Situating the 'alternative' within the 'conventional' — local food experiences from the East Riding of Yorkshire, UK

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A B S T R A C T

Policy makers rarely feature in research into alternative and local food systems (ALFS), yet are often regarded as central actors in supporting such local food systems, sometimes as part of wider rural development strategies. Furthermore, what 'local' actually means has long been debated in the alternative food networks literature, with the consensus that the term is contested and defies definition. This paper explores discursive constructions of 'local' food, drawing on in-depth interviews with farmers, local food businesses, consumers and policy makers in East Yorkshire. The paper argues that the concept of local food is contextualised and refracted through the people and places in which food is produced and consumed. It illustrates the complexities involved in understanding, and making sense of, local food networks and their relationship with conventional food systems.

The paper has two core concerns. The first is to challenge conceptualisations of local food as linked only to non-intensive agricultural regions. The second attends to situating food production and consumption within local contexts to understand the diverse and relational interpretations of the 'local' which policy makers, businesses and consumers have with regard to food. The paper concludes that alternative and local food systems interact with the conventional food system in complex and multiple ways, underlining that it is not a case of 'either/or', but that food production and consumption are heterogeneous and refracted through specific places.

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1. Introduction

Local food systems, it is argued, can be a key part of sustainable rural development strategies (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003; Seyfang, 2006; Tregear et al., 2007; Marsden and Sonnino, 2008). However, we know relatively little about the capacity of different places to develop local food systems, and the significance that they have for sustainable rural development strategies, especially in relation to the ways that policy makers can effectively support their development. Local food has become increasingly viewed as a means to revive lagging rural economies (Ilbery et al., 2004), respond to farming crises, alleviate fears about food safety, and bring equilibrium to a food system regarded by many as being out of balance (Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Goodman, 2004; McMichael, 2005; Seyfang, 2006). However, although there is a clear record of policy intervention in the local food and rural development sector at different scales (local, sub-regional, regional,

national and EU), and an ever-increasing volume of academic and policy research, such research tends to focus on areas that were bypassed by industrial farming methods. For instance, parts of Wales, Devon and Cornwall, areas which are viewed as being marginal or peripheral. For these regions, alternative and local food systems (ALFS) have been seen as a means of adding value to local economies and capitalising on consumer demand for local quality food (Renting et al. 2003). As a result of this geographical focus, there is a lack of attention paid to ALFS in 'conventional' agricultural areas, where the richness and diversity of farming and food attributed to some other areas is often assumed to be lacking. Industrial agricultural spaces are, paradoxically, seen as being somehow marginal to the development of local food networks (albeit central to the standardised globalised food chain) (see Qazi and Selfa, 2005). Additionally, although policy and the work of policy makers are regarded by many as being critical to the future success of ALFS, very little academic research specifically addresses the role of policy makers in supporting local food in industrial agricultural areas. Policy makers have recognised the value of ALFS, especially the concept of reconnecting consumers and food producers. Moreover, a further gap relates to how policy makers

themselves define and make sense of ideas of 'local' food and rural development. In addressing this gap, Little et al.'s (2012: 90) discussion of regional policy makers' support for local food in the UK's South West and West Midlands, emphasised the lack of research dealing with power in the governance of such networks. Within the ALFS literature, 'policy' is frequently relegated to a fleeting and momentary comment regarding its centrality, without lingering to explore what this so-called 'centrality' might mean, or what form it might take.

