

Guest editorial

What's alternative about alternative food networks?

The landscape of agrifood studies and politics in advanced industrial countries has changed dramatically in the last ten years or so. The productivist research and policy agendas that dominated for most of the second half of the last century magnified an intensification of agriculture and globalisation of food markets that promised to accelerate the eradication of embedded food networks. These agendas came to be epitomised by the relentless march of the 'golden arches' celebrated in George Ritzer's Macdonaldization thesis (Ritzer, 1996). What more fitting reminder of inadequacies of this familiar orthodoxy than the news at the close of 2002 of Macdonald's enforced retrenchment of its fast food outlets following a sustained decline in profits and sales. Far from disappearing, those diverse and dynamic food networks that had been cast as remnant or marginal in the shadow of productivism have strengthened and proliferated. This unexpected turn of events has garnered unprecedented interest from researchers and policymakers in, variously, 'alternative' and/or 'quality' and/or 'local' food networks (see Murdoch et al, 2000). These overlapping but nonidentical collective nouns consolidate a multiplicity of food networks from organics and fair trade to regional and artisanal products that represent some of the most rapidly expanding food markets in Europe over the last decade (for example, Michelsen et al, 1999). What they share in common is their constitution as/of food markets that redistribute value through the network against the logic of bulk commodity production; that reconvene 'trust' between food producers and consumers; and that articulate new forms of political association and market governance. In this sense, alternative food networks represent an archetypal case of what Michel Callon and his colleagues at the Centre Sociologie de l'Innovation at the École des Mines in Paris call the 'economy of qualities'. The term signifies a gathering moment in market relations in which the conditions and competences of production, consumption, and regulation become molten in the heat of intense social reflexivity and, thereby, subject to reorganisation or 'qualification' (Callon et al, 2002, pages 194–195).

It is no coincidence that the new-found research and policy significance attached to these so-called 'alternative food networks' (AFNs) is greatest in Europe whether in theoretical, political, or economic terms. Indeed, their 'alternativeness' has come to be associated with an intensification of differences between (North) American and (Western) European food cultures and politics. For example, these differences play through a stylised analytical opposition between 'political economy' and 'actant network theory' (ANT; see Goodman, 1999); popular mobilisations against US cultural and corporate food imperialism (Bové and Dufour, 2001), and regulatory disputes between commercial and government players, as in the case of genetically modified foods (Barry, 2001). But, as the papers in this theme issue illustrate, they are just as important markers of the telling fractures and frictions in the social disputation of the future of food and farming within Europe (Mormont and van Huylbroek, 2001). In the wake of a litany of food scares that have shaken consumer confidence in industrial foodstuffs; ongoing trade wars over protectionist tariffs and precautionary barriers; and an increasingly insupportable agricultural subsidy regime, AFNs have nourished new market, state, and civic practices and visions.

Without too much exaggeration, ‘quality’ has become the hallmark of policy shifts and political realignments in the European Union (as well as individual member countries) that, for the first time, position food and farming at the service of wider regional development, environmental, and public health objectives (Valceschini and Mazé, 2000). In this sense, we might think of ‘quality food’ as a successful example of what Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Star call a ‘boundary object’ (1999), sufficiently supple and robust to gather to it diverse social investments; holding them in conversation without imposing a singular order or design on what is being assembled.

The papers in this theme issue are themselves the product of a collective intervention in this contested landscape of European food politics convened under the auspices of a COST research network on “Institutional innovation and integrated rural development”. They derive from the activities of a working group on AFNs involving researchers from some eleven European Union member states over a five-year period. These papers represent collaborations between researchers in three of these countries—the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands working at the confluence of three main theoretical conversations. First are concerns with the place of the material and technological in social theory (see Pels et al, 2002). Here, the papers interrogate these themes in ways which overspill any narrow association with ANT and amplify the fact that the theoretical moment signalled by this acronym is neither as singular nor as settled as some would suppose (see Law and Hassard, 1999). Second are concerns with the space—times of economic activity and market transaction. Here, the papers explore various conceptual means to make sense of the distant intimacies of food production and consumption (see Whatmore, 2002). And, third, are concerns with the fabric of ‘trust’ that AFNs perform. Here, the papers examine the sociomaterial invention of ‘product traceability’ generated in/by AFNs (see Karpik, 1996).

The first paper by Henk Renting, Terry Marsden, and Jo Banks develops the notion of short food-supply chains and examines their role in rural development strategies. Short food-supply chains refer to face-to-face interactions, such as farmers markets; relations of proximity that transact the local or regional identity of a commodity; and extended relations that ‘shrink’ trading space—times, such as fair-trade networks. The authors provide important comparative evidence from seven European countries assembled as part of an IMPACT project. The second paper, by Han Wiskerke, examines the case of organic wheat and bread in the Netherlands as an example of the sociotechnical constraints on the durability of AFNs. The paper provides a closely worked example of the Dutch experience of strategic niche management as a means of strengthening their technical and institutional practices. The third paper, by Pierre Stassart and Sarah Whatmore, reflects the potent effects of food scares on food politics in two European countries most intensely effected by them, the United Kingdom and Belgium. It examines the bodily register of alternative meat networks constituted between producers and consumers through the Belgian cooperative Coprosain. The fourth paper in this theme issue by Eric Collet and Marc Mormont draws on original research on Belgian fruit producers and their efforts at constructing a ‘quality’ brand to their product without resorting to formal ‘certification’ protocols.

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