The Commodification of Trust and Ethics: Local Foods and Neoliberal Environmental Governance

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Local Food Systems (LFS) in the developed world context are often considered an alternative to industrial agriculture, offering consumers and producers a different way to engage with food production and consumption. Buying food locally has, for consumers, become a way to resist or oppose the conventional food system and its associated negative environmental, social, and health effects. This paper will discuss how both conventional agriculture and LFS adhere to certain neoliberal constructs such as commodification in order to illustrate that the two are not as oppositional as often assumed. It will argue that although LFS may not be entirely ‘anti-conventional,’ they can still offer new ways to think about and carry out food policy and agriculture and food related governance.

Introduction

Local foods have emerged in the last 10 to 20 years as an alternative food choice for Western consumers and as a way for both producers and consumers to engage differently with agriculture and the environment. Local food systems (LFS) are often presented in opposition to the wide array of negative environmental, social, and health effects associated with conventional agriculture. However, a closer look at how local food initiatives function forces us to ask what it means to oppose conventional agriculture. This paper asserts that although direct farmer to customer relationships enable commodification in LFS and indicates adherence to neoliberal constructs, this does not necessarily undermine the notion that local foods are a rejection of conventional agriculture. Instead, in both adhering to certain neoliberal constructs while rejecting...
others, local foods are neither entirely anti-conventional nor neoliberal in nature, but some sort of partial neoliberal-environmental governance structure that simultaneously seeks to oppose conventional agriculture through more ecologically mindful commodification schemes. This paper will first provide a short overview of conventional agriculture as embodying neoliberal processes such as commodification, followed by an analysis of the commodification of territoriality and ethics in LFS.

Conventional Agriculture as Neoliberal in Nature
Neoliberalism is a “powerful ideological and political project in global governance,” yet it is not hegemonic in any way (McCarthy and Prudham 2004). Rather, neoliberalism can be conceived of as multiple combinations of a few characteristic processes, one of which is commodification. Commodification (Heynen et al. 2007), marketization (Castree 2008; 2010), and valuation (Heynen and Robbins 2005; Bakker 2005) all refer to the same type of process in which “phenomena that were previously shielded from market exchange” (Castree 2008, 142) are assigned prices and values and “invaluable and complex ecosystems are reduced to commodities through pricing” (Heynen and Robbins 2005, 6).

Conventional agriculture has become synonymous with industrial capitalist agriculture and with globalized neoliberal processes. Since the 1970s, conventional agriculture has been characterized by “unprecedented deregulation,” “export-oriented neoliberal development strategies” (Watts and Goodman 1997, 1), increasing trade liberalization, and the promise that the market will “facilitate the best distribution of resources and the greatest accumulation of wealth” (Rosin et al. 2012, 8). A growing critique of conventional agriculture asserts that the pursuit of profits through agricultural trade and the reliance on markets for regulation undermines and degrades the environment upon which agriculture and food production relies. Soil degradation, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and air and water pollution are among the environmental consequences of business-as-usual “profit-driven agricultural industrialization” (Guthman 2004, 3).

In addition to deregulation and trade-liberalization, the full commodification of food is an integral part of conventional agriculture. Conventional agriculture attempts to, through intensification, specialization, and concentration, “speed up, enhance, or reduce risks of biological processes” (Guthman 2004, 65) in order to reduce complex natural and environmental systems to standardized, reliable commodities. Specialized mono-cropping, increased use of machinery and chemical fertilizers to intensify production, and the concentration of production to only the largest farms has stabilized the food supply, but at a significant cost. These innovations are at the root of conventional agriculture’s negative environmental impacts.
Scholars have also noted significant detrimental social and economic consequences of conventional agriculture. As “traditionally protected markets are opened up to global trade liberalization,” (Ilbery et al. 2005, 117) and as large food processors, manufacturers, and retailers play more prominent roles in food distribution, farmers face decreasing revenue from their products. As costs of production (fossil fuels, machinery, and chemical fertilizers) rise, farm incomes decrease and farmers experience what Marsden and Smith (2006) refer to as the “cost-price squeeze.” These economic pressures have created an agrarian context in which farmers struggle to compete in an increasingly globalized market and have less control as “the neoliberal model is likely to further increase the influence of multi-national companies over food” (Watts et al. 2005, 25).

Canadian food policy specifically has, since the 1970s, focused on “industrialization throughout the food system” and on the “production of [food] commodities for export” (Kneen 2012, 1). More recently, the Conference Board of Canada’s assessment of food policy continues the trajectory of industry support, with Loblaws, McCain Foods, PepsiCo, Heinz, Cargill, Maple Leaf, and Nestlé acting as key members of the process (Bronson 2012). One of the conclusions in the report states that “Canada’s approaches to genetically modified foods, country-of-origin labeling, and food additives are generally sensible and, for the most part, balance regulatory needs with industry sensitivities” (Bloom, Grant, and Slater 2011).

