

Should we go “home” to eat?: toward a reflexive politics of localism

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Abstract

“Coming home to eat” [Nabhan, 2002. *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*. Norton, New York] has become a clarion call among alternative food movement activists. Most food activist discourse makes a strong connection between the localization of food systems and the promotion of environmental sustainability and social justice. Much of the US academic literature on food systems echoes food activist rhetoric about alternative food systems as built on alternative social norms. New ways of thinking, the ethic of care, desire, realization, and vision become the explanatory factors in the creation of alternative food systems. In these norm-based explanations, the “Local” becomes the context in which this type of action works. In the European food system literature about local “value chains” and alternative food networks, localism becomes a way to maintain rural livelihoods. In both the US and European literatures on localism, the global becomes the universal logic of capitalism and the local the point of resistance to this global logic, a place where “embeddedness” can and does happen. Nevertheless, as other literatures outside of food studies show, the local is often a site of inequality and hegemonic domination. However, rather than declaim the “radical particularism” of localism, it is more productive to question an “unreflexive localism” and to forge localist alliances that pay attention to equality and social justice. The paper explores what that kind of localist politics might look like.

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1. Introduction

Books such as “Coming home to eat” (Nabhan, 2002) and “Eat Here” (Halweil, 2004) represent the current clarion call among alternative food system advocates. US food activist discourse, with its growing discussion of “foodsheds” and the problems of “food miles,” has been making increasingly stronger connections between the localization of food systems and the promotion of environmental sustainability and social justice. In activist narratives, the local tends to be framed as the space or context where ethical norms and values can flourish, and so localism becomes inextricably part of the explanation for the rise of alternative, and more sustainable, food networks. In Europe, localization has become integral to a new E.U. system of devolved rural governance to enhance rural livelihoods and preserve

European heritage. In both cases, although for different reasons, the local has become “beautiful,” as was “small” (“pluriactive” in Europe) in the 1970s and 1980s, “organic” (“multifunctional”) in the 1990s or—at least in the US—“wilderness” early in the last century.

In many cases, academics also have embraced localization as a solution to the problems of global industrial agriculture. In the US, the academic literature on alternative food systems emphasizes the strength of an embeddedness in local norms (Kloppenborg et al., 1996; Starr et al., 2003; DeLind, 2002), such as the ethics of care, stewardship and agrarian visions. This normative localism places a set of pure, conflict-free local values and local knowledges in resistance to anomic and contradictory capitalist forces. In Europe, the encouragement of local food systems has different roots. It has emerged in the context of new forms of devolved rural governance in parallel with the slow process of reform of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The CAP is undergoing a gradual transformation from a strongly

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centralized, productivist sectoral policy towards a more decentralized model in which a multi-functional agriculture is a key element of an integrated, more pluralistic approach to rural development (Gray, 2000; Lowe et al., 2002). In addition, at the meso-level, episodic food ‘scares’ and heightened consumer health and food safety concerns in Europe have stimulated a ‘turn’ to quality in food provisioning and reinforced support for multi-functional agriculture. Supporters of local food systems in Europe, while arguably less prone to the radical transformative idealism of US social movements, regard relocalization and re-embedding as strategies to realize a Eurocentric rural imaginary and defend its cultural identity against a US-dominated, corporate globalization.

Our own work certainly supports the view that global industrial agriculture has succeeded through the creation of a systemic ‘placelessness’, and that place has a role in the building of alternative food systems (DuPuis, 2002, 2005; Goodman and Watts, 1997). Yet, also based on our past work, we are cautious about an emancipatory food agenda that relies primarily on the naming and following of a particular set of norms or imaginaries about place (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; DuPuis et al., forthcoming; See also Gaytan, 2004). As the following discussion will show, an “unreflexive” localism could threaten a similar romantic move to the “saving nature” rhetoric of environmental social movements. Unreflexive localism, we argue, can have two major negative consequences. First, it can deny the politics of the local, with potentially problematic social justice consequences. Second, it can lead to proposed solutions, based on alternative standards of purity and perfection, that are vulnerable to corporate cooptation (Guthman, 2004; DuPuis, 2002).

We are therefore joining a growing number of agro-food scholars who have acknowledged with David Harvey (1996) that the local is not an innocent term, observing that it can provide the ideological foundations for reactionary politics and nativist sentiment (Hinrichs, 2000, 2003; Hassanein, 2003). We agree with the many recent thoughtful critiques that have called for a closer examination of “the local” of local food systems, to “explore the ambiguities and subtleties of the ideas of ‘localness’ and ‘quality’” (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000, p. 296 quoted in Winter, 2003. See also Allen et al., 2003). In common with these scholars, our critique is meant to be cautionary, not destructive of the alternative food agenda (against global, big, conventional, environmentally degrading food systems). The intent of our critique is to put localist actions on a better political footing, one that can contribute to a more democratic local food politics. In this vein, we will question a localism which is based on a fixed set of norms or imaginaries. In particular, we show how an “unreflexive” localism arises from a perfectionist utopian vision

of the food system in which food and its production are aligned with a set of normative, pre-set “standards.” This kind of food reform movement seeks to delineate ‘alternative’ food practice standards and pre-determine their ‘economies of quality’ rather than to engender the alternative political processes by which local decisions about the food system could come about democratically.

With these aims in mind, we begin with a brief overview of the a-political (anti-democratic, anti-reflexive) bent in current food localism discourse in the US (brief because the critique has largely already been covered, particularly by Hinrichs, and Allen et al.). This is followed by a more substantial review of localist “value-chain” rural development studies in Europe, which we believe have strong parallels with US localist perspectives, particularly in their lack of reflexive attention to local politics. We then explore ideas from human geography, political sociology and political science that we believe provide useful pointers on how to bring politics into analyses of local food networks. This will also enable us to understand the claims for and against localism as a normative solution to globalization. We will use these conceptual tools to examine both the US localism literature and the European scholarship on the quality ‘turn’, ‘alternative agro-food networks’ (AAFN) and ‘short food supply chains’ (SFSC).

