Moral Economies of Food in the Socialist/Post-socialist World

Marisa Wilson

Abstract This chapter explains how economic activities become associated with moral understandings such as the 'right' way to provision food. It shows how such moral economies developed in Western Europe under the headings "liberalism" and "socialism" and gives examples of ways each is actualised in the production, exchange and consumption of food. Historical and present-day ideas about "the right way" to provision food have real-life effects, illustrated by the way fruit is traded globally. The chapter concludes with a detailed example of the socialist moral economy of food in Cuba, showing how socialist ideas about how food "should be" provisioned affect people in everyday life.

Keywords Moral economy · Neoliberalism · Socialism · Cuba · Food sovereignity · Comparative advantages · Commodities

Introduction

Moral economy can be defined as the way economic activities are influenced by moral dispositions and norms, and how those norms may be compromised, overridden or reinforced by economic pressures (Sayer 2000). In this view, markets and moralities are not mutually exclusive or opposing forces—they involve reciprocal relations whereby markets depend on and influence moral sentiments, while social norms, moral conventions and other ethical considerations exert a powerful influence on economic behavior (Jackson 2013). This essay contrasts the moral economy of food in socialist and post-socialist countries with countries that espouse a liberal or neoliberal approach to the production and consumption of food. In the first two sections I provide a very general outline of two common moral economies of food that stem from the history of European philosophy. In the third I provide a

M. Wilson (✉)
Geography Building, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh,
Drummond Street, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, UK
e-mail: marisawlsn@gmail.com

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more detailed account of socialist moral economies of food with an example of ideals and practices of food sovereignty in Cuba. I conclude by relating socialist moral economies of food in Cuba to post-socialist food economies in other places such as Russia and Eastern Europe.

Neoliberal Moral Economies of Food

The most common theory of economic life is market liberalism or neoliberalism. This is a moral economy because it is based on certain moral norms such as the idea that the best economy is a *global* economy, according to which each country (and individuals within each country) *should be* treated as distinct entities, competing in terms of their own self-interest. Neoliberal moral economies of food are based on the idea that food is best treated as a commodity that acquires an increasing amount of (monetary) value with each additional processing or marketing stage. The 'should be'—the moral element—comes from the belief that this kind of economy is best to ensure the General Welfare of all people on the planet (Myrdal 1953/2002). However, the ever-increasing production, processing and consumption of food commodities has been criticized as detrimental to both bio-physical and socio-cultural processes (e.g., Friedmann 2004).

One of the first proponents of the market liberal moral economy of food was Ricardo (Ricardo 1817/2004), who wrote that it was an advantage to all countries for each to trade in that wherein it specialized. A contemporary example is the idea that the European Union, or parts of it, are better suited to trade in certain commodities such as wheat and sugar, while other places (including parts of the EU itself) are better placed to trade in fresh fruits and vegetables. At the global level, this means (theoretically) that the United Kingdom may buy organic apples from New Zealand at a better rate than producing them for herself, though apples can grow all over the UK.

In everyday life, the neoliberal moral economy of food is evidenced in consumers' regular trip to the supermarket, which contains food from all over the world including French beans from Zambia or Kenya (Freidberg 2004), avocados from Chile or Mexico, bananas from Costa Rica and St Lucia. The persistence of long-distance trade over more localized producer-consumer networks stems in part from a history in which land and labor in formerly colonized places, such as New Zealand, were used to ensure basic foodstuffs for former imperial places, such as the United Kingdom and its former colonies, based on Ricardo's theory of comparative advantages. Yet forms of resistance to this dominant moral economy of food continue to emerge alongside it, in the former imperial world as well as the formerly colonized world.

Socialist Moral Economies of Food

Like the market liberal moral economy, the socialist moral economy emerged in Europe during the Industrial Revolution (c. 1760–1840) as an alternative theory of economic life. Its earliest and most famous proponent was Marx (1818–1883). Although the two moral economies originally developed from similar lines of thought (Dumont 1986), the socialist moral economy developed in opposition to the market liberal moral economy. In the socialist moral economy, economic life *should be* more than just individuals or countries trading in markets for their own self-interest. Social anthropologists have argued that this is indeed the case, since *both* self-interested *and* caring relationships (e.g., based on trust or friendship) are present even in the most market liberal societies (Parry and Bloch 1989; cf. Polanyi 1944). Human geographers make similar arguments, as both market-based and "socialist" behaviors (e.g., a market vendor gifting produce) make up producer-consumer relationships in places like the UK.

The socialist moral economy of food provides an alternative to the production and trade of food commodities based on comparative advantages. In this theorisation, food is more than just a commodity or something to be produced and traded for profit. Rather, food is a social necessity produced through the combined workings of humans and nature. Land and labor are needed to produce food, but its production need not lead to the exploitation of workers and nature (cf. Moore 2014). Recently these ideas have been taken up in movements for *food sovereignty*, a concept that derives from the worldwide Via Campesina movement (see Desmarais 2007; Bartos, this volume). Food sovereignty means that people and communities have the right to determine who produces food, what is produced, why it is produced, how it is produced, and where the final products are destined. Food sovereignty attempts to make up for the "democratic deficit" in neoliberal ideas of food security based on comparative advantages, which, as Raj Patel argues, may be 'entirely compatible with a dictatorship—as long as the dictator provided vouchers for McDonald's and vitamins, a country could be said to be "food secure"' (Patel http://rajpatel.org/2009/11/02/food-sovereignty-a-brief-introduction).

