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Making reconnections in agro-food geography: alternative systems of food provision

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Abstract: This article reviews recent research into alternative systems of food provision. It considers, first, what the concept of 'alternativeness' might mean, based on recent discussions in economic geography. Informed by this, it discusses food relocalization and the turn to 'quality' food production, arguing that both are 'weaker' alternative systems of food provision because of their emphasis on food. It then examines some 'stronger' alternative systems of food provision, which emphasize the networks through which food passes. Lastly, the paper reflects on the concept of alternativeness in the context of food supply chains, and suggests some possible directions for future research.

Key words: alternative food networks, relocalization, turn to 'quality', weaker and stronger alternative systems of food provision.

I Introduction

In the first of three progress reports on agro-food geographies, Winter (2003a: 506) detected a move towards research into food chains and consumption. This article reviews recent literature on the first of these – research into food chains – focusing on 'alternative systems of food provision' (p. 507). There are three reasons for this choice of subject. First, developments in the 'alternative' food economy are central to what Winter views as the main exogenous driver of new research in agro-food geography: 'the shift from a homogeneous agricultural commodity market to a more segmented market' (p. 506). Secondly, debates over alternative food networks (AFNs), food relocalization and the turn to 'quality'

food production, all of which Winter (2003a: 507) classifies as belonging to the 'alternative' food economy, are thriving.¹ A review of this literature is, therefore, timely. Lastly, the conceptual basis of the 'alternative' food economy is disputed. Winter (2003a: 507) notes that it is associated with two concepts, postproductivism and embeddedness, that have been heavily criticized. Such conceptual uncertainty begs the question: what is alternative about the 'alternative' food economy? (cf. Whatmore *et al.*, 2003).

In response to this question, section II draws on recent work in economic geography that is beginning to articulate what 'alternativeness' might mean (e.g., Gwynne *et al.*, 2003; Leyshon *et al.*, 2003). Section III discusses alternative *food* networks, with specific

reference to food relocalization in the European Union (EU) and debates over food quality and labelling, arguing that these represent 'weaker' alternative systems of food provision. 'Stronger' alternative food *networks*, where emphasis is shifted from food to the food supply chains (FSCs) along which it passes, are discussed in section IV. The last section reflects further on the concept of alternativeness in the context of FSCs, and suggests some possible directions for future research.

Thus structured, this review is delimited in two ways. First, its main geographical focus is western Europe and North America. Secondly, it does not enter into a sustained engagement with debates over food consumption. These boundaries are partly a reflection of the literature reviewed: several authors having noted that agro-food studies tend to underplay the role of consumption (Cook, 1999; Lockie and Kitto, 2000: 15; Lockie, 2002: 290; Goodman, 2004: 13). However, they have to do also with the paper's conceptual thrust: the 'material' aspects of food production are more relevant to its goal of examining the 'alternativeness' of alternative systems of food *provision* than the more 'culturally derived' consumption aspects (see Crewe, 2000: 280, cited by Goodman and DuPuis, 2002: 14; see also Morris and Evans, 2004: 106). Indeed, Goodman and DuPuis (2002: 11) express concern that consumption-focused food studies often neglect the 'production side of food'. A flavour of this may be found in Bell and Valentine's (1997: 16) assertion that: 'the rural is commodified through food consumption in "farm shops", quaint village tearooms and "local", characterful pubs, all ripe for city day-trippers to pick'. It is not suggested that there is no merit in their argument, but that the systems of provision that supply such enterprises may be very different – 'alternative', even – in ways that are overlooked by concentrating on their role as signifiers of particular ruralities. Goodman and DuPuis (2002: 11) want to 'build a better theoretical

bridge between food studies and agro-food studies'. The objective here is more modest: to contribute to the conceptual basis of the latter.

II Alternative to what?

I 'Cracks in the neoliberal façade'

To discuss alternative systems of food provision may appear quixotic. After all, FSCs have become globalized² and the so-called Washington consensus has given rise to a worldwide 'neoliberal hegemony' (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 381). Neoliberalism has 'demonstrated an ability to absorb or displace crisis tendencies, to ride – and capitalize upon – the very economic cycles and localized policy failures that it was complicit in creating, and to erode the foundations upon which generalized or extralocal resistance might be constructed' (p. 400). Thus, while the neoliberal project has undergone a metamorphosis since the early 1990s – which Peck and Tickell (2002) characterize as a change from 'roll back' to 'roll out' neoliberalism – this has not altered its 'fundamental commitment to opening borders for the free movement of capital' (Gwynne *et al.*, 2003: 4).

Nevertheless, the advent of 'roll out' neoliberalism, while it attests to the continued hegemony of the neoliberal project, is also a sign of its frailty (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 390), an implicit acknowledgement of its failings and internal contradictions (cf. Whatmore and Thorne, 1997: 287–89). Indeed, Leyshon and Lee (2003: 3) detect cracks in its façade, caused by the growth of theoretical and practical critiques of three tangible outcomes of neoliberalism: mounting social inequality at both national and global scales (see Leyshon and Lee, 2003: 13; and Gwynne *et al.*, 2003: 225 respectively); vulnerabilities 'created by a global economy operating in real time' (Gwynne *et al.*, 2003: 227), particularly the herd behaviour of investors and currency traders; and the undemocratic nature of the governance of global capitalism, through bodies such as the

International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (p. 227).

Gwynne *et al.* (2003: 227) suggest that these criticisms 'have the potential to acquire the moral weight and coalition of interests to mount an effective challenge, and to articulate an ... [as yet] ill-defined bottom-up alternative'. In the FSCs of some of the 'neoliberal heartlands', however, this process seems well under way (Winter, 2003a). For example, Goodman (2004: 3) argues that, in the EU, the growth of AFNs has been linked with the rise of a new rural development paradigm. However, while alternative systems of food provision – or, at least, academic interest in them – have undoubtedly expanded, the nature of the alternative(s) on offer is unclear. For instance, Lee's (2000: 155) finding that producers of ornamental hardy plants, by collaborating with consumers in order to create 'economic geographies of regard', have been able to remain in business despite being, by conventional assessment, beyond economic marginality, was not replicated by Sage's (2003: 58) research into AFNs in southwest Ireland. Clearly, therefore, these two sets of alternative networks demonstrate different dimensions of 'alternativeness'.

