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**PLACE AND SPACE IN ALTERNATIVE FOOD
NETWORKS: CONNECTING PRODUCTION AND
CONSUMPTION**

David Goodman

Department of Geography, King's College London

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Introduction

This chapter examines the ‘alternative food economy’ constituted by the provisioning of ‘quality’ food products to what at present is a relatively narrow segment of consumers. Typically, though not exclusively, these are rich in economic and cultural capital, the ‘worried well’, as the phrase goes. In short, there is a strong class dimension to the social relations of consumption of the ‘organic’, the ‘local,’ the ‘regional,’ and the ‘alternative’ (Tregear, 2005). The social positioning of these foods, seen through the prism of class, race and inequality, and the corollary of how to democratise access, should be kept in mind throughout the following discussion.

The analysis focuses on the ‘geographical imaginations’ (Harvey, 1990; Gregory, 1996) and conventions of quality underlying the construction of the spaces of alternative production and consumption, the socio-ecological relations holding these networks together, and how these spaces are being redefined by the countervailing forces of dissolution and assimilation into conventional corporate supply channels. The main theoretical issues concern the conceptualisation of the geographies—the places and spaces—of alternative food production and consumption and the material and discursive trafficking between them. Are these linkages to be found in unconventional, contested knowledges and shared ethical values or, more instrumentally, in the marketing opportunities afforded by the anxieties of the ‘risk society’ and efforts by rich, self-interested and predominantly white consumers to quarantine themselves from food risks? (Cf. Szasz, 2007).

Alternative food networks clearly are reconfiguring an expanding subset of production-consumption relations and nature is being commodified in different, hopefully more sustainable, ways. However, it is well to remember that these networks and new economic forms are embedded in capitalist societies rather than inhabiting a more benign, parallel universe.

Accordingly, it is important to bring critical social analysis to bear on the recent literature on 'alternative', local and 'quality' food networks and examine the distribution of gains arising from these new economic activities between local and extra-local actors, and locally, along the lines of class, gender, race, and ethnicity. In this respect, the present chapter seeks to redress the limited attention given to the unequal relations of consumption and the uneven retail geographies of quality food in the literature on the alternative food economy.

Context

The 'turn' to quality foods and the emergence of alternative food provisioning networks reflects the confluence of longer-term developments and more conjunctural factors. The following are among the most prominent of these developments, although this discussion is avowedly schematic rather than exhaustive.

As many commentators have suggested, the unnerving frequency of 'food scares' in Western Europe, especially the BSE pandemic and recent outbreaks of Foot and Mouth disease in the UK, have provoked a 'crisis of trust' (Murdoch and Miele, 2004b, 170) among consumers and prompted closer interrogation of the practices of large-scale corporate agriculture. In effect, the sanitarian-Fordist pact between the corporate food industry, with its standardized, highly processed product lines, and middle-class consumers has been undermined, provoking a flight to 'quality' and encouraging the growth of alternatives to supermarket provisioning. This crisis of confidence in mass-produced 'placeless and faceless' foods is articulated mainly, though not exclusively, by higher income consumers with the means to opt out from mainstream food provisioning.

These 'fugitives' from the industrial food system, although still restricted by time-space constraints and open to the appeal of supermarket convenience, have reinforced parallel cultural

changes in contemporary eating habits. For the more affluent, these changes include the attractions of culinary diversity, quality foods, and gastronomic distinction, to which the media panders with the cult of celebrity chefs and food writers, elite restaurants and food shops, and the titillation of food pornography liberally featured in up-market newspapers, magazines, and lifestyle publications. The August, 2004 cover of *The Observer Food Monthly* bearing the headline “Dish of the day” and featuring the buxom, bikini-clad wife of Salman Rushdie reclining on a table of lobsters surrounded by male chefs epitomizes this culture of celebrity and privileged excess.

Local food initiatives have been among the beneficiaries of the continuing, if halting, process of reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). For these initiatives, milestones in the 1990s included the closer targeting of the European Union (EU) Structural Funds on local rural development in depressed agricultural regions and support for endogenous, ‘bottom up’ socio-economic development under LEADER: Liasons Entre Actions de Developpement de l’Economie Rural (Ward and McNicholas, 1998; Ray, 2000). At the macro-level, reforms of the CAP responded to the trade liberalization mandate of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) by prioritising non-production related payments, such as environmental stewardship schemes, which are considered not to distort international trade and so are classified as ‘green box’ programmes under WTO criteria. These so-called Second Pillar programmes, by de-coupling farm payments from production, are gradually re-orientating the CAP away from its narrow, sectoral focus towards a more decentralised model in which a multi-functional agriculture is the centre-piece of a more pluralistic, integrated and endogenous approach to rural development.

However, this shift is glacial and strongly contested (Potter and Tilzey, 2005), with significantly different approaches to its implementation among EU member states (Lowe et al,

2002), and increasingly is dominated by a rearguard struggle led by France to defend current levels of EU agricultural support, which are due to be renegotiated by 2013. These reform dynamics have been further complicated by concerns for food security. These were well and truly aroused in 2007/2008 by record commodity prices, food price inflation and declarations of a world food crisis at the G-8 Summit in July, 2008. Commodity price inflation has since receded with the global 'credit crunch' but food security is now firmly on the policy radar and whether or not local food networks will be given greater priority over conventional agriculture remains very much an open question at this point.

