Rethinking Food Production-Consumption: Integrative Perspectives

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Following some initial forays in the early 1990s and more recent reconstructive work on commodity systems analysis, there are now further encouraging signs that the consumption ‘turn,’ already animating other social science fields, is beginning to be ‘acknowledged’ in agro-food studies. Indeed, consumption matters, manifest in systemic anxieties about food provision and a turbulent politics, simply have become too prominent to be ignored. The chronology of recurrent food ‘scare,’ epitomized by the mad cow pandemic in Western Europe and E. coli 0157:H7 outbreaks in the United States, is by now very familiar. Yet, for all its contemporary prominence, consumption is still very much a theoretical ‘black box’ in agro-food studies. Furthermore, despite the ‘metabolic vectors’ so evident in food ‘scare,’ the analytical categories of production and consumption are rarely articulated holistically. The papers collected in this Special Issue address these gaps or, more humbly, reveal reasons for their persistence.

Although conjunctural events certainly have given momentum to recent agro-food scholarship on consumption, this topicality builds on several older theoretical strands. The first of these is the filiere-commodity systems-agroindustrial complex tradition of the 1980s, whose conceptual roots lie in the ‘agrarian question’ problematics of classical Marxism. Power is located unequivocally in the sphere of production, politics are circumscribed by class struggle over surplus value extraction, and consumers, wreathed in commodity fetishism, are without agency. Recent efforts to moderate the production-oriented characteristics of this analytical lineage, notably the ‘systems of provision’ concept (Fine and Leopold 1993; Fine 1994; Fine, Heasman and Wright, 1996), represent a significant current in the growing confluence of interest around consumption (Dixon 1999; Friedland 2001).

A second analytical strand in this confluence arises from the perceived limitations of structuralist agrarian political economy, which places “the whole process of social change largely beyond actors’ practices and control” and, more specifically, provides “little room for accepting the importance of actors’ cultural and knowledge negotiations in defining the meaning of food” (Arce and Marsden 1993, p.296). This seminal paper and its sequel (Marsden and Arce 1995) arguably are loosely informed by the cultural ‘turn’ in social theory, but their more direct inspiration comes from the actor-oriented perspectives developed by Norman Long and his colleagues (Long
1986, 1992; Ploeg 1986, 1990, 1993; Long and Ploeg 1988). These perspectives fit squarely in the political economy tradition that frames the 1980s commoditization debates. This tradition again is to the fore in analyses of the changing loci of value capture and market power in favour of the large retail multiples, which also has attracted scholarly attention to food consumption (Burns 1983; Marsden and Wrigley 1995; Wrigley 1998; Marsden et al. 2000).

The salience of consumption has been further reinforced by the explosive growth of literature on the so-called quality ‘turn,’ which comprehends organic production, other ‘alternative’ agro-food networks, quality assurance schemes, and territorial strategies to valorize local food products. In Europe, this research is contextualized by public debate aroused by food ‘scare’s and the gradual redirection of the Common Agricultural Policy from narrowly sectoral productivist goals towards more endogenous and multi-dimensional policies of rural development.

Although the treatment of the quality ‘turn’ in food consumption is primarily micro-analytic and ethnographic, some contributors have engaged productively with meso-level formulations of social network theory (Murdoch 2000) and convention theory, particularly Salais and Storpor’s (1992) ‘worlds of production’ version of this perspective (Murdoch and Miele 1999, 2000; Murdoch et al. 2000).

These different theoretical sources have all contributed to the current salience of consumption, but its theorization is impeded by a reluctance to cut loose from analytical frameworks which privilege the production ‘moment’ in agro-food circuits (Goodman 2001, 2002). In brief, consumption continues to be ‘used’ to talk mainly about production (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). The apparent primacy of consumption is essentially devoid of analytical meaning, relegated to the realm of external, contextual forces, with consumers abstractly figured as ‘discerning,’ ‘affluent’ and so on, and theoretical development remains focused on the behavior of producers and forms of productive organization. As argued elsewhere, the consumption ‘turn’ in agro-food studies has been largely nominal. That is, “Consumption has been neglected, under-theorized, treated as an exogenous structural category, and granted ‘agency’ or transformative power only in the economistic, abstract terms of demand” (Goodman and DuPuis 2002, p. 10).

