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# 'I am pleased to shop somewhere that is fighting the supermarkets a little bit'. A cultural political economy of alternative food networks

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## ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a cultural political economy (CPE) analysis of consumers' semiotic and material construals of alternative food networks (AFN). It starts by outlining, in the context of debate over AFN, why CPE is a useful analytical tool. The collection of talk data from 40 respondents, and food consumption data from 20 respondents, is outlined and explained. Talk data reveal that interviewees construe conventional and alternative food networks differently based on values relating to food quality judgements, provenance and trust, and alternativeness. Consumption data demonstrate respondents' material engagement with conventional and, to a lesser extent, alternative food networks. The paper concludes that CPE is a productive framework for analysing AFN *qua* a subaltern economic imaginary, and that it can help to set them on 'firmer' ground, both ontologically and normatively.

## 1. Introduction

Alternative food networks (AFN) remain a popular topic of scholarly enquiry. Of particular interest has been their links with 'ethical' consumption, exemplified by numerous studies of fair trade (e.g. Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Clarke et al., 2007; Dolan, 2010; Goodman et al., 2012; Goodman M, 2004, 2010; Low and Davenport, 2006; Lyon et al., 2010; Mutersbaugh and Lyon, 2010; Raynolds, 2002, 2009; Raynolds et al., 2007; Raynolds and Ngcwangu, 2010; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997; Wilson, 2010; Wright, 2004). Much of this work has focused on "'enlisting' practices of mediation" (Adams and Raisborough, 2010, 258), such as marketing materials and how-to guides. Consequently, theorising about ethical consumption has "run ahead of considerations of its material dimensions and their implications for livelihoods and lifestyles" (Goodman et al., 2012, 243; see also Adams and Raisborough, 2010, 258; Johnston, 2008, 231).

This is starting to change. Sarmiento (2017, 494), for example, identifies three important strands in recent AFN research: "work on food and embodiment, the diverse economies of food, and more-than- human food geographies". Although epistemologically and methodologically diverse, these all attend to the materiality of food, consumers and non-human participants in food systems. Moreover, Sarmiento (2017, 495) argues that the third strand, "actor-network and assemblage thinking", can be used when "analysing the expansive networks that impinge on specific bodies—whether on individual bodies or those of specific social groups—and shape the prospects for what Gibson- Graham refer to as community economies". This, Sarmiento argues, will help researchers to trace the relations of dominance that constrain and limit the prospects of AFNs and, in particular, to "assay what needs to be done in order for more ethical foods to be no longer simply 'alter- natives' to conventional foods" (Sarmiento, 2017, 495).

However, such work is hampered by a lack of clarity over what characterises both 'more ethical foods' and AFN. The ontological status of AFN remains uncertain (Sarmiento, 2017, 485). Instead, what unites activities grouped under this heading is that they tend to address "ecological, social, and/or political economic problems associated with conventional food systems" (Sarmiento, 2017, 485). Thus, the ontological status of AFN *qua* AFN would appear to depend on whether they produce more 'ethical' and/or less 'problematic' foods. However, numerous studies have identified normative shortcomings of AFN (e.g. Barnett et al., 2016; Goodman D, 2004; Goodman et al., 2010; Guthman, 2008; Hinrichs, 2003; Sarmiento, 2017, 486; Winter, 2003). AFN, and 'ethical' consumption in general, have been characterised as part of a neoliberal discourse of 'responsibilization' (Goodman et al., 2010; Harris, 2009), wherein "[m]oral considerations 'lose', so to speak, their transcendental attributes...and re-emerge as business opportunities" (Shamir, 2008, 14).

On this interpretation, AFN are not alternative to conventional food networks, but occupy a niche within them. This is because consumers can choose whether to consume 'ethically' within an economic system that operates, to a large extent, according to a different set of normative criteria. Thus AFN, and 'ethical' consumption more generally, "re- produce an overt and rather disturbing inequality that is greatly in need of exposure and, perhaps, dismantling" (Goodman et al., 2010, 1785). On this basis, it could be argued that AFN do not have an independent existence: hence Wilson's (2013) argument for 'autonomous' food spaces. Consequently, the activities analysed by research into AFN are actually performed within conventional food networks. This means that, far from redressing the problems associated with the latter, AFN perpetuate a moral economy that prioritises market forces over social good (q.v. Sayer, 2000, 89).

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However, such interpretations do violence to the intentions of many AFN participants: to retailers and consumers who buy fair trade branded products as part of concerted and multi-scale attempts to promote equity, fairness and justice (Barnett et al., 2011, 109); and to the producers, intermediaries and consumers who “experiment and strive for what they see as greater empowerment by...attempting to remake the world as they find it in the places they inhabit” (Goodman et al., 2012, 247). That said, it remains important to analyse such attempts to ‘remake the world’ in order to improve our understanding of what they are trying to achieve, how they seek to achieve it, and what the intended and unintended consequences of those efforts are. This begs the question: how can such analyses be done?

There is little doubt that an approach which incorporates the materiality of food and the participants in food networks is required in order to undertake such analyses. However, it remains unclear whether the research strands reviewed by Sarmiento (2017) are sufficiently well developed to do so. For instance, the “actor-network and assemblage thinking” strand, identified by Sarmiento as being particularly well-suited to the task, is likely to require considerable development before it can take it on. This is because actor-network thinking “is stronger on the social construction of the material and immaterial features of marketised and/or marketisable use-values than it is on the logic of surplus-value and exchange-value” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 230 (fn 5), citing Slater (2002)). That is a significant problem, given that all food networks are irreducibly economic – in the broad sense of this term, meaning that they have to do with material provisioning (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 154; cf. Sayer, 2000, 94) – and that the global economy remains dominated by finance-driven accumulation, the disembedding of financial capital, and neoliberal market integration (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 416–7). Moreover, it has been argued that actor-network theory amounts to little more than “selective description” of complex economic phenomena (Fine, 2004, 336). This suggests that scholars will have their work cut out if they are to realise Sarmiento’s (2017) broad research agenda using the conceptual tools that have featured prominently in recent AFN research.

