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Author

Hedegaard Larsen, Morten

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by Dr. Morten Hedegaard Larsen

Visiting Scholar, Institute for the Study of Societal Issues,
University of California, Berkeley
PhD Fellow, Department of Foodscapes, Innovation and Networks (FINe)
Aalborg University

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Dr. Morten Hedegaard Larsen
Visiting Scholar
Institute for the Study of Societal Issues
University of California, Berkeley

PhD Fellow, Department of Foodscapes, Innovation and Networks (FINe)
Aalborg University
Copenhagen, Denmark
Email: ml@plan.aau.dk

Abstract

This paper will focus on the meta-theories and historical explanations for the rise in importance of food and associated experiences as symbols and media of community and identity in post-modern societies, including the surge in interest in agriculture and/or place and their interconnectedness and holistic use. Three main themes/concepts will be addressed and interwoven, so as to provide a fuller picture of the context of this research and the concept of perceptions more generally. These are: 1) Food and its increasing (symbolic) importance – why now?; 2) Agriculture, place and the authenticity conundrum; 3) The rise of experiences and events as mediators of food and agriculture. The three themes will each contain a brief and, admittedly, non-exhaustive literature review with supplementary historical descriptions, focusing, especially on the importance of perceptions in the themes explored. The three thematic areas will then be summarized and discussed.

Introduction

> "In 1994 – let alone 1984 – food was still largely conceived of as a form of sustenance. In 2014 it has become the primary way that the English take their culture: to be English is to eat; to eat out, to eat many different cuisines, to watch cookery programmes and to have an opinion on the alleged drug-taking habits of celebrity chefs."
>
> -- Will Self (2014 Guardian)

In recent times, food and its related experiences in most of the developed world seems to have gained an extraordinarily prominent and important position as the "canary in the coalmine" to measure the wellbeing of society and its cultural vibrancy. It has become a media and mediator of both differences and homogenization, perhaps due to its universal nature – a quality noted early on in the twentieth century by George Simmel (1994).

Appadurai (1981) provides a cautionary warning as to this mediating and/or homogenizing role of food, which must always be measured against how the society/community chooses to adopt and use food to achieve a homogenizing effect. Food and associated experiences and values can also be used to promote nationalistic agendas (Collingham 2011), increase inequality, and be a medium to instigate and/or showcase cultural differences and thus expose the "other" as intrinsically different (and perhaps bad). Point being that food, when used as a medium or means of identification and distinction, can be perceived as having extra-ordinary qualities compared to other social activities – you are, not just, what you eat; you eat what you are. Food can therefore become a potent symbol and marker of identification and make (symbolic) contributions to both change and coercion. Food, with its enormous presence and tropic qualities, makes it both monumental and illusive as a concept to derive universal meaning from, an ambiguity which might make it perfect as a twenty-first century medium in the experience society which will be addressed later.

Food and its Increasing (Symbolic) Importance –Why Now?

Using food as a marker of distinction or identity is not a new phenomenon (Elias 1978, Korsmeyer 2002, Mintz 1985). Mintz eloquently reminds us of the pervasive, if sometimes hidden, importance of food in our changing lives: "Transformations of diet entail quite profound alterations in people's images of themselves, their notions of the contrasting virtues of tradition and change, the fabric of their daily life" (Mintz 1985: 13). Issues of tradition and change and, therefore, ultimately of identity, seem intrinsic to food throughout history. But new linkages between food consumption and food production might be at play, linkages that carry with them meanings, understandings and forms that might be "unique" to our day and age.

Experiences (in the absence of a more appropriate/specific word) and their transformative and/or coercive powers are found within the contemporary study of school gardens, for instance, and in how school garden participation affects academic achievement and sites for learning (Klemmer et al. 2005, Dyment 2008), or how they can cultivate citizen-subjects (Pudup 2008). Family meals and commensality in general (Sobal 2001) are viewed as a means to hinder anything from teenage substance abuse (CASA 2010 and Gilman et al.

2000) to better grades, though what constitutes a "good" (or perhaps rather ideal) family meal experience is harder to define scientifically, as its role and meaning has changed throughout history.[1] In fact, food sociologist Anne Murcott has, convincingly, shown that throughout the entire twentieth century people have worried about the dissolution of the family meal; a meal which is intimately linked to the supposed decline of and perceived threat to the "traditional" family pattern (Murcott 1997, 2012). Indeed, based on empirical historical evidence from Edwardian England, Murcott suggests that family meals were not necessarily more common in Edwardian England than they are today, though they definitely were already closely linked to the values of the determining (both morally and economically) middle-classes—values that many wanted to be perceived as adhering strongly to.

