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Searching for the ‘Alternative’, Caring, Reflexive Consumer

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In a recent conversation about food politics with a food studies scholar, she balked at the use of the term ‘alternative’. For her, there was no point talking about ‘alternative’ food projects in a world where Wal-Mart sells organics and non-profit food projects form partnerships with grocery store chains. While we certainly understand this point, we are reluctant to abandon terminology designed to identify what is *different* – a taxonomy that guides us towards projects that are not the corporate, capitalist ‘business as usual’. Why? Because if everything is now located in the ‘mushy middle’ of do-good capitalism, how can scholars and activists figure out which strategies are most useful for working towards greater food system sustainability and social justice? How can we call out the ‘greenwashers’ and the cynical corporate do-gooding, and distinguish this from more substantive social movement efforts? Obviously there are no easy answers to these questions, but it seems that that some kind of boundaries are required – both analytically and politically.

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) is precisely the work the food studies field needs to substantiate, clarify, and push these kinds of conversations forward. A key contribution of the work is helping us move beyond pessimistic critiques of AFNs (as neo-liberal downloading) or naïve praise of AFNs (as ‘alternative’ saviours). This book is a ‘taking stock’ sort of work written by three of the most theoretically nuanced thinkers and astute critics in the field. Goodman et al. identify many of the polarizing dualisms that plague food studies. In their words, ‘[d]espite its narrative convenience, it is simplistic to decant [the food system] into a two-sector opposition between alternative food networks and mainstream food provisioning’ (p. 104). They then identify ways in which unproductive dichotomies can be transcended. For example, they advocate a reflexive politics that carefully considers the ‘alterity’ of food projects, rather than assuming a priori that everything local is virtuous, for example. Alterity does not necessarily mean oppositional, or anti-capitalist, but refers to ‘the development of new ways of doing things that coexist with this powerful [capitalist] system and attempt to change it from within’. Theorizing alterity is just one example of the sophisticated approach they bring to food studies, and these accomplishments are worth spelling out.

Key Contributions: Theoretical, Conceptual, Political

Analytically, Goodman et al. employ a dialectical approach that considers the responses of alternative food movement activists to market appropriation, as well as

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the impact that movement actors can have on for-profit food projects. More generally, this book reminds food scholars about the necessity of taking a complex approach to power – seeing it as both a disciplinary, productive force that shapes how we see, feel, and eat, while investigating simultaneously how power is concentrated in large bureaucratic institutions and market actors – think here of Nestlé, the retail heft of large supermarket chains, or the far-reaching impact of the US Farm Bill. Seeing power this way allows for a nuanced, but clear approach to AFNs; we can remain critical of how they reflect ‘the current neoliberal political regime’, at the same time we can carefully consider how they might represent ‘experiential, prefigurative social movement[s] creating innovative processes of collective learning and grounded practices in particular places’ (p. 155).

The book also brings a refreshing materialist, and politically sharp perspective to the study of food culture and politics. Goodman et al. acknowledge the political and ecological possibilities of AFNs, but they also recognize that we are facing ‘a *structural* problem, with roots in the global resource limits now facing intensive, fossil fuel-dependent, industrial agricultural systems’ (p. 107). This is a work that keeps its eye on the ball of ecological collapse and gross social inequities, and contains a significant critique of how states in the UK and EU have failed to face up to the severity of these challenges – food security rhetoric aside. The book’s ‘big picture’ scope is an important countermeasure in a sea of small-scale food case studies and local-eating projects. The authors productively draw from such case studies, while still facing up to the severity of issues plaguing the global system. In doing so, they acknowledge efforts and alterity without sugar-coating the situation we find ourselves in. For example, after assessing the ‘alternative’ food scene in the UK and Western Europe, they conclude that ‘apart from mainstream efforts to “endogenize” profitable segments of organics, locality, and local foods, these campaigns have made relatively little impression on conventional food systems and the prevailing ideology of “cheap food,” with its foundations in the distantiated patterns of global sourcing developed by transnational food manufacturers and supermarkets’ (p. 128). After assessing the situation in the US, they put forward a hard-headed assessment of the ‘enclave of civic agriculture – farmers’ markets, CSAs, farm-to-school programs, pick-your-own farms’, concluding that these efforts are unlikely to pose ‘any kind of competitive threat to the “incumbent” regime of “Industrial Organic,” not to mention the wider conventional provisioning system’ (p. 154).

