In food we trust

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Trust is central to food buying choices. The increasing number of food scares publicized across the world and the highly vertically integrated nature of the agri-food system that relies on economies of scale to keep food prices down, together highlight the issue of food safety. Consumers are challenged to reconcile their need for food against their fears of a seemingly poorly regulated food industry and lack of knowledge about the conditions under which their food is grown and processed. There is also increasing desire to be conscious consumers and engage in ethical consumption practices such as buying certified Fair Trade, organic, or directly from local farmers. Professor Cristina Grasseni at Leiden University's Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology has conducted extensive ethnographic research on how communities engage in ethical consumption practices in Italy, where activists and members of the Italian solidarity economy *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (Solidarity Purchase Groups) promote the idea of 'co-production' between producers and consumers (Grasseni 2013). Here, the co-production of food is a way of engaging in a rethinking of food provisioning — in terms of the influences and implications of new food provisioning for society, the economy, and the environment (Grasseni 2014a: 178). Their practice of solidarity is itself a form of trust that is important to the functioning of these semi-informal food provisioning systems, and may even be considered a form of direct democracy because of the self-governance styles their group employs to organize themselves (Grasseni 2014b: 79). This research has since led to broadening the anthropological investigation of alternative food networks to analyze how such networks challenge our understanding of local notions of food citizenship, and what power dynamics are at play within such networks and between the citizens engaging in them and larger governance structures.[†] Such themes are encapsulated in an ERC-funded project that has started this academic year called *Food citizens?*

[†] Food citizenship is a concept problematized primarily by sociologists and geographers that places 'civic agriculture' as a community-centric practice that envisions engagement in these systems as a citizenship activity, with the idea that conscious consumption may be a way to express core political values that also influence the development of a democratic and environmentally sustainable food system (see Renting *et al.* 2012: 294; Lyson 2005).

Collective food procurement in European cities: solidarity and diversity, skills and scale. This project aims to develop a critical theory of food citizenship that addresses how citizens conceptualize their own participation and belonging vis-à-vis food consumption and production, through a multi-sited investigation of urban food procurement systems in Italy, Poland, and the Netherlands undertaken by doctoral students on the project.

Trust, reciprocity, and social connection are central to agricultural markets, particularly short food chain types that bring farmers and consumers closer together (Hinrichs 2000: 296). Consumers participating in alternative modes of food procurement value the personalistic relationships they allow. The desire for a reconnection of food producers and consumers has the potential for local food movements to transform local food systems, with advocates asserting that such a transition could redress food-related environmental and social problems at the same time (Albrecht and Smithers 2018: 67). Such networks may generate trust through repeated interaction between consumers and farmers, as knowledge about a food's production conditions is transferred along with the product bought (Thorsoe and Kjeldsen 2015: 159). Cone and Myhre explain that the personal relationships that develop give consumers the feeling that they may reach out to farmers with their questions and concerns, as it is as if the farmer is entrusted with their health (2000: 194). This is cast as 'active trust', which although generative of stability for these networks, also creates a limitation as to the extent to which they may be scaled up, as scaling up in size compromises the short supply chain and personalistic relationships that characterize such networks (Navin 2015: 444). By informing consumers about production and inviting them to their farms, farmers cultivate trust with consumers that creates stronger relationships and ultimately a more long-term business relationship that allows farmers to plan production decisions (Albrecht and Smithers 2018: 78). These 'green economic relationships' are particularly visible in farmers' markets, but may also be found in community supported agriculture organizations (commonly known as CSAs) (Klimek *et al*. 2018: 83; see also Bubinas 2011). These systems also create venues for trusting relationships between farmers to develop. Such trusting relationships are necessary for cooperation in organizing farmers' markets and sharing technical support to drive innovation in small farming, creating a healthy local food system for small farmers to rely upon (Chiffoleau 2009: 218, 227). Thus, engaging in these networks creates stability in what is historically a sector considered economically risky due to its vulnerability to environmental changes and in a time of rising economic precarity in Europe in general.