This suggests that, with regard to alternative systems of food provision, it is necessary to discuss not only the extent to which they are 'alternative' economically but also in what ways that alternativeness may be manifested. This suggestion is bolstered by Goodman's (2004) recent review, which tends to equate AFNs with what has been termed the 'quality' turn in food production. Doing so, as argued below, can elide two practically similar, but conceptually distinct, types of AFN. However, in order to make that argument it is necessary first to interrogate the concept of 'alternativeness' in the context of FSCs. This is so because, as Fagan (1997: 197–98) and Watts and Goodman (1997: 14) argue, the globalization of, and indeed within, food production cannot be 'read off' from the experiences of other industries.

2 The sociospatial construction of FSCs (I): entrenching uneven economic development? Attention to different spatial practices has been central to recent interest in alternative economic geographies. For, as Leyshon and Lee (2003: 4) argue, 'given that the attempt to build global neo-liberalism is an inherently geographical project involving the construction of a uniform, neo-liberal economic geography, the various oppositional movements and projects to "think and perform the economy otherwise" reveal a keen attention to matters of space and place'. Similarly, in debates over alternative systems of food provision, it is food 'relocalization', often discussed within the context of the 'quality' turn, that has attracted most attention (e.g., Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000a; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Morgan and Morley, 2002; Hinrichs, 2003; Sage, 2003; Weatherell *et al.*, 2003; Winter, 2003b).

Interest in food relocalization follows a prolonged period of what might be termed 'delocalization', but is more usually referred to as agricultural industrialization (Parrott *et al.*, 2002: 241) or productivism (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998). Because it has been promoted by policy-makers as a means of stimulating endogenous development in 'lagging' (i.e., economically marginal) rural regions (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998; Ray, 1998; Parrott *et al.*, 2002), it is tempting to view food relocalization as part of a postproductivist transition (PPT) in European agriculture (q.v. Ilbery and Bowler, 1998). However, Evans *et al.* (2002: 325) argue that the idea of a PPT is too crude to capture recent developments. Instead, they advocate giving greater attention to changes in governance structures and the social relations of production (p. 326).

However current developments are conceptualized – as agricultural multifunctionality (Wilson, 2001), ecological modernization (Evans *et al.*, 2002), a PPT (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998), etc. – it is clear, as Evans *et al.* (2002) imply, that they are linked to, if not driven by, policy developments occurring at

a variety of spatial scales. Setting the global context for the governance of agricultural production are the current negotiations over the WTO's Doha Development Agenda. These are ongoing, but the intention, as discussed above, is the establishment of a globalized, neoliberal food industry where comparative advantage turns on 'natural resource endowments or economic factors of production' (Gwynne *et al.*, 2003: 137). Suitably endowed 'emerging' market economies are being encouraged to specialize in 'non-traditional' agricultural exports (p. 138), while in the developed market economies the WTO is seeking to reduce protectionism (Potter and Burney, 2002) – such as the Common Agricultural Policy's (CAP's) intervention buying, export refunds and import duties – and establish an agricultural trading system that is 'fair and market-oriented'.³

This is, as argued by Leyshon and Lee (2003: 4), following Harvey (2000), a utopian project. Indeed, that is one of its main strengths: the promise of a 'better' future world. Another is that 'the "programme" for the delivery of this utopia can be delivered in deceptively simple and straightforward terms' (Leyshon and Lee, 2003: 4). However, the adjective 'utopian' is apposite for another reason. For, as noted above, the inability of neoliberalism to deliver this 'better' world is becoming increasingly obvious. This makes it unlikely that the WTO will be able to engineer matters so that agricultural trade will become both market-orientated *and* fair. As Lazonick (1991: 75–76) argues, capitalist development is predicated on the ability of certain enterprises to grow by building sustained competitive advantage. Doing so depends not on market competition but on their ability to generate internal economies by gaining privileged access to resources. Prolonged capitalist development, therefore, results in 'concentrated control of product markets, usually with a small number of dominant (typically called oligopolistic) organizations vying for market share' (p. 84). This has already happened in many of the

world's food sectors, with the result that FSCs are often dominated by oligarchies.⁴ Barrett *et al.*'s (1999) study of the trade in fresh horticultural produce from Kenya to the UK suggests that the same pattern is emerging in FSCs that have developed around the exploitation of nontraditional agricultural exports from 'emerging' market economies. Thus, globalization on the neoliberal model is likely to further increase the influence of multinational companies over food and reduce that of national and supranational governments.

Thus, as Evans *et al.* (2002: 316) suggest, 'emphasis on the need for farmers to be able to compete in a liberalized global market seems to place greater emphasis worldwide on the continuation of productivist principles'. This makes it unlikely that there will be a PPT in any strong sense but does not mean that there will be no change. As Evans *et al.* (2002: 327) note, '[c]ontemporary agricultural discourse ... focus[es] not on "non" or "after" production issues but on how to reorientate production to the new demands and constraints posed by public health, environmental concerns and farm-animal welfare'. This process of reorientation has been termed 'ecological modernization' (p. 327). By mitigating productivist agriculture's deleterious environmental consequences (soil erosion, pollution, reductions in biodiversity, etc.), ecological modernization may bring it closer to environmental sustainability. However, it will not reduce the social and economic inequalities that already exist between marginal and/or remote rural areas and those that have been, or can be, incorporated into productivist agriculture. If anything, such inequalities are likely to increase as markets are 'neoliberalized' and production subsidies phased out (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998: 57). In dealing with marginalized rural areas, therefore, the key task for policy-makers will probably be one of helping to mitigate the tendencies toward further uneven economic development that the revised WTO rules are likely to encourage.

3 The sociospatial construction of FSCs (II): 'placing' organisms
 Leyshon and Lee (2003: 10–11), drawing on the work of Carrier and Miller (1998), argue that one goal of the neoliberal project is the production of social gains, specifically the freedom to make economic choices, at the level of the consumer. However, the consumer in question is not a flesh and blood individual but 'virtual', an economic abstraction. The consequence of this construction of people as 'virtual' consumers is that societies are being remodelled around the latter. Leyshon and Lee (2003: 11) characterize this process as the ongoing displacement of freedom from poverty and deprivation by increasing freedom to make economic choices for those who can afford to do so.

