Neoliberal subjectivities or a politics of the possible? Reading for difference in alternative food networks

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Recent research on alternative food networks has highlighted the centrality of place-embeddedness as a strategy in constructing alternatives to conventional agri-industrial food systems, and has illustrated the political nature of these strategic localisms. Recently, critical human geographers and sociologists have drawn on relational theory to criticise the localism of alternative food networks as representing a politics of place which is unreflexive or defensive. Furthermore, some readings of alternative food networks argue that they reproduce the very neoliberal subjectivities that they seek to oppose. This article argues that agri-food scholars should be aware of the ways in which their readings of alternative food networks can guide and reproduce alternative food network practice. Drawing on Gibson-Graham's technique of 'reading for difference', I argue for a reading of alternative food networks that sees difference beyond the discursive field of neoliberalism. The article explores recent debates around governmentality as the mechanism through which neoliberal subjectivities are reproduced, and draws on a preliminary discussion of the alternative food network practice of the 100 Mile Diet in order to illustrate the arguments made.

Key words: *alternative food networks, food politics, localism, 100 Mile Diet, neoliberalism, governmentality*

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Introduction

The recent emergence of food networks as modes of resistance to agri-industrial food systems has been followed with interest by geographers (Feagan 2007; Winter 2003a, 2004, 2005), particularly as place plays a significant role in defining these alternative food networks (AFNs)[1]. The construction of 'the local' as a space in which AFNs can thrive has drawn critical attention from some scholars, who have questioned the positioning of the local as an alternative to the 'placeless global' of conventional food systems. Specifically, scholars have labelled AFN localism "unreflexive" and "defensive" (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003b). Following these observations, a new critique is emerging from a group of US scholars which suggests that AFN localism tends to reproduce the very neoliberal forms and subjectivities which these alternatives seek to challenge; a critique expressed recently by Guthman, whose work:

> [theorizes] how projects in opposition to neoliberalizations of the food and agricultural sectors seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms, spaces of governance, and mentalities. (2008, 1171)

This article seeks to challenge the scepticism of such critiques, and does so with the conviction that the tendency to read neoliberal logics and subjectivities in AFN initiatives might inadvertently be closing down possibilities for constructive socio-environmental change in and through food networks. I argue that while AFN practices can be read as reproducing neoliberal forms, it is important for scholars to consider how the choice of theoretical framing can limit the ability to recognise new political openings offered by AFN localism. The argument is illustrated by two contrasting readings of the 100 Mile Diet, an experiment in localism which involves eating food produced within 100 miles of one's home. The first reading follows the critiques outlined above, whereas the second explores Gibson-Graham's practice of "reading for difference rather than dominance" (2006, xxxi). This perspective demonstrates how the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivity is not the only outcome that can be read in performances of AFN localism. Furthermore, I suggest that a constructive critique should carry with it a reflexive awareness of how academic scholarship can shape our understanding of a politics of the possible.

This article opens by reviewing the ways in which place has become important in defining alternatives to industrial agri-food systems. I then introduce the arguments which have led scholars to label AFN localism "unreflexive" and "defensive", and summarise the ways in which AFN localism has been read as reproducing neoliberal forms and subjectivities. The third section introduces the 100 Mile Diet, and explores the different

ways that its practices might be read, both following contemporary AFN critiques and by those seeking to open discursive spaces outside the perceived dominance of neoliberalism, before offering some tentative conclusions.