This focus on industry as the group that needs the most protection, or that carries the most sway, excludes other concerns such as hunger (Bronson 2012), agricultural sustainability, the decline of family farming, and food insecurity, especially in Indigenous communities (Bronson 2012; De Schutter 2012). Groups such as Food Secure Canada (FSC) have grown out of a policy context in which these types of concerns are not present. Food sovereignty, hunger and poverty, and sustainable (both environmentally and socio-economically) agriculture have thus become the cornerstones of FSC and other grassroots food organizations. While the Conference Board of Canada focuses their assessment of food policies in Canada on “food additives, genetically-modified foods, health benefit claims, country of origin labeling, inspection, and international trade” (Bloom, Grant, and Slater 2011) and their effects on the food industry, the FSC strives to move food sovereignty, hunger, and sustainable agriculture to the forefront of policy discussions.

According to Kneen (2012) the “growing neoliberalism in public policy” and the exclusion of social and environmental issues from the food policy agenda have spurred an individualist response. Even as neoliberalism in policy has supported the growth of the food industry and capital-intensive farming in Canada, it has also “encouraged a tendency to seek personal food solutions” (Ibid) as consumers become more aware of health issues
related to industrially-produced foods and their own ability to demand food from sources they trust and production methods they wish to support. While formal groups such as the FSC seek to pursue change through policy and advocacy at a governmental level, the type of individualist responses to Canada's inadequate food policy that Kneen points to can be seen best in informal clusters of local food initiatives.

Local Foods: Opposing Conventional Agriculture and Embracing Neoliberalism

Although the perception of localization as the “neat antithesis to globalization” is arguably an exaggerated dichotomy (Hinrichs 2003, 33), LFS are often seen as a partial solution to environmental and social problems associated with global conventional agriculture. They represent ecologically sound food production methods, social and economic justice, and better food quality (Born and Purcell 2006, 200). The term “local food” usually refers to more than just food produced within a certain physical proximity. Typically a whole host of meanings are attached to LFS, ranging from high quality food for consumers to sustainable production methods and small-scale production. These embedded meanings have increasingly been questioned in alternative food systems scholarship and contribute to what Born and Purcell term the “local trap”—the assumption that because something is local, or produced at a local scale, it will necessarily embody these preconceived characteristics (Born and Purcell 2006). Although there is growing recognition that none of these characteristics are necessarily guaranteed when one purchases local foods (Hinrichs 2003; Smithers and Joseph 2010), LFS are still predominantly seen as a rejection of conventional agriculture (Dupuis and Goodman 2005).

Building on Born and Purcell’s local trap warning, it is important to recognize that while local food initiatives seek to oppose conventional agriculture, and while conventional agriculture is inextricably tied to neoliberal faith in markets and commodification processes, we cannot assume that local food production necessarily also opposes neoliberalism as a whole. Indeed, there are many indications that local food systems adhere to processes of commodification and faith in markets and consumer dollars, while also opposing the environmental and social degradation associated with conventional agriculture. The following analysis on the commodification of territoriality and ethics attempts to offer a more precise indication of what local foods actually oppose, and what they may embrace in terms of neoliberal environmental governance.

Commodification of Territoriality and Ethics in Local Foods

Instead of assuming that commodification (which is part and parcel of neoliberal processes and capitalist agriculture) necessarily leads to environmental degradation, I wish to begin with the premise that "local" is a place for reassembling resources and value and for “evolving new commodity frameworks and networks” (Marsden and Smith 2005, 442). LFS do not do away with the neoliberal process of commodification, nor should
they. Rather, they engage in a different sort of commodification: one that attempts to reassemble how we value our food by being more ecologically and socially (as opposed to only economically) mindful of production costs and effects. Similar to Guthman’s description of organic farming, local food provisioning “incorporates and builds upon complicated natural systems” instead of oversimplifying or attempting to standardize biophysical processes (Guthman 2004, 3). Local food movements resist reductionist commodification schemes characterized by industrial agriculture and seek to engage with, rather than attempt to intervene upon, ecological and social processes.

Dupuis and Goodman (2005) discuss one such form of commodification and valuation, arguing that local foods market the idea of territoriality as an indicator of quality. By assigning value to specific regional characteristics, territory “becomes a commodity in itself” (Buller and Morris 2004, 1078). European Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) schemes, or Canadian initiatives such as Foodland Ontario or Buy British Columbia (Ilbery et al. 2005) represent the creation of a market indicator for a specific place—something previously not marketized in such a fashion. Local farmers’ markets, agri-tourism, community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, and direct-sell strategies, though less institutionally organized, also operate with the same intent in mind. They appeal to the idea that regionally produced food is more desirable than “placeless” conventional food products.