Since 2003, myriad direct EU production subsidies have been consolidated into a 'single farm payment' system, which gives greater scope to market forces in commodity agriculture and concomitantly highlights the social and environmental rationale of continued farm support, strengthening prospects for the possible re-nationalisation of farm policy. Localised quality food networks and 'Short Food Supply Chains' (SFSCs) have an integral role in the market-based Second Pillar strategy to restructure the productivist model of the post-WW II agricultural settlement. The institutional space and budgetary resources created by CAP reform have encouraged some scholars to envision alternative food networks (AFNs) as forerunners of the 'new' model of rural development, as advocated in the 1996 Cork Declaration, the Agenda 2000 reforms, and more recent EU policy statements (Ploeg et al, 2000).

Alternative food provisioning networks, where premium prices or economic rents still can be earned, provide opportunities for more diversified farm livelihoods. Such networks promise relief from the oppressive cost-price pressures on farmers exerted by the combination of diminishing direct, production-related subsidies and the market power of oligopolistic retail

multiples, with their harsh, exploitative techniques of supply chain management (Marsden, Flynn, and Harrison, 2000; Marsden, 2004; Sustainable Development Commission, 2008).

With this broad, contextual overview of the ‘turn’ to quality in local food networks, the discussion moves to the spaces of localised production and spaces of consumption in these networks, and examines several neglected questions found in the interstices between these categories. The final section briefly considers the uneven retail and moral geographies of quality food provisioning, with some illustrative examples from London, and argues for a renewed emphasis on social justice in food production-consumption practices as the foundation of a re-invigorated food policy.

Spaces of Localised Production

Attempts to theorise the emergence of AFNs have engaged an eclectic range of meso-level perspectives, including commodity chain analysis, systems of provision, convention theory, actant-network theory, culture economy approaches, and discussion of the aesthetics of local and regional gastronomic networks. A second focus has provided ‘thick’ ethnographic descriptions of individual local networks and detailed analyses of the plethora of food quality accreditation and promotional schemes devised to provide new bases for rural development (Morris and Young, 2000; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999; Tregear, 2003; Parrott et al, 2002)

Taken broadly, these perspectives are primarily production-centred, concerned mainly with different modalities of economic coordination, with consumers and consumption seen as appendages of the production process. Among the meso-level approaches, the more avowedly sectoral or industry focus offered by commodity chain analysis has enjoyed a recent resurgence,

as in the work of Brian Ilbery and Damian Maye (2005, 2006) and Peter Jackson and his colleagues (2005).¹

However, convention theory has been easily the most influential in AFN research since it speaks directly to the ‘economy of quality’ (Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Morgan et al, 2006). This approach 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 the different conventions of quality (Wilkinson, 1997).

In this literature on the quality ‘turn’ to alternative food provisioning, the concepts of ‘quality’ and the ‘local’ are frequently used inter-changeably, although, oddly enough, only quality is theorised as a socially constructed category. Quality is defined in terms of various elements drawn from Granovetterian sociological analyses of regional industrial networks, notably interpersonal relations, trust, embeddedness, localised tacit knowledge, and other ‘untraded dependencies’ (Storpor, 1999). Local provenance has become virtually synonymous with ‘quality’, and this is forcefully conveyed by the concept of re-embeddedness in local social and ecological relations developed by Murdoch, Marsden and Banks (2000).

In policy terms, SFSCs are formulated primarily as farm-based initiatives that are regarded collectively as the catalyst of an alternative rural development, promising a different trajectory from the productivist model of the post-WWII agricultural settlement, whose dynamics have decapitalised farms, concentrated resource access and land ownership, impoverished rural

¹ These recent contributions draw on archetypal commodity chain methodologies, bypassing earlier re-workings of this tradition, including the cultural economy approach of Jane Dixon (1999) and the systems of provision perspective developed by Ben Fine and his colleagues (Fine et al, 1996; Fine, 2002).

communities, accelerated out-migration, devalued localised tacit knowledge, and devastated local ecologies. According to protagonists of this new trajectory, the “earlier modernization paradigm ... is increasingly at odds with society’s expectations of agriculture” (392) and the “reconstruction of agriculture and countryside and their realignment with European society and culture is imperative” (Ploeg et al, 2000, 396).

It is revealing to analyse the emergence of alternative or local quality food networks in terms of several intertwined or overlapping geographical imaginaries, again centred mainly on production, which are articulated in the literature and debates on the reconstruction of European rural development policy. These imaginaries cast AFNs as vectors of resistance, cultural identity, and rural regeneration.

