It is not easy to keep up with today’s contentious food politics. Consider the following small sample of actors and issues from 2018–2020.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest, Food Corps, the American Heart Association, and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), among many others, repeatedly squared off with the Trump administration over school lunch standards. In one recent skirmish, they denounced a new rule that would “simplify” compliance with the National School Lunch Program. The proposed action of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), FRAC charged, would “weaken nutrition standards, eliminate the guarantee that all children will receive a balanced and healthy school meal regardless of school setting, and diminish the nutritional value of other foods sold in the cafeteria.”

Other advocacy groups focused on keeping food safe from harmful contaminants. The spread of food-borne pathogens in 2018–2020 included outbreaks of E. coli in lettuce and flour, salmonella in poultry and ground beef, and listeria in pork and mushrooms. Government oversight, never vigilant, was further weakened in 2019 when the USDA gave meat companies more authority to police the safety of their own operations. The executive director of Food and Water Watch offered a simple equation: “There’s no doubt about it: faster line speeds + less inspection = more food contamination.”

Despite regular reassurances that no scientific evidence proves genetically engineered food to be harmful to human health, consumers are skeptical. At the least, they support a “right to know.” After several years of failed
state referenda to require labeling (with food manufacturers outspending proponents by as much as 17:1), action shifted to the federal level in 2018. The law passed that year required labeling—of a sort. Among other things, it exempted ingredients derived from “bioengineered” crops (such as high fructose corn syrup from genetically engineered corn) if no residues could be detected, allowed manufacturers to list information solely through a QR code, and preempted more exacting state initiatives. “No one should be surprised that the most anti-consumer, anti-transparency administration in modern times is denying Americans basic information about what’s in their food and how it’s grown,” lamented the Environmental Working Group’s Scott Faber. Nongovernmental organizations have tried to fill the gap left by federal policies. Consumers can look for the Non–GMO Project label, for example, when they do their shopping.

Amid growing concerns over climate change, groups such as the Community Alliance with Family Farmers and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition remind us that conventional farming and meat production are big parts of the problem, depleting water resources, reducing carbon sinks, and spewing methane. More sustainable production, they argue, will have to come from smaller farms, using organic alternatives to conventional growing methods, selling to local communities. Proponents of a Green New Deal promise to “reforest riparian areas, invest in conservation practices that rebuild degraded soil, and remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to reduce the 9 percent of greenhouse gas pollution from American agriculture to zero.” The political obstacles are formidable. Businesses urge an easier solution. Consumers can improve both personal and environmental health by purchasing products with the Eat Real Food label. And for carnivores who are both repentant and affluent, Beyond Meat and Impossible Burgers promise to deliver “the juicy, delicious taste you know and love, while being better for you and the planet.”

Healthy, local, and sustainable foods tend to cost more and be hard to find in many neighborhoods. Feeding America is one of the organizations trying to fix that, in part by keeping these inequalities in the public eye. The organization’s studies document the scope of food insecurity in an affluent United States and how it disproportionately afflicts African American and Latino families. Some efforts to remedy the problem take an entrepreneurial tack. Francesca Cheney’s Sol Sips is a vegan cafe in Bushwick, Brooklyn, founded with help from a GoFundMe campaign and offering a brunch menu with sliding-scale prices. Other programs work through government channels. At the local level, the Los Angeles Food Policy Council “equips small business owners in economically disadvantaged communities with the support they need to sell the kinds of food that are hard to come by in many
Nationally, a wide range of advocacy groups have tried to fight off restrictions on the food stamp program. Early in 2020, the focus was on President Donald Trump’s budget proposal, which “would make steep cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other federal safety net programs.” Additional activist targets include administration edicts tightening eligibility thresholds, shortening time limits, and toughening work requirements.

These are only a few battlegrounds and combatants in recent food fights. Close up, it is hard to identify common themes or the larger significance of specific goals, such as getting more refrigerated display cases into corner stores. Taking a broader perspective reveals some important commonalities. While the issues and organizational actors are varied, they can be seen as providing different answers to pressing questions about how food is produced, what food is made available to whom, and how best to protect consumers from risky or unhealthy food. There are also efforts to connect the dots among these issues, aiming for “food justice”: a food system that is sustainable economically as well as ecologically and equitable for producers as well as consumers, regardless of class, race, and gender.

