

Commentary

Perspective and power in the ethical foodscape

From some vantage points, the contemporary foodscape appears littered with ethical alternatives. Consider, for example, the view from Union Square in New York City. Overlooking the square is a multistorey Whole Foods, offering the usual upscale array of organic produce, free-range meats, cage-free eggs, certified seafood, GM-free breakfast cereals, and biodegradable utensils to go with the take-out salad bar selections. Around the corner, Think Coffee brews organic, fairly traded, shade-grown coffee—locally roasted in Brooklyn, to boot! On the opposite side of the square, a branch of the ‘Green-certified’ Goodburgers chain promises customers antibiotic-free chicken and humanely raised beef. A few blocks south, the newly opened Otarian restaurant posts the carbon count of all its all-veggie fast food, none of which contains flown-in ingredients. And in the square itself, a thrice-weekly greenmarket overflows with produce, meats, cheeses, fish, and baked goods, all more-or-less local.

From the perspective of someone seeking an ethically credentialed meal (leaving aside momentarily the question of whether the credentials are valid) Union Square’s foodscape lacks for little. In this sense it is not unique even among neighborhoods in downtown Manhattan, much less in the global North more broadly. From San Francisco and London to Prague and Hong Kong, shoppers and diners who want ‘values for money’ do not have to search terribly far. In such places (as well as less urban ones) retailers both mainstream and alternative have not only quickly adapted to the demands of such consumers; they have also encouraged and refined them.

But obviously they do not deserve all the credit for the rapid transformation of contemporary foodscapes. As the papers in this theme issue have shown, it is equally important to consider the forces operating on and beyond the market: the purchasing co-ops and fair trade NGOs; the school systems that have reformed their meal programs; the government initiatives to use food policy to address a range of socio-economic, ecological, and especially health problems. Although Lang (2010) focuses on European Union and national-level policy making, New York is just one example of a city where municipal governments are attempting to build a healthier and more sustainable urban foodscape using a combination of labeling laws, procurement, tax credits, and education (Allday, 2008; Clapp et al, 2010; LDA, 2005).

The literature analyzing these and related trends is now enormous. Yet as the preceding papers also demonstrate, the empirical terrain is hardly stable. Ongoing economic turmoil and the climate change threat are only two of the more obvious, macrolevel reasons why whatever seemed apparent a few years ago about particular food movements or problems may no longer apply. In this brief commentary I certainly will not attempt to survey all the questions that still need to be asked, as Goodman et al (2010) put it, about ethical food’s “premises, promises, and possibilities”. Instead, I simply want to explore some of the parallels between the term *foodscape*—now familiar, though still not in the dictionary—and landscape, a much older geographic concern. In particular, I want to consider how the analysis of a foodscape’s ethical dimensions might benefit from some of what we know about *perspective*, as it applies to landscapes both real and representational. Both terms have at least a few definitions; I will first talk about foodscapes simply as the actual sites where we find food (Winson, 2004), and later consider their constructed nature

(Johnston and Baumann, 2009; Johnston et al, 2009; Yasmeen, 1996). Some of the following points will probably ring familiar to those already immersed in agrofood studies. At the least I hope to highlight a few areas worthy of further inquiry.

Perspective's two distinct though related meanings—as a point of view and as a technique of portrayal—both pertain to the broad question of what makes a food or food-related practice appear ethical. Focusing for the moment on the first meaning of perspective, we know, for starters, that food ethics are deeply contextual and highly varied. We humans all eat, but we do not all share the same ideas about what or how we should eat—or, for that matter, about how food should be produced and distributed, how much it should cost, or even how much time and effort we should devote to procuring, preparing, and eating food relative to other pursuits. Nor do we all agree about which actors or institutions should be responsible for ensuring access to ethical food, however defined.

Yet the aspects of contemporary foodscapes most commonly described as ethical do not reflect this diversity. This is partly because 'ethical' has become a convenient descriptor for the many kinds of food networks and practices that purposefully aim to be fairer, kinder, healthier, more ecological, more supportive of small farmers, and even just more pleasurable [the alternative term is, of course, 'alternative', which has arguably grown less useful as corporate supermarkets and food manufacturers have overhauled their own supply chains and product lines to accommodate those who want alternatives (Holloway et al, 2007; Whatmore et al, 2003)]. But partly also it is because the ongoing conversations about ethical food—within and between the circles of academia, activism, business, and policy making—still include relatively few voices.