The book also takes a refreshingly blunt approach to the market embeddedness of most AFN projects, and raises critical questions about the precise nature of their alterity. Building from Gibson-Graham, Goodman et al. argue against the ‘master-narrative’ of capitalism and make note of the plurality of economic forms within capitalism (p. 245; Gibson-Graham, 1996). For example, it is difficult to make generalizations even about a fairly specific form of food project like a CSA; they come in multiple shapes and flavours and involve different degrees of member participation and civic governance (pp. 81–82, 124). While they argue that we cannot automatically dismiss market-based projects, Goodman et al. also challenge the idea that such projects can sit ‘within the market’, but still be ‘against the market’. Indeed, in the case of fair trade, they bring a much-needed materialist perspective to the topic to shed light on how mainstreaming fair trade and commoditizing ‘care’ works to the detriment of the poorest, and most vulnerable producers in the Global South (who are the least well positioned to provide high-quality, high-volume supplies to cor-

porate behemoths like Nestlé and supermarket chains demanding standardized fair trade products).

Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman's ability to transcend materialist/cultural divides is partly rooted in their interdisciplinary backgrounds (crossing divides of food studies, geography, and sociology), but it also seems embedded in their long-standing scholarly interest in promoting food scholarship that integrates food production and cultural consumption (see Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). The theoretical resources they bring to bear on this task is nothing short of masterful. (While writing this review, one of us [JJ] found herself writing multiple emails to graduate students saying, 'You must take a look at this book. It will help you think through...') Given that we are obvious 'fans', it is clear that our commentary is not focused on identifying a fatal flaw or unpacking one of the book's contradictions – especially since so much of *Alternative Food Networks* is devoted to exploring the contradictions embedded in food projects. Inspired by the book's animating spirit of moving the food studies conversation forward, in our remaining space we would like to briefly discuss the food 'consumer', and how this figure relates to the book's argument about alternative food networks, as well as the field of food studies more generally.

Consumer Agency, Meaning, and the 'Foucault Machine'

For a work that does not present a lot of data about consumers, the food consumer maintains a significant presence in this book. Goodman et al. argue against the idea of seeing food simply, or exclusively as a 'fetish' that needs to be revealed or unveiled. This approach tends to disregard the meaning embedded in food consumption, and they argue that an analysis of consumer agency, meaning, and knowledge is required to get a complete analytic picture. The consumer is positioned as a figure that should neither be romanticized (as it often is in debates about ethical consumption), nor discussed in isolation of structural inequalities and materialities (as has been the case for some cultural studies approaches), nor should it be automatically dismissed or disparaged (as it can be by structural Marxists, who identify emancipatory agency in production processes, or focus exclusively on de-fetishization). In sociological and media studies of consumption, the 'dupe versus hero' dichotomy is widely acknowledged, and there are several significant attempts to move beyond it. Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, for example, highlight 'the pitfalls of binary thinking that separate consumption practices from political struggles', and advocate 'critical consumer studies' that are 'dedicated to careful investigations of the contradictions and ruptures within capitalist consumerism in order to discern both the promise and the limits of political action' (2012, pp. 13–14).