Resistance

In this imaginary, local food provisioning is depicted as a site of ‘resistance’ to the anomic forces of a globalising corporate food system and against further incursions of placeless, homogenised foods and standardised gastronomic practices (Cf. Miele and Murdoch, 2002; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004; DeLind, 2003; Kloppenburg et al, 1996). Here, the local is seen as the normative realm of resistance to the global corporate food regime, characterised by the time-space compression of production-consumption, and “the corporate principles of distance and durability” (Friedmann, 1994, 30). This ‘revival of the local’ also finds resonance in the wider context of international trade negotiations, where the notion of multifunctionality, as the essence of the *‘exception europeenne’*, is advanced by the EU to legitimise continued agricultural support (Buller, 2001; Potter and Burney, 2002), and thereby maintain a bulwark against the homogenizing pressures of trade liberalization (Potter and Tilzey, 2005, 2007). The intersections between agri-environmental public goods, rural cultures, local foodways and traditional inhabited

landscapes here are woven into a narrative to underpin the model of European agricultural exceptionalism.

Cultural Identity

The imaginary of resistance against ‘placeless and faceless’ foods is closely allied to narratives of cultural identity, as reflected in President Francois Mitterand’s reference to a “certain kind of rural civilisation” in Europe and the importance of preserving it for future generations (The Times, 7 February, 1987), a sentiment echoed more recently by Christine Lagarde, then France’s trade minister, who considers farming as “fundamental to our identity” (*The Economist*, 10 December, 2006, 28). This cultural narrative embraces the defence and conservation of local agro-food networks, historical landscapes and *terroirs*, tacit knowledges and craft skills, and regionalised culinary networks, epitomised by the agenda set out by the Slow Food Movement (Murdoch and Miele, 1999; 2004a,b; Miele and Murdoch, 2002). Here, neo-populist yearnings can be detected in the characterisation of the ‘new rural development paradigm’ in terms of processes of ‘re-peasantisation’ (Ploeg et al, 2000). This same narrative is the central thread running through earlier advocacy of endogenous rural development and operationalised by Jan van der Ploeg’s notion of regionally differentiated ‘styles of farming’ (Ploeg, 1990; 1993). In this imaginary, rural development grounded in farm-based quality food enterprises promises to revitalize rural society and redress the more egregious social and ecological consequences of post-WW II productivism.

Territorial Valorisation

These geographical imaginaries of resistance and cultural identity are complemented and reinforced by a market-oriented developmental imaginary of territorial valorisation. This is neatly illustrated by the tenor of the 2002 Curry Commission report, *The Future of Food and*

Farming, issued in the wake of the severe UK outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease. Farmers are advised to develop new livelihood opportunities and exploit untapped sources of value added by making a ‘reconnection’ with consumers through new markets for quality local produce.

These new livelihood opportunities and sources of value added are open to those producers who can successfully adopt quality conventions that demonstrate territorial provenance or embeddedness in localised socio-ecological processes. In this economic discourse of market-based ‘re-connection’ through reconfigured producer-consumer relations, the focus is on the local capture of value added, which is envisaged as a means to arrest, or even reverse, the historical decline of the share of farm activities in the value stream of the agro-food system. In short, territorial valorisation is seen as an entrepreneurial opportunity, a farm livelihoods strategy and the cornerstone of a revitalized rural economy (Cf. Marsden and Smith, 2005).

This shift towards the production of quality local foods, as opposed to the generic ‘placeless’ commodities of productivist agriculture, which often are sold into the closed ‘internal markets’ of conventional supply chains and contract production relations, is variously conceptualised as the re-embedding, re-socialising, and re-localising of food systems. SCFCs are a major institutional expression of these reconfigured production-consumption relations, whether in the form of direct, face-to-face contact at farmers’ markets, for example, or narrated to distant consumers by symbols, logos and labels of quality and ‘qualification’ of place, process, and product, or the ‘three Ps’, according to Ilbery et al (2005).

Thus farmers are encouraged to ‘short-circuit’ industrial supply chains and to reconstruct the producer-consumer interface by engaging with different conventions and constructions of quality “that evoke locality/region or speciality and nature”(Marsden, Banks and Bristow, 2000, 425). With “their capacity to re-socialise and re-spatialise food”, SFSCs are in a position to

"redefine the producer-consumer relation by giving clear signals as to the origin of the food product" (425), since these new relations play a key role in "constructing value and meaning" and enhance the potential of products "to command a premium price" (425).

In a nutshell, SFSCs are seen as the vehicle for capturing the economic rents arising from the commodification of the 'local', with these returns accruing, at least in theory, to owners of local material and intellectual property rights (Cf. Moran, 1993; Guthman, 2004a). However, as we observe below, these property holders must contend with extra-local actors, who have the power to capture shares of this value stream at other sites as these quality products navigate the spaces of consumption

Interstitial Questions

Several interstitial questions arise between the spaces of localized production and the 'translation' of territorial resource endowments and their semiotics into value in spaces of consumption. Although their unfolding bears directly on the relations of power in the production-consumption spaces of the new 'economy of quality', these issues are linked by their relative neglect in the literature on quality food networks.

