

Eat Local? Constructions of Place in Alternative Food Politics

Edmund M. Harris

**Graduate School of Geography, Clark University,
950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610**

In recent years those seeking alternatives to industrialized and globalized food systems have looked beyond organic production to develop a range of alternative food networks, or AFNs. Alongside these developments in sustainable food and agriculture activism, a body of literature has emerged in rural sociology, agri-food studies and human geography exploring the development of alternative food networks. This article explores some potential synergies between this literature and geographical theory surrounding space and place. Place has been identified as central to AFN discourse and efforts to localize food systems, and while the benefits of localized food systems can be accepted uncritically by activist communities and the media, important questions have been raised about the reflexivity of local food activism. This article argues that a closer engagement with place theory would help avoid the fetishized constructions of the local often present in alternative food politics. Drawing on geographical debates about place, this article demonstrates the ways in which geographical place theory could inform and develop literatures examining alternative food politics.

1. *Introducing Alternative Food Networks*

The production and consumption of food are fundamental elements of life. Despite the everyday nature of food consumption, however, processes of food production are largely hidden from view, at once everywhere and nowhere as food distribution systems circle the globe and people know increasingly little about the sources of their food. This vision of a world where food appears on supermarket shelves ‘from nowhere’, in which food scares are increasingly common, and where unsustainable agricultural systems place ever greater pressure on limited resources has driven the development of alternative food networks (AFNs).

Alternative food network (AFN) refers to a wide range of food production, distribution and retail activities presented as alternatives to conventional food systems, including farmers’ markets, direct marketing schemes, community supported agriculture, vegetable-box delivery schemes, community gardens and food cooperatives.

Figure 1 summarizes four outcomes of the development of AFNs, as detailed by Jarosz (2008):

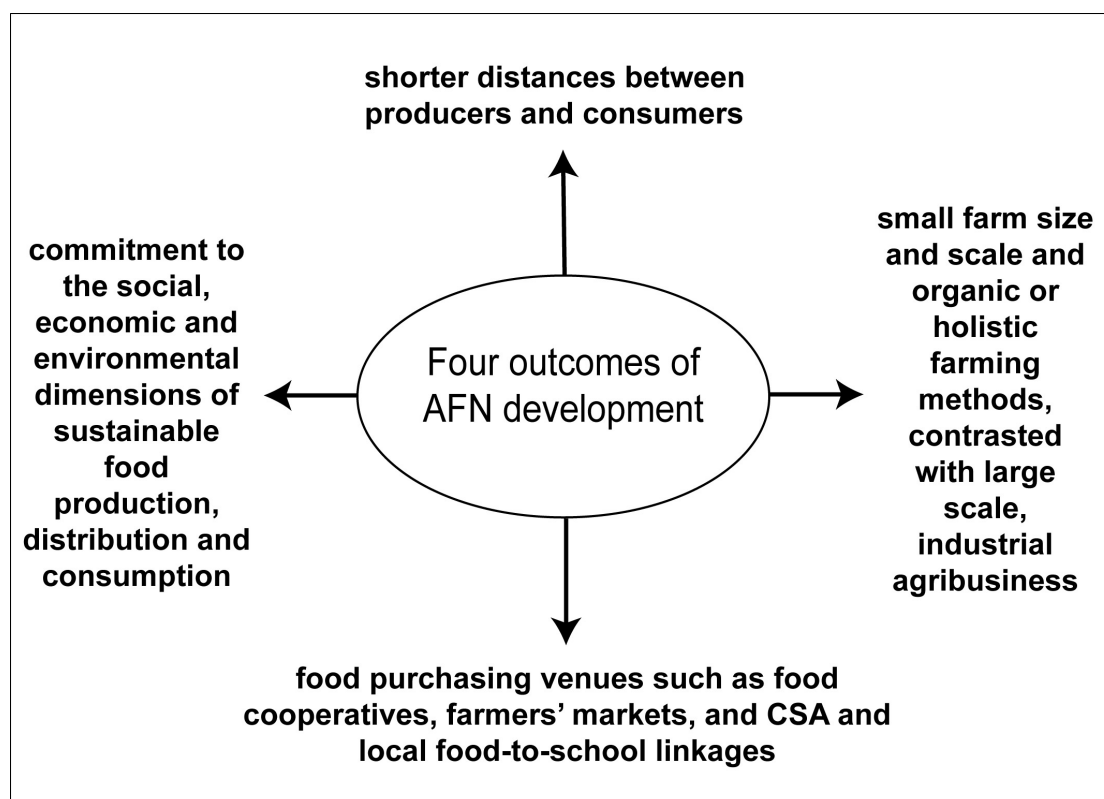


Figure 1: Four outcomes of AFN development (Jarosz 2008, p. 232)

