Links between producers and consumers in alternative food systems in France and Belgium : sustainable development made practical ?

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Abstract
The contemporary shift in the occidental food system is mostly described in terms of globalization, standardization, and industrialization, as regards the analysis of food chains, and in terms of social anxiety, when considering the consumers side. In this context, how can we interpret the emergence of alternative systems, which claim sustainable approaches opposing the dominating processes ? What this paper aims at addressing is, on one hand, the specific manners set up by such alternative systems to deal with the consumers' uncertainties ; and on the second hand, their specific relationship to the question of sustainable development. How do these systems respond to the contemporary food uncertainties and their reflexive and multiple nature – consumers' concerns for safety, dietetics, taste, ethics ? In what ways such systems establish material and discursive practices which introduce the question of sustainable development ? How equity and durability are introduced ?
To answer these questions, we will focus on the links established between producers and consumers in alternative food systems in France and Belgium, and identify how and to what extent these systems eventually translate sustainable development into discourses and practices, and deal with the consumers' but also the producers' uncertainties at the same time. We will show how the principles of these systems, which assume the irregularity of the agricultural production instead of suppressing it, express an attachment to nature, in opposition to the process of detachment held by the industrial food chains.

Keywords

Sustainable Development – Agrifood systems – Social learning – Food consumption

Introduction

This paper focusses on the relationships linking producers and consumers in different alternative food systems in France and Belgium and aims at identifying how and to what extent these systems deal with consumers' and also producers' uncertainties and translate sustainable development into discourses and practices.
The evolutions in the contemporary occidental food system are mostly described in terms of globalization, standardization, and industrialization (Marsden & al., 2000) and in terms of social anxiety, when considering the consumers' side (Fischler, 1993 ; Poulain, 2002). This interpretation has to be moderated in two ways : firstly, besides this largely studied process of globalization, we can also talk of an " alternative geography of food " (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). Of course, alternative systems are not purely contemporary. They have on the contrary solid roots in the past, or at least echo former experiences such as consumerist movements and cooperatives. But what needs further research is both the specific manners they deal with the contemporary uncertainties and their reflexive nature (Beck, 1992), and their specific relationship to the question of sustainable development.
Secondly, consumers are far from being always anxious, and we should better talk of uncertainty : this uncertainty is irregular and multiple. It is not limited to food safety but also due to the abundance of

products and dietetical injunctions, making the choices more difficult, and linking visceral, corporeal and ethical concerns. It is then central to understand how these different forms of concern are expressed by consumers, handled by food chains, and collectively addressed in some alternative systems.

To conduct such an analysis, it is necessary to build a frame of analysis able to apprehend at once private food practices and collective actions of food chains, and their interactions. Consumers' representations and practices are usually analysed by anthropologists and sociologists of food, with little interest in the actions of food chains, while sociologists of market, rural sociologists, or economists study the food systems but rarely link them to consumers' concerns and practices. In the last years, several scientists, sometimes from other disciplines such as geography or environmental studies, have strongly renewed theses approaches (in particular Whatmore & Thorne, 1997 ; Goodman, 1999 ; Lockie, 2002), mainly through actor-network theory schemes (see for example Callon, 1998). But in most of these works, the focus is generally centered on food systems (alternative ones, such as organic food or fair trade, but also conventional chains). The scientific program drawn by these scientists can now be completed by works aiming at studying more precisely the consumers' discourses and practices inside such systems, and the interactions between actors of the food chain and consumers.

Analysing both sides and their interactions supposes, in theoretical terms, to consider the complete food chain from primary production to consumption, but also the complete " eating chain " [filière du manger] from buying to eating through cooking, and, in methological terms, tools ranging from food biographies to ethnographic observation of culinary practices and interactions between producers and consumers.

We will confront two cases which will help us to analyse the collective actions aiming at reducing the uncertainties and demonstrate how they also contribute to the translation of sustainable development into practices. The common points and differences of these two cases will finally allow us to underline the importance of learning processes in these actions. The first case is a weekly fruit and vegetable box functioning on long term subscription of consumers grouped in an association (close to the principles of CSA, " Community Supported Agriculture "). The second one is a farmers cooperative specialized in farmer meet production, which sells beef, pork and chicken products through a network of farmers shops and markets.

Settling the shared uncertainties

Our first case is a CSA network which was launched in south-east France in 2001. Such systems emerged in Japan in the sixties and were then developed in Europe and in North America. The principle is that each member purchases before the beginning of the season a share of the coming harvest for a set price, negociated between consumers and producers according to the costs and products of the farm.

These systems can be studied as social movements (Hassanein, 2003) or as new forms of economic arrangements in the perspective of economic sociology (Hinrichs, 2000). We have tried to link both approaches in a former work demonstrating how this specific form of exchange was also a form of political engagement for consumers, though it could not be seen as a complete decommodification of food, the market referents remaining always close (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, 2004). Here our purpose is to address the question of consumers' uncertainties and the way they are taken into account in such systems.

