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Filling a blank space: A study on the emergence of food communities (*Fødevarefællesskaber*) within the Danish foodscape

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Abstract:
Across Europe and North America, novel forms of consumer-producer networks have emerged for the past 10-20 years. Some of these can be described as being 'civic', as they are distinguished by producer-consumer relations and alliances which extends the conventional food market settings. Examples include networks such as solidairity purchasing groups and community supported agriculture. This phenomenon has only recently emerged in Denmark, in the shape of Food Communities (in Danish: *Fødevarefællesskaber*). The paper is based on case studies of two Danish food communities, one in the capitol of Copenhagen and another one in another major city, Århus. Our inquiry is divided in two parts: one part which focus on characterizing the Danish food communities in relation to the field of alternative food networks in Denmark. What is novel about these communities? How do they differ from other networks? Can a degree of progression be identified in relation to initiatives preceeding the Danish Food Communities? The second part of the inquiry is an analysis of the food communities as community. The particular relations which are forged within 'civic' food networks are supposed to be transparent, just and equitable. Departing in Bauman's notion of community as well as critical accounts of the 'dark side' of local-based development, our aim is to determine whether the food communities can be characterized as *aesthetic* or *ethic* communities. Issues include which processes of exclusion and inclusion can be observed, how food quality and economy is negotiated between producers and the involved citizen-consumers. The inquiry can be summarized in two issues: how are the food communities novel? And are they good examples of just and equitable (food) communities?

Introduction

Across Europe and North America, novel forms of consumer-producer networks have emerged for the past 10-20 years. Within the academic field of agro-food studies, many different perspectives on these 'alternative' food networks have offered. Some have identified the growth of alternative systems of food provisioning as a countermovement to the ongoing processes of modernization in the food sector. A defining feature of contemporary agri-food systems is the

extension of food supply chains across the globe, aided by the considerable resources of corporate agri-business and by the retail sector (Higgins, Dibden, & Cocklin 2008). While a focus on increasing the quantity of food production remains significant, a range of alternative and 'shorter' food networks are emerging. These 'alternative agri-food networks' (AAFN) are defined as such due to their 'turn' away from productivist, standardised and industrial systems of food provisioning towards a focus on notions of 'quality', 'place' and 'nature' (Bryant & Goodman 2004; Goodman 2003). A key characteristic of this type of supply chain is the capacity to resocialize or respatialize food, thereby allowing the consumer to make new value judgment about the relative desirability of foods on the basis of their own knowledge, experience, or perceived imagery. Commonly these foods are defined by either the locality or even the specific farm where they are produced; and they serve to draw upon an image of the farm and/or region as a source of quality. Short food supply chains on the one hand 'short-circuit' the long, anonymous supply chains characteristics of the industrial mode of food production. On the other hand producer-consumer relations are 'shortened' and redefined by giving clear signals on the provenance and quality attributed of food and by constructing transparent chains in which products reach the consumer with a significant degree of value-based information (Renting, Marsden, & Banks 2003).

The growing importance of value-based information has been interpreted as an overall shift towards an 'economy of qualities' (Callon, Méadel, & Rabeharisoa 2002) or what has been termed a growing 'design intensity' of production as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary production regimes (Lash & Urry 1994). Within agro-food studies, terms like 'the quality turn' has become commonplace (Bryant & Goodman 2004). 'Post-productivist' qualities are in that regard just some among several other qualities, which gains importance on a food market distinguished by market saturation. Examples of the many different quality conventions include what has been termed commercial (e.g. price), domestic (e.g. attachment to traditions and place), industrial (e.g. efficiency and reliability), public (e.g. recognition of trademarks, brands and labels), and civic (e.g. ecology, health, safety and social justice) conventions (Murdoch & Miele 1999).