1.1. The romantic anti-politics of localism studies

There are strong parallels between the academic literature on alternative, localized food systems and the rhetoric of food activism built on alternative social norms or a kind of “alternative ethic.” Norm-based and ethical narratives also have become one pillar of a questionable scalar binary of global-local relations, as we observe below. Many of the arguments speak about “relocalizing” food systems (Hendrickson and Hefferman, 2002) into local “foodsheds” (Kloppenborg et al., 1996), thereby “recovering a sense of community” (Esteve, 1994) by “reembedding” food into ‘local ecologies’ (Murdoch et al., 2000) and local social relationships (Friedmann, 1994, p. 30). For example, Holloway and Kneafsey (2004) argue that alternative food networks resist capitalism through a substantively rational form of norm-based action. Localist food politics, therefore, “implies that food production–consumption is undertaken within an ethical framework” and that this “ethic of care” is intrinsically spatial: “These spatialities are often associated with the desire to foster relations of ‘closeness’ or ‘connectedness’” (2004, p. 1). Hartwick argues that a geography of consumption entails “a greater realization of connections between consumers, places, and networks [which] allows an ethical politics of consumption” (1998, p. 424).

In their study of alternative visions of food and farming among alternative food producers and activists

in the Upper Midwest, Kloppenburg et al. (2000, p. 182) found that one key definition of sustainable food involved production in a “proximate system” which emphasized “locally grown food, regional trading associations, locally owned processing, local currency, and local control over politics and regulation”. Similarly, in their analysis of a local Kansas City Food Circle, Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002, p. 362) state that “the Food Circle’s perceived role is to connect all actors in the food system in a sensible and sustainable way that sustains the community, is healthy for people and the environment, and returns control of the food system to local communities”.

These positions are based in a counter-logic to the political economy of agriculture arguments about the rise of capitalist agriculture as a global corporate regime (McMichael, 2000). As Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002, p. 349) describe it:

As people foster relationships with those who are no longer in their locale, distant others can structure the shape and use of the locale, a problem that is being explicitly rejected by those involved in local food system movements across the globe. This compression of space and the speed-up of time are key components of accumulation in the modern era. In the global food system, power rests with those who can structure this system by spanning distance and decreasing time between production and consumption. This reorganization of time and space indicates a great deal of power on the part of just a few actors that are able to benefit from the restructuring of the food system.

Localism becomes a counter-hegemony to this globalization thesis, a call to action under the claim that the counter to global power is local power. In other words, if global is domination then in the local we must find freedom. Friedmann, a trenchant observer of the globalization of food, makes this point forcefully: “[o]nly food economies that are bounded, that is, regional, can be regulated” because they bypass the “corporate principles of distance and durability” (1994, p. 30).

Pointing to Habermas’ idea of the “colonization of the lifeworld” by the instrumental (anomic) reason of capitalism, Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002) correspondingly embrace the local as the normative realm of resistance, a place where caring can and does happen. This echoes much of the US local food system literature, in which care ethics, desire, realization, and a sustainable vision become the explanatory factors in the creation of alternative food systems. In these norm or ethics-based explanations, the “Local” becomes the context in which cultural values work against anomic capitalism (See also Krippner, 2001). In Europe, the local is invested with similar hopes as a redoubt against

globalized mass consumption of ‘placeless foods’ (Murdoch and Miele, 1999, 2002; Murdoch et al., 2000).

But who gets to define “the local”? What exactly is “quality” and who do you trust to provide you with this quality? What kind of society is the local embedded in? Who do you care for and how? As Hinrichs, Winter and others have noted, “the local” as a concept intrinsically implies the inclusion and exclusion of particular people, places and ways of life. The representation of the local and its constructs—quality, embeddedness, trust, care—privilege certain analytical categories and trajectories, whose effect is to naturalize and occlude the politics of the local. The naturalized local then becomes heralded as the incubator of new economic forms whose emergence configures a ‘new rural development paradigm’ for some observers (Ploeg et al., 2000).

Food activists in the US and proponents in Europe of agrarian-based rural development both therefore argue that localist solutions resist the injustices perpetrated by industrial capitalism. But is localism in itself more socially just? Along with Harvey (2001), we are concerned that localism can be based on the interests of a narrow, sectional, even authoritarian, elite, what we call an “unreflexive” politics. To formulate a more reflexive politics of localism, we draw specifically on the social justice literature, and on the idea of an “open politics” of reflexivity to envision a localism that is more socially just while leaving open a definition of social justice. Unreflexive politics are generally based on what Childs (2003) refers to as “the politics of conversion”: a small, unrepresentative group decides what is “best” for everyone and then attempts to change the world by converting everyone to accept their utopian ideal. Together with other scholars of contemporary democracy, such as Nancy Fraser (1995) and Iris Young (2000), Childs argues that the more democratic (or what we are calling “reflexive” and “open”, what Childs calls “transcommunal” and what Benhabib (1996) calls “deliberative”) politics is the “politics of respect”. Here, the emphasis is not on creating an ideal utopian “romantic” model of society and then working for society to meet that standard, but on articulating “open,” continuous, “reflexive” processes which bring together a broadly representative group of people to explore and discuss ways of changing their society. These processes also take account of the unintended consequences, ironies and contradictions involved in all social change, and treat ongoing conflicts and differences between various groups not as polarizing divisions but as grounds for respectful—and even productive—disagreement (cf. Hassanein, 2003). In other words, we place fully democratic processes squarely at the center of our formulation of an open politics of localism.