Place and the local in alternative food networks

An academic literature examining alternative food networks emerged during the 1990s following the recognition of changes in food production-consumption relationships. Whatmore and Thorne (1997) were among the first to write about alternative *geographies* of food, highlighting the inherent spatiality of these changes. This literature largely addresses the European and North American contexts, and has focused on the attempts of food producers to create niche markets for products embedded with information about place (Ilbery *et al.* 2005) and to connect with consumers in ways different to those practised by mainstream agri-food businesses. Recent reviews have identified two forms of place-embeddedness within AFN activism: "product and place" and "process and place" (Maye *et al.* 2007; Watts *et al.* 2005). The first refers to attempts to embed food *products* with a sense of place or of geographical provenance. This strategy is more widespread in European AFNs, and is perceived to add economic value and stimulate rural development (Goodman 2004, 7; Ilbery *et al.* 2005). The second form refers to attempts to embed food production and consumption *processes* in place. Maye *et al.* (2007) describe how these 'process and place' alternatives, which are more evident in North America, "emphasise social and ethical values associated with particular supply chains" (Maye *et al.* 2007, 7). As such, they are viewed as 'stronger alternatives' by Watts *et al.* (2005) since both processes of food production and consumption are addressed.

In these ways the embedding of food production and consumption in 'local' places has become central to the 'alternatives' expressed by AFN activists today—alternatives to the "systemic placelessness" created by conventional agri-industrial food systems (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, 360). More recently, however, AFN research has moved to question the notion of alterity in AFNs (Kirwan 2004), and to emphasize the diversity of production methods, spaces, motivations and identities articulated through AFN practice. Holloway *et al.* (2007) suggest that the term 'alternative' has been mobilised differently in the European and North American contexts, in the former being closely tied to debates about rural development and entrepreneurship, and in the latter as part of "a more politicised discourse of oppositional activism" (Holloway *et al.* 2007).

Academic commentaries following 'localism' in AFNs have, particularly in the more politicised AFN discourse of North America, adopted a critical stance suggesting that AFN localism "becomes a counter-hegemony to [the] globalization thesis" and that the local is constructed as "a realm of normative resistance" (DuPuis and

Goodman 2005, 361; cf. Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002). These critical academic commentaries highlight the potential for the localist discourse in AFNs to reinforce a binary of 'the global' and 'the local'. The following section explores the roots of this critical stance in geographical theory, and demonstrates how it has been linked to the discursive dominance of neoliberalism.

Critical responses to alternative food network localism

By highlighting the socially constructed and contingent nature of 'the local' elaborated in AFN discourse (see Goodman 2003)[2], the critical accounts introduced above have drawn on recent debates in human geography that explore the social construction—and attendant politics—of scale (see Marston 2000; Brenner 2001).

The central problematic for AFN scholars engaging with this normative localism is that when 'local' is equated with 'good', any activity taking place at this local scale also becomes 'good' or 'more just', a conceptual shift which risks depoliticizing localist activism (Goodman 2003; Hinrichs 2003). Allen *et al.* (2003) draw on Harvey's observation that there are "a plurality of theories of justice" (Harvey 1996, 398) to suggest that there are also "a plurality of localities from which justice can be claimed" (Allen *et al.* 2003, 73). They argue that "[t]hese differences may be obscured by the universalization of the local as a site of resistance" (Allen *et al.* 2003, 73). Hinrichs (2003) and Winter (2003b) both observe "defensive" tendencies in AFN localism, leading Hinrichs to suggest that:

> [D]efensive food system localization tends to stress the homogeneity and coherence of "local", in patriotic opposition to heterogeneous and destabilizing outside forces, perhaps a global "other". Predicated on such pat assumptions about the community or the heritage being preserved and promoted, localization becomes elitist and reactionary, appealing to narrow nativist sentiments. (2003, 37)

Thus AFN scholars argue that "defensive" (Hinrichs 2003) or "unreflexive" (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) localism can lead to undemocratic or unrepresentative leadership of AFN agendas by local elites. Allen *et al.* (2003) and Winter (2003b) present case studies which illustrate how localism and associated understandings of what is 'right' and 'just' can become entangled in gendered, racial and class divisions. The need for a more nuanced engagement with localism is articulated by DuPuis and Goodman in their concluding call for a "reflexive politics of localism":

> An inclusive and reflexive politics in place would understand local food systems not as local "resistance" against a global capitalist "logic" but as a mutually constitutive, imperfect, political process in which the local and the global make each other on an everyday basis. (2005, 369)