While concurring with the thrust of this argument, we suggest that this 'drive towards abstraction' (Leyshon and Lee, 2003: 10) is neither as new as its association with neoliberalism might suggest, nor confined to consumers. Regarding the first point, it can be argued that the social construction of individuals as consuming subjects⁵ dates from the early development of marketing discourse between the world wars.⁶ This is not to suggest, à la Hassanein (2003: 80), that individuals are passive in the face of marketing discourse; rather, that it addresses people as abstract and atomized consumers. For instance, advertisements, a ubiquitous marketing technique, address people as consuming subjects who have internalized the norms on which capitalist markets are built (Williamson, 1983: 42). However, while advertisements can 'command attention and ... define the terms of the negotiations, there is no guaranteed effect' (Sinclair, 1987: 65). Marketing discourse is, in de Certeau's (1984) terms, a strategy that people can resist using tactics. Nevertheless, conceptualizing marketing in this way emphasizes the power relations⁷ that permeate social life in developed market economies.

A set of similarly reductive processes have long been visited on the nonhuman organisms

that enter FSCs. The main difference is that, while marketing discourse aims at the social construction of individuals as consumers, other organisms are often 'reconstructed' by food processors. For example, food scientists have long been analysing and altering harvested organisms' chemical components (to retard chemical and biological breakdown, produce particular flavours and guide consumer perceptions of food), usually as part of efforts to incorporate them into industrialized food production (cf. Murdoch and Miele, 1999: 467–68). More recently, technologies have been developed that enable organisms to be manipulated at the genetic level (Whatmore, 2002). The organisms that go into food are, therefore, being atomized, their chemical and genetic structures altered to produce particular characteristics.

These two atomizing tendencies are brought together with particular force in the marketing of food. For instance, it has been argued that the UK is becoming an increasingly visual society (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 33–40; Rose, 2001: 6–7). This dovetails with the use of imagery in food marketing. Most processed food comes in opaque packaging and consumers are invited to judge its likely excellence from the associations generated by the images on the packet (Allen *et al.*, 2003: 65; CPRE, 2002a: 7). Images are diachronic and metaphorical, and are frequently used to promote associations that would be difficult to substantiate in a synchronic medium (e.g., text). In supermarkets, even fresh food is often packaged and stored in chiller cabinets, preventing it from being felt or smelt. There are pragmatic reasons for this: packaging can help prevent contamination and chilling retards breakdown. It has also been argued that such hygienic presentation is part of efforts to assure consumers that food is safe (Murdoch *et al.*, 2000: 119; Stassart and Whatmore, 2003: 449). Nevertheless, selling food on its appearance and using promotional imagery provide scope for double commodity fetishism (Cook and Crang, 1996). They are

also examples of cultural atomization, reducing the basis on which consumers can make judgements concerning food excellence to how it looks.

These atomizing tendencies have not gone unchallenged: there is, for example, widespread resistance in Europe to the commercial planting of patented, genetically modified food crops.⁸ Moreover, their limitations have been exposed repeatedly by food 'scares', when producers have been unable to prevent, and have sometimes unwittingly encouraged, the transmission of harmful agents between species that feed on the processed remains of others (Whatmore, 2002: especially 120–21). Another set of challenges to these tendencies have been attempts, particularly in western Europe and North America, to 'perform' FSCs otherwise by constructing alternative systems of food provision. Their growth has been attributed to an erosion of trust in conventional FSCs and the consequent expansion of so-called 'careful' consumption (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000b: 317), and to their potential to contribute to endogenous economic development in lagging regions (Ray, 1998; Goodman, 2004: 3).

However, Goodman (2004: 13) expresses concern that European AFNs, unless they engage more directly with consumption, may end up reversing the 'democratization' of access to food brought about by conventional FSCs. While more research into the role of consumers in enabling alternative systems of food provision to perform FSCs otherwise would be welcome, we take issue with Goodman's (2004) conception of 'alternativeness'. Specifically, Goodman's (2004: 3, 13) equation of AFNs with the turn to 'quality' food production is too restrictive. Producing high-quality food is one way of 'performing' FSCs but, as argued below, there are others.

Paying greater attention to the differences between AFNs is also important for the very reason that Goodman (2004: 13) uses to make the case for more research into

consumer agency: 'the formidable economic and spatial power concentrated in the hands of the leading food manufacturers and retailers'. For, as argued below, when it comes to being able to resist incorporation into conventional FSCs, some alternative systems of food provision are likely to prove stronger than others. Thus, the following sections differentiate between weaker and stronger alternative systems of food provision. This could be interpreted as an attempt to argue that there are two types of alternativeness, rather than the one ('quality' food) on which Goodman (2004) concentrates. This is not our intention. It is more likely that alternative systems of food provision exist along a spectrum, from weaker to stronger. The following sections should be read, therefore, as an attempt to start thinking about the extent of the 'alternativeness' of alternative systems of food provision, primarily in western Europe and North America, that have attracted the attentions of academic researchers.

III Alternative food networks

I Food relocalization in the EU

Within the EU, food relocalization has been encouraged as part of attempts to stimulate endogenous economic development in lagging regions. Such regions have been encouraged to 'identify and valorize local resources – including cultural identity – in the hope that this will overcome the structural barriers to economic convergence within the Union and soften the impact of impending CAP reforms' (Ray, 1998: 5). It has been suggested that one means of doing so is by securing Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status for 'typical' regional foods (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998: 329–30). PDO and PGI awards are examples of 'defensive localism' (Winter, 2003b), protecting distinctive products that claim historical associations with a specific area (see, for example, de Roest and Menghi, 2000). They are based on the French Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée scheme,

developed for wine, which is closely bound up with the concept of *terroir* (Barham, 2003). There is some dispute, at the WTO, as to whether these are acceptable forms of proprietary designation (p. 129). Even assuming that they are accepted, however, their potential for stimulating endogenous economic development in regions that lack a developed culture of *terroir* is limited (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000a: 230; Parrott *et al.*, 2002; Tregear, 2003). For example, relatively few PDO or PGI applications have been made from within the UK's Less Favoured Areas (Parrott *et al.*, 2002: 252), despite substantial government encouragement (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000b: 319).