Recent research emphasizes the processual nature of AFNs, explaining their emergence from, and contingency upon, a variety of socio-cultural and economic processes. As such, AFNs are positioned by scholars within processes of global economic restructuring, rural decline and redevelopment, environmental concerns and

progressive political ideals (Whatmore *et al.* 2003; DuPuis & Goodman 2005; Jarosz 2008). Embedded in these multi-scalar processes, AFNs seek to localize food systems and to encourage contact between food producers and consumers, seeking to respatialize food systems perceived to have become 'placeless'. As activists work to re-embed food systems in 'local' places and communities, some academic commentators have identified *place* as the conceptual "quiet center" of AFN discourses (Feagan 2007, p. 23) and have worked to situate AFNs within theoretical discussions of scale, space and place.

This article introduces the reader to some of the academic literature exploring the development of AFNs, focusing in particular on critical responses to AFN localization. Two important issues have emerged as organizing concepts in this rapidly expanding literature:

- 1) *Alterity*. Researchers have questioned what constitutes AFNs' 'alternativeness' (Allen *et al.* 2003; Whatmore *et al.* 2003) and the degree to which AFNs are truly alternative (Holloway *et al.* 2007a). They have suggested distinctions between 'strong' and 'weak' alternatives (Maye *et al.* 2007; Watts *et al.* 2005).
- 2) *Quality*. Researchers have suggested that the (perceived) quality of food products has become a 'conceptual battlefield' (Morgan *et al.* 2006, p. 71) between conventional and alternative food systems, in which different approaches to the knowledge and regulation of food compete for the trust and confidence of consumers (Fonte 2008; Ilbery & Kneafsey 2000; Goodman 2004).

Constructions of the *alterity* of AFNs centre on their embeddedness in 'local' places (Allen *et al.* 2003, p. 63; Hinrichs 2003; Feagan 2007). In a similar way, the linking of food products or food production processes to specific places, be it through place of origin labeling or 'local' retail arrangements, is central to constructions of *quality* mobilized by actors in both AFNs and conventional food systems. In agreement with Feagan (2007), therefore, this article argues that constructions of place are of fundamental importance in alternative food politics and the development of AFNs, and that place-based geographical imaginaries form the foundations for debates about alterity and quality.

In light of the importance of place in AFN discourse, this article seeks to bring geographical place theory into conversation with critical responses to alternative food politics. The following section introduces some of the arguments mobilized by AFN activists against conventional food systems, outlining the convictions that drive alternative food politics. In section 3, the article steps back from the landscape of food politics to review how

place and space are conceptualized in human geography. Then with these theoretical perspectives in mind, the article returns to consider the critical responses to AFN localization in section 4, introducing some key approaches and drawing on geographical theory to interrogate the mobilization of place in AFN activism. The article closes with some suggestions as to how this research agenda might fruitfully be developed.

2. *Against conventional food systems: What drives alternative food politics?*

Alternative food networks have developed in response to widespread dissatisfaction with conventional food systems. The term ‘conventional’ is used here with caution, since authors have made clear that a dualistic conventional/alternative conceptualization of food systems hides the many variations within, and links between, these two categories (Ilbery & Maye 2005; Watts *et al.* 2005; Holloway *et al.* 2007b). In a broad sense, therefore, conventional food systems are globalized networks of food production, distribution, storage and retail that are controlled by multinational agri-business and retail corporations. Production and supply chains are managed over long distances, exhibit high degrees of vertical integration, and are driven by corporate capital. Ownership and control in the agri-food sector is highly concentrated, resulting in what Heffernan *et al.* (1999) describe as an “hour glass” food system, in which “thousands of farmers feed millions of consumers through an increasingly corporately controlled agri-food system that involves input suppliers, food processors, and retailers” (Morgan *et al.* 2006, p. 55).

AFN activists’ dissatisfaction with conventional food systems can usefully be conceptualized in two, albeit closely related, areas: food *production processes*, and food *products*. Taken together, these concerns build the argument that conventional food systems no longer function adequately: that the food system is “broken” (Blay-Palmer 2008, p. 6).