More recently, some AFN scholars based in the US have refined this critique to suggest that many AFNs which are represented as explicitly alternative to the neoliberal mainstream food system in fact reproduce the very neoliberal forms and subjectivities that they seek to oppose. This critique is directly largely towards the oppositional AFN discourse expressed in the US (Allen *et al.* 2003), and draws heavily on understandings of neoliberalism developed by human geographers and others[3]. Introducing this position, Guthman states:

> Food politics has become the progenitor of a neoliberal anti-politics that devolves regulatory responsibility to consumers via their dietary choices. (2007, 264)

The understanding of neoliberalism mobilised here has been explored in depth by human geographers in recent years, and is defined by Harvey as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005, 2). Guthman cites Harvey's definition when developing her argument that "contemporary food sensibilities and activism, as well as the scholarship that supports it, have helped produce … neoliberal governmentalities" (2008, 1172), and draws on Peck and Tickell's (2002) observation that under the "asymmetrical scale politics of neoliberalism, local institutions and actors [are] being given responsibility without power, while international institutions and actors [are] gaining power without responsibility" (Peck and Tickell 2002, 386).

Central to this critique is the suggestion that localism, far from being apolitical (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, 368), is in fact highly political and serves to reproduce neoliberal subjectivities in which consumer choice and responsibility are valued and expanded. In his recent analysis of neoliberalism, Castree makes this contrast clear:

> Though neoliberalism's advocates depict it as non-political … the reality is that it is politics by other means: what Ulrich Beck calls a form of "*high politics* which presents itself as completely *non-political*". (2008, 143, citing Beck, 2000, 122, emphasis in original)

It is, therefore, this form of 'high politics' which AFN scholars claim is at work when AFN activism is described as reproducing neoliberal subjectivities, a term which Bondi has helped to unpack:

> As a form of governmentality, neoliberalism works by installing a concept of the human subject as an autonomous, individualised, self-directing agent … [i]n so far as this vision of the human subject is recognised and assimilated, people are recruited into neoliberal forms of governmentality. (2005, 499)

For example, in a study of AFN Farm-to-School programs in the US, Allen and Guthman explicitly describe this process:

> [N]eoliberalization is not only a political economic project, but also one that instills particular ideas about citizenship and subjectivity to produce hegemony for the political economic project—what some refer to as governmentality. Discourses of personal responsibility and individual success, consumerism, and choice all figure in the production of neoliberal subjectivity. (2006, 410)

In the remaining part of this article I want to question this critique of contemporary AFNs. I argue that by framing AFN studies in a way that suggests that the reproduction of neoliberal forms is inevitable, scholars risk developing a scepticism which could conceal any political potential that such activism might offer. Indeed, I suggest that this approach acts discursively to reinforce the structures of neoliberalism that it purports to critique, and that in consequence it may limit the opportunities for constructive socio-environmental change that might emerge through such networks. There is a sense in Guthman's most recent contribution (2008) that this risk is already present in the minds of these AFN scholars. Guthman writes:

> [A]ctivists produce neoliberal forms not because they embrace a particular discourse, but because neoliberalism is in many ways characterized by these emergent forms … it is difficult to know what something outside of neoliberalism might look like when all is seen as neoliberalism. (2008, 1180-1181)

The difficulty of seeing a "politics of the possible" (Guthman 2008, 1181) when all is seen as neoliberalism is recognised here. Encountering such potential is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges not only in enacting viable alternatives to agri-industrial food systems today, but also in our production of analytical commentaries around them. As such, it is this sceptical reading of contemporary AFNs—which sees neoliberalism everywhere

and which accords neoliberalism the ability to 'characterize all emergent forms'—that I seek to question here. I want to ask whether a different reading might lead us down a different, more constructive path.

Reading alternative food networks for difference

The argument presented here seeks to question the scepticism of the critique outlined above. The authors of this critique do, however, express a desire to put AFNs on a stronger political footing (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; DuPuis *et al.* 2006; Guthman 2008), and frame their work as fundamentally supportive of efforts to create viable alternatives. I share this desire to increase the political efficacy of AFN activism, yet I argue that in order to do so, we should be cautious as academics in the ways we approach and analyse these practices.