Much of this contemporary research seems to be legitimized by an overall concern with the separation between nature and man – especially children and nature (Hess & Trexler 2011), and the resulting decline in "eco-literacy" or "food-literacy." These are concepts, not infrequently, linked directly to later poor dietary choices (resulting in obesity) even though such choices are probably better understood when analysed within the overall structural/societal contexts that largely determine these experiences (Smith, Trenton G. Stoddard, C., Barnes, M.G. 2009, O'Neill, Rebane and Lester 2004). But what such studies into school gardens and family meals do indicate, most importantly, is that food and related experiences are perceived, at present, to be part of solutions to larger structural issues and challenges, or can be used as relevant means to address these.

Indeed, (fresh) food – according to American food writer David Kamp – is the sole political feature that survived from the sixties political and cultural upheaval: "The counterculture generated plenty of misbegotten movements and lysergically distorted belief systems that would later cause its members to feel disillusioned or embarrassed. But the fresh food movement wasn't one of them. In fact, it might well be the counterculture's greatest and most lasting triumph." (Kamp 2006: 142).

Using food and related experiences as part of a political narrative is not uncommon, however. Political sentiment can be found in studies of food deserts, food justice and legislation (Nestle 2002), and food production systems (Belasco & Horowitz 2009, Pollan 2009). Using food as a political medium is understandable, as it is one thing all people share and partake in, but its prominence also as a mediatized phenomenon cannot be explained, entirely, by its universal importance to human interaction and survival. Indeed, one would be forgiven to assume that food should mean much less, and occupy fewer of our thoughts, as there – at least in the developed world – has never been easier access to so much and so cheaply prized food.

It is, therefore, not out of need or want that the great focus on food has arisen in most of the developed world. Food as sustenance – as invoked by the initial quote – or nutrition solely, seem not to do the (symbolic) importance of food justice. Food is part of, and a contributor to, increasing mediatization and identity making (Rousseau 2012), done for purely entertainment purposes, but also, it seems has allowed a stronger confluence between nutrition and experience. Food is more than nutrition, as eloquently pointed out by Pollan

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[1] See for instance Cinotto (2006) for a description of the changing and idealized family meal in an American context.

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(2009) in his "Defense of Food," and such allowances has opened up the nutritional field to include issues of foodscapes explored (very) holistically/experimentally (Dolphijn 2004). Or, using a more reductive/objectionist perspective (Sobal & Wansink 2007), both studies are dependent on Appadurai's (1990) notions of "scapes," and therefore, indirectly and inescapably, how the environment affects behavior and consumption. Reducing food to its nutrients can be relevant in many areas of practice and research, but within the area of nutritional behavior and experience, an emphasis on nutrients might have lost some of its legitimizing and explanatory powers – if not its popular appeal. Nutrition/nutrients as a science gained power with technological breakthroughs during the twentieth century. This is not to claim that nutrition is not a greater concern for many more people than ever before; rather the issues are different (from under- to malnutrition for instance), and, as will be made more obvious at the summarizing part of this paper, both concerns over nutrition and related environments can, logically, increase together. Particular (sociological) theories given for food's contemporary prominence are also burgeoning, and this paper cannot exhaust all those theories, but will try to provide sources relevant to the limited discussions and themes of this paper.

The importance of food, and implicitly agriculture, could be ascribed to "ontological insecurities" about society (Giddens 1990), or the appearance of a "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000) presumably characterizing the postmodern world. Its (possible) future consequences, made explicit by the introduction of the "Risk Society" (Beck 1992), along with worries about health in increasing individualized societies (Petersen &Lupton 1996), surely all contribute to the overall perceptions held of food and also agriculture in contemporary society. An overall sentiment/hypothesis derived from this development could be that as traditional societal structures are eroded or replaced, the need for a re-imbeddedness and meaning in, presumably, fragmented societies emerges, and can take the form of adherence to traditional and/or local food production. Such preferences might also carry with it some negative social elements and have its origins in a "defensive localism" (Winter 2013) reacting against the forces brought about by increased globalization. Interestingly, the "local" sphere in most developed countries has been under the influence of global streams of trade and political fluctuations for centuries now and vice versa (Trentmann 2005), and these local consumption patterns (still) remain quite distinct despite the, suggested, homogenization of consumption and consumer culture (Trentmann 2007).

