



‘I am pleased to shop somewhere that is fighting the supermarkets a little bit’. A cultural political economy of alternative food networks

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ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a cultural political economy (CPE) analysis of consumers’ semiotic and material construals of alternative food networks (AFN). It starts by outlining, in the context of debate over AFN, why CPE is a useful analytical tool. The collection of talk data from 40 respondents, and food consumption data from 20 respondents, is outlined and explained. Talk data reveal that interviewees construe conventional and alternative food networks differently based on values relating to food quality judgements, provenance and trust, and alternativeness. Consumption data demonstrate respondents’ material engagement with conventional and, to a lesser extent, alternative food networks. The paper concludes that CPE is a productive framework for analysing AFN *qua* a subaltern economic imaginary, and that it can help to set them on ‘firmer’ ground, both ontologically and normatively.

1. Introduction

Alternative food networks (AFN) remain a popular topic of scholarly enquiry. Of particular interest has been their links with ‘ethical’ consumption, exemplified by numerous studies of fair trade (e.g. Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Clarke et al., 2007; Dolan, 2010; Goodman et al., 2012; Goodman M, 2004, 2010; Low and Davenport, 2006; Lyon et al., 2010; Mutersbaugh and Lyon, 2010; Raynolds, 2002, 2009; Raynolds et al., 2007; Raynolds and Ngcwangu, 2010; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997; Wilson, 2010; Wright, 2004). Much of this work has focused on “enlisting’ practices of mediation” (Adams and Raisborough, 2010, 258), such as marketing materials and how-to guides. Consequently, theorising about ethical consumption has “run ahead of considerations of its material dimensions and their implications for livelihoods and lifestyles” (Goodman et al., 2012, 243; see also Adams and Raisborough, 2010, 258; Johnston, 2008, 231).

This is starting to change. Sarmiento (2017, 494), for example, identifies three important strands in recent AFN research: “work on food and embodiment, the diverse economies of food, and more-than-human food geographies”. Although epistemologically and methodologically diverse, these all attend to the materiality of food, consumers and non-human participants in food systems. Moreover, Sarmiento (2017, 495) argues that the third strand, “actor-network and assemblage thinking”, can be used when “analysing the expansive networks

that impinge on specific bodies—whether on individual bodies or those of specific social groups—and shape the prospects for what Gibson-Graham refer to as community economies”. This, Sarmiento argues, will help researchers to trace the relations of dominance that constrain and limit the prospects of AFNs and, in particular, to “assay what needs to be done in order for more ethical foods to be no longer simply ‘alternatives’ to conventional foods” (Sarmiento, 2017, 495).

However, such work is hampered by a lack of clarity over what characterises both ‘more ethical foods’ and AFN. The ontological status of AFN remains uncertain (Sarmiento, 2017, 485). Instead, what unites activities grouped under this heading is that they tend to address “ecological, social, and/or political economic problems associated with conventional food systems” (Sarmiento, 2017, 485). Thus, the ontological status of AFN *qua* AFN would appear to depend on whether they produce more ‘ethical’ and/or less ‘problematic’ foods. However, numerous studies have identified normative shortcomings of AFN (e.g. Barnett et al., 2016; Goodman D, 2004; Goodman et al., 2010; Guthman, 2008; Hinrichs, 2003; Sarmiento, 2017, 486; Winter, 2003). AFN, and ‘ethical’ consumption in general, have been characterised as part of a neoliberal discourse of ‘responsibilization’ (Goodman et al., 2010; Harris, 2009), wherein “[m]oral considerations ‘lose’, so to speak, their transcendental attributes...and re-emerge as business opportunities” (Shamir, 2008, 14).

On this interpretation, AFN are not alternative to conventional food

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networks, but occupy a niche within them. This is because consumers can choose whether to consume ‘ethically’ within an economic system that operates, to a large extent, according to a different set of normative criteria. Thus AFN, and ‘ethical’ consumption more generally, “reproduce an overt and rather disturbing inequality that is greatly in need of exposure and, perhaps, dismantling” (Goodman et al., 2010, 1785). On this basis, it could be argued that AFN do not have an independent existence: hence Wilson’s (2013) argument for ‘autonomous’ food spaces. Consequently, the activities analysed by research into AFN are actually performed within conventional food networks. This means that, far from redressing the problems associated with the latter, AFN perpetuate a moral economy that prioritises market forces over social good (q.v. Sayer, 2000, 89).

However, such interpretations do violence to the intentions of many AFN participants: to retailers and consumers who buy fair trade branded products as part of concerted and multi-scale attempts to promote equity, fairness and justice (Barnett et al., 2011, 109); and to the producers, intermediaries and consumers who “experiment and strive for what they see as greater empowerment by...attempting to remake the world as they find it in the places they inhabit” (Goodman et al., 2012, 247). That said, it remains important to analyse such attempts to ‘remake the world’ in order to improve our understanding of what they are trying to achieve, how they seek to achieve it, and what the intended and unintended consequences of those efforts are. This begs the question: how can such analyses be done?

