

Knowing Food and Growing Food: Beyond the Production-Consumption Debate in the Sociology of Agriculture

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This paper examines some recent contributions to the literature on consumption in agro-food studies, with particular attention to the conceptualization of the loci and practice of food politics. The current interest in food consumption and its politics is informed by the earlier 'turn' to culture and the cultural in post-structuralist and post-modernist social theory, which contested the dominant optic of production relations, workplace politics, and associated conceptualizations of power. Despite these more general theoretical developments, however, current efforts to bring consumption into rural sociology are critically impaired by the continued reliance on production-centered theoretical frameworks. Consequently, although in other fields consumption has been "duly acknowledged" (Jackson 1999, p. 95), it is argued that the treatment of production and consumption in agro-food studies is still highly asymmetric. As this asymmetry is redressed, the potential of new forms of progressive food politics can be engaged, ranging from diffuse, often localized, struggles over modes of social ordering, such as knowledge systems, to more formal alliances between producers and consumers.

In this paper, the alternative conceptualizations of food politics are illustrated by two contending interpretations of social resistance to recombinant bovine growth hormone/bovine somatotropin (rBST) in milk production by Buttel, (1998; 2000) and DuPuis (2000). For Buttel, unorganized and consumption-based resistance to rBST does not truly qualify as political action and, he argues, has made little difference to the contemporary configuration of the dairy food system, and the dominance of such powerful actors as the large-scale, national and multinational dairy firms and dairy co-ops. DuPuis, on the other hand, heralds anti-rBST activity as a new form of consumption-based politics, despite its fractured, unorganized political base and its support primarily among upper- and middle-class people. In this view, reflexive consumption is a social act even if it is not part of an organized social movement.

The divergence between Buttel and DuPuis arises from more deep-rooted theoretical differences concerning the constitutive roles of production and consumption in contemporary society. These differences emanate, in turn, from a larger disagreement between Marxian and production-oriented perspectives and more

'cultural' and consumption-oriented views of society that are now prominent in the social sciences. The tensions between these contending frameworks are explored throughout the paper in the context of recent attempts to bring consumption and consumers 'back in' to rural sociology.

Section I briefly reviews commodity systems analysis and several contributions to the recent consumption 'turn' in agro-food studies. Commodity fetishism emerges as the key operational concept in these perspectives, with the result that consumer politics, paradoxically, are confined to the worlds of production. Current efforts to use the resources of actor-network theory to overcome this imbalance, which is symbolized by the marked division between rural 'production' sociology and the sociology of food, are taken up in Section II. Since ANT, in turn, fails to meet this integrative challenge, Section III explores several alternative theorizations of consumption developed in analytical frameworks so far disregarded in agro-food studies. While perspectives broadly associated with the cultural 'turn' have much to offer, Section IV also warns of the dangers of 'over-shooting'. The final sections of the paper argue for the rethinking of both production-centered and cultural approaches to food politics in ways which acknowledge the contested processes of interaction between how we 'grow food' and how we 'know food'. By integrating these arenas of struggle over knowledges, we can begin to bridge the divide separating perspectives which 'know' food only as either Marxian fetish or Durkenheimian totem.

Lost in Production: The Elusive Consumer in Agro-Food Studies

In agro-food studies, particularly in the U.S., discussions of the commodity have been most strongly influenced by William Friedland's (1984) pioneering work on commodity systems analysis. Following a Marxian reading of the notion of fetishism, analysis of the commodity chain has principally been directed toward "uncovering" the social relationships behind the production of a particular commodity. While commodity chain analysis can be extended to any commodity, it has been most widely applied to food or other agricultural products.

From the production-centered Marxian perspective on food systems, the commodity occupies the conjoining space between the two spheres of the economy, the production sphere and the market sphere (or sphere of "circulation," as Buttel describes it). Yet, commodity exchange per se, seen only as exchange value in the marketplace, has no "politics." The definition of politics in this case comes from the Enlightenment notion of freedom as throwing off the yoke of a dominant authority. Political power is conceptualized as a coercive relationship between a dominant actor and a dominated actor who behaves according to the dominant actor's will (Weber, 1978 [1922]). Production-centered theorists, based on Marx's arguments about the sphere of production in Capital, see domination and power struggles as arising primarily in the ways capitalists seek to extract surplus value by exploiting workers. Marx insists, as Buttel rightly notes, that political power is located in the sphere of production only. The power to shape society depends, therefore, on control over the sphere of production and the capacity to transform the relationships between worker and capitalist in the immediate labor process.

In the Marxian sociology of agriculture, production is the locus of power and the

privileged terrain of political action, and the commodity form acts as a “veil” that conceals exploitative social relations. Consumers, from this perspective, are passive both because they interact only in the non-political sphere of circulation/the market and because they are unaware of the unequal power relationships obscured by the veil of the commodity fetish. Correspondingly, the role of commodity chain analysis in agro-food studies and related fields is to awaken the consumer to true political consciousness. Until consciousness is awakened, consumption which claims to be politically-based is, at best, ineffective and, at worst, reinforces accumulation and power.

