Shaping norms. A convention theoretical examination of alternative food retailers as food sustainability transition actors

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ABSTRACT

Changing the shared rules and norms underpinning dominant regimes is seen as one driver of sustainability transitions, yet relatively little attention has been paid to exactly how actors seek to change these. In this study, we focus on the norm-shaping work performed by alternative food retailers, a potentially influential alternative food network actor, as a potential element of food system sustainability transitions. We use convention theory as a novel framework for examining this. Convention theory focuses on shared rules and norms in economic co-ordination and offers a framework for examining how actors negotiate what is right and desirable. By this theory, actors are considered to engage with a plurality of universally accepted notions of worth, organised into different worlds of justification, and to use specific strategies of justification or negotiation to propose and justify different configurations of ideals and their manifestations. The analysis shows how the retailers, by engaging with the different worlds of justification through different strategies of negotiation, promoted four overarching ideals of food production-consumption. Although we must be cautious of overstating the change-making potential of very marginal actors, the view opened by the convention theory perspective is one of active, strategic negotiation taking place in the margins of the dominant food regime, with potentially interesting interactions with the growing landscape pressures to take the food system in a more sustainable direction.

1. Introduction

"Consumers are accustomed to living in [the] sociotechnical food regime. It permits the convenience of purchasing groceries at a single supermarket; it provides abundant meat at low prices; it supplies fruit and vegetables all year round, regardless of seasonality, thanks to imports; and it sells foodstuffs in conveniently processed forms". (Smith, 2006: 444)

The modern, mainstream food system is characterised, at the consumer end, by unprecedented abundance, seasonally unchanging selection and low prices. As Smith writes above, this is what is considered normal and what consumers have come to expect. This same system, however, is coming under increasing criticism due to its perceived negative sustainability impacts, resulting in a widely recognised need to transition to a more sustainable food system (Spaargaren et al., 2012).

In this paper, we approach food system sustainability transitions through the perspective of changing norms, specifically how actors occupying a marginal position in the food system engage in proposing new views of what is, and what isn't, right and desirable in food production-consumption. The concept of sustainability transitions describes longer term, fundamental changes to systems of production and consumption in a more sustainable direction (Spaargaren et al., 2012; Geels, 2004). Two main streams of transitions thinking have been used in examining sustainability transitions in the food system, the multi-level perspective (MLP) and the social practices approach (Hinrichs, 2014). The MLP sees transitions as shifts from one regime to another, as outcomes of the interaction of socio-technical developments at niche, regime and landscape levels (e.g. Geels, 2002, 2004). Regimes are the 'deep-structure' of socio-technical systems (Geels, 2004: 905), structured complexes of "established practices and associated rules that stabilize existing systems" (Geels, 2011: 26), carried and reproduced by social groups (Geels, 2004). Niches are spaces in which actors develop novel practices, "with the intention to alter or reform the regime and create spaces for more desirable practices (Roep and Wiskerke, 2012: 207). The landscape level represents major, macro-level contextual trends that impact the regime and niche (Geels, 2011).

The social practices approach takes a horizontal, actor-centered

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approach to sustainability transitions (Hinrichs, 2014), examining how the emergence of new social practices change "the rules and resources of a new regime-in-the-making" (Spaargaren et al., 2012: 11). Often focusing on consumption practices, the social practices approach is interested in the "shifts in patterns of consumption that are required to absorb […] radical innovations" (McMeekin and Southerton, 2012: 347).

There has been a convergence of the two approaches in the literature and attempts to combine them (Hinrichs, 2014). It is acknowledged that social practices are always reproduced within, and influenced by, the dominant regime (Spaargaren, 2011; Hargreaves et al., 2013), and conversely, the social and human aspect of transitions is gaining attention in the MLP alongside technological and material aspects (e.g., Spaargaren et al., 2012; Geels, 2004; Hinrichs, 2014).

In line with this convergence, in this paper, we focus on an aspect of sustainability transitions that pertains to both approaches: shared ideals, rules, norms and legitimacy, and their change as part of sustainability transitions. Rules include cognitive rules such as "schemas, frames, cognitive frameworks or belief systems", normative rules such as "values, norms, role expectations", and regulative rules (Geels, 2004: 904). Legitimacy refers to actions being "desirable, proper or appropriate within (a) system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995; cited in Geels and Verhees, 2011). New ways of doing things need societal embedding, including cultural (ie. cognitive and normative) legitimacy (Geels and Verhees, 2011).

A transition would entail a shift in regime rules (Geels, 2004). Attempts to introduce new rules and norms come primarily from those outside the dominant regime. Niches are seen as a site where alternative rules, including values and norms, are articulated and institutionalised (Roep and Wiskerke, 2012), and where, in what Smith and Raven (2012) describe as processes of niche empowerment, actors seek to restructure the regime. This involves actors engaging in "outward-oriented activities of representing, promoting and enrolling support" (p. 1031).