Food Production Processes

Conventional food *production processes* have been recognized as deeply unsustainable, in environmental, economic and social terms (Buttel 2006; Harrison & Wolf 2008). Industrial agriculture is heavily dependent on fossil fuels, required for the production of chemical inputs, the operation of farm machinery, and the long-distance transport of produce (Jones 2001). In many areas, mainstream agricultural methods are reliant on unsustainable water sources and result in the dramatic depletion of soil resources. Moreover, agriculture is a significant source of greenhouse gases, contributing to global climate change (Baumert *et al.* 2005). The air and water pollution associated with industrial agriculture also continue to cause significant environmental and social

damage, most evident in the controversies surrounding concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) in the US (Pew Commission 2008).

In addition to environmental pollution and unsustainable resource use, industrial agriculture is unsustainable in social and economic terms. As corporate control of food production and retail is consolidated, producers face a “cost-price squeeze” (Goodman 2004, p. 10) that forces down wages for agricultural workers, often leading to a reliance on undocumented immigrant workers (Buttel 2006, p. 216). During the twentieth century, agriculture has experienced a dramatic shift away from mixed farming towards specialization and monoculture, accompanied by an intensification of external inputs and an increase in concentration, both spatially and in terms of ownership and corporate control (Magdoff *et al.* 2000; Buttel 2006). These changes have led to the decline of many rural communities previously dependent on small-scale farming, and to the emergence of rural food deserts amid areas of large-scale, monoculture production (Blanchard & Matthews 2007; Lyson *et al.* 2008, p. xii).

Food Products

These *production processes* in turn produce food *products* that raise concerns about food safety and human health. Repeated food scares have raised public anxieties, specifically regarding pesticide content, the use of artificial additives, salmonella, BSE, *E. Coli* 0157, foot-and-mouth disease, genetically modified foods and the presence of dioxins in animal feed (Morgan *et al.* 2006; Constance 2009; DeLind & Howard 2008). Regulatory agencies have struggled to restore public confidence in the face of widespread media attention and food recalls, leading many consumers to seek food products from ‘alternative’ food systems. Demand for healthier food products is also increasing, as the effects of the widespread availability of cheap processed food high in fat, sugar and salt contributes to rising levels of obesity and other diet-related disease (Belasco 2008, p. 88; Cabinet Office 2008). While demand for organic food has risen in response to concerns about the health and safety of food products, consumers are increasingly turning to ‘local’ food products in order to avoid the perceived safety risks associated with large-scale industrial food production and processing (Starmer & Kulick 2009).

In summary, AFN activists argue that conventional food systems no longer produce food that is safe and healthy, and cannot be sustained in the medium to long-term. In searching for the root cause of the breakdown of the conventional food system, many advocates of food system reform cite the disconnection of consumers from producers, and the sense that food systems have become disembodied from the communities and societies that they serve. Feagan (2007, p. 38) describes this sense of disconnection:

The geography of the modern food system reveals that, as food chains become stretched further and in more complex ways across space, we experience both the physical and psychological displacement of production from consumption, and all of the other disconnections and disembedding which follow in that stead – loss of rural agricultural resilience and diversity, degradation of the environment, dislocation of community, loss of identity and place.

In response, efforts to create alternatives to the conventional food system have focused on reconnecting food systems with places, challenging the perceived homogeneity of the industrial food system with a heterogeneous array of alternatives embedded in specific ‘local’ places. As Feagan (2007, p. 23) has argued, place seems to form the “quiet center” of AFN discourse. The following section introduces different approaches to the theorization of place that have developed in human geography, in order to inform the exploration of critical responses to AFN localization in section 4.

3. *Place in Geographical Thought*

Hinrichs (2007, p. 10) has recently emphasized the importance of theorizing *place* in working to restructure food systems, and hints at the complexities behind this concept:

If we think of *space* in simple terms of distance and configuration, the notion of *place* incorporates more: the specificity of location, particular material forms, associated meanings, and values (Hinrichs 2007, p. 11 emphasis in original).

