

**abstract** A significant volume of social science research effort is being directed at examining food systems that are regarded as being in some way 'alternative' to 'conventional' ways of food provisioning. This article provides an up-to-date critical review of this work on alternative food networks (AFNs), with particular emphasis on debates about definition, the types of AFN studied and the main concepts applied to their analysis. An assessment of where debates on AFNs currently stand shows how the politics and practices of AFNs have come under critical scrutiny from sociologists and other agri-food scholars. The article ends by considering recent calls to move beyond a prevalent 'alternative'–'conventional' dualism and makes suggestions for future theoretical and empirical studies, including a call for greater application of standard sociological categories of power, class, inequality and social justice.

**keywords** alternative food networks ♦ fair trade ♦ local food ♦ organic food ♦ quality food ♦ short food supply chains ♦ social embeddedness

## Introduction

Since the late 1990s, a growing body of social science research – particularly within sociology, human geography, anthropology and agri-food studies more generally – has been directed towards examining food systems that are regarded as being in some way 'alternative' to 'conventional' ways of food provisioning. This *Sociopedia* article provides an up-to-date review of the main elements of this work on so-called 'alternative food networks' (AFNs). However, before doing this, it is necessary to briefly explain what we mean by AFNs and why they have become such a keen focus of research attention for agri-food scholars.

AFNs constitute organized flows of food products that connect people who are concerned with the morals of their consumption practices in some way with those who want a better price for their food, or who want to produce food in ways counter to the dominant (or conventional) market logic (Whatmore and Clark, 2006). These new and rapidly expanding food networks are typified by the growth in sales of fair trade, organic, local, regional and speciality foods, and of retail outlets such as farmers' markets (FMs) and box schemes. In seeking to establish more direct

relationships between producers and consumers, AFNs are often conceived of as being in opposition to conventional, supermarket-led food chains. Table 1 summarizes some of the main distinctions that are often drawn between 'conventional' and 'alternative' agri-food networks in the academic literature, wherein a number of binary opposites are depicted. Words such as 'quality', 'embedded', 'sustainable' and 'traditional' characterize AFNs, denoting artisan, small-scale and specialized production. Initially, AFN products were usually sold through 'alternative' supply networks rather than supermarket outlets (upholding the distinctions noted in Table 1), including charity shops, FMs, box schemes, food co-ops and community supported agriculture (CSA) schemes. Today, however, a significant number of AFN products are now sold in supermarkets. In the UK, for example, around 75 percent of organic produce is sold through supermarkets.

The simple distinctions in Table 1 between 'alternative' and 'conventional' networks are therefore increasingly contested and becoming difficult to maintain in practice (Ilbery and Maye, 2005).

**Table 1.** Contrasting 'networks' of food provision

Conventional	Alternative
Modern	Postmodern
Manufactured/processed	Natural/fresh
Mass (large-scale) production	Craft/artisanal (small-scale) production
Long food supply chains	Short food supply chains
Costs externalized	Costs internalized
Rationalized	Traditional
Standardized	Difference/diversity
Intensification	Extensification
Monoculture	Biodiversity
Homogenization of foods	Regional palates
Hypermarkets	Local markets
Agrochemicals	Organic/sustainable farming
Non-renewable energy	Reusable energy
Fast food	Slow food
Quantity	Quality
Disembedded	Embedded

Source: Ilbery and Maye (2005: 824).

Nevertheless, defining AFNs in this framework provides a reminder of their philosophical origins. It also begs the question as to why supermarkets are now interested in AFN products. The answer is simple: they have recognized – in response to growing consumer demand, especially from more affluent consumer groups – the huge sales potential of some AFN products. The question that follows from this, is why such consumer interest in AFNs? One of the main reasons is that consumers are now more interested in food, generally; they want to know where their food comes from and how it was produced (Morgan et al., 2006). This is partly influenced by growing media attention, but more significantly it is in response to increased consumer anxieties about the safety and quality of industrial food networks, prompted by repeated food scares (e.g. BSE, *E. coli* and avian influenza). A study of consumer confidence in Austria, Italy and the UK, for instance, revealed that the growth in 'novel' (and alternative) food markets was a consequence of confidence building strategies that sought to address deficits in disembedded trust, widening chains of interdependence, a succession of food scares and the introduction of GM technologies (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001).

