

Editorial

Researching Diverse Food Initiatives: From Backyard and Community Gardens to International Markets

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Introduction

Given the current environmental crisis and prevalence of social justice concerns, there is no doubt that we need a different approach to how food is produced, consumed and distributed. While both academic and popular accounts of the food system often focus on the violences and exclusions created by export-oriented, high-input, industrial agriculture, the focus of many communities, practitioners and academics is on what can and has been done to create and support alternative food initiatives. Food sovereignty movements in the Majority and Minority worlds, community gardens, community supported agriculture and people-led approaches to sustainable agriculture have all made important contributions to how food is produced, distributed and consumed in the 21st century. For those involved in these movements, and for those who work with them, there is a need for detailed discussion of the specific practices associated with alternative food initiatives, and for considered, yet generative, explorations of the strengths, limitations and conundrums of different approaches. For academics working closely with alternative food movements, there is also the question of how best to contribute to the movements, and how to understand the role of the researcher in researching and actively supporting movements in varied ways.

The papers in this special issue have their genesis in a series of sessions held at the Institute of Australian Geographers annual conference in September 2009. The sessions sought to draw together research on existing alternatives to mainstream agriculture and to further understand the role of research and researchers in contributing to the movements they study. With this special issue, we aim to further develop these themes. Our first aim is to contribute to the picture of a world full of existing alternatives. There are a myriad of diverse ways that food economies are being rethought and differently enacted. In the special issue, we consider diverse food practices drawn from Majority and Minority worlds, from Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts, from small scale voluntary initiatives to agricultural networks that comprise hundreds of millions of producers. While our approach cannot be uncritical, our critiques and discussions are drawn from a “tasting” rather than a “judging” stance (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. xxvii) with analyses that support the development of socially just and environmentally sound approaches.

The second aim is to grapple with the role of academic researchers in supporting these movements. As academic researchers, we can contribute by undertaking research to strengthen existing initiatives and experiments, and help new ones come into being. This special issue showcases research that uses very different approaches, including modelling, empirical description, and action-oriented research, and both quantitative and qualitative techniques, to contribute to building sustainable food systems. We understand these projects as involving a performative approach to research. Describing research as performative is a means of drawing attention to the way that all research contributes to making the world we come to live in, whether the research is explicitly performative, such as participatory and action-oriented research, or whether the research is ‘unconsciously’ performative, such as research that purports to be simply describing the world, yet in so doing actually contributes to making the world that is being described more real (Law and Urry 2004).

In this editorial, we will draw out three major themes that arise from the papers. We first turn to the question of alternatives. How might we understand alternatives and what kinds of alternative approaches are discussed in the papers? We then turn to the question of place and localism that arises from the papers. The papers in the special issue discuss the potentials and pitfalls of understanding the local as a locus for ethical action. Finally, we discuss the role of research and researchers in supporting and strengthening much-needed alternatives to mainstream agriculture.

From food ‘alternatives’ to food ‘diversity’

One concern for researchers working with ‘alternative’ food initiatives is how to represent them. Perhaps most familiarly, alternatives are understood in a “capitalocentric” framing (Gibson-Graham 1996, p. xxi). This means that alternatives are understood in relation to capitalism, whereby capitalism is seen as the dominant form of economy, and other economic arrangements (such as self-provisioning, gifting, barter and so on) are seen not just as minority forms of economy but as forms that are shrinking as capitalism’s reach extends to

all ‘corners’ of the globe (Gibson-Graham 1996). This capitalocentric framing is understandable given that food production seems to be more and more concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer corporations who are able to wield enormous power along the entire food supply chain (e.g. Patel 2007). This framing is compelling not just for the way that it seems to capture today’s emerging economic reality but for the way that it resonates with a familiar political narrative which pits the powerless many in struggle against the powerful few.

However the capitalocentric framing has shortcomings. It privileges only one economic reality, the reality of corporate expansionism, and casts other realities into shadow. These other realities include the 1.3 billion in the Majority world who are small-holder and subsistence farmers (World Bank 2012), and whose relationships with corporate agricultural cannot be presumed. In some areas small-holder and subsistence farmers are struggling as they are pushed into more marginal lands as industrial agricultural spreads (e.g. Altieri 2004, Horrigan *et al.* 2002, Ong’wen and Wright 2007) but in other areas subsistence farmers are maintaining and even extending traditional agricultural practices (e.g. Msachi; 2009, Wright, 2010). Even in the Minority world the capitalocentric framing ignores the diversity of ways that food is produced, distributed and consumed, whether through backyard production, community gardening or community supported agriculture. While it is easy to dismiss these activities as trivial, it is worth remembering how a range of economic activities in the Minority world have been sidelined. For example, there is a body of work that documents the extent of unpaid housework and caring work. This work finds that the value of goods and services produced by unpaid workers in households is roughly equivalent to the value of goods and services produced by paid workers (Ironmonger 1996) and, as demonstrated, by Williams (2005), unpaid work is increasing rather than decreasing. Williams’ insight into unpaid work in the Minority world is pertinent for how we understand food ‘alternatives’:

It would not be an exaggeration to say that an anthropologist from another planet parachuting himself/herself into the advanced economies might quickly come to the conclusion that the current mode of organization has subsistence practices at its very core, and that if any mode of delivery is on the margins or receding, then it is the commodity economy (p. 47).