In recent years, several contributors have re-visited commodity systems analysis and its parallel notions of production chain, filières, and agro-industrial complexes. The latest development in this tradition in agro-food studies is the ‘systems of provision’ (SOPs) concept formulated by Ben Fine and his colleagues (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Fine, 1995; Fine, Heasman and Wright, 1996). Economic geographers also are in the vanguard of the renewal of commodity systems analysis (Dixon, 1999; Hartwick, 1998, 2000; Leslie and Reimer, 1999).

This renewed interest in commodity systems analysis seeks to attenuate the emphasis of the prototype on vertical integration and production-oriented characteristics in order to create room for reflexive consumer praxis built on reciprocal relationships with the production process. Consumption as a theoretical category has “arrived” in agro-food studies, as exemplified by several recent papers that putatively assign consumers a key role in their analytic schemas. Arguably, however, these accounts are not explicitly ‘about’ consumption and consumer practices, even though consumption as a category is deployed as a causative mechanism to help explain trends and directions of change in agro-food sectors. That is, the consumer emerges only to disappear again into a production-centered framework. A few examples of work in this field will show that, despite increasing attention in the agro-food literature, the consumer continues to remain elusive.

Marsden and Wrigley’s (1995) study of the transformation of the retail food industry’s increasing control over the British food market was one of the first agro-food analyses to take consumers seriously. However, despite their concentration on the realm of exchange in this study, they conclude their discussion by stating that the extent of consumer action in the future “will depend upon the development of the social and political consciousness of the consumers themselves. This in turn depends upon an ability to overcome the types of commodified individualism and positionality much of the contemporary system attempts to promote” (1995, p. 1911). Consumers have an “undeveloped” consciousness, which will continue to be undeveloped - that is, unpolitical - until they acquire the collective awareness necessary to articulate an effective challenge to the production system.

Murdoch and Miele’s (1999) more recent analysis of the increasing complexity of modern food provisioning contains a more complex view of the consumer. In their analysis, they adopt Eder’s proposition that nature in modernity is experienced as an ambivalent ‘double structure’ (Eder, 1996), oscillating between a view of nature as moral authority and as ‘utilitarian object’. This duality is used to distinguish between “non-standard food production/consumption practices”, identified with alternative, “more localized and differentiated forms of production”, and “a set of increasingly globalized mass consumption food patterns” (Murdoch and

Miele, 1999, pp. 466-67). On the premise that this dichotomy corresponds to “two general production areas” in which “socio-natural relations are differentially constructed”, Murdoch and Miele explore how the tensions within “Eder’s double structure might be reconfiguring the relationships between producers and consumers” (1999, p. 469).

However, Murdoch and Miele explain the dynamics of these ‘new’ production-consumption patterns in structuralist terms, as a response to external societal shifts and transitions. Thus they describe mass food consumption as the concomitant of standardized production processes “or perhaps driven” by these (1999, p. 466). Conversely, the expansion of localized, differentiated, more ‘natural’ food production networks is attributed to “key trends now sweeping through the agro-food sector”, namely, rising affluence and enhanced food safety concerns, resulting in the “growth of discerning food consumers” (p. 469). This account is not only looking ‘back to nature’ but also to the two ‘worlds of production’ of its title, which command analytical attention. Thus, “new trends in food consumption” and “the rise of a new culture of consumption, centered upon the search for a healthier diet and the rediscovery of traditional cuisines” (p. 473), emerge as unexamined categories, foils for the theorization of production, even though they have explanatory power ¹. In short, the concern to examine the reconfiguration of producer-consumer relationships is overwhelmingly one-sided, with consumers cast in stratified, market research terms, without ‘agency’ or meaningful everyday practices. The “new culture of consumption” seen developing around “traditional products and organic animal-friendly foods” (p. 473) is articulated theoretically with production only in the economic terms of growing demand and market expansion.

The figures and conceptual categories found in Murdoch and Miele (1999) - ‘discerning food consumers’, ‘new cosmopolitan consumers’, and ‘greater consumer awareness’ - appear as common tropes in a literature that ‘uses’ consumption mainly to talk about production. A further example of this reification emerges in Morgan and Murdoch’s analysis of conventional and organic food supply chains, which focuses on systems of codified and local or tacit knowledge and the particular socio-economic forms in which these are embedded in the two networks (Morgan and Murdoch, 2000). Thus their detailed, confessedly stylized, account of conventional and organic food production is accompanied by a reductionist (and elitist) treatment of consumers. “In contrast to the industrial food chain (where the consumer is a largely passive and ignorant actor) the consumer tends to assume a more active role in decentralized organic chains...” (2000, p. 170). In the latter, “the consumers...tend to be well-educated, middle-class professionals who are able to pay a premium for organic produce and who are willing to get involved in running local food schemes” (Morgan and Murdoch, 2000, p. 170).