From this perspective, the critiques made by Hinrichs (2000, 2003), Hinrichs and Kremer (2002), Winter (2003) and Allen et al. (2003) can be seen as raising the problem

that unreflexive localism can lead to a potentially undemocratic, unrepresentative, and defensive militant particularism. Hinrichs (2000, p. 301) has made the fundamental point that to assume that locally embedded economic activities necessarily involve non-instrumental, ethics-based interpersonal relations is to “conflate spatial relations with social relations.” In this respect, Hinrichs and Kremer (2002) show that local food system movement members tend to be white, middle-class consumers and that the movement threatens to be socially homogenized and exclusionary. In a case-study of recent initiatives to relocalize the food system in Iowa, Hinrichs (2003, p. 37) cautions that these attempts to construct regional identity can be associated with a “defensive politics of localization,” leading to reification of the ‘local’ and becoming “elitist and reactionary, appealing to nativist sentiments.”

Allen et al. (2003) also demonstrate that localism in current alternative food movements is not necessarily associated with advocacy of more socially just “care ethic” political agendas. In their study of alternative food initiatives in California, the leaders of these organizations articulate a clear preference for ecological sustainability over social justice, and express confidence in entrepreneurial, market-based processes of change in the current food system. (See also Allen, 1999). In Europe, Michael Winter (2003) also situates his empirical analysis of support for local farming in five rural areas of England and Wales within ideologies of ‘defensive localism’, and notes that local consumers can regard conventionally produced foods as equally locally embedded as organic products. On the basis of these findings, Winter (2003, p. 30) concludes that “the turn to local food may cover many different forms of agriculture... giving rise to a wide range of politics.”

These critiques show that the politics of localism can be problematic and contradictory. However, these critiques are not made to de-legitimize localism but to provide a better understanding of the complexity and pitfalls of local politics and the long-term deleterious effects of reform movements controlled primarily by members of the middle class. The social history of middle class reform movements bent on “improvement,” whether of “degraded” urban environments or unhealthy working class families, created a “sanitarian” (Hamlin, 1998) germ politics, which separated the “dirty” from the “clean” and, in the same way, established a welfare system that distinguished between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor. Several feminist social historians have critiqued these welfare reform movements for their narrow race, class and gender “maternalist” politics based on a particular norm or “standard” as the “right” way to live (Baker, 1991; Mink, 1995). DuPuis (2002) shows the connection between the rise of US food reform and welfare movements, in which the middle class controlled both

reform agendas by universalizing particular ways of living as “perfect.”

As critiques of the US reform movements have noted, this “politics of perfection” stems not only from a class hegemonic politics, but also incorporates the racial representation of whiteness as the ‘unmarked category.’ Lipsitz (1998) calls US white middle class politics “the possessive investment in whiteness.” This possessive investment has a material aspect in the monopolization of resources, with mortgage credit and education being two instances that Lipsitz emphasizes (See also Cohen, 2003). This is accomplished by a sleight of hand in which institutionalized racism is hidden behind a representation of what is “normal”, with all variations from this norm represented as deviations. For example, a coalition of white middle-class reform groups, health officials and farmers elevated milk to the status of a “perfect food” which would improve the general health of all bodies when, in fact, milk is a culturally, genetically, and historically specific food (DuPuis, 2002).

A reflexive local politics of food would entail taking into account ways in which people’s notions of “right living,” and especially “right eating,” are wrapped up in these possessive investments in race, class and gender. Such a politics would actively seek to expose and undermine the tendency of specific groups to work from this “politics of perfection”, which universalizes and elevates particular ways of eating as ideal when, in fact, all eating—like all human action—is imperfect and contradictory (Guthman and DuPuis, forthcoming).

The power and effectiveness of white middle class reform movements—from abolition to alar—cannot be denied. These movements have accomplished much, especially in terms of providing US cities with water and sewer systems, without which they would have continued to be places of extremely high mortality (Tarr, 1996; Platt, 2005). However, particularly with the rise of a new, more fractured middle class politics in the US, it is important to pay more attention to the ways in which our possessive investments in our own racial privilege influences how we define problems and solutions.

One way to do this is to consider recent reinterpretations of US history which have put race squarely at the center of the story, particularly those histories that examine the creation of local rural places. For example, Matt Garcia’s *A World of Its Own* (2001) and Herbert’s *White Plague* (1987) show how white middle classes created systems of racial domination in California and Texas rural localities, respectively. In fact, one of the most shocking aspects of Matt Garcia’s history of Los Angeles orange production regions in the early part of the twentieth century is the juxtaposition of political rhetoric describing orange growers as democratic yeoman with cheerful pictures of them dressed up in Ku Klux Klan robes. Orange growing communities put Hispanic workers “in their place” in more ways than

one, burning crosses on lawns if Hispanic families tried to move into neighborhoods beyond the labor camps and colonias, while allowing them to provide “ethnic” entertainment in exclusive white supper clubs.

Needless to say, European local food movements stem from a very different history of class, racial and gendered relationships. Calls for the relocalization of food systems appear to stem from a perceived need to protect European rural economy and society from the potentially damaging consequences of international agricultural trade liberalization. These defensive moves include replacement of direct production subsidies by forms of farm income support, notably for agri-environmental and rural development schemes, considered to be non-trade distorting under World Trade Organization rules, the so-called ‘green box’ payments. These changes are reinforced by a growing perception in EU policy circles that the consumer-driven ‘turn’ to quality has created a wider range of farm-based livelihood opportunities for those producers who can adopt conventions of product quality which emphasize territorial provenance in localized socio-ecological processes. A case in point is the UK, where re-localized, embedded food systems are seen as a means to enhance the competitiveness and economic and environmental sustainability of farming. This view of local food systems as the foundation of a more competitive, market-oriented farming sector is articulated very clearly in the 2002 Report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming, whose brief was to formulate a new strategy for agriculture following the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic in Britain. Although this market-oriented approach is more nuanced and muted elsewhere in the EU, the European academic literature on local food systems places great emphasis on the economic viability of new, farm-based sources of value-added and related processes of territorial valorization, as we discuss below.

