



Alternative Food Networks*

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Moving Alternative Food Networks beyond the Niche

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Introduction: 'Opening up' AFNs

Alternative food networks (AFNs) have become an increasingly dominant feature of agri-food scholarship over the last 10–15 years. Numerous research papers, as well as special issues, edited books, monographs, conferences and conference sessions document the rise of AFNs as a new mode of agri-food governance. A quick search on Google Scholar (17 September 2012) for 'alternative food networks' in preparation for writing this commentary listed no less than 1060000 results! It is clearly a burgeoning area of agri-food research, at least if measured by the number of research outputs.

When reading a sample of these AFN articles, one quickly identifies some by now familiar plot lines that characterize their development. The alternative positioning and 'alternativeness' (Whatmore et al., 2003; Watts et al., 2005; Maye et al., 2007) of AFNs is a common feature of most studies. As Tregear (2011, p. 419) notes in a useful recent review, most articles position AFNs as representing forms of food provisioning that are different/counteractive to mainstream (or conventional) food systems. AFNs are also often characterized as constituting organized flows of food products that connect people who are concerned about the morals of their consumption practices in some way with those who want a better price for their food (Little et al., 2010, p. 1797). Another common argument in articles is to recognize the potential of AFNs

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in rebuilding social interaction between producers and consumers, combined with a stronger attachment between product and place to initiate benefits to the wider food system (e.g. increased consumer confidence). Finally, AFNs are often typified in the literature by the growth in sales of certain foods (fair trade, organic, local, regional, speciality) and ways of selling (farmers' markets (FMs), farm shops, box schemes, CSAs).

A number of articles now exist on most types of 'typical' or, what the authors of *Alternative Food Networks*, mapping AFN trajectories, call, 'first generation' AFNs. We have arguably reached saturation point with these types of AFN study. Some familiar conceptual tools and ways of studying AFNs are also operationalized in this now substantial body of agri-food literature. For instance, AFN work has tended to favour empirically grounded approaches, rather than higher-level theoretical development (Goodman, 2003; Maye and Kirwan, 2010). Consequently, much AFN work has arguably not moved much beyond the initial theoretical framings, which at the time sought to understand the social and material constructions of 'quality food' (Marsden et al., 2000; Murdoch et al., 2000; Harvey et al., 2004). Three concepts – short food supply chains (SFSCs), convention theory, and social embeddedness – dominated the early phase of AFN scholarship. More recent papers tend to provide greater critique of AFNs, challenging, for example, an over reliance on romanticized notions of the countryside and nature, as well as unpacking the privileges assigned to terms like 'alternative' and 'local' (e.g. DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Nevertheless, a number of papers still draw heavily on the three founding concepts. The critiques of AFNs noted above apply especially to local quality foods and organic foods – i.e. niche-orientated retail markets (Little et al., 2010).

The observations set out above are clearly very general and offer a broad-level assessment of AFN studies across agri-food studies to date. The point I am keen to stress by way of introduction to this commentary is that, despite the volume of AFN studies we now have, we also have some familiar ways of doing this work. We do have other perspectives not so far mentioned above. There are, for example, emerging ways to conceptualize AFNs – e.g. Holloway et al.'s (2007) diverse economies work (see also Kneafsey et al., 2008), Goodman et al.'s (2010) ethical foodscape perspective, Hayes-Conroy and Martin's (2010) work on visceral politics, Morris and Kirwan's (2011) work on ecological embeddedness. Despite this caveat, as a general observation it is clear that we need to urgently 'open up' how AFNs are positioned, conceptualized and studied. We need to do this for at least two reasons: first, to ensure the field continues to remain academically vibrant; and, second and more importantly, so that this work offers perspectives that are useful to AFN practitioners and wider food policy.

The time is ripe, in other words, for a book that critically reviews this body of work and offers fresh perspectives on where we go next. A systematic review of AFN scholarship and its integration with wider food debates is urgently needed. For this reason, I warmly welcome *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice and Politics*. The authors (David Goodman, E. Melanie DuPuis and Mike Goodman) have all made significant contributions to the study of AFNs in the past and are ideally placed to provide a much needed overview and critical intervention. As they put it, 'After four decades of alternative food networks... it is time to take stock of the experience of these social movements and the debates and controversies they have spawned among activists and academics' (p. 10).

