

Rural Europe Redux?

Reflections on Alternative Agro-Food Networks and Paradigm Change

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to invite wider debate on the nexus postulated between alternative agro-food networks (AAFNs) and the rise of a new rural development paradigm in Western Europe¹. This problematic is engaged in conversation with recent contributions to the rapidly expanding European literature on AAFNs². It is suggested that closer attention to several ‘blind spots’ and silences, analytical and political, is essential in order to specify more fully the characteristics of the paradigm shift envisaged and the accompanying changes in social structures and power relations.

Recent views of AAFNs as the forerunners of a paradigm change, a territorialised, ecologically-embedded successor to the modernisation paradigm of rural development, are examined in Section II. The focus falls mainly on the ‘turn’ to quality, ‘repeasantisation,’ and some political-economic interrogations of territorialised, farm-centric value added strategies as the innovative motor of the ‘new’ rural social economy. Further doubts about the conceptualization of contemporary European rural development in the radical terms of paradigm shift rather than continuities in change are expressed in Section III. Finally, it is argued that consumption circuits and the nature of their integration with food production require explicit attention in this literature. The failure to ‘acknowledge’ consumption and related questions of social justice reinforces the case against these new modes of food provision as the centre-piece of rural development.

In contextualising this discussion, the institutional conjuncture created by Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform is generally conducive to change in the classic modalities of supra-national and national agricultural policy. Lowe et al (2002, 14-15) distinguish three new developments in contemporary European agricultural policy: “...subsidiarity and the increasing decentralization of agricultural policy within

the European Union,” multifunctionality, which is “challenging the classic sectoral vision of farming as an exclusively productive enterprise,” and territoriality. In this long march of reform, from the 1992 MacSharry reforms to the 1999 Rural Development Regulation (RDR) and more recent proposals, the existence of the CAP as a narrow production-centred programme for agriculture is besieged by a competing pluralistic vision of multifunctional, integrated rural development (Gray, 2000; Buller, 2000; Lowe *et al*, 2002). European Union (EU) enlargement and agricultural trade liberalization reinforce this policy reorientation towards forms of farm income support considered to be non-trade distorting under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules (Potter and Burney, 2002). Substitution of such ‘green box’ payments for direct production support is the centrepiece of the January, 2003 CAP reform proposals presented by the EU agricultural commissioner in preparation for the current Doha round of world trade negotiations.

However, although the present conjuncture appears to favour the WTO’s ‘decoupling’ agenda and correlate proposals for a multifunctional ‘European Model of Agriculture,’ this reorientation faces strong resistance from ‘core’ EU countries, which can produce complex and unexpected consequences, as the October, 2002 Franco-German agreement to maintain current CAP commodity subsidies until 2006 revealed. In addition, the Doha trade talks are behind schedule and face an uncertain future in the divisive international climate following the Iraq War. Pragmatists would also point out that major reallocations of CAP budget funds so far have not accompanied the discursive shift between what O’Hara (2002, 8) terms, in the case of Ireland, “a ‘traditional’ agri-centred model and a parallel regional/spatial model.”

Moreover, with the flexibility in national agricultural policy conferred by the 1999 Rural Development Regulation, there is room for significant divergence in national agendas. Thus, Lowe *et al* (2002) observe that French rural policy responds “essentially to an ‘agrarian agenda’,” while permitting a degree of ecological modernization around the notion of *agricultural* multifunctionality” (15, original emphasis). In contrast, the British response to the RDR is “more specifically rural,” less concerned with agricultural survival, and looks “to a diverse rural economy to provide crucial additional or

alternative income sources to farm families. Ultimately, the British agenda is a countryside one rather than an agricultural one, a response to an increasingly differentiated rural space in which farmers are one set of economic, social and environmental actors amongst others” (*Ibid*, 15-16).

These differences are instructive as we turn to examine recent analyses of AAFNs and claims that they are emblematic of a new model of European rural development.