As is shown above, it is important to note that there are considerable cultural and historical variations on this narrative of decline and betterment using food, or agricultural experiences, as vehicles of change and/or coercion. This could perhaps be explained by degrees of urbanization and industrialization – also of the food production system. For instance, it is perhaps not surprising that the "re-imagination" and re-introduction of farmers markets selling local and organic food mostly, has its origins in the US; as the US was – and, arguably, continues to be – the country with the most industrialized food production and retail system in the world. An antitheses, or different food narrative, was perhaps therefore more needed in the US and subsequently in other Northern Hemisphere countries, than say, in Southern Europe where a continuing adherence to local products and retail systems prevails, to a much larger degree (Thøgersen 2011). It should be noted, that "alternative" agriculture movements can be found as early as in the beginning of the twentieth century with the biodynamic movement in Germany, emanating from the teachings and writings of Ru-

dolf Steiner.

In Denmark (the author's native country) the emergence of the concept of New Nordic Cuisine illustrates and illuminates some of these more recent developments. Recent research (Micheelsen et al. 2012) has shown that the New Nordic Diet, a diet invented by an elite group of chefs and dieticians to include exclusively "Nordic" food products as part of a larger dietary research project, has been less favoured by lower educated rural men than higher educated urban women who already to some degree were aligned with the content and associated values of the diet: "That's fine, we already eat that, we'll do fine" (Micheelsen et al. 2012:19). The *perceived* barriers to this new food experience/products, are recognized less by those already aligned culturally and economically with its content.

That perceptions matter greatly for this concept is evident in the research into the New Nordic terroir, and very interestingly, also seems to affect change and sustain traditional practices in tandem, on a micro-scale, admittedly: "Foraging for Nordic wild food is a living traditional practice, but, increasingly, it has also become an important element in the building of various Nordic brands. Terroir narratives about the return to traditional methods of food preparation, and to 'natural' local food, are vital for the success of New Nordic servicescapes" (Larsen & Österlund- Pötzsch in Lysaght et al. 2013: 77-78).

Though moving beyond the "media-scapes" and "service-scapes" (of mostly higher-end restaurants) has proved harder for the New Nordic Cuisine, as appropriation and consumption by the Danish population, in general, has been severely limited – along with any scientific evidence to support the purported nutritional benefits of the diet compared to just following approved nutritional recommendations – eating nutritious food is healthy (Uusitupa et al. 2013).

That local, organic and/or New Nordic food products do not have any scientifically proven intrinsic nutritional benefits for ones individual health, does not mean that they do not have potentials to affect (positive) change elsewhere, especially in the primary production, and the understanding of this held by the consumers of its products. Perceptions of agriculture – often coupled with implicit notions of the environment and nature – have been shown within consumer studies to play a not insignificant role when choosing what foods to consume or not (Lassen & Korzen 2009, Harper & Makatouni 2002).

Organic food, as a whole, is an excellent example of the importance of perceptions and how these affect everyday consumption of such products. In a Danish context organic food is perceived by consumers to benefit both family members' health, farmers' livelihood, animal welfare, the environment and nature, and eventually future generations, and that all these benefits are holistically related (O'Doherty Jensen et al., 2008:102; Øllgaard et al., 2008). These findings seem further related to the finding that consumers perceive of organic food and food production as generally more 'natural' (e.g. O'Doherty Jensen, 2004; Onyango et al., 2007). Consumers, who consider purchasing organic foods, are, in many ways, "moved" to perceive of the actual "field production" of these products. These perceptions can translate into consumption, which, in turn, can change production: "A key finding is that consumer behaviour co-evolves with market development" (Midmore et al. 2008).

Adding to this argument is the fact that organic food has provided an alternative to "conventional" food products. Its importance is thus two-fold, as it simultaneously presents itself as an alternative, while – by its mainstream presence and appropriation (in an American and Northern European context, at least) by consumers – questioning the legitimacy of "conventional" food, on the basis of different essential and previously unquestioned parameters: "Concern about animal welfare is more important for particular organic products and countries where intensive animal farming systems are commonly used. This includes chicken meat and eggs, pork products and, to a lesser extent, beef and dairy products" (Pearson et al. 2010). This point is also reflected in a 2007 EC report: "The combined benefits of agriculture through the production of safe food, respect of environmental and animal welfare standards is more likely to be selected as important by respondents in most Member States, but particularly northern European countries" (EC 2010: 73).

Perceptions of individual health and safety are, still, considered the most important explanatory factors to the consumption of organic foods, which is even the more interesting (when discussing the uses of perceptions) as organic food products have *no* documented "extra" positive health effects on the individual's health when compared to conventionally grown food products (Smith-Spangler et al. 2012). Indeed, individual economic-choice-rationalities (always nicely equated but rarely questioned), have been shown to be after-rationalisations themselves. Some research suggests instead that the consumption of organic food for most consumers in Western Europe is actually, primarily, motivated by their belief in organic foods' universal "goodness" (Thøgersen 2011). And then, secondly, these beliefs are dressed in the cloak of the "rational" economic optimizing consumer, as post-rationalizations, in order to present oneself as a critical and/or authentic consumer, or true to ones own (individual) tastes (Grauel 2014).