This paper uses a different conceptual approach to analyse AFN: cultural political economy (CPE). This approach was chosen for four reasons. First, CPE takes seriously the intertwined relationship of the material and semiotic dimensions of economic activity. It therefore answers one of the criticisms of AFN research noted above: that it has too often focused on the semiotic at the expense of the material. Secondly, CPE demonstrates considerable robustness and internal consistency. Its key proponents, primarily Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum, have spent decades developing and honing CPE as an analytical framework.<sup>1</sup> That is not to imply that CPE is in some way definitive: see Staricco (2017) and Tyfield (2015) for recent critiques. Instead, it means that CPE’s proponents have undertaken a good deal of what Bhaskar (e.g. 2008) called the philosophical under-labouring required to produce a credible framework for understanding how the materiality of, and the meanings ascribed to, economic activity interact to produce particular outcomes not the least of which is the relatively long-lived dominance of particular hegemonic way of understanding and under-taking economic activity.<sup>2</sup>

CPE’s internal consistency is provided by its grounding in critical realist epistemology (Sum and Jessop, 2013, viii). It thereby avoids, Sum and Jessop (2013) argue, both the Scylla of structuralism and Charybdis of constructivism. CPE acknowledges the existence of a material world beyond the social constructions of it made by agents operating within it (citizens, social scientists, entrepreneurs, policy makers etc.), but starts from the premise that this world “is too complex to be grasped in all its complexity in real time” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 3). It follows that “all actors are forced to construe the world selectively as a condition of going on within it” (Jessop, 2010, 338). From these premises, it follows both that structures are, in part, socially constructed and that social constructions are subject to structuration. Thus, as Bhaskar (1989, 38 – cited by Collier, 1994, 243–4) argued: social structures do not exist independently either of the activities they govern, nor of agents’ conceptions of what they are doing; therefore social structures may be only relatively enduring.

This does mean that CPE can be criticised for being anthropocentric, given that the meaning-making it focuses on is undertaken by people. Nevertheless, Collier (1994, 261) has argued that critical realism is compatible with a de-centring of rational human agents in social scientific analysis. This holds out the possibility of a conceptual rapprochement between CPE and more-than-human thinking. However, that line of argument is not pursued here, as this paper concentrates on human agents’ participation in AFN.

This leads to our third reason for using CPE: it facilitates a focus on the ways in which human agents construe and participate in AFN in the context of their construal of and (non)participation in conventional food networks. Few studies have attempted this. For example, studies which have worked with consumers whose ‘ethical’ consumption includes supporting local food and drink enterprises, have tended to focus on their construal of alternative economic imaginaries (e.g. Blake et al., 2010; Eden et al., 2008a,b,c; Hayes-Conroy and Martin, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Little et al., 2009; Seyfang, 2006; Weatherell et al., 2003; Winter, 2003), while neglecting their material consumption practices. As Blake et al. (2010, 410) observed, “the practices of consumers who view their consumption as ordinary and at the same time try to buy ‘local’ are under-researched”.

The final reason for using CPE is to check whether it can be applied successfully to small-scale and seemingly counter-hegemonic economic networks. The ontological basis for such an analysis is present. For instance, Sum and Jessop (2013, 26) posit the existence of ‘imaginaries’: “semiotic systems that shape lived experience in a complex world”, and which we are obliged to construe in order to go about our daily lives. However, while there may be as many economic imaginaries as there are economic agents, few evolve into social constructions of reality (q.v. Sum and Jessop, 2013, 162–4). It is that process, the evolution of hegemonic social constructions of reality, that has been at the core of CPE scholarship to date (e.g. Heinrich, 2015; Jessop and Sum, 2006; Sum and Jessop, 2013). Belfrage and Hauf (2015, 2017) have begun to test the applicability of CPE at smaller scales, but this work is in its early stages.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines how CPE can contribute to the study of AFN. Section 3 summarises the collection and analysis of research data from consumers concerning their construal of, and engagement with, alternative and conventional food networks. Analysis of those data takes place in Section 4, using the CPE approach outlined in Section 2. Section 5 reflects on the usefulness of CPE in this context and, based on it, concludes that the existence of AFN can be defended both ontologically and normatively.

<sup>1</sup> Jessop’s work on CPE and the strategic-relational approach, from which it was developed, extends over more than three decades. Key monographs include Jessop (1990), Jessop and Sum (2006) and Sum and Jessop (2013); the latter contains an extensive bibliography of their other publications on CPE.

<sup>2</sup> These ‘dispositives’ (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 25) are considered in more detail in Section 2.

## 2. Cultural political economy and alternative food networks

CPE is “an emerging post-disciplinary approach” (Jessop, 2010, to the study of the relationship between economy and culture. CPE has three features that make it a useful analytical lens through which to examine AFN. First, it highlights “the complex relations between meaning and practices” (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1156), whereby selective and simplified economic imaginaries evolve to account for and guide economic activities, experience of which informs further semiosis. Thus, and secondly, CPE insists on “the co-evolution of semiotic and extra-semiotic processes and their conjoint impact on the constitution and dynamic of capitalist formations” (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1156). Together, these mean, thirdly, that “economic objects are always socially constructed, [and] historically specific” (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1157).