Food Sovereignty and Everyday Life in Cuba

In Cuba, for example, food sovereignty is tied to a particular version of socialist moral economy with a number of implications for people's everyday lives. In *Everyday Moral Economies: Food, Politics and Scale in Cuba* (Wilson 2014), I attempt to explain how ordinary people in rural Cuba shift between two "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983/2006): the socialist nation (based on the tenet: 'From each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs')[1] and global

[1]This has recently changed to: 'From each according to his capacity, to each according to his work', as I explain in chapter 4 of my book (Wilson 2014).

capitalist networks. I show how moralities attached to these scales play out in "ordinary" economic life and how socialist values, which are really nationalist values in Cuba (cf. Kapcia 2000, 2008), shape the ways people produce, exchange and consume food. For instance, Cuban farmers often justify their shift to more labor-intensive agroecological production in terms of the *lucha* (fight or struggle) to "defend" Cuba's national interests. Consumers often speak of an everyday "fight" to provision food for their families. In contrast to the outside world of consumer capitalism, much of the moral landscape in Cuba is shaped by this "inside" world of Cuban socialism-nationalism.

The moral interplay between local, national and global scales of food provisioning in Cuba is even more interesting when one considers its colonial history. Like other colonies, in pre-1959 Cuba land and labor were geared towards the production of food-as-commodities for export (especially sugar), which led to the need to import food. Ironically this pattern of comparative advantages continued into the post-1959 socialist period, as Cuba exported sugar to the Soviet Union in return for key food staples and energy supplies. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba faced an acute economic crisis that saw drastic reductions of food and energy imports from the USSR. Low-input food production for domestic consumption became a symbol of a collective "fight" for national food sovereignty (Funes et al. 2002) and small-scale food production became a moral economic activity that allowed small farmers to regain dignity (and incomes) after decades of Leninist discrimination. The counterpart to Cuba's emphasis on food production was another nationalist *lucha* to "resist" the temptations of market liberal forms of consumption by enduring food scarcities (Wilson 2009).

The Cuban food economy remains closely tied to the global neoliberal food economy, however, since the Cuban government continues to import a large amount of food from its powerful neighbor, the United States. The continued *moral* separation of these market-led and socialist networks for food production and consumption has led to scarcities in the socialist food sector, as high-priced commodities entering from the outside are unaffordable to workers receiving their "due" in Cuban pesos and subsidized food (both of which continue despite recent reforms and calls to "normalize" Cuban-US relations). Yet even in the face of extreme food scarcities of the post-1990s period, many Cubans continue to uphold emotional and affective values of the national *lucha*, which makes food provisioning in Cuba more than a simple matter of survival.

Conclusion: Socialist and Post-socialist Moral Economies of Food

In everyday life, Cubans must produce, exchange, and consume food under the practical confines of *both* neoliberal and socialist moral economies of food. Yet they often do so by maintaining nationalist values such as collective resistance against outside economic interests. The continuing socialist moral economy of food in

Cuba contrasts with post-socialist countries of the former USSR, including many that have entered the European Union under a (theoretically)[2] neoliberal food economy. While Cuba remains somewhat isolated from its status as a supply zone, food commodity exports from post-socialist countries like Lithuania and Bulgaria (Jung et al. 2014) are encouraged under a market liberal regime. Cuba continues its drive for national food sovereignty; yet both Cuba and post-socialist countries have the comparative *dis*advantage of unequal access to food's commodification.

This essay has shown how access to food and other everyday necessities is shaped by the prevailing moral economy. Whether (neo)liberal or (post)socialist, these apparently abstract forces have real consequences for people's everyday lives.

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[2]Like the ideal socialist moral economy (of food), neoliberalism is an ideal rather than a reality since places like the EU continue to implement mercantilist policies including subsidies on key commodities such as sugar.

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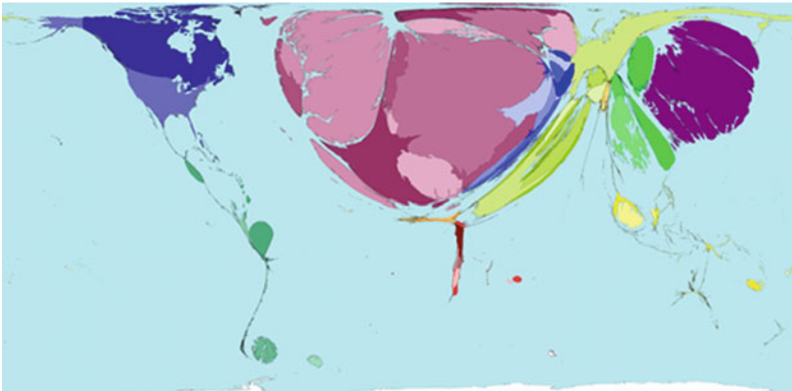
Fruit exports. South American territories export twice as much fruit (net) as territories in any other region, except for Western Europe. **Territory size shows the proportion of worldwide net exports of fruit (in US$) that come from there. Net exports are exports minus imports. When imports are larger than exports the territory is not shown**. *Source* www.worldmapper.org. Published with kind permission of © Copyright Benjamin D. Hennig (Worldmapper Project)



Fruit imports. The net fruit imports of Western European territories are four times greater than the combined net fruit imports of territories in any other region. **Territory size shows the proportion of worldwide net imports of fruit (in US$) that are received there. Net imports are imports minus exports. When exports are larger than imports the territory is not shown**. *Source* www.worldmapper.org. Published with kind permission of © Copyright Benjamin D. Hennig (Worldmapper Project)