Instead, perceptions relating directly to the environment and overall societal sustainability might play an even larger role than previously assumed when determining what foods to eat or not. This is perhaps especially true for organic foods, as the procurement of these is never done entirely on price. If this were the case, very few, if any, organic food products would probably be available outside of home gardening; instead organic food is highly dependent on the perceptions of the consumers choosing these: "Perceptions of organic food are affected by their beliefs about the safety and quality of conventional food production and subsequent attitudes to conventional versus organic products. Purchasing behaviour is affected by their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and the ability to pay premiums for organic products" (Harper & Makatouni 2002). The perceptions – not necessarily knowledge – consumers have of agricultural production and its effects on the environment, in general, exercise considerable influence over their final food choices. These issues of place and related values will be explored next.

Agriculture, Place and the Authenticity Conundrum

- More than food, for more than consumers

In his semi-classic work Berman (1982) tries to understand the contradictions and ambiguities of modernity, using Marx and Engel's famous line "All that is solid melts into air." In or-

der to provide an introductory understanding of the post-modernity of today one could add to the above lines…."and all that is (really) real must come from the land."

If we are to believe contemporary theory, we live in a "post-modern" "post-industrial" world with all the ontological insecurities this can cause, as already briefly mentioned (Bauman 2000, Giddens 1990, Beck 1992). The values and meanings inherent in societies are, apparently, shaped not by the present as much as what came before, which probably, also, speaks to the ambiguity of using post-modernism as a "unique" historical category. Indeed, the initial experiences of early twentieth-century industrialization share thematic similarities with the early experience of the, arguably, post-modernist "knowledge" society in the twenty-first century. The alienating effects of urbanity witnessed by Engels and Marx comes into play in the post-modern societies, where the fear of loosing both industry and nature are prevalent. We live in a time where development/progress, be it technical or social, is moving faster than ever before, but also, it seems, is fuelled with more anxieties than before. It is perhaps not surprising if people participating in such societies are looking for authenticity, and associated/related events.

Farmers markets, for instance, at once represent something old and something new. It is a re-imagination of the past, legitimized by the beliefs in its intrinsic and *real* capabilities to effect change in our contemporary food consumption and production. Interestingly, new food experiences and/or consumptive initiatives are, often, legitimized by narratives/perceptions imagined or replicated from the past – they are, in other words, deemed authentic. Authenticity does not have to adhere specifically to linear time, rather place and frequency are significant parameters. Starbucks is older than New York's Union Square Farmers Market for instance. But visitors might attach greater authenticity value to the latter than the former due to its "pre-modern" spatiality and perceived sociability. Though it could, reasonably, be argued that Starbucks is a more authentic representation of (mass) consumption than the farmers market.

Perhaps therefore, or thereof, much attention for the last 10-15 years has been afforded to document the discursive and performative meanings of (urban) farmers markets (Circus 2008; Izumi, Wynne Wright, & Hamm 2010; Zukin 2008), alternative food systems and outlets often coupled with notions of an emerging "creative countryside," and not infrequently postulated as part of the perceived development of agriculture in most advanced countries, moving from a productivist to a post-productivist regime (Ilbery & Bowler 1998), though this concept is, rightly, not without its critics (Wilson 2000).

The recognition and use of authenticity as a concept of meaning and therefore potential agent of change is widespread in contemporary literature, on food experiences (Beer 2008), food services (Robinson & Clifford 2012), in a tourist perspective (Richards 2011, Cohen 2010, Sims 2009), on hospitality (Zeng et al. 2012), on governance and mediatisation (Brown & Michael 2002), consumer culture (Michael 2013), consumption and consumers (Miller 2001, Grauel 2014), event studies (Getz 2007), and within many more areas of research. Its critics are often quick to dismiss authenticity as a backward (looking) concept, or a form of left-wing conservatism or defensive localism, reducing 'the search for authenticity' to mere marketing strategies, or even a hoax as described by popular author Andrew Potter (2010) or in classical Marxist terms an advanced form of "commodity fetishism" or a commodifica-

tion of culture – and sometimes rightly so, as authenticity can be utilized for monetary means (Pine & Gilmore 2007).

But, again, authenticity and its uses is not such a new thing. Outka (2007), in her "Consuming Traditions," shows how the concept of authenticity was used and misused by different manufacturers and retailers as early as the nineteenth century in order to increase sales and as a promotional tool. Importantly, in the case of Cadbury (British chocolate manufacturer) Outka also shows that the ideal of the authentic was at times, actually, translated into concrete better social conditions for its workers: 'Wages were better, benefits were greater, the housing was better built' (Outka 2007: 45). The point being, that though food is not something we can very easily ever establish as something completely authentic, its associated values and/or perceptions of authenticity still influence how we understand them and how we choose to consume, for instance.