Many consumers are thus concerned about conventional networks of food provisioning and are will-

ing to seek alternatives. Various phrases have been coined to capture this change in consumer attitude, including 'the quality turn', 'concerned consumerism' and, taking a more critical perspective, 'political consumption'. Consumer critiques of mass-produced foods are not uniformly expressed socially or spatially, representing in most cases the voices of wealthier consumers in developed market economies. It is their anxieties that have provided a significant market impetus for the growth in AFNs and a greater emphasis on food quality. Closely related to this turn to quality, in response to public anxieties about industrial foodstuffs, is the rise of 'ethical consumerism', which includes concerns for better animal welfare standards, social justice and environmental sustainability. This is particularly important in relation to international fair trade networks, which challenge exploitative relations in agri-food systems and mobilize support in pursuit of ethical agendas (Barnett et al., 2005; see also section on empirical evidence later).

We have now established what we mean by AFNs and explained the importance of consumer decisions in influencing their development and growth. The irony, as we see later, is that most of the theoretical and empirical work has remained rooted at the production end of the food chain. The remainder of this

article is structured as follows. It begins by providing a brief review of key theoretical perspectives that have been applied to AFNs. The main types of AFN studied are then reviewed. This includes a review of some influential papers and themed issues published in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which help to explain the nature and types of AFN studied. The next section in the article provides an assessment of where debates currently stand regarding AFNs. This shows how the politics and practices of AFNs have come under critical scrutiny from sociologists and other agri-food scholars. One noteworthy concern is the impact of corporate mainstreaming, which research suggests is absorbing, appropriating and blunting the critique of conventional food provisioning presented by AFNs. The article ends by considering recent calls to move beyond a prevalent 'alternative'–'conventional' dualism and makes suggestions for future theoretical and empirical studies.

## Theoretical approaches

Much of the initial theoretical work on AFNs has been dedicated towards understanding the social and material constructions of 'quality food' (Harvey et al., 2004). Three concepts have been central here, namely short food supply chains, convention theory (CT) and social embeddedness. Before reviewing these concepts in turn, it should be noted that much AFN work has tended to favour empirically grounded approaches, rather than higher level theoretical development. So while AFN work has been influenced by work on actor-network theory, cultural economy approaches and CT, it remains somewhat underdeveloped theoretically (Goodman, 2003). This is partly because this work has sought, particularly at a European level, to provide detailed descriptions of new approaches to food provisioning that offer practical pathways for rural development.

In this vein, Marsden et al. (2000) and Murdoch et al. (2000) conceptualized growing consumer interest in food provenance as offering small-scale producers the potential to develop what they called *short food supply chains* (SFSCs). SFSCs shift food production out of 'industrial modes' by building new chains that enable small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) to capture a higher proportion of value added, as well as making direct connections with final consumers. The key characteristic of SFSCs is that foods reach the final consumer having been transmitted through a supply chain 'embedded' with value-laden information concerning the mode of production, provenance and distinctive quality assets of the product. While this is best demonstrated through forms of direct marketing and face-to-

face contact between producer and consumer, Marsden et al. (2000) identified two further types of SFSC: spatially proximate and spatially extended. The former is where products are sold through local outlets in the region of production, so that the consumer is intimately aware of the locally embedded nature of the product at the point of retail. In contrast, the latter type occurs when products are sold to consumers (e.g. via the internet) who are located outside the region of production and/or have no personal knowledge of the area.

The SFSC concept has proved to be a popular framework to understand the nature of supply chains along which alternative products travel, extending and emerging from commodity chain analysis. However, it has been criticized for assuming that the starting point of the supply chain is the primary producer. Unlike traditional analyses of conventional food supply systems, it ignores the 'upstream' dimensions of the chain (i.e. an understanding of where producers source their input supplies from). This omission may throw into doubt the alternativeness of local food products, especially if the upstream inputs are from conventional suppliers and/or from outside the local area; hence why some authors now argue for a 'whole chain approach' to AFNs (see Ilbery and Maye, 2005). Other related concepts such as 'systems of provision' and 'global value chains' have also been applied to AFNs, but to a lesser extent, as well as attempts to 'follow the thing' (Cook et al., 2006). This latter work – inspired by commodity circuits approaches – attempts to follow alternative foods as they move across and between different sites of production and consumption.