The 'productivist' regime has been attributed with relatively well-defined characteristics. One example is how the industrialization of the agri-food system has been analysed using the concepts of appropriation and substitution (Goodman, Sorj, & Wilkinson 1987; Goodman & Redclift 1991) as well as studies of how processes of deregulation since the 1980s have reshaped agro-food systems across the globe in terms of space-time configuration (Bonnano & Cavalcanti 2011; Bonnano 2004; Bonnano et al. 1994). The characteristics of 'post-productivist' phenomena like AAFN, however, are far less well defined. Several studies of AAFN have emphasized that a wide range of different types can be identified. One example is that AAFN exhibit significant diversity in terms of how producers and consumers are integrated. It has been proposed to distinguish between 'short', 'proximate' and 'distant' producer-consumer networks (Renting, Marsden, & Banks 2003). Other studies suggest distinctions between 'direct produce, close typicity and distant typicity' (Tregear 2007). Each of these distinctions refer to radically diverse configurations of producer-consumer relations within the food market. Apart from market context, it has

also been emphasized that the actual shape of AAFN is contingent on national contexts, as studies of organic food networks have demonstrated (Michelsen 2002; Guthman 2004; Coombes & Campbell 1998; Kjeldsen & Ingemann 2009; Michelsen 2001). It can thus be expected that the shape of emerging AAFN is contingent on particular national development trajectories. This is also the case in Denmark, as we will deal with below.

Theoretical framework

One interesting category among AAFN include cases where either producer or consumers have pursued explicit strategic goals of transcending the 'conventional' market setting in terms of the roles played by consumers and producers, respectively. Such efforts to construct alternatives to the established 'rule of the game' within the modern food market have received significant academic attention. One particular example is the case of 'civic agriculture' (Lyson & Guptill 2004; Lyson 2004). The term civic agriculture refers to the process of building local markets through direct sales to consumers; markets which are supposed to promote community social and economic development in ways that commodity agriculture cannot (Trauger et al. 2010). Examples of 'civic' forms of agriculture include community gardens, farmer's markets, Community Supported Agricultre (CSA), community kitchens, box schemes, pre-ordered and bulk meat purchases, U-pick operations, among many others (Trauger et al. 2010; Delind & Bingen 2008). Civic forms of agriculture have not only been associated with local scale, but are also supposed to be embedded in community-based values and institutions (Delind & Bingen 2008). In that regard, civic forms of agriculture have been framed as reembedded economies in the Polanyian sense, with economic exchange being reembedded into social institutions (Guthman 2007; Bacon 2010; Dale 2008; Polanyi 1992, 1957; Barham 1997). In this vein of research, civic agriculture (and food) has a distinct scalar and ideological bias. It has been argued that civic agriculture poses a conceptual dilemma, as local agriculture is by definition a civic enterprise within this conceptual framework (Delind & Bingen 2008). Another issue is that markets, local as well as non-local, does not automatically encourage social equity, democratic participation or other 'progressive' qualities (DeLind 2011; Winter 2003; Delind & Bingen 2008). Most of the accounts of 'civic' agriculture cited above are distinguished by an explicit focus on farm-level, which does not consider consumers or sites of consumption in much detail. In an ideological sense, these approaches can be attributed a distinctive agrarian ideology (Allen 2004; Guthman 2004), which might not be surprising, given the term 'civic agriculture'. This is one of the reasons why phenomena such as fair trade does not fit very well into the framework of 'civic agriculture' as this involves a reconfiguration of consumer-producer relations, but across extended distances in physical space. Even though the analytical framework regarding 'civic agriculture' has its flaws with regards to issues of scale and ideology, this does not rule out the possibility that the use of the term 'civic' in relation to food networks might still be relevant.

Discussions of 'civic' issues regarding consumption processes can also be found many other places. Tim Lang and collegaues has raised the issue in relation to the perceived need for a revised food policy (Lang 1999, 1998; Lang & Gabriel 1995; Gabriel & Lang 1995) and the theme has also been prominent in many other debates on the political dimensions of food consumption (de Bakker &

Dagevos in press; Evans 2011; Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, & Le Velly 2011; Hill 2011; Rumpala 2011; Stehr & Adolf 2010; Lockie 2009; Johnson 2008; Trentmann 2007; Schudson 2007)

In the present paper, we will focus on 'civic' aspects of AAFN, as they have appeared in the Danish context. One textbook definition of the notion 'civic' is that it (in its plural form) concerns "*the study of the theoretical and practical aspects of citizenship, its rights and duties; the duties of citizens to each other as members of a political body and to the government.It includes the study of civil law and civil code, and the study of government with attention to the role of citizens — as opposed to external factors — in the operation and oversight of government*" (Wikipedia 2012). In the following, we will narrow down our focus on the issue of distribution of rights and duties between consumer/citizens and producers. As the critical remarks about scalar and ideological bias in prior conceptualisations of 'civic agriculture' are worth taking seriously, some adjustments to the use of the term 'civic' as it has been used in the 'civic agriculture' approach should be made.

