



## **Problematizing the Emergence of Household Food Security in England**

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**Abstract.** Household food security is a term associated with social welfare and the distribution of resources within society. It is also an organizing metaphor that is highly political and context dependent in its construction and deployment. How the concept emerges into new situations is often overlooked. This article problematizes the recent emergence of household food security in England, a feature closely linked to the food policy developments of the UK Government (2007–2010). I explore household food security in England through a discourse analysis of published policy texts and semi-structured interviews with third-sector practitioners. These reveal the tensions surrounding the introduction of household food security into this domestic policy setting. I show how policymakers used the concept strategically, and how the discursive and institutional legacies of food poverty and the welfare state constrained the wider adoption of household food security in this contemporary setting.

### **Introduction**

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations states that: ‘Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Household food security is the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern’ (FAO, 2009, p. 8). This definition has evolved over time and has come to represent a powerful and hegemonic construction of a food security discourse<sup>1</sup> that has influenced policy actions and interventions throughout the global policy community. The concept retains a unifying power and political salience most often associated with times of crises, particularly the global food crises that have occurred over recent decades (Midgley, 2013).<sup>2</sup> The organizing power associated with the discourse of food security remains widely used by the international policymaking community (e.g. United Nations, G8 and G20 groups of nations); however, its global reach had not, until recently, extended into domestic United Kingdom (UK) or English policy.

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Therefore, when the UK and English Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Gordon Brown began to discuss household food security within the context of a developing English food policy and wider food security concerns this signalled a potentially significant change in public policy attention and possible policy intervention. The aim of this article is to problematize the recent emergence of household food security within English debates.

### *'Problematizing' Household Food Security*

The traditional conceptual lineage of household food security is associated with Sen's (1981) study of mid-twentieth century famines, which challenged prevailing constructions of food security as a supply-side problem. Sen argued that socio-economic capacities and distributional issues were also important in overcoming the 'acquisition problem' (1995, p. 34). The access of the individual and the capabilities they possessed to legally transform their bundles of entitlements (resources such as land, labour and money) into other goods (e.g. food) were critical. Entitlements are 'not an alternative term for the distribution of income or food' but recognize the different relations (economic, political, social and cultural) that can determine an individual's access to food (Hussain, 1995, p. 3). Thus, the household emerged as a further site and level of social organization and governance that came under the auspices of food security concerns. Such developments were pertinent at a time when 'neo-liberal' logics were beginning to reorder and reshape state powers. The practices associated with neo-liberal economic and political stances became apparent in relation to food security, at household, national and global scales, through, for example, the privatization of local social welfare landscapes and food provisioning for the vulnerable in the United States (US) (e.g. Poppendieck, 1995; Curtis, 1997; Warshawsky, 2010). The political purchase that the food security discourse continues to exert underpins the importance of exploring its application to new contexts and domestic policy settings, as well as critical consideration of the practices it can create and maintain that influence everyday life. Greater attention is being given to the framing of food security and the implications this has for politicization, contestation and change in agri-food systems and society (Mooney and Hunt, 2009; Rivera-Ferre, 2012). However, further exploration of the meanings and practices surrounding household food security is crucial as food is 'arguably... the most elemental material symbol of the social contract' (Patel and McMichael, 2009, p. 23). Household food security is frequently associated with welfare and safety-net responses by local and national governments worldwide. The discursive and material practices of household food security, and the political responses to it, can reproduce social, cultural and economic relations, and associated inequalities (McMichael, 2009). Consequently, I focus on exploring the emergence of household food security in England as a contemporary problem of welfare-related food provisioning.

'Problematizing' provides a way of thinking about household food security as a problem in relation to past and contemporary discourses and practices, and how these are understood and performed by different actors. Foucault notes that problematization

'does not mean the representation of a pre-existent object more the creation through discourse of an object that did not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter in to the

play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)' (Foucault in Collier et al., 2004, p. 3).

How different actors think about, construct and use the concept of household food security in relation to other discourses and practices (existing and possible) is key. Moreover, for a situation to be problematic 'social, economic and political processes' must 'have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number or difficulties around it' (Foucault, 1984, p. 388). Thus, how the concept appears and develops (if at all) within a domestic setting requires attention to both historic and contemporary contexts.

### *'Problematization' as a Mode of Enquiry*

Collier et al. (2004, p. 3) note that "'problematization" is a technical term that suggests a particular way of analysing an event or situation' and propose it as a 'mode of enquiry' of the contemporary. Problematization involves identifying what has generated the situation that is perceived as a problem, and the possible responses, rather than suggesting a single resolution: 'it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to' and in turn 'how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematization' (Foucault, 1984, p. 389). This necessitates 'second-order' observation to recognize the multiple possibilities that are contingent to the situation, rather than first-order observation with its sole orientation to identifying interventions (Collier et al., 2004). Therefore, problematization requires the situation to be viewed as a question as well as a problem (Rabinow, 2002). Problematizing a situation also encourages the recognition of past practice and its potential influence on the contemporary through the interplay of actors, knowledges, and conditions that can feedback and determine the construction of the problem at hand and resultant responses.

The relationship between the observer and the problematized situation is important. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize my position in relation to the 'problem' explored in this article and how this has influenced the choices made in data collection and analysis. The original research presented here is informed by my experience and involvement in UK food policy and food security discussions during the Brown administration, June 2007–May 2010 inclusive. Prior to autumn 2008 I was responsible for food policy research in a leading UK think tank. Consequently, interviews, conversations and observations informed the background thinking to this article, but due to ethical obligations these are not reproduced. After leaving the think tank I continued to be involved in policy discussions on food security. This change in role has meant a change from first-order to second-order observer in my research; a shift from identifying policy gaps and recommending specific actions to thinking beyond prescribed policy foci and practices (such as considering food provisioning for all households, not just those with children, which has been the traditional concern of British policymakers). I noticed that while considerable attention was given during debates to national and global food security concerns, comparatively little attention was given to the emerging concept of household food security. In combination these factors have influenced the approach followed. I focus on two research sites: policy texts wherein the problem was constructed and potential solutions identified; and,

interviews with third-sector actors to explore their understandings of the issue and their practices. I now discuss these sites in more detail.

This article traces the evolution of the Brown Government's construction of household food security through a discourse analysis of food policy documents published during this administrative period. These comprised seven published policy documents from: The Strategy Unit (TSU, 2008a, 2008b), Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010), and the published minutes of the Council of Food Policy Advisers established to advise the government on key areas of food policy and their two published reports (CFPA, 2009, 2010 – the latter published after the final food strategy and before the change in government). This administrative period also coincided with a number of global and domestic events that should be noted as contingent contextual factors to the food policy developments, and potential uncertainties and difficulties that could have unsettled or disrupted existing thinking and practice (cf. Foucault, 1984). These included: the most recent global food crisis and attendant food price inflation, the emerging global crisis in capitalism, along with internal UK political pressures such as the power shifts towards nationalist parties in the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales, as well as wider crises in confidence regarding the Brown premiership. The article focuses on the Brown Government's food policy developments. This policy applies to England only as the devolved administrations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) developed their own food policies during this administrative period as food-related policy matters such as agriculture and health were not reserved to the UK government under devolutionary settlements (see Midgley, 2010). In conducting a discourse analytic approach I focus on the discursive structures (regularity of categories and ideas) as well as narratives, rhetoric and metaphors to explore and interpret the policy developments regarding household food security in the published documents (see Hajer, 1995, 2005; Hajer and Laws, 2006).

The article then contrasts the discursive constructions found within policy texts with those of third-sector actors who identified themselves as improving household food security, which were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The term third sector recognizes the variety of organizations that participated in the research and the range of activities undertaken. Participants were drawn from national organizations as well as those operating in different sites throughout the north-east region of England. Sample recruitment followed a purposeful strategy complemented by 'snowballing' recruitment (see Appendix 1 for description of organizations represented in this sample). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 organizations between September 2009 and February 2010 by the author/researcher. This period coincides with the end stages of the food policy developments and the Brown administration. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. All participants were asked about their perceptions of household food security and their activities in relation to policy and policymakers. Transcripts were initially analysed by theme and then discursively analysed following the approach previously outlined for the policy texts. This element of the methodological design attempted to capture how participants understood and constructed the issue, how this influenced practice, and if any discursive alignment or tension with the policy constructions could be identified.

The next section reports the analysis of this study in more detail. The discursive constructions identified in the policy texts are presented first; the main documents are discussed in sequential order of publication to reveal the emerging narrative construction of household food security by policymakers. These are followed by

the discursive constructions identified through interviews with third-sector actors. I then reflect on the problematization of the concept in England, and research on household food security more broadly.

### **The Discursive Construction of Household Food Security in English Policy Texts**

On entering office one early action of former Prime Minister Brown was to instruct a review of the UK's food policy framework. This appeared to be a step change in the way policymakers were prepared to engage with food as an overarching and cross-cutting issue rather than encountering food in different departmental contexts that led to disparate food-related policy approaches (Barling and Lang, 2003). As part of the review a discussion paper, *An Analysis of Issues*, was published (TSU, 2008a). In this document food security was discussed in relation to the national food supply chain and associated, possible threats. In stark contrast to previous policy discussions, the term 'food insecurity' appeared in connection to UK households. Little space was given to the matter in the document, which stated: 'Few people in the UK are hungry, but low income households are more at risk from food and nutritional insecurity' (TSU, 2008a, p. 74). Immediately, the connection between income levels and food insecurity is made, although the extent of this relationship is uncertain. What is important is the use of the term 'insecurity', suggesting an initial consideration of this issue as a potential problem and a situation of concern to policymakers. Also of importance is the distinction between food insecurity and nutritional insecurity (although neither term is defined), and that these issues are only associated with a specific population – low income households.

This early narrative built on the metaphor of 'hunger'. It constructed hunger as a stage or experience beyond food insecurity. From a historical perspective the discourse of hunger in Britain and its presence as a policy issue was reduced in both domestic and global arenas respectively, by the introduction of the post-war welfare state and its design to combat the evil of want, and the decline in the British Empire and its influence (Vernon, 2007). By the 1960s hunger was re-identified but was reframed as a form of deprivation and poverty (Vernon, 2007). The association between food and poverty (often referred to as 'food poverty'), and possible interventions in this relationship, goes back to the different forms of relief offered to the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor since the sixteenth-century poor law; they have continued to permeate cultural constructions of poverty (Jones, 2000). In contemporary British debates this concerns health outcomes (Dowler, 2002; DH, 2004, 2005), social welfare and the development of a social exclusion discourse (Levitas, 1998).

The metaphor of hunger was then strategically used to dismiss the experience of hunger as irrelevant in a UK setting, even though 'few people' preface the statement. The use of selected statistics from a recently published government agency survey of low income households and their diets suggested lack of money as the main reason why individuals consumed insufficient food (Holmes, 2007). However, the discussion paper omitted other results from this survey. The results provided evidence that food insecurity was present in low income UK households; indeed the survey had specifically followed the approach used by the US Department of Agriculture for measuring household food insecurity (Radimer, 2002). Results revealed that respondents who sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat had lost weight, 5% had not eaten for a whole day due to a lack of money and this happened at least three times a year (Holmes, 2007).

Initially policymakers constructed household food insecurity by: first, emphasizing its relative insignificance in relation to a master metaphor of hunger; and, second, as a potential problem but an anticipated and accepted outcome for a particular group within society (low income households). No questioning of inequalities within society and/or the food system is evident. Therefore, it was signalled very early in the policy process that household food security would be considered within existing decision-making and institutional structures and that low income households would be the target group to which any interventions would be applied.

The final food policy review document, *Food Matters*, presented a vision of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable food system (TSU, 2008b). The review identified three roles for government in the food system: 'correcting market failures, addressing equity concerns and fostering positive culture change relating to food' (TSU, 2008b, p. 38). It is with regard to ensuring equity that policymakers build on their earlier narrative association of food insecurity with low income but now introduce the rhetoric of the welfare system as being able to respond to such needs: 'Generally this [safeguarding social equity] will be achieved through the tax and benefit system, but special measures may be needed in some cases to ensure that the more vulnerable in society have adequate access to nutritious food' (TSU, 2008b, p. 38). The 'special measures' refer to a long-standing scheme, Healthy Start (previously Welfare Foods), that supports the basic nutritional needs of infants, children under four years of age, mothers from low income households, and all pregnant women under 18 years of age, by providing vouchers to obtain fruit, vegetables and milk/infant formula. This statement marks a shift towards dietary health outcomes as an important component of the emerging construction of the problem.

The internal narrative of *Food Matters* reflects an adherence to the neo-liberal order (guided by free markets with minimal state intervention), arguing that while many issues become manifested by the food system it was better not to intervene in the food system but to 'target the source of the problem' (TSU, 2008b, p. 40). Continuing:

'real clarity is needed about what the problem is and where the appropriate point of intervention is. For example, the effects of poverty on access to food are better addressed through the tax and benefit system, and focused interventions targeting those most in need [i.e. Healthy Start], than by the Government attempting to drive food prices below the economic cost of production' (TSU, 2008b, p. 40).

In *Food Matters* the terminology of 'household food insecurity' vanishes, as did explicit mention of nutritional insecurity. The document's narrative constructed the 'problem' by linking poor food access (symptom) to poverty (problem). Here policymakers are attempting to problematize the issue, but this process is embedded within an ideological position and decision-making structure that advanced the argument that there was a clear, existing and adequate institutional response to poverty through the state welfare system, with additional support – for low income mothers and their children – to ensure the equity it proclaimed. Consequently, the narrative argument was building to outline a defensive position that advocated no further action. The review document's internal narrative presented a justification of the existing social order, distribution of resources, and institutional practice.

The emerging policy construction of household food insecurity was inconsistent. For example, Defra – which would later be tasked with taking the government lead on cross-departmental food policy delivery – in a discussion document published

in the same month as TSU (2008b) used the term 'household food security' but linked this only with 'affordability', stating that 'everyone should be able to afford a healthy diet' (Defra, 2008, p. 29). Whereas, 'access' was only associated with transport and food distribution systems. The uncertainty and ambiguity may not just be a necessary stage for problematization to enable the situation to be contextualized but a stage that is necessary for policymakers to ultimately order the issue (Hajer and Laws, 2006). The change in terminology from 'insecurity' to 'security' also suggests a change by policymakers in their constructions of the situation, moving from a potential problem towards an outcome orientation that could denote a productive application of the discourse's power rather than adopting a disciplinary stance.

The government published its *UK Food Security Assessment* in the following year (Defra, 2009a, 2009b). This document is important for five reasons. First, the transition to an outcome orientation was confirmed. The documents discussed 'household food security' rather than 'insecurity', and 'food affordability' was noted as an 'outcome' of the 'logical framework of the food security assessment' (Defra, 2009b, p. 6). Second, household food security was mentioned throughout the document, with occasional reference to 'household affordability and access' (e.g. Defra, 2009a, p. 12). Moreover, an informal definition of household food security was being used: 'challenges to household food security in the UK relate to access at all times to available and affordable food' (Defra, 2009a, p. 18), which echoes and imports the FAO definition and trade-orientated discourse (Lawrence and McMichael, 2012; Lee, 2013). Third, the role of the state in the food system, and in ensuring household food security was stressed. For example, while stating that 'every Briton should have access to an affordable, healthy diet; achieving this is at the core of Government policy', the statement continued: 'For the Government, this also means ensuring food is available in any civil emergency' (Defra, 2009a, p. 11). The new association with 'civil emergency' was an acknowledgement of contemporary pressures linked to fuel strikes and the disruption this could cause to food distribution if food industry behaviours did not maintain normal operations. This asserts a dominance of the state in food provisioning and the security of circulation (Foucault, 2009), which previous documents (TSU, 2008a, 2008b) had refrained from, presenting the state as one amongst many actors in the food system.

Fourth, the indicators reveal the influence and feedback of past representations of policy problems. Three key indicators are used to construct household food security: the relative prices of fruit and vegetables for low income households, food price change in real terms, and household access (as physical distance) to food stores. The indicators reflect a composite framing of household food security relating to dietary health, income inequality and physical accessibility. This reflected the long history of the presence and relationship of these particular variables, which can be found in British policy discussions of food poverty and access and the implications for health inequalities (e.g. DH, 1996, 2004, 2005; Acheson, 1998) and social exclusion (e.g. Lang, 1997; SEU, 1998; Wrigley, 2002). However, none of these previous discussions engaged with household food security.

The fifth and final aspect was the status of the *UK Food Security Assessment* and its role in the governance of household food security in England (as well as wider food security). This was a discussion document with no policy weight or delivery requirements, providing a descriptive statistical statement on the extent of food security at different political scales represented through a selected indicator set. This provided a safe environment for policymakers to think about household food secu-

rity, affordability and access without implicating future interventions and resource commitments. In doing so the *Assessment* constructs a relative norm that represents a desired outcome for the population and against which future progress and policy actions could be measured. This role of the document reflects the logic of normalization (Rabinow, 1984; Foucault, 2009). The latter involves the development of ideas and representations of the norm (discourses, statistical knowledge and measures) within a population that acts as the basis by which any deviation is determined and dealt with to ensure the population's welfare. Normalization thus becomes a practice of security (Foucault, 2009). The logic of normalization could be construed as ensuring the norm of household food security for both individuals and society as normalization enables a 'shift from exclusion to inclusion, to sending the victims outside the bounds of the polity, to a mechanism... that allows them to be contained within' (Elden, 2007, p. 564). However, as normalization processes attempt to bring unfavourable and deviating behaviours into line, the identification of what is the norm and what is marginal to this is critical. The population and the norm are therefore both relative and political constructions. This has implications for how the population group identified as marginal is governed, which is brought to the fore in the final food strategy.

During 2009 a further document, *Food Matters: One Year On* (Defra, 2009c), was published. This discussion document only mentioned food security in relation to domestic consumers and increasing the amount of information available to enable them to make informed decisions about eating local and seasonal food. It is an inclusive framing, applying household food security to the entire population, but it also marks a shift towards constructing household food security as a cultural issue and the responsibility of the individual consumer. Thus, the narrative begins to adhere to an ideology of 'rights with responsibilities' that is closely associated with New Labour (the Government); this combines moral new-right thinking with collective welfare provisioning. This ideology was also epitomized in the final food strategy.

In January 2010 the government published *Food 2030*, its overarching food strategy for a 'sustainable, secure and healthy food system' (Defra, 2010, p. 4). The strategy's narrative discussed food security primarily in the context of national and global scales and concerns. With respect to food affordability the document noted recent food price rises and how these had affected low income households; food now accounted for 17% of their average household spend compared to 15% in 2005, and 11% for all households. In contrast to the *UK Food Security Assessment*, the government constructed food affordability as beyond its control, arguing that the European Common Agricultural Policy had kept food prices artificially high, which affected low income households disproportionately. In the strategy there was one mention of food security in relation to UK households, but this issue was now firmly situated within a discursive framing orientated towards both sustainability and health outcomes: to achieve the goal of 'enabling and encouraging people to eat a healthy and sustainable diet' (Defra, 2010, p. 16). This document marked the effective end point of the policy problematization of household food security and the emerging narrative in English policy. The strategy asserted that:

'Low income families have poorer health than the general population. The reasons for this are complex, but diet plays a role. Households need access to affordable, nutritious food to give them food security. The Government's *UK Food Security Assessment* shows that physical access to food is not itself a significant problem, nor a significant negative factor in diets.

There are however a number of other barriers to accessing healthy food including lack of income, education and skills, which affect low income and other vulnerable groups more acutely. A lot of work is already underway to address these barriers such as increasing access to fruit and vegetables through the Healthy Start initiative, and small-scale local initiatives, including food distribution charities and community food growing initiatives' (Defra, 2010, p. 13).

This statement represents the problematized complexity of household food security; the contributing factors and the mix of appropriate responses. Income levels remain pivotal to this construction. However, the narrative draws on, and continues, traditional policy explanations and discourses of food poverty experienced by British households as being due to underlying cultural practices that reflect 'human inefficiencies' in budgeting, food purchasing, preparation and cooking skills (Dowler, 2002, p. 706). This cultural problem and the proposed solution extends the government's 'licence to operate' in individual choice, which policymakers were hesitant to suggest earlier as dietary decisions could be seen as a matter of individual choice but noted how 'cultural change' arguments could be used to expand the basis of government intervention (TSU, 2008b, p. 40). It suggests that the constructed problem is beyond income inequality and by implication the capabilities of the welfare state to respond to it in isolation.

The narrative's focus expands from being solely orientated to low income households to include 'vulnerable groups'. Both population groups are situated within a 'local' context. This shift is enhanced by reference to these groups as 'socially excluded' in the strategy's action points (Defra, 2010, p. 18). The rhetoric of social exclusion is one of socio-spatial polarization<sup>3</sup> and marginalization, and builds on a complex and problematic pre-existing UK policy discourse of social exclusion (Levitas, 1998). This reiterates the need to bring marginalized individuals and groups within social norms. Utilizing the social exclusion discourse enables spatial inequality to be associated with constructions of household food security. The pre-existing power of social exclusion as a recognized discourse deployed by the government in this instance provides the justification for spatial and community responses rather than the solution stemming solely from the welfare system. Thus, there is the explicit instruction requiring 'small-scale local' and 'community' responses by third-sector organizations to deal with household access and food security.

The above extract appears immediately before text noting the relative extent of food security for households in 'developing countries'. This contextualization suggests a further strategic and political positioning of the issue that attempts to emphasize the importance of UK government commitments to enabling healthy and sustainable diets within global food security and development concerns given wider security threats:

'In global terms... high food prices have a greater impact in developing countries. Households in developing countries spend over 60% of their budget on food. Maternal and child under-nutrition in developing countries remains a concern. There are significant new global threats to good nutrition including the volatility of food prices, climate change and its impact' (Defra, 2010, p. 13).

At the end of the Brown administration the problematization of household food security constructed a problem that was associated with specific population groups

who must be helped to overcome identified 'barriers' to enable the desired policy outcome to be achieved. The matter had been subsumed into wider food governance issues and pre-existing political ideologies regarding welfare state support (rights with responsibilities) and policy discourses, perhaps most importantly that of social exclusion to construct food-related welfare as a facet of socio-spatial polarization, which could only be responded to on a social (welfare system for the most vulnerable) and spatial (local and community) basis. This situation could be resolved through existing institutional arrangements to bring the marginal population within societal norms. Table 1 summarizes the narrative argument and discourses identified in the policy texts.

Concurrent to the above policy developments were the discussions of the Council of Food Policy Advisors (October 2008–March 2010 inclusive). Analysis of the Council's minutes of meetings and reports illustrate the dominance of existing discourses and practices surrounding food poverty and access and the contentious nature of these within English debates. The Council's discussions are framed in terms of 'poverty' and 'food poverty' (CFPA, 2009, 2010, see minutes 11 May 2009 and 14 September 2009)<sup>4</sup> with a further shift towards 'inequalities of access to a healthy low [environmental] impact diet' as a proposed policy priority (CFPA, 2010, pp. 4, 8, 9) wherein physical, economic and cultural access to food is noted (aligning to the FAO construction and adhering to the final policy position of Defra, 2010). In the meeting of 14 September 2009 under the item headed 'Food Poverty' it was noted: 'Recent research suggests that people do not like the word "poverty"... Access is as important as affordability'. Nowhere in the reports or meeting minutes is the terminology of household food (in)security mentioned. This suggests that for this concept to emerge in England it required the backing and power of central government policymakers to use and import the language in the process of developing a food policy

**Table 1.** The discursive construction of household food security in English food policy texts (2008–2010).

Narrative sequence	Source	Discourse
<i>Beginning:</i>		
Acceptance of risk of food insecurity for low income households as a problem.	TSU, 2008a	Hunger metaphor as counter discourse
<i>Middle:</i>		
Poverty can impact on access to food but equity provided through welfare system, this may be targeted to the most nutritionally vulnerable and so no change to the existing system is necessary.	TSU, 2008b	Poverty
Shift towards outcomes so that household food security becomes a metaphor for access and affordability.	Defra, 2009a, 2009b; CFPA, 2009, 2010	Social exclusion
Consumers should be provided with information to choose food that is sustainable and local.	Defra, 2009c	Rights with responsibilities
<i>End:</i>		
Food security of households is linked to healthy behaviours and choices through overcoming barriers of low income, education and skills.	Defra, 2010; CFPA, 2010	Social exclusion
Emphasis on most vulnerable groups in their localities, local charitable responses are appropriate in addition to the welfare state.		
These issues are significant problems globally and particularly problematic for the global south.	Defra, 2010	Global development and security

that was embedded within global debates (on human rights discourse importation, see Gordon and Berkevitch, 2007).

### **Third-sector Perspectives on Household Food Security**

#### *Constructing the Problem – Poverty*

The managers and directors of organizations who participated in this research perceived that their activities improved the food security of households and wider communities, and frequently presented narratives concerning poverty in different settings and its effects on food provisioning practices. Participants often recounted the experiences of their clients going without food or struggling to purchase food, which they used to ground their arguments. In contrast to the policy framings such accounts were used to construct the problem as one of structural poverty rather than a cultural failing. This led to a range of responses, including food redistribution and growing suggested by policymakers. For example, the manager of a youth project providing wider food access activities noted:

‘Yes, it is poverty, because I would say, if they didn’t need it, they wouldn’t come, and some of them depend on that bag of stuff [food parcel] every week, not all of them. It does help them out, but some of them do... we fill applications in for them... they’re lucky if they’ve got £10 left [from state benefit support], once they’ve paid their bills... and that’s for food for all week. What can you get with £10?’

To help put this comment in perspective at the time of interview, early 2010, Davis et al. (2010) identified that a single person of working age required £44.34 per week to meet minimum income / societal standards for food consumption. This figure is at least four times the amount referred to by the project manager.

Consequently, a lot of the organizations were supplementing low income households and vulnerable consumers by providing meals or food-bank services in response to perceived needs. Other participants spoke of their services helping vulnerable and/or low income groups (including the homeless, recently housed, lone parents, refugees, people in low paid employment, and in one case sex workers). Notably not all of these categories related to children in contrast to the policy interventions justified on the basis on infant and child health. For example, a community kitchen manager directly commented on the way the kitchen was used by clients to subsidize their low incomes:

‘So everybody is subsidized, I mean, not everybody is on the streets or living rough. A lot of people are housed on their friend’s floor and they use what money they’ve got and then they subsidize their income by coming here.’

Whereas the manager of a regional food redistribution franchise commented:

‘The government aren’t ever going to admit that there’s food poverty in Britain, but there is; it’s just the tip of the iceberg the people we’re working with.’

However, constructing the issue as a poverty problem was problematic in itself. The director of a national food and agriculture campaign network discussed the difficulties they had encountered over time:

'We made a very big song and dance about calling it food poverty, specifically because when we were doing the work, it was during the last Conservative Government, where, as you know there was no such thing as society, no such thing as poverty, so we made a big deal about saying: "Yes, there is" ... When there was a change of government and there was such a thing as society and there is such a thing as poverty and everybody recognized the problem, we also recognized that a lot of the groups who might want to be part of such a support network, that actually the term poverty wasn't particularly attractive. People... probably were poor, but the poverty wasn't particularly the thing that they identified themselves as being, so we stopped calling it food poverty because there's no longer any political need, we thought, to do that. Nor did people want to identify themselves in that way. And the jargon of the time was access... And then we got to the... end of the point where actually we thought that defining it as food access was particularly helpful, because both food poverty and food access had come from a health inequality background.'

Continuing:

'All of the language, none of it works. Poverty didn't work. I don't think access works much better to be honest. Food security definitely does not do it for me... the main thing it should mean, is that people on low incomes wouldn't be on low incomes, because obviously the main problem is poverty... And I think one of the reasons for that is because if we characterize the problem as being about poverty or low income, immediately the majority of the population think, subconsciously, nothing to do with me. They'll probably think first, "oh, that's a shame"... but it is not "them". And if most people think, "that's nothing to do with me", that means there's no votes in it, which politicians can then think, "well, it's nothing to do with me either"... And it's not much of a media story... so we've lost getting anybody's attention to do anything about it, before we even get past first base.'

This extensive narrative highlights the complexity of finding a discourse that actors can align and engage with to begin to initiate change and effectively challenge the existing social order and decision-making framework associated with food-related welfare. Moreover, this participant highlights the problem of awareness and recognition but then translating those into action given the legacies of successive British poverty debates (outlined previously). The account also emphasizes that how an issue is named is important: 'food poverty', 'food access' and 'food security' were not perceived as interchangeable, with particular inferences and discursive understandings associated with each. This contrasts the eliding of terms by some authors in a UK context (e.g. Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; CFPA, 2009, 2010; see also note 4).

The national campaign network director then discussed how their organization had reframed the issue to overcome the problematic constructions of poverty, access and security:

'I think probably the way we're dealing with it... is running projects and campaigns which, if we win, they will disproportionately benefit people on low incomes, so for example, protecting children from junk-food marketing... [will] disproportionately protect children from families on low incomes because it's families on low incomes who feel most pressured to buy

branded goods and junk food, to help their kids to feel part of society... so we never say: "This is a campaign about poor children". Ever. But actually poor children, I think, benefit more from it.'

In doing so they created an alternative construction of the situation that stimulated a non-traditional policy response. This disruption enabled other actors to align themselves and work in coalition to advocate a change in policy (see Hajer, 1995). However, the disruption was reliant on being able to link to an existing rhetoric of obesity and the broad acceptance of this as a growing social, economic and health problem.

Elsewhere, there was a clearer alignment between one national third-sector organization and the Brown administration. The national food redistribution network manager while emphasizing how they wanted to have a 'long-term impact on... all people that are suffering from food poverty' commented:

'But we are sometimes not sure which aspect we should talk most about. So I think before we would mostly talk about food being diverted away from landfill and talk about the environmental benefits of our work. Now, with more and more focus on food security, and because we have to compete against the greener technologies that are really good for the environment, we have to highlight this aspect that makes us unique, which is that we ensure that food goes to people first.'

The agreement between the government's and this organization's narratives linked together food poverty and food waste as a way of resolving problems associated with the food system (see Poppendieck, 1995). These two issues were positioned within wider food security and sustainability discourses that were policy priorities of the Brown administration. Food redistribution offered a means by which both parties could make the most of the opportunity presented by this particular policy window; food redistribution gained national attention and policy support, whereas policymakers could bring these issues within existing discursive frameworks and institutional behaviours presented in *Food 2030* (see Kingdon, 1995). As Poppendieck (1995, pp. 29–30) notes regarding hunger alleviation in the US the 'awareness of the possibility of "solution" is a precondition for the perception of a problem' and that the 'nature of the available remedy contributes to the content of the typification'.

### *Constructing the Problem – Institutional Failings*

In direct contrast to the policy rhetoric that argued the welfare system was the most appropriate mechanism for responding to 'the effects of poverty on access to food' (TSU, 2008b, p. 40) participants expressed considerable disdain for the welfare system's functioning and ability to do this. Participants commented that increasingly they/third-sector organizations were enabling people to 'get by' rather than the state supporting individuals. The manager of a youth charity who had initiated food support activities commented that:

'You shouldn't have to have charities in place for people to make ends meet or to help them with their food.'

This highlights the different expectations expressed by participants as to with whom responsibility for household food security lay: the state, third sector or in combination. This reflected a long-standing debate regarding the roles of philanthropy and

the state in responding to poverty, including food poverty (Leat, 1998; Jones, 2000; Dowler and Caraher, 2003), of which household food insecurity was the latest stage. This is important given that the responsibility for addressing household food security was transferred in part from the state to third-sector organizations (food redistribution and food growing organizations) in the final strategy document.

At the time of interview food-bank managers expressed frustration regarding the increase in recession-related unemployment and poverty they were responding to. They noted an increase in the number of food parcels requested to help households where benefit claimants were waiting for payments to arrive following recognition of their eligibility by the state. Based on these accounts the delay was taking at best an average of two to three weeks. Consequently, it could be argued that some organizations were subsidizing the welfare system and its institutional inefficiencies. The director of a national food-bank organization explained the situation as follows:

*'And so a lot more people have been made redundant or they've lost their jobs or their contracts have not been renewed. And in the face of all of that, pressures on individuals and families has not gone away. And we haven't got a, what I would call, a government structure, or a national framework for speeding up the response to individuals' needs. And for example, little things like when people go for their benefits, government is unable to provide benefits in a timely manner and the crisis hotline which is supposed to be the solution to making sure that people who are entitled to their benefits get immediate financial support, is just overwhelmed and doesn't work. So we are finding that we are increasingly called upon to provide support for people who, for want of a better description, are entitled to benefits.'*

Moreover, the director's narrative went on to highlight how those experiencing food insecurity did not neatly fit into policy constructions of the socially excluded:

*'Low income and low rates of benefits does trap a lot of people in poverty. That's an endemic problem and that needs to be addressed. But on the other hand there are lots of people who do get into crisis who may not be entitled to extra support from the state who just need a temporary hand and for those people you can't say, "Oh well, the government should be bailing them out". What we're saying to them is, it would be jolly nice if the government could be bailing them out, but where do you draw the line. Now I'm not in the business of telling the government where to draw the line. What we want to do is to tell the government we're willing to work in partnership with you to make sure that people who are in poverty get some kind of support.'*

What is evident in this extract is the perceived boundary between what institution (state, third sector or in combination) should have responsibility for overcoming food insecurity and the possible negotiation of roles. But, also how this is blurred by the distinction made in the categorization of those eligible for state support and those who need more temporary help.

Another food-bank manager also discussed the institutional inadequacy of the welfare system for those in 'crisis' – this term draws on and reflects a status used in British welfare policy for discretionary 'crisis loans' to individuals. The leaflet produced by the organization to encourage food donations and raise awareness of the service utilizes this rhetoric (see Figure 1). The leaflet emphasizes and reports the

failings of the benefit system for individuals and households, and uses the rhetorical power of ‘people in crisis’ to construct the need for additional support for households in the local community to access food.

The food-bank manager stated that their organization was struggling to stay open and expected to close (and subsequently did one month after interview). For the manager this was worrying as they could not identify any other provision to meet the existing local need, stating:

‘There will be nothing available... we sent everyone [referral organizations/agencies] a questionnaire... asking what other options were available for people in this situation and there is no other organization... I have had a probation worker said he went out and bought some stuff for somebody, but clearly they’re not supposed to. So that’s it. You know, Social Services, the government, you know, nobody acknowledges the need.’

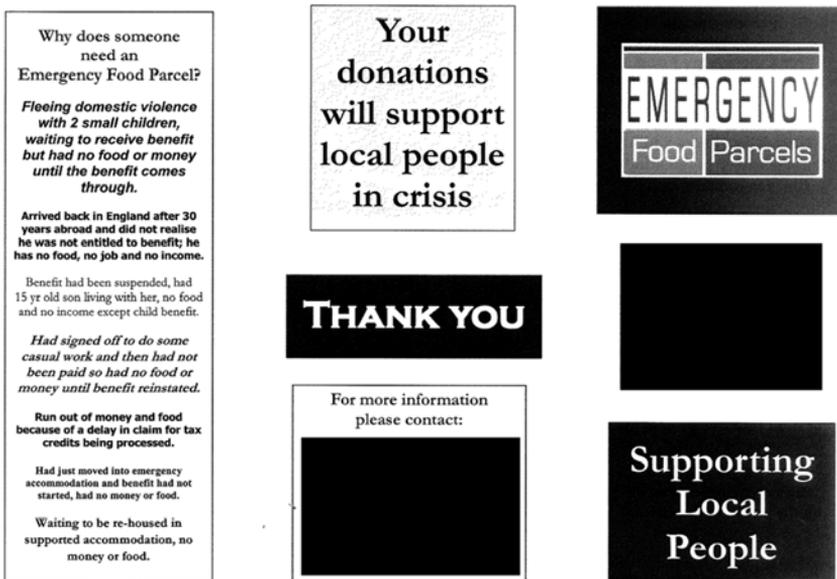
One explanation given by the food-bank manager was that charitable funders assumed that the state system met any poverty-related need (‘the basics’), and hence funding was orientated to other areas of perceived need. Consequently, the food bank could not find support from either the charitable or public sector to fund emergency food relief services:

‘It’s not one of the “in” things. The “in thing” is children, youth work, getting them off the streets, healthy living, but just the basics, it just doesn’t fit into people’s criteria.’