There is little doubt that an approach which incorporates the materiality of food and the participants in food networks is required in order to undertake such analyses. However, it remains unclear whether the research strands reviewed by Sarmiento (2017) are sufficiently well developed to do so. For instance, the “actor-network and assemblage thinking” strand, identified by Sarmiento as being particularly well-suited to the task, is likely to require considerable development before it can take it on. This is because actor-network thinking “is stronger on the social construction of the material and immaterial features of marketised and/or marketisable use-values than it is on the logic of surplus-value and exchange-value” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 230 (fn 5), citing Slater (2002)). That is a significant problem, given that all food networks are irreducibly economic – in the broad sense of this term, meaning that they have to do with material provisioning (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 154; cf. Sayer, 2000, 94) – and that the global economy remains dominated by finance-driven accumulation, the disembedding of financial capital, and neoliberal market integration (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 416–7). Moreover, it has been argued that actor-network theory amounts to little more than “selective description” of complex economic phenomena (Fine, 2004, 336). This suggests that scholars will have their work cut out if they are to realise Sarmiento’s (2017) broad research agenda using the conceptual tools that have featured prominently in recent AFN research.

This paper uses a different conceptual approach to analyse AFN: cultural political economy (CPE). This approach was chosen for four reasons. First, CPE takes seriously the intertwined relationship of the material and semiotic dimensions of economic activity. It therefore answers one of the criticisms of AFN research noted above: that it has too often focused on the semiotic at the expense of the material. Secondly, CPE demonstrates considerable robustness and internal consistency. Its key proponents, primarily Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum, have spent decades developing and honing CPE as an analytical framework.¹ That is not to imply that CPE is in some way definitive: see Staricco (2017) and Tyfield (2015) for recent critiques. Instead, it means that CPE’s proponents have undertaken a good deal of what

¹ Jessop’s work on CPE and the strategic-relational approach, from which it was developed, extends over more than three decades. Key monographs include Jessop (1990), Jessop and Sum (2006) and Sum and Jessop (2013); the latter contains an extensive bibliography of their other publications on CPE.

Bhaskar (e.g. 2008) called the philosophical under-labouring required to produce a credible framework for understanding how the materiality of, and the meanings ascribed to, economic activity interact to produce particular outcomes, not the least of which is the relatively long-lived dominance of particular hegemonic way of understanding and undertaking economic activity.²

CPE’s internal consistency is provided by its grounding in critical realist epistemology (Sum and Jessop, 2013, viii). It thereby avoids, Sum and Jessop (2013) argue, both the Scylla of structuralism and Charybdis of constructivism. CPE acknowledges the existence of a material world beyond the social constructions of it made by agents operating within it (citizens, social scientists, entrepreneurs, policy makers etc.), but starts from the premise that this world “is too complex to be grasped in all its complexity in real time” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 3). It follows that “all actors are forced to construe the world selectively as a condition of going on within it” (Jessop, 2010, 338). From these premises, it follows both that structures are, in part, socially constructed and that social constructions are subject to structuration. Thus, as Bhaskar (1989, 38 – cited by Collier, 1994; 243–4) argued: social structures do not exist independently either of the activities they govern, nor of agents’ conceptions of what they are doing; therefore social structures may be only relatively enduring.

This does mean that CPE can be criticised for being anthropocentric, given that the meaning-making it focuses on is undertaken by people. Nevertheless, Collier (1994, 261) has argued that critical realism is compatible with a de-centring of rational human agents in social scientific analysis. This holds out the possibility of a conceptual rapprochement between CPE and more-than-human thinking. However, that line of argument is not pursued here, as this paper concentrates on human agents’ participation in AFN.

This leads to our third reason for using CPE: it facilitates a focus on the ways in which human agents construe and participate in AFN in the context of their construal of and (non)participation in conventional food networks. Few studies have attempted this. For example, studies which have worked with consumers whose ‘ethical’ consumption includes supporting local food and drink enterprises, have tended to focus on their construal of alternative economic imaginaries (e.g. Blake et al., 2010; Eden et al., 2008a,b,c; Hayes-Conroy and Martin, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Little et al., 2009; Seyfang, 2006; Weatherell et al., 2003; Winter, 2003), while neglecting their material consumption practices. As Blake et al. (2010, 410) observed, “the practices of consumers who view their consumption as ordinary and at the same time try to buy ‘local’ are under-researched”.

The final reason for using CPE is to check whether it can be applied successfully to small-scale and seemingly counter-hegemonic economic networks. The ontological basis for such an analysis is present. For instance, Sum and Jessop (2013, 26) posit the existence of ‘imaginaries’: “semiotic systems that shape lived experience in a complex world”, and which we are obliged to construe in order to go about our daily lives. However, while there may be as many economic imaginaries as there are economic agents, few evolve into social constructions of reality (q.v. Sum and Jessop, 2013, 162–4). It is that process, the evolution of hegemonic social constructions of reality, that has been at the core of CPE scholarship to date (e.g. Heinrich, 2015; Jessop and Sum, 2006; Sum and Jessop, 2013). Belfrage and Hauf (2015, 2017) have begun to test the applicability of CPE at smaller scales, but this work is in its early stages.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines how CPE can contribute to the study of AFN. Section 3 summarises the collection and analysis of research data from consumers concerning their construal of, and engagement with, alternative and conventional food networks. Analysis of those data takes place in Section 4, using the

² These ‘dispositives’ (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 25) are considered in more detail in Section 2.

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