

# Local or localized? Exploring the contributions of Franco-Mediterranean agrifood theory to alternative food research

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**Abstract** Notions such as *terroir* and “Slow Food,” which originated in Mediterranean Europe, have emerged as buzzwords around the globe, becoming commonplace across Europe and economically important in the United States and Canada, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Given the increased global prominence of *terroir* and regulatory frameworks like geographical indications, we argue that the associated conceptual tools have become more relevant to scholars working within the “alternative food networks” (AFN) framework in the United States and United Kingdom. Specifically, the Local Agrifood Systems (*Systèmes Agroalimentaires Localisés*, or SYAL) perspective, first articulated in 1996 by French scholars, seeks to understand the relationship between the development of local food systems and specific territories. We review the empirical and theoretical literature that comprises each of these perspectives, highlighting three areas in which SYAL scholarship may be relevant to AFN researchers. First, while AFN scholars tend to understand the “local” in terms of positionality, in a distributionist sense (*vis-à-vis* one’s relation to sites of food production or consumption or along commodity chains), SYAL studies frame local food systems as anchored within particular territories. Second, SYAL research places significant emphasis on collectivity, both in terms of collective institutions and shared forms of knowledge and identity. Third, although both perspectives are framed in opposition of the industrialization of the

global food system, AFN scholars focus more on alternative distribution schemes (e.g., organic, fair trade, and direct marketing schemes), while SYAL researchers favor territorially anchored structures (e.g., geographical indications).

**Keywords** Alternative food networks · *Systèmes Agroalimentaires Localisés* (Local Agrifood Systems) · *Terroir* · Territory

## Abbreviations

AFN	Alternative food network
CIRAD	Center for Agricultural Research for Development
CSA	Community supported agriculture
GI	Geographical indications
SYAL	<i>Systèmes Agroalimentaires Localisés</i> (Local Agrifood System)

## Introduction

In recent years, scholars, activists, and consumers have increasingly looked to alternative food systems to provide an antidote to the standardizing and industrializing tendencies of conventional food production. In the United States and United Kingdom, social movements and scholarly work emerging around alternative food networks (AFN) have, until recently, focused on voluntary labels like organic and fair trade, and on direct marketing initiatives such as farmers’ markets. In Mediterranean Europe, by contrast, scholars and activists have concentrated on regulatory frameworks like geographical indications (GIs) and social movements like the Slow Food movement, each of which privileges the linkages between the “*terroir*,” or

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taste of place, of particular regions and the foods and drinks produced there. Given its increased global prominence, we argue that the conceptual tools and analytical frameworks associated with *terroir* have become more relevant to Anglo-American scholars.

Notions such as *terroir* and “Slow Food,” which originated in Mediterranean Europe, have emerged as buzzwords around the globe, becoming commonplace across Europe and economically important in the United States and Canada, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. To give just a few examples, Overton and Murray (2013) note that wine producers and consumers in the “New World”—including the United States, Chile, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand—increasingly focus on wines’ regions of origin as markers of quality.<sup>1</sup> Jacobsen (2010) argues that “the time has come” for an American articulation of *terroir* (see also Trubek 2008). American conceptualizations of *terroir* extend from artisanal cheese producers in Wisconsin and Vermont, who refer to the way their farms’ native grasses and soils imbue their cheese with unique tastes (Author interviews 2009, 2010; see also Paxson 2010, 2013), to discussions of southwestern borderlands foods (Nabhan 2012), to New England oyster producers’ references to “*merroir*,” an oceanic adaptation of *terroir* (LaChance 2012). In Mexico, home of the oldest recognized GI outside of Europe (tequila), efforts are underway to recognize a variety of place-based foods, including cheeses, mushrooms, *nopal*, and *chiles* (Torres Salcido et al. 2011), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recently funded a large-scale study to investigate the possibility of using *terroir* as a framework for sustainable development initiatives in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Vandecandelaere et al. 2010).