II. Towards a New Rural Development Paradigm?

Quality ‘Turns’

In broad terms, the catalyst and foundational theme of the Western European AAFN literature is the perception of a ‘turn’ by consumers away from industrial food provisioning towards quality. A partial list of the production and institutional innovations associated with the quality ‘turn’ would include conversion to organic and low external input farming practices, new premium quality food production, multi-functional farm enterprises, place-based production and marketing initiatives, new modes of food provision, such as short food supply chains (SFSCs), and farmers’ markets. These developments frequently are attributed contextually to episodic food ‘scares’ and the enhanced reflexivity of consumers in the post-BSE world (Murdoch and Miele, forthcoming).

Mistrust of the standardized foods produced by industrialised agriculture and processed and distributed by highly concentrated, globalised agro-industrial corporations, it is suggested, has given added salience or weighting in consumer knowledge practices to *transparency*. This criterion is met by schemes to assure quality, provenance and traceability, organic agroecological production practices, and forms of direct marketing. Demands for greater transparency in socionatural metabolic relations, which Marsden, Murdoch and Morgan (1999) associate with “the conflict between globalized aspatial systems of production and locally situated ecological systems” (299), speak eloquently

for a relational approach to innovative food production-consumption practices. In effect, these demands lift one corner of the veil of commodity fetishism, namely, ecological production relations, insofar as globalised, agro-industrial space, allied to the intrinsically local character of agricultural activities, works to conceal production practices and environmental degradation from distant consumers (Buttel, 1997). As struggles to ‘name’ the organic reveal, however, these pressures for transparency tend to ignore the social conditions of farmers and, more especially, those of farm workers (Allen and Sachs, 1993; Guthman, 1998; Bunin, 2001).

As mention of commodity fetishism implies, consumption in the AAFN literature is ‘used’ mainly to talk about the production ‘moment’ in agro-food circuits (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). Consumers in the quality ‘turn’ are conceptualized in abstract, economic terms as ‘discerning,’ ‘affluent,’ and so on, leaving little room to acknowledge a politics of consumption or recognize the importance of producer-consumer alliances in ensuring the economic viability of AAFNs. This focus also is seen in recourse to Salais and Storpor’s (1992) ‘worlds of production’ version of convention theory to conceptualize the quality ‘turn’ as a contested process of transition (Murdoch and Miele, 1999, 2002; Murdoch et al, 2000). That is, a transition from the ‘industrial world,’ with its heavily standardized quality conventions and logic of mass commodity production, to the ‘domestic world,’ where quality conventions embedded in face-to-face interactions, trust, tradition and place support more differentiated, localized and ‘ecological’ products and forms of economic organization.

Several brief points of relevance to the later discussion of paradigm change are worth noting here. The first is the reification in the AAFN literature of the ‘local’ as a spatial configuration that is ontologically given rather than the contingent outcome of dynamic processes of sociospatial change (Swyngedouw, 1997). This reification emerges in the neglect of social processes and relations of power that produce, reproduce and restructure the scale of the local. In other words, the local tends to escape sociological and sociospatial analysis. A second, related point is that the concepts of embeddedness, trust and personal interaction that describe convention theory’s ‘domestic world’ also

require closer scrutiny. As Hinrichs (2000) indicates, to assume that the local embeddedness of economic forms precludes exploitative relations “conflates spatial relations with social relations” (301). Sayer (2001) similarly warns, “The focus on embeddedness can inadvertently produce an overly benign view of economic relations and processes...” (698). This danger can be seen in the AAFN literature in the tendency to compare exploitative global capitalist actors negatively with their embedded local counterparts, implicitly legitimizing relations of domination at this scale.

These cautionary theoretical observations need to be borne in mind since the AAFN literature is characterised mainly by empirically-grounded analyses of alternative food practices, institutional mechanisms of rural governance, and the potential of AAFNs/SFSCs as engines of rural economic growth. European AAFN research intersects here with public debates on food safety and CAP reform, and contested alternative imaginaries of rural economy and society. As already noted, these arenas lend substance and momentum to the advocacy of AAFNs as innovative precursors of a paradigm change, of a more endogenous, territorialised and ecologically-embedded successor model to the allegedly exhausted and crisis-ridden modernisation model of conventional industrial agriculture (Marsden *et al*, 1999; Ploeg *et al*, 2000).

