot of people with kids here, they walk around with slings everywhere, very pro-breastfeeding and everything natural, hipsters, but diverse, you got African American, the historical African American-white you got a lot of Jewish people here, lots of gay people. And it’s supposed to be financially diverse with apartments, with smaller homes, with larger homes.
—Susan Peters

A liberal hippy enclave. Philadelphia is a very liberal progressive city to begin with and this neighborhood is the most liberal most progressive neighborhood in the most liberal most progressive city. It's ultra. Mount Airy is founded on this belief of being open minded and being tolerant, accepting of others. People in this neighborhood are very socially conscious, socially active, they care about political issues, humanitarian issues and along with that a lot of these other ideas come into play such as locally grown food, that grows out of social awareness and environmental concerns.
—Ron Murphy

Mount Airy is the setting of my research project and the first aim of this chapter is simply to provide some context. As Sidney Mintz (1985) argued long ago, consumption decisions are far less interesting than the constraints under which they are made, and in this chapter I describe the food environment to give a sense of what is available here and at what cost. I also offer a description of dominant local norms around food and parenting that guide my subjects’ beliefs and behaviors and a description of the institutions that helped establish these local norms. I begin by explaining Mount Airy’s strong appeal and why so many financially struggling families continue to try to make their home in the neighborhood despite the relatively high real estate prices, questionable quality of local public schools and an almost unattainably conscientious consumption ethos. It is significant that out of the fifteen families I initially recruited, three moved away during the course of the research, to areas (one to rural Indiana and two to Atlanta, GA) where life “would be easier” “less stressful”, “where we can relax”. The reasons the
remaining twelve sets of parents try to stick it out here are strongly related to class- and political identity and their socially reproductive goals².

**Green, diverse, progressive**

Mount Airy is a quiet neighborhood about 9 miles north west of Philadelphia’s center city. The name Mount Airy is derived from the country estate William Allen, a chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, built in the area in 1750 (Farmer Jarvis 2008; Perkiss 2014: 26). The neighborhood is elevated about 336 feet and offers scenic views, especially on the west side where it is bound by Wissahickon Valley park, an 1800 acre park that is part of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park system. Part of the park also stretches into the western part of the neighborhood, which is further characterized by broad, tree lined streets and colonial and turn-of-the-century stone homes as well as smaller row homes and apartment buildings. It’s quietude, greenery and vicinity to the park offer a respite from the city and are characteristics often mentioned by the parents in my study who discovered in Mount Airy a suitable place to raise their children.

In addition to the beauty of Mount Airy’s physical setting, the parents in my study, like many other Mount Airy residents, were also greatly attracted to the neighborhood for its diversity and progressive image. I must note that this image stems largely from the carefully constructed progressive reputation and demographic composition of West Mount Airy, which is 41% African-American, 54% white, and 5% Asian or Latino (cited in Perkiss 2014: 169) and has a particular liberal political history I discuss below. East Mount Airy is more than three quarters black, around 20% white and has an equally small percentage of Asian and Latino residents (City

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² The creative ways in which people reconcile their liberal politics, expensive, politically motivated consumption preferences with the diversity of the neighborhood and a lack of funds as well as the many dilemmas this gives rise to are discussed in subsequent chapters.
Data 2010). This side of Mount Airy is less affluent and less overtly liberal or “crunchy”.

Nevertheless, my informants come from both East and West Mount Airy and all invariably bring up the same highly valued neighborhood characteristics of diversity and progressivism when explaining their choice for the neighborhood, though all also agree that West Mount Airy is the more desirable place to live, if more expensive. According to as of yet unpublished ethnographic data by local sociologist Sarah Johnson (personal communication and cited in Perkiss 2014: 210), local housing patterns historically were and continue to be segregated along class lines with the largest homes on the largest lots spread out through West Mount Airy and smaller homes, row homes and apartment buildings more common in East Mount Airy and along the eastern edge of West Mount Airy. However, despite these significant differences between East and West Mount Airy in terms of affluence, demographic composition, political history, appearance and housing stock, in Philadelphia Mount Airy as a whole is an understanding that signals diversity and tolerance, liberalism, progressivism and social activism. With the exception of this chapter, I generally use the term in the same way as my informants do, using Mount Airy to refer to either East or West Mount Airy, but it is important to grasp the distinction.

According to the 2013 American Community Survey, Mount Airy as a whole (the neighborhood is congruent with zipcode 19119) is 62% African American, 30% white, and 5% Asian or Latino, with roughly 4% of residents self-identifying as multiracial (United States Census Bureau 2013). Many same sex couples live in the community, which also has a large Jewish presence. Contributing to the area’s progressive political feel is the fact that many residents have advanced degrees, earning the neighborhood the nickname “PhD ghetto of

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3 This often-mentioned diversity of the neighborhood’s housing stock was not a key factor in the early integration efforts because the black families that were interested in Mount Airy were middle-class and upwardly mobile and interested in the more exclusive homes.
Hybrid (or other environmentally responsible cars with low emissions) are a common sight in Mount Airy, many of them adorned with bumper stickers promoting progressive goals and ideas such as “Coexist”, “Pro-family, pro-choice” or “Stop Bitching and Start a Revolution”. Political candidates endorsed with lawn signs are invariably Democrats (or Ralph Nader), in fact, the only mention of the GOP I ever encountered in the 6 years I have lived in the area was a bumper sticker that said “Republicans for Voldemort”.

The neighborhood’s progressive reputation stems in large part from West Mount Airy’s history of deliberate racial integration dating back to the years following WWII. In what follows I explain this aspect of the neighborhood’s history and lasting image of tolerance and inclusivity in some detail, for there are strong parallels between this history and image and current local politicized food and parenting practices that guide and constrain the families in my study. Furthermore, I have discovered that while Mount Airy’s reputation and diversity is a great source of pride for the parents in my study, it also creates dilemmas for these white middle-class parents who want to simultaneously distinguish from as well as ideologically align with local families from different socio-economic groups, as I will explain.

West Mount Airy is nationally known for being one of only a handful of American neighborhoods\(^4\) to successfully resist white flight and common discriminatory techniques in the real estate market during the postwar residential crisis which led to widespread racial segregation in many cities in the north including Philadelphia (City Data 2009). During this time, when housing was scarce after a dramatic decline in new construction during the Great Depression and WWII, many blacks, encouraged by legal reforms, the New Deal and other wartime economic opportunities moved to America’s cities. “In Philadelphia, the black population swelled, from

\(^4\) Oak Park, Chicago and Shaker Heights in Cleveland are other examples (Cashin 2004: 44, Perkiss 2014: 26)
nearly 251,000 in 1940 to more than 376,000 in 1950” (Perkiss 2014: 23) and here as in other cities in the country, this development was often met with white hostility and fear. Real estate agents and lenders capitalized upon these fears of instability by “blockbusting” or encouraging white home owners to quickly sell at first sign of a neighborhood’s “turning”, often undervaluing the original sales and then marking up prices for the prospective black home buyers.

In West Mount Airy, a small, activist, interracial group of members from four different local religious organizations got together in 1953 to devise strategies aimed at stemming the tide of white flight. Where elsewhere other middle-class white homeowners with the means to buy a house in the newly constructed suburbs fled the city (Jackson 1985; Hayden 2004; Fishman 1989), this group of local homeowners decided to try to integrate the black newcomers into the neighborhood. The initiatives initiated by this alliance of religious institutions, officially called the Church Community Relations Council, to build “acquaintance and understanding along group and color lines” (Perkiss 2014: 35) were eventually taken over by a secular community organization called West Mount Airy Neighbors (WMAN) which is still operational and to this day organizes intentionally racially integrated playgroups and community events. A neighbor and former WMAN president discussed some of the techniques they used to try to integrate the neighborhood at the time:

They had tactics. They successfully abolished the practice of putting up “sold” signs, for this sent up a red flag to the rest of the neighborhood and could lead to white flight. And if a house in a mostly-white part of the neighborhood went on the market with a [racially restrictive] covenant attached to the deed, a white couple would buy the house but then quickly resell to a black family with a new deed.

In the popular media (Funderberg 2005; 2006; Dyan 2004) and in the local imagination, these efforts have often been and still are interpreted as the principled stance of a group of moral people against racism and social injustice. However, local historians and other academics have
pointed out that the historic integration efforts were also materially motivated and aimed at preserving the economic vitality of the neighborhood and with that the value of these activists’ homes (Cashin 2004; Sugrue 2008; Perkiss 2014). White flight could force many house sales in a short time at deflated prices and greatly undermine the economic standing and stability of the neighborhood. Making sold signs illegal worked to manage or delay the panic response of the neighborhood’s white homeowners and the buying and reselling tactic allowed white residents to personally get to know and “vet” the black newcomers, to see if they were equally invested in maintaining the value of their home and neighborhood, which they were⁵. The first black families who sought to move into Mount Airy in the 1950’s were well educated, middle class and upwardly mobile. To them, integration into a safe white neighborhood was interesting precisely because it offered the economic stability and opportunities that black neighborhoods did not and while many blacks may have been inspired by the idea of racial justice, the decision to buy a home in Mount Airy was therefore often an economic one (Cashin 2004; Perkiss 2014)⁶.

The high professional status of the black families that moved in was key to the success of interracial living in Mount Airy because it allowed black and white integrationists alike to largely ignore the difficult issue of staggering socioeconomic inequalities between white and black populations in the rest of the city and country. The homogeneity of the economic status of the integrationists, the classist nature of their integration project and the ultimately limited scope of their liberal politics first came under attack by members of Philadelphia’s civil rights

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⁵ Such tactics also worked to indebted these new black families to the white neighbors who facilitated their move into the neighborhood.

⁶ More than one of the more affluent white subjects in my study, while generally highly educated, seemed utterly perplexed by this black pragmatic or opportunistic interest in racial integration and conceptually struggled with the idea that their black neighbors might be disinterested in racial integration as a democratic principle but are simply looking for equal opportunities. Wealth and where in the neighborhood subjects live has a lot to do with their understanding of integration, as I’ll explain later.
movement during the 1960’s and remains the critique of many on the political left with regard to the idea of integration based on race alone in general. It is well articulated in a 1998 edition of the Nation specifically dedicated to the limits of a narrow focus on race in integration efforts: “...the left, in my opinion, should resist a liberal conception of integration that merely promotes assimilation and celebrates diversity without demanding a radical transformation in the relations of power...” (Kelley 1998) and Eric Foner and Randall Kennedy state that: “We do not believe that the left should cede the language of integration to conservatives or to those who understand race relations as a psychodrama rather than a system of unequal access to economic resources and political power” (1998).

Despite these critiques from the civil rights movement and the academic left, the local narrative of Mount Airy as a successfully integrated community is tenacious and continues to dominate the local white imagination. To many of my neighbors, living in Mount Airy is great because it offers all the conveniences, safety and greenery of the suburbs while allowing them to retain their “liberal ethos of urbanity” (Perkiss 2014: 59) and cosmopolitan culture. Perkiss, who is a native Mount Airy resident and historian who recently published her dissertation on the history of the integration effort, ascribes this in part to a successful marketing campaign that WMAN undertook as part of their attempt to stabilize the area and to prevent white flight. “In an era when the American ideal was quickly becoming synonymous with a suburban utopia”, she writes, “WMAN set out to sell the integrated community by recasting urbanity as a beacon for middle-class liberalism” (2014: 59).

Mount Airy’s deliberately constructed and marketed liberal image in turn also attracted and continues to attract educated, middle-class residents from other minority groups, whose presence contributes to and reinforces this local image of diversity, tolerance, and progressivism.
For example, from the 1960’s onward the area became a popular place to live for same-sex couples, especially lesbians. They, too, were attracted by the neighborhood’s safety, quietude and greenery as well as by local feminist experiments in collective childcare and cooperative housing. The influx of leftist Jewish residents began with the 1982 relocation of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College of Philadelphia (RCC) from the Temple University campus to Wyncote, a suburb just north of Mount Airy (Perkiss 2014). Reconstructionist Judaism, a modern American Jewish movement, is based on the idea that Judaism should be situated in the contemporary world, grounded in contemporary social and cultural values and socially engaged (Sarna 2005). Several of the college’s influential progressive rabbis, staff and other Jewish leaders associated with the RCC settled in Mount Airy, attracted by its proximity to the college, its quietude, which makes it suitable for a contemplative life and, again, its carefully marketed image of racial tolerance which fit their progressive political identity and concerns. Students wanting to live closely to their faculty soon followed and this thus led to the establishment of the large community of erudite, progressive Jews in the neighborhood who are socially engaged, today especially with environmental issues (hence the hybrid cars).

These additional groups set the political tone and contribute significantly to Mount Airy’s “crunchy”, socially activist image that is so attractive to the parents in my study, many of whom specifically mention the diversity and “realness” of Mount Airy as great assets that compare favorably to the “bubble” that the Philadelphia suburbs constitute even though the latter may in some instances be cheaper places to live and have better public school systems. It is considered especially valuable as an environment in which to raise the next generation, for many parents want their kids to be exposed to progressive ideals. Mount Airy offered a good solution to parents who self-identify as urbanites, value diversity and are politically progressive but who
wanted to raise their children in a place where they could run around in a yard and safely ride a bike through the neighborhood. As Ted explains his and his wife’s choice for Mount Airy:

We wanted a house and a yard and a driveway. We wanted to live in city proper, we kind of viewed ourselves as people who would live in the city proper. Mount Airy is a very diverse and integrated community I think, unusually so and that was something that was attractive to us. We liked the feel... we didn’t want to raise our kids in a sheltered life. Even going to a private Quaker school here I feel they are exposed to a greater variety of types of people than they would have in public school in Wyndmoor (the closest suburb), which is like all of 3 blocks from us. I want them to have a realistic view of the world and what it is made up of. To be able to interact with different types of people and not be frightened of different types of people.

Another father, Reese, explicitly states that he deems the liberal environment of Mount Airy beneficial for his children:

We moved here for these reasons: Mount Airy is a liberal community and it’s a god-dammed liberal community. It's a dig-in-your-heels liberal community. Really. I don't really feel that way myself but I want my kids to grow up around that. And because it’s diverse. It has many different kinds of housing stock. You can live in an apartment in Mount Airy, you can live in a row home, you can live on a half acre or quarter acre 5000 square foot detached house lot. I met some really committed individuals at a block party recently. They are in their 70's and I met this gentleman and had a lot of respect for this older man. Then the host started telling me that when he and his wife moved in they were living communal style. I didn't ask what communal meant, we don't need to go there. But there were two other couples in that house who had since moved and became doctors.

And that speaks to the political history of Mount Airy: very liberal but highly educated with the resources to become doctors.

**Performative politics**

In all, Mount Airy’s postwar community efforts towards racial integration were rare in the nation and, thanks to powerful narrative construction on the part of key local community organizations, well known. And while these historic integration efforts attracted and continue to attract many progressively minded people including the majority of my informants and continue to be a source of pride, the narrative also allowed and continues to allow neighborhood residents
to ignore the fact that the integration project was inherently classist, organized by and for the benefit of educated, upwardly mobile, successful professional white, black, and later also gay and Jewish, families. Perkiss also ultimately concludes that: “The Council’s vision of interracial living was, in a sense, performative, an outward manifestation of both economic status and liberal politics” (Perkiss 2014: 51). I argue that this is still true today and still, like in the sixties, particularly in less diverse West Mount Airy.

Mount Airy’s performative politics are a good example of the kind of de-politicized, consensual politics thinkers like Swyngedouw (2011), Lacoue-Labarthe (1997), Rancière (2001) and others have critiqued. For living here allows parents to raise children with the political ideal and philosophy of urban diversity, but in a largely socioeconomically homogeneous environment, without being confronted with the more marginalized groups of people and challenges that accompany life in many other “diverse” parts of Philadelphia (including East Mount Airy). I also argue that Mount Airy residents have liberal politics on various other issues (such as food) in addition to the politics of integration that are similarly performative and post-political in nature and which are manifestations of consensual progressive ideals and socioeconomic status at the same time. These performative progressive ideals continue to make it possible for many (West) Mount Airy residents to retain a politically liberal urban identity while ignoring the issue of class and inequality and avoiding confrontation with any “real” political antagonism.

Not surprisingly, class, and in particular the class-based exclusivity of living in progressive (West) Mount Airy, is not something locals tend to bring up. Partially this is connected to the difficulty of discussing class in the United States in general (Ortner 1991; 2003; 2006) but this discussion is especially difficult in the local context because the idea of class
privilege is not compatible with Mount Airy’s liberal post-politics that profess tolerance and inclusion. There is also no established neighborhood history or protocol for discussing class differentiation, and class privilege is further obscured by a strong local norm of non-conspicuousness. As one of my informants put it: “Class identity in this country is so under the radar, it is so not a way of identifying. But it’s even worse here because this is an anti-conspicuous consumption neighborhood. That is what makes it different.” Perkiss, by citing a 1979 quote from Philadelphia Inquirer staff writer Howard Shapiro echoes the same common sentiment: “If neighboring Chestnut Hill is home for the well-to-do, then West Mount Airy is the home of those who could be and, in many ways are, but choose to live differently.” A participating mother, Cindy Murray, explained:

“Where we used to live, in Northern Virginia near DC, it was more about keeping up with the Joneses.”

Jeff (her husband): “You mean pretentious.”

Cindy: “Yes. I felt I had to go to the grocery story in high heels. And I was waiting for Jeff to buy me a David Yurman ring. I was like, where is my David Yurman? Now I no longer care. I care more about the kind of people I am around now than about jewelry. The crunchiness of Mount Airy makes it ok to have fewer things, it doesn’t threaten our class identity as much here.”

While all my informants agree that in the Mount Airy context, flaunting expensive jewelry would be in poor taste, there are other ways in which socioeconomic status is expressed and performed, often precisely with certain politically liberal ideas, goals, behaviors or purchases, many of which require vast resources of time, money or expertise. Place of residence within the neighborhood is a case in point. For the historically most politically active, most racially integrated pocket of West Mount Airy also just so happens to be the most prestigious
place to live in Mount Airy. Here, we tend to find no ostentatious jewelry, cars, fur coats or other obvious luxury items but many of the homes and lots are large and more expensive than in other parts of the area. West Mount Airy is also greener, has more amenities and is more walkable than its Eastern counterpart and it is widely understood that this is the better place to live. Other examples of progressive practices that are high status at the same time are the many expensive local green initiatives such as the installation of solar panels or my neighbor’s $25,000 geothermal heat pump, which will utilize the deep earth’s stable 55 degree temperature to heat their home in winter and cool it in summer by running water pipes three–to four hundred feet down underneath their property and which will largely eliminate the use of fossil fuels for their heating and cooling needs. Another obvious example is the common choice to enroll children in one of the two selective, private Quaker schools in the area, whose curricula are guided by the six, traditionally liberal, core principles of peace, environmental stewardship, community, equality, integrity and simplicity but whose kindergarten tuitions start at $23,000.

In addition, and a central theme of this dissertation, common local food and parenting practices are often similarly informed by liberal, green or progressive political ideas while at the same requiring vast resources of time, money and expertise. Using cumbersome cloth diapers is an example of a green parenting practice that requires great resources of time (Buozis 2014), as is breastfeeding which is easier achieved by women who do not have to work or who have enough autonomy in their job to carve out time and space to pump. Choosing fair trade food is a “just” but expensive example, as is organic, wild-caught, free range, grass-fed or pastured food,

7 In fact, those living in West Mount Airy are among the wealthiest in the city of Philadelphia and the city of Philadelphia collects the largest percentage of it’s taxes from a few streets there (PhillyLists 2013).
8 West Mount Airy real estate is also “thinner” (Guthman 2011:88) than that in other parts of the neighborhood, which is primarily a function of average income but also of differences in walkability such as walkable access to parks or amenities.
or local food bought directly from a fairly compensated farmer or artisan. All these food choices signal a liberal or green political message (even though the food in question may be a product of the very system ill-informed consumers are claiming to reject\(^9\)) while at the same time expressing and reinforcing the high status of the chooser. Status is affirmed and promoted by demonstrating the ability to afford these foods, claimed knowledge about them, sophistication of taste as well as by the health and weight benefits of eating this way.

However, like a house in historically liberal West Mount Airy, eating “justly” remains out of reach for large swaths of the American population, including many Mount Airy residents and this is a fact many well-situated critical food consumers and even food activists tend to overlook (Guthman 2003; 2008; 2011). This is what I mean when I say that there are clear parallels between locally normative food practices and the historic integration efforts in the neighborhood: though both are inspired by liberal convictions and ideals, both in effect also work to affirm and reproduce class differentiation in the neighborhood in hidden, undiscussed ways. In the end, many aspects of Mount Airy’s racial–as well as food politics remain more performative than transformative in nature because they ignore issues of economic inequality and inadvertently wind up excluding large groups of residents. As Josh Hoffman put it:

\[9\] In fact, mainstream agri-business incorporates and appropriates much of the profit, and the values, of the alternative food sector. As Guthman (2004) reveals in her ethnography of Californian organic agriculture, which dominates the U.S. market for organic food, most organic food and vegetables are produced on large estates, using intensive methods and migrant wage-labor, are trucked across the continent and mostly sold in supermarkets where employees are underpaid. Pratt (2007: 285) also explains that: “The labels ‘organic’, ‘fair trade’ or ‘local’ do not in themselves reveal a great deal about the extent to which their producers have resisted or been absorbed by the corporate interests in the food industry, nor much about whether the values they embody are part of a radical or conservative political agenda.” My lower-budget informants who cannot afford even the organic supermarket food are much more aware of these critiques of organic, free trade or alternative food because they have looked more critically at this food to determine if it was worth their extra money.
I will occasionally refer to the other members of my neighborhood as neurotic faux hippies. There is a sort of performance aspect of their liberalism, of progressive politics, of having the right food politics and I’ve found that people come to their conclusions in an incredibly uninformed way.

Not coincidentally, Josh and his family live in East Mount Airy. As I have indicated, East Mount Airy is less picturesque, more black than integrated, more struggling than upwardly mobile and also technically not part of the locally exalted historic integration process, which took place in just a small pocket of West Mount Airy. It is also less expensive so not surprisingly, East Mount Airy is where most of the financially less well-off and struggling families in my study find themselves (several despite having grown up in West Mount Airy). To many of these parents, also self-proclaimed middle-class progressives who value the local political history, their place of residence is a bit of a mixed bag. While they consider East Mount Airy not as “nice” as other parts of the neighborhood and would prefer to live in West Mount Airy, the advantage of living on the East side, according to several of my respondents, is that it is more “real” and provides more of an actual experience of diversity, which serves to legitimize their urbanity, their politics and professed commitment to social justice. Many are eager to demonstrate a familiarity with and understanding of their more diverse neighbors and refer to them in positive ways. Josh: “I like the fact that when we moved here there was only one other white family on the block. When we then moved into the street we brought down the average income quite a bit. Haha.”

The experience of raising kids on a budget in close proximity to lower income black families make white middle-class consumption patterns stand out and begin to expose the class-based exclusivity and ultimately performative nature of many of Mount Airy’s progressive politics. Many of the more squeezed parents in my study share the view of the typical Mount Airy resident such as articulated by Josh above and are openly critical about the idealistic but
often clueless “white people well-intentioned nonsense” of their wealthier, more insulated neighbors. A good example of a white-centric, uninformed activist initiative was provided to me by the local Food Justice Committee, which I joined partially out of a desire to try to give back to the neighborhood I was studying and partially because I wanted to better understand local critical thinking about food and inequality. Though several deeply committed members did have very realistic understandings of local food inequalities and successfully executed several initiatives that enhanced access to and affordability of food in the local cooperative grocery store for low income residents, there were also several other sincere committee members who were significantly more detached from pressing problems in the local food environment. Their proposals included the idea to promote vegan soul food in 84% black, but poverty-stricken neighboring Germantown (Metropolis 2011; Citydata 2014) and the mind-boggling initiative to award homeless graduates of a culinary training program in a nearby shelter with kitchen supplies such as frying pans and a slow cooker, which they, in the absence of a home and a kitchen, have painfully little use for.

The generally less affluent, younger neighborhood residents who joined my study, many from East Mount Airy, are much less likely to make mistakes like these. Because an advantage of being exposed to greater socioeconomic diversity is that it helps develop an awareness and vocabulary for discussing difference including class difference that has been missing from much of the local activist political discourse. One of them, Donna, who is not struggling financially but who lives in East Mount Airy and works as a teacher in a low-income school district is actively engaged in hands-on service project organized by a network of local churches to provide homeless families with temporary shelter and home-cooked meals. She described other
volunteers, “people with all the right politics”, as out of touch with the population they are motivated to help:

I got mad at somebody who said: “I’m going to give them some other things, I am going to expose them to some variety.” And I said: “No, that is not ok, they don’t like that. Cook what they want. And what they want is baked pasta and garlic bread and maybe they’ll eat some salad. You don’t bring them couscous. They don’t want it. It is disrespectful to people.

At the same time, more truly integrated living in a part of the neighborhood that is not only racially, but also socioeconomically diverse including low income is also considerably more complicated. For daily life in East Mount Airy is accompanied by a much greater variation in behaviors, norms and practices, not all of which are in alliance with the goals and priorities these white liberal middle-class parents have set for themselves and their children. And while many East Mount Airy parents aim to distinguish from their more sheltered West Mount Airy neighbors with a truer embrace of diversity, they have no intention to personally embrace the behaviors, norms and practices of their low income black neighbors, either. Several examples of this emerged during the course of the study, for it is often around food and parenting norms and practices that such class differences are expressed and reproduced. These create special dilemmas for parents, because children are often very aware of differences in food and parenting styles, which then demand a response or explanation that parents feel must simultaneously instill a tolerance of and respect for their neighbors, in accordance with their liberal politics, as well as a subtle message of differentiation. The contradictions between parents’ attempts to preserve and reproduce middle-class status in a situation of financial stress, and the personal goals of tolerance and inclusion at times lead to uncomfortable or difficult parenting moments in the supermarket, public school or playground, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters.
The Mount Airy food environment and Weavers Way Co-op

Mount Airy’s food environment is diverse: a reflection of the people who live there. It is easy to find both conventional as well as more expensive alternative food in the area, in stores and in restaurants. There is one conventional grocery store in Mount Airy itself, on Germantown Avenue, which constitutes the dividing line between East and West Mount Airy. It is easily accessible by car and also by bus. There are several other conventional grocery stores in nearby surrounding neighborhoods, as well as a popular produce wholesaler many of my informants rely on for discounted conventional produce. Convenience stores abound though there are no fast food chain restaurants in Mount Airy itself. Local, organic, natural food is available at a small seasonal farmer’s market in Mount Airy, through the neighborhood’s various Community-Supported-Agriculture groups and at the iconic cooperatively owned grocery store Weaver’s Way Co-op, which is open to the public and which I will describe in detail below.

