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Review

Progressing knowledge in alternative and local food networks: Critical reflections and a research agenda

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A B S T R A C T

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In the now extensive literature on alternative food networks (AFNs) (e.g. farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, box schemes), a body of work has pointed to socio-economic problems with such systems, which run counter to headline claims in the literature. This paper argues that rather than being a reflection of inherent complexities in such food systems, the continued uncertainties about the fundamental nature and development of AFNs are, at least in part, a function of how AFNs are often conceptualised and investigated, which ultimately impedes progress in knowledge of such systems. After introducing the main theoretical perspectives of research in the field, and setting out what is known currently about AFNs and their characteristics, the paper goes on to articulate four features of AFN research which, it is argued, give rise to problems in this field. In particular, the paper identifies inconsistent use of concepts and terms, conflation of the structural characteristics of food systems with desired outcomes and/or actor behaviours, insufficient acknowledgement of the problems of marketplace trading, and a continued lack of a consumer perspective. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for future research into AFNs that seeks to break current boundaries and encourage greater progress in knowledge in this field.

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1. Introduction

Since the early to mid-1990s, an extensive literature has developed on alternative food systems or networks (AFNs). These may be described as forms of food provisioning with characteristics deemed to be different from, perhaps counteractive to, mainstream¹ modes which dominate in developed countries. Examples that have been studied include localised and short food supply chains (Marsden et al., 2000; Hinrichs, 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Ilbery and Maye, 2005a), farmers' markets (FMs) (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Kirwan, 2006), community supported agriculture (CSA) (Allen et al., 2003), and community gardens and organic schemes (Macias, 2008). The socio-economic virtues of such food networks have long been extolled, particularly for farming and rural communities, but also for small retailers, consumers and others in regional economies. Such networks have also been argued

to foster ecological benefits including reduced food miles and carbon emissions, and encouragement of more extensive agricultural production. Yet whilst these claims have tended to headline the AFN literature, a body of work – partly theoretical, partly empirical, and offered by scholars from different disciplines – has for some time pointed to a range of problems with these systems. From a socio-economic perspective for example, some localised food initiatives may maintain rather than overturn pre-existing inequalities between participants (Allen et al., 2003; Goodman, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005) and exhibit insularity and defensiveness rather than openness (Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003). Recent work has also begun to question the positive environmental impacts of AFNs (e.g. Edwards-Jones et al., 2008; Oglethorpe, 2009).

When any literature reaches such a point in knowledge development, where a growing body of work opposes the prevailing wisdom and challenges its assumptions, it is appropriate to take stock, reflect critically on the evidence and consider what it means for the focus and direction of future research. In fact, several reflective contributions already exist in the AFN literature, from scholars who have, for example, critically compared the perspectives of north American and European research (Goodman, 2003), explored how relationships between alternative and conventional systems are theorised (Watts et al., 2005; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006) and how meanings of alterity are constructed (e.g.

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¹ For the purposes of this paper, the terms 'mainstream' and 'conventional' are applied interchangeably to denote types of food production and distribution system which have come to dominate markets in developed countries. That is, systems heavily reliant on industrialised methods of food production and processing, global sources and means of supply, corporate modes of financing and governance, and an imperative towards operational efficiency.

Goodman, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000). Empirically too, authors have reflected on problematic findings and offered novel ways of conceptualising AFNs in an effort to move thinking forward (Hinrichs, 2000; Allen et al., 2003; Dupuis et al., 2006). Yet in spite of these contributions and developments, it seems that the literature has reached something of an impasse, with some debates and exchanges appearing to entrench scholars in established theoretical positions, rather than encourage the breaking of new boundaries. As scholarship on alterity in other fields such as urban regeneration and community development (Amin et al., 2003) and creative industries (Crewe et al., 2003) reveals, knowledge progress in alternative systems is enhanced by conceptual transparency and a willingness on the part of researchers to question prevailing orthodoxies. Hence, the aim of this paper is to offer a fresh critical review of the AFN literature, consolidating the current state of knowledge in a direct way and, by building on existing critical contributions such as those mentioned above, to articulate on-going problems in AFN research which may be impeding the development of our understanding of these food systems.

The text is structured as follows. First, an overview is given of different theoretical perspectives adopted in AFN research, and the contribution of each one to knowledge. Second, the paper summarises the outputs of these strands of work in terms of what, overall, is claimed to be beneficial about AFNs and what is adverse. Next, the paper identifies and discusses the four key features of AFN research which, it is argued, have created a problematic state of knowledge in this field, specifically: unclear and inconsistent use of concepts; conflation of structural characteristics of AFNs with desired outcomes and/or actor behaviours; insufficient acknowledgement of the problems of marketplace trading; and a continued lack of a consumer perspective. Finally, a set of research recommendations is offered which suggests avenues for future study that are intended to break the mould of existing scholarship, to explore new territory. Ultimately, it is hoped that the ideas expressed in this paper will contribute to knowledge progress on AFNs by stimulating debate and encouraging fresh perspectives and new approaches to research in this important field.