Given this growing scholarly and popular interest in *terroir* and the associated proliferation of both communities of practice and the regulatory establishment of GIs in diverse countries, we review the extensive body of literature on *terroir*, territory, and local foods coming out of Mediterranean Europe and Latin America. This work has received relatively little attention from scholars working within the “AFN” framework in the United States and United Kingdom. Specifically, the Local Agrifood Systems (*Systèmes Agroalimentaires Localisés*, or SYAL) perspective, first articulated in 1996 by scholars at the French Center for Agricultural Research for Development (CIRAD), seeks to understand the relationship between the development of local food systems and specific territories (CIRAD 1996). Although the SYAL tradition does not

constitute a school of thought outside of existing agrarian studies traditions, it does comprise a unique scholarly perspective, represented by a scientific committee, hosts biennial conferences, and is well represented in several academic journals.

In this paper, we review the empirical and historical literature that comprises each of these perspectives, describing their evolution and some of the ways in which the SYAL framework differs from existing research on AFNs, particularly as developed in Anglo-American scholarship. Although the SYAL and AFN perspectives share key similarities—to the point where some might figure the SYAL approach as one strand in the AFN tapestry—we make this distinction to bring attention to insights that the SYAL framework offers for larger AFN debates, such as the nature of “alterity” and the effects of regulatory institutions. In our discussion below, we suggest two principal ways in which the SYAL literature presents a useful critique. First, rising interest in and recognition of the role of *terroir* in local food systems raises the question of whether and how AFN scholarship might account for these changing conditions, both in the United States and globally. Second, we suggest that the SYAL engagement with territorially based, collective food systems highlights certain lacunae in AFN research. Although we do not find that the SYAL perspective’s contributions are absent from AFN debates, we do find productive differences in emphasis that have been useful in our own thinking, and that we hope will be relevant for other AFN scholars, particularly those based in the United States and United Kingdom.

Here we highlight three areas in which SYAL scholarship may be relevant to AFN researchers. First, while AFN scholars tend to understand the “local” in terms of positionality in a distributionist sense (*vis-à-vis* one’s relation to sites of food production or consumption or along commodity chains), SYAL studies frame local food systems as anchored within particular socially constructed territories. Second, SYAL research places significant emphasis on social collectivities, both in the sense of collective institutions, and also with respect to shared forms of knowledge and identity. Third, although both AFN and SYAL perspectives are framed in terms of opposition of the industrialization of the global food system and the cooptation of food chains by increasingly powerful retailers and vertically integrated, transnational agrifood companies, they situate themselves differently with respect to what constitutes a meaningful “alternative” to conventional agrifood structures. While AFN scholars focus more on alternative distribution schemes, including organic, fair trade, and direct marketing [e.g., community supported agriculture (CSA) and farmer’s markets], SYAL researchers favor territorially anchored structures such as GIs.

<sup>1</sup> For example, there are now 209 registered “American Viticultural Areas” for wines in the United States, not only in California, but also in places like Colorado, Illinois, and North Carolina (Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau 2013).

## SYAL perspectives

In 1996, researchers at CIRAD in France introduced the concept of Local Agrifood Systems (SYAL), defining a SYAL as “production and service organizations (units of agricultural production, agrifood enterprises, markets and stores, restaurants, services, etc.) [that are linked] by their characteristics and *by their relationship to a specific territory*” (Muchnik 1996, as cited by Muchnik and de Sainte Marie 2010, p. 13). In one sense, the SYAL perspective extends the French notion of *terroir*—a combination of biophysical and cultural elements that combine to produce place-based tastes and flavors—to conceptualize additional spatial and ecological aspects of territory (and locality), such as the actors, their activities, forms of social organization, and agricultural practices in particular places and their influence on the foods and drinks produced there (Bérard et al. 2005). In this article, we are principally concerned with SYAL scholars’ focus on two (intersecting) areas: the linkages between the cultural factors and know-how and the unique characteristics of agricultural products in specific places; and the political-economic dynamics of organizational proximity that convert territories into mechanisms or assets for rural development (for example, strategies of adding value and coordinating production activities) (Sanz Cañada 2008).