In their work on the role of rules and norm-shaping work in transitions, Geels and colleagues (Geels, 2004; Geels and Verhees, 2011) highlight the promise of sociological approaches in understanding these. With a focus on 'competent actors', some strands of sociology see all actors, not only powerful ones, as capable of engaging with and shaping shared rules and norms. Actors in a system are both constrained and enabled by its rules, but also hold the capacity to change them through strategic actions: "social actors knowledgeably and actively use, interpret and implement rule systems. They also creatively reform and transform them " (Geels, 2004: 907). Norms, rules and legitimacy are interesting because of the more uneven and unpredictable power positions of actors in terms of capacity to influence them, compared with the material aspects of transitions. Some actors may have more legitimacy than others in certain fields (Patriotta et al., 2011) or on certain issues.

With the increasing interest in the role of rules and norms in transitions, some work to understand *how* actors shape ideals, rules and norms as part of sustainability transitions and how new practices are legitimised has started to emerge. Geels and Verhees (2011, 912–13) examine the production of cultural legitimacy, arguing that it 'arises from the creation of linkages to the existing cultural framework', with actors interpreting issues by drawing upon 'cognitive deep structures' or 'repertoires' and actively using 'symbols and categories for sense-making'. They also point to the notion of plurality in interpretive approaches to culture; which see culture as a 'fragmented and (sometimes) contradictory set of repertoires that actors can mobilize in different ways'. Elzen et al. (2011), in turn, draw partly on Goffman's (1974) concept of framing in explaining how 'regime outsiders' may challenge normative orientations as part of driving sustainability transitions. Smith and Raven (2012), examining niche empowerment, call for attention to narratives as a "key political device" whereby "actors develop narratives in an attempt to reshape perspectives and patterns of social action and enable institutional reforms." (p. 1032).

In this paper, we advance the discussion of norm-shaping in sustainability transitions by bringing a new theoretical tool, convention theory (CT), to the examination of how actors engage in shaping (or maintaining) the rules and norms of a system. Convention theory is an economic sociological theory examining the deployment and shaping of shared rules and norms, or notions of what is worthy, desirable and right, in economic coordination (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Wilkinson, 1997). It recognises the constructive aspect of coordination and negotiation as actors actively and strategically seek to promote specific understandings of 'worth' in different domains (Rosin and Campbell, 2009; Patriotta et al., 2011). It has deep resonance with the notions of legitimacy, collective sense-making or framing, cognitive deep-structures (see also Thévenot et al., 2000), shared moral understandings and narratives as political devices put forth in the studies described above. Despite these resonances and the explicit focus on norm-shaping negotiation in CT, it has not, to our knowledge, previously been applied to sustainability transitions studies.

Empirically, we examine the negotiation of new ideals, rules and norms in alternative food networks (AFNs). AFNs, such as farmers' markets, community supported agriculture and independent, specialist food retailers, are widely considered a more sustainable alternative to the conventional food system (for a review, see Forssell and Lankoski, 2015), and feature prominently in visions of food system change in the agri-food literature. However, critics have also argued that AFNs are too marginal to have any significant impact on the food system (see Mount, 2012).

Transitions thinking is enticing from this perspective as it also acknowledges the role of less dominant actors in systems change. These actors are considered differently, as potential 'seeds of transition' (Van der Ploeg et al., 2004; Geels, 2004) that may affect the wider system through more diverse mechanisms than just gaining a greater share of the system (Oosterveer and Spaargaren, 2012; Brunori et al., 2011). Accordingly, agri-food scholars have started to engage with the sustainability transitions literature in understanding the role AFNs might play in food system sustainability transitions, including its human and social aspects such as social innovation (Kirwan et al., 2013); learning and co-production of innovation (Brunori et al., 2011); the creation and embedding of new shared visions of agriculture (Bui et al., 2016) or how new social practices around food consumption are developed in AFNs (e.g. Fonte, 2013; Crivits and Paredis, 2013).

Some scholars have characterised AFNs as a niche (e.g., Brunori et al., 2011) but AFNs may perhaps better be understood as networks that draw on both niche and regime rules and practices, given their hybrid nature, aka. that they typically share characteristics of both the alternative and the conventional food system (see Forssell and Lankoski, 2017). AFNs also typically do not operate in a supported, protected space as niches are characterised as initially having (eg. public funding or experiment status) (Geels, 2004). Although AFNs usually are market actors, the roots of some AFNs are in social movements and they can thus also be seen as having similarities to 'regime outsiders' (eg. Geels and Verhees, 2011). AFNs' similarities to niches include the significant work required to keep the niche together and running, and to articulate the rules involved, and that the work in niches often aims at solving the problems of existing regimes (Geels, 2004). Even if AFNs are not purely a niche, the notion of niches and how they interact with the landscape and regime is helpful in thinking about how they might play a part in changing the food system.

Like the transitions perspective, CT counters the idea that marginal actors such as AFNs are powerless to change the food system. Particularly the perspective that even less powerful actors have resources to challenge prevailing rules and norms and that rules and norms are always 'up for grabs' (Patriotta et al., 2011), brings a more nuanced picture to how marginal actors might be part of changing wider systems.

Previous applications of CT to the study of AFNs have suggested that