Rent-seeking and the Competitive Control of Quality

The premium prices on which the territorial valorisation model of rural development is founded encourage rent-seeking behavior by off-farm, downstream actors and are vulnerable to competitive erosion. This is particularly the case where these excess profits reflect product differentiation strategies, such as the adoption of "territorial identity labels and 'traditional', 'local' and 'organic' designations that are broadly *generic* in character" (Goodman, D., 2004, 9, original emphasis). Key issues here concern "the durability and magnitude of these income flows and the location of the actors who capture them" (Ibid, 8-9). Other authors, notably Valceschini

et al (2002), Buller (2000) and Ray (2000), also recognise that the logic of territorial valorisation is susceptible to the proliferation of competing quality schemes, labels and logos as public agencies utilise territorial identity to promote regional development (Mollard et al, 2005). Corporate food interests, notably supermarket chains, also have responded to the new constructions of quality, and particularly the marketing focus on provenance and traceability, by developing own-label, locally-sourced product lines and quality food brands, such as the 'SO: Sainsbury's Organic' range, launched in 2005. "This combination of imitative expansion and strategic convergence (is) accentuating downward pressures on price margins and threatening to shift economic rents away from the farm and local level" (Goodman, 2004, 9).

Remarkably, however, apart from Terry Marsden's (2004) recent contribution, the rent-seeking behaviour of downstream actors, notably retail multiples, has received little attention. In addressing this neglect of food chain relationships, Marsden analyses the production of new quality food 'spaces' and the concomitant struggle to dominate the material and discursive construction of quality. "Competitive control of quality", he argues, confers power to delineate "competitive spaces', boundaries and markets" between retailer-led commodity chains and AFNs (147). In short, control of the cultural meanings of quality can be translated into excess profits or economic rent. Marsden's prognosis for AFNs in the UK is not optimistic since the large retailers, backed by "a supportive state", hold an almost impregnable advantage over other actors in this struggle due to "the continued institutional and regulatory dominance of retailer-led food governance ". (Marsden, 2004, 144). This analysis of quality struggles and power relations across the spaces of food provisioning hopefully will stimulate further research on this critical theme.

This raises the question of how AFNs/SFSCs will be ‘folded’ into the conventional food system. Will there be co-habitation and complementary yet relatively autonomous growth or will these networks be selectively co-opted and ‘mainstreamed’ and increasingly subjected to the practices and downward cost-price pressures typical of the conventional system? If the latter is the case, AFNs will have brought only temporary respite from exploitative supply chain management and the income “squeeze “on farmers.

This increasingly seems to be the fate of organic agriculture in the US (Guthman, 2004a), where supermarket chains, such as Wal-Mart, Safeway, Kroger’s, Target and Trader Joe’s, in a fine demonstration of Tim Lang’s simile of oligopolistic competition as ‘synchronized swimming’, are rapidly expanding their own-label lines of fresh and processed organic products. With annual rates of growth of 15-20 percent in 1998-2005 and organic food sales estimated at US\$13.8 billion in 2005, this ‘space of consumption’ clearly has captured the attention of the leading US food retailers. The rising intensity of competition is reflected in the US\$565 million acquisition of rival Wild Oats Marketplace by Whole Foods Market, which pioneered organic retailing in the early 1980s, increasing its number of stores from 193 to 303 in the US, Canada, and Britain.²

This mainstream future also is being consolidated in the UK, where the leading multiples hold a 75 percent share of sales of organic products. The increasingly corporate face of UK organics was again revealed in October, 2007, when Abel and Cole, already a giant in the organic box delivery sector with some 50,000 customers and sales of \$56 million, announced that it had

² The US Federal Trade Commission approved this merger in 2008 after initially filing a legal complaint on 6 June, 2007 to block the proposed takeover.

sold an interest in the business to the private equity firm Phoenix. The case of Rachel's organic yogurt, the brand name originally of a single dairy farm in Aberystwyth, the first certified organic farm in Britain, and subsequently used to designate its supply network of organic Welsh dairy farms, provides a cautionary tale of the appetite of the mainstream food system. This SFSC subsequently scaled up to supply Sainsbury's before being acquired by Horizon, the dominant organic milk supplier in the US, whose large-scale, 'factory farm' production methods were challenged legally in 2007 by US organic consumer groups as usurping organic regulatory standards. Horizon, in turn, has been swallowed up by the multinational conglomerate, Dean Foods, leaving behind only the Rachel's Organic brand name in memory of local 'resistance' and eco-cultural identity.

These illustrative cases warn of the potency of 'mainstreaming' and brand imitation in diluting and disempowering the counter-narratives and imaginaries of 'local', 'organic' and 'quality' foods.

Social relations of consumption

While the accelerating incorporation of organic and local products into the mainstream noted above holds out a promise of more democratic access, at present, the social relations of consumption underlying these new forms of food provisioning are highly unequal. Their markedly higher prices, the time-space commitments needed to acquire and prepare these alternative and local foods, and the associated food knowledges involved strongly suggest that significant levels of economic and cultural capital are required to gain access to these

provisioning systems. Moreover, within organics, the Soil Association's 2006 market report noted that a premium sector is now emerging.³

Despite higher prices, this report reveals that the annual growth in sales of organic produce has averaged 27 percent over the past decade, although they still account for less than 1.6 percent of total UK food sales. As we have seen, AFN/SFSC and other actors, notably supermarkets, clearly are responding to this increasingly differentiated market, whose emergence raises the prospect of a new, multi-tiered food system stratified by income and other class markers. In the main, only highly privileged consumers are in a position to join this "flight to quality", leaving others as the "missing guests at the table" (Goodman, 2004, 12-13). This is a critical issue of social policy, as recent work on the poverty-food-health nexus (Dowler and Turner, 2001) and the stubborn persistence of child poverty under New Labour, with currently 2.8 million children below the poverty line (*Financial Times*, 28 March, 2007), make abundantly clear.⁴

Noteworthy efforts to break down these "socially exclusive niches" include the growth of community food co-operatives and particularly the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative introduced by DEFRA in 2003, with its emphasis on sustainable food, better access for minority groups and improved working conditions for public sector catering workers (Morgan, 2007).