Drawing on a model of analysis proposed by Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006), I argue here for an approach to reading the landscape of alternative food politics which emphasises difference, using the 100 Mile Diet as an example of AFN localism. Following a review of this particular AFN phenomenon, I first suggest a reading of the enactment of the 100 Mile Diet which follows the critical route outlined above—reading AFN practice as reproducing neoliberal subjectivities. I then examine the idea of governmentality, the mechanism through which some AFN scholars suggest such subjectivities are reproduced, and position this concept within understandings of neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse. I suggest that as academics we play a significant role in the reproduction of neoliberalism-as-hegemonic-discourse. The article questions how we might imagine alternatives that operate outside neoliberalism, drawing upon Gibson-Graham's practice of reading for difference rather than dominance. Before offering some tentative conclusions, I offer a second, different, reading of the 100 Mile Diet, in order to highlight how the way such performances are read might open up spaces in which to enact a politics of possibility, rather than reproduced neoliberal subjectivity.

The 100 Mile Diet: an alternative food network experiment

The 100 Mile Diet is an experiment in local eating initiated by Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon, residents of Vancouver, Canada. The year-long experiment involved Smith and MacKinnon only consuming food from within 100 miles of their home, following the claim that:

> When the average North American sits down to eat, each ingredient has typically travelled at least 1,500 miles. (100 Mile Diet 2008, citing Pirog *et al*. 2001)

Despite these geographical restrictions Smith and MacKinnon practiced the 100 Mile Diet for one year. Their experience has since been publicised through the 100 Mile Diet website (100 Mile Diet 2008) and in a book which details the experiment (Smith and MacKinnon 2007). The 100 Mile Diet website provides information for others wishing to try similar experiments, and aims to turn the 100 Mile Diet idea "into a movement" (100 Mile Diet 2008). 100 Mile Diet experiments have since been established across North America, and more recently in the UK. I now outline how the critique which reads AFNs as tending to reproduce neoliberal subjectivities might be constructed with reference to the 100 Mile Diet.

The 100 Mile Diet: reproducing neoliberal subjectivities

The 100 Mile Diet is predicated on the normative assessment of food sources—that locally sourced food is 'better' than food sourced through the conventional agri-industrial food system. The justifications include greater support for local economies and a reduction in environmental impacts, all achieved by an adjustment in one's personal consumption behaviour (100 Mile Diet 2008). Eating locally involves the construction of 'the local' as a space of opposition to conventional food systems, and is also a strategy that centres on consumer choice. It is this emphasis on devolved individual consumer choice as the basis for addressing the socio-environmental injustices of conventional food systems that creates the nexus with the subject central to Peck and Tickell's analysis of neoliberalism (2002, 386). This suggests that whatever socio-environmental change is achieved by following the 100 Mile Diet, the neoliberal subjectivities of consumers will continue to be re-enacted.

Guthman describes how popular representations of ethical eating are "full of 'making choices,' 'voting with your dollar' and … 'knowing where your food comes from' — linking knowledge explicitly with choice" (Guthman 2008, 1176), a theme which is strong in Smith and MacKinnon's account of the 100 Mile Diet experiment:

> We could continue to decipher every far-flung product that appeared on our supermarket shelves. Or we could start fresh. We could immerse ourselves in the here and now, *and the simple pleasures of eating would become a form of knowing*. (Smith and MacKinnon 2007, 33 emphasis added)

For theorists of neoliberalism, encouraging consumers to value choice is central to the operation of neoliberal market economies, enabling governance through the "regulated choices of individual citizens" (Rose 1996, 41).

The emphasis placed by the 100 Mile Diet on knowledge of one's food sources and on expanded choice is seen, in this reading, as reproducing this central tenet of neoliberalism.

