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The Netherlands

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Grasseni, C.; Nobayashi, A.

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Rethinking foodscapes. Does it matter how food reaches my plate?

Cristina Grasseni[1]

[1] University of Leiden, The Netherlands.
c.grasseni@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract. As an anthropologist I interpret *foodscapes* as an invitation to rethink what it means for us to focus on how food reaches our plate, in social and cultural terms. This piece focuses on 'alternative' food procurement, in particular on which kinds of alternatives are being pursued and how this choice articulates diverse and sometimes conflicting stances, which must be understood in their own context. I will use ethnographic anecdotes as examples, introduced by a preamble on alternative food procurement and its meaning.

Keywords: Alternative food procurement; foodscapes; alternative food networks; conviviality; food citizenship

1 Introduction

Alternative food networks have been variously described as ushering in change, not only in practice but principally in the mentality towards food provisioning. The global food system - the prevalent mode of production and consumption - has reached its limits and yet fails to see them; producing water scarcity on the one hand and floods (through climate change and soil erosion) on the other; reducing soil fertility while increasing desertification; making overproduction and hunger coexist. There is increasing awareness that food production has been actively overlooked in our collective thought, being persistently imagined as fundamentally benign (Sage 2012, van der Ploeg and Marsden 2008). However, increasing documentary and scientific evidence points to the fact that the cattle and dairy industry, for example, is one of the major culprits of climate change. Recent ethnographic investigation denounces the multiple layers at which CAFOS (*concentrated animal feeding operations*) are a fair, if putrid, representation of the globalized economy. The animals are not the only ones mistreated; the workers themselves are exposed to physical and emotional overload, kept in compounds in and outside the working environment, sometimes in conditions of semi-slavery and often easily blackmailed if their status is of illegal immigrants, or kept segregated according to their ethnicity and languages, so that no information can travel easily across different departments (Blanchette 2015).

Visual arts and documentary films are attempting to form an alternative public imaginary around food production. This has been achieved by diametrically different styles of films, such as the documentaries *Food, Inc.* or *Cowspiracy* (Kenner 2008,

Andersen and Kuhn 2014) and the Sensory Ethnography Lab production *Leviathan* (Castaing Taylor and Paravel 2012). While the former articulate the abominations of intensive farming and animal agriculture, the latter offers a wordless, tantalizing exploration of life at sea on a commercial fishing vessel.
Meanwhile, a sizable scholarship debates what kinds of alternatives are being implemented and questions whether they are in fact *alternative* at all, or what it is they would present an alternative to (Whatmore et al. 2003, Kneafsey et al. 2008, Goodman et al. 2012).

2 Alternative to What?

Many people worldwide now believe that the global food economy is not self-sustainable from an environmental, financial, and social perspective. Citizens and consumers are therefore organizing themselves into local groups and networks, to try to replace supply-chain consumerism with a higher control of production and distribution through direct producer-consumer collaborations (sometimes called "co-production": Grasseni 2013).

This is often a bottom-up social phenomenon that lacks definition in a single conceptual framework, as it is grounded locally in many different contexts and histories. Yet, these groups have emerged in several countries, and are now joining together in national and transnational networks (see for example urgenci.net, ripess.org). In the process, they develop knowledge in areas beyond food production per se, such as logistics and accounting, leadership, management, communication. They also develop skills, such as liaising with public administrations, doing outreach in schools, and managing listservs and websites. Sometimes these networks succeed in establishing a new model for local, quality supply (such as community-supported agriculture for example in the United States: see Henderson and VanEn 2009), but sometimes they remain limited in their impact or inclusiveness (as with some Faith and Justice groups in Italy and the US; see Valer 1999).

By comparison with other forms of direct food provisioning, these networks of consumers seem to have appropriated the discourse of 'food sovereignty' that is more typical of the farmers' movement. 'Food sovereignty' is in fact a grassroots concept proposed by marginalized producers contesting the global food system, claiming rights to self-determine seed provenance and access to markets (Wittman 2009, Via Campesina 1996). Claiming more self-determination for both producers and consumers (Thivet 2014) means claiming the right to participate in decision-making about food systems - what Lang has termed a form of food 'democracy' (Lang 1999). 'Civic agriculture' was originally advocated in North America to critique the societal implications of industrialized agri-food systems, namely their lack of transparency and the resulting consumer deskilling and food insecurity in 'food deserts' (Hinrichs & Lyson 2009). Others underline how only broader agendas of societal equality can guarantee food 'justice' (Alkon and Mares 2012).