The attempts to bridge the two separate environments of food consumption and production also seem particular to recent times. The huge mainstream success of food writer Michael Pollan and his books is surely an indicator of such holistic interest, along with the mediatisation of "celebrity" alternative farmers like Joel Salatin in a US context. The sentiment guiding these attempts to re-connect food production with its end-consumers, if only on a perceptual level, is eloquently summed up by Vileisis: "Typically, the history of America's remarkable food system has been recounted as a singularly progressive tale. Yet for many of us, the marvel of fresh leafy lettuce in the winter nests right aside the uneasiness that our children don't know milk comes from cows" (Vileisis 2008: 9).

In a globalized world with increasing trade of food products, foods might appear to have become more homogenous and standardized as part of the *McDonaldization* of Society (Ritzer 1993), which, in sentiment, mirrors the "mythic roots" of "massification" (Bourdieu 1984), which is often invoked to illustrate the perpetual decline of society. These are perceived developments that have instigated food movements – now themselves globally present – whose primary role is to support local alternatives to what they perceive as a threat to not just nutritional standards and traditional cuisine (the two often being equated) but also to local culture and communities, to which local food, both its production and consumption, is perceived to have a stabilizing and (therefore) positive effect, which can counter the (bad) influences of the global markets. Again we find a dichotomous and oppositional interpretation of market and community, and the close alignments between global structures as market driven and local structures based and orientated in community.

These perceptions of global homogenization and standardization might be influenced by the fact that the global food systems have not brought us less choice but much more, which in itself might trigger responses of insecurity and even anxiety – or the paradox of choice (Schwartz 2004). These choices are provided new meanings and significance in the experience economy.

The Rise of Experiences and Events as Mediators of Food and Agriculture

We apparently live in an "Experience Economy" (Pine and Gilmore 1999), where services and experiences are replacing production as primary economic pursuits, or perhaps more correctly, because of increased productive capabilities and gained efficiencies, more time and money can be spent in the service and leisure industries. Significantly, only eight years should pass until an addition to Pine and Gilmore's hugely successful book was apparently needed; it was titled "Authenticity: What consumers really want" (Pine & Gilmore 2007).

"The only thing constant is change" an old saying goes, and in contemporary society in the developed world where knowledge, communication, values and meaning are mediated and often interwoven, the planned event and or experience becomes simultaneously, and para-doxically, the symbol of authenticity and/or something "real" because it is requires a spatial reality (and thus is considered un-mediated) and an accelerator/medium for further media-tion, change and increased consumption of services and experiences (Richards 2012). This call for spatiality could, also, partly, work as an explanatory factor contributing to the rise of food as a symbol and medium.

"Food is not only a metaphor or vehicle of communication; a meal is a physical event" (Douglas 2014: 12) reads Mary Douglas' cautionary warning when food is overtly loaded with cultural symbolism and discourses. Ironically it seems to be exactly the physicality of food that makes it such a potent symbol and/or medium in present society. It both trans-gresses boundaries and establishes them, and by its tropic nature is always in flux, changea-ble but stable, intimate to the extreme but part of the mundane features of everyday life. In other words food as medium and mediator is perfect in the experience economy exactly because of these qualities – imagined or otherwise.

Food and related experiences can thus be perceived as the perfect "Levinisian" bridge to the "other," or the closest one gets to an intimate, yet still impersonal, experience in public. Farmers markets, as already mentioned, could thus be perceived as, and actually work as, promoters of community in urban areas, promoting "gemeinschaft"/community but using the cloaks of "gesellschaft"/business for implementation – trying to bridge the dichotomous divide between "gemeinschaft" (often believed to be naturally inherent in rural communi-ties) and "gesellschaft" (often perceived as the foundation of urbanity) according to the now classic divide described by Tönnies (1949) and Simmel (1950). This division can, also, re-enforce withdrawal. Indeed, the making, of two separate spheres of public and private in-teraction is noted by Elias, as a "basic condition" of modern civilization: "[W]ith the advance of civilization the lives of human beings are increasingly split between an intimate and a public sphere"(Elias 1978: 198). This sentiment, again, carries with it some notions of the supposed decline of community values, or the urban realm as an anti-environment for community, due to its fragmented nature and general anonymity of its partici-pants/inhabitants.