Production and consumption thus appear as autonomous, ‘purified’ categories of social life, sites only skeletally connected through the act of purchase. As Whatmore (2002) observes, the production-centred conceptual constructs of agro-food studies configure “the geographies of food as a unilateral translation of socio-material value from field to plate, in which food is little more than the terminus of the crop” (p.6). The analytical challenge, then, is how to move beyond the theoretical asymmetries and linearities of this framework, with its implicit alignment of power relations and assignment of agency, and acknowledge consumers as relational actors in recursive, mutually constituted food circuits.

This agenda is gaining increasing recognition as contributors chafe under the polarization between production-centred perspectives of society and cultural approaches, whose purview is restricted largely to social practices, meaning and identity in the sphere of consumption. This polarization is interrogated by Tovey (1997) as a dubious academic ‘division of labour’ between rural ‘production’ sociology and the ‘cultural’ sociology of food. Likewise, Whatmore (2002) sees the ‘economic/cultural faultline’ as the source of the ‘compartmentalization of
production and consumption” (p. 6). For Goodman and DuPuis (2002), this divide separates perspectives which theorize consumption practices either in terms of Marxian commodity fetishism or Durkheimian cultural totemism.

If these polarities map the agenda, few have ventured to cross this divide. The most ambitious reconnaissance is Lockie and Kitto’s (2000) schematic formulation of a symmetrical approach, which borrows its relational ontology from actor-network theory (Latour 1993; Law 1994). In confronting the ontological discontinuity between production and consumption, these authors urge that greater weight be given to the recursive, relational organization of the socio-material networks conjoining these ‘worlds.’

These thumbnail sketches crudely reveal the theoretical foundations and conjunctural origins of the contemporary interest in consumption in agro-food studies, draw attention to the incipient quest for an integrative understanding of production and consumption, and so set the stage for the papers assembled here.

Workshop papers

The papers in this Special Issue were first presented at a workshop, ‘Rethinking Food Production-Consumption: Integrative Perspectives on Agrarian Restructuring, Agro-Food Networks and Food Politics’, held at the University of California, Santa Cruz in December, 2001. The idea of the workshop was to promote critical reflection on the consumption ‘turn’ in agro-food studies and the theoretical resources marshaled in the development of integrative production-consumption frameworks. A related challenge, given the pre-eminence of production-centred perspectives, was to problematize conceptualizations of consumer politics. The workshop revealed sharp divergences around these themes, and particularly on the respective merits of inherited political economic frameworks and post-structural approaches in addressing the task of integration. Similarly, differences arose over commodity fetishism as the ‘gatekeeper’ to a politics of consumption; that is, whether such a politics presupposes a (prior) politics of production. It is appropriate that these divergent positions be divulged in Sociologia Ruralis, since it has played such an active role in encouraging debates on consumption and its bio-politics.

In extending his recent work, Stewart Lockie argues that consumption cannot be satisfactorily integrated in agro-food studies without a thorough reconceptualization of inherited perspectives. For this purpose, he draws on actor-network theory (ANT) and the Foucaultian concept of governmentality to advocate a relational approach to food production-consumption studies. Lockie is particularly attracted to the conceptual tools furnished by ANT to analyze ways in which the macro, such as ‘consumption,’ is the generative outcome of micro-social interactions – “all localized acts embedded in traceable networks.” This approach is applied to the technologies of knowledge deployed by producers, retailers and market researchers “to render food consumption knowable, and thus manipulable,” in this case, organic food consumers in Australia.

