



Local rural product as a ‘relic’ spatial strategy in globalised rural spaces: Evidence from County Clare (Ireland)

Geoff A. Wilson*, Ian Whitehead

School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Plymouth, Drake, Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, UK

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Using a case study from County Clare (Ireland), this study critically analyses notions of ‘local’ rural production. It investigates where rural businesses source the different components of their products and how these interrelate with the locality, how local businesses use the notion of ‘local’ in their product branding, and what the socio-economic and political constraints and opportunities are for businesses seeking to foreground the ‘local’ in their business marketing. Echoing critical studies on the notion and use of ‘local’ in rural product branding (e.g. Burnett and Danson, 2004; Ilbery and Maye’s; Feagan, 2007; Darby et al., 2008; Giovannucci et al., 2010), we argue that even remote rural areas such as County Clare in western Ireland have become so embedded in globalised economic and decision-making pathways that the ‘local’ in rural product branding only remains ‘local’ as a relic process associated with past localized rural production activities.

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1. Introduction

The issue of ‘local’ food and rural product branding has been a long-standing research topic in human geography and rural studies as part of wider debates on the relationships between ‘local/alternative’ and ‘conventional’ rural production. Key questions relate, in particular, to the interlinkages between rural product, local process and place (e.g. Winter, 2003; Ilbery et al., 2005; Pike, 2011), the labelling of rural products as ‘local’ and associated accreditation schemes such as the French ‘appellation d’origine contrôlée’¹ (Moran, 1993; Renting et al., 2003; Stassart and Whatmore, 2003; Treagar et al., 2007), and ‘alternative’ or ‘relocalised’ food chains (Goodman, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Sonnino and Marsden’s, 2005; Hopkins, 2008). These studies point towards the increasing importance of the ‘local’ for rural product identity, quality, and sales success, and highlight the complexities associated with scalar interactions between local, regional, national and global levels (Marston et al., 2005; Woods, 2007; Leitner et al., 2008), as well as implications for environmental sustainability (Buller and Morris, 2004; Ilbery and Maye’s, 2005).

In particular, they highlight that rural product ‘relocalisation’ processes are a response to mass consumerism, verticalisation and agricultural productivism, offering a territorialised, environmentally more embedded challenge to the globalisation paradigm that defends local traditional products and the social and economic structures that sustain them (Murdoch et al., 2000; Wilson, 2001; Morris and Buller, 2003). It is argued, therefore, that developing local and regional products allows rural stakeholders to add value and reconnect with consumers (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Burnett and Danson, 2004; Marsden and Sonnino, 2008), and that commodifying or valorising commodities by local people can improve local social capital and empowerment and prevent leakage of profits from the local to the global (Tellstrom et al., 2006; Higgins et al., 2008).

European farms and other rural businesses are increasingly embedded in global economic processes and transitions and pressurized by global competitors (Renting et al., 2003), referred to as the “competing dynamics of globalisation and relocalisation” by Marsden and Smith (2005, 441). Yet, despite the threats that globalisation poses for local communities, many believe that subsumed within this global transition is a strong justification for encouraging the development and strengthening of local economies (Giovannucci et al., 2010). As a result, Ilbery et al. (2005, 119) emphasised that “the recent consumer shift towards more ‘local’ and ‘natural’ products is ... encouraging quality production systems to become ‘re-embedded’ in local territories”. Similarly, the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD, 2006, 3) suggested that, “local foods offer retailers and food service companies an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Not only does it

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Geoff.wilson@plymouth.ac.uk (G.A. Wilson).

¹ One of the first appellation d’origine contrôlée was granted to Comté Cheese in France in 1958 to protect its quality and territorial identity. Since then milk for this cheese must come from within the defined region of production and from herds located within 25 km of the relevant cheese dairy, but there are no guidelines for the provenance of packaging or labelling material or for employment of local workforce (Ilbery et al., 2005).

show that these companies are part of the community but they are also a very valuable proposition as consumer demand for local foods grows”.

Often local initiatives have been supported by national or EU policies such as Regulations 2081/92, 2082/92 or 1257/99 (introducing protected designations of origin and certificates of special character for products with local raw materials), through the EU LEADER programme (Ray, 2000), or through national initiatives such as the UK Countryside Agency's 'Eat the view: promoting sustainable local products' campaign (Countryside Agency, 2002). These have promoted the multifunctional benefits of local rural products as enhancing local rural economies, strengthening local confidence and identities, and contributing towards more local self-determination through locally differentiated markets (Canada and Vazquez, 2005; Wilson, 2007, 2010). 'Local' products are often cleverly advertised to promote a regional image with associated notions of environmental sustainability (e.g. low carbon footprint) and strengthening local social capital (e.g. by employing people from the locality).