In rather similar vein, consumers also appear as an insubstantial, shadowy presence in the literature on the construction of ‘quality’ in food networks, and the constellation of forces adduced to explicate these changing ‘conventions’ (Arce and Marsden, 1993; Marsden and Arce, 1995; Marsden, 1997; Wilkinson, 1997; Murdoch, Marsden and Banks, 2000). Murdoch, Marsden and Banks (2000, p. 108), for example, note that there is “a growing number of discerning consumers”, with “concerns about food safety and nutrition”, who “increasingly are linking notions of food quality to notions of nature in the agro-food system...” Again, despite the

apparent causal primacy attributed to consumers in these analyses, theoretical development is dominated by the behavior of producers and their ‘worlds of production’, whose markets are characterized in terms of two production continua: “standardized-generic” products and “specialized-dedicated” products. Categories of food consumption are then ‘added on’ or associated with the respective markets as, for example, with the “growing market of specialized consumers (those who are opting out of the mass markets of generic foodstuffs)” (2000, p. 121).

As this brief survey reveals, not only are production-centered frameworks still preeminent in agro-food studies, including here actor-oriented analyses, but also the ‘turn’ to consumption in this field is illusory. Consumption has been neglected, under-theorized, treated as an exogenous, structural category, and granted ‘agency’, or transformative power, only in the economic, abstract terms of demand. In these analyses, to paraphrase Appadurai (1986, p. 31), consumption emerges as private, atomic and passive rather than as “eminently social, relational, and active”.

These reconstructive efforts add little to the theorization of consumption per se and effectively reaffirm the analytical centrality of production and labor as the privileged loci of politics and social change. In essence, the dynamics of consumption are located in the sphere of production, and consumers are enjoined to practice production-centered politics. Much of this work conceals an implicit, unacknowledged notion of consumers as manipulable, blinkered individuals, whose political epiphany will come if only the scales of commodity fetishism can be removed from their eyes. The consumer escapes theoretical attention because she or he does not appear to “act” politically. For Marx, politically emancipatory action, by definition, occurs only in the class struggle that takes place in the realm of production. Politically conscious action cannot occur in the sphere of circulation because in that sphere, according to Marx, the only apparent relationships are those between things. Fetishism precludes politics in this sphere, or makes political what is really just bourgeois ideology. Bourgeois ideology gives consumption the appearance of emancipation when, in fact, it is implicated with capitalism as, for example, when upper income consumers buy so-called “niche market” products.

Actor-Network Approaches and the Promise of Symmetry

In the search for a way forward from the production-centered analytics of commodity fetishism, a third question has recently come to the fore: how to overcome the glaring sub-disciplinary disjuncture between rural ‘production’ sociology and the sociology of food (Tovey, 1997). This realization is the foundation of an incipient yet ambitious undertaking to theorize the practices of food provision and consumption as being co-determined; that is, ‘worlds’ which are conjoined and mutually constituted (Lockie and Kitto, 2000). Borrowing methodologically from actor-network theory (Law, 1994; Latour, 1993), food production-consumption practices, it is argued, ideally should be theorized without recourse to a priori causal schemas which distinguish classes of phenomena “that drive from those that are driven” (Law, 1994, p. 12). Analogously, producer cultures and consumer cultures are not ‘purified’, separate categories of social life but rather mutually constitutive. This ‘symmetrical’ approach to food production-consumption networks is formulated schematically in a recent contribution by Lockie and Kitto (2000).

In an earlier paper, Lockie and Collie (1999) begin to prepare this ground by building on disparate, unintegrated elements of contemporary theorizations of food consumption, notably Ben Fine's SOP analysis (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Fine 1995; Fine et al, 1996). Seeking methodological and theoretical tools to explore the social practices that hold agro-food networks together, Lockie and Collie (1999, p. 64) call for ethnographic inquiry to extend our understanding of "the whole material culture surrounding food production and consumption". In a more recent contribution, Lockie and Kitto (2000) suggest that, although this important dimension is recognized by the SOP approach, it is "poorly developed in both theorization and operationalization" (Lockie and Kitto, 2000, p. 5). Furthermore, production activities are privileged in SOP analysis as "*determinants* of consumption practices" and "the role of agency is marginalized" by giving primacy to structural tendencies in the shaping of SOPs (2000, p. 5, original emphasis).

The quest for conceptual resources to more fully comprehend production-consumption interactions brings Lockie and Kitto (2000) to actor-network theory (ANT) which, they note approvingly, is aligned "with the broad trend towards relational theories of power within contemporary sociology" (2000, pp. 8-9). However, these authors similarly are dissatisfied with the uses to which ANT has so far been put in agro-food studies. These are variously criticized for not improving on commodity systems analysis (de Sousa and Busch, 1998; Busch and Juska, 1997), formulating a "linear set of metabolic relational processes" (2000, p. 13) that privileges production and erases consumption (Goodman, 1999), and for "the continued 'black-boxing' of 'the consumer'" (p. 15) in Whatmore and Thorne's (1997) analysis of 'fair trade' coffee production-consumption networks.