³ The onset of the 'credit crunch' since September, 2008 and a return to 'value for money' in food shopping suggest that continued rapid growth in the organic and quality food sector is in serious jeopardy. Whether these developments will widen or narrow relative price differences between organic and conventional foods remains to be seen.

⁴ In the US, two legislative mechanisms directly enhance the access of food-aid recipients and low-income families to farmers' markets: the Seniors Farmers' Market Program and the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, a component of food-aid provision ear-marked for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

Media coverage of Jamie Oliver's damning indictment of school meals in 2005 gave further momentum to this process and school meals have become "a litmus test of New Labour's avowed commitment to public health, social justice and sustainable development" (Ibid, 8). Public sector food procurement should be seen as only the foundation stone of a new, well-funded national food policy if the question of inequitable access and the public health consequences are to be tackled comprehensively (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008). The critical issue still is how to create large-scale provisioning systems that democratize access and make nutritious food affordable. In addition, this must be done in ways that avoid the re-imposition on farmers of the exploitative practices and cost-price squeeze currently associated with retailer-led supply chain management (Marsden et al, 2000; Marsden, 2004). In the absence of such new systems, the mainstreaming of alternative quality foods represents a Faustian bargain for producers.

In this respect, a recent *Time* magazine (12 March, 2007, 11) notes that the advice to "Forget Organic, Eat Local" offers cold comfort to organic producers whose premium price margins have been eroded by the multiples under competitive pressure to 'get big or get out'. European experience also suggests that the economic rents implicit in the slogan 'Eat Local' are vulnerable to imitation and appropriation. This vulnerability is revealed in a survey undertaken in 2007 by the Guild of Fine Foods, whose members account for some 25 per cent of the deli and farm shop sector in the UK. According to press reports, the director of the guild, Bob Farrand, said "Waitrose actively mimics delis and farm shops with speciality and locally sourced foods, but often at lower prices because of its buying power" (*The Guardian*, 3 July, 2007, 11). Guild members expressed their apprehension at Waitrose's plans to expand nationally from its base in southern England, initially by targeting smaller market towns. A possible way to square this

particular circle is to find mechanisms to reduce supermarkets' oligopolistic power over supply chains, such as the proposal by the Sustainable Development Commission (2008) to introduce domestic 'fair trade' principles to re-structure relationships between producers, retailers and consumers.

Without a more interventionist state and root-and-branch changes in UK competition policy, the continued dominance of the oligopolistic supermarkets is unlikely to be disturbed, as Marsden (2004) contends. The Competition Commission's report into the grocery sector published on 30 April, 2008, indicates that this scepticism continues to be well-founded. Narrowly equating the public interest with consumer choice in local retail markets, the report broadly accepts the market power of the Big Four and Tesco's pre-eminence and offers only nominal relief to their beleaguered suppliers. That is, it acknowledges the ineffectiveness of the previously voluntary code of conduct in addressing the current gross imbalances in supermarket-supplier relationships and recommends the creation of an ombudsman charged with its enforcement. This is little more than a mild annoyance to supermarkets since it leaves the oligopolistic market structures that account for the powerlessness of growers and suppliers firmly in place.

Spaces of Consumption: the Elusive Consumer

By and large, consumers in agro -food studies have been described in the instrumental, abstract terms of neo-classical demand theory or, at best, been assigned to the stratified categories beloved of market research profiles. That is, to paraphrase Arjun Appadurai (1986, 31), consumers emerge as private, atomistic and passive rather than being "eminently social, relational and active". In a very real sense, the theoretical challenge facing agro-food studies in attempting to bring consumption 'back in' is to explore each of these dimensions fully (Goodman

and DuPuis, 2002). Rather than using consumption as a means to talk mainly about quality and its production, the everyday social practices of food consumption and the knowledges that inform these routine, habitual practices should share analytical priority.

In analysing the consumer politics of alternative food networks, Goodman and DuPuis (2002) invoke the figure of the ‘reflexive consumer’ in order to access forms of agency that are not encompassed by emancipatory mass politics, the Marxian terrain of class struggle in production or formally organised, collective social movements.⁵ Taking this post-Foucauldian approach, the political can then be re-defined as a more de-centred “capacity to act” (Baker, 1990), which extends into the ‘private’ sphere of everyday life. Several recent papers have broadly incorporated this perspective in analyses of the quality ‘turn’ to alternative modes of food provisioning.

