Alternative Food Networks

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Glossary:

Alternative Food Networks: New and rapidly mainstreaming spaces in the food economy defined by—among other things—the explosion of organic, Fair Trade, and local, quality, and premium specialty foods. In these networks, it is claimed that the production and consumption of food are more closely tied together spatially, economically and socially; however, the politics and practices of alternative food networks have more recently come under critical scrutiny from geographers and others as a narrow and weakly politicized expression of middle- and upper-class angst.

Convention Theory: An influential theoretical approach to studying Alternative Food Networks. Identifying the norms, qualifications, and organizational forms involved in network coordination which uphold different conventions of ‘quality’, convention theory offers a general typology to distinguish product quality in terms of ‘orders of worth’ that specify the different logics orchestrating their production and governance.

Conventionalization Thesis: With particular reference to California, the conventionalization thesis suggests that large-scale organic producers are integrated into national and global commodity networks, while holistic, ‘movement farmers’ or ‘artisanal’ growers serve low volume, localized markets. This also known as the ‘bifurcation’ thesis of structural change in US organic agriculture.

Embeddedness: Drawn from a dialogue between Granovetterian economic sociology and heterodox economics, so-called embeddedness in alternative food networks refers to the ‘re-placement’ of food within its social, cultural, economic, geographical and environmental contexts in response to the ‘dis-embedding’ forces of conventional food networks.

Ethical Trading Initiative: Formed in the 1990s in the UK through a coalition of supermarkets, transnational corporations, activists, and development NGOs, the Ethical Trading Initiative focuses on the enforcement of international labor standards at the points of commodity production in the global South across food and a number of other commodities such as flowers and clothing.

Fair Trade: Developing from political 'solidarity' movements in the 1960s and networks of 'alternative trading organizations' created by development NGOs, church groups and charitable institutions, fair trade was conceived originally as an alternative political project intended to replace the conventional international trading system; it now extends to all manner of foods, handicrafts, and manufactured goods. Constructed as a ‘politicized’ movement and market, fair trade is distinguished by its commitment to more equitable development for poor Southern farmers and producers through direct trading links with Northern consumers who pay a premium price and ‘social dividend’ for goods such as coffee and bananas.

Quality Foods: These are foods—such as organic commodities, those with definable (and often certifiable) places of origin, and ‘distinguished’ by taste—that, through both materially- and socially-constructed means, affect a host of assignable characteristics that attempt to set them apart from Other foods.

Reflexive Localism: This refers to a theoretical project vis a vis local food movements and their conceptualizations that works to get beyond the typical normative and potentially conservative/reactionary localisms that have become *de rigeur* in local food activism and scholarly work.

Spatial Dynamics of Care: This is where, in alternative food networks, an ethics of care is constructed across the places and spaces of food production and consumption to connect, for example, fair trade producers and consumers, and organic consumers to a pesticide-free countryside. These connections are fostered through both material and discursive means, the later often through highly ‘meaningful’ labels of origin and/or images of producers designed to invoke an affective response.

Sustainable Agriculture Movements: These are heterogeneous and increasingly fragmented congeries of NGOs, food and agricultural activists, government institutions, and academics working to make conventional agriculture more environmentally and socially sustainable. Some argue that the more ‘radical’ early incarnations of sustainable agriculture have been ‘captured’ by a techno-centered and flat political agenda at the expense of a more robust and holistic food democracy.

Synopsis (200 words):

Several interrelated processes, not entirely synchronous, but with cumulative effect, are transforming and diversifying modern food provisioning in North America, Western Europe and many other parts of the world. These processes have created economic and cultural spaces, often designated as niche markets, for alternative food networks (AFNs), whose products – organic, Fair Trade, local and quality, premium specialty foods – are differentiated from those typically furnished by mainstream food manufacturers and retailers. Through the lens of the so-called 'quality turn', we work through some of the conceptual devices and empirical materials that define this turn in US, European and transnational AFNs. Here, food space and place figure heavily in the polysemic material and social construction of 'quality' foods, not least in the labeling of food origins, 'local' foods, and the 'moral geographies' that look to connect the processes and places of food production and consumption. Given their economic growth, their capture by and movement into more 'mainstream' food networks, and the normative register assigned to AFN practices, we critically interrogate the spatial and political expressions of AFNs from a number of different and interrelated perspectives.

Introduction: Alternative Food-Scapes

Several interrelated processes, not entirely synchronous, but with cumulative effect, are transforming and diversifying modern food provisioning in Western Europe, North America and many other parts of the world. These processes have created economic and cultural spaces, often designated as niche markets, for alternative food networks (AFNs), whose products – organic, Fair Trade, local and quality, premium specialty foods – are differentiated from those typically furnished by mainstream food manufacturers and retailers (see figures 1 to 11). In their infancy, AFN products were distributed through new institutional forms, parallel to mainstream channels, such as charity shops, food cooperatives, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) or box schemes.