Local restaurants include a mix of classically urban pizza parlors, Philly cheese steak joints, Chinese take out windows, diners and Irish pubs, and more alternative restaurants that aim to serve local, organic, artisanal food in as eco-friendly a way a restaurant can. The most popular example is probably the restaurant Earth, Bread and Brewery, which serves creative flatbreads, soups and salads using local, often organic produce and sustainably raised meats, brews their own beer in-house, makes their own natural sodas and serves it all in a décor of salvaged architectural materials. Several other restaurants, too, actively try to appeal to the progressive middle- and upper middle-class Mount Airy resident by offering alternative, natural, wholesome food and adopting eco-friendly practices, in so doing both expressing and confirming some of the local class-based food norms and contributing to Mount Airy’s environmentally and politically conscious image and feel. Several of my informants who have adopted strict food
rules out of health, political and/or environmental concerns, say to appreciate these local restaurants:

Neri: Does it help, living in Mount Airy?
Michelle: Yes. People are more understanding. The restaurants, for example Earth Bread, all of their meat fits our category, they source it, it makes it easier going there because more options are open. Usually when I go out to a restaurant the things I can eat are limited.

This particular restaurant however, serves flatbread (pizza), which does not cost that much to make, allowing the price of a meal there to stay fairly low, which appeals to many local residents.

Other Mount Airy restaurants that have adopted similar green and healthful practices but serve higher-priced food items have a harder time staying in business. An interview with one of these local restaurant owners again revealed that some of the idealism and progressivism so often proclaimed by Mount Airy residents may obscure more fundamental material concerns and also points to the fact that eating out at independently owned, sustainable restaurants constitutes a financial stretch for many principled Mount Airy residents, which reaffirms local class distinctions. Andrew Portman, who closed his restaurant a year after I interviewed him, explained some of his restaurant’s “green” practices, which he initially thought would help bring in conscientious Mount Airy customers who care about their health and that of the environment but ultimately came to the conclusion that his prices trumped any of his efforts in this regard. I quote him here at length because he brings up the image of the neighborhood and the problem with the price and exclusivity of alternative food which, paired with the financial constraints of his customers causes dilemmas for him and his clientele:

Neri: How did being in Mount Airy influence you and the type of restaurant you would open?
Andrew: I grew up in Mount Airy so knowing the neighborhood and the underlying eco-or political philosophy certainly influenced how hard we went towards trying to be eco-friendly. Sourcing local food is kind of a fad right now but we are fortunate in Pennsylvania to have farms, just a couple of hours away, we have ranches, just a couple of hours away. All our beef comes from Pennsylvania and it’s grass-fed. And we try to be environmentally friendly. We compost. All the table scraps are composted. We recycle every little piece of paper and cardboard, very little goes into the trash. Most of our light bulbs are CFL, we have a very efficient dishwasher. We do all those things. We had these ideas, these principles before we opened up the restaurant, but certainly we felt the restaurant would do better if we could get the word out that we would do these things to try to lessen our impact on the environment. It’s on our website. There is a little thing on the door that says we use Philly compost. It’s on our menu, it says we use grass fed beef from Pennsylvania. And people ask and we can tell them. I don’t know how much that influenced where people eat in Mount Airy though. It might be a very small segment of the population. I think there is a very vocal, activist, crunchy minority here in Mount Airy that does influence the local culture but they don’t actually go out and spend the money to back up that influence. When they do go out and spend that money they are sometimes shocked that things in general aren’t more towards what they picture it should be.

I have learned that people are ultimately most interested in a good meal at a fair price. A small segment of the population is very vocal about these kinds of eco-things but the majority of people in Mount Airy just want a nice neighborhood they want a nice block. Yeah so you’re responsible with your trash, you recycle and you frequent the local businesses and do all that but... And as a business owner you are responding to the people who are coming to your store and so this vocal crunchy minority is not something you’re targeting. And when they do come, they want an entirely separate gluten-free menu. I swear to god. They want an entire menu devoted to gluten free items. They want things for less money. When they look at the wine list they are shocked at the prices of the wine. In addition to the gluten free, there is a lot of vegetarians. And also it seems to me an increasing number of vegans. It is hard for vegans to go out to eat unless it is a vegetarian vegan restaurant. I am more sympathetic to the vegans, because it is a life style choice, than to the gluten free who are basically trying to make their own unfounded assumptions somebody else’s problem and then refuse to pay for it.

In sum, this local restaurant owner got frustrated by locals who, at least theoretically, want to eat well, healthily (which can mean different things to different people) and sustainably in an independent local business owned by a Mount Airy native, yet who ultimately can’t afford the prices of his more difficult to procure menu items. And the Mount Airy residents who do have the spending power to eat at his restaurant did not come often enough to sustain his business, perhaps because not everybody wants to actually put their money where their mouth is,
as he suggests. Another contributing factor to the folding of the restaurant may have been the fact that it was not particularly child-friendly, which is a real problem in a neighborhood full of young families where the intensive parenting style is so prevalent and ingrain... Nonetheless, the presence of restaurants like these does mean that in Mount Airy, the choice for alternative food is not restrained by availability or physical access, works to express and affirm local food norms and with that contributes to the reproduction of the “green”, progressive image of the neighborhood.

The institution that plays the biggest role in the shaping of these local food norms and broader neighborhood image is Weaver’s Way Co-op. The Co-op is a small grocery store, cooperatively owned but open to the public and the main local source of (pricy) alternative food. It is closely tied to Mount Airy’s political history, continues to place a strong mark on the neighborhood’s image and feel and, I argue, offers Mount Airy residents with resources an important place and opportunity for the performance of their liberal politics and class status. Consequently, the ambivalence many of the parents in my study experience about their more affluent white middle-class neighbors and their performative politics including food practices can be illustrated with a discussion of common attitudes towards Weaver’s Way Co-op, West.

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10 Earth, Bread and Brewery, by contrast, is always packed with children, who generally like pizza and are expressly catered to with other child-friendly menu items, as well as crayons and coloring pages, picture books, child-friendly cups and relatively fast service. The restaurant is also loud, which appears to reduce parent’s urge to hush their children. However, some parents took its child-friendliness a step too far, allowing their kids to run around the restaurant, which resulted in a few incidences where staff tripped over underfoot children. The owners then resorted to handing parents with small children a brief note upon their entering the restaurant, asking them to please keep their children in their seat to help prevent additional accidents and to keep everybody safe. This, in turn, erupted into a heated controversy on the Mount Airy Parents Network list serve with many parents expressing their outrage at what they considered a hugely offensive step on the part of the restaurant’s owners (though they remain in business with tons of kids in attendance).
For many other neighborhood residents, too, the Co-op inspires strong opinions and critiques that I have come to view as reflective of a person’s class position in the neighborhood.

The Weaver’s Way Food Cooperative opened in January 1973 on 555 Carpenter Lane in West Mount Airy. In an interview, buying manager Norman Weiss, who has worked for the Co-op since its inception, explained that it started as an offshoot of a local buying club which primary purpose at the time was simply to bring more affordable food to the neighborhood. The founder, Jules Timmerman, went around the neighborhood to recruit people to join the club:

He went door to door so whomever answered the door, he recruited. Once it really became a Co-op and got a board and stuff then it became more of a community organization. But not with food idealism. With socialist ideals. A lot of the initial members were ex-socialists, they were some of the same people that started Beachcombers club [a cooperative swim club 14 miles north of Mount Airy] as well as other cooperative initiatives that were connected. Some on our board were on the board of other Co-ops across the country, we had a board member from the Berkeley Co-op. Some of our board members were also very involved with the PTA of the Henry school across the street. So it was a civic thing. A culture of being community oriented and food plays a big role in that.

The Co-op grew out of the culture of post-1960’s activism and its distrust or dislike of anti-socialist government intervention in community affairs and connected to the spirit of the activist, cooperative practices associated with Mount Airy’s mid-century integration efforts (Perkiss 2014). As Norman pointed out above, it was not the only or the first cooperative initiative in the neighborhood. In addition to the cooperative swim club, other examples included co-housing communities, a cooperative nursery school, a cooperative learning center for children and adults called The Mount Airy Learning Tree, a cooperative parent-run babysitting cooperative as well as a parent-run outdoor summer camp for toddlers. The cooperative spirit seems to have never left Mount Airy for all of these organizations are still operating today and a brand-new co-housing community of 20 families is in planning stage. During an interview,
Weaver’s Way former General Manager also mentioned that: “Some of the old-time socialist sentiment is still alive and I think some of the young people also really embrace the whole thing of sharing.” Another example of a successful cooperative-like initiative in Mount Airy that is new is a children’s consignment store across the street from the Co-op where parents can resell clothes their children outgrew called The Nesting House. Many Mount Airy parents of young children use it as a money-saving and environmentally friendly way to update their growing children’s wardrobes. It has the added effect of creating connections and a degree of intimacy among neighborhood residents, which I experienced when I spotted the boots my own son outgrew in the house of one of my informants.\(^\text{11}\)

The seventies were popular times for Co-ops all around the country (Cox 1994; Knupfer 2013) and Weaver’s Way quickly became a success. Membership grew quickly: eight years after it first opened its doors, the Co-op had two thousand registered members and hundreds of additional applications to process (Perkiss 2014: 149). Unlike the majority of other Co-ops however, Weaver’s Way has lasted and continues to do well. Some estimate that of the hundreds of Co-ops that were founded nationwide in the seventies, only 16 are still operating today, of which Weavers Way is a thriving example. A second Weaver’s Way store opened in neighboring Chestnut Hill in 2012, as well as two beauty and wellness stores, a pet store and the organization is in the planning stages for opening a store in a third location. Weaver’s Way also operates two farms in the surrounding area, producing food for sale at farmers’ markets, the Co-ops and a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), supporting five full time farmers during the growing season and offering hands-on farming experience to the students of Philadelphia’s Saul Agricultural High School, on whose grounds the second farm is located. Weaver’s Way employs

\(^{11}\) I discuss additional formal and informal sharing networks in subsequent chapters.
around 160 people, its membership is currently up to 5,400 households and annual sales are around $20 million.

Both in terms of its labor practices as well as the food it stocks, the Co-op can be considered responsible and politically liberal. The $10.50 starting wage for an hourly worker is well above the Pennsylvania minimum wage of $7.50 and Weaver’s Way employees receive health benefits and vacation time. The food on the shelves is vetted by the staff, and many of the parents I spoke with expressed a real trust in these people’s judgment, often assuming that “if it is for sale at the Co-op, it must be good”. The organization strives to sell as much locally produced food as it can source, in an attempt to support local communities, artisans, farmers and agricultural workers as well as the students of Saul Agricultural High School. They also aim to stock the store with sustainably produced food, much of it organic or low-spray, and produced by fairly compensated workers with minimal cruelty to animals. In addition, Weaver’s Way does some modest advocacy work in the city of Philadelphia and state of Pennsylvania. As the Co-op’s General Manager, who recently left the organization after 11 years to head up Philadelphia’s biggest food bank, explained:

We would sign on for things. When it came to pay scale in the city, we were in favor of that and voted for that. When it came to assigning the 40,000 empty lots that are here in Philadelphia, to have them more easily transferred to people’s hands so they could use them to farm on, at least some of them, that is something we signed on to and went to city council for that. We advocated for getting rid of plastic bags. For labor issues such as vacation time and sick time. Stupid stuff that should be a national right. So that was some of the basic stuff that was in line with how we run the business. The SNAP benefits, when they were being cut in Pennsylvania, we signed onto that but we only wrote a letter. We should have done more by being arrested and protesting but we did not do that. We talked about it.

While all of my informants and many of my neighbors tend to agree with the Co-op’s general principles and initiatives and appreciate the quality food, feelings about the Co-op vary, for as much as the organization strives to be a community institution, it is also divisive in
revealing ways. The most significant and obvious way in which the Co-op divides is by its prices, which are high. Despite the fact that Weaver’s Way founding motivation was to bring more affordable food to Mount Airy, the organization’s current goals of selling alternative, sustainably raised food, offering generous labor conditions and expanding the business are all reflected in the prices, which tend to be comparable to the prices at Whole Foods Market and in some cases slightly higher because the Co-op cannot take advantage of the economies of scale the way the Whole Foods enterprise can. The high prices exclude many Mount Airy residents including many of my informants who are living on relatively low incomes and who are financially dependent on cheaper food.

The Co-op is also locally divisive in a more subtle, cultural way. For the experience of shopping at the Co-op is different from shopping in a conventional grocery store and customers need a degree of insider status, specific knowledge and a certain attitude or cultural sensibility to successfully navigate the store. A familiarity with alternative health-food-store type food is key, as is the shelving of conventional customer service expectations. Co-op customers (and their children) must also be able to appear comfortable with a relatively greater number of unconventional or alternative people than you’d find in an average grocery store, such as the quilt-wearing truck driver for example and they need to know how to shop. The spatial organization and unwritten rules for moving through the store are unconventional in several ways and insider status is probably best revealed and affirmed by how familiar and comfortable a person seems to be with the layout and rules.

Despite being recently remodeled, the Mount Airy Weavers Way location is still small and cramped and on a typical weekday there will be paid employees as well as working members at work, stocking shelves in the middle of the day, which makes navigating the store, especially
with a cart, difficult. Most customers use a shopping basket, though only the insiders observe the unwritten rule that it be placed on the counter that runs along the length of the store and that people walk back and forth from the shelves to their basket with their purchases rather than carrying it with them through the store like in a conventional store. Instead of a basket, customers can also choose to place their items in a slightly larger plastic shopping box they can slide on the counter. The often-sandy, unwaxed produce is stocked unconventionally in wooden crates and cardboard boxes often with hand-written labels and much of the product is sold in bulk, upstairs on the second floor where it is hard to find. If you would not know it was there you would be unlikely to discover the wall of containers of bulk grains, nuts, dried fruit and legumes that customers can bag and label themselves. Upstairs are also honey and olive oil dispensers, as well as a grinder for making your own peanut butter, all of which require some user knowledge.

Checkout is different, too: there are four cash registers, which are lined up on a counter next to one another. Customers ready for checkout line up in one line, which snakes around the corner and make their way to the next available cashier when he or she calls out for the “next shopper!” The Co-op does not provide plastic shopping bags and though paper bags are sold for 15 cents a piece, shoppers are really expected to bring their own shopping bags, which the insiders do. Alternatively, shoppers may use one of the many free cardboard boxes that are thrown on top of the shelving throughout the store. Pinch-style tools are provided for grabbing boxes from the shelves and you frequently see customers jumping up with these tools in their hands, trying to grab or knock a box off the shelf and boxes falling down in the middle of the isles. Cashiers do not bag groceries, in the cooperative spirit, shoppers are expected to do this themselves though this is not explained or indicated anywhere.
Co-op shopping proficiency is a sign of insider status, which in turn is connected to a person’s membership status. There are four types or levels of Co-op membership status: At the bottom are non-members who simply use the Co-op to shop for food but whom are not formally committed to the organization. Next to them are non-working Co-op members who pay $30 in annual dues, may run and vote in board elections, receive an annual patronage rebate, a monthly newsletter and receive small discounts on a few items. Top insiders are working members who also pay $30 annual dues and may run and vote in board elections, receive an annual patronage rebate, a monthly newsletter and who, on top of that, do 6 hours of Co-op work each year stocking, prepping, unloading, doing committee work or other things in exchange for a 5% discount on all store products. At the very top are long-term working members, who have been involved with the Co-op since its inception and who know the ins and outs of the organization intimately.

Membership status is publicly revealed by the cashiers who ask each shopper for their member number before ringing up their purchases. If you do not have a number, this exchange signals and affirms your outsider status for it makes plain that you are not a member. If you have a long number, 4 digits or more, or are having a difficult time remembering your member number, this signals low insider status for it means you are a recent member. Highest insider status goes to those with the shortest member numbers and who tend to mention it to the cashier without needing to be asked, for this signals long-term membership. Co-op member numbers are not recycled so the lower a person’s member number is, the longer this person has been a Co-op member.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} During Weaver’s Way’s meetings, members with low numbers invariably state their member number as part of introducing themselves, which then typically elicits applause from the rest of the group.
While anybody with $30 is welcome to join the Co-op, becoming a member does not make sense for all Co-op users because membership requires larger resources of money in other ways as well as time. While non-members pay the highest store prices, Co-op members tend to spend more on groceries overall because their membership commits them to shop at the Co-op regularly, which, even with the 5% discount for working members is still significantly more expensive than other supermarkets. Furthermore, because the store does not have a parking lot and parking nearby is difficult, frequent Co-op shopping is much more conducive to those who live within walking distance of the store in in higher-priced West Mount Airy (living within walking distance of the Co-op is a highly prized real estate characteristic that receives special mention in local housing listings). Because the store is so small and has no parking, big shopping trips are highly impractical and the Co-op is much more conducive to the European-style, frequent, small shopping trips few Americans have time for anymore and makes more sense for members who live in the vicinity. The six hours a year that working members must dedicate to work in the Co-op may not sound like much but can be a tough commitment to working parents of young children, or people working multiple jobs.

In all, Co-op membership— and insider status is to a large degree a function of class: shopping at the Co-op is expensive, a logistical commitment and an unconventional experience that requires resources of money, time as well as the confidence to face the store’s cultural idiosyncrasies. Shopping at the Co-op further suggests prime residential status, as well as a progressive political identity and critical understanding of the food system. This, in addition to the quality and healthfulness of most of the food, continues to be an important appeal of the Mount Airy Co-op even though in surveys, many customers have been vocal about the inconveniences of shopping there. These survey results were translated into an organization-wide
customer service training project and a different, more conventional store layout in the Chestnut Hill store location, which, in response and not surprisingly attracts a more racially and economically diverse clientele according to buying manager Norman Weiss:

The store in Chestnut Hill processes more food stamps than the Mount Airy store. We are not sure why but maybe there, it’s more accessible by bus, there are more people working up there. Another reason could be that here it’s a little more clubby, it’s an insiders club. That is the reputation the Mount Airy location has always had throughout the years, that it is an insiders club. I understand how it can appear that way. You have to know how to shop for example. Like no other store has shopping boxes where you slide it on the counter. You walk in and right away you think this is not how a normal store works. Not everybody is comfortable with that.

Nevertheless, while for some Mount Airy shoppers the opening of the Chestnut Hill location resolved some issues, many Mount Airy residents including many of my informants continue to feel excluded from the Co-op because of financial reasons, issues of accessibility, the stores’ singularity and lack of true diversity. As Jackie Dyer, whose Eritrean husband used to do most of their shopping and cooking, explained:

The Co-op is too expensive for us. And I could talk more about that. We both have a kind of conflicted relationship with the Co-op. I find the coop kind of elitist. Since my husband came here, when he first came here we were doing the work requirements and he actually did my parents work requirements, too so he was doing 3 shifts and was there a lot and he never felt comfortable there. He grew up in Ethiopia, which was a communist country and he always felt there was a communist culture at the Co-op because of the cooperative thing. And it is a little bit like that. Like, the spaghetti is always really thick and you don't have a lot of choices. Though it's not really about the choices but there is a culture to the Mount Airy Co-op. You got to know the drill or the routine or people look at you funny. It is definitely an insiders club. My parents live down the street from the Co-op and we did shop there when I was young. But the real reason we don't shop there is that it's just too expensive. Plus the cultural thing.

Other participants also brought up the elitism of the Co-op and of alternative food more generally, which is antithetical to its community and labor-oriented mission but a widespread sentiment among priced-out critical food consumers. As one of my interviewees, Sarah put it:
I am really concerned about the whole corporatization of food, how badly regulated that tends to be and around the world really. But I don’t think shopping at the Co-op makes that better, I think if anything that fuels it because it creates this elite food market that then allows the mass market to continue and I think we need to think of more creative ways to better control the corporatization of our food. And I know the good folks at the Co-op, there are activists there but what I worry about is the political economy of food and what the elitist food markets do to that. I think giving people the opportunity to opt out of the conventional food market leads to the situation where they then feel good about doing the right thing and then they are done. But no, you actually just made the commodity that you want to be more available to everyone more expensive by creating this elite market.

The exclusion of low-income neighborhood residents from the Co-op and its elitist food politics and consumption ethos is also the reason the long-time general manager stepped down last year:

I got a little burned out with the whole organic, natural, being as pure as we can. I said why can’t we have sugar? Why can’t we have chocolate chips from Hershey? They are less expensive. Some people might want to buy them. And staff said well we don’t want any non this and non that and I said how about 1 product and we put them way down on the shelf, by your ankles? But the staff didn’t want to do it. Some Co-ops do it but our staff didn’t want to do it. I just said, all right, do whatever you want. And that is when I started thinking maybe I have run my course.

In several ways, the Co-op is emblematic of the image of Mount Airy, which is one of the reasons I have described it here at length: like (West) Mount Airy, the Co-op is politically liberal and green and has a history of progressively minded community activism but it is high status and socio-economically exclusive at the same time. Many of my more squeezed, less insular informants and neighbors understand this well and are critical of this situation, a sentiment some express eloquently like Jackie and Sarah above. More often, this sentiment is expressed with a more defiant attitude, often mixed with humor, which takes aim at the tiring, politicized, environmentalist, “just” nature of shopping at the Co-op and the righteous Mount Airy lifestyle it exemplifies. Such as when one of my neighbors walked into the Co-op the other day asking a cashier, purposefully loud enough for everybody else to hear: “And where do you keep the
cigarettes these days? Upstairs?” Other parents in my study often qualify their explanations of their families’ eating or consumption habits with defiant add-ons that might be out of place in more typical suburban surroundings such as when Meghan Hoffman said: “My children get juice boxes to take to school. Fuck it.” Or Susan Peters who said: “We are middle-class Mount Airy through and through but I do use plastic. Sue me.” More affluent participants in the study, with the time and the resources to make consumption choices more in line with the exalted local norms don’t tend to say things like this and I have come to view opinions about and attitudes towards the Co-op and its advocated mode of shopping and eating as telling representations of a person’s financial reality, politics, place of residence in the neighborhood and thus class position.

Interestingly, though many of the more strapped participating parents in my study were critical of the Co-op’s prices and Mount Airy’s unaffordable consumption ethos in general, many despite having grown up in Mount Airy and regularly shopping at the Co-op as children, their defiant, humorous critique is about the extent of their protest. Parents overall would simply shrug off the fact that they cannot or no longer afford the Co-op or live in accordance to Mount Airy’s expensive high standards and instead focused their energies on devising their own strategies for eating well, healthily and ethically, using a time-consuming combination of highly selective conventional shopping and homesteading, as I will describe.

Their is a very different response than the response of an older generation of Mount Airy residents and Co-op members, many of whom have been extremely vocal in their protest against the increasingly high prices of the Co-op and its shifted mission from affordable to “just” food. These people, many of whom have been members since close to founding and thus have high insider status, wrote letters to the Co-op leadership and placed publications in the newsletter demanding explanations for and solutions to their economic exclusion from the Co-op. Their
objections led the general manager to hold a series of open “pricing meetings” during 2014 and 2015 to offer these disgruntled members a sounding board for their frustration, several of which I attended. These meetings, which at times became quite heated and uncomfortable, resulted in several price reduction initiatives: Co-op basics, which reduced prices on 100 basic grocery items such as milk, eggs and produce, a 10% price reduction program for people who can demonstrate to receive public assistance called Food For All, and Senior Discount Tuesdays, which grants all Co-op members 65 years and over a 10% store discount every Tuesday. Taken together, these initiatives seem to have satisfied the testy old membership; especially the Senior Tuesday program is popular (according to the current GM perhaps too popular and financially unsustainable which time will have to tell).

The appeal made by the older members was framed as an economic issue of middle-class squeezing, well explained by core member Mary Beth who opened the first pricing meeting with the following statement:

I want to make sure we all understand that this is a class issue. That it is really about the middle class. I have always considered myself middle class but I think I have fallen out of the middle class. I am a single woman, work for a non-profit, have progressive values and this is why I moved to Mount Airy. I care about equality, the environment, supporting farmers, but I can’t afford it. I have no money stashed away. I am on a fixed income. I live frugally and I cherry pick at the Co-op but I can’t afford to shop there. I can’t afford to be ethical!

However, while this also applies to the squeezed parents in my study, whose political opinions, life choices and financial situations are very similar to Mary Beth’s, they cannot take advantage of two out of the three new discount programs since they are not over 65 and are not squeezed enough to qualify for public assistance. They remain furthermore excluded because of their busy lives and lack of time as well as by their geographical location in the neighborhood that is not within a practical distance from the Co-op. The response by the Weavers Way leadership to
accommodate a particular fraction and not all of its priced-out middle-class customers, paired with my informants’ lack of time thus makes the parents in my study fall through the cracks in yet another way, though one that is locally specific.