There is an elusive convergence between direct food provisioning and 'food democracy' (Renting et al. 2012). I say it is sometimes an elusive convergence, because

in most commercial schemes for community-supported agriculture, for example, consumers only 'participate' by buying. Also, in the development of Fair Trade, the critique is that by scaling up, and as brokers stepped in, consumers lost a say 'in the construction of the commercial relations preceding their purchases' (Dubuisson-Quellier et al. 2011: 311).

Increasingly, economic and political players are also attracted to projecting their good will towards positive change (in the name of corporate social responsibility, or promoting the advantages of a 'green' economy, for example). However, a proliferation of narratives of change does not necessarily correlate to impactful or meaningful practices of change. Transitions to sustainable lifestyles are being imagined as a matter of finding the right 'technology fix' and implementing it with the right policies, with little attention given to the relevance of culture to the practice of procurement, and to the diversity of styles of participation.

The current policy debate on transitions to (food) sustainability seems to be based on an expectation of getting clear, simple, imperative solutions such as engineering flood-resistant crops through genome editing (Bailey-Serres & Voeseneck 2020) or solving the increased global demand for proteins with an equally global switch to an insect-based diet. For example, considering that some insects are already mass-farmed to produce food colouring, it should not be too difficult to package suitably tasty and nutritious ersatz protein-rich foods (van Huis et al. 2014). The following question is, of course, 'How do we make them swallow it?' (Dekker et al. 2020). This is answered by a corresponding increase in calls for 'nudging' strategies to be systematically employed at policy level to change lifestyles (Harbers et al. 2020).

The opposite but complementary trend is that of over-burdening individual consumers with the civic responsibility of making the right, informed choice. This also follows an imaginary of diffused technologies, for example the idea of being able to tag each single apple, so that the conscious consumer can scan it in the supermarket and see exactly what its food miles and ecological footprint are, and 'choose' for the best. This very imaginary was at work in the 'Supermarket of the Future' pavilion visited by hundreds of thousands during Milan's 2015 Universal Exhibition (Expo) on the theme Feeding the Planet. Energy for Life. An interactive installation designed by MIT MediaLab for the Italian cooperative supermarket chain COOP would allow visiting 'customers' to visualize not only the price and location of origin, but also food miles and nutritional value (Ecochamber 2016).

The sociocultural dimensions of diversity, skill and scale are silenced by these imaginaries, which do not appreciate the fact that individuals grow up and act in diverse social environments and are capable of being involved in an informed debate on the diversity of solutions at hand. Food procurement can constitute a space of 'transgression' (Goodman & Sage 2014) and of 'counter-epistemologies' (Grasseni 2013). Citizens can re-signify producer-consumer relations, which feed back into innovative social practice. Food procurement networks can thus be read as 'citizenship laboratories' (Forno et al 2015), where people educate themselves about sustainability, frugality, or global justice, but also learn to exercise their democratic capacities through situated deliberation and practice. In this sense, it can enable forms of 'lifestyle politics' (de Moor 2016), relying on consumers' agency (Dubuisson-Quellier et al. 2011). The issue

of food sustainability takes different meanings and leads to specific practices according to local concerns, such as those of the ageing, those of the postindustrial poor, and of immigration, outmigration and gentrification.

3 Anthropology of and with food procurement

Anthropological scholarship is less interested in formulating universal definitions and solutions, and more inclined to observe and voice diverse processes from the bottom up. This means recognizing both the limits and potentials of the actual practices and narratives that are emerging. Anthropology's mission is precisely "… to seek a generous, comparative but nevertheless critical understanding of human being-and-knowing in one world we all inhabit … to describe the lives of people other than ourselves, with an accuracy and sensitivity honed by detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience" (Eriksen 2016: 6).

My current project 'Food Citizens?' on collective food procurement in European cities (see Foodcitizens.eu), and my previous work on Italian solidarity economy networks (Grasseni 2013), explore how and why people take the initiative of organizing into groups in order to rethink the logistics of food provisioning. Beyond a strict interpretation of citizenship as the formal granting of affiliation in a national register, anthropological readings of citizenship have insisted on the ethical and political aspects of active participation in a polity. How we procure and share food is central to cultural understandings of how we act and participate in our societies. Food is a mediator of relations within social networks, not just a commodity or nutrient. Eaters are not just consumers, but social actors whose meaning-making depends on faith, gender, age, income, or kinship.