The theoretical perspectives that have influenced the SYAL perspective are diverse and include economic geography, economic anthropology, neoinstitutional social science, and sociology of agriculture/food systems (Sanz Cañada 2008). Many SYAL scholars demonstrate a critical affinity with agrarian historical traditions such as the French *Annales* school, with its attention to detailed everyday life studies (see Edelman 2005); this is made explicit, for instance, in Bérard and Marchenay’s (2007) reference to Zonabend’s (1984) *The Enduring Memory* and Torres Salcido et al. (2011) reference to Braudel. Conventions theory, which perceives quality as the fundamental concept for the analysis of economic life, has also had a strong influence within SYAL scholarship (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Storper and Salais 1997; Sylvander 1995; Thévenot 1995; Wilkinson 1997). As Muchnik et al. (2008) point out, these roots nurture three currents in SYAL scholarship: a focus on spatial concentrations of agrifood firms and activity within territories, influenced by notions of “clusters” (Porter 2000) and “industrial districts” (Beccatini and Rullani 1996); studies on processes of qualification and certification of territorially based products; and work integrating the SYAL concept into the broader environmental and social challenges faced by rural communities. SYAL scholars find institutional support in the International Conferences of the Local Agrifood Systems Network, held roughly every 2 years since 2002, and

the key journals that publish SYAL research (e.g., *Agroalimentaria*, *Cahiers Agricultures*) are primarily comprised of scholars from Europe and Latin America. Over time, researchers have interpreted and employed the SYAL in two primary ways: as a concrete object, a group of visible agrifood activities that are territorially established; and as an approach, a strategy for handling the development of local resources, even if the “system” does not exist as such (Muchnik 2009).

The theoretical perspectives employed within the SYAL tradition also reflect an active commitment to territorially based and cooperative agricultural structures (Boucher 2012; Correa Gómez et al. 2006; Fourcade 2008; Linck et al. 2006; Muchnik 2009; Muchnik et al. 2008; Sanz Cañada 2008; Torres Salcido et al. 2011). In Europe (and particularly in Franco-Mediterranean countries), many territorially based products benefit from state-sponsored institutions (e.g., the European Union’s Protected Designations of Origin and Protected Geographical Indications, France’s *appellations d’origine contrôlée*, Spain’s *denominaciones de origen*) that legally tie production to a specific region and codify the particular practices that have defined the product over time.<sup>2</sup> The regions with the greatest concentrations of GIs are frequently characterized by strong, long-standing collective producer organizations that are now using GIs as strategies for rural development. Furthermore, many countries, particularly in Latin America and Asia, have recently passed new legislation recognizing and protecting place-based products.<sup>3</sup> The European Union has also funded considerable research on GIs in Europe and in the Global South and has used this research to make recommendations on the impact of GI protection in varying contexts (for example, in debates over the protection of GIs in the World Trade Organization) (see Bowen 2010; Evans and Blakeney 2006; Josling 2006; Kireeva and O’Connor 2010; Vittori 2010).

## AFN perspectives

As noted, AFN scholarship comprises a diverse body of agrarian research. Here we direct our analysis to the Anglophone literature on local food systems originating primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom (see Goodman et al. 2012 for a critical review). This work has framed localization as an alternative to the globalization and industrialization of the food system. Many scholars

<sup>2</sup> In this article, we use the term “GIs” to describe all of these protective institutions.