Lockie and Kitto (2000) critique these earlier extensions of ANT for giving inadequate weight to the recursive relational organization of socio-material networks, reflecting the mutually constitutive material and symbolic interactions between production and consumption (Lockie and Kitto, 2000). They argue that closer attention to these recursive relationships is needed in order to avoid linear characterizations of production-consumption networks that are corrupted by the modernist search for the locus of power, typically identified as upstream agents and intermediaries, who apparently can "unproblematically dictate the situation in which food is consumed both materially and symbolically" (2000, pp. 15-16).

However, the omissions and biases detected in these earlier contributions do not diminish the strength of Lockie and Kitto's (2000) support for ANT's relational ontology, theory of power and conceptual tools in constructing a fuller understanding of food production-consumption networks. Their essential point is that these resources must be applied more comprehensively to the material and symbolic dimensions of food consumption. Its real import is that agro-food studies now is positioned to explore potentially fruitful points of convergence with recent theorizations of consumption in other areas of the social sciences and humanities.

Before embarking on this exploration, it is worth observing that much contemporary consumption theory has developed in analytical frameworks so far disregarded by agro-food studies. That is, reconstructed commodity systems analysis and ANT are by no means the only candidates in the quest to bridge the divide between rural production sociology and the sociology of food identified by Tovey (1997). For example, ANT's commendable rejection of the locus of power as the

overriding analytical concern is counterbalanced by its avowed discomfort with “critical theory” and its questionable agnosticism on issues of politics (Casper and Clarke, 1998; Murdoch, 1997). In contrast, other post-Foucauldian approaches to politics and society have extended social understandings of “the political” as something beyond the search for the locus of power, without rejecting the political as an focus of study. Accordingly, agro-food studies should extend its analytical horizons beyond the limiting current choice between commodity systems analysis and ANT. As conceptual arsenals of consumer politics, one disarms consumers, and the other disarms politics.

To lead agro-food theory back to richer, more insightful perspectives for consumption-production analysis, it is necessary to undertake a brief historical overview of consumption studies.

The Consumption Turn in Social Theory

The last two decades have seen an increasingly well-theorized challenge to the production-centered approach to economic relationships, part of the broader cultural “turn” in the social sciences previously noted. While the debate over whether and how to integrate consumption into commodity systems analysis continues, consumption as a focus of study has gained a high profile in the social science disciplines, driven in part by the current sociological interest in “pop culture”. Food and its consumption figure prominently in this new and burgeoning literature, finding expression in the rising tide of “food and society” courses currently being taught in US universities. Much of this work emerges from decidedly non-Marxian social science genres. For example, Ritzer’s (2000) enormously popular *The McDonaldization of Society* fits strongly into a Weberian analytical mode. Other studies, and endless popular films, explain food more in terms of Durkheim’s idea of “totem” - as a symbol which represents social relationships (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978) - and less in terms of Marx’s “fetish”, a symbol which hides social relationships. Thus a “totemic” perspective infuses studies of food as symbols of cultural identity and solidarity, such as Jeffrey Pilcher’s (1998) *¡Que Viven Los Tamales!*, Stephen Mennel’s (1995) *All Manners of Food*, and the collected articles in *Golden Arches East* (Watson, 1997). Feminist approaches also feature strongly in food consumption studies, including Susan Bordo’s (1993) study of anorexia nervosa, *Unbearable Weight*, and studies of women’s historical role in feeding the family, such as Bynum (1991) and DeVault (1994).

While this work opens up a new realm of study for the social sciences, it also has weaknesses as a source of analytical tools for agro-food studies, as Tovey (1997) has observed. Specifically, this work tends to ignore, undertheorize or explain away production-consumption relationships. One example is Ritzer (2000), who finds “McDonaldization” everywhere he looks, thereby eliminating the need to study production as anything other than a mere exemplar of the same trend. The neglect of the production side of food in this literature echoes the general turn away from the material, the economic, and production in cultural studies.

To build a better theoretical bridge between food studies and agro-food studies requires a brief reconnaissance of developments in cultural theory over the last few decades. Here, it is particularly fruitful to look to those scholars who have remained

in conversation with Marx while attempting to reconcile political economy with cultural studies. Many of these scholars come out of the “cultural marxism” tradition pioneered by Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson. Surprisingly, these well-established cultural Marxist approaches have been widely ignored in current attempts in agro-food studies to ‘acknowledge’ consumption. A brief overview of three such approaches - the “New Times” analyses of the Birmingham school, the “material culture” school, and the standpoint feminists - reveals the potential fruitfulness of these perspectives in agro-food studies. These literatures provide useful links between the culture/identity studies of consumption and the more production-centered focus of commodity studies.

“New Times” analyses grappled with the rise of working class support for Thatcher in 1980s Britain. Stuart Hall, one of the founders of this intellectual movement, argued that late capitalism represented a new era, that is, a new set of interactions between the forces of production and social relations. “This is not to argue that New Times are necessarily and inevitably ‘good times. . . . Capitalism is still deeply entrenched - in fact, more so, globally, than ever before. And the old inequalities associated with it remain” (1989, p. 17). However,

Another feature of New Times is the proliferation of the sites of antagonism and resistance, and the appearance of new subjects, new social movements, new collective identities - an enlarged sphere for the operation of politics, and new constituencies for change (1989, p. 18).