Continuing:

‘Because we’re working in an area, which is not recognized as being an area of need... for example, if the government or the council said, “Oh yes, we

Figure 1. Emergency food parcel leaflet (2009).



Source: anonymized, reproduced with permission.

actually do need an organization to be providing forty food parcels a week, who can we get to do that, or who can we support to do that." There is no recognition of that need whatsoever.'

## Conclusions

I have problematized the emergence of household food security in England from a second-order perspective to gain an insight into how the construction and perception of a problem can influence the identification and justification of responses by different actors (Foucault, 1984; Collier et al., 2004). The focus has been on welfare-related matters of household food security as a representation of the social contract in a contemporary setting (Patel and McMichael, 2009). The analysis has revealed how the situation and potential responses were constrained by the dominance of existing institutions (the welfare state), discourses (food poverty and social exclusion), and political ideology (rights with responsibilities and the neo-liberal order).

In more detail, the institution of the welfare state dominated policy and practitioner perceptions to the extent that this was institutionalized into responses. For example, policymakers deemed this system as being the most appropriate to address the impacts of poverty on food provisioning, and their utilization of welfare state rhetoric in policy texts closed down possible changes in welfare delivery to respond to the situation. Whilst practitioners constructed the welfare system as contributing to the problem, yet incorporated this institution and its practices into their responses, such as food-bank support for individuals in crisis. Both policy texts and practitioner accounts reflected the presence of the welfare state and poverty in connection to food provisioning; yet, this is where any similarity revealed by the problematization ends. Practitioner perspectives were subject to the powerful discursive legacy of food poverty and access, and remained focused on responding to these issues through a variety of actions. Whereas, policy texts made household food security an 'object of thought' (Foucault in Collier et al., 2004, p. 3), and consequently enabled the concept to be constructed as *different* to poverty, and support justifications for a different approach that was orientated to countering socio-spatial exclusion and stimulating cultural change through personal responsibility in food choices (TSU, 2008b; Defra, 2010).

Problematizing household food security by following the term's introduction into an English policy setting revealed the concept's organizing power. It also highlighted how the concept was strategically and opportunistically adopted and adapted by policymakers. For example, hunger was constructed as a relatively extreme experience to household food insecurity. This enabled policymakers to use the metaphor of hunger to close down consideration, and potential recognition, of hunger in English households but open up the possibility of food insecurity existing. Whereas later in the policy process the recognition of household food security as a domestic policy issue was made possible in part through food redistribution practices offering policymakers a ready-made solution (Poppendieck, 1995; Kingdon, 1995). Moreover, the problematization process explicitly undertaken by policymakers (reflected in TSU, 2008a, 2008b) utilized the concept as a device to maintain rather than question the existing distribution of resources in society. This may have prevented consensus between policy and third-sector actors about the problem and possible solutions, and contributed to the limited mobilization around household food security and its subsequent failure to extend into participant perspectives, particularly when the

dominance of existing discourses is recognized. This also holds implications for future policy developments and debates surrounding food provisioning and welfare in England.

The policy developments also highlighted how household food security was used as a governing mechanism: reflecting techniques associated with normalization processes (Foucault, 2009). In the policy texts individuals classed as insecure became subject to the operation of political and relative cultural constructions of their behaviours and situations – epitomized through social exclusion rhetoric – leading to attempts to bring the marginal population and individual behaviours into closer adherence to the prescribed norm represented by household food security and its association with responsible food choices. In contrast, third-sector participants tended to emphasize the processes and/or relations that generated and represented the problem rather than the norm and what outcomes could be achieved; often appearing problem driven rather than outcome orientated, which may also account for the disparity between policy and practitioner representations of the situation.

The article has emphasized the need to examine how household food security is understood in different contexts with the implications this holds for all within society (included and excluded, secure and insecure). In England, the concept could only be discerned by contrasting it with those signifiers attached to food poverty, food access and social exclusion. This echoes the importance of recognizing the concept as a political and relative construct. Thus, in different places household food security will have different meanings and implications for the social contract, social norms, and everyday practice. Attention must continue to be placed on how this organizing concept organizes.

The organizing work takes place through the redrawing of the social contract: who and what is to be the focus of resource (re)distribution and the mechanisms by which this is to be delivered. As the achievement of household food security is considered to be beyond the capabilities of the welfare state alone, by both policymakers and research participants, a mixed food welfare landscape has emerged. This new landscape might reproduce or re-express existing inequalities; it might also provide new opportunities to challenge them.

## Notes

1. A discourse is a system of meaning that can influence material practice.
2. Challenges to the concept's power are occurring as food security becomes politicized and its applicability to contemporary practice is questioned by the rights-based discourse of food sovereignty in different contexts (Patel, 2009; Lawrence and McMichael, 2012; Lee, 2013).
3. Social exclusion is not referred to elsewhere in the strategy but appears in a later document (CFPA, 2010, p. 9) accompanied by a naïve construction of spatial exclusion illustrated by a photograph of a street of terraced housing (signifying a traditional working class area), taken from behind a wire fence with a skip of rubbish in the foreground.
4. Archived minutes are published online at <<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/food/policy/council/reports.htm>>.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Sample description by organizational activity and site.

Main organizational activity	Site of activity		
	National (UK)	Regional (Northeast England only)	Local only (specific sites in Northeast England)
Emergency relief	1		3
Food growing		2	2
Health			1
Food retail/redistribution	1	3	
Advocacy	2		
Charitable funder	1		



## **Responses to the Crisis of Neo-liberal Globalization: State Intervention in Palm Oil Production in Chiapas, Mexico**

HÉCTOR B. FLETES-OCÓN AND ALESSANDRO BONANNO

*[Paper first received, 23 January 2013; in final form, 2 July 2013]*

**Abstract.** Employing the case study of the cultivation of African palms for the production of palm oil in Chiapas, Mexico, this article probes the theme of alternative patterns of development to neo-liberal globalization. In particular, it discusses the issue of the return to state intervention (neo-Fordism) as an instrument to promote socio-economic development. Chiapas has been the theatre of the Zapatista movement of 1994. As a result of that popular uprising and despite its overtly neo-liberal posture, the Mexican state intervened significantly in Chiapas. In this context, the monoculture of the African palm has been pursued as a strategy to address local poverty among farmers, generate alternative and renewable forms of energy and provide a scheme for socio-economic growth in the area. This article illustrates the contradictory results of this 'interventionist' developmental project and the consequences and resistance that it entailed. The analysis of this case reveals the problematic nature of nation-state led interventionist schemes in a context marked by the emerging crisis of the neo-liberal model. It also underscores the significance of local initiatives that are generated by the aspirations and abilities of local residents.

### **Introduction**

In the 1970s, the crisis of the Fordist regime (O'Connor, 1974; Habermas, 1975; Bonanno et al., 1994) ushered the era of neo-liberal globalization (D. Harvey, 2005). For the last three decades, neo-liberalism has offered the ideological underpinning for the construction of an increasingly global capitalism. The claim that the economy and society work better when the market functions autonomously and is free from state intervention and regulation defines our times. Characterized by a high level of capital mobility, deregulation, expanding transnational networks of production and consumption, global private standards, and accelerated exploitation of labour and natural resources, neo-liberal globalization is the dominant form of contemporary

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capitalism (Stiglitz, 2003; D. Harvey, 2010; Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2011). In recent years, however, recurrent economic, political, and social crises have allowed many commentators to contend that neo-liberal globalization has experienced a legitimization crisis: neo-liberalism cannot keep its promises to society, and its class dimension is overt (e.g. Lupel, 2005; Helleiner, 2010; Dumenil and Levy, 2011; Raulet, 2011; Overbeek and Van Apeldoorn, 2012). Similar arguments have been made for agriculture and food (Busch, 2011; Bonanno, 2012). The essence of this position can be summarized in three points. First, the theory of neo-liberalism is far removed from reality. There are too many unjustified assumptions and inadequate interpretations about the functioning of society to justify the statement that reality is accurately reflected by this theory. Second, the outcomes of neo-liberalism favour dominant groups overwhelmingly. The world elite, the so-called 'one percent' (Flank, 2011; Van Gelder, 2011; Byrne, 2012; Collins, 2012), has benefited enormously from neo-liberalism while the middle and lower classes and the global poor have seen their socio-economic conditions deteriorating. Third, the application of neo-liberal measures leads to recurrent economic, social, and environmental crises. Often, solutions to these crises have not been sought through free-market oriented measures but through state intervention. From the financial sector to natural disasters, to employment and economic growth, the market has not been able to address crises. Conversely, calls for state intervention (i.e., bailouts, clean-ups, stimulus programmes) have been seen as more desirable and have been proposed from all sides, including global corporations.

It is this recurrent request for state intervention that represents the backbone of arguments about the developing legitimization crisis of neo-liberalism and the attractiveness of neo-Fordist state interventionist strategies (Underhill and Zhang, 2008; Tabb, 2010; Krippner, 2011; Krugman, 2012; Pollard, 2012). Despite calls for less regulation stemming from the intellectual and political right (Bhagwati, 2004; Cohen and DeLong, 2010; Greenwood, 2011), state intervention has emerged as the most commonly sought and practiced response to the crisis of neo-liberal mechanisms and of neo-liberal globalization itself. Summarizing this sentiment and lauding the virtues of the Fordist era, the left-leaning economist and Nobel laureate Paul Krugman (2012) contends that, today, Fordist-style state intervention can generate both balanced economic growth and a much more just society.<sup>1</sup>

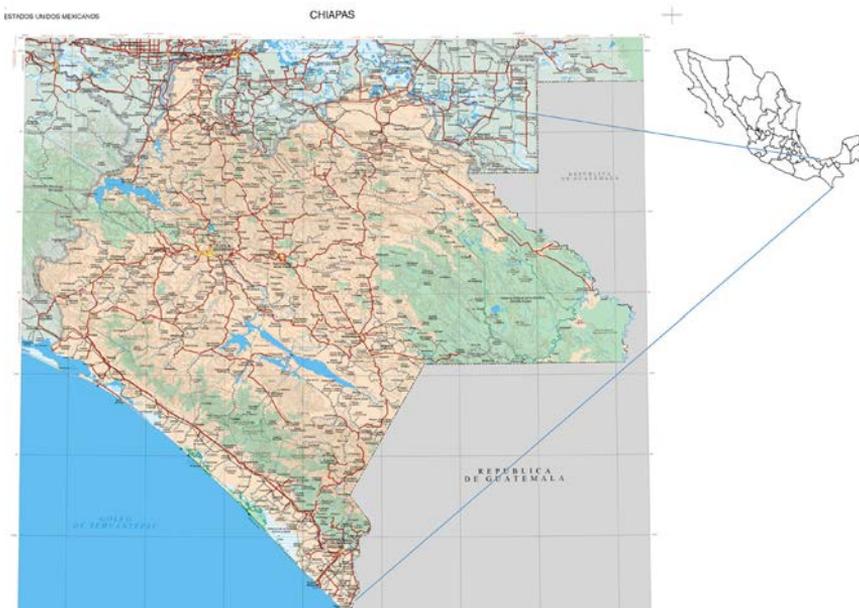
Literature on the legitimization crisis of neo-liberalism (e.g. Lupel, 2005; Helleiner, 2010; Raulet, 2011; Overbeek and Van Apeldoorn, 2012; for agri-food, see Wolf and Bonanno, 2014) underscores that the search for solutions to the various crises of neo-liberalism (i.e. financial, economic, environmental, social and political) generated two major types of responses. The first camp proposes a greater dose of free market mechanisms (e.g. Bhagwati, 2004; Cohen and DeLong, 2010; Greenwood, 2011). It is argued that the market is still very much constrained by state intervention and regulation. Therefore, further deregulation, reduced state intervention and austerity measures are the prescribed solutions. The second camp (e.g. Lupel, 2005; Raulet, 2011; Krugman, 2012; for a review of this literature, see Hudis, 2013) contends that in mature capitalism, market mechanisms engender instability and crises. Accordingly, it is enhanced state intervention that is required to address existing problems. They call for the end of austerity politics and propose a return to Fordist-style state intervention and policies (neo-Fordism). Most of the positions within this camp do not necessarily subscribe to the 'regimes of accumulation' thesis. In these accounts, rather than a regime, neo-liberalism is seen as a complex of actions and ideological

constructs that is dominant in society but that can be, and is, opposed. It is not necessarily a system, but it represents those more or less organized forms through which the dominant class attempts to maintain power. Alternative actions based on different ideological constructs are possible. A return to enhanced state intervention in the economy and society, they contend, is the desirable solution for current problems.

As these neo-Fordist calls for a return to an interventionist state characterize debates over the evolution of neo-liberal globalization, doubts remain about the effectiveness of a solution that has encountered significant limits and criticisms in the past (O'Connor, 1974; Habermas, 1975; Lipietz, 1992; Wolf and Bonanno, 2014). Accordingly, the objective of this article is to probe the effectiveness of calls that wish to propose more state intervention. We wish to contribute to discussions that seek alternatives to neo-liberalism but also contemplate concerns about the use of state intervention. Ultimately, we would like to offer some insights into the possibility that market mechanisms and state intervention may not necessarily be appropriate solutions to the problems of today's society.

This theme is probed by examining the consequences of the reintroduction of Fordist-style measures as solutions to the current crises of neo-liberalism. More specifically, this article offers some insights into the contradictions generated by state intervention in developmental schemes in agriculture and food in a less-developed region of the South. It studies the case of the implantation of palm oil production in the state of Chiapas in Mexico (see Figure 1).

This is a case in which the – otherwise neo-liberal<sup>2</sup> – Mexican state intervened to promote the cultivation of African palms for the production of agrofuel in the state of Chiapas. Because of the political, historical and socio-economic conditions that characterize Chiapas, and for the case of this state only, the Mexican state has maintained an interventionist posture that resembles past Fordist strategies as its



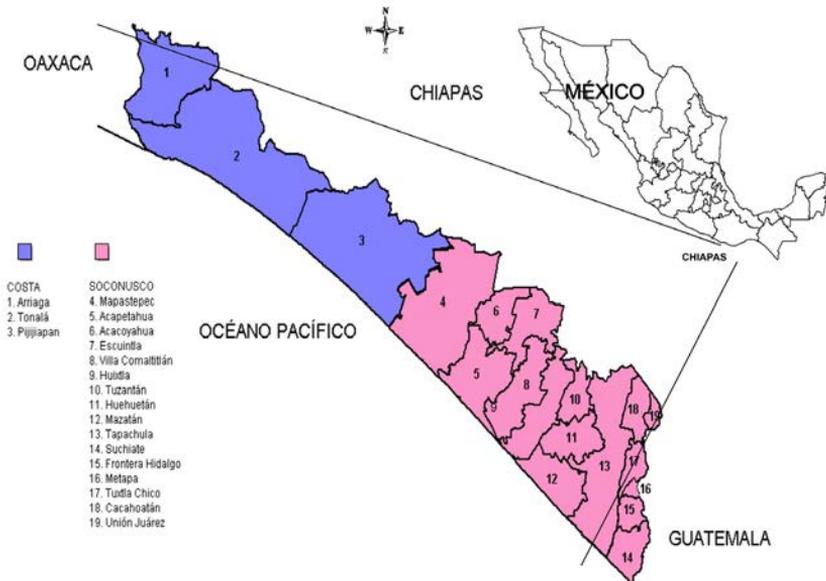
**Figure 1.** Chiapas, Mexico.

Source: authors' elaboration on map from Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía.

double objective has been to promote socio-economic development and maintain social legitimation.<sup>3</sup> As indicated above, the research question that is addressed in this work refers to the desirability and effectiveness of a social system characterized by state intervention. While the complexity of this issue prevents this article from being exhaustive, this case study offers some elements that could contribute to the discussion on alternatives to neo-liberal globalization and new forms of Fordism (neo-Fordism) (Bonanno, 2012; Krugman, 2012).

We employed a case-study methodology. The case has been researched through the examination of existing documents and quantitative data, interviews with key informants, and site visits. Interviews were carried out in palm producing areas in the regions of Soconusco and Costa, which are among the primary palm producing regions in Chiapas (see Figure 2).

Data were analysed through the use of techniques of *saturation* and *negative cases* whereby the conclusions were confronted with alternative interpretations that were not selected. This posture allows for the generalization of conclusions (Berg, 2007; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). This article is divided into five sections. The first analyses the historical context of the case. It discusses Fordism, its crisis, and the development of neo-liberalism in the context of globalization. The evolution of agriculture in Mexico under neo-liberalism is discussed in the second section, along with specific information on the state of Chiapas. The third section illustrates the case study, documents the expansion of the African palm culture for the production of palm oil, and discusses the contradictions associated with this process. The contradictory dimension of state intervention is analysed in the next section. Finally, from the case study it is concluded that alternatives to both neo-liberalism and new forms of state intervention could be desirable solutions in agriculture and food.



**Figure 2.** Areas of research, Soconusco and Costa, Chiapas, Mexico.  
 Source: authors' elaboration on map from Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía.

### Context: Fordism and Neo-liberalism

The setting for this research is the state of Chiapas in Mexico and the context is neo-liberal globalization (Prasad, 2006; Crouch, 2011). In the early 1980s, Mexico began to introduce neo-liberal measures in the governing of its economy and society (Merrill and Miró, 1996; Morton, 2003; Otero, 2004). This was part of the international process to address the crisis of Fordism (Aglietta, 1979; D. Harvey, 1989, 2005; Stiglitz, 2002; Bonanno and Constance, 2008). Throughout most of the twentieth century and, particularly, after World War II, Fordism was the system of organized capitalism that coordinated mass production and mass consumption, generated steady accumulation, enhanced democratic legitimacy, produced unparalleled economic growth and abundance, and forged a consumer culture. In advanced societies, the 'capital-labour accord' gave management ultimate control over the labour process and production, but organized labour was granted collective bargaining power to negotiate salary, benefits, and work conditions. Consequently, many workers shared substantially in productivity gains, and enjoyed much increased benefits. Participating actively in politics, unions helped to shape policymaking, planning, and labour legislation. The Fordist state employed Keynesian policies of advanced fiscal controls, broader socio-economic regulation, and expanded health, education, and welfare benefits. The middle class grew enormously, and many people attained the standard consumer package and sharply improved living conditions. Post-war Fordism enhanced inclusion of many formerly marginalized people, raised the social wage, and advanced equal opportunity and equality of condition, especially in social democracies. However, the middle class and the overall class system remained complexly and steeply stratified. The lowest strata benefited little, and sharp inequalities between dominant and subordinate races, ethnic groups, and genders, production workers and professionals, non-union workers and unionized workers, as well as the economic distance between developed and developing countries manifested the era's political compromises and pattern of bureaucratization. Inequalities of this sort existed to some degree worldwide. In the advanced North, Fordism was criticized particularly as state intervention and mediation were viewed as forms of oppression and domination over the masses (Marcuse, 1964; O'Connor, 1974; Habermas, 1975; Offe, 1985). In the case of the South, Fordism was viewed as a system that extended the control of core countries and their multinational corporations over developing countries and their people, increasing economic and political dependency and domination (Frank, 1969).

At Fordism's economic high tide, attacks came from all sides of the political spectrum for its alienating, depoliticizing, regimenting, homogenizing impacts. The intellectual right sharply criticized the political nature of state interventionism by showing its distortions and long list of unwanted consequences. In the classical manifesto of neo-liberalism, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman directly criticized Fordism in agriculture by lashing at commodity price support programmes (1982, pp. 181–182). Introduced to stabilize agricultural prices and support the income of farmers – in particular for those operating small family farms – but also to control surplus labour, they were viewed as instances of wasteful expenses, bureaucratization and inefficiency. For Friedman, price support programmes created unwanted surpluses, kept farmers on the land despite low income and poor expectations for economic growth, increased food prices for consumers and, paradoxically, discriminated against the very small, family farmers that they were supposed to assist. Government intervention altered the unbiased functioning of the market in

favour of a system determined through political negotiations and compromises that inevitably suffered from the influence of powerful special interests. In effect, Friedman argued that the creation of farm programmes in the US was the result of the over-representation of rural areas in the electoral system and Congress (1982, p. 181).

Equally critical of price support programmes were authors that wrote from the Left (Rodefeld et al., 1978; Buttel and Newby, 1980). Both the populist and Marxist Left attacked price support programmes for their ineffectiveness and inefficiency, waste of resources and, more importantly, for distributing funds in ways that discriminated against poor segments of society. These criticisms were not just limited to the US but equally applied to other parts of the world, including the European Union (then European Economic Community), Japan and Australia (Johnson, 1973; Mottura and Pugliese, 1980). Sharply opposing pronouncements of supporters of neo-liberalism, the Left called for more democratic forms of state intervention that would bring substantive equality, freedom, and well-being to society (Jessop, 1982; Carnoy, 1984; Offe, 1985).

In less-developed countries such as Mexico, the benefits of Fordism were less visible. Yet and despite contradictory policies, state intervention redistributed resources, created needed infrastructure, and allowed a good portion of the numerous peasant class to stay on the land (Hewitt, 1999; Otero, 1999, 2004). While social inequality and instability remained high and the urban elites increased their power and wealth, price-support programme mechanisms, land redistribution measures, investment in infrastructure, and entitlements *de facto* contained migration from rural to urban areas and to the US and guaranteed low but sustainable living standards to rural residents. To a significant extent, peasant agriculture was supported and its development encouraged (Weller, 1998; Hofman, 2000). In Mexico, import substitution strategies initiated in the 1950s boosted industrial production and productivity while the stable exchange of the peso promoted exports. The result was a significant expansion of the economy that, by the end of the 1960s, enabled Mexico to be largely self-sufficient in food crops and most consumer goods (Merrill and Miró, 1996; Pechlaner and Otero, 2010). In agriculture, investment for the creation of infrastructure expanded cultivated land while efforts in extension improved the quality and quantity of production, including that generated by the peasantry. To be sure and despite these improvements, the problems of poverty and immigration remained (Galarza, 1964; Merrill and Miró, 1996; Hewitt, 1999; Otero, 2004).

By the early 1970s, more competitive international markets, high social welfare costs, the oil crisis, recession, social resistance, and other problems led to Fordism's demise. Supporters of neo-liberal globalization saw the Fordist state to be the cause of economic contractions and related social pathologies. The appeal of neo-liberal ideology and Anglo-American efforts to weaken labour, slash the welfare state, reduce wealthy people's tax burden, deregulate the private sector, and privatize the public domain undermined Fordism. Particularly successful was the neo-liberal design to replace the politically driven state intervention with 'neutral' market forces (Habermas, 1975). Friedman and like-minded neo-liberal theorists argued that state intervention is always influenced by powerful interest groups and rarely works efficiently and to the benefit of the intended groups. Conversely, market forces operate in ways that are independent from particular interests and tend to reward meritorious groups and actions. Through market forces all people will receive what they deserve (Friedman, 1982, pp. 180–185). The appeal of this proposal was significant as it represented a credible alternative to the dissatisfying inefficiency and ineffec-

tiveness of state intervention and its wasteful costs, large bureaucracy, and frequent abuses (Friedman, 1982).

The establishment of neo-liberal globalization marked an era in which the application of market mechanisms, a much reduced social state, and the enhanced mobility of capital characterized the economy and society. Equally important was the subordination of political decisions to market forces. The pursuit of profit in the free market was elevated as the most fundamental condition of the operation of society (D. Harvey, 2003, 2005). This economization of politics defined neo-liberal globalization (Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

As neo-liberal globalization expanded, contradictions mounted and economic, social and political crises emerged. Solutions, however, were increasingly sought through state intervention rather than market mechanisms (Underhill and Zhang, 2008; Helleiner, 2010; Raulet, 2011; Pollard, 2012). While supporters of neo-liberal globalization called for additional market liberalization and austerity measures,<sup>5</sup> state intervention has been viewed as the most effective solution. Dismissing conservative and left-leaning arguments against Fordism, neo-Fordists stressed the relevance of state intervention at the economic, social and political levels. Economically (e.g. Krugman, 2012; Pollard, 2012), the importance of Keynesian economic policies (deficit spending and market regulation) was emphasized along with the historical ability of these policies to address deep recessions. Politically (e.g. Raulet, 2011), they denounced the neo-liberal posture that equates profit making with 'good for all' political decisions. This 'economization of politics', they contended, limited political participation of the middle and working classes. Giving priority to processes guaranteed by state intervention, they argued that balanced mechanisms that foster economic growth but also social stability should be achieved. Socially (e.g. Collins et al., 2008), neo-liberalism's restructuring of social welfare mechanisms and programmes largely eliminated their availability to, and effectiveness for, the working and middle classes. A return to state intervention in the social was viewed as necessary and a fundamental condition to stimulate demand, reignite socio-economic growth and generate pacified and stable social relations. Despite the relevance of many of these pronouncements, the fact that state intervention has not been as effective as hoped in the solution of problems has brought to the fore the question of the desirability of a return to Fordist style measures.

## Setting

### *Mexico*

In agriculture in Mexico, the implementation of neo-liberalism centered on the progressive elimination of state-sponsored programmes and opening of markets. Targeted were support programmes like those that supported peasant agriculture, local food production and consumption, and land redistribution. The acceleration of this process in the 1990s is symbolized by the reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which de facto abolished the *ejido* system in 1992, and Mexico's membership of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1994 (Cornelius and Myhre, 1998; Otero, 1999, 2004; Morton, 2003). The *ejido* system was one of the institutions directly derived from the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920. It provided public land<sup>6</sup> to peasants and was intended to be a system in support of peasant agriculture. It also allowed the existence of networks of local food production that permitted *campesinos*

to have access to basic food stuff. The reform of the *ejido* system made this land available for commercial use. Simultaneously, the Mexican state ended its support of agricultural labour and de facto promoted its immigration to the US (A. Bartra, 2004). The signing of the NAFTA in 1992 and its implementation in 1994 opened Mexican agriculture to US and Canadian exports. Without the protection of government programmes, local farmers could not compete with producers from the North, and Mexico imports of basic food stuff increased rapidly and dramatically (González Chávez and Macías Macías, 2007). As a result, Mexican producers were forced to specialize in the export of high value products such as fruits and vegetables and relatively reduce the production on basic food products such as corn.

An important consequence of this change was the policy shift from the Fordist 'food security' to the neo-liberal 'market opportunities'. Under Fordism, one of the objectives of the domestic agricultural policy was to generate adequate production to satisfy the needs of the country and those of the poor and working population in urban and rural areas alike (Ramirez Silva, 1989). In this context, in the four decades following World War II, agriculture was identified as a strategic sector that could support the expansion of urban areas and the interests of the ruling class, but also control the overabundant rural labour force and deliver some benefits to peasants and small producers (R. Bartra, 1974; Ramirez Silva, 1989; Merrill and Miró, 1996). The neo-liberal shift to 'market opportunities', conversely, decoupled social goals from economic objectives and made the market-driven search for profit the essential dimension of the national agricultural policy. While a handful of producers benefited from neo-liberal measures and the growth of the export market, the vast majority of farmers experienced a deterioration of their living conditions, *campesinos* lost most of their ability to produce food for self-consumption and lower and middle classes urban consumers were hurt by food prices increases (González Chávez and Macías Macías, 2007; Pechlaner and Otero, 2010). There was a progressive impoverishment of the Mexican peasantry and small and medium producers as programmes created to alleviate the opening of the market were poorly funded and inadequate to improve production structures and productivity (Otero, 2004). As market forces and unfair competition from the North – commodity support programmes remained much stronger in US and Canada (Pechlaner and Otero, 2010) – depressed living conditions in rural areas, immigration increased (A. Bartra, 2004). Defined as 'the import of food and the export of farmers' (A. Bartra, 2004), neo-liberal agricultural policy worsened the conditions of many segments of Mexican society (Pechlaner and Otero, 2010).

#### *Chiapas: Resistance to Neo-liberalism and Neo-Fordism*

In the case of Chiapas, Table 1 indicates the extent to which the use of land devoted to the production for domestic consumption (primarily corn) has been redirected to the production of industrial or export crops. In this respect, the case of Chiapas follows the same pattern experience in the rest of the country (Lechuga, 2006). Yet the recent history and overall conditions of Chiapas are significantly different from that of the rest of Mexico. Located at the southern tip of Mexico, bordering Guatemala, Chiapas is synonymous with poverty, social marginalization, and a high concentration of 'indigenous population' or *indios*. The most recent official data indicate that about 32% of the local population is defined as 'indigenous'. Although agricultural production has historically been the primary economic activity, in the last 20 years

**Table 1.** Land employed for principal crops in hectares, Chiapas, changes 1993–2011.

Year	1993	2001	2008	2011
Corn	744926	938908	699921	711199
Coffee	231328	241029	254275	257367
Beans	97520	126353	118471	118391
Palm	3,823	16793	19290	38525
Sugar cane	20651	27496	28817	31584
Mango	13101	17656	25979	26484
Banana	22599	23845	25007	24355
Cocoa	30000	22637	19781	19717
Sorghum	8,133	13431	14862	13306
Soy	6,868	11978	10614	14366
Sesame	1,359	9,544	8,388	9,073
Watermelon	1,707	1,267	2,363	1,779
Rice	2,119	847	1,406	523
Beef	NA	2531102*	2387567	2538781
Pork	NA	674882*	780429	772644

Note: \*data refer to 2002.

Source: authors' elaboration on data from Servicio de Información Agroalimentaria y Pesquera.

the average size of local farms has decreased from 13 to 8.6 hectares and the number of farms that remained active in agriculture has also decreased from 99.5% to 88.2% of all farms (INEGI, 2007). This was the result of a complex set of factors that included the fragmentation of property due to inheritance (land divided among the members of the farm family) and the use of land for alternative activities. In this context, more production has been directed toward fruits and vegetables and crops for industrial use, such as the African palm sugar cane and mango, and less toward food crops for local consumption.

On January 1, 1994, as NAFTA took effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (or EZLN) initiated a rebellion against the Mexican government. They denounced the exploitative nature of neo-liberal globalization as the claim of 'land, freedom and self-determination for the indigenous people and the dispossessed' echoed around the world. What became a peaceful movement forced the neo-liberal Mexican government to grant local residents significant autonomy. Simultaneously, the Mexican government inaugurated a policy of support and socio-economic intervention in Chiapas with the declared objectives to combat poverty and promote development. However, the actual agenda had social control and the appeasement of the large pro-Zapatista international public opinion as its unspoken goals.<sup>7</sup> In essence, the otherwise neo-liberal Mexican state initiated a Fordist style interventionist strategy to exercise social control in Chiapas.

In this context, the state of Chiapas was granted a *de facto* special status, and the issues of autonomy for the indigenous people, socio-economic growth, resistance to social exclusion, and opposition to neo-liberalism constantly occupied centre stage in the international arena. This situation translated into a continuous economic intervention of the Mexican state in Chiapas as, in 2011 alone, the Mexican government spent the equivalent of USD 0.5 billion for programmes in this state. Among these government-sponsored programmes were the 'social development' and the 'fight against inequality' initiatives. These types of Fordist programmes received almost two third of the funds and significantly more than other and more market-

oriented projects such as the Chiapas Competitivo y Generador de Oportunidades (for a competitive Chiapas creator of opportunities). Additional funds were made available through international programmes that provided resources to the Mexican government (Sabines, 2011). It is important to stress that these programmes were directed primarily to small farms as farming remains a fundamental component of the local economy (Sabines, 2011).

## The Case

### *The Expansion of African Palm Production and the Politics of Agrofuel*

One of the programmes initiated by the Mexican state in Chiapas consisted of support for the cultivation of the African palm. The rationale for this intervention rested primarily on two items. First, the Mexican government sought ways to legitimize its actions in regard to the poor socio-economic conditions of, and political instability in, Chiapas. In particular, the deep-rooted problem of poverty in the region remained too visible and required intervention. Additionally, the domestic but, above all, international public opinion depicted the Mexican state's actions in Chiapas as 'authoritarian'. Programmes that would mitigate this negative image appeared necessary and desirable (Morton, 2011; Ramor, 2011). Second, a wave of protest against the instability of, and increases in, corn prices and concerns over the use of food crops for the production of ethanol prompted the Mexican government to attempt to reduce the use of fossil fuel through the production of renewable energy sources that did not involve corn and other food crops. Because of its agronomic performance,<sup>8</sup> the cultivation of the African palm was identified as an effective means to produce agrofuel (Ramirez Zamora, 1991; Pineda Morales, 2009).

Funds for the African palm project came also from the local government. Both federal and local state officials defined the African palm project as an opportunity to stimulate the local economy and create growth for the impoverished local population while contributing to the energy and food questions. Reducing the amount of food crops used for energy production had become a widely supported proposition. This rationale was reminiscent of Fordist plans as it contemplated the implementation of productive activities whose declared objectives were the socio-economic development of local communities and their social stability. These objectives broke with calls for 'market opportunities' that had defined the actions of the Mexican state since the 1990s (Morton, 2011).

To be sure, in this project the federal government took a much more prominent role than the local government even though the local government enacted many of the project measures. Following a tradition of centralized authority and reduce local autonomy, the hierarchical posture that characterized federal-local state interaction in Mexico was reproduced (A. Bartra, 2004; Morton, 2011). In this context, Chiapas state officials acted in ways that adapted to the requirements of Federal plans. Concerns about often-imposed sanctions – such as reduced budget allocations and the curtailing of political careers of local officials – shaped the moves of the officialdom of the local state. Exceptions to the strict control of Federal authorities consisted primarily of situations in which local mobilization supported local government's actions. In Chiapas during the years of the Zapatista uprising, the relationship between the EZLN and the local government represents a case in point (N. Harvey, 1998; Collier, 2008).<sup>9</sup>

Originally cultivated in Guinea, West Africa, the African palm was imported to South and Central America in the twentieth century. Along with Mexico, six other countries – Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras, Brazil, and Guatemala – have been actively engaged in its production. In Chiapas, the palm appeared in the 1950s (Ramirez Zamora, 1991; Pineda Morales, 2009). The weather, humidity, and height and depth of the soil in the area proved a perfect ecosystem for its development, and, today, palm oil has become one of the most profitable products for vegetable oil. The oil is divided into ‘crude oil’ and ‘kernel oil’. The crude oil is generated from the crushing of the palm fruit. Kernel oil is extracted from small almond-like fruits that can be found in the centre of the palm. Both types of oils are widely used as they are employed as primary ingredients in the production of more than 200 items and as components for about 900 more in a variety of industries, including food, house and cleaning products, and cosmetics (Pineda Morales, 2009). In Mexico, the production of palm oil is distributed in three regions of the tropical humid South and Southeast. In the South in the state of Chiapas, palms are produced in Soconusco, Costa and Selva regions. In the Gulf of Mexico, production is concentrated in the state of Veracruz and in the state Campeche. Chiapas is the largest and most efficient producer, with about 67% of the total land cultivated, 81% of production, and the highest yield (17 metric tons per hectare in 2010) (López Trujillo, 2007, p. 47; SIAP, 2010).

In 1952, 30,000 seeds were imported and planted on 200 hectares by a local firm. The establishment of this first commercial plantation was accompanied by the construction of the first plant for the extraction of the oil. Later, this firm introduced new seeds from the Ivory Coast and increased production on 700 hectares (Ramirez Zamora, 1991, p. 5; Velasco, 2010). Growth was steady but remained relatively limited. It was in the mid-1970s that the National Commission for the Cultivation of Fruits (CONAFRUT) began to promote the crop. For this purpose and until 1982, CONAFRUT imported more than one million seeds from Indonesia, the Ivory Coast, and Costa Rica and equipment with the processing capacity of two tons of fruits per hour. In the following years, planting spread through the area and palms appeared in a number of communities. Yet, problems seemed to outnumber benefits. Issues with crop management, poor skills in the processing of the fruits, and limited availability of funds to finance operations were listed as reasons for the poor performance of the crop by the Mexican Department of Agriculture. In effect, limited extension support and experience with the crop prevented farmers from achieving desired results.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1990s, the political instability and social protest generated by the action of the Zapatista movement, and, to a lesser extent, the search for alternative energy sources created impetus for state intervention. A new push to increase palm oil production began in 1996, during the government of Ernesto Zedillo. At that time, palm oil demand amounted to 130,000 metric tons, but domestic production could satisfy only 3% of this demand. Accordingly, the federal government proposed the cultivation of an additional 2.5 million hectares. Among the states selected for the project, Chiapas occupied a central position (Pineda Morales, 2009). State intervention continued into the new century and the Ministry of Rural Development of Chiapas supported by federal funds established the Palm Oil Production System in 2004. This programme was implemented in the Soconusco region in 2006, under the name of the Palm Oil Programme.