However, in Europe, the rural imaginary also embraces a distinctive European “possessive investment” in national traditions, although expressed in an “unmarked” discourse of small family farms, local markets where producers and consumers interact, regional food cultures, vibrant rural communities, and ecologically diverse rural environments. In the words of former French president, Francois Mitterand, these constitute a “certain kind of rural civilization” (The Times, 7 February, 1987). Perceptions that this civilization is now under threat extend across the political spectrum. In the case of France, this threat is identified with globalization by left social movements, whereas for the radical right it comes from immigration. These currents also can be seen in the strange rural compromise forged by the market-based, rural value-added policies of neoliberal governments in both Italy and the UK which, by a stroke of political alchemy, have

managed to bring both left and right agendas together around the European rural imaginary. For example, a neoliberal compromise in Italy can be seen in the funding of the Slow Food Movement’s recent Terra Madre conference: while the movement itself is led by left-leaning Carlo Petrini, much of the funding came from the neoliberal state and from the right-wing National Alliance (Hooper, 2004).

To varying degrees, this rural imaginary has also had a discernible influence in several recent contributions to European rural sociology. It is particularly salient in the notion of endogenous rural development, which builds on the empirical observation that European agriculture is entangled in a diverse constellation of socio-ecological, economic, cultural, and historical relations. This approach more recently has been transposed into the proposition that the practices, new forms of economic organization, and institutional changes associated with the ‘turn’ to quality in food provisioning constitute a “new” rural development paradigm (Ploeg et al., 2000). Its normative content is evident in the view that this new paradigm, unlike its predecessor of agricultural modernization, is “rooted in historical traditions” and indeed “can be understood as a kind of *repeasantization* of European farming” (ibid, 403, original emphasis).

This diversity is conceptualized in terms of ‘styles of farming’, and it is argued that “Europe’s countryside (should) be safeguarded as precious ‘cultural capital’” by promoting “farming styles based on the optimal use of local resources” (Ploeg and van Dijk, 1995, p. xii). This normative position is underpinned by the claim that “Endogenous development patterns tend to materialize as self-centered processes of growth: that is, relatively large parts of the total value generated through this type of development are re-allocated in the locality itself” (Ploeg and Long, 1994, p. 2).

A rural imaginary also infuses the characterization of ‘alternative agro-food networks’ (AAFN) and ‘short food supply chains’ (SFSC) as sources of resistance against the homogenizing effects of ‘placeless’, globalized, industrial modes of food provisioning and the ‘McDonaldization’ of regional food cultures (Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Murdoch and Miele, 2002; Marsden et al., 1999; Murdoch et al., 2000). The Slow Food Movement and its efforts to counter the march of the ‘golden arches’ by valorizing regional cuisines and their rural networks of provision arguably is the most prominent expression of this oppositional, ‘militant particularism’.

Unlike its US counterpart, however, the normative idealization of the ‘rural local’—the re-localization and re-embedding of agro-food practices in local eco-social relations—is obscured, at least in part, by a complementary discourse of economic performance and competitiveness, which has attracted policy support. As noted earlier, the gradual re-orientation of the EU’s

Common Agricultural Policy towards a wider notion of rural development involving more decentralized policy-making, multifunctionality, and territoriality has enhanced receptivity to this discourse (Lowe et al., 2002, pp. 14–15). In this respect, the claims articulated earlier to buttress the concept of endogenous rural development re-emerge with AAFN/SFSC seen as new sources of value added that can be retained locally and hence as catalysts of rural economic regeneration and dynamism. As argued elsewhere, “The ability of quality food products to secure premium prices and so generate excess profits is a central plank of (this) market-led, value added model” (Goodman, 2004, p. 8). However, as discussed at length below, formulations of this market-oriented, ‘economic’ localism also occlude place politics, not least the struggles to appropriate and sustain the flows of economic rent arising in the ‘new economic spaces’ created by AAFN/SFSC (Ploeg et al., 2000; Marsden et al., 2002; Ploeg and Renting, 2000; Renting et al., 2003).

In keeping with this economic analysis, the local is framed as a site of new opportunities for value-added generation. Thus producers are encouraged to ‘short circuit’ industrial chains by building “new associational networks” and creating “different relationships with consumers” through engagement with “different conventions and constructions of quality” that evoke “locality/region or speciality and nature” (Marsden et al., 2002, p. 425). With “their capacity to re-socialize or re-spatialize food,” SFSC are in a position to valorize those qualifiers of ‘the local’ and its socio-ecological attributes—*terroir*, traditional knowledge, landrace species, for example—that can be translated into higher prices. In this instrumental context, ‘the local’ becomes a discursive construct and is deployed to convey meaning at a distance, and thereby becomes a source of value. Bluntly stated, from this perspective, the local and SFSC are empirically and theoretically conjoined principally in the form of economic rent, though without explicit attention to the politics of its appropriation.¹

As we have noted previously, some authors discern the contours of a new rural development paradigm in the processes and practices that are (re-)valorizing the local as a site of new value streams and accumulation (Ploeg et al., 2000). This paradigm change is predicated on a transition from the agricultural modernization logic of economies of scale to a focus on economies of scope (Ploeg and Renting, 2000) and a re-emphasis on non-commoditized circuits characteristic of the “old and well-known ‘resistance paysanne’” (Ploeg et al., 2000, p. 403). The integration of new and traditional rural

development practices is regarded as the source of significant ‘synergies at farm enterprise level’ as farm households reduce their dependence on mass markets by mobilizing on-farm resources and diversify output by re-integrating value-adding activities into the farm production process.