First, it is necessary to underline the fact that uncertainty is intrinsic both to production and consumption, simply because it is due to the organic and metabolic nature of production and consumption processes (Goodman, 1999). Therefore, uncertainties are shared by producers and consumers, even though they are of different kinds.

It is easy to understand how producers' uncertainties are lowered through the system : the producers are sure to sell all their products (at least the part of their production they intend to market through this system), the price is set for the whole growing season and does not crush if there is an overproduction.

The way consumers' uncertainties are dealt with is more complex. Firstly, because these uncertainties themselves are multiple. Consumers' forms of concern can be described through two main categories : concern for the self, and concern for the environment (Lamine, 2003). The concern for the self (based on the expression of M. Foucault, 1984) includes the notions of food safety, care for one's body and health, gustative pleasure and sharing. The concern for the environment includes respect of the environment and ethical conceptions of consumption. Even though this system offers no formal guarantee of a superior quality as regards food safety, dietetics, taste, and the impact on the environment, it gives consumers a promise – rather than a guarantee – for each of these concerns. The only proper guarantees concern the production practices (but not their effective impact on the environment), the proximity and the freshness of the production. All the rest is a matter of promise and not guarantee, and this is the second reason why the surpassing of consumers' uncertainties is so complex. This promise is supported by a contrast to the generalized distrust towards industrial food chains and by the change of scale from global circuits to local ones. Moreover, it is reinforced by the collective discussions that the system supposes, as we will see in last section.

This case shows us how producers and consumers deal together with their respective uncertainties, and bring to each other certainties of different nature : consumers offer producers the principle of a quantitatively predictable demand, whereas producers offer consumers a qualitative mix of guarantees about freshness, production practices, proximity and promises about food safety, dietetics, and taste.

In the belgian case, a cooperative selling meat and pork butchery's products was created by producers willing to have a better hold on their activity and become independant from conventional chains, as in the precedent case. But what makes the difference is the stronger importance of the question of food safety. The history of the cooperative shows the evolution of the qualification of the products, initially centered on the direct relationships from farmers to consumers and then, on the "safeness" of the products guaranteed to consumers (Stassart, 2003). The trajectory of the cooperative follows and anticipates the food crises. But taking into account quality and risk can not be limited to measurable and quantifiable criteria. The consumers want « safe » products, but safe means both precise things, such as excluding additives, and also relatively undetermined elements. What is in question is not to guarantee a certain quality codified on a detailed label, but to express this quality through food products whose conditions of production were discussed in details by farmers and brought to consumers' knowledge. The cooperative and the shops have to give consumers signals and indices signifying the *effort* of quality as much as quality itself. And the system does not evacuate nor deny risk : the consumers can always question the quality, ask the sellers and through them, the farmers.

Sustainable development translated into the criteria of qualification

In this section we will show that through this common settling of shared uncertainties, producers and consumers translate sustainable development into criteria of qualification adopted in their production and marketing systems.

Our idea is not to take the definition of sustainable development for set and granted, with a shared and uncontroversed definition, but to identify what definitions and what practices express forms of sustainable development, among the actors and systems which will be studied. It is thus necessary to consider both discursive regimes and pragmatic ones and the way they interact (Deleuze, Guattari, 1980). In what ways such systems establish material, eco-social and discursive practices which introduce the question of sustainable development and in what sense : limited impacts of agriculture

on the environment, or functional integrity (Thompson, 1997) ? Ecologization of nature (Latour, 1995) ?

The CSA-type local contracts are based on the respect of two kinds of irregularity : the irregularity of the assortment of products, depending on the crosp and the weather or other hazards, and the irregularity of the products themselves, which are not graded, and express a form or attachment to nature, opposed to the process of detachment held by the industrial food chains (Mintz, 1991 ; Cronon, 1991). This respect of the natural irregularity of production and products appears here as a pragmatic translation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development.

Other fundamental characteristics of these systems also contribute to a pragmatic translation of sustainable development. In these local contracts, consumers and producers take mutual commitments lasting at least the whole growing season : this subscription principle brings durability into the system. What if consumers don't renew their subscription from year to year, which is the case for many of them (between 10% and sometimes 50%) ? Other consumers will enter, and the group of consumers remain stable even though the individual members change over time. Durability is thus strengthened by this principle of forming an organized group of consumers, allowing a durable viability of the activity, when hundreds of small farms still stop every year.

Finally, in these local contracts, the definition of the price is explicitly based on the real costs of production and a " decent " income for the producer : the equity is here in question and discussed by producers and consumers. Of course, this discussion is lead on stable and exterior bases such as the market prices which always remain a referent and the prices already established in other systems of the same network.