Not only is territory marketed, but ethical practices are also given a new and important valuation. These embedded ethical ideas can refer to ecologically-friendly production practices (Guthman 2007), a desire to support local farms and communities (Marsden and Smith 2005), and concerns over animal welfare and human health (Renting et al. 2003). They may also represent more ambiguous ideas of “local empowerment” (Eaton 2008, 998), romanticized traditional food production, and “pastoral symbolism” (Eaton 2008, 1003). Whatever the specifics, the ethics and morals of food production have become powerful selling points and commodities in LFS.

Moreover, farmers themselves are becoming a part of the embedded ethical commodity, insofar as they must establish and maintain consumer trust that certain production methods have been used (Marsden and Smith 2005) in emerging direct-marketing strategies. Even though ethical practices may in theory underlie consumer motivations for buying food directly from farmers, in practice and in places like farmers’ markets, “trust seems to trump the need for details” (Smithers and Joseph. 2010, 244). In her discussion of voluntary food labeling schemes, Guthman argues that by placing monetary value on ethical ideas, food labeling concedes to neoliberal reform processes rather than opposes them (2007). Similarly, the value placed on trust and the commodification of the
farmer who can convey trustworthiness is an integral part of direct producer-consumer interactions in local food systems and indicates adherence to certain neoliberal processes.

According to Guthman (2007), “Commodities that embed ecological, social, and/or place based values have been posed as an important form of resistance to neoliberalization” because they are meant to protect land and people from the “ravages of the market.” Similarly, Eaton argues that the turn to “quality local food production” can be seen as a method of “coping with processes of neoliberalization” by offering producers protection from global markets (2008). What local food initiatives oppose, then, is conventional agriculture’s exploitative use of land, resources, and labour, but not simply neoliberal processes. It is by creating marketable products based on certain territorial or ethical considerations, and attaching “economic values to ethical behaviours” (Guthman 2007, 457), that these exploitations are purportedly opposed. Thus, the strategy for opposing certain neoliberalization processes in agriculture actually further commoditizes nature, as well as farmers, indicating an adherence to certain other neoliberalization processes. Viewed in this light, “re-localization” schemes in local food systems appear “to be not so much in resistance to neoliberal globalization as an intrinsic part of it” (Dupuis and Goodman 2005, 367). In light of this discovery, can LFS offer a viable form of resistance to environmental and social ills associated with neoliberal conventional agriculture if they utilize commodification schemes to do so?

Neoliberal Reform and Resistance to Conventional Agriculture
Commodification schemes in LFS mean that consumers can choose to value certain environmental, social, or ethical food production attributes using their food dollar. This type of consumer choice is reminiscent of how Anderson and Leal (2001) describe free-market environmentalism. They argue that as soon as an individual participates in the market, where they spend their money provides an “objective measure of these subjective values because bidders must give up one thing of value to obtain another” (15). A consumer who chooses to place trust in an individual farmer, or decides to pay more for their food based on location, is doing just that: giving up one thing of value (money) for another (ethical practices in food production). Putting faith in the market and in consumer dollars is a somewhat uncomfortable, or at least unexpected, place for the local food movement to find itself. It doesn’t have to be, though, if those markets value environmental and social costs in new ways. The simple dichotomy of trying to place local foods squarely as resistance or adherence to neoliberal processes and conventional agriculture takes away from what could be a more productive discussion of how local food initiatives might embody some neoliberal reform and still resist conventional agriculture.

If commodification is understood as the process in which a good is rendered stable for market exchange, and conventional agriculture’s associated environmental problems
stem from the attempt to turn food into a stable market commodity (thus alienating it from nature), then it seems logical that the goal of local foods would be to de-commoditize food and restore the connection between food and the natural environment. However, if commodification is also understood as the process in which new values are attached to goods previously outside the reach of the market, then many local food systems further commoditize food in the sense that they place new meanings and add new market values to certain types of food or certain conditions of production, and in turn, make consumers responsible for choosing to value those conditions. Unlike conventional agriculture, local food systems strive not to abstract food from its biophysical context but to reattach that context to the product in the form of ethical environmental and social values. In this way, local foods continue the process of commodification, but do so in a way that takes environmental and social concerns into consideration.

Conclusion
While it remains unlikely that we can do away with treating food as a commodity, by engaging with nature, the environment, farmers, and the commodification process differently, local foods can still offer new ways for thinking about environmental governance as it relates to agriculture. Perhaps like neoliberalism, local foods are not entirely unified or coherent as a structure. Instead, local food systems are somewhat malleable and varied. They need not be thought of as clear opposition to neoliberal processes, but as a potential space for some form of partial neoliberal environmental governance. Most importantly, LFS offer new forums within which to construct food policy that can speak more meaningfully to the intersection of agricultural, social, environmental, and economic agendas as experienced by farmers and consumers, not just industry and business.

References