<sup>3</sup> Brazil and Peru passed legislation on GIs in 1996, followed by South Korea and India in 1999, Columbia in 2000, and Chile in 2005, to name just a few.

within this tradition have focused on the “embeddedness” of local food systems and the ways in which they convey values such as care, community, and stewardship (Kloppenburg et al. 1996; DeLind 2002; Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002; Hinrichs 2000). Another group of scholars has framed locality in more political economic terms, employing concepts such as “alternative trade networks” and “short food supply chains” to analyze the relationships between AFNS, notions of quality, and sources of economic value and rural development (Murdoch et al. 2000; Parrott et al. 2002; Marsden et al. 2000; van der Ploeg et al. 2000; Renting et al. 2003; Watts et al. 2005).

Goodman et al. (2012) and Fonte (2008) have argued for further distinctions within the AFN framework, noting that scholars from the United States tend to focus more on food activism and fostering opposition to the industrial food system, while scholars from the United Kingdom are more oriented towards reforming and creating agricultural and food policies. We agree that variations in the cultural, social, and political-economic contexts of the United States and the United Kingdom have differentially shaped the trajectories of the respective literatures and discuss some of these variations in this paper. However, overall and in terms of the three key differences in emphasis that we identify in this paper, we find it useful to compare the SYAL literature with an AFN perspective that incorporates the English-language literature on local food systems coming from both the United States and Europe.

### Visions of the local: chains versus territories

By always foregrounding the spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations, we can better understand the process whereby a space achieves a distinctive identity as a place (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 8).

Relative to most AFN research, SYAL scholars utilize significantly different conceptualizations of the “local.” We argue that this difference matters; the notion of locality in all of its senses—historical, environmental, and economic—shapes and is shaped by the relations along food chains and the power dynamics that suffuse them.<sup>4</sup> The SYAL literature views the environmental (soil, microclimate) and cultural (local knowledge, production and

consumption patterns) conditions of particular, socially constructed territories as conferring distinctive characteristics to the foods and drinks produced there. In contrast, AFN research tends to frame the local not as anchored in place, but rather as a positionality established by relationships within specific food commodity chains or networks. AFN scholars are more likely to frame locality with respect to distributional configurations within food chains—focusing on the distance between sites of production and consumption, whether defined as simple proximity (as demonstrated by the importance of terms like “locavore” and “food miles”; see Pirog et al. 2001)<sup>5</sup> or in terms of socio-economic notions of distance such as global commodity or value chains (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994; Gereffi et al. 2005; see Dolan and Humphrey 2000; Ponte 2002 for examples applied to food chains). These conceptualizations tend to evoke images of relations between producers and consumers built on spatialities of distribution and exchange rather than on social and cultural relations reproduced in specific places. As such, Bair (2005, p. 168) cites a need for a better understanding of “how chains are articulated within and through the larger social, cultural, and political-economic environments in which they operate.”

Reflecting this distributionist-positional understanding of the local, many AFN scholars have examined the social ties and trust fostered by economic proximity between producers and consumers. For example, Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002, p. 362), looking at the Kansas City local food movement, argue that the relationships being nurtured between producers and consumers “incorporate the idea of trust that is negotiated by proximity and interaction, instead of the faith in abstract principles that is prevalent in the globalized food system.” Likewise, Kirwan (2004) argues with regard to farmers’ markets in the United Kingdom that policymakers, producers, and consumers have attempted to create alterity within the food system by respatializing food (insisting that food be produced locally) and re-socializing food (by ensuring that there is direct contact between producers and consumers). Marsden et al. (2000) conceptualize “short supply chains” as creating different relationships between consumers and producers, emphasizing the role of the relationship itself in constructing value and meaning (rather than solely the type of product). In sum, these studies argue that when compared to the global food system, where relations between producers and consumers are distant, anonymous, and motivated by profits, local food relations are built on cooperation, interdependence,

<sup>4</sup> Many theoretical and empirical approaches have been advanced with respect to the social construction of places, regions, and territories—terms that we here use interchangeably in the context of food production and consumption. Since the 1980s, a general consensus has developed that understands place as a constitutive feature of human practice and habitation, and yet also a quality that is performatively remade through situated practice (Pred 1984; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Casey 1998; Secor 2004).