While the multiplicity of antagonisms makes a revolutionary mass politics difficult, new forms of agency and arenas have emerged, including consumption. Moreover, although consumers may not possess the revolutionary capacity of a proletarian class, this group can aspire to power, if power is defined as the ability to set parameters, such as rights, obligations and rules governing processes (Mulgan, 1989, p. 360).

This re-thinking of the definition of power echoes similar theoretical transformation in Marxist feminism. Feminist standpoint theory (Hartsook, 1983, Smith, 1987), for example, arose in conversation with Marxian epistemology. From a Marxian perspective, the proletariat, because of its class standpoint, can “see” the reality behind commodity fetishism and understand the class struggle as the true emancipatory politics. Standpoint theorists argue that women, socially positioned as responsible for reproduction of social worlds, similarly have a capacity to understand and know a reality beyond the bourgeois ideology of exchange. This expanded epistemological potential can lead to a women’s form of emancipatory politics. Building on these foundations, feminist political theory has transformed the notion of “political” beyond more classical Weberian or Marxian notions of domination and “locus of power.” In particular, feminist theory has added the “private” sphere of everyday life and of reproduction to concepts of politics (Gordon, 1990). This has led to a re-definition of the political as a more de-centered “capacity to act” (Baker 1990), to encompass the diverse ways in which actors influence the construction of future society.

Drawing on the Gramscian tradition, Hall, his New Times colleagues, and the standpoint feminists adopt a more diffuse definition of politics that sees any form

of influence as political action. Their view of power is closer to Gramsci's "war of position" than to the outright revolutionary "war of maneuver" more common to Marxian political perspectives. Consumer activism may never overturn the capitalist system, but as a political action, it does wield power to shape the food system.

The third approach pertinent to thinking about consumption derives from the material culture framework of Arjun Appadurai and Daniel Miller. Rather than arguing that the production-centered perspective is no longer applicable in late capitalism, Appadurai (1986) dismantles the distinction made by Marx between earlier "traditional" modes of production and their transparent non-market power relationships and the capitalist mode and its ostensibly veiled market relationships. Examining the nature of material culture in the Durkheimian intellectual tradition of Marcel Mauss, Appadurai finds that capitalist and pre-capitalist relations are not as distinctively different as Marx would have us believe. Instead, whether societies are defined as traditional or modern, he shows that exchange relationships are a complex mix of (non-market) use and (market) exchange values, an analysis that makes the idea of the commodity fetish as veil problematic.

From Appadurai's perspective, consumption activity has always contained within it significant power to change society, no matter the economic period. To find this power, however, one has to look at consumption with different eyes than those of Marx. One has to see the mutual constitution of social relationships between producer and consumer, and the ways in which market and non-market activities are continually embedded within each other, rather than being contained in separate spheres.

The material culture approach to consumption advanced by Appadurai (1986) finds common ground with Lockie and Kitto's (2000) endorsement of ANT and their related insistence on the "centrality of non-humans" (p. 15) to the theorization of food production-consumption networks. The convergence between these perspectives is seen in their critiques of ontologies that fetishize 'society' and the epistemological importance each attributes to materiality and material objects in actively constituting social worlds. Each approach seeks to elaborate a sociology of things, a sociology of relational materialism in Law's (1992) lexicon, as central to a theory of social action (Long, 2000). In short, both ANT and material culture studies reject theoretical perspectives in which material worlds are socially constructed and these domains are ontologically separate. As Miller (1998) notes, "The key theories of material culture developed in the 1980s demonstrated that social worlds were as much constituted by materiality as the other way around (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987)." Or again, the work of Douglas and Isherwood (1978) and Bourdieu (1977; 1984) suggested "an active role for objects in the constitution of social relations" (Miller, 1995a, p. 148).

Looking at the "life of things" in society, a life that goes beyond the fetishized sphere of exchange, brings material culture theorists beyond the act of purchase to the reproductive world in which things gain other meanings. For Miller, this has resulted in more sensitive, nuanced attention to the complexities of the world of consumption - not just how things are bought but how they are used afterwards, that is, in the world beyond exchange, where most things spend most of their "lives". Using Hegelian Marxism as a framework, Miller's (1987) analysis of the consumer is strikingly similar to feminist standpoint theory: the consumer, as

reproducer of culture, has epistemological access to a world beyond the commodity fetish. However, this is not the world of production but the world of meaning in which things are embedded, in which things and people interact (Miller, 1987). While this seems ontologically similar to ANT, what distinguishes the material culture approach is its emphasis on systems of meaning, stemming from its self-conscious re-embrace of Durkheim, particularly through his disciple, Marcel Mauss.

