

# ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS: CONCEPT, TYPOLOGY AND ADAPTATION TO THE SPANISH CONTEXT

**José Luis Sánchez Hernández**

Department of Geography  
University of Salamanca (Spain)

## I. CHALLENGING THE CORPORATE FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN: A NEW RESEARCH ISSUE FOR SPANISH GEOGRAPHY

The powerful role of global corporations, both processors and retailers, detaches food from its social, historical and geographical context. The well-know metaphor of the sandglass clock puts these big organizations in the narrowest part, monitoring every transaction and flow between millions of disconnected producers and consumers. In addition, food packaging displays the huge transformation process undergone by food, naming many chemical aditives which transform natural produce into industrial stuff. Food scares like dioxines, mad cow disease, E.coli, foot and mouth disease... look like the rejectable consequence of the two strategies developed by the agrobusiness corporations to overcome the intrinsic limits of nature for producing food (Atkins and Bowler, 2001). First, the *appropriation* of natural processes by the industry, which puts them back into the value chain under the fashion of inputs that farmers must purchase (equipment, seeds, pesticides) to keep on the market. Second, the *substitution* of natural produce by new food (sweeters, margarine) made from an industrial mix of generic natural ingredients (fat, proteines, glucose). Both genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the so-called functional foods constitute another step beyond along this trend of de-naturalization that, however, is being challenged by a growing number of citizens (Morgan *et al.* 2006).

Several lines of criticism conflate to fuel this increasing social reaction. People who believe that global capitalism is destroying rural resources, landscapes and communities by imposing unfair trade rules, who choose a healthy diet with non-processed items to avoid the risks of industrial production, who look for traditional, expensive or exotic food to run away from the tedious supply of the prevailing system, who follow different life styles, who see the food chain as an opportunity to build a new model of self-centered development or who are simply willing to pay premium prices if there is any guarantee that the item bought

is better in any way. All these market niches share a common concern about the quality of their food intake. But quality is a subjective and contextual concept itself, so the linkage between a specific quality and a singular food may arise from three different sources (Ilbery *et al.* 2005): its nature (composition, nutritional value, taste and flavour), its process of transformation and delivery (traditional, sustainable, fair, corporate, independent, direct) or its geographical provenance (which enables a differentiated identity, linked to the properties of the original territory).

Therefore, UFOs (*unidentified food objects*, in nice words of Bérard and Marchenay 2004) are losing some market share in face of the good performance of food which embodies the will of producers and consumers to meet around the experience of a production/consumption system which is aware of its individual, economic, social, cultural, environmental and geographical implications. *Alternative food networks* (AFN) may thus be defined as the systems or channels of food production, distribution and consumption which are built upon the re-connection or close communication between producer, produce and consumer, allowing for the development of new forms of relationship and governance of the actors' network and also enhancing a re-distribution of value for primary producers (Winter 2003a, 2004; Watts *et al.* 2005). Literature on the topic has identified a wide range of AFNs, but Spanish geographical research has just focused on its two most traditional ones: designations of origin and organic agriculture.

Two main biases are apparent in the Spanish approach to these kinds of AFNs. First, they are conceptualized as mere tools, instrumental for rural development (Molleví 2004, Armesto 2007a). Second, only the rural location and the production stage have been researched, neglecting their linkages with the moments of distribution and consumption, which are mostly urban phenomena. But both utilitarianism and fragmentation are blocking any theorizing effort about the potential of designations of origin and organic agriculture to develop new and more complex spatialities of a networked and trans-scalar nature. AFNs are actually cause and effect of a relationship between a group of actors that cannot be properly understood if they are splitted into different stages or moments. There is a need for developing comprehensive reflections about their capability to build alternative geographical constructions which rely on the linkages that connect their members, who live in different and sometimes distant locations.

Two challenges follow for Spanish economic geography: to widen the limits of these research efforts by including new AFNs and to add new contents and goals to the study of designations of origin and organic agriculture. This paper is intended to make two preliminar contributions here. First, a survey of alternative food networks and practices. Second, to launch a research agenda suitable for the singularities of the Spanish food market. This contextual caveat is very important because the literature revised is mostly Anglo-american, thus mediated by processes and values somehow different to those prevailing in the Southern European countries, to the extent that the alleged *alternative* content of some food practices may be a matter of deep discussion from other cultural realms.