However, the rapid growth of AFN sales, particularly to more affluent income groups, attracted the attention of the large-scale retail supermarkets, which now provide shelf-space for AFN products, often under their own labels, and increasingly subject AFN producers to the rigorous cost-price disciplines of supply chain management. The differentiated products supplied by AFNs and their spectacular growth has reinforced perceptions that 'quality', in its various socially-constructed and material dimensions, rather than price is becoming the new basis of competition in food provisioning. The 'turn' to quality, and the scope it provides for further product differentiation, neatly complements the competitive strategies of firms in the highly oligopolistic sector of food retailing. The neatness of fit between non-price quality attributes and oligopolistic product differentiation strategies is illustrated perfectly by organic products in the UK, where supermarkets currently account for 70 per cent or more of sales.

The interface between 'alternative' and 'conventional' food provisioning thus is an increasingly permeable and highly contested terrain. While the distinction between these two systems retains some heuristic value and provides insight into the eco-social imaginaries and materialities of these provisioning schemes, this entry highlights the competitive and cultural-political dynamics unfolding along this interface as 'alternative' food products enter mainstream channels of provision. Additionally, we emphasize the contested nature of the spatial, political-economic and cultural conceptualizations of what 'AFNs' constitute in popular and academic discourse.

Quality, its material and discursive construction in farm fields, the market-place and on the table, is the fulcrum of this struggle to control modes of integration between food production and consumption. The turn to quality associated with the rise of alternative food practices and the proliferation of AFNs thus potentially represents a significant reconfiguration of producer-consumer relations and the spaces where these are performed. Although the production 'moment' in these alternative agro-food circuits dominates academic research, the quality 'turn' and the growth of AFNs typically are attributed to processes whose effects work largely through the demand side as consumer knowledges, perceptions, and economies change.

These processes include heightened consumer anxieties about the safety and nutritional value of standardized industrial foods as the result of episodic food scares (e.g. BSE; *E.coli*; salmonella; foot and mouth disease; avian influenza). This crisis of confidence in mass-produced 'placeless and faceless' foods is articulated particularly by higher income consumers—the 'worried well'—with the means to *opt out* from mainstream provisioning. In this climate, rising affluence and growing income inequalities have translated these omnivore food anxieties into effective monetary demand for quality products of known provenance, transforming cultural norms of 'good food,' taste and social distinction.

The prominence of provenance and place—'terroir'—in new constructions of quality has received further impetus from the parallel, closely related rise of ethical consumption, and a 'moral imaginary' of food which encompasses ecological sustainability, social justice, cultural integrity, and animal welfare, for example. This has certainly been the case with transnationally-sourced fair trade foods such as coffee and is encapsulated in the so-described novel 'moral economy' created by the discursive and material producer-consumer connections that characterize fair trade networks. Here, moral geographies work to stitch together the various 'poor' places of production in the underdeveloped South with those of the 'spectacular' places of consumption in the North in the name of transnational development for small-farmer communities. Price premiums and guaranteed price floors mix with the emplaced solidarity images of farmers to facilitate a 'developmental consumption' that allows Northern consumers the opportunity to convert their 'labor' of choosing fair trade goods into on-the-ground Third World

development. This morally-charged ‘charm offensive’ of developmental consumption is echoed in Northern AFN discourses in the precepts of consuming to support the livelihoods of small farmers, rural communities, and ecological farming through the purchase of organic and local foods.

Finally, in the European Union (EU), meso- and macro-level developments are creating new opportunities for AFNs and quality food products as the gradual reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is slowly attenuating the pronounced sectoral emphasis on agricultural production and commodity support mechanisms. Impelled by the trade liberalization mandate of the World Trade Organization (WTO), this narrow and sectoral productivist focus is giving way to a pluralistic, regionally-based and more endogenous concept of integrated rural development. Thus, the institutional space and budgetary resources created by CAP reforms have encouraged some scholars to see AFNs as the vanguard of the ‘new’ model of rural development, as advocated in the 1996 Cork Declaration, the Agenda 2000 reforms, and more recent EU policy documents. That is, innovative expressions of a new paradigm of European rural development are marking the transition away from the productivist, crisis-ridden model of conventional industrial agriculture into AFN lands ‘beyond’.

These disparate processes, operating at different scales and conjunctures, have combined to give AFNs ‘room for manoeuver’ in food provisioning systems, despite the continuing hegemony of mainstream industrial foods and the retail multiples. The quality ‘turn’ manifest in AFNs has stimulated a significant body of academic research and a wide repertoire of theoretical approaches.

Approaching AFNs: Understanding the Spaces of Quality, Embeddedness, and Ethics

The liminal yet integral situatedness of food in agricultural nature, social labor and culture gives rise to multiple material and discursive constructions of quality. This polysemic character of food, in turn, explains the complex analytics of the quality turn to alternative food networks. The main conceptual categories used to explicate this turn in

food provisioning and consumption are the interrelated characteristics of quality (e.g. taste, ‘distinction’, etc), embeddedness, trust, place and the local.

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The contested and contingent nature of these constructs, and the associated difficulties of deciphering their complex expression in material environments, social behavior, organizational forms, discourse and power relations, defines the theoretical and empirical challenge posed by AFNs.