More generally, it has been argued that economic growth can be generated through the production of speciality, or niche market, foods. This resembles the argument, prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, that regional development can be generated through flexible specialization. While there are examples of groups of specialist food producers adopting such a strategy successfully (Stassart and Whatmore, 2003), Lovering (1999: 384) warns that delivering economic development by encouraging flexible specialized production for niche markets can work only under specific conditions and in some places. As Winter (2003b) notes, marginalized rural areas may be unable to cultivate speciality foods. Furthermore, speciality food production, like PDO and PGI protection, is predicated on uniqueness, not flexible specialization. Thus, in a neoliberal market economy, producers of protected and speciality foods may end up competing against each other for finite niche markets. Committing a number of producers in an area to the production of one distinct food product for export is, therefore, a recipe for economic vulnerability (the case of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese is instructive here – see de Roest and Menghi, 2000).

Attempts to promote food relocalization are also being incorporated into the CAP. In anticipation of changes to WTO rules, the

CAP has acquired a second 'pillar', which aims to encourage rural development (Grant, 2003: 19–21). Following recent agreement on further CAP reform, 'modulation' of funds from pillar one to pillar two will begin earlier, in 2005, and will be at a higher rate than previously forecast until 2010.⁹ France and the UK are in the vanguard of 'modulation' (Lowe *et al.*, 2002: 6). However, it is in the UK, where pillar two funding is being channelled into rural, as opposed to agricultural, development (p. 15), that the prospects for CAP-funded food relocalization appear most promising. The implementation of pillar two requires member states to draw up rural development plans (p. 11). The one for England (Wales and Scotland have their own – p. 12) contains two grant schemes that have the potential to help producers retain more of the value that gets added to food as it moves along FSCs. The first is the Processing and Marketing Grant. This is 'designed to improve the agricultural processing and marketing infrastructure in England ... projects must give primary producers an adequate and lasting share of the resulting benefits' (MAFF, 2000a: 3). Food producers may also apply for grants under the Rural Enterprise Scheme, for help with the marketing of 'quality' food, diversification into new or 'non-mainstream' crops or livestock, and the integration of farming with other practices (MAFF, 2000b: 3–4). However, although no specific studies of their impact have been published to date, Morris and Buller (2003: 564–65) suggest that these schemes are not providing a significant boost to food relocalization.

2 Food quality and labelling

As Goodman (2004: 3) observes, western European AFNs are closely associated with the turn to 'quality' food production. The term 'quality' can refer both to the characteristics (qualities) and degree of excellence of food. As the following summary of these two uses demonstrates, 'quality' is difficult both to define and theorize (Parrott *et al.*, 2002: 243).

This, in turn, makes the relationship between the 'quality' turn and alternative systems of food provision problematic.

Although food is corporeal, its characteristics are readily translatable into bearers of visual, aural, textural and taste sensations, their detection and appreciation are culturally mediated. Taste, too, is both a physiological process with a distinct set of purposes (Stassart and Whatmore, 2003) and culturally specific. Thus, similar foods may be valued differently by different cultural groups (Mansfield, 2003) and the ability to distinguish subtly different flavours, for example in wine, can function as a class marker (Guthman, 2002: 295, 300). Matters are complicated further when taste information is used to evaluate the degree of excellence of food. Doing so is predicated on a hierarchical evaluation of food characteristics. Such hierarchies are culturally defined, just as the characteristics that underpin them are culturally mediated. There are, therefore, two processes here, both of which can be subject to the operation of power relations. These may, for example, influence the range of characteristics that are to count in the evaluation of excellence. There is a strong case for considering all the characteristics of a particular food when coming to a judgement about its degree of excellence, so as to maximize the chances of their corroborating one another. However, as argued above, the ways in which foods are marketed, particularly by large food producers and retailers, can make such corroborative evaluations difficult.

Moreover, it is not always easy to detect the embodiment of particular qualities (in the sense of either characteristics or excellence) in food products. Consumers, therefore, must often rely on others' assurances that the food they buy has been produced and processed in particular ways. This lack of first-hand knowledge presents opportunities for commodity fetishism.¹⁰ One way in which those who seek to provide alternative foods that embody particular characteristics (e.g., 'typicality', organic production methods, fair trade) and/or

a high degree of excellence is through the use of product labelling (see, for example, Ilbery *et al.*, 2003). As the victory, in the European Court of Justice,¹¹ of Parma ham producers (whose product is protected by a PDO) over a British supermarket chain demonstrates, labelling schemes, if properly policed, may resist the atomization of food into its constituent chemical components, the double commodity fetish (by conveying information about the economic, social and environmental consequences of food production¹²) and the deskilling of producers.¹³

However, labelling schemes have two weaknesses. First, the advantages that labels bestow on foods bearing them will depend both on how well the production and processing they signify are policed, and on how effectively the benefits associated with them can be substantiated. Secondly, labelling schemes may themselves be subject to fetishization. An example of how these weaknesses can compromise labelling schemes is provided by organic food. It has been claimed that organic food is healthier and has a higher degree of excellence (tastes better) than conventional food. Both claims are contested. For example, the UK Food Standards Agency argues that 'organic food is not significantly different in terms of food safety and nutrition from food produced conventionally'.¹⁴ It is difficult to make an evidential case that organic food is healthier partly because of the way that food science knowledge develops: it is necessary to prove that harm occurs before a particular production process can be labelled 'unhealthy'.¹⁵ However, there is growing resistance to this approach. Stassart and Whatmore (2003: 459–60) argue that AFNs construct 'profane' food knowledges in opposition to scientific ones. Organic farming, for example, is risk averse, aiming to reduce the chances that human intervention in food production will create 'unhealthy' food by minimizing it.

The claim that organic food tastes better than food produced by other means must also be treated with caution (Guthman,

2002: 308). Many factors influence the taste and degree of excellence of a particular food (e.g., variety, freshness and method of preparation) and it would take a finely tuned palate to isolate the process or place of production. Even where such differentiations are made, as with wine, the level of connoisseurship required in order to make them has class implications. Making hierarchical distinctions on such a basis is difficult and, moreover, gives ammunition to those who argue that buying organic food is primarily an expression of cultural capital.

