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Engaging *Alternative Food Networks*: Commentaries and Research Agendas

DAVID GOODMAN, E. MELANIE DUPUIS AND MICHAEL K. GOODMAN

Alternative Food Networks had its genesis in three leading questions that had been relatively neglected in the great outpouring of research on alternative forms of food provisioning and the social movements at their base. What is to be done to create a more effective democratic food politics founded on open, deliberative processes of civic governance? What are the threads of material, ethical and political commitment that hold people together, however loosely, in these innovative organizational forms? Our third question reflects the fact that most of the alternative economies discussed in the book must secure their social reproduction and disseminate their values in the spaces of (neo-liberal) capitalism. It therefore asks what are the factors that condition and delineate alternativeness and how narrowly do these circumscribe the 'politics of possibility' of market-embedded social movements, such as organic agriculture, fair trade and Slow Food?

To explore these questions we proposed three overarching conceptual bridges: reflexivity, shared knowledge practices, and alterity. Broadly speaking, these concepts are deployed to assess the potential of these 'diverse economies' to 'reconfigure the values, time-space relations, and structures of governance of everyday food provisioning and the global trading system' (p. 7).

Writing *Alternative Food Networks* gave us the opportunity to review the research agenda devoted to the creation of a better food system, systematize our critiques of the limitations of that agenda, and consider how to overcome these limitations. The commentaries in this issue acknowledge the strengths and point out some of the weaknesses of our project. In particular, the commentators, like us, are working to further the conceptual ideas that, hopefully, can help to frame more effective actions to build a future food system that is more sustainable and more just.

We greatly appreciate the response to our work in the commentaries published here, and also in a larger corpus of work by scholars who have found our analytical frames and reformulations to be useful in their empirical research. We are grateful to the authors of these commentaries for grappling with our sometimes dense prose and sometimes challenging ideas in ways that respect what we are saying while asking us to listen to their own not-always-congruent points of view. This kind of conceptual engagement is the definition of reflexivity as laid out in our work on knowing and growing. The invitation to respond to these commentaries gives us an

David Goodman is Emeritus Professor at the Environmental Studies Department, University of California Santa Cruz, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA; email: <hatters@ucsc.edu>. E. Melanie DuPuis is Professor of Sociology, Sociology Department, University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, USA. Michael K. Goodman is Professor of Environment and Development, Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

opportunity to clarify some complex points in the book and also to indicate future directions for research.

Ethnography and Care

As many of the commentators note, and we readily acknowledge, much of this book is not based on our own grounded, ethnographic work on AFNs. Rather, since our first contributions to this literature, we have concentrated on the conceptualization of AFNs as catalysts of food system social change in order to understand what headway this movement-based economic activity is making towards a new and effective food politics. Communities of practice certainly play a central role in food system change, but others are doing the important, grounded work of documenting the diverse experiences of these initiatives, as the burgeoning output of case studies clearly demonstrates (Maye, this issue).

More current commentary in food panels at professional meetings, such as a recent panel called 'Beyond Food' at the 2013 Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting, has emphasized the need for conceptual work. These panelists noted the proliferation of grounded case studies, often celebratory, of food movements and short food supply chain economies, but stressed that much more must be done to situate this research in larger analytical frames that conceptualize sustainability, alterity, or new forms of economic life. We hope that the analytical perspectives and research agenda developed in this book contribute to this conceptual niche, namely, the larger framing of the role of communities of practice and their concomitant ways of knowing.

In particular, some commentators feel that our ungrounded analytical approach ignores AFNs as 'communities of care'. Where, as Laura DeLind (this issue) asks, is the parent caring for the autistic child, the communities of care that pitch in together to create a world that is liveable and mutually comforting? While some of us have worked as part of – and been comforted by – alternative food networks, and have met and comforted other people in these networks, we have consciously avoided the telling of individual one-on-one relational stories as illustrative of contingent situations. We realize that because of this omission we may be criticized for poor field study methodology (we are not 'out there' on the ground looking at life on the food sidewalk, we are not bringing 'the people' into our stories), and for being inattentive to the ways in which 'care' brings alternative movements together in larger networks that go beyond food.