The literature on AFNs has drawn but sparsely on meso-level theories and concepts. These include the network paradigm, actant-network theory, conventions theory, and culture economy approaches. More avowedly sectoral or industry perspectives have extended commodity chain analysis in elaborating such concepts as ‘systems of provision’ (SOPs), short food supply chains (SFSCs), and global value chains (GVCs), to give greater analytical purchase on issues of governance, power relations, and the competitive dynamics of economic rent. Other allied but more culturally-inflected approaches draw loosely on the ‘commodity cultures’ approach in order to ‘follow the thing’ as these alternative foods move from and among sites of material and symbolic production and consumption.

Of the meso-level approaches, convention theory has been by far the most influential in AFN research since it speaks directly to the ‘economy of quality.’ It offers a general typology to distinguish product quality in terms of ‘orders of worth’ that specify the different logics orchestrating their production and governance. It thus identifies the norms, qualifications, and organizational forms involved in network coordination and which uphold different conventions of quality. The ‘worlds of production’ variant of this perspective has been used in the AFN literature to conceptualize the quality ‘turn’ as a contested process of transition. That is, from the ‘commercial’ and ‘industrial’ worlds, with conventions based respectively on price and standardized quality norms, to the ‘domestic’ world, with quality conventions founded on trust, tradition and place, and the ‘civic’ world, where conventions incorporate social justice and environmental sustainability.

The concept of social embeddedness has been drawn, somewhat uncritically, from the dialogue between Granovetterian economic sociology and heterodox economics, united by their critique of the asocial abstractions of neo-classical economic theory. This productive dialogue influenced the 'new' industrial geography and research on Marshallian industrial districts in the late 1980s, and also informs more recent debates on the economy-culture divide in human geography. However, this genealogy and recent reworkings of the concept of embeddedness have received scant attention in the AFN literature. Similarly, major theoretical advances in human geography, notably relational conceptualizations of place, space, economy, and the politics of scale find little reflection in AFN research, despite the critical importance attributed to the local and provenance.

The meso-level perspectives deployed in AFN research are production-centered and focus primarily on the characteristic features of different modalities of economic coordination. Consumers and consumption are seen as mere appendages to the production process or as abstract inhabitants of 'spaces of quality' in typologized 'worlds of production.' Reconstructive efforts have sought to overcome this neglect by theorizing consumers as social, relational and reflexive constituents in AFNs and deploying the notion of consumer knowledges. These efforts attempt to transcend the false dichotomy between production-centered perspectives of society and cultural approaches, which respectively theorize consumption practices in terms of Marxian commodity fetishism or Durkheimian cultural totemism. This 'economic/cultural faultline' also is reflected in the unhelpful academic division of labor between agricultural 'production' sociology and the 'cultural' sociology of food. Other authors have addressed this issue by developing notions of consumer aesthetics to analyze cultural formations of production and consumption in comparative perspective, as in the polar cases of US fast food and Italian slow food, standardized and artisanal culinary traditions.

In further efforts to get beyond these false dichotomies, recent work on AFNs has sought to explore and characterize the expansive 'moral geographies' that inhabit and often underpin these networks. Extending the so-called normative turn in human geography, research has focused on the 'economy of regard' fostered in farmers' markets and the 'spatial dynamics of concern' in constructing the spaces and places of fair trade. Here it is argued that an 'ethics of care' is woven in the tissue of the imagined and

material connections between knowing consumers and distant Others in the diverse forms of free range chickens and cattle, pesticide-free streams, artisanal bread makers and Ghanaian cacao growers. There remains great scope for deeper theorization along these lines, in particular through a careful and critical exegesis of the limits and possibilities of these nascent conceptualizations of ethically-drenched 'alternative economic spaces' for concrete political action and social justice.

In the main, the AFN literature has neglected theoretical development in favor of empirically grounded, case-study analyses of alternative food production and provisioning networks, new economic forms, and institutional mechanisms of governance and policy. This emphasis has yielded 'thick' ethnographic descriptions of individual local networks and detailed analyses of the burgeoning number of food accreditation, labeling and promotional schemes devised to provide new bases for rural development.

These generalizations extend broadly across AFN scholarship. Nevertheless, despite a shared micro-analytic toolkit, the US and Western European literatures diverge significantly on several points. These two branches of scholarship project different socio-political imaginaries, which can be attributed to their respective research constituencies. A parallel literature has arisen on globalized AFNs, but one heavily framed by the precepts of Third World development and the quality turn's penchant to 'certify everything'. Thus, an implied project of this entry is to suggest that further conceptual and empirical cross-fertilization needs to open up between Northern-focused AFN work and that on Southern 'development-focused' AFNs.

The American Experience: Conventionalization, Entrepreneurialism, and Localism

In the US, researchers are in conversation with activist communities and typically have strong normative commitments to the social movements contesting the hegemony of the mainstream, corporate industrial food system and the allied agricultural techno-scientific complex. Correspondingly, AFNs and, more generally, sustainable agriculture movements (SAMs) figure as material and symbolic expressions of eco-social imaginaries of alternative, local and regional 'foodsheds,' whose scaling-up, it is argued, would create an ecologically sustainable, egalitarian and socially-just food system. In the

US literature, AFNs and SAMs thus are assessed in terms of their oppositional status and 'transformative potential' to deliver progressive systemic change in food provisioning.