This observation reflects a common interpretation of place in human geography as space that has been made meaningful (Cresswell 2004, p. 7). Agnew (2005) has expanded this definition, however, describing three meanings that ‘place’ has acquired, each positioned differently along a continuum from “nomothetic (generalized) space at one end to idiographic (particularistic) place at the other” (Agnew 2005, p. 89):

The first [meaning] is place as location or a site in space where an activity or object is located and which relates to other sites or locations because of interaction and movement between them. A city or other settlement is often thought of in this way. Somewhere in between, and second, is the view of place as locale or setting where everyday-life activities take place. Here the location is no mere address but the where of social life and environmental transformation. Examples would be settings from everyday life such as workplaces, homes, shopping malls, churches, etc. The third is place as sense of place or identification with a place as a unique community, landscape and moral

order. In this construction, every place is particular and, thus, singular. A strong sense of 'belonging' to a place, either consciously or as shown through everyday behaviour such as participating in place-related affairs, would be indicative of a 'sense of place'.

In this careful definition of the meanings of place, Agnew makes clear that although place is always more specific than abstract space, the degree and mode of specificity can vary significantly. In agreement with Hinrichs (2007), Agnew (2005) and many other geographers (e.g. Cresswell 2004; Massey 1999) argue that space and place are defined with reference to each other: that the terms are co-constitutive.

Again following Agnew's (2005) schema, the conceptualization of space and place in human geography can usefully be divided into four broad perspectives. A complete review of these approaches is beyond the scope of this article, but some key points are presented below:

- The *humanist* approach emphasizes human agency, views places as spaces made known and familiar through human experience (Tuan 1974, 1977), and describes place as a fundamental part of the human existence (Relph 1976). More recently, geographers and philosophers have sought to re-establish this understanding of place as irreducible (Sack 1997; Malpas 1999), arguing that place is more than just a social construct, and that society itself is "inconceivable without place" (Cresswell 2004, p. 31).
- The *neo-Marxist* approach focuses on how the spaces of social life are produced, and sees places as never fixed but constantly reproduced through practice. Lefebvre (1991) focused on the 'colonization' of everyday 'concrete spaces' (or places) by the spatial practices and representations that characterize the 'abstract space' of capitalism (Agnew 2005, p. 90), an approach developed further by Harvey (1989), Soja (1989, 1996) and Merrifield (1993).
- The *postmodern-feminist* approach centres on a rejection of grand narratives that suppress difference and multiplicity and in particular, rejects an automatic association of place with home and domesticity (Rose 1993). Rather than conceptualizing places (and the identities associated with them) as bounded and static, places are viewed as constituted relationally, both by their internal relations and by relations that "run out from a place" (Massey 2007, p. 21). This approach reminds us that 'the global' is locally constructed, problematizing the local/global binary that is axiomatic for many (Cox 2005). Crucially, this assertion of place as open, collaborative and constituted through social relations is viewed as vital to maintaining the possibility of political change activated from 'grassroots' organization.

- The *contextualist-performative* approach maintains a suspicion of grand narratives, but also rejects a division between representation and practice in the conceptualization of space and place (Agnew 2005, p. 91). Thrift (1999) for example, calls for a focus on bodily practices in place, and argues for “strong limits on what can be known and how we can know it because of the way human subjects are embodied as beings in time-space” (Thrift 1999, p. 303). In this sense, places are constantly being performed, are fleeting in nature, and are never completed since they depend on further practices and events.

In a broad sense, the concept of place has been developed both as meaningful connection between humans and the world – the way in which humans experience and structure reality, and also as a critical device used to demonstrate inequality and injustice resulting from power relations. The purpose of this overview is not to advocate one reading of place over another, but rather to bring debates about the meaning and significance of the concept of place into conversation with critical responses to AFN practice. In the remainder of this section, some questions raised by geographical debates around place are drawn out. These questions are revisited later in section 4 to explore some specific aspects of AFN discourse.

Many theoretical engagements with place emphasize its bounded nature, and demonstrate how social rules determine what is included and excluded. For example, Sack (1999, p. 29) argues that:

Since place involves ourselves as agents in bounding and controlling areas of space, a place must have rules about what is or should be in and out ... Unless human rules are part of the process, the term place can be dropped, or replaced, without remainder, by the original idea of things or interacting objects located in space.