Work on AFNs has been strongly influenced by *convention theory* (CT), the second of the three approaches reviewed here. Conventions are defined as 'the practices, routines, agreements and their associated informal and institutional forms which bind acts together through mutual expectations' (Salais and Storper, 1992: 174). The 'worlds of production' element of this work has been particularly influential in AFN studies, especially in relation to quality food economies. In a seminal contribution, Murdoch et al. (2000: 113–15) argue that CT can help to understand economic relationships as 'culturalized', with specific conventions 'bundling around' food networks to make them economically negotiable. In other words, they argue that it is possible to identify specific norms, values and organizational forms for different food networks, each with different conventions of quality (or 'orders of worth'). Their paper expands on the work of Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski, in identifying six 'conventions' relevant to quality food products: commercial (e.g. price and value of goods); domestic (e.g. products that draw on

attachments to place and traditional methods of production); industrial (e.g. efficiency and reliability concerns); public (e.g. consumer recognition of trademarks, brands and packaging); civic (e.g. societal benefits) and ecological (e.g. production impacts).

The key contribution made by CT is that it helps to unveil the hybrid nature of quality production/AFNs, as food producers and processors can exist simultaneously in 'several worlds of production'. For example: a specialist food company can exist in a 'domestic world', espousing conventions of tradition, trust and place; an 'ecological world', where conventions related to environmental sustainability are important; and a 'commercial world', where conventions are related to price and value for money. This is useful, especially as agri-food scholars increasingly contest heuristic frameworks that arbitrarily divide 'conventional' and 'alternative' worlds of production. Various papers apply CT to other AFN examples, including Kirwan's (2006) study of farmers' markets, where he identifies 'a convention of regard', and Rosin and Campbell's (2009) recent paper on New Zealand's organic food sector.

The essentially economic nature of business development in AFNs raises issues in relation to a final concept – *social embeddedness*. This propagates the idea that economic behaviour is embedded in, and mediated by, a complex and extensive web of social relations. Work on social embeddedness thus recognizes the importance of social connectivity and reciprocity, which, although fundamental to all economic life, are essential ingredients in alternative initiatives, especially those involving direct agricultural marketing. Social interaction may also be understood in terms of acknowledgement, attention, respect, friendship and sociability, all of which can be subsumed within the concept of 'regard', as articulated by Sage (2003) in his study of alternative 'good food' networks in southwest Ireland.

Social embeddedness has made significant contributions to AFNs, providing a useful conceptual tool to explore the complex interplay between the 'economic' and 'social'. As with SFSCs and conventions of quality, social embeddedness has an established conceptual legacy. Most agri-food scholars refer to Granovetter's (1985) seminal reworking of Polanyi (1944) as their conceptual base. In a critical reading, Krippner (2001) accuses Granovetter (and others) of misinterpreting the embeddedness concept by *overemphasizing the social* and thereby further separating the 'social' and the 'economic'. If one accepts the merits of Krippner's critique, then it is necessary to question interpretations in agri-food studies that depend so heavily on Granovetter's reading. Indeed, various contributions have started to do exactly this.

As Winter (2003) argues, it is a mistake to solely attribute social embeddedness to AFNs in that all economic relations are socially embedded to some extent, including in all types of food supply network. More generally, Sayer (2001: 698) warns that 'the focus on embeddedness can inadvertently produce an overly benign view of economic relations and processes'. Thus local food economies that are fuelled by interpersonal ties, trust and reciprocity (i.e. those that are socially embedded) may carry undercurrents determined by relations of power, inequality, conflict and personal gain. In fact, as argued later in this article, there is a notable neglect of the standard sociological analytical categories of power, class, inequality and social justice in the treatment of AFNs. This is a significant limitation of the AFN literature.

## Review of empirical evidence

This section turns to review the empirical evidence related to AFNs. Research on AFNs started to emerge in earnest in the late 1990s. One of the first accounts was a chapter by Whatmore and Thorne (1997) on the international fair trade movement. A decade or so later, a burgeoning and varied set of usually empirically grounded AFN studies now exists. This covers work on organics, fair trade, local and regional foods, various types of AFN (e.g. farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, box schemes), labelling and branding initiatives, public procurement and so on (Maye et al., 2007). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive account of all of this work, so our intention is to provide a general review that summarizes core themes and identifies wider issues that have influenced different elements of this work. In doing so, we want to recall a general distinction noted by Goodman (2003) in one of the first special journal issues on AFNs. In his editorial comments, he distinguishes between 'European' and 'Northern American' AFNs. In the European case, AFNs, he argues, have been discussed in terms of their potential to contribute to small rural businesses and processes of rural development. In the North American literature, by contrast, AFNs have often been used in more politicized discourses of oppositional activism. This is a useful general assessment, which we flesh out in more detail, below.

