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SO WHAT?

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Is it relevant to talk about ‘alternative’ agrifood networks?

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KEY POINTS

- Alternative and conventional agrifood networks are not separate spheres functioning in radically different ways.
- Alternative agrifood networks are characterised by a promise of difference in the projects of those who promote them.
- This promise of difference spurs the formulation of specific rules that are interlaced in various ways with conventional rules.
- Upscaling of alternative agrifood networks does not necessarily lead to their ‘conventionalisation’.

Rural studies research pools initiatives as varied as fair trade, organic agriculture, short food supply chains and local products under the umbrella terms ‘alternative agrifood networks’ and ‘alternative food systems’. Why call all these approaches ‘alternative’? Is it still relevant to do so when they involve multinational agribusiness corporations and large supermarket chains? Can these initiatives develop commercially and upscale while remaining alternative? Finally, what analytical framework can research propose to study these phenomena?

The ‘alternative’ label problem

Research on alternative agrifood networks has, since the late 1990s, been focused on the ‘alternativeness’ issue. The initial aim was to underline the fact that these approaches could address the multifaceted unfairness prevailing in the dominant agrifood system and provide a cornerstone for a new agricultural and rural development model. This research clearly aimed to turn the spotlight on minority initiatives, enhance their visibility and recognition, while ensuring that they would receive close attention. The rural economists and sociologists behind this research thus often took an activist stance, simultaneously denouncing the multiple crises of the dominant agrifood system and promoting alternative approaches.

Yet since the early 2000s—as a result of their more extensive field knowledge—the viewpoints of these same researchers have become more nuanced (Maye *et al.*, 2007; Goodman *et al.*, 2012). In numerous publications they have stressed that conventional and alternative agrifood networks actually do not operate in completely autonomous and different ways. Rather than pitting alternative against conventional approaches, some researchers have also pointed out that it would be more appropriate to put forward the ‘hybrid’ nature of short

food supply chains. A local product can hence be both alternative, because of how it is marketed, and conventional, because of its production method. Other research has focused on the 'conventionalisation' of some organic farming and fair trade initiatives.

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Promoters of these approaches often face tensions when they are involved in collaborations with multinational agribusiness corporations and supermarket chains. Ultimately, alternative initiatives can in some ways resemble the conventional system they initially aimed to oppose (decreased producer margins, lower consumer awareness, extensive monocultures, etc.).

Given these conditions, is it still relevant to talk about 'alternative' initiatives? While it now seems invalid to reason in terms of a great divide between two agrifood spheres—alternative versus conventional—upon what solid foundations could alternative agrifood networks be explored?

Projects hinged on a promise of difference

We feel that this question could be addressed by focusing on projects that underpin alternative initiatives (Le Velly, 2017, 2019). What is the common thread between a local food supply chain for collective catering, a fair trade network and the efforts of an association devoted to preserving local produce? The answer cannot be based on the assumption of stand-alone actions that are totally separate from conventional food supply chains. But these three approaches,

like so many others, share a project that is geared towards modifying the functioning of conventional agrifood networks. For its proponents, this project is hinged on a promise of difference—the promise that another production, trade and/or consumption organization will generate benefits for producers, consumers, regions, the environment, etc.

This reasoning has several advantages. First, it provides an opportunity to take the dichotomy of the categories set by the actors seriously. For instance, in the fair trade sector, the 'market price' is often pitted against the 'fair price', while 'consum'actors' are put forward as being at odds with 'usual consumers'. These contrasts are not based on clearcut differences that are evident in practice. Fair trade prices are never completely exclusive of market prices. These oppositions are nevertheless vital to understand the rationale and intent underlying the commitment of fair trade actors. They embody the promise of difference that shapes their action. Reasoning in these terms also provides a project-related framework for assessing conventionalisation phenomena. If the actors' project is not clearly delineated, the external observer runs the risk of judging conventionalisation according to his/her own personal preferences and motivations.