Such arguments do a disservice to organic farming and its supporters. For, as Allen *et al.* (2003) demonstrate, pioneer organic farmers in California had clear social and economic goals¹⁶ that have been sidelined by the narrowing of debate to a discussion about taste and positivistically defined food safety. This has aided both the incorporation of Californian organic agriculture into conventional FSCs and its redefinition in terms that suit large food producers and retailers (Allen *et al.*, 2003). As a result, its social and economic objectives have been lost and it has largely ceased to be what it once was: an alternative system of food provision situated within alternative distribution and consumption networks.¹⁷

3 Weaker alternatives?

We argue, therefore, that the turn to 'quality' food production, and the 'defensive localism' approach to food relocalization, are weaker alternative systems of food provision. This is because they emphasize the foods concerned, not the networks through which they circulate. This makes them vulnerable to incorporation, and subordination, within conventional FSCs. Indeed, it has been argued that the turn to 'quality' food production is driven by large producers and retailers: partly to defend market share in conditions of market saturation for mass-produced foods (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998: 332–33; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999: 2210; Flynn *et al.*, 2003: 39, 43; Winter, 2003b: 26); and partly as a way of

appropriating premium profits for 'quality' produce, where 'quality' is defined in line with their preferred criteria (Gilg and Battershill, 1998: 27–28; Guthman, 2002: 303; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002: 360, 364). There is an irony here, as some labelling schemes, such as organic (Allen *et al.*, 2003) and Fair Trade (Renard, 2003), were developed in order to provide alternatives to the produce of conventional FSCs. However, the existence of these labels demonstrates that the production of such foods is not absorbed in their regions of production (de Roest and Menghi, 2000: 447–48; Kneafsey *et al.*, 2001: 309; Barham, 2003: 129; Hinrichs, 2003: 36; Tregear, 2003: 100). Thus, the production both of 'quality' foods and those protected by labelling schemes relies on spatially extensive (often international) FSCs and, in the case of coffee roasting (for instance), multinational-controlled processing facilities, in order to be viable economically. By being enrolled (Callon, 1986: 211–14) in such networks, these foods become vulnerable to subordination within them in order to serve the interests of their most powerful actors (Allen *et al.*, 2003). This means that they can be considered as niche market foods whose production does not challenge the current trend towards standardized and globalized food production.¹⁸

IV Alternative food networks

1 Networks and trust

A possible way of guarding against such incorporation and subordination might be for alternative systems of food provision to minimize their involvement with conventional, multinational FSCs by creating, or becoming involved with, alternative networks. This idea has already received attention in the broader context of rural development.¹⁹ Murdoch (2000), for example, differentiates between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' networks. The former are organized sectorally and incorporated into large-scale production and consumption networks (p. 408). The latter

link small-scale producers in subregional learning and innovation networks that can foster endogenous growth (p. 412). It follows that, in order to stimulate endogenous economic development, policy-makers should concentrate on encouraging the formation and expansion of horizontal networks.

Kneafsey *et al.* (2001) use Murdoch's twofold typology of networks, along with some of Ray's (1998) 'culture economy' ideas, to develop a more nuanced understanding of the interaction of inter- and intra-regional flows in rural economic development. However, their analysis raises three questions over the usefulness of 'vertical' and 'horizontal' networks as distinct concepts. First, the adjectives are easy to confuse with their counterparts in economics; the more so as Murdoch's (2000) definition of vertical networks focuses on sectoral links and could, therefore, shade into a discussion of vertical integration. Secondly, in Kneafsey *et al.*'s (2001: 300) model of horizontal and vertical networks, the strength of the latter is represented as a combination of relationships with *external* actors in FSCs and *external* market outlets. Thus, signifiers of dimension substitute for those of spatial scale. Thirdly, the implication that trust is present only in horizontal networks (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2001: 300) is an oversimplification. Regular, face-to-face contact is important in informal learning networks (Friedman and Watts, 2003), but it does not follow that they must be 'horizontal' (i.e., intraregional). This has a particular bearing on attempts to encourage endogenous economic development, for it has been argued that it is immigrants to rural areas who tend to be the most innovative (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2001: 303; Sage, 2003: 51). One possible reason for this is that they can 'bridge' between networks in their places of origin and destination (McLean, 2003). The important role played by such 'bridges' or 'weak ties' between networks, in the spread of information and innovation, is well established (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2002). Thus, it may be that the interregional

networks to which immigrant entrepreneurs belong, and the social capital that they possess (expressed in terms of trust) in both these and intraregional networks, are more significant in their ability to make their enterprises successful.

Although the terms 'vertical' and 'horizontal' network are open to critique, this does not mean that the ideas underlying them are unsound. The conceptual differentiation between networks that operate within a defined area and those that link it to others, and the greater potential of the former to generate endogenous economic development, are relevant to alternative systems of food provision. Moreover, although it cannot be argued that trust has a specific spatial component, the issue of personal contact is important to it. This raises the possibility that trust is related to individuals' use of space. Here, Blois' (1999: 202–207) distinction between trust (that tends to be granted by, and to, individuals) and reliance may be useful. For, if applied carefully, it could provide a fruitful way of thinking about the different types of relationship that tend to predominate at different spatial scales.

2 Short food supply chains: stronger alternatives?

Taken together, these factors suggest that one means of building stronger alternative systems of food provision might be to revalorize short food supply chains (SFSCs). The verb 'revalorize' is used advisedly here. There is nothing new about SFSCs: they preceded the now conventional, internationalized FSCs, and have not been entirely displaced by them (Battershill and Gilg, 1998: 477; Hinrichs, 2000: 298; CPRE, 2002a). However, there is growing interest in the apparent resurgence of what Morris and Buller (2003) call the 'local food sector'. Evidence, particularly concerning how and where economic value is added and retained within SFSCs, is scarce (p. 560). Nevertheless, studies of recent developments in England and the USA, such as farmers' markets (Holloway

and Kneafsey, 2000; La Trobe, 2001; Hinrichs, 2000; 2003; Archer *et al.*, 2003), box schemes (Dürschmidt, 1999), farm shops (Youngs, 2003) and community-supported agriculture (Hinrichs, 2000), of the survival of *vente directe* in France (Battershill and Gilg, 1998; Gilg and Battershill, 1998) and the growth of farm-based butchers' shops in Umbria (Ventura and Milone, 2000), give an idea of the extent to which the revalorization of SFSCs can represent a stronger alternative to increasingly globalized FSCs than the alternative *food* networks discussed in section III. From these and other studies it may be argued that revalorized SFSCs present four dimensions of alternativeness.