ALFS have defied precise definition (Eriksen, 2013), and interpretations of what they encompass are broad and geographically varied. ALFS have been described as food provisioning systems which are different, or even countercultural, to conventional food supply chains which dominate in developed countries (Tregear, 2011), and as part of a distinctive, ecologically-sensitive food network (Morris and Kirwan, 2011). Examples include localised and short food supply chains (Hinrichs, 2003), farmers' markets (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000), farm shops, producer co-operatives, box schemes, community supported agriculture (CSA) (Holloway et al., 2007a), and community gardens (Holland, 2004). ALFS are often based on characteristics such as direct contact and increased trust between consumers and producers, embeddedness within the region, and proximity to the site of consumption (Sage, 2003; Kirwan, 2004). Nonetheless, ALFS are diverse and specific, with varying motivations for production and consumption. Jarosz (2008: 232) suggests that ALFS are often defined in four major ways: (1) by shorter distances between producers and consumers; (2) by small farm size and scale, and organic or holistic farming methods, which contrast with large scale, industrial agribusiness; (3) by the existence of food purchasing venues such as food co-operatives, farmers markets, CSA and local food-to-school linkages; and (4) by a commitment to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable food production, distribution and consumption. However, she recognises that ALFS may employ industrialized production techniques, exploit farm workers and still produce organic food, and that some ALFS may emphasise certain characteristics at the expense of others. These different methods of food production-consumption involve relationships between the growers and producers of food, and those who consume it, in ways which are different to those relationships in globalised food systems. In the 'conventional' system of food provision, consumers are argued to be geographically and physically removed from production processes, and food is viewed as anonymous or 'placeless' (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000: 319; Morgan et al., 2006). Watts et al. (2005) stress that it should be the networks (or systems) between producers and consumers and the food that are investigated in analyses, rather than simply the food itself, as it tends to be such networks that represent the otherness, not the food. So while commodity products like wheat or vining peas are grown locally, they are then processed, packaged and retailed by companies linked into transnational (vertical) networks of supply and demand. As Sonnino (2013: 4) notes, whether it is 'mass produced, industrial corn from the American Midwest, or milk sourced from an intensively managed farm in Devon, (they) are still local for somebody'. Food itself might also be 'alternative', as mainstream markets forsake some items, such as rare-breed animals (Holloway et al. 2010), or perhaps, heritage varieties of fruits and vegetables, that do not fit into industrial production methods and conventions.

Using East Yorkshire in eastern England as a case study of an 'industrial' or 'intensive' agricultural region, the paper explores how ALFS are spatially distinctive and contingent, and discursively constructed by, and through, people and place. As Jarosz (2008) observes, ALFS emerge from processes-in-place that both constitute and sustain them. The paper contributes to the literature on local food systems in two key ways. Firstly, it presents new

evidence from East Yorkshire which challenges conceptualisations in the UK of local food as linked, almost exclusively, to non-intensive agricultural regions. The paper further extends the debate on place and food, by viewing local food systems as co-existing, and as co-constituted, with the intensive food production sphere. ALFS might thus be entangled in complex ways with more conventional agricultural practices. Secondly, by attending to the situatedness of food production and consumption within specific local geographies, the study highlights the varied interpretations which policy makers and local food businesses have regarding ALFS. Examining local food systems in specific agricultural regions offers interesting insights through exploring how the history, experiences and practices in each place frames contemporary understandings and discursive constructions of what constitutes 'local' food. At a time of renewed concern about food provenance in light of the horsemeat scandal in the UK (Farmers' Weekly, 2013), interest in alternative and local foods has been reinvigorated. It is, therefore, important to examine how local food systems are continuing to gain footholds in diverse agricultural regions.

2. Food for thought – policy making for local food

For policy makers, local food is often viewed as an opportunity for economic development in areas which are economically and/or geographically marginal, as well as providing a means of reconnecting consumers and producers (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002). This can be part of a new paradigm of rural development (Renting et al., 2003), thus overcoming the cost-price squeeze of conventional agriculture. By concentrating on areas that were somehow peripheral to the development of industrial agriculture (e.g. Marsden and Sonnino, 2008), the ALFS literature tends to dismiss the potential for ALFS in spaces of industrialised agriculture. In such places, 'alternative' and/or 'local' food systems are presumed not to be relevant. This fails to take into account the diversity of local farming systems – as (even) intensive farming areas can display signs of diversity of practice (Carolan, 2011), and people can be staunchly defensive of local economic activities.

Marsden et al. (2002: 809) and Van Der Ploeg et al. (2000) promote agriculture as a critical part of rural development, suggesting that policy making is essential to bring about a holistic rural development incorporating agriculture. Agriculture can, of course, encompass many different types of activity. More localised and diverse systems could, therefore, offer greater benefits for rural development through being more locally embedded. This is in contrast to the negative externalities and disembeddedness associated with conventional agriculture, which can be detrimental to the health and success of rural areas and economies. The extent to which agriculture should be integral to rural development is not agreed, nor, indeed, is the form such agriculture should take. Furthermore, it is open to debate as to how policy makers can help achieve this (and even if they should support the sector in this way). Few academic studies have specifically addressed the role of policy as it relates to the development of ALFS. Where policy is considered, there is a strong leaning towards an emphasis on planning issues (Curry and Owen, 2009).

More recently, researchers have acknowledged the role of policy makers, their practices and subjectivities, in affecting both policy development and policy outcomes (see Ray (1999) on the role of policy implementers). Harvey et al. (2011) explore how regional policy makers imagine the spaces of the South West region of England, and how this influences the work that they do. Meanwhile, Little et al. (2012) examined the way that policy makers understood and attached meaning to local food, and how their views differed