

The interpersonal world of direct marketing: Examining conventions of quality at UK farmers' markets

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Abstract

Inherent within emerging new food supply chains (FSCs) in the UK in recent years, and in particular those based upon direct marketing, is the (re)connection of production–consumption processes and concomitantly producers and consumers. New forms of connection are apparent, as food produce is differentiated on the basis of quality constructs which are often linked both to the place and nature of its production, but also to the exchange context. As a result, quality evaluation has become increasingly complex and heterogeneous, necessitating context-specific examinations of its mediation. This paper seeks to do this through its examination of producers and consumers at farmers' markets (FMs). Utilising the framework of Conventions Theory, it assesses how producers and consumers coordinate their mutual expectations in order to circumvent the uniform standards of 'conventionally' produced food and create new production–consumption spaces. In so doing, the notion of a *Regard* Convention is suggested as a means of acknowledging the non-economic benefits of FSCs that are underpinned by direct marketing and, in particular, those that involve face-to-face interaction between the participants concerned.

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1. Introduction

The industrialisation and globalisation of the agro-food system has socially, culturally, and geographically disembedded food production from its consumption, meaning that consumers have come to rely on 'common definitions of quality' (Murdoch and Miele, 1999, p. 468), or 'uniform standards', which have 'supplant[ed] human judgement' at a local level (Busch, 2000, p. 280). However, the succession of crises within the UK agro-food system since the late 1980s (such as those involving listeria, salmonella, *E. coli*, BSE,¹ and Foot and Mouth) have acutely focussed consumer attention on the production and distribution of their food, and dented their confidence in 'conventionally'² produced food and the 'uniform standards' that underpin it (Goodman, 1999; Marsden et al., 1994; Sassatelli and Scott, 2001). As such, a number of authors (e.g. Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Marsden et al., 1999; Miele, 1999;

Murdoch et al., 2000; Watts and Goodman, 1997) now consider that the contemporary agro-food system is undergoing a 'qualitative shift'. Within this process, mass agricultural production and consumption are acknowledged as continuing (where notions of quality are based on the market logic of efficiency and cost), yet at the same time there is the emergence of food markets which incorporate 'a range of socially constructed food quality criteria' (Marsden, 1998, p. 110). Underlying these criteria is product traceability, leading Watts and Goodman (1997, p. 22) to argue that amongst certain consumers there is now a renewed emphasis on 'notions of place, social embeddedness and trust, to counter the disabling, panoptic vision of structuralist globalisation and the hegemonic, triumphalist discourse of post-1989 neoliberalism'. This is resulting in a fragmentation within food provision, which is placing new demands on producers in terms of marketing and distribution, but also providing new opportunities for those excluded by globalised processes (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Miele, 1999; Murdoch and Miele, 1999).

Nevertheless, these socially constructed quality criteria are highly complex, incorporating not only the physical

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¹Bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

²In this context, the term conventional is being used as a shorthand for the globalised, industrialised agro-food system.

properties of the product (intrinsic qualities), but also the conditions under which it is produced, distributed and retailed (extrinsic qualities) (Nygard and Storstad, 1998; Renard, 1999). As product traceability has become an increasingly important part of food quality assessment for consumers, so they need to be able to trust the authenticity of a product's provenance (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000). One response has been the rapid growth of direct marketing initiatives³ based on establishing face-to-face links between the producers and consumers concerned, in which 'authenticity and trust are mediated through personal interaction' (Marsden et al., 2000, p. 425). Farmers' markets (FMs), in particular, have captured the imagination of social scientists, policy makers, producers and consumers (e.g. DEFRA, 2002; DETR, 2000; Hinrichs, 2000; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Hoskins, 2000; Janes, 2002; LUC, 2001) as a means of re-socialising food by ensuring there is face-to-face contact between producers and consumers, and re-spatialising food by insisting that it is locally produced (NAFM, 2002). It is they that form the empirical focus of this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the social construction and coordination of food quality at UK FMs, as a context-specific example of how human-level judgments can circumvent the 'uniform standards' of 'conventionally' produced food, and in the process create new production–consumption spaces that are influenced by locally contingent quality criteria. Whilst there is a growing recognition, across a range of disciplines, that all economic transactions are, to some extent at least, embedded within a wider social framework, the notion of embeddedness⁴ is especially germane to understanding direct agricultural marketing initiatives such as FMs. Indeed, Hinrichs (2000, p. 296) argues that the embeddedness of the economic exchange process within these contexts can be understood as their 'hallmark and comparative advantage'. However, much as discussed by Sage (2003) in relation to a 'good food' network in Ireland, Lee (2000) with respect to small-scale horticultural production and consumption, and Raven and Pinch's (2003) analysis of the British kit car industry, this paper is intent on going beyond simply financial evaluations to develop a more inclusive insight into the social construction of quality within this context, which it does through its incorporation of relations of 'regard' (after Offer, 1997).