We begin by first reviewing work on arguably the most archetypal AFN – fair trade – which represents a growing body of work on 'global AFNs'. Significant attention has been directed towards understanding the role of fair trade in improving the lives of producers and their host communities in less



developed countries (for reviews see Binns et al., 2007; Raynolds et al., 2007); particularly the notion of certification. This is not surprising given its role as the mechanism for ensuring that fair prices and wages are paid to the producers concerned. What this empirical work shows is the heterogeneous nature of the international fair trade movement, comprising different organizations and certification systems. Bezencon and Bili (2006), for example, have identified two main forms of fair trade network: the 'Fair Trade Mainstream Type of Distribution Chain' (MTDC), coordinated by the Fairtrade Labelling Organization (FLO), and the 'Fair Trade Alternative Type of Distribution Chain' (ATDC), coordinated by the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT). In the case of the former, commodities are distributed by mainstream distributors such as supermarkets, whereas alternative trade organizations (ATOs) form the key mechanism for distribution in ATDCs, with sales typically occurring through dedicated shops. In addition, there are ATOs operating beyond the direct influence of either the FLO or IFAT. As Binns et al. (2007) note, the existence of these different forms of supply network is significant, both for ideological reasons, in that some systems more obviously reinforce fair trade's inherently oppositional character than others, and for socioeconomic reasons, in that the various dividends and guarantees received by producers are more clear-cut in some systems than others. These conclusions echo other works that also express concern about the extent of 'mainstreaming' within fair trade networks, as companies such as Starbucks and McDonalds develop significant fair trade portfolios (Renard, 2005).

The next body of AFN work relates to the 'quality turn'. One of the dominant features of this work, particularly in Europe, is the attempt to link 'product and place'. This is captured by Ilbery and Kneafsey (1998: 330; emphasis added) who note the 'considerable potential for a *relocalization of the agro-food system* in which locally produced quality products and services, with authentication of geographical origin and traceability, are transferred to regional and national markets'. Research on quality food economies is now well established, comprising two principal empirical sources. The first of these is work examining food labelling and speciality foods. Various policy initiatives to promote foods with territorial associations are now prominent and these became a key focus of interest for agri-food researchers from the late 1990s. Most notably, the European Union, in 1992, introduced the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) quality labels to 'protect' and 'promote' food and drink products with a

recognizable geographical origin. Past research efforts have also tracked the impacts that changes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), especially the introduction of the so-called 'second pillar' of the CAP (Rural Development Regulation 1257/99), have had on these processes, including the role of schemes such as the Rural Enterprise Scheme and the Marketing and Processing Grant scheme in marketing quality agricultural products.

The second body of work related to the 'quality turn' emanates from a European research project called IMPACT (see [www.rural-impact.net/](http://www.rural-impact.net/)) that attempted to map a 'new rural development dynamic', constructed in direct opposition to the 'agro-industrial dynamic' (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). This work championed the construction of SFSCs. Papers published by the contributors (see especially *Sociologia Ruralis* 40(4), 2000) examine the distribution and economic significance of quality food production in Western Europe – as an AFN. Van der Ploeg and Renting (2000), for example, analyse 30 case studies from the programme, focusing on quality production; while Renting et al. (2003) document an increase in 'alternative' activities within six European countries that includes the number of PDOs/PGIs, FMs, farm shops, on-farm butchers and box schemes, in mainly marginal rural regions. The overall message from this body of work is that 'fixing' products to places can help engender greater endogenous rural development.

These accounts are very useful, but they provide a particular vision of AFNs, inspired as a response to political and economic changes affecting agriculture (Goodman, 2004), which focuses almost exclusively on farms and the quality food economy in order to enable on-farm 'value added' production. As such, in order to broaden this perspective the next few paragraphs review work on local and organic food systems, bringing in examples from a wider geographical catchment, starting with the local food sector.

Supermarkets and other private sector interests are becoming increasingly interested in the potential of the local food sector, including both specialist and other locally branded products. This tendency is further supported by policy statements and initiatives from government offices and non-governmental agencies. In the UK, for example, political support for local food was vocalized after the publication of the Curry Report (2002), which was published after an investigation into the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak in the UK. In North America, support for local food systems is also burgeoning, although developments in places like Australia and New Zealand are more sporadic and certainly not so strongly voiced in policy circles. Empirical studies of

local food networks include FMs, box schemes, CSA and farm shops; with examples in the US, the UK and other parts of Europe (see, for example, Hinrichs, 2000; Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Kirwan, 2006; Kneafsey et al., 2008).

