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In Search of the Vocabulary for Eastern European Food Studies. Conceptual Remarks After the Workshop: Alternative Food Supply Networks in Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract

The article aims to organise the discussion about the position and role of research on alternative food networks and sustainable food systems in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It was inspired by a debate that ensued during a meeting of researchers of alternative food systems held in October 2017 in Riga. Based on the meeting, one can conclude that it is necessary to: 1) develop a universal theoretical framework to study food practices which will take into account the specificity of this part of Europe; 2) consider the unique activities and initiatives embedded in the tradition of the region; and 3) establish functional connections among researchers involved in food studies.

Keywords: food studies, alternative food networks, Eastern European Countryside, sustainable agriculture, sustainable consumption

Researchers of sustainable food systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, theories and conceptual

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frameworks developed most often in Western academic centres (e.g. Goodman, DuPuis, Goodman 2014) allowed the discipline to thrive, making scientists and practitioners interested in small farming and local food initiatives. On the other hand, Western bias (Fredrychowa, Jehlicka 2018), conceptualizations of sustainability embedded in other contexts, models of civic activity and transformation of rural areas mean that researchers in CEE lack the conceptual apparatus that would be adapted to the social, cultural and political specificity of their region (Śpiewak 2016). This observation lay at the foundation of a workshop organised by the Baltic Studies Centre and the Latvian Academy of Culture, *Alternative Food Supply Networks in Central and Eastern Europe*; it was held in October 2017 in Riga. This article will address the most important findings of that meeting.

The aim of the workshop was to systematise how reflections on alternative food systems develop and how they are practised and conceptualised in the CEE countries. During the 2-day meeting, 40 food system researchers worked together to answer questions regarding¹:

- a) The diversity of food production and consumption systems, their dynamics of change, social demand and challenges related to them in the CEE countries;
- b) Cultural embeddedness of food manifested as folk turn, rediscovering of traditions, retroinnovations, gastronationalism, ethnic and regional identities;
- c) Organisation of alternative food networks (AFNs), horizontal and vertical classification of this type of initiative;
- d) Governance and policy of sustainable food system development;
- e) Theoretical framework for AFN research purposes, strengths and weaknesses of the existing approaches and the possibility to work out a unique conceptual framework adapted to the specificity of Central and Eastern Europe;
- f) Changes and dynamics of food discourses and the role that AFNs play in this process.

The workshop was divided into three parts in which the respective research results and practical projects were presented. Joint sessions were also held to summarise and systematize the overall discussion. In general,

¹ The information about the workshop is based on the official programme and posts available at: www.fcrn.org.uk.

the presentations may be categorised as: theoretical (e.g. Petr Jehlicka, *Sustainability hidden in plain sight*; Talis Tisenkopfs, *Precious potato. Alterity from the farmer and consumer perspective*); focused on the specificity of particular food practices (e.g. Mikelis Grivinis, *Wild thing... You make our Hearts Sing*; Daniel Keech, *City Horticulture. Rural identity*); devoted to social change (e.g. Astra Spalvena, *Different Faces of Vegetarianism in Latvian Cookbooks*; Joanna Storie, *Allotment Gardening in Latvia: more than a survival strategy*); and the organization of alternative food systems (e.g. Liisi Reitalu, *Rethinking the alternativeness in post-socialist alternative food networks*; Lilian Pungas, *Food Self-Provisioning and Dachas – Same but different*). The recap sessions discussed issues relating to the network formation, information exchange and possible forms of cooperation among food researchers in the CEE countries.

One of the problems raised during the workshop deserves particular attention. The concepts of sustainable food systems and AFNs are becoming increasingly more popular among researchers of food, agriculture, consumption and urban movements. Concurrently, they are strongly embedded in the Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean cultures (Fonte 2008). The basic typology differentiates between AFNs in Northern and Southern Europe, remaining oblivious to other regions (Bilewicz, Śpiewak 2015). For example, one of the most important works that organises the knowledge of alternative food systems is based on research conducted in the UK and the USA (Goodman, DuPuis, Goodman 2014). The terminology and reliance on such centrally derived conceptualisations of food practices, citizenship, specific areas and their roles, are the reasons why regional specificity becomes, at least partially, lost to research which seeks to impose the central conceptual framework on areas located outside the centre. This becomes particularly clear with respect to such – to a certain extent – coherent areas as Central and Eastern Europe. Despite internal differences it is a region that shares a common specificity, historical background, similar elements of culture and experience in terms of the transformation processes. Therefore, it requires a research language that will take its uniqueness into account (Ballinger 2017).