This way, the Co-op pricing conflict brings to light another differentiation among middle-class Mount Airy residents in addition to the distinction between more affluent and more strapped middle-class families, namely the distinction between old and new middle-class households experiencing a squeeze. Interest in distinctions between old and new middle classes in various parts of the world has been growing in recent years (Fernandes 2006; Freeman 2012; Schielke 2012; Srivastava 2012; Zhang 2012) but these studies have typically posited the difference as a matter of difference in wealth and security between old and new members of the middle class. In the American context, scholarship has described both the distinction between financially stable, older middle-class Americans who were able to secure “the terms of the liberal welfare state defined in the United States by the New Deal” (Jefferson 2015: 311) as opposed to their younger middle-class counterparts, as well as, conversely, older middle-class Americans as less secure, who “try to maintain” while a wealthier new middle class taps the potential of the new financial economy (Heiman et al. 2012: 14). What I discovered here instead are two sets of struggling middle-class Americans: a younger group of parents who are significantly starved for time and an older group which has a little more disposable time and enjoys a few more accommodations, though again, some only in the local context.

Another way in which these two groups differ is in their political response and approach. Whereas the older middle-class Mount Airy guard publicly turned to the institution from which they felt excluded using traditional protesting tools like letter-writing and open forums, the younger generation, equally excluded from the Co-op’s good food and just way of eating, does
not feel compelled to advocate in this traditional political way. Instead, in order to eat (and feed) the way they want and think is right, this group has turned to their own forms of food production and the creative construction of community networks that help them meet these goals. To a large degree, this difference in response is simply an expression of the difference in significance the Co-op has for these two groups of people, but I also see it as an expression of the political climate in which either group came of age. For in contrast to the older generation, the younger parents who are the subject of this dissertation were raised in the seventies and eighties under a system of neoliberalism that moved the burden of economic security from the state onto the population and their behavior is in certain ways a classic neoliberal acceptance of their lack of collective rights and their personal responsibility for matters of health and well-being.

In the next two chapters, I explain how middle-class and upper middle-class parents of varying means manage to meet local alternative food—and intensive parenting norms on varying budgets. I describe how the most affluent parents tend to meet their personal responsibility for health and the reproduction of their and their family’s class status by spending money in the capitalist marketplace and I contrast that with the creative, community-building, but highly demanding and time-consuming initiatives of those on the smaller budgets. In the final chapter, I argue that the social networks strapped parents have actively constructed for the cost-lowering production and sharing of resources such as food, and which are organized largely outside of the capitalist marketplace, might conceivably be considered as socialist and political in spirit as the founding of the Co-op in 1973.
CHAPTER 4: MEETING LOCAL FOOD AND PARENTING NORMS: MOTHERS’ DILEMMAS, CONTRADICTIONS AND A THIRD SHIFT

While varying significantly in their ability to afford it, the Mount Airy parents participating in my study overwhelmingly favor local, organic and otherwise alternative food. Parents are environmentally and politically aware and very much prefer to buy food that is healthful, chemical-free, not mass-produced or processed and which supports local food producers as directly as possible (Pratt 2007). This food and conscious way of eating is, as I have described, strongly normative in the Mount Airy context and a strong marker of class including class-appropriate politics. Mothers in particular actively strive to avoid fast, processed or convenience food from conventional supermarkets or chain restaurants: this is the type of food that has been most implicated in America’s obesity crisis, and poses the greatest threat to the preservation of health and thinness, both of which have become embodied markers of higher class status in contemporary America.

However, while none of the children in my study are overweight or obese and only one mother could be considered to be overweight, thinness is not something women openly admit striving for. In fact, I would go so far as to say that in the local context, talking about being thin, about dieting or about body image issues with people outside of one’s closest personal circle is taboo. I ascribe this to the strongly leftist, feminist culture of this particular group. The women in my study are all educated in issues of gender inequality and women’s rights and recognize the historic lack of freedom women have had in choosing how to look (Bordo 1993). Openly caring more than a token amount about weight or appearance would contradict this political feminist stance and would send the wrong message to their daughters (and sons). However, at the same
time, the social context of Mount Airy does not allow for bigger bodies and privately, the majority of the mothers in my study do in fact watch their weight quite carefully.

Paradoxical is the simultaneous existence of another local food norm, which is to celebrate food and to periodically indulge in, even gorge on, non-healthy foods just for pleasure. Several food writers and social scientists writing about food have noted this simultaneous existence of two, seemingly contradictory major culinary discourses: that of restraint and indulgence, or of “selectivity and omnivorousness” (Naccarato and Lebesco: 2012: 11). While a lot of the local food is healthful and wholesome, there is no question that food is also enthusiastically celebrated in Mount Airy. There are local food festivals, popular food trucks offering decidedly un-healthy food and numerous good restaurants, bars and cafés. Omnivorousness or eating a variety of foods is also associated with middle or upper class status for only if resources are abundant can people afford to try new and unfamiliar things and risk wasting it (Tannahil 1973). The trick, of course, is to only occasionally indulge so as to preserve appropriate health and body size but while adults can cognitively switch back and forth between these two discourses, for children, especially young children, this can be very confusing.

Parents also fully subscribe to local intensive parenting norms. As I explained in Chapter 2, the intensive parenting norm can be characterized by an encouraging, empowering and permissive attitude towards children that is expensive and time consuming. Evidence of the intensive parenting norm is all around in Mount Airy: parents tend to talk, read and interact intensively with their children, they strive to enroll them in as many of the locally offered stimulating activities they can afford and encourage children to speak up and negotiate. This last point is well illustrated by the remarks of Bret, father of three-year old Louis, which he volunteered when I asked him about his family’s food routines:
We want to teach him to sit at the table and participate in the family dinner so our rule is no food after dinner. He can have dessert if he eats a good dinner but after that, we’re done for the night. But we’re not good at sticking with that because if he does want something extra after dinner I’ll say: “Convince me. Why should I let you have that?” And if he makes a good argument, I’ll give it to him.

In sum, the ideal Mount Airy mother must, among other things, eat and serve her family healthful, alternative, “just” food that tastes good and indulge in it and allow her agentive children to indulge in it, while at the same time ensuring that she and her family stay thin without dieting or appearing concerned about body size. In this chapter, I describe the various strategies parents, mostly mothers, use to try to comply with all of these local food and parenting norms at the same time. I argue that these strategies, which I understand to be undertaken by the middle class in attempts to fend off downward mobility both on the structural as well as symbolic level, together create a set of almost untenable contradictions for middle-class mothers, particularly in the realm of food and feeding and particularly for those on the most limited budget. I show how the biologically and socially reproductive task of feeding children fills mothers with anxiety and argue that for many of them the set of tasks involved in the feeding of children constitutes a “third shift”13 they carry out on top of their first two shifts of paid employment and household work outside of the kitchen.

The third shift involves research, shopping, cooking, feeding and cleaning up. It suggests that the socially reproductive work of feeding a family has become so complicated and time consuming that it warrants its own designation and can no longer be placed under the same denominator as cleaning and other housekeeping tasks. I must point out that technically, the only mothers in my study who work a third shift are those who have jobs outside of the home and who also carry the main responsibility for other household tasks. However, even for those who

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13 I thank Jeff Maskovsky for suggesting this term.
do not work outside of the home or who have partners who perform a fair share of household labor, the term is useful for it indicates quite well just how much work feeding the family has become and that it constitutes its own category of labor.

**Feeding middle-class children, instilling good habits**

The intensive parenting style that dominates among parents like the ones in my sample has received a lot of attention as well as critique from social scientists (Lareau 2003; Hays 1998; Davidson 2008; Katz 2008; Wrigley 1995). However, not many scholars have described the formidable contradictions this method creates for parents, usually mothers, in the realm of food and feeding. Children in Mount Airy not often hear the word “no” but are more likely to be negotiated with. Children are considered to be agentive, choosing consumers in their own right, their wishes and desires to be taken seriously and many mothers in my study consider a reliance on authoritative control to be disrespectful to their child. This means that many mothers also feel they cannot simply say “no” to children who ask for certain foods, as the above example from Bret illustrates. While there are advantages to being raised in this intensive way (Lareau 2011) it makes it harder for middle-class mothers to feed their children the healthy foods that have come to be associated with middle-class status and body norms because she can’t just tell the kids what to eat. Instead, children (as well as partners and other family members whose dietary habits may influence that of her children) must be influenced to *want* to eat this way so that they can be trusted to make their own appropriate consumption decisions. Would a mother decide to employ the more traditional, authoritative, directives-based parenting style Lareau documented among the working class, she could simply forbid her children to eat certain foods and manage their diet with a lot less time and effort.
Getting kids to eat appropriately using appropriate parenting techniques is a major task for all mothers in my study, regardless of their specific financial situation. It is far from straightforward to get children to want to eat whole grains and organic vegetables, not in the least because children like sweets and many of the foods associated with childhood obesity such as boxed cereal, processed snacks and sugary drinks are specifically designed for and marketed to children. To modify children’s desires many mothers adopt specific practices to socialize their children into the appropriate eating habits associated with their class position. These practices include explaining nutrition facts to their children, reading labels together and offering a rationale for not buying certain products. Children’s exposure to media tends to be severely restricted in the families I studied, because, as one mother put it: “it limits their ideas of what they can be” but also to a large extent to control influencing by advertising (Pugh 2009). When children do see commercials mothers often take time to explain the concept of marketing to sometimes quite young children to teach them how to become more critical and discerning consumers. “They just want our money”. This practice simultaneously meets the goals of parenting intensively as well as instilling the food habits most linked to appropriate health and body size.

Parents must also model appropriate eating habits themselves. Mothers invariably described becoming more restrained and healthful in their own eating habits once they had children. Children and their parents thus eat healthily and wholesomely and only periodically indulge. Sweets and treats tend to be strictly rationed and closely monitored, with several children still working on their Halloween candy in April, for example. Not all mothers are able to stick with their own rigid food rules however and more than one mother admitted hiding chocolate and candy from the children and one confessed she periodically stops for a fast food
“fix” on the way home from work, hiding the trash in the car. In some households, mothers spoke of certain foods in hushed coded language, offering me for example not a coke but “a dark sweetened caffeinated beverage”.

But parents must also teach their children a love of food for the local norm of joyful omnivorousness applies to children, too. This means that in addition to getting children accustomed to choosing healthful food and to not overeat, it is also considered important that children have, as one mother called it: “a stimulated, curious palate”. Children should love a variety of foods and not be picky. This ideal contributes significantly to the difficulty of the task of feeding children for it is very hard to instill in children a desire to try new foods. Children, especially young children are natural food neophobes (Pliner & Hobden 1992; Logue 2004) and it can take months of repeated exposure before a child will accept a new food. This task typically falls on the mother and adds to her labor. Consider the following fragment from my field notes, taken after observing a dinner in the Davis household with their children, age 4 and 2. Dinner consisted of pan-fried rainbow trout with pecan butter sauce, sautéed zucchini, rice and a salad. The children each got a scoop of rice, an inch-long piece of fish and half a zucchini slice on their plate along with some lettuce with raspberry dressing, which they ate first. The older child protested about the zucchini but ate it when his father insisted, after which he was allowed to get himself some grapes. His sister, however, who just started talking a month or two before, also did not want to eat the zucchini and kept up her resistance much longer:

“Ellen, please try a bite of your zucchini.”
“No. I already tried it.”
“When?”
“A long time ago.”
“Oh, how about today? Did you try it today?”
“No. A long time ago.”
“Do you want to try it again today?”
“No. Not right now.”
“What if I cut off a tiny piece, a tiny try-bite?”
“No.”
“What if you give it a name?” Here is a tiny piece, what are you going to call it?”
“Ladybug.”
“Ok, why don’t you eat ladybug? There will be a cookie for treat when you do. Want to let ladybug play with the rest of your food in your tummy?”
“No.”
“Ok, well, do you want to give it another name?”
“Horse.”
“Ok, why don’t you let horse play with the rest of your food in your tummy? He wants to play. You can have a cookie after.”

The child finally ate the miniscule piece of zucchini after that last mention of cookie as well as a second very small piece that her mother played hide and seek with, “hiding” it under the table, behind her back and finally was able to “hide” in the child’s mouth. After dinner, when the children were in bed, Lori explained that that had been a pretty typical exchange: “I just want her to try it. Carter, [their son], now knows that that is the expectation and doesn’t protest as much anymore but it took the same kind of effort with him.” To these parents, getting their children to eat tiny pieces of zucchini is mainly about setting expectations (for a piece of vegetable that small makes no nutritional contribution), instilling healthy eating habits and cultivating a taste for vegetables and other healthful food. But both parents also enjoy food, they have a vegetable garden and enjoy cooking and trying new things and the above is an example of how young children are gently but exhaustingly socialized into their family’s healthful and omnivorous eating habits.

Similarly intense and time-consuming is the common local practice of “baby-led weaning” that has the same goal. Brought up and explained to me by several sets of parents, baby-led weaning is not so much about the cessation of breastfeeding as about the “baby-led” introduction of solid foods at around 5 or 6 months of age. The belief is that children will turn
into better, less picky and more adventurous eaters if they are allowed and encouraged to have positive experiences with food, which, the understanding is, they will if they are allowed to choose and experience a variety of foods in a variety of ways rather than being spoon-fed special baby food. The babies in my study who were ready for solids were introduced to them in a free-form style, for example given a two-inch chunk of banana and allowed to explore it with their hands and mouths and to rub it on their skin, hair and clothes. According to local doctrine, spoon-feeding is considered too structured and disempowering to the child even though it would be a lot less messy and thus a lot less work if an adult were to keep control of the bowl and spoon and dole the food out bite by bite. The dinners I observed where babies were allowed to eat this way were indeed hugely messy though the babies did seem to enjoy themselves tremendously with the food. One child was given his own bowl of lukewarm soup containing broth, turkey meatballs, kale and beans which he spilled all over his high chair tray, clothes and hair while squealing with delight. His father simply smiled and said “Food makes you feel good, doesn’t it?” And to me: “He doesn’t like mushy food. He likes texture and spice”: a comment which signaled pride in his son’s sophisticated food preferences and which served to justify giving the child his own bowl of soup in the first place.

Baby-led weaning also means a child should be allowed to eat only if and when she wants to, which is impractical for adults for it means children might get hungry at odd hours. Yet forcing food or making a child finish a meal is not in line with the intensive parenting approach and is also understood to negatively affect a child’s relation to food and future eating habits. Sarah, full-time working mother of a 2-year old boy felt insecure about this aspect of her parenting:

So he does enjoy eating, yes. So that’s good. But there is also all that other stuff about eating besides nutrition and stuff, such as don't make your kids neurotic about food,
right? And I find that stressful, I think it is a very middle-class… from my community of parents and this sort of middle-class community here that is very educated and does a lot of research, and gets together in groups and on list serves and things like that. So that is another issue that comes up and something that I read about and how not to get into food fights with your kids. So there is that additional behavioral aspect around food and eating and I really try to not express emotion around food too much with him yet I've always wanted him to eat at dinner. So here I am being selfish because I don't want him to wake up in the middle of the night because he's hungry.

Adding to the laboriousness of feeding children and the insecurities that accompany it are the local green norms of reducing environmental waste and avoiding the production and consumption of toxins in materials like plastic and packaging. With only one exception, the parents in my study do not tend to rely much on plastic baggies or other convenient disposables for carrying or eating food. This means that part of parent’s daily household routine is the collecting, washing, drying, storing and packing of the reusable food containers their children take with them to school or day care. All kitchens I entered thus invariably had a drying rack stacked with water bottles, lunch boxes, snack-containers or washable snack bags on them, contributing to the clutter in the kitchen.

In all, among the subset of Mount Airy families who participated in my study, feeding a family in accordance with local food, environmental and parenting norms is a lot of work and can be said to constitute a third shift. Mothers especially feel that a lot is at stake in this domain and feeding children has thus become a major part of the socially reproductive work they perform on a daily basis. Several mothers brought up the contrast between their way of feeding the family today and the foods and feeding styles they were brought up with themselves in the 1970’s and 1980’s: with a hands-off parenting approach and a reliance on processed convenience food and convenient packaging. They marveled at how much more involved and time consuming issues of food and eating have become compared to when they were young themselves. One
affluent stay-at-home mother in my sample became so overwhelmed with the demands of the task that she decided to outsource part of it:

I’m a stay-at-home mother so food is the center of my universe. However, at dinner time it used to be the constant: what are we having for dinner? Very stressful. And I found that before I picked up Emma from school I should have dinner at least prepped because when she comes home she wants my attention. Probably in part because she is an only child. And I always felt bad saying “no go watch TV I am going to make dinner” because she had just been in school all day. So I felt like dinner should be prepped around 1 o’clock. And then we have our food restrictions: I don't eat meat but I do eat fish, Emma can't have shellfish, she has a shellfish and a peanut allergy so we have to make sure that is out of her diet. She'll eat meat. I don't. My husband likes meat. So it was always like, this frying pan is for the shrimp, this pan is for the chicken. And it was also hard to try to come up with something creative to keep things interesting because if you feed someone the same thing week in and week out they get bored with it. And I want Emma to have a broad palate. Which I think she does. So, we got a friend who is a trained chef to come on Mondays and cook between 3 and 4 meals for us. She cooks a huge variety. There are grains, proteins, fresh vegetables and it's really good. So then I have a refrigerator stocked with stuff I can just whip in the microwave when she gets hungry and spend time with Emma instead.

Of all the mothers in my study, only the most affluent one cited above is able to address all norms at once: parenting intensively by spending one-on-one time with her child after school, offering healthy, home cooked foods and stimulating her child’s palate by exposing her to a variety of foods whenever she is in the mood for it. For the rest of the sample, who are not in the financial position to outsource the third shift, this is different. To varying degrees and depending on income and available time, mothers are forced to compromise, which often leads to feelings of regret and inadequacy. Most mothers I spoke with expressed feelings of having fallen short in at least some respect. As one mother of a picky eater with a full-time job and the main responsibility for the household said:

14 Though even this mother expressed insecurity about her strategies: she admitted being worried about turning her daughter into a dreaded picky eater by enabling her to pick and choose her own dinner every night and not requiring her to eat something she did not like.
I blame myself for his narrow palate. I kick myself because I feel like I did a bad job exposing him to different foods when he was little. I would sometimes think oh my god this is another whole set of things I need to do as a parent and I didn’t have the energy for it and often fell back on making things I knew he liked, on what was easy.

**Dilemmas, contradictions and the third shift**

The biggest difficulties arise for mothers who fully ascribe to local food and parenting norms but for whom a local, organic, variety of food is out of reach financially. As I have described, while alternative food is easily accessible in Mount Airy’s farmers’ market, cooperative grocery store, restaurants and cafés, several of the moms in my study could simply not afford to shop there, some despite living in a dual income household. In fact, simultaneous processes of income stagnation, underemployment and debt burdens have contributed to the paradoxical situation where these families’ middle-class financial status (and with that their ability to afford to even live in the neighborhood) is actually dependent on the cheap consumption goods which threaten this status symbolically. And of the many inexpensive goods available to the American consumer on a budget, none undermine middle-class status in quite the same way as cheap, conventional, mass-produced food, certainly in the Mount Airy context. This situation then, of fully ascribing to certain norms but being unable to afford them, creates some of the most frustrating dilemmas and contradictions for the more strapped mothers in my study, considerably complicates their tasks of shopping, cooking, feeding and parenting and adds to the demands of the third shift.

One way in which it becomes more work to feed the family appropriately on a budget is that it requires more research. Where mothers of means to varying degrees are able to “opt out” of the conventional food system and the threats it represents by being able to, for example, buy

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15 Today’s wages simply don’t stretch as far as they used to. For example, the federal minimum wage purchases fewer goods and services than it did in 1968 (Cooper 2013).
peace of mind by shopping exclusively at Whole Foods or the Co-op or by having groceries delivered, mothers in the squeezed middle are often forced to shop in conventional grocery stores. They speak negatively of these “mainstream”, “not green”, supermarkets filled with “crud” “under shrink-wrap” and describe the need to be “vigilant” and “armed” with research\textsuperscript{16} in order to safely navigate that environment. Thus, in order to find the most healthful foods in the conventional food system mothers on a budget spend more time doing research on food, the industrial food system, stores and prices than the more affluent moms and are more thoroughly and accurately informed as result. Whereas the moms on a budget had detailed knowledge about things such as the chemicals used in the conventional food system, their effects on the body and in which produce to find them, knew about soil depletion, animal welfare conditions and labor and trade issues, more affluent mothers had much vaguer ideas about these kinds of things. For example, when I asked Jackie if there are any foods she would never buy she said:

I always try to find jelly without high fructose corn syrup. Why? Because I’ve heard that it’s really awful (laughs). Isn't that terrible for a well-educated person? To just say, oh someone told me not to eat that? But I don’t eat it mainly because my friends don’t. I do sort of have a loose understanding of why it is bad for health and the environment but it is kind of a hearsay decision.

Donna said:

I prefer to go to the farmers’ market, it’s local and it hasn’t come from very far away. And on the local farms they are probably not doing crazy stuff and you just know that it is probably ok. I feel that when I go to Whole Foods, you don’t have to think. They have done something, they have done something for you. I’m assuming that they have some sort of standard they apply. Even though I don’t care so much about organic versus non organic I do think there is some kind of regulation going on which might make that stuff a little bit better. I also think if something is organic maybe there are other things that come into play, like it’s more expensive so maybe the people are treated better. You know, you make these assumptions. I never know if that stuff is true at all.

\textsuperscript{16} I was struck by this discourse of warfare informants use to explain the rigor of their preparation and the perceived level of threat they face in conventional grocery stores.
Mothers on strict budgets tend to conduct their research at night, after the children have gone to bed and report that food is the number one topic of online conversations and communications they have with other moms. Complicating this already time consuming and sometimes disturbing information-gathering task is a deep mistrust of “the system” which makes mainstream publications and reports from well-established sources such as the New York Times or the well-known Environmental Working Group circumspect. The belief is that mainstream news and environmental organizations are not independent enough from big industry and government so mothers spent additional time hunting for more objective information from independent organizations in the nether reaches of the Internet.

Once the research is done, the activity of grocery shopping significantly adds to the third shift because tenuously situated mothers often shop in multiple places to get the better deals they researched or because they feel they can safely buy certain foods in particular grocery stores but not in others. Some of their markets are far away and this also makes it harder and more time consuming to shop. Shopping in these conventional grocery stores with children in tow complicates things further for many of the foods mothers feel the need to avoid are often exactly the kinds of foods that are marketed to children and that children notice and ask for. At the same time, as I explained, the intensive parenting norm prescribes that mothers listen to these requests, explain why they can’t get certain foods and, if necessary, enter into negotiations, which can significantly draw out the shopping excursion. In contrast, the affluent mother who shops at Whole Foods is able to avoid these sorts of tiring negotiations and let her children be the agentive consumers intensive parenting also prescribes. Her kids can pick whatever foods they like for in a place like Whole Foods none are believed to contain the harmful chemicals or have the low-status connotation foods in a conventional supermarket do. Amy: “I always let them
choose. And I know they might go for the $5 pint of blueberries, but hey, at least they are making healthy choices.”

What affluent mothers and their children shopping at places like Whole Foods miss out on however, is exposure to people from other socio-economic groups. As I described in Chapter 3, Mount Airy’s history of deliberate racial integration and lasting image of inclusivity is a big source of pride for the mothers in my study. My informants invariably described themselves as politically progressive and many said the choice to live or stay in the neighborhood and not in “the bubble of a suburb” was motivated by a desire to offer their children the experience of diversity. However, it is no news that people tend to be more comfortable with diversity within their class position than diversity among classes and for many families in my study it is thus true that exposure to diversity means exposure to middle-class or affluent blacks, lesbians, Jews or other groups. This is less true for the more strapped families who tend to live in closer proximity to the neighborhood’s poor black community in the more affordable areas, send their children to local public, parochial or more affordable schools and who are similarly dependent on mass-produced lower-priced food and other consumption goods. As a result, the less well-off families and their children are more exposed to “real” (socio-economic) diversity, which, though perhaps not always comfortable, in the local context is considered a plus. For example, Jackie, whose husband is African, articulated clearly how her family’s financial constraints had the unexpected locally desirable side effect of facilitating more interaction with a larger variety of people and thus the creation of a more truly Mount Airy lifestyle:

The main reason we started shopping at the ACME [a conventional grocery store in Mount Airy where many of the customers and cashiers are black] was the prices. But I also realized, we moved to Mount Airy with the hope that this is a multicultural, integrated, multiracial neighborhood, which it is not so much anymore. It was more when I was growing up here. It was much more integrated by class and race when I was a kid. But the ACME is a vestige of that whole old Mount Airy that I remember. It is much
more integrated than the rest of the area. When I am there the people are friendly and talk to you and when you are there with your kids people want to play with your kids and there is a community to it. It's hard to say that this commercial corporate store is where the community is but it is. And the food quality is lousy, it is a terribly run store, the food is like, rotting on the shelves, but I just feel like if my husband goes there with the kids and shops there they all know them and it just feels more like our community. It wasn't a conscious decision that ACME was going to be our community but it has started to feel like that.

However, while this mother is grateful for the sense of community and belonging this affordably priced local grocery store has offered her biracial family, class based differences remain in place and in some way are amplified in places such as ACME. For Jackie is also a very restrained shopper. She cannot afford organic food and is not convinced of its health benefits but she is a highly vigilant conventional food shopper and rejects elaborately packaged foods, high-calorie processed foods, “snacky type foods”, soda or even juice. This presents a difficult contradiction: by being what she calls a “populist shopper” Jackie is on the one hand aiming to make her children feel like they live and belong in an integrated neighborhood while on the other starkly setting them apart by her consumption preferences. And she is finding that it is almost impossible to instill in children the middle or upper class eating habits that are believed to have the most protective long-term effects, without at the same time explicitly or even implicitly judging other, non-healthy foods and by extension those who eat them. This dilemma of whether to emphasize “democratic” versus “distinctive” eating (Johnston and Baumann 2010) is another way in which the feeding and parenting tasks of mothers in the squeezed middle are more

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17 She shops this way even though her two sons are underweight and their pediatrician has expressed concern about that. While it would be easier to make the boys gain weight on candy and chips, it is not even occurring to Jackie to compromise on her family’s healthful eating habits and instead tries to “fatten them up” with wholesome foods like cheese, milk and butter, demonstrating how deeply ingrained these food habits are.
complicated than those of more affluent ones whose children are more shielded from low-income people with different consumption habits.