Distinguishing between alternative and conventional rules

Alternative agrifood network building processes can then be analysed by taking the project into account. The promise of difference is not just expressed in words; it also gives rise to what we call 'alternative rules', i.e. new rules drawn up specifically for the purpose of implementing the project's promise of difference (Le Velly, 2017, 2019). These alternative rules may span a range of tangible operations, e.g. developing new relational and logistics networks, new contracts and regulations, new quality conventions and assessment systems, new packaging and retailing channels, etc.

The creation of an alternative agrifood network therefore calls for a change of rules. The way practitioners then creatively manage the initiative is exciting to watch, while it is also essential to understand how these innovative alternative rules are linked to conventional rules. Our surveys revealed a variety of coordination dynamics in this regard. When constructing alternatives, one rule is thus often simply substituted by another: elimination of one input and replacement by another, or adopting intercropping; abandonment of the free choice option by a consumer who instead subscribes to receive a vegetable box without knowing the contents in advance, etc. In many cases, findings also reveal that conventional rules still apply and hamper the

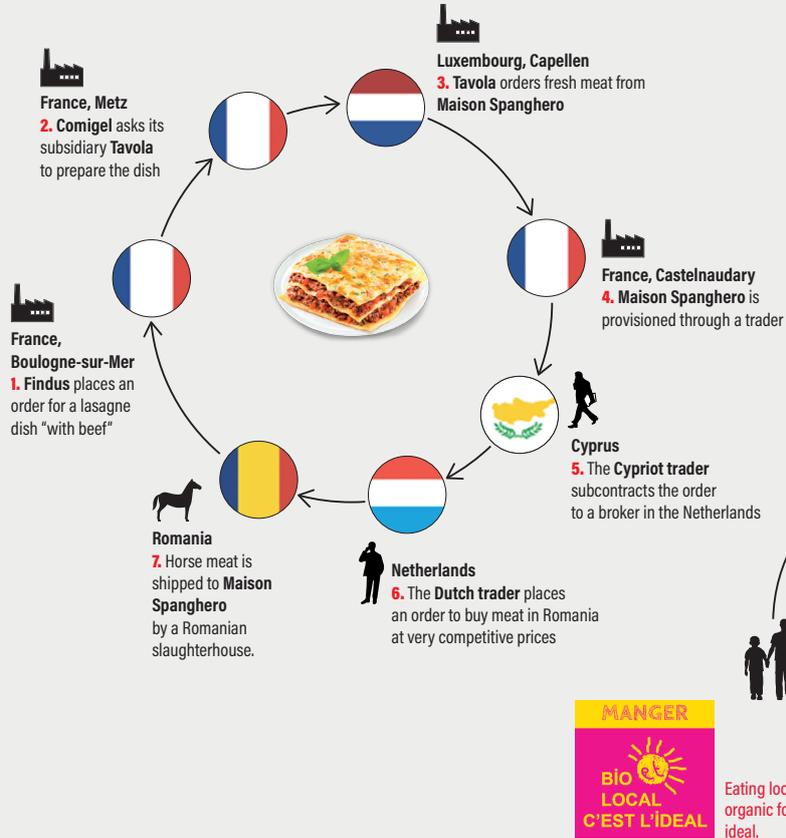
METHODOLOGY

The book *Sociologie des systèmes alimentaires alternatifs. Une promesse de différence* (Le Velly, 2017) is based on some 15 years of field surveys conducted on French fair trade initiatives and local short food supply chains. These surveys combine direct observations, documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. The author's analysis was firmly rooted in two theoretical corpora, i.e. the sociology of organised action (Jean-Daniel Reynaud, Erhard Friedberg, etc.) and the sociology of market agencements (Michel Callon, Franck Cochoy, Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier, etc.). This theoretical framework prompted him to consider alternative agrifood networks as 'hybrid spaces', governed by rules, whose capacity of action depends on their human and non-human components.