Given this framing of place as an act of inclusion/exclusion, many critical human geographers have been reluctant to support political movements that call for the defence of ‘local’ places from the ‘threat’ of globalization. Harvey (1996), for example, has described (relatively fixed, static) places as under threat from (globally mobile) capital, and has suggested that socially constructed places and their struggles to assert place-identities often fall into parochialism and the construction of us/them distinctions between those in the place to be defended and those outside. Castree (2004, p. 135) now describes as “axiomatic for a cohort of critical human geographers” the view that attempts to construct boundaries around ‘local’ places are misguided, because “such boundary acts are always false attempts to shut-out ... translocal ties that in part constitute those places”. Moreover, Castree describes how this view leads to the assumption that ‘local’ place-based politics

“typically engenders actions that are politically regressive” (2004, p. 135). Instead, Castree argues that “it is perfectly possible for inward looking localisms to be founded on an explicit and conscious engagement with extra-local forces” (2004, p. 163).

At issue here are questions about the relational constitution of places and the way places are conceptualized against a backdrop of global socio-economic and political processes. Does place describe a sense of rootedness and authenticity for a specific group of people in a certain location? And if so, does this constitute a defensive posture against ‘predatory’ globalization that results in parochial and exclusive politics? Perhaps place should instead be imagined as an event, constituted by the meeting of people, objects and flows, framed by routes rather than roots (Cresswell 2004; Massey 1994, 2004)?

What is clear is that constructed places are not simply things to talk about, write about or organize politics around, but are also ways of looking at and making sense of the world. With this in mind, the following section returns to the landscape of alternative food politics, and explores the role that constructions of place play in creating alternatives to conventional food systems.

4. The importance of place for alternative food networks

Efforts to localize food systems are central to most AFN projects (Feagan 2007). To counter the globalized nature of conventional food systems, activists have developed models that focus on reconnecting producers and consumers in specific ‘local’ places, often framing their efforts in explicitly spatial terms. Three examples are detailed in Figure 2, demonstrating some of the different ways of constructing the ‘local’ place within which an alternative, more sustainable, food system could be established. Crucially, these spatial models for AFNs all involve a *discursive bounding of ‘local’ places*.

AFN Model	Spatial Rules	Bounded Area
100 Mile Diet	Consumers source food produced within 100 miles of home	An arbitrary physical area 200 miles in diameter
Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	Multiple consumers pay an annual subscription to a nearby farm, in exchange for deliveries of produce throughout the year	The notion of 'community' (a socio-spatial area)
Foodshed	A 'framework for thought and action' regarding the sourcing of food. A tool to help consumers think through and relate to a local food system.	A biophysical region akin to a watershed: defined by 'natural' characteristics

Figure 2: Examples of spatial models for AFNs (see Smith (2007) on the 100 Mile Diet; Cox *et al.* (2008) on CSAs; Kloppenburg *et al.* (1996) on foodsheds)

The embedding of food systems in 'local' places has become the central strategy for AFN activists, who see human agency and diversity in local places and contrast it to the structural homogeneity of globalized conventional food systems. In the context of activists' desire to address issues of social and environmental justice, localization often becomes a normative strategy:

Localism becomes a counter-hegemony to [the] globalization thesis, a call to action under the claim that the counter to global power is local power. In others words, if global is domination then in the local we must find freedom (DuPuis & Goodman 2005, p. 361).

Critical responses to AFN localism

AFN scholars have questioned this straightforward opposition of 'local' and 'global' food systems. For example, Hinrichs (2007, pp. 10-11) warns against a simplified vision of two food systems in scalar opposition:

If globalization is seen as one master process with largely negative effects, then localization becomes its reverse, a process that will neatly and predictably turn the bad to good. Reality, however, appears far more complicated.

AFN activists are not alone in using the global/local binary to conceptualize spatial political change. This scalar binary is commonly elided with space/place (Agnew 2005, p. 82), defining *local places* as specific, traditional

and diverse, opposed to *global spaces* that are general, modern and homogeneous. Hinrichs (2003, p. 36) summarizes some of the attributes commonly mapped onto global and local, included here in Figure 3.

Global	Local
Market economy	Moral economy
An economics of price	An economic of sociology of quality
Transnational corporations dominating	Independent artisan producers prevailing
Corporate profits	Community well-being
Intensification	Extensification
Large-scale production	Small-scale production
Industrial models	"Natural" models
Monoculture	Bio-diversity
Resource consumption and degradation	Resource protection and regeneration
Relations across distance	Relations of proximity
Commodities across space	Communities in place
Big structures	Voluntary actors
Technocratic rules	Democratic participation
Homogenization of foods	Regional palates

Figure 3: Attributes associated with 'global' and 'local' (Hinrichs 2003, p. 36)