Though affluent mothers are not oblivious to this conundrum and some are uncomfortable with the elitist connotation of their way of eating. One mother in particular, Donna (the elementary school teacher in one of Philadelphia’s low-income neighborhoods in Philadelphia whose husband, a corporate lawyer, earns the major share of the household’s income) had well-articulated ideas about this. Because of her job, Donna is keenly aware of the difference between her own family’s eating habits and that of less fortunate Americans and she is articulate about the origins and ramifications of these differences. Her take on the situation goes beyond a simple distinction between correct, healthy and distinctive eating versus populist, unhealthy, democratic eating, for she considers democratic eating distinctive in itself: part of being a sophisticated person, she argues, is to be at home and comfortable with a true variety of people in a variety of situations:

If my kids would eat a variety of things it is easier. Like you could go to a bunch of different types of people’s homes. I do think that a lot of people who feel very sophisticated, it’s not that they like a variety of foods, it’s just that they are sophisticated about food and would not eat something in the home of a family that I teach, they might not eat some of those things. But I would like my kids to be able to fit in socially in a variety of households.

Partially for this reason, Donna, who does most of her shopping at Whole Foods, the farmers’ market or the Co-op, will let her boys have sugary conventional cereals or other mass-produced conventional foods from other stores so as not to alienate them completely from other socio-economic groups and mainstream American food culture in general.

Of the more strapped mothers in my sample, the majority regularly shops at Wegmans, an East coast supermarket chain. Wegmans is a logical choice for several reasons: First of all, the
store offers lower priced, bulk-sized family packs of produce, meat, and packaged goods, which constitute significant savings. At the same time, even though the store offers these discounts and is known for being more affordable, Wegmans is not a low status store. Large part of the appeal is also that the store offers organic, natural and luxury foods such as artisanal cheese in the same place as affordable conventional products. It thus represents a kind of crossover between Whole Foods and conventional American supermarkets. It allows the mothers in my study to pick and choose which items they’ll buy organically at a higher price and which items they’ll buy in conventional form without having to travel to multiple stores and without having to set foot in the loathed traditional American grocery store. The drawback is that Wegmans is far away, about 30 minutes by car from Mount Airy and that it is huge, which can make navigating the store somewhat overwhelming.

I trailed all the mothers in my sample on at least one grocery shopping trip, which brought me to Wegmans with Michelle on a Friday night in September 2014. It was by far the most exhaustive shopping trip of the study and illustrative of the hard and tiring lives some families in the squeezed middle live. Michelle works full-time as a librarian and her husband works full-time, too. Partially because of their schedule, partially to avoid frustrating conflicts over food with her three-year old son and partially to avoid traffic and crowds, Michelle prefers to shop by herself on Friday night. She shops on payday, every other week and I met her there at 9:30PM, after she had worked all day, cooked dinner, cleaned up and put her son to bed (and I should add, before getting up again on Saturday morning to go back to work in the library). The family buys most of their groceries at Wegmans and she and her husband, an IT specialist, have i-phones on which they have installed the Wegmans app. The app allows shoppers to compose an electronic shopping list and makes shopping in the massive store a little easier by indicating in
which isle to find the foods on the list and by providing a running total. It is a shared app, which means both parents can add things to the joint list on the app during the weeks leading up to the shop and both parents know exactly how much money their groceries will cost that two-week period. They try to keep their total under $150 for the two weeks, which is the lowest food expenditure among the participants in my study. They do also buy some of their staples such as rice, beans and flour in bulk at Costco so their total monthly food expenditure is higher than $300. Moving swiftly through the isles consulting the app, Michelle explained that by steering her directly to only those things she needs the app helped her avoid spontaneous buys, which would drive up the total. She was careful to avoid name brands because of the added cost and limits the amount of produce she buys. On her budget, Michelle was able to buy only very few vegetables for the 2 weeks: a bag of onions, a one-pound bag of carrots, a large tub of spinach and some broccoli. The majority of the budget was spent on filling, low-cost but generally healthful and unprocessed foods such as pasta, eggs and tortillas.

By shopping at Wegmans while her son is asleep Michelle meets two norms simultaneously: she is able to buy appropriate food, some of it organic or natural at a lower price than this food would cost at Whole Foods or the Co-op and she is not cutting into her already scarce interaction time with her son. She is not having a prized diverse experience however, since the store’s other customers seem to be mainly suburban middle-class whites. Though her family’s diet lacks fresh fruits and vegetables, Michelle is able to find relative health on a budget by shopping at Wegmans but has to adopt rather exhaustive measures to achieve it.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{18}\) Arriving bleary eyed at the checkout counter around 10:30PM I was surprised to learn that this mother’s day was still not over. While in line, Michelle mentioned she also participates in a Nielsen consumer study and would have to scan every single grocery item she bought that night before being able to put the groceries away and finally going to bed. Participating in the study,
I think partially because of genetic predisposition but perhaps also partially because of this family’s financial dependence on cheaper, filling foods high in carbohydrates and low in fruits and vegetables, Michelle is the only mother in my sample who is overweight. To control it, she works out vigorously three times a week, which does cut into her time with her son but which she justifies by labeling it “bonding time with daddy”. Her husband is not overweight but works hard to keep it this way by practicing strict portion control and by bicycling an hour to and from work each day. Biking to work saves money, the couple has only one car and it saves train money, but Bret also explained that it is a major factor in controlling his weight. His workday starts at 7AM, which means he is on his bike off to work at 6AM every morning. He bikes during all seasons and in all weather. Their son, an extremely picky eater, is actually a little underweight.

This couple’s intense food and exercise practices are comparable to those of a mother in a study conducted by geographer Julie Guthman in 2009. Guthman (2011: 84-87) interviewed several women in the obesogenic environment of Fresno, CA, so called because the majority of families in the area were overweight and because the local built environment lacked walkability and access to healthy food. Guthman discovered that rather than environmental realities a better predictor for obesity was the class and racial composition of the people who lived there. In her book, she pays special attention to a mother named Diane who self-identified as middle class but whose acute financial situation landed her in this low-income environment. Guthman describes how this woman was the only one in her sample able to maintain health and thinness in this environment by adopting rather stringent practices of the self, such as running two miles a day regardless of the often hot weather. Michelle, too, self-identifies as middle class despite their low

she explained, helps make ends meet for it earns her credit points on Amazon, which she used for her son’s diapers when he was younger and now uses for other household items.
income and she, too, invokes this specter of personal responsibility, in her case in the form of discipline and restraint in the grocery store and by exercising vigorously despite an already quite heavy work-and parenting load.

**Do-it-yourself food production**

In addition to elaborate research and complicated grocery shopping routines a third way in which the less well-off mothers in my study address the disconnect between ascribed-to food norms and financial reality is by adopting a do-it-yourself approach to food and feeding. While some of the more affluent mothers sometimes rely on high-quality convenience foods (or a private chef), the squeezed mothers in my sample all cook from scratch and do not rely on the convenient shortcuts many of their own mothers relied on when they were young. In addition, almost all grow at least some of their own produce in the spring, summer and fall, much of which they then pickle, can or otherwise preserve. Some supplement their garden produce by picking additional produce such as strawberries, peaches or tomatoes on seasonal day trips to farms with pick-your-own plots and orchards, which they then preserve at home. Many women also bake their own bread, cakes and other goods; one roasts her own coffee beans; one keeps chickens for eggs and one keeps bees for honey.

While these intense efforts in the kitchen and garden significantly contribute to the third shift, the approach is a logical response to the financial precarity of this subgroup of middle-class families in this context. Homesteading, which is what these food-activities essentially amount to, allows mothers to feed their families the healthy, local, often organically grown, humanely produced food they value so highly and promotes class-appropriate health and body size but at a fraction of the price this food costs at the farmer’s market, Co-op or premium grocery store. There is also a political component to provisioning this way for making their own food
simultaneously allows mothers to reject the “bourgeois”, firmly capitalist and exclusionary stores like Whole Foods, while eating healthful food that is actually very similar to what is for sale there. Finally, the DIY approach to feeding the family has the added benefits of tasting great and being high status and distinctive. In many segments of America today, being not only knowledgeable about where one’s food comes from but also skilled in how to grow, preserve and prepare food is distinctive. Chefs, food writers and food activists like Alice Waters, Michael Pollan and others have popularized this view. The “conspicuous competence” (Visser 1991) my informants display in their bread baking, vegetable growing, canning and fermenting activities all contribute to these families’ cultural capital, constitute an important demonstration of socioeconomic success and an example of how middle-class status can be performed and achieved through food practices (Naccarato and Lebesco 2012: 8), in my observations in Mount Airy typically carried out by women.

I want to make a distinction here however between the contemporary “hipster” approach to making your own food and the homesteading techniques applied by the parents in my study. While it might be true that the popular hipster-appeal of gardening, pickling and so on adds to the cachet of my informant’s lifestyles, I want to stress that for my informants homesteading is first and foremost about eating well while saving money. As I have indicated, some of the families in my study are living on extremely tight budgets and while highly educated and self-identifying as middle class, their actual incomes are closer to the poverty level and their lives are

19 Shopping at the Co-op used to be an anti-capitalist statement, too but as I described in the previous chapter, the sentiment among many neighborhood residents is that this store is in fact becoming more and more like a Whole Foods, catering to affluent, educated elites and contributing to inequalities in Mount Airy and the American food system more generally.

20 Fathers, too, are involved in vegetable gardening though mothers are the driving force behind these activities. Many of the fathers in my study are avid home beer brewers however, which is another good example of a money-saving yet highly distinctive DIY approach to food. I describe this in more detail in Chapter 5.
hard. I want to stress that appearing “hip” is not on the forefront of the minds of these parents who struggle to pay their mortgage, who can’t afford to heat their homes over 60 degrees, whose wardrobes are comprised of thrift shop finds. Confirming this too is the sighed wish of one of the most skilled homesteaders in my study to be able to afford take-out food more often. This does not mean this father is not proud of his accomplishments in the garden and home kitchen but it does mean he is not concerned about how it would look or what the anthropologist would think if he didn’t cook and bake one night but would simply order a pizza instead.

The DIY way of feeding the family requires a large amount of research and planning. The urbanites in my study did not grow up on farms or in households where they learned these techniques, which meant they had to learn all gardening, preserving and food preparation techniques on their own. For gardening, this included gathering knowledge about things as local soil conditions, pests, the sun exposure of their yards, expected weather patterns and so on. Preserving, canning, pickling and fermenting also have high learning curves and much of the learning involves frustratingly wasteful trial and error. Much of this information is learned online but my informants also have bookshelves lined with cookbooks and gardening books, which they borrow from one another. A couple I interviewed one evening in their home, elaborate self-drawn garden plans strewn over the coffee table, described how they had spent all day at the gardening center, debating the height, depth and placement of the vegetable beds, fencing, water management and other technical details of their garden.

The elaborate homesteading activities I documented were probably the most interesting and unexpected findings of the fieldwork. It was surprising to arrive at a family’s house at the end of the afternoon and be offered a plate of homemade pickles and a home-brewed beer before a dinner. To be offered a delicious homemade pizza with home-made sauce. I was impressed
with the speed and ease with which mothers pulled out a lump of sourdough from a batch in their refrigerator and created beautiful loaves of bread to go with the rest of a dinner prepared from scratch on a weeknight after a full day of work.

Most interesting about the DIY way of feeding the family are the social networks it creates and sustains. There is a lot of sharing that goes on among people who intensively garden and preserve, cook and bake and I believe it is these networks that bolster this otherwise so precarious group. Many mothers, especially, closely cooperate with one another around these activities and the exchange of information and receive mutual recognition and support from one another. Often, women’s shared food production events turn into enjoyable social situations for their whole families. Meghan illustrates this enjoyable social aspect of these food-based networks well:

So my son is really hard to get to eat fruit and vegetables so we’ve come up with all these conniving ways to get him to eat them. I make banana muffins which is the only way he’ll eat bananas. We go fruit picking. We do lots of organic fruit picking. We go to a farm in New Jersey and it’s great fun and we make jam and pie filling and then we can it. That was one of the things we got into as we were like, well, we can’t afford all the food that we want to eat so how do we get more fruit with less money and we’re like let’s go pick it and then wow, look at all this fruit lets can it. And it’s very easy to do. Every year when we do the strawberry jam it’s like a huge festival, we invite lots of people over and do like 50 jars of jam and a huge… my husband also brews beer so we have around 17 kettles of various sizes in the house and we have outdoor burners and it’s all sorts of stuff. It’s a lot of fun, the kids really like it and when they get tired they just sit in the shade together and eat berries. It’s really nice.

This community is what Meghan refers to when she says “I enjoy being poor.” It is in these networks, too, that I recognize some activist potential. Father’s, too play a big role in the activities and social connections around the production, distribution and consumption of food, which I describe in more detail in the next two chapters.

Obviously, because the DIY approach to feeding the family is so time-consuming, it makes long and meaningful engagement with children harder. It is impossible to both spend
large amounts in the kitchen and garden as well as with children, especially for those mothers who also work outside of the home and this situation creates at times strong feelings of insecurity, inadequacy and guilt in mothers. Mothers are well versed in the benefits of intensive parenting, aware that children need to be instructed, prepared and coached to do well in school and life later on. Mothers seem to consider this socially reproductive parenting work their job but are also aware that they are the primary parent held responsible for the physical well-being and health of their children. This makes the prioritization of healthy food and instilling class appropriate eating habits seem prudent, too (and perhaps a more attainable and concrete parenting goal in the face of their children’s insecure and unclear futures).

Trying to catch two birds with one stone, mothers sometimes try to involve children in gardening and cooking, also because local lore has it that children who are involved in food preparation become “better” eaters, but with limited success. Children’s interest is unpredictable and mothers also admit that working in the kitchen by themselves (with a beer nearby), is much more efficient and enjoyable than with children who require constant instruction and assistance. This was explained to me by a mother of two who was getting ready for a dinner she was hosting at her house for two additional families, speedily baking a loaf of bread and a carrot cake from scratch, preparing a chicken and rice dish and a salad while working to clear out space in her kitchen for the beer bottling her husband, a home brewer, would do later that night. During all this, her two children, one of whom has learning differences and requires extra school work practice, were playing video games. This tableau is very different then from the scene in the affluent mother’s house who spends all afternoon in intense interaction with her child while her private chef deals with dinner.
In addition to time, the DIY approach to feeding the family also requires a lot of space, both outside as well as inside the house and thus impacts the living arrangements of the families who provision this way. For example, the basements of these families in my study were serious working and storage areas and could not have been farther away from the suburban ideal of a “finished” recreational basement. When taken on tours of the basement, homesteaders would show me the counters and sinks they installed for food preparation, their second refrigerators and standing freezers and rows and rows of often hand-built shelving for the storage of jarred sauce, jam and pickles. Several also had growth systems with lights that enabled them to start planting vegetable seeds in late winter so that they would have plants to plant in the garden by early spring.

Upstairs tended to be more functional than beautiful or comfortable, too. More production—rather than consumption—oriented, the kitchens of the most strapped parents looked quite different from the spacious granite-countered showcases I saw in the more affluent homes with many kitchens as well as dining rooms containing multiple refrigeration units. For example, in her small row home Carol had a traditional refrigerator-freezer combination in the kitchen, and an upright freezer as well as two small counter-depth refrigerators in the crowded dining room. The dining room-freezer was for storing different kinds of flours, summer fruit and foods she buys in bulk, one of the small refrigerators was used exclusively for pickles, 48 pounds of them as I was proudly told, and the last small refrigerator was for her husband’s beer, for which there was no space in the jam-packed regular refrigerator in the kitchen. At Bret and Michelle’s, too, multiple refrigeration units could be found. In addition to a hand-rigged refrigerated box for the temperature-controlled fermentation of the homebrew in the basement, the house had a traditional refrigerator-freezer unit in the kitchen, as well as a converted chest
refrigerator containing two kegs of beer, an additional refrigerator and upright freezer in what would have otherwise been the dining room. The refrigeration needs of the DIY-food producers present yet another contradiction for this group because these units are a big energy drain which conflicts with these parents’ goal of environmental stewardship though ultimately proves that matters of money and taste trump environmental concerns.

Different middle-class experiences of motherhood

Again, feeding children healthful, alternative, good tasting food and parenting intensively are important strategies for maintaining middle-class status. Proper food habits contribute to health and thinness and are symbolically distinctive in diverse ways. Parenting intensively helps prepare children for an insecure and competitive future by instilling the vocabulary, skills and confidence they need to compete for skilled jobs in the new economy. But while food and parenting have become a laden subject for all mothers in my study, the ease with which women in different financial positions and different fractions of the middle and upper middle classes are able to live in accordance with local cultural ideologies of food and parenting varies considerably. I have described the various strategies parents of varying means employ to try to meet local food-and parenting norms simultaneously, as well as the stark differences in the organization of the daily lives and home environments of the diverse group of Mount Airy families in my study. These very different sets of socially reproductive food and parenting practices constitute two different middle-class experiences of motherhood and illuminate as well as reinforce fragmentations in the American middle class.

Whereas wealthier upper middle-class moms can buy appropriate food and peace of mind in the alternative food marketplace and let their children be autonomous agentive consumers in that environment, strapped mothers must do a lot more research, compromising, food production
and negotiating with children. Also, because alternative food and intensive parenting requires significant resources of money and time, strapped parents more often have to choose between one and the other. Several parents I interviewed even mentioned feeling that they have to choose between quality education and proper consumption. As Jackie explained:

So the question of food vs education I thought about a lot because I realized that.. I made the decision, maybe not actively but retro-actively, that I'm going to be sort of a food populist and I am going to shop with the masses at ACME instead of with the elites at the Co-op. I made the exact opposite choice when it comes to education. And I've wrestled with that for why is it, why do I feel so strongly that my kids should be in private school and I'm not buying into the public when it comes to education and I've made this retroactively intentional decision in the opposite way about food.

Of course, as I have also explained, in the local political context and given the neighborhood’s celebrated image of successful integration, shopping with children in a diverse environment and avoiding elitism is considered a good thing. It is important therefore to remember that the different experiences of middle-class life and socially reproductive strategies are not a simple matter of inequality between “successful” well off parents on the one hand and “failing” strapped parents on the other. While I have shown that compared to more affluent parents, precariously situated mothers spend more time researching, shopping, cooking, baking and gardening and thus less time with their children, they trump more affluent local families in terms of critical knowledge of our food system and the politics that support it, in their culinary skills and expertise and in exposing their children to a true diversity of neighborhood residents. I return to the potential political implications of these findings in the last chapter, after first describing the roles fathers from different class positions play in the work of social reproduction in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5: FATHERS’ REPRODUCTIVE WORK

Most of the fathers in my study share their wives’ alternative food norms and all subscribe fully to the intensive parenting norm, but trying to live according to these norms does not create the same kinds of contradictions for fathers as they do for mothers. While middle-class fatherhood under varying conditions of material strain creates contradictions of its own, which I outline in this chapter, the fathers in my study generally do not work a third shift of food care and do not struggle with their kids over food-related issues. This is primarily because of stubborn gender division of labor arrangements, which continue to keep women in charge of and responsible for the domestic domain including the feeding of children and all the dilemmas that brings with it, though fathers do have a role in the domestic sphere, particularly around food and childcare.

To some extent, the relatively traditional domestic labor arrangements I documented among these otherwise young, politically progressive families can be explained by couples’ overall division of labor, with men generally working more outside of the house than their wives, many of whom thus have more time and opportunities to take charge of the home and childcare. This situation in turn is attributable to structural realities of scarce and unequal employment opportunities, inflexible work arrangements and lack of affordable quality childcare. In the United States, the structure of work is still such that decent pay, benefits, and prospects for promotions are almost entirely restricted to positions that demand full-time hours (or more), which essentially forces families to depend on a primary breadwinner (Townsend 2002: 197-198). Men’s privilege as a group including the wage gap means that they have greater access to those full time jobs and this reality, paired with tenacious cultural expectations around parenthood and lack of affordable quality childcare that would free mothers up, continue to make
it for the majority of families in my study more logical, financially and practically, for the husband to assume the role of primary breadwinner even though their wives are equally well educated and qualified to work and even though most parents would prefer a more egalitarian sharing of earning work.

However, while with a breadwinner-homemaker division of labor it would perhaps only seem fair that the partner at home takes control of the household work (a common ideology that plays a role in the recreation of structural gender inequality (Pyke 1996; Julier and Lindenfeld 2005)), unsurprisingly and with only one exception, the women in my study who do have jobs outside of the home also perform the majority of domestic work and remain the ones in charge of its organization. While male housework participation has nearly doubled in the past 40 years and the amount of time they spend caring for children has nearly tripled (Bianchi et al. 2007; United States Census Bureau 2011), in the United States and the industrialized world more generally (Hook 2006), a truly egalitarian sharing of the responsibility for and performance of household work has remained elusive. This is well documented (Hochchild and Machung 2012; Kessler-Harris 2003; Klein et al. 2012; Slaughter 2015) and not fundamentally challenged by the picture that emerges from my household observation data.

However, while the mothers in my study remain firmly in charge of the household, fathers do contribute, and when they do mostly to food-related tasks such as researching the food system, gardening and cooking, and childcare. Without exception, the fathers in my study are fully committed intensive parents who have embraced the widespread and normative “expectation of paternal closeness and involvement” (Townsend 2002: 102). All fathers spoke knowledgeably and lovingly about their children, were deeply involved in decisions about their children’s education and healthcare and regularly engaged in intense, time-consuming projects
and activities with them (often with or around food). Their engagement and intense fathering practices reflect and confirm the trend of increased paternal involvement that writers of American fatherhood (Townsend 2002; Coltrane 2000) and the household division of labor (United States Census Bureau 2011) have well documented. Fathers’ deep involvement in the socially reproductive work of parenting makes sense given the high-stakes process that child rearing has become in the face of economic insecurity and increased competition in the educational system and job market. Their focus on food does, too, given its direct relationship to the preservation of class status via health and body size (both of themselves and that of their children), as well as taste preferences and the expression of the locally liberal politics. In addition, to some of the fathers in my study, the shared male interest in food and food production activities offers important social and emotional benefits.

This chapter begins with the description of the socially reproductive food and parenting practices of the middle-class fathers in my study. Neither has been the specific focus of ethnographic inquiry, the literature tends to favor mothering and working class fatherhood (Broughton and Walton 2006; Townsend 2002), though Annette Lareau (2003) did discuss the gender division of the work of parenting and in particular the significant amounts of time fathers spent shuttling children to and from their activities. I also touch on other forms of domestic labor that fathers performed. I found that men, while devoted fathers, do not prioritize the needs of children or others as much or as often as women when making household decisions. This is the main reason their concerns about food and parenting do not translate into a third shift. I also found that many of the men seemed to feel the need to “masculinize” or somehow alter the domestic work they do perform, which often complicates matters, causing tension rather than easing the burden on their wives. I will begin this chapter by describing some of these findings.
that overall tend to mimic and confirm existing scholarship on the household division of labor by
gender. In one way then, the chapter can be read as a modest, small scale “taking stock” of the
household division of labor 26 years after *The Second Shift* first appeared.

I then move on to describe some contradictions fathers in different fractions of the middle
class face as they try to meet the conflicting goals of providing for their families and being an
involved parent and supportive husband while living and modeling an ethical lifestyle in
accordance with dominant local progressive politics. The difficulty of simultaneously trying to
meet competing family and professional goals has been confirmed by existing scholarship on the
experience of fatherhood. Townsend in particular explains well how the fathers he spoke with
struggled with the contradictory demands of the “package deal” they put together for themselves
and which consists of marriage, fatherhood, employment and home ownership: “To be a father is
to reconcile competing ideals, demands and responsibilities: time spent with children against
money earned, the kind of house you live in against the length of your commute, your
responsibility as a husband against your responsibility as a father...” (Townsend 2002: 30).
While this scholarship is mainly concerned with conflicting demands for fathers’ finite resources
of money and time, in this chapter I expand the focus to also include the conflicts that the
specific parenting goals fathers have adopted create. The men in my study want to teach and
model to their children social values of equality, social justice and environmental stewardship, be
present as fathers and husbands, while trying to make a living in the current political and
economic climate. In trying to meet these three goals simultaneously, fathers often wind up
sending rather contradictory messages to their children, which they then have to mitigate or
somehow explain or make up for. While this takes different forms for fathers in different middle-
class fractions, it is a dilemma they all contend with to some degree.
The chapter ends with a description of some of the strategies men have devised to mitigate some of these contradictions, in particular squeezed fathers’ important role in the establishment and maintenance of social networks that support their families and children. In anthropology, this type of work has routinely been recognized as work performed by women, especially poor women (Stack 1983) and among ethnic minorities (di Leonardo 1987). Here, I argue that men play an active role in the creation and maintenance of these social networks, too, which is an important form of reproductive work. Some of the men in my study play an important role in the maintenance and strengthening of kin networks that provide vital support to their nuclear families and most of the men in the squeezed group actively help construct networks of neighbors and friends that help support their families or that support their children at school. The medium for the construction of these networks is often the age old social tool of food sharing. I pay particular attention to the network that exists around a local home brew club that meets once a month and to which several of the fathers in my study belong. While the club is almost exclusively male, the families of the members are tied together through the husbands’ shared hobby of beer brewing and drinking. The brew club also fulfills other needs and helps reconcile some of the other contradictions men face, which I will describe in detail.

The division of labor by gender

Even though all but one father in the study have higher paying jobs than their wives; none are responsible for the overall organization of household work and; with the exception of one father, none do as much household work as their wives, the fathers I talked to all professed an egalitarian gender ideology. Josh: “I have a bit of a chip on my shoulder about equality. My [single] mother was very much not interested in division based on gender. Or race. Or religion. Which was a good perspective to grow up with. I would prefer not to be interested in those
divisions”. Many were eager to point out their comfort with women, such as when Jimmy explained: “I grew up in a household of all women and generally am much more comfortable around women than men.” Or Brett who said: “I work in IT and would really like to see more women get into that field, it’s a bit limiting to be around guys all day long.” And the beer brewers were adamant about being welcoming to women in their overwhelmingly male brew club, stressing the value of diversity including gender diversity, the value of female taste preferences, going out of their way to emphasize how much they valued women’s opinions of their home brews.