In order to do this, the paper is structured as follows. First, conventions theory (CT) is discussed as being an appropriate theoretical framework for the examination of socially constructed food quality criteria. However, the starting-point of CT is as a theory of production

organisation (Salais and Storper, 1992),⁵ whereas this paper is concerned particularly with producer–consumer relations. As such it has been necessary to adapt CT, which has included developing the idea of a 'regard convention' that can more fully acknowledge the significance of *non-economic* benefits where there is face-to-face interaction. The paper utilises empirical case study material drawn from research carried out at five FMs, and Section 3 outlines the methodology employed in its collection. Section 4 then reports on the results of the data collected, before Section 5 concludes with a discussion of the research findings and in particular the pertinence of CT (including a regard convention) to understanding the complex way in which quality is assessed within FMs to create new production–consumption spaces.

2. Conventions theory and the interpersonal world of direct marketing

Since the early 1970s, social scientific research into the agro-food system has been dominated by macro-level political-economic approaches, underlain by neoclassical economics and a 'market' logic (Busch and Juska, 1997; Hughes, 1999). These have facilitated an explanation of globalisation processes, but are increasingly recognised as less well suited to an explanation of local-level contingency and the emerging complexities associated with the construction and mediation of food quality within specific economic, social and political contexts (e.g. Arce and Marsden, 1993; Busch and Juska, 1997; Goodman, 1999, 2001; Jessop, 1995; Murdoch et al., 2000).

In order to reassess the relationship between the economy and society, and to circumvent the oversimplified and abstract concept of the neoclassical 'market', many authors have revisited the work of Polanyi (1957 [1944]), Polanyi et al. (1957) and Granovetter (1985) in utilising the notion of 'social embeddedness' as a means of incorporating the 'social' within our understanding of economic exchange processes (e.g. Block, 1990; Hinrichs, 2000; Jessop, 1999; Sage, 2003; Thorne, 1996).⁶ Others have

⁵Notwithstanding Murdoch et al. (2000) who suggest that CT has since been extended to more broadly encompass negotiation processes within modern economies.

⁶It is worth noting that Granovetter's notion of embeddedness is not without criticism. For example, Krippner (2001) cautions that in reworking Polanyi's original concept from an earlier era, Granovetter has altered its fundamental meaning. Polanyi emphasised that societal motivations are incorporated into institutions to fulfil those motivations, rather than the other way around: or in other words, both the market and its responses are socially constructed. In comparison, the network of social relations Granovetter proposes sees the "market as a residue of social activity that is not itself social" (Granovetter, 1985, p. 795), and in so doing perpetuates the separation of the market from society rather than seeing the market as the result of social construction. Krippner (2001) argues that at a theoretical level this continuing separation of the market from society restricts our wider understanding of the market. However, this paper is not principally concerned with the theoretical conceptualisation of the market and, notwithstanding Krippner's reservations, the notion of 'social embeddedness' is considered to be a useful descriptive

³These include: community supported agriculture, pick-your-own fruit and vegetables, farm shops and stalls, local exchange trading systems (LETS), food festivals, and a growing range of community and vegetable box schemes.

⁴Used within this context to convey the principles of social connectivity, reciprocity and trust (Hinrichs, 2000).

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