The first adjustment concerns the scalar bias inherent in the notion of 'civic agriculture'. Our concern is to study the development of producer-consumer networks (food networks) which stretches across a multiplicity of spaces. It would be unadequate to delimit the scope of the study to farm-level. A quote from a UK study of local food consumption is illustrative in that regard: "*..consumers become constructed not as potential agents contributing to the meaning of local food, but as passive recipients with no locality of their own. In this reading, by the time local food comes to the consumer, it is an essentially placeless category rather than a practice negotiated in place by those located in that place.*" (Blake, Mellor, & Crane 2010: 411). Another variant of the scalar bias is that researchers should be mindful not to conflate local scale with intrinsic attributes, such as social justice, trust and solidarity. One example is that local scale does not in any way gurantee 'civic' enterprise, as many studies 'the local trap' have exemplified (Sonnino 2010; Born & Purcell 2006; Brown & Purcell 2005; Purcell & Brown 2005). Furthermore, the notion of community, an integral part of the notion of 'civic', should be scrutinized thoroughly. As pointed out by Bauman (Bauman 2001) community is 'a good thing', something to aspire for and good to have. According to Bauman, community involves some basic tensions, such as the troubled relation between freedom and equity. Bauman thus distinguish between two basic types of communities: ethic and aesthetic communities. Where ethic communities are distinguished by mutual obligations established through a shared history, aesthetic communities are distinguished by short-term engagements between citizens, typically emerging from collaborative 'projects'. Whenever communities emerge, they are based on a notion of who constitutes members of the community and who does not. That means that communities have an 'inside' within which a distinct social order is established, as well as an 'outside'. As studies of social capital have illustrated, the combined effects of internal closure and external coupling plays an important role in relation to economic development (Woolcock 1998; Schulman & Anderson 1999; Kjeldsen & Svendsen 2011; Svendsen, Kjeldsen, & Noe 2010).

Apart from the need to consider scalar and ideological biases in the analytical approach to 'civic' food networks, there is also a need to consider the particular

national developmental contexts, as mentioned earlier. As it has been the case in Denmark, the relations between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' food networks is shaped by particular interplays between market actors, civil society and the state. Denmark constitutes a particular case of a coordinated market economy (Hall & Soskice 2001), where the state has been an active player in shaping the agricultural and food sector.

The Danish context

Denmark is distinguished by a highly modernized food and agricultural sector. Historical studies of the development of the Danish food system has emphasized that already from the late 1880's, a significant focus on 'efficient' and export-oriented farming emerged within Danish agriculture (Ingemann 1999, 2002). As Denmark had few other natural resources but agricultural land, the Danish state played a very active role in the modernization process. State funding of both research institutions and agricultural extension service created close links between state, science and food systems development. The result has been a food sector distinguished by highly efficient farms, farmer-controlled cooperative processing firms and farmer-owned extension services. In terms of product quality, the development of industrial quality standards such as Danish Bacon and Lurpak Butter has been a historical stronghold of Danish agriculture. These development trajectories have had a significant impact on on the relation between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' in the Danish food sector. As several studies of the development of the Danish organic food sector has demonstrated, organic farming was included in the 'mainstream' food sector at a relatively early stage of its development (Kjeldsen & Ingemann 2009, 2010; Michelsen 2001). One of the indicators of the level of professionalization within the organic sector is that the average farm size within the Danish organic dairy sector is bigger than within their conventional collegaues (Dalgaard et al. 2008). With the organic sector being included in the 'mainstream' food sector, there is a relatively minor 'alternative' food sector in Denmark. There is not much systematic data available on consumption of food outside Danish retail chains, but most estimates state that approximately 10-12 percent of the food market in Denmark takes place outside the established retail sector (ØL 2009; DST 2007; Kjeldsen 2005). Food networks operating outside the 'mainstream' include many different types of networks. Examples include regional box schemes, national level box schemes, specialty shops as well as ecological communities, consumer groups and others. These examples exhibit a diverse array of 'taskscapes' (Ingold 2000), different fields which are distinguished by different actors, practices, rationalities and ideologies. Even though these alternative food networks only constitute a minor part of the food market, they might be very important as examples of social innovation within the Danish foodscape.