Men were also typically eager to explain that they were not averse to, threatened by, or in any way insecure about performing household work, particularly tasks involving food and childcare. Many of the men in my study spoke of growing up with mothers who worked and some had fathers who cooked or performed other household tasks and they were eager to point out the normality of men doing household work. William Davis for example, who is the family’s full-time breadwinner and whose wife is a stay at home mother for their 2 young children is in the habit of cooking dinner every night and says to think nothing of it: “My mother worked when I was growing up. I knew no different. I was always surprised when my friends’ mothers didn’t work. So my father cooked and since I am the one to cook now, it feels very normal to me, just an extension of what I’m used to.” David, who works full time and does some cooking and cleaning and who is responsible for “straightening up” at home also grew up in a household with two working parents and a sharing of tasks:

Now I have people at work who have more of a division of labor, they bring home the bacon and the wife takes care of the house and that is so 1950's in my mind. My mom always worked. I was one of the first kids where my mom left, to go to work. My dad did most of the housework, he made my lunches, he did most of the day to day cooking and he got that from his dad. His dad, my grandfather would work a third shift, wake up, cook dinner and go to work. So this division of labor goes back a few generations.
In *The Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild explained this contradiction between stated support for gender equality with unequal gender divisions of labor by distinguishing between what she called “shallow” and “deep” gender ideologies (1989: 14-17). According to her, many people’s stated gender ideology is shallow because it is contradicted by deep feelings about gender. While I also noted a clear contradiction between the professed ideals of egalitarianism and task sharing and the lived reality of these couples’ often quite traditional division of labor, both inside as well as outside the home, I never got the impression that the men in my study, did not “deeply feel” that women are equal. They admire their wives, respect their opinions and would like to see them (as well as their daughters) thrive in professional careers. Several fathers also mentioned they would welcome the extra income. Instead, I’d argue that the common use of the “language of equality” (Knudson-Martin and Ranking Mahoney 2009: 50) can be better understood as a tool to reconcile these gender dilemmas in the organization of these couples’ lives, for fathers were quite aware of their traditional gender arrangements and ultimately uncomfortable with it. As Ted explained: “No, we never sat down and discussed: ok let's have a situation where Donna is going to have three quarters of the domestic chores and I'm going to have one quarter. That is far from ideal. But that is how it evolved for discrete tasks. We do what is most practical on a case by case scenario.” And in their case, “most practical” almost always means Donna does the household chore in question, because she works fewer hours (though also full-time) and is home more than he is.

Other men also often took pains to make clear that the fact that they are the main provider for their families and do less household work than their wives is purely a function of structural
constraints and the prioritization of pragmatism over ideology in household decisions. As Josh explained of their situation:

It was not a conscious decision of ours to arrange ourselves this way, it was more an incidental decision but there is an enormous amount of work to be done in any household and having 1 partner at home actually makes it a lot easier on both. I was explaining to [their daughter] the other day that if Meghan and I both worked we wouldn't be able to do what we do on the weekends, we would not go places and do things we would go grocery shopping. Things would be a lot less interesting and we would spend a lot less time together. It allows us a lot more time together as a family, it frees us up.

This is a typical example of the narrative that can be employed to rationalize a family’s labor arrangement, which in reality is far from ideal in this case. For this family might have time to spend time together on the weekends, they are also quite strapped and Josh’s wife is only reluctantly unemployed. They rely heavily on Meghan’s parents financial support and are in dire need of a second income but Meghan, who is highly educated with a masters’ degree and experienced in various non-profit jobs, was having a difficult time finding work that would allow her to continue spending time with their special-needs child. She had been looking for work for about a year when I met them. Josh at the time was working for “a small, social justice oriented tech firm” but switched to slightly more lucrative jobs at less idealistic companies that did not align with his values as much twice during the two-year course of the study in a constant quest to bring more money into the household.

The structural realities of a lack of job opportunities in our current economic climate, the scarcity of decently-paying flexible jobs that allow for working from home or spending time with family, inequalities in pay scale for men and women and the lack of quality affordable childcare create situations like this for various other families in my study, too. While the majority of the mothers in my study do work outside of the home, they work in more part-time, less secure jobs that do not pay as well as the jobs their breadwinner husbands have. While most would prefer a
more equal sharing of wage earning, families need the health and retirement benefits that accompany demanding full time jobs so from a practical perspective this ideal does not make sense. A complicating factor is the intensive parenting style the parents in my study fully ascribe to. The absolute centrality of children, children’s well-being and happiness in the lives of my informants and the intensive techniques their parenting style requires means that outsourcing childcare becomes virtually impossible, certainly for those in the squeezed middle whose earnings are low and who cannot afford quality preschool programs.  

Only one of the twelve couples had achieved the ideal of a true partnership: an equal sharing of wage earning with both parents working full time in jobs that paid very nearly the same amount. They also shared household duties very equally both in terms of time spent doing household labor as well as in terms of the planning and organization of it. This couple is proud of their equal arrangement but their young son spends long days in daycare, their house is in a constant state of disarray and their lives have a frantic feel. They often quarrel over the mess in the house but neither has time to organize it and, because it is their shared responsibility, neither is accountable for it. They would like a second child but hesitate because of the already hectic pace of their lives and the little time they would be able to devote to this child. Michelle told me: “People say: you are good parents. Have the second child. Things will work itself out. But how? How is it going to work out? I just don’t see how it would be fair to anyone.”

In the other households, the domestic labor is not equally shared as I have pointed out, but when explaining this, too, fathers often employed the language of equality and stressed that their often rather traditional division had nothing to do with old-fashioned gender expectations nor women’s protective clinging to certain tasks (Counihan 1998) but rather were utterly logical.

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21 This also means that parenting this way is almost impossible for single parents.
divisions of labor based on objective, gender-neutral skill sets. They usually explained that each partner was simply “playing to their strengths”, using the ideology of equality to make traditional divisions seem as neutral personal choices. Even though men are spending more time than previous generations doing household labor, women continue to be the ones who do the invisible mental labor of anticipating family members needs and are the ones who keep track of schedules, homework deadlines, grocery needs, laundry piles and so on. Women also tend to be in charge of the household budget and to keep track of household spending. This invisible female labor has been well described before (Hochschild 1989; 2003; Gerson 1986; Klein et al. 2012; DeVault 1991; Counihan 1998; Miller 1998) and is a reality my own study confirms. Despite the language of equality, many women in my study do not feel they can entrust their husbands with the overall organization of household work including the budget and tend to delegate tasks to them, which then become additional jobs women have to think of, manage and keep track of.

A couple of anecdotes illustrate this well: During one late afternoon of household observations in the Tanner household, for example, Carol said loudly to her daughter, who was given her dinner early while Carol was preparing food for her and her husband: “Pretty princess, maybe you can ask your sweet daddy to cut that for you?” To me, she then added in a whisper: “He is not that helpful around the house so I tell him things to do. But he is a great litigator.” Another afternoon in the Hall household when David walked in with a bag of groceries his wife Tessa said: “Let me see the groceries. Did you get the broccoli?” Then to me: “He is quite notorious for not bringing home everything on the list”.

Sometimes, the domestic labor was organized untraditionally, but mainly because of women taking on traditionally “male” tasks, such as in the Hoffman household where the
unemployed but smart and hard-working Meghan was happy to take on any challenge that presented itself in the house. As Josh explained:

With the exception of sewing which I am really terrible at either of us is able to do most of the things around the house. Meghan is always willing to reglaze a window or to paint something so that is hugely helpful. And that might be a difference [from traditional couples], her willingness to just go and do these things. She is always like: “I’ll just learn to plaster, whatever”. I think other people get tripped up by the gender... so like, this needs to be fixed and the male partner needs to go and fix it. And I think really? Anybody can do these things. Anybody with two hands and a good set of eyes.

Much more often however, the division of jobs fell along deeply familiar and utterly predictable gender lines, despite the language of equality. Josh himself did not, for example, sew but does have the responsibility for the house’s computer maintenance, which he explains logically but uncritically: “If it is a specialization than it becomes a household job. So I get stuck with the computer maintenance because it is faster. And frankly at this point it is faster when Meghan cooks because I am not in practice as much.” Other fathers made similar statements as did some mothers. Ted said: “I take out the trash. I do the yard. She does more cleaning. It’s sort of broken down to what we can stand.” Brett explained: “It is what we are each best at. She usually does the laundry. Cooking is pretty even. Pancakes, Michelle does them. If it's grilling, I'll do it.” Cindy: “We have made the decision to play to our strengths. He likes to mow the yard. With a push mower. Seems a little ridiculous but he gets it done.” Henry: “There's things I'm really not good at and Kathy is better at. So she folds clothes better so she does that. She is more organized with getting food. She is the purchaser, going and getting it and making those choices. I take care of the garden.” Donna, who works full time and whose husband admits that she does three quarters of the household work compared to his one quarter, is also clinging to a discourse of equality and sharing even though she at the same time also literally states doing more: “I’d say
childcare is very evenly divided, I do more cleaning but he does all the kitchen cleaning. It’s pretty evenly divided. I feel I do more.”

Donna also felt she needed to stay in control of the grocery shopping: “I shop and I tell you the reason I shop is that I feel I’m better economically”. This is also a very familiar refrain. DeVault (1991) and Miller (1998) have previously described this budgetary responsibility of women, who tend to be the ones to make sure the household budget lasts through the end of the month, anticipating and budgeting for household expenses, class trips, birthday gifts and so on. This means that when men shop, they are unburdened by this budget and will often buy much more expensive food than their wives would, leaving it up to her to make up for it elsewhere.

While I have interviewed a few women whose husbands balked at the cost of organic food, most men seemed less concerned about money or the budget than their wives. This is of course one of the differences among men in different middle-class fractions. For the fathers in the tightest economic spot were painfully aware of how much they spend and need for everything, but most other fathers had little idea of how much they spend on food monthly. “We don’t have to pay attention to that”, “Between five hundred and a thousand dollars a month”, “Donna knows”. Because of this male lack of attention to food cost and willingness to pay for convenience even wives in more affluent households were reluctant to send men to the grocery store because they prefer to avoid spending money needlessly, even if they have enough of it.

The only couple who shares the responsibility for grocery shopping equally are Brett and Michelle, the couple on the tightest budget. To facilitate this sharing, they have installed a shared Wegmans app on their i-phones, which allows users to compose an electronic shopping list and will provide a running total of the items of the list. Brett and Michelle, who shop once every other week, “on payday”, can both add things to the list electronically, each from their own
phone and even scan the barcodes of products they have previously bought at Wegmans when that item runs out. The app will tell them in which isle to find the item and it will tally their estimated total cost. Brett and Michelle both use the app enthusiastically and showed it to me on several occasions. I find it interesting for their app based system plays a big role in establishing and maintaining the egalitarian sharing of household labor they strive for. In their family, not one person has the list “in her head” but instead, it is on their phones, accessible to both. They can both add to it and also take things off the list that the other may have put there. While this is a source of conflict, it also initiates constant conversations about food, shopping and their budget and keeps both engaged with these things. The app also makes the experience of shopping more of a truly shared one and ensures that both know exactly what to expect in terms of meals for the following 2 weeks, which is very modest and lacks in fresh fruits and vegetables.

A final previously documented aspect of the gender division of labor on the household level I also noticed and want to mention here is that men frequently “masculinize” jobs to better fit their personalities or preferred approach to tasks. Several of the fathers I spoke with would take an authoritative tone when explaining their and their family’s food or parenting strategies and mention being “evidence-based” or “data-driven” and of putting that character trait to work in the grocery store or kitchen, or in making parenting decisions. As William Davis explained his and his wife’s decision to delay and spread apart their children’s vaccinations: “We’re data driven, especially me as an engineer and I don't think there is enough studies going on that say it is ok that these vaccines are all bunched together. There is still a lot of research to be done, a lot of data collection. So I took all the precautions I could given the data I had.” Henry Reed looks for “studies that look legitimate and are independent” when making dietary choices.
In his article on the cooking and eating habits of a group of firefighters in New York, Jonathan Deutsch (2005) describes how these men skillfully perform traditionally female food-related tasks such as choosing health-conscious recipes, selecting groceries on a budget and cooking family-style dinners in the fire station, but feel the need to “masculinize” these tasks with the use of practical jokes and vulgar language to set themselves firmly apart from the traditional housewife. While I never observed any father using foul or misogynistic language in the kitchen, it is true that they carry out the household food tasks in different and arguably more typically masculine ways, often invoking science or applying technology to the task in a constant quest for efficiency but generally to the exasperation of their wives. A good example comes from the Reeds, where the household division of labor was in transition because Kathy had recently returned to work after four years as a stay at home mother.

As a stay at home mother, Kathy traveled a somewhat complicated shopping circuit: “I rotate between the farmers’ market for local produce, Whole Foods for organic produce and bulk stuff, Trader Joes for snacks and staples and the Shoprite for cheaper, more basic things.” She often took their toddler along to some of these places (Whole Foods and the farmers’ market) and let her pick out foods there: “the most random assortment of things you could ever imagine”, that they then later tried to incorporate into a meal together. Kathy saw this as valuable exposure and as providing lessons in decision-making and how to look for quality food, just like several other mothers I observed shopping with their children, and as I described in the previous chapter. Now, with their now 4-year-old at school whole days and with Kathy back at work, there was less time for shopping and the rest of the housework so the couple had been discussing which tasks Henry could take over. Henry, a physician, whom I interviewed separately, was already very interested and involved in the household’s food practices: he learned to garden at a young
age and started his own family’s vegetable garden and puts in a lot of time maintaining it. He and Kathy also watch critical documentaries about the food system together and even temporarily switched to a vegan diet after watching one of these, which involved learning about veganism together and trying new foods and recipes. He said to be more than willing to take on more tasks at home:

We have had conversations about the household work and buying food is something I am certainly open to doing. I have come to realize what a task it is to know, where you can get what. What is good to get at Trader Joes, what is worth the money to buy at Whole Foods, what we can get more cheaply at let's say normal grocery store. We have even talked about how great it would be to have a specialty app, we would call it like Green Moms or something like that and it would be something a company would develop and would do that food selection for you. To kind of go around and get all of those things because it's not going to be all under one roof. Really, the effort to go to four different stores to get food is a lot of work and she was the one to go and get it and make those choices. And that was clearly dictated by time, she just had the time during the day to do it. Now that she is working, she has less time and this whole process is evolving.

It then became clear however that he had no intention of shopping in this intensive way himself, nor of taking their daughter to the store with him for these shopping and food lessons, but he was instead contemplating a systems-approach to the task and to create a computer program to help them stock the house:

If I take on the grocery shopping we should be playing on our strengths and weaknesses. So I'm the guy who can make databases and excel spread sheets that could track our home as an inventory and I could set up programs that could automatically order stuff. You know, set up grocery lists that we would just plug into the computer and have it delivered on Tuesdays or whatever. I would be able to do that if it comes to that. It’s a topic of discussion that is evolving. It depends on how much Kathy’s time is dedicated to other things. It's been interesting.

This is not helpful to Kathy. While she has a husband who is willing to, not merely help with but actually take over, a big part of the household work, his approach would be to “stock the house
like an inventory”, and Kathy feels strongly that they need to select their own food. She also values involving their daughter in the process:

So I still do 95% of the shopping because if it was up to him he would just order groceries online all the time. But I like going to the grocery store. And with Denise. I like to make our own selections as opposed to some person putting it in a box and sending it to my house. But he just says, well, we don't need to go to the store so much, we can just order it online and blablabla.

This negotiation is about so much more than just the complicated process of food selection in what many consider to be an unsafe food environment. Any conflicted feelings Kathy may have had about going back to work are exacerbated by Henry’s depiction of their home, which had been the center of her life for four years, as an “inventory”. His comments can be interpreted as an under-appreciation of the painstaking food selection work she had been doing, supporting their new vegan lifestyle, often patiently with their young child in tow. On the surface, their discussion is about a division of labor and also about cost, for groceries ordered online tend to be slightly more expensive and customers are charged delivery fees and are expected to tip, but more fundamentally it is a discussion about the meaning of food, and the value of the time, care and dedication with which women feed their families. All of that is undermined with representing the home like an inventory, the food apparently just a source of nutrition, not much more than a basic need, and the activity of shopping simply a task to get out of the way or a problem to solve.

This example also illustrates another way in which the household work of fathers, especially around food and cooking, differs from mothers’ approach and that is in the orientation of the work. For mothers, their work around shopping and cooking is conducted with the rest of the family in mind, especially the likes, dislikes and needs of children. When men express and interest in or passion for food it is often for other reasons. The way that attention to others is
gendered is discussed in Sara Ruddick’s Maternal Thinking (1989) and in Hochschild’s discussions of care work (2012) and clearly confirmed by my data. During interviews, most fathers express a preference for organic, locally sourced foods, to want to avoid processed foods and some also bring up labor conditions and a desire to support small farmers as food goals. But whereas mothers generally invoke health and in particular the health of their children to explain these preferences, men are more likely to refer to science, the environment and politics. As Josh explained:

I think it [food] is an interesting subject so I try to stay involved with food decisions in the household, I don't know how much that is a gendered thing. My personal politics are also really engaged with food politics. The way that we eat has a much broader global impact, so I guess I think about it a lot, I think it is a fascinating subject so I try to stay involved in the household decisions, because that affects me and it affects my family.

Whereas his wife also cares about the environmental impact of food production and the politics of food more generally, it remains up to her to integrate these principles with the preferences of her children. As she later explained to me in an interview:

My husband doesn’t understand that for me, it is all about, are the kids going to eat it? We’ll have these conversations, he’ll say: “We need to eat more vegetarian food.” Because of the huge environmental impact of feedlots. And I’ll say: “That’s great. Who is going to eat it?”

Dan invoked science to explain why he is not opposed to genetically modified organisms (an unusual and unpopular view in Mount Airy): “I am not against GMO foods, I looked into them and it can be used for good things such as crop yields. I just wanted to make sure I had as much information about them as possible.” To his wife however, the large-scale economic benefits of GMO’s are utterly beside the point. What she emphasized was that GMO foods are often heavily treated with potentially toxic pesticides and herbicides (because the nature of the genetic modifications is often to make plants resistant to these pesticides and herbicides which
can then be used to farm more efficiently and with less labor and resulting in better crop yields) and she does not want to expose her children to these chemicals. Other mothers agree that the main problem with GMO foods is not their genetic alteration per se, but the fact that many of these crops have been heavily sprayed with potentially toxic chemicals. This then is another example of how the men in my study have a different focus, a more outward-facing orientation towards the public, the political and the large-scale, while the women in my study tended to be more turned inwards, towards the health and well-being of their own family, especially children.

While all mothers in my study go out of their way to reconcile their personal food preferences (both in terms of politics as well as taste) with their children’s nutritional health and likes and dislikes, fathers are generally much less conflicted. They buy and cook what they prefer or think is right and appear to be largely unconcerned with children’s generally highly selective food preferences. Again, this is not a new insight or revelation in the work on the household division of labor (See for example Counihan 1998; DeVault 1991; Miller 1998) but is an important reason for why feeding children often results in a third shift for women but not for men. In the case of other household tasks, too, men will often not prioritize the needs or desires of the rest of the family, such as for example doing laundry, but only their own laundry and not that of the children. It is a difference the women in my study are were very aware of and articulate clearly, such as Donna:

On Sunday he often cooks. And when he does he doesn’t have to take my likes into account because I’m so picky but he also doesn’t really take the kids likes into account enough. Like he made creamed spinach last Sunday, I’m like, come on, creamed spinach?

Even William Davis, who is the one in his household who cooks every single night even though he works full time and his wife is a stay-at-home mother, is, upon closer inspection, not responsible for actually feeding the children. To William, cooking is fun and a normal thing to
do: he grew with parents who both worked full time and in his childhood home, his father was responsible for cooking since he got home before his mother did. So he is used to this arrangement and likes to cook. William cooks well and puts together tasty, rather elaborate meals each night, often using the vegetables and herbs from his garden. On the evenings I was there he prepared trout with almond butter sauce, salad and zucchini and beef stroganoff with egg noodles and a salad another night. As I already described in the previous chapter, his children did not eat the trout dinner however and they also did not eat the stroganoff. During a subsequent interview it became clear that this is normal, that their children never eat much dinner at all and that William does not even really expect them to:

When I make dinner I know they are not going to eat it. I’m ok with that. They are part of the family and they have ownership, too and I want them to make their own decisions. As long as they understand there should be a balance to what they eat. So they can have dessert, they can have the unhealthy thing as long as they have the healthy thing that goes with it, there is the yin and the yang. So there are times when Aidan says: "I'm not going to have my dinner so I'm not going to have a treat tonight.” I’m not worried about them being hungry, they don't eat much dinner anyway, for them it is mainly about breakfast and lunch.

Not surprisingly, breakfast and lunch are the meals that their mother Lori is responsible for. So while the elaborate, balanced meals carefully prepared by William do achieve the goal of exposing children to the ideal of class appropriate quality food and omnivorous eating habits, they do not actually feed the children, which, in this family as well as all others, firmly remains their mother’s responsibility. For these children, too, mom’s food thus typically remains preferable over dad’s, which, while this can be a source of comfort and pride for women (Counihan 1999: 45), generally means more responsibility, more planning, more work and also often more frustration (Paugh and Izquierdo 2009; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013). This was confirmed in my interviews with these two parents who, when I asked them about the process of
cooking gave very different answers. William stressed the fun and creativity of cooking and Lori said that it felt less like a creative outlet than “chore-ish”.

In sum, the fathers in my study aspire to an egalitarian gender division of labor, both outside as well as inside the home, but for the most part do not achieve this, partially because of structural and practical reasons and partially because of deep-seated, sometimes subconsciously held, gender distinctions and orientations that guide their behaviors. Traditional gender distinctions tend to be in place in most of the families and compared to existing, and often much older, research on the household gender division of labor in the U.S. then, much seems to have remained the same. One difference between the fathers in my study and the men described in the established literature on the household division of labor however is their interest in food, in particular their committed investment and participation in DIY projects around food such as cooking, gardening and beer brewing, as well as the ways in which food informs their politics. Several men explained how their interest in food emerged once they had children which opened their eyes to questions of diet, health and the environment, both out of an awareness of the need for their own health and longevity as providers, as well as a concern with the health of their dependent children themselves. As William explained:

Having children made me change my ideas about me. I am no longer the priority, they are, they are the focus. I also experienced an awakening of my mortality. The closest thing to immortality in my view is my children. To realize that they will be there after I am gone, it is a different realization that made me think more about the environment, the planet. Of course you know you're mortal but before having children you don't really think about it.

And Dan said:

Having children has made me more environmentally conscious. I was always aware of the environment and my impact but younger kids are more sensitive to pollutants and things and it is a whole different thing. So I am much more aware. For example this is an old house and we were very careful with the lead paint and things like that. We also looked into vaccinations, how to do these vaccines, do they need them all? And I worry
about food, the additives, the pesticides, the environmental degradation that accompanies our conventional food production system.

However, while most fathers care deeply about food and do spend more time than before they had kids researching, sourcing or producing good food, their newfound critical knowledge of food typically does not translate into a third shift the same way it does for women. This is mainly because fathers remain not primarily responsible for the overall organization of the household, the household budget, or their children’s diet. For men, their opinions about food can translate into straightforward personal consumption preferences and decisions and not into the kinds of conflicts and dilemmas that mothers, who are often trying to achieve several conflicting goals at once, struggle with. With the exception of Brett, men also overall seem less willing to go out of their way to guide children’s eating habits, to make the sacrifices in terms of time and convenience their wives do, or trying to save a penny. In certain instances, this, as well as other discussions or negotiations about the household division of labor causes marital tension such as when Kathy can no longer do the third shift by herself and Henry refuses to shop in four different places.

Another difference between the fathers in my study and the men described in older literature on the household division of labor is that the former devote extensive amounts of time and energy to their children. Like the mothers I studied, fathers parent intensively and fully accept the notion that raising children is exhausting, time consuming and expensive. Fathers are deeply engaged in their children’s lives, spend relatively large amounts of time in child-care tasks and in particular see a critical role for themselves in the development of their children which is central to the intensive parenting style. From my conversations with fathers it became clear that they see their key parenting responsibilities as consisting of three interconnected
elements: to teach, to model and to expose. While mothers also engage in these education-like aspects of parenting, I observed it most consistently in father-child interactions. I especially observed these intensive father-child interactions around food related activities. In what follows I describe how these two domains of household work to which the men in my study are most committed; food and childcare, often conflate and inform one another.

**Parenting with food**

Central to the intensive parenting style is the notion that a child has innate talents and skills that parents and caregivers, often with the help of teachers and other knowledgeable adults, need to uncover and consciously cultivate and develop with activities and instruction. The approach stands in contrast to what Lareau (2003) calls the accomplishment of natural growth, which is based on the idea that children will develop on their own, without specific cultivation, and that parent’s role is limited to providing basic needs and instilling good manners. It is well documented that children who are raised in a household where they receive lots of hands-on instructional time, are read and talked to extensively and are frequently exposed to new experiences perform better in school and other social institutions (Lareau 2003; 2012; Ochs and Schieffelin 1994; Hays 1996). Fathers are aware of this as much as mothers are and their parenting activities of teaching, modeling and exposure should be viewed as central part of their intensive parenting approach and their full commitment to the deliberate and conscious effort to raise their children in a way they believe will allow them to maximize their potential as a human being.