However, this critique of inattentiveness to communities of care misunderstands one of the central arguments of the book. That is, we explicitly reject the communitarian model of food justice as the way forward to new, more sustainable forms of social life, and the related idea that care and 'shared values' are the central pivot point of social change movements. These notions of 'care' can get in the way of creating new, more just forms of social life. Indeed, as the analysis of fair trade in the book bears out, the turn to economies of quality and transnational corporate retail has created cultural economic geographies of care that effectively exclude poorer, more vulnerable farmers around the world. Our framings of AFNs move away from 'sharing and caring' and toward new forms of social life that are embedded in larger ways of knowing and modes of governance based on respect. Local food movements and other local communitarian initiatives based on shared values of caring

and shared visions of the future are important to group identity and solidarity, but are inadequate to the task of transforming a fundamentally unequal, divided world.

What reflexivity does, as a process, is to ask groups to go beyond their own shared visions, values and carings and to participate in larger, cross-solidarity, collaborative modes of social change. That is, to work with people who have different communities of practice, solidarities or mutual carings, different values and different visions of what a sustainable future would look like.

Going one step further, and drawing upon critical race theory's critique of 'good intentions', we would argue that caring is an intrinsic act of power (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Working, for example, to eliminate food deserts because you care about others' access to food, intrinsically *names* those others as dependent on your beneficence, on your willingness to care for them, leading to efforts to 'bring good food' to these neighbourhoods. Instead, a more structural analysis shows that food deserts are the product of financial exclusions, mortgage redlinings and a long history of decision-making at the city and higher institutional levels as to which parts of town will be deigned liveable and others 'empty' – as told forcefully in Nathan McCintlock's (2011) description of food deserts in the City of Oakland. From this perspective, AFN efforts would focus less on caring people driving trucks of organic food to these neighbourhoods and more on people advocating at higher levels of government for new forms of zoning, financing and development policies. Such advocacy would not only help the people in those neighbourhoods but also leverage a coalition of interests that see how zoning has created less sustainable forms of life for everyone – because the same system that creates places of empty retail also creates the unbikeable, unwalkable suburban sprawl that characterizes middle-class neighbourhoods.

None of us could live without our communities of care, and unlike the usual political economy critique, we are not saying that solidarity-based food movements are unimportant because they are 'marginal' or 'contingent'. But the point is that putting caring at the top of a political agenda makes the larger structures of inequality invisible – until, of course, those food truck projects yield little in the way of results and people start asking larger questions about where these deserts came from in the first place.

Reflexivity, Justice and Sustainability

Attention to these larger questions is what reflexivity is about and one of our ambitions for the book was to advance our ideas on reflexive food justice. The lynchpin of reflexivity as a conceptual frame is laid out most explicitly in our chapter on food justice, which discusses four different ways of thinking about food justice. In other work, one of us shows the ways these notions of justice parallel different modes of knowing sustainability and, by extension, alternative food systems (DuPuis and Ball, 2013). This is part of two of current agendas. The first is DuPuis's project to reach a better understanding of how modes of knowing are aligned to forms of social justice, and how reflexivity about both ways of knowing and forms of just action is a necessary part of effective sustainable social change (DuPuis, forthcoming). The second is Mike Goodman's project to conceptualize the mediated knowledges and forms of mediation that govern the cultural and material 'lives' of sustainability under neo-liberal regimes.

In Chapter 2 of the book, we develop a critique of perfectionism and perfectionist food reform movements, arguing that these create new visions of the good life by constructing new categories of pure eating and living. But all social movements based on purity are intrinsically exclusionary, establishing strongly demarcated boundaries between the pure and the impure. The book therefore advocates an 'imperfect politics' that rejects notions of purity and their intrinsic dichotomies as the starting point of positive social action.