These factors emphasise the importance of context when conducting research within a CPE framework. The importance of temporal context emerges from Jessop and Oosterlynck’s (2008, 1157) insistence on the historicity of all claims to knowledge. This informs the core CPE concept of imaginaries, the selective and simplified understandings of reality by which we live. Economic activities, therefore, proceed on the basis of economic imaginaries. However, while these are all “equal before complexity, some are more equal than others” (Jessop, 2010, 338): meaning that, at any given time, one economic imaginary will tend to be dominant. That imaginary will thereby acquire epistemological authority, such that economic activity will tend to be organised in accordance with it. However, because all economic imaginaries are partial, there will always be “interstitial, residual, marginal, irrelevant, recalcitrant and plain contradictory elements that escape any attempt to identify, govern and stabilize a given ‘economic arrangement’ or broader ‘economic order’” (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1158).

It is here that geographical context becomes important. For imaginaries, like other forms of knowledge (q.v. Thrift, 1985), “exist at different sites and scales of action – from individual agents to world society” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 165). It follows, therefore, that “economies are discursively constituted and materially reproduced on many sites and scales, in different spatio-temporal contexts, and over various spatio-temporal horizons. They extend from one-off transactions through stable economic organizations, networks, and clusters to ‘macro-economic’ regimes” (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1158). Thus, CPE can and, ideally, should adopt both micro-scale (bottom-up) and macro-scale (top-down) perspectives (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 183). To date, most work on CPE has adopted a macro-scale perspective (Jessop and Sum, 2017, 351). This is unsurprising, given that CPE emerged from Jessop’s (1990) and Jessop and Sum’s (2006) “critical interrogation and recontextualisation” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, viii) of different schools of regulation theory. However, “because [such] hegemonic projects in capitalist social formations exclude, marginalise, or suppress some identities and interests in creating an ‘illusory community’, space opens for subaltern forces to engage in tactics of resistance, demands for reform, and counter-hegemonic strategies” (Sum, 2015, 41). This reference to an ‘illusory community’ serves as a reminder that, within CPE thinking, no structure can, either materially or semiotically, encompass the real world in all its complexity. Thus, there will always be semiotic and material resources from which to construe counter-hegemonic imaginaries.

CPE’s basis in critical realism leads it to emphasise that hegemonic economic imaginaries, which are in the privileged position of being able to socially construct the economy (as opposed to the social construal of it by subaltern imaginaries), are never ‘fixed’. Instead, despite the path-dependency that they give rise to through their structuration of the material and semiotic aspects of the economy, hegemonic projects “require continuing social ‘repair’ work for their reproduction” (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1157). Sum and Jessop (2013, 25) use the term *dispositive* to describe these “discursive-material fixes”.

Sum and Jessop (2013) devote considerable space to explaining the mechanisms by which dispositives develop, become influential and achieve and maintain hegemonic status. They describe these processes in evolutionary terms: variation, selection and retention. It could be argued that this speaks to ‘totalising’ ambitions of the part of CPE. However, as there is not space to pursue this here, these terms will be accepted on heuristic grounds. The key point is that the inevitable ‘gap’ between a hegemonic dispositive and the complexity of the real world will always leave space for the construal of subaltern or counter-hegemonic imaginaries. It follows that all imaginaries – hegemonic and otherwise – “ignore key features of the actually existing natural and social world” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 191). Given that variation tends to occur randomly, there seems no reason to suppose that there cannot be, at the micro-scale, as many economic imaginaries as there are economic agents. However, given that they will always arise within the context of an extant dispositive, not all possible imaginaries will be compossible.<sup>3</sup> The selection and retention of compossible imaginaries is governed by four modes of selectivity: structural, discursive, technological and agential (q.v. Sum and Jessop, 2013, 214–9). These will tend to be manifested in one of seven ‘discursive-material moments’ (q.v. Sum and Jessop, 2013, 220–4). The discursive-material moment that is most relevant to this paper is “[c]ounter-hegemonic resistance and negotiations” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 223–4). Such discursive-material moments can give rise to: the building of counter-hegemonic challenges; the strategic and tactical disruption of dominant cultural symbols and practices; dialogue with other groups and the hegemonic dispositive; the accommodation of counter-hegemonic challenges by the hegemonic dispositive; and further variation of socio-economic imaginaries (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 223–4).

In any given time and place, therefore, it is possible to ‘think and perform the economy otherwise’ (Leyshon and Lee, 2003) than according to the dominant dispositive. Thus, CPE provides a firm ontological basis for the existence of AFN. However, just because AFN can have ontological status, it does not follow that they will necessarily be preferable to conventional and/or dominant food networks. Such judgements depend on the evaluation of different food networks against normative criteria. To do so does not necessarily involve embracing the so-called ‘responsibilization’ of food consumption outlined above, and which has been critiqued as the ‘micro-isolation’ of food politics (Goodman et al., 2010, 1790). This is because, as Sayer (2011, 177) suggests, there are different scales of normative evaluation. For Barnett et al. (2011), drawing on Young (2006), there are two: “one to do with individual interaction and the other to do with the background conditions within which that interaction takes place” (Young, 2006, 91, cited by Barnett et al., 2011, 7). The former occurs at the micro-scale of individual consumers and transactions; the latter can occur at larger scales, including those of the network and the dispositive.