<sup>5</sup> According to an article in the *New York Times*, the term “locavore” was coined by “concerned culinary adventurer” Jessica Prentice in 2005 (Burros 2007; Locavores 2011).

shared interests, and civic engagement (see Lyson and Green 1999).

A related body of AFN research draws on Polanyi's (1944, 1957) notion of embeddedness to analyze the role of social relations within locally embedded, alternative food systems, in contrast to the distanced, socially disembedded food relations associated with global industrial agriculture. Hinrichs (2000) explains that embeddedness—understood as embodying social connection, reciprocity, and trust—is framed as the hallmark of direct agricultural markets. She argues that by allowing for shared risks between producers and consumers and explicitly emphasizing community, CSA, more than farmer's markets, is an economic form “where marketness and instrumentalism might be creatively reconciled with social embeddedness” (p. 300). Sage (2003) argues that face-to-face interactions and collective values underpin “relations of regard” in a local food network. Winter (2003) describes a continuum, with embedded relations based on close social ties and loyalty on one end, and disembedded, impersonal, price-based relations at the other end.

A principal contribution of a Polanyian approach is the conceptualization of markets as embedded systems of social norms, trust, and face-to-face interaction, constructed through a “double movement” of commodification versus social resistance. Critics, however, have argued that the embeddedness of alternative food systems has often been rather assumed than critically and empirically supported (Sonnino 2007), and that this oversimplification contributes to an acritical stance toward local food movements. Hinrichs (2000, p. 301) warns that assuming that locally embedded supply chains preclude exploitative behavior and uneven power relations “conflates spatial relations with social relations.” Moreover, scholars have noted that the presumption of a binary opposition between embedded and disembedded supply chains leads to a failure to acknowledge that *all* supply chains are embedded in particular places and social contexts, and furthermore, that chains combine embeddedness and disembeddedness in complicated (and sometimes contradictory) ways (Sonnino 2007).

In contrast to the distributional-positional notion of the local that characterizes AFNs, SYAL scholars place territory, defined as a space that is simultaneously socially constructed, culturally marketed, and institutionally regulated (López and Muchnik 1997), at the center of local food systems. The diverse actors that constitute particular territories are linked—as we detail in the following section—by shared identifications; as such, territoriality and belonging can thus be considered both a value and a socio-spatial relation (Muchnik et al. 2008). As noted above, SYAL scholars understand territory, which is strongly linked to *terroir*, not just in terms of the biophysical resources (e.g., soils, microclimates, landscapes) that structure economic

activity, but also particular ecologies and historical contexts and linked to specific practices and cultural and social resources (e.g., institutions, organizations, knowledge, traditional practices). Bérard and Marchenay (2006, p. 109) argue that the inscription of these localized products in a place “is related to their historical roots and the collective practices that produce them... They straddle space and time, and are built on shared knowledge and know-how.” As an example, they discuss the Ardèche region in southern France, where local chestnut varieties developed as the management of the natural environment led local producers to identify, select, and graft a large number of varieties, of which the size, shape, and qualities of the chestnuts correspond to customs that differ by region.

Importantly, the temporal dimension of agricultural production also provides a means to distinguish between *local* (in the AFN sense) and *localized* (in the SYAL sense) food systems. Muchnik (2009) explains that while the term “local” refers to “an inherent quality at any given moment,” the term “localized” refers to “a process, a system that has been localized, which was not always in that place and with no guarantee that it will remain there forever.” Muchnik (2009; see also Muchnik et al. 2008) and others (e.g., Requier-Desjardins et al. 2003) use the term “territorial linkage” to refer to the historical and cultural linkages that differentiate SYALs from other types of clusters that are merely delimited spatially. The products that we think of as typical today (e.g., Bordeaux wines, meat from the Argentinean pampas) were localized at one time, when local populations “adapted and created the skills and technology to anchor products like this locally” (Muchnik 2009, p. 9). The opposite process is also possible: formerly deeply rooted local products can disappear.

