



# Producing healthy outcomes in a rural productive space



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## ABSTRACT

Restructuring within European agriculture is an ever-emerging phenomenon shaped by a reforming Common Agricultural Policy agenda, and increased concentration within the food industry. As an element of reorganisation within Irish agriculture, a new phase of expansion into horticulture emerged in the late 1990s. This happened in correspondence with the introduction of a more concentrated retail market and within the context of specific labour market policies developed to facilitate a flexible workforce. Thus, producers were encouraged to expand production and divert from constraints associated within mainstream farming, as part of a wider entrepreneurial drive within agriculture. Regime change such as has taken place within horticulture corresponds with Guthman's valorisation thesis i.e. moving from so-called commodity crops to speciality crops in an attempt at overcoming a crisis in overproduction (2004). Within this context, 'health' emerges as an iteration of a localisation strategy and an attempt to counter the negative effects of globalisation. As the sector has undergone significant contraction, an unintended legacy of this valorisation project has been innovation in migrant workers' (the labour force) reproduction strategies and a dynamic engagement with the rural space. Taken together, these changes foreground the role of intergovernmental policy in shaping rural productive spaces in unintended ways. Furthermore, it suggests that more research needs to focus on health as a production system and the multi-dimensional factors that position it within a food chain context.

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## 1. Introduction

The appetite for healthy diets has fuelled an ever changing food culture in recent years with fruit and vegetable consumption positioned centrally in related policy discourse. However we know relatively little about the impact of a dietary health focus on the work environments and systems of production that support the growth of the involved commodities. This article is an attempt to consider connections between health as a targeted outcome and the systems of production that have developed in response. Following a prompt from [Lang and Heasman's \(2004\)](#), the genesis of health and health policy is traced to paradigms of production. Specifically, the post WWII productivist era is associated with modernisation and intensification, with the targeting of health promotion in response to under consumption, under production and poor distribution. While within the past few decades, the risks of industrialised agriculture have seen a growing alliance between public health and environmental concerns; as a result reconnecting food and farm policy matters with human and ecological health has

become a key ambition of food system reformers ([Lang, 2009](#); [Lang et al., 2009](#)).

Aside from the public role of health in serving the public good, it represents value within a supply chain context. Yet as with other food based concepts, 'local' and 'organic', treating food issues in isolation e.g. separately to production, runs the risk of reducing them to a single issue political frame ([Morgan, 2014](#)) and a tendency towards commodity fetishisation. Meanwhile, supposed schisms that have defined the modern food system e.g. health food versus junk food, are better understood as features of a single food regime, characterised by a variety of options that include an interest in health, choice and convenience ([Burch and Lawrence, 2005](#)). Corresponding with this, the agri-food sector plays out through constantly evolving negotiations which are often discordant and occur between international trade bodies, the EU, national states and private corporate interests ([Busch, 2010](#)). It is for these reasons that the networks or systems between producers and consumers require analysis rather than the food issue itself, as the networks reveal the multi-dimensional factors informing food issues ([Watts et al., 2005](#)).

In the context of situating food issues within a broader frame of understanding, questions have been asked about alternative and local food systems and the extent to which they do not in fact

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necessarily represent an opposite to industrial agriculture (Guthman, 2004; DuPois and Goodman, 2005; Watts et al., 2005; Jarosz, 2008). Such systems are therefore recognised as not automatically informed by a values perspective and sometimes falling well short of this e.g. potentially exploitative of farm labour while still claiming an 'organic' label. Julie Guthman's interrogation of organic production understands its emergence as partly a response to a crisis in overproduction in commodity farming. She suggests that what is unprecedented about the emergence of such food systems is the way consumption forces have been a driver of associated growth with 'symbolic attributes' of healthy living constructed into the commodity (Guthman, 2004, p. 83). Her development of the concept *valorisation* which she describes as "*seeking value through the realm of consumption*" (p. 65) is used here to consider targeting health as a response to a crisis in overproduction and an iteration of a localisation strategy. The analysis is also concerned with the related interplay between agricultural restructuring and intergovernmental policy on the rural space. To date, much of the focus on rurality has been on landscape as an economic resource and as a local public good (Oueslati and Salanie, 2011; Howley et al., 2014). While recent work has emerged that brings to life migrant workers within the rural European space (Kasimis et al., 2003; Kasimis and Papadopoulos, 2005; Kasimis et al., 2010; Jentsch et al., 2007; Vergunst, 2009), there is much to learn in applying such analysis to different contexts. This may be particularly so in cases where the concept of the communality of rural society is still prevalent and therefore directs our focus 'away from the rural as a location of production and work' (Tovey, 2007, p. 170); this is salient where Irish rural places still carry an understanding as sites of community, socially cohesive, with their own distinctive values and identity.