Critical responses to localism in alternative food politics call into question the binary thinking described by Figure 3 and warn of the risks of engaging in “defensive localism” (Allen 1999; Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003; DuPuis & Goodman 2005). The central problematic here is the suggestion that any activity that takes place on a ‘local’ scale is intrinsically more ‘just’, a conceptual move which risks depoliticizing these activities and leading to an apolitical understanding of localization as a strategy. This critical response emphasizes how, at worst, localization can “provide the ideological foundations for reactionary politics and nativist sentiment” (DuPuis & Goodman 2005, p. 360), discursively bounding ‘local places’ in an exclusionary manner as discussed in the previous section. Holloway and Kneafsey (2000, p. 294) describe the outcomes of such defensive localism:

The valorization of the ‘local’ [...] may be less about the radical affirmation of an ethic of community or care, and more to do with the reproduction of a less positive parochialism or nationalism, a conservative celebration of the local as the supposed repository of specific values and meanings.

This describes the first of two tendencies in the politics of localization identified by Hinrichs (2003, p. 37): “defensive localization”, which “emphasizes the construction, relational positioning and protection of the ‘local’”. This approach to alternative food politics often identifies local agricultural economies as ‘threatened’

by multinational multiple retailers, agri-businesses and government regulation, and calls for a reconnection of local consumers with local producers in order to protect local rural and agricultural economies. Exemplified by 'buy local' campaigns, this politics of defensive localization represents a small-scale version of defensive nationalism, such as the 'buy American' campaigns organized in response to the transfer of US manufacturing jobs overseas (Hinrichs & Allen 2008), in which responsibility is felt to be greater towards those closer to home.

The second tendency described by Hinrichs (2003), however, is that of "diversity receptive localization". In this case, the boundaries of local places are defined as borders rather than barricades, and as such "constitute the rich edges between contiguous places permitted and expected to be different". Local places are seen as embedded within wider trans-local flows, and understandings of the 'local' are "relational and open to change" (Hinrichs 2003, p. 37). This willingness to incorporate the multiple meanings of the local reflects DuPuis and Goodman's (2005, p. 369) call to "make localism an open, process-based vision, rather than a fixed set of standards", and raises questions about the extension of responsibility across beyond 'local' places.

The critical responses described above raise two visions of localism in AFNs, each of which rests on a distinct construction of 'local' place. The former, 'defensive localism', constructs bounded local places in which the challenge is to defend local practices from the predations of national and global agri-food systems, businesses, and politics. This often involves recourse to supposed 'traditional' values, and can result in exclusionary and regressive politics. The latter, 'diversity-receptive localism', acknowledges both the heterogeneity of local places and the constitutive nature of their relations to other places, and can build a reflexive politics that is able to critically assess the roles that local places play in extra-local networks.

Theorizing constructions of place in AFN localism

The parallels between debates about localism in the AFN literature and the wider debates among human geographers about place-based politics are significant. The reluctance of some agri-food scholars (Hinrichs 2000, 2003; DuPuis & Goodman 2005; Winter 2003; Holloway & Kneafsey 2000) to uncritically endorse localism in alternative food politics mirrors the scepticism expressed by geographers towards place-based political responses to globalization (Harvey 1996; Massey 1994, 1999; Watts 1999, 2000). This parallel between AFN activists' construction of 'local' places and theoretical perspectives on place raises questions for scholars working to formulate a critical response to AFN localism. Does the place-based nature of AFN localism invariably engender regressive political strategies? What effect does discussion of *re*-localization have on alternative food politics? Are moral actions only possible in 'known', local places? These questions demonstrate

the potential for a deeper understanding of alternative food politics through a closer look at the concept of place, and are explored in the remainder of this section.

Does the place-based nature of AFN localism invariably engender regressive political strategies?

DuPuis and Goodman (2005) have made a significant contribution to the debate among AFN scholars regarding the potentially regressive, or “unreflexive”, nature of AFN localism. Engaging with current debates in human geography, they declare their enthusiasm for Amin’s (2002, p. 397) call for a shift from “politics of place to a politics in place”. Amin (2002, p. 397) describes the latter approach to place-based politics as developing

... a nonterritorial way of viewing place politics in an age of global connectivity. Instead of seeing local political activity as unique, places might be seen as the sites which juxtapose the varied politics – local, national, and global – that we find today. What matters is this juxtaposition.