To summarize, most AFN understandings of locality emphasize spatial proximity, social ties, and interaction in ways that are not necessarily tied to the particularities of the environmental and social histories of the places in which they are embedded. We argue that although AFNs are certainly “localized” just as SYALS are, the AFN approach tends to understand what it means to be local in largely self-referential terms. Because of this, Feagan (2007, p. 24) argues that advocacy centered on reconfiguring the “place of food” within the Anglophone literature would benefit from a “deeper engagement with the geographical concepts inherent in these treaties” and a focus on re-spatialization.”

### **The “who” of alternative food: collective action, cooperation, and know-how**

SYAL scholars' spatial conceptualization is linked to their emphasis on social collectivities, which include shared

forms of knowledge (“know-how,” translated as *savoir-faire* in French and *saber-hacer* in Spanish), as well as the institutions that help translate and guarantee this knowledge (e.g., producers’ cooperatives and local and regional regulatory boards). For researchers working within this perspective, localized food systems (whether codified through protective institutions like GIs or not) are built around the notion that each constitutes a type of “commons.” These systems incorporate (1) physical, edaphic, and other natural factors associated with notions of *terroir*; (2) local social networks that integrate both producers and consumers; and (3) the respective “know-how”—social, practical, and ecological—used to create and maintain the distinctive qualities associated with territorially based foods and drinks. Here we focus on the roles of know-how and collective institutions—the social means by which distinctive qualities and localized territories are produced via everyday activities.

First we look at know-how, the practically acquired, collectively produced set of skills and knowledge that is considered inextricable from the development of the unique qualities of local products (Bérard and Marchenay 2008; Bouche et al. 2010; Moity-Maïzi 2010; Muchnik et al. 2008). To provide an example, the production of a specific local cheese necessarily integrates multiple forms of know-how, including the dairy farmers’ pasturing rotations and milking schedules, the cheesemakers’ cultures and the way he or she cuts the curd, and the cooks’ use of cheese as an ingredient. There are multiple links between know-how and particular qualities or characteristics. First, know-how is *practical* and built through experience (often referred to by the Greek term *metis*; see Scott 1998; Freidberg 2004), allowing it to be flexibly adapted to changing social and environmental circumstances. Second, know-how is a *distributed* form of knowledge: the production of a particular quality, such as a particular taste in wine, depends on upon a constellation of interrelated forms of know-how from vine-pruning to grape pressing. Third, for SYAL scholars, know-how is a form of *collective* knowledge—a set of norms, rules, and understandings that are passed down, protected, and codified by a group of producers.

Within SYAL case studies, practical and political complexities of know-how are an important theme. Some key areas of debate include: (1) the degree to which know-how should be figured as characteristic of a particular territory as such, or rather embedded in households or acting within networks (in a Latourian “actant” sense) to “fashion” territories (Moity-Maïzi 2010, p. 59); (2) the methodological approaches that are most appropriate to the study of know-how, especially given its collective nature and the fact that aspects may be communicated nonverbally (Bouche et al. 2010); (3) the degree to which know-how is