This case is thus revealing how sustainable development through its different dimensions can be made practical.

The belgian case of the farmers cooperative brings different questions. First, as meat is in question, and not fruits and vegetables, the question of the natural irregularity of production has to be dealt with in other terms. Some animal products can intrinsically be produced on a regular and frequent base, such as eggs and poultry, other are more irregular (lamb, veal, some cheeses etc.). An isolated farmer would not of course have the possibility to deliver beef or lamb every day, all year round, whereas he can deliver every week a fruits and vegetables box, as in many CSA systems. With meat, a farmer can adapt the supply to the irregularity of production : if he normally takes animals to the slaughter-house every month, the consumers will be able to buy a meat box once a month, with a big quantity of meat that they can share with friends or freeze. If the farmer only produces one sort of meat, only an organization with several farmers can bring diversity in the box. Some CSA systems actually adopt this principle and offer meat boxes. The alternative chosen by our belgian cooperative is to go further in the collective organization of farmers, and bring together enough farmers so as to be able to have a permanent and complete supply.

The system is therefore more complex and less direct, and we can talk of an lenghtening of the chain. This is reinforced by the fact that the cooperative also sells transformed products (ham, sausage and so on). Then the question becomes : how the good translation of the different dimensions of sustainable development is possible despite this lenghtening ? The quality of the translation has to be guaranteed by the introduction of trust mecanisms. These are both codified mecanism, through the certification by an exterior organization, and uncodified mecanism, lying in the farmers' commitment to adopt safe production technics.

Processes of learning

Different processes of learning take place in such interactions, which allow to link the two previous questions of shared uncertainties and sustainable development. These processes of learning are

cognitive, material and also axiologic. Cognitive, because they are centered on the introduction and sharing of theoretical and technical knowledge. Material, through the principle of physical access of consumers to the place and process of production, expressed in a permanent invitation to come on the farm. This material dimension of learning processes can also be seen in the material links drawn between the different stages of the "eating chain". For example, the way a vegetable is produced interfere with the way it will be cooked and eaten, and *vice versa*. These interferences are expressed in the discussions and in the communication tools such as the weekly leaflet often co-written by the producer and some consumers, which gives recipies as well as comments about the farm activities and growing processes.

These cognitive and material processes of learning contribute to "re-skill" the consumers, in opposition to the "de-skilling" resulting from the generalization of convenient food. Besides these cognitive and material aspects, these interactions also generate values, as they question the type of economic and agricultural system and partly create specific forms of communauty (Allen et al., 2003). Of course, there are limits to this last point, as such systems often end up serving largely well-to-do consumers, even though their networks insist on the access of low-income people (as was pointed out in the "first international congress" held by the "local contracts" network in Aubagne, France, in February 2004). Moreover, it is clear that the primary concern of these systems is not community development but economic innovation, and to generate an alternative livelihood, although this entrepreneurialism carry some 'empowering' of non economic impacts and dimensions (Tovey, 2002).

The belgian case also shows us processes of learning taking place from farmers to consumers, through intermediaries, and back from consumers to farmers, because farmers have to learn about the consumers' perceptions and desires about meat (tenderness, taste, fat etc.). Processes of learning then allow the consumers to accept the idea that the chicken coming from the farms is less tender than the industrial one they maybe used to buy before, but is more tasty, that it also loses less weight when cooked, and maybe has to be cooked differently. Farmers, through the mediation of cooperative's and shops sellers and butchers learn that some consumers would prefer a beef meat that is fatter than the belgian usual standards they were used to due to the technical breeds improvement, because fatter meat is also more tasty.

In both cases, compared to a codified quality such as in the case of organic products sold in conventional chains, there is a negociation about the process of production and a constant possibility to get access to it. This negociation and this access are not necessary effective, most consumers being far from asking questions and going to the farm all the time, but they are at least virtual, and this in itself is powerful.

Conclusion

The main conclusion is that these two alternative food systems with the specific, though different, links they establish between producers and consumers, reveal a principle of commitment of consumers and actors of the food chain, which we can oppose to the principle of delegation observed in the case of organic food when marketed in conventional ways.

These alternative food systems create specific forms of organization of production, marketing and provisioning, and generate these new links between producers and consumers, which allow for a translation of sustainable development in *common* practices, in the two senses of the word " common " : *common* as *ordinary* — everyday practices of buying, cooking and eating food products are in question here, and *common* as *shared* — collective learnings made possible in these systems.

But these notions are not absent in longer chains and not even in the mass distribution. On the contrary, the belgian case showed the necessity to avoid systematically opposing short distance and long distance chains. Therefore, it appears more heuristic to ask for each kind of chain how sustainable development is addressed.

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