2. Theoretical perspectives in AFN literature

Across the now extensive literature, scholars have approached the investigation of AFNs from a variety of conceptual and theoretical positions. Drawing in particular from reviews by Wilkinson (2006), Goodman (2003) and Murdoch (2000), three main sets of perspective are introduced here, on the basis that the studies within each tend to adopt ontological and methodological approaches distinct from the others. It is emphasised that the grouping of perspectives offered here is not intended as definitive or exhaustive, nor that every element in each perspective is mutually exclusive of the others. Rather, the purpose is to give a sense of how, conceptually and theoretically, different strands of work have tackled AFNs and the knowledge contributions they have made, to better contextualise and inform the main critiques set out later in the paper.

Political economy is the first key perspective that can be identified in AFN research. Inspired by a Marxian approach to understanding of the social world, it takes the position that large-scale political and economic structures, in particular the forces of neo-liberalist politics and global capitalism, can largely explain micro-level patterns of human behaviour and choice, and that the imperative of social science research is to expose and seek to redress the negative impacts that these forces inflict on well-being. In terms of AFN research, studies by Allen et al. (2003) and Goodman (2004) can be considered illustrative of a political

economy perspective, being focused on explaining the development trajectories and outcomes of localisation initiatives in terms of the political and economic realities shaping those initiatives, and conceptualising AFNs as movements in constant struggle against threatening forces of global capitalism.

What contributions have political economy studies made to knowledge of AFNs? First, by bringing attention to important contextual forces that situate and shape food systems, and using them to explain how AFNs develop, these studies identify, and offer an explanation for, the inequalities and injustices that can emerge in such systems. As such, this strand of literature has often offered a valuable counterweight to more idealistic positions on AFNs and it is noteworthy that many of the problems of AFNs revealed so far in the literature have come from scholars in this field. Furthermore, researchers within this strand have also sought to build on these critical insights by offering re-thinking of concepts, an example being the 'reflexive localism' concept of DuPuis and Goodman (2005) and DuPuis et al. (2006). Built on an analysis of theories of social justice, the concept is a vision of localism whereby the processes of political decision-making are constructed to give the best possibility for democratic outcomes, for example by maximising open, respectful dialogue between participants. As a result, it is argued, AFNs underpinned by reflexive localism avoid being hijacked by powerful socio-political elites and economic interests, but nevertheless are more than a loose collection of disparate actors pursuing their own agendas. Overall therefore, the political economy body of work has offered a valuable and intriguing contribution to AFN knowledge, although it is not without critique. Murdoch (2000), for example, argues that this perspective struggles to explain the survival of agrifood SME clusters or filières such as those found in France and northern Italy, which do not operate according to the conventional logic of global capitalism but which appear to prosper in spite of its presence. Furthermore, as will be argued later, the impulse within the political economy field to ascribe socio-political objectives to AFNs can be considered a problematic conflation of spatial scale with actor behaviours/motivations, and the concept of reflexive localism, too, can be critiqued for being somewhat idealistic.

A second set of AFN studies takes what may be described as a rural sociology or development perspective. Work here shares the position of political economists that mainstream agrifood systems, shaped by global capitalism, have strong marginalising and dehumanising effects and that AFNs have the potential to redress those effects. However scholars in this strand tend to be preoccupied specifically with the rural area implications of these dynamics, and employ different theoretical bases for explaining the redress potential of AFNs, e.g. referring to theories of endogenous growth rather than Marx. Moreover, whereas the political economy perspective conceptualises AFNs and their development trajectories strongly in terms of political and economic forces, in this strand many scholars take the approach of AFNs as social constructions or embodiments of the members of local (rural) communities themselves, as expressions of the beliefs, values and motivations of those members as they pursue activities that they hope will lead to socio-economic gains. Empirical investigations in this field typically explore these phenomena at a micro-level, invoking sociological interpretations of concepts such as embeddedness, trust, quality and care as theoretical underpinnings (e.g. Sage, 2003; Kirwan, 2004; Kneafsey et al., 2008).

In terms of contribution, scholars in the rural development field offer reasoned explanations of how AFN initiatives may deliver positive socio-economic benefits, via a vision of effective leveraging by communities of (particularly endogenous) resources and capital (e.g. Renting et al., 2003; Van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004). Furthermore, the studies within this strand that conceptualise

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