lasting or may be lost or displaced by regulation, economic competition, or changing tastes (Bouche et al. 2010; Muchnik et al. 2008); and finally, (4) whether and how contestations between locally defined and market-defined quality criteria turn qualities into sites of social struggle that privilege particular forms of know-how at the expense of others (Benkahla et al. 2005). To give an example, Bérard et al.’s (2008) research on Salers cheese, protected by a GI in France, provides insight into the enduring effects of regulation and economic competition and the ways that discussions of quality and collective regulation can become sites of social struggle. They examined the manner in which the designation of the Salers GI combined with regulations over hygiene enacted by the French state to spark a contentious struggle among producers over whether to replace the *gerle*, the traditional wooden vat in which the cheese is made, with stainless steel vats.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to know-how, a second body of SYAL literature analyzes the structures and practices of cooperative governance associated with territorially embedded production systems. Because many European products (as well as an increasingly number of products in the Global South) are protected by GIs and other state-sponsored institutions, many SYAL scholars have focused on analyzing how these systems are organized and specifying the forms of social and economic coordination that characterize them (see, for example, Barjolle and Sylvander 2002; van de Kop et al. 2006; Barham and Sylvander 2011).<sup>7</sup> Many SYAL studies assess the “organization of organizations,” or the manner in which multiple producer, state regulatory, marketing, and consumer organizations are operationally interconnected and engage in struggles over qualification (Sanz Cañada 2008; Barjolle et al. 2007; Barjolle and Thévenot-Mottet 2005; Perriet-Cornet and Sylvander 2000; Sanz Cañada and Macías Vázquez 2005). This research includes case studies of the collective organizations that govern diverse GIs, including those for olive oil (Sanz Cañada and Macías Vázquez 2005), wine (Touzard et al. 2008), and cheese (Bérard et al. 2008; Bérard and Marchenay 2006, 2008; Poméon et al. 2006; Torre 2006). For instance, Sanz Cañada and Macías Vázquez’s (2005) examination of Spanish olive oil cooperatives showed how cooperatives became caught up in multiple, often contradictory, and contentious aspects of producing *terroir*, including

<sup>6</sup> The traditional wooden vats were championed by small-scale “traditionalists” who argued in favor of the fermentation-enhancing properties of wood, while higher-volume producers (who were constrained by the size of the wooden vats) and French health officials (who preferred the hygienic properties of steel) preferred the stainless steel vats.

<sup>7</sup> These specifications are approved and regulated by state institutions but collectively defined—often through a rather contentious process—by the producers themselves.

participation in regulatory efforts to establish GIs, identification of organoleptic properties in olive oil, and determination of the specific practices that imbue olive oil with particular characteristics and contribute to environmental conservation. In another case, Torre (2006) found that a collective organization associated with a French GI helped ensure the reputation of their cheese by engaging in advertising campaigns and differentiating their product according to “vintages” based on *terroir*, but that their successful collective actions ultimately rested on a combination of contractual relations and organizational trust. In studies like these, SYAL scholars make a number of analytical distinctions, for instance between spatially delimited “geographical” proximity versus “organizational” proximity, defined as an organization’s capacity to foster interaction between its members (Rallet 2002; Torre and Filippi 2005; Fourcade 2008); and between different forms of governance, including sectoral governance, which highlights the impacts of public and private regulatory impacts on specific sectors within food systems (i.e., by reducing transaction costs or allowing for vertical integration), and territorial governance, which considers the ways in which a broad array of localized factors (including collective organizations, local know-how, and particular designations of quality) generate costs or benefits for the territory to which they belong (Muchnik et al. 2008).

In sum, we have argued that SYAL research on the twin elements of cooperative governance and know-how may be relevant to AFN scholars. AFN scholars often engage collective institutions such as farmer’s markets (Hinrichs 2000; Holloway and Kneafsey 2000; Kirwan 2004; Selfa and Qazi 2005) and CSA (DeLind 1999; Hinrichs 2000; Feagan and Henderson 2009; Lang 2010; Pole and Gray 2013), and, to a lesser extent, cooperatives and unions, which are more common in analyses of fair trade and organic agriculture in the Global South (see, for example, Bassett 2010; Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2011; Mutersbaugh 2005).<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the theoretical tools employed by SYAL scholars may supplement the AFN studies that have already explicitly employed the concept of know-how assess relational links between commodities, knowledge,