Those aiming for food justice follow different paths, however. The HEAL Food Alliance goes local, aiming to stimulate local economies, protect the environment, and improve conditions for low-wage workers through “cross-community organizing, advocacy for policy solutions, and holding powerful food system actors accountable.” Food First keeps the national and global in view. It argues that a Green New Deal can be the starting point for addressing climate change while also democratizing politics and reducing inequality if it incorporates the voices and needs of farmers and food system workers.

But when goals are at odds—if closer monitoring for food contaminants or higher pay for farmworkers means higher prices for low-income consumers, for example—how should we balance the values of consumer health, environmental sustainability, and equal access? What role can we reasonably expect food fights to play in achieving the larger goals of rebuilding communities, reducing inequality, empowering consumers, and saving the planet? And if we want positive results, how should we divide our energy? Should we guide consumer choices and let markets do the rest, as with the Non–GMO Project? Or pressure governments to take decisive action, such as through the farm bill?

No answers will escape criticism. Market strategies can be faulted for giving in to neoliberalism (or simply for not working). Directing consumers toward better food often neglects class and racial biases in the definition of “better.” And most politically practical measures leave control of the food system in the hands of large corporations. Achieving change will surely require broad coalitions among activists. Yet many calls for
reform implicitly draw social boundaries: between “corporate” business and small enterprises, between responsible and complacent consumers, between true radicals and mere reformists, and between those with and those without the character and competence to make the right choices.\textsuperscript{15}

\section*{I. Food Reform and Social Movements}

These dilemmas of food reform have been faced many times before.\textsuperscript{16} This book resurrects three eras of lively food protest in the United States to show how activists defined food problems, articulated solutions, and mobilized for change. In so doing, the book offers readers historical background to better understand, and important reference points to better evaluate, contemporary food politics.

\subsection*{A. Introducing the Cases}

The earliest case features evangelical dietary reformers who gathered around Sylvester Graham in the late 1830s. A former missionary for the cause of temperance, Graham warned that store-bought bread, alcohol, and other “stimulating” foods undermined both health and morality. For Graham and his allies, the products of bakeries, cafes, and spice shops were symptomatic of a commercializing urban society, subverting the appetites and well-being with which natural men and women were endowed by God. Health and piety could be restored with a spare and unadorned vegetarian diet centered on homemade whole-grain bread. Grahamites preached this gospel through public lectures and pamphlets, finding their greatest support among middle-class strivers in the largest northeastern cities. Fifty years later, in the Progressive Era, these arguments were born again among health reformers such as John Harvey Kellogg. This group, too, blamed meat, alcohol, refined flour, and other dietary indulgences for all manner of physical ailments and social problems. But this period also saw more “modern” efforts to combat adulterated and unhealthy products. One campaign, fueled in part by sensational revelations of impure meat, demanded legislative action and helped establish the Food and Drug Administration (1906) to police the industry. Another promoted mandatory home economics classes in public schools to upgrade women’s expertise in food preparation and nutrition. More efficient household management, these domestic scientists claimed, would improve health and even solve “the class problem” by teaching poor families how to eat economically. Both Progressive campaigns saw informed consumers and responsible businesses as the keys to safe and healthful family provisioning, with an enlightened state ensuring consumer education and business responsibility. The third era this book covers—the late 1960s and early
1970s—is the heyday of the grassroots movement for organic food. More skeptical of mainstream science and more critical of commercial food production, these activists sought fundamental changes that would ensure that food was grown ecologically, by small farmers, and without the artificial chemical inputs profligately used by “big ag” (the large companies responsible for the lion’s share of farm production). Many organic activists went further, calling for a thoroughgoing democratization of the food system through farmer-run certification programs and cooperatively operated retail stores. Ultimately, organized producers turned to the federal government to set and enforce organic standards, creating new opportunities for growers and letting concerned consumers buy with confidence.

