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RESEARCH COMMENTARIES: FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH PRIORITIES OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS

Alternative food systems and the citizen-consumer

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Abstract

Ethically informed and committed consumers are crucial to the functioning of many alternative food systems. These consumers are poorly understood, though, and their common description as informed and democratically minded finds little resemblance to the real world. Few individuals fit the ideal of the concept of the so-called citizen-consumer. This commentary therefore argues that both researchers and practitioners interested in the success of alternative food systems must rethink the concept of the citizen-consumer. By focusing on consumption contexts, cultural and social influences, and the impact of systems of provision on acts of ethical consumption, the nature of such acts will be better understood. This understanding will increase the

chances for proliferation and longevity of consumption niches so crucial for market innovation.

Keywords

alternative food systems, citizen-consumer, sustainable consumption

So-called “alternative” food systems, which encompass numerous efforts to make the production, distribution, and consumption of food more sustainable, depend greatly on engaged and committed consumers. Most of the many direct-distribution systems proliferating in Western societies, for example, require particular configurations of consumers engaging with producers on a long-term basis to be successful (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999). The niche markets in which innovative ideas can be tested and developed are thus dependent on groups of committed consumers until they reach a level of refinement that makes them suitable for mainstream markets (Seyfang, 2006). Many popular alternative food system innovations addressing sustainability, such as organic agriculture or local distribution networks (e.g., box schemes or community supported

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agriculture operations), would not have surpassed their infancy stage without a critical number of committed consumers.

The group of consumers willing to invest time, energy, and money into supporting sustainable food niches is small but growing, and in many instances such consumers appear as groups of like-minded people (Little, Maye, & Ilbery, 2010). These consumers are often treated as rational, informed, and willing to forego personal economic benefits for collective (political) goals. In the literature these consumers are referred to as “citizen-consumers.” Follesdal (in Micheletti, Follesdal, & Stolle, 2006) describes this view as follows:

Citizens can be strongly committed to distributive justice and the decent and respectful treatment of those they affect. This commitment can find expression through purchases. Political consumerism allows individuals, living under conditions of globalization beyond control of accountable governments, to express their sense of justice as citizens of the world. A defensible role as consumer and citizen under globalization requires them to exercise their economic power responsibly when seeking to promote a legitimate global economic order that treats all as equals. (2004, p. 14)

Consumption is described as increasingly driven by citizens’ (ethical) values instead of consumers’ (selfish) preferences. Citizen-consumers are said to be increasing in number and thus becoming an increasingly strong force in the market. Their existence and growth in numbers is described as a reaction to an unsustainable agricultural system and the decreasing influence of elected politicians, and is frequently used as argument to predict the increasing importance of alternative food systems that will lead to changes in how food is produced, distributed, and consumed.

At the same time it remains highly unpredictable when, where, and how citizen-consumership surfaces. Today’s consumers, who are often praised for thinking ethically when making consumer choices (Micheletti, Stolle, & Berlin, 2012), have

proven difficult to deal with (Yates, 2009). They fail to act in accordance with their stated values, and their initial willingness-to-pay arising from their ethical convictions is often lost in the face of disproportionate conventional market information that argues against quality premiums and for personal gains as primary logic of consumption choices (cf. Rischkowsky & Döring, 2008). With such widespread and erroneous assumptions about the group of consumers referred to as citizen-consumers, the viability of new ideas in the food system that aim for higher levels of sustainability and consumers’ commitment is therefore questionable.

Attempts to encourage consumers to engage with alternative food systems often focus on providing information to facilitate voluntary, pro-environmental, and pro-social behaviors on the part of individuals (Belz & Peattie, 2012). However, the effectiveness of information-based approaches in encouraging individuals’ sustainable consumption practices has remained limited (Heiskanen, 2005; Prothero, McDonagh, & Dobscha, 2010), and numerous doubts have been raised about how the phenomenon of the citizen-consumer is commonly dealt with. While it is widely acknowledged that consumers are both more aware and more concerned about social and environmental problems than ever before (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Peattie, 2010), critics of the citizen-consumer concept claim that consumers’ expression of good ethical intentions must not be taken for anything more than just that: good intentions (Thøgersen, 2010). Soron (2010) points out that to be true citizen-consumers as they have been idealized, these consumers would have to analyze all aspects of their life and change their behavior in dozens and dozens of ways, which is a highly unrealistic prospect. The claim has also been made that consumers’ alleged high level of concern for social and environmental issues — usually derived from surveys — suffers from a lack of attention to reality, ignoring trade-offs connected to sustainable consumption (Devinney, Auger, & Eckhardt, 2010). So it is jokingly claimed that consumers are cause-driven liberals when surveyed, but economic conservatives at the check-out line (Devinney et al., 2010).