Many of these accounts recognize that farmers participating in the local food sector often do so on a small scale (at least, compared to their conventional counterparts), as well as marketing their produce directly to consumers. In SFSC terminology, they represent face-to-face chains, as opposed to locality-based systems (which can be understood as spatially extended chains), which mainly concentrate on processed foods such as wines, cheeses and cooked meats. Survey evidence on local foods suggests that face-to-face chains also provide important social and economic benefits. There is a consensus in the literature, for example, that buying food in the area that it was produced, particularly if direct from the producer, improves relations between producers and consumers. Morris and Buller (2003), for example, found that farmers in Gloucestershire became involved in the local food sector to re-establish trust with their consumers and become better integrated in the local community. Winter (2003) meanwhile argues that consumers buy local foods to support local farmers and 'defend' their local area. Morris and Buller (2003: 562) also found that economic considerations, particularly the higher prices producers can get for products, were an important incentive for farmers to become involved in the local food sector.

As noted earlier, local food networks can be about more than simply the establishment of alternative pathways for agrarian restructuring. A number of community projects, for example, are trying to bring food into economically deprived areas, intent on supplying relatively cheap, fresh foods in a bid to reduce social problems such as bad diet and poor health, as well as providing employment for the people involved in supplying and running the schemes. However, there has been relatively little research on these community-orientated local food networks, many based in so-called 'food deserts', where access to affordable, healthy food is poor (but see Kneafsey et al., 2008).

A related strand of work under the 'local food' umbrella relates to public procurement: the supply of food to public institutions, such as schools, hospitals and prisons. Again, the level of agri-food research activity in this area has been somewhat piecemeal until of late, even though it is an issue that attracts considerable political attention in parts of Europe and North America. One of the first pieces of research on public procurement was a report by Morgan and Morley (2002), in which they argued

that a key obstacle blocking the localization of public food procurement within Europe was the principle of 'non-discrimination', whereby EU law prohibits food procurers from specifying the term 'local' in their purchasing contracts. In an effort to relocalize supply, they encouraged public procurers to be creative in stipulating the need for more 'fresh', 'organic', 'seasonal' foods, small lot contracts and more precise delivery times. This they suggested will enable public institutions to take advantage of initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable food systems through purchasing more locally sourced food; sentiments that were echoed in a study of the Cornwall Food Programme in the southwest of England by Kirwan and Foster (2007). Research on public procurement has been given a further, significant, boost recently by the publication of Morgan and Sonnino's (2009) book on sustainable school food systems, which includes examples from London, New York, Rome and the UN's new school feeding programme. A series of papers on the US Farm-to-School programme also provide important conceptual and empirical insights into the nature of these networks and their alternativeness (see, for example, Allen and Guthman, 2006).

The final area of work relevant in this context is research related to organic foods. Like fair trade, organic foods present a tricky analytical problem for agri-food scholars: a strong symbol of alternative food provisioning, but also criticized for commercial success and expansion, the use of mainstream distribution chains and a growing number of corporate organic food labels. This tendency is better known as the 'conventionalization thesis', and is built around a series of papers that draw on survey evidence from the Californian organic sector, widely noted for its incorporation into conventional food networks; redefined to suit the needs of large producers and retailers (Guthman, 2004). However, evidence from other parts of the world, contests this thesis. Recent surveys of commercial organic farming in New Zealand, for example, have revealed increasingly complex worlds of organic production (Rosin and Campbell, 2009).

## Where we stand and where we are heading

This next section considers where such empirical findings leave us in terms of current theoretical and empirical work on AFNs. One of the most important, and perhaps more obvious, messages emerging from the increasing volume of work dedicated to AFNs, is the range and diversity of schemes that might be labelled 'alternative'. What is also clear is

that these networks of food supply need to be critiqued, including the privileges assigned to terms like 'alternative' and 'local'. Recent research is starting to question the extent to which small businesses engaged in activities grouped under the AFNs umbrella can really be seen as 'alternative', in that as noted by Ilbery and Maye (2005) in a UK context, businesses may have to 'dip in' and 'dip out' of 'conventional' supply chains due to the ways in which the dominant agri-food network is currently structured (e.g. though being forced to source organic seed from overseas). Other work by Venn et al. (2006) reveals a clear disjuncture between academic and lay discourses when it comes to AFNs. They surveyed actors involved in what are described as 'alternative' projects, and found that they very rarely described themselves as 'alternative', with many in fact openly resenting the term, seeing it in some sense as pejorative. There is also growing evidence, and an emerging critique, of corporate mainstreaming, particularly evident in studies of fair trade and organic food networks. Inherent within this, it is clear that the processes of absorption and appropriation diminish the conventional food system critique that AFNs are deemed to historically represent.