These insights highlight the limits of using the term food ‘alternatives.’ To call a set of practices ‘alternative’ is to presume that there is a mainstream (see also Wright 2010, Healy 2009) and to give this perceived mainstream more credence than it deserves. Perhaps more appropriate than food ‘alternatives’ would be the term food ‘diversity’ in order to recognise the multiplicity of ways that food is produced, distributed and consumed, some of which will involve corporatisation but others which will involve diverse forms of labour, markets, enterprises, property and finance. For example, Table 1 identifies just some of the diverse economic practices that comprise the food ‘economy’ in the regional centre of Newcastle, Australia.

Table 1: The Diverse Food Landscape of Newcastle

ENTERPRISES	TRANSACTIONS	LABOR	PROPERTY	FINANCE
<p>CAPITALIST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nationally based retailers ▪ International retailers (e.g. ALDI) ▪ Local retailers (e.g. cafes and coffee shops) 	<p>MARKET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Food from major supermarkets ▪ Food from local retailers 	<p>WAGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Workers at national and international retailers ▪ Workers at local retailers ▪ CSA workers ▪ Community garden workers 	<p>PRIVATE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Retail spaces ▪ Backyard food growing areas 	<p>MAINSTREAM MARKET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Loans from mainstream banks
<p>ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Small family-run food businesses ▪ State/Council owned businesses (e.g. council owned worm farm) 	<p>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Food sourced directly from farmers (e.g. farmers' markets, CSA) ▪ Saturday morning sales of community garden seedlings ▪ Sales of community garden herbs to restaurants and coffee shops ▪ Fair trade produce 	<p>ALTERNATIVE PAID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In-kind payments for 'volunteers' ▪ In-kind payments for community garden workers ▪ Self-employed workers (e.g. farmers, sole operator food outlets) 	<p>ALTERNATIVE PRIVATE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Land used for community gardens from councils, churches, schools, sports clubs ▪ Premises for CSA and community kitchens on notional leases or donated arrangements from institutions ▪ Showgrounds for Farmers' Markets 	<p>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Loans from cooperative banks and credit unions ▪ Slow money lending
<p>NON-CAPITALIST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-employed farmers ▪ Self-employed food operators ▪ CSA ▪ Community gardens ▪ Community kitchens ▪ Food 'rescue' schemes 	<p>NON-MARKET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Food from backyard production and community gardens for home use or gifted to neighbours and friends ▪ Donations of food to community kitchens or food 'rescue' schemes ▪ Donations of waste from restaurants and coffee shops for community garden composting 	<p>UNPAID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community garden volunteers ▪ Community Kitchen volunteers ▪ Self-provisioning workers (e.g. back-yard producers, allotment community garden producers, dumpster divers) 	<p>OPEN ACCESS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gleaning and scrumping from overhanging trees and trees in public parks ▪ Open community garden produce ▪ Dumpsters for diving ▪ River for fishing ▪ Open access meals from community kitchens 	<p>NON-MARKET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family and friend lending ▪ Donations and gifts ▪ Sweat equity

Source: Adapted from Cameron 2012, p. 92. See also Gibson-Graham et al 2013, p. 14

The papers in this special issue focus on various aspects of food diversity. They cover research on the supply chain of fresh tomatoes from rural producers to urban retailers in Australia (Roggeveen); cooperative production of organic pineapples in Uganda for international markets (Lyons); household-based agriculture in Australia and New Zealand (Ghosh; Larder et al); customary harvesting of ‘bush’ foods in remote Indigenous Australia (Buchanan); and community gardening in Australia and the Philippines (Cameron et al).

Thinking about place: the local in local food movements

In understanding diversity in agriculture, and to explore the potential for sustainable and socially just food systems, it is important to grapple with the notion of place and the local. There is a tendency both within social movements, and to some extent within academic accounts, to see ‘local food’ as unproblematically good and ‘global food’ to be unproblematically bad. Impelled by important, even urgent, questions over climate change, such approaches raise important concerns. In doing so, however, they often leave consideration of the local and place largely unexamined. Yet attention to the ways social movements conceptualise place and work across space may lead to important insights about diverse agricultural systems, about social movements and about place itself.

