

A framework for reading economic diversity in food networks and its application to community supported agriculture

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Highlights

- We propose a framework that expands our understanding of economic diversity in food networks.
- This framework allows for reading economic diversity both *within* and *between* food networks; that is, to capture the forms of alterity in relation to capitalist models, and the diversity amongst food networks (the many possible ways to be 'alter').
- This framework includes the dimensions of ontology and forms of reproduction: economic relations, political integration and knowledge production.

Background and research question

Problem: Industrial capitalist agriculture is increasingly recognized as socially and environmentally unsustainable. The quest for sustainable agriculture necessarily involves the identification, support and establishment of non-capitalist, more sustainable models of food production and consumption.

Gap: Different frameworks for food network analysis can be found in the Alternative Food Networks, and the Community Economies literatures. However, these frameworks suffer from some common shortcomings, which may include: binary thinking, the predominant focus on economic relations, and their inability to capture at the same time alterity in relation to capitalist models and the diversity amongst food networks. Therefore, the analytical conceptualization of food networks remains fragmented.

Question: How can we 'read' for diversity in food networks to identify spaces of possibility beyond capitalism?



Framework

Dimensions	Element	Guiding question	Modes	
Ontology <i>Escobar (1995; 2018), Shiva (1993)</i>	Time	How are these elements constructed?	Dualist (Euro-modern) Relational	
	Space			
	Human nature			
	Logic of relation			
Forms of reproduction	Economic relations <i>Gibson-Graham (2006, 2011)</i>	Enterprise	Capitalist Alternative capitalist Non-capitalist	
		Labour		How is surplus appropriated?
		Transactions		How is labour compensated?
		Property		How is commensurability negotiated?
		Political integration <i>Jessop (2007), Brand (2016)</i>		Regulation and participation
	Knowledge production <i>Escobar(1995), Moore (2015)</i>	Legitimation		How are economic activities legitimated?
		How is knowledge reproduced?		

Application

The framework was tested on 24 case studies of community supported agriculture (CSA) which were selected through a literature review.

Ontology

- *Dualist ontology:* external nature and atomized, 'rational' human beings, an instrumental logic of relation with the non-human world. In CSA dualist ontology is manifested through the pursuit of profit maximization, disconnect between farm members and farm owners and the process of food production.
- *Relational ontology:* interconnectedness of human and non-human worlds. In CSA it can be recognized through slow rhythms of food production with respect to natural cycles, avoidance of fossil fuel consumption, involvement of volunteers on a farm etc.

Economic relations (transactions)

- *Capitalist mode:* farmers sell fruits or vegetables to the market or re-sell products from other producers.
- *Alternative capitalist mode:* farmers use alternative currencies or engage in barter.
- *Non-capitalist mode:* farmers offer shares free of charge to low-income support organizations and community members. Gift-giving also takes place in a form of free 'extras' such as berries or flowers.

Political integration (regulation and participation)

- *Capitalist mode:* CSA act mostly as passive adopters of state policies, laws and regulations. If they engage in channels of representation, CSA act according to the dominating economic rules.
- *Alternative capitalist mode:* CSA adopt voluntary practices and standards developed by non-state actors, still reproducing capitalist logics of accumulation, commodification etc.
- *Non-capitalist mode:* CSA proactively reclaim their political agency. They might form food councils or engage into deliberate democracy.

Knowledge production

- *Capitalist mode:* CSA primarily procure solutions from R&D centres and university.
- *Alternative capitalist mode:* more interconnected and networked forms of knowledge production. This structure rests on a multiplicity of knowledge producers and experts, which also implies less marked power relations.
- *Non-capitalist mode:* farmers learn from each other in the process of cooperation and this way create more sustainable agricultural practices. They draw heavily on various traditional local and international farming practices, as well as on scientific knowledge.

Insights

- Distinct CSAs show different configurations of the framework's elements.
- Configurations change over time, especially as a result of tensions between actors, or between CSA and its context.
- Initial ontology does not necessarily translate into forms of reproduction.