Admittedly, 'multistakeholder initiatives' (MSI) have become increasingly common in public and private realms of food governance, especially those devoted to the governance of South–North supply chains associated, not coincidentally, with less-than-ethical labor and environmental practices. In some but certainly not all such initiatives, 'multi' does actually describe a broad range of views. How much the views of less powerful stakeholders actually influence MSI processes and outcomes (eg codes or standards) is another question (Dolan and Opondo, 2005; Fuchs et al, 2009; Tallontire, 2007).

Several years ago Britain's newly formed Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) distinguished itself as an MSI devoted not to singular injustices or environmental problems (eg sweatshop labor, rainforest destruction) but rather to the broader cause of making global supply chains more ethical. What, in fact, did that mean? Despite a membership that included a few global South labor unions, it meant that the ETI focused its early efforts on the supply-chain problems that NGO and company members (the latter initially mostly supermarkets) considered most ethically egregious from the viewpoint of British consumers, such as child labor. As it happens, some of the NGO members' own recent exposés of child labor on African horticultural export farms had helped convince the supermarkets that participating in the ETI was in their own best brand-name interests (Freidberg, 2004; Orton and Madden, 1996).

Horticultural export firms in Zambia were among the first to pledge to comply with the principles in the ETI's "Base Code". Zambia was a relatively new exporter and the firms saw ETI compliance as a way to compete against major players such as Kenya. For them, like their supermarket clients, it made good business sense. But it meant that the companies and their outgrower farms had to make sure that the pre-teens and teenagers who used to help out with harvests of mangetout and baby corn no longer did so. The company managers and farmers and even some of the supermarket buyers admitted that a total ban on child labor (meaning under-16) was not necessarily appropriate in Zambian export agriculture, given that the work

was not terribly onerous and given also that many young people supported younger siblings (Zambia has one of the world's highest rates of AIDS orphans), or at least needed to work to pay for their own school fees. They did not believe that the ban was the ethical, right thing to do, in other words, but rather what had to be done for business reasons.

The ETI also assumed that the costs of building more ethical supply chains would be borne by the suppliers themselves. Exactly what this entailed would vary, of course; in Zambia supermarkets wanted to see concrete evidence of ethics in the form of on-farm clinics and childcare. For many outgrowers, already squeezed by flat earnings and the supermarkets' increasingly stringent food-safety and traceability standards, the costs of looking ethical convinced them that export horticulture did not, in fact, make good business sense. They left the industry, and the farm workers who were ostensibly supposed to benefit from the ethical upgrades simply lost their jobs.

At the time, the Zambian experience of the ETI seemed to signal an ominous trend. Supermarkets' so-called ethical supply-chain standards, developed with the help of well-intentioned but influence-hungry NGOs, looked likely to exacerbate vulnerability and inequality in global South production regions (Freidberg, 2003). Neilson and Pritchard's (2010) research in South India's tea districts shows that such concerns are still justified. Elsewhere, though, the evidence is mixed. The GlobalGAP standard of "good agricultural practice", for example, initially looked like bad news for many actual farmers, especially smallholders in poor countries (Campbell, 2005; Freidberg, 2007). Both the standard's scope and detail (it covers not just basic worker welfare but also traceability, on-farm hygiene and agrochemical handling, environmental management, and animal welfare) and costly certification favor large agro-enterprises. But as a retailer-led MSI, GlobalGAP has attempted to demonstrate inclusiveness by, among other things, allowing small producers to get certified in groups, and by appointing an African 'smallholder ambassador'. In Kenya and Tanzania, horticultural smallholders who do get certified, typically with donor assistance, not only earn more than they would otherwise (selling domestically or to overseas wholesale markets) but also receive training in safer, more ecologically sound agrichemical use (Lazaro et al, 2010). In Senegal, meanwhile, GlobalGAP and other standards have indeed driven the dramatic consolidation of horticultural export production on plantation-scale farms. But Maertens and Swinnen (2009) argue that surging employment on these farms has done more to reduce rural poverty than smallholder contract farming ever did.

These findings testify to the value of ongoing empirical research on retailer-led (or otherwise private) food-standards regimes. They also suggest that earlier critiques of such regimes have not fallen on entirely deaf ears (we hope not, anyway!) But new evidence of the uneven effects and enforcement of retailers' supply-chain standards (Ouma, 2010) should not distract from the largest retailers' own enduring and increasingly oligopolistic power to decide what the standards will be and who will shoulder their costs. All their shows of stakeholder dialogue, transparency, good corporate citizenship, and so forth represent both exercises and defenses of this power. Political ecology has repeatedly demonstrated how power relations at multiple scales shape landscapes and their representations; the same point applies to contemporary foodscapes (Blaikie, 1985).