The scale of Danish food networks operating outside the established retail sector is relatively minor. Still, some of the most significant developments, in terms of social innovation, have taken place outside the mainstream. During the 1990s, fueled by the emerging interest for organic food among Danish consumers, several attempts had been made to create alternative sector organisations like independent dairies and slaughteries. Many of these projects failed, and by the late 1990s most of the 'alternative' food market took place within established retail chains or via localized systems of provision, such as box schemes or direct selling. From the year 2000 and onwards, several new

innovative approaches could be observed on the Danish 'foodscape' (Kjeldsen & Ingemann 2009). One of the important projects was the web-based box scheme Aarstiderne.com (aarstiderne.com 2003). The enterprise started out as a local box scheme, supplying 100 local families with fresh vegetables. This business setup proved relatively unsuccessful in economic terms, but also in terms of a heavy workload on behalf of the producers. The owners of the enterprise then decided to transform their business into a national-level box scheme, capable of supplying virtually all Danish households, but with the market stronghold being the Danish capitol of Copenhagen (AA01_direktør 2002). More than 10 years later, Aarstiderne.com delivers 35.000 boxes with fresh organic fruit and vegetables every week to consumers all over Denmark. The enterprise is one of the few examples of the successful transformation from local-level box box scheme into a highly professionalized e-business operating on national level. Other important initiatives taking place from the year 2000 and onward, was the creation of the first Danish CSA Landbrugslauget. Landbrugslauget was a consumer-owned cooperative farm, managed by skilled farmers, who also had shares in the cooperative. The CSA was, like many similar initiatives in North America, based on the direct involvement of urban consumers, both in terms of ownership but also in terms of doing field work. These projects paved new paths across the Danish foodscape. Aarstiderne was the first Danish food network to utilize web-based means of consumption on a national scale, and Landbrugslauget was the first farm in Danish history which was owned by a group of consumers (the cooperative had 500 members, including 3 farmer members). These developments forms the background context, from within which the food communities emerge.

The Danish Food Communities (Fødevarefællesskaberne)
The main empirical cases in our inquiry is the Danish food communities in Copenhagen and Aarhus. The two food communities in have been studied using semi-structured qualitative interviews. Until now, 7 respondents have been interviewed. Each interview lasted for approximately 2 hours. The respondents were selected using snowball sampling. Furthermore, content analysis was applied in relation to public documents and websites (Krippendorff 2004).

The Danish food communities[1] are food networks, which emerged for the first time in late 2010 in the Danish capitol Copenhagen. From a modest start in Copenhagen, the movement has spread to at least 4 major cities of Denmark, including the second-largest city of Aarhus. The food communities in Copenhagen now counts more than 3.000 members, organized in local networks within 9 different neighborhoods of Copenhagen. The food community of Aarhus counts 300 members today (the network started one year later than the one in Copenhagen) and is not yet differentiated between neighborhoods within the city. The food community in Aarhus received significant assistance from the activists in Copenhagen, when starting up their own network. The basic organization of the food communities is that they (as a group) source fresh vegetables from regional farmers. The regional farmers (typically placed in the urban periphery) delivers their produce once a week to a distribution central in the city, operated by the consumer-activists. It is then the responsibility of the consumer-activists to pack the vegetables in boxes which are picked up on the

[1] See websites at www.kbhff.dk and www.aoff.dk

distribution central by each individual member. In that manner, the food communities seek to meet one of their main objectives, to provide affordable, fresh and organically as well as locally grown vegetables. The Danish food communities are based on a set of common principles[2]. The principles state that:

(1) Food should be grown and produced in organic quality
(2) Food shall be as local as practically feasible
(3) Food supply shall mirror seasonal variation
(4) Trade should be fair and direct
(5) Production and consumption shall be environmentally friendly
(6) The food communities shall raise awareness about food and organics
(7) The food communities should be economically sustainable and independent
(8) The food chain should be transparent and trust-building
(9) Food should be widely accessible and affordable
(10) The food communities should be powered by local, collaborative communities

The food communities have established distribution centres, shops, in Aarhus and Copenhagen, where the farmes deliver their produce each week. Each member of the food community takes turns in the shop packing the vegetables in boxes. The operation of the shops is coordinated by the individual neighborhood groups. So far, only Copenhagen is divided into such groups. Apart from the local groups, the food communities are differentiated functionally in the shape of working groups, which manage different aspects of the operation of the network. Examples of working groups include retail, communication, finance, events and many other categories. The activists in the working groups are recruited among the food community members.