The symbolic economy of food that figures prominently in Lockie’s account also is to the fore in the papers by Julie Guthman and Mara Miele and Jonathan Murdoch. Thus Guthman calls for more systematic study of the intersection between the social life of food and its political economy, and takes the taste-value nexus as one analytical vector with which to bridge the ‘economic/cultural faultline.’ Guthman
Goodman analyzes “taste – arguably the gatekeeper of consumption, as both sensation and performance – and its ramifications in production and exchange” by delineating its “cartographies of conversion from meaning to economic value and back again.”

Following Warde’s (1997) classification of the antinomies of taste, Guthman analyzes organic food production and consumption to trace the iterative circuits of trade in commodified value and aesthetic meaning. These circuits link ecological farm produce and the Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, California, for example, or the multinational activities of the organic Horizon Dairy. These cases, she suggests, demonstrate that the creation and distribution of value and rent are inseparable from the trade in representation and meaning. Guthman reaffirms the significance of the commodity chain approach for its critique of capital and her preference for a concept of power that identifies “the power to appropriate the work of others,” and “which seems crucial to an enlivened politics of consumption.”

Mara Miele and Jonathan Murdoch also are concerned with aesthetics and their symbolic and material consequences, but their focus is the role of a ‘gastronomic aesthetic’ in holding together regional cultures of food production and consumption. That is, by valorizing typical regional cuisines and thereby sustaining the networks of farming, artisanal food production, local ecologies, livelihoods and foodways in which these are embedded. With the broader purpose of demonstrating the neglected analytical relationships between aesthetics and rurality, Miele and Murdoch examine the organization and growth of the Slow Food Movement in response to the competitive threat posed by standardized, industrial food outlets to local food cultures, and particularly as represented by “local osterie and trattorie, the kinds of places that serve local dishes and which traditionally have been frequented by people of all classes.” This wider analysis is complemented by a more detailed case-study in south-west Tuscany of Ristorante Bagnoli, one small node embedded in “a gastronomic landscape” linking food culture, ecological sustainability and the local economy. Although a ‘politics of recognition’ involving cultural identity here takes precedence over the ‘politics of redistribution’ (Fraser 1995), Miele and Murdoch’s discussion reveals the importance of the aesthetic dimension as an integrative force in food production and consumption.

The papers by John Wilkinson, Mary Hendrickson and Bill Heffernan, and Lourdes Gouveia and Arunas Juska explore production-consumption linkages from a more distinctly sectoral perspective by analyzing the restructuring processes assailing mainstream agro-food systems as they respond to globalizing forces, technological change and rapid industrial concentration. John Wilkinson utilizes the framework of appropriationism and substitutionism to explore the vulnerability of the giant corporations in food manufacturing to opposing trends in contemporary food consumption, or “the new extremes of dynamic demand.” That is, on the one hand, resurgent demand for agricultural products as final food and, on the other, the convergence towards science-based product and process innovation, currently exemplified by the growth of functional foods or ‘nutriceuticals’ but potentially magnified by the powerful agrichemical-pharmaceutical-biotechnology complex. Wilkinson draws attention to the structural consequences of “the continuously moving frontiers between food, health, and nutrition,” strengthening or undermining the strategic position of differently located actors in agro-food systems. In this respect, the rise and ‘mainstreaming’ of organic foods is instructive,
renewing the appropriationist trajectory of adding value to the original agricultural product and, at least for now, short circuiting makers of industrial foods, mainly to the benefit of the large retail multiples.

At the sectoral level, Mary Hendrickson and Bill Heffernan focus particularly on processes and mechanisms – mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures and strategic alliances – underlying the pronounced rise in concentration levels in U.S. agro-food systems in the past decade. Their analysis reveals the growth of closed, ‘internal’ markets as huge conglomerates vertically and horizontally integrate activities from field to plate, the concomitant emergence of powerful clusters of control over food chains, such as Cargill-Monsanto and ConAgra-DuPont, and rising concentration in food retailing. Rather than merely declaim these processes of industrial concentration, Hendrickson and Heffernan explore “spaces for alternatives,” that is, for localized, community-based food systems that “avoid competing with global firms in their areas of strength.” This localized positioning is illustrated by the Kansas City Food Circle, a metaphorical and operational expression of connection and connectivity between regional organic producers and consumers. Hendrickson and Heffernan envision socially embedded, personalized food systems as sites where ‘citizen’ consumers act normatively and with awareness of the social implications of their consumption choices. Following Foucault, the Food Circle is situated theoretically by suggesting that it can mobilize resources in the cultural sphere to challenge the material resources of globalized industrial food systems entrenched in the economic and political spheres.