This brief, necessarily truncated, overview gives just a glimpse of the array of theoretical perspectives available to agro-food studies, which promise to enrich the recent consumption 'turn'. However, as we suggest in the following section, such borrowings should not entail a wholesale abandonment of commodity systems or ANT, since consumption perspectives have pitfalls and limitations of their own.

Lost in Consumption: Over-shooting the Cultural "Turn"

The literatures produced by these earlier and ongoing explorations represent a vast resource, perhaps overwhelmingly so, for agro-food studies as it contemplates theorizing food consumption in all its material and symbolic diversity. That is, consumption as other than a 'lumpen' appendage to production and distribution or, at best, as a superstructural 'automatic pilot', redirected by exogenous factors (e.g. life-style changes; post-Fordism), which serve principally to refocus attention on worlds of production. Although this reconstructive work has barely started, agro-food studies might draw more explicitly from cultural Marxian approaches. However, this must be done with care.

One significant lesson concerns the danger of 'over-shooting', to the point where the division of labor between the sociologies of food production and consumption revealed by Tovey (1997) becomes even more pronounced. Thus Miller (1995a) suggests that this divide also is common in anthropological studies of consumption. "It is not surprising that earlier studies had this tendency, because in many cases they were aimed specifically at repudiating what was seen as an obsessive concern with relations of production as opposed to consumption. By the 1990s it has become evident that neither of these pursuits is best carried out in isolation" (1995a, p. 151).

Commentators in other fields give a more oppositional portrayal of the analytical costs of over-shooting, suggesting that the cultural 'turn' has been at the expense of social theoretic ideals and a concern with material culture. As Gregson (1995) observes, "The geographical literature on consumption highlights the ascendancy of cultural, as opposed to social, theory in social geography...and cultural theory in the tradition of Gramsci, Williams, Hall and Said. "...these writings...bring with them a particular interpretation of consumption grounded in meaning, identity, representation and ideology." In Gregson's view, such approaches "require a firmer grounding in structural social inequalities (the significant differences of gender, class, race, sexuality...) and in material culture.... it is precisely this social-theory derived agenda which the cultural 'turn' in geography has left behind and which has brought about a crisis for social geography" (1995, p. 139). A related but more moderate 'progress report' in human geography acclaims "the beginnings of the much-needed fusion of materialist analyses with more culturally derived approaches" (Crewe, 2000, p. 280) ².

Critiques of cultural studies approaches to consumption which point to the inadequate attention to production and “structural social inequalities” essentially argue for a return to traditional sociological categories of social science explanation. However, the answer to ‘over-shooting’ is not to revert wholesale to production-centered analytical categories but rather to demonstrate that cultural Marxian perspectives enable effective political engagement with a broad range of social questions, extending beyond the immediate production arena. That is, in agro-food studies, the challenge of Tovey’s (1997) division of labor is how to combine the sociologies of production and consumption in ways “that do not privilege the agency and power of either producers or consumers” (Lockie and Collie, 1999, p. 270).

Such an integrated perspective is a very tall order indeed. However, one step in this direction would be to follow culturally derived approaches to consumption at least to the point of recognizing that food politics encompasses worlds beyond the classical sociological terrain of the labor process and production. As Miller (1995a, p.157) observes when advocating a new approach to the anthropological study of consumption, “it is difficult to appreciate that an emphasis on commodities may not be at the expense of an empathy with society and a concern with social relations, but this opposition stems from a particular ideology that this recent literature suggests the discipline can transcend”.

Knowing Food and Growing Food: Rethinking Food Politics

There are many possible ways in which bridges between the sociology of food and agro-food studies could be built. In this respect, the current focus on knowledge systems in agriculture is extremely promising. Discussion of sustainable agriculture has turned increasingly to “growing” as a practice that is constructed through struggles between agricultural knowledge systems (Hassenein, 1999; Kaltoft, 1999; Morgan and Murdoch, 2000; Campbell and Liepins, 2001). These contributions are replete with in-depth studies of alternative farmers and their struggle to build and maintain alternative knowledge systems. However, once again, the consumer, whose values, subjectivity and activity are intrinsic to the making of alternative food systems, remains uni-dimensional. Yet, from the epistemological position of cultural marxism, how the consumer goes about “knowing” food is just as important as farmers’ knowledge networks in the creation of an alternative food system. By linking these struggles over knowledges, we begin to see the politics of the food system as involving alternative “modes of ordering” in which food is an arena of contestation rather than a veil of reality. However, it is clear that any attempt to integrate how we “know food” with how we “grow food” will require re-thinking both production and consumption-centered notions of politics (DuPuis, 2002). In particular, can we get away from perspectives that see food only as Marxian fetish or as Durkheimian totem? The difficulties of this integrative challenge can be illustrated by reference to some recent work on the politics of organic agriculture and food.

Allen and Kovach’s (2000) study of organic food social movements in the U.S. provides substantial evidence that an organized, activist politics surrounds the organic industry, as practiced by groups such as the Organic Consumers Association and the political education provided by the Organic Trade Association³. These authors also regard natural food stores as spaces in which political

organizing can and does occur, as in the recent case of opposition to the proposed U.S. National Organic Standards (See also Vos, 2000).