The postulated uniqueness of tools and approaches to studying sustainable food systems has two dimensions. The first one refers to the need to develop a theoretical framework that will enable description of the specificity of a given CEE state while contributing constructive elements to

general scientific discourse. Among the attempts to develop such a framework is the concept of quiet sustainability (Smith, Jehlicka 2013). It assumes that in the case of CEE, it is a mistake to search for politically motivated food practices that refer directly to the idea of sustainable development, which is typical of the countries of the centre (ibidem). There is a myriad of food-related behaviour patterns, activities and motivations that do not relate directly to a politically defined alternativeness, but are nevertheless well embedded and have a great transformational potential. For example, in the CEE countries allotments, dachas and food self-provision traditions may prove to be more important for the transformation of the system than single urban gardens established by activists. Deeply rooted and politically invisible, practices in post-socialist countries reveal a variety of socio-cultural factors and unique trajectories of sustainable development (Whitehead 2010). They translate into different ways of organising alternative food systems (Bilewicz, Śpiwak 2016), generate unique challenges, but also offer a unique potential in terms of food and sustainable development. AFNs in Central and Eastern Europe are not simply a number of solutions from Western Europe or the USA that have merely been copied and transferred to the CEE countries. Instead, they are their iteration further modified by the specific context of the region.

The second conceptually interesting topic of the workshop was devoted to the specific and unique activities and initiatives. The CEE countries are characterised by a variety of food-related practices. In addition to trends adopted from other areas, the region can also boast its own unique solutions. Self-provision traditions and informal networks for the exchange of home-made food are still very strong (Jehlicjka, Smith 2012; Smith, Kostlecky, Jehlicka 2015). Food production and processing for one's own needs is a widespread and relatively unique practice. Moreover, contrary to appearances, it does not disappear despite new consumer movements. Subsequent translations of this practice become an indicator of new classes and social groups. With the exception of social media, the social horizon of home production is still determined by strong family bonds (Kopczyńska, Zielińska 2017; Hoop, Jehlicka 2017). The local symbolic field in which sustainable food systems operate is also slightly different and more conservative compared to the countries of the centre. Important elements that have an impact on the social construction of quality are: references to the past, rural idyll, origin, taste. Values associated with the

organic production regime, fair trade and social justice have a much smaller effect on consumers (Śpiewak 2016).

This discrepancy was evident in the examples of specific food-related initiatives and social practices presented during the workshop. On the one hand, initiatives transferred from the centre are beginning to develop in the CEE countries. Food cooperatives, the growing slow food movement, community supported agriculture and high-quality food delivery initiatives associated with urban movements are emerging, attracting researchers' attention. Similarly to the countries of the centre, such activities are associated with the development of the middle and creative class as well as new forms of social divisions and exclusions. On the other hand, they are entering a region marked by its own unique practices. For example, the Baltic countries still have strong foraging traditions, which on the one hand are an important element of culture while on the other they still constitute an important source of income for some people (Grivinis et. al. 2016). Romania has strong pastoral traditions that are a crucial component of the cultural landscape. Ukraine is reviving the tradition of dachas, with a folk turn movement (national identity revival) evolving around small farms (Mamonova 2018). Cultivated anew or rediscovered by new groups, traditional or reconstructed practices allow the CEE countries to rebuild the recently disturbed sense of relationship with the land and ethnic group (Smith, Jehlicka 2007).

The last crucial topic raised during the workshop addressed the position and strategies adopted by researchers of sustainable food systems in the CEE countries. Western bias, domination of centre-based scientific journals, a grant system focused on problems defined outside the region, a technocratic and competitive model of scientific career development along with researchers' self-marginalisation, are the reason why this region, with its own specificity, can hardly make it to the main scientific discourse. According to some researchers, this is due to its semi-peripherality and the related neo-colonialism of contemporary disciplines dealing with food production systems (e.g. Smith, Jehlicka 2013). Therefore, the problems related to AFN research are both exogenous (lack of discussion space and a low interest of centre-based researchers in the situation in the CEE region) and endogenous (low activity of local researchers, difficulty in evaluating the importance of small farms and recognising the significance of traditional food practices) (Mamonova 2018; Smith, Jehlicka 2013).

Importantly, the participants of the meeting did not opt for a reactionary response to these problems. Withdrawal into practicing science exclusively within one's national language or region is not a solution. One of the most important conclusions from the workshop was that it is necessary to establish real and functional relationships among food researchers in CEE. It should result in increased visibility of our works, exchange of concepts, joint research and practical projects. The purpose of such activity cannot be limited only to improving the recognition of our discipline as practiced by researchers from the centre. The assumption is that research on AFNs and sustainable food systems in this part of the continent should supplement the prevalent narration and theoretical core of our discipline with concepts and ideas genetically associated with Central and Eastern Europe.

The workshop organised in Riga raised the important issue of identity and position of research originating from the CEE region. Studies on sustainable food systems in CEE need their own vocabulary and conceptual framework. However, the goal is not to create an alternative, intellectual space, but to use the CEE specificity to enrich the already existing academic discussion on small farms and food consumption models. It seems that the Riga meeting, which inspired reflections presented in this article, may be an important step towards raising the importance of studies and analyses of alternative food networks originating from CEE.

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