Contested Knowledge Practices: “Growing Food and Knowing Food”

This emphasis on forms of agency and politics embedded in everyday social practices opens up the issue of consumption in AFNs to analysis in terms of competing knowledge systems. This formulation only recently has been extended to the consumer and ‘knowing food’ that we eat, although it has been quite widely used to characterise sustainable agricultural production or ‘growing food’ as a struggle between formal and tacit knowledge systems. (Kloppenburg, 1991; Kloppenburg and Hassanein, 1995; Ploeg, 2003). That is, “By linking these struggles over knowledges, we begin to see the politics of the food system as involving alternative ‘modes of ordering’ in which food is an arena of contestation rather than a veil over reality” (Goodman and

⁵ Goodman and Dupuis (2002) essentialise the figure of ‘the reflexive consumer’ by failing to consider the various understandings of ‘reflexivity’ and the different ways in which these contribute to social change. I grasped this point after reading Littler (2005).

DuPuis, 2002, 16). On this approach, food is no longer polarised conceptually between Durkheimian totem—a symbol which represents social relationships—and Marxian fetish—a symbol that conceals social relationships—but emerges as an arena of struggle, as well as a realm of relationality (Ibid, 15). An analytical focus on the contested knowledges of ‘growing food’ and ‘knowing food’ provides a bridge between the spaces of production and consumption, private and public spaces, and highlights alliances across these spaces in which consumers engage as active and relational participants. This amounts to the simple, yet long ignored, recognition that food, its producers and consumers, are entangled in a politically contested, ever-changing discourse of competing knowledge claims.

Although not examined at length here (see Goodman, 2008), the nature of the ‘politics’ in a reflexive and ethical politics of consumption is attracting increasing controversy and debate. Scepticism remains deeply rooted (Bernstein and Campling, 2006; Guthman, 2004b) but several recent contributions regard consumption as a potentially important arena of citizenship and of a participatory, civic ‘republican’ politics (Cf. Needham, 2003), and one where consumer advocacy organizations can articulate forms of ‘individualised collective action’ (Micheletti, 2003; Clarke et al, 2007; see also Miller, 1995). In this respect, Soper’s (2004) concept of an ‘alternative hedonist’ ethics and politics offers an innovative, nuanced analysis of the shift to ethical and ‘green’ lifestyles in affluent societies and social groups (see also Soper and Thomas, 2006).

The issue of who ‘knows food’ and has the resources to act upon this knowledge raises serious questions about the class and racial character of food provisioning cultures (Cf. Slocum, 2006a,b). Thus in an earlier paper, Guthman (2002, 299) discerns an “elite sense of reflexivity” in recent work on consumption politics, arguing that “... implicit to notions of reflexivity is that

mass-taste is pre-determined, unreflective, and based on a cultural economy of food to which the reflexive eater objects”. While food knowledges are not the exclusive property of the affluent elite, the power to opt out of conventional provisioning clearly is constrained by income and unequally distributed. In this context, Jaffee et al’s (2004) call for the recognition of ‘fair provisioning’ and social justice in alternative production-consumption relations exposes a neglected and critical dimension of the politics of alternative food provision. As they succinctly observe, “Analyses of the social embeddedness associated with alternative and direct marketing of food have not foregrounded considerations of equity” (175).

Contested Aesthetics of Food.

Questions of knowledges, social justice and equity in spaces of consumption arise in a rather different guise in recent work by Jonathan Murdoch and Mara Miele, who explore the changing and increasingly contested aesthetics of food in an anxious post-BSE world. These aesthetics and their contingent socio-cultural construction offer an explanation of the reproduction of differentiated spaces of production-consumption. In an initial paper on this theme, they contrast an ‘aesthetic of entertainment’ developed by standardised, mass food chains, such as McDonalds and Burger King, where the quality of food is secondary and disguised by the ‘restaurant experience’, and the ‘gastronomic aesthetic’, the hallmark of the Slow Food Movement (SFM), whose reference points are freshness, seasonality, and typicality, and whose dominant rhetoric is *terroir* (Murdoch and Miele, 1999).

A subsequent paper argues that food scares have made consumers more reflexive about food and its origins and led them “to rediscover the product ‘behind the sign’” (Murdoch and Miele, 2004b, 160). This cognitive shift is described in terms of a ‘relational aesthetic’, which is conceptualized as a ‘double movement’ involving disconnection to establish critical distance for

reflection and new forms of (re)connection. They go on to analyse quality conventions articulated in terms of cultural heritage, ecology and social justice by the SFM, Soil Association and Fair Trade organizations, respectively, and the role these social movements play in orchestrating this relational aesthetic to promote and commodify certain notions of quality, and so construct ‘alternative’ spaces of food production-consumption.

As Murdoch and Miele (2004b, 170; original emphasis) observe, these new social movements

... aim to regulate and monitor alternative food chains while simultaneously attracting consumers to their products [C]harter marks and logos are employed to draw consumers into a new relationship with the environments of production. In short, the marks and logos *fold* complex sets of relations into food products in ways that permit easy consumer appreciation. They therefore promote a new aesthetic of food, one based on *connectedness* to those natural and social conditions that are thought to ultimately determine the quality of food.