Yet, few studies have investigated in detail the meaning of 'local' in rural product branding, leading Giovannucci et al. (2010, 97) to argue that "for local to thrive, it must be properly identified and credibly conveyed to consumers". This was also the conclusion of a study for DEFRA on local and regional food and drink in 2008 (SERIO, 2008) which stressed that, with growing interest in local products, the misleading use of the term in the marketing of products was identified as likely to lead to its invalidation. Treagar (2003) and Ilbery and Maye's (2005) argued that more work is particularly needed with regard (1) to whether all components of a product come from 'local' sources, (2) to which components of the production process the 'local' relates and how this is used in product branding, and (3) to whether and how the foregrounding of the 'local' by rural producers is aided by wider regional and national socio-economic and political drivers. Pike (2011), focussing on Newcastle Brown Ale, further pointed towards the 'sequential disconnection' of brand from its intrinsic material ties and production process, originally based on the distinctive waters of the Tyne combined with locally particular yeast strains and raw materials (i.e. barley, hops and malt) brewed with locally idiosyncratic and variable brewing equipment and brewers' skills.

Building on Woods (2007) call for more in-depth empirical studies on the complex interlinkages between the local and the global in rural contexts, Ilbery and Maye's (2005) detailed analysis of rural product pathways in the Scottish/English border region, and a recent Irish study by Healy and McDonagh (2009) on commodification and conflict in local branding in Ireland, this study seeks to address these issues and to critique often simplistic assumptions about the 'local', with reference to a case study from County Clare (western Ireland). Using examples from both food and non-food production in County Clare, we will analyse where rural businesses source the different components of their products and how these interrelate with the locality, how local businesses use the notion of 'local' in their product branding, and what the socio-economic and political constraints and opportunities are for businesses seeking to foreground the 'local' in their business marketing. We will argue that even remote rural areas such as County Clare in western Ireland have become so embedded in globalised economic and decision-making pathways that the 'local' in rural product branding only remains 'local' as a *relic process* associated with past localised rural production activities.

2. The 'local' as a contested concept in rural product branding

Before analysing how rural businesses use notions of the 'local' in their product branding, the contested meanings of 'local' need to be further unpacked, especially as this article posits 'local' as an

integral component in revalorising the rural when associated with products such as food and as the local is often synonymous with quality, safety and environmental sustainability (Darby et al., 2008; SERIO, 2008; Giovannucci et al., 2010). Key for local rural producers is the importance of measures that seek to capitalise on the value of 'local' association and to promote quality production at the local level. In this sense, 'local' products are often cleverly advertised to promote a regional image with associated notions of environmental sustainability – as we will see below, at times a cynical and calculated use of the 'local' in a branding and marketing context. Yet, while these assumptions probably chime with most empirical evidence of how the 'local' has been used by rural businesses, there is inherent danger of reification of the 'local' as a spatial attribute with unquestionable 'positive' attributes in spatial, discursive and material terms.

There has been much critical debate about the meaning of 'local' in both spatial and discursive terms, with realisation of the complex nature of such a term and the need for care in interpretation (Burnett and Danson, 2004). Notwithstanding this, several interrelated issues can be identified. First, critical human geography literature has highlighted how decision-making processes at the 'local' level are embedded in complex nested spatial hierarchies in which the local is only one of many spatial layers including the individual/household, the regional, the national and the global (e.g. Brenner, 2001; Jonas, 2006; Leitner et al., 2008; Wilson, 2009). This means that although many would associate the 'local' with community-level decision-making (seen in the 'foodsheds' of Kloppenburg et al., 1996), bioregions (including geographical indications such as 'terroir'), methods of production (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000) or specific limits to distances travelled (Darby et al., 2008; Giovannucci et al., 2010), the 'local' can only be understood as a discursive and spatial term by taking into account its complex embeddedness within nested hierarchies. In a rural context, Ilbery and Maye's (2005) notion of the 'shortness' (or not) of food supply chains ties in directly with this concept of nested hierarchies, as the relative shortness of food supply chains is a direct expression of interlinkages between a locality and spaces/places 'up' (to the global) or 'down' (to the individual) the nested hierarchy spectrum. Increasingly in recent decades, such boundaries have been diluted by globalisation processes, leading Woods (2007) to coin the notion of the 'global countryside'. This notion emphasizes the interconnectivity of rural localities where globalisation and hybridity, in particular, have led to a reconstitution of rural place, highlighting the differentiated geography of rural globalisation that remakes rural places not necessarily through processes of domination and subordination, but through a micro-politics of negotiation and hybridization in which local rural actors retain some agency in shaping their circumstances.

Second, in their critical review of defining 'local' food spaces, Giovannucci et al. (2010) have argued that the 'local' can never be 'owned' as a conceptual category but can only be 'attributed' through specific mechanisms such as geographical indications, voluntary labelling agreements, or the patenting of 'local' rural products. 'Local' is, therefore, not necessarily linked to a 'real' geographical space but artificially assigned by producers and used (or not) by consumers in their rural product purchasing decisions. Feagan (2007, 33) argued that despite this, local food systems must be orientated within some form of geographical boundaries, thus providing, often stark contrast to the 'agroindustrially produced food-plate'. In this context, 'local' is the antithesis of 'exotic', is characterised by seasonal relationships to rural products (especially food), and is closely aligned with branding as a signal of reputation or quality. The latter highlights that the 'local' is often discursively seen as synonymous with 'quality', 'safety', 'healthy' and 'secure', while the 'global' is often characterized by 'cheapness', 'storable', 'processed' and, sometimes, 'exotic' (SERIO, 2008). Indeed, the loss of the link between communities and their

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