

BOOK REVIEW:

WORLDS OF FOOD: PLACE, POWER, AND PROVENANCE IN THE FOOD CHAIN
BY KEVIN MORGAN, TERRY MARSDEN AND JONATHAN MURDOCH, OXFORD
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This is an important book for two reasons. Firstly, it stands as the fine but sadly last book of Jonathan Murdoch, who tragically died before its publication. Secondly, and more happily, it represents yet another valuable output from three key thinkers and researchers in the vibrant social science team working on food systems at Cardiff University.

The book sets out to break with the binary thinking which the authors see as bedevilling agri-food analysis which too often describes a “bifurcated food sector” (p.8). This conventional analysis proposes that the food system can best be seen as a conventional system driven by productivist agriculture, large companies and mass markets, a system which is “de-territorialising” food. And then there is an ‘alternative’ system of nascent ecological agriculture characterised by smaller companies, localised markets, committed to “re-territorialising” agriculture with the goal of sustainable development. The problem with this bifurcated vision, say Kevin Morgan, Terry Marsden and Jonathan Murdoch, is that there is an increasingly “porous” terrain between them. The model might be neat, but the reality is messier.

Instead of imposing or just criticising this view, the authors set out to describe the world that many of us encounter when trying to understand modern, highly complex, internationalising food system. Their argument is that modern food systems are battling over three issues: provenance (what food offers), power (who controls it) and place (where food comes from, the narrative it tells about place from primary production to end consumer’s belief about it).

Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch (henceforth referred to affectionately as M³) remind us that, although so many of us are captivated by trying to unravel modern food’s complexity, food is ultimately about a relationship with the natural world. All the Grand Theories M³ review in early chapters – commodity chain analysis, actor network theory, conventions theory, etc – have amplified a social perspective of food but are in danger of brushing away the relationship with the natural world. It’s not that the grand social theories are wrong; on the contrary, they all offer valuable and ground-breaking insights into contemporary reality. The problem is how to weave them together intellectually. I agree. Social scientists’ value to civil society and policy-makers is sometimes diminished by our adding to, rather than diminishing, the ‘policy cacophony’¹. And it is when M³ address this issue of governance that, for this reviewer, their book takes off. The world of policy, already fissured by multi-level governance, is charged with high politics. This partly explains why agriculture does not quite or always follow the path to globalisation mapped by other commodities such as cars or electronic white goods though it does on some fronts. That’s why the

cry of free traders today is ‘why is food so special?’, a shorthand for removing public subsidies. Food, they say, is just a commodity like any other. Not so, say M³, reinforcing a view seminally charted by Kautsky², but amplified by others³. There is no need for defensiveness. Modern food systems have many features peasant societies do not. They are dynamic almost to the point of volatility; complex to the extent of being occasionally labyrinthine; characterised by clusters which can span the globe; industrialised to a point of blandness; enshrining aching long distances between producers and consumers even when the food looks ‘local’; having a capacity to squeeze farmers through the retailer’s power over specifications; and having the capacity to drain regions of their food lifeblood or (is this worse?) lashing them to a neo-colonial just-in-time contract. It is on this latter point of regionality and place that M³ turn to a series of fascinating case studies of regions. And it is these which above all make this book stand out, combine their own recent researches with others’ work.

In Tuscany they look at how the creation of modern Italian regional government opened up political space – offering leadership, funds, identity protection, pursuit of new markets and more – to nurture a renaissance from farm to town. Tuscan policy has centred on “managing holistic territories rather than discrete sectors”. The focus is Toscana rather than pasta or wine. In California, by contrast, there is no California, only Californias. The last century or so has witnessed remarkable innovation; strawberry production came from nowhere. Wine too. Its milk production outstripped Wisconsin’s by 1993. And yet, California has been a heartland for the reaction, leading fights over rBGH, promoting urban agriculture, creating farmers’ and organic markets, is now locked into water wars, and a much remarked re-birthing of an ‘alternative’ agriculture. M³ do not see this counterculture as evidence of bifurcation for the simple reason that neither conventional/dominant nor alternative agri-food systems are static. Both are dynamic and face big challenges (labour, water, image).

Their third study is of their home territory, Wales. M³ show how the legacy of being the first industrial nation still surfaces. The culture of food-as-fuel, they argue, has helped marginalise Wales’ dominant hill farmers while bowing before the UK’s highly concentrated food retail sector. Yet this mix is paradoxically now grappling with a desire for authenticity and place-identity. Wales (like Scotland and, when peaceful, Northern Ireland) has been given more political autonomy by the post 1997 ‘New’ Labour Government. This is not the regional autonomy of either Tuscany or California, though that may come, but compared to being ruled from London, it is a big change. This new Welsh governance includes food and agriculture, so the new political élite has found common ground with activists to promote quality marks, notably for lamb. (Indeed, as an aside, since this book was published, the Wales Assembly Government has received increased powers, and shows signs of pursuing this quality approach alongside wider quality of life and well-being commitments; the new politics is seizing food identity alongside appeals to cultural and economic identity.)

Taking stock of their three case studies, M³ propose that a “new moral economy of food” has emerged. They use Sayer’s 2000 definition that moral economy “embodies norms and sentiments regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others.”⁴ I prefer Edward Thompson’s approach in his magisterial 1971 essay ‘The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century’ in which he showed how the transition from a feudal to a capitalist industrial

society spawned reactions ranging from overt to petty revolts at the ruthless transition in shared values and assumptions⁵. Common assumptions about rights and access to food, in a fragile food economy, betray the meanings of daily life. Riots, theft, politicking, drastic action, all show how those assumptions can be and are contested. To apply the term moral economy of food to the transition today as M³ do is correct, precisely for these reasons. The deracination in contemporary food, - where 'glocal' (mock local, globally sourced) food vies with authentic regional or global and, more rarely, authentic local - is being contested. So is the ecological neo-colonialism of intensive food systems where 'pure' foods derived in distant lands are marketed as socially just exports. Weeding the sham from the truly fair-trade is one among many of the challenges social justice movements now have. All is not as it seems. This complexity adds grist to the M³ mill. And labelling – offered by neo-liberals as the mechanism of consumer choice – actually becomes a nightmare mix of standards, logos, messages. No wonder label use, if at all, is restricted to a second or two, thus failing to be facts which aid discrimination but become yet more info-bits to weed out from the info-soup.

This is a fine book, thoroughly to be recommended. It is well written and taut in structure, managing to combine case study specifics with intellectual panorama. It connects disparate discourses while offering its own. It conveys the M³ take on modern food, while being faithful to the happily reborn critical tradition within food social science. It also shows the value of its authors' engagement with the real world of policy. This doesn't submerge their research but, on the contrary, informs and excites it.

¹ Kautsky K. *The Agrarian Question*. London: Zwan, 1988 [1899]

² Goodman D, Redclift M. *Refashioning Nature: Food, Ecology and Culture*. London: Routledge, 1991.

³ Sayer A. Moral Economy and Political Economy. *Studies in Political Economy* 2000; 62:79-104.

⁴ Thompson EP. The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. In: Thompson EP, editor. *Customs in common*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993 [1971]: 185-258.

⁵ Thompson EP. The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. In: Thompson EP, editor. *Customs in common*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993 [1971]:185-258.