The explosive growth of European AAFN research is generating a fascinating range of local and regional case-studies of these innovative activities. In addition, several contributors have recently made preliminary schematic efforts to ‘map’ the distribution and economic significance of quality food production in Western Europe. Thus in Ploeg and Renting’s (2000) analysis of 30 case-studies from the IMPACT programme, quality production constitutes one of three overlapping, often synergistic, clusters of what they define as “rural development” practices. These clusters are pluriactivity, which has strong historical roots in many countries, cost-reduction by ‘farming economically’ using on-farm resources and, thirdly, high quality food production, a cluster that encompasses Parmigiano Reggiano cheese in Italy, organic dairy and meat, agro-tourism, and farmers’ markets. As these authors stress, the socio-economic impact of these practices depends on “synergy at farm enterprise level” (533). For example, “Organic farming in Tuscany

results on the average in some 20% increase of total farm income” but, when combined with direct marketing and agro-tourism, “the contribution of rural development practices to total farm income rises to 84%” (533-534). In the case of the Dutch Wadden islands, “Roep (2000) demonstrates that on one of the ‘*avant garde*’ farms, the extra value added of a range of *interconnected* activities” is more than four times “the value added on a comparable conventional farm...” (*Ibid*, 534, their emphasis).

The question of synergy is also important in assessing the regional socio-economic impact of rural development practices, which Ploeg and Renting (2000) insist should not be analyzed in isolation. In the West of Ireland, for example, “Taken *together* pluriactivity, cost reduction and quality production account for a *total* contribution of $29+5+1=35\%$ to regional agricultural income.” (538, their emphasis). The authors add that “Similar examples can be found in other countries. In the Dutch context, nature conservation, quality production, farming economically and pluriactivity contribute at least 50% to regional agricultural income” (*Ibid*, 538).

Ploeg and Renting (2000) usefully reveal the range and diversity of rural development practices and the significance of synergies at the farm and regional levels. However, their analysis can do little more than illustrate the potential socioeconomic impacts of the quality ‘turn’ and paradigmatic rural development practices since comprehensive data are lacking and because these practices are so broadly defined. A second review of the IMPACT research studies identifies ‘new’ rural development practices with SFSCs, defined empirically as organic farming, quality production and direct marketing (Renting, Marsden and Banks, 2003). Some kind of SFSC activity is found on 20-30% of all farms in France, Germany, Italy and Spain, 5-10% of farms in the Netherlands and UK, and under 1% in Ireland, but economic impact figures are described here as “best educated guesses” (11). Even on this narrower definition, the authors acknowledge that far more detailed investigation of “the temporal, spatial and evolutionary dynamics involved in SFSCs” is required before we can “gauge whether they are economically, socially and environmentally stable over the long-term” (12).

Moreover, as we argue below, the different blend of ‘old’ and ‘new’ rural development practices in these schematic surveys confuses the issue of paradigm change.

Apart from these surveys, AAFN research is at once too specifically place-based and geographically extensive to review in this short paper. Accordingly, we concentrate instead on the framing of quality ‘turn’ innovations and rural development as a way to identify salient themes and omissions.

Adding Value, ‘Repeasantization,’ and Multiplier Effects

As the schematic AAFN surveys suggest, claims of a paradigm change are founded, in substantive terms, on the economic calculation that ‘alternative’ rural development practices provide secure new bases of farm income growth and territorial value-added. In the lexicon of mainstream regional economic analysis, what are the likely regional income and employment multiplier effects of AAFNs, and to what extent will ‘leakages’ reduce these coefficients, to the detriment of regional gross product? (Ploeg and Renting 2000; Knickel and Renting, 2000). Although regional multiplier effects are difficult to quantify at this stage, the emphasis in the AAFN/agrarian-based rural development literature on innovation at the farm enterprise level and internal, multi-functional synergies provides some tentative clues.