These analyses usefully remind us of the dynamism of valorization processes. However, they do not address the political driving forces behind the reconfiguration of space and scale and the new forms of commodification of territoriality. The local as an arena of political-economic struggle and socially constructed scale of accumulation remains an opaque category, conceptually and empirically, a veritable black box. Territoriality, a cipher for the local, similarly is unexamined, figured by landscape, habitat or craft knowledge in ways which naturalize the social relations underlying its production and reproduction.

2. Rethinking the idea of the local: taking politics seriously

The purpose of our critique is not to deny the local as a powerful political force against the forces of globalization. Our real goal is to understand how to make localism into an effective social movement of resistance to globalism rather than a way for local elites to create protective territories for themselves. This requires letting go of a local that fetishizes emplacement as intrinsically more just. We have to move away from the idea that food systems become just by virtue of making them local and toward a conversation about how to make local food systems more just.

In seeking to bring politics ‘back in’ to analyses of local food networks, we are drawn to Amin’s (2002) proposal for a new politics of the local. Thus he argues for a “shift in emphasis from the politics *of* place to a politics *in* place” (p. 397, original emphasis). The former “... sees cities and regions as performing a kind of place-based politics,”... “a distinctive politics of place based on the powers of proximity/particularity in a world of displaced and multiscale happenings and power geometries” (pp. 396–397). Politics in place, by contrast, is “a nonterritorial way of viewing place politics in an age of global connectivity. Instead of seeing political activity as unique, places might be seen as the sites which juxtapose the varied politics—the local, national, and global—that we find today. What matters is this juxtaposition” (Amin, p. 397). The merit of Amin’s conception is “to see political activity in places as plural, open, and contested” (p. 397), thereby avoiding the normative contradictions to which a politics of place is prone (See also Castree, 2004).

To forge our understanding of the local as an imperfect politics in place, we need to begin by opening

¹Marsden et al. (2002, p. 426) do stress that research to advance greater understanding of the processes determining “the attribution and allocation of economic value across the different actors in the supply chains” be placed on the agenda.

up the black box of “trust” and ask: where does that trust come from and is it always, intrinsically good? In some cases, such as local food systems controlled by organized crime, trust involves the certainty of harm if one does not follow the rules. The historical relationship between organized crime and New York’s Fulton Fish Market comes immediately to mind here ([New York Times, 1997](#)) although there are clearly many other examples.

Trust, therefore, like all other social interaction, is political. It is not necessarily based on equitable relationships nor reflexive democratic processes. Yet, the relocalization literature has tended to treat trust as intrinsically just, another way of depoliticizing an activity by purifying it. This “perfect” politics is embedded in social narratives of salvation and degradation that have been a part of US middle class, romantic, reformist culture since the early nineteenth century ([DuPuis, 2002](#); [Vandergeest and DuPuis, 1995](#)).

Instead, we seek to free food reform from its control by consumers of a particular class and ethnicity who have historically set the agenda for “saving” the food system. In the next section of the paper, we will “depurify” ideas of the local and of trust by re-admitting politics into an understanding of food relocalization as a social movement. This enables a rethinking of the local not as a romantic move toward emancipation but as an “open”, inclusive and reflexive politics in place.

To do this, it is necessary to place the local food systems debate into the larger debate over devolutionist forms of governance. Lawrence, in an overview of new localist forms of rural governance, lists three major political problems that arise when decisionmaking is moved down to what gets characterized as “the lowest appropriate level” (2005, p. 5). First, localization can simply reinforce local elites at the expense of other local actors. Secondly, localization may be a zero-sum solution because it can result in unproductive inter-regional competition. Finally, localization is not necessarily incompatible with globalization and may be open to deployment in a neoliberal “glocal” logic ([Swyngedouw, 1997a, b](#)). In other words, to understand the ways in which localization can lead to inequitable consequences requires understanding how it might relate to various existing forms of power.

Interestingly, there are vast areas of work on these three issues that have been largely ignored in the local food studies literature. A brief overview of work in these three areas—urban studies, regionalism, and the politics of scale—will illustrate the power of understanding local food systems as a politics in place.

2.1. *Urban studies*

The politics between city elites and their urban hinterland food producers in food relocalization projects has

been entirely ignored. We would argue that this is due to a disciplinary split between urban and rural sociology, and urban and rural geography. Rural sociologists, perhaps not surprisingly, tend to be particularly unfamiliar with urban sociology. While this lacuna may have been of less significance in earlier studies of rurality, it becomes particularly problematic in the study of local food systems, which are characterized by relationships both within and between the urban and the rural. For example, there has been little attention to the urban political interests around farmers’ markets. In other words, if only for purely demographic reasons, food politics, whether the “urban–rural food alliances” of the 1970s and 80s ([McLeod, 1976](#); [Belasco, 1993](#)) or today’s “food policy councils” are based in urban activism. Nearly all food councils—The Kansas City Food Circle, the Toronto Food Policy Council, etc.—are named after the city that contains the consumers, not the region that contains the producers. This suggests that we need to understand the urban to understand local food systems. Better analysis of local urban–rural politics will lead, we believe, to less reliance on normative—“*gesellschaft/gemeinschaft*” explanations and give greater weight to the opening up of political processes.

A related approach to the ‘unreflexive localism’ of European research on the quality turn would emphasize that insofar as politics are drawn to the analytical foreground, this place is taken by *food politics* whose ethos and organization are typically urban. These politics emerged in the 1980s to challenge the environmental degradation caused by industrial agriculture, occupy the spaces created by the withdrawal of the nation-state from regulatory arenas, and to campaign for healthy and safe food provision. Contemporary expressions of these food politics include AAFN/SFSC and the associated revival of ‘local’ food products, regional cuisines and specialty foods. Yet, for all their recent momentum and growing diversity, the role of urban political interests in the articulation of these projects and reconfigurations of the local has been largely ignored.