Concern about the clout of Wal-Mart, Tesco, and their peers is of course a major reason for the vitality of many alternative food networks (AFNs) (Maye et al, 2007). Participants in these networks might argue that the retailers' very reliance on rigid codes of conduct runs contrary to their own vision of an ethical foodscape forged out of personal relationships of trust and loyalty. Often these visions are explicitly local, but not always. Fair trade is just one example of a long-distance AFN effectively

‘shortened’ by a combination of technology and social–political solidarity (Renting et al, 2003).

Neilson and Pritchard’s side-by-side study of fair and ethical trade show that, even if the two certifications look very different on the shelf (partly because the latter never goes on the label, making it effectively invisible to consumers), they may have similar ramifications in production regions. Theirs and other scholars’ ‘horizontal’ analyses of such regions reveal who is excluded from the benefits of fair or ethical sourcing: the abandoned tea estates’ destitute workers; the smallholders too poor to get certified; the cooperatives too inconveniently located (Dolan, 2009; Jaffee, 2007; Mutersbaugh, 2002). While such a analytical approach is not entirely new, it remains a useful corrective to the purposefully narrow vision of much fair and alternative trade marketing (which shows consumers only the smiling beneficiaries of their purchases) as well as to the ‘vertical’ focus of much commodity and value-chain research. It also points, I think, to the need for a similar kind of panning out elsewhere in the foodscape.

The AFN literature now abounds with studies of alternative consumption sites: the farmers’ markets and CSA farms, the community gardens and consumer co-ops. Such studies provide insight into the ethical views of the various AFN participants. Some highlight those who are marginalized or perhaps entirely absent from such sites, whether because of race, class, location, or dietary preferences (Guthman, 2008a; Jarosz, 2008). But the AFN literature does not tell us much about the nonparticipants’ ethical perspectives. The implicit if unintentional suggestion is that such people either face exclusion for one of the aforementioned reasons or they simply *do not care*. It is akin to assuming a sharp divide between moral economies and the supposed amorality of the market economy (Sayer, 2007).

Miller’s *The Dialectics of Shopping*, based on his in-store ethnography of more-or-less conventional supermarket shoppers in north London, presents a more complicated picture (Miller, 2001). Most of his subjects steered clear of ‘ethically marked’ goods even if they were in the midst of expressing concern about the injustices that these goods were supposed to address. Sometimes cost was an issue but not always. Rather, Miller argued, his subjects saw shopping as an activity that was foremost supposed to show care, not one’s ethical support for justice. To prioritize the latter appeared to them uncaring and thus in a sense immoral. As Miller put it, “ethical shopping is viewed by many people as a kind of “cold” attitude practised by cold people, which is antipathetic to “warm” shopping, which is generally an expression of love for people one feels responsible for” (page 135). “Warm” shopping might mean occasional extravagances; more often it meant managing the household’s money in a careful, thrifty manner.

One could argue that Miller’s study was both too small and done too long ago to provide any insights into the minds of 21st-century supermarket shoppers, whether in north London or anywhere else. My point here, though, is not whether his analysis is or ever was correct, but rather that it took seriously the moral ideas of people who did not express them through overtly alternative or oppositional behavior in the marketplace. To neglect or dismiss such ideas (whether they belong to consumers, farmers, or Tesco employees) is more than an academic mistake, for it leaves us with a tunnel vision view of the ethical foodscape. It endorses, even if inadvertently, the righteousness of much alternative food discourse [the “if they only knew...” syndrome (Guthman, 2008b)], and to risk contributing to the polarization of popular food politics.

The last point I want to make here concerns the technologies that make credible the foodscape’s ethical forms. In tracing the history of the landscape idea, Cosgrove (1985) links the technique that made paintings look realistic to Renaissance era art patrons to larger scientific and political-economic developments. Linear perspective

relied on “mathematics and geometry ... directly relevant to the economic life of the Italian merchant cities of the Renaissance, to trading and capitalist finance, to agriculture and the land market, to navigation and warfare” (page 50). Landscape painters used the same basic metrology to represent places that surveyors, architects, and artillery scientists used to order and appropriate them. They created commanding views that appealed to a class of art buyers who liked to feel in command. But linear perspective’s method set it apart from other methods of artistic flattery (eg in portraiture), and in an important sense above them: “because it was founded in geometry it was regarded as the discovery of inherent properties of space itself” (page 51). The scientific authority of the tool buttressed that of its creations.