Food studies often focus on the 'macro' scale (for example, the logistics of food systems) or the 'micro' scale (for example, the individual deliberations or habituated reflexes of consumers in supermarkets). At the 'meso' level of sociocultural analysis, we find people's collective participation in the production and distribution of the food they consume, at multiple levels.

We can categorize three types of networks: 1. Those directly active in foraging and food production (for example, in allotments or community gardens); 2. Those engaged in setting up short chains, where producer and consumer come directly into contact; and 3. Those active in food governance (for example, in food policy councils). These multiple forms of collective food procurement have not yet been comparatively analyzed in Europe in terms of their broader implications for what it means to participate in society through collective food choices. This is an important challenge if we consider how currently, considerable attention goes to food procurement in cities (for example, in relation to its (un)sustainability), but with little notice paid to cultural diversity – even within Europe.

Place-based foods may underscore gender-conservative agendas, political localism, or be oblivious of social inclusion; exclusive solidarity feeds on self-reliance. For example, survey data about Italy's Solidarity economy networks (more than 7,000

families in Lombardy alone) tell us that they are mostly highly–educated, white, middle-aged women (Forno et al. 2015). Collective food procurement may thus enable new forms of participation and solidarity, but in the same breath confirms degrees of segregation between classes, gender, faiths, ages or ethnic groups. Does it matter how food reaches my plate? Increasing numbers of people think it does, and act accordingly, but how this matters is variously interpreted, even in conflicting ways. For example, there are 'short food chains' which focus on a 'zero mile' diet, in the belief that rediscovering seasonality and eating local food as much as possible is important to increase the sustainability of our food system. This option can be described as a choice to keep close to one's territory and traditions as a form of food heritage (Grasseni 2017). Additionally, local foods are usually posited as fresh, since they don't have to travel so far or (supposedly) spend too much time being refrigerated before arriving in our pantries.

Local foods are imagined as simple, genuine, and sometimes as tokens of shared roots in a peasant past. Local foods are not expected to be highly processed, or be industrial products from large manufacturing plants. The aesthetics of small scale usually, and sometimes tacitly, accompanies the morality of the local (Grasseni 2014). However 'local' foods may well not be simple foods. To appreciate this, one needs to place them in the context of globalized food systems, namely the seed-to-table large organized distribution not only of food, but of food components, machinery, tools and materials; a chain dominated by multisector and multinational corporations, which deal not only with agriculture, but with laboratories, transport, marketing and veterinary facilities. I shall illustrate this with two ethnographic examples.

4 Ferraris and potlucks

As part of my fieldwork in the 1990s I lived with dairy farmers and cattle breeders in the Italian Alps (Grasseni 2009). Here, views are opposed between breed 'improvers', who practice progeny breeding to intensify milk production, and defenders of multifunctional farming and local breeds that are less productive, but more adapted to the local terrains. At cattle fairs organized by breed associations, the 'queen' of the fair is usually the product of progeny breeding. My hosts made use of embryo transfer to obtain as many heifers as possible out of one genetic line, combining a potentially excellent mother with the semen of progeny bulls raised in specialized 'genetic centres'. In principle my hosts would love to practice cloning to maximize their line of production ('if you can have ten Ferraris why have only one?' summarized an agricultural consultant – only, cloning is forbidden by law).

These conversations happened in remote valleys at the southern feet of the Alps, but even mountain farmers were not unaware of developments in the plains of Cremona, where Galileo, the first cloned progeny bull, was obtained for scientific research in 1999. Vice-versa a practitioner who does not accept progeny breeding to intensify milk production, will view the same queen of the cattle fair not as a 'Ferrari', but as an 'anorexic pin-up' – all udders to produce more milk. This language articulates visions underlying competing professional cultures of intensive agriculture on the one hand, and of sustainable, multi-functional farming on the other.

In my monograph (2009) I explained how breed improvement was powerfully backed up by scientific discourse and a capillary network of breed advisors and experts to whom registered farmers would turn to keep one's dairy farming business 'modern' and thus qualify for agricultural aid and project funds. In these circles, multifunctional farming and the refusal of progeny breeding would be seen as backward and uneconomic. Later developments in the European Common Agricultural Policy recognized organic and multifunctional farming as key to ecosystem services and also to social services (for example in the form of didactic farms) but making a living out of dairy farming without specializing in milking machinery and progeny breeding – for example as part and parcel of subsistence agriculture or of eco-tourism - remains prohibitively challenging (Pe'er et al. 2019).