Before I proceed, I want to make clear that none of the fathers in my study consider their parenting responsibilities to be *limited* to these three principles of teaching, modeling and exposure. Fathers also work hard to provide material needs, want their kids to be and stay
healthy and recognize and work with their partners to fulfill children’s additional needs for affection, safety and security. While I pay special attention to the kind of person these fathers are consciously trying to raise, after basic needs have been met, I do not intend to suggest that the fathers in my study do not have loving, affectionate relationships with their children or that they consider this aspect of parenting unimportant. On the contrary, these men have boundless love and energy for their children and a deep devotion to their happiness and well-being, which informs the decisions they make. This is one of the reasons I take issue with overtly critical interpretations of the intensive parenting style the parents in my study employ. This parenting approach has been explained as calculated efforts by parents raising children in insecure economic times to give children a “competitive edge” in the college admissions process which will ultimately help maximize their future economic success (Katz 2012) and thus contributes to the creation of new forms of inequality between children of educated, middle or upper middle-class parents and children from lower income parents who use more traditional parenting methods based on discipline and respect for authority (Katz 2012; Lareau 2003; 2012). Intensive parenting strategies have also been critiqued for producing spoiled, entitled children who remain dependent on facilitating adults for far too long, lack autonomy and problem-solving skills and who cope poorly with stress and disappointments (Nelson 2012; Segrin et al. 2013). While much of this research seems sound and I recognize the clear links between parenting style and the reproduction and growth of social inequality, critical interpretations too often overlook the positive, loving motivations of educated middle-class parents to make their children’s happiness central to their lives, as well as the joys of interacting intensively with wondrous children.

What’s more, critiques of intensive parenting also do not acknowledge the fact that parents themselves are often painfully aware of the inequalities their parenting approach works
to reinforce and reproduce. While I obviously can’t speak for the parents in Lareau’s and other studies, the Mount Airy parents I spoke with are socially engaged with issues of inequality of many kinds and this engagement informs their intensive parenting to a large extent. They explicitly aim to raise aware, socially progressive, inclusive, ethical children who value and are comfortable with diversity, who consider men and women equals, who are environmentally responsible and overall motivated to make the world a better place. As I explained, these values inform my subjects’ conscious decision to raise their children in Mount Airy for example. While a suburb might be safer with higher-performing public schools, the parents in my study specifically selected this deliberately integrated urban neighborhood with the goal of raising their children in a tolerant, racially and religiously diverse environment welcoming to all sexual orientations and family forms. In addition, where financially possible, several of my informants have also built their professional lives around issues of social justice or environmentalism. For these parents and others who have made similar personal sacrifices out of a desire to reduce social inequality, the realization that their intensive interactions with their children as well as the conscious consumption decisions they make on behalf of their children wind up reproducing the very kinds of inequality they are trying to overcome is wrenching and has the effect of strengthening their emphasis on issues of social inequality in their parenting.

The instructional role the fathers in my study have adopted begins with a deep investment in their children’s formal education. As William Davis explained: “I focus a lot on education. Education equates opportunities, also financially. It is sort of a tool belt, the more tools you have the more freedom the more opportunities you have in the future.” All fathers were very involved in the school selection process, aware of homework demands and deadlines and seemed genuinely interested in what their kids were learning at school. Children were very aware
of the value their fathers attach to their education and tend to accept their father's role in this respect. During an observational evening in the Bartley household for example, I witnessed Donna ask her boys repeatedly to start their homework during the hour and a half the three of them were home together while she was preparing dinner but they ignored her. They promptly complied however when their father came in at about a quarter to seven, and, after greeting his family immediately said: “Get your homework out of your bag and start doing it.” Even Reese, who is an outlier in the sample because of his outspoken traditional views on the household division of labor and refusal to do housework of any kind including changing diapers was very involved in his son’s education. He selected the private school his son attends, engages his son in frequent conversations about what is being taught at school, is aware of homework requirements and takes time to explain current events, science, politics and anything else that presents itself to his 9-year old son.

In addition to their emphasis on formal schooling, fathers were also committed to providing supplemental information and educational experiences. During an interview Brett brought up the thirty-million word gap, for example, the 1995 study by University of Kansas researchers Hart and Risley, which revealed that children from high-income families have heard on average thirty million more words than children from low-income families by the time they are 3 years old, which has major effects on their educational success and life outcomes. While theirs is not a high-income family, Brett very obviously made sure to use plenty of words when addressing their young son, repeating his sentences back to him with corrected grammar and explaining all his decisions and requests elaborately, which is representative for other fathers in my sample, too.
Food and food-related activities often allow for teachable moments. Familial interactions at the dinner table are an obvious example: it is often during these moments when school, homework and current events are discussed and when even young children who do not participate fully in these discussions are exposed to words and the notion of conversation. The food on the dinner table itself also allows for explicit instruction, such as when one evening I observed Josh questioning his daughter about a science project they had done together on the weekend. He had taught her the concepts liquid, gas and solid and, testing to see if she had understood and remembered, asked if she could identify these forms of matter on her plate. Fathers will sometimes discuss the food itself and for example explain to children where it or the recipe comes from or explain and quiz kids about nutritional concepts. Also at the table, parents typically model good eating habits (even if they later supplement their own diet with hidden candy and other forbidden goods), and deliberately try to expose their children to a variety of foods.

The value of exposure was broadly shared among the fathers in my study and something they invariably brought up in conversations about parenting. As Ted put it: “Broad exposure is the goal,” because it is key to a child’s self-actualization. Broad exposure to a variety of things, experiences and activities will allow parents to uncover a child’s unique set of talents and skills that they then can nurture and develop in order to make that child “the best versions of themselves they can be”. This understanding motivates a lot of the intensive parenting behavior and explains the sacrifices parents make in terms of money and time spent on finding toys and activities that engage their child. David: “They key is try to get them exposed to as much as possible and then let them make their own decisions their own mistakes, their own victories. I think the trick is trying to balance that.” As a parenting goal, broad exposure can be understood
as an attempt to manage the risks associated with an insecure future. Exposure is key precisely because these parents are raising their children in uncertain economic times. The safest thing a parent can do in this situation is thus to aim to prepare children as broadly as possible for whatever this unsure future may have in store for them. Perhaps, if children are exposed to lots of things, people, activities and ideas, that which will prove to be useful to them later on will be among them. William Davis articulated this well: “I’m not sure what kind of future I’m preparing my children for. I do realize [future success] is a little bit of luck and a lot of connections. But the more you are exposed to things the better you will be able to react to challenges.” Being able to react to challenges can also be understood as being flexible, which is a highly valued trait in today’s labor market and capitalist system characterized by flexible forms of accumulation (Harvey 1991; Martin 1995; Susser 1997).

Exposure can take the form of anything but includes and often begins with exposure to different kinds of foods. Especially with young children who are too young to enroll in activities or to cognitively grasp museums or cultural events, food is a good and affordable place to start exposing them to new experiences. Fathers clearly see the value of exposing their children to a variety of ethnic, regional, fancy, and even low-brow American food (in small doses) because they feel it exposes their children to the people and countries associated with these foods and makes them more cosmopolitan. William:

My children are definitely more worldly. Growing up in Memphis, it is not as cosmopolitan. So food is a perfect example. I did not have sushi, I did not have Thai food, not until I moved out. And my kids have been exposed to all that stuff and it creates more of a worldly feel.

Exposure to a variety of foods also teaches children class-appropriate omnivorous eating habits (Johnston and Baumann 2010) and exposure to eating out in restaurants or other people’s homes instills table manners and how to socialize around food (Bourdieu 1984). Steven:
My [two-year old] son gets exposed to the expectation of table manners at my parents’ house and when we travel and when we go out to restaurants with him. That is the way to do it. We strive for one night a week where things are more formal.

Fathers value this goal and contribute to this exposure by cooking, taking their families out to eat and by modeling broad and diverse eating habits. Additional teaching, modeling and exposure takes place around other food-related activities. Whereas more typical men’s hobbies such as watching sports, golf, fishing or going to the gym tend to take fathers away from family, the Mount Airy dads I got to know more often pursue hobbies that do not require leaving the house and which allow them to involve their children. Many of these are organized around cooking or other forms of food production. In fact, the majority of men turned to food production when they became fathers and their resources of time and money became more constrained. Josh described this transition in detail:

Before we had kids we used to go to bars a lot. A lot of our entertainment was consumption. Even though we did not have a whole lot of disposable income at the time, there was enough to do that. Now that seems incredibly wasteful. Movies, television we just did what we did to be entertained. Entertainment was the goal. There was also our education but it felt like education was for its own sake. And we were politically involved but having a child brought a new perspective. So what changed was that I got in better shape, stopped smoking, stopped doing terrible things. And with a child we were resource constrained all of a sudden, no more disposable income. And we were more time constrained and tied to the house so that was when a lot of the cooking and creative-making started. We weren't just going to go buy things, that wasn't responsible, so that meant that if we wanted to enjoy good things than we needed to figure out how they were produced and then produce them ourselves. The fermentation started around then, when our son was a year old. I had some co-workers who had done it and had been interested in it for some time. I also around that time realized, and this may sound a little odd, that I did not have a lot of substance to my life. Having a child threw into sharp relief that I

22 It is important to realize that the goal of exposing children to food creates more conflicts for mothers than for fathers because mothers remain ultimately responsible for feeding children. From my observations it became clear that for fathers, exposure can be as simple as placing a new food on their child’s plate while it is mothers who do the work of trying to get the kid to actually eat the new food, as I have described. Mothers, too, struggle more with the dilemma of wanting to instill certain class appropriate eating habits and preferences while at the same time not condemning those who don’t share them.
didn't do anything constructive with my life. All of my entertainment, all of my activity was mainly consumption-based and I thought I should learn to produce something. So I learned to make beer, which has been a lot of fun. I learned to cook better than I had, got books, tried recipes, researched things. I learned to roast coffee. That was one of the things. Which was surprisingly difficult. In the process I have come to appreciate professionals who are really good at something. I can appreciate just how difficult it is to be really good at producing something like a really good cup of coffee.

Cooking and baking bread are common, for some daily, activities in which fathers will include their children. They view these as valuable opportunities to teach them how to measure, how to use tools and how to clean up after oneself. Gardening is another example of a hobby that provides rich opportunities for spending instructional time with children, exposing them to a variety of foods and modeling desirable behavior.

Seven out of the twelve fathers in my study are avid gardeners who spent a lot of time and energy designing, setting up and maintaining their gardens and most of them strive to actively engage their children in the process, being just as likely to engage daughters in these kinds of educational experiences as sons. Henry Reed for example, while unwilling to shop in four different places, does actively involve his four-year old daughter in his vegetable garden. To him, teaching her about where food comes from is a deliberate parenting goal. He feels it is his duty as her father to teach her important things about nature, science and environmentalism and gardening allows him to address all three. In addition, the activity of gardening also presents an opportunity to teach and model the principle of finishing what you start and how to follow through on tasks. He has found creative ways to engage his daughter in the gardening process and to keep her engaged which is no small feat with a child that young:

For me, a big part [of the appeal of gardening] is doing those activities with Denise. So everything from like, we go out and search for worms together in the neighborhood and when we get them we put them in the compost to put in the garden and that's a big activity. And planting the seeds. Although she doesn't participate in all of it, she helps, she plays, she likes to water. It is a satisfying thing to be able to tell her when we're
having a tomato, this is from our garden. I am enthusiastic about that. I need to teach her that. Because otherwise how is she to know?

When children are involved in gardening, the activity can facilitate conversations about farming, the food system and the environment, teach them the qualities of patience and perseverance and has the added benefit of instilling the value of eating well. Children who are exposed to food from their own gardens can often tell the difference between that and supermarket food and their discernment and sophisticated food vocabulary is class-affirmative in the local context and a source of pride to parents. Fathers who garden play a central role in instilling these traits and skills by teaching, modeling and exposing children to healthy as well as “appropriate” eating styles and with these activities also contribute modestly to the preservation of class-appropriate levels of health and thinness.23

Another activity in which fathers involve their children is beer brewing. Like vegetables grown in a backyard garden, home brew is natural, local, free of chemicals, ethically and sustainably produced, high-quality and good tasting. These are all things that are inherently appealing to the fathers who brew, but are represent values they are interested in instilling in their children. Oddly in this American context, nobody, neither fathers nor mothers, seemed to find it the least bit problematic however that children would be taught how to produce an alcoholic beverage, or contribute to the production of alcoholic beverages for their parents. To me this signals that beer brewing is viewed mainly as a form of food production rather than associated with adult drinking. And indeed, many men who do brew beer also produce other fermented foods such as kombucha, sauerkraut, kefir or sourdough bread and approach it as a science-based food production craft. As Josh said during a meeting of the brew club: “Brewing is

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23 Their contribution to preserving health and thinness is modest because, again, it tends to remain up to mothers to manage children’s actual intake of these foods.
a combination of food, dork and science and that is all I want in life.” According to Ron Murphy, another member of the brew club, one of the big appeals of brewing to the young fathers in this brew club is the very fact that it can be combined with family life.

It is a home activity. It's called home brewing for a reason, you're home. It doesn't draw away your time as much and keeps you local. And it's an easy enough activity too where it doesn't require a lot of your attention. So for dads, you're stuck home with the kids anyway and this gives you something to do because the kids need more attention than the beer does. Once it's going it's going, you don't have to monitor it the whole time. So for a lot of the guys, once they have kids, they are now stuck at home and it gives them something fun and interesting to do while they are at home.

While several men jointly buy and share equipment and brew and bottle in each other’s basements to pool resources of time and labor and thus do occasionally leave the family home for their hobby, several shared Ron’s view that it is a hobby which combines nicely with the responsibility for dependent children. In their opinion, home brewing does not need to conflict with the intensive parenting style and even creates additional opportunities for intensive interactions with children. Steven is a father who involves his young children, ages four and seven, in the beer brewing process. Using the technical inside language of brewing, he explained during an interview that he does not like to use malt extracts but does all-grain brewing instead, which takes more time. From start to finish it takes 6 hours to get a batch done and if it is on a weekend he will have the responsibility for the children at least part of that time while his wife, who works full time during the week, does yoga or goes out for a run. It is on days like these when he tries to involve the kids in the process:

I have them help me take the grains and pour them into the grinder and crush them up and dump it all into the mash ton and when that's done they like to scoop it out and put it in bags. Other guys involve their kids in brewing to some extent, too. It’s good, the kids are working with the grains, it is teaching them something; here is what we're doing with these grains, we crush them and put the hot water in to let it soak and to get all the wort and all the enzymes out of it.
He also laughingly described a time during which his then three-year old son turned the spigot on his brew kettle and several gallons of beer poured out over his kitchen floor. It would obviously be much more efficient and less messy to simply put the children in front of a TV while brewing but this is not an idea that ever seems to occur to Mount Airy parents. The intensive parenting norm is so ingrained in this community that an alternative, less intensive, less interactive approach to the children is simply out of the question for fathers and mothers alike. By engaging their children in their brewing hobby, Steven and other fathers gain an opportunity to interact intensively with their children, to teach them scientific concepts and procedures as well as project management, to model learning, which the process for many home brewers still is, and to expose them to the ideal of locally produced food. Home brewing also offers several additional advantages to the men and their families, which I outline in the end of the chapter. I do have to note here, however, the significant difference between involving children in an adult activity such as beer brewing and involving them in activities that are specifically designed with the child in mind such as children’s music or gym classes or simply playing children’s games. Not surprisingly, it is more typically mothers who initiate and engage in expressly child-centered activities whereas fathers appear to be more likely to find ways in which to engage children in activities they themselves are interested in. This is another example of the often routine female attention to others writers on maternity have noted previously (Ruddick 1989; Hochschild 2012).

Concluding this section, from interviews it became clear that fathers are unsure of what kind of future they are preparing their children for but strive to raise ethical individuals with a range of options. A strong focus on education, a critical awareness of their role as models of appropriate and desirable behavior and the striving to expose children broadly are all part of this goal. I have shown how often, the two main areas of male household involvement; food and
parenting, conflate, for food and food related activities often provide good parenting opportunities: they allow for hands-on instruction and the modeling of values such as environmentalism, the prioritization of health, hard work and persistence. Food can also be used as an avenue for exposure. While fathers in the squeezed middle spend more time on food production, affluent fathers also spend time on cooking and gardening and the articulated food and parenting goals of the fathers in my study and the extent to which they manage to meet these goals are very similar and do not seem to vary significantly by their financial situation.

However, the ability and ease with which to engage intensively with children, to educate them, to expose them to a wide variety of people, things and experiences and to model desirable behaviors is closely connected to resources of money and time and there are clear inequalities between the two groups of fathers in this respect. More affluent fathers are better able and more likely to satisfy some of the intensive parenting demands in the marketplace with their ability to afford an excellent private school and things like violin lessons, stimulating summer camps or international travel. These things not only buy fathers enriching experiences for their children but also a little peace of mind with the assuring knowledge that their children are being appropriately educated, engaged and prepared. Though these fathers do not by any means outsource their reproductive work to paid professionals completely and prioritize making time for intensive interactions with their children, they do ultimately have an easier time achieving their food and parenting goals. For fathers in more squeezed situations need to devise quality educational and horizon-broadening experiences for their children on their own, with limited funds and in addition to their work demands.

Another form of inequality between squeezed and affluent fathers exists in the coherence of the messages they are able to send their children. While all fathers were very aware of their
great influence on their children as role models and often consciously tried to model behaviors that confirm what they intend to teach and instill, several fathers, especially those on the tightest budgets, frequently found themselves thwarted by limiting, structural realities of time and money and realize that they are ultimately not in full control over their reproductive work. This aspect of parenting has not received much scholarly attention, but constitutes a hidden arena where clear and painful contradictions exist between fathers in different middle-class fractions and it is to these contradictions in the daily lives of fathers I turn next.

**Raising children, reconciling messages**

An interesting observation I made during the time spent with fathers was that not one of them seemed to play sports with their kids. I also noticed that the fathers in my study never seem to watch sports, though they do try to exercise for health and weight reasons, mostly by biking. This could be partially a function of the generally young age of the children of the families in my study and the time pressures these families are under, but can also be understood as an indication of the type of man these fathers are or aspire to be. For the men in my study, all products of liberal arts colleges and politically left, aspire to a particular kind of modern masculinity and want to be not just husbands but feminist, work sharing husbands, not just fathers but intensive involved fathers, not just workers but ethical, socially responsible workers, not just homeowners but urban homeowners in a diverse setting and so on. While several scholars have concluded that fatherhood is inextricably intertwined with breadwinning (Broughton and Walton 2006; Gerson 1986; Lamont 2000; Townsend 2002) many of the men in my study are rather uncomfortable with their traditional breadwinner role because of its association with a traditional kind of masculinity they philosophically reject. All fathers I spoke with would much prefer a more equal sharing of responsibilities and some also explained that this would be a more consistent message
to send their children, especially daughters whom they are explicitly raising to be educated, confident and independent women. However, with a family comes the huge responsibility to “keep necessity at bay, put food on the table and keep a roof over ones head” (Lamont 2000: 30) which is a responsibility that trumps other ideals or preferences and for most couples, the breadwinner arrangement simply makes most sense financially and practically (as my observations of the couple who do organize themselves equally also confirm). This contradiction, between the professed ideal of gender equality and the lived reality of the traditional male breadwinner model, is one all but one father in my study present to their wives and children daily.

However, more affluent breadwinner fathers receive a sizeable salary in return, which enables them to selectively choose living- and schooling environments for their children that affirm or re-inscribe their strong belief in gender equality as well as other values that align with their liberal politics and parenting goals. One father explained:

Our kids go to the Waldorf school. It’s a small school. People are generally like minded. It is nice because you know that when our kids go to a friend’s house that those parents have a similar set of beliefs. Including beliefs surrounding food. They are not going to shove Perdue chicken at my kids, they are going to get something a little better.

In addition, while they may be conflicted about this, breadwinner fathers in lucrative careers can at least enjoy the satisfaction of providing well for their families. All also say to find their work itself rewarding, which means they can confidently model to their children the value of persevering in a good education.

By contrast, the political ideals and parenting goals of the more precariously situated fathers are often undermined by the economic reality in which they are trying to keep their families afloat. For the fathers in the squeezed middle are also living breadwinner lifestyles and
work a lot but do not earn enough to similarly cherry-pick neighborhood- and educational environments for their children. Though only one of these families sends their children to a local charter school, the private schools that this group can afford are less exclusive than those the more affluent children attend and while this has the benefit of higher exposure to more real diversity, it also increases the parenting pressures and work they and their wives must do at home to offset some of the ideas and products their children are exposed to at these more diverse schools. In addition, fathers in the squeezed middle tend to find less satisfaction in their breadwinner role because they are in fact not adequately providing for their families, despite working full time jobs. And they often also can’t find comfort in the notion that they are modeling the value of a good education and teaching their kids that they can be whomever they want to be, because the majority of the squeezed fathers dislike their jobs despite majoring in their favorite subject and pursuing advanced degrees and are in effect modeling what happens when you do not rigorously prepare yourself for a profitable career. In addition to the frustrating reality of being forced in a breadwinner role without significant material benefits and the mixed message they are sending their kids, fathers in the squeezed middle are also aware of the paradoxical fact that the less money they make, the more work their wives have to do at home in order to uphold their class appropriate lifestyle and consumption pattern, thus strengthening the very gender division of labor they would prefer to move away from.

The financial and practical pressure on men to fulfill the breadwinner role does mean that the women in my study have more freedom to pursue interests and jobs and careers that they are passionate about and that are more personally fulfilling and enjoyable. Though several women do not work or are looking for work, the ones who do have jobs that are gratifying on some level: one mother, who cares deeply about urban politics and urban education works as a school teacher
in a low-income Philadelphia neighborhood, another mom who is equally invested in urban poverty works as a librarian for the city of Philadelphia in that same low-income area, another is a contractor and buys, restores and sells properties in her native South Philadelphia, another is working on a doctorate degree. Not only do all of these women have more freedom in pursuing issues that motivates them, they also get to model doing socially activist work to their children and get to practice what they preach. The fact that these jobs do not pay enough to support the family is not something young children are aware of and thus does not constitute a contradiction or at least not yet.

All of this is well illustrated by David’s trajectory of professional decisions. Before David and Cindy got married and had children, David was a full time musician in a band and Cindy was working as a researcher’s assistant but planning to leave that job and contemplating what to do next. “We knew Cindy was either going to work in adult education, which pays very little, or go back to school, which pays even less.” They also knew they wanted children and in that scenario of having children with a woman earning little to nothing, playing music full time no longer made sense, so David quit the band. After traveling together for 6 months David simply took the best-paying job he could find with health benefits and Cindy went to graduate school. As David explained:

I just wanted to get a job. Cindy was going back to school, so I was like, I'll try to be the breadwinner for a while. I did look into some other work that aligned a little bit more with my interests such as non-profit work and I did a fair amount of applying in that field and was offered one or two positions but by then she was pregnant and I was worried about the finances, the health insurance, [my current employer] provides a lot of that.

It is hard. We are trying to be a family that finds ways to do things that we like in our lives. I recognize that for her, with school, well, of course it's also a career but it is a career which is defined by things she is really interested in, which is not the type of career I ever had. I just went to work and found myself in this career and it's good for now, it meets a lot of needs so that's what I do. But I don't get excited about it. There is definitely times when I resent Cindy's work. I want it over and I want more income in the
house. But when I step back from that I am really excited for her and proud of her and I want her to do this stuff.

In fact, with the arrival of the children David no longer does anything he likes to do, which is illustrative of several other men in my sample, too:

It’s too hard time-wise. After the first one was born we had Friday night friends night when one of us would go out. We would try to keep some independent stuff. We both played music in our lives and tried to keep that going and I played soccer and tried to keep that going. But after the second one was born it went out the window. When the night comes around it's very hard to leave. Cindy just can't be away from the baby for that many hours, certainly not at night [because she breast feeds].

Another contradiction fathers in the squeezed middle contend with more than more affluent fathers is that between the professed value of diversity and the reality of being exposed to true diversity, especially socio-economic diversity. While all fathers said to aim to expose their children to as much diversity as possible, broadly conceived to include diverse experiences as well as people, and carefully selected their children’s neighborhood- and school environments with the criteria of diversity on the forefront of their minds, this parenting goal becomes much trickier when children are actually confronted with low-income people and their often quite different norms and behaviors.

As I explained in the previous chapter, mothers who are priced out of the alternative food market face this contradiction when shopping with children in the local, diverse, affordable supermarket and children are made aware of the conventional, processed food their neighbors are buying. Fathers, regardless of income, tend not to grocery shop with children but are also at times confronted with behaviors from people whose presence they say to value but that go against their parenting goals. An example comes from an interview with William Davis, who is not squeezed but does live across the street from the local public elementary school, which, because of the city of Philadelphia’s redistricting efforts dating to the seventies, draws its
students mostly from nearby impoverished Germantown (Perkiss 2014). During interactions William consistently emphasized exposure to diversity as a parenting goal (with his elaborate meals, for example) and as a positive facet of his children’s childhood and a positive difference with his own:

My children's childhood is very different from mine. It’s better, they are exposed to a lot more things, a lot more diversity than I was growing up. This is principally a function of where we are, we are in Philadelphia here, there is much more diversity and I think it is also a sign of the times. My children see the Henry school kids walk by here, for example, every day.

But while he theoretically considers the walking by of black public school kids a good and positive part of his young children’s lives24, he also mentioned how they are noisy and loud, do not obey traffic rules and throw trash and wrappers in his carefully designed and maintained flower garden out front, thus suggesting how this exposure has the unintended consequence of affirming difference rather than leading to the desired sense of integration.

William is the only affluent parent who lives in the part of West Mount Airy that is near the school and the Co-op. It is considered a desirable part of the neighborhood but the houses in that section tend to be small and the rest of the affluent families live in other parts of West Mount Airy, in large stone homes that are spread apart and set back from the street, where their wealth allows them a level of geographical insulation. Though these families live furthest away from the public schools and the less affluent, more black parts of Mount Airy, they can conceptually retain the image of living in an integrated neighborhood because of the presence of well-off black families there, as well as the tenacious, well marketed image of West Mount Airy

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24 Apparently not aware of how limited that passive kind of exposure to diversity is. In this, he is far from alone, other parents, too, seem to think that simply putting children in the presence of others will teach them something valuable and I documented no instances of parents actively instructing children in cultural sensitivity or encouraging or facilitating direct, personal interactions between their children and those from lower income backgrounds.
as successfully integrated neighborhood, described in Chapter 3. This means more affluent parents, mothers and fathers alike, physically more removed from the less picturesque parts of Mount Airy, have an easier time constructing a coherent narrative for their children about diversity and tolerance and do not typically have to do the parenting work of reconciling the professed principle of the value of diversity with the confrontation with undesirable behavior more typical of depressed urban areas like described by William, above.