This is not an exhaustive collection of historical examples of contentious food politics in the United States. The cases come from the periods before our own with the most intense consumer activism around food issues. The “consumer” part of this claim is important. My focus is on consumers because it is among them that recurrent problems of trust in food arise and because it is among them that cross-fertilization from other social movements is most common. Consumers sometimes allied themselves with producers, and they did not necessarily define themselves with the label of “consumers.” Nevertheless, they are the central actors in a coherent, long-running food movement. Accordingly, I set aside the large-scale mobilizations of farmers in the populist movement and during the Great Depression. And even around the time of my chosen periods, there are other “food protests” that I do not include, such as the use of lunch counter sit-ins in the Civil Rights Movement (in which the primary goal had little to do with the production or distribution of food) or the boycotts of lettuce and grapes led by the United Farm Workers (in which consumers were allies but not beneficiaries). One other obvious candidate—temperance—does not figure as a distinct case, but I discuss it as an important tributary to the featured food activists of the 1830s and late nineteenth century.

**B. Comparing the Cases**

The cases I have chosen offer contemporary readers a mix of the surprisingly familiar and engagingly eccentric. But the book provides more than antiquarian pleasures. It both highlights and seeks to explain long-term continuities (in the problems confronted, the ideals invoked, and some of the tactics used) and sharp differences in how these problems have been addressed from one time and case to another. Chapters 2–4 flesh out these similarities and differences. Here, I provide a brief overview. Reformers in each period raised doubts about the healthfulness of particular staples such as white flour and highly processed food. They warned consumers that
products such as bread, canned meat, and frozen vegetables, whatever their nutritional value, carried risks from adulterants, pathogens, or chemicals added in production. The quality of such food was thought to suffer because it had been shipped long distances, with the standard for “long” increasing over time. Critics often noted, too, that these hazards were most common in the cheapest food and thus were borne most heavily by the poor. And in each period, those charged with defending consumer well-being—doctors, scientists—were key targets, as villains or saviors, in narratives of public health versus private gain. As we will see, the specifics vary from case to case in important ways, but these general themes of nutritional health, consumer safety, inequality, and the proper role of science run through all three periods, as they do in contemporary conflicts over school lunches, contaminated meat, food security, and genetically engineered ingredients.

At a similar level of abstraction, common themes can also be found in the alternatives offered. Reformers in each period anticipated contemporary activists in praising “local” food products, including food made in the home. Most championed some version of “natural” food as superior to the products of commerce and industry. All saw expanding the number of educated consumers as an important lever for change. And all at least dabbled in some kind of certification scheme to help consumers choose healthier and safer products, whether the certifying authority was a civil or a state body. In each era, food activists believed that pursuing the alternatives they championed would contribute to social betterment. Their reforms would improve personal or community morality, reduce the nutritional costs of poverty, and make both the science and governance of food serve the public good.

On the side of these virtues, however, always stood certain kinds of people—respectable or WASP or tutelary or cool, but always solidly middle class. Food, scholars have long noted, is one common tool for marking social differences, from nomads versus agriculturalists and children versus adults to one class or ethnic group versus another. Campa}
Activists also varied in whether they aimed not just at better food, but also at a more democratic food system. They differed on whether the mainstream science of their day should be treated more as enemy or as potential ally. Campaigns diverged in the degree to which class inequalities, among both consumers and producers, were part of the agenda for change. And over time, the distinction between good and bad food aligned with different social boundaries—pious versus sinful, disciplined versus profligate, native versus foreign, hip versus square, depending on the case.

C. Rethinking the Cases as a Recurrent Social Movement

How can we make sense of this puzzling combination of long-running similarities and sharp contrasts? My answer—this book—amounts to an extended argument for thinking of these cases, and those in our own time, as a single, recurring movement. Social scientists are practiced in devising common labels for discrete objects; for example, from a sufficient analytical distance, many contemporary political movements look like “populism.” The argument here is more ambitious: Mobilizations at different times to change the food system are tied together both by systemic causes and by cumulative legacies, even as they conform to the political cultures and models of protest that are distinctive to their eras and allies. In developing this framework, I lean most heavily on sociologists who analyze social movements and on scholars, especially historians and humanistic social scientists, in food studies. The latter have published excellent accounts of particular cases, and they are especially sensitive to the cultural contexts that shape food politics, past and present. It has become easier to marry their work to the sociology of social movements because the latter field has come to include in its bailiwick challenges to cultural as well as to political authority, insurgency that relies more on informal networks than on formal organization, and protest that involves little public and collective action. Social movement theory also offers useful categories of analysis. These highlight (for example) the framing of social problems, the identities underlying participation, and the tactics and forms of organization deployed by activists. This book’s case histories are built on this conceptual scaffolding. Last, social movement researchers offer some plausible causal suspects in their explanations for why movements’ framing or organization or tactics take the form they do.