Thus, my interest lies in examining how the increased presence and demand for fresh fruit and vegetables as idealised elements of a healthy diet alter the rural landscape and social relations of production? Relatedly, how do intergovernmental policies influence these changes in ways it did or did not imagine?

## 2. Geographies of food

The study of agricultural change is well considered (Friedman and McMichael, 1989; Goodman and Redclift, 1991; Ilbery and Watts, 2004; Morgan et al., 2006; Bernstein, 2011). The regimes associated with developments in this context are referred to as productivism and post-productivism, broadly defined as the movement from modernisation and a focus on industrial agriculture with large intensive farms (productivist) to a focus on environmental matters, concern for the demise of the family farm and an interest in responding to food scares in the chain as well as animal health (post-productivist) (Lowe et al., 1993; Ward, 1993; Calleja et al., 2012). The main criticism of these concepts has been a failure to recognise that distinct epochs may happen in parallel; as a result, multifunctionalism is understood as a regime facilitating the multidimensional co-existence of productivist and post-productivist functions and thought (Wilson, 2001). Similarly, in considering regime change in the context of agri-business, Morgan et al. (2006) suggest that processes of territorialisation (increased regulation by private interests) and reterritorialisation (in which local and regional geographies return to play a central role in reshaping food production and consumption systems), may in fact happen simultaneously. Thus, 'it is the relative degree of spatial exposure to global forces that has conditioned new forms of agri-food geographies, at least over the last twenty years' (2006, p. 55).

As Guthman has indicated, agricultural restructuring and innovation within that context may not only be to create economies of scale but may also signify a response to agriculture's exceptional characteristics, including the tendency for overproduction (2004).

Valorisation then is a practice that leads to investment in speciality crops requiring a plentiful labour-force that can accommodate the flexible nature of production. Adaptations within this context may include varietal and technical developments to facilitate the expansion of production (2004, pp. 74–82). In this article, I utilise Guthman's thesis of valorisation in relation to contemporary horticulture. The analysis sees horticulture as situated within an agricultural restructuring process and linked indirectly to CAP reform as well as a deregulated labour market. Taking a lead from the empirical data, this paper considers three practices as evidence of a valorisation strategy to include: the *turn* to speciality crops in this new phase of horticulture, a corresponding move to employing migrant workers to meet the labour requirement; and the specific means through which technical and varietal developments emerged and have been mirrored by labour developments with a particular legacy within the rural space.

## 3. Valorisation as strategy: interpreting the literature

Firstly, speciality crops go hand in hand with a specific value added dimension e.g. a 'local' label; while market based 'value added solutions' in specific contexts may be understood as the default response to globalisation of the food system (Allen, 2004; Guthman, 2008). The literature shows that the turn to speciality crops does not necessarily involve investment in a new crop but may also indicate varietal developments or a turn to crops previously shunned because of their labour intensive nature (Guthman, 2004). However such choice is manifest, the emergence of speciality crops has been researched in specific settings thus: it has been facilitated by the availability of cheap and plentiful labour relative to the high costs of fixed capital. Consequently growers have discontinued mechanical processes and readopted manual techniques, targeting the production of high value crops (Wells, 1996). It suggests an entrepreneurial agriculture with expansion and diversification happening on the basis of product and labour market developments (Kasimis et al., 2003); it has represented an opportunity to specialise production and to remove other less profitable enterprises (Calleja et al., 2012); while for some, it has included a combination of valorisation (switching *into* vegetables) with intensification practices. Intensification here represents a second innovation in response to agricultural restructuring adapted by Rogaly (2006) from Guthman (2004). Rogaly identifies intensification as threefold and apparent in: the employment of migrant workers, the return of the gangmaster and the use of piece rates (Rogaly, 2006).

The second element of valorisation of interest is the employment of a flexible workforce. Some of the key points emerging from the literature on contemporary horticultural labour show the demand by growers for particular attributes in the workers, manifest in the language of 'quality'. Thus, while flexibility is an endemic feature of horticultural production, Rogaly (2006) identifies reliability as a key quality sought by employers in UK horticulture. His analysis draws on the work of Ponte and Gibbon (2005) who suggest global value chains are ever more determined by 'lead firms' who imprint complex quality information into widely accepted standards, allied with broader narratives about quality that flow more commonly within society. Relatedly, the literature shows that in choosing migrant workers, employers may see them as more tolerant of unattractive employment conditions than domestic labour as well as having a 'better' work ethic (Dench et al., 2006; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010). As a result, it can be argued that labour shortages are politically and socially constructed and that they need not exist (Geddes and Scott, 2010; Kasimis et al., 2010; Moriarty et al., 2012). In an extension of this point Anderson (2007) argues that immigration controls, particularly as they pertain to low wage work, construct certain types of workers, and

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