While many areas of urban studies have something to offer to the analysis of local food systems, we will review only two subdisciplines here: community power studies and urban environmental history.

Studies of community power began with Robert Dahl’s historical analysis of political power in New Haven, Connecticut (1961), continuing with [John Gaventa’s study of power and powerlessness in Appalachia \(1980\)](#) and most evident today in the studies of city growth politics first initiated by [Logan and Harvey \(1987\)](#). The findings of these community power studies make it difficult to conceive of the local as the ethical guarantor of an egalitarian “politics of care.” These studies show how local elites go about controlling city

and regional politics, although often constrained the by increasingly global competition over economic growth. One of the classics of urban community power research—Dahl's (1961) study of New Haven, *Who Governs?*—demonstrates the power of elites in that city, although the social composition of that elite group changed over time. At first, old patrician families maintained political control, later replaced by local industry leaders, and then by an ethnic political regime.

While Dahl was not much interested in how city politics affected the urban hinterland, it is worth thinking about how each of these urban political elites would have had significantly different relationships with their surrounding rural brethren. Consider an urban–rural politics under a patrician urban regime, compared to an ethnic urban regime. The problem and potentials are vastly different. One interesting question worth exploring is the difference in the interface between a patrician, and industrial and an ethnic politics with a rural agrarian politics. To what extent have different political interests clashed or coincided?

So far, for US cities, urban environmental historians have come the closest to trying to answer these questions. They emphasize the role of local institutions, elites and political coalitions in the creation of urban ecosystems that relate cities to nature (Cronon, 1991). They have shown how middle class urban consumer reformers in the US have been a powerful political force in the creation of modern urban ecosystems (Tarr, 1996; Platt, 2005; DuPuis, 2004) including food systems (DuPuis, 2002). For much of the modern urban period, white middle class consumers—in alliance with the growing class of government professionals—actively supported the growth of large scale capitalist urban provisioning systems because they saw this system as cheaply and efficiently meeting their needs (Cohen, 2003), part of the larger Fordist “bargain” that defined modes of urban livelihood provisioning. In some periods, the agenda of urban consumer elites focused on food safety and quality, defined as sanitation and inspection. At other times, this agenda has included a concern over prices, ostensibly to solve food access problems for the poor, but also in alliance with middle class consumers struggling with tight budgets (DuPuis, 2002). Urban elites also have sought to gain and maintain power over their rural hinterlands for other purposes—recreation, leisure, resource use, etc. (Vandergest and DuPuis, 1995).

Now, however, this Fordist triangulation between urban consumers, government professionals and large-scale global capitalism—the old sanitarian Fordist regime—has unraveled. With the disintegration of this modern consumer–government–industrial food alliance, some urban consumers are looking for new allies. In the US, many of these new middle-class urban consumer movements—particularly those inspired by Alice Waters

and Carlo Petrini—are looking to Europe—particularly Italy and France—as a kind of “city on a hill” example of a different kind of political alliance between cities and the countryside. The extent to which European urban–rural relationships in fact fulfill this ideal, the extent to which they will be able to maintain this ideal as Spain becomes the new California and Africa becomes Europe's global garden (Friedberg, 2004), and the extent to which US consumers will be able to re-create Europe in their backyards are all key questions in understanding the contemporary politics of food localism.

2.2. Sectional politics

We also need to recognize, as human geographers have long understood (Harvey, 1985; Cox, 2002), that rather than a romantic movement of resistance, localism can be mobilized as a powerful strategy of territorial competition between regions. For the most part, localism is as much a protection of particular places against other places as it is a form of resistance to some abstract conception of “the global.” Two literatures are particularly applicable here: the economic geography literature on regional industrial competitiveness, and the historical literature on sectionalism and regional urban–rural/farmer–consumer alliances.

In some cases, sectionalism can walk a thin line between a regional development effort and a form of xenophobia. For example, in California, one commercial for the state cheese industry features two cows, one of which is embarrassed because she has a spot on her flank that resembles the state of Wisconsin. “Is that why Marge acts so weird to me,” she asks her friend and fellow cow, “because I thought it was because of the time I backwashed in the water trough.” As this case shows, sectional competition and xenophobia can become political bedfellows. Local social movements supporting sustainability need to ask whether there are costs to allying themselves with xenophobic sectionalism or “defensive localism” (Winter, 2003). There may also be a cost to alliances with local elites that stand to benefit from localization. While these may seem like obvious points, they often get missed in homogenous references to “community” and “trust” in the localist discourse on food.

The prospect that greater inter-regional competition may lead to uneven, if not zero-sum, outcomes, offers a serious challenge to the notion of relocalization as a new rural development paradigm in Europe as well. Thus, Buller and Morris (2004, p. 1078) observe, “once territoriality becomes a component of value, it also becomes a commodity in itself, to protect and exploit, a source of differentially commodified relationships,” leading to, in Marsden's words, “new rural geographies of value” (Marsden, 1999 p. 507). The dimensions and

expressions of this new competitive territoriality of value, and its implications for processes of rural development, are only just beginning to be explored. Thus Marsden et al. (2002) express their misgivings that these new rural geographies will be disequalizing, reflecting the asymmetrical spatial distributions of socioecological assets and competences. In this case, the problem is that SFSC and their localized space–time equations may be unique and resistant to replication. This distinctiveness creates “one of the most significant paradoxes of the new rural development paradigm” (p. 436), which leads these authors to urge that “we need to progress the concept of rural development clustering” to ensure that SFSC “collectively make a major spatial impact” (p. 436).