The examples of direct public contestation and organized social movements clearly fall into the realm of politics in the traditional sense. Not only is the consumer “awakened” to political action, this awakening includes a defense of what Allen and Kovach call consumers’ “right to know” or the “defetishization” of production. Consumers demand labels that attest to how their food is grown and, in the case of the U.S. National Organic Standards debate, contest any State attempt to weaken the legitimacy of the production process. Organic movements can be seen as the praxis of commodity systems analysis, although here consumers rise to defend the labor processes in organic agriculture from perceived ‘re-fetishized’ industrialization. Through symmetrical organized activity, the fetish of food becomes the totem of mutual collective food and agriculture movements.

In Allen and Kovach’s characterization of the organic movement, the consumer clearly is regarded as a political actor in the food system, practicing a “form of politics” that has been widely accepted ever since E.P. Thompson’s (1968) *The Making of the English Working Class*. But where should boycotts be situated, such as the consumer boycott of table grapes in support of United Farm Workers’ organizing in the 1980s? In this case, some actors were part of an organized movement while others’ political activity occurred only at the point of sale (or non-sale). Here, the definition of politics as organized social movement starts to blur, and new notions of politics begin to emerge.

Thus new studies of organic food and fiber systems increasingly are addressing the fact that the struggle over questions of ‘knowing’ food - for example, the question: “what is organic?” - involves more than merely making the system “transparent”. Increasingly, whether or not a food will be certified - that is, known as “organic” -- has involved significant political struggle. Examples of these contestations include Allen and Sach’s call for a form of certification that takes the social condition of farm workers into account (1993), the already noted controversy over the USDA’s organic rules (Vos, 2000; Guthman, 1998; 2000), and studies of “quality” as an arena of struggle in food networks (Guthman, 1998; Murdoch and Miele, 2001; Sage, 2002).

Buniri’s (2001) comparative study of Indian and Californian organic cotton systems shows that the question “what is organic” is itself the contingent product of contestations over knowledges within networks of power, historically evolving over time. In her U.S. case, contestations over the transparency of the production system do not extend to examining the social condition of farmers, nor of farmworkers. Interestingly, relations between Indian organic cotton growers and their primarily European consumers have given rise to certification standards that do incorporate support of farmers’ social needs. Nevertheless, even in the Indian case, farm laborers are still left out of the picture. Buniri’s study is noteworthy for the interconnections it reveals between production arena struggles involving farmers and workers and the consumer-producer politics of defining the organic. In other words, there are many forms of politics in the organic arena, some of which are less obvious to production-centered perspectives and more visible to the cultural marxist or feminist scholar focusing on diffuse forms of power, on everyday resistance, and on other struggles over knowing and growing food.

These conclusions echo the current thinking in social theory in general. For example, both critical race and feminist theorists have been especially insightful in their studies on the formative power of meaning and representation in society and their critique of structuralists for ignoring these factors (See, for example, Hall, 1989; Gordon, 1990). However, some recent contributions in this area reconceptualize notions of identity as “both a matter of social structure and cultural representation” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 56). Drawing on Gramsci, this recent work revives the emphasis on the study of “formations”: historically contingent social and political “blocs”. The notion of formation bears some resemblance to Law’s (1994) concept of “modes of ordering”, yet with an explicit awareness of political struggle.

In this respect, alternative discursive and material projects, such as those represented by organic agriculture, Fair Trade, anti-rBST groups, eco-labelling, or the Slow Food movement, for example, seek to reconfigure the hegemonic formations or ‘orderings’ of the socio-ecological in industrial or conventional agro-food networks (Goodman, 2001). Analyzing Fair Trade, Whatmore and Thorne (1997) argue that “what is analytically distinctive” about an actor-network perspective on the ways people make the worlds in which they live, “is how they strengthen relationships amongst formerly ‘passive’ actants in commercial networks - the producers and consumers - through a mode of ordering of connectivity which promotes non-hierarchical relationships framed by ‘fairness’” (1997, p. 301). Food is no longer polarized conceptually as either totem or fetish, but emerges as an arena of struggle, as well as a realm of connectivity.

As this brief discussion emphasizes, the notion of cross-sphere alliances, bridging the spheres of production and exchange, private and public (or even erasing these distinctions altogether), is at the core of this more discursive notion of politics. These alliances include consumers as both actual and potential actors, and the social relations formed in consumption -both with producers and with other consumers - are regarded as more than just “private,” that is, a-political, action. Discursive perspectives “see” politics in places where a production-centered framework finds only a failed attempt to overcome capitalist forces.