This literature repeatedly affirms the ‘strategic’ or ‘central’ role of farmers and their privileged ability to appropriate the higher income flows generated by rural innovation (cf. Ploeg and Renting, 2000). That is, innovation often is a question of re-allocating existing resources *within* the farm enterprise since “they have the land, space, craftsmanship, buildings, animals, products and the capacity to *recombine* and *reconfigure* the resources at their disposal. It is important to note that these resources are ‘already paid for’ and that they are multi-purpose...By building primarily upon resources that are owned and controlled by the farm family... transactions costs can be kept low,” as well as new investment (Ploeg and Renting, 2000, 531, original emphasis). In a separate paper, Ploeg (2000) notes, “Farming economically is basically a strategy to *contain monetary costs...*” (499, original emphasis) by reducing resource flows

mobilised through markets in favour of those mobilised in non-commoditised circuits (500). Clearly, such practices raise awkward questions about the magnitude and distribution of local multiplier effects.

However, leaving aside such technicalities, the key point is that this literature fails to subject farm-level innovation and AAFN-centred strategies to critical sociological analysis. Case-studies of AAFNs/SFSCs do not systematically engage issues of power within the farm enterprise, as variously configured by social relations of production, domestic labour, gender relations, and patriarchal property structures. Beyond the farm household, the ways in which these strategies will mitigate such long-standing rural problems as income inequality, low paid employment, rural poverty, social exclusion, and more general questions of uneven development receive negligible attention. At each level, enthusiasm for an alternative, socioecologically embedded rural development model overrides Sayer's (2001) warning and occludes exploitive capitalist processes and relations of domination. Indeed, advocacy of paradigm change that envisages AAFNs as new vectors of farm income diversification embedded in the cost-containment logic of non-commoditized production circuits seems far removed from pressing contemporary rural development issues and more aligned with an idealized vision of a rural Europe of resourceful yeoman farmers and the era of 'high farming.'

Thus, against the modernization paradigm's 'farmer entrepreneur' oriented by 'the logic of the market,' Ploeg *et al* (2000) call for the reconceptualisation of the farmer: "the interrelated movements away from the 'script' of agricultural entrepreneurship, reflected in...newly emerging rural development practices can be understood as a kind of *repeasantization* of European farming" (*Ibid*, 403, original emphasis). The expansion of AAFNs/SFSCs "on the bases of new, non-commodity circuits" and, it needs to be said, non-commoditized gendered domestic labour relations, may offer some farm households one type of livelihood defence mechanism in response to the income "squeeze on agriculture" (395). However, how the revival of agrarian populism is to be translated into socially inclusive, equalizing trajectories of rural development is not at all clear. As Shucksmith (2000) observes of efforts to build "cultural-territorial identity, rurality,

sustainability or indeed endogenous development itself... the greatest challenge will be...to reflect on who gains and who loses in the process” (215). Advocates of the new rural development paradigm and ‘repeasantization’ need to take this challenge to heart and spell out the implications of their vision of rural futures more fully.

As it stands, the paradigm change advocated by Ploeg *et al* (2000) would re-write “the ‘script’ of agricultural entrepreneurship” by minimizing integration in commoditised input circuits and yet maintain farm-based, now multifunctional, activities as the fulcrum of rural development. Whereas the putative demise of modernized, productivist agriculture previously had released the disequalising sociospatial processes of ‘the consumption countryside,’ with its multiple, contested social spaces (Mormont, 1990; Marsden, 1998, 1999), it now allows for the phoenix-like re-invention of the farm productive enterprise, following its re-integration in the logics of the “old and well-known *resistance paysanne...*” (Ploeg *et al*, 2000, 403). In this respect, Ploeg *et al* (2000) are more closely aligned with the *sectoral* ‘agrarian agenda’ of ‘Farm France’ than the differentiated, consumption-oriented conception of rural space that underlies British rural policy (Lowe *et al*, 2002).