Measured against this standard, SAMs have been castigated persistently by academic scholars for their neglect of labor relations, social justice and the needs of low-income consumers. Despite SAMs' origins in the radical civil rights and anti-war politics of the 1960s and 1970s, contributors have emphasized the primacy of an alternative technological managerialism and related efforts to achieve scientific legitimacy over social justice and a progressive transformative politics.

In this managerialist representation, it is argued, the organic is framed as a competing system of efficient resource management, buttressed by modernist epistemology and scientific knowledge claims. This representation privileges ecological sustainability, food safety and health concerns, placing SAMs on the neo-liberal, green consumerist terrain of individual market choice and consumer sovereignty. Such technocentrism, contributors have emphasized, has pre-empted progressive socio-ecological politics that gave prominence to questions of social justice, food security, class, gender and race. This social agenda, by default, has fallen to an uneasy coalition of Community Food Security movements and anti-hunger activists, which advocate local entrepreneurial initiatives and public food entitlement approaches, respectively.

These shifts in the political ambition of organic AFNs charted by US scholars also have been theorized in terms of commodity fetishism. Thus, by contrast with conventional industrialized foods, the organic intentionally unveils its ecological production relations 'farming in nature's image', and philosophical values of stewardship and a 'land ethic' of care are ascribed to this 'moral ecology' of transparency. However, as several authors have demonstrated, this transparency does not extend to labor, working conditions, citizenship, or equality of access to nutritious food. In short, the commodity fetish has been re-worked to support food safety and health claims, while continuing to obscure unjust social relations of production and consumption. The ethical standing of organic AFNs and SAMs arises from their embeddedness in sustainable ecologies and not, as in the case of Fair Trade, in moral economies of social justice.

This 'technology-led vision' was endorsed by the leading SAMs in negotiations over the USDA's Proposed Organic Rule in the late 1990s and is codified in the

technocentric regulatory criteria used to define acceptable production practices for the USDA's 'Organically Grown' label. This narrow conception, which effectively translates 'organic' into a market brand, a mode of technological competition, and one among many differentiated food products, has fragmented SAMs and dissipated hopes invested in organic agriculture as a progressive force.

Most recently, activist ambition and academic research has focused on the development of localized food systems, local farmer knowledge, and territorial labels of origin. This research tracks smaller organic growers, excluded by scale requirements from interregional and export markets, who are seeking new sources of economic rent and livelihood by going 'beyond organic' and finding niches in local direct marketing and local food networks. Some US contributors have denounced the economic privilege and WASP-ish ethnocentrism that currently characterizes these networks. However, efforts to develop a food justice movement to mitigate the class and racial complexion of AFNs are isolated and incipient at this point.

In following this trajectory of SAMs, US scholars have analyzed the decline of progressive politics and structuralist critique and the emergence of a more circumspect, incrementalist analytics of change, more accommodated to the hegemonic neo-liberal discourses reifying the market and consumer choice. One recent empirical study of thirty-seven alternative food initiatives in California reveals that they are characterized by an entrepreneurial culture and a politics of engagement explicable only by neo-populism. These Californian initiatives are no longer 'oppositional' but rather 'alternative' organizations articulating narrowly proscribed claims of localism, community food security, and sustainable local agriculture.

The trajectory of fragmentation is formulated in political economic terms in debates evoked by the so-called 'conventionalization' and 'bifurcation' theses of structural change in US organic agriculture, and with particular reference to California.

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These formulations contend that the rapid growth of markets for organic produce, reinforced by the minimalist 'allowable inputs' approach to federal codification, has

engendered a dualistic process of change. Large-scale, often monocultural producers are integrated into national and global commodity networks, leaving holistic, ‘movement farmers’ or ‘artisanal’ growers to serve low volume, localized markets. Empirically, the large-scale specialized segment of organic production shares many attributes with its conventional industrial counterpart, and these similarities are even more pronounced in marketing and distribution as Earthbound Farms meets Whole Foods, Inc., accentuating the industry’s dual structure.

Other contributors have argued that the division between ‘industrial’ and ‘artisan’ growers *within* the organic sector is problematic and may conceal unwarranted normative and ideological assumptions. For example, that ‘artisanal’ maps directly onto more progressive, movement-oriented ideologies and holistic agroecologies, and that ‘industrial’ equates with both economic behavioral and conservative ideological elements of the ‘conventionalization’ thesis. This debate clearly calls for more empirical research, not least because agro-industrial dynamics and capitalist imperatives of social reproduction are pervasive.

This discussion of binary structures and unexamined normative assumptions leads neatly to agrarian localist discourses and portrayals of AFNs as sites of resistance to time-space distantiation and corporate power articulated through the oligopolistic, globalizing industrial food system. In contributing to those discourses, US scholar-activists have formulated such normative concepts as ‘food-in-social-context,’ ‘commensal community’ and ‘foodshed’ as counter-narratives to corporate hegemony. In this binary opposition, the local is represented as a potentially ‘insulated space,’ which affords opportunities to re-embed food provisioning in local institutions and the ethical norms of a ‘moral economy’ characterized by mutuality, reciprocity and equity. These norm-based, neo-populist narratives propagate ideas of ‘secession,’ disengagement and what some authors term the ‘principle of succession,’ which involves a gradual transition from the industrial food system to the foodshed.

