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How to survive: Artificial quality food schemes and new forms of rule for farmers in direct marketing strategies

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1. Introduction

Current agri-food policy and programs highlight the need for a shift in the approach to move towards more sustainable agriculture – socially and environmentally. In this respect, new policies are often based on market-led models that add value to certain distinctive products or practices. In this context, "quality food schemes" (QFSs herein after) emerge – those in which particular products or characteristics from small scale food production are ascribed a certain superiority that allows the producers to obtain premium prices. These schemes take the form of territorial management or economic planning strategies that link quality to the production from certain districts or regions (Marsden and Smith, 2005). These mechanisms have also helped to re-localize the food industry and to create a new paradigm of rural development granting greater autonomy to rural farmers and entrepreneurs (Marsden and Smith, 2005; Murdoch et al., 2009). Generally such QFSs are characterized by direct marketing venues, such as farmers' markets, farm-to-table initiatives, or food basket schemes, by direct connections with the restaurant sector, or by a re-connection between consumers and producers via, for instance, on-site farm visits.

However, the implementation of such quality schemes is a multi-level process that does not necessarily offer win-win solutions to all sides involved (Allen et al., 2003; Allen, 2004). For example, alternative marketing (i.e. direct, local) requires a strong education of consumers about food choices – who are advised to change purchasing habits and buy seasonal and often more expensive products (Hinrichs, 2000; Guthman, 2003; Hinrichs and Allen, 2008). Programs are usually designed around convincing consumers through awareness-raising campaigns and through new venues that can facilitate behavioral shift – i.e. offering new experiences around food provisioning. On other hand, the exclusivity of certain direct marketing channels, which are often only accessible to a certain spectrum of convinced consumers, makes it difficult for farmers to rely on and remain exclusively in such alternative markets (Jarosz, 2008; Gray, 2013).

Additionally, food justice scholars have pointed to the social inequalities, exclusionary discourses, and the relations of power more broadly at work in these initiatives (Goodman, 2003; Slocum, 2007; Guthman, 2008; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). They call for moving beyond an overly benign analysis of economic relations and processes embedded in direct marketing and other "alternative" food market venues (Sayer, 2001; Wilson, 2013), and show the need for different activism engagements rather than consumption in niche spaces (Alkon and Guthman, 2017). In those views, the social embeddedness assumed in the agricultural direct markets should be not idealized because marketness and instrumentalism are part of local food systems as well (Hinrichs, 2000; D. Goodman, 2003). Trust and civic engagement between producers and consumers can also abruptly dissolve. In this direction, others have suggested that urban and rural politics might play a role in the reproduction of inequalities (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), while calling for the re-politicization of the local and the alternative, for a better understanding of the urban–rural politics and social relations uniting producers and consumers, and for an in-depth examination of alternative food networks as a politics of place (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000).

In response, the objective of this paper is to examine how farmers navigate these externally-created QFSs, and how these strategies influence farmers' lived experiences and their perceptions of questions of rule and power in the agricultural cycle of production and consumption. We do so by analyzing experiences of farmers integrated into QFSs within a peri-urban agricultural area of Barcelona. Ultimately, we aim to understand the extent to which this particular form of governing food and farming are contributing to a more equitable and sustainable food systems. Our study contributes to broader debates on urban rural politics and on the politics of alternatives in the context of a transition towards agricultural sustainability.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2 we present some theoretical insights about agri-food policy and QFSs, and direct marketing. In section 3 we explain our methods. In section 4 we describe the case study area, and the programs promoted by the regional institutional government to support QFSs. In section 5 we present farmers' lived

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experiences when embedded in such schemes. In section 6 we reflect on the urban-rural politics of our case study, and discuss implications for a broader debate on governance and politics of the alternative food networks.

2. Agri-food policy, the quality turn and the politics of the direct marketing for a socio-economic agricultural transition

2.1. The rationales behind the creation of quality food and their implications

Over the last fifty years, the industrialization and globalization of agriculture has led to important environmental and social impacts, including rural exodus, disconnection with nature, soil contamination, and climate change (Lawrence et al., 2004; Magdoff et al., 2000; McMichael, 2017). More recently, the need to maintain a productivist-oriented form of agriculture while compensating for associated market failures has fostered a correspondingly more post-productivist agriculture focused on meeting both social and environmental objectives (Buller and Morris, 2004; Renting et al., 2003). The post-productivist agriculture turn attempts to shift both production processes and consumption choices (Renting et al., 2003) by developing tools such as labels and voluntary certifications, value-added marketing, cataloguing, and consumer awareness campaigns (see analysis of this strategies in, for example, Goodman, 2004; Guthman, 2007). Such tools "re-qualify" foods in relation to either their production processes or their region (with *distinctiveness*), in order to create new market benefits for the producers (and other agri-food chain actors) and address social and environmental externalities. Market benefits contribute to both a relatively more secure access to an increasingly competitive market and higher revenues for farmers through value added processes (Buller and Morris, 2004).