AFN have been criticised for failing to engage sufficiently with larger-scale normative issues. Such criticisms tend to take four main forms. First, attempts to create local AFN, particularly those that seek to provide fresh and healthy produce to disadvantaged groups, can re-inscribe unequal power relations through a ‘new philanthropy’ (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2008) which adds “symbolic domination to structural inequality by making the giver appear generous and superior and the recipient passive and inadequate” (Sayer, 2011, 178). Secondly, ‘ethical’ and local food marketing and consumption have been interpreted as potentially socially exclusive and reactionary (Alkon, 2013; Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Blake et al., 2010; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000). They may, for example, hark back to a

<sup>3</sup> Compossibility refers to those things that are possible “relative to specific time-space structures and horizons of action” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 4).

Table 1  
Expenditure on food (in UK pounds) during two weeks by twenty local food consumers.

Food diarist	Spent at retailer where recruited	Spent at super-markets	Spent at retail markets	Spent on home delivery	Spent at other retailers	Total spend	% spend realised where recruited
1	33.52	10.18	6.80	–	42.87	93.37	64.3
2	18.70	84.04	–	5.04	12.55	120.33	74.1
3	15.38	97.16	–	–	50.97	163.51	22.4
4	29.04	240.83	–	–	14.77	284.64	38.8
5	16.38	174.59	–	–	–	190.97	60.8
6	84.38	133.27	23.46	–	45.89	287.00	85.3
7	20.00	129.26	–	–	2.00	151.26	59.8
8	34.77	19.64	12.84	–	57.68	124.93	61.3
9	38.84	204.88	–	23.00	–	266.72	57.9
10	51.32	45.80	–	–	–	97.12	79.2
11	2.55	120.09	19.05	–	12.81	154.50	13.8
12	17.28	127.83	16.40	16.78	26.95	205.24	61.7
13	42.98	11.85	3.65	7.96	19.08	85.52	100.0
14	16.75	46.57	10.00	12.20	11.91	97.43	84.8
15	10.62	61.61	21.35	–	–	93.58	42.8
16	14.92	53.30	42.09	10.80	199.85	320.96	3.0
17	6.42	186.17	15.54	–	–	208.13	30.9
18	18.35	163.95	–	–	3.49	185.79	69.6
19	17.69	100.73	5.20	–	35.85	159.47	47.3
20	19.84	31.30	1.00	19.84	8.04	80.02	87.3
Totals	509.73	2043.05	177.38	95.62	544.71	3370.49	
%	15.12	60.62	5.26	2.84	16.16		57.3

Note: Purchases from convenience stores are recorded in the ‘other retailers’ column.

white, bourgeois and idyllic rural imaginary that ignores social injustice. Thirdly, an emphasis on the ‘branding from below’ (q.v. Sum and Jessop, 2013, 224) of food and drink products is consistent with neoliberal policies that pit “the local against the local” (Feagan, 2007, 37) in a global imaginary of competing places. AFN that rely on such techniques to emphasise their alterity can, therefore, be interpreted as part of a neoliberal ‘flexible specialisation’ prescription for economic development (cf. Watts et al., 2005, 28). Lastly, where AFN use such branding in order to justify charging a price premium, they risk reversing the democratisation of access to food and drink achieved by conventional food networks (Goodman D, 2004, 13).

On this basis, it could be argued that AFN, despite claims that they encourage and enable ‘ethical’ consumption, may actually contribute less towards improvements in social justice than conventional food networks. However, given the contingent nature of all economic networks, such arguments require careful consideration in light of the available evidence. For it is only by evaluating the semiotic and material resources put into action in AFN that such normative evaluations of them, and of the networks to which they are alternatives, can be made. It is to such an evaluation that we now turn.

### 3. Methods

Forty consumers were recruited in England at alternative food retailers. This sample was recruited purposively (q.v. Etikan et al., 2016) in order to ensure that all respondents were users of AFN – the paper’s object of study – and that data saturation was approached (q.v. Baker and Edwards, 2012). A two-pronged data collection strategy facilitated an analysis of the relationship between the semiotic and material aspects of their food consumption. Semi-structured interviews (q.v. Kvale, 1996; Warren, 2002) were conducted. Interviewees were asked what was important to them in their food consumption, with the issues raised discussed in turn; they were prompted to talk about topics in the interview schedule that had not previously been mentioned. The topics were: price and value for money; food quality; food safety; food and health; ethical factors; environmental factors; and local provenance. Interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and coded axially.

Twenty interviewees agreed to record all food expenditure, excluding meals purchased in restaurants and cafés, for two weeks. This period was chosen to encompass at least one major shopping trip, which it did for all but one respondent. Respondents recorded the date, place and cost of each purchase. As supermarkets dominate the UK grocery market, purchases from them were interpreted as engagement with conventional food networks. These food purchase diaries (diaries hereafter) were completed after the interviews to prevent them becoming post hoc justifications of the behaviour recorded. Completed diaries were collected from interviewees allowing, in most cases, a debrief. The researchers gave interviewees a £5 voucher and diarists an additional £5 voucher.

Diaries were analysed using descriptive statistics, two of which require elaboration. First, estimates were produced, using geographical information software, of the distance between the diarist’s home and each retailer they used. In most cases, geo-referenced data (postal codes) were available; in the remainder the relevant town/village centre was used. These estimates are the source of the data presented in columns three and four of Table 2. Secondly, estimates were made of the extent to which diarists avoided buying supermarket produce where the local food retailer through which they were recruited sold reasonable equivalents. These were calculated as follows. When the retailers were visited, the categories of food that they sold were listed. When the diaries were examined the purchase of any item belonging to one of these categories was noted. It was not always possible to identify every item on a given receipt and, even where the category could be identified (e.g. cheese) it was not always known whether the individual product (e.g. cheddar) could have been purchased from the retailer through which the diarist was recruited. Nevertheless, the data were judged sufficiently detailed to allow robust estimates to be made of the total amount of money spent on food categories that the retailer through which the diarist was recruited was known to stock, and the amount of money spent on those food categories at each retailer visited by the diarist. These estimates are the source of the data in the final column of Table 1.