Several recent contributors have sought to problematize the conflation of social relations and spatial relations in those idealized formulations of local food networks. Such spaces, it is argues, may accommodate a reactionary ‘defensive localism’ marked by conservative politics and nativist sentiments, rather than the progressive, ethical and

associative economy so often imputed uncritically to localized AFNs. In short, eco-social embeddedness can obscure difference, inequality and social injustice.

Other authors have challenges such 'normative localism,' where the local is cast as the realm of resistance to anomic, globalizing capitalist forces, for its erasure of the politics of the local. That is, it fails to recognize that contested issues of distributive justice, human rights and identity can arise in these idealized, insulated spaces. The notion of 'reflexive localism' accordingly has been proposed in order to focus attention on the social relations and power asymmetries subsumed in the rhetorics of 'sustainable local development' and 'local control.' A reflexive conceptualization of localism recognizes the 'differential (or adverse) incorporation' of social classes into the market economy, civil society and state. Social classes are differentially positioned to benefit from 'sustainable local development' but these distributive consequences are lost in the discursive trappings of normative localism.

Activist narratives of a normative localism embedded in a secessionist moral economy also have failed to problematize scale construction at the local level. This omission ignores potentially negative outcomes of the dynamic, contested interactions between local forms of social-spatial organization and translocal actors and institutions. Rather than situating the local within a relational politics of scale, it is framed as a social space where new economic forms incorporating ethical norms are allowed to grow and flourish. In short, the local is reified, obscuring the contested socio-spatial processes involved in its construction and the practicalities of secession and local control. Although these analytical limitations and erasures arguably reflect the preoccupation of US scholarship with the 'movement' aspects and 'transformative' potential of AFNs, similar shortcomings also are found in the European literature.

Niche Markets, Re-Localisation, and 'Alternative' Policy: AFNs and the Western European Experience

Although reified local-global dichotomies, norm-based localism and neo-populist rural imaginaries inhabit the European literature, it differs from its US counterpart in the prominence given to AFNs as territorialized value chains, a source of diversified farm

livelihoods and, more broadly, as catalysts of revitalized rural economies. The focus is more economistic: 'just value' rather than 'just values' and communitarian discourses of social justice. The instrumental market-centered tenor of AFN research in Europe intersects with wider political economic processes, ranging from CAP reform, the transition to more pluralistic visions of rural development, and devolved rural governance to public debates on food safety and the conservation of rural socio-ecological environments. In this context, AFNs are envisioned as integral elements of a European eco-social imaginary, which is articulated politically by claims of rural cultural exceptionalism and finds institutional expression as 'multi-functionality' in EU rural development policy and international agricultural trade negotiations.

In buttressing claims of European exceptionalism, a complementary discourse of economic performance and competitiveness has emerged, which frames AFNs/SFSCs as new sources of value added that can be captured locally and so stimulate rural economic regeneration. These value streams arise from the capacity of AFNs to re-embed and re-socialize food provisioning in local ecologies and communities. In this way, as urged by the 2002 Curry Commission report, *The Future of Food and Farming*, published in response to the UK outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, AFNs are 're-connecting' with consumers through new markets of quality local produce.

In this market-led, 'economic' localism, re-connection is made by valorizing signifiers of the local that can be commodified and translated into premium prices; that is, into streams of economic rent. Several contributors have drawn attention to the dynamism of commodification processes as new attributes of territoriality are 'internalized' by the discourse of food quality and subsumed by the value-form, including the conservation of rural landscapes, wildlife habitat, and sustainable rural environments. Other authors suggest that the spatial proliferation of territorial valorization processes will lead to 'competitive localism,' threatening economic rents and accentuating the uneven development patterns implicated in these 'new rural geographies' of food.

European AFN/SFSC research has grown rapidly in recent years and a wide selection of local and regional case-studies is now available. Some contributors have made preliminary schematic attempts to assess the geographical distribution and economic significance of quality food networks. However, such is the dearth of

comprehensive data that only 'educated guesses' are possible about the economic impacts of AFNs, their temporal, spatial and evolutionary dynamics, and their stability in the longer term. Accordingly, the following discussion concentrates on several lacunae and erasures in European AFN research.

This literature re-affirms the role of farmers as key actors in the re-localization of food provisioning and privileged beneficiaries of the economies of scope associated with the diversification of on-farm production activities. Yet farm-level innovation and AFN-centered rural development strategies have largely escaped critical interrogation. Thus AFN case-studies typically fail to analyze relations of power within the farm enterprise, whether in the labor process, the household or gendered property structures. Similarly, although farm-based multifunctional activities are seen as the engine of the 'new' rural development model, there has been little systematic evaluation of how this model will address entrenched rural problems of income equality, low paid employment and rural poverty or reconfigure spatial processes of uneven development. By neglecting to examine relations of domination at these different scales, this literature leaves unanswered the question of 'who gains and who loses' from this market-led, farm-centric response to the quality 'turn.'

