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New rural livelihoods or museums of production? Quality food initiatives in practice

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the European Union's stated commitment to the principle of multifunctionality within its Common Agricultural Policy has fostered a resurgence of interest in recovering and protecting the heritage and traditions associated with local agricultural products. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the growing political and economic salience of heritage-based initiatives, however, we argue that it is important to interrogate the meanings and assumptions that underlie notions of heritage and tradition. In this paper, we use case study research from France and Poland to explore the potential contradictions associated with heritage-based food systems. While quality initiatives create essential spaces for maintaining rural livelihoods in the face of the homogenizing trends in the global agro-food system, particularly for regions where traditional agriculture has been economically marginalized, they also have the potential to undermine local specificity and privilege powerful extralocal actors at the expense of local communities. We pay particular attention to how, in practice, these initiatives may (1) reduce the diversity of available products, (2) create static notions of culture and (3) fundamentally change or distort the character of products in promoting the shift from local to extralocal markets. Our analysis suggests that a more careful investigation of heritage-based initiatives' vulnerabilities is warranted, particularly with respect to the varied nature of local contexts. Initiatives that merely codify cultural products without taking the social-organizational context into account risk becoming little more than "museums of production."

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union's stated commitment to the principle of multifunctionality within its Common Agricultural Policy has fostered a resurgence of interest in recovering and protecting the heritage and traditions associated with local agricultural products. Origin-labeled products (e.g., Protected Designations of Origin, PDO; Protected Geographical Indications, PGI), for example, link the production of agricultural goods to particular territories (i.e., the Champagne region in France; the area surrounding Parma, Italy) as well as the historic conditions of production that have evolved over time in these regions. More than 700 PDOs and PGIs for food products have been registered in the European Union, as well as more than 4200 for wines and spirits. Other initiatives seek to counteract homogenization and the increasing loss of species diversity in global agriculture by protecting heritage breeds of domestic livestock and heirloom seed varieties. And agritourism initiatives frequently aim to demonstrate the "synergy" (Van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003) between heritage-based tourism and agriculture when promoting rural development.

Although we recognize that the institutionalization of particular aspects of culinary heritage can create vital spaces for maintaining rural communities and cultures, we also argue that the very process of institutionalization can eradicate and diminish locality. It is thus necessary to examine the assumptions and power relations that underlie heritage-based initiatives. The passage from local to extralocal markets, for example, introduces new organizational requirements into the supply chain. Further, new political and institutional arrangements promoting regulatory harmonization introduce new quality standards into the production and distribution process. Both processes result in new relations of power along the supply chain. As producers, consumers, and governmental officials engage in initiatives to protect and valorize the unique heritage of their regions and cuisines, it is important that they recognize these potential contradictions.

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2. New paradigms? Quality food initiatives and theoretical foundations

In the European Union, where many of these heritage-based initiatives are associated with the principle of multifunctionality (as institutionalized within the Common Agricultural Policy), the resulting "synergistic benefits" (Van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003) are perceived to have positive effects on overall rural development (Warner, 2007). For some analysts, this represents nothing short of a "new and strong paradigm" for agriculture (Van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003). Yet within that general framework, analysts identify regional variation with respect to relocalization and heritage-based efforts. Fonte (2008), drawing on insights from the CORASON research project into the intersections between locality and knowledge in eleven European nations[1], identifies two general perspectives reflected in efforts to relocalize food traditions in Europe. In some Western European nations, relocalization reflected an effort to "reconnect" with the food system and valorize foods connected to territory in order to rebuild the linkages between producers and consumers. Yet in other regions of Europe, primarily those where agriculture has been economically marginalized, an "origin-of-food" perspective holds sway and is a component of attempts to engage in integrated rural development.