Towards Pragmatic Food Politics

So, what does this book offer that is new and useful? A key contribution, in my view, is its overall conceptual framework. The book conceptualizes AFNs in relational terms, which Goodman et al. view as ‘the organizational expression of recursive material and symbolic interactions between producers and consumers’ (p. 7). The book usefully promotes a food politics that is ‘process-based rather than perfectionist’ (p. 6). As they themselves recognize, they are not the first authors to do this kind of thing. They also place emphasis on AFNs as communities of practice and social movements. A particularly interesting aspect of the more pragmatic food politics offered here is how the alternativeness of these food and fair-trade social movements are positioned: not as oppositional (i.e. mass mobilization to overthrow hegemonic neo-liberal capitalism) but more as new knowledge practices that broker and promote ways of doing that coexist with the main system (i.e. initiating change from within). This general conceptual point about relational contingency is arguably becoming more and more important in food politics, as I will argue below in the context of how to go about integrating local food systems in food security debates.

A more straightforward, but nonetheless equally important, message to be taken from reading the authors’ very scholarly, and at times theoretically dense, volume is that the now familiar AFN foodscape needs to be modified, extended and repositioned in a new ‘world of food’ (for example, see Foresight, 2011). As the empirical material reviewed across the book shows, the ‘AFN’ label in fact represents a highly heterogeneous set of food systems – it may be expressed in ‘typical’ terms, but in fact a whole range of individual, community-based and social enterprise-funded initiatives fall under this label. I will use the rest of this commentary to consider this last point. In particular, I want to examine how AFNs – especially local food networks (LFNs) – can contribute to the delivery of equitable, community-level food security. This requires placing less emphasis on ‘typical AFNs’ – i.e. niche-market locality networks – and much greater emphasis on socially orientated initiatives.

Alternative Food Networks offers useful ways to develop a more ‘imperfect’, process-based food politics and this sort of perspective fits very well when one tries to find ways to integrate localism into wider food security debates. The reflections offered below are contextualized within the UK and to a lesser extent wider Europe, a place where AFNs are firmly rooted in endogenous rural development discourses that frame localization in terms of value-added potential and territorial embeddedness. It thus relates especially to Part II of the book, which examines UK and Western European AFNs. Elements of the conceptual material reviewed in Part I are applicable here too, including reviews of theories of practice, AFN framings as communities of practice and social movements, and links to social justice theory, the economics of innovation, niche developments and transition pathways. I will write less directly to the material reviewed in Parts III and IV, which respectively examine AFNs in the USA and global fair-trade networks.

LFNs and Food Security: Niches, Dialectics and Overflows

The first two chapters in Part II of *Alternative Food Networks* provide a very clear account of how AFNs have emerged in Europe, including charting their relationship with the CAP (as part of a bimodal structure of subsidy support), working through the taxonomic distinction between local and locality networks, identifying

neglected work on the social economy of local food, and revealing the politics and mainstreaming of AFNs, particularly organics. This will be familiar territory to some readers, but the latter part of Chapter 5 and in particular Chapter 6, which examines the dynamic between food security debates and grass-roots food relocalization movements, is particularly helpful in extending discussions about AFNs. The chapter reviews how policymakers are responding to the demand to achieve national food security in the UK. What it reveals too is how the prominence of national food security at both UK and European levels has effectively increased tensions between those who support localized food systems and policymakers and food industry representatives 'who see the ecological modernization of conventional systems as the foundation of national food security' (p. 105). It provides a strong critique of 'eco-technological' and 'new bio-economy' approaches. As they put it, 'despite the fine labels, the new food supply models apparently will continue to feature the same familiar powerful actors' (p. 112).

The chapter also reviews responses by two UK social movements: those organizations involved in the Making Local Food Work (MLFW) initiative and the burgeoning transition movement. The authors' review reaches a similar conclusion to a recent analysis conducted by Kirwan and Maye (2013): LFNs are increasingly sidelined and ignored in food security debates in the UK. As the authors put it, 'relocalized food networks are still out of favour as a key building block in mounting an effective response to the challenges of sustainability and uncertain global supplies' (p. 128).

One of the interesting points covered in their review – although slightly lost in the detail – is the emergence (or at least recognition) of newer strategies, particularly collective projects operating at community-based levels, which are part of MLFW. They classify these types of project as "'second generation" localization initiatives' (p. 121), distinct from 'first generation' examples (such as FMs and box schemes) that we are all familiar with. MLFW does support the latter but the emphasis on "second generation AFNs" (p. 127) is useful heuristically in a bid to push AFNs beyond the niche and to integrate local food systems within mainstream food policy.

Some of the conceptual material at the end of Chapter 5, although not used to set up Chapter 6, about niches, dialectics and overflows, is also useful in a bid to 'open up' AFNs and especially LFNs as part of debates about sustainable food security policy. The authors also use framing and 'overflowing' (following Callon, 1998) to show how the interface between markets and social movements are contested and part of a dynamic dialectical process. The important point this makes is that AFN movements are 'evolving hybrid strategies' (p. 104). The book also reviews the economics of innovation literature, including Geels and Schot's (2007) work on socio-technical regimes and niche innovations and Seyfang and Smith's (2006) work on grass-roots social innovations (see also Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). Again, although sometimes hidden in the wider body of material reviewed, this theoretical material provides a rich source to inform future studies that seek to reposition AFNs beyond the niche market.