The erasure of relations of domination and, by extension, politics in analyses of economic localism is complemented by the limited attention given to the rent-seeking behavior of downstream actors, notably retail multiples. In addressing this neglect of food supply chain relationships, a recent study analyses the production of new quality food 'spaces' in the UK and the concomitant struggle to dominate the material and discursive construction of quality. Competitive control of quality confers power to delineate markets and draw boundaries between retailer-led commodity chains and AFNs. In the UK case, the entrenched regulatory hegemony of retailer-led food governance, sanctioned by the state, places AFNs at a tremendous disadvantage in this struggle. This analysis of power relations across the spaces of food provisioning hopefully will stimulate further research on this theme.

Other contributors have approached this question more generally by emphasizing the dynamic nature of economic rents and their competitive erosion by rent-seekers. These pressures are exemplified by EU Regulation 2081/92 regarding PDI/PDO

designations, which has led to a profusion of quality assurance schemes, logos and labels to valorize territorial identity and local provenance. In one study, these differentiation strategies are described in terms of the 'qualification' of place, process and product, or the three Ps. These new territorial constructions of quality are open to imitation and strategic convergence, and retail multiples have responded by developing own-label, locally-sourced product lines and quality food brands.

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Such moves by leading retailers to dominate the emerging 'quality food spaces' suggest that 'mainstreaming' and brand proliferation may so dilute the meaning and imagery of 'local,' 'organic' and 'specialty' foods that these terms will become meaningless as indicators of 'alternative' food provisioning networks. These dynamic changes at the interface between 'conventional' and 'alternative' provisioning clearly threaten the foundations of the territorial value-added model of rural development insofar as these competitive pressures erode price margins and rents are captured by extra-local downstream supply chain actors. Several authors have identified the need for a better understanding of the dynamics of economic rents and their distribution as a major research gap in the AFN/SFSC literature.

This gap and the neglect of social relations, power dynamics and the politics of the local arguably are symptomatic of a deeper theoretical problem. That is, the ontology of the local is taken as a given, and not as a category that is socially constructed, contingent and therefore in need of explication. AFN/SFSC scholarship thus does not problematize the local as 'place,' as a scale of accumulation nor its genesis in dynamic and contingent interactions with translocal actors and institutions. The static, bounded and reductionist conceptualization of the local in this literature entirely ignores theoretical developments in human geography, notably relational perspectives of place, as in Doreen Massey's work, and analyses of the politics of scale. Close engagement with such work would expose the reification of the local and its naturalized social relations to much needed critical analysis.

The failure to acknowledge consumers as active partners in the emergence of AFNs is paralleled by the limited analysis of the social relations of consumption in both the US and Western Europe. With its markedly higher prices, quality food provisioning has been characterized as a ‘class diet’ of privileged income groups, who can afford this form of personal ‘quarantine’ from conventional industrial foods. Thus the US natural foods chain, Whole Foods, is satirized as ‘Whole Paycheck.’ Several recent studies of public sector procurement policies, notably school meals, community food cooperatives, and sustainable urban food systems speak to this issue of democratic access.

Such initiatives, however, almost surely will be overtaken by the accelerating incorporation of quality foods into product lines of mainstream retailers. The ‘Wal-Mart effect’ on the conventional-alternative provisioning interface represents the new frontier for the analysis of ‘spaces of quality’ and their alterity. This raises the interesting question of how mainstreaming and more democratic access will unsettle the eco-social imaginaries and moral geographies of quality foods, perhaps by diluting the moral charge of connection as these commodities are popularized and no longer garner social distinction.

Globalised AFNs: Qualities, Ethics, and Mainstreaming

So-called quality foods and foods invested with particular ‘qualities’ are driving the growth of globalised AFNs in forms of transnational organic food chains, the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), and fair trade networks. All three have—in one way or another—captured the geographical imaginations of activists and scholars, politicians and businesses, and consumers and producers as pathways to ameliorate damage to the livelihoods of workers and peasant communities in these neo-liberal ‘times’.

Certified organic AFNs comprise the growing on- and off-season movement of tropical fresh and processed foods to the North from the South; one of the largest and fastest growing exporters is China. While research to date has been highly descriptive, excellent accounts of one such AFN exist in the particularly fine-grained ethnographic analyses of a set of Mexican organic coffee cooperatives. Attention here is to the practice of the governance ‘work’ of organic certification and the potential problems this writes

into the eco-social relations fostered amongst coffee, community members, certifiers and international regulatory bodies. This research points to the paradox of the 'roll-out' of certification schemes throughout poor farming communities in the South: greater development possibilities open up but at the expense of often unforeseen economic and social costs in internecine competition and conflicts among communities and their members. In short, certification for producer communities—in organic and fair trade networks—is not a neutral practice. A related lesson is that these political economies of certification can often only be gleaned through extensive ethnographic research.