Territorial Quality Schemes and Spatial Valorization

Even on its own calculative terms, the territorial value-added approach to agrarian-based rural development has significant potential weaknesses, which throw its longer term political economic viability into question. These limitations are discussed briefly under the broad headings of competition, replicability, and uneven development. The ability of quality food products to secure premium prices and so generate excess profits is a central plank of the market-led, value-added model. These excess profits represent economic rents, which may arise as short-lived gains from product differentiation, or more permanently as monopoly rents created by bureaucratic and regulatory barriers to entry, as in the case of organic certification and production quotas, and by the scarcity value of certain speciality foods, such as A.O.C. products.

Since rents attract rent-seekers, the *durability* and magnitude of these income flows and the *location* of the actors who capture them become key issues. The competitive erosion of excess profits can reflect widespread adoption of product differentiation strategies, including territorial identity labels and ‘traditional’ ‘local’ and ‘organic’ designations that are broadly *generic* in character. The rapid growth of food products claiming territorial identity following the introduction of EU Regulation 2081/92 and PDO designations is a case in point. Thus Valceschini et al (2002) observe that regional quality promotion by public authorities is undermining the criteria and intent of this regulation by placing “the emphasis on the reputation of the product’s ‘native’ region, rather than on specific production conditions” (24). The authors add, “The possible regulatory authorization of regional brands could lead to sweeping changes in the distribution of the economic rent that is derived from such differentiation among the players in the agrifood chain across Europe” (*Ibid*, 24).

This combination of imitative expansion and *strategic convergence* also is open to corporate food interests, of course, accentuating downward pressures on price margins and threatening to shift economic rents away from the farm and local level. Corporate food retailers have responded quickly to food safety concerns by developing a variety of product quality strategies, including supply chain management to enforce quality assurance standards, such as HACCP, product traceability norms, the sourcing and labeling of ‘local’ foods, and the introduction of own-label territorial identity foods. Examples here are Tesco’s sale of over 100 locally-sourced products with some form of Welsh label in their supermarkets in Wales, the development by Waitrose of ‘Welsh Organic Lamb’ (Banks and Bristow, 1999), and “Carrefour’s *filières de qualité*... and another major distributor’s *Reflets de France* product line, which banks on the regional tie” (Valceschini et al, 2002, 25). The market power of these corporate networks co-opts and subverts agrarian imaginaries and the territorial or endogenous value-added logic of SFSCs and AAFNs. In the UK, the current struggle to acquire Safeway, the country’s fourth largest chain, with Tesco, Sainsbury, and Wal-Mart, the world’s largest food retailer, among the bidders, exemplifies the concentration of retailer buying power. The struggle arouses fears of even greater oligopsonistic control over supply chains,

intensifying the squeeze on the production costs and profit margins of farmers and other actors upstream.

A focus on supply chain relations also warns against the simple conflation of AAFNs/SFSCs and the local embeddedness of the main actors. As Marsden, Banks and Bristow (2000, 426) observe about industrial and alternative food provisioning, “Types of speciality, quality, region specific, or organic foods are by no means solely the preserve of the alternative mode... This is producing some interesting mutations with regard to supply chains... in terms of the types of relations and organizational features they display.” These authors point, for example, to local product sourcing by corporate retailers and, on the other hand, to the international reach of some alternative quality networks, as in the case of Parmigiano Reggiano and other AOC/PDO products. In this respect, the “*key influences upon the attribution and allocation of economic value across the different actors in the supply chains... (is)... a significant research gap in recent literature*” (*Ibid*, 426, original emphasis). Clearly, empirical evidence of these supply chain processes is vitally important to a realistic assessment of the territorial value-added model.