In a recent analysis of food security politics in the UK, Kirwan and Maye (2013) operationalize Mooney and Hunt's (2009) conceptualization of food security as a consensus frame to examine local food systems' positioning within these debates. Although not considered in *Alternative Food Networks*, Mooney and Hunt's (2009) work on framing is certainly worth close consideration in a bid to 'open up' how LFNs are framed, especially given the work's roots in social movement theory. They

assert that there is 'contested ownership behind the apparent consensus on food security' (Mooney and Hunt, 2009, p. 470). They identify three collective action frames, which encompass food security as a consensus frame. These are: food security associated with hunger and malnutrition; food security as a component of a community's developmental whole; and food security as minimizing risks in industrialized agricultural production in terms of the risk of 'normal accidents' and 'intentional accidents' associated with agro-terrorism. Collective action to address each of these frames can vary, with multiple interpretations possible. Each food security framing can, on the one hand, carry a 'flat key', which usually reinforces extant dominant interpretations and practices and, on the other hand, carry a 'sharp key' that offers critical, alternative interpretations and practices. The keys within each frame thus imply power differentials, with either an endorsement or critique of dominant institutional practices.

Kirwan and Maye (2013) apply this conceptualization of food security collective action frames to the relationship between 'official' UK food security approaches and the place of LFNs within these debates. Their analysis shows how the UK's official response to food security epitomizes a number of the 'flat' key characteristics described by Mooney and Hunt (2009). The most striking feature of the UK approach, particularly since the 1980s, is the consistent argument that national food security will be best achieved via an effectively functioning global market for food, in conjunction with the European Single Market. *Alternative Food Network's* analysis of the UK situation reaches a very similar conclusion.

In order to understand the contribution that LFNs might make to the UK's food security in the twenty-first century, Kirwan and Maye (2013) argue that it is necessary to avoid framing approaches to food security in oppositional terms. Such static frames fail to reflect the dynamic and transitional qualities of particular production systems. Approaches to food security, including those associated with LFNs, thus need to be understood as being permeable. This allows for the articulation of a more processed-based, relational vision of sustainable food security. Adopting this perspective offers a more transformative and progressive role for LFNs, both now and in the future. These are dominant themes that also run through the authors' excellent analysis.

Closing Remarks: Where Next?

I agree with the authors that we need to move (European) AFNs beyond the niche, recognizing the role of collective and community-orientated schemes, as well as developing more contingent perspectives that avoid static framings of the local. I have argued here that UK and European AFNs need to be reinvigorated and seen as more than an innovation for farmers and producers. This is particularly the case when set against a mainstream food policy discourse that is increasingly dominated by food security debates and neo-productivist responses, which sideline AFNs to a piecemeal role in sustainable food provisioning.

In this new 'world of food', *Alternative Food Networks* offers useful ways to 'open up' AFNs research. I end this commentary with the following reflective comments. First, it is clear that AFNs are at an interesting and potentially critical turning point. Constructing simplistic binaries between 'alternative' and 'conventional' networks is no longer useful. As the book's review shows, most AFN scholars are now using language that captures a sense of hybridity, relationality and diversity. Second,

in relation to the future evolution of AFNs in the UK and Europe, it is clear that SFSCs and the quality food economy have epitomized their characterization and development in the past. The SFSC concept clearly has important and continued value, particularly at a European rural development policy level. The social and economic benefits of farm-based direct marketing are arguably still to be realized. The argument presented here, about extending AFNs beyond the niche, is not that we should ditch this important element of AFN development. On the contrary, this must continue; however, we must also do more to get politicians and policymakers to realize that AFNs have much more innovation, diversity and more to offer than value-added, farm-level production.

Third, important questions about evidence need to be addressed, responding to concerns raised in recent reviews by Tregear (2011) and Kirwan and Maye (2013), for example. The benefits of AFNs and LFNs are widely heralded, but there is now an urgent need, especially given the emergence of a new (neo-productivist) agricultural regime, to develop quantitative and qualitative indicators that can assess and evidence positive AFN impacts. There is a paucity of data on SFSCs and direct marketing, and an alarming lack of evidence about basic aspects of the local food sector (Kirwan and Maye, 2013). Some might contest calls for 'quantification' and 'measurement' of, for example, material, socio-economic and / or health benefits, but demands for such evidence are becoming more important. Finally, there is a need for us, as academics, to radically rethink how we do research on AFNs going forward, including working more closely with activists, advocates and practitioners to build evidence and baseline knowledge to then argue convincingly against techno-scientific responses to agri-food sustainability. We have much work still to do.

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