Thus one of the key messages, in terms of assessing where we stand in relation to AFN work, is that agri-food scholars are increasingly asking questions about the 'alternativeness' of AFNs. Is the concept still valuable, or is it in danger of becoming increasingly meaningless? This is an important question, especially as the 'alternative' banner has proliferated to include more and more things. Rather than reject the concept outright, the emphasis within the literature appears to be on developing more subtle frames of reference for understanding AFNs. For example, there is a general consensus among agri-food scholars that constructing simplistic binaries between 'alternative' and 'conventional' networks is not useful; rather, AFN scholars now use a language that captures a sense of hybridity, complexity and diversity. In this vein, Watts et al. (2005) have distinguished between 'weaker' and 'stronger' AFNs. In the former, emphasis is placed on the quality and labelling features of locality *food* networks (i.e. the product is key), whereas the latter focus on the revalorized and embedded characteristics of local food *networks* (i.e. the supply chain/network and nature of relations are key). Watts et al. (2005: 34) thus suggest that AFNs 'can be classified as weaker or stronger on the basis of their engagement with, and potential for subordination by, conventional food supply chains operating in a global, neoliberal polity'.

An emerging set of papers also now argue that 'alternativeness' has to be understood in relation to

an equally contestable notion of the 'conventional', with the utility and meaning of the term being context dependent (Maye et al., 2007). Particularly useful here is a recent paper by Holloway et al. (2007), who call for a relational approach that recognizes the multidimensional, contested and dynamic nature of food production–consumption relationships. They demonstrate this through an analysis of three AFN case studies: a CSA project in Scotland, an urban market garden in England and an internet-based sheep adoption scheme in Italy. Their analysis shows how each has unique characteristics that enable each project to express different forms of resistance to dominant systems of food provision. This, they argue, calls for a need to go beyond simply labelling practices, and to examine how the specific ordering and spatiality of particular projects can challenge centres of power in food supply chains.

Both of these papers draw on work examining alternative economies, particularly the work of Gibson-Graham (1996). As in AFNs, the popular thesis for alternative economies is to see them as opposing hegemonic neoliberal capitalism in a variety of ways. Gibson-Graham's (1996) work, however, suggests that we need a more complex understanding of these relationships, and that within (rather than outside) the fragile capitalist system lie possibilities for a proliferation of economic practices that are less strongly centred around money making, and more around social and ethical concerns. This framework privileges multiple 'ecologies of productivity' that value non-monetary practices within the economy over traditional market forces. Such writings are becoming increasingly influential for AFN scholars and offer a valuable future direction as a way to avoid reverting to binary oppositions of 'conventional' and 'alternative', emphasizing instead the relational contingency of what is regarded as 'alternative'.

A further key area of debate relates specifically to local food networks. In recent years, a series of critiques have started to emerge on localism, building on earlier critical comments regarding the dangers of conflating social and spatial relations in such networks (Hinrichs, 2000). In a notable contribution, DuPuis and Goodman (2005) challenge the 'normative' conceptualization of localism, calling instead for a 'reflexive localism' that recognizes potentially differential incorporations of social class into such networks. Such reframings are now becoming influential in recent rereadings of AFNs. These include Allen and Hinrich's (2007) review of 'Buy Local' schemes in the US, which they suggest are awash with tensions and complexities (not least in terms of how 'local' is defined) that tend to be underexamined by those participating in them.

Research on FMs in Massachusetts and Minnesota by Slocum (2007) is equally critical, showing how these are places of 'white belonging', as well as inherent class-bias. These inequalities of race and wealth serve both to enable different food economies and to separate people by their ability to consume. Other examples could also be mentioned, but the point is that agri-food scholars are now becoming more sensitive to the dangers of falling into the 'local food trap' (Born and Purcell, 2006), wherein 'local' is uncritically accepted as being 'good'.