#### 4. Consumers' engagement with alternative food networks

Interviewees construed distinct imaginaries for alternative and conventional food networks. It is notable, and consistent with previous studies (e.g. Lee, 2000, 2006; Sayer, 2003, 2007, 2011), that these imaginaries were differentiated on the basis of the values that interviewees ascribed to them and by which they expected each network to operate. These values can be grouped into three main themes: food quality judgements; provenance and trust; and 'alternativeness'.

Table 2  
Estimated distances to retailers' premises from food diarists' homes.

Food diarist	Location of diarist's home	Estimated distance (km) from diarist's home to retailer where recruited	Estimated mean distance (km) from diarist's home to all retailers used
1	Village	5.5	6.6
2	Rural	4.3	12.2
3	Village	7.4	11.6
4	Rural	15.6	13.9
5	Village	7.4	14.4
6	Village	1	9.1
7	Rural	3	10
8	Village	6.4	15.3
9	Town	3.5	20.6
10	Rural	2.5	6.2
11	Town	0.5	1.3
12	Town	1.5	1.2
13	Town	1.5	1.3
14	Town	2.5	3.5
15	City	11	6.9
16	Town	5	3.6
17	City	6	7.5
18	Village	3	9.5
19	Village		10.3
20	Village	17	10.1
Mean		5.5	8.8

Note: Column 3 is blank for food diarist 19 because the retailer through which they were recruited delivered to their home.

Interviewees consistently defined food quality in terms of taste,<sup>4</sup> freshness and provenance. These attributes varied by produce: for fruit and vegetables freshness was paramount, for meat provenance was. About half stated that visual inspection is an important way of trying to judge food's freshness before purchase. However, several were suspicious of the aesthetic uniformity of supermarket displays of fruit and vegetables. For example: "I think with supermarkets you get them all the same size and looking very good; it doesn't necessarily mean that they have got a good taste" (male, in full-time employment). Thus, interviewees use additional senses to corroborate visual evaluation. Several reported using smell (e.g. when purchasing fresh fruit) and touch – feeling or weighing produce in the hand – in this way. By doing so they implicitly, and in several cases explicitly (in interviews), rejected the evaluation criteria encouraged by supermarkets: unblemished uniformity of appearance. This parallels Lamine's (2005, findings from research with French consumers involved with AFN).

Semiotic corroboration of provenance was also important for the great majority of interviewees, particularly where sensory corroboration proved impossible. For instance: "this is important: if you are into food quality you want to know where it's come from" (male, in full-time employment). Most said that they regularly sought English and/or British produce; about half said they bought local food. However, there is more to provenance than origin. As another interviewee said, judging food involves evaluating its "more hidden quality" (male, in full-time employment): that is, what has gone into producing it and getting it to the retailer. The sources of semiotic corroboration mentioned most by interviewees were product labels and vendors.

Two types of labelling were discussed: lists of ingredients and branding. Few paid much attention to ingredients, other than to avoid certain additives on health grounds. Some were impatient of such scrutiny: "[y]ou haven't really got time, have you, to go around the shops with your specs [spectacles] saying: now, hang on a minute, what is this chemical here? It's a load of nonsense" (male partner of female interviewee, in full-time employment). However, this was not due primarily to indifference about the contents of the food they buy. Instead, they omitted scrutiny of labels for one of two reasons. First, "we are probably better off not knowing" (female, in full-time employment) about how food is produced. For this and other interviewees such ignorance enables them to continue consuming foods produced or processed in ways to which they might object if they knew about them. This signifies a decision not to 'problematize' aspects of their food consumption, which appeared sometimes to reflect a compromise between competing demands on their time.

The second reason given for not reading labels concerned the usefulness of lists of ingredients. For instance:

I don't know how you would actually check on whether something was safe or not. That's one of the problems: you have only got their word for it, as with anything, unless you want to sort of go around and do your own research on where it comes from. So you have to rely on what they tell you (male, in full-time employment).

Moreover, even though one may be able to rely on lists of ingredients, "unless you are a sort of scientist you really don't know what they mean" (male, in full-time employment). Such views echo Eden et al.'s (2008a,b,c) findings that UK consumers are sceptical of food assurance schemes.

<sup>4</sup> As taste is evaluated at the fourth stage of final consumption (embodiment – qv. Mansvelt, 2005, 7), and as this paper deals with the first two (sale and purchase), it is not discussed here.

The second main source of semiotic corroboration of food provenance, and hence quality, was vendors' knowledge. This tallies with Murdoch et al.'s (2000, 117) argument that there can be an inter-personal element to food quality because it is defined partly on the basis of trust. Most interviewees said that they buy food from small businesses, including those through which they were recruited, because they trust them to provide produce whose 'discernible' and 'hidden' characteristics are of high quality. The following quotations illustrate interviewees' perceptions of the difference between the conventional and alternative food networks they use. "[T]he food industry...know damn well they are flogging junk to most of us all the time, and the kids as well. They couldn't care less: they are making money" (female, in part-time employment). By contrast: "I kind of believe and trust that the stuff you get from [named local food retailer] is going to be less processed, have less additives, less gunk and junk in there, be more natural, more like 100 per cent food" (male, in full-time employment). A different interviewee said that they had stopped eating beef after publicity about Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy:

We have it occasionally now but, again, we would tend to trust and buy from a quality local butcher that can say, well, that has come from [a known source]...rather than a supermarket where you don't know where the hell it's from. And even if it had it on the label there are all sorts of stories about them re-dating and re-labelling stuff at the packing plants and all the rest of it. But it [buying meat from supermarkets] has become rather more anonymous. I think less trustworthy would be a bit of an extreme way of putting it, but less deserving of that extra level of trust that you might want (male, in full-time employment).