Another ethnographic example of competing visions with regards to how foodscapes should make us rethink how food reaches our plate comes from the Hairst, a yearly harvest fair held at the village of Huntly, north of Aberdeen in Scotland. In September 2018 I participated in the ceilidh dinner What's On Your Plate. Here, a variety of vegetarian, vegan and non-vegetarian dishes were presented by their cooks, who were each invited to explain not only the recipe, but also their meaning and motivation, often in broader terms of sustainability debates and food politics. This 'Potlatch supper' was intentionally presented as a moment of anthropological encounter – potlatch being the original Kwakiutl ceremony studied, among others, by American anthropologists from the native nations of the North West Pacific Coast of the United States in the 19th century.

The word has now seeped into everyday American English as 'potluck', half preserving the idea of a ceremonial feast at which each party contributes an elaborate, unique dish, and introducing an element of 'luck' or surprise. In this particular case, the idea of Huntly's Deveron Projects was to ask professionals of different backgrounds to reflect on food and its commitment. An additional original characteristic of the Potlatch (for which it was banned by US authorities in the late 19th Century) was the aggressive gifting and conspicuous consumption that would shame one's guests and challenge them to reciprocate. Perhaps unwittingly in line with their native American precedents, most of the Huntly participants had respectfully polemical contributions to make, standing up to present their dishes. For example, a local fumigation practitioner presented us with a pot of spelt porridge – an apt visual cue for the multiple types of pests that endanger our stored grains. His hardly appetizing anecdote was about maggots, and how they would annihilate half of our crops if we did not enforce industrial and potentially highly toxic methods of fumigation – a powerful reminder of how the safety of our daily feeding is enmeshed with the provisions of agrochemical industry.

Another confronting speech was given by a breeder of Angus beef. She had cooked beef stew and explained to all present, including vegans and vegetarians, how the beef and dairy industry of the Highlands is the most sustainable she could conceive of, given that it could – and had – provided for the region with no need for imports, and is entirely local and seasonal. She then argued how other dietary options require a number of ingredients that do not grow locally, and, while she was happy to cook for vegetarian farm guests and visiting volunteers, she also felt that it was an imposition of a double burden on her as cook and homesteader. The implication was that decreasing

CO2 emissions on a global level by cutting down on animal proteins requires local ways of implementing the general principle.

If a transition to vegetarianism in the Highlands meant eating processed and imported foods, that would actually increase the role of global distribution of ingredients with which agro-business is reshaping the environment globally, especially industrial and largely GM crops such as soy. The question she posed was this: What is ultimately better; eating beef (perhaps a dairy cow at the end of her production cycle) from a local farmer, or not eating meat at all – perhaps patronising the global food system by purchasing highly processed vegetarian 'non-meat' burgers? Making this choice would probably lead to different decisions on a day-to-day basis, according to where we are and how much we know about how and where we provision our food (cf. Weiss 2014). There was no public responses nor a collective debate about these questions, as the speeches were held in turn one after another, and the dining party accepted them at face value while being free to eat each from whichever dish had been presented for sharing. Very few of us lead lives that afford the luxury of the information needed to answer each of the challenging questions raised about knowledgeable access to food, because this information is intrinsically tied to practice: it depends on how much we travel, how long we stay in the places we live, how well we know the socio-economic environment surrounding us, how connected we are to the local food systems and to the producers of the food we consume.

On the other hand, while a political preference for short food chains usually goes together with a rediscovery of cooking skills, and a cultural preference for fresh food (as well as the cultivation of canning, pickling, and fermenting skills), from a social point of view, this can also mean consuming pricier foods and finding the time to cultivate these skills. Neither money nor time is readily available to most of us. Or rather, they are differently available to specific groups in society, and differently available in different societies. As an example I offer an ethnographic cameo from recent first-hand experience, based on my family's choice to buy vegetables as much as possible from a local social garden.

