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Critical review

Different conceptions of place: Alternative food networks and everyday meals

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ABSTRACT

This review uses the concepts of place and space to provide insights into recent critical geographic approaches to food and agriculture. For alternative foods, the use of the term "alternative" has changed markedly from indicating a contrast with conventional food to signifying a broader commitment to progressive politics. In contrast, everyday meals highlight how people navigate conflicting claims on their limited resources. For everyday meals, the moral economy is a flexible concept that reveals how food connects people both economically and morally. Food creates powerful connections for linking people together through food chains, regional identities, and progressive politics. This critical review of the role of place for food raises important questions about how progressive politics are applied to different places and the evolving role of critical food scholars.

1. How to place food?

Place and space are central geographic concepts, and food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed through a dizzying array of connections. Specific place origins, however, become obscured under a mountain of commodity corn or when meat from different animals and farms is reconstituted into a hot dog. While industrial food obscures places origins, social scientists remain divided over non-industrial food, disagreeing over both the definition of this broad category and how it connects different scales and actors. In this critical review, I argue that the space and place of food raises important questions about how progressive politics are applied to different places and the evolving role of critical food scholars.

Social scientists use the concepts of place and space in a myriad of ways (Cresswell, 2013). Here, I hone in on a distinction that Agnew (2011: 317) makes between two different conceptions of place: "The first is a geometric conception of place as a mere part of space and the second is a phenomenological understanding of a place as a distinctive coming together in space." Agnew observes that the first conception of place is implicitly adopted by most social scientists, because it enables the development of abstract concepts that are generalized across time and space. Progressive politics is a central concept that critical food scholars use to generalize across different places through food. In contrast, the second conception of place emphasizes how historical and geographical contexts for food are created through connections between different places and scales.

This critical review analyzes the conception of place for food. The subsequent section analyzes different conceptions of place for alternative food networks. Next, I analyze different conceptions of place for everyday meals with an emphasis on moral economies. The final section discusses the implications of these different conceptions of place and food for critical food scholars.

2. Alternative food networks

One of the most significant developments that shapes how critical scholars approach food is the prevalence of the idea of alternative food networks (AFNs) and the linking of AFNs with more ethical relations around food. Social scientist's use of the concept of alternative in reference to food and agriculture has changed markedly; for instance, Beus and Dunlap (1990) for the US context, analyze the writings of major proponents of alternative and conventional agriculture, and from these writings they identified six dimensions to distinguish between alternative and conventional agriculture. However, social scientists criticized this paradigmatic approach for creating an overly simplistic binary and for overlooking important issues (Holloway et al., 2007). For example, Allen et al. (2003: 73) draw attention to the issue of social justice for farm workers in California's "alternative agrifood initiatives." They also acknowledge the importance of recognizing the differences between places and warn against generalizing across different contexts.

As the range of issues associated with food changed, so too did the way that scholars conceptualized the spaces and places of alternative food. Goodman et al. (2012: 3), for example, writes, "These alternative projects are seen as templates for the reconfiguration of capitalist society along more ecologically sustainable and socially progressive

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lines." They situate AFNs as helping to reconfigure capitalist society. Cameron and Wright (2014) argue that the term alternative problematically reinforces capitalist relations, because alternatives are part of but subordinate to the mainstream. Instead of alternative, they put forward the term food diversity. For critical food scholars seeking to differentiate noncapitalist food, introducing a new term such as food diversity provides more clarity than attempting to redefine alternative food, a term which is already widely used in scholarly and popular discourses.

Aside from diversity, critical food scholars use a variety of adjectives to distinguish better, good, and artisan food from typical industrial food commodities (Grasseni and Paxson, 2014). Critical food scholars also developed terms, such as food justice and food democracy, to explicitly link food with broader progressive political goals (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010).

The conception of place changes substantially when alternative is redefined to signify a broader commitment to progressive politics. Using the former definition of alternative, which is constructed in contrast to conventional agriculture (e.g. Beus and Dunlap, 1990), certifications such as organic and free trade, provide legible examples of alternative agriculture. However, critical food scholars have long been skeptical of the commodification of values — often described as neo-liberalization — and the idea of voting with your wallet (c.f. Deirdre et al., 2006). Gibson-Graham (2004: 410) articulate a response to these capitalist relations; they write, "Through our research, we are interested in generating or fostering discourses of economic difference that can represent (and perform) the proliferative diversity of noncapitalist economic activities, subjects, and projects in place." As Sarmiento (2017) discusses, Gibson-Graham's "diverse economies" approach is influential for AFN researchers.