Some scholars see the development and valorization of regional products in Europe as a key part of efforts to promote a kind of rural "re-peasantization" in agricultural communities (Van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003; Knickel and Renting, 2000; also see Gilarek et al., 2003; Granberg et al., 2001; Tovey, 2001). Gilarek et al. (2003) employ the term "backwards modernization" in relation to Polish agriculture to suggest that, in an era of agricultural modernization, farmers might paradoxically find profitable markets for products that recall more tradition-based, agrarian, and so-called "backwards" production strategies. Through the profitable production of nostalgia, farmers find what Potter and Tilzey (2005) term "spaces for post-productivism within an inherently productivist agriculture… [by] map[ing] out an alternative 'consumption countryside.'" The renewed focus on agricultural heritage in the European Union reflects the guiding principle of "multifunctionality" within agriculture; this perspective maintains that farming "not only produces food but also sustains rural landscapes, protects biodiversity, generates employment, and contributes to the viability of rural areas" (Erjavec et al., 2009: 45; also see Potter and Burney, 2002). Potter and Tilzey (2005: 590) further explain that advocates of strong multifunctionality "position their case firmly within what Reiger (1977) has called 'the moral economy of the European Community' (sic) by regarding the activity of farming as one of the defining conditions of rural space, the purpose of state assistance being to create the conditions under which family farming, rural landscapes, and society can flourish." Under the rubric of multifunctionality, promoting and preserving cultural landscapes, regionally significant products such as Protected Denominations of Origin, heritage livestock breeds, and entrepreneurial agritourism projects help foster high degrees of "jointness" and "synergy" (Van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003: 40).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the growing political and economic salience of heritage-based initiatives, however, it is important to interrogate the meanings and assumptions that underlie notions of heritage and tradition. We argue that the integration of heritage and tradition into local food systems reflects both particular *meanings* that people and communities share in their relationship(s) with their food, and specific *practices* of production and consumption. First, the consumption and preparation of food are bound up in local histories and collective memories. Slow Food activist Alberto Capatti, for example, explains that Slow Food "is profoundly linked to the values of the past. The preservation of typical products, the protection of species from genetic manipulation, the cultivation of memory and taste education—these are all aspects of this passion of ours for time" (p. 5, as cited by Morgan et al., 2006). Trubek (2005, 2008) calls taste a form of local knowledge in places like France, where communities rely on particular foods and taste to remember experiences, explain memories, or express a sense of identity. Bérard and Marchenay (2008) argue that shared practices and history are the most essential aspect of localized food systems. They state, "All localized products are founded on a lowest common denominator – historical depth and shared know-how – that defines "origin" in basic terms and allows us to think of these products as a family." The collective dimension makes these products a part of the local culture and helps to distinguish provenance (meaning to issue from a place) from origin (meaning to truly *be* from a place).

At the same time, the meaning that consumers and producers attribute to traditional foods is also explicitly political and oppositional. The re-emphasis on the cultural heritage of food products is a conscious response to the standardizing and industrializing tendencies of globalization. Bessière (1998) states that "heritage is [not]… solely a link between past and present, but also… a reservoir of meaning necessary to understand the world: a resource in order to elaborate alterity and consequently identity." The values and meanings attached to food are in turn linked to particular practices, which, moreover, involve shifts in social relations and strategies tied to power in the food system. By promoting and protecting specific practices and skills, local actors re-appropriate and revalorize what has been lost, while also helping to create and innovate (Bessière, 1998). According to Ray (1998), the protection of agricultural heritage can be seen as "[an] attempt by rural areas to localize economic control" by "increasingly adopting cultural markers as key resources in the pursuit of territorial development objectives … [and] revalorize[ing] place through its cultural identity." The commitment to "rescuing" traditional agricultural products is therefore not just "a salvage effort akin to preserving a language or plant species from extinction," as described by Gade (2004), but more importantly, a potential means of sustaining the rural families and communities who have built their livelihoods around these products. Barham (2003) states that concepts like *terroir* and heritage reflect "a conscious and active social construction of the present… to recover and revalorize elements of the rural past to be used in asserting a new vision of the rural future."

Although the narratives that surround traditional or artisanal food products tell us that we are consuming "the product of a unique and traditional farming system, surviving in a sea of mass production," Pratt (2007) reminds us that traditional or artisanal products "are not survivals as such, they are generated out of sustained commercial activity, state regulatory systems, and international trade agreements." As such, the selection, protection, and institutionalization of these traditional and heritage-based products are enmeshed in particular bounded political, institutional, and social settings. Local actors mark identities and define specifications for products at least in part in response to markets and competition, and traditional products are flanked by a complex web of laws, International Property Rights, and state regulatory agencies that codify and protect who has the right to produce these goods and how they are produced. While some of these products might be strongly embedded in their localities and collective histories, others have been appropriated by extralocal actors or altered to conform to specific market demands or logistical requirements. Many scholars have cited a need for increased attention to the ways these

[1] Case studies were drawn from research in Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Southern Italy, Poland, and Norway.

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