Trust appears in interesting ways throughout the agri-food system, both in defining relationships and highlighting tensions. This is illustrated by interesting ethnographic examples. Guntra Aistara in particular highlights the way in which Latvian farmers' trust in the EU was shaken by the adoption of geographic information system (GIS), a farm dimension mapping system that disqualified some farmers from organic agricultural subsidies after they had invested in transitioning to organic farming, leading them to question the EU's ethics (Aistara 2009: 134-5). Here, Aistara (2009: 137-8) detailed how Latvian farmers wanted to incorporate biodiversity protection measures following local ecological restoration practices by introducing wild horses to graze abandoned grasslands, a proposal that locally they used to define themselves as distinct from conventional farmers to present themselves as more innovative than the new EU rules. However, they were told that such practices do not conform to 'Good agricultural practice guidelines' and later these organic farmers encountered problems with this regulatory regime, leading to disappointment in the institution (ibid.: 138). Additionally, Demeulenaer has found that French

farmers' movements contest seed production and regulatory regimes of the EU, where small-scale, mostly organic farmers engaging in the community practice of seed saving and production is limited — this is because the EU is forcing them to convert to high-yield varietals, a process that is ultimately resulting in a declining knowledge around breeding strains, which gives GMO producers even more power over the agri-food system, creating a widening dichotomy between local and scientific knowledge (2014: 45-6, 49). These tensions highlight some of the basic cleavages farmers must mediate in their relationship with the EU. We may interpret the rise in interest in alternative food systems as at least partially a response to this increasing regulation that distances producers from governance institutions and inspires creative economic problem solving to stabilize their livelihoods by creating new, personalized relationships with likeminded consumers.

As such, some of these alternative agri-food systems take place outside of the formal economy, in the so-called grey economy of informal exchange. Many small producers, including urban gardeners and some small family farms, engage in market and quasi-market activities outside of the regulated economy. People engaging in urban gardening may share or barter their harvests in informal ways within their communities, creating new social relationships and new micro-economies (see Bellows 2004: 250). Such economic exchange networks also rely on trust. In socialist-era Lithuania, illegal sales of raw milk reached urban residents through 'personalized trust-based networks' (Mincyte 2012: 43). This practice has continued today and is even relied upon as a coping mechanism against market liberalization and agricultural industrialization that has made the lives of rural residents more precarious (ibid.; see also Knudsen 2015). Here and elsewhere in Europe, some traditional, home produced foods have been made illegal by the EU's food hygiene regulations for failing to meet food safety standards, which complicates and challenges local beliefs that such foods are 'good' and 'clean' (see Aistara 2015). Anthropologist Melissa Caldwell found that in Russia, foods that are circulated through personal networks as gifts are perceived as more trustworthy, 'ecologically clean', and even better tasting than industrially produced foods that were viewed as 'anonymous' or 'impersonal' (2007: 54). Such cosmologies around what constitutes healthy, safe, and tasty food drive consumer decision-making to participate in alternative food networks. Those social scientists problematizing alternative food networks as movements of larger social projects that decommoditize food (e.g., Chiffoleau 2009; Hinrichs 2000), may cast these systems, as well as membership-based community supported agricultural-type structures, as part of a broader 'sharing economy' based on trust between producers and consumers (Lagane 2015: 135).

This raises the issue of ethics in an interesting way. Trust is central to these economic exchange relationships and alternative food systems, but they may take place at the margins of the legal, formal economy, challenging us to consider what the definition of an *ethical consumer* truly is. Indeed, much of the interest in buying local and products of designated origin stems from this value-based desire to consume ethically. The term 'virtuous foods' was coined by Heldke (2012) to describe food qualified with terms such as 'organic', 'local', or 'artisan' (Trubek 2011: 192). Ethically branded products and engaging in alternative food networks allow consumers to turn consumption into a meaningful act of public expression of their social values, cultivating what Gross has called a new 'food habitus' (2014: 21). As Dolan has argued, ethical consumption may be part of one's constitution of self, performing one's morality as a response to neoliberal globalization (2007: 239-40). This has been voiced by others as a shift of framing civic engagement

as the making of moral market choices that allow people to perform their political values (Humphery 2017: 92).

Finally, researchers have pointed out that some organic food producers may employ industrialized farming practices or exploit farm laborers despite casting themselves as 'local' or otherwise embedded in these more ethical economies (Jarosz 2008: 233). Such revelations and perspectives reveal the complicated territory within which discussions about ethical consumption circulate, and the mine field of moral questions consumers must navigate in their daily choices. As such, a further investigation into the role of alternative food networks in reshaping the global food economy, and importantly the agency of citizens in this process and implications for their own perceptions of belonging, are critical themes to investigate in contemporary European food politics.

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