While the papers in this collection share a common concern with industrialised, export oriented, capitalist approaches, the visions of how diverse food initiatives work in and with place differ substantially. Here, the papers go beyond a simplistic understanding of local-as-good, global-as-bad, to give a richer understanding of the spatialities associated with alternative food movements. This attention to the ways place and the local are created and responded to by practitioners resonates with calls from within geography to move beyond ideas of place or space as settled, pre-existing and independent of social relations (Massey 2005). Here, the places of alternative food are complex and come into being relationally, in culturally and socially-imbued ways.

Within the special issue are conceptions of place that challenge ideas of local-as-good in important ways. Roggeveen’s considers the embodied greenhouse gas emissions (GGEs) of greenhouse grown tomatoes by looking at the journeys taken by tomatoes throughout the food chain. She finds that popular conceptions that construct ‘local’ food as inherently having lower embodied greenhouse emissions, do not reflect the complex realities that see on-farm emissions far exceed emissions generated by transport. By following the humble tomato from farm to shop and by documenting the GGEs produced at various stages in the production and distribution process, Roggeveen reveals the importance of the conditions under which tomatoes are grown. Roggeveen’s research is consistent with other studies on the importance of interrogating the entire food supply chain, including recent research that raises the possibility that what might be most important in terms of GGEs is the energy efficiency of the home refrigerator used for storage or the source of energy used for home cooking (Llorenç et al 2007). Roggeveen draws on Fagan’s work to suggest that, “‘local’ is not a fixed or given geographical scale. What constitutes ‘localising’ a food provision system will vary

in complex ways from place to place and commodity to commodity” (Fagan 2008, pp. 3-4). Such complexities are further underscored by Lyon’s (this issue) discussion of the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative in Uganda where organic, certified pineapples grown for the international market are supported by funding activities within Australia. The places of her discussion are widely dispersed, half a world apart. Yet place and the local still figure in powerful ways.

Larder *et al.*’s discussion of food sovereignty in an Australian context also links the rich places of the local to global movements. They look to urban producers, backyard gardeners, to better understand the values and meanings of food sovereignty. Urban Australia, for Larder *et al.*, is an important, though under-recognised, food-producing space (see also Ghosh this issue). The local in this context is the microscale of backyards and homes. Yet Larder *et al.* find that producers understand their gardens in broader contexts, as social and agronomic spaces within networks of agri-food systems. This, then, is a local, both place-based and embedded in the home, yet networked to create larger scale understandings situated “within the broader tapestry of food sovereignty movements” (Larder *et al.*, this issue). By aligning the seemingly small and insignificant work of backyard gardening with an international movement associated with hundreds of millions of small-scale farmers across the globe, Larder *et al.* highlight how small acts can be seen as part of a much broader movement to remake the food ‘system’.

Buchanan’s paper (this issue) also situates local food production in important ways. In attending to community food economies in remote Indigenous Australia, Buchanan’s work powerfully situates food within a broader ontological space. Here place and the local are understood in culturally-imbued ways as Indigenous people cultivate diverse economies of food harvesting that are important to the maintenance and expression of Indigenous ways of being. This resonates with work in Indigenous geographies more broadly that emphasises the need to respect and acknowledge Indigenous understandings of place and locality, and to recognise the situated nature of all views of place (Rose 1996, Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2009, Coombes *et al.* 2012, Larsen and Johnson 2012, Bawaka Country 2013). Rather than a backdrop to food production, place (or Country in an Indigenous Australian understanding) is an active participant in contributing food (Watson and Huntingdon 2008, Burarrwanga *et al.* 2013). Country nourishes people, as people may nourish Country within the context of broad, more-than-human relationships of reciprocity and care (Bawaka Country 2013).

Research as a performative practice

The papers in this special issue speak, in various ways, to the understanding that research is a generative or performative practice that participates in helping worlds come into being (e.g. Law 2004, Law and Urry 2004, Gibson-Graham 2008, Cameron 2011, Cameron and Hicks 2013). The papers are underpinned by a political commitment to reshaping the current food system and building different food futures. The research practices are informed by this commitment. This means that the researchers are not tied to any one research method but use

methods that might help chaperone particular futures into being. Four papers use the overarching strategy of ‘making visible’ worlds that are largely hidden from view in order to make these worlds “more ‘real’, more credible, more visible as objects of policy and activism” (Gibson-Graham 2008, p. 618). These papers use research methods that include quantitative surveys, modeling and qualitative interviews. Two of the papers use the overarching strategy of ‘collaborating’ in order to work directly with groups and communities, and contribute to relatively immediate outcomes.