The quality food rhetoric built as a response to the plethora of environmental and social claims, including increasing public demands for higher food quality, has been accompanied by a more intense communication of quality in production through local and regional brand building (Renting et al., 2003; Goodman et al., 2014; Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2012). In this context, "quality food schemes" emerged as local/regional solutions to the decline of rural economies. They encompass both the production of specialty foods together with "institutional innovations, direct marketing, short food supply chains, local food systems, and the renewed legitimization of artisanal food practices and regional cuisine" (Goodman, 2003: 2). Thus, QFSs involve areas or regions in which such a strategy is deployed: where particular products or particular characteristics from food production are ascribed certain superiority that allows the producers to obtain premium prices or access exclusive markets. Quality food is also a strategy adopted by public institutions in order to sustain small scale and sustainable farming (i.e. the normalization of organic food).

The Alternative Food Networks literature (AFNs), which describes oppositional, more socially sustainable, or simply more ethical, spaces of food production and distribution (Goodman et al., 2014) has generally overlooked the fact that the qualifications or characteristics upon which difference, or alterity, is assigned are sometimes abstract or subjective (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Johnston, 2017). By focusing on highlighting and building difference, AFNs have generally excluded or erased the wide continuum between the two extremes in the agri-food spectrum. In QFSs, quality is what produces difference from the "other". Somehow different from other qualifiers (local, organic, community-based, cooperative), "quality" is abstract and becomes an elastic term. Yet, it comes as quite handy to study production sites where the differentiation alternative VS mainstream is not clear-cut. As a framework, it has been often used to analyze orchestrated strategies for supporting sustainable farming and rural development. On the ground, with a more depoliticized discourse and more marketed-based approach than the one around AFNs, QFSs has been used as a strategy by public institutions working with a broad spectrum of food producers (that might not be called alternative nor agri-food players). Here, critical consumers are encouraged to create and engage with quality-centered food, such as protected designation of origins schemes, in order to re-connect with the food they eat and those who produce it (Johnston et al., 2011; Cox et al., 2008; Hinrichs and Allen, 2008; Calvário and Kallis, 2016). However, its use entails the risk of creating a binary thinking - where some sort of food is qualified, and the rest is identified as poor quality or "bad" food – a difference that is not sustained by a proper analysis of how quality is built, under which criteria quality products and practices are identified and rated and for whom.

In such regions, products are embedded in a local ecology and sold using the trademark of this newly rebranded locale (or other conditions of production) (Murdoch et al., 2009; Guthman, 2007; Johnston and Szabo, 2011). Consumers within quality schemes value such trademarks or what these suggest as new esthetics, pleasures, tastes and others, and act influenced by them, rather than by purely economic rationale. In the literature on AFNs and sustainable food production, the concept of embeddedness is often used to explain how complex the interplay between the economic and the social rationales is, posing problems for the construction and stabilization of purely economic or fully commoditized relationships (Murdoch et al., 2009; Hinrichs, 2000). This embeddedness has changed the map of the food sector, in which more marginal regions are able to reinvent themselves – and compete in the new embedded markets (Murdoch et al., 2009). Quality thus becomes a path to autonomy and a way of survival.

However, attributing too much value to the local production processes – or to other "quality" characteristics – gives rise to niche markets (Murdoch et al., 2009) and possible forms of exclusivity. For instance, these sustainable forms of agriculture might remain relatively marginal vis à vis a globalized food sector. "Qualified" characteristics might also become mainstreamed by a large agricultural corporate sector which appropriates and rebrands them (Johnston et al., 2009). For this reason, it seems desirable for the values and premises on which embeddedness is constructed to be based on carefully considered social and/or environmental criteria and consumers should be well informed about these criteria. Several critics also denounce the problems associated with the strategy of localization as a form of food activism, which comes with a very diffused, uncritical and innocent idea of what "local" is and means (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2003; Harvey, 1996). Others have pointed out that the meaning of what constitutes "sustainable" food systems deserves consideration when linking rural producers with urban consumers (Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Moragues-Faus, 2016).

In a context of neoliberal governance (Wacquant, 2012; Pudup, 2008; Marsden and Franklin, 2013), the quality food rhetoric can be seen as the perpetuation of a form of governance that avoids direct intervention and legislation and devolves responsibility – but not power – downwards (to regional governments first, and to farmers and consumers in a latter step) (Higgins et al., 2008; Lawrence, 2004). This governance pushes for certifications and new rules, rather than good practices (Guthman, 2007). In turn, the creation of "quality food" as a strategy for driving socio-ecological changes is paradoxical, because it fetishizes the commodification of food, which is considered to have harmed small farming and rural livelihoods (Agyeman and McEntee, 2014). In this line, critical scholars have warned that farmers markets remain fundamentally rooted in commodity relations (Hinrichs, 2000) and in forms of exclusion and exclusivity (Alkon and McCullen, 2011). With the notions of embeddedness, networks and trust, a "softer treatment of capitalism" or eco-capitalism, might be legitimized (Sayer, 2001:700 in Goodman, 2003), without questioning fundamental hidden problems attached to market-based economic relations, such as marketness and instrumentalism (Hinrichs, 2000; Block, 1990).