Another interviewee said of the produce sold by a local organic centre: "I would trust them more than I would the organic stuff in the supermarket but I don't know why. I wouldn't buy stuff from them because it's very expensive" (female, in part-time employment). These comments indicate different economic imaginaries relating to conventional and alternative food networks. Although both have their pros and cons, many interviewees spoke of their desire and willingness to use AFN because they believed them to be more trustworthy than supermarkets concerning the provenance, and hence the quality, of the food they sell.

This was not the only contrast displayed in interviewees' elaboration of these distinct conventional and alternative economic imaginaries. They were accompanied by distinct geographical imaginaries. This is exemplified in the economic-geographical imaginary of an interviewee who bought lamb from a local farm shop because they prefer to buy British meat, their regular butcher sold only New Zealand lamb, they prefer not to buy fresh food from supermarkets, and they like to support local retailers. Such examples, combined with the fact that more interviewees identified the socio-economic benefits of supporting local business than claimed to buy local food, suggest that local AFN are benefiting from something akin to the localism whose growth in the USA was discussed by Hess (2009). They also suggest that the main reason for using local AFN is to buy food from local retailers whom they trust, rather than to buy local food *per se*.

Those interviewees who sought out local food<sup>5</sup> mentioned three main benefits of doing so. Many said that buying local food supports local businesses and helps keep money and employment in the area. Buying local meat was thought by several to be good for farm animal welfare by reducing the distance that livestock have to travel<sup>6</sup> and, in at least one case, by enabling them to view the animals on the farm and see that they were well looked after. Two said that buying local organic food benefits the environment because there are not "chemicals being sprayed over the fields locally" (male, in full-time employment). A few also said that buying local food can have environmental benefits by reducing the distance from "field to plate" (female, recently retired). The fact that few interviewees mentioned environmental factors was a surprise. However, it may reflect the complexities of the debate over the environmental impacts of food networks (q.v. Coley et al., 2009; Pretty et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2005).

Overall, AFN appeared to benefit from a combination of factors that had led some consumers to problematize their use of conventional food networks. As noted above, the issue of trust, specifically the lack of it, is important. Several interviewees expressed concern about, and even a dislike of, supermarkets. This ranged from annoyance about their stocking policies (female, not in employment) to a dislike of their 'ethos' (female, in part-time employment). Thus, using AFN could be interpreted as an act of resistance to the economic dominance of the major supermarket chains: "I am pleased to shop somewhere that is fighting the supermarkets a little bit" (female, recently retired). Others expressed concern over their semiotic dominance. For instance:

I find it extraordinary that supermarkets have such a hold on people because in fact you get far better value for money in the local greengrocer and in the local butcher, especially the local butcher, than you do in the supermarket (female, retired).

This suggests that a key difference between interviewees' imaginaries of conventional and alternative food networks concerns scale. They expressed concern about the power that they perceive multiple retailers to have over both the economic activities and the imaginaries of food retailing, and stated that they resist it by shopping at small local retailers.

The extent to which twenty interviewees contributed materially to alternative and conventional food networks was recorded in their food purchase diaries. Although the diaries, strictly speaking, provided semiotic data, the provision of corroborating receipts and careful re-reporting of expenditure gave the authors confidence that they are a robust proxy for the material aspects of consumption.

Table 1 shows the money spent on food by diarists over two weeks. The total spend (column 7) is broken down, in columns two to six, by retailer type, with the figure in column two showing the amount spent with the retailer through which they were recruited. As the total of column three shows, 60 per cent of food purchases by value were from supermarkets. This is much lower than the 82 per cent of the UK grocery market controlled by the main multiple retailers.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, these consumers still obtained most of their food through conventional food networks. As supermarkets are making increasing efforts to demonstrate the provenance of their produce, at least in premium-priced ranges, and as local and regional sourcing play a part in this (Freidberg, 2010, 1869), it seems possible that AFN are vulnerable to conventionalisation. For example, consumers who bought food through AFN might be persuaded to buy food with clearly-demonstrated provenance from the supermarkets through which they already purchased most of their groceries. The interview data show, however, that supermarket use is selective and influenced by other factors. For instance, an interviewee with two children noted that:

<sup>5</sup> Definitions of 'local' ranged between about 18 km and the county boundary.

<sup>6</sup> They did not seem to consider the (often considerable) distances involved in getting animals slaughtered.

<sup>7</sup> Kantar Worldpanel records UK grocery market shares in the 12 weeks to 31 December 2017 as: Tesco 28%; Sainsbury's 16.4%; Asda 15.3%, Morrisons 10.7%; Aldi 6.8% and Lidl 5%. Source: <https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/en/grocery-market-share/great-britain>; last accessed 3/2/18. The Co-Operative and Waitrose were excluded from this figure as they are significantly different structurally from most capitalist enterprises.

we would about once a fortnight do a bulk shop at one of the supermarkets, probably [names supermarket] because it's our side of town, to get the sort of stuff that you can't procure at a decent price anywhere else these days (male, in full-time employment).

This reveals a perception, confirmed by other interviewees, that certain things cannot reasonably be purchased except from supermarkets: such as vegetarian sausages, falafel and tofu (female, in part-time employment).

The corollary of this is that a number of interviewees claimed to avoid buying from supermarkets food that they can buy through AFN. For example:

I never buy vegetables at supermarkets or hardly ever.....the only fruit I buy from supermarkets is things like oranges and sometimes bananas: oranges because I have fresh orange juice at breakfast time and it is cheaper to buy oranges in bulk. I never buy apples from supermarkets...ever. I buy them always from a producer at [names location] when I can. I mean I am very averse to supermarket shopping (female, retired).