Lourdes Gouveia and Arunas Juska engage vigorously with post-structuralist protagonists of the consumption ‘turn’ and ‘alternative’ agro-food networks, taking issue with their limited sectoral vision and calling for a societal project to reincorporate those marginalized and displaced by industrial food systems. The exploitative nature of these systems is illustrated by the case of meatpacking in Nebraska and Iowa, and the strategic efforts of this highly concentrated industry to construct and maintain the meat commodity fetish and its occlusive separations of “nature and society, production and consumption, food consumers and food provisioning workers.”

These strategies are particularly exposed by crises in regulatory regimes, here those governing immigrant labour supplies, principally Latino workers and often undocumented, and meat safety. Gouveia and Juska analyze two ‘moments’ of contested regulation: the “immigrant scare” fuelled by nativist concerns in the late 1990s, and the food ‘scare’ provoked by the 1993 Jack-in-the-Box outbreak of E. coli 0157:H7, which led to the Pathogen Reduction Act of 1996, or the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) system. These case-studies of ‘taming workers’ and ‘taming nature’ vividly demonstrate the contested construction of the fetishized production-consumption divide. The view that “what we witness, especially in the United States, is the fragmentation of politics along diverging production and consumption spheres” leads Gouveia and Juska, whose first concern is “the raw exploitation of displaced immigrants,” to re-assert the analytical value of Marxist political economy.

The papers by Michael Redclift and Laura Reynolds are located on the wider, but no less contentious, terrain of world trade. Michael Redclift traces the dualistic cultures associated with the consumption of chewing gum, “the quintessential ‘American invention’” and “an American addiction” by the late 1930s, and the
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extractive production of its gum base, chicle, by Mayan peasants in the forests of the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. This paper examines the historical construction of production and consumption as “parallel cultural universes,” distanced rather than integrated, and which gave rise to different cultural identities. The spatial practices of chicle production and chewing gum consumption can be seen as a combined but uneven movement of ‘erasure’ and ‘appearance’ in everyday life. As Redclift emphasizes, “The history of chewing gum in the United States is celebrated in popular culture; that of chicle production in Mexico is largely tacit and ignored.”

Rejecting these parallel and culturally-distanced universes of producers and consumers in world trade, the Fair Trade ‘project’ seeks their integration and transcendence. The focus of Laura Reynolds’ paper is another American addiction, coffee, and the struggles of Fair Trade activists to overcome what Michael Redclift calls “The selective amnesia which besets…primary economies in developing countries.” Raynolds suggests that “a commodity systems approach provides the best analytical purchase on Fair Trade consumer-producer linkages.” However, she also finds that some post-structuralist modifications to this approach are helpful, notably attention to discourse construction and contestation. As an alternative to conventional international commodity markets structured by price competition, Fair Trade calls for “socially relinking production, trade and consumption” based on shared values of equity and trust, operationalized by the payment of fair or premium prices for Third World products. In this context, Reynolds examines recent Fair Trade coffee initiatives in the US, and how labels and packaging can ‘humanize’ trade relations by discursively constructing connectivities between producers and consumers. With these narrative transactions, it is argued, “Fair Trade ‘shortens’ the social distance between producers and consumers.” As Raynolds recognizes, however, preferential prices and stable contractual arrangements are unlikely to bring equality unless Fair Trade networks can successfully achieve “the individual and collective empowerment of producers.”

The following collection of papers is evidence of the vitality of the conceptual and political engagements in agro-food studies. The divergent perspectives revealed here hopefully will encourage renewed efforts to carry forward the project of articulating food production and consumption in a unified framework of analysis.

References


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