What is emerging from these recent debates is a division between an activist (normative) narrative of localism and an academic (reflexive) narrative of localism; a division that is echoed in a recent debate about US Farm-to-School (FTS) programmes. In a critical survey of such programmes in California, Allen and Guthman (2006) suggest that in their attempts to fill in the gaps created by political and economic liberalization, FTS programmes in fact reproduce neoliberal forms and practices through labour relationships, private funding sources and the devolution of responsibility to the local; resulting in serious consequences for social equity. This is a hard-hitting attack on a programme of work that has captured the attentions and energies of a number of people, including practitioners, activists and academics, across the US. It has also become an important symbol of progressive transformation for many in the agri-food movement. However, it is not a universally accepted critique. In replying to the article, Kloppenburg and Hassanein (2006) question whether it is fair to generalize the conclusions from California to the rest of the country. As they put it: 'the result ... is an essentialization of FTS programs that is misleading and inadequately supported by data' (p. 417). They are also highly critical of the view that practitioners and activists involved in these schemes are unwittingly reproducing processes of neoliberalism. Instead they suggest that 'those engaged in the over 400 FTS programs nation-wide are now undertaking, however imperfectly, resistance and critical thinking and political action and that they are endeavoring to achieve equity, public funding, and state support for their proposed reforms' (Kloppenburg and Hassanein, 2006: 420).

## Future directions for research

In terms of future directions, AFNs are thus at an interesting and potentially critical turning point. Agri-food scholars are actively critiquing some of the assumptions underlying AFNs and, as the above debate shows, divisions are also emerging. On the one hand, there are academics and activists who

advocate a '*pragmatic*' agenda, working both with and within the existing food system; whereas, on the other hand, there are those who advocate a more '*purist*' agenda, seen through a structuralist critique of neoliberalism. Debates about the ethics and politics of AFNs thus look set to continue. On a more practical level, the future development of AFNs will also be influenced by the current economic downturn, climate change imperatives, growing productionist pressures and the ongoing food security crisis. How and where AFNs fit within this new political economic context will be an important influence on future research. More specifically, from the foregoing review it is clear that AFNs have attracted significant attention and excitement within agri-food studies, with important contributions from rural sociology. In fact a case could be made that research attentions within agri-food studies are currently imbalanced, with too much emphasis on AFNs. There is insufficient space here to explore this further, but it is worth noting as a contextual point.

As such, we believe there are (at least) five areas where future research efforts could be directed, in relation to AFNs. The first of these is a call for continued engagement with work on alternative economies and a broadening of the theoretical frameworks used. Notable here are Gibson-Graham's (1996) post-structuralist writings on 'diverse economies'. Their ontological reframing helps to move discussions beyond dualistic tensions, reconstituting AFNs and the food economy as a range of possible practices. In addition, this article argues for a greater application of the sociological categories of power, class, inequality and social justice in the analysis and further theorization of AFNs. The use of such categories is oddly silent in much AFN work to date. A second future research theme is the need for more work that examines the moral and ethical claims associated with AFNs. AFN scholars need to link more closely to recent writings on the 'moral turn' within critical social theory (Popke, 2006). While there has been considerable work on fair trade, more research is needed to identify how and why different AFNs become labelled as 'ethical'. How, for example, do AFNs work ethically in practice and what are their social implications and impacts? Such questions are becoming increasingly important as debates about the 'scaling up' of AFNs intensify.

A third theme relates to where AFN work takes place. To date much AFN work has been concentrated in Europe and North America. While recent contributions have included perspectives from the 'global South' (see Maye et al., 2007), more research is needed to assess the development potential of AFNs in these majority world contexts, including



theoretical and moral assumptions. There is also real potential to draw more explicitly from political ecology and development studies literatures. In particular, a livelihoods approach may be useful as a mechanism to assess all actors engaged in local food networks, including the relative experiences of different social classes, especially marginal and excluded groups (Goodman and Goodman, 2007). This seems to be a fruitful, and as yet, unexplored avenue of research that could further demystify localness and 'open up' the underlying sociology of AFNs.

The fourth area of work relates to consumption. One of the long-standing criticisms of AFN work is the production-orientated bias inherent in many studies, although there is a growing body of research on consumer attitudes to AFNs, particularly in relation to organic and local foods, supported by useful research efforts exploring producer–consumer relations (see Kneafsey et al., 2008). Despite this, more effort is needed to understand consumer involvement with AFNs, moving beyond attitudinal assessments to capture, for example, the role of embodied practices, the influence of taste and aesthetics, the social relations and interactions between consumers involved in AFNs and so on. Some work has started to move in this direction (see Roe, 2006, for example), but more is needed. Recent writings on non-representative theory could be usefully drawn upon here. Another core aspect of future consumer work is in relation to diet, in that AFNs potentially offer important mechanisms to overcome food and health problems (Morgan and Sonnino, 2009), and yet hitherto research in this area has been limited.