Strategic imitation and convergence on the various modalities used to represent territorial identity raise the very real prospect that quality differentiation by AAFNs will be trivialized and economic rents redistributed from the farm level and other local actors. As Valceschini et al (2002) warn, territorial quality schemes then “would just be one of a series of marketing tools” (26). Similar limitations come into play as AAFNs scale-up from local niche markets and rely on identity labels to make *relational* connections between ‘local’ sites of production and more distant spaces of consumption. A.O.C. labels typify these material and symbolic exchanges between worldwide consumers and situated *terroir*, entangled in the histories of people and place – ‘cohabited nature,’ ‘cohabited landscape’ (Barham, 2003). The effectiveness of these symbolic mediators of quality, commitment and certification inevitably suffers from processes of abstraction as supply chains are extended.

The critical question, therefore, is whether the logic of territorial valorization governing AAFN/SFSC development will produce ‘label fatigue,’ that is, a bewildering and counter-productive proliferation of competing quality schemes, labels and logos. This scenario of market-led ‘competitive territoriality,’ to paraphrase Henry Buller (2000), invites parallels with neo-classical trade models of comparative advantage (Ray, 2000), and the attendant dangers of the fallacy of composition. That is, in certain individual cases, regions may succeed in appropriating the gains from trade, but this condition may not hold in the aggregate as competition intensifies. More generally, EU protection of so-called ‘geographical indications’ is currently being challenged by the US and Australia as a violation of WTO rules against trade discrimination.

These considerations pose serious questions about the replicability and durability of the AAFN/SFSC model of spatial valorization, and stress the importance of assessing powerful *disembedding* forces (Sayer, 1997). Spatial uneven development certainly is a possible corollary of competitive territoriality insofar as only the most distinctive food products are likely to have the capacity to resist pressures to redistribute economic rents to extra-regional agents as production expands and supply chains are extended. Marked differences can be expected to emerge between new, embryonic AAFNs and those with well-entrenched institutional defences of ‘captured’ markets, and which can operate as “‘semi-oligopolies,’ such as the Parmesan cheese cluster” (Ploeg and Renting, 2000, 536). Even in this emblematic and “‘mature case of rural development” (446), producers face a cost-price squeeze and must continuously reduce costs in order to prevent too great a price differential emerging between Parmigiano Reggiano and its close industrial substitutes (Roest and Menghi, 2000).

III. Paradigm Shift or Continuity in Change?

Recent programmatic statements on AAFNs and agrarian-based rural development press the case for paradigm change in vivid binary contrasts: old and new, crisis and rupture, modernization and alternative models (Ploeg *et al*, 2000; Ploeg and Renting, 2000; Renting, Marsden and Banks, 2003). These oppositions overlook the complexities of transition, its uneven spatial and temporal intensity, and the possibility

that processes of change may not engender convergence, but rather *accentuate* existing dualisms, as between highly intensive industrial agriculture in East Anglia and the Paris Basin, for example, and other rural areas of more regionally-embedded, multi-functional agriculture. Moreover, irrespective of their developmental potential, many AAFNs are relatively new and struggling to become established, suggesting that claims of binary transition are unnecessary and premature. We have also seen that the spatial incidence and economic importance of alternative rural development activities in national farming structures varies very significantly.

In its binary formulation, the crisis of industrial agriculture is absolutely central to theorizations and prognoses of a new European rural development paradigm. Yet this crisis, its social and spatial patterns, and ways in which the ‘old’ might shape the ‘new’ receive little analytical attention. Indeed, since the eclipse of the modernization paradigm is taken as a foregone conclusion, the unexamined assumption is that farmers and other rural actors face an unyielding imperative to embrace the new model. This recalls earlier characterizations of agricultural and rural change in terms of post-productivism and endogenous development, which are among the theoretical antecedents of alternative rural development (Wilson, 2001). Ploeg and Renting (2000) draw this parallel when they refer to tertiarization, the integration of service activities into farming, and the well-endowed capacity of ‘traditional farming’ to enter the post-Fordist era. Commenting that ‘L’histoire se répète’ (530), they suggest that “Through rural development, agriculture is increasingly moving ‘beyond modernization’” (531).