What gives authority to ethical claims in today’s foodscapes? More precisely, what gives economic actors confidence in a particular product, place, or purveyor? Obviously it varies; as discussed above, plenty of people would argue that a personal relationship between producer and consumer is both ethical in itself and the best assurance of the food’s integrity. But outside of those relationships (and in some circumstances even within them) food’s ethical authority relies on a host of technologies, some older and more thoroughly explored than others. Brands and packaging, for example, have reassured consumers about the wholesomeness of products since the early days of industrial food manufacturing. Advertising followed soon afterwards (Domosh, 2003; Jones and Morgan, 1994; Levenstein, 2003). More recently, these visible mediums have drawn reinforcement from an ever-increasing number of standards and certification regimes.

Much of the research on food standards has focused on how they are implemented and enforced, how they affect different supply chain sites and actors, and how their role in food governance reflects and reinforces broader political–economic and cultural trends (Busch, 2000; Gibbon et al, 2010; Henson and Reardon, 2005; Mutersbaugh, 2005; Ouma, 2010). Relatively few studies have addressed the question of how particular standards are constituted and legitimated—how, in other words, their line-by-line specifications become accepted as technical means towards ethical ends. Organic standards have received closer scrutiny than most (Campbell and Liepins, 2002; Guthman, 2004), but this is clearly an arena of both contestation and change. New science or media exposés may throw old standards into doubt, and/or create pressure for entirely new ones. Concerns about climate change have already done both, as seen by the Soil Association’s controversial proposal to disallow organic certification for airfreight products and subsequent, ongoing efforts to carbon label foodstuffs (Bolwig and Gibbon, 2009; Brenton et al, 2009; Rosenthal, 2009).

More generally, both corporate efforts to demonstrate ‘sustainability’ (witness Wal-Mart’s multi-indicator index) and new government ‘sustainable food’ policies (witness New York City, London, Sweden, etc) seem likely to generate continued demand for new metrics. Which experts will be enlisted in their creation? What data and calculative methods will they draw on? How will different publics be convinced of these metrics’ rigor and ethical purpose—or will they? And how, finally, will these metrics play out on the foodscape; how will they influence not just who can eat what in different places, but also perspectives on what is *good* (as in ethical) to eat in such places? While geographers and other agrifood scholars are accustomed to addressing questions of this nature, I think we could benefit from more conversations, especially about methodology, with the field of science and technology studies. Either way, we have plenty of work to do.

Susanne Freidberg, Department of Geography, Dartmouth College

References

- Allday E, 2008, "S.F. food policy heading in a healthy direction" *San Francisco Chronicle* 30 November
- Blaikie P M, 1985 *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (John Wiley, New York)
- Bolwig S, Gibbon P, 2009, "Overview of product carbon footprinting schemes and standards", OECD Joint Working Party on Trade and Environment
- Brenton P, Edwards-Jones G, Jensen M, 2009, "Carbon labelling and low-income country exports: a review of the development issues" *Development Policy Review* **27** 243–267
- Busch L, 2000, "The moral economy of grades and standards" *Journal of Rural Studies* **16** 273–283
- Campbell H, 2005, "The rise and rise of EurepGAP: European (re) invention of colonial food relations" *International Journal of Sociology of Food and Agriculture* **13** 1–19
- Campbell H, Liepins R, 2002, "Naming organics: understanding organic standards in New Zealand as a discursive field" *Sociologia Ruralis* **41** 22–39
- Clapp J, Gans S, Borelli A, Cook B, Schell S, 2010, "FoodNYC: A blueprint for a sustainable food system", Borough of Manhattan, New York
- Cosgrove D, 1985, "Prospect, perspective and the evolution of the landscape idea" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* **10** 45–62
- Dolan C, 2009, "Virtual moralities: the mainstreaming of Fairtrade in Kenyan tea fields" *Geoforum* **41** 33–43
- Dolan C, Opondo M, 2005, "Seeking common ground: multi-stakeholder processes in Kenya's cut flower industry" *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* **2** 87–98
- Domosh M, 2003, "Pickles and purity: discourses of food, empire and work in turn-of-the-century United States" *Social and Cultural Geography* **4** 7–26
- Freidberg S, 2003, "Cleaning up down South: supermarkets, ethical trade and African horticulture" *Social and Cultural Geography* **4** 27–43
- Freidberg S, 2004, "The ethical complex of corporate food power" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **22** 513–531
- Freidberg S, 2007, "Supermarkets and imperial knowledge" *Cultural Geographies* **14** 321–342
- Fuchs D, Kalfagianni A, Havinga T, 2009, "Actors in private food governance: the legitimacy of retail standards and multistakeholder initiatives with civil society participation" *Agriculture and Human Values*, doi: 10.1007/s10460-009-9236-3
- Gibbon P, Ponte S, Lazaro E, 2010 *Global Agro-food Trade and Standards: Challenges for Africa* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hants)
- Goodman M K, Maye D, Holloway L, 2010, "Guest editorial. Ethical foodscapes?: premises, promises, and possibilities" *Environment and Planning A* **42** 1782–1796
- Guthman J, 2004 *Agrarian Dreams? The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA)
- Guthman J, 2008a, "Bringing good food to others: investigating the subjects of alternative food practice" *Cultural Geographies* **15** 431–447
- Guthman J, 2008b, "'If they only knew': color blindness and universalism in California alternative food institutions" *The Professional Geographer* **60** 387–397
- Henson S, Reardon T, 2005, "Private agri-food standards: implications for food policy and the agri-food system" *Food Policy* **30** 241–253
- Holloway L, Kneafsey M, Cox R, Venn L, Dowler E, Tuomainen H, 2007, "Beyond the 'alternative' – 'conventional' divide?: thinking differently about food production – consumption relationships", in *Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice* Eds D Maye, L Holloway, M Kneafsey (Elsevier, Oxford) pp 77–93
- Jaffee D, 2007 *Brewing Justice: Fair Trade Coffee, Sustainability, and Survival* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA)
- Jarosz L, 2008, "The city in the country: growing alternative food networks in metropolitan areas" *Journal of Rural Studies* **24** 231–244
- Johnston J, Baumann S, 2009, "Tension in the kitchen: explicit and implicit politics in the gourmet foodscape" *Sociologica* **1**, doi: 10.2383/29565
- Johnston J, Biro A, Mackendrick N, 2009, "Lost in the supermarket: the corporate–organic foodscape and the struggle for food democracy" *Antipode* **41** 509–532
- Jones G, Morgan N, 1994 *Adding Value: Brands and Marketing in Food and Drink* (Routledge, London)