Despite widespread support from critical food scholars for AFNs, Tregear (2011) critiques AFN scholarship by emphasizing the significance of different conceptions of place. First, Tregear (2011: 425) warns that there is a tendency "within AFN scholarship to refer to recently coined terms, such as [the quality turn and defensive localism], as if they were unambiguous and unquestionable, instead of employing them cautiously, as theoretical proposals to be explored, debated and tested." In other words, critical food scholars are too eager to generalize insights from situated and contextual places to abstract concepts that operate in space. Second, Tregear (2011: 425) observes that the emphasis by social scientists on "value-laden goals" could bias researchers to study food systems that pursue "virtuous goals" as opposed to those that "exhibit apparently non-virtuous goals." Extending the critique of abstract concepts — here identified as "virtuous goals" — she cautions that critical food scholars are in danger of becoming biased to seek out the discourses that resonate with their abstract theories. In the process, scholars hazard overlooking widespread resistance to industrial food.

The role of scale has important implications for the space and place of food. When alternative is defined as meaning a commitment to progressive and noncapitalist values, critical food scholars warn against assuming a correlation between smaller scales and better food. Building on Hinrichs (2003) and Winter's (2003) insights on food localism, DuPuis and Goodman (2005) introduce two types of localism, a reflexive localism that recognizes the broader impacts of consuming local food with an unreflexive localism that either glosses over the complexity of local politics or is based on standards that can be co-opted by corporations (see also Goodman et al., 2012). In looking at the "place of food," Feagan (2007: 39) arrives at a similar conclusion as DuPuis and Goodman, arguing that although there is variation between localities, local food systems should embrace democratic values to "bear progressive fruit."

However, as Agnew (2011) demonstrates in his analysis of the two different conceptions of place, social scientists are often in a rush to extrapolate from contextual places to abstract concepts that operate in space. He cautions against assuming that place must be progressive, charging that "why the politics associated with a 'progressive sense of place' must necessarily be progressive is not explained" (Agnew 2011: 325). As critical scholars, we can and should promote progressive goals, but categories, such as alternative food and the local, are often contradictory. Making alternative food and reflexive localism synonymous with progressive politics hazards becoming tautological. Consequently, I have little interest in the following question: how does alternative agriculture promote progressive politics? Rather, I want to ask: how do places create ideas of alternative agriculture and the local? And how are progressive politics being expressed in these places?

3. Everyday meals

A related approach to AFNs examines everyday practices of buying, preparing, and eating food. People face a proliferation of ethical considerations in their everyday decisions about food consumption. Upstream, large producers and retailers seek to exploit premiums from food certification strategies; downstream, people experience conflicting claims on their limited resources of time, money, and care.

Others evaluate the importance of everyday meals by interrogating the role of social anxiety (Jackson, 2015; Jackson and Everts, 2010). Two insights from Jackson's (2015) recent contributions are key to contextualizing everyday meals in the Global North. First, the industrialization of food production has led to more social anxiety about food. Advances in food technology provide more variety for consumers, but these processes also lengthen supply chains and disrupt "food's seasonality and local provenance" (Jackson, 2015: 24). Focusing on frozen chicken, Jackson explores how industrialization of food contributes to social anxieties, particularly for raw meat. Second, he evaluates how consumers utilize practical knowledge and embodied skills to navigate anxieties about food. Jackson (2015) delves into the "embodied, tacit, and practical knowledge that consumers employ" in their routine trade-offs "between different practical and ethical claims on their attention, such as quality and price, taste and value, convenience and sustainability" (2015: 26). He brings our attention to consumers' practices and explanations, demonstrating how seemingly inconsistent behavior is the result of conflicting commitments.

Analyzing how ethics become a part of daily routines, Barnett et al. (2011: 13) write, "Ethical consumption campaigning seeks to embed altruistic, humanitarian, solidaristic and environmental commitments into the rhythms and routines of everyday life — from drinking coffee, to buying clothes, to making the kids' packed lunch." Instead of examining consumers in the abstract, they emphasize the practical choices and range of possibilities that people encounter. In this formulation, citizens are also discerning consumers who are faced with expanding responsibilities. As people consume more "ethical" products, they generate leverage for advocacy organizations to make strategic interventions that have more "explicitly political aims and agendas" (Barnett et al., 2011: 13). Increased consumption of fair trade products, for example, empowers fair trade NGOs to advocate for broader policy goals aimed at ensuring fairer conditions for workers in the Global South.

However, Gregson and Ferdous (2015: 247) caution that Barnett et al. "continues to universalize the consumer living in the Global North" (Gregson and Ferdous 2015: 247). They find that the idea of ethical consumption, especially when connected with fair trade, problematically reinforces "an imaginary of Northern consumers and Southern producers" that forms the basis for a problematic "politics of global responsibility" (Gregson and Ferdous 2015: 245). In response, they put forward a different conceptual understanding of consumption that recognizes the agency of consumers in the Global South. Their article appears in a themed issue of this journal edited by Crang and Hughes (2015) that looks at ethical consumption in the Global South, and these articles demonstrate how awkwardly progressive ideas of consumption from the Global North transfer to other places.

The moral economy is a flexible concept for exploring how food connects people through not just multi-scalar economic projects but