I do more than borrow freely from social movement scholarship and food studies. I also stake out different ground. My departures turn on rethinking mobilization around food issues, past and present, as parts of one recurring movement. To begin with, this means organizing the narrative around a single genre of protest over long stretches of time. The analyses published by most social movement researchers focus on short cycles of
protest (e.g., the 60s) and on mechanisms of contentious politics (diffusion, scale shift, brokerage) shared by movements of varied types. My work takes a different approach. The general strategy is to ground accounts of protest in an enduring social problem, such as labor exploitation, which both animates and gives coherence to protests scattered over historical time and social place. That focus, in turn, directs attention to the different temporal contexts within which protest unfolds. There is the familiar temporal context of a historical period (the Gilded Age, the New Deal, the neoliberal turn against unionism) within which protest campaigns rise and fall and in which activists are guided both by prevailing understandings of social problems (is the enemy Capital? foreign competition?) and by prevailing constraints on doing so. There is the context of larger trajectories of protest, anchored in the changing character and periodic aggravation of enduring social problems, as in the boom-and-bust cycles of the economy. And there is the context of long-term movement legacies, in which the outcomes of any given struggle (e.g., the triumph of the American Federation of Labor over the Knights of Labor) live on to influence later mobilization.

For all my emphasis on limiting generalization—to specific problems and genres, to temporal contexts—the approach I advocate is a more broadly applicable one, suitable for other recurring movements focused on (for example) human relations with the environment or gender inequality, as well as labor and food. The invitation to generalize, however, is simultaneously a call to unpack temporal contexts. Fleshing out fuller explanatory accounts then requires a deeper dive into each genre of protest. For this book, that means exploring recurrent problems thrown up by a changing food system, the influence of ambient activist cultures in each of the three eras, and the cultural and institutional residues from prior food movements. In the final section of this introductory chapter, I offer an overview of this framework to help situate the case studies that follow.

II. The Food Movement in Three Temporal Dimensions

A. The Long Run of a Capitalist Food System: The Problem of Trust

What makes food activism a genre and gives it continuity is above all its roots in a capitalist food system and, more specifically, in changes in the production of food that regularly threaten consumer trust. My nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century food activists often sound surprisingly alike because they are dealing with similar problems, ones that revolve
around trust. All sorts of social interactions are enabled, or at least lubricated, by trust, whether that is based on emotional ties, settled habit, or considered judgment.\textsuperscript{22} As consumers, we need some basic assurance that the food we take into our bodies will not harm us. Our sense of confidence may involve nothing more than taken-for-granted familiarity: I have never noticed any problems from eating this stuff, so why think about it? Beyond such personal experience, we also come to trust food by proxy. If I trust the family member, the neighbor, or the well-known shopkeeper, I am likely to trust the food I get from them. Or, moving away from such personal ties, if I trust the brand, the government monitor, the credentialed expert, or the labeling authority, I am unlikely to question the food that bears their stamp of approval.\textsuperscript{23}

This fundamental trust in food can break down; doubts can quickly develop about the healthfulness, safety, legibility, or quality of food.\textsuperscript{24} Among the reasons for mistrust are innovations in food production, yielding new products (processed cheese, chicken nuggets) or well-known products packaged in new ways (plastic-wrapped, pre-sliced bread). These innovations may temporarily undercut trust based on familiarity. Even if a product is familiar, doubts may be raised if it comes from an untrusted or discredited source, as with some contemporary food imports from China. Or trust may be lost if those who have vouched for a food’s safety, such as government agencies or nutritionists, betray consumers’ confidence. All of these threats to trust can be expected from the normal operation of a capitalist food system—the background source of the “grievances” that underlie the food movement. There is, to begin with, a relentless process of commodification whereby foods made or food tasks performed in the home are produced for sale on the market. Graham complained about commercial bread in the 1830s (it should instead be made by loving mothers), and Michael Pollan bemoaned the decline of home cooking in the contemporary United States. Moreover, despite the nearly two-hundred-year gap between them, the two men point to a common source of mistrust: a more or less anonymous cash nexus that replaces personal ties and raises the possibility that sellers, unlike loving mothers, will not have your best interests at heart.