However, several recent contributors to the productivism/post-productivism debate have articulated strong critiques of this representation of farm output diversification and its empirical validity (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001a; Evans *et al.*, 2002), and have questioned whether the values, attitudes and behaviour of rural actors actually correspond to this uncompromising binary definition of their alternatives. Thus, Wilson’s (2001) summary of actor-oriented and behaviourally-grounded research in Europe identifies as key findings that “grassroots actors hold a plurality of often highly disparate opinions on issues surrounding environmental, agricultural and rural

change,”...“diverse actor communities...can often neither be branded ‘productivist’ or ‘post-productivist’ ... (and)...many agricultural actors continue to adopt ‘productivist’ action and thought” (87). This plurality of action and thought is revealed clearly by studies of ‘post-productivist’ farm management practices, including agri-environmental schemes, which emphasise that their adoption often is more indicative of economic pragmatism than a fundamental shift in farmers’ values, again suggesting that agricultural and rural change ‘on the ground’ is complex and contradictory (Morris and Potter, 1995; Morris and Evans, 1999; Buller et al, 1999).

A further complication is that some countries may be more resistant to such practices than others. As Wilson (2001) observes, “Spain, Portugal and Greece, in particular, have criticized the EU for imposing policies that aim at the *extensification* of agriculture at a time when they are still mostly concerned with ‘catching up’ with their Northern counterparts through the *intensification* of commodity production” (91, original emphasis). A recent case-study gives substance to this view as Hoggart and Paniagua (2001b) stress how poorly Spain fits “a north-central European model of agricultural change “ (68) characterized by farm diversification, post-productivist values and pluriactivity.

We can accept that the modernisation paradigm does indeed have an uncertain future, but more actor-oriented and behaviourally-grounded research is needed to clarify the multi-faceted nature of this ‘crisis,’ whether or not this designation is merited (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001a), and, if so, its likely evolution in time and space. In this light, a more modest approach to the contours of a successor model and the role of AAFNs might first see their present efflorescence as innovative responses to the ongoing struggle for rural livelihoods.

In this weaker formulation, AAFNs create ‘new spaces of possibility’ for farm reproduction and rural livelihoods, building on the heterogeneity and polyvalence that are such distinctive features of contemporary European food practices (Goodman, 2002). To use a now less fashionable term, AAFNs creatively extend the repertoire of rural

‘survival strategies.’ Interestingly, many leading contributors to current debates on rural change were instrumental in giving wider prominence in European rural sociology to the diversity of ‘farming styles’ and rural livelihood strategies, well before multi-functionality became ubiquitous in the lexicon of EU rural development policy (Ploeg, 1990; 1993; Marsden, 1990; Whatmore, 1991; Pugliese, 1991).

Moreover, this earlier body of research and the continuities it evokes also are more relevant to the ‘strong’ AAFN/SFSC position than might be apparent initially because it is unclear exactly which activities belong in the rural development ‘box.’ This suggests that advocates of rural paradigm change are torn between a focus on emerging innovative organizational forms (Renting, Marsden and Banks, 2002) and a more inclusive position, which, perhaps unwittingly, plays down the ‘rupture’ with conventional intensive agriculture. Thus, as we have seen, some protagonists insist that low external input styles of ‘farming economically’ (Ploeg, 2000) and pluriactive, part-time farming (Ploeg *et al*, 2000; Ploeg and Renting, 2000) be included. For example, Ploeg (2000, 497) remarks that “a considerable proportion of what is vaguely referred to as ‘normal agriculture’ should also be situated within that other model of rural development,” and argues for the inclusion of “pluriactivity and part-time farming, from which sources the majority of people living in the countryside derive their livelihood” (497). Analytically, this re-labelling of long-standing or ‘old’ practices shifts the centre of gravity away from ‘vanguardism,’ ‘rupture’ and paradigm change towards continuity and incrementalism.

The continuities implicit in this wider conceptualization of rural development are suggested by the case of Ireland, where 47% of farm households engaged in off-farm work in 1998, which accounted, on average, for 40% of total farm household income (Kinsella *et al*, 2000, 485). Furthermore, in the late 1990s, Ireland stood only in fourth place behind Finland, Germany and Austria in terms of the proportion of pluriactive farm households (*Ibid*, 485). As these authors observe, “Since pluriactivity appeared on the research agenda in the late 1970s, it has become accepted as a structural phenomenon...that is prevalent throughout the European countryside” (*Ibid*, 481).

