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Reflexive Localism: Toward a Theoretical Foundation of an Integrative Food Politics

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This book is neither simple nor easy to read. It is an attempt to systematize and update the work on alternative/local food networks that has engaged the authors for many years and that has produced many articles, published mainly in *Sociologia Ruralis* and the *Journal of Rural Studies*.

It is a complex read, because it puts together different contexts (USA and the 'UK and Western Europe') and it draws from many different social theoretical traditions. But it is worth the effort, since it engages the reader in a vast and deep, reflexive analysis of alternative food networks (AFNs).

The authors' interest focuses on the big question that has animated the debate on alternative food movements during the past two decades: are AFNs a failed project, due to the influence of neo-liberalism, or are they an expression of prefigurative politics, alternative, not because they are oppositional, but because they are an expression of food production and consumption practices that are incompatible with the dominant organization of the food system ('resistance of the third kind', in the words of Van der Ploeg, 2007)?

The authors take a critical perspective and try 'to strike a balance… between critique and constructive analysis of the problems facing those working to change the place of food in our lives, practices, politics' (p. 249).

A critical perspective means rejecting the interpretation of AFNs as failed projects, but also the 'normative portrayals of the local as places with conflict-free, communitarian values of reciprocity and fairness' (p. 8). They propose the concept of 'reflexive localism', as the foundation of a democratic local food politics.

The first part of the book – which is divided into four parts – is the theoretical foundation of a 'reflexive localism' the other three parts are an application of the concept to alternative food movements in the 'UK and Western Europe'[1] (Part 2), in the USA (Part 3) and to the 'cultural material politics of fair trade' (Part 4).

My comments concentrate mainly on two points: first, the complexity of the theoretical construction; second, the application of the concept of reflexive localism to AFNs and to fair trade networks.

The Complexity of Reflexive Localism's Theoretical Construction

The theoretical foundation of reflexive localism tackles the problem of overcoming the division pointed out by Tovey (1997) between the sociology of food consumption and the sociology of food production. A synthesis is proposed between the political

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economy and cultural sociology of food, suggesting to draw in this task from three theoretical traditions:

1. the tradition of New Times;
2. the material cultural studies of Appadurai and Miller;
3. the feminist standpoint theory.

Through the lens of the New Times tradition, which observes the proliferation of 'sites of antagonisms and resistance', AFNs can be seen as a new form of agency. The standpoint feminist theory adds the private sphere (and hence consumption and reproduction) to the concept of politics, legitimizing the inclusion of the different forms of critical consumption into the concept of food politics. Finally material cultural studies are utilized to stress that market and non-market activities are continually embedded within each other and, by consequence, production and consumption cannot be conceived or analysed separately. A change of paradigm presupposes a change in the production system as well as in the consumption model, since the social relationships between producers and consumers are mutually constituted. All three theoretical traditions attribute to AFNs some form of 'alterity' to the dominant capitalist system.

Further, in their analysis of the literature on AFNs, the authors propose a focus on 'knowledge systems', criticizing approaches centred only on the practices of alternative farmers: 'from the epistemological position of cultural Marxism, how the consumers goes about "knowing" food is just as important as farmers' knowledge networks' (p. 45). The creation of AFNs can be seen as 'struggles over knowledges', 'alternative "modes of ordering" of material and cultural resources in which food is an arena of contestation rather than a veil over reality' (p. 45). The problem can now be formulated as the way to integrate how we 'grow food' and how we 'know food', which require rethinking the relation between production and consumption and reframing the notion of politics, not centred in production or consumption alone, but as the relation between them.

The conceptualization of food as knowledge is conceived as a way of constructing an 'integrated symmetrical perspective', which is possible according to the authors by drawing on Gramsci's concepts of 'formation' and 'hegemony', or on Law's (1994) concept of 'modes of ordering'. Here a discursive perspective emerges that sees alternative projects as a way of reconfiguring the hegemonic formations or 'orderings' of the socio-ecological. Where a more production-centred framework finds only a failed attempt to overcome capitalist forces, the discursive yet eminently material notion of politics sees AFNs as bearing the seeds of a political struggle to realign consumption–production relationships on alternative eco-social foundation, 'a terrain of contested orderings as well as a realm of connectivity' (p. 47).

Finally the authors recall 'linkages and tangencies' with other bodies of literature or sub-disciplines: theories of practice (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002), evolutionary institutional economics and transition theory (Dosi et al., 1994; Seyfang and Smith, 2006), convention theory. Among these last, they draw on socio-technical transitions theory to classify the multiform practices of local food in relation to the dominant regime as 'competitive' when they aim to replace it, or 'symbiotic' when the result of the relation is an 'add-on in the existing regime to solve problems and improve performance' (p. 66).