It should be noted that Simmel did, also, see the anonymity of urban life as liberating for its participants, exactly due to its impersonal nature. This is a sentiment also found in more recent "urban" sociologist Richard Sennet's work for whom the complexity and the many different roles afforded to those willing to accept the impersonal nature of urban public life

is very rewarding, as it furnishes the self with the complexity of the surrounding objects and people: "[T]he experience of urban life can teach people to live with multiplicity within themselves. The experience of complexity is not just an external event, it reflects back on individuals' sense of themselves" (Sennett 2005:109).

Farmers markets, and other related food experiences like food festivals etc., could thus be seen as a contributing factor to the diversity and community of (urban) life as they, supposedly, differ from mainstream food outlets (supermarkets) in both aesthetics and possible social interaction, as these are often viewed derisively as "non-places" (Auge 1994) and "Like going to the movies, shopping engaged them in a public culture – but in a private space of their own" (Zukin 2005: 78). But farmers markets can also work as tools for urban gentrification and symbols of inequality, as participation in these markets often come with a costly prize tag compared to mainstream food outlets like supermarkets: "Their desire for alternative foods, both gourmet and organic, and for 'middle class' shopping areas encourages a dynamic of urban redevelopment that displaces working-class and ethnic minority consumers" (Zukin 2008: 724). Again, the medium of food is shown not to be either inherently good or bad for community, but rather dependent on the context, implementation and aims of its instigators.

The role and aim of food experiences is, therefore, not necessarily only to provide its customers with fresh produce but also to instill and create a sense of community for both the citizen as well as the consumer, who are no longer viewed as two separate categories. This historical division of consumer and citizen is rather questionable (Sassatelli 2008), and in recent literature (Miller 2001) the meanings of consumption, and thus use of things, are treated, rightly, with much seriousness as the full meanings and uses of objects to the consumer is more fully unfolded and understood. This is done even to the point where the object makes the human actors, involved with its transformation, its subjects. This can be seen in a historical perspective (Pollan 2001), or using present research methodologies of non-human agency (Ren 2010).

Event studies have, also, recently emerged as an original field of investigation (Getz 2007) separate from tourism and marketing, traditionally the most prominent areas of event research, although celebrations, events and exhibitions – in all their forms – have been used extensively within anthropology and sociology for multiple purposes. Today, there are entire dissertations focusing on food events, including analyses of different foodscapes (Adema 2006, Ruiz 2012). The meanings of the "festive and/or affective foodscape" in these last writings are multiple and their influence on both individuals and structures should not be underestimated in regards to community building and branding. These works show how certain food festivals (Adema 2006) thrive in some communities but not in others, and they document the continuing importance of food festivals, both internally and externally, for the hosting communities, as well as their branding of and economic potentials for the hosting city. Food events are legitimized by both social arguments of community building and economic arguments relating more to branding and economic benefits for participating cities.

But it is not necessarily the events' potentials to unite all these well-intended societal/economical intentions, be they based in community, communicative and economic wel-

fare and/or reassuring reconciliation between the roles of the consumer and citizen; any surge in planned celebrations and events could also be a sign of what has been labelled a form of neo-localism. A localism that – paradoxically – might have arisen due to the removal of spatial barriers and the emergence of globalised society: "The elaboration of place-bound identities has become more rather than less important" (Harvey 1989:4). Place, and its celebration is, therefore, pursued, valued and marketed more, exactly because its significance, in the traditional sense, is actually vanishing. When you can go anywhere, you want to be somewhere, and somewhere that is perceived as "real."

It should be noted that this form of (local) boosterism using events is not a new phenomenon. In an American context agricultural celebrations and fairs have been used extensively to promote rural places (Edwards 1999). These events even serving as "feeders" of exhibition materials and activities to the World Fairs, which, arguably, together with the Olympics, have been *the* events to host for any international metropolis, or those seeking to become one, through the late nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century, and to which we will return.

There are several explanations and theories as to the rise of the importance of experiences in most developed countries. Pine and Gilmore (1999) mention the structural development that people, in general, have accumulated more expendable income to spend on experiences overall. Experiences and events can therefore be seen as the transitory symptom/symbol of moving from an industrial society to a knowledge/service society. This development of an experience economy is also linked to the commercialization of traditions (Richards 2007) and "glocalization" of culture coupled with a general broadening (cultural omnivores) in people's cultural orientation, where individuals are not necessarily limited to *one* way of life, but can throughout their lives experience and/or consume many different lifestyles.