## II. ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE

Whatmore and Thorne (1997) coined the term *alternative geography of food* in their case-study about the distribution of Peruvian coffee in the United Kingdom under the fair trade scheme. Twelve years after, a stream of Anglo-American specialized literature has flourished on the topic and a large amount of papers and chapters is actually available. The different trends discussed by these comentators are listed below:

1. Quality food schemes. Until the 1990s, D.O. foods were the only alternative to conventional industrial production. Their special taste, their rural location, their linkages with tradition, their sustainable practices and the prevailing role of small local producers in the supply chain are all reasons for AFN membership.
2. Quality certification. Certified food usually displays a logo or seal which means that its production process has followed carefully detailed rules whose accomplishment must be supervised by the producer itself, by a third party or by the final retailer.
3. Organic food. The term includes every food whose production rejects chemical inputs, respects the natural life cycle of animals and plants and matches local ecological conditions.
4. Community-supported agriculture. It is a sort of alliance of concerned consumers and local farmers: the former agree to buy seasonal food from the latter, who are responsible of the delivery at the customers' homes.
5. Box schemes. Close to the previous case, they are made of cooperatives and local consumption groups that ensure a regular procurement of seasonal food grown up in a sustainable way and harvested in the local community or its close surroundings.
6. Farmers' markets. These markets where farmers sell their own food production to urban customers are usually held every week or every second week.
7. Direct (on farm) sale. This option follows the same rationale of farmers' markets, but it is the customer who travels to the rural countryside to purchase food in its original cultural, geographical and economic context.
8. Public sector food procurement. Procurement to schools, hospitals, universities, prisons or any other public facilities serving meals constitutes a powerful way to strengthen local food production, to develop a sense of local community and to make the consumption of organic food more usual.
9. Buy Local Food: this strategy is based on private and public actors's agreement upon the need to localize the food procurement chain as a means to develop the local economy. Campaigns are launched to make people more sensitive about the socio-economic advantages of buying locally-produced food.
10. Comunitarian food supply projects. Local governments support the constitution of consumption cooperatives in deprived neighbourhoods and food deserts for purchasing and delivering fresh and healthy food at cheap prices.
11. Urban food gardens. Wastelands, building sites or gardens may be cultivated by neighbours to produce their own food and deliver it to local households, shops or restaurants.

12. **Fair trade.** Purchasers of this kind of food receive the guarantee that producers, who usually live in far and developing countries, are paid a fair price, that is, an amount of money that pays off the work done and is enough to enjoy a decent living standard.
13. **Diet and lifestyle.** Certain people's beliefs and attitudes are materialized into food intakes which differ from the social norms or patterns. Vegetarians, macrobiotics, ethnic minorities, religious groups, freegans... have consumption styles of their own which create their particular production, distribution and exchange circuits, flows and spaces.

ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS AND THEIR CONSTITUENT PRINCIPLES.

Type of network	PRODUCT	PROCESS		PLACE
		Processing	Distribution	
Quality food schemes				
Quality certification				
Organic production				
Community supported agriculture				
<i>Box schemes</i>				
Farmers' markets				
Direct sales (on farm)				
Public sector food procurement				
<i>Buy Local Food</i>				
Community food supply				
Urban food gardens				
Fair trade				
Diet and lifestyle				

Source: author's elaboration.

This discussion of AFNs and their basic principles and goals leads to three main conclusions. First, there is a wide array of practices which attempt to settle food procurement systems that are more or less apart or different from the conventional pattern, and this phenomenon deserves a geographical reflection. Secondly, as the figure above displays, the autonomy, challenge or *alternativeness* content of every AFN depends on the *hybridization* or specific mix of its constituent principles (product, process and place). Thirdly, these networks have a true geographical foundation for three reasons: (i) their territoriality is both passive (dependence from territorial resources) and active (creation of new territorial

relationships and forms); (ii) the pervasive role of the *local* in their practice and discourse; (iii) their networked nature attaches a particular spatio-temporal identity to food, shaped by the interaction within a network of producers and consumers linked by a proximity which is simultaneously geographical (sense of place) and institutional (communication by means of logos and seals or through shared values and principles).