-
- Lang T, 2010, "From 'value-for-money' to 'values-for-money'? Ethical food and policy in Europe" *Environment and Planning A* **42** 1814–1832
- Lazaro E, Riisgaard L, Kilima F, Makindara J, Mnenwa R, 2010, "Sustainability standards and agro-food exports", in *Global Agro-food Trade and Standards: Challenges for Africa* Eds P Gibbon, S Ponte, E Lazaro (Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hants) pp 120–135
- LDA, 2005, "Better food for London: the mayor's draft food strategy", London Development Agency
- Levenstein H, 2003 *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (University of California, Berkeley, CA)
- Maertens M, Swinnen J, 2009, "Trade, standards, and poverty: evidence from Senegal" *World Development* **37** 161–178
- Maye D, Holloway L, Kneafsey M, 2007 *Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice* (Elsevier, Oxford)
- Miller D, 2001 *The Dialectics of Shopping* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL)
- Mutersbaugh T, 2002, "The number is the beast: a political economy of organic-coffee certification and producer unionism" *Environment and Planning A* **34** 1165–1184
- Mutersbaugh T, 2005, "Fighting standards with standards: harmonization, rents, and social accountability in certified agrofood networks" *Environment and Planning A* **37** 2033–2051
- Neilson J, Pritchard B, 2010, "Fairness and ethicality in their place: the regional dynamics of fair trade and ethical sourcing agendas in the plantation districts of South India" *Environment and Planning A* **42** 1833–1851
- Orton L, Madden P, 1996, "The global supermarket: Britain's biggest shops and food from the Third World", Christian Aid, London
- Ouma S, 2010, "Global standards, local realities: private agrifood governance and the restructuring of the Kenyan horticulture industry" *Economic Geography* **86** 197–122
- Renting H, Marsden T, Banks J, 2003, "Understanding alternative food networks: exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development" *Environment and Planning A* **35** 393–412
- Rosenthal E, 2009, "To cut global warming, Swedes study their plates" *New York Times* 22 October
- Sayer A, 2007, "Moral economy as critique" *New Political Economy* **12** 261–270
- Tallontire A, 2007, "CSR and regulation: towards a framework for understanding private standards initiatives in the agri-food chain" *Third World Quarterly* **28** 775–791
- Whatmore S, Stassart P, Renting H, 2003, "What's alternative about alternative food networks?" *Environment and Planning A* **35** 389–391
- Winson A, 2004, "Bringing political economy into the debate on the obesity epidemic" *Agriculture and Human Values* **21** 299–312
- Yasmeen G, 1996, "'Plastic-bag housewives' and postmodern restaurants?: public and private in Bangkok's foodscape" *Urban Geography* **17** 526–544