These additions to the rural development ‘box’ significantly broaden its social and economic base. At the same time, however, the radical or distinctive identity of the *new* rural development, with AAFNs/SFSCs as its dynamic, innovative expression, becomes less pronounced. This loss of conceptual clarity and empirical understanding of what distinguishes the ‘alternative’ from the ‘normal’ arguably is compensated by a fuller appreciation of the spatio-temporal disjunctures, complexities and continuities of contemporary rural change.

IV. By Way of a Conclusion: The Missing Guests

Finally, returning to an earlier theme, both the strong formulation of paradigm change and its weaker counterpart of continuity in change ‘see’ rural development through the prism of production and supply. Demand for AAFN/SFSC production is treated as an exogenous factor, as if these new organizational forms were the sole determinants of rural change and its magnitude. Two points call for attention here.

The first is that AAFNs, by their very constitution, in some way *reconfigure* production-consumption relations in the process of extending their spatial and temporal reach. Conceptually, this requires that the active, relational and political role of consumers in the genesis and reproduction of these new economic forms be ‘acknowledged.’ Otherwise, the analysis of AAFNs will remain partial, one-sided, and deficient, losing sight of consumers as active partners in the contested knowledges of ‘knowing food and growing food,’ and privileging economistic framings of these networks, and rural development more generally, in terms of the generation and distribution of value added (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). There are encouraging signs that contributors to agro-food studies are now responding to this integrative analytical challenge from several different theoretical perspectives (Whatmore, 2002; Stassart, 2003; Guthman, 2002; Gouveia and Juska, 2002; Murdoch and Miele, 2002; forthcoming). Politically, to *imagine* radical change in food production, systems of provision, and the spatial scaling of everyday foodways without the agency of consumers is simply quixotic, given the formidable economic and spatial power concentrated in the

hands of the leading food manufacturers and retailers (Heffernan *et al*, 1999; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Lang, 2003).

Secondly, in the absence of consumer price subsidies and related institutional changes, *alternative* quality food production seems destined to retain its status as a narrow 'class diet' of privileged income groups. In the case of organics, for example, the premium paid over prices for conventional products varies from a low range of 20-50% to 100-200% at the other extreme (Miele, 2001, 37-42). In addition, 1998 market survey data indicate that organic products, including imports, account for less than 2% of total food sales in the EU, with projections of 6-7% by 2005.

For all its serious, widely documented limitations, the industrial food system arguably has attenuated income-related class differences in food consumption by democratizing access (Allen, 1999). With AAFNs and direct selling schemes as presently structured, this process is in danger of being reversed and further fragmented by the emergence of a new multi-tiered food system differentiated by income and class. In the flight to quality, upper income groups will be provisioned increasingly by the AAFNs/SFSCs associated with 'repeasantization' and the new rural service economy. Those unable to join this flight and secure access to safe, nutritious food are the missing guests at the table set by this model. These inequalities of access point to the larger omission of the consumption side of the development equation, and consideration of how a transition from the contemporary structures and patterns of mass consumption might be articulated.

These silences again argue for a modest assessment of food quality networks and their paradigmatic potential. For the moment, these innovative modes of provisioning represent socially exclusive niches rather than the future of European rural economy and society.

Notes

1. This paper is a revised version of a Keynote Lecture given at the Final Conference, COST A12 Rural Innovation, held in Budapest, 5-7 April 2002. I am grateful for the comments of two anonymous reviewers.
2. In addition to individual papers, this collective reference to “the European literature on AAFNs” refers particularly to Theme Sections and Special Issues published in *International Planning Studies*, 4(3), 1999; *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(2) April, 2000, 40(4) October, 2000, and 41(1) January, 2001; and *Environment and Planning A*, 2003, 35(3).

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