The ETI, developed in the late 1990s and located in the UK, was formed from a coalition of supermarkets, transnational corporations, activists, and development NGOs. With its focus on the enforcement of international labor standards at the points of commodity production in the global South, research on the ETI has focused on food, flower and clothing production. Some of the best work on ETI AFNs—again done at the ethnographic scale—has focused on the international trade of 'veg' from Africa to the UK. Contextualized against the canvas of wider food 'scares' from imported goods, one scholar conceptualizes the ETI as a form of 'soft' colonialism working to produce 'pure' African spaces through the regulation of non-exploitative labor and chemical-free foods. Here, the unintended and non-neutral consequences of the ETI certification have worked to marginalize some of the poorest farmers, alter community social relations through the creation of 'benign dictators' invested with certificatory power, and further entrench the economic power of supermarkets more than half a social, economic, and cultural world away.

Fair trade AFNs have quickly become an expanding 'sacred' space for activists, scholars (much beyond geography), and many multi-national corporate entities (see figures 12 to 18). Some of the earliest geographical work utilized fair trade coffee as a backdrop around which to wrap a series of conceptual and theoretical threads; here it was argued the 'nourishing networks' of fair trade coffee were better conceptualized through the Latourian metaphors of 'longer' versus 'shorter' networks of 'immutable mobiles'. This was put forward in an attempt to shed the essentialized scalar categorizations of the local, regional, and global in describing the 'mode of ordering of connectivity' in the producer-consumer connections of fair trade coffee AFNs. Unlike AFN scholarship, work

(geographical and otherwise) following this initial beginning has been more conceptually- and theoretically-driven and ethnographic research on fair trade networks has been relatively neglected.

Several lenses have been used to work through fair trade and its bid to 'guarantee a better deal for Third World producers'. An early developmental lens for fair trade has given way to wider discussions of how fair trade must constantly negotiate the contentions of the conventions it articulates: those of domesticity (e.g. trust) and civic norms (e.g. global citizenship) *vis a vis* those of commercial, industrial- and market-ness (e.g. price, quality, labeling, etc). This articulation is encapsulated in the rather empty twin platitudes—both of which have been uttered with little geographically-minded acumen or verve—that fair trade operates 'in the market but against it' and/or that it is 'in the market but not of it'. Newer and more grounded work on the so-called development 'case' for fair trade has sought to explore the ability of these AFNs to build small-producer capacities (at a number of levels) and bolster livelihood strategies within and beyond fair trade commodity chains. On the other hand, dissection of the governance structures of fair trade certification and regulation is beginning to reveal some problematic aspects of this certificatory regime in the growing inequalities of power between producer communities and regulators.

There is also a 'business' case being made for fair trade, particularly through the publication of the book *Fair Trade: Market-led Ethical Consumption*. In simple terms, the arguments being made are that fair trade is simply another expression of consumer choice and is in fact a neo-liberal solution to the problems of international trade and development. While the validity of these claims is somewhat questionable from a number of different perspectives, it is a rather politically-savvy, 'realpolitik' line of argument that attempts to pre-emptively defend the fair trade model from the critiques and gerrymandering of more powerful so-called 'free trade' advocates. In many ways, it is these conceptualizations that have paved the road for fair trade to move smoothly into the mainstream of supermarkets and larger retail outfits, and become part of the established repertoire of some of the transnational giants of the conventional food system, such as Nestlé, McDonald's, and Starbucks.

The final lens discussed here is that of ‘consumption’: work has concentrated on conceptual development that entrains production and consumption, space and place in the exploration of fair trade AFNs. This has come at the expense of greater engagement with ‘live’ consumers. Rather, one strand of the discussion has focused on the use of the images and discourses of producers’ ‘em-placed’ livelihoods designed to link the spaces and places of fair trade production and consumption. It is argued that these ‘political ecological imaginaries’ have given poor farmers, fair trade companies and NGOs the opportunities to ‘seize the fetish’ and re-work it towards more advantageous Third World development. More recently, it has been suggested that the re-worked fetish has damaging effects through an essentialization of the Other that maintains the deeper inequalities of representation and political economy that quite rightly still haunt the global economy; soft colonialism might just be rearing its ugly head in fair trade AFNs.

Another strand of engagement with fair trade’s consumption-scape explores the sort of ethical key to which fair trade is tuned. Conceptualized as a ‘solidarity-seeking’ moral economy, it has been suggested that fair trade moves beyond the requirement that one must be socially and geographically ‘near’ to care about others. Instead, these AFNs shed the confines of ‘place’ to open up an ‘ethics of care’ that is similarly fostered across distant social, economic, and geographical ‘spaces’. And, yet, counter-arguments are emerging to suggest that, precisely because of the far flung distances between producers and consumers in the global economy, it is only through the images, realities, and connections of place that fair trade can and does work.

A number of further avenues are opening up for greater empirical and theoretical work on globalized AFNs. For instance, research is beginning to focus on the sort of Faustian bargain fair trade has made to enter the mainstream: on the one hand, markets have expanded rapidly and thus more money is being transferred from the well-off North to poor farmers in the service of livelihood empowerment and economic development. On the other hand, this growing presence in conventional retail spaces has come at the price of a lower political register that is starting to see fair trade networks first and foremost as ‘quality’ products rather than as advancing a potentially transformative political project. More research needs to focus on the wide-ranging effects of the mainstreaming of fair trade and other ethical goods from a number of geographically-

informed angles. Not least of all, researchers should engage with the growing bifurcation of the fair trade movement—similar to that in organic AFNs—along the faultlines of the so-called 'movement' or '100 percent' fair traders versus those that advocate a more mainstreaming perspective.