First, as suggested by the phrase 'local food sector', SFSCs may present a spatial alternative to conventional FSCs (Renting *et al.*, 2003: 398). For instance, they may reduce the distance that food travels between the sites of its production and sale. In many cases this is achieved by direct sales (producers to consumers) through, for example, farmers' markets, farm shops and box schemes (Gilg and Battershill, 1998: 30; Dürschmidt, 1999: 134; Hinrichs, 2000: 298–99; La Trobe, 2001: 183; Morris and Buller, 2003: 562; Youngs, 2003: 532). However, it may also be achieved by bringing food into places that are poorly served by conventional FSCs: so-called food 'deserts'. Lang and Rayner (2003: 72) note that, in the UK, poorer areas suffer higher rates of ill health. In such areas, fresh food is either more expensive than processed food (Dowler and Caraher, 2003: 59) or not readily available, and often both (Wrigley, 2002: 2031). Dowler and Caraher (2003: 63) group fresh, healthy food with the provision of clean water and sewerage as a utility to which all should have access as of right. Although defining it as a utility will not necessarily increase the consumption of fresh, healthy food in areas where it is most lacking,²⁰ preliminary results from a study in Leeds suggest that 'retail provision intervention may have a marked effect on improving the diet of the most "at risk" groups in nutritional terms'

(Wrigley *et al.*, 2002: 2078). Moreover, local food initiatives can provide work for local people in food distribution and sales and may, if managed appropriately, provide an alternative outlet for local farms' produce.

Although the examples given above are spatially bounded,²¹ several authors argue that SFSCs can also be spatially extended (Raynolds, 2002: 420; Hinrichs, 2003: 36; Renting *et al.*, 2003: 399). Examples include fairly traded produce and direct selling by telephone, post or the internet. In such cases, the 'short' in SFSCs may refer to the reduced number of powerful intermediaries between producer and consumer. For, although spatially extended SFSCs may still rely on multinational companies (e.g., courier firms), they minimize contact with FSCs dominated by large food producers and retailers. There is an argument for considering direct sales 'at a distance' as SFSCs, although they are perhaps a weaker alternative than, for example, a farmers' market, because of their reliance on conventional communications networks. However, the same cannot be said for the other types of spatially extended SFSC proposed by Raynolds (2002) – fairly traded produce – and Renting *et al.* (2003: 394) – covering organic and 'quality' food. These, as presently constituted, are alternative *food* networks and, as such, represent weaker alternatives still. In the case of fairly traded produce, it is the labelling that establishes a link between producer and consumer (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997: 298). There is, as Renard (2003: 95) warns, a danger that the values associated with fairly traded produce could be 'neutralized' if it is 'captured by the dominant actors of the market' (cf. the salutary example of Californian organic agriculture discussed in section III). Renting *et al.* (2003: 399) also suggest that extended SFSCs may be created using certification labels. Their definition of proximity thus transcends propinquity to encompass cultural 'likeness' and knowledge conveyed by product labels (p. 400). However, in the absence of empirical examples, it is not clear how

such 'short' FSCs differ from those of, say, supermarkets.

Secondly, SFSCs may present a social alternative to conventional FSCs (Renting *et al.*, 2003: 398). The ability to buy food in the area in which it was produced, and in particular directly from the producer, may improve the flow of information about it (La Trobe, 2001: 182; Morris and Buller, 2003: 560), thereby improving food traceability and reducing the scope for commodity fetishism. Research in England has found relatively high levels of trust in local food among its consumers (Dürschmidt, 1999: 149–50; Archer *et al.*, 2003: 492; Youngs, 2003: 538). Such research also appears to suggest that trust in local food, often expressed as a 'liking' for it, is more important than food 'patriotism' (q.v. Hinrichs, 2003: 40) – for example, support for local producers – at least among English consumers. Thus, personal interaction and trust may be important to the (re)growth of SFSCs. For example, farmers in Gloucestershire interviewed by Morris and Buller (2003) claimed that the benefits of becoming involved with the local food sector were that it helped to re-establish trust between consumers and producers, and promoted 'a sense of community integration' (p. 564). Such communities are not simply expressions of spatial proximity, however. Instead, as Dürschmidt (1999) found when studying a box scheme in Bristol, they may be interpreted as an '*alternative support network between like-minded people*' (p. 145, italics in original).

Thirdly, there is potential for SFSCs to be alternative economically. Indeed, they are so almost by definition, existing in the 'interstices of the mainstream' (Morris and Buller, 2003: 564). However, matters become more complex when attention is focused on the food producers that supply SFSCs. As noted above, Sage (2003) found little evidence of producers existing beyond conventional economic marginality on the basis of relations of regard (q.v. Lee, 2000). Nevertheless, evidence from France and England

shows that farmers participating in the local food sector tend to operate on a relatively small scale (Battershill and Gilg, 1998: 480; Morris and Buller, 2003: 563) compared to their 'conventional' counterparts. Ironically, this may make them more conventional economically. For, as Battershill and Gilg (1998: 479) found, farmers participating in *vente directe* tended to receive less in subsidy payments from the CAP, the lion's share of which goes to larger farms. *Vente directe* farmers, therefore, had a 'tendency towards modest self-reliance' (p. 479). Morris and Buller (2003: 562), too, found that economic considerations, particularly the higher price they can get, are an important incentive for farmers to become involved in the local food sector.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to class such producers as conventional simply because they acknowledge the centrality of economic considerations to their enterprises. For, as Lee and Leyshon (2003: 193) point out, 'all economies are irreducibly material'. The economic is the 'means through which people sustain their lives' (Lee, 2000: 140). Thus, any economic activity that is unable to 'make a living' for those undertaking it will fail. There are, however, different ways of making a living, and Lee (2000: 138) argues that 'it is possible to identify spaces of production *within* the market but *outside* the norms of capitalist evaluation' (italics in original). It is this that producers involved with the local food sector could be doing. Caution is necessary because there is, as yet, little evidence for such a claim. However, two UK studies (DEFRA, 2003; Morris and Buller, 2003) found that most small businesses engaged in the local food sector are run by people whose commitment goes beyond 'making a living' to encompass social objectives, such as those noted above, and environmental benefits, such as reductions in food miles and in the use of agro-chemicals.