Over time, newly commercialized foods and food tasks become familiar. But their production tends to move away from local circles—such as the town butcher or dry goods merchant—to more distant sources that can produce more cheaply and distribute more widely. These lengthening commodity chains (delocalization) are also endemic to modern capitalist food systems, whether the distance is down the street to the baker or halfway around the globe. Food businesses also regularly innovate, developing new ways to manufacture products (the animal carcass disassembly line, for example) or entirely new products (e.g., margarine, energy drinks). These will at first be unfamiliar and of uncertain trustworthiness. And a dynamic
Commodification, delocalization, and technological change do not operate in a vacuum. Social movement scholars long ago recognized that the grievances that anger us and the opportunities for action that beckon us are filtered by collective beliefs. Similarly, whether developments in the food system undermine trust depends in part on consumer expectations and knowledge; these may change independently of shifts in how food is produced and distributed. Growing doubts about the competence or integrity of government food regulators recruited directly from the ranks of industry, for example, can erode confidence even when the food itself is unchanged. Consumer expectations, however, are themselves influenced by other dynamics of the food system. Food producers and distributors compete, and one way in which they may do so is by casting aspersions on their competitors. Early twentieth-century mass producers such as Heinz made invidious comparisons between their pristine modern facilities and unhygienic small shops. Even earlier, purveyors of “natural” or “pure” food worked to discredit the healthfulness of conventional products. Competitors may also enlist the rival nutritional or safety claims made by scientists, raising consumer skepticism about this important measure of trustworthy food. Advocacy groups have come to use a similar tactic—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) calling consumers’ attention to the worst practices of meat production, for example, or the Environmental Working Group calling out “the dirty dozen” fruits and vegetables for their pesticide residues. A last threat to trust comes from the food scandals that periodically alarm consumers, as with recent cases of pathogens in lettuce, flour, and meat. On one hand, these scares have an “eventful” character: There is an element of serendipity in when and where they occur. On the other hand, such outbreaks are products of the routine operation of the food system. Developments in agriculture and industry, such as concentrated animal feeding operations, raise the odds that, sooner or later, there will be contamination. Food alarms also create opportunities for businesses and advocacy groups to amplify their warnings about competitors’ products. Thus, contamination crises are both normal risks of modern food production and occasions to dramatize those risks for consumers who might ordinarily—perhaps deliberately—be unaware of them.

Together, these dynamics of the food system underlie the long-term, recurrent character of “the” food movement. And they go far to explain why contemporary debates over food safety, health, and transparency so clearly echo earlier ones. There are other reasons that food reform campaigns scattered over two centuries show a family resemblance. As Melanie
DuPuis shows, they draw on a relatively stable repertoire of American cultural themes. DuPuis highlights the ideal of pure and disciplined individuals. One could make a similar case for other parts of the repertoire, such as populist skepticism about experts and pervasive doubts about state authority. Another continuity over time involves the consistent gendering of food reform. We will see this in the overrepresentation of women (relative to prevailing norms of public protest) among both the leadership and the rank and file of the reform campaigns discussed in this book. We will see it, as well, in the ways that idealized womanhood serves as one source of trust in food, whether that takes the form of bread-making mothers, expert housekeepers, or Mother Earth herself. My primary emphasis, however, is on those continuities that are rooted in the food system. This focus has the merit of directing attention to the problems that reformers are addressing. It also helps account, as the “constants” of deeply rooted cultural ideals and gender norms cannot, for the timing of mobilization. And it puts in sharp relief the question of why such enduring problems evoked such different responses from one case to another.