Governmentality and the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivities

The concept of governmentality is central to the explanations offered by many theorists of neoliberalism as to *how* neoliberal subjectivities are reproduced. Following Foucault's 1979 lecture *On Governmentality* (Foucault 1991), a body of thought has developed which understands government as a decentred process which rejects the association of government solely with the state and identifies practices, techniques and tools of government which operate in 'micro-settings', including within 'subjects' (O'Malley *et al.* 1997, 501). Nikolas Rose uses 'government' to refer to:

> All endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others … [including] the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one's own passions, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself. (1999, 3)

This demonstrates how the concept of 'governmentality' operates as the mechanism through which neoliberalism subjectivities are seen to be reproduced in AFNs. Here is one such analysis:

> [R]elocalization appears to be not in resistance to neoliberal globalization but an intrinsic part of it … In other words, relocalization can be part and parcel of what Dean (1999), using Foucault, calls "neoliberal governmentality" – the creation of neoliberal political subjects. (DuPuis *et al.*, 2006, 256, citing Dean 1999)

In coining the neologism 'governmentality', Foucault linked government ('*gouverner*' - understood in a broad sense) to modes of thought (*'mentalité'*) suggesting that "it is not possible to study the technologies of power without an analysis of the political rationality underpinning them" (Lemke 2001, 1). Governmentality is, therefore, closely tied to the development of discursive fields through which the exercise of power is conceptualised (Lemke 2001, 1; Rose and Miller 1992, 175). It is through the discursive field of neoliberalism that it is suggested that neoliberal subjectivities are reproduced. For example, Guthman suggests that contemporary food politics contribute to the "techniques of rule" (2008, 1176) exercised in this discursive field, including "ideas of localism, consumer choice, and value capture – ideas which seem standard to neoliberalism" (Guthman 2008, 1174).

Debate concerning the ways in which a neoliberal governmentality might actually 'get at' people's everyday lives—about the mechanics of the process of subjectification—remains unresolved. Much of the governmentality literature maintains close ties to the work of Bruno Latour in order to explain how techniques of rule are able to "govern at a distance" (Rose 1999, 49), stressing the idea that government can intervene in the lives of a widely dispersed population, and lead "people … [to] bring themselves to order through obligation and self-restraint" (Allen 2003, 140). While some have attempted to embed the governmentality approach more solidly in place (e.g. Murdoch 2004), others remain unconvinced of the explanations offered as to *how* Foucauldian concepts operate when divorced from the spatially bounded sites of the prison or asylum (Allen 2003, 83; Barnett 2005, 9).

Questions regarding the ability of governmentality to explain how neoliberalism might discursively 'get at' the local lives of its 'subjects' are important. The argument I wish to make here, however, concerns the status of 'hegemonic discourse' commonly attributed to neoliberalism in this literature. Wylie (2006), using the example of gender, emphasises that the discursive subject does not pre-exist its discursive representation:

> A discourse of gender is not 'about' gender: instead it *creates* gender, makes it really, actually exist as a consequential and meaningful set of beliefs, attitudes and everyday practices and performances. (Wylie 2006, 303 emphases in original)

The recognition that discourse *creates* its discursive subject serves to remind us that, as academics, our engagement with the neoliberal discourse as an analytic category serves also to enact that discourse. Our academic analyses do not stand as 'outside' as we might like, and they too contribute to the (re)production of a neoliberal reality, even when adopting a critical stance. Foucault made clear the normalizing potential of discourse, and it is to the role of academic voices in such normalization which I now turn.

The hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism

The definition of discourse presented above emphasises its productive potential. I suggest here that in order not to see neoliberalism everywhere we look, we might explore Gibson-Graham's technique of "reading for difference not dominance" (2006, xxxi) as a theoretical framework to examine contemporary food politics.