While we fully support this kind of theoretical reconciliation, it turns out that acknowledging the 'consumer versus dupe' dichotomy is far easier than producing scholarship that effectively avoids this binary. One place where challenges continue to occur is in framing the parameters of consumer consciousness vis-à-vis neo-liberal capitalism. How do we acknowledge and account for consumer agency, meaning-making and consciousness, while situating consumer consciousness within a larger political-economic context of neo-liberalism? Some studies exaggerate the agency and creativity of everyday consumption – a tendency that is ably critiqued in Goodman et al.'s analysis of fair trade. At the other extreme, we are wary of how Foucauldian theories of governmentality can be used to generate totalizing accounts of surveillance and discipline – accounts that leave little room for nuance and com-

plexity. We think of the latter tendency as a kind of ‘Foucault machine’: the analyst inserts seemingly agentic subjects (e.g. consumers shopping for justice through fair trade coffee, or mothers seeking to protect their children by purchasing organic baby food), and churns our disciplined subjects who have taken up the tasks downloaded from the state. While we are wary of the ‘Foucault machine’ and its tendency to reduce complex processes to a predetermined neo-liberal narrative, it remains clear to us that Foucauldian insights on neo-liberal’s productive power must be taken seriously: neo-liberal ideologies do have a powerful pull on consumer consciousness in many empirical contexts. In our own interviews with food consumers, for example, we are conscious of how our questions about people’s eating and ethical proclivities seem to inadvertently provoke feelings of shame among participants, conveyed through confessional narratives about the shortcomings of their shopping habits, and the assurance that they will ‘try harder’ to make their dollars count in the supermarket.

There is clearly no easy way out of these entanglements. While acknowledging these tensions, Goodman et al. suggest that significant promise lies in reflexivity, ‘as the political practice that can make the power of alternative economies manifest in a more inclusive and livable world’ (p. 156). In the next section, we explore the ideas about reflexivity put forward in the book, and consider how they might help us think through the complexities of consumer consciousness in neo-liberal times.

Consumer Consciousness: ‘If Only They Were Reflexive...’

While not in the title, reflexivity is a key theme of the book. Goodman et al. ‘conceptualize alternative networks as reflexive “communities of practice” of consumers and producers whose repertoires create new material and symbolic spaces in food provisioning and international trade’ (p. 7). Reflexivity is not just a way to understand current projects, but is a way to assess their transformative potential. For example, local food projects without reflexivity run the risk of defensive localism, and elitist parochialism (see also DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). In contrast, a ‘reflexive localism’ provides the ‘foundation of a democratic local food politics that is processual, open-ended, and altogether messier – less dogma and romanticism, greater experimentation, more negotiation, more openness to alternative worldviews’ (p. 8).

Reflexive localism is clearly an important goal for local-food movements, and we applaud the book’s attention to this topic. Prioritizing reflexivity can generate strategies for identifying the democratic credentials of food projects, and challenge groups to think through their own privilege. At the same time, identifying reflexive processes in the lives of food consumers is not a straightforward project. We have grappled with this concept in our own work (e.g. Johnston and Szabo, 2011), which is perhaps why we continue to ask questions like the following: What does reflexivity look like in the lives of consumers? How much consumer reflexivity can we reasonably expect? When does individual consumer reflexivity devolve into narcissism? In conversations with relatively affluent consumers at Whole Foods Market (WFM)(Johnston and Szabo, 2011), we found a mixed picture of reflexivity: most consumers were attracted to organic, ‘natural’ products primarily because of their quality and deliciousness; many expressed skepticism of WFM’s claims of sustainability and beneficence in the food system; and only a handful reflexively discussed their privileged position in the food system. In addition, our recent interviews and focus groups with female consumers suggest that even those who reflect thought-

fully about food issues often feel unsatisfied with their ability to enact this reflexive practice through their food purchases – especially when juggling a host of responsibilities with limited time, energy, and money (Cairns et al., forthcoming). Given this challenge, consumers often employ a series of ‘make-do’ strategies – such as relying on the imagery on food packaging to determine an item’s ethical status, or relying on other actors (like Whole Foods) to make ethical decisions for them. While we believe that reflexivity is a key concept that should be used to evaluate food projects, we would caution about the tendency of replacing ‘if they only knew’ (Guthman, 2008) with ‘if only they were reflexive’ – especially in a political-economic context where privileged consumers are most able to access eco-products that position them as thoughtful, and sustainability-minded (Johnston, 2008; Johnston et al., 2011). From a social movement perspective, it seems imperative that we keep Goodman et al.’s structural critique in the forefront of these conversations, so as to avoid a politics of reflexivity that inadvertently fetishizes the reflexive *individual as the locus of social change*.