Although evidence is thin, a fourth way in which the revalorization of SFSCs may provide a stronger alternative to conventional

FSCs is by encompassing a wider range of produce than alternative *food* networks. Both the 'quality' turn and the 'defensive localism' manifested in many labelling schemes (PDO, PGI, etc.) tend to concentrate on processed (high value-added) foods (e.g., wine, cooked meats, some cheeses²²). They tend to bypass low value-added food that has undergone no, or relatively little, processing (although there are exceptions, such as Jersey Royal potatoes, which have a PDO). However, relatively low value-added food figures prominently in Gloucestershire's local food sector (Morris and Buller, 2003: 562, Table 1). Similarly, consumers interviewed by Archer *et al.* (2003: 494) expressed a strong preference for being able to buy fruit and vegetables at farmers' markets, with meat and dairy/eggs coming a distant second and third, respectively.

V Weaker, stronger, or hybrid alternatives?

Although the foregoing sections argue that it is possible to classify different alternative systems of food provision as either weaker or stronger, it bears repeating that this is not to suggest that all AFNs can be neatly divided into one of two types. Instead, we argue that, in economic terms, AFNs can be classified as weaker or stronger on the basis of their engagement with, and potential for subordination by, conventional FSCs operating in a globalizing, neoliberal polity. However, this provisional assessment has several 'blind spots', arising from the angle from which the subject has been reviewed and the paucity of published studies in certain key areas. Some of these are explored below.

First, it should not be assumed that systems of food provision which present a stronger economic alternative are more beneficial, either environmentally or socially, than conventional FSCs. For instance, Gilg and Battershill (1998: 36) note that many *vente directe* producers farm in a conventional (productivist) manner. Direct sales are, therefore, no guarantee of environmentally sustainable

production, unlike (at least in intent) food labelled as organically grown. It has also been argued that stronger alternative systems of food provision, such as farmers' markets, are potentially reactionary (e.g., white, bourgeois and harking back to a rural idyll²³) and may promote social and spatial exclusivity (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000: 294–95; Guthman, 2002: 299; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002: 365–66; Allen *et al.*, 2003: 63; Hinrichs, 2003: 41; Winter, 2003b: 301). While there is evidence that participants in England's local food sector(s) are engaging with the world as they find it, and not trying to (re)create an imaginary past (Dürschmidt, 1999: 150; DEFRA, 2003: 1), detailed scrutiny of the social and environmental consequences of (economically) stronger alternative systems of food provision would be welcome.

In addition, the economic consequences of (economically) stronger alternative systems of food provision also merit further study. For example, a number of small-scale food retailers interviewed by Morris and Buller (2003) reported a decline in local food sales over recent years, something that the authors ascribe to encroachment from supermarkets and 'the growth of alternative retail outlets, such as farmers' markets' (p. 564). This contradicts Holloway and Kneafsey's (2000: 291) argument that farmers' markets provide a local multiplier effect by drawing more shoppers into town or city centres, and raises the possibility that an extant alternative system of food provision (through small-scale, local retailers) is losing out to a new one. Thus, the extent to which new alternative systems of food provision are generating additional sales of local produce, as opposed to providing new outlets for it, is unclear. Furthermore, smaller shops, as employers of local people and consumers of local services (CPRE, 2002a: 5; 2002b: 6; DEFRA, 2003: 20), are likely to provide a larger local multiplier effect than, say, farmers' markets, which are unlikely to generate local employment (as stallholders must be involved in production) and have fewer overheads. Thus, if farmers'

markets take business from local shops in their catchment area, they may have a deleterious impact on the local economy. Moreover, research by two of the present authors suggests that, as their businesses mature, some 'alternative' food producers reduce their involvement with farmers' markets in favour of more 'stable' relationships with wholesalers and large retailers (Ilbery and Maye, 2005).

Further examination of the economic consequences of an expansion of new alternative systems of food provision could also inform debates over the use of local food as a tool of spatial economic policy. For, although studies have been made of attempts to use 'defensive localism' as a regional development tool in the EU (e.g., Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998; 1999; 2000a; Knickel and Renting, 2000; de Roest and Menghi, 2000; Parrott *et al.*, 2002; Barham, 2003), policy-makers are beginning to investigate the economic development potential of the local food sector (e.g., DEFRA, 2003). In the UK, this is likely to take two forms. First, support for individual projects through EU structural funds and CAP pillar two grant schemes, such as the Processing and Marketing Grant and the Rural Enterprise Scheme, particularly in regions where food and drink production forms a 'cluster' (q.v. DTI, 2001). Morris and Buller (2003: 564–65) suggest that, in Gloucestershire, such schemes have had limited impact. However, further research is required to determine whether this finding holds good elsewhere. Secondly, 'localized' procurement of food is being advocated as a means by which the public sector can provide a significant boost for local and regional economies. The beneficial impacts of this could be pronounced in lagging regions, where public sector buying power can have a significant impact on economic activity.²⁴ Although EU rules forbid 'spatial' discrimination in tender invitations for public procurement contracts, Morgan and Morley (2002) argue that it is possible for committed public-sector institutions to buy local food and, at the same time, improve their catering service to clients and

staff. Indeed, the UK government recently announced a review of public procurement, partly in order to examine whether small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are getting a 'fair' chance to compete for supply contracts.²⁵

However, public procurement of local food will not guarantee that economic value will be retained locally, nor that the local food sector will be able to maintain itself as a stronger (economic) alternative to conventional systems of food provision. Local suppliers may end up being taken over or put out of business, and profits may be remitted elsewhere. What is required, therefore, is more research into the functioning of local food economies, to complement and expand on that done by authors such as Jones (2003) in Languedoc and Morris and Buller (2003) in Gloucestershire. For, as argued above, it seems likely that it is alternative food production and distribution *networks*, rather than individual 'nodes' (people, produce or enterprises) within them, that have most potential to provide a strong alternative to conventional FSCs. The need for more work of this sort is underlined by preliminary findings from research into ways of improving linkages between food sector SMEs in Europe's lagging regions.²⁶ This research has found that there is no straightforward division between production for local and nonlocal markets, nor between 'quality' and conventional food. Instead, Ilbery and Maye (2005) suggest a diverse local food economy (Figure 1) characterized by four main types of production/consumption network: speciality (e.g., 'quality' foods); community (local food projects); commodity ('standardized' conventional food); and public (e.g., public procurement).