The novelty of the Danish food communities?
As mentioned earlier, the food communities adds to a very limited number of consumer-controlled initiatives within the Danish foodscape. Market- or state-driven initiatives have been far more common in Denmark, due the particular institutional context which Denmark offers (a coordinated market economy). What is also remarkable about the food communities, is the rapid growth that they have experienced. In the case of the food community of Copenhagen, they have recruited a significant number of members. When Landbrugslauget started, they were able to recruit 500 shareholders, but only 30 out of these actually purchased the produce of the enterprise (Kjeldsen 2005). When Aarstiderne started back in 1997, they only had 100 customers. It was only until their period of rapid growth from the year 2000 and onwards, that they were able to increase their customer base. The unifying feature between Aarstiderne and the Danish food communities is that they both have utilized state-of-the-art information technology, whereas Landbrugslauget had significant difficulties doing the same. In the case of the food communities, they have right from the start been based on the utilization of social media. Web-based technologies like Facebook, Wordpress, Wikis, Google Docs, email clients form the backbone of the infrastructure of the food communities. The accounts delivered by some of

[2] http://kbhff.dk/om/hvorfor/

the activists in Aarhus is quite illustrative in that regard. They stated that when they started the food community in Aarhus, they found a producer who met their selection criteria via a Google search and the initial recruiting of members were carried out on Facebook. Wordpress was chosen as the CMS which powered their website, and to resolve emerging issues they consulted the food community Wiki which had earlier been established by the food community in Copenhagen. Email and Wordpress-posts are the daily means of communication, apart from work meetings face-to-face. In conclusion, the food communities are in fact 'powered by' information technology, and more specifically, social media. This constitutes a novelty within the Danish foodscape, as earlier projects have struggled to utilize the potential of web-based social media for social networking. The only other enterprise which has had success with that, has been Aarstiderne.

The food communities as 'community'

As noted in the brief review earlier, many established CSA's or other forms of 'civic agriculture' share a common agrarian ideology, which is expressed in establishing a burden sharing between producers and consumers. Consumers are typically expected to deliver some part of the work needed to produce food. This might involve quite an effort on behalf of the consumers (DeLind 1999). This is only partly the case with the Danish food communities. The activists do the packaging, but are not involved in the production of vegetables. The agreements between the food communities and the farmers only concerns delivery to the respective distribution centres. The producers are specialized producers, who have already established distribution of various kinds of their produce, and the food communities constitute only a minor part of their total production. Until now, agreements between the food communities and the farmers have only been on a week-to-week basis and there has only been discussions taking place whether it would be feasible to implement some sort of plan for which crops and varieties to grow. In that regard, the farmers can not readily be considered as members of the community. In relation to earlier projects such as Landbrugslauget, this is an important difference.

What the difference expresses is that the food communities does not share the agrarian sentiments inherent in the 'classic' CSA form of organization. Landbrugslauget did exhibit clear indications of being informed by a distinct agrarian ideology, whereas the food communities can be described as a post-agrarian food community, an attribute which they share with networks such as Aarstiderne. The activists within the food community uses the web as a virtual meeting place, in addition to the shop within urban space. Virtually all of the respondents showed little, if any, interest in going to the producers' farms to see with their own eyes how their food was produced. Instead, they were more concerned with how the food communities could foster stronger ties between the members. One of the respondents from the food community in Aarhus, who was involved in arranging events, stated that he had a hard time making the members attend the events he arranged. All the producers said during the interview that they had experienced no inquiries from the consumer-activist regarding how the food was produced. The two activists involved in negotiating deliveries from the producers, also expressed that their main concern regarding the product quality was that it conformed to organic quality standards.

Preliminary conclusions and outlook

The Danish food communities have existed for little more than two years and have managed to recruit a quite substantial number of member in a short span of time. One of the important factors which might explain their rapid growth, could be their successful utilization of social media in relation to reaching potential members. Another important factor is that their aim of supplying affordable organic food of high quality have so far been successful. Considering that food in Denmark is relatively expensive due to high food taxes, might help explain the rapid growth. Another important factor is that the entry into the food communities is relatively easy, compared to earlier projects.

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