The administration of President Calderón (2006–2012) proposed a more sophisticated policy that specifically attempted to legitimize state actions while fostering

processes of capital accumulation. Faced with the contradiction between food production and the cultivation of crops for alternative energy sources, this Administration recommended the cultivation of African palms on marginal land only. '[I propose]', Calderón wrote, 'the utilization of marginal land to obtain the inputs necessary for the production of agrofuel. This process should not affect food security and should not affect the security of the environment'. Dwelling on this strategy, two programmes were created: the 'Programme of Sustainable Production of Inputs and the Programme of Introduction of Bioenergetic Products' (Calderón, 2008, pp. 266, 267). Following these directives, in Chiapas, state intervention in agriculture was shaped to go 'beyond food production' and develop new energy sources to meet the challenges of the society and the needs of the Mexican population (Sabines, 2007, p. 219).

In support of this strategy, in February 2008 the act named Promotion and Development of Bioenergy was passed. Its objective was to foster energy diversification and sustainable development in order to guarantee support for Mexican rural areas. Following the approval of this act, in May 2008, the federal government introduced the Inter-sectorial Strategy for Bioenergy. It called for 'the promotion and expansion of production lines of biomass inputs and the production of bioenergy that would promote energy security through the diversification of energy sources. It would generate and integrate synergies and provide support for sustainable rural development' (Calderón, 2008, p. 209). The government further developed the programme Sustainable Production of Inputs for Bioenergy and for Scientific and Technological Development. In this context, it was established to bring to production 300 000 hectares of African palm with a first installment of 70 000 hectares in 2009 (Calderón, 2008, p. 209).

The Calderón administration and the local state viewed the promotion of agrofuel as part of the overall process of intervention for the modernization of Chiapas and as a way to address social, environmental, and economic concerns. An official statement – aptly named 'productive reconversion' – described this effort accordingly: '[Our objective] is to promote the substitution of traditional crops, such as corn for self-consumption, that affects the environment [sic], with others that are sustainable and that maximize profit' (Government of Chiapas, 2009, p. 1). The state government further proposed the Chiapas Solidario Development Plan for 2007–2012. According to this programme, priority was given to the introduction of new agrofuel-oriented crops given the limited availability of renewable energy in Mexico. Moreover, a report of the Mexican Petroleum Institute underscored the importance presented by future diversity of fuel markets in the case of both fossil and renewable energy (Sabines, 2007, p. 218). It also argued that the introduction of new crops for renewable energy would generate new research for agrofuel production with limited or no environmental impact, such as biodiesel, ethanol, hydrogen and methane. In 2007, the state of Chiapas established the Institute of Bioenergy and Alternative Energy and, just in the region of Soconusco, three palm nurseries. These nurseries supplied plants to producers at no cost (Pineda Morales, 2009).

To be sure, the neo-Fordist dimension of this posture was tempered by appeals to market conditions. Featuring a deficit in vegetable oils and fats, in 2012 Mexico imported about 85% of its 400 000 ton demand of palm oil. The Chiapas state government calculated that 'it would be necessary to have a production area of about 115 000 hectares, with an average yield of 18 tons per hectare, for 2 million tons of crop to cover the domestic demand' (IRBIO, 2011). To that end the state of Chiapas

planned to plant palms on 100 000 hectares during the six year period of 2007–2012. It was hoped to have 68 000 hectares operational in 2011 (IRBIO, 2011). Arguing that agrofuel production should ‘provide a greater amount of renewable energy for public transport’, the state built three processing plants in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Cintalapa, and Puerto Madero. As the price of palm oil remained high and following the decoupling of agricultural production from food production, numerous political and business actors decided to pursue the cultivation of the African palm rather than food crops. Indeed, the land devoted to the production of palms increased by 19 000 hectares from 2008 to 2011.

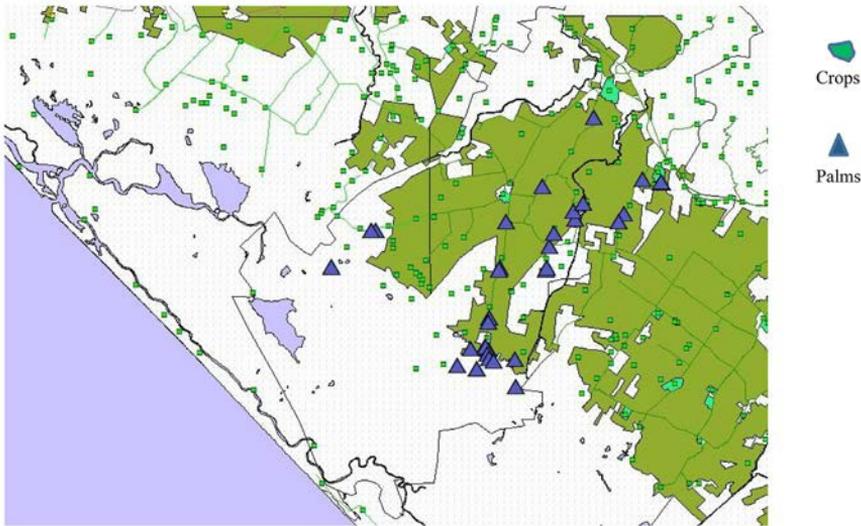
Pronouncements about the effectiveness, extent, and benefits of state intervention contradicted the outcomes of this process. In the early stages of the programme, the state provided support to farmers through a variety of programmes, including the establishment of fields, cleaning, fertilization, and harvesting as well as direct payments. Later, most of these programmes ended because of fiscal problems of the state. In recent years, support has been limited to the delivery of the young plants and minor support for the first year of operation. Additionally, despite state claims about the use of palm oil for agrofuel production, it has actually been employed exclusively for other industrial uses. The lack of infrastructure, the unavailability of an ineffective distribution system, and production costs higher than those of fossil fuel have prevented the expansion of agrofuel in Mexico. Accordingly, state intervention has remained characterized by fiscal problems while state pronouncements present an image that is different from the actual development of the region. It can be argued, therefore, that state intervention is not only limited by fiscal problems, but attempts to legitimize it clash with an overtly different reality.

To be sure, farmers did respond to these government programmes by increasing their participation in the cultivation of the African palm. Interviews with local producers indicated that they perceived an advantage in producing palms primarily because of market conditions. The fact that the state provided free trees was considered important, yet secondary. These two factors, local farmers contend, created significant incentive to initiate implantation of the monoculture. They pointed out, however, that the transition from food to industrial production was not without problems.

First, because of higher prices, farmers planted palms on prime land. The planting of palms on land that has been employed traditionally for the production of corn, sesame, *plátano macho* (a local banana variety), vegetables, fruits for export (as mango) and pastures is now common in Chiapas (Fletes, 2011). Also, palms have appeared on protected areas land. For example, palms have appeared on a 7,000 hectare section of the Selva Lacandona (in Southeast Chiapas), an ecosystem reserve that should have been off limits to any commercial culture and on Encrucijada (Soconusco), a biosphere reserve. Additionally, the fact that surrounding parcels are also planted diminishes the diversity of the ecosystem and makes it more vulnerable to decay and pests (Fletes et al., 2010) (see Figure 3).

Second, and as mentioned above, farmers experienced economic difficulties during the three years needed to generate the first crop. Earlier, the state provided monetary payments for the productive reconversion. As this programme ended and economic problems became more difficult to handle, farmers began to plant food crops along with palm trees, compromising the efficiency of both types of cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Third, because more land is devoted to industrial crops, fewer food crops are sent to local markets and less food is available for self-consumption. According to



**Figure 3.** Palm plantations on basic crop and fruit areas in the ecosystem reserve Encrucijada.

Source: authors' GPS map.

estimates from a local survey (Fletes, 2010), about 20% of local food production was replaced by palms. Additionally, interviews with local farmers tell stories of substitution of palm production for food crops. One farmer states: 'I plant only palms... I do not believe that planting other crops is efficient... I used to produce rice, corn and bananas in great quantities but now I produce only palms.' Another farmer says: 'I had cattle but also mango and corn. But now it's all palms.' In a context in which the availability of food crops is already insufficient, the growth of palm production has been accompanied by food imports from national and international markets. Accordingly, food is available increasingly through formal market transactions and is less available to those of limited means. As some farmers were able to increase their cash flow, others suffered the consequences of the formalization of food consumption (see Figure 4).

This is a situation that has affected the level of food sovereignty of local residents. Finally, the instability of the oil market makes producers (particularly the many small farmers in the regions) vulnerable to decreases in price. With virtually no alternatives to the monoculture and limited ability of the state to assist, drops in prices have serious consequences to the local economy and communities (see Figure 5).

#### *Processing Plants and Farmers*

Throughout most of the 1990s, the limited presence of processing plants or *extractoras* prevented farmers from increasing the participation in programmes to expand palm production. In Soconusco only two plants were in operation at the time. Given the relatively limited processing capacity and growing supply, farmers could not sell their production and were often forced to leave their crops to rot in the fields. This situation was partially altered in the subsequent years and, by 2012, there were seven processing plants located in the state. This was the result of state plans to facilitate



per metric ton. During the following two years, the price declined but subsequently rose steadily. By 2011, crude oil sold at about USD 1,100 per metric ton. The price paid to producers is set by the *extractora*. It is published at the plant and updated periodically, allowing producers to know exactly how much they would receive for their crop. The local price paid in 2012 was about USD 130 per metric ton. Prices also change according to the delivery destination. Direct delivery of fruits to processing plants commands higher prices than those paid at delivery points – or *recibas*. Distant *recibas* pay lower prices.

Farmers also like the payment system. They receive a check when fruits are delivered to the receiving facility. These checks are highly appreciated as they could be cashed immediately and, given their popularity, circulate as informal currency. Because the fruits can be harvested every 15 days and the price is known in advance, this rapid payment system and its transparency represent a significant departure from existing practices. With other crops, such as fruits, vegetables, and grains, prices are set by a complex system run by intermediaries and are frequently unknown to farmers. Despite the fact that processing plants determine the price to be paid, farmers feel that they have more control of their business in palm production than in the case of other crops.

This rosy view of the growth of African palm cultivation is accompanied, however, by problems for farmers. They view those who manage/own processing plants as actors who have significant power over them. While processing plants need raw material to operate, plant managers' ability to choose among a relatively large number of producers give them asymmetrical power over farmers. In effect, managers of *extractoras* not only do establish actual buying prices, but decide with whom to do business. Farmers that are not liked by managers risk not being able to sell their crops. Moreover, farmers feel that the experience of processing plant leaders and their knowledge of the sector puts them at a disadvantage. This power asymmetry is identified as a source of uncertainty for farmers. Additionally, attempts to establish agreements with *extractoras* through the 2000s resulted in farmers' increased mistrust. As a result, processing plants are viewed as entities that want to take advantage of farmers. Often, farmers have asked for the support of local state officials to address this problem. However, state intervention in this controversy has lacked as mediation between the parties has not materialized, and the local state has not been able to mitigate the mistrust that farmers harbour for *extractoras*.

Farmers' dissatisfaction with the power of *extractoras* has translated into resistance. In particular, farmers decided to draw plans to own an *extractora*. In 1999, a number of small producers joined forces to form an association that included 300 members and about 2,500 hectares of land. In the following years, the difficult relationship between farmers and *extractoras* confirmed the farmers' belief in the benefits of owning a processing plant. Despite these good intentions, a number of obstacles stood on the way, including the lack of financial resources and technical and managerial personnel. The turning point occurred in 2009 when the society was able to recruit a local engineer with background in the sector and work experience in the United States. Under the leadership of this individual and a local producer, the society was able to recruit and train a sufficient number of technicians and workers to staff a plant. Additionally, this association was able to negotiate the use of an older facility that was built in the 1970s and, later, was placed out of production. The negotiation was particularly successful and generated favourable conditions such as free rent. This plant became fully operational in 2009. Aided by available state-sponsored

programmes (such as the Tropico Humedo programme), the growing demand for crude oil, effective management, and support from farmers and the community, this group was able to generate sufficient capital and credit to build a new plant. Construction initiated in 2011, and the new plant was completed in April 2012. Privately owned *extractoras* responded by establishing private support programmes for producers such as programmes for the direct collection of harvested fruits on the field, sale of inputs at discounted prices, and technical assistance. Despite this support, the volume of fruits available to processing plants diminished because of the success of the farmer-owned plant.

## Discussion

There are a number of problems that make state intervention in African palm production in Chiapas ineffective and inefficient. At the *economic level*, the cultivation of the African palm did generate the positive result of higher returns for farmers. Despite being exposed to global market price fluctuations, farmers welcomed the system of direct payments and the practice to be paid frequently. Yet and despite state plans, palm production displaced food crops on prime land causing less food to be sent to local markets and available for self-consumption. Because local food consumption became increasingly connected to external food supply chains, farmers and local residents became more and more exposed to food price fluctuations, depended on cash availability for the acquisition of food, and experienced a reduced level of food sovereignty. Ultimately, state intervention rather than diminishing the dependency of local farmers and residents on global markets, increased it. State action was not able to reconcile the expanded economic opportunities for farmers with the overall socio-economic stability and well-being of the local community.

At the level of production of *alternative energy on marginal land*, state intervention created a system that is significantly different from original plans. These plans contemplated the production of alternative, renewable energy on land that could not be employed for food production. Their desirability was justified by claims that they were beneficial to farmers, society and the safeguard of the environment. In reality, African palm oil produced in Chiapas was never employed in the energy sector. It has been exclusively employed as a food additive and industrial input. State plans for alternative energy production never materialized. As in other instances of agrofuel production, the negative environmental impact contradicts its assumed economic benefits. The CO<sub>2</sub> emission of palm oil production is higher than that generated for the production of fossil fuels (Holt-Giménez and Kenfield, 2009; Jonasse, 2009; Castaneda et al., 2011). It has been calculated that the carbon emission for oil production is 10 times larger than the emission generated for the production of fossil oil (Manrique, 2010). Accordingly, state intervention promoted a form of energy that is renewable but not environmentally and economically sound. The claim that the expansion of palm production would be on marginal land also never materialized. The state could not control its growth on prime land and on ecosystem reserves. These negative environmental consequences add to the problems associated with food availability for poor residents of the regions indicated above.

At the *organizational and planning levels*, state plans for cultural reconversion were inefficient. Despite goals to create payment programmes to support farmers' incomes during the reconversion, the state's fiscal crisis prevented the generation of adequate technical and economic assistance to producers. Furthermore, the state

could not control problems between farmers and processing plants. While the state facilitated the construction of a number of plants and supported the strategy to reduce the asymmetric power between *extractoras* and farmers, the control that plant managers and owners exercised over farmers remained strong. Farmers responded by establishing their own processing plant. As the confrontation continued, the state was unable to mediate between the parties.

## Conclusions

The research presented in this article speaks directly to the issue of the desirability of state intervention in a context (Mexico) dominated by neo-liberal ideology and practices and in a region, Chiapas, characterized by economic underdevelopment and social unrest. The case of Chiapas' production of the African palm represents an instance of state intervention that had a number of economic and social goals. Economically, it intended to improve the conditions of local producers and produce agrofuel as an alternative source of energy. The protection of the environment and the construction of sustainable forms of energy production were among the key objectives of the state. Similarly important was the state concern with social legitimation. Chiapas has been the theatre of overt strong protest against the Mexican state that gained international support and visibility. State intervention was designed to control resistance and appease the local population. The African palm project was part of a state intervention plan to satisfy certain economic, social, environmental, and political objectives.

The many contradictions that characterized state intervention in Chiapas support the claims of ineffectiveness and inefficiency that fueled the neo-liberal critique of Fordism and its ideological and political clout over the last four decades. Despite explicit plans to promote economic expansion, enhance social stability, create alternative and renewable energy sources, and protect the environment, the results were off target. Following critique from the Left, state intervention maintained its class nature and failed to achieve substantive gains. While farmers' incomes were enhanced, the overall exposure of local farmers and residents to the unwanted consequences of market forces increased. Similarly, food sovereignty decreased as less food was accessible in local markets and its availability was increasingly linked to formal market mechanisms and the corporate actors that control them. State intervention helped subordinate the lives of local residents to global forces and fostered their disembedding from the local context.

These contradictions cast doubts on the desirability of state intervention in a context defined by the crisis of neo-liberal globalization. As neo-liberal globalization seems to have exhausted its legitimacy, the return to state intervention seems equally problematic. The state, in its national and local forms, seems ill-equipped to face economic, environmental, and developmental challenges in a context in which social relations are increasingly shaped by distant actors and processes. While the importance of state action cannot and should not be diminished, evidence from this case suggests that alternative options should be considered and eventually promoted if democratic forms of development and socio-economic growth are sought. In particular, the case study reveals the significance of local initiatives that are fueled by the aspirations and abilities of local residents. Two instances should be recalled in this respect: the establishment of a farmer-owned processing plant and the manner in which farmers handled the transition from food crops to the palm monoculture.

The establishment of a farmer-owned processing plant is an example of the ability of local farmers and residents to mobilize available resources, create new and effective forms of organization, and propose locally generated plans for socio-economic development. The additional benefits of this empowering initiative are many and include the generation of added value that is kept in area, the harmonization of key facets of the production process, farmers' control of the production process, the reduction of differences in power between farmers and the processing industry, and the strengthening of local social bonds and solidarity. The manner in which farmers handled the transition to the palm monoculture is telling of the ability of local residents to generate solutions to emerging problems. Simultaneously, it is also an indication of the limits that local initiatives may encounter in the absence of autonomous institutions of coordination and planning. This is particularly the case in a context characterized by strong centralized state action. While it was relevant for farmers to continue food production on land devoted to palm production, the coexistence of the two cultures was neither productively efficient nor environmentally sustainable. It appears, therefore, that the presence of local institutions that would coordinate these activities and that would allow a more direct participation from all stakeholders could represent a beneficial turn.

Following the indications from the case study and as the debate on the crisis of neo-liberalism and the limits of a possible application of a neo-Fordism model unfolds, attention to the initiatives of local actors and their empowerment, but also to the contradictions and limits that these actions entail, can constitute important elements in the discussion on the creation of better patterns of socio-economic development.

## Notes

1. To be sure, this literature does not argue that neo-liberal globalization is no longer dominant. It simply stresses that its various and recent crises have been addressed through proposals involving state intervention.
2. Mexico has been the theatre of the significant introduction of neo-liberal measures. While state intervention in agriculture was not totally dismantled, it was reduced much more than in the US and Canada. These are Mexico's counterparts in NAFTA (see Pechlaner and Otero, 2010). While some programmes and agencies were restructured but remained in place (i.e. the PROCAMPO programme, BANRURAL was renamed and reorganized as Financiera Rural), many others were eliminated. The turning point of this restructuring was the act Ley de Desarrollo Rural Sustentable passed in 2001.
3. Fostering economic growth and legitimizing existing social arrangements were the declared objectives of the Fordist state. In effect under Fordism, the success of any nation state was determined by its ability to promote capital accumulation and, simultaneously, maintain social legitimation (Aglietta, 1979; Carnoy, 1984; Lipietz, 1987, 1992; Antonio and Bonanno, 2000).
4. Despite ideological claims, under neo-liberal globalization corporations actively sought state support. In this regard, the reduction of state intervention refers to the 'social state'. For an elaboration of this issue, see Bonanno and Cavalcanti, 2011.
5. Austerity measures resulted in economic stagnation, high unemployment rates, lack of productive investments, and the deterioration of public services. This neo-liberal action engendered resistance by the general public that protested declining socio-economic well-being and bleak future perspectives. It also created opposition from corporate groups that lamented limited state assistance and the lack of additional corporate freedom (Habermas, 2012; Lapavistas, 2012).
6. The *ejido* system adopted a number of ways to distribute land to *campesinos*. It distributed federal land; restituted land to communities and small towns; expropriated private land and redistributed it to *campesinos* and more. Under the traditional system, *ejidatarios* (*campesinos*) were allowed to use communal land and control the products generated by the cultivation of this land.
7. There is a copious literature on the Zapatista movement and rebellion. See N. Harvey, 1998; Collier, 2008; Ramor, 2011; Morton, 2011.

8. The African palm has an annual yield of nearly 5,000 kilograms of oil per hectare (10 times greater than other oilseeds such as soy), which translates into approximately 6,000 liters of biodiesel (Pineda Morales, 2009; Miccolis and Teixeira de Andrade, 2012).
9. The relationship between the government of Chiapas and the EZLN is complex. While a formal alliance was never signed, this relationship was significantly different from the overt opposition that existed between the EZLN and the federal government.
10. According to the government: 'This failure was due, among other things, to the fact that producers depended on credit for their operations. This credit was partial and inadequate. There were errors in the processing phase which affected the ability to create efficient processing plants. Finally, there were problems with the crop management strategies that were not clearly established' (Velasco, 2010, p. 92).
11. Farmers indicate that the shade created by grown palms limits the growth of other crops. Additionally, they also reported that practices for the cultivation of the palm are often incompatible with the needs of other crops.

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# **Governing Global South–North Organic Food Exporting: Possibilities for Democratic Engagement and Impacts for Smallholder Farmers**

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**Abstract.** Export of certified organic agricultural products is one of a number of market-based development strategies for improving the socio-economic and ecological realities of smallholders in the Global South. Yet the outcomes of participation in these export-led initiatives have been mixed. The extent to which organic export agriculture might deliver benefits to smallholders is, at least in part, related to the deliberative capacity of organic governance processes – on which participation in organic exporting relies. Deliberative capacity is taken to include broadly inclusive and authentic inclusion of smallholders, and other local actors, in organic governance processes. This article contributes to understandings of participation in organic governance and its outcomes by evaluating smallholder and other Southern actor engagement in three aspects of organic governance arrangements: organic standards, compliance and inspection requirements. The results presented here – drawing from fieldwork in Uganda and Ghana – demonstrate that, on the one hand, organic governance arrangements are characterized by limited democratic engagement and decision-making; standard-setting processes largely exclude smallholder and other Southern actor interests, as well as creating new forms of dependency between smallholders and export companies. However, and in other circumstances, the introduction of group certification and local inspection services has provided smallholders with bargaining power with export companies and northern buyers. These spaces point to possibilities for organic governance to improve the socio-economic and ecological realities of smallholders in the Global South.

## **Introduction**

Pathways for ‘development’ in the Global South frequently situate the globalization of rural land and labour as central to economic growth. This ‘global development’ agenda has delivered socio-economic and ecological problems for Southern smallholder farmers, and exacerbated domestic food insecurity and food import dependence<sup>1</sup> in many countries and regions (Bello, 2009; FAO, 2010; McMichael, 2010). Yet despite its limits, especially in terms of its capacity to deliver national and local-level

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food security, global development is normalized and institutionalized via a range of regulatory and policy frameworks, and demonstrated in a range of contemporary processes, including international trade, foreign direct investment and the so-called global land grabs (McMichael, 2010, 2013; Cotula, 2012). Responses – and resistance – to this development model are varied. On the one hand, civil society, smallholder farmers, consumers/citizens and researchers have coalesced in a diversity of alternative food networks and food sovereignty movements,<sup>2</sup> including those that aim to localize markets, shorten agri-food supply chains, and support peasant and subsistence agriculture (Whatmore et al., 2003; Whittman et al., 2010; Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). A number of Southern and Northern actors have also sought to improve export markets by embedding socially and environmentally sustainable practices, including via the formation of alternative agri-food standards. Organic food and farming standards are amongst these. In recent years the certified organic sector has experienced significant growth in the Global South. While there remain gaps in the data related to organic production, the FAO (1999) predicted an expansion in South–North organic trade of 20% each year and as an outcome of this expansion, an estimated 10% of the world’s organic farmers are now located on the African continent, with most of these smallholders (Parrott and Marsden, 2002; Bouagnimbeck, 2008; Willer and Kilcher, 2011). The majority of Africa’s certified organic produce is sold on export markets, demonstrating the emphasis on certified organic agriculture as a ‘trade not aid’ approach to development, as well as the limited presence of domestic organic markets and local alternative food-trading networks (for example, see Freidberg and Goldstein, 2010).

The expansion of African organic exporting raises a number of obvious tensions. For example, some food justice activists have argued export-led agriculture reduces the land and labour available to ensure local and/or national food security, as well as tying smallholder livelihoods to the whims of Northern consumer preferences, corporate actors, and organic certification requirements (for example, see Freidberg, 2004; Parrott et al., 2006; Lyons et al., 2012). Some within the organic movement have also opposed African organic exporting on the basis of concerns that airfreight of organic food (and the associated carbon emissions) is antithetical to the core environmental principles of the organic movement. This ‘food miles’ debate<sup>3</sup> coalesced in 2007 when the UK Soil Association proposed organic standards would prohibit the use of airfreight for transport of organic produce. While the UK Soil Association subsequently dropped this proposal, thereby appearing to respond to broad calls for social and economic justice for African smallholder farmers via participation in international organic markets, many unresolved questions and tensions remain.

It is in this contested terrain around South–North organic exporting this research is located. In this article, I examine the extent to which the expansion of export-led certified organic agriculture opens space for authentic and inclusive forms of deliberative democracy (see Dryzek, 2009), and with outcomes that might enable smallholder farmers and other Southern actors to shape their socio-economic and ecological realities, including the outcomes of their participation in export markets. To assess this, empirical data are drawn from research in Uganda and Ghana, countries that have undergone varying degrees of expansion in organic exporting across commodities and sectors.

The results presented suggest mixed outcomes in terms of smallholders’ and other Southern actors’ deliberative capacity. On the one hand, the analysis demonstrates the certified organic sectors in Uganda and Ghana are sustained, to a great

extent, via the exclusion of Southern actors (including national organic peak bodies, civil society and farm groups) in general from the governance of organic agriculture, and smallholders in particular. This is demonstrated in the dominance of Northern actors in defining both organic governance arrangements and the content of organic standards; and the limited extent to which Ugandan and Ghanaian organic farm and civil society organizations and smallholders have succeeded in shaping organic agri-food export networks in ways that represent their socio-economic and ecological interests. As such, the claims of development agencies and corporate actors related to the impacts for smallholders associated with participation in organic exporting are often disconnected from the lived realities of smallholders themselves.

However, and at the same time, some organic farm and civil society organizations and smallholder farmers have negotiated aspects of the terms of their participation in export markets, including their relationships with export buyers. The formation of a smallholder group certification scheme and local inspection arrangements has been central in establishing the conditions for this deliberative capacity. In these contexts, actors have been able to shape aspects of both the processes, and outcomes, of alternative organic agri-food initiatives. This bargaining power of organic smallholders and other Southern actors represents what Friedmann and McNair (2008) refer to as ‘cracks’ in international trade deliberations, providing potential new pathways to ensure trade relationships are equitable and socially just.

### **Global Agri-food Development and Democratic Engagement**

Agri-food systems are characterized by ongoing technological, economic and sociocultural transformation. In recent decades, this transformation and restructuring has been shaped significantly by structural adjustment, modernization and industrialization (see McMichael, 2010, 2013). The production and consumption relations that underpin the corporate food regime that has emerged from this transformation are shaped by corporate markets and global value chains, and mediated via global private standards and regulations (Neilson and Pritchard, 2009; McMichael, 2010; Oya, 2012). This regime is also underpinned by mantras of growth and productivity, which in turn drives further technological innovation across the agriculture and food sectors.

The policies and practices underpinning the corporate food regime shape the global development project, and further integrate smallholder and peasant farmers into cash cropping and export markets; including as suppliers of ‘dessert’ commodities such as bananas, sugar, cacao and coffee, as well as non-traditional and out-of-season crops, including cut flowers and winter vegetables to Northern markets (Freidberg, 2004; Dolan, 2008; Holt Giménez et al., 2009). This transformation from traditional and/or domestic production, to production for export markets, has occurred unevenly across temporal, geographic and social locations (Borras et al., 2008, p. 170). Despite this variation, general trends emerging from these restructuring processes demonstrate growing import dependence and food deficits for countries in the South, the results of which have greatly reduced Southern farmers’ capacity to control their food systems (Holt Giménez et al., 2009).<sup>4</sup> The expansion of the corporate food regime has also reduced the viability of agroecological and low-carbon farming systems (Patel and McMichael, 2009).

Opposition to the social and ecological ruptures associated with export-led agricultural development is articulated in a diversity of alternative food networks

and food sovereignty movements (Schanbacher, 2010; Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). While some of these movements are not antithetical to export agriculture, they frequently place at their core support for trade policies and practices that, first and foremost, serve the rights of people, and only after that consider food as a tradeable good.

But what form and content might trade policies and practices take so as to serve the rights of people, especially smallholder and peasant farmers in the Global South? For international peasant movement *La Via Campesina* this includes trade relations that are 'appropriate to democratic conditions of food production and distribution' (McMichael, 2005, p. 287). It is the extent to which organic export agriculture might converge with democratic conditions, and their effectiveness in delivering social and ecological benefits to smallholders, that is the focus of this article.

While there is a range of approaches for evaluating the democratization of organic governance arrangements, and its outcomes, this article focuses on aspects related to decision-making processes. Drawing from deliberative democratic political theory, deliberation and participation are now widely recognized to be part and parcel with democratic decision-making (Dryzek, 2009; Sarkissian et al., 2009; Pretty, 2012). Proponents of deliberative democracy assert that those affected by decision-making should be engaged in dialogic processes related to such decisions, and in ways that enable them to shape the outcomes so as to reflect their social, economic, ecological and other aspirations and needs (for example, see Dryzek, 2009). While this participatory turn is widely recognized as being one of a number of mechanisms for democratizing decision-making processes, and their outcomes, it is also critiqued for failing to deliver on such promises. The 'inclusive' and 'empowering' discourses frequently associated with deliberative engagement, for example, are also criticized for masking the exclusion of certain groups – including minority groups – thereby reinforcing the interests of the most powerful (for example, see Cooke and Kothari, 2001). And after civil society and social movement (often) hard-fought victories for recognition as legitimate actors in deliberative dialogues, their inclusion in 'insider' deliberations may be ineffective in influencing decision-making in ways that deliver positive social and environmental changes. Participation in deliberative processes may also redirect scarce organizational resources away from other, arguably more strategic, activities (Schlosberg and Dryzek, 2002; Whelan and Lyons, 2005).

In the context of such limits, Dryzek (2009, p. 1382) has articulated some of the terms and conditions that might be required for effective and democratic dialogue and decision-making – or more broadly, what he refers to as 'deliberative capacity'. First, he argues deliberation must be authentic, enabling participants to freely reflect on their values and beliefs, including the freedom to change one's mind, as well as to reciprocate with others engaged in deliberative processes. Second, deliberative processes should be broadly inclusive of a diverse range of actors, representing a broad range of interests and discourses. Third, deliberative processes should result in outcomes that have consequences for decision-making.

To critically evaluate the extent to which organic exporting might engender democratic dialogue and decision-making – or more specifically, deliberative capacity – this article examines decision-making processes related to the governance of organic food and agriculture. A number of participatory and inclusive models of organic certification have emerged in recent years, including related to organic certification in the Global South, that form the basis of this analysis (see Hatanaka, 2010; Nelson et al., 2010; Konefal and Hatanaka, 2011; Lyons et al., 2012). This participatory turn

is particularly evident in the African context, and is connected with growing calls for greater inclusion of African actors in organic governance arrangements. The Lusaka Declaration on Mainstreaming Organic Agriculture into the African Development Agenda, for example – an outcome of the Second African Organic Conference, Lusaka, Zambia, 2–4 May 2012 – articulated the importance of both participatory research and collaboration with African stakeholders to ensure equivalence between African and export organic standards, including international recognition of the East African Organic Products Standard.

To date, there has been relatively little research that evaluates the various forms of deliberative decision-making processes in export organic agri-food networks, and the effectiveness and implications of these deliberative models for democratic governance (for research in related fields, see Raynolds, 2004; Jaffee, 2007; Bacon, 2008; Dolan, 2010; Hatanaka, 2010; Nelson et al., 2010). This article contributes towards filling this gap, by analysing the social relations that shape South–North exporting of organic agriculture produce.

More specifically, in this article I will evaluate critically the extent to which the socio-economic and ecological realities and priorities of smallholders and other Southern actors are brought to bare as part of decision-making processes, and in turn are reflected in organic standards and compliance requirements and processes. On the basis of these findings, I will assess the authenticity of claims related to democratic and participatory organic governance with the lived realities of those engaged in certified organic agriculture exporting and organic governance arrangements in the Global South.

On the one hand, South–North export relations have been repeatedly defined by their inequitable power relations, injustice and food insecurity (Holt Giménez et al., 2009; Oya, 2012). However, and at the same time, organic governance arrangements (including standard-setting, auditing, etc.) represent sites of negotiation and struggle between stakeholders from the South and North – particularly as international organic certification bodies seek to ensure organic standards are locally appropriate, meaningful and acceptable, and as international traders seek to engage local communities as part of a broader commitment to corporate social responsibility. As such, organic agri-food governance provides spaces for civic and democratic engagement, and where smallholders are – to some extent – able to occupy multiple, fluid and contested roles in shaping both the agricultural development agenda and its socio-economic and ecological outcomes (Larner and Le Heron, 2002; Gibson-Graham, 2006; DuPuis and Gillon, 2009; Raynolds, 2012). Friedmann and McNair (2008) describe these spaces of civic engagement (and contestation) as ‘cracks in the asphalt’, or openings for smallholders, farming organizations and others to assert bargaining power, thereby reshaping agriculture and food systems. Adding to this understanding, Raynolds (2012) describes such civic engagement as providing space for social regulation, where the values of diverse actors, including social movements, are able to inform organic standards. Examining these spaces of civic engagement – the focus of this article – opens up the possibilities for identifying and analysing the contingent, partial and fluid bargaining power of smallholders, and in so doing, avoids polarizing the experiences and socio-economic and ecological outcomes associated with engaging in export-led agriculture (see Oya, 2012).

This article now turns to an overview of organic agriculture governance globally. This provides the context to examine the extent to which smallholders and other Southern actors have been engaged in deliberative processes, and with outcomes

that have shaped decision-making related to organic exporting in two selected countries, Uganda and Ghana.

### **The Governance of Organic Agriculture**

The corporate food regime has enabled the production of high-volume and, until recently, low-cost food. Yet the recent spikes in food prices (in 2007–2008, and again in 2011) – an outcome of a combination of factors, including speculative investment by finance capital, the burgeoning agrofuel industry and climate change, amongst other factors, may signify the end of cheap food (for example, see Moore, 2012). This increasingly costly (in economic, social and ecological terms) bulk and largely undifferentiated food is incompatible with the values of a growing number of producers, consumers, retailers, civil society organizations and others, who value ‘quality’, including foods differentiated on the basis of their social, environmental and animal welfare attributes. Reflecting this, in recent years there has been a significant expansion of market and non-market arrangements for the provision of quality produce, including farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) and Slow Food movements (Donati et al., 2010), as well as the proliferation of quality governance mechanisms, including production standards, monitoring, certification and labelling (including fair trade, GLOBALG.A.P, Rainforest Alliance and organic agriculture) (Raynolds, 2004, 2012; Bacon, 2008; Jaffee and Howard, 2010; Oya, 2012). These governance mechanisms provide traceability for quality attributes across increasingly complex and distanced agri-food chains, including South–North organic export trade relationships. The emergence of organic (and other) governance arrangements is demonstrative of the so-called ‘audit culture’ that characterizes the neo-liberal governance of food and agriculture, and agriculture in the Global South is now commonly mediated by one, or a number, of these quality standards (Campbell and Le Heron, 2007; Jaffee, 2007; Bacon, 2008; Campbell, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2013).