It is sometimes suggested that social interaction and related experiences are on the decline in contemporary society (Putnam 1996). The bedevilled individualization is often accused of being the main perpetrator of this decline, though studies suggest that neither sociability nor its associated experiences and events are under threat. A larger study by Ingen & Dekker (2011) makes the case that many perceptions held about the decline of traditional community pursuits and celebrations is not necessarily due to less sociability, but can be explained, rather, by an increase in informalization processes. This means that traditional social activities, be they through formal memberships in clubs, associations or otherwise, might be replaced, or supplemented, by more informal settings and occasions that do not require memberships or particular spatial environments, for instance. The decline in – say – bowling memberships can thus be offset by other social interaction less recordable, but not necessarily less sociable. This process of informalization could be viewed as part of a larger social "re-arrangement" where individuals partaking in the "Network Society" (Castells 1996) find new outlets and forms to interact and express sociability: "Knowledge transfer takes place within defined circuits between different groups and 'scenes' in the creative sector. One of the essential requirements of this system is physical spaces where people can meet and validate new cultural forms, or 'play-grounds of creativity' such as cafes, squares, museum foyers. These are also the new spaces that are often so attractive to tourists" (Richards 2011: 1234).

Castell's, himself, is an advocate of networks to further sociability for the individual – though admittedly these expressions will be mostly utilized by already well-connected people, and critical voices are heard as to the nature of such "networking individuals and their sociability": "The mobility and independence of network nomads who swing from contact to contact and project to project, socially and spatially, without insisting on a consistent self-image, is now considered the most valuable asset of human capital" (Vannini and Williams 2009).

Increased individualization, or individual freedom, might actually lead to more sociability as expressed through events and other informal spatial arrangements. These might differ slightly or significantly from the form and content of their predecessors of yesteryears, but their use as vehicles of expression and (symbolic) meaning to community and beyond surely remains – though, admittedly, community and associated meanings might also be ontologically different than yesteryears', if we agree, that we are moving from industrial to knowledge society (Stehr 1994) in the developed world.

Urbanization has become coupled with the legitimization of new economic instruments and parameters and their importance, where events and cultural symbols play a determining role, as metropolises compete globally for attention and money through culture-economic initiatives, while midsized cities compete regionally, and so on. The particular frequency and intensity of urban competition and development might be particular to contemporary society, but using events and experiences to further urbanization is not new. The Olympic Games, for instance, have been used extensively as a "catalyst of urban change" throughout the twentieth century: "What began simply as a festival of sport has grown into an unusually conspicuous element in urban global competition and, for its host cities, a unique opportunity to attract publicity, bring in investment and modernize their infrastructures and images" (Essex & Chalkley 1998: 203).

And it might not just be commercialization of traditions taking place but also traditionalization, or "culturalization," of commerce or the mix of worldly and spiritual spheres. Marxists might interpret this next step as the ultimate alienation of man and nature (or the true state of man) secured through an advanced form of commodity fetishism as exemplified by Debord's "Spectacle Society" (1994), but its materiality and presence in everyday life is undeniable, and perhaps most illustratively performed at the celebrations and events of our times.

Could such developments be due to the merger between citizen and consumer? The blurred lines between citizen/consumer might work to influence both market and nonmarket, as the market is attached to traditional non-market values and vice versa as is evident in the rise of farmers markets, food co-ops, for instance. It should be noted, however, that the strong division between that of the consumer and citizen could be somewhat of an historical illusion, as the two categories have always transgressed and shared common areas (Sassatelli 2008). Again such sharp distinctions could be due to an idealization of the past, whose societies so often are narrated as less complex than present society.

Summarization and Discussion

More of everything, less of that something…

Food, and to some degree agriculture, and its associated experiences, carry much significance today, as symbols of the longevity, and dare one say the sustainability of societies and communities in general, and as media and/or vehicles for social change, as well as a symbolic and very real (the two not being mutually exclusive) mark of distinction and identity. These observations are in themselves nothing new, as previous literature has proficiently shown that food and its associated experiences have been used in multiple ways (Elias 1978, Korsmeyer 2002, Vileisis 2008, Bourdieu 1984, Mennell 1986). But the particular form and associated expressions and meanings associated with these might be, somewhat, unique to our present times.

It is hard not to recognise the influence of the "risk society" (Beck 1992) in the above themes and the themes they invoke, along, or together, with the perceived negative separation between man and nature that is reminiscent of earlier literature also involving the urban/rural continuum, which suggests real differences between urbanity and rurality (Tönnies 1940, Simmel 1950), dismisses these differences (Dewey 1960, Pahl 1965), or suggests that the urban/rural continuum continues to hold real significance as part of an (imagined?) identification of special rural and urban qualities (Bell 1992).