Agro-food studies here finds itself at a crossroads that has generated intense debate in economic geography in recent years. Thus one current has explored the significance of territorially specific competences of ‘untraded dependencies’ (Storper, 1995)—notably localized knowledges and interpersonal networks and pools of skilled labor—in generating agglomeration economies and sustaining regional economic competitiveness. As in the SFSC literature, the individual enterprise is placed very much at the center of the analysis. This focus had led several leading economic geographers to deplore what they see as a concomitant retreat from political economy and the neglect of exploitation, power and politics in scaling the space economy of contemporary capitalism (Amin and Thrift, 2002; *Antipode*, Special Issue, 33(2), 2001).

Although this critique is addressed to the ‘new’ economic geography and its obsession with industrial districts, learning regions and knowledge economies, it usefully highlights the normative stakes at issue in taking an enterprise-centered approach to the concept of ‘rural development clustering’. As Perrons (2001, p. 208) observes of the “focus on the minutiae of change, in particular linkages between firms in economic clusters...”, “These studies are very partial and the wider consequences of economic change or firm competitiveness *for the well-being of people in places are correspondingly neglected*” (our emphasis). One possible point of departure, as agro-food studies ‘meets’ regional development, is to affirm, with Cox (2002), following Harvey (1985), the importance of ‘territorial coalitions’ in contesting and improving local positions in the geographic division of production and consumption.

In other words, and this is a deceptively simple point, when we attempt to implement a local food system strategy, we need to pay attention to local institutional interests. We need to ask: which local institutions are more successful in promoting democratic, reflexive localist solutions and which merely perpetuate local inequalities? In this respect, historical scholarship on the organization of regional institutions in American and

European political development is revealing (Sanders, 1999; Bense, 1984). For example, Elizabeth Sanders has examined the inter-connections between different forms of agrarian and urban politics in several US regions, to explain why “farmer-labor alliances” were more salient in some regions than others. Using Sanders, DuPuis (2002) and DuPuis and Block (2002) show how different urban–rural political alliances resulted in the establishment of different dairy market order policies in the Chicago and New York milksheds. This historical perspective on the politics of regionalism could greatly add to the understanding of local food systems today. For example, if the racial or ethnic composition of cities differs significantly from the characteristics of the rural hinterland, how will this affect potential political alliances? Agrarian politics, at least in California, also entails a landlord class—often living in local cities—over and above a producer class, and the interests of this landlord class often differ not only from those of producers but also of other city residents (DuPuis, 2005). In these cases, the perspectives gained from urban studies may help provide explanations for the relative strength or weakness of urban–rural food alliances.

2.3. *Localism and neoliberal globalization*

Several influential social constructionist formulations of contemporary global–local relations argue that globalization processes are producing a new “scalar fix” in the geographic division of labor of the state (Jessop, 2000). In this reconfiguration of political scales, the subnational and global levels are gaining prominence at the expense of the nation-state, a process that has been characterized as “glocalization” (Swyngedouw, 1997a, b) and the “hollowing out of the state” (Jessop, 1999, 2000). A number of authors (Jessop, 1998; Lovering, 1999; Lawrence, 2005; Dean, 1999) have suggested that the embrace of localist forms of control “are experiments in sub-national regional governance that are themselves a response to wider problems in managing global capitalism” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 3). Relocalization can be seen as part of the restructuring of government toward “governance”: the devolution of decisionmaking to local networks of self-governing actors, coordinated through multi-layered institutional structures. From this more critical perspective, relocalization appears to be not so much in resistance to neoliberal globalization as an intrinsic part of it, because it has “endorsed and fostered the self regulation of individuals and communities which, at the regional level, equates to the acceptance of programs, techniques and procedures that support market rule, productivism and global competition” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 9). In other words, relocalization can be part and parcel of what Dean (1999), using Foucault, calls “neoliberal governmentality.”

In the face of these new arguments about global governance, the presumption that localization intrinsically stands as a force against globalization seems, at best, naive. In fact, in the absence of specific case-studies, it is arguable that localization most recently has been deployed to further a neoliberal form of global logic, a refashioning of agricultural governance that plays on both left ideals of political participation and right ideals of non-interference in markets (See also Allen et al., 2003). This is a dangerous political bargain, which in other arenas has led to the dismantling of hard-fought government institutional capacities in utility regulation, anti-trust and the state protection of citizens' health and welfare.

It would be equally presumptuous, of course, to argue that all localism is the handmaiden of neoliberalism. However, only by looking at the local as a “politics in place” is it possible to understand the ways in which localism is deployed for or against global forces.

3. Conclusion: local politics as the new politics of scale

The largely apolitical approach to place construction in the agro-food literature on the quality ‘turn’ and local food systems contrasts vividly with the lively debates on the politics of space and place found in human geography. These debates bring out the importance of spatial and scalar political processes in the social construction of place, emphasize the contingent nature of sociospatial structures and scalar orderings, and direct analytical attention to the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in these struggles. Agro-food studies could draw inspiration from the literature on the “new politics of scale.” The new politics of scale (NPS) “refers to the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings, and hierarchies among geographical scales”... “the referent here is thus the *process of scaling*,” (Brenner, 2001, p. 600 original emphasis). The contested social constructedness of scale also leads to recognition of what Agnew (1999, p. 504) calls the “historicity of spatiality”: the changes over time in the “geographical embeddedness of power relationships” (p. 512; cited in Amin, 2002, p. 386).

Despite its potential complementarity, the agro-food literature on local food systems curiously has ignored this challenging body of work in human geography. Indeed, the quality ‘turn’ literature takes the ontology of the local as given, not as a category to be explicated in terms of societal processes. This stance is certainly idiosyncratic, if not myopic, when “The proposition that geographical scale is *socially constructed* (is) an established truism within contemporary human geography” (Brenner, 2001, p. 592, original emphasis). In this perspective, territories and scales are “*contested* social constructions” (Herod, 1991, p. 84, original emphasis)

and the ontology of scale, from the ‘local’ to the ‘global’, is not preordained but can be reconfigured through socio-political struggle (Smith, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997a, b).