### **III. HOW TO DEAL GEOGRAPHICALLY WITH ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS IN SPAIN?**

This agenda for a geographical research programme on AFN in Spain looks for an explanation of how these emerging patterns of economic action are re-shaping the territory at different scales. This agenda may be splitted into three main sections, according to the three conclusions outlined above. Its final goal is to develop a body of knowledge that should be able to assess if Spanish AFNs meet the keys of the concept: reconnection of actors, redefinition of networks' values and redistribution of the value added.

#### **1. Section 1: nature and extent of AFNs in Spain**

Specialized literature takes for granted that AFNs are alternative because they challenge a food regime ruled by global corporations where regional diversity in consumption patterns and food heritage is very narrow. Nevertheless, this Anglo-American context does not fully apply to European Mediterranean countries, where some of the AFNs described above are not new at all because the corporate system has never reached such an hegemony. Beyond its current political definition, the term *alternativeness* also implies a geographical dimension that warns against any temptation of a mechanistic translation of the term outside its original context. Therefore, a preliminary step is that of wondering which AFNs were already settled in Spain, which of them are really new, and if any other local food chains have been ignored as alternatives just because they are so deeply embedded in Spanish society that do not look alternative at all, despite their reconnecting, redefining and redistributing power.

Just after this preliminary conceptual task, the second main goal of this section can be tackled: an inventory of AFNs, including information about their objectives, employment, turnover, delivery and retail systems, market share, organizational and financial support, social profile, relationships with other AFNs, geographical extent and linkages with the conventional businesses.

#### **2. Section 2: typology and constituent principles of Spanish AFNs**

Section 2 is focused on finding out the role of the product, process and place principles within Spanish AFNs, in order to identify the core rationale of Spanish alternativeness and compare it with the ideology which rules Anglo-American AFNs. It can be hypothesized that the bulk of AFNs will be founded on place and will show a high degree of institutionalization due to the active role of regional and local authorities in the promotion of local food backed by logos, which follow the path opened by the successful quality food schemes supported by European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. The contested nature of Designations of Origin and other cognate schemes as AFNs and their

embeddedness in Spain demand special attention to discuss their potential for meeting the three aforementioned goals.

Other traits of the 'back to local' trend are foor fairs, direct and on-line sales (quickly growing for high value added products like wines or ham), customized production or the development of franchises in urban areas ruled by partnerships of rural D.O. producers.

Evidence of certified traceability (mostly leaded by big supermarkets), fair trade, organic food or ethnic retailing will also be easy to find, but these experiences are far from reaching neither the quantitative role nor the iconic relevance of locally bounded AFNs.

### **3. Section 3: geographical foundations and implications of AFNs in Spain**

Where should AFNs be located, assuming that they include producers, distributors and consumers? An integrated approach to the geographical shape of AFNs is needed to encompass the spatial extent of the relationships between every actor involved in each kind of AFN, and to acknowledge that their constitution is often started by consumers and not by producers (Maye *et al.* 2007; Holloway *et al.* 2007). According to Thrift and Olds (1996), the spatiality of economic processes can be depicted as bounded territories, as networks, as flows and as images and discourses. AFNs may be drawn as a combination of these four elements, corresponding to discourses and images the role of emotional and intellectual linkages between producers and consumers (trust, proximity, values) that glue the collective construction of territories. Different AFNs have different spatial configurations and shapes as a consequence of the relative position of product, process and place in their constituent logic.

## **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Criticism against the industrial and corporate food system leads to the emerging meaning of alternative food networks whose different nature and unbalanced economic, political and social extent are apparent. Anglo-American economic geography has paid attention to these networks during the last decade or so and up to thirteen food procurement systems have been identified that reconnect producers and consumers, that assume new values like sustainability, equity, safety, health or geographical provenance and redistribute value in a more balanced way among involved actors.

Nevertheless, Spanish geography has only focused on the most popular AFNs, namely designations of origin and organic agriculture, highlighting their contribution to rural development. Therefore, this article launches the proposal of integrating these limited reflections in a wider research agenda about AFNs. Such an agenda is discussed around three main topics: a conceptualization of AFNs which includes their adaptation to the Spanish context, their inventory and a preliminary assessment of their quantitative size; a typology of Spanish AFNs according to their constituent principles (product, process, place); and, according to the guidelines of relational economic geography, an explanation of Spanish AFNs' potential to build their own territorial shapes.