The final avenue for future investigation relates to animals and AFNs. There is a significant body of social science literature dedicated to animal–society relations. However, very little research has examined relations between animals and AFNs, despite obvious material and moral significances and potential for helping to determine what it is that makes AFNs 'alternative'.

## Annotated further reading

- DuPuis E, Goodman D (2005) Shall we go 'home' to eat? Towards a reflexive politics of localism. *Journal of Rural Studies* 21: 359–71.  
An excellent paper that critiques localism and calls for greater scrutiny of the concept.
- Goodman D (ed.) (2003) Special issue: International perspectives on alternative agro-food networks: Quality, embeddedness, bio-politics. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19(1).  
A landmark special issue on alternative food networks, including important papers on quality production, local foods and fair trade. A must read for AFN scholars.
- Harvey M, McMeekin A, and Warde A (eds) (2004) *Qualities of Food*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.  
This book includes a series of theoretically strong chapters examining elements of the 'quality turn' from contrasting perspectives.
- Kneafsey M, Holloway L, Cox R, Dowler L, Venn L, and Tuomainen L (2008) *Reconnecting Consumers, Producers and Food: Exploring Alternatives*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.  
This book provides a detailed analysis of six alternative food networks, including accounts from producers and consumers connected to those networks.
- Maye D, Holloway L, and Kneafsey M (eds) (2007) *Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice*. Oxford: Elsevier.  
This book examines the range of debates and practices surrounding efforts to establish alternative food networks, with case studies from Europe, North and South America, Australia and Africa.
- Morgan K, Marsden T, and Murdoch J (2006) *Worlds of Food: Place, Power and Provenance in the Food Chain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
This book includes three theoretical chapters related to food networks, one of which summarizes work on convention theory, social embeddedness and quality food economies, followed by three case study chapters from research in Wales, Italy and the US.
- Raynolds L, Murray D, and Wilkinson J (eds) (2007) *Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization*. London: Routledge.  
A useful collection of papers on the changing political and organizational form of the international fair trade movement.

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**résumé** Un volume significatif d'effort de recherche de la science sociale est consacré à l'examen des systèmes de nourriture qui sont considérés d'une certaine façon comme étant alternative aux manières 'conventionnelles' de l'approvisionnement de nourriture. Cette introduction faite par Sociopedia vise à fournir une étude critique et mise à jour sur les Réseaux Alternatifs de Nourriture (RAN), avec, dans les débats, un accent particulier sur la définition, les types de RAN étudiés et les principaux concepts appliqués à leur analyse. Ce matériel est employé pour fournir une évaluation sur où les discussions sur les RAN tiennent actuellement. Ceci montre comment la politique et les pratiques des AFN ont attiré l'attention minutieuse et critique des sociologues et d'autres experts de l'agro-alimentaire. L'introduction finit en considérant des appels récents pour se déplacer au-delà d'un dualisme 'alternative'-'conventionnel' prédominant et fait des suggestions pour de futures études théoriques et empiriques, y compris un appel pour une plus grande application des catégories standards sociologiques de pouvoir, de classe, d'inégalité et de justice sociale.

**mots-clés** alimentation biologique ♦ alimentation de qualité ♦ alimentation locale ♦ commerce équitable ♦ enchaînement court de approvisionnement ♦ intégration sociale ♦ réseaux d'alimentation alternatives

**resumen** Un significativo volumen de esfuerzos en investigación social se centra en examinar sistemas de alimentación considerados, de alguna manera, como formas entre 'alternativas' y 'convencionales' de

provisión alimentaria. Esta contribución en Sociopedia aporta una revisión actualizada y crítica de estos trabajos sobre Redes de Alimentación Alternativa (RAAs), con un énfasis particular a los debates sobre su definición, tipos de RAAs estudiadas y conceptos básicos aplicados a su análisis. Este material tiene como objetivo proporcionar una evaluación sobre el tipo de debates que se están llevando a cabo actualmente sobre RAAs. Esto demuestra como las políticas y prácticas asociadas a las RAAs han llegado a cierto escrutinio entre sociólogos e investigadores en agro-alimentación. Esta contribución concluye considerando recientes llamamientos sobre la necesidad de moverse más allá del actual dualismo 'alternativo-conventional' y sugiere futuros estudios teóricos y empíricos, incluyendo la necesidad de una mayor aplicación de estándares de categorías sociológicas de poder, clase, desigualdad y justicia social.

**palabras claves** alimentación de cualidad ♦ alimentación ecológica ♦ alimentación local ♦ cadenas cortas del suministro de alimentación ♦ comercio justo ♦ integración social ♦ red de alimentación alternativa