

# The city in the country: Growing alternative food networks in Metropolitan areas

Lucy Jarosz

*Department of Geography, University of Washington, Box 353550, Seattle, WA 98195 USA*

## Abstract

Alternative food networks (AFNs) are commonly defined by attributes such as the spatial proximity between farmers and consumers, the existence of retail venues such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) and a commitment to sustainable food production and consumption. Focusing upon processes rather than attributes, this paper identifies two place-based processes that both promote and constrain the emergence and development of AFNs. Urbanization and rural restructuring are critical to the development of AFNs. AFNs are not a “thing” to be described, but rather emerge from political, cultural and historical processes. The interactions of urbanization and rural restructuring produce AFNs that are differentiated and marked by uneven development that does not necessarily support all farmers participating in the network. This indicates both the fragility and the dynamism inherent in AFNs that are tied to metropolitan development and change. Paradoxically, increasing urban demand for seasonal, and organic produce grown ‘close to home’ and the processes of rural restructuring which emphasize small-scale sustainable family farming and its direct food linkages to cities do not necessarily enable all farmers to consistently make a living from season to season. Evidence for these claims comes from an in-depth, qualitative case study reliant upon participant observation, in-depth interviews and draws from a statewide farmer survey and a regional consumer survey in Washington State.

© 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Alternative food network; Sustainable agriculture; Farmers markets; Urban agriculture

## 1. Introduction

Alternative food networks (AFNs) represent efforts to respatialize and resocialize food production, distribution and consumption in North America, Europe and Australia. In conceptualizing and defining AFNs, researchers grapple with a diversity of processes and locations that produce and sustain AFNs in particular places and times (Morris and Buller 2003; Sage 2003; Maxey 2006). They conceptualize AFNs in relation to rural and regional development, various forms of capitalist restructuring, and as an ecological and social vision and discourse embracing environmental awareness and progressive social goals (Watts et al., 2005; Hassanein, 2003; Goodman, 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Feenstra, 1997). These conceptualizations reveal a variety of positionalities and include claims that AFNs exist along a spectrum of ‘strong’ to weak’ in terms of their social and

environmental objectives (Watts et al., 2005), that they do not exist at all (Holloway et al., 2007) and to what degree and how they counter (or do not) large scale, industrial agriculture and the conventional system of commodified food provisioning (Smith and Jehlicka, 2007; Allen et al., 2003; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002). Recent research also interrogates whether and to what degree AFNs address the objectives of social justice and inclusion, ecological sustainability and economic viability (or alternatives to capitalism) within a broader social movement that considers food as a human right rather than as a commodity (Hassanein, 2003; Goodman, 2004; Hinrichs, 2003; Slocum, 2006).

This paper identifies two key processes shaping the development of AFNs in metropolitan areas. In so doing, I argue that considering both rural and urban contexts are important in understanding the diversity and contingency of AFNs. This diversity and contingency arises from a particular constellation of ecological, political, economic and socio-cultural processes rooted in place. Drawing from

*E-mail address:* jarosz@u.washington.edu

David Harvey's work on dialectics (1996) I argue that AFNs emerge from processes-in-place that constitute and sustain them. Drawing from Marxist theory, Harvey's dialectical approach is rooted in historical-geographical materialism and what he identifies as the principles of dialectics (Harvey, 1996, p. 48). For Harvey, dialectical thinking emphasizes processes, flows and relations over analyses of things, structures and systems. Thus, 'things' like AFNs are constituted out of multiple, contradictory processes and relations, which they internalize in place and through time. These processes are not inherently specific to any particular scale, but emerge instead out of particular material and spatial development trajectories that incorporate the historical, political, economics and social dimensions of globalization, regional development and local change.

Urbanization and rural restructuring are two such processes, and their interactions produce contradictions and tensions for people involved in AFNs. Specifically, this paper goes on to explore how it is that farmers are enabled and constrained by these processes. The interactions of urbanization and rural restructuring produce AFNs that are differentiated and marked by uneven development that does not necessarily support all farmers participating in the network. This indicates both the fragility and the dynamism inherent in AFNs that are tied to metropolitan development and change (see also Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2006).

In a case study analysis of a metropolitan region, I identify rural restructuring and urbanization as central processes for the emergence and development of AFNs through the analytic offered by grounded theory in qualitative methodology (Charmaz, 2000). This inductive mode of analysis aims to generate theories from empirical data (Cope, 2005). As rural regions in proximity to metropolitan areas restructure from agro-industrial forms of production to smaller scale family farms, urban growth creates demand for seasonal, locally grown foods as well as spaces for residential and business development. These processes simultaneously promote and constrain the emergence and development of AFNs. Rural restructuring in metropolitan settings entails, among other things, the rise of small-scale farms dedicated to supplying nearby cities and towns with seasonal foods sold in venues such as farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSA).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, agro-industry continually relocates in search of cheaper land, labor and water farther from densely urban centers to rural areas located both within and outside national borders. Increasing urbanization and gentrification fuel demand for organic, seasonal, and locally grown food and different modes of food provisioning such as farmers markets—especially from wealthy and middle class consumers—as development and

residential construction changes the landscape and triggers farmland preservation activities, zoning regulations, and urban growth management policies. These politically infused activities create both opportunities and challenges for small-scale family farms active in AFNs, because as the urbanization and agrarian restructuring create both opportunity and demand, they also increase labor time and the potential for burnout, while revenues do not necessarily or consistently increase. Paradoxically, increasing urban demand for seasonal, and organic produce grown 'close to home' and the processes of rural restructuring which emphasize small-scale sustainable family farming and its direct food linkages to cities do not necessarily enable all farmers to consistently make a living from season to season. Evidence for these claims comes from an in-depth, qualitative case study spanning two metropolitan counties based upon participant observation and in-depth interviews with a range of people active in the production and provisioning aspects of the AFN. This research aims to contribute to further conceptualizing AFNs by identifying urbanization and rural restructuring as key processes that construct and sustain them. AFNs are entangled in these processes while anchored to specific and dynamic agro-ecologies. Small farmers experience this entanglement in their everyday practices of growing food and selling it through venues such as farmers markets and CSA.

In the following section, I situate this argument within the current research stream that conceptualizes AFNs. I then describe my research methodology and present my case study in paper's next three sections which outline the processes of rural restructuring, urbanization and the experiences of small farmers active in producing for the region's farmers markets and CSA.

## 2. Defining alternative food networks

AFNs are 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 are contrasted with large scale, industrial agribusiness; (3) by the existence of food purchasing venues such as food cooperatives, farmers markets, and CSA and local food-to-school linkages;<sup>2</sup> (4) by a commitment to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable food production, distribution and consumption. The first attribute defines AFNs in terms of shorter distances between where food is grown and where it is purchased and eaten. Farmers in AFNs grow food in proximity to people buying and eating the food they grow (La Trobe and Acott, 2000; O'Hara and Stagle, 2001; Renting et al., 2003). AFNs minimize transport distances, oil consumption and bypass middlemen in the distribution chain. This form of direct marketing allows farmers to capture and keep more profit,

<sup>1</sup>CSA means that consumers pay \$350–450 to farmers at the beginning of the growing season and then receive weekly deliveries of seasonal produce throughout the growing season.

<sup>2</sup>Farm-to-school linkages provide fresh produce from local farms to school dining rooms.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/92577>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/92577>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)