Future research could consider, in the light of Figure 1, whether it may be necessary to begin thinking of alternative systems of food provision as being hybridized when considered at the level of the individual enterprise. There are at least two ways in which this might be happening. First, as Gilg and Battershill (1998: 33) and Morris and

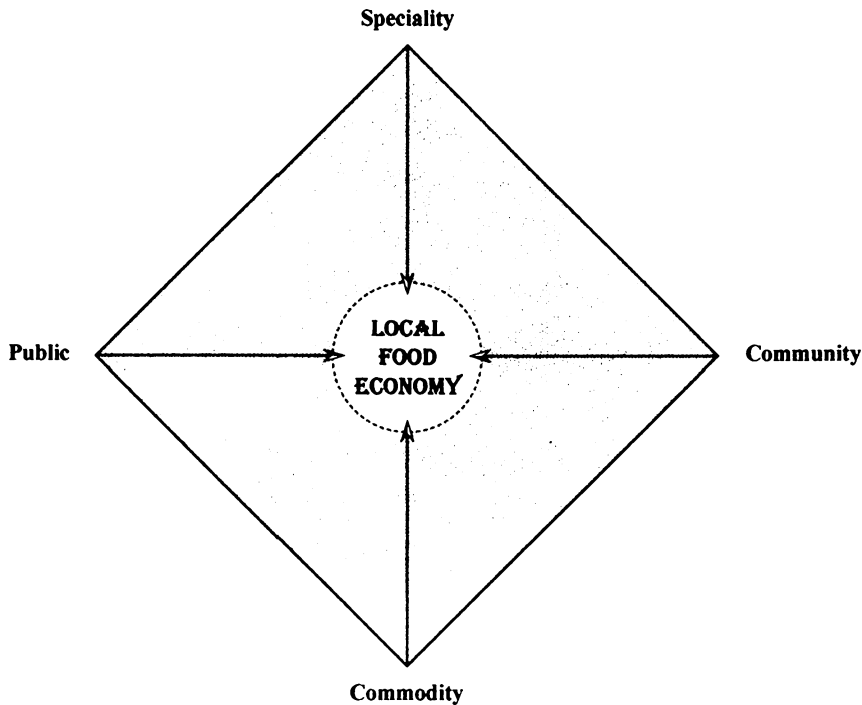


Figure 1 Schema of a local food economy

Buller (2003: 563, Table II) found, individual producers may engage with more than one of the above types of production/consumption network. This raises interesting questions: are stronger alternative systems of food provision currently too marginal economically to enable food producers to 'make a living' from them? Are they regarded as one alternative which can be exploited as circumstances or profitability allow? Secondly, if the idea of there being weaker and stronger economic alternatives to conventional FSCs survives such scrutiny, research could consider the 'alternativeness' of alternative systems of food provision with reference to social and environmental criteria, thereby producing stronger hybrid alternatives that combine economic, social and environmental factors. Such alternatives are, of course, utopian: pointing to a future better world. But, then again, so is neoliberalism.

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Notes

1. As recent themed issues of the *British Food Journal* (vol. 105(8), 2003), *Environment and Planning A* (vol. 35(3), 2003), *Journal of Rural Studies* (vol. 19(1), 2003) and *Sociologia Ruralis* (vol. 42(4), 2002) attest. A recent

- issue of *Social and Cultural Geography* (vol. 4(1), 2003) was also, from a different perspective, devoted to food.
2. For more detail on the 'globalization' of FSCs, see Fagan (1997); Watts and Goodman (1997).
 3. Quotation taken from paragraph 13 of the WTO's Doha declaration, retrieved 7 May 2003 from http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/min01_e/mindecl_e.htm
 4. Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002) exemplify the impact of vertical integration in the US grain industry; Renard (2003: 90) notes that four companies dominate global coffee roasting; and European food retailing is dominated by a small number of supermarkets (Poole *et al.*, 2002).
 5. Our use of the adjective 'social' here corresponds with Latour's (2000: 113) definition of it as 'a way of tying together heterogeneous bundles'. In other words, marketing discourse (see following note) seeks to tie individuals into social networks favoured by the neo-liberal 'project', while disconnecting them from those that it does not favour.
 6. Watts (2004) argues that marketing can be analysed as a 'discourse', in the sense in which the concept was developed by Foucault (1972).
 7. Where power is defined as the ability to structure the possible field of action of others (Foucault, 1982: 221).
 8. For instance, a British pressure group, Friends of the Earth, runs a Campaign for Real Food. Retrieved 2 May 2003 from http://www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food
 9. Summary of the CAP Reform Agreement – 26 June 2003. Retrieved 30 July 2003 from www.defra.gov.uk/farm/capreform/agreement-summary.htm
 10. As Cook and Crang (1996) argue, such fetishism may comprise both a mystification of the means of production and attempts to associate food with particular knowledges, qualities or emotions; this latter process often being achieved through advertising.
 11. The Court's decision was reported in *The Independent* (21 May 2003: 3).
 12. Although this may entail increased surveillance and control of farmers' and processors' activities (see, for example, Litchfield, 2002: 10–13; Wiskerke, 2003: 443).
 13. The deskilling of farmers is well advanced in parts of the USA (Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002: 359).
 14. Retrieved 23 May 2003 from <http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk/science/sciencetopics/organicfood/>
 15. The emergence of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease is a case in point: by the time the 'unhealthy' food was recognized as such, deaths had already occurred.
 16. In addition, of course, to the environmental goals of organic farming.
 17. It should be noted that this argument is a departure from Allen *et al.*'s (2003) oppositional/alternative conceptualization.
 18. What Allen *et al.* (2003) define as 'alternative'.
 19. One example is the EU-sponsored IMPACT research programme – see Knickel and Renting (2000), Ventura and Milone (2000) and other papers in *Sociologia Ruralis* 40(4).
 20. Because, as Bourdieu (1984: 179–83, 194–99) demonstrated, social class and cultural milieu influence people's attitudes to food.
 21. Although, as DEFRA (2003) makes clear, the spatial boundaries in question are not clearly delineated and may vary between, for example, producers and consumers.
 22. According to de Roest and Menghi (2000: 439), cheese and processed meats account for 53% of Italian PDO and PGI awards.
 23. The 'rural idyll' is, as Little (1999: 439–40) observes, an overused and underexamined concept.
 24. For example, Morgan and Morley (2002: 60) note that public procurement accounts for 11% of Welsh Gross Domestic Product.
 25. News of the review retrieved 19 September 2003 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3179907.stm>
 26. Supply chains linking food SMEs in Europe's lagging rural regions (SUPPLIERS, QLKS-CT-2000-00841); see, for example, Ilbery and Maye (2005).

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