The diary data go some way to confirming this. Column eight of Table 1 shows that, overall, diarists bought from the retailer through which they were recruited more than 57 percent of what they could have bought there, based on their overall purchases of similar items. Moreover, these figures underestimate the extent to which diarists used AFN, as they take account only of money spent at the retailer through which they were recruited. In several cases, interview data revealed that diarists use additional AFN. Diarist 14, for example, obtained much of their seasonal fruit and vegetables from an organic box scheme. Diarist 16, who had the lowest percentage spend at the retailer through which they were recruited, noted that most of their meat came from another AFN. During the time they kept the diary, they also purchased half a pig from a local smallholder. These three AFN accounted for their entire meat spend during that period. Removing this outlier, the 19 remaining diarists bought from the retailer through which they were recruited about 60 per cent of what they could have bought from them.

However, while diarists made a significant material (economic) contribution to AFN, their commitment was tempered by other factors. Barnett et al. (2011) provide a convincing account of what is probably the most important of these. Drawing on Warde (2005), they argue that much consumption activity is embedded in 'integrative practices' – "bundles of activities...bound together by normative ends and emotions" (Barnett et al., 2011, 67). Therefore, consumption is often one of a group of linked activities rather than a practice in its own right (Warde, 2005, 137, cited by Barnett et al., 2011, 68). In the absence of detailed observational data on interviewees' integration of consumption with other activities, this proposition is examined using two proxies: interviewees' statements about the factors that influenced their choice of food shops; and the estimated distances from diarists' homes to those shops.

Column four of Table 2 shows that the mean distance from a diarist's home to the food retailers they used was 8.8 km. Diarists travelled an average 5.5 km to the retailer where they were recruited. This, in combination with the interview data, suggests that their use of local AFN is fitted into other travel patterns (cf. Weatherell et al., 2003, 241). This is consistent with Gijsbrechts et al.'s (2008, 12) observations that consumers seldom visit more than seven shops and that distance is an important selection criterion. It is also consistent with Scholderer and Grunert's (2005) argument that 'convenience' can often be the most important factor when choosing a retailer. As our diarists appear to fit their use of AFN into other travel activities, we suggest that their material support for local AFN is likely to be constrained by other habitual practices. In turn, this suggests (à la Barnett et al., 2011) that attempts to persuade consumers to problematize their consumption decisions are likely to succeed only to the extent that they do not involve problematizing other of their existing spatial practices.

## 5. Discussion

Taking a CPE approach has allowed us to demonstrate that our respondents construed, both semiotically and materially, distinct imaginaries of conventional and alternative food networks. Moreover, it has shown that their normative evaluations favour AFN. Their key normative distinction was that their use of conventional food networks tended to be based on reliance, whereas their use of AFN tended to be based on trust (q.v. Blois, 1999, 199–200). Respondents relied on supermarkets to fulfil their legal obligations by selling food that would not do them immediate harm, but they tended not to trust them. They were more likely to trust local AFN to sell them high quality food of known and honestly-declared provenance. However, that trust is conditional. Several interviewees emphasised that they might withdraw it if they discovered something not to their liking. This bears out Morgan et al.'s (2006, 189) point that providing food with specific characteristics, and of sufficient quality, are vital to the survival of AFN. The picture is complicated, however, because interviewees' use of local AFN is conditional both on the quality of the food – in terms of its freshness, provenance and taste – and on the extent to which use of them can be slotted into their existing use of space. Therefore, just because a retailer is trusted does not mean that it will be supported in preference to one that is simply relied on.

A second normative distinction to emerge from the data is that the 'alternativeness' of local AFN is considered a good thing in its own right. Both the talk and diary data demonstrate that respondents sought to maintain a variety of economic-geographical imaginaries of food. As one said: "the High Street is dying, so the opportunities are reducing" (male, in full-time employment); a sentiment echoed by most of those who saw a value in supporting local retailers. They support AFN but at the same time they value supermarkets for their convenience, range, prices, etc. Thus, our respondents construed diverse economic-geo-graphical imaginaries, "deriving from diverse values, which operate both within capitalism and, simultaneously, as alternatives to it" (Lee, 2006, 428).

These distinct imaginaries can, following de Certeau (1984), be interpreted as tactical disruptions of the accumulative logic of oligopolistic grocers and, by extension, of the dominant dispositive. Tactics are used by the 'weak' to trick the 'strong' (de Certeau, 1984, 26) but are circumscribed by, and operate within, strategies (pp. 29–30): the "calculus of force relationships" (p. xix) that 'map out' one's place in the social order (as consumer, etc.). Thus, the tactics of everyday life can disrupt the dominant dispositive whilst simultaneously confirming it.



Therefore, our respondents' subaltern imaginaries form part of the 'reservoir' (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1158) of economic imaginaries and activities that are marginal to the dominant dispositive but provide semiotic and material resources that can be used both to resist and 'repair' it. It is this tactical aspect of AFN that our respondents appeared to value. The corollary of this is that AFN are, to some extent, prisoners of their alterity, because it is for this that they are valued.

