A discursive analysis of oppositional interpretations of the agro-food system: A case study of Latvia

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ABSTRACT

This article critically reflects on the literature that addresses the complexity of food systems, which is often caught in application of simplistic binary oppositions of local vs. global, short vs. long, sustainable vs. intensive, etc. It then goes on to show, through a case study analysis of food-system discourses in Latvia how the binary oppositions surrounding with food systems, are actually mobilised in a specific national context.

Agro-food systems are often explained through binary opposing knowledge systems that, depending on the theoretical affiliation of the author, might be called frames, narratives or discourses. These powerful instruments are used to explain, and often prescribe, the overall direction of agro-food systems. However, such narratives have difficulties in explaining the diversity that underlies these knowledge systems.

This article analyses two agro-food discourses in Latvia — the *intensification discourse* and the *alternative discourse*. The *intensification discourse* supports greater intensification of the agro-food system whilst the *alternative discourse* has consolidated groups of actors under the claims of greater sustainability, the need to shorten food chains and support local producers. This article suggests that the explanatory power of these discourses evaporates when the individual actors' practices are analysed: the micro level reveals that the two discourses often overlap and that they are intertextually connected.

We discuss three ways in which the discourses can overlap: (1) partial affiliation, (2) multi-lingual communication, (3) replacement of underdeveloped aspects. These three forms of overlapping illustrate how middle grounds are created between the discourses. The analysis of intertextuality demonstrates how macro knowledge structures are reinterpreted when transformed into micro practices.

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The amount of evidence describing various food system aspects is growing as is the number of explanations of how we can and should interpret food systems. The ongoing expansion of the field illustrates the diversity of food systems. Theoretical perspectives develop interpretations that describe overall food system processes and grasp the relational/competing knowledge systems — what we can call 'food system discourses'. However, these explanations often appear to be simplistic when confronted with the diversity of practices that actually occur within food systems (see O'Neill, 2014; Freibauer et al., 2011; Lockie, 2006). It is for example, impossible to use simple binaries (good vs. bad, long vs. short, global vs. local, etc.) to explain the diversity of aspects that motivate, say, a certified organic farmer, who operates in short food supply chains (selling directly to consumers) packs her products 'just like in supermarkets' and sells only products of the "*right*" shape and colour. This combination of actions could be described as a commodity practice (Nost, 2014) intended to create the value of the produce; or her customer — a person who demands a supermarket experience from the certified organic farmer. Recently there has been growing interest in going beyond simplified binary interpretations of the agro food system (see Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Renting et al., 2003; Marsden et al., 2000; Brunori, 2007).

In this article we critique the literature, much if which does not adequately capture the complexity of food systems and is caught in an uncritical application of binary opposites (of local vs. global, short vs. long, sustainable vs. intensive, etc). We then go on show

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how these binary oppositions are actually mobilised in the Latvian context through a case study analysis of the discourses surrounding the food-system. The explanations given will demonstrate how discourses are implemented in everyday practices, how they mutually coexist, and how they coexist within the context. The article supplements the growing amount of evidence illustrating the complexity of interpreting agro-food systems.

To analyse the characteristics of the selected case, we have used critical discourse analysis (CDA). The tradition of research into the knowledge structures that underpin agro-food systems has used several instruments for such analysis. Researchers have applied frame analysis (Tomlinson, 2013; Kirwan and Maye, 2013), discourse analysis and narrative analysis (Freibauer et al., 2011; Thompson and Scoones, 2009). We use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) a powerful analytical approach that helps us to understand the aspects of power relations and social order within a studied field. The properties of CDA – its ability to address the power relations of competing knowledge systems, inequality, knowledge reproduction and the strong political context (van Dijk, 2001) and to uncover what is hidden and look beyond the surface (van Dijk, 1995) – have attracted scholars from various fields. These qualities are also helpful when studying food systems. From a theoretical macro perspective, authors commonly point out the distinction of knowledge fields prevailing in food systems and their relative strengths: for example, global or conventional as opposed to local food systems (Feenstra, 1997; Feagan, 2007; Martinez et al., 2010) or alternative supply chains (O'Neill, 2014; Venn et al., 2006; Goodman, 2004), unsustainable vs. sustainable food systems, old vs. new food policies (Lang et al., 2009) or the new food equation (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010), etc. The reference these authors make to the prevalence of one or another interpretative perspective accentuates the need to use an approach that recognizes power that regulates social encounters. This explains our choice to use CDA. In some of the works describing these comparisons the term 'discourse' is used, however, it is mainly applied in a sense that does not allow grasping the full range of its analytical properties.

