



Revealing the hidden geography of alternative food networks: The travelling concept of farmers' markets



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ABSTRACT

Alternative food networks in post-socialist settings are often studied using concepts and analytical tools developed in the Anglo-American context. As a result, the findings tend to replicate and confirm rather than challenge and extend the extant knowledge and theorisations. Based on a recent study of farmers' markets in the Czech capital Prague, the paper claims that viewing these 'from the periphery' produces novel insights complementing those garnered in researching them in the West. In the context of earlier alternative food initiatives, the boom of farmers' markets, which Prague experienced in the early 2010s, was unparalleled. In less than 24 months, 41 farmers' markets were established in and around the city. Focusing methodologically on the discourse of the organisers of farmers' markets and theoretically on the complex hidden geography underlying the farmers' markets' boom, we are able to unpick the intricacy and paradoxical nature inherent in this development. While acknowledging the farmers' markets embeddedness in the local context, we argue that a more comprehensive understanding of farmers' markets requires engagement with a flow of ideas and know-how transcending the locality. The ensuing type of farmers' markets is a result of interactions among different travelling concepts as well as of their encounter with the specificities of the local post-socialist context. We argue that the fact that these concepts were not necessarily concordant with each other and also insufficiently adapted to the local context had a profound effect on Prague farmers' markets' boom.

1. Introduction: researching farmers' markets in the global semi-periphery

The recent proliferation of farmers' markets (FMs) outside the 'core area' of North America and Western Europe in a diversity of social contexts in both the Global South and European East raises some important geographical questions which have, so far, been largely overlooked in alternative food scholarship: How do 'food innovations' like FMs 'travel' and which factors – both within and transcending the FMs' locality – are at play? How do these insights extend the existing knowledge on FMs and alternative food networks (AFNs) more generally, and in particular, with respect to the cosmopolitan relevance of their conceptualisations? This is an important question as the dominant academic discourse of AFNs and FMs have so far been mainly produced in the North American and West European contexts.

The emerging research of FMs in post-socialist Central and Eastern

Europe (CEE) tends to focus on consumers' motivations for shopping at FMs and their relations with vendors (Balcarová et al., 2016; Rajkovic et al., 2017; Spilková, 2008; Zikienė and Pilelienė, 2016) and the question of FMs' diffusion from the Western centre has so far largely escaped researchers' attention. The existing literature seems to assume that the markets in the 'global semi-periphery', such as CEE, occur in response to similar concerns and aim to deliver similar results to those in Western contexts. They are 'read from the West' or, as Wendy Larner put it, 'here' continues to be studied by using the analytical tools of 'there' (Larner, 2011, p. 89). Drawing on an in-depth investigation into the boom of FMs in the Czech Republic's capital Prague in the early 2010s, in this paper, we take issue with this stance and propose an approach aimed at producing 'situated knowledge' (Larner, 2011) on FMs.

As alternative food researchers we were captivated by the speed with which a large number of FMs sprang up around Prague.¹ The May

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¹ Several FMs which were an integral part of the studied phenomena were located beyond the city's administrative boundaries, within Prague metropolitan area (Ouředníček and Temelová, 2009). For the sake of comprehensibility, however, we refer to 'Prague FMs' in the rest of the text.

2009 issue of the first Czech cooking magazine for foodies *Apetit* published an article titled ‘Is Prague going to get its markets?’ The article was scathing about the limited opportunities for purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables in the Czech capital. At the time of publishing the article, there was not a single farmers’ market in Prague. The main places to shop for food were supermarkets and other large stores. A bit more than one year later, in the autumn of 2010, twenty-four FMs were regularly held in Prague. At the end of summer 2011, forty-one FMs were serving their customers in Prague.

The sudden surge in the number of Prague FMs deviated profoundly from the hitherto experience of similar food initiatives in Czechia, which had been marked by their niche and small-scale character, limited reach and incremental development (Zagata, 2012; Fendrychová, 2015). To understand this intriguing phenomenon, we explored its sources, main actors, and their motives and aims. Focusing on the key group actor behind the emergence of FMs in Prague – food activists turned market promoters and organisers – the paper identifies and then disentangles what is termed the ‘organisers’ discourse’. Important inconsistencies within this discourse and its dissonance with the dominant academic understanding of FMs point to the need for a ‘geographical revision’ of FMs’ conceptualisation, namely extending the research of FMs beyond the Western core and focusing on the processes by which ideas and know-how travel.

In the field of FMs research, our approach is innovative in three ways. First of all, in what we study – the boom of FMs in the locality (compared to case studies of one or two FMs), secondly, in where we study it – in the post-socialist CEE semi-periphery (compared to the core area of North America and Western Europe) and thirdly, given the status of the locality, also in how we study it – producing situated knowledge (compared to applying existing conceptualisations from ‘the core’) and utilizing the organisers discourse (compared to the consumers’ survey).