Gibson-Graham (1996) see strategies of representation as partially responsible for the current discursive dominance attributed to capitalist economic systems:

> These [strategies include] the tendency to represent economy as a space of invariant logics and automatic unfolding that [offers] no field for intervention; the tendency to theorize economy as a stable and self-reproducing structure … these tendencies [contribute] to an affect and attitude of entrenched opposition … a habit of thinking and feeling that [offers] little emotional space for alternatives. (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxii)

These tendencies also typify contemporary analyses of neoliberalism, reflecting in particular Guthman's description of neoliberalism as "characterised by these emergent forms" (2008, 1181). Thus neoliberalism is represented not only as self-reproducing, but also as able to colonize all alternatives even as they emerge. Gibson-Graham suggest that the narrative of neoliberalism as "global capitalism's consolidating regulative regime" (2006, 4) tends to assume a level of certainty and totality that "blind[s] us to potential failures or faltering moments of this new governmental technology" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 4). They seek instead an alternative stance in which place-based activism, such as AFN localism, is not seen as already 'sold-out' to neoliberalism—a position which views academics' doubts about "local economic experimentation" as fuelled by a "moralistic stance … [which is] seldom if ever satisfied" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 5-6).

The choices of analytic category made by academics are significant, as has been argued with reference to identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) and scale (Moore 2008). The risk here is that neoliberalism becomes reified as a "hegemonic story" (Larner 2003, 509) and as an analytic category in a way that can blind academic commentary and critique to the specific political actors and organisations in question, in this case specific AFN projects, and in doing so, blind us to new political opportunities. In order to destabilize this hegemonic story, Gibson-Graham describe the importance of "cultivating [themselves and others] as subjects who can imagine and enact a new economic politics" in order to repoliticize representations of the economy (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxviii). I argue here that by adopting Gibson-Graham's practice of "reading for difference rather than dominance" (2006, xxxi) we might learn to read the landscape of alternative food politics not as reproducing the dominance of hegemonic neoliberalism, but as populated by a variety of emergent institutions and practices (paraphrasing Gibson-Graham 2006, 54). In so doing, we might better acknowledge attempts to imagine and enact a food politics which achieves different socio-environmental justice outcomes to those of conventional food systems, and offer a more constructive academic critique.

At stake here is our ability to imagine a politics of the possible. Guthman concludes that this politics lies "in the indeterminacy of neoliberalism … and [in] the always possible unintended consequences", and that an

engagement with the strengths of neoliberalism holds the most promising route to activist projects which might produce political openings (2008, 1181). This approach, however pragmatic, seems unable to imagine a politics of the possible which is not reliant on neoliberalism somehow 'slipping up' or making a mistake. Ironically it settles for an ontological framing which 'others' any food politics not performed on the neoliberal stage. I suggest here, following Gibson-Graham, that it is only through cultivating a mode of thought which can operate outside the discursive bounds of neoliberalism that we might be able to grasp the positive changes which are being enacting in AFNs. In this sense, the reading of AFN activism as reproducing neoliberal subjectivities is *just one* reading, but it is *not the only reading possible*. Following this realisation, we must ask which reading allows us to best imagine, acknowledge, develop and encourage a politics of the possible?

Reading the 100 Mile Diet for difference

The previous reading of the 100 Mile Diet as reproducing neoliberal subjectivity located power outside the arena of local food politics, familiarly back in the hands of globalised agri-industrial corporations, the supermarkets, and the politico-economic institutions behind the neoliberal order (cf. Harvey 2005). This suggests that part of the task of reading for difference is a rethinking of how we script power. John Allen (2003) has recently reminded us of the diverse geographies of power, taking the "all encompassing and individualizing apparatus of rule" described by some theorists of neoliberalism (see Hardt and Negri 2000) and highlighting the "emptiness precisely where the spatial and temporal mediations of power should be" (Allen 2003, 194). When neoliberalism is seen as operating in this way, new subjectivities are formed from the "simple act of living" (Allen 2003, 194), as was described in the first reading of the 100 Mile Diet. If, however, we choose to reject the binary formulation of centred, possessed power on the one hand and decentred, localised resistance on the other, then the diverse and "mediated arrangements of power" described by Allen (2003, 196) present a route towards the politics of possibility described by Gibson-Graham (2006).

