

Sub-Theme Proposal for CMS 2017

Reorganizing the neo-liberal food system: Evolution, Rebellion or Revolution?

On one hand the neo-liberal food system can be considered highly efficient. This system of production and distribution has produced higher yields, and lower food prices in real terms, as well being highly profitable for organisations and, latterly, futures traders (Clapp, 2014). On the other hand, it has been criticised for a narrow view of what constitutes efficiency. The organization of the food system around the primary goal of profit accumulation has also produced obesity alongside persistent undernourishment (Alexandratos & Bruinsma, 2012), and environmental degradation contributing to climate change (IAASTD, 2009). Meanwhile there is a concentration of wealth and power in a small number of trans-national agri-food corporations at the expense of individual producer and consumers (Halweil, 2002, p. 25). This state of affairs has given rise to counter tendencies, apparently expressing discontent and a desire to change the food system for the better (Allen, 2010).

Whilst few could disagree with this sentiment, the question of how to re-organize the food system in a 'better' way remains. The call for some sort of 'food revolution' to address contemporary problems in our food systems is not new, but it is contested. Specifically, proposals differ in terms of what is to be changed, who is to take action to bring the change about and whether this will be at the individual, civil or political level as well as the means through which that change will be achieved.

Prominent claims to revolution include The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, which is backed by the Gates Foundation. This envisages increased farm productivity and livelihoods through a re-run of the technological farming solutions applied in the original green revolution. The need to boost productivity and ensure food security underpins the argument behind this approach, undermining claims of 'greenness' (Tomlinson, 2011). Opponents, however, point out that the world already produces more than enough food for its growing population and point to the need to revolutionize the political economy instead of technological innovation (Holt-Giménez, Shattuck, Altieri, Herren, & Gliessman, 2012). Others are concerned with consumers' dwindling knowledge of food production, nutrition and cookery (Meyer, Coveney, Henderson, Ward, & Taylor, 2012; Thompson & Coskuner - Balli, 2007). Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution aims to equip people with the requisite knowledge to act as responsible consumers in food markets, taking an educational approach.

A plethora of so called alternative food movements have rebelled against the dominant food system. They reflect a multitude of issues of concern and modes of

organisation. Gleaning and dumpster diving networks link up to those concerned with re-distributing food to address undernutrition and food waste. Alternative agriculture groups and farmers markets reconnect producers and consumers, often promoting particular production standards of ethical production, such as organic. Meanwhile we are called on to act as individual citizens, to exercise our influence in the market by voting with each fork full. We are enabled to enact this change by a range of labelling and certification schemes designed to inform consumers. Armed with this information we are expected to make responsible buying choices and signal a desire for more accountable production thereby bringing about changes in the food system. Or so the argument goes.

Some 'revolutions' (e.g. Jamie Oliver) have been critiqued for lending support to the neo-liberal conceptualisation of the market. Other revolutions (e.g. Green Revolution for Africa) are critiqued because they favour the interests of particular commercial organisations. The actions of civil groups have been portrayed as more rebellious than revolutionary with limited potential to unsettle extant practice. The ability to vote through consumption tending to privilege the values and interests of the wealthy, without unsettling the dominant mode of production and consumption (Eden, Bear, & Walker, 2008, p. 1047). More fundamental re-organising of the food system through community-based food production can be understood as a quiet revolution in the way that it defies the standard market model (Boehm, Mizocsky, Watson & Lanka). Instead, it offers a 'special emphasis on creating and building community around the interwoven issues of food, land and nature'. (Hinrichs, 2000, p.299) Approaches to change differ then. From those that are evolutionary offering no fundamental change to revolutions aiming to upturn the faith in markets and replace economic values with social and/or environmental values through other methods of organisation.

We welcome papers that critically examine our contemporary food system, the problems it generates and/or the range of initiatives that seek to address its current deficiencies. In particular we hope to explore questions about who might bring about change, the extent of change that might be brought about, the interests served by change and who is/should be responsible for change. In short, can and will deficiencies be addressed through continued evolution of industry, through the rebellious acts of individuals or civic society or might these amount to a full-blown revolution?

We welcome papers from any discipline that critically explores our food systems and the possibilities of change. We encourage contributors to engage with the food system at the political level, as well as the social, cultural and economic level. Contributors may consider any aspects of the food system and approaches to change and take a theoretical or empirical approach. Questions that might be addressed are not limited to but could include the following:

- Critiques of current developments within the food system such as technological solutions, sustainable intensification, or the financialisation of commodities.
- Case studies and practice-oriented discussions of approaches that challenge aspects of industrial agriculture, the global food system, the monopoly of supermarkets, etc. Contributions from practitioners welcome.
- Alternative futures, the scale, limitations and social reach of forms of localism and biodynamic, craft, seasonal and cooperative production. To what extent do these alternatives disrupt and/or reproduce existing market relations and inequalities?
- The role and identities of revolutionaries – who can lead change, how can they lead change, how do those engaged in alternative projects understand their role?
- Industry responses to calls for change – how are acts of rebellion institutionalised, with what effect at to what end?
- The values that underpin the dominant food system and how these might be challenged by ethical or moral understandings of food production and consumption practices?
- What might a revolutionized food system look like? Are there other players that can help change the status quo?

Convener Biographies

Gillian Hopkinson (lead convener), Lancaster University

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Gillian Hopkinson is a senior lecturer in the marketing department of Lancaster University Management School where her research and teaching focus on retail channels, with a strong emphasis on food. Her recent research explores multi-actor networks and in particular looks at the contestation of meaning in the interaction of celebrity chefs, commercial organisations and consumers. This has been published in journals including the Journal of Marketing Management, Industrial Marketing Management and Marketing Theory.

Previous track convenor experience: Critical marketing stream, CMS 2009, Manchester (including editing resultant special edition in Marketing Theory).

Dave Watson, University of East Anglia

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Dave Watson is a senior research associate on the Work, Learning and Wellbeing evidence programme for the Economic and Social Research Council funded What Works Wellbeing Centre.

He joined Norwich Business School in December 2015 and has worked on research projects in a number of settings, including social movements, community food organisations and with vulnerable groups in deprived areas. He also has experience of working in a number of settings outside academia including local government and the third sector.

He has recently submitted his my PhD in the Business School at the University of Essex which looks at the role of community food organisations in addressing alienation in the food system and supporting well-being. He has an interdisciplinary background holding a BA in Philosophy and MA in sociological research methods. My research interests are broad, but I have a particular interest in the concept of well-being and the sociology and political economy of food systems and alternative forms of organisation.

Previous convenor experience: Alternative food and drink markets track, CMS 2015, Leicester (including editing resulting special edition in Journal of Marketing Management)

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Isabelle Szmigin is Professor of Marketing at Birmingham Business School, the University of Birmingham, UK. Her interests lie primarily in the areas of consumer research, services, ethical and social marketing. She has held ESRC, European Foundation for Alcohol Research (ERAB) and British Academy research grants. She has previously worked in publishing, financial services and the chemical industry in various marketing roles.

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