Goodman et al. clearly appreciate the complexities of reflexivity as it relates to questions of power. Citing Lockie and Collie, they prescribe an approach that does ‘not privilege the agency and power of either producers or consumers’ (p. 44), and insist that ‘food production and consumption are interactive and recursive’ (p. 51). Rather than separating producers and consumers into academic silos, they should be seen as ‘active, relational and political partners’ that are creating new food knowledge together (p. 82).

There is much to agree with here. For us, the argument for integrating production and consumption scholarship is one of the most important contributions of this book. However, we caution that such an analytic approach must remain sensitive to the empirical differences in power relations in the realms of production and consumption. Today, most food and consumption scholars feel extremely uncomfortable portraying consumers as ‘dupes’, or even misguided, for fear that they will be accused of elitist accounts of ‘false consciousness’. Still, researchers must ask tough empirical questions about how much agency and power consumers actually have relative to producers – especially in the realm of knowledge construction, and *especially* given the market dominance of corporate actors in the food retail system (pp. 86–87). An approach to production and consumption as equal, *symmetrical* partners in an analytic dialectic must be careful to avoid blind spots that occur when we are inattentive to power – when we miss, or underestimate the ways that power tends to congregate with institutional, corporate actors, creating knowledge that confuses and misleads consumers, or affirms racist, classist, and gendered ideas. Our research with female consumers reveals that even those who actively research the issues surrounding their food purchases can feel overwhelmed by competing knowledge claims about the most ‘ethical’ option. Navigating this contradictory information was particularly stressful in cases where women felt compelled to justify expensive ethical purchases to their partners (Cairns et al., forthcoming).

While the book includes extensive discussions of race and class inequalities, gender is strangely absent from the analysis – a noteworthy omission given that the realms of food and consumption are deeply gendered. Drawing from our research with mothers, we argue that the reflexive consumer is a classed, gendered project – one that privileged mothers have much greater access to, but still leaves them feeling inadequate. This analysis requires unpacking the ‘commodification of care’ – a key concept within Goodman et al.’s book – as a *gendered* phenomenon. In light of

longstanding associations between care and femininity, and in a contemporary context where women continue to do the majority of food shopping, we argue that the commodification of care serves to extend the gendered labour women have historically performed. As dominant conceptions of caring consumption expand beyond the domestic realm, women's shopping practices take on a new level of social and environmental significance.

In our own research, we find that pressures to shop ethically and responsibly is particularly salient for mothers, and manifest in the figure of the 'organic child'. This gendered and classed cultural ideal constructs the good mother as one who consumes conscientiously in order to care for her child and the planet (Cairns et al., forthcoming). During focus groups and interviews with mothers, we found that women felt individually responsible for preserving their children's purity (e.g. by preparing homemade baby food with 'natural' ingredients) and protecting the environment in which they will grow. Raising an 'organic child' requires immense amounts of time, knowledge and money, and often results in feelings of stress and anxiety – particularly among poor and working-class mothers who struggle to negotiate these pressures on a limited budget. While some mothers engaged reflexively with the organic child ideal – critiquing its underlying elitism or questioning the feasibility of its demands – this figure continued to hold significant sway as an internalized standard of good mothering, generating ideals and practices that were difficult to summarily reject. Our analysis of the organic child helps us to move beyond binaries of consumer resistance and subjection, to reveal how neo-liberal ideologies are embedded in women's lived experience and affect – in their food choices, and the emotions surrounding food consumption.

As we digest Goodman et al.'s significant contribution to food studies, and endeavour to both learn from and build upon this work, we propose that a feminist analysis has much to offer the theoretical debates at the heart of this work. Bringing a gendered lens to the commodification of care can help us to move beyond dichotomies of agentic consumers and disciplined subjects to carefully unpack the interplay of power, meaning, emotion, and materiality in the alternative foodscape.

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