In this alternative reading, those experimenting with the 100 Mile Diet become the "strategic activists who confront all kinds of specific forms of domination, authority, manipulation, coercion, and seduction, and nevertheless continue to mobilize their local capacities for change" (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii citing Allen 2003). The suggestion here is not that power can be removed from social processes (Gibson-Graham 2006, 133) or that the differences between the constructed local or global can be 'flattened'. Rather, by recognising a more complex topology of power relations, the possibilities inherent in the exercise of power through collaborative associations might become apparent. Allen writes that:

> Negotiation and shared outcomes replace confrontation and opposition and take us into a realm of the 'power' to act, rather than the domain of the 'powerless' who are likely to be left feeling that 'power over' them is all that they are ever likely to experience. (2003, 196)

So where can we locate the 100 Mile Diet activists in this alternative landscape of power? Smith and MacKinnon's (2007) experiment can be read as an attempt to recultivate themselves as subjects, changing their personal politics not in response to a 'powerful' discourse, but by enacting a different negotiation of the ethical dilemmas posed by food systems today. The process of self-education emphasised by Gibson-Graham (2006, xxvii) is evident in their experiment, and whilst Guthman highlights the link between knowledge and choice in the context of neoliberalism (2008, 1176), the implication of this criticism—that citizens should refrain from seeking knowledge about their food systems for risk of being labelled a 'self-improver' (Guthman 2008, 1177)—offers little hope for a politics of the possible. This alternative reading might consider the 100 Mile Diet not as a finalised alternative ready for widespread adoption, but rather as a tentative move towards positive socio-environmental change in contemporary food systems.

Conclusion

The two readings of the 100 Mile Diet offered here illustrate the argument that the ways in which academics analyse alternative food politics have the potential to reinforce the alleged dominance of discursive neoliberalism, and thus to close down openings for constructive socio-environmental change. Indeed, Barnett argues that theories of neoliberalism "have difficulty accounting for, or even recognizing" new forms for individual-based collective action that have emerged alongside neoliberalism (2005, 10), a category into which many emerging AFNs might fall. It is through our reading of these new forms of social action that I argue we might be able to imagine, and in so doing, start to enact, a politics of possibility in the landscape of contemporary food politics. Barnett suggests that we should abandon the language of neoliberalism, due to the inconsistencies in the mechanisms of governmentality—an opinion not shared by those formulating the critique of contemporary AFN activism introduced above. These scholars are of the opinion that neoliberalism retains too much analytical power (Guthman 2008, 1173) to reject due to inconsistencies in its explanatory mechanisms, leading Guthman and others (DuPuis *et al.* 2006; Allen and Guthman 2006; Harrison 2008) to develop the critique discussed in this article.

I have argued here that while performances of AFN activism do appear to reflect the processes of subjectification described by theorists of neoliberalism, this is due to the analytical power ascribed to neoliberalism by these critiques. I have argued that if multiple readings of AFN localism are possible, we must approach its study in ways which can recognise openings in AFN practices, and that support a politics of the possible. In so doing, I seek to echo the tone of "informed, cautious hopefulness" set by Hinrichs and Barham (2007, 345), who see both challenges and opportunities in the diverse practices of AFN activism. Gibson-Graham (2006) conclude their unfolding of a postcapitalist imaginary by emphasizing its recognition of "modest beginnings and small achievements without limiting their effectivity in time and space" and by offering us "a larger world in which to start where we are" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 196). It is in this larger world that I hope we might be able to see contemporary enactments of alternative food network activism.

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Notes

[1] As with all recently-coined acronyms, AFN has several close relatives: alternative agro-food network (AAFN), local food system (LFS), alternative food initiative (AFI), shortened food (supply) chain (SFC or SFSC). For clarity, this article refers to AFNs throughout.

[2] This critique of AFN localism first emerged coherently in a special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* following a workshop held at the University of California Santa Cruz (Journal of Rural Studies 2003 Volume 19, Issue 1).

[3] This position is elaborated in a recent issue of *Geoforum* focusing on neoliberalism and agro-food activism in California (Volume 39, issue 3).

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