This article is focused on governance arrangements for the expanding organic agriculture sector. Since the introduction of the first organic standard in 1973 by the UK Soil Association, Willer et al. (2008) estimate there are at least 468 governmental and non-governmental agencies that offer organic certification services. Organic certification is obtained (usually after a period of conversion) via proof of compliance with a set of standards, and generally with verification via third party-certification. Organic standards stipulate allowable inputs (e.g. animal manures and some natural herbicides), allowable practices (e.g. crop rotations, companion planting and animal husbandry practices), as well as prohibited substances (including synthetically derived agricultural chemicals, genetically modified organisms, and antibiotics). In addition, organic standards stipulate a range of social criteria (including reference to labour relations, gender equity and child labour) in an attempt to ensure equitable conduct as part of organic production and trade relations, as well as a range of environmental management criteria (biodiversity, soil fertility and water conservation), and detailed record keeping requirements.

### **Growth of Organics in the Global South**

The production of organic food and agricultural commodities has grown rapidly in the Global South in recent years, with at least 90 Global South countries producing

organic products in commercial quantities, and worth an estimated USD 500 million (Barrett et al., 2002; Reynolds, 2004; Willer and Kilcher, 2011). Demonstrative of certified organic sector expansion in the Global South, in 2010 an estimated 40% of the world's organic producers were in Asia, followed by Africa (28%) and Latin America (16%) (Willer and Kilcher, 2011). The majority of African organic produce – and the majority of organic produce from the Global South – is sold to export markets, including the European Union, the United States and Japan. Only two African nations (Egypt and South Africa) have reported sizeable domestic markets (Willer et al., 2008). The organic crops grown in Africa include fresh vegetables from Egypt, Kenya, South Africa and Zambia, dried fruit from Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Madagascar and Morocco, coffee from Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, tea from Tanzania and Uganda, palm oil and cocoa from Ghana and olive oil from Tunisia (for a detailed list, see Bouagnimbeck, 2008).

While traditional and/or subsistence farming methods – including crop rotations, intercropping, mulching and organic pest control – are frequently described as 'passive' or 'de facto' organic (for example, see Jaffee, 2007 and Parrott and Marsden, 2002, respectively), recent growth has been recorded in the certified commercial organic sector.<sup>5</sup> While de facto and certified organic farms may not demonstrate significant differences in terms of actual farming practices, certified organic farmers are required to provide proof of compliance with a set of internationally recognized agronomic, ecological and social criteria; aspects that are verified via detailed record keeping and regular farm inspections.

The expansion of certified organic agriculture and the integration of Southern farmers and smallholders into organic export markets is the focus of a growing body of agri-food and development scholarship. Prior research has examined the extent to which organic governance (alongside other factors, including the entry of corporate firms) signifies the 'conventionalization' of organic agriculture (for example, see Guthman, 2004; Campbell et al., 2010). Research in this area has identified the co-option of organic movement interests by powerful Northern actors and capitalist interests, and the subsequent weakening of organic standards, as well as adversely impacting farmers by introducing additional bureaucratic requirements and costs related to compliance (for example, see Buck et al., 1997; Guthman, 2004; Gómez Tovar et al., 2005; Jaffee and Howard, 2010). Bacon (2008), Gómez Tovar et al. (2005), Arora et al. (2013) and others have also examined the livelihood impacts associated with entry into certified organic agriculture, including standards compliance requirements, as well as the privileging of larger farms, while Reynolds (2004, 2012) and others have identified the dominance of Northern actors in defining the content of organic standards. There is also a growing body of work that examines the gendered dimensions of participation in certified organic markets, including related to the labour process, resource access and ownership (for example, see Lyon et al., 2010).

To date, however, there has been limited research that examines the politics of Southern actor engagement in organic governance processes (including standard-setting, auditing processes, etc.), and the extent to which such engagement might deliver democratic decision-making – or what Dryzek (2009) refers to as 'deliberative capacity' – thereby democratizing export trade.<sup>6</sup> Through an analysis of aspects of the social relations of production related to organic governance, this research makes a contribution towards filling this gap.

## Research Methods

The results presented in this article draw from an initial four months fieldwork in Uganda in 2005, one month fieldwork in Ghana in 2006, and follow-up fieldwork in Uganda for a period of between two and four weeks in 2006, 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013. These countries were selected to examine Southern actors' participation in, and experiences of, organic governance for a number of reasons. In 2005, when this research began, Uganda had the largest area under certified organic production in Africa. Uganda remains in the lead in terms of certified organic land in Africa; with 226 954 hectares of certified organic, or around 1.74% of Uganda's total agricultural land (Willer and Kilcher, 2011). There has been significant investment in Uganda's organic sector from development agencies, including the Swedish International Development Corporation Agency's (SIDA) support for the Export Promotion of Organic Products from Africa (EPOPA) to facilitate organic exports (Gibbon et al., 2007). The EPOPA programme ran between 1995 and 2008 (operating in three East-African countries: Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia), and providing financial support to 30 organic export companies (Parrott et al., 2006). According to Agro Eco and Grolink (Agro Eco Louis Bolk Institute, 2009), EPOPA has supported the conversion of an estimated 30 000 smallholder farmers to organic farming practices in Uganda alone. In 2005, when fieldwork in Uganda began, EPOPA was providing financial support to at least 11 companies engaged in the export of tropical fruits, cotton, vanilla, coffee, Nile perch, tilapia, sesame and spices, with a number of additional companies in the process of obtaining organic certification (including for shea butter, essential oils and honey). Interviews were undertaken with smallholders under contract with two of these export companies – Amfri Farms (tropical fruits) and Kawacom International (coffee).

In contrast, organic agriculture in Ghana represents just 22 276 hectares, or 0.15%, of total agricultural land (Willer and Kilcher, 2011). The Ghanaian organic agriculture sector has received only a few international financial supports, including funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to establish a national peak body, the Ghana Organic Agriculture Network (GOAN). A number of large commodity traders – including the Ghana Oil Palm Development Company and the Ghana Cocoa Board – are also engaged in the production of small quantities of organic produce, alongside their much larger conventional production. An estimated 3,000 farmers were certified organic in 2006, a figure that is estimated to have grown since then, and by 2009 covered around 29 140 hectares, producing essential oils, herbs, horticultural crops, palm oil and cocoa. Interviews were undertaken with smallholder vegetable producers, cocoa and oil palm producers.

Fieldwork included in-depth interviews with over 60 women and men organic smallholders, including 40 pineapple and coffee growers in Uganda, and 20 cocoa, oil palm and mixed vegetable growers (including cabbage and tomatoes) in Ghana. In Uganda, initial fieldwork was followed up with focus group discussions with a group of 15–20 growers, who were members of an organic cooperative up until 2013. Interviews were also undertaken with a number of representatives from export companies: Amfri Farms, a domestically owned tropical fruit export company; and the international coffee trading company, Kawacom International in Uganda; and the Ghana Oil Palm Development Company, owned mostly by a single Belgian shareholder, as well as minority Ghana shareholders. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives from the national peak organic organizations (National Organic Agricultural Movement of Uganda – NOGAMU, and Ghana Organic

Agriculture Network – GOAN), as well as from national and international organic certification organizations and development agencies. It also included participant observation at a number of events, including meetings, training days and workshops, as well as textual analysis of a range of government and industry documents, including research papers, advertising and promotional print and web-based material.

The data collected as part of this research have been analysed with a focus on smallholders' and other Southern actors' lived experiences in the context of South–North organic governance arrangements, with a specific focus on deliberative capacity in terms of processes related to organic standard-setting, group certification and local inspection. The following discussion presents the analysis of this data.

### **Democratizing Organic Governance Processes? Organic Standard-setting**

As explained earlier in this article, entry into organic export markets relies on organic certification, which is granted upon compliance with a set of organic standards. The codification of organic principles, beliefs and practices into systematic production, auditing and certification standards and requirements is not straightforward. Rather, standards are negotiated (and renegotiated) by movement and market actors, including farmers, farmers' organizations, development agencies, processors, retailers, traders, consumer groups and others (Lockie et al., 2006; DuPuis and Gillon, 2009; Raynolds, 2012). Friedmann and McNair (2008, p. 409) have described these messy negotiations related to organic standard-setting as representing 'arena(s) for contestation, multiplication (and) confusion'. At the same time, for DuPuis and Gillon (2009) this dialogue and/or negotiations related to the content of standards, compliance procedures and others aspects provides opportunities for actors to (re)shape the technologies of organic governance. Yet the extent to which Southern actors have been effective in shaping organic governance processes and, more broadly, the deliberative capacity of these processes appears mixed. To assess the deliberative capacity of South–North organic governance arrangements, and the impacts of this for the democratization of organic exporting, this article starts by examining the place of African smallholders, farm organizations and civil society in shaping processes related to the content of organic standards.

There is little doubt that some local actors have succeeded in ensuring their inclusion in dialogic processes alongside other international actors regarding setting organic standards. Since at least the early 2000s, for example, a number of representatives from Uganda have attended events organized by the international organic agriculture peak body, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), including conferences and trade fairs (e.g. BioFach).<sup>7</sup> Yet these forms of inclusion appear to be at the lower end of the participatory spectrum (see Sarkissian et al., 2009), with Ugandan actors occupying 'observer' roles, and African organic produce part of an exotic 'display'. While Ugandan actors (both people and products) are present, this passive status renders them as recipients of information, including standards, rather than engaged in active roles – including in forums where aspects of governance, including organic standard-setting, are negotiated and settled.

Yet in what appears to signify a shift from this passive recipient status, one Ugandan representative from NOGAMU – the national organic certification body – was elected to the IFOAM World Board in 2008 for a three-year term. This was alongside the appointment of four other Global South representatives, out of a total of 10 mem-

bers. In this role, the Ugandan representative of the World Board has participated in the Steering Committee of Organic Standards East Africa, as well as being a member of the regional standards working group responsible for drafting the East African Organic Standards. The engagement of this actor at the global level, including inclusion in standard-setting processes, may signify the growing capacity of Southern actors to participate in international dialogue over time.

While the inclusion of a Ugandan representative indicates an attempt to widen the scope in terms of both the actors and interests engaged in dialogic processes – aspects commensurate with that of deliberative capacity – there are significant limits in the extent to which this has translated into outcomes that are broadly representative of local interests and concerns. Despite the inclusion of a Ugandan in dialogue related to international standard-setting, for example, representatives from national organic organizations in both Uganda and Ghana, and a representative from the national organic certification organization UgoCert, lamented this appointment had delivered few impacts in terms of shaping the content of organic standards. As a result, they described organic standards falling short in terms of reflecting the interests and realities of African smallholders, and other Southern actors. The failure to recognize equivalence between Ugandan and IFOAM standards related to livestock handling demonstrates this.

Organic standards for livestock handling require animals to be reared on land that is certified organic. In Northeast Uganda, the Karamojong – an ethnic group of pastoral herders that have resided in this region since the 1600s – frequently move cattle across large areas of land, not all of which is certified organic. Representatives from UgoCert and NOGAMU agree it is highly unlikely activities that could exclude land from compliance with organic standards are happening in this region where the Karamojong range their cattle. The region has been – up until very recently – characterized by political and social instability, including regular cattle raids, and is isolated from incompatible land uses such as chemical-intensive agriculture and mining. As such, UgoCert requested principles of equivalence (see Barrett et al., 2002) to enable Karamojong to obtain organic certification. A representative from UgoCert explained land that cattle were grazed on in Northeast Uganda, while not certified organic, was equivalent to certified organic land. Despite years of negotiation on this issue, IFOAM eventually rejected this proposal, a decision that has excluded some herders from obtaining organic certification. A representative from UgoCert reflected on this outcome: ‘We have no bargaining power, we have absolutely no say.’

As this case demonstrates, while representatives from Uganda’s organic sector have been included in negotiation processes related to standard-setting, including via the election of a Ugandan representative on the IFOAM World Board, they express frustrations related to their constrained positionality in terms of shaping the actual outcomes of these processes. While a Ugandan representative was present in standards negotiations, they described being constrained in their capacity to shape the content of standards. Other examples of struggles related to organic standards equivalence continue, demonstrated, for example, in the yet to be resolved negotiation process related to international equivalence for the East African Organic Products Standard (see the 2012 Lusaka Declaration on Mainstreaming Organic Agriculture into the African Development Agenda).

The challenges related to the equivalence of organic standards are demonstrative of a broader concern raised by many Ugandan and Ghanaian organic advocates: that inequitable power relations enable Northern interests to ‘speak for’ Southern

stakeholders. While the participatory turn in international organic governance has encouraged Northern organic inspectors and certifiers to ‘speak with’ Southern farmers, farmers’ organizations and organic organizations – including as part of their management of internal control and participatory guarantee audit systems, detailed further below – there was little evidence that such dialogue translated into significant shifts in terms of the actual content of organic standards. As an outcome, smallholder farmers and representatives from organic organizations frequently described organic standards as inconsistent with their lived realities.

This schism was particularly evident in discussions related to the content of social standards. A representative from UgoCert, for example, lamented that social criteria (including standards related to labour conditions, gender equity, etc.) were often irrelevant and/or culturally insensitive to local circumstances. For example, he described the emphasis of organic standards on the rights and working conditions of plantation workers. He explained, however: ‘We don’t have plantation workers in Uganda; we have thousands of smallholder farmers, who mostly don’t employ farm labour. Organic standards are yet to adequately deal with the concerns and interests of smallholders.’ This example highlights the mismatch between labour-related issues on organic farms – including the specific issues for smallholders, such as the burden of costs and time related to ensuring organic compliance for farm families with small land size and minimal income – and the content of organic standards. This disconnect is revealing, given there are such social (and economic) justice claims associated with organics that are frequently relied upon as the basis for export companies’ corporate social responsibility agenda.

This disconnect between the content of standards and smallholders’ lived realities was not only raised in relation to organic standards, but also regarding other quality standards smallholders were compliant, or undergoing compliance with. For example, a number of smallholder producers required certification with Fairtrade and Utz Kapeh to comply with export buyer requirements (see Bacon, 2008). Like organic standards, these quality standards imposed requirements some smallholders described as inappropriate. For example, at a Fairtrade standards training day for organic smallholder pineapple producers in Southwest Uganda, extension officers explained that smallholders would be required to buy gumboots as protective footwear while they worked their plots. This engendered strong opposition from smallholders – including vocal group discussion and some heckling – who were otherwise supportive of Fairtrade principles, and enthusiastic at the prospects of a price premium associated with Fairtrade certification. Yet one smallholder exclaimed: ‘Why would we buy gumboots when we can’t always afford food.’ It was not simply the cost of purchasing gumboots that elicited a strong response from smallholders, but also the widely shared view that protective footwear was neither urgent, or an important, health and safety issue. Rather, smallholders identified malaria, complications during childbirth as well as AIDS and syphilis as significant health-related issues in their community. Protective footwear was low on their list of priorities compared to making available malaria testing and anti-malarial treatments, as well as local midwives and doctors to assist women during childbirth. Even in cases where deliberative processes might enable diverse perspectives and issues to come to light – a first step towards deliberative capacity – the results presented here demonstrate these issues and concerns were constrained in terms of translation into locally relevant standards.

Similarly, organic cocoa producers in Ghana discussed inconsistencies between Fairtrade claims related to social and economic justice, and their lived realities. One older cocoa producer, for example, exclaimed: 'How can this be fair trade? I am an old woman and I still need to work each day in the hot sun to earn money, I have no savings.' Despite improvements in market access, Fairtrade had failed to enable this smallholder to earn sufficient income so as to instigate a savings plan that could enable her to retire from farming at an age she believed was appropriate. Rather, this farmer – and like many others – was dependent on the buyer, the Ghana Cocoa Board, for her income and livelihood, and with little space to negotiate her interests. Even with Fairtrade's involvement, the working conditions and relationship with the buyer failed to meet this farmer's expectations regarding a reasonable quality of life.

Overall, the evidence presented here reveals moments of Southern actor inclusion in standard-setting processes. It is evident in representation on international standard-setting committees, such as IFOAM, enabling Southern actors to engage in negotiations related to the content of organic standards. However, this appears yet to be matched by substantial changes in terms of the content of organic standards. Indeed, the results presented here demonstrate that while some Southern actors are included in standard-setting negotiations, their interests appear to be excluded from the outcomes of such dialogue (see Reynolds et al., 2007; Dolan, 2008; Lyons et al., 2012; Smith and Lyons, 2012; Reynolds, 2012). In this light, participation of Southern actors may be read as a strategy to legitimize standard-setting processes, by being seen to broaden the scope for inclusive engagement and dialogue. Yet organic (and other quality) standard-setting processes appear to fall short in terms of their deliberative capacity, leaving little room for Southern actors to play a substantial role in informing the content of organic standards in ways that better represent their lived realities, including issues and concerns.

### **Shifting South–North Power Relations? Group Certification and Local Inspection**

While the experiences of smallholders and farm organizations in Uganda and Ghana related to standard-setting processes and the content of organic standards points to limited deliberative capacity, there were other activities that demonstrated the democratization of export trade relationships. Foremost among these activities included the formation of smallholder group organic certification schemes.

To obtain organic certification, smallholders, and other farmers, are required to verify compliance with organic standards through detailed record keeping of farm activities. The imposition of an individualized audit model in the south has been widely critiqued (for example, see Mutersbaugh, 2002; Reynolds, 2004, 2012; Dolan, 2010). One agricultural consultant expressed his frustrations at what he (and others) understood to be the inappropriate 'European model' of organic certification. He was one of a number of people advocating for significant changes to pathways for organic compliance:

'Early on, they were trying to use audit systems developed for EU large farmers rather than smallholders, so we ended up trying to develop something that was a bit more appropriate' (Agricultural Consultant, Kampala, Uganda).

In East Africa (and elsewhere), there have been strong calls to restructure organic audit arrangements in ways that will enable them to more appropriately reflect the diverse and locally specific circumstances of smallholders. It is in this context that the impetus to develop a smallholder group certification scheme arose. Group certification is based on the organization of smallholders into groups, and with an organic certificate awarded to the group – and generally held by the export company – rather than individual smallholders. Management of the group occurs via an internal control system (ICS). The ICS employs an internal quality control document that stipulates requirements related to growing methods, post-harvest handling, record keeping and other activities.

This audit model has reduced the cost associated with organic certification, conditions that assist in explaining the recent increase in the numbers of certified organic smallholders in countries in the Global South (for example, see Lyons et al., 2012). Yet while this new smallholder-specific audit model has opened the way for the inclusion of smallholders in certified organic export trade, many farmers practising organic methods remain unable to join organic groups. Organic pineapple and coffee smallholders in Uganda, and cocoa producers in Ghana, for example, recounted stories of neighbours they knew who were unable to join their organic smallholder group, due to the limited quantity of certified organic produce their export buyer was able to take. The export buyer is responsible for deciding which smallholders are to be included as group members, circumstances that privilege exporters as determinants of the distribution of benefits associated with participation in organic exporting, as well as, at times, creating conditions for animosity and jealousy between smallholders.

Some smallholders who were members of organic groups also spoke of familial ties influencing purchasing arrangements within their group. Some pineapple producers in Uganda, for example, expressed frustration that certain group members were able to sell greater quantities of pineapples to the export buyer, than they were able themselves. They explained this as an outcome of local buyers showing preference for their family members. While a representative from Amfri Farms, an export buyer, explained that decision-making related to the distribution and quantity of purchases across group members was determined by smallholders' capacity to comply with 'quality' indicators, including size and colour – not personal favours – some smallholders were not convinced by this explanation. Organic coffee producers who sold to Kawacom International raised similar concerns, citing favouritism amongst family members as a frequent factor in shaping organic coffee buying arrangements amongst their group members.

These concerns related to buying arrangements suggest that, while group certification has enabled the entry of large numbers of smallholders into organic export markets, at the same time smallholder groups demonstrate inequities that are manifest in a disproportionate distribution of benefits amongst smallholders. Export companies demonstrate significant power in determining the distribution of these benefits, given their opportunity to grant preference to some growers above others. Despite some attempts by export companies to make decisions related to their buying arrangements transparent, some growers describe these processes as shrouded in subterfuge; circumstances that are antithetical with the democratization of markets. In recent years, the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative also lamented the extent to which their buyer, Amfri Farms, has reduced the quantity of pineapples

they purchase from the cooperative. This has created new pressures, and moments of conflict, between cooperative members.

There are other aspects of group certification that, while opening spaces for smallholder entry into organic export trading, have also constrained smallholders' and other Southern actors' capacity to negotiate the terms of their involvement, rendering them dependent upon their export buyer. For example, the export company holds the organic certificate, circumstances that result in recognition of smallholders' organic status reliant upon the company they supply. On the one hand, smallholders identified a number of benefits associated with this arrangement, including a reliable market for the sale of their organic crops, the provision of extension services, training, equipment, and other materials for use on the farm (for example, see Lyons and Burch, 2007). Some organic coffee smallholders also spoke of the difficulties in finding a market for their coffee beans prior to the arrival of Kawacom. Without a local buyer for their coffee, some growers had resorted to crossing the border into Kenya – which they described as both dangerous and illegal – in the hopes of finding a market for their coffee beans. The arrival of Kawacom had, for many growers, simplified the pathway to market.

On the other hand, smallholders also argued that tying recognition of their organic status to an export company created unequal power relationships, including enabling export companies to 'call all the shots'; including defining the terms of the relationship between themselves and their suppliers. Such findings are not unique to organic trade, and are commensurate more generally with other studies related to the impacts of contract farming in Africa (for example, see Barrientos and Dolan, 2006; Oya, 2012). Demonstrative of this inequitable relationship, Ugandan and Ghanaian smallholders described having little bargaining or negotiating power with their buyer. For example, some organic coffee and cocoa smallholders reported that their buyers did not always make payment for their organic crops within mutually agreed time frames. This was something to which smallholders had little recourse. A number of Ghanaian organic cocoa producers also spoke of frequent delays for payment for their crops. Such circumstances left smallholders economically vulnerable, and had adverse impacts for household food security, as well as the ability to pay for health and education related expenses. And yet, again, these were circumstances they described as having had few options to resist or respond to.

Similarly, coffee smallholders at Sipi Falls in Uganda expressed frustrations with what they described as 'empty promises' – or unfulfilled commitments – they had heard over the years from their buyer, Kawacom International. For example, many coffee smallholders spoke of Kawacom's commitment to supply tarpaulins for utilization during coffee drying, and lamented that only a few households in the community had ever received these, and those that had been provided were now worn and required replacement. Yet despite this frustration, they described feeling powerless to respond, given their dependence on Kawacom for the sale of their coffee.

Smallholders in Uganda also described situations where buyers rejected their organic produce on the basis of their failure to comply with market requirements. On a visit to the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative in Uganda, for example, one smallholder presented a number of tattered black-and-white photocopies of photos that showed produce (pineapples and bananas) that were described by their export buyer as non-compliant with export standards. The bananas had some marks on the skin, and the pineapples were reported to be a larger size than market requirements. The export buyer, Amfri Farms, provided these photos as indicators of poor quality.

Yet these photos had engendered both confusion and anger amongst smallholders, with one farmer despairing: 'What do you Europeans want? We don't know what you want? Only when our produce is not good enough do we find out what you don't want.' This smallholder's concern was supported by others, who expressed frustration at the limited information made available related to organic production standards.

The arrangement on which group certification is based – with certification held with the export buyer rather than individual growers – clearly creates both opportunities and constraints for smallholders, and with mixed impacts in terms of democratizing market relations. On the one hand, smallholders appear relegated to the margins, occupying the role of price-takers and recipients of export company scattered and inconsistent offerings – often under the banner of corporate social responsibility – and with little deliberative capacity to negotiate the terms of their relationship with their buyer.

Yet this is not the only story. In one instance, for example, the Katuulo organic smallholder group was able to countervail inequitable producer–exporter South–North power relationships. The bargaining power of this smallholder group was evident in the range of beneficial socio-economic outcomes members of the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative were able to negotiate with their export buyer, Amfri Farms. Members of the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative had, in recent years, negotiated an arrangement with Amfri Farms to assist in transport of produce to local markets. Prior to negotiating this arrangement, smallholders travelled via foot, or in a few cases, via bicycle, to deliver produce to local markets. According to some smallholders from the Cooperative, the provision of transport arrangements by Amfri Farms had eliminated – or at least reduced – a time-consuming and physically demanding task from their workload. In addition, Amfri Farms have also provided various supports related to the construction of a community health clinic; including transport of building materials. In explaining their decision to support the health clinic, a representative from Amfri Farms stated it was in the interest of their company to support ongoing social and community development at Katuulo, as well as at their other organic farming community sites. While Amfri Farms' support for the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative demonstrates an extension of their corporate social responsibility mandate, there was also evidence to suggest the bargaining power of the cooperative was instrumental in shaping the form of these supports.

For example, the Katuulo organic smallholder group's capacity to negotiate with Amfri Farms was described by both smallholders and Amfri Farms' representatives as being assisted by their long-standing existence, as well as their formalized structure of governance with elected representatives, regular meetings, and a cooperative bank account and communal savings plan.<sup>8</sup> A representative from Amfri Farms stated the cooperative structure, as well as other attributes of the group, readied them for compliance with group certification processes required for both organic and Fairtrade certifications. He also emphasized the benefits and simplicity of working with an already formed cooperative, especially in terms of ensuring compliance with the internal control system. He described the Katuulo Cooperative as 'effective and coordinated', and one of their 'best groups' of organic smallholders. He also stated the company 'relied' – indeed 'depended' – upon 'good farmers', including members of the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative, to ensure the regular supply of quality fresh fruit to their international buyers. While Katuulo was one of their

most remote suppliers (over 200 kilometres from Kampala, where Amfri Farms dries and packages fruit prior to export from Entebbe International Airport), representatives from Amfri Farms explained that the cost associated with extra travel was more than compensated by the benefits of working with this cooperative.

In other words, on the basis of their cooperative structure and associated organizational capacity, the Katuulo smallholder group demonstrated some bargaining power in deliberations with their buyer. Such deliberative capacities indicate the 'opening up' of negotiations in ways that may assist, more broadly, to democratize organic markets. Yet the decline in sales from Katuulo by Amfri Farms in recent years raises questions about the long-term bargaining power of this group of smallholder farmers.

In addition to the introduction of smallholder group certification providing new opportunities for deliberative capacity, the introduction of domestic organic inspection arrangements also provides a site to examine the extent to which organic governance might align with democratic governing principles. To date, most organic inspection for compliance with organic standards in the global south is undertaken by international inspectors (including IMO, EcoCert and SKAL) (Barrett et al., 2002; Arora et al., 2013). This arrangement is costly, as well as raising a number of cross-cultural challenges related to the interpretation of standards. In 2004 in Uganda, UgoCert – and along with support from a number of other national and international organizations – was successful in obtaining international recognition to conduct local inspection.<sup>9</sup> The development of a joint inspection protocol in Uganda – whereby local inspectors undertake inspection on behalf of international certifiers – has provided a precedent for the establishment of domestic inspection protocols for the recently drafted Regional Organic Agriculture Standard in East Africa, as well as inspection processes in other African nations. While the discussion above indicates (at least to date, but this something that may be expected to shift over time) the Ugandan organic sector has achieved little in terms of shaping the content of organic standards, the introduction of domestic inspection opens spaces for local actors to engage as moral arbiters in the interpretation and implementation of organic standards.

There is strong support among some Southern actors for the use of local inspectors, with growing pressures exerted on export companies to utilize local inspectors, including funding from EPOPA contingent upon the use of local inspectors:

'Many operators here in Uganda are actually putting pressure on their certifiers to use the local inspectors, so that the costs can be reduced. So, many of the operators are refusing to meet the costs of flying in an inspector from the UK, or Germany' (EPOPA Representative, Kampala, Uganda).

Both smallholder group certification and the introduction of local inspection services have created spaces for smallholders and other Southern actors to negotiate the inclusion of local priorities. These spaces for civic engagement signify opportunities for the participation of Southern actors in deliberations and other decision-making processes related to global organic agriculture governance and trade.

The results presented here suggest smallholders who are members of a farm cooperative prior to their entry into certified organic export trade can be expected to have significant capacities that equip them to bargain with their export buyer. Cooperative, and other forms of collective organizing, signifies strategies to maintain and extend the 'cracks' in organic governance arrangements in which Southern actors

are able to negotiate their interests. Yet there is much work to be done in this regard, given many cooperatives were disbanded in Uganda, and elsewhere, alongside neoliberal agriculture reform (Wiegratz, 2010).

This research also demonstrates smallholder groups with fewer members have been able to ensure greater transparency and accountability (including relating to purchasing arrangements), in comparison to larger groups. Members of the Katulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative, for example, could at least identify who the favoured suppliers in their group were, and had initiated a process to ensure that, throughout the course of the growing season, each cooperative member was provided with an opportunity to sell additional pineapples. In contrast, coffee growers at Sipi Falls – with group membership of over 3,000 smallholder farmers – did not know all the members in their cooperative, and had little access to knowledge related to the purchasing arrangements across this large membership base.

Smallholders' bargaining power also appeared to be related to their proximity to markets. Organic growers with limited market opportunities – including organic coffee growers at Sipi Falls in Uganda, for example – were tied to Kawacom International, both geographically and contractually, given the organic certificate was held with the company. This dependence closed down smallholders' opportunities to negotiate, for fear of losing their market altogether. Circumstances were similar for organic oil palm producers under contract with the Ghana Oil Palm Development Corporation (GOPDC). Out-growers under contract with the GOPDC described themselves as having little room to manoeuvre in terms of their buying arrangements. These growers were tied to the GOPDC via a 20-year contractual arrangement. If oil palm growers broke their contract, they not only lost access to a market for their oil palm, they also lost the land on which their oil palm was farmed. Under such circumstances, smallholders had few options, and little deliberative capacity, to negotiate with their buyer.

### **Conclusions: Organic Governance and Opportunities for Democratic Engagement?**

Global rural development and the corporate food regime have driven an export agriculture agenda that has delivered food insecurity and social and ecological problems for the Global South. This food crisis also intersects with the contemporary fuel and climate crises. The expansion of export-led organic markets in the Global South raises tensions amongst supporters of alternative agri-food initiatives related to the extent to which this pathway for rural development – driven by development agencies, corporate actors, parts of the organic movement, Northern consumers and others – might perpetuate the same inequities and injustices. Amongst these includes concerns organic exporting will simply replicate unfair and ecologically fragile South–North relations that have come to underpin conventional trade, as well as rendering organic smallholders dependent upon the whims of both the global machinations of organic governance regimes, as well as a broad range of Northern stakeholder interests (including retailers, consumers, etc). In a context of rising food prices, such circumstances may be expected to worsen food insecurity and food crises for exporting Southern nations.

This article contributes to this debate by problematizing South–North relations through an examination of the nuanced relationships that emerge within, and across, diverse technologies of organic governance. In particular, the article has sought to

contribute to debates related to the extent to which the technologies of organic governance – on which export trade relies – might provide new opportunities for deliberative capacity, thereby democratizing South–North organic export market relationships? This article has focused on Uganda and Ghana due to the centrality of the African continent to broader debates about organics and the future of food – given the continents' rapidly expanding certified organic agriculture sector.

This article has examined the extent to which organic governance arrangements demonstrate and/or facilitate deliberative capacity amongst Southern actors, particularly smallholder farmers. Here, deliberative capacity is taken as one measure for the democratization of deliberative processes that underpin market relations. This article has examined three aspects of organic governance, including organic standard setting, group certification and local inspection processes.

The results presented paint a mixed picture. On the one hand, Ugandan and Ghanaian smallholders, and other local actors, have been limited in the extent to which they have been able to shape organic governance arrangements and their outcomes. While some Ugandan actors participate in standard-setting processes, they have gained little ground in terms of shaping the actual content of organic standards. Rather, the results presented here demonstrate that processes to define the socio-economic and ecological conditions of certified organic agriculture have largely been captured by Northern stakeholder interests. Group certification has also, in some instances, created new forms of dependency between smallholders and export buyers, circumstances that are maintained by the opacity of various aspects of organic governance arrangements. Ugandan and Ghanaian actors lament that new forms of participation and inclusion are constrained by inequitable power relations, including between smallholders, certifiers, export buyers and retailers. As a result, Southern actors describe being at the whims of local and international export buyers. But this is not the only story.

At the same time, Ugandan and Ghanaian smallholders, farm and civil society organizations (and often in collaboration with other Southern and Northern actors) have succeeded in shaping some aspects of organic governance arrangements, including the introduction of a smallholder group certification scheme, and via the introduction of local inspectors. There was also evidence of smallholder groups negotiating with their buyers in ways that were delivering outcomes that reflected smallholders' needs and interests. Such activities – albeit small, compared to broader trends in the organic and conventional agri-food sectors – represent moments of deliberative capacity, and may signify further ruptures in the corporate food regime.

These 'cracks' are opportunities for the democratization of organic governance processes. On the basis of research presented here, certified organic exporting from the Global South, and the technologies of organic governance on which it relies, demonstrate small, and precarious, moments of democratic engagement. Widening these 'cracks', thereby normalising inclusivity, transparency, as well as meaningful and deep engagement with Southern actors – in other words, facilitating deliberative capacity – will be a necessary precursor to ensure certified organic exporting might play a part in building a democratic food future.

## Notes

1. Alongside increasing dependence on food imports in the Global South, their cost is also estimated to have risen by 11% in 2010, and by up to 20% for low-income food-deficit countries (FAO, 2010).

2. Amongst these food sovereignty movements includes seed saving, women's cooperatives, the formation of local food and farming networks, as well as opposition to genetic engineering and inappropriate forms of food aid (Holt Giménez et al., 2009).
3. The debate that followed this proposal by the UK Soil Association highlighted the potential discord in marrying organic farming and international rural development agendas, particularly in the context of concerns about climate change, peak oil and local food security. Yet at the same time, others responded with concerns that African smallholders were being asked to carry the burden of responses to climate change, a position that was frequently articulated in media headlines, including claims that 'effort(s) to curb climate change may hurt African farms' (Clayton, 2007).
4. While the African continent was self-sufficient in food through the 1960s, and between 1966 and 1970 was a net exporter, by 2008 the continent was importing 25% of its food (Holt Giménez et al., 2009).
5. It is likely the non-certified organic sector in Africa is much larger than the certified organic sector; however, data related to the former are limited at present.
6. Amongst the little research in this area includes Reynolds et al. (2007) examination of the role of civil society organisations in shaping new organic governance arrangements.
7. It can be expected that these events will be increasingly attended by Southern stakeholders, given that 75% of IFOAM's membership base is now located in the global south (Reynolds, 2004).
8. The Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative is demonstrative of Uganda's long history of cooperative forms of organizing, although Uganda's economic reforms since the 1980s have been associated with the dismantling of many (see Wiegatz, 2010).
9. There are only few countries in the global south that have achieved recognition for domestic inspectors to undertake organic inspection, and amongst these include Brazil, China, Egypt, Nicaragua and Peru (Barrett et al., 2002).

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## **Feeding the Planet or Feeding Us a Line? Agribusiness, 'Grainwashing' and Hunger in the World Food System**

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**Abstract.** In this article I examine hunger in the world food system in light of agribusiness corporate environmental communications. Using data gleaned from advertisements and websites, I examine the messages of companies such as Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, and Monsanto, among others, selling their contributions toward sustainability and alleviating hunger through biotechnology and globalization. In analysing these I contrast claims of corporate social responsibility with what I call 'grainwashing', which misleads the public. This analysis is important to an ever-evolving sociology of agriculture and food in which structural challenges, conflict, power, and inequality determine hunger in a system in which people lack food sovereignty or food justice. It connects the study of agribusiness and hunger to environmental sociology and theoretical considerations such as treadmill of production and ecological modernization ideas explaining corporate environmental communication and practices.