This, in turn, enjoins researchers to take care when labelling the imaginaries that construe local AFN as 'defensive' localism; just as Winter (2003), from whom the term derives, did. Our respondents wanted to support the local economy by shopping in small local retailers and, to a lesser extent, by buying local food. However, although support for local retailers was an important component of their imaginaries of local AFN, that support was conditional on the existence of trust. Such trust-based economic networks appear to be predicated on direct personal contact, and it is likely that this will have a spatial component because it will usually need to be slotted into consumers' other spatial practices. In this context, therefore, it might be more productive to think of 'local' as a marker of the scale of human relationships, rather than as signifying specific places. If that is so – and further research is required in order to determine whether and to what extent it is – it would help to free the 'local' from its current status as being normatively suspect (q.v. Feagan, 2007, 39; Hess, 2009, 104; more broadly, see Harvey, 1990, 351). If the local scale in economic imaginaries derives from a desire to enter into trust-based relationships that depend for their establishment on unmediated interaction, that would make 'local' a categorical variable with which researchers could engage, in addition to being a scale of normative evaluation.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, adopting a CPE perspective reminds us that there is no reason to assume, *a priori*, that progressive and regressive imaginaries will tend to occur at one spatial scale rather than another. Indeed, Sum and Jessop (2013, 12) argue that space is both socially constructed and socially constitutive, rather than being an external parameter of enquiry. This was clearly the case for our respondents, whose economic imaginaries gave rise to spatial practices that depended, in part, on the extent to which they reclaimed responsibility for their consumption decisions. Referring to Gibson-Graham's (2003) ethics of the local, we found that their behaviour: recognised the particularity of small-scale local food retailers and their produce; instantiated contingency by using local food retailers that can be incorporated into their habitual spatial practices; honoured and supported difference from the accumulative logic of conventional food networks; and cultivated local capacity by spending money with local enterprises. This may be a slightly idealised reading; but our respondents declared, and the diaries demonstrated, a willingness to seek out and engage with local entrepreneurs on the basis of normative criteria (trust and food quality), rather than leaving such evaluations about what goes on in food networks entirely to others. By demonstrating the "socially benign attributes of local food" (Morgan, 2010, 1855), our respondents can be considered to be engaging in 'ethical' consumption in a way that, while it is consistent with the neo-liberal responsibilization agenda, can neither be 'read off' from it nor be assumed to simply collapse back into and thereby reinforce it.

This addresses a key concern expressed about AFN: that they cannot prevail against the formidable corporate and political forces that dominate conventional food networks (see, e.g., Allen et al., 2003, 74; Morgan, 2010, 1865). While it is undoubtedly the case that AFN *qua* AFN cannot do so, a CPE perspective alerts us to the possibility that the material and semiotic resources that AFN produce may, through the evolutionary process of selection, either displace or be incorporated into, and hence change in some way, the dominant dispositive. Indeed, a CPE perspective can help researchers to resist conceptualising different imaginaries as mutually exclusive, and the power as 'flowing' in one direction. The conventionalisation debate is a case in point here. For example, it has been demonstrated that the codification processes associated with the structuration of certified organic produce, and its subsequent popularisation, have narrowed its socio-economic focus (Allen et al., 2003; Guthman, 2004) by marginalising or, in CPE terms, not selecting "the normative arguments of the organic movement that organic farming is how all farming should be done" (Tomlinson, 2008, 146). Nevertheless, there is evidence that the growing consumption of organic produce has promoted the well-being of non-farmed organisms and the environment (Gabriel et al., 2010; Gomiero et al., 2008; Meisterling et al., 2009, 227; Thomassen et al., 2008, 105). Thus, elements of organic imaginaries have been selected and have led to at least some improvements in (at least non-human) well-being.

However, the main advantage of adopting a CPE perspective, and thereby focusing on both the semiotic and the material aspects of food consumption, is that it enables AFN to be set on a firmer conceptual basis and allows a clearer distinction to be drawn between their categorical and normative characteristics. With regard to the normative aspects of AFN, CPE can rein in the excesses of the 'moral turn' in social science (Goodman et al., 2010, 1783), where critiques mounted from an often under-specified moral high ground provide "little more than scepticism coupled with a concern to be reflexive" (Sayer, 2011, 219). Scepticism and normative evaluation are vital to critical social science, but they can only serve a useful purpose, either scientifically or socially, if they are properly contextualised. If it does nothing else, CPE provides researchers with consistent and defensible epistemological, ontological and methodological premises for doing so.

This, in turn, can provide a counterweight to the counsels of despair that often characterise the conventionalisation debate. To be sure, the selection, from within the dominant dispositive, of certain aspects of the alternative imaginaries that develop in its interstices, will tend to neuter those aspects that cannot be assimilated easily (see above, and Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, 1157). Thus, the dominant dispositive will tend to change over time, and it may be that the selection and retention of elements from alternative imaginaries can influence that change in directions that promote social and/or economic and/or environmental goods. However, such outcomes, whether good or bad, are difficult to predict with any level of accuracy when dealing with open and complex systems such as societies and economies.

Thus, a CPE perspective allows AFN research to navigate between its own Scylla, of an increasingly arid 'moral turn', and its own Charybdis, of conventionalisation-induced despair about the ability of AFN to help to make the world a better place. But it also prompts reflection on what differences it is realistic to expect AFN to be able to make. Given their size, and the fact that they tend to operate within a dominant dispositive that is, at least, at variance with their imaginaries, we conclude that the main good that AFN can do is to contribute to the ongoing, and necessary, process of variation. AFN are repositories of material practices and ideas that exist outside of, and may be opposed to, the dominant dispositive. Whether they succeed or not is, arguably, beside the point (cf. Jessop and Sum, 2017, 348). What matters is that from them may come the means of creating a more socially, economically and environmentally just world. That makes the existence of AFN a good thing.

<sup>8</sup> There is an intriguing parallel here with Sayer's (2000, 86) observation that, for David Hume and Adam Smith, 'moral sentiments' "tend to decline with distance".

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