More squeezed parents do live in the less desirable, more black and low income parts of the neighborhood and while this is a source of pride, it also means being confronted with people smoking and cursing, jaywalking, buying junk food and littering. While generally very careful not to say negative things about their immediate neighbors and certainly not while being interviewed, the parents in my study would occasionally make spontaneous comments about these things they observed in their part of the neighborhood. Courtney, for example, who works tirelessly in her elaborate vegetable garden one evening hesitantly said: “I know gardening is a question of time and money and many people simply don’t have that but … I also think they just … don’t care.” For she herself also does not have much time and certainly no money to spare, yet does prioritize the growing of organic food and does find the time and the resources to eat a healthy diet and can ultimately not really understand why other people would not want to do the same for themselves and their children and rely on cheap convenient food instead.

In sum, though in terms of responsibilities, goals, tasks and time spent with children, the socially reproductive work performed by fathers in different fractions of the middle class is not dramatically different, two forms of inequality do emerge clearly from my observations: The first form of inequality exists in the ease with which fathers are able to provide their children with quality education and experiences. Just as the more affluent mothers can employ their spending
power to assuage some of their insecurities about food by letting their children freely choose food in a “safe” environment like Whole Foods, more affluent fathers have the means to alleviate some of their insecurities about the futures of their children by paying for elite schools and stimulating extra-curricular activities. Another area of differentiation between fathers in various structural positions exists in the internal coherence of the messages they aim to confer to their children with the three interconnected parenting goals of teaching, modeling and exposing. Fathers of means are able to present a coherent picture to their children, modeling the value of investing in a good education and contributing to that education with broad exposure to a variety of things that do not contradict their politics or parenting goals. Fathers in the squeezed middle who are unhappy breadwinners are not modeling the value of a good education as well and more frequently run the danger of exposing their children to ideas and behaviors which contradict that which they are trying to teach and instill. At the same time, as I will show in the next and final section of this chapter, the predicament of fathers in the squeezed middle, whose wages or chosen line of work do not instill a sense of security, has led them to the construction of alternative means of providing, including the formation of social networks of friends and neighbors that support them and their families in various ways. In what follows, I describe some of these networks that men of fewer means have worked to construct, in particular the brew club.

**Social networks and the brew club**

When children are involved it changes things. It makes you less centrally focused. When it was just Meghan and I it was very much like we do things because we want to do them together or go off separately. With children we are more into the small community. — Josh Hoffman

In his account of the rise of the 19th century society, characterized by emerging capitalism, increasing privatization and a new class system, Hobsbawm describes the increasing isolation of
the 19th century bourgeois family, which, as that society’s new basic unit of property and business enterprise, also became bourgeois society’s basic social unit (1997 [1975]: 277). He contrasts this privatized bourgeois family unit of the industrial age with the family system of the old regime, whose duties to itself and the community were intertwined. Even though, obviously, all participating families in my study are firmly entrenched in the capitalist system and live in a nuclear family system part of which is even often still patriarchally organized, I discovered some parallels between Hobsbawm’s description of the two family systems’ orientation towards and use of the community and the two groups of families I got to know.

For one of the first things I noticed about the family organization of my participants was that the wealthier informants tend to organize their household purely on their own, as husband and wife team, and tackle logistical or organizational problems with their spending power in the marketplace, without the use of a social network. While they have networks for socializing and fun, as well as for the exchange of information, they do not ask the members of their network to help them with resources or the reproductive work of caring for children, providing food, transportation or other family needs. In contrast, the parents in my study who are restricted to a small budget often turn to collective networks for support with their reproductive work, relying more on both Mount Airy’s established neighborhood collectives such as the babysitting Co-op, as well as their own informal community networks. The more squeezed families in my study also rely more on their parents for either financial or practical support. The principal reason for this is economic necessity: they simply cannot afford to buy the solutions to all their family’s needs. This greater engagement with the local community is facilitated by their physical location in a part of the neighborhood that is perhaps more akin to working class urban communities, where they live in houses that are placed close together rather than set back and spread apart like the
homes of the affluent, and where parents and children are able to easily move back and forth between neighboring homes and gardens\textsuperscript{25}.

In the literature on class and household organization, the value (as well as pitfalls) of social support networks has been well documented. It has been recognized that working class and poor households need to construct networks of care to bolster them and to help get them through periods of scarcity. In particular, the work poor women of color do in the structuring and maintaining of these kinds of networks has been well described (Stack 1974; Hill-Collins 1990; di Leonardo 1987). With their work, these and other scholars have drawn attention to the important links between motherhood and community relationships, showing how domestic labor and responsibility are located both within and between households as well as between households and the larger community setting. These are arrangements I also documented among the squeezed white mothers in my study. I noticed, for example, that their children are able to roam more freely by themselves in their part of the neighborhood, which is made possible and facilitated by the local network of mothers who accept a shared responsibility for the neighborhood kids.

Here, I discuss the role of fathers in the construction and maintenance of the networks that anchor their families. While this not a set of activities commonly associated with fatherhood (but see Hansen 2004) I have found that several fathers rely on community networks to help them meet the responsibilities of providing for their families in a time of economic insecurity, in particular networks organized around the sharing of food. Their financial predicament, paired with their non-traditional, perhaps more modern form of masculinity and great interest in food

\textsuperscript{25} It could also be argued that the ways these families get around contributes to a greater sense of community, for they more often than the wealthy families rely on public transportation to get to and from work and school, which contributes to daily social interaction with a variety of people that people driving alone in cars miss out on.
and food production techniques have made it culturally possible for these men to reach out beyond the confines of the household and play this anchoring role by accepting help from a larger circle of people. In addition, food production and food sharing (especially beer) constitutes a pleasurable, affordable hobby that offers sensory, class appropriate enjoyment in a life characterized by deprivation that may also aid in coping with the pressures that accompany the great responsibility for the material well-being of their families. In the next, concluding, chapter I explain how these shared (re) productive activities of the men and women in my study passionate about food and parenting could potentially be understood as emerging acts of resistance against the hold capitalism has over their reproductive lives (Federici 2012: 101; Gibson-Graham 1996) but for the moment I will concentrate on my ethnographic data on local networks used and supported by fathers, paying special attention to the benefits of their participation in the brew club.

As I have described, Mount Airy has a long cooperative tradition, so part of the neighborhood’s sense of community and sharing mentality predates the families who currently live here. Weavers Way Co-op is probably the best known example, but there are several other neighborhood networks, some dating back to the 1950’s, that today’s parents can tap into. Examples include the babysitting cooperative I already mentioned, which is a community network of parents, though in practice mainly mothers, that provides its members with mutual childcare in a reciprocal way, without the exchange of money. It just celebrated its 40th anniversary and was featured in a small local newspaper where parents are quoted as saying it functions as “the village we all need” and “parents supporting parents” (Another example is Tot Lot, a similarly free, half-day outdoor summer camp at a local playground for toddlers between the ages of 2 and 5 run cooperatively in shifts by the parents whose children attend. Another is
the very active Mount Airy Parents Network list serve, or MAPN, to which over a thousand local parents subscribe (and where I recruited the majority of my informants). It is used for the announcement of neighborhood events, for locating and reviewing local services and specialists such as contractors, landscapers, accountants, doctors, dentists, therapists and so forth, and also for material needs: local parents use the list to send “curb alerts” if they have disposed of things such as furniture, kitchenware, children’s clothing, books or toys or offer these for a small fee to the members of the community. Conversely, list subscribers frequently ask for things they need on the MAPN. While the majority of messages on the MAPN are posted by women, most fathers in my squeezed group of research participants also read the daily emails from the list serve, offering help where able and using the network for information and small material needs.

This is what Brett did when his three-year old son expressed an interest in playing with water. Brett does not have excess income to spend on toys but when his son enthusiastically started experimenting with water on their porch, Brett decided he wanted to give him a water table. He considers playing with water, creating streams, flows, waterfalls and filling buckets and so on a good, wholesome and instructional form of play and was feeling pressure to provide his son with this toy. Following Townsend (2002) and Broughton and Walton (2006), “extras” like these that fathers feel pressured to give their children are part of the American paternal provider role, as well as symbolic expressions of highly valued emotional closeness with children. But this dedicated father did not feel he could spare or justify spending the forty or so dollars a new water table would cost, partly also because these are made out of plastic and are not the tasteful toys he would prefer to spend his money on (Pugh 2009), so he put a request on the Mount Airy Parents Network list serve asking if anybody had one they would be willing to part with. He was successful: a neighborhood mom whose children had outgrown their water table responded and
he picked it up for free from her front porch (the first time the mom had forgotten to place it there so it required two trips and several email exchanges). It did have “a wonky leg” but Brett, who is quite handy, was able to stabilize the table and give his son a new toy; fulfilling his provider role and expressing his love and closeness by turning to the network instead of by spending money (though the process did require resources of time and patience as well as organizational and technical skills).

The responsibility for domestic life also involves relationships between households and other social institutions (Doucet 2000; 2006). I discovered some instances where fathers play a role in the construction of networks around their children’s school, for example in the social scene around the bus stop, which is an additional way in which fathers are involved in supporting their child’s education. Fathers realize success in school is not limited to academics and play an active role in paving the way for their child’s social success, too by investing in a social network of parents and kids. For example, though he says to dread it, Reese walks his son to the bus stop each morning and hangs out and talks with the other fathers and mothers on the block. He was there when an incident on the school bus occurred; an older child had made fun of and pushed a second grader, and he was the one to mobilize the network to verbally intervene on behalf of the second grader and other neighborhood kids who had similar experiences. This is another small example of how men can rely on community networks to help them fulfil traditional paternal responsibilities, in this case that of protection (Townsend 2002). The incident also provides an example of how the typical Mount Airy male is much more likely to take a non-confrontational, consensus-based communal approach to a conflict situation rather than relying on a more traditional masculine forcefulness towards the offending child, the bus driver or the school administration.
For three men in my study, a particular fruitful avenue for community building and network construction has been home beer brewing, an activity they turned to once they became fathers. Though two of these men already knew each other from picking up their CSA shares in the neighborhood, the connection to the third guy was established at the brew club. The brew club is a monthly gathering of home beer brewers at the Malt House, which is a home brew supply store in Mount Airy which opened in 2012. Members bring a sample of one of their home brews to the meeting, which is usually organized around a particular thematic beer style (though members may bring anything), for the other members to taste and discuss. As the owner and several additional brewers I know mentioned, male friendships are frequently formed or strengthened in this social space.

I attended one of the brew club meetings on the invitation of one of the fathers in the study in February of 2014. A responsible man, he walked the 20 minutes from his house in pouring rain, carrying his growlers of beer, because he didn’t want to drive home under the influence. There were about 12 men in attendance and no other women besides me, though according to the men I spoke with a couple of women do sometimes come. When I asked further about what seemed to me the strongly (white, heterosexual) male character of the gathering, several men again turned to the language of equality (Knudson-Martin and Ranking Mahoney 2009: 50) to emphatically stress how much they welcome women to the home brew club. At the same time, they were quick to point out the differences between male and female beers and

26 Though I questioned this welcoming attitude on several occasions, imagining that for these mostly married men, drinking with a group of guys might be more fun and relaxing than in mixed company, the men I asked about this did genuinely seem to be comfortable with the idea of women joining the brew club. I later realized that it’s precisely the solidly male character of the brew club that makes the occasional presence of a couple of women not fundamentally challenge its “boy’s club” feel and that the presence of women actually provides a sense of comfort because it confirms these men’s liberal, inclusive and feminist political image of themselves.
brewing style. Several men explained that women are more creative and make more interesting beers with more flavorful styles, using more ingredients including untraditional ingredients, such as different kinds of fruit. They also seemed to agree that women have more refined palettes and taste things in beer that men can’t detect. And that women treat beer brewing as a form of cooking “like a cake, or a stew”, as compared to men for whom brewing “is a science equation to solve.” Ron acknowledged the sexism that exists in beer culture but stressed that in the brew club:

There is no attitude of like, women can't do this or whatever. Most home brewers, when they do meet a woman who homebrews think this is very cool because it is such a rare thing. It is a very rare thing. And generally the women who do do it are pretty comfortable with themselves. But the root of it lies in this very traditional mentality that beer is a man's drink, you know. Women drink wine. Though this is obviously changing.

The tasting, in the backroom of the brew supply store, got underway immediately. It was mostly congenial and everybody was friendly, but the gathering did have a slightly competitive aspect to it. One by one, each Brewer was put on the spot and invited to describe their beer and any new or notable techniques or ingredients used before each member poured himself a sample in the glasses provided by the owner of the store. Part of the competitive aspect was expressed by the tendency of club members to pour themselves smaller amounts of the beers brewed by novice brewers and more of the beers brewed by more experienced club members. Members around the room then took turns commenting on the beer, sometimes critically, and asking questions. It is a little exposing and for the more junior brewers I am sure a slightly nerve-wracking experience. I also think my unexpected presence initially contributed to the discomfort of some of the attending men though that feeling seemed to fade as the evening wore on and the palliative qualities of the alcohol in the brews we were tasting started taking effect.
Much of the conversation revolved around beer but as the evening progressed conversations shifted to a host of topics including politics and the news, neighborhood events and as well as family life and parenting stories. Though the home brewers range somewhat in age and not all have children, this topic of conversation is one many of the brew club members can participate in. It is further promoted and facilitated by the fact that the owner of the store takes care of his infant daughter in the store during the day. This means there is a crib in the corner of the tasting room and on the counter next to the sink baby bottles, nipples and pacifiers lie among the bottle caps, openers, funnels, tubes and other beer brewing paraphernalia, which serve as physical reminders of children, fatherhood and the demands of family life. The owner’s daughter was born a year after he opened the brew supply store and while his wife works full time and earns decent money and the shop generates some income, they could not afford full time day care for the baby nor staff to run the store, which is how they arrived at this arrangement. He explained it has worked out well:

When she was real little it was easy, all I needed was a blanket and some toys and she would just lay there and hang out. Customers are usually surprised at first but usually pretty positive, everybody likes babies and kids and stuff like that and she is very easy going and she is a very happy baby so it’s not like they come in and there is this screaming crying kid. Although that does happen sometimes and I think oh god these poor people have to sit here and listen to her fuss. But for the most time people just say oh how cute, a baby, how old is she and stuff like that. A lot of my customers have kids so when they come in and they have their kids with them they can hang out together and play with the toys I have kicking around. I have learned to not put the toys away when my daughter is not here because they distract my customer’s kids when they ask me about their latest beer recipe.

This arrangement, the fact that many of the home brewers feel comfortable and are able to bring their children along to the brew supply store and the topic of conversation during beer tasting all underscore and confirm the easy combination of beer brewing and fatherhood and family life. These are not two domains that fathers strive to keep separate but conflate and inform one
another in various ways. Several men also mentioned for example that they had received valuable advice as well as material things from the other fathers in the group; clear benefits of the social network they have created around beer brewing. One father explained: “Most of my parenting advice I’ve gotten from guys in the home brew club. When my wife and I got pregnant I got tips, a bunch of baby stuff was giving to me by guys from the home brew club, things they didn't need anymore.” And another father mentioned:

The woman who watches my daughter, I got her name from somebody in the home brew club. The club is one of my resources for that because many of these guys are parents. And the one who got me the name of the woman who now watches my daughter, I know him, I know he is a good person and I know his kids and they seem well adjusted so that was a good recommendation, that was definitely a benefit to me.

This is one example of how father’s membership in the brew club offers clear benefits to the whole family, including material benefits. Ron: “Brew club is mostly about the guys but there are ancillary benefits. Like with any social network. Parents are going to meet a group of other parents via the home brew club and all the advantages that comes with that, yes.”

Additional benefits stem from beer events that the home brewers organize in addition to the monthly tasting at the Malt House. Several smaller groups of men I know get together every other weekend and sometimes more to brew, share food and socialize and their wives and children are often included. Three fathers who do so of are the ones in my study, and from the neighborhood I know two other groups of brewers who do the same. For the three men in my study it began when they outgrew their basic home brewing starter kit (which, interestingly, their wives bought for them) and became more accomplished and adventuresome home brewers. With money tight, they decided to pool funds to jointly buy additional, larger, more expensive brewing equipment such as pots, kettles, kegs, barrels and pumps, the use of which they then share. They also pool resources of time and knowledge and get together about once a week to brew in each
other’s basements. Unlike the monthly tasting at the Malt House, these events often also gather together the rest of the families. For example, during one of the evenings I spent observing in the Hoffman household, dinner turned into an impromptu potluck dinner for all the members of the three families because the men had arranged to spend the evening washing and sterilizing beer bottles and to bottle the batch of beer they had brewed together in Josh’s basement. For these three families, sharing dinner appeared to be a routine event with neighbors walking into the house with hot dishes of food, straight to the oven as if it was their own kitchen, without knocking or ringing the doorbell and all the children playing together easily. Ron also described how male-initiated beer brewing events typically turn into communal food feasts for much larger groups of people:

Once people get into brewing it almost always at some point turns into an outdoor activity. Guys expand and will get a big burner and they do it out in their backyard or their garage or their driveway or whatever. And so it is a naturally conducive thing to then also have a grill going. You've got the burner going for the beer, you’re standing around, why not have a grill with some food? So it's real common for the guys in the club to have a beer-barbeque, they are brewing beer and having a barbecue at the same time and are sharing food with all the other families. That’s what happens with this type of food making. Most people prepare food in their kitchens, but the beer brewers are special, they are getting into production. It is a form of manufacturing. And part of it is the scale, you are producing more than you can consume. Like if you are making sauerkraut, which a lot of the guys do, you are not going to make just a little bit of sauerkraut, you are going to make **five pounds** of sauerkraut and now you have all these jars, or a bucket, of sauerkraut because if you are going through all that time and effort you might as well make a bunch of it and then well, you better grill some sausages and start handing it out…

Though he and others I asked pointed out that social food sharing events like these are not really about reducing the cost of eating well, especially not when the time spent producing this

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27 Events like these feel very similar to the strawberry festival Meghan described in chapter 4, but remember that that came about out of a concern with the health of her child, who would not eat fruit so she tried to make fruit-eating more attractive to him. In contrast, these beer-barbeques are organized in the first place to entertain the men.
food is factored in, similar local, organic, craft food in a restaurant-setting can be quite expensive. For the food (including the beer) that these skilled do-it-yourselfers make and share is good, high quality food. The potluck dinner I shared for example, consisting of a chicken and rice dish, a chicken pot pie with garden vegetables, Brussels sprouts, collard greens, potatoes, a loaf of bread, carrot cake and beer was delicious, healthful and all homemade. In addition, these collaborative events with good food that gather whole families of like-minded people are cost-saving in another way, for they fulfil a social need that young parents then not have to fulfill elsewhere for a fee and prevents them from spending money in restaurants or bars and on babysitters. As Brett said: “It is not about money. It's a combination of the quality factor, the freshness, the locally grown, which goes along with the quality and the sense of satisfaction that comes from making something yourself and sharing that. Here is my sauerkraut, try it. I made it.” The owner of the Malt House recognized this, too:

There is value in the social aspect [of brewing]. You can bring it to parties and a lot of my brewers are dads and brewing is a social outlet. Once you get married and have kids you don't have as much free time and you can't go out and do all the things you used to. So with this there is this social network and it's nice because they've got kids, too and you get together and you bring the kids over and you have dinner and everybody brings their homemade beer so instead of going out to the bar where you would be spending money you are going over to one of the guys in the home brew club and you meet other people who have that same hobby as you. So there is a huge social aspect to it.

And Josh explained why his wife is so supportive of his time spent brewing:

Meghan recognizes that she gets a clear benefit from it. Though it is something I really enjoy she also knows that my work is often really stressful. So the fact that it is a good stress relief helps, it is also extremely convenient because a lot of our social interactions involve going to people's houses for dinner or having them here and it is just a very nice... you can always bring it, it is always something you can offer, it uncomplicates things.

In all, the system of mutual obligations (Mauss 1925) that organizes the frequent sharing of home-made food and drink among this group of families, often initiated by the male members of these families who joined resources in order to affordably produce beer, has led to the creation of
community relationships and functional ties between families in difficult financial situations. In addition to the exchange of information and expertise, tools, space, time and the labor needed for the production of food and beer, this network also facilitates the exchange of other forms of information and material things parents need. On top of that, it fulfills their need for sociality and connection and roots their children into the community they have so carefully chosen.

What’s more, the high quality, sophistication and great taste of the food and drink these people jointly produce, consume and feed to their children works to affirm class membership and identity at a time when other, material signals of class status have become out of reach. The politically and environmentally just nature of this food, produced locally, sustainably and without labor exploitation is similarly distinctive and affirming of the particular white, liberal middle-class identity that characterizes Mount Airy, as described in Chapter 3. The distinctive nature of this food is not, in typical American fashion, something the study participants tend to bring up but becomes apparent from statements like these from Meghan: “The justification [of our efforts] is that the food we make tastes better, but I think that we also like the approbation that comes from bringing something homemade to a potluck.” It also becomes apparent in the slightly competitive nature of the food gatherings, such as the brew club meetings but also at the shared potluck I attended. When I admired the beautiful, hot, steaming loaf of bread Meghan pulled out of the oven for example, her neighbor Nancy was quick to point out: “Oh yes, she does a nice quick and easy loaf”, indicating that she, herself, bakes more complicated breads and demonstrating her knowledge, skill and discerning taste to the anthropologist.

A final argument I want to make here about the role and function of the brew club is that for these educated, liberal men in this context, unhappy in a breadwinning role which does not comfortably support their families and thus unable to fully step into a traditional male provider
role, brewing beer is a locally acceptable way to affirm and re-inscribe their masculinity. The strong association of beer with masculinity in popular culture, the overwhelmingly male composition of the brew club and competitive setup of the meetings, the science and technology involved in brewing (and in the building and rigging of equipment) and the fact that brewing typically does not take place in a kitchen but in a basement or garage all contribute to the understanding of beer and brewing as a masculine domain. At the same time, it constitutes a “good” masculinity that is not overtly traditional, aggressive or exclusive and can bridge the gap between the common distinction of “rough” and “respectable” forms of masculinity (Bederman 1996; Kessler-Harris 1993; Maynard 1989; Meyer 2002). For as I have pointed out, brewing combines nicely with family life: it generally does not get irresponsibly expensive, it can be done at home, it offers additional benefits to the whole family and even presents hands-on instructional parenting opportunities. Ron agreed: “Absolutely, it's an outlet that appeases both things in that you can stay at home, be a good dad, be a good husband but it's beer so it's got a masculine tone to it. You're not at home planting a flower garden, you're at home making beer. So home brewing helps these guys to walk that line.”

In some respects, the more strapped fathers in my study share some similarities with the blue collar fathers Broughton and Walton (2006) describe in their work on the effects of deindustrialization. They argue that for the blue collar men in their study, the loss of manufacturing jobs facilitated an emasculation and forced them to adjust their traditional working class understandings of manhood and fatherhood from hard working, high earning providers to adult learners and/or stay-at-home fathers on a budget. Similarly, the highly educated middle-class men in my study whose income and financial situation in the current economic situation does not support the middle-class lifestyle they may have expected, had to let
go of the middle-class cultural ideal of the independent, private, nuclear bourgeois family. Hobsbawm dates back to the early 19th century. Instead, they find themselves dependent on communities of kin, friends and neighbors and have refashioned their lives according to a form of sociality more akin to that which once characterized proletarian life (Federici: 2012: 12). Collective food production practices such as beer brewing or making large amounts of jam during a strawberry festival constitute the avenues for the reintroduction of these forms of sociality more typical of working classes. At the same time however, these practices yield class re-inscribing food as well as class-appropriate intensive parenting opportunities that help maintain forms of middle-class distinction. For these reasons, the collective beer brewing the men in my study are so committed to should thus be seen as making a significant contribution to the reproduction of their families and not be dismissed as merely a manly hobby. In the next chapter, I examine the possibility that the collective reproductive practices I have documented thus far could be considered variations of commoning activities that may have some anti-capitalist, post-neoliberal potential.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: REINTERPRETING MIDDLE-CLASS REPRODUCTIVE PRACTICES

Precarity signifies both the multiplication of precarious, unstable insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of the political party or trade union. This double meaning is central to understanding the ideas and politics associated with precarity; the new moment of capitalism that engenders precariousness is seen as not only oppressive but also as offering the potential for new subjectivities, new socialities and new kinds of politics (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3).

The pressures on the American middle classes find expression in family life around the socially reproductive work of choosing food and parenting. Though some parents in my study are less squeezed than others and lead considerably more comfortable lives, all parents regardless of income worry and are unsure about the future of their children in the current economic climate marked with extreme and rising income inequality, low growth, high unemployment and stagnating wages. Scholars have described how this concern for the future of the next generation is expressed in intense parenting strategies and I have argued that this concern is also expressed in a preoccupation with food. This is because the task of choosing food in America today confronts consumers with many of the harmful excesses of the capitalist system and second, because food is connected to class status, and thus the future prospects of the next generation, in various ways: First, it can promote and maintain health and thinness, which are strongly associated with higher class status today and especially in urban contexts of “thin” real estate (Guthman 2011). Second, food is connected to class via taste as a marker of social and cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1984) including politically correct omnivorousness (Johnston and Baumann 2009; Naccarato and Lebesco 2012). Third, food choice can signal proper citizenship (Mintz 1985; Maskovsky 2015; Guthman 2011) as well as, I argue, appropriate, liberal middle-class politics because of food’s direct link to political issues such as the environment, public
health, animal welfare, labor policies and so forth. Finally, healthful, tasteful, distinctive, politically “just” food simply costs more than conventional food (or “crud under shrinkwrap”) and is thus distinctive in that sense. Even so, organic, artisanal food sustainably produced by a fairly compensated farmer still costs less than other markers of class distinction such as works of art, international travel, or a large home, and may help explain the focus on good food by people for whom those traditional markers have become completely out of reach.

