



Nurturing proximities in an emerging food landscape



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ABSTRACT

Most AFN studies tend to investigate in which ways these socio-economic constructs are distinct from conventional agricultural circuits. Less emphasis has been put on investigating how the relational processes leading to the formation of different types of AFN constitute different socio-economic constructs. In this paper, I use theoretical underpinnings from the debate in economy geography about proximity dynamics to explore the relational processes of formation of AFN. The use of proximity as a conceptual framework allows distinguishing between spatial (i.e. Euclidean distance) and relational (cognitive, organizational, institutional and social) understandings of emerging producer-consumer relations. I will perform this empirically by investigating accounts from small organic farmers located in a remote rural region of Sweden of how they establish and develop such short relations. The paper confirms findings from previous studies accounting that individual farmers are engaged in co-occurrent forms of market relations but goes further by emphasizing the new spatialities and temporalities of the flows of goods, persons and information across the physical landscape that are induced through the formation of AFN.

1. Introduction

Bos and Owen (2016) recently listed the main forms that Alternative Food Networks (AFN) may take in contemporary farming and marketing practices including Farmers' Markets, farm shops and farm gate sales, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), box delivery schemes, producer and consumer co-operatives or community gardening initiatives. The respatialisation of agricultural networks through AFN has spurred as many processes of stretching and reaching outside the local, as the establishment of renewed expressions of the local itself (Forney and Häberli, 2016). Hence, the reconfiguration of agricultural networks has led to the constitution of food networks as an *assemblage* of intertwined relational geographies (Feagan, 2007).

Over the past two decades, scholars in agro-food studies have made significant contributions to theoretical developments in the field of human and economic geography (Feagan, 2007; Morgan and Murdoch, 2000; Murdoch et al., 2000; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). However, agri-food studies appear to have been less prone to influence from emerging conceptual developments coming from this field. Goodman et al. (2012), for instance, contend that studies investigating AFN seem to *systematically ignore* the growing body of work on place-making processes from human geography. More specifically, Brunori et al. (2012) argue that, even though the growing body of AFN literature has indeed managed to highlight a “rich set of practices”, these experiences and empirical observations “still need adequate theoretical understanding” (2012: p. 4). Using a coherent analytical framework to

investigate AFN would ensure a sounder scientific basis to systematically compare these experiences and contribute to conceptual developments in the field, based on the identification of commonalities and distinctive features.

In this paper, theoretical underpinnings of the notion of proximity (Torre and Gilly, 2000; Torre and Rallet, 2005) are used to explore the processes supporting the development of AFN in the north of Sweden. The proximity approach is a growing strand of human geography which, in a nutshell, addresses the issue of how economic actors develop ‘close’ relations. This resonates with well-known issues addressed in AFN studies about the respatialisation and resocialisation in producer-consumer networks, especially in relation to local, direct or short food supply chain. In France, proximity is already strongly associated with scholarly and policy debates on AFN and what constitutes the tenets of an agriculture of proximity (Guiomar, 2011; Hochedez, 2008; Torre, 2000), *une agriculture de proximité*. Geographic proximity between producers and consumers is understood as an untapped potentiality that may be exploited through the implementation of relational devices. Some studies based on French experiences of what an agriculture of proximity entails have already been published in the international literature (Aubry and Kebir, 2013; Filippi et al., 2011; Kebir and Torre, 2012; Torre, 2006), but the notion has yet to be more widely applied in the context of AFN.

This study applies the notion of proximity to understand the spatial, temporal and relational logics of the formation of AFN. It investigates how relations of proximity in agriculture are constituted, maintained

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and developed in practice. This will be achieved by answering the following two research questions: How can different types of AFN be characterised as the interplay between one or more modes of organised proximity? How can the engagement of producers in multiple types of AFN be understood locally as an evolutionary process (termed here “proximity trajectory”) drawing on several modes of organised proximity?

2. Resocialising and respatialising food

The conventional food industry is criticized for the distancing in producer-consumer relations it induces (Chiffolleau, 2009). Distance in this context is understood both in terms of the considerable physical separation between the places where food is produced and where it is consumed (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Jarosz, 2008), but also with respect to the widening of the intellectual and cultural gap in how consumers relate to food (Dowler et al., 2009:200). Scholars have invoked both the lack of personal trust in food consumption (Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016) and the high number of intermediaries whose actions are orchestrated and dominated by a few large-scale global economic actors (Murdoch et al., 2000) to characterise this process. In this scheme, AFN have been framed as a possible response to these concerns, by proposing food supply models based on a high level of agency (Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016) of smaller producers, allowing these producers to “collectively gain autonomy from the industry” (Forney and Häberli, 2016: p. 149) and to shape and organise their ‘own’ version of the food supply chain. Particularly, the role of consumers as full-fledged actors in the food supply chain, involved in recursive, mutually constituted food circuits (Goodman, 2002; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006), is brought to the forefront. Hence, the emergence of AFN are understood as a process of dis-embedding from the conventional food industry, as much as they are as a process of re-embedding food into renewed social and economic relations (Brunori et al., 2012).