Solution 1

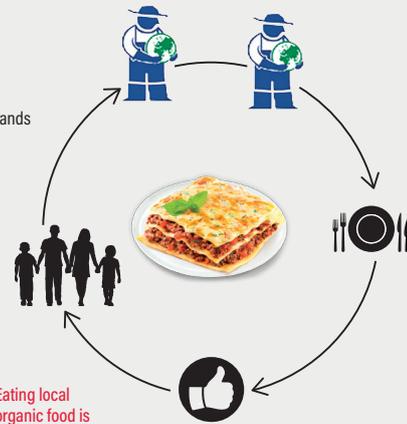
For a lasagne dish: 2 traders, 4 companies, 5 countries

(Source: Le Monde)



Solution 2

For a lasagne dish: two local organic producers, a preserved environment and you.



The horse meat lasagne scandal in 2013 provided an opportunity for many promoters of short food supply chains, such as Corabio, to boast about the difference offered by their approach. According to the press release of the Rhône-Alpes Coordination of Organic Agriculture (Corabio) of 18 February 2013.

process of constructing alternatives. For example, health regulations or the public procurement code cannot be disregarded by canteen managers wishing to relocate their supplies. Finally, and perhaps more surprisingly, it is not uncommon for conventional rules to foster the development of alternative networks. In several cases involving the construction of local supply chains for collective catering and food aid, we hence found it advantageous to go by certain rules from conventional networks, such as those concerning wholesalers' infrastructure and knowledge.

Insight into upscaling mechanisms

Research also provides answers to the many questions raised by the upscaling of alternative initiatives. The situation has markedly changed since the late 1990s. In France, many actors—although quantitatively

in the minority—are involved in short food supply chains and organic farming. Above all, the most prominent players in the conventional sphere are now also involved in these initiatives, e.g. large farms are converting, manufacturers are developing specific product ranges for hypermarket outlets, etc. In other countries, the same trend applies to fair trade, to the extent that researchers are now assessing the impacts of its mainstreaming.

What about this trend, should we worry or be happy about it? We have developed an analytical framework to address these questions (Le Velly, 2017). Changes in rules that enable upscaling must first be assessed. We thus analysed changes in logistics networks and farmers' organization selection rules that enabled the commercial development of the *Artisans du Monde* French fair trade network in the 1990s. We also investigated how rules were drawn up that led to the creation of an AMAP (the French equivalent of North American

community-supported agriculture) focused on fisheries products involving nearly 2,000 households, i.e. fortyfold more than the average number involved in vegetable AMAPs.

The potential of these new supply chains can be determined once the upscaling conditions have been identified. Their ability to fulfil the project's promise of difference is distributed among all of their components—which depends on the networks of individuals, but also on contracts and routines, material devices, etc. From this standpoint, it is essential to keep in mind that actors' motivations

are not everything. A tailored information system or an efficient logistics network is often a more critical factor in determining the ability of alternative initiatives to generate a difference.

This interpretation does not give a single ready answer. It even calls for a departure from any *a priori* interpretation, which would indicate that conventionalisation is inevitable once the market grows or conventional actors invest in it. The risks associated with these developments should not in any way be disregarded, but the future is not a foregone conclusion. ■

TO CONCLUDE

The analytical framework developed and applied in the book *Sociologie des systèmes alimentaires alternatifs. Une promesse de différence* (Le Velly, 2017) is neither optimistic/angelic nor pessimistic/deterministic. It may seem unusual to conclude in these terms if we contemplate the stance of a researcher based remotely from the phenomenon he/she is analysing, yet it is much less so in the light of the fact that the scientific debate on alternative agrifood networks may influence practices. Fostering a mindset that lauds the breakthrough of short food supply chains, fair trade and organic agriculture can be motivating, but there is still a risk of disappointment and disillusionment when coping with the daily challenges associated with building alternatives. Similarly, when a well-established critical sociological approach is adopted, foreseeing the inevitable degradation or co-optation of alternatives might be tempting, especially since this trend is often confirmed by the facts, yet this latter research strategy may lead to some resignation. Building food networks that deliver on their promises is not an easy task, but also not impossible. We must continue to strive to gain insight into the intricacies of their design so as to better support them.

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