### **Introduction**

Food is central to human well-being yet people are often powerless to meet their needs in a world food system dominated by agribusiness (McMichael, 1998; Patel, 2008; Clapp and Cohen, 2009). Globalization has created large-scale agricultural production in the form of an expanded global supply chain in which food is treated as a commodity just like any other product on the market (Friedland, 2004; Moreira, 2004; Magdoff and Tokar, 2010). Such dynamics have enormous consequences concerning the power one has over what is eaten, where food comes from, and how much it is going to cost thus leaving a great portion of the world's population limited food sovereignty (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Hunger remains a large element of this system with the numbers topping one billion hungry people for the first time in human history in 2009 in the wake of the global food crisis, though declining to 870 million in 2012 (FAO, 2012).

In this article I will examine agribusiness environmental communication as it pertains to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and hunger. I will analyse messages

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from companies such as Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Cargill, and Monsanto, among others, touting contributions toward sustainability and alleviating hunger through increased free markets, global integration and supply chains, and the implementation of new technologies. I will contrast CSR claims with what I call 'grain-washing'. I will introduce this term to emphasize the particular importance of greenwashing to agribusiness and its place in the world food system. Using a core food staple at its root, the term applies specifically to agribusiness, implying the potential for deceit in the industry with the term's derivation from combining greenwashing and brainwashing. Grainwashing is therefore agribusiness greenwashing.

An analysis of this dynamic is important to an ever-evolving sociology of agriculture, food, and hunger in which structural challenges, conflict, power, and inequality determine food availability, access and sovereignty in an increasingly fragile natural environment.

### *Food Insecurity and the Environment*

Food insecurity is lacking access to enough food for an active healthy life (Reutlinger, 1986). Food insecurity has multiple structural causes and numerous components, with research discussing hunger not simply as food supply but also distribution, empowerment, entitlement, nutritional value, and the ability to withstand socio-economic and political instabilities (see Sen, 1981; Bennett, 1986; George, 1989; Uvin, 1994; DeRose et al., 1998; Buttel, 2000). Taken together, these mean that hunger concerns food availability, access, utilization, stability, and sovereignty (Scanlan, 2009). Intrinsic to this are hunger's roots in inequality and the political economy of the world food system and agribusiness power (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Friedmann, 1993; McMichael, 1995; Magdoff et al., 2000; Clapp and Fuchs, 2009). Although politically charged and with disagreement as to its root causes or how best to address the issue, as a social concern no one necessarily favours hunger or famine – particularly as manifested in the face of the child or an overcrowded refugee camp. For this reason it is an important cause for corporations stake a claim in supporting – including its environmental links.

Among many other components of this complex issue (Scanlan, 2009), hunger is inherently an environmental concern and much attention has been paid to sustainable agriculture and population threats (Ehrlich et al., 1993; Henke and Zappacosta, 1996; Harper and Le Beau, 2003; Brown, 2009; Pretty, 2010). But, food scarcity is not the predominant problem and those most critical of hunger focus on its access and distributional problems. Furthermore, there needs to be greater consideration of the limits of and stress on the environment associated with the world food system and barriers preventing access – including the challenges of what are touted as solutions such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and industrial agriculture. Global efforts to cope with environmental threats have been significant, but many argue care must be taken to minimize the ecological footprint of feeding the planet (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010).

### *CSR or Grainwashing?*

Environmentalism, CSR, and sustainability have become buzzwords among the world's multinational corporations, with agribusiness no exception (Munshi and

Kurian, 2005). With a growing demand for 'green goods' (Smith et al., 2010) businesses and organizations of all kinds are expected to become increasingly conscious of the environment – part of what Friedmann (2005) has described in agribusiness as the 'corporate environmental food regime', in which emergent and expanding ecological concerns shape the world food system. This demands vigilance of company actions and claims, asking whether the world's agribusiness multinationals reflect shared values and true social responsibility or if in reality they are greenwashing their image as a public relations (PR) or spin tactic to gain trust and improve their reputations and bottom line (Dinan and Miller, 2007a, 2007b). In this article I will compare and contrast the promotion of environmentally friendly images with grainwashing, addressing the following research questions:

1. How do the world's most powerful agribusiness corporations present their role in alleviating hunger and protecting the environment in print advertising and CSR statements?
2. In what ways are such claims grainwashing in that the underlying actions behind them are actually harmful to global food security and sustainability?

### **Theoretical Considerations**

I will connect sociological perspectives on the environment with the field of environmental communication. Incorporating a critical approach on environmental discourse and focusing on greenwashing specifically, I will evaluate agribusiness efforts at creating shared values through CSR and advertising. The centrality of advertising to global capitalism parallels theoretical debates in environmental sociology pertaining to the compatibility of the consumptive dynamics of this system with sustainability (Corbett, 2002) and sound environmental principles (Beder, 2006a).

#### *Corporate Environmental Communication*

Environmental communication takes on multiple concerns, focusing on the persuasiveness and symbolism of language as it pertains to ecological messages (Cox, 2006). From an anti-fracking protest or a newspaper editorial on 'green jobs' to a scientific study on climate change, environmental messages are pervasive. It is beneath this wide umbrella that I will examine grainwashing.

Cox (2006, p. 12) defines environmental communication as 'the pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of the environment as well as our relationships to the natural world; it is the symbolic medium that we use in constructing environmental problems and negotiating society's different response to them.' As for corporate environmental communication specifically, academics and companies use a variety of terms to account for such practices including green advertising, green marketing, green PR, and sustainability marketing (Greer and Bruno, 1996; Karliner, 1997; Nakajima, 2001; Laufer, 2003).

As business practices are expected to become increasingly 'green', a major goal of corporate environmental communication is to reflect an image of what Jermier et al. (2006) call the 'new corporate environmentalism', through which a company acts responsibly toward protecting the planet (Maxwell et al., 2000; Simone, 2007; Crane et al., 2008; Lyon and Maxwell, 2008; Campbell, 2009). New corporate environmentalism is 'rhetoric with regard to the central role of business in achieving both economic

growth and ecological rationality and as a guide for management that emphasizes voluntary, proactive control of environmental impacts that exceed or go beyond environmental laws and regulatory compliance' (Jermier et al., 2006, p. 618) This can be done in multiple ways including using green energy, reducing waste, avoiding harmful inputs in company operations, or presenting consumers environmentally friendly offerings such as organic food, hybrid cars, or green investment portfolios.

A major component of the new corporate environmentalism can be increasingly found in CSR statements. Citing the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, Soule (2009, p. 19) notes that CSR is a public 'commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large.'<sup>1</sup> Companies that fail to establish themselves as good corporate citizens are doomed to lose legitimacy and public trust – particularly when viewed as being hostile to the environment (Beder, 2002a, 2002b). For example, British Petroleum, Dow Chemical, ExxonMobil, Monsanto, and Royal Dutch Shell have had suspect reputations from their harmful environmental practices and are thus expected to 'clean up their act' or at least appear as if they are doing so, and CSR is central to this (Athanasίου, 1996; see also Jenkins, 2004; Edoho, 2008; Bieri and Boli, 2011). Connecting to environmental communication in general, CSR has to be more than statements alone but also reflect actions exhibiting responsible values. Reinforcing an image of sound corporate environmentalism, these can come on many fronts from contributing money to local parks systems and zoos or sponsoring Earth Day activities to supporting community recycling efforts or partnering with schools or universities to promote environmental education. Research has thus argued how corporations can positively impact communities through CSR activities (Waswa et al., 2009; Bieri and Boli, 2011; Johnson et al., 2011).

Porter and Kramer (2011) have expanded CSR to what they refer to as 'creating shared value' (CSV) in corporate operations. The idea here is that addressing social concerns in a company's business practices is not counter-intuitive to profit but instead can contribute to profit maximization (Moon et al., 2011, pp. 51–52) and a company's long-term success (Büchner, 2012). This can be particularly useful to agribusiness (Sojamo and Larson, 2012). Referring to the issue of food insecurity specifically, for example, it is in the interest of agribusiness as well as hungry nations and individuals that agricultural productivity be as efficient and far-reaching as possible. New technologies, expanded markets and supply chains, environmental protection and water conservation, and more food mean greater profit potential while also addressing world hunger. Helping a world in need is the centrepiece of CSR claims while profit maximization keeps shareholders happy. To illustrate, Table 1 presents a number of CSR interests.

Taking the above into consideration, debates over CSR focus on the underlying motivations and ultimate outcomes of such policies in practice (Hussain, 1999; Frankental, 2001; Lyon and Maxwell, 2008; Lin, 2010) and this is central to greenwashing, to which I will now turn.

### *Environmentalism or Greenwashing?*

Given the tenuous and often incompatible relationship between capitalism and environmental well-being argued by Marxist ecology (Foster, 2000), corporate environmentalism has prompted skepticism. Given emphases on globalization, mass

**Table 1.** Examples of agribusiness CSR statement initiatives and claims.

Company	Sample of CSR Initiatives and Claims
ADM	<p>Environmental stewardship; promoting diversity; promoting safety; responsible supply chain management with its Socially and Environmentally Responsible Agricultural Practices and Doing It Right programmes for cocoa and soy, respectively; social investment with the ADM Cares programme; and emphasizing 'the responsible development of agriculture, improving the quality of life in ADM communities, and fostering employee giving and volunteer activities.'</p> <p>'To realize our vision of being the world's most admired agribusiness, we are intent on creating value while growing responsibly. That's why our 30,000 colleagues are working to continuously improve our environmental performance, establish a sustainable supply chain for the crops we source, and ensure that our capital investments, social investments and investments in people help us fulfill our vital purpose' (Archer Daniels Midland Corporate Social Responsibility Overview 2011).</p>
Bunge	<p>Creation of the Bunge Foundation to develop the communities in which the company works through education and volunteerism; maintaining value chain sustainability 'from field to table'; managing risk; promoting an environmental programme focused on sustainable agriculture, climate change, healthy diets, and waste reduction.</p> <p>'Ensuring food security for a growing world requires sustainably producing and delivering millions of tons of agricultural commodities. Bunge's value chains – integrated businesses and operations – begin at the farm and end with consumers. They enable us to produce the food, fuel and other products people count on every day' (Bunge Sustainability Report and 2010 Annual Report).</p>
Cargill	<p>Conducting business with integrity; enriching the communities in which it works through promotion of education, environmental protection, mentoring, and volunteerism through the creation of its Cargill Cares Councils; operating responsible supply chains that promote sustainability, manage risk, and share 'best practices'; working to feed the world with expanded production, less waste, and improved nutrition through its 'grow your own' gardening initiatives.</p> <p>'Cargill is committed to operating responsibly as we pursue our goal to be the global leader in nourishing people. Expectations for companies are rising, and we are responding by making our company more accessible and helping others understand not only what we do, but how we do it. To earn trust, we must meet our obligations to the wide array of people and organizations we serve' (Cargill 2013 Corporate Responsibility Report).</p>
Conagra	<p>Fighting food insecurity through its Child Hunger Ends Here campaign; giving back to communities in which the company operates and in which its employees live; promoting health, nutrition, and food safety; protecting the planet by sustainably using resources and sourcing materials, managing waste, and reducing climate change and energy use.</p> <p>'The people of ConAgra Foods create everyday food in extraordinary ways. That means making food that's delicious, safe, nutritious and convenient, while collaborating with others like farmers, suppliers, customers and people who love our food. We're looking forward to making food for generations to come, and doing so in a way that's not only good for business, but good for you, good for the community and good for the planet' (Conagra Foods 2013 Citizenship Report).</p>
Monsanto	<p>Commitments to community involvement with its Monsantogether programme; enhancing food security and nutrition; fostering diversity and inclusiveness; promoting product stewardship and safety; seeking responsible supply chain management; sharing knowledge; and sustainable agriculture and protecting the environment and limited resources.</p> <p>'Our people are working for a better tomorrow by putting the right tools in the hands of farmers today. Farmers can be people working as little as an acre in Africa, to a family working 10,000 acres in the Corn Belt of America, to a large enterprise farming hundreds of thousands of acres in Ukraine, Brazil or Argentina. By offering these growers better tools and information, we become their partners, protecting their natural resources, fighting hunger, improving nutrition, and providing economic benefits to everyone involved in an improved system of agriculture' (Monsanto 2012 Sustainability Report).</p>

consumption, and profit above all else, corporate efforts to present themselves as socially responsible or sustainability friendly are viewed by critics as nothing more than marketing, PR spins, or new motives for profit that deflect attention from environmental destruction. It is in this context that skeptics apply the term greenwashing to imply deception within corporate environmental communication.

Greenwashing occurs when an industry or specific company presents an appearance of environmental stewardship when in reality their practices are ecologically harmful. CorpWatch defines greenwashing as 'the phenomenon of socially and environmentally destructive corporations attempting to preserve and expand their markets by posing as friends of the environment' (2001; also see Athanasiou, 1996; Beder, 2002a, 2002b). TerraChoice, an Underwriters Laboratories firm, similarly defines greenwashing as 'the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service' (2010). According to TerraChoice, corporate claims-making commits numerous 'sins of greenwashing' including hidden trade-offs, lack of proof, vagueness, false labels and outright fibbing, irrelevance, and praising the lesser of two evils.

According to Tokar (1997), greenwashing is comprised of two simultaneous processes: the emergence of corporate environmentalism and the rise of environmental consumerism demanding greener business practices and products. Tokar notes the consequences for this are not just in how the environment is treated but for environmental politics in that consumers become increasingly disengaged from politics, believing they can instead buy their way toward a sustainable planet – a market solution prevails when corporate advertising and CSR statements frame the discussion. Along these lines greenwashing is made possible and perpetuated by corporate PR firms increasingly important to multinational companies needing a sustainability strategy (Frankental, 2001; Beder, 2002a; Grant, 2008; Esty and Winston, 2009).

Reinforcing this, Dinan and Miller (2007a, 2007b) speak to the powerful role that PR has not only for corporate environmentalism but public perception and company interests that reveal the power of communication. Athanasiou (1996, p. 1) similarly argues that 'public relations, not physics – or even ecology – is the paradigm science of the modern age' with roots evolving 'to the development of advertising as we know it today and the emergence of professionally organized systems of appearance management.' In an era of corporate personhood affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* [2010] 558 U.S. 310' in 2010, greenwashing parallels sociological notions of dramaturgy and 'impression management' strategies of individuals (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's 'presentation of self' takes place at organizational levels as companies devote energy towards appearing as amicable corporate citizens (Young and Massey, 1978; Miller and Hunt, 2008). Image management and a corporation's reputation are as important as the quality of its products or services and these not only reflect its values but attempt to alter those for society (Beder, 2002b, 2006b). The need for sound environmental PR is thus invaluable to corporate communication in all industries (Beder, 2006b; Dinan and Miller, 2007a). This includes global agribusiness and because favourable environmental spin is so important, a Terrachoice study cited by Derber (2010, p.84) found that more than 99% of 1,018 randomly selected consumer products were guilty of at least one of their greenwashing sins.

Switzer (1997) further connects the power of PR firms to agribusiness, citing their significance for increased opposition to environmental groups on institutional and grass-roots fronts using greenwashing, lobbying, the media, think tanks, and oth-

er means – essentially a tool for wielding power (Dinan and Miller, 2007a, 2007b). Beder (2002a, p. 110) notes two of the largest and most powerful firms are Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Martstellar, whose services for global clients have been more than just PR but have also included lobbying, grass-roots organizing, and even gathering intelligence on environmental activists. The networks that PR firms create and the influence they have make greenwashing not only possible, but believable. As part of a PR programme of environmental spin promoting products and practices, corporate messages persuade policymakers, government regulators, consumers, concerned citizens and even environmental organizations themselves who cooperate with corporations in programming, often being accused of greenwashing as well (Beder, 2002a). This means that through greenwashing and the power of PR, corporations find it easier to change public opinion than change harmful practices, challenging the need for more stringent regulations and attacking critics as Monsanto infamously did with Rachel Carson after the publication of *Silent Spring* (Beder, 2002b, p. 108; also see Beder, 2006b; Dinan and Miller, 2007a).

Greenwashing comes in many forms including billboards, corporate environmental reports, mission statements, philanthropy, print advertisements, television commercials, and an array of web content. In an era of 24/7 information access with blogging, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, corporations are becoming increasingly savvy at distributing positive messages and managing impressions. BP, for example, devoted a great deal of effort on many fronts following the 2010 Gulf oil spill, developing its YouTube channel and buying Google link space when people searched for information. In addition, corporations sponsor programmes in schools to ‘educate’ children on various issues, while supporting conferences, organizations, and sustainability initiatives (Doyle, 1992; Beder, 2002a, 2002b; Laufer, 2003). Finally, events and campaigns intending to generate greater public awareness of environmental issues and solutions to achieve sustainability are preyed upon by corporations, with Earth Day activities being a particular favourite (Beder, 2002a). Corporations have the power to control the content and hijack the message of such events as with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and others that have followed. As Greer and Bruno note, ‘the Earth Summit itself was greenwash on a grand scale because it gave the false impression that important, positive change was occurring and failed to alert the world to the root causes of environment and development problems’ (1996, p. 24).

### *Agribusiness ‘Grainwashing’*

Addressing hunger can be valuable to corporate public image. Examining grainwashing can get at how agribusiness may tout its role in addressing the world’s food security needs while simultaneously contributing to many problems within the world food system. Parallel to Lubitow and Davis’s (2011) analysis of corporate co-optation of ‘going pink’ in the fight against breast cancer, grainwashing potentially co-opts discussions of hunger and creates an image of environmental CSR.

Hunger is a popular cause and agribusiness that is in the business of food would seemingly benefit from promoting its ability to address it. In this regard, CSR is not just about ‘doing no harm’ but also emphasizes the positive in promoting good deeds. Building on statements seen in Table 1, for example, the list of financial partners donating millions of dollars and tons of food to Feeding America, the leading domestic hunger-relief agency in the United States, is a who’s who of agribusiness and food industry giants, including Campbell, Cargill, ConAgra, Dean Foods, Gen-

eral Mills, Kellogg, Kraft, Nestlé, and others. Sponsorship keeps food banks stocked and supplies funds for agriculture programmes such as Invest an Acre, in which Feeding America has partnered with ADM and Monsanto. Another hunger organization, Share Our Strength, also works closely with Bird's Eye, ConAgra, Duncan Hines, Jimmy Dean, and others in its No Kid Hungry campaign. Companies may also initiate their own programming to address hunger, such as Tyson's Hunger Relief or Kraft's sponsorship of the Fight Hunger Bowl. A major collaborative effort has been the Global Harvest Initiative, combining the efforts of ADM, DuPont, John Deere, and Monsanto with the consultancy of several environmental organizations including Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund. Although one cannot doubt the enormous need that hunger organizations have for support or the impacts that corporate programming may achieve, such actions may overshadow the negative impacts agribusiness may have on hunger and the environment.

Hence the scrutiny of such practices and consideration of whether this is true CSR or grainwashing. Sojamo and Larson (2012), for example, analyse the environmental stewardship of agribusiness giants Bunge, Cargill, and Nestlé in managing water security essential to their global supply chains, while Jansen and Gupta (2009) and Glover (2010) look at the potential for biotechnology to be 'pro-poor'. Bruno (1998) examines European backlash against the introduction of genetically modified soybeans and the agribusiness campaign marketing itself as environmentally enlightened. Similarly, McKenna et al. (1999) explore the branding practices of the H.J. Heinz Company, which incorporate images of nature to increase marketing to Asia, while Opel (1999) reveals how the bottled-water industry commodifies the environment in text and images on its containers. Finally, Entine (1996) looks at 'green' manufacturers such as Ben and Jerry's, for example, revealing that even good-intentioned companies with the outward appearance of CSR can fall short in their altruism and sustainability practices.

### *Environmental Sociological Perspectives*

Despite the significance of greenwashing for a variety of subfields in the discipline including economic sociology, environmental sociology, organizations, political sociology, and media studies, among others, there has been little analysis by sociologists (McKenna et al., 1999; Krieg, 2008). However, discussion outside of sociology provides a solid research foundation (see Banerjee et al., 1995; Entine, 1996; Helvarg, 1996; Bruno, 1998; Karna et al., 2001; Nakajima, 2001; Munshi and Kurian, 2005; Lubitow and Davis, 2011). This research, though strong, is largely void of sociological theory in its analysis. Greenwashing fits nicely in debates between treadmill of production and ecological modernization perspectives over the environment and the world food system, and I will discuss these here.

Ecological modernization theory has roots in neo-liberal economics (Hawken et al., 1999; Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000). At the core of this perspective is the idea that modernity and its high levels of energy use, resource consumption, and standard of living can be achieved and maintained sustainably. Making modernization possible, it argues that capitalism is essential to environmental well-being and that it is through human ingenuity and the logic and efficiency of the free market and improved productivity that ecological problems are best addressed. For example, if pollution, carbon emissions, or other 'negative externalities' become too costly, the market will discover ways to address them – hence the proliferation of hybrid and

electric cars or promoting the miracles of 'clean coal technology'. Modernity and development thus do not threaten the environment but instead are rooted in scientific progress that provides solutions for protecting it. It is based on the rational principle that 'cutting down all of the trees' is not good business if you need them to make a profit. So, that resource will therefore be rationally managed or an alternative will be developed. CSR is a component of ecological modernization in that industries must act in ways that consider the 'triple bottom line' of profit, social responsibility, and the environment to survive (Elkington, 1997).

Considering agriculture and food, the manner in which agribusiness frames biotechnology, genetic modification, or the Green Revolution as solutions to hunger closely reflects ecological modernization. Global agribusiness views global supply chains and science as best capable of feeding the most people efficiently and cost effectively thereby addressing hunger. Supporters of ecological modernization point to growth in food production and other options in a 'greening' economy as evidence that ecological modernization works.

Treadmill of production theorists are skeptical in that although 'green economics' and corporate sustainability claims through triple bottom line thinking are attractive, it is the *capitalist system* that is problematic but remains unchanged in ecological modernization thinking (Foster et al., 2010). The treadmill of production perspective questions the compatibility of capitalism and environmental well-being because of the inherent exploitive and inequality dynamics of the global capitalist system (Schnaiberg, 1980; Gould et al., 2004; Foster et al., 2010). This perspective argues that the earth is in peril because of the placement of profit over ecology, even if the former is destroyed by the latter and is ultimately not sustainable. CSR claims from this perspective are greenwashing spun by a PR machine that presents companies in the best possible manner to convince the public that corporations are doing what's right. In this vein, Athanasiou (1996, p. 3) notes, 'the key to greenwashing is manufactured optimism... to carry out the message that, though the world may seem to be going to hell, everything is in good hands.' Treadmill of production perspectives argue that in this context, problems such as hunger persist and multinational corporations manage their images of leadership towards solutions to distract from the harm they do.

Modernity has enormous detrimental impacts on the human ecological footprint (York et al., 2003) and the technology, energy, and resource consumption dynamics of the world food system are a large part of this. To grow, package, and transport the food we eat, modern societies use energy and raw materials at an unprecedented rate, making present-day agriculture emblematic of the treadmill of production – with industrialized, 'factory farming' that critics note alienates us from our food (Manning, 2005; Petrini, 2007; Pollan, 2007). Advances like a hybrid corn plant may yield more per acre but do not alter the fact that such innovation is grounded in a capitalist system of profit over people. This system would downplay, among other things, the health uncertainties of GMOs, the impacts of biodiversity loss, or the consequences of a peasant being displaced from the land and the effect on the world's poor (Pray and Naseem, 2007; Scuro, 2007). Treadmill of production ideas argue systemic change is needed to correct the injustices associated with hunger and environmental degradation while grainwashing masks needed reform.

Finally, treadmill of production ideas complement approaches critical of globalization that argue it has created greater dependency and a transition of countries from feeding themselves to exporting cash crops for the global marketplace. Former-

ly self-sufficient countries have become net food importers through purchasing food for consumption in the 'global food regime' dominated by agribusiness and central to the treadmill (Friedmann, 1993; McMichael, 1995, 2005). Grainwashing promotes the efforts to address global food needs while shrouding corporate dominance and the ecological impacts of the world food system (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010). Corporations approach hunger as pertaining primarily to the lack of food, emphasizing free-market and technology solutions to confront threats from population pressure and distracting the public from more important root causes of food insecurity such as inequality, conflict, and politics, let alone the environmental challenges (Scanlan et al., 2010).

### Data and Methods

Company statements are made for public consumption. Otherwise, they do not fulfill the purpose of environmental communication and touting CSR. In this regard there is a wealth of data for analysing the image that agribusiness portrays.

I will focus primarily on grainwashing as it appears 1. in print magazine advertising by agribusiness companies; and 2. on company websites, including advertising, CSR statements and annual reports, fact sheets, and other documents. For print advertising, I will examine ads from *Harper's Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *National Geographic* from 2000 to 2012 in addition to ads appearing in *The Economist* since the 2007 global food crisis, a key benchmark for examining the political economy of the world food system. I based the selection of these magazines on their reputations for reporting and analysis of environmental and social issues, their broad and relatively mainstream readership, their mix of progressive and conservative perspectives and the regularity of corporate advertising of interest. As for company websites, I will examine a sample of the largest and most globally far-reaching agribusiness companies according to *Fortune 500*, focusing on ADM, Bunge, Cargill, ConAgra, Dow, Monsanto, and Pioneer (a DuPont company), and documents available particularly since the global food crisis.<sup>2</sup> I list these companies and their respective websites in Table 2. Taken together these forms of environmental communication complement each other nicely and use similar language to emphasize the core messages.

I will examine the text and imagery presented in the environmental communication of the companies of interest, extrapolating key themes as they pertain to hunger and sustainability. I am less concerned at this point with the frequency of certain themes that would come from 'counting' instances of references to hunger, sustaina-

**Table 2.** Food and agribusiness corporations analysed in this analysis.

Company	Company Homepage
Archer Daniels Midland	< <a href="http://www.adm.com/en-US/Pages/default.aspx">http://www.adm.com/en-US/Pages/default.aspx</a> >
Bunge	< <a href="http://www.bunge.com">http://www.bunge.com</a> >
Cargill	< <a href="http://www.cargill.com">http://www.cargill.com</a> >
Conagra	< <a href="http://www.conagrafoods.com">http://www.conagrafoods.com</a> >
Dow	< <a href="http://www.dow.com">http://www.dow.com</a> >
DuPont Pioneer	< <a href="https://www.pioneer.com/home/site/us">https://www.pioneer.com/home/site/us</a> >
Monsanto	< <a href="http://www.monsanto.com/Pages/default.aspx">http://www.monsanto.com/Pages/default.aspx</a> >

bility, CSR, and so forth that emerge. Instead, I will take a more qualitative approach to the analysis, pulling out representative text and categorizing themes and quotations from the data without the assistance of software. This approach has enabled me to capture larger bits of narrative that I believe speak more richly to the grain-washing I examine. The categories I will describe below emerge from that narrative analysis. I am planning a more quantitative analysis in my future research, however, which includes as noted above an expanded variety of food companies and a much greater number of cases.

Although numerous themes exist, I will focus on hunger to contrast impression management regarding the responsibility agribusiness claims for feeding the planet with the contradictions that the world food system presents for hunger and the environment. The methods in this article fit within a tradition in the social sciences of examining the forms and influences of advertising on a variety of fronts, including children, gender and race inequality, and health, among others (Goffman, 1979; Roy, 1998; Frith et al., 2004; Stone, 2007; Calvert, 2008) as well the usefulness of analysing corporate sustainability reports in research (Feller, 2004). As to the environment and food specifically, Sturgeon (2009) discusses the significance of advertising for framing the perception of nature and the meaning for environmentalism and how the public responds to those messages, while Corbett (2002) looks at growth in the 'greening' of advertising practices, speaking to the commoditization of nature. In another example, exploring company 'greenness', Grillo et al. (2008) examine advertising in the forestry industry, reinforcing the importance of corporate environmental communication and stewardship – especially for industries impacting nature directly such as agriculture, mining, or forestry.

I will extend arguments to hunger and food, noting that advertising not only manages corporate image but can also shape consumer and government responses and discussions of food security. Global agribusiness seeks to win what Gronski and Glenna (2009, pp. 130–131) emphasize as 'dueling visions for producing food: global, high-tech, and profit-driven versus localized and people-centered.' Championing a more critical perspective, the latter approach tends toward the concept of 'food justice' (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010; Alkon and Agyman, 2011), which seeks to build a better, more sustainable food system developed from the bottom up. Through academic research, the social sciences can also influence public debate, framing the question of food security with an alternative vision as to its roots and public perception (Rivera-Ferre, 2011) This is central to the findings and discussion that follow.

## Findings and Discussion

Flaunting slogans like ADM's 'Resourceful by Nature', Cargill's 'Nourishing Ideas, Nourishing People' or ConAgra's 'Good for You, Good for the Community, Good for the Planet', agribusiness has defined the political economy of food in its interest while seeking to appear as good citizens. Ultimately pursuing profits and *corporate* sustainability, agribusiness exemplifies global interconnectedness and power. Grain-washing reinforces the dynamic of marketing scientific solutions to hunger – peddling CSR versus the realities of maintaining a destructive global food economy laden with harmful inputs and unequal distribution systems and outcomes. I will examine these ideas, elaborating on key themes emerging from agribusiness corporate communication and greenwashing. These include biofuels, GMOs, global supply chains, and industrial agriculture, which are all presented as solutions to hunger.

*Biofuels*

With the energy crisis and recent spike in global fuel prices, the topic of alternative energy has attracted great attention. The nation's chemical producers, farmers, fuel companies, and policymakers placed biofuels at the centre of this discussion, making them the alternative fuel of choice though with important implications for the world food system (Borras et al., 2010; McMichael, 2010; Tokar, 2010).

Biofuels such as corn ethanol, for example, have been argued to have many attractive benefits, including being made from a renewable energy source and burning more cleanly with reduced carbon dioxide emissions than petroleum. Furthermore, biofuels could contribute to job creation and economic growth and improve energy security by reducing U.S. foreign energy dependence. Agribusiness is certain to benefit from growth in biofuels research, production, and consumption and therefore was at the forefront in promoting them as a viable alternative, cooperating with petroleum companies also eager to capitalize.

Consider a 2006 advertisement from ADM. Pushing biofuels as 'a growing solution to energy needs', ADM reinforces all of the above claims in the text of the advertisement, displaying images of soybeans at the top and rows of corn taking up one third of the page. ADM is not alone in its efforts, with Pioneer proclaiming they are 'leading the way in biofuels' (2007, p. 6). In doing this Pioneer is seeking to develop corn hybrids with characteristics specifically suited for ethanol while also yielding higher output per acre, taking full advantage of 'the miracles of science' – a clear example of an ecological modernization perspective. Also touting ecological modernization, DuPont (2008) proclaims:

'The global transportation industry requires new alternatives to petroleum fuels that are renewable, locally sourced, cost effective, and viable across all geographies with minimal environmental footprints. At DuPont, we believe biology will help reduce the global reliance on fossil fuels. DuPont's unique scientific capability will provide solutions that are sustainable, renewable and matched to real-world needs.'

Agribusiness believes in the potential (and profitability) of biofuels as a solution to the global energy crisis. Science and new technologies applied to agricultural production are viewed as central in solving energy problems, and without scrutiny much of the public and the policymakers who dole out research grants and subsidies to support such endeavours become believers themselves. Agribusiness has the image of finding solutions in a challenged world with great faith given to it even when the corporations have much to gain (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009). Furthermore and reinforcing work by Gronski and Glenna (2009), agribusiness advertising examined here underlines patterns of global trade envisioned in U.S. farm policy and promoted by the World Trade Organization, which speak to important political economy dimensions of this.

The problem with biofuels, however, is that the devotion of cropland and energy to them shifts agriculture away from food needs, contributing to scarcity and rising food prices. Cargill (2011), in collaboration with the World Bank and the World Wildlife Fund notes the sensitivity to and negative impacts of biofuel production on food security. Despite this, the company (Cargill, 2013) still aggressively promotes its ability of 'adding value to things that grow' in biofuel initiatives 'sharing knowledge, insight and resources to grow your *biofuels* business', developing a slick promotional brochure targeting farmers and even devoting a telephone number specifically for

biofuel inquiries. This is a perfect example of agribusiness saying one thing but doing another at the expense of the environment and global food needs.

In an often-cited example, a *Washington Post* editorial (Brown, 2006) notes that the same amount of grain needed to fill an SUV's 25-gallon gas tank with ethanol could feed a single person *for a whole year*. Increased biofuel production has been blamed for having a large role in the global food crisis and hunger that stems from it as the world's poor become further strapped to meet food needs (Magdoff, 2008; Patel and McMichael, 2009; Scanlan et al., 2010). Furthermore, biofuel technology has not produced an efficient nor realistic alternative as agribusiness claims and the problem is not just with corn. Bunge's sugar-cane ethanol programme and the consumption of Brazilian rainforests raise additional questions concerning agribusiness profits at the expense of the environment.

Grainwashing skews the negative impacts of biofuels and their resource-intensive production processes and threats to hunger. From a treadmill of production perspective, agribusiness does little to promote sustainability or improve hunger but instead profits from political influence and public trust, garnering research and development funds, and generating new grain markets. Agricultural productivity is higher than ever, but if it is at the expense of food crops and sustainability this does little to reduce hunger – especially when prices are impacted (Magdoff, 2008; Magdoff and Tokar, 2010). In sum, while promoting the outward appearance of corporate responsibility, agribusiness simultaneously commits multiple sins of greenwashing, including fibbing, vagueness, and hidden trade-offs with the impact on hunger being the largest of these.

### GMOs

Whether it is growing drought and pest-resistant wheat or more resilient 'super rice', GMOs are central to agribusiness in that they are a recurrent theme in how companies present themselves in this analysis. GMOs have attracted a lot of attention in food and environmental discourse with discussion addressing the uncertainty present in debates over their safety (Cook, 2004; Pringle, 2005; Tamis et al., 2009) as well as their application to the world's poorest societies with the greatest need to address hunger (Tripp, 2001; Jansen and Gupta, 2009; Glover, 2010). Considering food security as a specific component of this discussion, the ability of GMOs to meet the needs of hungry citizens versus their safety and their increasing 'environmentalization' are hotly contested (Buttel, 2005). Exemplifying this conflict, numerous countries have banned the importation of GMO food, even aid in the midst of widespread hunger as was the case in Zimbabwe, among numerous others. Agribusiness has much at stake and is certain to protect what it sees as a lucrative endeavour in the form of new Green Revolution technologies from which they argue poor and hungry countries will benefit. This is revealed in their grainwashing.

Monsanto prides itself at being on the leading edge of what it terms 'agricultural biotechnology' research, promoting 'innovation, collaboration, speed' and taking great aims in educating the public through its 'biotech basics' on their website. As Glover (2010) notes, Monsanto has been making these arguments for decades using the idea that its technology could improve the lives of the world's hungriest citizens, thus emphasizing its emergent science and product line as 'pro-poor biotechnology' or 'biotechnology for the poor' (see Jansen and Gupta, 2009). Furthermore, highlighting GMO safety and claiming that 'the genetic enhancement of agricultural

products may be one of the oldest human activities', Monsanto (2010) argues for the many benefits of genetic modification as a solution on multiple fronts:

'Given increasing demand for food, feed and fuel, agricultural biotechnology provides a way for farmers to produce more grain on the same amount of land, using fewer inputs. Ultimately, this technology helps farming become more sustainable. For farmers, biotech crops can reduce cost by raising yield, improving protection from insects and disease, or increasing tolerance to heat, drought and other stress. Value-added biotech traits can provide consumer benefits such as increased protein or oil, improved fatty-acid balance or carbohydrate enhancements.'

Agribusiness therefore claims that GMOs can end hunger, improve nutrition, be environmentally sustainable – all in all, a magic bullet of sorts 'producing a better seed for a brighter future' in Monsanto's words. It was argued therefore that government policies that assisted in the development and promotion of biotechnology seeds alongside programmes aimed at education and implementation of such seed systems in developing countries could empower farmers on the frontlines of hunger (Tripp, 2001), thus tapping into a grander vision and purpose for the science and its potential (Jansen and Gupta, 2009; Glover, 2010).