B. Short-Term Contexts: Social Movement Piggybacking

Within this long run of food movement activity, reform waxes and wanes on a shorter time scale. And at that scale, there are all sorts of differences, both across periods and, within the Progressive Era, among cases. For example, there are contrasts in how reformers framed their critiques. Does eating the wrong foods endanger your immortal soul, as Graham warned, or does it imperil the environment, as advocates of organic food claimed? Does part of the blame lie with ignorant consumers, as domestic scientists argued, or with corrupt businesses, as some backers of pure food legislation and organic food charged? Differences also appear in how reformers sought to restore consumer trust. Should we rely mainly on educating consumers, the main emphasis of Grahamites and Progressive Era health reformers? On government regulation, such as a pure food law? On voluntary certification, the preferred strategy in the early organic movement? As I noted earlier, standards for good and bad food imply boundaries between good and bad people, but the specific content of these evaluations varies. For Grahamite reformers, the improved diet embraced by good Christians raised a bulwark against the loosening moral standards of an urbanizing society. Sixty years later, the threat was to native Protestants from the immigrant hordes, including their unscientific (and thus unhealthy) food preferences. In the late 1960s, organic-food advocates framed the opposition as one of consumers against avaricious corporations and their government flunkies. In all three eras, food reform is primarily a concern of the middle class. But again, there
are variations. What counted as the mark—or the cultural capital—of the virtuous middle? The display of rigorous self-control? Of efficient mothering? Youthful liberation from old middle-class norms? Discerning taste? These marks of virtue reflect general models of middle-class distinction, adapted and applied to food ideals. This is the basic approach I take to explaining differences across the cases. Some of those differences can be tied to the specific problems raised by changing food systems—a theme to which I return when discussing social movements’ legacies. For example, one can hardly explain the environmentalist preoccupations of the organic movement without reference to worries over pesticide use, a problem largely without precedent in the earlier periods. But the more pervasive influences on food activism are the prevailing social distinctions and existing models of protest in each era. They provide the lenses through which actors interpreted generic problems such as adulterated or unhealthy food, allocated blame, and thought of appropriate solutions. I especially highlight the ways that food activists piggybacked on other social movements of their day. All of the cases I examine in the following chapters occurred during periods of lively protest: evangelical reform, Progressivism, “the ’60s.” Leading figures in each case had personal roots in other movements or were part of wider activist networks. Key Grahamites, for example, had backgrounds in evangelical temperance; pure food champions were involved in other Progressive causes; and organic-food advocates often came out of the New Left or environmentalism. For their part, activist organizations commonly overlapped with counterparts in other movements, as with campus ecology clubs in the late 1960s, or they had a hand in other causes, as with reform-minded women’s clubs in the early 1900s. There were thus many channels through which wider templates of social reform could travel to activism around food, shaping the critiques voiced, the alternatives offered, the organizational models deployed, the tactics used. Much as social movement scholars speak of the “co-opting” of social networks and institutions for resources to mobilize, I emphasize the co-opting of cultural models for food reform. This transposition is important for another reason. These were, in large part, consumer movements, with little by way of formal organization enlisting rank-and-file participants. The movements on which reform-minded consumers piggybacked provided shared scripts to guide and coordinate choices about which foods to favor and which to shun.

C. The Long Run of Food Reform: Movement Legacies

Cultural piggybacking helps explain differences across cases and adds a more historically grounded layer to my account, rooting the specific characteristics of food activism in particular times and contexts. A third layer
of explanation turns back to the long haul, but in a different way. For the Progressive Era and organic-food periods, I show how legacies from prior eras of food activism influence successors. They do so through several paths. Measures to restore consumer trust in food left institutional residues. The most important ones from the Progressive Era are the Food and Drug Administration, university hubs for nutritional research, and formal ties between home economists and food companies. All of these shaped the conflict over organic food in the 1960s. The National Organic Program that came out of the organic movement, in turn, plays a role (often as whipping boy) for contemporary food activists. These institutional legacies may operate by tying the hands of later reformers. One reason that improved conditions for farmworkers could not be incorporated into federal standards for “organic” produce was that labor and agriculture had long been regulated by different government departments. But legacies may also exert their influence by drawing the lines along which trust eventually breaks down. The reliance of pure food advocates and domestic scientists on government regulation and reputable corporations to reassure consumers meant that when these institutions lost credibility in the 1960s, trust in food went down with them.