This position follows the axioms about place that Castree (2004) criticizes: that attempts to bound local places are invariably misguided and that localist place-based politics are regressive in character. Following Amin (2002) and Massey (2004, 2007), however, the critical AFN literature has engaged with recent relational perspectives on place and has called for a local politics that “thinks beyond the local” (Massey 2007, p. 15).

In this sense, the critical AFN literature is starting to draw on debates about place in human geography to argue that while defensive localism is damaging, the development of more ‘localized’ food systems is not inevitably regressive. DuPuis and Goodman (2005) see in geographical debates a theoretical approach that supports the distinction made by Hinrichs (2003) between defensive and diversity-receptive localism. They lend their support, therefore, to an alternative food politics that carefully considers the politics of constructions of place and the local, and argue against the reification of ‘the local’ as the solution to the broken conventional food system. They suggest instead that:

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. (DuPuis & Goodman 2005, p. 369)

Does the term ‘relocalization’ frame alternative food politics debates in a constructive way?

While AFN scholars have engaged with debates about the link between politics and place, the relationships between spatial and temporal frameworks have not yet been examined in detail. Human geographers have

demonstrated how descriptions of spatial difference can often be expressed in temporal terms. Narratives of progress, development and modernization rearrange “spatial differences into temporal sequence” (Massey 1999, pp. 280), with some areas marked as ‘backward’ and others as ‘modern’. These spatio-temporal imaginaries form an important part of the common-sense understandings of space and place, as described in section 3, which construct space as ‘modern’ and ‘dynamic’, and place as ‘traditional’ and ‘static’. As Agnew (2005, p. 82) demonstrates, this elision of spatial with temporal difference is often contradictory:

From one perspective, place is therefore nostalgic, regressive or even reactionary, and space is progressive and radical. From another side, place is being lost to an increasingly homogeneous and alienating sameness. Placelessness is conquering place as modernity displaces traditional ‘folkways’. From both perspectives, usage reflects a subtle incorporation of time into how the terms [space and place] are defined.

This contradiction is fundamental to the questions being raised in the critical AFN literature. Enthusiasm for the localization of food systems stems from the fear of a “systemic ‘placelessness’” created by global industrial agriculture (DuPuis & Goodman 2005, p. 360), yet on reflection, AFN scholars find defensive localism and its attendant place-based politics reactionary and regressive (Holloway & Kneafsey 2000; Winter 2003).

As Agnew (2005, p. 82) observes, there is no simple correlation between approaches to place construction and political persuasions. In many cases, those on the political Left might support the dynamism of space, thus holding out the hope of a better, more equal world in the face of more conservative, or nationalist, support for place. Yet in alternative food politics, the case for place is championed by those across the political spectrum. The intertwining of spatial and temporal geographical imaginaries therefore serves to demonstrate the great complexity of constructions of place, and of the politics built upon them. This area of debate raises questions about enthusiasm in AFN discourse for *relocalization*, rather than simply *localization*, of food systems, since the former clearly implies a shift that is not just spatial, but also involves a return to ‘how things used to be’.

Are moral actions only possible in ‘known’, local places?

A further strand in debates about place that is pertinent to explorations of alternative food politics concerns the relationships between place, responsibility and morality. Sack (1992) has described the experience of consumption as central to modernity. Consumption is frequently tied to place, either through the association of products with certain places or through the deliberate construction of specific retail environments. Despite their

claims of alterity, AFNs still seek to encourage the consumption of food products that often mobilize ‘local place’ associations as part of their marketing and product identity. At the root of his argument about the possibility of moral actions, Sack (1992, p. 22) argues that morality is only possible if the ‘moral agent’ is fully aware of the consequences of their actions. In the world of globalized production and distribution systems, however, consumers frequently lack this awareness. Cresswell (2004, p. 23) explains:

Morality, to Sack, is based on a knowledge of the consequences of what we do. Consumption, through the disguise of production processes hides the consequences of our purchase and thus creates an amoral consumer’s world. A key part of this equation is the spatial scope of such consequences. Hypermodernity is characterized by a characteristic globalism that makes each local action potentially global in its consequences. It’s all too much for the individual to process.

Sack (1992, p. 22) argues, therefore, that “geographical knowledge becomes ... a necessary precondition for moral action”, and as Cresswell (2004, p. 23) suggests, local, place-based consumption offers an alternative in which “morality is possible due to the close proximity and accountability of the producers of goods”. The close association between place and morality presented by Sack contributes to the theoretical framing of the ethics of place-based action, and supports the implicit constructions of place mobilized by proponents of civic agriculture (DeLind 2002; Lyson 2007).