Agribusiness communications praising biotechnology are widespread and being used in a way that intends to persuade the public of the good they are doing. Each of the corporate websites examined provides reassuring statements about GMOs and their importance. Consider a similar cure-all example from DuPont (2011):

'Biotechnology holds a great deal of promise to enhance our lives and planet. With a world population expected to reach nearly nine billion by 2050, biotechnology offers new potential for meeting the world's demand for food, feed, fuel and materials while reducing our footprint on the planet. DuPont is putting science to work by creating sustainable solutions essential to a better, safer, healthier life everywhere.'

Agribusiness advertising thus reflects ideas from Athanasiou (1996, pp. 11–12), who notes that companies sell biotechnology as the only choice against the specter of overpopulation and the 'Malthusian nightmare' – making them necessary 'as a key plank in the second Green Revolution that will again massively increase the productivity of agriculture, feeding all the world's people.' Furthermore, it is an important example of ecological modernization in that great faith in technology and the wonders of science will provide the solution to global food needs and hunger. Treadmill of production theorists would counter that GMOs are a key element in fueling profit motives of the industrialization of the world food system, citing the harm to food security, the poor, and the land that the agribusiness-dominated Green Revolution has done (see Shiva, 1991).

In addition, there are industry-wide endeavours to cooperatively promote genetic modification and what agribusiness views as its benefits. Advertisements from the Council for Biotechnology Information (CBI), for example, argue the benefits of biotechnology and how genetic manipulation means fields with less pesticide and more efficiently produced crops, be they for biofuels, clothing, or food. As evidence of further arguments to win over the public (and younger audiences), the council's website (<<http://www.gmoanswers.com>>, formerly <<http://www.whybiotech.com>>) even contained an 18-page activity book for kids and potentially schools to save

the children from 'Frankenfood' fears they may hear of and distract from the widespread criticism levied against GMOs.

One should not confuse the CBI with the National Center for Biotechnology Information ([NCBI] <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>>), which is a public, non-partisan U.S. government agency connected with the National Library of Medicine/National Institutes of Health and dedicated to education on biomedical and genomic topics. In what could be evaluated critically as a greenwashing sleight of hand given the similarity of names and associated acronyms, the privately funded CBI is comprised of founding corporate members that include BASF, Bayer CropScience, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, Monsanto Company and Syngenta. These companies in turn collaborate with supporting agribusiness organizations, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, American Seed Trade Association, American Soybean Association, National Association of Wheat Growers, National Corn Growers Association, and National Cotton Council, who have a vested interest in promoting GMOs and presenting their case that public health and safety concerns are their primary mission.<sup>3</sup>

A large critique of GMOs is that their long-term effects on human health are undetermined – hence the distrust not just from consumers but also policymakers in the European Union and elsewhere (Athanasίου, 1996; Buttel, 2005; Dąbrowska, 2007; Tamis et al., 2009). Food safety is of no uncertain concern, thus making industry claims to address hunger by feeding the planet with GMO technology subject to scrutiny based on the sins of greenwashing framework, particularly the sins of no proof, vagueness, and the lesser of two evils.

Extending this, as these technologies are marketed, globally traditional agricultural practices such as 'seed saving' are no longer possible – or in fact become illegal as companies view this as violating their patent protections (Shiva, 2000). Monsanto is infamously known for patrolling the fields for violators and suing small farmers who commit violations (Water Willow, 2011), even recently winning the case '*Bowman v. Monsanto Co. et al.* [2013] Sup. Ct. 11-796' in the U.S. Supreme Court and upholding their patent rights. Furthermore, such technology is also expensive and well beyond what can be afforded by the world's poor, who are most dependent on the land for their livelihoods. In this regard, the promising potential of biotechnology argued by agribusiness to be of assistance to the world's poorest comes up short, and many times because the poor themselves are not included in the discussion of what is best for them (Jansen and Gupta, 2009; Glover, 2010). Pursuits of true food sovereignty and food justice could alter the negative outcomes, empowering the poor in ways for them to best address hunger and do so in an ecologically sound manner.

Increased production and efficiency from GMOs and Green Revolution policies may thus do nothing for improving food security but in fact constrain the poorest developing countries who are squeezed out from its benefits. *More* may be produced, but this ultimately does not mean *more accessible* or *more affordable*. Furthermore, companies fail to fully acknowledge the impact of the growing amount of grain swallowed up as animal feed that does not even directly reach people and also affects pricing. This is central to what McMichael (2012a) refers to as the 'global livestock complex' resulting from shifting diets connected to industrial food systems and the global expansion of Western diets. Thus, as with the use of grain for biofuels, production and agribusiness profit to expand markets on this front is detrimental to food security and the environment.

In sum, hidden trade-offs, irrelevance, lack of proof, and vagueness are greenwashing sins that run throughout claims publicizing the benefits and promise of GMOs. As for hidden trade-offs specifically, Athanasiou (1996) notes that biotechnology firms promote their products as solutions to hunger and growing population pressure with no mention of the threats to biodiversity loss from GMOs or their unknown health impacts. When this intricate balance is upset, food security suffers ultimately even though ecological modernization ideas would have us believe otherwise.

### *Global Supply Chains*

Globalization is also a dominant theme in agribusiness environmental communications. Endorsing the benefits of unfettered, free trade practices, the world food system is shaped by agribusiness interests and cooperation with the vision of governments and organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (Madeley, 2000; Jarosz, 2009). Globalization has accelerated with the growth of new technologies in communications and travel, but is fueled first and foremost by economic interests. What results are 'global grocers' (French, 2000) and a 'supermarket revolution' (World Bank, 2007) in an industrial food system designed to produce, store, transport, and market as much food as efficiently as the global supply chain will enable (Weber, 2009).

Reinforcing this, ADM boasts in an advertisement that it 'can link farmers to almost any market in the world', connecting growers and sellers with consumers who need what agribusiness has to offer, while Bunge (2013, pp. 1–2) makes 'setting the world's table' the focus of its work, bringing 'food from where it is grown to where it is needed, whether it comes from close to home or thousands of miles away.' ADM makes clear the global sourcing of food in its corporate mission. Consider the following, which features a boy seated at a table holding tofu in his chopsticks. Flushed right as in the ad, the text reads:

'Somewhere west of Shenyang, a teenager is stopping for dinner.  
Which is why the soybean harvest west of Peoria is not stopping.  
And why a soybean processor west of St. Louis is not stopping.  
And why a ship's captain on the west coast is stopping but just for a while.  
Somewhere west of Shenyang a teenager is stopping for dinner.  
A dinner rich in soy protein.  
As one of the world's largest soy processors,  
we like the idea there will be no stopping him now.'

Globalization and agribusiness seeks to put food on the world's tables, be it in China as in this advertisement or 'somewhere in the heartland' where a child is sitting down to breakfast as depicted in another. ADM (2010, p. 8) summarizes this nicely, noting its desire 'to connect the harvest to the home to serve the vital food and energy needs of a growing world.' What such a statement does not reveal is the impact of globalized, corporate agriculture on small farmers who cannot compete in their own marketplace, as has been the case with Mexican maize growers and Chinese soy producers – a pattern of 'depeasantization' contributing to poverty, unemployment, urban migration, wage exploitation, and food insecurity (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010). Agribusiness power and the disenfranchisement from sustenance and the land among the rural poor thus create not only misery in the countryside but compound

this with the enormous growth of urban slums as people search for opportunity in the city. Small producers find themselves unable to compete in a free trade system in which they are unfairly disadvantaged, further exacerbating structural inequalities in the system (Madeley, 2000; Bello, 2009; Clapp and Fuchs, 2009) and leaving local communities more powerless (Murphy, 2010).

Ironically, grainwashing the impacts on small-scale agriculture, these advertisements emphasize the role of 'the small farmer'. This occurred, for example, in an advertising series titled 'ADM Thanks Farmers', where they feature family farms and their important contribution to the food system. Monsanto exhibits a parallel depiction with its America's Farmers Mom of the Year Contest. Such efforts essentially distract the public and policymakers from agribusiness dominance and the global, corporate, industrial farm. In presenting small operations and the 'face' of farmers, production is portrayed as being carried out by individuals in small-scale operations despite them being connected to a global infrastructure that ships their grain around the world, dramatically increasing 'food miles' (Norberg-Hodge et al., 2002) and the 'oil we eat' (Manning, 2004). Agribusiness must hope in this advertising that in consumer questions of 'where does my food come from' the public may console itself in believing it was grown on a family farm close to home – one responsible not only for their personal food security but their community and the planet.

Another irony in emphasizing the family farm in corporate environmental communication is that in the wake of the global food crisis there has been a growing trend in large-scale 'land grabs', which involve the purchase of foreign agricultural land for the purpose of outsourcing food production, commoditizing food in new ways and further threatening the sovereignty of small-scale producers and natural resources (Smaller and Mann, 2009; Borras et al., 2011). Although at first the pursuit of governments wanting to reduce their vulnerabilities to global markets and hunger, land grabbing increasingly has become the practice of investors, speculators, and multinational corporations that take control of the land, doing so with state cooperation (GRAIN, 2010). From a treadmill of production perspective, land grabs further solidify the power of agribusiness in the global food regime focused on worldwide production and distribution without consideration of consequences.

Additionally, the global supply chain and industrial nature of the world food system has enormous environmental impacts. The food miles incorporated into getting sustenance from field to table has a large ecological footprint from the energy used to store, process, and transport food throughout the world (Norberg-Hodge et al., 2002). Inputs from heavily mechanized agricultural processes, chemical herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers, and enormous water consumption have additional ecological impacts among many other biophysical constraints on food production (Ehrlich et al., 1993; Harper and Le Beau, 2003; Manning, 2005). When the energy and multiple inputs used to generate the food people around the world consume is vastly greater than the caloric benefits they actually attain, the long-term sustainability of such a system is questionable, nor does it guarantee access to food for those in need while also devastating local markets.

Cargill (2010) also underscores its role in the world food system, claiming sound global citizenship in its CSR statements and a 'neighbour-like' presence in 65 countries. Cargill seeks to not merely provide a network for distribution and supply but also a 'local presence', in which it can act as a good citizen and promote community investment, environmental protection, food safety, responsible supply chains, rural development, and partnerships with stakeholders and 'neighbours' with whom it

claims to live and work. As with ADM, Cargill emphasizes the 'down-home' feel to its presence, invoking images of partnerships and family farms to distract from corporate domination of the system. A Cargill advertisement elaborating this theme features two men leaning on a pickup truck on a farm. One is the producer of premium eggs for food cooperatives in Japan while the other is an Illinois farmer growing corn to very precise standards for feeding the chickens producing those eggs. The text reads:

'They live across the ocean from each other, but we help them conduct business like they live across the road... Cargill's *Signature Growers* program brought the egg producer together with a farmer... The result is a mutually beneficial business relationship that has grown into a friendship. This is how Cargill works with customers.'

Thus, like ADM's claim to be 'the supermarket to the world', Cargill's goal is reaching out to a global marketplace, integrating food systems in a way that achieves their vision 'to be the global leader in nourishing people' (2008).

Leading the world in nourishing people should not be separated from the enormous power and profitability agribusiness gains in this position – nor forget that these profits are given more importance than people or the environment as a treadmill of production perspective would argue. Critiques of globalized, industrial agriculture such as from McMichael (1995), Shiva (2000), Bello (2009), or Patel (2008), and the dismay over contemporary food systems as espoused by the slow food movement (Petrini, 2007) among others, are skeptical that the globalization of agriculture improves food security. Portraying the world food system as beneficial for all neglects the widespread prevalence of hunger, which has been as bad as ever with globalization and puts a lot of faith in an industry that has shown to be untrustworthy (Eichenwald, 2001; Robin, 2010). Grainwashing in this regard is part of what Munshi and Kurian (2005) call an 'imperializing spin cycle' central to the neocolonial dynamics of agribusiness power in the world food system associated with the supermarket revolution, global land grabs, and ultimately what in the United States can be seen as a 'foodopoly' (Hauter, 2012).

Global agribusiness impacts local food systems in ecologically harmful ways that connect to hunger. Grainwashing shrouds these dynamics and the vulnerabilities of those most dependent on the land for their survival, demanding critical evaluation (Lacy, 2000). Even with its neo-liberalism emphasis, the World Bank (2007) acknowledges the risks imposed by agribusiness concentration and globalization. As part of a development agenda with those most dependent on agriculture at the centre, the World Bank recognizes the need for competition and small-scale markets that empower local farmers. The more dependent the global citizenry is on large-scale operations, the less food sovereignty they have, and the more destructive the consequences when prices increase or food becomes scarce.

Globalization means greater transportation of food around the planet, making it available in new places and forms, but this does nothing to ensure that those most in need are able to afford and access it or that people will be able to continue working the land. The fact that famines remain a devastating phenomenon, as evidenced by the 2011 drought in East Africa – the worst in over half a century – indicates that markets and agribusiness not only cannot prevent catastrophes but may actually exacerbate them in disrupting local markets and dramatically changing the way people have lived their lives for generations. Furthermore, agribusiness even profits from

them as governments and relief agencies buy and distribute food-for-aid packages delivered during crises (Murphy and McAfee, 2005). Although agribusiness may pledge to work closely with small farmers who know all of their animals by name as depicted in one Cargill ad, agribusiness seems incompatible with and contradictory to their well-being. The power differentials are too disparate and the profit potential too large for empowered peasants and genuinely localized food sovereignty to exist – ultimately a question of food justice.

## **Conclusions**

The above themes culminate around the responsibility addressing hunger that agribusiness claims to pursue. The contradiction of this, however, is that food is viewed as a commodity more than a right in a world food system wrought with devastating ecological consequences. In the hands of the multibillion dollar agribusiness industry, this responsibility typically means profit and corporate survivability over improving food security and environmental sustainability. Be it what they see as CSR or what critics view as grainwashing, agribusiness messages are important studies in sociology and impression management. The questions thus remains, is agribusiness feeding us or fooling us with its PR?

Agribusiness emphasizes a solution for improving food security that reflects ecological modernization thinking. Firmly believing that biotechnology and genetic modification, industrial agriculture, and a global food distribution network are the best ways to address hunger, food multinationals present themselves as responsible corporate citizens committed to eliminating social ills, protecting the planet, and supporting local farmers and the poor (Jansen and Gupta, 2009; Glover, 2010).

To sum up with a couple of additional corporate environmental communication examples, advertisements from Monsanto warn that climate change and a global population that will soon reach nine billion threaten food security, but that their biotechnology can address the looming peril. In a different advertisement they note that they are finding ways to do more with less, increasing output while consuming fewer precious resources such as water. Cargill speaks of its virtue in capturing energy from the waste produced at their beef facilities, while ADM claims that its practices ‘improve agricultural efficiency, make food more affordable, and feed a hungry world’. Marketing these ideas and coupling efforts with massive lobbying efforts costing over USD 139.2 million in 2012 (Center for Responsive Politics, 2013), agribusiness seeks to influence policymakers and the general public to believe it is doing the right thing. It does this by convincing others that a world food system can meet challenges with technological innovation – that ecological modernization is possible. Through what is ultimately a corporate environmental food regime (Friedmann, 2005), agribusiness PR optimistically portrays the status quo of the food production, distribution, and consumption system as sustainable and that any future threats from hunger, overpopulation, or environmental degradation can be resolved if we trust in its expertise.

Critics would respond that such claims are grainwashing that masks the reality of the true workings of the political economy of food. Politics and widespread inequality are prevalent in this system, resulting in hunger’s persistence while agribusiness expands its profits and power through supply chains centred on a treadmill of production churning out food from factory farms and ‘grabbed’ land. The global food crisis and responses from and impact on the world’s poor speak to great vulnerabil-

ity and instability (Patel and McMichael, 2009; Magdoff and Tokar, 2010). Ecological modernization claims are 'good business' but not sustainable or sound social responsibility. CSR statements and advertisements that speak to the ability of agribusiness to improve the well-being of the planet without acknowledging the treadmill of production they promote can be viewed with skepticism by dissecting the language they speak and contrasting that with the impacts of their actions. Grainwashing is a distraction from the inequality and ecological harms of the world food system that is not about the good neighbours and family farms agribusiness promotes as its image.

Grainwashing fits with what others (Greer and Bruno, 1996; Beder, 2002a; Feller, 2004) have described as the well-crafted spin of the agribusiness PR machine, seeking to rewrite history, define the present, and ensure its future through capitalizing on the legacy of and what it views as the ongoing potential of a continued Green Revolution. Thriving on fears of overpopulation, this collaborative project of international development and agricultural organizations with the world's governments and agribusiness in many ways has achieved its objective of 'more' regarding food supply. The problem, however, has been determining at what cost and for whom have such benefits been garnered the most and whether the poor are truly served (Jansen and Gupta, 2009; Glover, 2010)? In the world food system more food does not mean more access, better nutrition, greater stability, or increased sovereignty. Hunger has remained persistent and a majority of the world's population remains vulnerable to price shocks and environmental degradation while having little power in a global marketplace dominated by a few. Food sovereignty withers and food justice is non-existent as localities are consumed.

Treadmill of production ideas emphasize the shortcomings of ecological modernization perspectives on food and the environment as portrayed in agribusiness CSR statements and its advertising. Unlike a running shoe ad or automobile commercial, agribusiness is not necessarily directly selling a product in its environmental communications but instead promoting ideas: that high energy and resource input, scientifically engineered, globally sourced food systems are better at feeding the planet and can operate in a sustainable manner; that the poor farmer in the developing world and local markets are better off as their partner; and that taking on the challenge of addressing hunger is their primary mission – one that they are most capable of doing and are emboldened to pursue.

In some respects the neocolonial dominance of global agribusiness takes on the feel of a new version of 'the white man's burden', given the efforts agribusiness seemingly goes to. Findings here, however, and a growing body of work, much of which I have cited above, offers counterarguments to the agribusiness vision that has created a global food regime wrought with hunger, food injustice, and limited food sovereignty – ideas reflected nicely on land grabs by the international nonprofit organization GRAIN: 'Today's global food crisis will not be solved by large-scale industrial agriculture... but the governments, international agencies, and corporations steering the global food system are bankrupt in solutions' (2010, p. 147).

Building on this quotation, one should note that agribusiness is certainly not acting alone in promoting the food system it envisions as ideal, nor is it the only beneficiary of its practices. In this regard there is certainly a mutual 'seeking out' of players in the global food regime. Examining the larger dynamics of the political economy of the world food system, industry think tanks, research universities, and governments throughout the world in cooperation with international agencies such as the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture of the United Nations and the World Food

Programme among others, shape food policy in ways that benefits agribusiness. Consider again the international food aid regime noted above, for example, which Murphy and McAfee (2005) argue greatly profits global agribusiness that produces and transports food around the world in a market solely for this purpose. Critics argue that this system actually creates more food insecurity under the guise of providing assistance – contrary to what agribusiness or the sponsorship of the state would have the public believe.

Another important collaboration between the state and agribusiness and its lobbyists and industry associations in both the United States and the European Union are agricultural subsidies and their implications in the world food system (see Peterson, 2009), particularly for the global peasantry. And of course, probably the most telling examples of these processes are the current global land grabs that epitomize Gronski and Glenna's (2009) discussion of the global, profit-driven, and technology-intensive food production that overlooks the food injustices of the system and its effects on people who most depend on the land (see McMichael, 2012b; Cheru and Modi, 2013; White et al., 2013). Agribusiness acts with the complicity of the state, international organizations and agencies who help frame and support its interests. Grainwashing should therefore not be separated from the politics and policies that define the food system, shaping what farmers grow and what we ultimately eat (see Winders, 2009; Nestle, 2013). Therefore, future research should analyse further the collaborative and interlocking power dynamics shaping CSR, hunger, and the environment

In closing, so widespread has been the impact and so fervent are the feelings of those refusing to be a part of the treadmill that new battle lines are being drawn and new visions of food justice are being formed to expose grainwashing and to take back the world food system (Bello, 2009; Patel and McMichael, 2009; Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010; Magdoff and Tokar, 2010). As part of this, the social sciences can take more active role in presenting this more critical alternative perspective (Rivera-Ferre, 2011). In portraying itself as socially responsible, agribusiness as 'the supermarket to the world' manages its image while carrying out the Green Revolution ideas of old. You cannot spell treadmill without 'ADM', and unless change is not only demanded but achieved, those affected by and most in need of solutions to food insecurity will find themselves continually powerless and hungry in a world food system forever dominated by agribusiness.

## Notes

1. There are numerous definitions of this concept and a vast amount of research discussing its conceptualization, including business-focused and market-oriented perspectives to more critical analyses. For additional discussion, see Michael, 2003; Dahlsrud, 2008; Lyon and Maxwell, 2008.
2. In addition to these corporations, I have collected some data and have begun to examine other food consumer products, production, and services companies such as Kraft Foods, Nestlé, Smithfield Foods, and Tyson, among others. Because of the focus in this article, I will leave analysis of these companies for future research.
3. Although I do not analyse more fully industry associations such as this, the CBI and its work appeared multiple times in the process of doing my research. Because three of its founding members are corporations of interest here (Dow, DuPont, and Monsanto), I will present this example as an important extension of their grainwashing strategies. Because of their power and the influence they seek to have over public opinion and policymaking, future research will examine more thoroughly these organizations and their role in the political economy of the world food system.

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## Alternative Food Networks\*

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### Moving Alternative Food Networks beyond the Niche

DAMIAN MAYE

#### 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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\* A discussion of *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice, and Politics* by David Goodman, E. Melanie DuPuis and Michael K. Goodman, 2011, Routledge, Abingdon, 308 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-67146-0 [hbk] £95.00.

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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## **Critical Reflection and Civic Discourse within and across the Alternative Food Movement**

LAURA B. DELIND

Born out of resistance to a faceless and essentially placeless food system, the alternative food movement has acquired a global reach. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the practice and politics of local food encompass everything from backyard (and front-yard) gardens, to national appellations, to calls for indigenous sovereignty. Organics are standardized, mass produced, and traded nationally and internationally. Fair trade products are familiar grocery store fare, their value represented by logos and their processes often dominated by multinationals.

There are those who see these changes as evidence of the movement's success. What was once an alternative vision has now moved into the mainstream, into popular (and global) awareness, bringing with it many enlightened values – care, ecology, sustainability, health, equity. There are others who see these changes as yet another demonstration of the power of market (or corporate) capitalism, its ability to commodify anything, underwrite neo-liberal policies, and reinforce the structures that gave rise to the original resistance. Frequently, opposing arguments (among practitioners, activists and academics) are as polarized and impassioned as the initial rhetoric that advocated 'a turn toward the local' and away from an industrial food system.

But, there are problems with either/or thinking, with seeing the world only in terms of 'us' and 'them'. Not the least of these is the question of who gets to say – act on and enforce – what is and isn't possible; who gets to decide what does or doesn't matter. Stated a bit differently, such essentialist thinking can lead to a loss of critical insight into the behavioural and thought processes that play out in lived contexts as well as across the many levels of what hopefully will become a generative and socially just food system. Given the severity of the problems we face on this once blue-green planet and the essential nature of food to our survival, we really need to stop cleaving to simplistic images and attacking convenient straw men. We need to expand our thinking and our tool chest in ways that permit, no, I really mean continually enable, public discourse and engaged citizenship. We also need to learn how to listen.

*Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice and Politics* is a bold step in this direction. From the outset, authors Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman explain that they want to steer a course between arguments of food system conventionalization and accounts celebrating the tenacity and virtuosity of the alternative vision. As they put it:

'We move away from bifurcated Manichean perspectives and a politics of "conversion" that seeks to change the world by embracing a perfect vision of an alternative world based on a fixed, static set of values, whether of

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the “good life” or “good food.” Instead, we rearticulate food politics toward an understanding of the world as relational and process-based rather than perfectionist. This relational worldview admits that its vision is never perfect but always can be improved by working in relationship with others, especially when informed by an open, reflexive, and contested view of “improvement” as an idea and a process’ (p. 6).

Their book is a theoretical exploration of the diverse patterns and practices that have shaped the alternative food movement and alternative food networks and their ability to contribute to greater ‘social empowerment and progressive change’. While never explicitly defined, alternative food networks can be understood (by this reader at least) as constellations of 1. shifting producer–consumer communities of interest and practice, and 2. continually contested and renegotiated knowledge claims that constitute and are constituted by trade relations and the economic and political infrastructure of the global food system.

To this end, the book is propelled along by dozens of timely questions, many of which the authors admit they cannot answer but which serve to push current conversation and future research in critical new directions. ‘How’, they ask,

‘can we grasp the proliferation of alternative food networks... since the 1990s? How can we understand the many different ways in which they are organized? Does the growth of these networks mark a watershed change...? How “alternative” are these re-localized networks? What are their relationships with mainstream provisioning? Is re-localization an oppositional move, articulating a new moral politics of food...? Are these moral politics grounded in a Putnamesque (re-)valorization of social community or is the quality “turn” to the local rather a new form of cultural capital in the Bourdieusian status wars of social “distinction”?’ (p. 65).

Like much of their earlier writings upon which this book is based, the authors’ perspective is informed by, or rather facilitated by, three analytical themes or ‘bridges’ that cross-cut their discussion of alternative food networks – reflexivity, shared knowledge practices, and alterity. Briefly, reflexivity refers to the practice of opening up inquiry in ways that move us beyond the normative, to recognize the complexities and contradictions of social life and the multiple notions of privilege and economy embedded within them (and it). With this awareness in mind, they wisely discuss the functions and contradictions of borders and networks and how they apply to localism both in the US and Europe. Local, they argue is not a ‘purified’ category, not ‘somehow given in the order of things’ but a site for exploring ‘the social struggle and contestation in the making of place and scale’ (p. 23). Consistent with their theoretical purpose, they focus on verbs (e.g. skirmish, bridge, negotiate, reimagine) rather than nouns (e.g. food, commodity, standards).

Shared knowledge practices suggest that not only are there inherent differences in cognition and meaning among food system actors and paradigms but that the process(es) by which these understandings come to be shared or parts selectively adopted and reframed provides significant insight into the evolving nature of new imaginaries and political asymmetries. Here, their discussion of Wilkinson’s theory of corporate reframing and the subsequent ‘overflow’ of alternative values provides insight into the processes that have propelled and transformed both organics and fair trade movements. This orientation also supports their argument that the consumer cannot be regarded simply as a passive or manipulated player in the dialectic

tics of food network analysis but rather consumer agency (especially when collectively realized) can be understood as ‘a form of political action’, one that may not lead the revolution, but still ‘wields power to shape the food system’ (p. 42).

Finally, alterity refers to a critical inquiry that accepts (and appreciates) the strategies by which alternative movements challenge the industrial food system while, at the same time, accepts their need to coexist within that system. According to the authors,

‘Alternative economies are... powerful but not intrinsically equalitarian. They are unfixed; that is they are always open to question. It is this “unfix- edness” that makes it necessary to keep food systems in the larger ongoing civic conversation about making a better world, with the “better” defined differently and reflexively by different people. It is the process of building this world despite our differences world views that makes the dynamic of alternative economies so complex, and so powerful’ (p. 156).

For the authors, innovation and especially innovation that brings with it greater social justice is possible within (rather than oppositional to) a capitalist market economy. A set of intriguing case histories (i.e. milk orders, organic materials, and organic pasturing) illustrate the internal conflicts, interdependencies, and policy outcomes that have occurred as alternative interests negotiate their way within the conventional system. The results are never clean or wholly satisfying. Neither are the authors sanguine about them but rather recognize that the process itself – a civic conversation open to democratic participation – is the sine qua non of coexistence and eventual equity and sustainability.

*Alternative Food Networks* is a necessary book. It provides both historical back- ground and theoretical critique for much contemporary food system scholarship, nationally and internationally. It is learned and sharp, and it challenges us to take stock of where we are in our personal and collective thinking about alternative and conventional food systems. Ultimately, *Alternative Food Networks* guides us through a bout of mental housekeeping – a reorganizing and polishing of our theoretical furniture – not because company is coming but because if we are going to continue to inhabit this intellectual space (and make good on the claims of an alternative food system), then we need to periodically manage our clutter before continuing on with our work and our lives. Still, I sense that the authors would be the first to point out that we live in a house and not a museum. All things are mutable. Everything should be questioned. And clutter itself is a sign of life – of ongoing inquiry and innovation. It should never be eliminated, but periodically it can (and should) be reorganized and re-evaluated. So, in the interest of making more clutter, I offer a few thoughts of my own prompted by the authors’ discussion, my training as an anthropologist, and my recent experiences working within the context of urban food and farming.

First, I must confess to being a bit perplexed by the nature of the authors’ engage- ment with context and the particular. When talking about shared knowledge claims as part of more process-oriented inquiry into alternative food networks, they write, ‘This notion of knowledges embedded in the habits and routines of “communities of practice’... performed and reproduced in the daily round of lived-experience, lends conceptual clarity to the durable polyvalence of food production–consump- tion practices’ (p. 51).

To my mind this is a profound and exhilarating statement, one that acknowledges the experiences and understandings of real people living in real places. To me, it

suggests the need for ethnography and thick description – for multi-sensual expression. It suggests spending time in lived communities, not just for the purpose of observing (and illustrating) how others express themselves behaviourally and conceptually but also for allowing the experience itself to serve as a catalyst for critical self-reflection. What do ‘we’ learn from this involvement – about ourselves and our relationships to existing structures of power and privilege? How does this help us ‘see’ the relationality of our differences and overcome our own myopic view of the world?

Yet, this level of intimate involvement and self-questioning seems largely to be missing from the authors’ discussion. I do not recognize any of the kids, parents, or grandparents who inhabit the urban neighborhood where I work. Nevertheless, their interactions with vacant lots, red-hot Doritos™, SNAP benefits, and the police are ongoing, and they certainly inform the local food movement in Lansing, Michigan, my own urban agriculture project being a case in point. Likewise, the language the authors use to speak about alternative projects remains wholly academic and scientific. The ‘people’ they refer to tend to be institutions and formal organizations. Despite a concern for the daily experiences and processes that extend resource ownership and political empowerment, the authors tend to keep themselves at arm’s length from the ‘unsanitized’ realities (and reflections) they understand too often go unexamined. Without a wider selection of practical, expressive, and theoretical tools, including those of the arts and humanities, I think it will be hard to move marginalized actors and knowledges into an open and democratic civic conversation. As the authors so clearly note, we cannot advocate critical political theory and be unwilling to engage directly with (and learn from) those who are not like us.

Second, the authors argue for a more tightly integrated approach to the local food system and its continually negotiated (as opposed to idealized) nature. They write,

‘a wider institutional understanding of the local food economy would extend beyond the market-embedded nexus of locality/local food to the myriad social enterprises, non-governmental organizations, and other organizations working to reduce inequities in health and access to fresh, nutritious food, alleviate “food poverty” and build sustainable local procurement systems’ (pp. 82–83).

This is a fine statement and it suggests to me that local food economies, like communities of place or of practice, cannot be approached or understood solely on the basis of formal market relations. If food economies are socially embedded then such things as history, geography, landscape, story, and identity all contribute to their ultimate shape and durability. Likewise, community members are multidimensional and their relationships are simultaneously meaningful, spontaneous, contradictory, and redundant. I am perplexed, therefore, that the authors have focused so heavily on producers and consumers (production and consumption) and the actions, tensions and negotiations that occur between them. The concern I have is that when market relations, rather than community relations, are privileged (as is so often the case), real people are easily reduced to shallow or instrumental players. Where does an urban neighbour fit who has been a unskilled farm labourer all his adult life, who is raising an autistic child, who voluntarily helps a friend fix his car (‘because my friend has no money’), who cannot read or write English, who loves tomatoes, and wants to plant a fruit tree on our urban farm so we will not forget him? He is a poor consumer, a poor producer and quite invisible on any conventional food chain. But

this same urban neighbour has spoken with his congressman about his dishonest landlord, joined the neighbourhood watch, planted his own garden, and is most definitely present in our lives and within his immediate community. The point I am trying to make is not only that markets tend to disappear whole portions of the population, but that other sorts of relationships and other sorts of knowledges (expert and otherwise) are essential for understanding and enabling local or place-based economies (food and otherwise) that are just and sustainable. It seems to me that consumers and producers (assisted by scientists and politicians) constitute only part of the alternative food discourse. We also need urban planners, landscape architects, community organizers, poets, preachers, archivists and neighbors to cultivate a less partial and more nuanced view of community life. In a recent essay, Wayne Roberts (2012) writes that Japan was able to handle its recent earthquake and tsunami because of shared values and relationships embedded in the society prior to the disaster. Japan's social stability, he suggests, does not hinge on the maintenance of producer-consumer relationships per se (though they are certainly part of the mix) but on a culture of caring and civic responsibility – 'of a strong sense of social cohesion and disciplined commitment to collective well-being' held in place by 'longstanding practices promoting equity' (Roberts, 2012). It is time, I think, to enlarge our food system inquiry and practice by relying less on external and emergency interventions and more on a deeper awareness of what predisposes communities of place and practice to act care-fully and sustainably.

My final comment has to do with what seem to me to be contradictory assertions on the part of the authors; first that 'different knowledges' (i.e., paradigms) can coexist 'without having to compete for dominance' (p. 186) and second that alternative food networks can and do exist within an industrial, capitalist, and global market economy. With this as background, they provide the reader with well-researched illustrations of how the alternative food movement has evolved over time, come into direct conflict with the conventional food regime, and ultimately resolved or accommodated their differences. Milk orders, organic materials and certification, fair trade values and ownership, as noted earlier, offer evidence of how marginal practices have been disappeared and/or how alternative strategies have been politically re-worked to suit dominant interests.

I understand that not all has been lost as alternative food movements have been stripped of essential relationships and contexts and as 'quality' and 'local' have been simplified and commodified by the mainstream food system. Values do 'overflow' and 'social movements can successfully rearticulate their demands and new forms of collective action [can] emerge to take up the banner of progressive change' (pp. 90–91). What I don't understand is why the authors see this process as a form of partnership and mutual coexistence, while, at the same time, they claim that activism and alternative knowledge claims serve principally as 'brakes' in the totalizing trajectory of corporate domination and inequity.

If alternative movement actors and conventional food system players are to be partners in an evolving global food system, then I would expect that both sides (not just one) would make significant sacrifices as well as work toward reducing their gross discrepancies in size, material assets and influence. Partners would need to respect (though not necessarily agree with) one another. They would need to share power (not absorb one actor into the next), and they would need to honour the decisions and protect the decision-making processes that emanate from a participatory democracy, especially as it operates at the smallest (most grounded) level. I don't

see this happening. It is really not possible to negotiate with someone who can take what he wants with impunity, whose control is hegemonic. For this reason I am suspicious of rhetoric that obligingly chirps 'big and small, there's room for all'. What is Hantz sacrificing in Detroit? What is Wal-Mart sacrificing in its organic or buy local campaigns? What is Nestlé sacrificing in its ownership of fair trade products? They have all been privately improved through innovations nurtured by the alternative food movement.

If, as the authors seem to suggest, the decades of sweaty, painstaking work accomplished by activists at the margins – with few material resources, minimal infrastructure, and much personal sacrifice – amounts to little more than keeping the beast from swallowing us whole, then perhaps it is time to rethink what we are doing. My interest has never been to slow down the likes of Hantz or Wal-Mart or Nestlé. Rather it has been to provide the physical and conceptual spaces within which alternative and unauthorized ways of knowing and being are made possible. Food and the agri-food system hold tremendous potential in our finite but infinitely variable world for doing just that. I would rather go down swinging – fighting for the alternative (and thinking it closer to an ideal than the dominant system) if all we can say at the end of the day is Starbucks handles seven types of fair trade coffee and Whole Foods now offers benefits to its workers.