AAFN/SFSC scholarship could productively engage with the socio-spatial practices of scale construction to theorize the contested processes constituting the local and the dynamic interaction between local forms of socio-spatial organization and translocal actors and institutions. Instead, the local in agro-food studies is currently taken for granted as a ‘purified’ category and treated as a *context* or locale that is conducive to the emergence of new economic forms incorporating ‘alternative’ social norms.

Several recent debates in ‘critical’ human geography reveal lines of theoretical enquiry that may be helpful in overcoming the neglect of place politics and socio-spatial processes in agro-food studies and the reification of the local and localism. A recent essay by Castree (2004) examines the ideas of place that “seem to have become axiomatic for a cohort of critical human geographers” (p. 135) and their shared premise that outward-looking connectivities and translocal ties engender and characterize a progressive politics of place. This normative position is based on “the idea that a geographical politics that proactively weds agendas in one place to those in myriad others—what Katz (2001, p. 724) calls a “rooted translocalism”—is to be preferred to one that is “place-bound” (Castree, 2004, p. 135).²

This cohort, represented in Castree’s paper by David Harvey, Doreen Massey and Michael Watts, has worked assiduously to discredit bounded or self-enclosed concepts of place often associated with these ‘purified,’ discrete representations. In contesting “attempts to put ‘strong’ boundaries around places—that is, to enclose peoples, resources or knowledges within a ‘local’ domain” (Castree, 2004, p. 135), this cohort has formulated a *relational* conception of place based on the ontological claim that “translocal ties... in part *constitute* those places.” As Castree (2004, p. 134) puts it, their “relational imaginaries together contest a view of places as “locations of distinct coherence” (Massey, 1999, p. 14). Instead, they depict place as “nodes in relational settings” (Amin, 2002, p. 391), as “specific yet globalized sites” (Watts, 1991, p. 10) and as “articulated moments in networks” (Massey, 1994, p. 5).” These dynamic, relational conceptualizations of place promise greater analytical purchase than the current presumption in agro-food studies that the ontology of place is given ‘in the order of things’.

These human geographers are very much aware of the dangers of an uncritical celebration of ‘local’

²Although not detailed here, Castree (2004) rejects the axiomatic force of this ‘shibboleth’ by drawing on the politics of the global indigenous peoples movement and assessing their ‘strong’ place claims.

place-projects, and several have raised the specter of ‘geographical fetishism’ (Castree, 2004; Watts, 1999). Similarly, in the ‘new’ industrial geography literature, with its emphasis on localized knowledge and interpersonal relations, Amin and Cohendet (1999) have warned against ‘spatial fetishization’ in accounts of socio-spatial embeddedness, which tend to exaggerate the autonomy of the local. As we have seen the pitfalls of ‘defensive localism’ also have been well-rehearsed in agro-food studies. However, this critique would be more incisive if it explored the far more extensive literature on place-making and spatial politics in critical human geography.

The relevance of the NPS for explorations of power and politics in local food systems lies in the centrality it gives to social struggle and contestation in the making of place and scale. This analytical focus also undermines reductionist global-local binaries and the tendency to concede the global as the domain of capital while paradoxically framing the local as a site of empowerment (Herod and Wright, 2002). This emphasis on contested socio-spatial processes draws on the wider point that “Interests are constituted at many different scales and contest scale divisions of labor that are equally varied and equally subject to redefinition” (Cox, 2002, p. 106). Leitner (2004) makes a related observation when discussing differences in the NPS literature on the conceptualization of power and its location. Thus some constructivist studies of scale “conceptualize power as located exclusively in capitalist production relations,” whereas others locate it “in a range of actors and institutions multiply situated in economic, political and cultural contexts, with different stakes and ideologies” (Leitner, 2004, p. 240). She goes on to suggest that “we need to conceptualize the politics of scale as only one dimension of a broader notion of spatial politics” (p. 237) in order to grasp the different spatialities and power relations associated with distinct socio-spatial projects (See also Cox, 1998a, b). These debates in human geography are active and ongoing but hopefully the preceding discussion has demonstrated their relevance for research on the quality ‘turn’ and local food systems.

This paper has cautioned against the reification of the local found in normative and market-oriented perspectives and their naturalization as a bulwark against anomie global capitalism. Bringing politics into the conversation allows us to abandon the “either-or” approach (Harvey, 2001) that has characterized local-global politics up to now. An inclusive and reflexive politics in place would understand local food systems not as local “resistance” against a global capitalist “logic” but as a mutually constitutive, imperfect, political process in which the local and the global make each other on an everyday basis. In this more “realist” open-ended story, actors are allowed to be reflexive

about both their own norms and about the structural economic logics of production.

In this respect, we find strong parallels between our concept of a democratic consumption politics and the democratic production politics articulated in Guthman’s (2004) vision of “process” vs. “standards” organic. Here she is drawing a distinction based on Harvey’s embrace of a “utopia of process” rather than a “traditional” standards utopian vision. How to make localism an open, process-based vision (Young, 2000), rather than a fixed set of standards, is one of the major challenges the alternative food systems movement faces today.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the Agro-Food Studies Research Group at UCSC (particularly Julie Guthman, Margaret Fitzsimmons, Patricia Allen, Mike Goodman and Bill Friedland) and its discussions of localism. The paper also benefited greatly from the comments of participants in the Local Development Strategies in Food Supply Chains at the XI World Congress of Rural Sociology, Trondheim, Norway, where portions of this paper were first presented. We would like to thank Terry Marsden who initiated the invitation to that conference, and the Center for Rural Research, Trondheim, Norway, for its financial support.

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