For example, from a production-centered viewpoint, Consumer Supported Agriculture may appear to be an epiphenomenal and transitory utopian entertainment for a few middle class consumers and their fortunate few farmer friends. Alternatively, this movement can be seen as bearing the seeds of a political struggle to re-define consumer-producer relationships that may, or may not, succeed in creating a broader farmer-consumer (or broader class) alliance. Similarly, the Monsanto web pages can be seen as the strategic political discourse of large-scale capitalists, marshaling the power/knowledge of hegemonic biological science in an attempt to create its own alliance with consumers. In other words, the “politics” of food get played out in ways that include both the struggles of contested knowledges and the struggles to form political alliances that will become more stable political formations of the future. These two arenas of struggle are equally powerful; each has an ability to influence the other, and each deserves analytical attention.

From this perspective, the fact that organic food consumption is presently a middle-class privilege - a “class diet”, if you will - and is not based on a formal social movement should not deny the politics of this activity. Of course, the middle class

is only one voice in the overall discursive political framework around organic food, and how it chooses to “know” organic food clearly may ignore other actors in the system, such as farm laborers and poorer consumers. However, “class diet” or not, the knowledge practices of reflexive consumption are expressions of agency and so constitute a politics of food. If a “broad church” approach is adopted, the consumer politics of organic food can be admitted without prejudice to other modalities of food politics.

Conclusion

With this discussion in mind, it is possible to return to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper. Both consumption and production spheres contain struggles, intrinsic contradictions, and ultimately, interactions across the boundary of the commodity “veil”. Whether using the notions of New Times, material culture, or standpoint theory, a discursive production-consumption perspective on the food system sees the political possibilities of consumption as less than the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism but more than merely a niche marketing opportunity. Consumer actions can be seen as political when they exercise “the capacity to act” in any way that affects the future form of society. For this reason, the substantial turn to organic milk production (recently expanding at a rate of over 100% per year) and the prevalence of non-rBST labeling in some parts of the country, represent a political response to the aggressive tactics of Monsanto. The fact that Monsanto continues to respond to this political pressure by lobbying against labeling and promoting anti-food disparagement legislation reflects the importance they attribute to this form of politics.

Conversely, from a more producer-centered perspective, Buttel points to the extraordinarily small market share of organic milk (after all, 100% growth from a small base is low in absolute terms) and the failure of non-rBST labeling in many states, in part due to Monsanto’s political strategies. He therefore describes anti-rBST politics as a movement that has risen and fallen. Writing from America’s Dairyland, Buttel observes that dairy farming as a whole has changed little in reaction to the new consumer politics. This perspective is located in a particular regional social formation: the production-centered dairy Midwest, where recent large-scale dairy industry mergers, new advances in biotechnology, and other forces that have made “growing milk” a more intensive and industrial activity over the last century assume primary importance. On the other hand, for DuPuis (2000), writing from the social formation of California’s alternative suburbia, consumption activities clearly have a “politics”, that is, an effect on the future of agro-food networks. Equally, from other socially embedded positions, one can see the power of discursive politics in the urban gardening movement in blighted inner-city neighborhoods (Lynch, 1995), in veganism (DuPuis, 2002) and in fair trade networks (Raynolds, 2000).

So, does this mean that contested knowledge as a politics is only important for the 2-3% of foods produced and consumed in alternative agro-food networks? No. The most cursory look at today’s food advertisements shows that all food is embedded in a contested discourse of knowledge claims. Contemporary food industry marketing is an attempt to meld common consumer aims with profit goals, by

enrolling consumer bodies (“Healthy Choice”), ideals of nature (“Hidden Valley”) or both (“Healthy Valley”). These efforts by the food industry to lure consumers into their food Disneyland have been only partially successful. Many consumers have displayed a healthy skepticism of the brightly colored signs - “natural” or “fat-free” - that lead to Healthy Valley. Instead, they have become reflexive, interrogating industry claims and refusing a passive role in the food system (DuPuis, 2000).

Despite the political lessons of numerous ‘food scares’, anti-GMO movements and the mad cow disease pandemic, agro-food studies has yet to develop an integrated analytical framework of production and consumption. Such integrative work on food provisioning and consumption promises to reveal the potential for new progressive food politics. A reformulated food politics would pay analytical attention to a broad range of activities, from diffuse capillary modes of social action to more formal alliances between producers and consumers, and the contested material and discursive orderings of the social and the ecological which articulate everyday bio-political contestations and connections.

Notes

- 1 Murdoch and Miele (1999) do note that consumer awareness of, and interest in, more natural and traditional products “derives not only from questions of taste (which might be linked, as in Bourdieu (1984), to questions of social identity) but, more prosaically perhaps, to questions of health and safety” (p. 481).
- 2 In this respect, ironically, studies on the food consumption side of Tovey’s (1997) divide are regarded as exemplary for “the ways in which they simultaneously deal with the symbolic aspects of domestic consumption and the structural and material parameters within which consumers operate and meanings are made” (Crewe, 2000, p. 279, original emphasis).
- 3 Other recent analyses of organic agriculture *qua* organized social movement include Buttell (1997), Buck et al (1997) and Reed (2001). Related themes in this literature concern pressures toward absorption in conventional corporate agro-food circuits, cooption by the state and increasing institutionalization (Buck et al, 1997; Tovey, 1997; Michelson, 2001; Kaltoft, 2001).

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