Central to Sack’s view of morality is the ability to take responsibility for one’s own actions. Recent contributions to relational thought, and in particular, the relational construction of place and place-based politics, have examined the spatiality of responsibility and asked how political responsibility varies between relationships with different spatial extents (Darling 2009; Massey 2004; Popke 2003). Relational place calls for a politics both of propinquity and of connectivity (Amin 2004), and questions whether responsibility for the effects of one’s actions – such as choices regarding food consumption – is equal in both local and extra-local relationships. For example, is it appropriate to privilege local food producers over those on the other side of the world, or is such a choice immoral? These debates highlight the role of responsibility in ethical consumption. Malpass *et al.* (2007) use the example of fairtrade to demonstrate the potential conflict between a politics that seeks to take responsibility for international trade justice and a politics of defensive localism, cast as ‘local fairtrade’, and argue that place can be used as a ‘scale frame’ to bring diverse local and global interests together.

The role of individual responsibility in alternative food politics has also been questioned by recent critiques of neoliberalism in AFNs, which have suggested that AFN activism can reproduce the neoliberal subjectivities it

seeks to oppose (Guthman 2008). The devolution of responsibility to the individual is central to neoliberal modes of governance (Harris 2009, pp. 57-58), and is echoed by Sack's emphasis of personal accountability.

These intersections between place and responsibility will be an important focus for further research in alternative food politics. More sustainable food systems will be those that enable all food system actors, including consumers, to act responsibly. As AFN activists seek to localize food systems and reduce reliance on globally expansive agricultural networks, questions of responsibility to current agricultural trade partners will have to be addressed, as well as those regarding responsibility to those in more 'local' places.

5. Conclusions: recognizing place in alternative food politics

Starting from AFN activists' arguments against conventional food systems and an emerging recognition of the centrality of place in AFN discourse (Feagan 2007), this article explores the links between geographical theory regarding place and AFN activism. Although place is constructed in a variety of ways in AFN discourse, the settings for many emerging AFNs are 'local' places, in which relationships of trust, regard and responsibility are perceived to circulate within the 'local community'. The message from critical commentaries of AFN activism, and indeed from critical human geography, is that in order to explore the politics of such place-based activism, concepts like 'place' and 'the local' cannot be taken as ontologically given: they must be recognized as social constructions.

This apparent scepticism towards accounts of 'local place' should not, however, be read as a rejection of localism in AFNs. DuPuis and Goodman (2005, p. 364), for example, argue for a more reflexive and equitable localism:

The purpose of our critique is not to deny the local as a powerful political force against the forces of globalization. Our real goal is to understand how to make localism into an effective social movement of resistance to globalism rather than a way for local elites to create protective territories for themselves. This requires letting go of a local that fetishizes emplacement as intrinsically more just. We have to move away from the idea that food systems become just by virtue of making them local and toward a conversation about how to make local food systems more just.

Conceptualizing AFNs as dynamic responses to unsustainable conventional food systems, rather than as static projects defined by certain attributes, might help avoid the fetishizing of local and emplaced alternatives. For

example, by emphasizing the political, cultural and historical processes through which AFNs develop, Jarosz (2008) develops a processual understanding of AFNs as emergent responses to ongoing urbanization and rural restructuring. This approach successfully captures the importance of place and the diversity of rural and urban interests invested in developing AFNs, and avoids an essentialized view of 'local place'.

This article argues that the academic discourse surrounding alternative food politics would be enriched by a stronger theoretical engagement with geographical space and place theory. Such an exchange would help navigate the risk of fetishized constructions of 'local' food systems, and develop a more nuanced understanding of the role place plays in food systems. While emphasizing the value of 'local' food systems, it is important to remember that conventional food systems also operate in places, albeit often with shallower roots. Industrial agricultural production, corporate-owned food processing plants, and supermarket distribution centres are all physically located in places, and contribute to the meaning and experiences of those places through the social relations that sustain them. The questions raised in section 4 about constructions of place in AFN discourse are offered as starting points for further debate around the 'place of food' in our society and communities, exploring the nature of place-based politics, the ties between spatial and temporal frameworks, and relationships between place, responsibility and morality. Greater integration of theoretical debates about place and space will undoubtedly enrich literature exploring the landscape of alternative food politics.

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