This paper explores how oppositional (binary) agro-food knowledge systems (discourses) merge at a micro level. For the purpose of this study, we have analysed two agro-food discourses in Latvia – the *intensification discourse* and the *alternative discourse*. The *intensification discourse* – mainly represented by the government sector, most market actors and several NGOs, supports a greater intensification, less State involvement (the State as a regulator/manager) and the right of humans to exploit natural resources. The *intensification discourse* is historically rooted and strongly incorporated in regulations and as such holds the dominant position. By contrast– the *alternative discourse* is a circle of ideas that has been consolidated from several recent projects and movements. It is represented by a diverse the range of actors contains a diversity of concepts. It has consolidated groups of consumers, enterprises and civic activists anxious to enhance sustainability, shorten food chains, support local producers, oppose GMOs, and other similar aims. However, the line separating two discourses only appears to be clear when looking at macro discourse structures. The explanatory power of the discourses vanishes somewhat when the everyday practices of actors (individuals, groups and networks) are analysed: the micro level reveals that the two discourses often overlap.

In order to analyse the relations between the *intensification discourse* and the *alternative discourse*, we have used several data sources – including interviews with various stakeholders and the participatory observations of civic group gatherings. In addition we analysed policy documents and press publications addressing food issues.

1. Discourse analysis of food systems

As can also be observed in other parts of the world, agro-food knowledge systems in Latvia have been described using two opposing interpretations which change over time (Locmele, 2014; Grivins et al., 2013, 43–45). Here we call these two knowledge fields *the intensification discourse* and *the alternative discourse*. Many studies addressing agro-food system interpretation systems have used various analytical tools, such as frame analysis (Tomlinson, 2013; Kirwan and Maye, 2013), narrative analysis (Freibauer et al., 2011; Thompson and Scoones, 2009), and discourse analysis (or at least have made references to the discourses). These are all powerful instruments with which to build an analysis. However, they have some limitations of applicability for this study. For example, frame analysis is mainly used to "*identify problems*", "*diagnose causes*", "*make moral judgements*", and "*suggest remedies*" (Entman, 1993, 51; Vliegenthart and van Zoonen, 2011) while narrative analysis focuses on analysing the story itself. CDA is used to analyse texts and looks at power relations behind the text (which in this case present themselves through the struggle between opposing interpretations of the food system). These characteristics (explained in detail later in this section) makes the CDA a useful analytical framework for exploring micro practices in opposing knowledge systems.

In this article the focus is on the analysis of the 'discourses' – the systems that, according to Fairclough (1992), include the production, distribution and consumption of texts (or the processes of text production, interpretation and interaction (Fairclough, 1989)). We see discourses as a system of logic with certain core beliefs and usage restrictions, that claim to represent the truth – seeking hegemony ("leadership as much as domination across the economic, political, cultural and ideological domains of society" (Fairclough, 1992, 92)). To put it more simply – the discourse is an analytic instrument that helps draw the borders of appropriate actions, practices and interactions. In this sense, discourses that structure the same domains of life compete with each other, and, inevitably, one of them will gain a superior position. The ordering of discourses sets out the power distribution in society: it grants power to certain ideas, groups of people and practices (Foucault, 1981). And finally, some of the discourses may become so powerful that through the internalisation and naturalisation they take the shape of 'common sense' (Fairclough, 1989, 91–93) or may be so integrated within power structures that official institutions even technologise the discourses by institutionalising practices that favour and reproduce the discourse (Fairclough, 1992, 215–218). Labelling, quality, infrastructural food production requirements or even a local product quality scheme appropriated by a big retailer –are just some examples that suggest the hegemonic position of the intensification discourse.

The analysis of discourses reveals how certain areas of knowledge are structured and how certain social practices are legitimised (Foucault, 1981) – "discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or 'constitute' them; different discourses constitute key entities … in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects …" (Fairclough, 1992, 3–4). However, when we examine the individual cases of discursive practices we can observe deviations from what we would expect. This is partly possible due to every individual situation having several overlapping discourses. It can also be partly explained by the restrictively constructive nature of the discourse: it gives the tools for construction (the words and the overall logics), yet in each specific situation actors still have some power to select the words and logics to apply. As Fairclough claims – "they [people] are able to act on condition that they act within the constraints of types of practice – or of discourse" (Fairclough, 1989, 28). Finally, the