In this respect, these NSMs are acting like trade organisations, setting trade standards, regulating a market, and using their control of quality conventions to exercise economic co-ordination and governance. Such organizations exemplify Micheletti’s (2003) notion of ‘individualised collective action’ and ‘political consumerism’ and provide one response to the question of how ‘ordinary’ ethical values performed routinely by individual consumer-actors can be ‘translated’ or mobilized in ways that can have wider systemic impacts (Barnett et al, 2005; see also Popke, 2006).

Murdoch and Miele’s work is a significant and coherent attempt to theorise the linkages between the spaces of production and consumption in alternative food networks. Nevertheless, the sense of these reflexive consumers is that they are still ‘led’ and ‘reactive’, and the emphasis falls strongly on the activities of the civil society organizations that regulate and orchestrate supply chains and their markets. Membership of this undifferentiated category of reflexive

consumers is achieved by making choices that are said to involve critical judgement. This requires that they engage and identify with the marketing of selected quality conventions and their respective logos, which seek to convey, and so purvey, distinctive forms of ‘connectedness’ with producers and spaces of production.

As such distinctiveness implies, however, only certain, selected socio-ecological relations are being revealed or made transparent by these logos and the auditing practices on which they are based, while others remain obscured. These different aesthetics are fetishised and alienated forms of relationality, reflecting what Andries Du Toit (2002, 371) calls the “technology of ethics”, where labels induce a kind of placebo effect; in this case, what he designates as an ‘ethics effect’ is experienced simply by engaging in the act of consumption. As some authors have stressed, such aesthetic moves can be described in terms of a very different ‘double movement’ of de-fetishisation and re-fetishisation. A common example is organic agriculture, where the technical or ecological relations of production are exposed to view but the social relations, including the wage-relation, working conditions and civil rights, remain hidden ‘behind the sign’ of the organic, as both Allen (2004) and Guthman (2004) have emphasized in the case of California.

In the case of Fair Trade, Bryant and Goodman (2004, 359) similarly analyse the de-fetishisation moves whereby knowledge of eco-social production relations is revealed “to allow consumers, it is hoped, to make moral and economic connections to the producers of the food they ingest”. They go on to suggest, however, that in this very act, “the effect is to commodify, in turn, the ethical relationship at the heart of fair trade—that is, small-scale farmers, producer cooperatives and ‘sustainably’ managed second nature. Fair trade knowledge flows thus act to *re-*

work the fetish surrounding fair trade commodities into a new kind of ‘alternative’ spectacle for Northern consumers” (original emphasis).

The failure to acknowledge the limited access of the vast majority of consumers to quality ‘slow’ foods is a further example of selective de-fetishisation. The relational aesthetics ‘branded’ in the logos of alternative NSMs re-enact and re-inscribe the fetish in their respective markets, subsuming these inequities in food distribution and consumption. This theme is extended in the following section, which looks briefly at the ‘alternative’ retail geographies of quality foods and the ‘moral charge’ of these political geographies of aestheticised consumerism.

Retail Food Geographies, Moral Geographies?

It is easy to suggest that quality foods and their associated knowledges can be sources of cultural and economic ‘consumer surplus’ and a form of social capital, fitting neatly into Bourdieu’s analysis of consumption and social distinction. Such distributional inequalities also can be mapped on to the uneven retail geographies of ‘quality food spaces’ described in *Time Out*’s “London Eating and Drinking, 2005”. Charting their rapid growth and spatial concentration, *Time Out* (2005, 8) suggests that

If there has been one major trend among food lovers (it is that) ... more and more (they) are shopping in local street markets instead of lamenting their decline. Farmers’ markets are springing up so fast ... that it’s hard to keep track. Borough Food Market—the jewel in the crown among London’s food markets, but, incredibly, only a few years old--now has more visitors than Madame Tussaud’s... . In addition, there has also been a rise in the number of quality food shops with a significant diversity of stock, from ‘ethnic’ stores to high quality delis and specialists.

The resurgence of food shops has occurred, it is argued, as a reaction against the “dreary shopping environments “created by supermarkets and because, while the multiples have given almost everyone else access to high-quality, inexpensive food ... better-off people can afford to

be more discerning” (8). In a paean to affluent discernment and its food spaces, Time Out selects two “foodie neighbourhoods” as emblematic of these unequal geographies and social relations of quality food consumption: Marylebone High Street and Northcote Road in Battersea, noting that “both have seen a vast transformation in their food shops, but for very different reasons” (8; see Figure 9.1).

[Insert fig. 9.1 here – landscape]

In the case of Marylebone ‘Village’, “the glut of fine food shops” is attributed to recent pro-active efforts of the Howard de Walden Estate, which owns Marylebone High Street and the surrounding 92 acres, and its “promise to its high-rent residents to provide a high level of services” (9). A partial list of ‘desirable’ shops attracted to the area by the Estate includes La Fromagerie, Rococo Chocolates, Total Organics, Marylebone Farmers’ Market (Sundays), Patisserie Valerie, Ginger Pig and Divertimenti, “arguably the best tableware and cookware shop in London” (9). Marylebone High Street also is home to The Natural Kitchen, with a shop front advertising ‘Organic, Wild and Artisan Food’, whose statement of “Who We Are” reassures its customers that “We do not do mass-produced food “. The culinary landscape of Northcote Road has been transformed by the 1990s gentrification of the Victorian terraced houses in the area. Soaring property prices and the influx of those able to afford them, mainly white professional classes, have revived the traditional street market and established food shops and attracted newcomers. These range from a cheese specialist, with “an appealing array of accoutrements, including several types of oatcake”, high-quality vintners, and master bakers to a new Italian deli, I Sapori, whose “stock is resolutely top-class stuff” (12). No food deserts here!