This is a somewhat different starting point from either Slocum (2007) or Guthman (2008) and in the book we state explicitly that reflexivity asks different questions of food movements beyond the 'white privilege' critique. This is where different theories of social justice come to the fore. With a distributive notion of social justice, the idea is to share the wealth, to be inclusive. But the point made by Lockie (this issue) is that AFNs do, in fact, have non-white, non-privileged social actors. But inclusiveness alone is not enough from the standpoint of a multicultural theory of justice. It is also more than 'accommodation' (Taylor, 1994). Nor is it a romantic embrace of the other. Instead, it involves understanding not only that one's own social actions are based on a particular vision of the good life that one can share in communitarian movements based on shared values, but also that other people with other visions participating in other communities of practice need to be recognized.

For example, the Hmong and other Asian farmers who participate with AFN farmers at farmers markets in many Californian towns are there for different reasons, and have different interests, than the farmers who are there out of a shared commitment to the local or the organic food movements. Different groups have different ideas of what it means to 'come home to eat' (Valiente-Neighbors, 2012) or create 'fairer' trade regions. A reflexive approach doesn't simply say, 'See, it's not just white privilege, we are inclusive.' That approach shuts down further questions. Instead, the important research question to be asked at this point is: 'How do these different groups, with different interests, create new forms of social life?' To do this requires a reflexive approach from a theory of justice based on recognition and respect. Otherwise, we will get more studies documenting inclusion, a trivial project of simply looking for African-Americans or other groups participating in AFN projects and trotting them out as proof of inclusiveness. Some of us have sat through too many local food policy meetings discussing how to 'bring the [non-participating group] in' to the movement. After several decades of these conversations, it seems like the wrong question.

The ground-level documentation of unreflexive food movements is simply not the right approach. We could document in detail how ideas about care and bringing good food to others create embarrassing scenarios in local food policy discussions. In other words, we could spy on privileged people as they describe their ideas of how to change the food system and show how these ideas do not fit into theories of social justice based on recognition and respect. But that research project is a dead end, leading to the 'You're not inclusive. Yes we are, look here!' research projects that miss larger questions about how to create a better world despite different ideas of that better world.

Life Cycles, Mainstreaming and 'Overflowing'

Alternative food and fair-trade networks are convenient collective labels for what are, in fact, incredibly heterogeneous sets of organizational forms of food provisioning.

Although simplification is always a risky move, especially given the fertile spaces of hybridity and contingency, it makes analytical and heuristic sense to distinguish between networks that are market-based, in some cases retail-led, and those whose social reproduction lies fully or partially outside the market. This distinction underlies our characterization of 'first generation' AFNs – organic agriculture, locality foods, farmers' markets and box schemes/community supported agriculture (CSA) – and 'second generation' collective localization initiatives, including social enterprises, community self-help schemes, and a variety of other not-for-profit organizations. We attempt to acknowledge this heterogeneity, hybridity and contingency at several points in the book (especially see pp. 118–127). Nevertheless, for different reasons, several of the commentators find that this is insufficient or unsatisfactory.

Thus DeLind (this issue) understands that such social constructions as 'quality' and 'local' are vulnerable to appropriation and further commodification by the mainstream food system and recognizes that alternative values can 'overflow' as social movements recalibrate their strategies to evade the corporate embrace. Yet she is puzzled 'why the authors see this process as a form of partnership and mutual co-existence...'. But this is not our vision at all, nor do we use the term 'partnership' to describe the accommodation of AFNs to corporate demands. To do so would fly in the face of the highly asymmetric power relations between these mismatched actors, as DeLind herself observes in her following paragraph.

Case studies of these asymmetries recur throughout our analysis of alternative food and fair-trade networks. To take one example, the reproduction strategies of three regional food networks in south-west England studied by Marsden and Sonnino (2006, pp. 318–320) are based on their sales to major supermarkets, despite the 'inherent fragility' of this unequal relationship and their exposure to unilateral decisions by corporate buyers to 'reassess their portfolios', arising from 'retailers' variable commitment to meeting quality/premium markets'. Partnership was the last thing in our minds, yet it is important to track the dynamics of those alternative networks and organizations that do seek their social reproduction in accommodation with mainstream food provisioning.