Following from the above, it is argued that the individual is not the right starting point for the analysis of citizen-consumership. Instead, the framework within which acts of citizen-consumership appear is given more emphasis. Rather than studying the consumer as an individual, this view implies the necessity of focusing more on macro- (i.e., societal) and meso-level (i.e., consumer communities) influences and how they influence individual acts of consumption. Acts of citizen-consumership are a complex phenomenon that goes far beyond information provision and willingness-to-pay. Successful alternative food systems are the result of a process involving networks of producers, consumers, and institutions embedded in continuous cycles of interaction and exchange. The success of each of these networks depends on its mission, whom or what it represents, how it does this, how many people are involved, the material resources it has access to, and how each in turn connects to other networks. All this leads to the growth of some networks, while others fail (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999). Rather than a concerned and knowledgeable individual, from this view the citizen-consumer must therefore be understood to be part of a complex network composed of numerous individual actors, as well as resources and institutions, resulting in a vibrant whole (Jarosz, 2000).


Today, research into the phenomenon of citizen-consumership focuses too much on a view of the consumer derived from neoclassical economics, viewing the consumer as an ethical version of the *homo economicus*.¹ This view revolves around information, education, and intention, and it persists despite the fact that marketing and consumer research in general has long ago moved on to aspects of human behavior dealing with culture and habitual aspects of behavior as well as context and the influence of “systems of provision” (e.g., Røpke, 2009). For academia as well as practitioners to understand the processes that result in well functioning niches for new ideas to develop, it is necessary to better understand the processes through which individual consumers are taking part

in collective (i.e., democratic) efforts to change dominant food systems. At present, the literature does not provide the necessary insights to answer questions such as “What makes an individual participate in sustainable food niches?” or “How can citizen-consumership be preserved over time?”

To answer these questions a timely view must be adopted. Too often research misinterprets a snapshot of individual consumer behavior as an expression of internally motivated acts. This view does not take into account the context-dependency of consumer behavior and the resulting changeability of consumer behavior, which in its turn leads to simplistic perceptions of citizen-consumership and disappointing results for many efforts to implement ideas to promote sustainability in food systems. Lamine (2005) suggests that demand should no longer be considered an external factor when studying local alternative food systems. Instead, she advocates an alternative view to the classical transaction in which a consumer is relatively unattached to the seller. To understand consumers’ participation in various food system innovations requires a perspective that sheds light on the social construction of markets (see also Chiffolleau, 2009) and acknowledges that *how* actors are connected is more important than their individual qualities. This view highlights the embeddedness of citizen-consumership in a web of social relations and physical “systems of provision.”

For academia to understand acts of citizen-consumership, and for practitioners to be more successful in establishing niches that allow for ideas to develop into innovations, more research is necessary that looks into the complexity of the concept of the citizen-consumer. Such research must not make the mistake of equating the concept of the citizen-consumer with an individual consumer. Rather than describing individuals, the concept should be understood to describe a temporary condition, one that no consumer embodies all the time, but some individuals are more likely to adopt than others. Future research must therefore counter the problem of context-deprived studies focusing on attitudes and buying intention, as well as methodological individualism (cf. Halkier, Katz-Gerro, & Martens, 2011). Further research is required to understand the success factors for an

¹ See Wikipedia for an overview of the concept of *homo economicus*: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_economicus

alternative food network to thrive. Such research should be of a qualitative nature to enable researchers to trace the complex links and alliances that operate between actors and different spatial scales. Further investigation is also required into the means by which producers, consumers, and institutions build stable alliances with each other. A nuanced and critical analysis of the phenomenon of the citizen-consumer is necessary to deepen the understanding of the reasons, underlying mechanisms, and struggles individual consumers face when engaging with consumption that requires collectively minded action. A better understanding of the motivational factors and enabling contexts for active citizen-consumers will further increase the ability of policy-makers to use the right levers to encourage voluntary experimentation with potential solutions to the many challenges the food system faces today, enabling those engaged in such systems to assure its long-term viability. 

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