A second route by which earlier movements may shape later ones involves the languages they use to diagnose problems and valorize alternatives. Historians and historical sociologists often reconstruct how popular understandings of who “we” are and what is at stake take particular forms and how they get reproduced over time. Sidney Tarrow, for example, discusses repertoires of contentious language that, like repertoires of strategy, offer ready-made formulas (“patriot,” “revolution”) for doing battle and make it hard even to think of alternatives. In the case of food, two important examples are “nature” and “the consumer.” The first term has been used in highly flexible ways as a measure of good food (is it “natural”?) and as what needs to be defended in battles against commercial products. These uses of “nature” were not new in the 1830s, but Graham helped make the term a regular touchstone for his successors. “The consumer” as an individual actor with rights and as a collective actor standing chastely apart from self-serving capital and labor was first popularized by Progressive Era reformers. Food activists of that period put it to good use. The category was subsequently institutionalized in government agencies and honored by advocacy organizations, and it saw extensive service in the organic movement.

A third path from past to future movements is, paradoxically, constructed from the future to the past, when activists invoke the examples of earlier insurgencies. Social movement researchers, asking why protest spreads from one place to another, refer to “the attribution of similarity.” If actors think of themselves as like others who have occupied factories or
built protest camps, they are more likely to follow suit as fellow members of the proletariat or the 99 percent. This identification can also be with actors long dead. These individuals may be considered worthy subjects of emulation or they may serve as precedents not to be repeated (as too reformist, too violent, too exclusive, or too hierarchical). The influence is activated after the fact, as reformers in the present deem past movements models to follow or oppose. Organic-food advocates sometimes held up Progressive Era champions of scientific agriculture and home economics as part of the problem they faced in the 1960s. Contemporary locavores, in turn, point to the dilution and co-optation of the 1960s movement and cast themselves as a virtuous alternative to an industrialized version of organic food.

Not all of these mechanisms are at work across all the cases in this book. Nor are they the only ways in which earlier periods shape later ones. Plenty of legacies are unrelated to prior activism. A prime example is the long-standing Christian tradition of associating indulgent eating with sin. For the purposes of this book on long-running food politics, however, it is legacies from earlier movements that I call out. How can we trace such legacies? It is all too easy to tell stories about how the past influences the present, and the role of legacies in social movements is no exception. This third layer of explanation becomes more plausible if there is documentation on two points. One consists of identifying mechanisms that transmit residues from a movement over time. Researchers should show how outcomes from earlier campaigns become institutionalized in policies and organizations, for instance, or are reproduced in popular culture and memorial practices. The role of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in carrying Graham’s dietary reform into the Progressive Era is one example. Claims about legacies gain credibility in a second way, if we can document actors thinking or acting in ways consistent with constraints laid down by past movements, and even—on a good day in the archives—acknowledging that they are doing so. For instance, proponents of organic food were guided in part by the perceived limitations of agricultural policies and food safety regulations created by Progressive Era reformers.

III. Overview of Chapters

Looking ahead, Chapters 2–4 present the three periods of food activism. Each begins with an overview of major changes in the food system of the day. These changes posed the challenges to consumer trust and the problems with which reformers grappled. The chapters go on to survey the broader social movement environment: evangelical reform (Chapter 2); Progressivism and “social purity” (Chapter 3); and the New Left, environmentalism, and the counterculture (Chapter 4). They then zero in on the critiques and
remedies offered by Grahamites and by the early advocates of health food, pure food, domestic science, and organic agriculture. For each, I rely primarily on the writings of leading reformers, on the records of organizations with which they were associated, and on the pamphlets and periodicals that amplified their voices. With each, I relate the reformers and their ideas both to wider movement culture and, in Chapters 3 and 4, to legacies from earlier waves of protest. Chapter 3, on the Progressive Era, carries a heavier load of cases. The quests for pure food legislation and domestic science were in many respects textbook cases of Progressive advocacy, confident in the power of government to solve social problems by applying standards of efficiency and professionalism. The concurrent call from reformers such as Kellogg to improve health through dietary change was—like all the cases in this book—a response to some common problems in the food system. But in this case, those problems were framed more in terms of individual Christian morality than in social uplift through enlightened state policy, a contrast that reflected the era’s larger social purity movement (with which Kellogg was allied).

Although such comparisons across movements are sprinkled liberally throughout the case studies, Chapter 5 more systematically sorts through similarities and differences and shows how they can be understood with reference to general food system dynamics, period-specific political cultures, and movement legacies. This concluding chapter goes on to briefly bring the analysis up to date, applying the same logic of explanation to contemporary calls for local and alternative food networks. It reminds readers, too, that my general approach to long-running movements is applicable beyond problems of the food system. But first, American food reformers of the 1830s.