The emergence of AFN has been described as a dual process of re-socialisation and respatialisation of food production and consumption practices (Jarosz, 2008; Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2012; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). Relocalisation of the food system contributes to the “recreation of place” through new forms of practices (Feagan, 2007: p. 30). AFN promote the re-embeddedness of farming practices in the social, economic and ecological fabric of particular places (Feagan, 2007; Feenstra, 1997; Tregear, 2011). Hinrichs (2000: p. 296) argues that the notion of social embeddedness has become a “convenient shorthand” that encapsulates multiple features of AFN in terms of social connection, reciprocity and trust and tends to conflate spatial relations with social relations (Hinrichs, 2000). Social embeddedness is grounded in personal trust and based on relations of reciprocity, familiarity and solidarity (Hinrichs, 2000; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016; Tregear, 2011). According to Murdoch et al. (2000: p. 117), such interpersonal recognition is “significant in defining the quality of the product”. Value-laden information about the food’s origin (Morris and Kirwan, 2011; Renting et al., 2003) induces a certain “cognitive alignment” between producers and consumers (Milestad et al., 2010: p. 228).

However, as Chiffolleau (2009:220) argues, social embeddedness of AFN is not only about interpersonal relations of trust, but is also cultural and political by nature. Economic exchanges in the context of AFN are ‘culturalized’ in the sense that they rely on conventions and values about food that generate new trade values on food produce (Maye and Kirwan, 2010; Murdoch et al., 2000). The interplay between personal and systemic trust is thus a component of AFN (Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016). In that respect, social embeddedness also addresses the collegial creation of “new shared meanings” (Brunori et al., 2012: p. 4) and of a “sense of belonging among the agrarian community” (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2012: p. 230). Hence, social embeddedness encompasses a broad range of cognitive processes that Sage (2003: p. 53) terms “non-monetary rewards”. The scholarly debate on reconnection has provided

a systemic perspective on the hybridity of the relations in AFN, interweaving economic, social, natural and moral elements (Dowler et al., 2009; Murdoch et al., 2000; Winter, 2003). To disentangle these complex processes, scholars have recently addressed ecological embeddedness, which can be understood as the processes by which the relationships between economic agents and the underlying ecology of production (e.g. soil, crops and animals) influence the development of actor-relations within AFN (Morris and Kirwan, 2011). The recognition by consumers of the biological quality of food supports the re-embedding of ecological values in the production process (Dowler et al., 2009; Morris and Kirwan, 2011; Murdoch et al., 2000). Ecological values thus become a platform to create “shared ethical and moral frameworks oriented towards principles of fairness, environmental sustainability and care” (Kneafsey et al., 2013: p. 15). Ecological embeddedness and moral reconnection are thus key characteristics of the collective “transformative capacity” (Bos and Owen, 2016: p. 4) of these emerging communities.

Spatial rescaling processes associated with AFN are often confined to the ‘local’ geography. Historically, this can be understood as an ideological opposition to the ‘delocalized’ and spatially-blind conventional food industry. However, the problem of the local bias in AFN studies has been noted by Hinrichs (2003: p. 33), who shows that “the spatial relations of ‘local’ may not always map in consistent ways onto specific social or environmental relations”. The problem inherent to the conflation of social relations to a certain spatial scale has been raised previously in human geography. Hess (2004) made a compelling critique of human geographers’ tendency to identify the local as the privileged site for embedded relations. In the case of AFN, an additional element that has exacerbated this bias is the importance of natural features and ecological values as constituting characteristics of the ‘quality turn’ (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006) and associating food quality to a particular place of origin, be it a region, a landscape or a farm. The spatial analysis of AFN ought not to be locked to the search for a one-size-fits-all local geography, but rather should seek to account for the diversity of spatialities resulting from the heterogeneity of relational constructs (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Morris and Kirwan, 2011).

In the context of AFN, being local emanates from the “shorter distances between where food is grown and where it is purchased and eaten” (Jarosz, 2008: p. 232), i.e. the physical distance that separates producers from their consumers (Eriksen and Sundbo, 2016; Favilli et al., 2015). However, Forney and Häberli (2016) note that such physical proximity cannot be considered as absolute, but is essentially relative to former conventional practices. In a recent synthesis of AFN literature, Kneafsey et al. (2013: p. 13) noted the subjectivity of the delineation of the local as this “reduced geographical area” ranges from about 20 km to 100 km in radius. No measurable threshold can be applied to characterise the localness of such arrangements.

In addition to physical aspects, the local dimension is expressed through relational features, i.e. in connection with *how* actors interact with each other in those relational arrangements. A key relational feature relates to the thickening of producer-consumer relations (Whatmore et al., 2003). In the literature, direct interactions between producers and consumers (Dowler et al., 2009) is a recurring feature of AFN. The notion of short food supply chains illustrates a shift towards an organization of the food chain that seeks to reduce the number of intermediaries (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Renting et al., 2003). The realization of direct interactions, i.e. no intermediary, is considered as an “ideal” configuration (Kneafsey et al., 2013: p. 13). Emblematic manifestations of these direct relationships are face-to-face interactions between producers and consumers. Meeting places are thus an important component of what make AFN seem ‘local’, as they provide new contact interfaces (Horlings and Marsden, 2014) that are based on individual recognition between producers and consumers and conducive of personal trust and cooperation (Carolan, 2006; Jarosz, 2008; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Sage, 2003; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016). The development of “food purchasing venues such as food cooperatives,

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