These two cases of ‘foodie gentrification’ emphatically underline, even to the point of caricature, the huge social and spatial inequalities that generally are typical of the consumption

relations of organic and artisanal quality foods. Close “connections among property, privilege and paler skin” are constitutive of these spaces of alternative food praxis (Slocum, 2006b, 7). Nevertheless, protagonists of alternative food provisioning contend that quality foods and their cultural economies represent embedded moral geographies and that, like fair trade products, they are morally charged. The more discerning ‘better-off people’, as Time Out has it, can eat their organic and exclusive, ‘handcrafted’ foods and still claim the moral high ground. On this argument, the eco-social imaginaries of quality food—think of the discourse of Slow Food—connect consumer lifestyles to an ethic of conservation, embracing traditional landscapes, rural communities, historical legacies of *savoir faire*, humane methods of animal husbandry, and cultural and gastronomic difference. Insofar as local and quality foods are “represented as embodying ‘alternative rural development’, producers and consumers are linked together in a discursive field in which consumption ‘makes a difference’” (Goodman, M., 2004, 902).

In effect, a Leopoldian land ethic of stewardship is performed *corporeally* through a food aesthetic, a performance to which higher income, and predominantly white, consumers have privileged access. This ‘politics of perfection’ around ‘right living’ and ‘right eating’ “universalizes and elevates particular ways of eating as ideal” (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005, 362). A middle-class, white food aesthetic is the ‘unmarked category’ in these politics, which embrace naturalized, unacknowledged possessive investments in class, race, gender and place/space (Lipsitz, 1998). As DuPuis and Goodman (2005, 368) observe, “it is important to pay more attention to the ways in which our possessive investments in our own racial privilege influence how we define problems and solutions”. To emphasise again, Leopoldian stewardship

enacted in the privileged white spaces of alternative food provisioning is not about social justice, whether in labour relations from ‘field to shelf’ or equal access.⁶

As Barnett et al (2005, 8) observe, drawing on Bourdieu (1984), “Ethical consumption often works by presenting consumers with what are essentially positional goods”, which reinforce social and cultural differentiation. Nevertheless, if alternative food practice currently is ordered by economic and cultural privilege and possessive investment in whiteness, critique should not involve outright rejection and blanket condemnation. To the contrary, this ordering is contingent and the possibility that other, more socially just, ethical engagements may emerge, as evidenced by the recent growth of public procurement programmes and food cooperatives in the UK, needs to be recognised and explored (Slocum, 2006b). Also, as Bryant and Goodman (2004) imply, alternative food practice can represent a form of counter-consumerism and such disenchantment with mainstream collective modes of provision may be an important precursor of a wider ‘alternative hedonist’ politics (Soper, 2004; Soper and Thomas, 2006). This brief commentary reveals the complex analytics of politicised consumption, with its ambivalences of reflexive, disaffected privilege, and it is high time that such questions moved centre-stage in the literature and praxis of alternative food provisioning.

Concluding Observations

This chapter has explored the recent research literature on the places and spaces of production-consumption opened up by the growth of alternative food provisioning networks. Particular attention has been given to the construction of quality and its contested meanings. The new quality conventions that inspire alternative food practices have created emergent markets, new

⁶ On the raced dimensions of AFNs in the US, see Allen (2004), Guthman (2004a) and Slocum (2006a,b).

sources of economic value, and unsettled power relations across the spaces of food provisioning. Further analysis of the evolving interrelationships between conventional and alternative food provisioning, captured by the notion of ‘mainstreaming’, and of how power asymmetries operate to influence rent distribution between actors in these value chains should be high on the research agenda.

Socially just food provisioning remains prominent in the imaginary of alternative food systems (Cf. Slocum, 2006b) but material progress on this front, with the exception of current efforts in the public procurement realm (Morgan, 2007; Morgan and Sonnino, 2008), so far has involved mainly isolated, micro-level initiatives. Apart from bemoaning its neglect, the research literature has tended to put this issue to one side. This chapter has suggested that recent critical analyses of moral food geographies and ethical consumption offer potentially fruitful ways of reviving debates on alternative food provisioning and social justice.

More pragmatically, however, social justice needs to be the centre-piece of a reinvigorated food policy to promote equal access to nutritious quality foods and in ways which sustain ‘fair’ livelihoods for farmers, farm workers and other actors in food provisioning. In turn, this requires parallel, root-and-branch measures to eradicate oligopolistic practices used by supermarkets to secure economic rents and dominate the value chain. Without deep-seated political and institutional change, alternative food networks are likely to be confined to provisioning ‘better-off people’ in narrowly circumscribed spaces of consumption whose boundaries are patrolled by rent-seeking retailers hungry for new opportunities to differentiate their product lines.

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