The rural/urban continuum illustrates, perhaps better than anything, the condition of post-modernity where "imagined" and/or perceived differences are as important as any "real" measurable differences – indeed reality is guided by perceptions of the "other" and associated places. Due to increased mobility, place (singular) should, in theory, matter less, but this does not seem to be the case. The importance of place, and its celebration, can be explained by increasing globalization and homogenization – including cultural commodification and standardization – where global structures are often associated with homogenizing markets and local structures associated with diverse community values, the latter often being perceived as intrinsically better exactly because of its locality or adherence to *place*. Though literature of historic consumption provides ample examples of how global trade interacts and changes the local (and vice versa), and that viewing the local as a separate entity from the global might be counterproductive and/or naïve.

The strongly felt presence of concepts such as authenticity, could be explained due to the, perceived, alienation between man and nature/agriculture generating farmers markets, school gardens etc. to cure ills and provide solutions that have barely been articulated before like eco-literacy or food literacy.

Authenticity can, also, provide individuals living under the, perceived, fragmented and illusive condition of post-modernism a re-assurance of their future choices by invoking ties to nature and (local) community, which are seen as good due to their perceived universal/stable/traditional structures. Again this complexity, and the acknowledgement of its existence, can actually strengthen the desire for authenticity.

Authenticity within food consumption and places can thus be viewed as an elitist concept that through the appropriation of communal spaces and individual consumption patterns makes opaque the 'actual' societal and political structures that guide our food consumption and understanding. But also it could be seen as the first step toward a new way of thinking about food and social systems and foodscapes that dares to question the productivist rationale of modernism and its spatial expressions, invoking and awakening a new understanding of, and relation between, the local and global – probably it will do both.

This conceptual sentiment of *doing both* is perhaps the "true" lesson of post-modernism, if we accept its premise. Concepts like authenticity have the thematic potentials to address conflicting messages and provide contradictory explanations to societal issues. Maybe this ability is also mirrored in our materiality of the twenty-first century and the growing acknowledgement that we can produce more of everything for everybody and still – even if it is "only" on a perceptual level – miss that something of the past, imagined or otherwise.

The increased individualization might run parallel to an increased socialization. But both are different forms and hold different aspects and experiences than individuality and sociability thirty, or even a hundred years ago. Providing credence to the concept of a universal humanism that is shared, but also one that is provided new meanings and (spatial) forms by its participants, both good and bad, throughout history.

Indeed, and this is the paradox, the mastery and control of nature which is the basis of our modern food systems can be perceived as alienating and unnerving. The bounty of plenty, in the twenty-first century, is questioned not due to its productive capabilities but rather because of its lack of a palatable narrative of place and transparency to which it could inform, and reassure, its consumers and citizens. This conundrum is eloquently summed up by Connerton (2009:46): "As natural ecosystems became more intimately linked to the urban marketplace of Chicago, they came to appear ever more remote from the busy place that was Chicago. Chicago both fostered an ever-closer connection between city and country, and concealed the very linkages it was creating."

Problems and issues associated with modern agricultural production, for instance is to a large degree perceptual. This is not to say that these developments are not indeed real, but that the ultimately overall meanings and thus societal importance and individual significance rest, to a large degree, in the perceptions of such developments and their perceived effects, as one cannot know everything for sure, and even what *sure,* or the truth, means might be debatable as we move from "Authority to Authenticity" (Brown & Michael 2010).

Perceptions about agriculture, food and people, therefore, does not just serve to navigate, interpret and/or internalize the symbols imposed by other agents and structures, but also, in their appropriation, circumvents and re-invents meanings and understandings of these. In other words, the importance of perceptions lies both in their use as "interpreters" of the surrounding world and as creators of the surroundings – the change perspective. These must, surely, not be underestimated, as is evident in the burgeoning food movements and its spatial outlets, as well as the increasing organic production worldwide. Also, important is the fact that participation in the local sphere is for many in the Western World a choice made out of want and less so out of social and economic necessity as in the past – perhaps

reflected in an increase in informalization (Ingen & Dekker 2011). This "choice," it should be noted still, often, excludes and eludes people with low socio-economic status, who still depend very much on locality, as their mobility and often also skills are more limited and less "mobile." Context continues to matter, greatly, if for different reasons, and with different effects, than in yesteryears.

Lastly, I would like to add that this paper is not a rebuff of the criticism levelled at the (global) food markets and its actors in regards to its, at times, exploitative attitudes towards the nature of resources (Belasco & Horowitz 2009), workers (Holmes 2013) governance (Guthmann 2007) and politics (Nestle 2002), among others. It is rather an attempt to show how these (often strongly) held perceptions came about, and how structural and historical developments can contribute to explaining their emergence, without retorting to complete structural determinism or complete rational-choice "free" actor perspectives, the two preferred methodological and philosophical lenses that the oppositional camps of these issues wear. Rather, reality is formed by perceptions that both influence and are influenced by individual choices and structural developments, whose autonomy and power structures vary depending on context.

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