Our purpose in this respect is to reveal the uneasy vulnerabilities and risks intrinsic to this trajectory. As our book demonstrates in spades, the experience of Europe and the US is replete with cases where mainstreaming has reduced AFNs to innocuous and pallid imitations of the alternative futures they once promised. The disappearance of the Welsh locality food, Rachel's Organic Dairy, into the ever-open maw of successive transnational conglomerates, or the rapacious expansion of Whole Foods Market spring to mind here. As Maria Fonte (this issue) recognizes in her commentary, the 'economization' and 'marketization' of ethical values is a key thread running through these mainstream engagements across different alternative food movements. It is seen clearly in the recent history of the contemporary fair trade movement, as the book emphasizes. Any serious study of mainstreaming must grapple with these unequal dialectics and how market-oriented food and fair-trade networks are adapting to this environment.

In her comments on conventionalization, Maria Fonte (this issue) suggests that we simplify these dialectic tensions 'resulting in a sort of life-cycle approach to AFNs, which are represented as passing through the different stages of radicalism, co-optation, new radicalism'. A further point is that, 'the co-optation of alternative values is represented as unproblematic', which allegedly leads us to overlook the specific ways in which the conventionalization of movement values has occurred in

different contexts. Rather than simplify the dialectics of mainstreaming, we argue that alternative food movements and markets coexist in permanent tension, as John Wilkinson (2009, p. 20) puts it, and we introduce the notion of 'framing/overflowing' in discussing the mechanisms and processes these movements adopt to resist conventionalization of their values. We are very much aware of the time-space specificities of conventionalization processes and we consider the different outcomes and alternative foodscapes these have produced at length in the chapters on Europe, the US, and fair trade. However, as Maria Fonte rightly observes, we do neglect to explore 'why (there is) so much fragmentation in the food movement', and particularly whether or not these divisions have weakened resistance to 'the appropriation processes set in motion by the dominant socio-technical regime'. These problematics deserve a prominent place on future research agendas.

Figuring the Consumer

Josée Johnston and Kate Cairns (this issue) ask some provocative questions about the subject (and subjectivity) of the reflexive consumer. How can we put flesh on the bones of this conceptual construct: 'What does reflexivity look like in the lives of consumers?' Where do we draw the line between reflexive concern for the collective good and the privileged, individualistic behaviour associated with the phenomenon of 'inverted quarantine' (Szasz, 2007)? These authors also reinforce our emphasis on power dynamics in the mainstream food system. It is one thing to conceptualize producers and consumers as 'active, relational and political partners' in the construction of shared food knowledges, and it is quite another to observe how this analytic symmetry works out in the everyday reality of hegemonic corporate retail and the 'white noise' of competing knowledge claims. How, for example, has the wider, explicitly transformative project of a movement-directed vision of 'trade justice' become simply one more constellation of global supply chains provisioning the shelves of Asda/Wal-Mart and their counterparts?

Johnston, Cairns and their colleagues are doing trailblazing work (cf. Johnston et al., 2011) on these central issues raised by the concept of the reflexive consumer and their proposition that she is 'a classed, gendered project'. In this vein, they emphasize the importance of unpacking the "'commodification of care"... as a *gendered* phenomenon'. As Johnston and Cairns rightly observe, our analytical framing of reflexive consumption is conspicuously silent on gender, and we support their insistence that this question needs much further research. Crucially, as they emphasize, 'a gendered lens... can help us move beyond dichotomies of agentic consumers and disciplined (Foucauldian) subjects to carefully unpack the interplay of power, meaning, emotion, and materiality in the alternative foodscape', in all its hybrid and contingent heterogeneity.

Concluding Remarks

We thank the commentators for carrying this conversation forward with their constructive criticism of *Alternative Food Networks*. We hope that our work will bring greater awareness of the socio-theoretical resources to be found in correlate disciplines that can enrich the conceptualization of these diverse economies and contribute to a more effective food politics. The commentators have identified several

theoretical and empirical priorities for future research that promise to reinforce the prominence of alternative food networks in food studies more generally. These include gender, reflexive consumption, the closer integration of conceptual and ethnographical work, movement fragmentation, and the contribution of food relocalization initiatives to food security policy in a resource-constrained world. Clearly, there is much still to do.

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