In the first of the ‘making visible’ papers, Buchanan argues that research is needed in the Australian context to better understand the extent of customary harvesting (fishing, hunting and gathering) and the economic, cultural, emotional, and physical role harvesting plays in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Without such research, government policies will continue to take a blinkered view of ‘development’, and ignore the potential for policies that might support customary harvesting as a means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve multiple dimensions of well-being. Buchanan draws on the studies of customary harvesting that are available--studies which predominantly use survey-based research--to help highlight how customary harvesting is interwoven into the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote regions. Buchanan argues for more studies of this type in order to help build a comprehensive understanding of customary harvesting and to contribute to a future in which the frame of development is enlarged to not just recognize but support customary practices that contribute to the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In a very different context, Ghosh also seeks to contribute to new possibilities by using modeling to demonstrate the amount of food that could be produced in low, medium and high density residential settings in Australian and New Zealand towns and cities. Ghosh finds that in three of five low density settings, enough vegetables could be grown to meet minimum daily requirements and to also produce a surplus (in one case a surplus of 104 per cent). The medium density residential settings could provide between 37 and 72 per cent of minimum daily vegetable requirements, and the high density setting could provide 42 per cent. Ghosh’s study helps to ‘make visible’ the potential of residential settings as highly productive foodscapes, and thereby contributes to the broader project of finding more sustainable ways of securing food for urban populations. Although Ghosh’s study is set in the Minority world, she makes links to studies of cities in the Majority world where similar food production possibilities are being explored.

The final two papers in this section on ‘making visible’ discuss food sovereignty and food miles in ways that deepen our understanding of where and how change might happen. Larder *et al.* help ‘make visible’ largely unrecognized practices of urban agriculture. Through qualitative interviews with backyard gardeners in the city of Brisbane, Australia, Larder *et al.* find that the values of backyard gardeners are consistent with those of the food sovereignty movement. By focusing on what backyard gardeners are already doing, their research seeks to contribute to a remaking of the food system. The final ‘making visible’ paper reveals the

complexity of providing accurate information to consumers about GGEs embodied in the food they purchase. As Roggeveen shows, focusing only on the number of miles between producer and retailer/consumer is misleading. Roggeveen's study includes the additional element of interviews with participants in the supply chain in order to help identify how policies might be better targeted to reduce GGEs. Roggeveen finds that cost efficiencies and the availability of alternatives (such as alternative energy sources) are the factors most likely to produce change in the supply chain.

The section on 'collaborating' comprises two papers. In the first, Lyons reflects on her collaboration with Katuulo Organic Pineapple Cooperative in south-west Uganda, a cooperative whose dried pineapples enter international trade flows by being exported to countries such as Denmark and Ireland. Lyons' commitment to a subject position of activist-academic has led her to use the 'research method' of helping to establish a health and medical clinic in the community of Katuulo. Her research 'practices' have included fundraising, writing grant applications, facilitating meetings with representatives from government and preparing and sharing meals. Lyons highlights how her research has helped on the one hand to bring new worlds into being (including a building for the health and medical centre) while on the other it has sometimes seemed to move at a glacially slow pace, particularly when expectations are high and distances between Australia and Uganda (measured in both kilometres and understandings) are vast.

Just as Lyons highlights how her research has involved risk and uncertainty, so too Cameron *et al.* in the final paper explore the open-ended nature of collaborative research endeavours. Drawing on interlinked research projects in Australia and the Philippines, Cameron *et al.* describe the collaborative approach as a step into the unknown by gathering together a range of human and non-human participants in the anticipation that some chemistry or synergy might occur and that fruitful (albeit modest) world-changing understandings and connections might be forged. Following a process of reassembling the things that come together in the moment of gathering (including in digital formats), Cameron *et al.* reflect on how the 'results' of gathering and reassembling are in a sense 'let loose' in the world to do work that researchers cannot predict.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue are testament to the commitment of researchers to reshaping the current food system and to conducting research on a variety of fronts that might strengthen the diversity of food practices.

Conclusion

Understanding the role research plays in bringing worlds into being, rather than merely describing them, provides us with a challenge of sorts. It means it matters what we, as researchers, notice, call attention to, measure and support. It means researchers must pay attention to the framings they use, the ways they may inadvertently re-inscribe diverse systems as endangered and so silence (again) the realities of billions of people who continue to build sustainable and diverse agricultures.

In this special issue, we attend to diverse food initiatives that take many forms. The papers offer no simplistic understanding of what a ‘good’ food system might look like. Instead, the focus is on understanding the richness and complexity of sustainable systems, problematising assumptions around ‘alternatives’ and simplistic valorisations of the local. This requires openness to the complex, diverse realities that exist and an awareness of the importance of acknowledging and supporting them.

Here, researchers are participants in the world; they actively work to bring about certain, ethical realities, to reframe and nourish certain, ethical subjectivities. Research becomes a process, not of simply uncovering, but of generation, of making visible, of collaborating, of shaping reality. These are stories of abundance and of possibility, of responsiveness and responsibility. We hope this special issue will promote attention to the rich diversity of food systems that can, together, and in wildly different ways, help sustain ourselves and our planet into the future.

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