This complex construction of the theoretical framework is really impressive. The different concepts are utilized by the authors as a box of tools very useful in building

an integrative notion of food politics, an important step toward the understanding of what is happening in the food economy and in the larger society around food.

The attention of the volume is more focused on the co-optation mechanisms through which the conventional system appropriates itself the new values; but it is important to interrogate also the very intriguing questions that the movement's fragmentation poses: why so much fragmentation in the food movement? Where are AFNs heading? Why do we need to draw from so many different social theoretical traditions? Is this evidence that in what Bauman calls a 'liquid society', a fragmentation/individualization of social actors (and AFNs) is necessarily reflected in the fragmentation of social theory? If so, should an effort to recompose social theory accompany, at least, the process of the recomposition of social movements?

Connected to these general questions, another one is pressing those interested to work for a democratic, socially and environmentally sustainable food system: how, in times of crisis, reordering and reconfiguration of global capitalism, has social representation changed, and how does it need to change for the voice of the weak and disempowered to be heard? On this matter, I would like to recall the theoretical perspective on new social movements that stresses their dual engagement with a 'politics of influence' and a 'politics of identity' (Cohen, 1996). Their dual orientation puts them in certain circumstances into a problematic dichotomy that the same movements' actors have to confront and manage (see also Tovey, 2002). In this vision 'conventionalization' is not only the unavoidable outcome of appropriation processes set in motion by the dominant socio-technical regime, but also the result of conflictive choices facing the movement members.

Reflexive Localism: AFNs in the 'UK and Western Europe' and USA and Fair Trade

While critics of AFNs see them as the creation of defensive communities, those who see AFNs as prefigurative social movements utilize network analysis to investigate how actors with different and sometimes contradictory interests work together to create new social and material world.

Reflexive localism looks at what has already been done to change the food system and recognizes both accomplishments and limitations of AFN politics. From a reflexive lens, AFNs are both representative of the current neo-liberal politic regime and a prefigurative, experiential social movement creating innovative processes of collective learning.

One criterion seems to emerge that discriminates just from unjust AFNs. AFNs that focus on forging communities of shared values are seen as intrinsically inegalitarian, because they are based on a single worldview. They tend to discourage participatory deliberation and different points of view. The fixedness of communitarian approach to food systems undermines the civic nature of alternative economies and makes them susceptible to be captured by the mainstream (p. 157).

But there is a difference between coming together to defend shared values and creating a network to design new forms of material life, creating boundaries as a strategy of exclusion and creating boundaries as 'topologies' or 'fields' in which people collaborate despite differences in values and worldviews. A reflexive approach understands that each set of values derives from a specific social context, respects multiple definitions of 'good food', and gives more emphasis to the nature of the

process of boundary setting and the design of objects itself, which needs to be based on public engagement.

The authors utilize this perspective to understand alterity of AFNs and co-optation mechanisms of 'locality food' in Europe, the conventionalization of organic agriculture in the United States and the marketization of the values embedded in fair trade around the world.

In Europe, the debate about AFNs focused originally on relocalized or territorialized value chains linking producers of quality food, often certified with Protected Designation of Origin labels, with distant consumers. The struggle to impose a 'quality turn' in the productive stance of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is valued as an economistic strategy: as 'opportunities for farmers to add value', as a source of income for marginalized farmers and a strategy of development for marginalized rural areas. The construction of 'locality food' is then characterized as a market-oriented AFN, in transition from a competitive to a symbiotic relationship with the dominant socio-technical regime. This interpretation tends to dismiss any possibility of finding 'alterity' in locality food networks, except in a 'restricted, though nonetheless significant, sense of the spatial reorganization of rural production', that includes 'enhanc[ing] the ecological sustainability and socio-economic vitality of rural areas in Europe' (p. 79). 'In terms of exchange and distribution, these networks have a symbiotic relationship with the conventional socio-technical regime. In the space-economy of production, however… locality foods are competitive with intensive commodity agriculture and their expansion is reclaiming rural space… Locality food networks are "hybrids" combining competitive and symbiotic relationships' (p. 84).

While I would agree with this last quotation, it seems to me that the authors themselves give a restrictive, economistic interpretation of locality food, which downplays the significance of the spatial reorganization of rural production and the importance of enhancing ecological sustainability through the protection of endangered food, biodiversity and local traditional knowledge from extinction. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, the social movement (which included local development agents) created around the quality strategy was able to mobilize marginal actors in rural areas and, still more importantly, to legitimize different models of agricultural production and food consumption. The strategy of valorization of locality food is characterized as market-oriented and symbiotic to the dominant socio-technical regime, while little attention is given to the 'reconfiguration' of the dominant socio-technical regime based on the intensive system of commodity production, a reconfiguration that is not trivial if the quality strategy is contested still today at the level of global trade governance institutions, like the WTO.