5 Potential and limits of local food

The Food for Good garden grows vegetables for eating and selling at a popular location in Utrecht, Transwijk Park, situated in the middle of a large housing estate. It is one of six community gardens and five city farms currently managed by an independent foundation, Utrecht Natuurlijk, which exists since 2015 with an independent director, advisory board and budget, but was previously part of the city administration under the 'Nature and Environment Communication' section. The foundation has the mission of cultivating municipal land for social purposes, thus the actual growers are residents and volunteers and what is not needed for their subsistence is sold to fund the operation. In this sense this is very different from a traditional food allotment scheme (volkstuinen), whereby an individual pays a yearly rent to the municipality to exploit a piece of land for own use. In the case of city gardens (sociale tuinderij or sociale stadstuinderij) the cultivation of vegetables or flowers is secondary to the function of connecting social

actors, for example local schools, residents, or in specific cases asylum seekers or patients under rehabilitation. Both the individual garden and the foundation keep a website (in Dutch) and actively communicate their mission and activities.

Located at the heart of a large park in the middle of a popular housing area, our visit on the way back from school with the children in the middle of February 2019 is a luxury. We are the only customers. As is often the case with gardens with a social or educational function, there is just one part-time employee present, whose duty it is to both look after the garden and supervise a variety of users, some of whom are in vocational training and some in therapeutic practice. The leader of the garden tells someone she calls a 'student' where to go and look for cabbages that would be good for us to take, as well as some tiny carrots and a red cabbage. She also tells her to go get the potatoes from the store for us, and we take about 1 kg at 1,50/kg. She shows her how to get rid of the biggest and dirtiest cabbage leaves. A few steps up from the muddy fields there is a kitchen and sales area, which is nice and warm, and there are some baskets that have apparently been prepared for selling, containing herbs and dried tomatoes, as well as seeds or spices in small paper pouches. Here the so-called student weighs our veggies with my son and draws up the list which comes to 6,50 Euros.

The young woman catering for us is indeed probably a student. We conclude this from her fine hands and the slow and careful movements with which she puts our cabbage in the plastic bags we brought from home, as well as the interactive and educational way in which she gets our son involved in drawing up the list of veggies (she has dirty hands from the mud) and adding up the bill: 6,50 Euros for a giant cabbage, various sorts of other cabbages, tiny carrots, and potatoes stored from the previous harvest. My husband only has a card or 10 Euro note. The store does not have a card reader and finding change requires calling in the woman in charge for the cash box. Luckily I have the exact amount in my purse. The student has dug up the carrots from the wet bed and they are covered with shiny, dark brown mud. After a good half hour of washing and brushing, though, even the tiniest one (as small as a fingertip) delivers an explosion of taste – almost spicy – in my mouth. Baby carrots we call them; most of them with double roots so unsellable on the market. We conclude that we enjoy the privilege of time, as most people could not or would not want to spend this time and money on dirty misshapen vegetables.

6 Food for citizenship?

I presented three very brief ethnographic anecdotes from a field site, an open festival I was invited to, and a public site that has become part of my family everyday routine. I place them side by side because engaging anthropologically in the food chain means unpacking the 'wisdom of the ordinary' or 'the banality of the everyday' as Kasia Cwiertka (2011) and Michael Herzfeld (2007) have defined it. Pausing on each interaction gives us insight into the multiple ways in which different actors in the food system invest food with meaning and purpose. Their choices are shared and articulated in multiple – even conflicting – ways and they are deeply felt by each as moral choices about what it means to participate in and shape one's global and local destiny.

For example, dairy farmers thinking of cows as 'Ferraris' articulate the acceptance of progeny breeding as a technology for the management of animal lives to produce milk. Others reflect more critically on more diverse ways of engaging with food production, not as a monoculture but as one side of a multifaceted practice which includes animal welfare and multifunctional agriculture. However this vision of agriculture is far from majoritarian in European policy (Pe'er et al. 2020). The second example reflects on the variety and nuances of different positions on how to change or adapt our diets. Veganism and carnism emerge from the Huntly Hairst potluck as both profoundly motivated choices, rooted in specific local practices and considerations, in ways that common sense and media rarely recognize. To even just find a commons space where to voice them both in a convivial way, leaving further debate to the small talk and serendipity of conviviality, meant encouraging commensality as a way not just to eat together but to reason together. The third and last example is a personal reflection from own experience, on the fact that not everyone has the luxury of engaging with food at a slow pace and on a local basis. A factor that structurally hinders the capacity to engage with food in civic ways, if this is only possible on the basis of personal motivation and investment.

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