The paper begins with a brief overview of the conceptualisations of AFNs and FMs and proceeds to the identification of the ‘geographical knowledge gap’ in this scholarship. After outlining our research methodology, we turn to the empirical material by exploring the timing and context of the Prague FMs boom. We then analyse the organisers’ discourse and scrutinize it through the lens of academic debates on post-socialism and on travelling concepts to produce situated knowledge of Prague FMs’ boom which we confront with the existing academic discourse of AFNs and FMs. The paper concludes by the explanation of how adopting our approach would advance the AFNs scholarship.

2. Theorising AFNs: ambiguous conceptualisations and geographical knowledge gap

FMs are an increasingly prominent, both practically and academically,² manifestation of a diverse set of food initiatives which are commonly referred to as AFNs. The term denotes a diverse set of initiatives and practices dealing with food production, distribution and consumption and includes community supported agriculture (CSA), community gardens, FMs, farm shops and initiatives in fair trade, organic, regional or artisan produce. Over the last twenty years, these developments on the margins of the agrifood system have attracted growing numbers of scholars resulting in a diversity of often conflicting and contradictory conceptualisations of AFNs. While this scholarship is often concerned, explicitly or implicitly, with geography in terms of food re-localisation, to our knowledge it rarely adopts the approach to studying the AFNs and FMs that Larner (2011) refers to as situated knowledge. In the following paragraphs we briefly reflect on the

² While in the 1998–2007 decade the Web of Science database listed 37 social science articles with the phrase ‘farmers markets’ in their topic (on average 3.7 per year), in the following 2008–2017 decade this number rose to 356 (on average nearly 36 per year), an equivalent of a 9.6 increase.

ambiguity of AFNs conceptualisations and then engage with this ‘geographical knowledge gap’ of AFNs.

2.1. The ambiguity of AFNs’ academic discourse

Among AFNs scholars, there seems to be a broad consensus about understanding AFNs as a response to the detrimental effects of the agrifood sector’s industrialisation and economic globalisation such as the growing corporate power of agribusinesses and supermarkets, price squeeze on farmers’ income, food scares and environmental degradation (Maye and Kirwan, 2010; Renting and Marsden, 2003). However, when it comes to AFNs’ ability to ameliorate or mitigate these issues, there is much less unanimity.

The considered virtues of agrifood system’s relocalisation could be divided according to three components of sustainability. Among environmental benefits figure reduced carbon footprint (Schönhart et al., 2008), agricultural methods more sensitive to the environment as well as better animal welfare standards following the tendency to organic production methods (Gomiero et al., 2011; Reisch et al., 2013). Economic benefits are seen in improvements of small-scale producers’ economic situation (Feagan and Henderson, 2009; Guthman et al., 2006) and retention of money in the local economy (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Tavernier and Tolomeo, 2004). Strengthened social cohesion and improvements in food access belong among the social benefits connected with AFNs (Kirwan, 2006). Considered are also indirect benefits related to consumers’ learning and adoption of sustainable practices (Cox et al., 2008; Sundkvist et al., 2005).

On the other hand, critics have argued that AFNs are socially exclusive (Goodman, 2009; Guthman, 2003), defensive in nature (Winter, 2003), subject of conventionalisation (Guthman, 2004; Jaffee and Howard, 2010), reproducing neo-liberal values (Alkon and Mares, 2012; Eaton, 2008) and not reflexive of the wider context of the agrifood system (Dupuis and Goodman, 2005; Freidberg, 2004; Levkoe, 2011). Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen (2013) highlight AFNs’ economic precarity and dependence on small groups of dedicated activists and external grant funding even in the relatively favourable context of economic affluence and history of social activism of the UK. Moreover, AFNs’ socio-economic impacts can be ambivalent. For example, while promoting economic re-localisation that might be beneficial to small-scale producers, they might have exclusionary and elitist effects at the consumption end of the network (Hinrichs, 2000). Equally diverse and contentious was discussion on the extent to which AFNs constitute an alternative to the mainstream food system in economic, social and environmental terms.³ More recently, a consensus seems to have emerged according to which AFNs represent a complementary rather than a radical alternative or an adjunct to the mainstream agrifood system (Hudson, 2009; Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013).

Conflicting conclusions regarding AFNs’ impacts and alternativeness exposed the need to identify the sources of this variety. The categorisation of AFNs, formulated by Watts and his colleagues (Watts et al., 2005) has been influential in this realm. The authors based their categorisation on AFN’s susceptibility to co-optation by conventional agrifood system. They identified (a) weaker AFNs which focus on product quality or re-localisation and therefore provide little guarantee for people’s livelihood autonomy or against exploitative labour relations (see also Pratt, 2007) and (b) stronger AFNs which emphasise the revalorised, localised short food supply networks based on trust and face-to-face relations – in other words social ‘embeddedness’ (see also Hinrichs, 2000).

However, the categorisation should not imply new exclusive binary categories but rather an idea of continuum. The concerns regarding food quality and the growing interest in the broader impacts of food

³ Detailed discussion of AFNs’ alternativeness is offered in papers by Tregear (2011) or Forssell and Lankoski (2015).

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