It is also the cultural and institutional legitimation of the 'quality turn' of the 1980s and 1990s that has favoured the re-articulation of demand by the AFNs in Europe, in 'a forum of continuous negotiation and contestation' (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 5) that presupposes a 'dialectic without synthesis' between the market and social movements.

In the USA, the 'mainstreaming' of the alternative food networks is mainly discussed through the production consolidation and growing share of organic food sales appropriated by corporate capital. The struggle for the national standard regulation in the USA, which under pressure of corporate capital has become based in 'allowable inputs' rather than on the specificity of the production process, is seen as the landmark of this process of appropriation and conventionalization. Among

those who inscribe AFNs into the neo-liberal agenda (Allen and Guthman, 2006) and those who consider them as new forms of governance (Kloppenburg and Hassanein, 2006), reflexive localism stresses that in the process of 'boundary making' and 'object design', the process is more important than the result (standards):

> 'alternative economics, including organics would cease to exist without civic processes that establish the legitimacy of alternatives. Yet the creation of that legitimacy involves civic struggles over the design of the organic object through ongoing civic discussion… In other words, the organic movement will never just be about the creation of standards. It will always be a civic conversation, with and between consumers, farmers, food businesses and regulatory institutions' (p. 173).

Extremely interesting is also the analysis of the mainstreaming of fair trade through the marketization and decentring of the meaning embedded in 'fairness', from 'care and development' to 'quality food'. This is a process that changes the knowledge network and the visual and textual imaginaries embodied in the fair trade product from a visual and textual 'thick description' of the producers' lives and livelihoods, through the 'logoization of care', to the 'celebritization' of fair trade, celebrity landscapes and celebrity tools up to the final embodiment of fair trade back to the farmers, their lives and livelihoods, farms and communities in the virtual environment of internet. 'The semiotics of fair trade… is no longer based on the marginality of livelihoods… but rather is dictated heavily by the quality and quantity supply chain requirements associated with the processes of mainstreaming' (p. 232).

While the implications of mainstreaming may be called 'neo-liberal sustainabilities', again some of the variants or potentially interesting alternatives within fair trade are discussed, which may buffer the effects of mainstreaming and marketization as well as providing new models of AFNs.

I fully agree with the authors' preoccupation to lay down the theoretical foundation for an integrative and balanced food politics based on a symmetrical approach to producers and consumers, and I think they have fully succeeded in this important task. At the same time the attempt to explain the dialectic tension between 'alternative niches' and 'dominant socio-technical regime' appears in some way still simplified, resulting in a sort of life-cycle approach to AFNs, which are represented as passing through the different stages of radicalism, co-optation, new radicalism. Still more attention is needed to contradictions and conflicting choices inside the movement and the dominant system as well as to the agency of social actors in the transition from niches into regime changes.

The co-optation of alternative values by the dominant system is represented as unproblematic, which lead to bypass the analysis of the specificity of the conventionalization process and the reconfiguration of the dominant socio-technical regime. It could be interesting to elaborate more deeply on the specific way in which, in the different contexts, appropriation of the movement's values by the conventional food system has operated. For example the authors illustrate how in Europe the conventionalization of the 'locality food' is the result of a dialectic involving local actors, public institutions and European government bodies. In the USA the conventionalization of organic agriculture is the result of the pressure of the corporate groups on the state. In the case of Fair Trade, co-optation of the movement's values by the corporate capital did not call for any involvement of the state, leading to a flourishing of private standards. Are these differences in the appropriation processes in any way

indicative of differences in the movement's praxis? Do they have any implication for the democratic control of the process of standard construction and the accountability of the resulting standards? Do they tell us something about the resulting reconfiguration of capital or are they meaningless in the process of the systematic concentration of power and ordering of meanings by capitalism?

These are only few of the many vital questions that this dense book raises to researchers and people concerned with developing and consolidating new, democratic, political, food imaginaries and practices.

Note

1. I feel uncomfortable with this expression. It would mean that either the UK is not in Western Europe or that the UK is taken as a representative of Western Europe. The latter meaning, I think, is the more appropriate in this case: the authors in fact base their analysis in this section on the situation and on the literature on AFNs in the UK, even if few references are made to France (with the case of AMAP) and Tuscany (with the case of GAS.P!). The perspective of Southern Europe and other marginalized parts of Europe (for example, see Granberg et al., 2001; Fonte and Papadopoulos, 2010) is taken into consideration only marginally and implicitly.

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