Further Reading

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Relevant Websites

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The Community Food Security Coalition: http://www.foodsecurity.org/
The USDA National Organic Program: http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOP/indexNet.htm
The UK Soil Association: http://www.soilassociation.org/web/sa/saweb.nsf?Open
The Organic Farming Research Foundation: http://ofrf.org/index.html
The International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling (ISEAL) Alliance: http://www.isealalliance.org/
The Center for Fair and Alternative Trade: http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/Sociology/cfats/index.html
The UK Fairtrade Foundation: http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/
The UK Food Ethics Council: http://www.foodethicscouncil.org/
Sustain: The Alliance for Better Food and Farming: http://www.sustainweb.org/
The UK National Farmers' Retail & Markets Association (FARMA): http://www.farma.org.uk/

Figure Titles and Captions:

Figure 1. Scenes from London's Borough Market.

Here, in the iconic Borough Market in London, the 'practice' of AFNs is readily apparent.

Figure 2. An Organic Statement.

This declarative statement that 'quality' foods 'won't bite back' goes to the heart of AFNs' charm offensive through their often combined sense of 'safer' and ethical food.

Figure 3. Feeding in the Niche.

The Ginger Pig provides a series of niche pork foods and charcuterie, with this 'niche-ness' forming part of the backbone of AFNs.

Figure 4. The 'Vision' of AFNs.

One of the important storyline of AFNs is that they provide the knowledge to consumers of where their food is coming from and how it has been produced. For the Ginger Pig, this vision means consumers knowing they are getting free-range and traditional pig breds but also, in a slightly humorous twist, free-range 'farmers and butchers'. Also note the other trappings announcing the quality of the goods given that they supply a well-known 'foodie' café and have garnered attention from the BBC and *The Observer Food Monthly*.

Figure 5. 'Knowing' Northfield Farm.

Northfield Farm's bid for quality comes through this proud statement: 'Our aim at Northfield Farm is to produce and source premium quality Beef, Lamb & Pork; naturally reared & humanely killed. We specialise in rearing and sourcing Rare and Traditional breeds of cattle, sheep & pigs. We believe the producer & consumer must strive together to ensure traceability and excellent. © 2004'

Figure 6. Northfield Farm's Rare Breeds.

Rare and traditional bred livestock is one of the 'alternative' selling points of Northfield Farm and one of the ways they work to differentiate themselves in the kinds of quality meats they provide.

Figure 7. "How Did it Get Here?": Tracing the Cheese.

This is an hour-by-hour photo-display of where the Comté cheese wheels in the right of the picture come from; the traceability of the cheese is foremost in the presentation of this quality food.

Figure 8. New Economies, Alternative Networks.

Quality, tradition, and the new internet economy blend in interesting ways in AFNs.

Figure 9. Re-producing AFNs I: Germany.

A modern incarnation of an AFN in the well-known form of a farmers' market in the city center of Erlangen, Germany.

Figure 10. Organic and Artisanal Goods.

Organic and artisanal goods, like this bread maker, are at the center of the AFN in Erlangen.

Figure 11. Re-producing AFNs II: Santa Cruz, California.

Scenes from the downtown farmers' market in Santa Cruz, California

Figure 12. The Beginnings of the Fair Trade Cacao Commodity Network.

Even this image of a fair trade cacao pod 'hides' the different relationships of power, economy, and politics 'present' in this cacao that will eventually end up in a fairly traded chocolate bar.

Figure 13. Fair Trade Farm in Costa Rica I.

Fair trade works through organized cooperatives of small farmers; this fair trade cacao farmer in the figure is part of cooperative known as the Asociación de Pequeños Productores de Talamanca (APPTA) on the south-eastern coast of Costa Rica (http://www.appta.org/). Also, fair trade works to produce goods based as much as possible on sustainable agroecological principles. Thus, the farmer is standing in the midst of his inter-cropped pineapples, cacao and other crops.

Figure 14. Fair Trade Farm in Costa Rica II.

This is another fair trade cacao farm in Costa Rica. Note that in this region of the country, most of the initial processing of the cacao (fermenting, drying, etc) is actually done by the individual farmers on their property.

Figure 15. Fair Trade Cacao in the Dominican Republic

These are processing facilities for CONACADO, the largest exporter of fair trade cacao in the world and located in the Dominican Republic. One of the things to note here, besides the massive size of the operation, is that the processing facilities are more cooperatively run and owned vis a vis the Costa Rican market. This is one of six *bloques* of farmers and processing facilities scattered around the country.

Figure 16. Drying Cacao in the Dominican Republic

Note the denuded hills in the background; often fair trade farms and cooperatives become islands of green in the midst of environmentally-damaging 'business-as-usual' farming.

Figure 17. A Cacao Nursery

This cacao-plant nursery is owned and operated by CONACADO; it was financed through fair trade funds and is used to promote the farms and development of its members.

Figure 18. The Fair Trade Social Dividend

This is an image of the infrastructure—roads, home gardens, housing—provided by the fair trade social dividend and price for fair trade cacao for the members of CONACADO.