I have shown how parents’ strategies for eating and getting kids to eat in a way that promotes class appropriate health and body size, taste preferences and the right politics vary among self-described middle-class families of different means. While on the surface all families in my study seem quite similar with comparable, high levels of education, similar progressive political views, and the same food and parenting goals, there are significant differences in income and wealth and the experience of economic stability. I have shown how the group of upper middle-class parents are fairly easily able to simply buy class-appropriate “safe” food in places like Whole Foods and the Co-op and described the much more intensive, time and energy consuming food procurement and production strategies the strapped middle-class parents have adopted. I have described the subsequent variations in the experience of family life including the household division of labor by gender and the different dilemmas and contradictions that emerge for mothers and fathers in different sections of the middle class trying to meet multiple competing goals at the same time. This final chapter is concerned with the question of how to interpret these diverse middle-class reproductive practices, in particular with the formulation of an interpretation that moves beyond critical rejections of these strategies as inherently neoliberal, self-centered and exclusionary.
I begin by looking a bit more closely at the experience of daily life for the more strapped group of people, many of whom grew up considerably more comfortably than they live now. I ask if their visceral experience of precarity might contribute to the emergence of a repoliticized critique of the current political economic system that is the cause of their predicaments. I also consider the role and ramifications of the extreme self-management techniques around food and child rearing these parents have adopted in the formulation of a possible critique, as well as the possible impact of their thorough understanding of the problems in the global capitalist food production system. I end the chapter with a consideration of the political potential of the commons-like social networks these families have organized around reproductive work. Taken altogether, I wonder if a lack of basic comfort in daily life, working a third shift of food care on top of two other work shifts, paired with a thorough awareness of the various kinds of inequalities created by the capitalist food production system, experienced and articulated by likeminded groups of educated people concerned for the future of the next generation whom have turned to collective forms of reproduction, could together constitute the beginnings of a social movement and articulation of a sustained political critique from a middle class in decline.

**Sensory deprivations**

The intensive food procurement and production activities I have described for the families who cannot afford to buy acceptable food in the marketplace solve many problems at once: they help parents circumvent the conventional food production system as well as the elitist alternative one; they allow, at least theoretically, for intensive, instructional time with children and the modeling of the values of self-sufficiency, environmentalism and of seeing tasks through till the end; they allow for the construction of social networks that support families with
reproductive work; and also typically yield tasty food which contributes to enjoyment and feelings of pride and accomplishment. But these intense activities also create new problems. Most obviously and as I have already pointed out, producing and storing ones’ own food and beer costs a lot of time, energy and space in the home and garden. This eliminates many parents’ leisure time and eats into the amount of time and space that remain available for children (who of course don’t always want to work in the garden or in the kitchen and have projects and commitments of their own) which is a real dilemma for parents who have internalized the intensive parenting ideology. I have also described the utilitarian kitchens and basements and even dining rooms-turned-food storage spaces in these homes, which are not large to begin with and which are a far cry from the renovated showcases of many other Mount Airy homes including those of some of my wealthier informants.

These drawbacks, combined with other cost-saving measures these parents employ such as for example turning down the thermostat\textsuperscript{28}, or shopping exclusively in thrift stores for clothes, while politically and environmentally just, constitute a visceral experience of squeezing that is far from comfortable and creates a very different experience of middle-class life from that in the more affluent group. Another such example is the experience of fathers’ commute to work. While all affluent upper middle-class families in my study own two cars, the strapped parents have only one, which mothers need to get children to and from school, which means fathers from these families commute to work by bicycle or sometimes bus. As with the intensive food activities, there are clear advantages to biking to work: it provides efficient exercise that for many men eliminates the need for spending time and money at the gym in order to maintain

\textsuperscript{28} As I have mentioned earlier, homes would typically not be heated to more than 60 °F when people were home. At night or when not at home, parents would let the temperature fall much lower. The lowest thermostat reading I encountered upon walking into a home that had been empty all day was 48 °F.
appropriate body size; it is an environmentally friendly way to travel; and fathers also see it as an important part of the behavior they are trying to model to their children. As Ted said:

I like to teach her stewardship and the example means a lot. Really demonstrating and teaching by action, biking to work and doing all our own gardening stuff, I think it will have an effect. She doesn't know the significance yet but later she'll realize that not everybody does these things so setting the example is a big part of my decisions.

For these reasons, several of the more affluent fathers also bicycle to work. However, it is important to realize that for Josh, Adam and Brett biking to work is first and foremost a financial decision and that unlike the upper middle-class fathers they do not have the option to take their car into work. This is a big distinction because riding in Philadelphia is not without its dangers: despite recent city-wide bike-initiatives promoted by mayor Michael Nutter including the expansion of the city’s bike lane network (Mayor's Office of Transportation and Utilities 2015; Beeler 2015), the commute to work for the fathers in my study is by no means an uninterrupted trajectory of bike lanes or otherwise bike-friendly roads and motorists are not always mindful of cyclers. All strapped bike-riding fathers in my study have had accidents, mainly in the winter riding on icy roads and have taken some precautions. Brett is thinking of buying studded tires for the winter explaining that “it's not the cold that bothers me, it's when I fall down, which happens every year”. Another father I interviewed wears a mobile tracker on his sleeve that is connected to his wife’s cellphone so she can trace him and his progress home and would notice if he was “laying slain on the side of the road somewhere” because in that case the tracker would stop moving.

Examining the practice of riding to work thus reveals some additional hidden inequalities among the families in my study. For the more affluent men riding to work is often preferable over driving for the health and environmental benefits, but ultimately a choice and an activity
they could forgo if the weather really gets bad, when they have an injury or when running late. For the more strapped fathers in my study biking to work is a necessity and exposes them to real physical risk. They could and sometimes do take the bus to work but for Brett this would mean leaving the house well before his customary 6AM so he rides, through rain, snow and ice. In winter he rides in the dark both ways. Josh more regularly takes the bus when the weather is bad and says to appreciate the 40 minutes of reading time that offers him, but regrets coming home late and missing the key interactional dinner time with his children. Adam will take the bus occasionally, but described many instances of being confronted with the unruly and deviant behavior of his fellow passengers on his bus route, which slows the commute down and makes him feel unsafe.

Another small difference between the commutes of the two sets of fathers is that the more affluent men have the option to shower at their point of destination. Henry is a physician at a hospital and showers in the surgery center, Ted has bought a membership at a gym near his office for the sole reason that it gives him access to their shower facilities, he does not ever use the exercise equipment or other services. In fact, he is also a member of a local country club, which also has a gym that he does not use because he prefers to get his exercise from biking. Like Adam and Josh, Brett does not have the kind of job or resources that make showering at or near work possible so he explained how he just towels off as best as he can and when the weather gets hot he brings a wet wipe to clean himself up a bit before putting on his shirt and tie for the day.

Some work in the field of sensory politics is concerned with the idea that information produced by the senses can change individual and group political behavior (Sutton 2010) and several scholars have written about instances of the formation of political subjectivities and
alliances in response to sensory experiences including sensory deprivation or of being forced to adopt the sensory prescriptions of a dominant group. “…the information produced through sensorial experience is a powerful motivator for citizen action or protest, and carries the potential for a radical reconfiguration of the forms and spaces of authority” (Spackman and Lahne 2014: 1). Writings on the subject of sensory politics range widely. One example is a study on controversial ear implants for deaf children subjected to the medicalized regime of a dominant hearing culture (Valente et al. 2011) another describes how Chicago residents of public housing were forced to adjust their meaning of comfort as heat was turned off or made less available and the critical action this inspired (Fennell 2011) and Maskovsky (2015) describes the unlikely alliance that formed in opposition to former major Michael Bloomberg’s proposal to restrict the sale of large sodas in New York: a successful movement that was partially motivated by libertarian ideas and corporate interests but also included representatives of poor and people of color who for various reasons fought to defend their right to abundant cheap sweetness and to resist the imposition of elite taste upon poor communities.

Mundane as my examples of tentatively heated, cluttered, utilitarian homes, thrift store clothes and icy winter bike rides are, they do provide the most strapped parents in my study with a physical, sensory experience of economic squeezing. The neoliberal regime of self-responsibility demands that they cope with this contraction by applying practices of the self, including the adjustment of sensory experience rather than turning to resistance and political activism, and to a degree this is what they have done and what I have described. However, this does not mean that these experiences of discomfort could not also contribute to a growing critical awareness of inequality and a growing resentment that might inspire political action. And indeed, while the parents in my study typically did not volunteer complaints, when pressed, they voiced
articulate frustrations about the fact that they had so little financial freedom despite having
invested heavily in their education, made sound, conservative financial choices and drastically
curbed their spending, all while managing to stay healthy and acting as good role models to their
children. Parents were particularly bitter about the difficulty of being present as parents, while
making ends meet and trying to absorb government’s retreat from services like education which,
many felt, required them to supplement their children’s subpar educational experiences as
parent-tutors in the home, in addition to running the rest of the household, in some cases as two
full time wage earners with limited time at home. Several people I spoke with also compared
themselves enviously to their parents, many of whom retired during a different moment in
capitalism and were able to secure some of the benefits of the Fordist-Keynesian system. Several
of these grandparents now support their children, either in kind or with child-care, vacations and
dinners out (or a coffee bean roaster). Though by no means are all strapped parents I spoke with
supported by the older generation, or anyone else for that matter: even the Co-op, a leftist bastion
based on the idea of community, inclusion and affordable food for all, did not feel compelled to
extend its discounts and support to this group of tapped yet non-assistance receiving non-seniors
who fully ascribe to its values.

In addition to the critical awareness that emerges in the process of making sensory
adjustments to the experience of squeezing, I argue that this experience plays a huge role in these
people’s dedication to eating well. I have in the preceding mainly emphasized how the intense
food production techniques I documented contribute to eating healthy, alternative, non-
conventional food that is class appropriate in multiple ways, but another major part of this time
investment is the desire to eat good tasting food, or to experience some form of comfort that at
the same time does not fundamentally challenge any of the other goals parents have set for
themselves and their families. Mintz (1985) made a similar argument when he argued that it was in part the sweet pleasure of sugar (in addition to the caloric energy it provided and its pairing with the stimulating “proletarian hunger killers” coffee, cocoa and especially tea) that helped keep England’s working classes toiling during the transition to capitalism. And Maskovsky (2015) shows how New York City’s soda ban opponents were partially motivated to political action by their right to pleasure. At the same time, as Mintz would agree, the pleasure of eating home-made food could also function as “an “antipolitics machine”—a safety valve against political unrest—” (Page 2002, quoted in Nonini 2014: 410) because it provides enjoyment and the satisfaction of being an able and accomplished provider of this food.

Food politics and the lack of advocacy

At the outset of the project, I hypothesized that the shared middle-class concern with food alone might inspire a political awakening or critique. That, as people (especially women) turned into parents charged with the responsibility for dependent children including what to feed them, their awareness of the increasingly capitalized and globalized, unregulated agri-industrial food production system would grow and critical opinions would form and be shared. I imagined that I might discover the potential for a larger political critique that would form from these shared critiques about food as people became aware of the fact that the polarizing forces that have been at play in the American food production system are the same that have been at work in capitalism more broadly and are behind the squeezing of America’s middle class. I reasoned that, since food scholars as well as popular writers had already broadly communicated the idea that powerful politics are at play at every step of modern food systems from the cultivation of crops to the intake of food (Guthman 2011; Patel 2008; Nestle 2007; Schlosser 2012; Pollan 2007; Yeoman 2003; Bittman 2015) food had already been recognized as a highly political issue,
including by my informants. However, while parents are indeed critically aware of these things and do indeed feel unsafe and insecure choosing food for their children in the current food system, I soon discovered a widespread lack of interest in advocacy or a disengagement with what scholars writing on the post-political call “politics as usual”. This broad lack of political engagement is well illustrated by Donna who herself has long been committed to the education of low-income children and the efforts of her church to feed the poor, but tried to explain the lack of engagement of her friends when it comes to bringing about political change.

I have 1 friend who definitely is politically engaged in a traditional way. But for the most part, my peers have no idea. Not in a bad way. I think they just think, like, Washington, eh. I think people don’t even understand how it works. Also where we are, things are not really contested, you’re in this bubble. So you’re around all this social inequality stuff, and it’s bad and it’s crazy but everybody sort of has the same, at least voting, ideas. And you know they pass out the paper with the recommendations of who you should vote for? And there is nobody running against the people on that list. So I often don’t pay attention to that stuff either.

While most of my other subjects are more engaged with broad electoral politics, this sentiment of futility is definitely at play in their lack of political activism for food justice. While my subjects frequently volunteered their detailed depressing knowledge and understanding of rampant problems with our modern food system, from food borne illnesses, contamination and recalls, to the environmental and endocrine effects of herbicides and pesticides, to the high suicide rates among farmers, problems with American food deserts, the mistreatment of farm animals, abuse of growth hormones and antibiotics, mad cow disease, growing rates of obesity and diet-related diseases, the enslavement of child workers in Southeast Asian fisheries, West African chocolate plantations and of migrant agricultural workers in the U.S. and on and on, I did not find evidence of a political critique that transcends these individual cases of injustice.
Instead, what I found was that those who could afford it had simply switched to alternative food and that those who could not afford to do so were turning away from consumption altogether and towards their own forms of food production (which is where I locate significant potential, as I will describe). The first reaction, the adoption of an alternative (more expensive) consumption pattern, is characteristic of the neoliberal moment, where solutions to the problems created by the capitalist system are frequently made available for purchase to consumers “voting with their dollars”. It is also a clear sign of the shortcomings and fragmentation of the alternative food movement which has, with a few exceptions, failed to transcend consumption-based solutions to our troubled corporatized, unregulated food system and failed to articulate a more fundamental production-side critique. A case in point is Weaver’s Way Co-op’s Food Justice Committee, which I joined for my project as described in Chapter 3. On this committee I quickly discovered that food as a political issue was first and foremost something its members practiced as consumers and that their activism was largely limited to making their personal consumption preferences available to lower-income people through education and modest cost-reduction programs. This tendency, common among well-situated Mount Airy residents, to practice food justice as shoppers (a form of performative politics which is expressive and constitutive of their privileged class position as I argued in Chapter 3) was expressly critiqued by local scholar and food activist Nathan Singer. Singer, who had taught a course on food justice at the college where he works, volunteered to deliver a series of three talks on food justice at the Co-op that were open to the public. During an interview with me, he explained how his main goal with his talks was to get people to switch from understanding food justice in terms of themselves as consumers to the need for being advocates. “That is the switch people have to make. They are not going to be able to change policy by changing their
consumption habits they have to get into the world of advocacy”. Though his lectures were positively received, they did not reach a large number of people with about 25 older white Mount Airy residents attending each time.

Singer’s critique of consumption-based food activism echoes Guthman’s (see also Hassanein 2003), who writes in the conclusion of her book on obesity: “The current conversation about food is remarkably indifferent to the dynamics of capitalism and the long-term production of inequality” (2011: 191). In her writings, she repeatedly critiques the work of food journalist Michael Pollan (Guthman 2003; 2007; 2008; 2011) who has been instrumental in disseminating the ideas about organic farming and gardening to the American public and who has argued that switching to organic alternative food has benefits for everyone across the political spectrum whether these are family values, labor concerns, environmental concerns, libertarian ideas about consumer freedom and so on. Guthman is very critical of such a consensual politics and writes: “Therein lies the problem: an approach that appeals to all parts of the political spectrum cannot challenge the political-economic forces that are producing cheap, toxic, and junky food—and making some people dependent on it” (2011: 186). Robbins (2011) too, critiques mainstream food politics for neglecting the broader political and economic context, referring to them as “apolitical ecologies” that limit further critical scientific inquiry, real, antagonistic political discourse, and transformative policy options. These critiques of the alternative food movement could also be viewed as critiques of the post-political situation in which certain marginalized groups are to bear the brunt of the excesses of the capitalist system yet excluded as political actors, and social and environmental problems are met with the market-based, consensual, technocratic solutions of the rest (Swyngedouw 2011).
Though I see clear parallels among the apolitical proponents of alternative food as described in this literature and the performative, class-affirmative food politics of some of the wealthier parents in my study, there is, thankfully, also an important distinction because most of the parents I spoke with in the course of my study recognize the limitations of alternative food as a strategy for political change. Many parents, regardless of income, were aware of the fact that alternative food is increasingly appropriated by the very same exploitative capitalist system that produces the conventional food in a parallel production line (Pratt 2007) and many also brought up alternative food’s uncomfortable implication in the production of new forms of inequality. Though all who could afford it chose alternative food because conventional food is still less healthful, environmentally more problematic, less appropriate in Mount Airy’s cultural context and doesn’t taste as good, many seemed uneasy and self-critical about their preferences during interviews, routinely qualifying their descriptions of their food habits with remarks like: “I know it is bourgie but I only buy organic milk”, or “we’re total snobs and mostly shop at Whole Foods”. This unease also prompted several parents who can afford the most expensive alternative food to occasionally deliberately expose their children to conventional food so that they don’t get out of touch with mainstream America and stay socially flexible (see Chapter 4). I found that many of the more affluent parents who eat healthful food, even if it is ethically produced in a sustainable way, are often left with the nagging feeling that their opting out of the conventional food system makes them and their children elitist and contributes to the recreation of the very kind of segregation and inequalities they were hoping to avoid by choosing Mount Airy as a place to live in the first place.

Not surprisingly, the Mount Airy people who have the most thorough and clearly articulated understanding of the ways in which these (white) upper middle-class alternative
consumption patterns can work to alienate and divide are those middle-class people who cannot afford them. And as I have described, they consider this understanding to be a real advantage of their daily exposure to greater socioeconomic diversity on their block, in their kids’ school, in the grocery stores where they can afford to shop and so on. Their proximity to low income and racial minority groups has helped them develop this awareness of and vocabulary for discussing difference including class difference that has been missing from much activist discourse around food. At the same time however, despite this more visceral critical awareness of social inequality including inequalities around food, these more strapped parents in my study were just as disinterested in advocacy work or “any [organized] move that would begin to undermine a food (and industrial) system that simultaneously brings hunger, danger and unremittingly undercompensated toil” (Guthman 2011: 186). While most of my subjects, irrespective of income, where generally engaged with national and local politics especially electoral politics (with some exceptions), the vast majority saw little point in grass roots advocacy, organized protest or other forms of political interventions beyond voting. Even Reese, who nearly died from non-Hodgkin lymphoma two years ago and who has tried to eat in a way that limits his exposure to possible carcinogens but was frustrated to realize that it was impossible to avoid all the additives he had been warned about, did not see the point of advocacy or protest:

Reese: So on day 3 of being sick, I start reading labels and it was impossible. Part of it was that I only had this amount of energy doing what I needed to do and I would have spent all my energy getting my own food.

Neri: What do you think of that situation? That it was so hard to find food without those ingredients you wanted to avoid?

Reese: I don't have enough time and energy in the day to get resentful about everything. How is my resentment going to change anything? Is Monsanto going to get on the phone and say “oh no, Reese Philips resents this? Oh no, Reese Philips signed the online moveon.org petition? We'll have to change it now?” There's nothing I can do that is going to make a difference. So why get upset about it?
Look, I vote and I push my wife to vote. I vote religiously. And they do their best to interrupt that by changing the polling stations. But people do not have the time to be more politically active. Because of these massive systems. Because they are trapped in the class that they situate themselves in. I mean even if you had, think about it, like a complete day to yourself. The little decisions I'd make, the micro decisions I would make would not be oh let me source this kind of food or that kind of food. I would not use my time like that. I'd sleep late and then wind up doing work. I'd wind up doing a few hours of work and then I would feel like I have accomplished something in society. People are not doing any more than they can.

This sentiment was echoed by several of my other subjects: young parents working long hours and parenting intensively during their time at home. While most do not seem to recognize that their lack of time is produced by the very same system that produces problematic food and other new forms of inequality, most of my informants do understand that modern (post-political) government operates to support the market and corporate interests (Ranciere 1999; Crouch 2004). They have little faith and interest in the technocratic fixes (Swyngedouw 2011) that have characterized the government and industry response to problems in the food system, and consider it utterly futile to try to go after a company like Monsanto\textsuperscript{29}. At the same time, the parents in my study are also not under the illusion that eating alternative food has any true socially transformative potential.

The turn away from consumption

Soon after starting the project, I discovered that instead of turning to advocacy, several of the families on tight budgets had started turning away from individualized market-based consumption and towards the construction of commons-like community networks for the

\textsuperscript{29}An exception were some members of the organization GMO-free PA, which I also sought out though they are not a Mount Airy organization. This group has, in fact, organized some disruptive protests in Philadelphia and other cities in the Mid-Atlantic directed against Monsanto and its influence in resisting labeling laws. One member was even arrested for civil disobedience during a march in Washington, DC in 2014.
production and sharing of their own food. I also found examples of the collectivization of parenting and childcare, organized by women both in informal neighborhood networks that allowed their children to move much more freely than wealthy children among the houses in the neighborhood as well as in the more formally organized network of the babysitter’s cooperative: a Mount Airy institution that has withstood the test of time. Though I argue that this turn to shared food, food production and parenting is born out of a desire to maintain a middle-class standard of living and health, I also see these productive community networks as a sign of dissatisfaction with the false choices offered by the dual food system and its neoliberal implication of “right” and “wrong” consumption and, more broadly, as a form of resistance to the hold that capitalism has over the reproductive lives of these families (Federici 2012: 99). The apolitical pragmatism of contemporary politics in service of the capitalist system drove the people in my study away from whatever traditional forms of political activism I was expecting to find, and towards the restructuring of everyday life in economic forms that can operate partially outside of the capitalist food production and consumption system instead, which can contribute to social transformation (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003: 145).

In an important respect, this turn to cooperative DIY food production and the accompanying reformulation of lives on a small, intimate neighborhood scale is more revolutionary than most articulations of the alternative food movement, because this way of life begins to re-expose the economic interdependence of people and thus the social nature of production relations that are increasingly obscured under the globalized capitalist mode of production and allow exploitation to go unnoticed. Making economic interdependence visible again is a step towards rendering these relationships objects of political action which is a key first step in re-politicizing the economy.
I am not alone in seeing political potential in this commoning of reproductive work (Federici 2011; 2012; Gibson-Graham 1996; 2006; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999; Hayden 1981; Hansen 2004). Federici in particular explains well how such commons building can be understood as a response to neoliberal state disinvestment from areas of reproduction, and as a rejection of the distancing of production from reproduction and consumption under capitalism, which has made it possible for swaths of people to ignore the conditions under which our consumption goods are produced as well as the social and environmental costs of these processes. Though I can’t refer to any of the Mount Airy parents in my study as ignorant, it is true that of all the parents in my study, those who work hard to produce their own food in shared growing, canning and pickling projects; the fathers who brew beer together in each others’ homes, yards and garages; and the mothers who have established and maintain the Mount Airy Parents Network and the babysitting collective have begun to transcend the image of the neoliberal consumption-oriented actor and, arguably, are less implicated in the reproduction of inequality than those who continue to meet these needs in the capitalist marketplace. Though the wealthier parents in my study also seem dissatisfied with abstract capitalist production relations, which they express in a desire to reconnect with food production and the land. They typically do so by vegetable gardening (though they garden individually and not in a cooperative way) by shopping at the farmers’ market or by signing up for a farm share where having a personal connection with the farmer who produced your food has become high status\textsuperscript{30}. They have not, however, turned to the collective forms of reproduction which, for the more squeezed parents

\textsuperscript{30} Henry, for example, mentioned at one point: “I went to the farmers’ market and saw dirt under the farmers nails. It made me so happy to see this dirt under the guy’s nails.”
cooking, canning, pickling and brewing together and watching each others kids in the babysitting cooperative, have come to characterize daily life.

To Federici, the recombination of production, consumption and reproduction must be the first step on the road towards building an alternative society: “We cannot build an alternative society and a strong self-reproducing movement unless we redefine in more cooperative ways our reproduction and put an end to the separation between the personal and the political, political activism and the reproduction of everyday life” (Federici 2012: 147). Though she typically locates these commoning activities among working class women, under the current precarious conditions her work applies to many of the self-described middle-class women in my study, too, as well as their husbands who have contributed significantly to the reintroduction of these forms of sociality with their beer brewing network and activities. The commons was rediscovered, in part, because of the fall of the Wall and the demise of the previously dominant statist model of revolution (see Chapter 2) and also in response to the encroachment of neoliberalism into every facet of our lives. With their shared food activities, the mothers and fathers in my study stand in the way of the total commodification of life and have begun a process of re-appropriation that could be considered a first step towards reclaiming some political control over their lives.

Though again, the parents in my study are not actively challenging the neoliberal regime along established political lines (though undoubtedly some of them and their peers did with the enthusiastic local support of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primaries) and while I cannot in good faith conclude to have discovered a new social middle-class movement that poses an imminent threat to neoliberal capitalism or the politics which sustain it, I have shown that several components of a social movement are in fact in place among the most strapped parents in my study: There are the sensory deprivations which serve as daily reminders of economic
squeezing and the severe limits of the contemporary middle-class wage; there is heightened exposure to and emerging communion with more marginalized people from low income and racial groups; there is the exposed and more realistic understanding of economic production relations, which has been recognized as a first step towards class consciousness (Wright 1997); and a critical understanding of at least that part of the capitalist production system that is concerned with food. Lastly and perhaps most promisingly, the parents in my study who have turned to alternative forms of social and economic organization in response to the experience of precarity are modeling these collective forms of organization, sociality and group-reliance to their children. I see real value in the agentive notion of collectivity this instills. It is in the collective organization of reproductive work that the next generation is first introduced to the possibility of common governance and the shared responsibility for neighborhoods and people and it is there where re-politicized alternative subjectivities might first begin to appear.
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