But, being provoked in this way is good. Perhaps that is what the authors intended all along – to keep us from growing complacent, to push us into deconstructing what we know (or think we know). Toward the end of their book they pose yet another set of questions to move us forward, questions that don't accept defeat and don't fall prey to easy 'we vs. them' dichotomies. They ask, 'can we design new modes of governance as mechanisms to formalize more complex relational worlds that acknowledge and work with multiple ways of knowing? Can we protect the autonomy of different ways of knowing while keeping boundaries between them more leaky, enabling more hybridization between them?' (p. 193).

Not only are these critical questions, but the authors go on to suggest that the place to begin looking for answers is within

'small groups of local people, cognizant or not of their putatively neoliberal subjectivities or the consolations of intellectual critique, [who] continue to experiment and strive for what they see as greater empowerment by adopting a politics of practice: of attempting to remake the world as the find it in the places they inhabit' (p. 247).

How we engage with the 'politics of practice' in all its mundane and heroic, informal and formal manifestations, I think, becomes our next critical challenge – as does understanding how such action plays out on real streets, informing place-based discourse and engagement as well as connecting with larger geographies and greater levels of socio-political abstraction. Despite, or rather because of, the popular acceptance of alternative food projects, locally and globally, there is now more reason than ever to be vigilant – to know the local and the particular well, while simultaneously questioning the familiar and challenging the patent answer.

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

MARIA FONTE

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'<sup>1</sup> (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 re-framing 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 (Kloppenborg 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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## Searching for the ‘Alternative’, Caring, Reflexive Consumer

JOSÉE JOHNSTON AND KATE CAIRNS

In a recent conversation about food politics with a food studies scholar, she balked at the use of the term ‘alternative’. For her, there was no point talking about ‘alternative’ food projects in a world where Wal-Mart sells organics and non-profit food projects form partnerships with grocery store chains. While we certainly understand this point, we are reluctant to abandon terminology designed to identify what is *different* – a taxonomy that guides us towards projects that are not the corporate, capitalist ‘business as usual’. Why? Because if everything is now located in the ‘mushy middle’ of do-good capitalism, how can scholars and activists figure out which strategies are most useful for working towards greater food system sustainability and social justice? How can we call out the ‘greenwashers’ and the cynical corporate do-gooding, and distinguish this from more substantive social movement efforts? Obviously there are no easy answers to these questions, but it seems that that some kind of boundaries are required – both analytically and politically.

*Alternative Food Networks* (AFNs) is precisely the work the food studies field needs to substantiate, clarify, and push these kinds of conversations forward. A key contribution of the work is helping us move beyond pessimistic critiques of AFNs (as neo-liberal downloading) or naïve praise of AFNs (as ‘alternative’ saviours). This book is a ‘taking stock’ sort of work written by three of the most theoretically nuanced thinkers and astute critics in the field. Goodman et al. identify many of the polarizing dualisms that plague food studies. In their words, ‘[d]espite its narrative convenience, it is simplistic to decant [the food system] into a two-sector opposition between alternative food networks and mainstream food provisioning’ (p. 104). They then identify ways in which unproductive dichotomies can be transcended. For example, they advocate a reflexive politics that carefully considers the ‘alterity’ of food projects, rather than assuming a priori that everything local is virtuous, for example. Alterity does not necessarily mean oppositional, or anti-capitalist, but refers to ‘the development of new ways of doing things that coexist with this powerful [capitalist] system and attempt to change it from within’. Theorizing alterity is just one example of the sophisticated approach they bring to food studies, and these accomplishments are worth spelling out.

### Key Contributions: Theoretical, Conceptual, Political

Analytically, Goodman et al. employ a dialectical approach that considers the responses of alternative food movement activists to market appropriation, as well as

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the impact that movement actors can have on for-profit food projects. More generally, this book reminds food scholars about the necessity of taking a complex approach to power – seeing it as both a disciplinary, productive force that shapes how we see, feel, and eat, while investigating simultaneously how power is concentrated in large bureaucratic institutions and market actors – think here of Nestlé, the retail heft of large supermarket chains, or the far-reaching impact of the US Farm Bill. Seeing power this way allows for a nuanced, but clear approach to AFNs; we can remain critical of how they reflect ‘the current neoliberal political regime’, at the same time we can carefully consider how they might represent ‘experiential, prefigurative social movement[s] creating innovative processes of collective learning and grounded practices in particular places’ (p. 155).

The book also brings a refreshing materialist, and politically sharp perspective to the study of food culture and politics. Goodman et al. acknowledge the political and ecological possibilities of AFNs, but they also recognize that we are facing ‘a *structural* problem, with roots in the global resource limits now facing intensive, fossil fuel-dependent, industrial agricultural systems’ (p. 107). This is a work that keeps its eye on the ball of ecological collapse and gross social inequities, and contains a significant critique of how states in the UK and EU have failed to face up to the severity of these challenges – food security rhetoric aside. The book’s ‘big picture’ scope is an important countermeasure in a sea of small-scale food case studies and local-eating projects. The authors productively draw from such case studies, while still facing up to the severity of issues plaguing the global system. In doing so, they acknowledge efforts and alterity without sugar-coating the situation we find ourselves in. For example, after assessing the ‘alternative’ food scene in the UK and Western Europe, they conclude that ‘apart from mainstream efforts to “endogenize” profitable segments of organics, locality, and local foods, these campaigns have made relatively little impression on conventional food systems and the prevailing ideology of “cheap food,” with its foundations in the distantiated patterns of global sourcing developed by transnational food manufacturers and supermarkets’ (p. 128). After assessing the situation in the US, they put forward a hard-headed assessment of the ‘enclave of civic agriculture – farmers’ markets, CSAs, farm-to-school programs, pick-your-own farms’, concluding that these efforts are unlikely to pose ‘any kind of competitive threat to the “incumbent” regime of “Industrial Organic,” not to mention the wider conventional provisioning system’ (p. 154).

The book also takes a refreshingly blunt approach to the market embeddedness of most AFN projects, and raises critical questions about the precise nature of their alterity. Building from Gibson-Graham, Goodman et al. argue against the ‘master-narrative’ of capitalism and make note of the plurality of economic forms within capitalism (p. 245; Gibson-Graham, 1996). For example, it is difficult to make generalizations even about a fairly specific form of food project like a CSA; they come in multiple shapes and flavours and involve different degrees of member participation and civic governance (pp. 81–82, 124). While they argue that we cannot automatically dismiss market-based projects, Goodman et al. also challenge the idea that such projects can sit ‘within the market’, but still be ‘against the market’. Indeed, in the case of fair trade, they bring a much-needed materialist perspective to the topic to shed light on how mainstreaming fair trade and commoditizing ‘care’ works to the detriment of the poorest, and most vulnerable producers in the Global South (who are the least well positioned to provide high-quality, high-volume supplies to cor-

porate behemoths like Nestlé and supermarket chains demanding standardized fair trade products).

Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman's ability to transcend materialist/cultural divides is partly rooted in their interdisciplinary backgrounds (crossing divides of food studies, geography, and sociology), but it also seems embedded in their long-standing scholarly interest in promoting food scholarship that integrates food production and cultural consumption (see Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). The theoretical resources they bring to bear on this task is nothing short of masterful. (While writing this review, one of us [JJ] found herself writing multiple emails to graduate students saying, 'You must take a look at this book. It will help you think through...') Given that we are obvious 'fans', it is clear that our commentary is not focused on identifying a fatal flaw or unpacking one of the book's contradictions – especially since so much of *Alternative Food Networks* is devoted to exploring the contradictions embedded in food projects. Inspired by the book's animating spirit of moving the food studies conversation forward, in our remaining space we would like to briefly discuss the food 'consumer', and how this figure relates to the book's argument about alternative food networks, as well as the field of food studies more generally.

### **Consumer Agency, Meaning, and the 'Foucault Machine'**

For a work that does not present a lot of data about consumers, the food consumer maintains a significant presence in this book. Goodman et al. argue against the idea of seeing food simply, or exclusively as a 'fetish' that needs to be revealed or unveiled. This approach tends to disregard the meaning embedded in food consumption, and they argue that an analysis of consumer agency, meaning, and knowledge is required to get a complete analytic picture. The consumer is positioned as a figure that should neither be romanticized (as it often is in debates about ethical consumption), nor discussed in isolation of structural inequalities and materialities (as has been the case for some cultural studies approaches), nor should it be automatically dismissed or disparaged (as it can be by structural Marxists, who identify emancipatory agency in production processes, or focus exclusively on de-fetishization). In sociological and media studies of consumption, the 'dupe versus hero' dichotomy is widely acknowledged, and there are several significant attempts to move beyond it. Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, for example, highlight 'the pitfalls of binary thinking that separate consumption practices from political struggles', and advocate 'critical consumer studies' that are 'dedicated to careful investigations of the contradictions and ruptures within capitalist consumerism in order to discern both the promise and the limits of political action' (2012, pp. 13–14).

While we fully support this kind of theoretical reconciliation, it turns out that acknowledging the 'consumer versus dupe' dichotomy is far easier than producing scholarship that effectively avoids this binary. One place where challenges continue to occur is in framing the parameters of consumer consciousness vis-à-vis neo-liberal capitalism. How do we acknowledge and account for consumer agency, meaning-making and consciousness, while situating consumer consciousness within a larger political-economic context of neo-liberalism? Some studies exaggerate the agency and creativity of everyday consumption – a tendency that is ably critiqued in Goodman et al.'s analysis of fair trade. At the other extreme, we are wary of how Foucauldian theories of governmentality can be used to generate totalizing accounts of surveillance and discipline – accounts that leave little room for nuance and com-

plexity. We think of the latter tendency as a kind of ‘Foucault machine’: the analyst inserts seemingly agentic subjects (e.g. consumers shopping for justice through fair trade coffee, or mothers seeking to protect their children by purchasing organic baby food), and churns our disciplined subjects who have taken up the tasks downloaded from the state. While we are wary of the ‘Foucault machine’ and its tendency to reduce complex processes to a predetermined neo-liberal narrative, it remains clear to us that Foucauldian insights on neo-liberal’s productive power must be taken seriously: neo-liberal ideologies do have a powerful pull on consumer consciousness in many empirical contexts. In our own interviews with food consumers, for example, we are conscious of how our questions about people’s eating and ethical proclivities seem to inadvertently provoke feelings of shame among participants, conveyed through confessional narratives about the shortcomings of their shopping habits, and the assurance that they will ‘try harder’ to make their dollars count in the supermarket.

There is clearly no easy way out of these entanglements. While acknowledging these tensions, Goodman et al. suggest that significant promise lies in reflexivity, ‘as the political practice that can make the power of alternative economies manifest in a more inclusive and livable world’ (p. 156). In the next section, we explore the ideas about reflexivity put forward in the book, and consider how they might help us think through the complexities of consumer consciousness in neo-liberal times.

### **Consumer Consciousness: ‘If Only They Were Reflexive...’**

While not in the title, reflexivity is a key theme of the book. Goodman et al. ‘conceptualize alternative networks as reflexive “communities of practice” of consumers and producers whose repertoires create new material and symbolic spaces in food provisioning and international trade’ (p. 7). Reflexivity is not just a way to understand current projects, but is a way to assess their transformative potential. For example, local food projects without reflexivity run the risk of defensive localism, and elitist parochialism (see also DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). In contrast, a ‘reflexive localism’ provides the ‘foundation of a democratic local food politics that is processual, open-ended, and altogether messier – less dogma and romanticism, greater experimentation, more negotiation, more openness to alternative worldviews’ (p. 8).

Reflexive localism is clearly an important goal for local-food movements, and we applaud the book’s attention to this topic. Prioritizing reflexivity can generate strategies for identifying the democratic credentials of food projects, and challenge groups to think through their own privilege. At the same time, identifying reflexive processes in the lives of food consumers is not a straightforward project. We have grappled with this concept in our own work (e.g. Johnston and Szabo, 2011), which is perhaps why we continue to ask questions like the following: What does reflexivity look like in the lives of consumers? How much consumer reflexivity can we reasonably expect? When does individual consumer reflexivity devolve into narcissism? In conversations with relatively affluent consumers at Whole Foods Market (WFM)(Johnston and Szabo, 2011), we found a mixed picture of reflexivity: most consumers were attracted to organic, ‘natural’ products primarily because of their quality and deliciousness; many expressed skepticism of WFM’s claims of sustainability and beneficence in the food system; and only a handful reflexively discussed their privileged position in the food system. In addition, our recent interviews and focus groups with female consumers suggest that even those who reflect thought-

fully about food issues often feel unsatisfied with their ability to enact this reflexive practice through their food purchases – especially when juggling a host of responsibilities with limited time, energy, and money (Cairns et al., forthcoming). Given this challenge, consumers often employ a series of ‘make-do’ strategies – such as relying on the imagery on food packaging to determine an item’s ethical status, or relying on other actors (like Whole Foods) to make ethical decisions for them. While we believe that reflexivity is a key concept that should be used to evaluate food projects, we would caution about the tendency of replacing ‘if they only knew’ (Guthman, 2008) with ‘if only they were reflexive’ – especially in a political-economic context where privileged consumers are most able to access eco-products that position them as thoughtful, and sustainability-minded (Johnston, 2008; Johnston et al., 2011). From a social movement perspective, it seems imperative that we keep Goodman et al.’s structural critique in the forefront of these conversations, so as to avoid a politics of reflexivity that inadvertently fetishizes the reflexive *individual as the locus of social change*.

Goodman et al. clearly appreciate the complexities of reflexivity as it relates to questions of power. Citing Lockie and Collie, they prescribe an approach that does ‘not privilege the agency and power of either producers or consumers’ (p. 44), and insist that ‘food production and consumption are interactive and recursive’ (p. 51). Rather than separating producers and consumers into academic silos, they should be seen as ‘active, relational and political partners’ that are creating new food knowledge together (p. 82).

There is much to agree with here. For us, the argument for integrating production and consumption scholarship is one of the most important contributions of this book. However, we caution that such an analytic approach must remain sensitive to the empirical differences in power relations in the realms of production and consumption. Today, most food and consumption scholars feel extremely uncomfortable portraying consumers as ‘dupes’, or even misguided, for fear that they will be accused of elitist accounts of ‘false consciousness’. Still, researchers must ask tough empirical questions about how much agency and power consumers actually have relative to producers – especially in the realm of knowledge construction, and *especially* given the market dominance of corporate actors in the food retail system (pp. 86–87). An approach to production and consumption as equal, *symmetrical* partners in an analytic dialectic must be careful to avoid blind spots that occur when we are inattentive to power – when we miss, or underestimate the ways that power tends to congregate with institutional, corporate actors, creating knowledge that confuses and misleads consumers, or affirms racist, classist, and gendered ideas. Our research with female consumers reveals that even those who actively research the issues surrounding their food purchases can feel overwhelmed by competing knowledge claims about the most ‘ethical’ option. Navigating this contradictory information was particularly stressful in cases where women felt compelled to justify expensive ethical purchases to their partners (Cairns et al., forthcoming).

While the book includes extensive discussions of race and class inequalities, gender is strangely absent from the analysis – a noteworthy omission given that the realms of food and consumption are deeply gendered. Drawing from our research with mothers, we argue that the reflexive consumer is a classed, gendered project – one that privileged mothers have much greater access to, but still leaves them feeling inadequate. This analysis requires unpacking the ‘commodification of care’ – a key concept within Goodman et al.’s book – as a *gendered* phenomenon. In light of

longstanding associations between care and femininity, and in a contemporary context where women continue to do the majority of food shopping, we argue that the commodification of care serves to extend the gendered labour women have historically performed. As dominant conceptions of caring consumption expand beyond the domestic realm, women's shopping practices take on a new level of social and environmental significance.

In our own research, we find that pressures to shop ethically and responsibly is particularly salient for mothers, and manifest in the figure of the 'organic child'. This gendered and classed cultural ideal constructs the good mother as one who consumes conscientiously in order to care for her child and the planet (Cairns et al., forthcoming). During focus groups and interviews with mothers, we found that women felt individually responsible for preserving their children's purity (e.g. by preparing homemade baby food with 'natural' ingredients) and protecting the environment in which they will grow. Raising an 'organic child' requires immense amounts of time, knowledge and money, and often results in feelings of stress and anxiety – particularly among poor and working-class mothers who struggle to negotiate these pressures on a limited budget. While some mothers engaged reflexively with the organic child ideal – critiquing its underlying elitism or questioning the feasibility of its demands – this figure continued to hold significant sway as an internalized standard of good mothering, generating ideals and practices that were difficult to summarily reject. Our analysis of the organic child helps us to move beyond binaries of consumer resistance and subjection, to reveal how neo-liberal ideologies are embedded in women's lived experience and affect – in their food choices, and the emotions surrounding food consumption.

As we digest Goodman et al.'s significant contribution to food studies, and endeavour to both learn from and build upon this work, we propose that a feminist analysis has much to offer the theoretical debates at the heart of this work. Bringing a gendered lens to the commodification of care can help us to move beyond dichotomies of agentic consumers and disciplined subjects to carefully unpack the interplay of power, meaning, emotion, and materiality in the alternative foodscape.

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## **Bastions of White Privilege? Reflections on the Racialization of Alternative Food Networks**

STEWART LOCKIE

It is something of an accepted truth that alternative food networks (AFNs) are bastions of the affluent middle and upper classes. No one else, it is assumed, could afford the premium prices routinely attached to organic, fair trade and other ethically produced foodstuffs. In *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice and Politics*, David Goodman, Melanie DuPuis and Michael Goodman ask us to think beyond income-based inequality and to consider how a range of other social cleavages may be reflected in and shape AFNs. They argue that race, in particular, has been inadequately problematized both by alternative food movements and by the scholars that study them. Certainly, many have argued that the social standards embedded within various eco-certifications are too weak, allowing, for example, the exploitation of migrant labour on organic farms in the US (e.g. Allen, 2008). But few have looked seriously or critically at the racial composition or dynamics of AFNs. To put it rather crudely, AFNs are not simply the domain of the affluent middle classes, the authors argue, they are the domain of the privileged white middle classes.

It is logically possible that to the extent AFNs are predominantly 'white' this is a reflection not of any processes specific to those networks but of correlations more broadly between race and class in those countries on which Goodman et al. focus their attention: the US and (to a lesser extent with respect to the discussion of racialization) the UK. However, it is also logically possible that AFNs are characterized by their own racially exclusionary practices. Critically, such practices do not need to be racist in intent to be exclusionary in outcome.

The basic proposition that AFNs largely exclude non-white ethnic and racial minorities, as well as the poor, will sit more comfortably with some readers than others. One does not have to look very hard to find numerous alternative food projects initiated by, and benefiting, a variety of ethnic and class groups. Some such examples are highlighted below. However, the purpose of this commentary is not simply to argue the point or to discount the impact of racialization within alternative food networks. The purpose, rather, is to argue that Goodman et al. mark out what ought, in fact, to be a far more substantial research agenda within agri-food studies. Having read this book, I am convinced of the need to push our understanding of racialization conceptually and empirically.

### **Conceptualizing Racialization**

To conceptualize the racialization of AFNs, Goodman et al. extend an argument they have developed through several previous publications (see DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; DuPuis et al., 2006); namely, that some of the values often espoused by

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AFNs have the potential, when applied unreflexively, to reproduce existing social inequalities. The valorization of 'local' foods, in particular, may protect the livelihoods and interests of landed elites while ignoring injustices associated with the distribution of land, exploitative labour relations, undemocratic political institutions, and so on. Such injustices may clearly have a racial basis. However, the racialization of food networks extends beyond this 'defensive localism'. Failure to acknowledge the many ways in which racial inequalities are embedded in existing institutions, social practices and geographies sees these replicated, if not reinforced, through alternative food networks. It is true that some AFNs make explicit attempts to engage in outreach to disadvantaged and/or marginalized groups. Nevertheless, such attempts fail to reform the class and racial composition of AFNs more generally, it is argued, because they fail to challenge the organization of AFNs according to the values, routines and preferences of the white middle classes. Intent, again, is not at issue here. At issue is the treatment of whiteness as an 'unmarked category' and failure, consequently, on the part of AFNs to 'connect the dots' between the ways in which they organize, the spaces in which they operate, the language and symbols they deploy and, ultimately, the exclusion of others (Slocum, 2006).

The relative paucity of literature addressing these connections could suggest that agri-food scholars have similarly treated whiteness as a largely unmarked category. The question then becomes whether these connections are there to be made. How compelling is evidence for the racialization of alternative food networks? And, to the extent that AFNs are racialized, how useful is the concept of unmarked whiteness in exploring and explaining this phenomenon?

### **The Extent of Racialization within Alternative Food Networks**

With respect to the first of these questions, Goodman et al. refer to a small but growing body of literature focused on the production of race through alternative food networks in the US (Slocum, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011; Guthman, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011). Contributions to this literature are based, for the most part, on in-depth qualitative analysis of discrete case studies of local food initiatives such as farmers' markets. Case study analysis is particularly well suited to tasks of exploration and theorizing; of unpacking what Foucault (1986) referred to as the *how* of power. Conversely, case studies provide a poor platform from which to make generalizations about the extent to which any particular finding or explanation might be representative at greater social, spatial or temporal scales. It is a basic epistemological principle that care should be taken when generalizing from case studies. Yet there is a distinct tendency within the relevant literature to imply representativeness by asserting that alternative food movements more generally are, in fact, predominantly white. Slocum (2007, p. 526), for example, states that AFNs engage 'with a white middle class consumer base that tends to be interested in personal health and perhaps in environmental integrity'. This positions AFN participants as not only white and middle class but as motivated by egoistic, rather than altruistic, motives. No evidence is cited in support of this statement yet it functions nonetheless to suggest that case study results concerning the production of whiteness are representative.

Guthman (2008), by contrast, references several other local case studies, and one national survey of US farmers' market managers, all of which observe that customers of the markets they studied or managed appeared to be predominantly white. This is enough to suggest that processes of racialization are not somehow unique to

a few conveniently chosen case studies, but still leaves unanswered many questions regarding the scales at which research results and the theoretical work they inform are relevant. The need for caution here is reflected in Guthman's (2008) acknowledgment of the possibility of regional variation (presumably, within the US) and of African-American involvement in farmers' markets. Yet Guthman is dismissive of the one study she references that focuses explicitly on the experience of African-American customers in markets serving predominantly low income, African-American communities. The study in question was based on point-of-sale interviews with customers of two farmers' markets in Chicago (see Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2006). The samples were modest for quantitative studies (approximately 60 interviews at each site) and no interviews were conducted with neighbourhood residents who did not attend the market. Nevertheless, both sites generated similar results (indicative of a positive customer experience) and recommendations focus on what can be learned to adapt farmers' markets to the needs of low-income minority communities (not on how to fit communities into a pre-existing norm). While no attempt is made to generalize beyond the interview group, this study does suggest there is nothing intrinsic to farmers' markets that is intimidating to, or inconsistent with the values of, working-class African-American consumers. By drawing attention to the study's small sample size, however, Guthman (2008) implies that its results do not need to be taken seriously. This positions the two Chicago markets not as exceptions to a wider pattern of minority exclusion (a feature that would make them all the more interesting), but as empirically and theoretically irrelevant.

Just how exceptional are the two markets studied by Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2006)? The USDA study cited by Guthman (2008) reports, based on estimations provided by farmers' market managers, that in 2000 approximately 14% of market customers were African-American, compared with 76% white, 5% Asian and 6% Hispanic (see Payne, 2002). No data, unfortunately, are reported on how many individual markets comply with or, conversely, buck this trend. Neither are data reported on customer characteristics less amenable to observation such as income and education.

One of the few types of AFN on which there are comprehensive quantitative data is the market for certified organic food. Studies across a number of Western countries, including the US, conclude that income is a poor indicator of consumption of certified organic foods (see Hughner et al., 2007). Some studies even find negative relationships between income and organic food consumption. This is not difficult to explain. Committed organic consumers who cannot afford the average price premiums attached to organic foods contain their expenditure by buying non-perishables in bulk, avoiding processed foods, minimizing waste, shopping at cooperatives and farmers' markets, avoiding expensive 'luxury' and 'gourmet' foods, and so on (Lockie et al., 2002, 2006). Associations between education and organic food consumption are more mixed. Organic consumers, further, are concerned about a variety of values in addition to health, including environment, food safety, animal welfare, etc. Such values, however, are widely accepted even by those who do not go out of their way to consume organic food (Lockie et al., 2002). Survey results consistently suggest, in other words, that organic food is not, in any universal sense, either a 'class diet' or a reflection of distinctly middle-class values. More common is the finding that organic food consumption is gendered. Women both evince higher levels of concern about the 'naturalness' of foods and are more likely than men to undertake household shopping and food preparation, both variables that are associated with more regular consumption of organic food (Lockie et al., 2004).

Comprehensive studies of the racial basis of organic food consumption are largely restricted to the US. Dettman and Dimitri (2007), for example, report that income, education and race (whiteness) are positively associated with the purchase of pre-packaged organic vegetables (salad mix, carrots and spinach) in the US. Based on actual grocery purchases by a panel of 41 000 consumers contributing to the ACNielsen Homescan database in 2004, it seems that we have here robust data consistent with 'the generally held stereotype that organic consumers are wealthy, well educated Caucasians' (Dettman and Dimitri, 2007, p. 460). Importantly, however, Dettman and Dimitri restrict their analysis to products sold with a Universal Product Code (or barcode) and pre-packaged in standard weight portions. As a consequence, organic vegetables sold through fresh food markets, farm-gate stalls and other outlets that do not use barcodes are excluded, as are organic vegetables sold, even by mainstream retailers, in random weight portions. This particular analysis thus provides compelling evidence that pre-packaged organic vegetables stocked by mainstream retail outlets are indeed more likely to be purchased by US consumers with higher incomes, higher education levels, and of Caucasian backgrounds (although the magnitude of this latter relationship was small). Given that many of these retailers utilize retail geographies, product selections (such as pre-packaged vegetables) and pricing strategies explicitly targeted at wealthy, educated, car-owning consumers these results are not entirely surprising (Lockie, 2009). Similarly, given that a large number of alternative food networks – and all of the strategies mentioned in the previous paragraph for containing expenditure by committed organic consumers are ignored – we should also not be surprised if consideration of different outlets and/or products yields different results.

Stevens-Garmon et al.'s (2007) analysis of Homescan data for 2001 and 2004 offers a case in point. Using a subsample of approximately 8,000 households for which data were available on the organic status of unpackaged vegetables sourced from any retail outlet, they find no consistent relationships between income and expenditure on fresh organic produce for either survey year (although, interestingly, highest per capita expenditures on organic vegetables were evident among households with annual incomes below USD 25 000). Further, Stevens-Garmon et al. (2007) find that, on a per capita basis, Asian and African-American households spent more on fresh organic produce than did white and Hispanic households in both survey years. Between 2001 and 2004, expenditure by Asian-American and 'other' households on organic produce declined slightly while increasing in white, African-American and Hispanic households. The proportion of African-American households purchasing at least some organic produce also rose, increasing from 34 to 37% between surveys. As a consequence, African-Americans displaced Asian-Americans as the leading consumers of organic fresh food in the US on the basis of per capita expenditure. Similar results are reported by Howie (2004) and Barry (2004).

In sum, there is considerable evidence that the characterization of organic food consumers as predominantly white, middle class and health-motivated – even in the US – is a misleading stereotype. Despite this, neither can it be assumed that research results concerning the purchase of certified organic foods are representative of all AFNs. The increase in African-American consumption of organic food between 2001 and 2004 coincided with the enactment of the US Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standard in 2002 and an increase in the supply and visibility of organic produce in mainstream retail outlets (Stevens-Garmon et al., 2007). These outlets now capture more than half of all organic sales in the US. It is entirely pos-

sible, therefore, that less mainstream sources of organic produce have a different demographic profile. The lesson to be learned from survey results concerning organic consumption is not that class and race are immaterial. The lesson, rather, is not to assume that class or race, at any particular time or place, will manifest either in a consistent manner or in ways that common sense and conventional wisdom tell us they might. Case studies that conform with conventional wisdoms on class and race are not to be dismissed, but neither is their relevance beyond specific sites to be taken for granted.

### Unmarked Whiteness and the Imaginary of Community Food

The conceptual utility of 'unmarked whiteness' is not undermined by a lack of evidence that all, or even most, AFNs are characterized by disproportionately white participation. Irrespective of whether they are the norm or the exception, exclusionary processes and outcomes in alternative food networks warrant analysis. Understanding the interplay of production and consumption in AFNs requires us to do more than identify the demographic characteristics of producers, consumers and other participants (or non-participants). It requires us to examine the processes through which specific people are mobilized as participants in specific networks and, conversely, the processes through which others are excluded. Indeed, one of the strengths of literature on the racialization of food networks is its focus on socio-spatial processes of inclusion and exclusion rather than on racial differences per se. Failure on the part of AFN participants to recognize the ways in which particular institutional and spatial arrangements suit some groups more than others offers a plausible explanation for some of the case-study results reported in the literature. The proposition, consequently, that unmarked whiteness generates processes of racialization at odds with the democratic goals of AFNs begs exploration and refinement through further case-study analysis.

Undertaking such analysis and developing more sophisticated accounts of racialization is not aided by premature or overgeneralization regarding the extent to which processes of racialization generate a particular racial profile among AFN participants at broader spatial or temporal scales. Partly this is a matter simply of spatial and temporal diversity (we should not expect that the racial composition of AFNs at particular sites in the US will necessarily be reflected elsewhere). But this is also a matter of diversity among alternative food networks. As stated above, the apparent contradiction of African-Americans being under-represented in some community food initiatives while consuming more certified organic food than other groups could suggest either better access to, or a preference for, more mainstream retail outlets. The latter (a *preference* for more mainstream outlets) could be explained by Guthman's (2008) argument that the historical appropriation of land in the US from Native Americans, the wholesale displacement of African-American farmers in the twentieth century, the exploitation of migrant labour, and so on (see also Lobao and Meyer, 2001) casts a long shadow over romanticized depictions of an agrarian past in which small farmers formed the bedrock of their communities. The discursive appeals commonly associated with community-supported agriculture schemes and farmers' markets (calls to pay the 'real' price of food, underwrite farm livelihoods, and sustain rural communities) position alternative foods in a struggle between small family or peasant farmers and the leviathans of corporate agriculture, but say nothing of the raced history of landowning and food provisioning. AFNs that por-

tray the financial sustainability of small farms as a moral issue for consumers may fail, therefore, to connect with those for whom such attribution of responsibility is experienced as an extension of what is already a privileged white history (see also Slocum, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011). Conversely, those that support minority farmers to supply low-income and/or minority neighbourhoods may assist in the construction of a community imaginary and experience more in tune with the residents of those neighbourhoods.

The 'community imaginary' projected by farmers' markets potentially ignores both material differences in the interests of inhabitants of communities of place and subjective differences in the experience of shared space (Alkon and McCullen, 2011). These are intriguing propositions which, again, beg further exploration and refinement. But it is quite a leap from the proposition that farmers' markets often ignore the raced history of US agriculture to the conclusion that a far broader set of activities and concerns associated with the loose concept of 'community food' – from home cooking to gardening and animal welfare – represent a peculiarly 'white imaginary' (Slocum, 2008, 2011). If this is true, what are we to make of community gardens in the US and the majority involvement, in many of these, of African-Americans and other ethnic minorities (Armstrong, 2000; Draper and Freedman, 2010)? One possibility is that such projects and their leaders represent figures 'of black success that white people love to like', figures that are threatening neither to capitalism nor racism (Slocum, 2011, p. 314). Such an explanation fails, however, to account for non-white initiative and participation. What, from such a perspective, could we possibly make of projects such as Baltimore's Duncan Street Miracle Garden; a project initiated in 1988 by African-American volunteers on what was then urban wasteland and which is, to this day, surrounded by an urban food desert (Corrigan, 2011, p. 1237)? Such projects evince their own community imaginary which, like the imaginary projected by farmers' markets, draws heavily on the emancipatory promise of togetherness and fresh food. Gardeners involved in the Duncan Street Miracle Garden 'give back' to the community by donating produce, allowing neighbourhood children to harvest fruit, sharing knowledge and providing a 'green oasis in the heart of East Baltimore' (Corrigan, 2011, p. 1238). 'Community' is a concept that appeals, in a variety of ways, to much more than the privileged white history of US agriculture.

### **Overgeneralization, Reification and Circularity**

Narratives of 'community' within alternative food networks may be associated, despite their discursive similarities, with very different socio-spatial processes of racialization. Overgeneralizing from case studies of particular kinds of AFN in particular places obscures these processes and, in so doing, obscures the many and varied contributions of people from non-white racial and ethnic backgrounds to community food initiatives. Beyond these relatively obvious empirical implications, however, the implications of overgeneralization extend to a number of additional theoretical and ethical concerns. In the remainder of this commentary I will argue, more specifically, that overgeneralization:

1. leads to the reification of simplified racial schemas;
2. obscures potentially more important dimensions of difference and solidarity;  
and
3. promotes circular and thereby untestable and irrefutable arguments.

*Reification*

Obvious phenotypical features such as white/brown skin colour play indelible roles in peoples' embodied experience of the social regardless of the often tenuous connections between these features and individuals' actual racial and cultural backgrounds (Slocum, 2007). That racial categories, as commonly understood, are socially constructed (and crudely at that) renders them no less relevant therefore to understanding social relations, identity formation, subjectivities, etc. As social constructs, however, care must be taken in the transportation and interpretation of racial categories beyond the historically and spatially specific sites in which they have been produced and/or exposed (see Shaw, 2006). Even if we accept the proposition articulated above that 'unexamined whiteness' (in certain societies) can produce equally unexamined norms of behaviour and organization, we must still accept that the meaning of whiteness and the processes through which such norms are produced may be far from universal. Failure to do so (a failure implicit in the tendency to overgeneralization) presents both whiteness and its converse, non-whiteness, as ahistorical and monolithic categories.

*Difference and Solidarity*

To begin by stating the obvious, reification of whiteness and non-whiteness obfuscates multiple dimensions of ethnic identification and difference. It is not enough to acknowledge that the boundaries between white and non-white may be fuzzy (Slocum, 2007). These may not be the most relevant boundaries in any case. As Hunter (2002) argues, the ways in which various non-white groups in the US encounter hegemonic whiteness can be very different and suggest equally different theoretical and epistemological approaches to race. For example, the experience of colonization, the continuing moral and legal rights, and the cultures and subjectivities of indigenous peoples within settler societies such as the US and Australia are vastly different to those of migrant ethnicities – including forced migrants. Failure to acknowledge the uniqueness and diversity of First Nations among the indigenous peoples of modern nation states is often experienced as racist, and subsuming indigenous peoples within blanket 'non-white', 'other' or even 'pan-aboriginal' categories is thus deeply problematic. What is not unique to indigenous peoples, other 'non-whites' or even 'whites' themselves is ethnic diversity. AFNs may be forced, or seek, to confront ethnicities that in other times and places have been in conflict as migration brings ostensibly former adversaries into proximity (e.g. refugees from the former Yugoslavia). Beyond race and ethnicity, AFNs may be characterized by, or seek to engage with, dimensions of difference and disadvantage associated with disability, age, displacement, etc. (Kingsley and Townsend, 2006). There is no a priori reason for race to empirically, theoretically or ethically trump other dimensions of difference or solidarity.

