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Book Review

Alternative agrifood movements: Patterns of convergence and divergence

Edited by Douglas H. Constance, Marie–Christine Renard, and
Marta G. Rivera–Ferre

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For almost two decades, a considerable scholarship has interrogated the rapid expansion and the “alternativeness” of alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs) and movements using multiple disciplinary perspectives.¹ The recently published *Alternative Agrifood Movements: Patterns of Convergence and Divergence*, edited by Douglas Constance, Marie–Christine Renard, and Marta Rivera–Ferre, offers a strong overview of this scholarship and draws into conversation case studies and examples from countries in the global North and South.

The book is the outcome of a mini-conference sponsored by Research Committee 40: Sociology of Agriculture and Food of the International Sociological Association, held in Lisbon, Portugal in 2012, coupled with a series of invited papers. In thirteen chapters, the book examines the ways in which patterns of convergence and divergence are evidenced in AAFNs. The book’s strength is that it draws into conversation examples and case studies from both the global North and South, and thus offers a collection of diverse perspectives and examples. However, knitting this diversity together in a cohesive package poses a challenge. The conceptual and theoretical

¹ See Goodman, DuPuis & Goodman, 2012; *International Planning Studies* 4(3), 1999; *Sociologia Ruralis* 40 (2 & 4), 2000, 41(1), 2001, 42 (4), 2002; *Journal of Rural Studies* 19(1), 2003; *Environment and Planning A* 35 (3), 2003; *British Food Journal* 105 (8), 2003; *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 19 (3), 2012.

threads chosen by the editors to draw conclusions across the chapters seem limited next to the diversity of the case studies themselves.

The book opens by asking a provocative question: to what degree can AAFNs be understood as the “the agrifood wing of the ‘movement of movements’” (p 30). The chapters that follow lay out a variety of perspectives in response, offering many more equally engaging questions. Anyone new to this scholarship would find the book’s introduction to be a useful overview. The introduction is furthered by two chapters that consider different ways of framing AAFNs and their potential for social change. Patricia Allen highlights how alternative food movements are converging around social justice goals and discourses of racism, classism, and sexism, but diverging around visions and practices for achieving these goals. This message is amplified in the chapter by Marie-Christine Renard, who draws on concepts of standards and public-private space to also suggest a convergence of values, but a divergence in practices and performances.

Four chapters that draw on examples of food sovereignty movements in the global South follow this conceptual framing. Annette Desmarais, Marta Rivera-Ferre, and Beatriz Gasco explore La Via Campesina’s challenges with alliance building and convergence among like-minded AAFNs focusing on social justice. Building on these themes, Debora Lerrer and Leonilde Servolo de Medeiros describe how the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil has moved from a struggle for land to a critique of the dominant agricultural model, converging in common political construction with La Via Campesina. The focus on the emancipatory question and social justice continues with Peter Rosset and Maria Martinez-Torres describing convergence of social movements through their construction of collective processes and dialogues about different ways of knowing. Indeed, bringing these examples drawn from the global South into discussions of global North AAFNs represents a welcomed milestone in alternative food scholarship. However, I find these chapters to present relatively homogeneous examples. Supplementing these with more diverse global South case studies (from East and South-East Asia for example) would illustrate the disparate and contradictory ways in which food-related resistance is understood and practiced, and thus complicate the offered conclusions about convergence.

In the final section of the book, scholars interrogate themes of convergence and divergence using a variety of AAFN examples from the global North. Michael Long and Douglas Murray suggest a convergence of individual market choices and collective action in their analysis of the motivations behind organic, fair trade, locally grown, and animal-friendly labels in the US. Phil Mount, Shelley Hazen, Shawna Holmes, Evan Fraser, Anthony Winson, Irena Knezevic, Erin Nelson, Lisa Ohberg, Peter Andrée, and Karen Landman explore local food initiatives in Ontario. Detailing a highly variegated terrain, they argue that despite diverging motivations, rationales, organizational forms, and trajectories, these local food initiatives are converging around ideals, barriers, and opportunities. Continuing to challenge a binary view of convergence or divergence, the chapter by Jason Konefal, Maki Hatanaka, and Douglas Constance—as well as the chapter by Bernhard Freyer and Jim Bingen—observe both these processes underway

simultaneously in their studies of sustainability and organic standards in the US, and underscore the hope of democratic process in the examples they cite. In efforts to help us further understand these converging and diverging elements, Patrick Mooney, Keiko Tanaka, and Gabriele Ciciurkaite question what is meant by “convergence” and bring some fresh thinking to questions of emancipation and transformation processes in AAFNs and movements. Using the example of Food Policy Councils in North America, they suggest a convergence around a democratic master frame and new forms of citizenship, and offer that the alternativeness of AAFNs might lie in the ways in which they incubate new and potentially oppositional practices.

The case studies examined in this book are diverse and the chapters reveal the complexities in convergence and divergence processes in food movements in both the global North and the global South. However, while the authors of the book’s chapters embrace nuance, multiplicity, and relationality in their consideration of disparate cases, the book’s editors seem to overgeneralize in the conclusions they draw, and tie the chapters into binary thinking about the global North and global South. Whereas the chapters speak to the politics of the possible (Harris, 2009), the conclusion closes off such opportunities. In a somewhat artificial delineation between “progressive” and “radical” trajectories, Marta Rivera-Ferre, Douglas Constance, and Marie-Christine Renard summarize that the chapters reveal a common class consciousness in the movements in the global South and reformist market-based approaches in the global North. The conclusion seems overly celebratory of food sovereignty movements in the global South and overly pessimistic of alternative food movements of the global North. It feels like a neat and tidy conclusion for a set of rather messy case studies. I would rather leave it messy and unwrapped, and keep struggling with its contents, instead of forcing such a definitive conclusion. Indeed market-based approaches are not limited to the global North, and “civil society/political approaches” are not limited to the global South. Global North AAFNs are engaged with food justice and transformative change (Alkon et al., 2013), and the food sovereignty movement in the global South faces serious theoretical and practical questions about its relationship to global markets (Agarwal, 2014; Edelman, 2014).

Indeed, reading the chapters for diversity, not dominance, reveals remarkably reflexive processes in all the cases discussed. The examples shared from the global North and global South alike, illustrate how alternative food protagonists are committed to listening with open minds, strengthening capacities, respecting different views, infusing flexibility into processes, challenging themselves to incorporate gender, race, and class perspectives and working collectively to address power structures. If—as the editors suggest—a goal is to find ways for the transformative approach they attach to food justice movements originating in the global South to infuse the neoliberalized context of the global North, without being co-opted or conventionalized, then creating camps is not very helpful. It strikes me as a rather stark binary to portray protagonists of AAFNs in the global North as defending ideas of the market while movement participants in the global South are defending their lives and livelihoods. Such a portrayal does little to help these movements build alliances, learn from each other, and jointly resist neoliberal capitalist relations.

In conclusion, the introduction to this volume offers a concise overview of the history and state of AAFN scholarship, making it a great early read for newcomers to the field. Drawing together experiences of global South food justice movements and global North alternative food movements is welcomed and a critical foundation to an engaged scholarship that can help unite food movements. I hope we can expand such comparisons. However, the book's conclusion seems to iron out the wrinkles and messiness with sweeping generalizations, thereby eclipsing possibilities.

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