

Localness as the new orthodoxy? Critical reflections on localisation of food systems

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Abstract – Localisation is often mentioned as the antidote to the negative consequences of globalisation. The paper evaluates the usefulness of the concept in relation to empirical studies of local food systems and proposes a revised understanding of the global-local continuum, which could be of use in developing sustainable organic food systems in a context of globalisation.¹

INTRODUCTION

Denmark can be termed as a “mature” organic market, since organic food have been present within the market for decades. Since the 1970’s, organic food systems have evolved into a number of different forms, ranging from local box schemes to inclusion in the large retail chains, which are the dominating consumption sites for organic products. Around 87% of all organic products are being sold there. The remaining 13% are being sold through various forms of “alternative” food networks (Kjeldsen 2005). The social and spatial settings for organic food networks in Denmark have thus changed significantly. The typical organic food system in the early 1980’s was primarily local and based on close interaction between producers and dedicated consumers, whereas the interface between consumers and producers when buying organic in the early 2000’s is at first glance of a more abstract kind. An increased selection of organic products in the retail chains can also be observed. Organic products can now be flown in from any remote corner of the world, regardless of the season at the site of consumption. This development can be attributed to the entry of organic production and consumption into the globalised food system. The globalisation of organic food systems have raised considerable debate, for example in international debates on “conventionalisation” (Guthman 2004; Hall & Moggyorody 2001). Globalisation poses a great challenge for regulation of organic agriculture and food systems, as thematised by EU research projects such as Organic Revision (www.organic-revision.org), but it is also an important issue to resolve in relation to the development of the organic movement and in relation to food policy issues.

CONCEPTUALISING GLOBALISATION

An initial conceptualisation of globalisation could be to use a binary distinction between the global and the local, which juxtaposes the two as opposed paths of development. In a similar vein, the historical development of Danish organic food systems can be depicted as a movement from “short”, spatially proximate organic food systems based on face-to-face interaction between organic producers and consumers and on to “long” food chains, operating in a formal market economy with the most abstract common denominator between consumers and producers, namely money (price). These two ideal-typical development paths can be termed respectively *ecological communities* and *ecological modernisation* (Kjeldsen 2005). It should be noted that ecological modernisation is a highly contested concept (Murphy 2000) and is here used to signify only the “greening” of production standards and product qualities. What is important about this binary distinction is that it tends to connect the global with relatively negative connotations, whereas the local is connected with relations of proximity and a higher degree of community, as illustrated below.

Table 1: Attributes associated with “global” and “local” (Hinrichs et al. 1998; Kjeldsen 2005)

Global	Local
market economy	moral economy
an economics of price	an economic sociology of quality
TNC’s dominating corporate profits	independent artisan producers prevailing
intensification	community well-being
large-scale production	extensification
industrial models	small-scale production
monoculture	“natural” models
resource consumption and degradation	biodiversity
relations across distance	ressource protection and regeneration
commodities across space	relations of proximity
big structures	communities in place
technocratic rules	voluntary actors
homogenization of foods	democratic participation
	regional palates
<i>Ecological modernisation</i>	<i>Ecological communities</i>

This distinction of attributes associated with the global and the local are widespread across a wide range of contributors to “green” theory and practice (Hines 2003), and the turn to local solutions on global problems (“act locally, think globally”) have been a significant theme within the environmental movement at least since the 1970’s. The questions which we will seek to address, is (1) to what degree localisation is useful as a guiding principle for devel-

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oping organic food systems, and (2) to what degree is localisation a value relevant for incorporating into organic principles?

CRITIQUING THE LOCALISATION "ORTHODOXY"

The first issue to address is that geographical proximity is viewed as having no costs and that nearness between the actors within the food system builds community. Several studies of local food systems conclude that alternative systems such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), farmers markets and others can exhibit exactly the same degree of instrumental rationality among both producers and consumers, which normally is attributed to the capitalist market economy (Hinrichs 2000; DeLind 1999). The mistake made here is to assume that spatial integration is the same as social integration. Other studies point to the fact that the motives behind buying "local" can be a chauvinistic, defensive localism, which is not centered on food quality (Winter 2003). A related issue is whether the local is a sustainable scale for organic food systems. A recent study of four Danish alternative food networks conclude that the local scale was not economically viable (Kjeldsen 2005), mostly due to the uneven spatial distribution of organic production and consumption, with most organic consumers living in major cities. The local scale was also deemed problematic in terms of a socially unjust distribution of workloads and economic risks among producers and consumers (Kjeldsen 2005). The conceptual mistake here is to assume that spatial integration is the same as system integration (coupling to relevant actors for maintaining the food system). If the global-local distinction was meant to serve as a description of the embeddedness of food systems, it seems to have limited practical value, since it does not adequately capture the diversity encountered in empirical studies.

A REVISED EMBEDDEDNESS CONCEPT

Instead of the binary global-local distinction, we propose that a revised understanding must distinguish between the spatial and the social, as well as the dimension of building viable business networks. For that purpose, a revised model of embeddedness which include both spatial integration, social integration and system integration (Hess 2004; Kjeldsen 2005) can be useful.

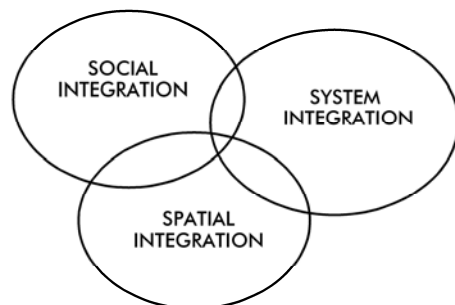


Figure 1: A revised model of embeddedness (Hess 2004; Kjeldsen 2005)

The model depicts embeddedness as three related, but distinct dimensions, which reframe embeddedness of food systems as positions within a relational field. The consequences of the model is that social integration can actually be established across distances in time-space and is thus not limited to spatial proximity. At the same time, the model can be used to problematise developments which are successful in terms of social and system integration, but not very successful in terms of "shortening" food chains. In that sense, it should be possible to balance views on the global-local continuum and thus avoid dichotomising the possible positions on the issue to either "reaction or utopianism, commitments to pasts that never were or futures that never can be" (Hinrichs et al. 1998:3) or continued expansion of a agro-industrial logic into the realm of organic agriculture.

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