*Circularity*

There are innumerable examples of alternative food activists, entrepreneurs, organizations, etc. taking clear and deliberate steps to promote more democratic access to high quality, socially and environmentally responsible food. The concept of 'unexamined whiteness' suggests explanations for why these may not always be entirely

successful. Overgeneralization, however, regarding the racial composition of AFNs amplifies this sense of failure and generates accounts of racially inclusive practices within AFNs as, in fact, part of the problem. Fair-skinned people are portrayed in such accounts as essentially incapable of understanding and modifying their racially privileged practices. Their attempts at inclusivity are not simply misdirected but oriented (even if inadvertently) towards extending and imposing norms of whiteness on others. Inclusivity therefore is not about problematizing these norms but about helping people feel good about their possessive investment in whiteness by allowing them to consume a kind of watered down and commodified multiculturalism – lending a cosmopolitan sheen to what remain fundamentally white projects and spaces. Overgeneralization thus allows scholars to ignore the stated intentions and values of AFN participants and to theoretically locate their activities within a project of hegemonic whiteness. From there, it is possible to discount the appearance of racial inclusiveness in some AFNs. ‘The presence of people of colour in white food spaces’, Slocum (2007, p. 521) states, ‘and their interest in alternative food practices does not make community food less white.’ By discounting the involvement of non-whites in AFNs the idea of unexamined and hegemonic whiteness is unchallenged. As an argument that explains away data on the racial composition of AFNs that may otherwise appear to refute the basic hypothesis of white hegemony this is circular, untestable and thereby epistemologically problematic. Perhaps more importantly, discounting the involvement of non-whites in certain AFNs comes at the cost of dismissing as irrelevant the intentions and values of those same people whom hegemonic whiteness is held to disadvantage. Taken to its logical conclusion, this implies that non-white community food activists are not resisting or operating outside of white hegemony but that they are, in fact, complicit in it.

## **Conclusion**

Complicity in a project of hegemonic whiteness is not a charge that Goodman et al. explicitly level at AFNs. In arguing that this is the logical consequence of overgeneralization concerning the racial composition and dynamics of AFNs I am not attempting to discredit the concept of ‘unexamined whiteness’. Nor am I attempting to minimize the importance of highlighting ‘blind spots’ in the practice and ethics of alternative food. On the contrary, I am attempting to encourage a much sharper focus on the processes through which social inclusions and exclusions are produced. We do not need to overstate the case to establish that racialization exists as one form of inclusion/exclusion within some food networks. Mischaracterization of AFNs, on the other hand, as universal bastions of white middle- and upper-class privilege trivializes the involvement of otherwise marginalized and/or disadvantaged participants within these networks. Such mischaracterization encourages us to focus scholarly attention solely on the identification and theorization of exclusion and thereby to lose sight of opportunities to explore and to learn from AFN practices that intentionally, or even unintentionally, promote inclusion. There is an important distinction, to be sure, between learning from success and uncritically celebrating the work of alternative food projects that accord with our own values, routines and preferences. However, there is an equally important distinction to be made between the critical analysis of AFNs and subtly ignoring or explaining away contrary evidence with circular and untestable arguments. In drawing attention to examples of racialization within AFNs Goodman et al., and the scholars they draw on, make a

convincing case to prioritize more empirical and theoretical work on the practices and spaces of alternative food. The insights they offer into the exclusionary consequences of defensive localism and other unreflexively applied values raise questions that ought to be asked across multiple sites and across multiple dimensions of difference and solidarity.

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## Alternative Food Networks and the Test-tube Burger

MOYA KNEAFSEY

I was pondering on how to begin my review of this richly textured and thought-provoking book, when the world's first 'test-tube burger' was cooked and eaten in London. The story was rather helpful, because it provided an excellent 'hook' to hang my thoughts upon, at a moment when I was struggling with where to begin. The genesis of the 'Frankenburger' represents the complete antithesis of everything that this book argues for, and also illustrates some of the complex trends that it so carefully articulates. Invented by a Professor of Vascular Physiology, produced in a laboratory with a team of around six scientists and funded by the co-founder of Google to the tune of GBP 250 000, the burger is the result of processes that are far from the open, participatory, and inclusive practices of making sustainable food systems that are advocated in this book.

I want to use the story of the burger as a spring board from which to engage with just three of the key themes presented in *Alternative Food Networks*. The first is the issue of food security. I start with this not because it is the most central theme in Goodman et al.'s book – although it is an undercurrent running throughout – but because the burger has been presented primarily as a solution to the problem of feeding the world, and because the book provides a useful critique of current policy discourses and research agendas on food security. As Chapter 6 demonstrates, these tend to 'frame' food security as a 'structural' problem of declining global resources in the face of major threats from climate change and population growth. Through a close examination of recent UK policy documents on food security and sustainability, the chapter highlights the tensions between supporters of re-localized food provisioning and policymakers and industry stakeholders who believe solutions will be found within the existing paradigm of industrialized farming systems, coupled with international trade and highly efficient supply chains. The discussion reveals 'how deeply the conventional food system is entrenched in political economic and cultural terms, and the policy distance that must be navigated before sustainable re-localized food networks and food justice come within reach as accepted goals in fairer, more open societies' (p. 107). The analysis illustrates how, in a number of important UK policy documents, the basic assumption is that food security will be achieved by ensuring ever increasing resource use efficiency, rather than any 'root and branch transition from one organizational template to a radically different model' (p. 110). Within this context, localized food networks are regarded as an 'interesting' and 'innovative' but essentially fringe activity; useful for 'reconnecting' people with their food, and promoting social benefits, but in no way capable of making any significant contribution to food security. Yet the authors argue that despite being generally dismissed in policies, initiatives such as Making Local Food Work and the Transition

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Town Network are 'creative responses by social movements and grassroots groups in the UK to the same impending constraints on hydrocarbons and ecosystem services [and] are galvanizing public support and encouraging collective action at a time when public disenchantment with conventional party politics and policy channels is widespread' (p. 119). They argue that although these projects are often small scale and dispersed, they yield valuable 'demonstration' or 'multiplier' effects and potentially open up new dimensions in the contemporary politics of food. This perspective on alternative food networks is maintained throughout the book, which, as a whole, crafts an argument that these initiatives represent a hopeful new 'politics of practice' situated in the places and times that people find themselves inhabiting.

In relation to ensuring food security, Goodman et al. note that beyond general assertions that smarter, more efficient technical and business practices are needed to keep enhancing the competitiveness and resilience of the agriculture and food sectors, UK policy documents provide little detailed discussion of the structural changes that will be needed in farming, supply chains and consumption patterns. To return to the burger, it is a perfect illustration of the 'technical fix' style of solution to the problem of global food security that dominates the policy discussions reviewed in the book. Launched in a carefully stage-managed media event, the burger is the product of a highly capitalized research and development process, which takes ideas of ecological modernization, or 'sustainable intensification', to new extremes. The production processes are so modern and so intensive that it seems that farms, farmers and animals are barely needed: thousands of burgers could potentially be produced from just one tiny sliver of beef muscle. Advocates of in vitro meat production point out that this type of food manufacture would reduce water consumption and carbon emissions associated with meat production, as well as eliminating animal suffering. It would help to satisfy the growing world demand for meat and therefore presents a solution that fits nicely into the current reductionist trend of framing food security as essentially a problem of global resource limits versus increasing demand (as also evidenced in critiques published in the *Journal of Rural Studies* (2013, vol. 29) special issue on food security). Quite apart from the many assumptions underpinning these arguments (such as the idea that ever-increasing meat consumption is an immutable societal trend), the process of developing the burger, in as far as it can be understood from my quick scanning of the media coverage, is quite at odds with the 'politics in practice' and 'reflexive localism' advocated by Goodman et al.

The forms of knowledge required to produce the burger are also different from the 'growing knowledge' described in this book and seen as necessary for the development of better food and better societies. This is a second key theme that the burger and the book illuminate from different perspectives. Chapter 9, which for me is one of the most important parts of the book, deals with the difficulties of creating the shared knowledge practices that are regarded as the foundation of alternative 'communities of practice'. Drawing on a real-world example of an attempt to create an organic strawberry-growing manual, the chapter demonstrates how different kinds of knowledge are regarded as credible within different institutional and work environments. It also illustrates how the implementation of knowledge practices is inseparable from the political economy of food production. The case study describes attempts to find replacements for the banned chemical methyl bromide, which was used to cleanse the soil of pathogens. In fact farmers already know that intercropping with broccoli cuts down on soil pathogens, but it brings in less money than strawberries, and this can be an issue if they are paying land rents that are based

on more lucrative per acre returns from strawberry production. Researchers in this case wanted to show that organic growing could alleviate the need for the use of methyl bromide or its replacement methyl iodide (which is even more toxic) but the difficulties lay not only in terms of the financial barriers to changing behaviour, but also in how to forge communications between two different knowledge systems: one based on scientific peer review of verifiable evidence-based results, the other on daily, embedded learning from peers in the strawberry production sites. This is a very important chapter because it really goes to the heart of current battles about the future of food – battles about what is known, what can be known, and perhaps most crucial of all, what can be accepted as legitimate. This is particularly important when considering the ‘sustainability’ of food systems because we can only really tell which behaviours are sustainable with the passage of time; in other words, the sustainability of any action can only be fully evaluated with a degree of hindsight. Localized and organic food systems are often dismissed because the dominant, albeit contested, ‘scientific’ view is that they are not productive enough and are actually just an enjoyable diversion from the serious business of feeding the planet. But as critics of this view suggest, the focus on technical fixes to improving productivity narrows down what counts as food ‘security’ as well as what can be known about it. To return to the lab burger again, it is the outcome of a type of highly specialized knowledge that can only be known and practised by a very few people (only a handful of scientists around the world know how to grow new muscle cells in a petri dish). When Goodman et al. talk about shared knowledge practices they are also concerned with the ways in which these become embedded in daily behaviours and routines, and they argue that the ability of alternative food networks to expand depends on their capacity to ‘reconfigure’ these routines away from the niche and into the mainstream. In other words, social innovation is required in order to build new practices and shared understandings of what constitutes good and sustainable food. Hence another reason why the burger is indicative of the deepening of ecological modernization rather than any radical change to the food system: its consumption will require no consumer behaviour change whatsoever, beyond a suspension of mistrust about its actual contents. On past experience, and often out of necessity, consumers have already demonstrated an ability to suspend (or at least suppress) their mistrust, eating all manner of processed-meat products despite various media horror stories about ‘pink slime’ and horsemeat.

Linked to this last point, a third key theme that resonates with the story of the burger and is a powerful thread running throughout the book is that of quality. Media reports about the test-tube burger picked up on the issue of taste, and questions have also been asked about the long-term safety of the product. The ‘expert’ tasters who were brought in to sample the product remarked that it tasted ‘close to meat’, although lacking in fat and flavour. Taste and safety are key components of overall food quality, but as illuminated throughout the book, quality is also about provenance and identity, process and certification. The politics of quality, or ‘who defines how food is grown and how it is known’ is a central field of engagement in the world of food, and ‘quality’ is a construct that can be enrolled into projects of very different political ambition. In Chapter 5, the authors ask some very pertinent questions about the politics of quality. For example, does the mainstream food system subvert the moral geographies of locality foods as they enter the market and industrial worlds of corporate retailers? Can mainstream retailers provide wider social access to quality foods and stimulate gradual transformation of food provisioning towards

a more equitable, sustainable future? Again, they use several case studies to examine the efforts of locality foods to either fit into corporate networks or resist. They situate these efforts within the context of the rise of the supermarkets as the chief arbitrators of quality, in tandem with the retreat of the state to baseline food safety regulation. With traceability now a mantra that is frequently invoked as the key to ensuring food safety and food quality an 'audit culture' of supply chain governance has emerged (p. 88), although the credibility of this has surely been undermined in the wake of 'horsegate'. Elsewhere in the book, quality reappears as a major component of the branding of fair trade products, thus enabling their entry into mainstream markets at the expense of their original moral geographies concerned with the building of transparent and direct relationships between producers and consumers. Throughout the book, food quality is recognized as political and, in Chapter 11, some searching questions are raised about the material implications of the 'tyranny of quality'. In the context of fair trade's reorientation towards high-quality products marketed through the major retailers, the chapter asks about the effects on supply chains and farmers themselves. It suggests that farmers and communities without the right quality products, post-harvesting facilities or knowledge systems to engage with globalized retailer supply chains are often excluded from contemporary fair trade networks. They are typically the most disadvantaged farmers on the worst soil – the very people that fair trade should support. So what about the quality of the world's first test-tube burger? It remains to be seen how this will be constructed and audited but there is little doubt that a process of legitimizing the notion of in vitro meat production as a safe and sustainable food source has already begun.

I have so far structured this review around the key themes of food security, knowledge and quality, all of which run through this book as well as being invoked by the burger story. I want to draw the review to a close by chewing over the real 'meat' of this book, however, which is the extent to which alternative food networks can be regarded as precursors of a broader project of social empowerment and progressive change, which would perhaps render the idea of a test-tube burger redundant. In order to address this issue, the authors use extensive case study evidence, either from existing studies or their own research, to critically examine the politics and practices of a range of local and locality foods, organic foods and fair trade networks. Building on their already published work, they take their conceptualization of a reflexive politics of food to a new level, building in greater theoretical rigour and developing a sustained but constructive critique of the first 40 years of alternative food activism. They do not see alternative food networks as 'oppositional' in the sense of wanting to overthrow states or capitalism. Rather, their alterity comes from the development of new ways of doing things that coexist within the current powerful system of corporate-dominated food chains and attempt to change it from within. One of the features that makes their overall analysis so convincing is the fact that the authors consistently avoid becoming glassy eyed and romantic about local and alternative food movements. Chapter 2, for example, covers some familiar ground in its arguments about the dangers of 'unreflexive' localism, but takes these further by engaging in depth with theories of justice and also proposing a description of reflexive localism as a practice. The practice requires an admission of the contradictions and complexity of everyday life, emphasizes process rather than vision, does not favour any one scale of political practice, and works within multiple notions of privilege and economy. What I found particularly challenging about this overall analysis is that the authors draw a very clear distinction between the concept of 'inclusion' and

the notion of 'shared values' and if there was one aspect that I felt needed more development it was this point. In Chapter 8, it is argued that alternative food networks that focus on forging communities of shared values are intrinsically inegalitarian because they are based on a single worldview. This kind of 'romantic' worldview is based on a dialectical notion of change, whereby development emerges from a personal conversion to new values, and then 'changing others' consciousness to become members of a community that shares these values' (p. 156). A politics based on shared values tends to discourage participatory deliberation and different points of view. Reflexivity on the other hand is anti-romantic, and rejects the idea that there is such a thing as an 'ideal' life. The authors thus walk a fine line between a welcome reflexivity and the danger of relativism, which shies away from assessing which values have exclusionary and self-serving potential. Whilst they draw attention to the dangers of shared values, they also recognize that values are what drive and inspire people to try and do things better. The point, I think, is that the construction of values needs to be recognized for what it is: the continuously updated outcome of a contested politics of ideas and knowledge, rather than the production of fixed or monolithic notions of the best or 'right' ways of living. In future work, it would be useful to see some really concrete case studies of the practices of constructing reflexive food politics that manage to be principled without being exclusionary.

I began this review noting my difficulty in knowing where to begin. This difficulty, I conclude, stems from the fact that this book provides such an extraordinary wealth of ideas and themes that it is difficult to do justice to the impressive depth as well as breadth of material that it covers. It draws on a wide range of published case studies and also builds new conceptual 'bridges', which open up new theoretical avenues and will surely stimulate a new generation of alternative food network research and debate. *Alternative Food Networks* offers many 'ways in' and also benefits from multiple readings. It delivers its ideas within the context of a consistently argued conceptualization of alternative food networks as a politics in practice, and with a commitment to putting them on a firmer footing. The authors, in their other work as well as this fine book, hope to 'walk a line' between conventionalization arguments which bemoan the appropriation of alternative food projects into the mainstream economy, and celebratory accounts which herald such projects as the precursors of a better food system and a better world. In this book, I think they do hold the line, skilfully articulating the many contradictions and imperfect knowledges and practices that make up our multiple worlds of food.



## **Engaging *Alternative Food Networks*: Commentaries and Research Agendas**

DAVID GOODMAN, E. MELANIE DUPUIS AND MICHAEL K. GOODMAN

*Alternative Food Networks* had its genesis in three leading questions that had been relatively neglected in the great outpouring of research on alternative forms of food provisioning and the social movements at their base. What is to be done to create a more effective democratic food politics founded on open, deliberative processes of civic governance? What are the threads of material, ethical and political commitment that hold people together, however loosely, in these innovative organizational forms? Our third question reflects the fact that most of the alternative economies discussed in the book must secure their social reproduction and disseminate their values in the spaces of (neo-liberal) capitalism. It therefore asks what are the factors that condition and delineate alternativeness and how narrowly do these circumscribe the 'politics of possibility' of market-embedded social movements, such as organic agriculture, fair trade and Slow Food?

To explore these questions we proposed three overarching conceptual bridges: reflexivity, shared knowledge practices, and alterity. Broadly speaking, these concepts are deployed to assess the potential of these 'diverse economies' to 'reconfigure the values, time-space relations, and structures of governance of everyday food provisioning and the global trading system' (p. 7).

Writing *Alternative Food Networks* gave us the opportunity to review the research agenda devoted to the creation of a better food system, systematize our critiques of the limitations of that agenda, and consider how to overcome these limitations. The commentaries in this issue acknowledge the strengths and point out some of the weaknesses of our project. In particular, the commentators, like us, are working to further the conceptual ideas that, hopefully, can help to frame more effective actions to build a future food system that is more sustainable and more just.

We greatly appreciate the response to our work in the commentaries published here, and also in a larger corpus of work by scholars who have found our analytical frames and reformulations to be useful in their empirical research. We are grateful to the authors of these commentaries for grappling with our sometimes dense prose and sometimes challenging ideas in ways that respect what we are saying while asking us to listen to their own not-always-congruent points of view. This kind of conceptual engagement is the definition of reflexivity as laid out in our work on knowing and growing. The invitation to respond to these commentaries gives us an

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opportunity to clarify some complex points in the book and also to indicate future directions for research.

### **Ethnography and Care**

As many of the commentators note, and we readily acknowledge, much of this book is not based on our own grounded, ethnographic work on AFNs. Rather, since our first contributions to this literature, we have concentrated on the conceptualization of AFNs as catalysts of food system social change in order to understand what headway this movement-based economic activity is making towards a new and effective food politics. Communities of practice certainly play a central role in food system change, but others are doing the important, grounded work of documenting the diverse experiences of these initiatives, as the burgeoning output of case studies clearly demonstrates (Maye, this issue).

More current commentary in food panels at professional meetings, such as a recent panel called 'Beyond Food' at the 2013 Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting, has emphasized the need for conceptual work. These panelists noted the proliferation of grounded case studies, often celebratory, of food movements and short food supply chain economies, but stressed that much more must be done to situate this research in larger analytical frames that conceptualize sustainability, alterity, or new forms of economic life. We hope that the analytical perspectives and research agenda developed in this book contribute to this conceptual niche, namely, the larger framing of the role of communities of practice and their concomitant ways of knowing.

In particular, some commentators feel that our ungrounded analytical approach ignores AFNs as 'communities of care'. Where, as Laura DeLind (this issue) asks, is the parent caring for the autistic child, the communities of care that pitch in together to create a world that is liveable and mutually comforting? While some of us have worked as part of – and been comforted by – alternative food networks, and have met and comforted other people in these networks, we have consciously avoided the telling of individual one-on-one relational stories as illustrative of contingent situations. We realize that because of this omission we may be criticized for poor field study methodology (we are not 'out there' on the ground looking at life on the food sidewalk, we are not bringing 'the people' into our stories), and for being inattentive to the ways in which 'care' brings alternative movements together in larger networks that go beyond food.

However, this critique of inattentiveness to communities of care misunderstands one of the central arguments of the book. That is, we explicitly reject the communitarian model of food justice as the way forward to new, more sustainable forms of social life, and the related idea that care and 'shared values' are the central pivot point of social change movements. These notions of 'care' can get in the way of creating new, more just forms of social life. Indeed, as the analysis of fair trade in the book bears out, the turn to economies of quality and transnational corporate retail has created cultural economic geographies of care that effectively exclude poorer, more vulnerable farmers around the world. Our framings of AFNs move away from 'sharing and caring' and toward new forms of social life that are embedded in larger ways of knowing and modes of governance based on respect. Local food movements and other local communitarian initiatives based on shared values of caring

and shared visions of the future are important to group identity and solidarity, but are inadequate to the task of transforming a fundamentally unequal, divided world.

What reflexivity does, as a process, is to ask groups to go beyond their own shared visions, values and carings and to participate in larger, cross-solidarity, collaborative modes of social change. That is, to work with people who have different communities of practice, solidarities or mutual carings, different values and different visions of what a sustainable future would look like.

Going one step further, and drawing upon critical race theory's critique of 'good intentions', we would argue that caring is an intrinsic act of power (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Working, for example, to eliminate food deserts because you care about others' access to food, intrinsically *names* those others as dependent on your beneficence, on your willingness to care for them, leading to efforts to 'bring good food' to these neighbourhoods. Instead, a more structural analysis shows that food deserts are the product of financial exclusions, mortgage redlinings and a long history of decision-making at the city and higher institutional levels as to which parts of town will be deigned liveable and others 'empty' – as told forcefully in Nathan McCintlock's (2011) description of food deserts in the City of Oakland. From this perspective, AFN efforts would focus less on caring people driving trucks of organic food to these neighbourhoods and more on people advocating at higher levels of government for new forms of zoning, financing and development policies. Such advocacy would not only help the people in those neighbourhoods but also leverage a coalition of interests that see how zoning has created less sustainable forms of life for everyone – because the same system that creates places of empty retail also creates the unbikeable, unwalkable suburban sprawl that characterizes middle-class neighbourhoods.

None of us could live without our communities of care, and unlike the usual political economy critique, we are not saying that solidarity-based food movements are unimportant because they are 'marginal' or 'contingent'. But the point is that putting caring at the top of a political agenda makes the larger structures of inequality invisible – until, of course, those food truck projects yield little in the way of results and people start asking larger questions about where these deserts came from in the first place.

### **Reflexivity, Justice and Sustainability**

Attention to these larger questions is what reflexivity is about and one of our ambitions for the book was to advance our ideas on reflexive food justice. The lynchpin of reflexivity as a conceptual frame is laid out most explicitly in our chapter on food justice, which discusses four different ways of thinking about food justice. In other work, one of us shows the ways these notions of justice parallel different modes of knowing sustainability and, by extension, alternative food systems (DuPuis and Ball, 2013). This is part of two of current agendas. The first is DuPuis's project to reach a better understanding of how modes of knowing are aligned to forms of social justice, and how reflexivity about both ways of knowing and forms of just action is a necessary part of effective sustainable social change (DuPuis, forthcoming). The second is Mike Goodman's project to conceptualize the mediated knowledges and forms of mediation that govern the cultural and material 'lives' of sustainability under neo-liberal regimes.

In Chapter 2 of the book, we develop a critique of perfectionism and perfectionist food reform movements, arguing that these create new visions of the good life by constructing new categories of pure eating and living. But all social movements based on purity are intrinsically exclusionary, establishing strongly demarcated boundaries between the pure and the impure. The book therefore advocates an 'imperfect politics' that rejects notions of purity and their intrinsic dichotomies as the starting point of positive social action.

This is a somewhat different starting point from either Slocum (2007) or Guthman (2008) and in the book we state explicitly that reflexivity asks different questions of food movements beyond the 'white privilege' critique. This is where different theories of social justice come to the fore. With a distributive notion of social justice, the idea is to share the wealth, to be inclusive. But the point made by Lockie (this issue) is that AFNs do, in fact, have non-white, non-privileged social actors. But inclusiveness alone is not enough from the standpoint of a multicultural theory of justice. It is also more than 'accommodation' (Taylor, 1994). Nor is it a romantic embrace of the other. Instead, it involves understanding not only that one's own social actions are based on a particular vision of the good life that one can share in communitarian movements based on shared values, but also that other people with other visions participating in other communities of practice need to be recognized.

For example, the Hmong and other Asian farmers who participate with AFN farmers at farmers markets in many Californian towns are there for different reasons, and have different interests, than the farmers who are there out of a shared commitment to the local or the organic food movements. Different groups have different ideas of what it means to 'come home to eat' (Valiente-Neighbors, 2012) or create 'fairer' trade regions. A reflexive approach doesn't simply say, 'See, it's not just white privilege, we are inclusive.' That approach shuts down further questions. Instead, the important research question to be asked at this point is: 'How do these different groups, with different interests, create new forms of social life?' To do this requires a reflexive approach from a theory of justice based on recognition and respect. Otherwise, we will get more studies documenting inclusion, a trivial project of simply looking for African-Americans or other groups participating in AFN projects and trotting them out as proof of inclusiveness. Some of us have sat through too many local food policy meetings discussing how to 'bring the [non-participating group] in' to the movement. After several decades of these conversations, it seems like the wrong question.

The ground-level documentation of unreflexive food movements is simply not the right approach. We could document in detail how ideas about care and bringing good food to others create embarrassing scenarios in local food policy discussions. In other words, we could spy on privileged people as they describe their ideas of how to change the food system and show how these ideas do not fit into theories of social justice based on recognition and respect. But that research project is a dead end, leading to the 'You're not inclusive. Yes we are, look here!' research projects that miss larger questions about how to create a better world despite different ideas of that better world.

### **Life Cycles, Mainstreaming and 'Overflowing'**

Alternative food and fair-trade networks are convenient collective labels for what are, in fact, incredibly heterogeneous sets of organizational forms of food provisioning.

Although simplification is always a risky move, especially given the fertile spaces of hybridity and contingency, it makes analytical and heuristic sense to distinguish between networks that are market-based, in some cases retail-led, and those whose social reproduction lies fully or partially outside the market. This distinction underlies our characterization of 'first generation' AFNs – organic agriculture, locality foods, farmers' markets and box schemes/community supported agriculture (CSA) – and 'second generation' collective localization initiatives, including social enterprises, community self-help schemes, and a variety of other not-for-profit organizations. We attempt to acknowledge this heterogeneity, hybridity and contingency at several points in the book (especially see pp. 118–127). Nevertheless, for different reasons, several of the commentators find that this is insufficient or unsatisfactory.

Thus DeLind (this issue) understands that such social constructions as 'quality' and 'local' are vulnerable to appropriation and further commodification by the mainstream food system and recognizes that alternative values can 'overflow' as social movements recalibrate their strategies to evade the corporate embrace. Yet she is puzzled 'why the authors see this process as a form of partnership and mutual co-existence...'. But this is not our vision at all, nor do we use the term 'partnership' to describe the accommodation of AFNs to corporate demands. To do so would fly in the face of the highly asymmetric power relations between these mismatched actors, as DeLind herself observes in her following paragraph.

Case studies of these asymmetries recur throughout our analysis of alternative food and fair-trade networks. To take one example, the reproduction strategies of three regional food networks in south-west England studied by Marsden and Sonnino (2006, pp. 318–320) are based on their sales to major supermarkets, despite the 'inherent fragility' of this unequal relationship and their exposure to unilateral decisions by corporate buyers to 'reassess their portfolios', arising from 'retailers' variable commitment to meeting quality/premium markets'. Partnership was the last thing in our minds, yet it is important to track the dynamics of those alternative networks and organizations that do seek their social reproduction in accommodation with mainstream food provisioning.

Our purpose in this respect is to reveal the uneasy vulnerabilities and risks intrinsic to this trajectory. As our book demonstrates in spades, the experience of Europe and the US is replete with cases where mainstreaming has reduced AFNs to innocuous and pallid imitations of the alternative futures they once promised. The disappearance of the Welsh locality food, Rachel's Organic Dairy, into the ever-open maw of successive transnational conglomerates, or the rapacious expansion of Whole Foods Market spring to mind here. As Maria Fonte (this issue) recognizes in her commentary, the 'economization' and 'marketization' of ethical values is a key thread running through these mainstream engagements across different alternative food movements. It is seen clearly in the recent history of the contemporary fair trade movement, as the book emphasizes. Any serious study of mainstreaming must grapple with these unequal dialectics and how market-oriented food and fair-trade networks are adapting to this environment.

In her comments on conventionalization, Maria Fonte (this issue) suggests that we simplify these dialectic tensions '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'. A further point is that, 'the co-optation of alternative values is represented as unproblematic', which allegedly leads us to overlook the specific ways in which the conventionalization of movement values has occurred in

different contexts. Rather than simplify the dialectics of mainstreaming, we argue that alternative food movements and markets coexist in permanent tension, as John Wilkinson (2009, p. 20) puts it, and we introduce the notion of 'framing/overflowing' in discussing the mechanisms and processes these movements adopt to resist conventionalization of their values. We are very much aware of the time-space specificities of conventionalization processes and we consider the different outcomes and alternative foodscapes these have produced at length in the chapters on Europe, the US, and fair trade. However, as Maria Fonte rightly observes, we do neglect to explore 'why (there is) so much fragmentation in the food movement', and particularly whether or not these divisions have weakened resistance to 'the appropriation processes set in motion by the dominant socio-technical regime'. These problematics deserve a prominent place on future research agendas.

### Figuring the Consumer

Josée Johnston and Kate Cairns (this issue) ask some provocative questions about the subject (and subjectivity) of the reflexive consumer. How can we put flesh on the bones of this conceptual construct: 'What does reflexivity look like in the lives of consumers?' Where do we draw the line between reflexive concern for the collective good and the privileged, individualistic behaviour associated with the phenomenon of 'inverted quarantine' (Szasz, 2007)? These authors also reinforce our emphasis on power dynamics in the mainstream food system. It is one thing to conceptualize producers and consumers as 'active, relational and political partners' in the construction of shared food knowledges, and it is quite another to observe how this analytic symmetry works out in the everyday reality of hegemonic corporate retail and the 'white noise' of competing knowledge claims. How, for example, has the wider, explicitly transformative project of a movement-directed vision of 'trade justice' become simply one more constellation of global supply chains provisioning the shelves of Asda/Wal-Mart and their counterparts?

Johnston, Cairns and their colleagues are doing trailblazing work (cf. Johnston et al., 2011) on these central issues raised by the concept of the reflexive consumer and their proposition that she is 'a classed, gendered project'. In this vein, they emphasize the importance of unpacking the "'commodification of care"... as a *gendered* phenomenon'. As Johnston and Cairns rightly observe, our analytical framing of reflexive consumption is conspicuously silent on gender, and we support their insistence that this question needs much further research. Crucially, as they emphasize, 'a gendered lens... can help us move beyond dichotomies of agentic consumers and disciplined (Foucauldian) subjects to carefully unpack the interplay of power, meaning, emotion, and materiality in the alternative foodscape', in all its hybrid and contingent heterogeneity.

### Concluding Remarks

We thank the commentators for carrying this conversation forward with their constructive criticism of *Alternative Food Networks*. We hope that our work will bring greater awareness of the socio-theoretical resources to be found in correlate disciplines that can enrich the conceptualization of these diverse economies and contribute to a more effective food politics. The commentators have identified several

theoretical and empirical priorities for future research that promise to reinforce the prominence of alternative food networks in food studies more generally. These include gender, reflexive consumption, the closer integration of conceptual and ethnographical work, movement fragmentation, and the contribution of food relocalization initiatives to food security policy in a resource-constrained world. Clearly, there is much still to do.

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## Book Review

### **State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet**

Worldwatch Institute, 2011

London: Earthscan

x + 237 pp., ISBN: 978-1-84971-352-8 [pbk]

The Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World* is a much anticipated yearly appointment for the broad community of academics, practitioners and policymakers committed to sustainable development. Every year since 2004 the *State of the World* has addresses a different topic of concern, and the 2011 volume was dedicated to the global food crisis. The book focuses on Africa, which is considered by many to be a global hotspot of undernourishment, food insecurity, and agricultural vulnerability to climate change (e.g. Müller et al., 2011). There are 15 chapters, most of which are written by leading practitioners and, as the title suggests, the book is mainly a showcase for examples of successful change toward innovative, sustainable agricultural practices, with analysis and predictions limited to the introductory and concluding chapters.

The message resulting from such a rich illustration of case studies is clear: a radical change is needed in the way food is produced, stored, distributed and consumed from the local to the global level. 'Business as usual' is not an option for solving the coexisting challenges of fragile food systems, climatic change, and malnutrition. Indeed, the opposite is true: agriculture as we know it significantly undermines the ecological and social basis on which it relies. For this reason, the *State of the World 2011* advocates a paradigm shift that involves considerable innovations in the way that agri-food systems are understood, evaluated and governed. It advocates a form of agriculture based on agroecological principles, is poor in external inputs and rich in knowledge and job creation, reunifies ecological and cultural components and is sensitive to the local conditions, especially those of marginalized environments and communities. Consistent with a growing body of scholarly research (e.g. Pretty et al., 2003; Pretty, 2008; Altieri and Toledo, 2011), this book shows that such an approach to agri-food systems is already working for thousands of the most marginal and poorest farmers in the world. However, the implications of this concern not only smallholders in Africa or in the Global South, but the global agri-food system, including producers and consumers in the Global North (Reganold et al., 2011).

Four themes run through the many examples presented in the *State of the World 2011*. One theme is the fundamental need for a systemic approach to agriculture. The book shows how innovative, sustainable practices are often the result of adopting a systemic approach to analysing agri-food problems and, very importantly, of implementing and evaluating policies. Adopting a systemic perspective is formulated by different contributors in the book in different ways. Many wish to consider the entire value chain rather than just food production, to take into account agriculture's environmental and cultural components, or to locate agriculture along with

health, education, and gender issues in the wider picture of rural development. In all cases, however, the need to avoid reductionistic and mechanistic approaches is clearly argued and supported by examples that range from soil fertility to irrigation and from biodiversity to post-harvest losses. A corollary for adopting a systemic approach is that, although farmers might take a central role in some cases, many other actors (e.g. policymakers, private business, NGOs, extension agents, researchers, consumers) at different levels (e.g. from local to international) exert influence on the agricultural system to different degrees. Successful agricultural innovations depend fundamentally on the consistent actions of this varied set of social, economic and institutional actors, and not only on farmers' choices. A second overarching theme in the book is that of learning. Learning is not strictly intended to mean just the training and education of farmers, although this might turn out to play a central role, especially in contexts in which smallholders have to face environmental conditions that they do not have a previous experience of. Instead, learning is intended to be seen more broadly as the system's adaptiveness to changing conditions, and the ability of marginalized groups, including women, to become empowered and efficient communicators in active social networks. In this sense, learning is not unidirectional – that is, involving farmers acquiring knowledge from experts (i.e. a reductionist 'social fix' approach) – but is a multidirectional process, in which different actors (farmers, government, researchers and consumers) learn from each other. In such a learning process, farmers are not receivers of knowledge but active co-producers and experimenters in innovative solutions. This is illustrated in the book, with its examples of low-cost technologies developed by creative farmers. It is linked to the third overarching theme of the book, of scaling up and mainstreaming. As often happens, the best practices do not gain momentum and remain limited to a few local communities. Here, again, it seems that the synergic action of different actors at different levels in the system is a necessary condition for successful scaling up and mainstreaming. In addition, evaluation – a too frequently underfunded enterprise – is called upon to play a key role. An appropriate evaluation of experiences in different contexts is essential in order to identify the best practices to be mainstreamed. Finally, the fourth overarching theme is the absence of one-for-all solutions for achieving sustainable agriculture. The case studies presented in the book show how each agri-food system has a unique configuration. In some cases, innovation occurs 'spontaneously' while in others an external trigger (for example, in the form of knowledge or financial incentives) is needed. In some cases, investment in technology is the main ingredient for enhancing adaptiveness, while in others the missing element is social capital in the community – e.g. the lack of trust among farmers hindering organized action or collective decision-making. Nevertheless, in this respect the *State of the World 2011* shows convincingly that, even when one specific agri-food system is at stake, making a transition toward sustainable agriculture can require the deployment of many policy tools whose action is mutually reinforced, rather than a search for one successful policy.

The strength of the *State of the World 2011* surely lies in the clarity and accessibility of the arguments presented and in its stimulating overview of diverse successful innovations in sustainable agriculture. The book is accessible to a wide audience. However, the academic audience might be disappointed by the sometimes limited amount of references to supporting literature and the one-sided argumentation. Indeed, the book could have probably been improved by a more balanced presentation of arguments for and against agroecological practices, which occur in only a few

contributions. This would have made the message even more convincing, especially in the eyes of those who are critical about agroecology and similar approaches. Despite that, the book can certainly be described as stimulating reading for an academic audience and can be recommended to students as a valuable resource to complement standard textbooks.

The transition to sustainable agri-food systems will definitely not be an easy one. It will require capital, time, and commitment. However, reading the *State of the World 2011* provides some convincing reasons to be hopeful.

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