<sup>8</sup> Like SYAL research, many AFN studies address questions regarding the definition and regulation of quality, focusing in particular on debates over quality in organic and Fair Trade agrifood networks (Guthman 2004; Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2006, 2011; Mutersbaugh 2005; Reynolds 2000; Reynolds et al. 2004; Renard 2005) and on the link between the proliferation of private standards and third party certification schemes and neoliberalism (Busch and Bain 2004; Hatanaka et al. 2005; Guthman 2007; Neilson 2008; Reynolds et al. 2007). A few AFN scholars have also focused on the influence of cultural norms and social structures on transnational commodity networks, and on the alternative movements that have emerged alongside and/or in opposition to them (Freidberg 2004; Schurman and Munro 2009).

and networks (including, for example, Dunn’s (2004) study of Polish baby-food manufacturing and Freidberg’s (2004) study of the international fresh vegetable trade).

### Political engagement: framing opposition

Finally, we compare the approaches taken by AFN and SYAL scholars as they seek strategies by which to oppose or resist the industrial food system and its domination by transnational corporations. We argue that neither of the two schools is inherently more oppositional in character; indeed, they have much in common, including the sentiment that they represent (as Holloway et al. 2007, p. 4 note for AFN scholarship) a “politicized discourse of oppositional activism” that aims to establish an alternative food economy by instilling norms of social justice and environmental sustainability into existing distribution networks (Fonte 2008). In this regard, we question the contrast between an AFN “oppositional” standpoint versus a more reformist European perspective that engages more directly with state policies (i.e., those related to rural development and multifunctionality) (Fonte 2008). We find that SYAL scholarship has important radical currents, and join (Goodman et al. 2012, p. 135) in questioning the notion that AFNs are uniformly oppositional, given, as they note, the “narrative of displaced militancy and retreat from national agendas...[that] has become an increasingly dominant theme of US scholarship on sustainable agriculture movements.”

That said, we identify a key difference between the way the two perspectives consider opposition and reform; SYAL scholars show near unanimity in favoring GI or territorial protection as a path to an agrarian alternative, in contrast to AFN researchers’ tendency to focus on alternative distribution frameworks such as organic, fair trade, and direct marketing (e.g., farmer’s markets, CSAs, farm-to-school).<sup>9</sup> Insofar as both perspectives share a reformist agenda, each has an ambiguous relationship with a market-based model that relies on labels and/or direct communication between producers and consumers to transmit information about the values with which agricultural goods are imbued and for which consumers agree to pay more. Both also rely on the regulatory power of the state. SYAL reforms focus on the state as the agent that guarantees the quality and integrity of the GI label itself and, more

<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to these tendencies. Some of the AFN scholars from the UK, for example, have analyzed GIs (e.g., Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000; Ilbery et al. 2005; Parrott et al. 2002), and some SYAL scholars have analyzed farmers’ markets and other direct marketing schemes (e.g., Chiffolleau 2009, who uses an AFN perspective to frame her study). However, we argue that these are general patterns do characterize the literature.

importantly, enforces protection of existing GIs. For AFNs, reformist initiatives include institutional interventions that tie support of alternative food production to regulatory initiatives like the National Organic Program.

In each, then, a significant reformist strand focuses on developing regulatory rubrics for alternative production and distribution networks, but at the same time does not directly challenge private, corporate control of territorially embedded goods (SYAL) or alternative food distribution channels (AFN), both of which are increasingly dominated by powerful corporate players (see Jaffee and Howard 2010; Touzard et al. 2008). Moreover, each perspective tends to advocate for the global expansion of their respective alternative networks. The SYAL approach frames GIs as a viable rural development strategy and aligns them within an international legal and framework that would extend protection of these goods to Latin America, Africa, and Asia (van de Kop et al. 2006). Larson (2007) notes that the increased use of GIs worldwide reflects not only the high economic stakes involved in the commercial use of place-based names (Josling 2006), but also the fact that diverse stakeholders perceive GIs as a useful rural development strategy (van de Kop et al. 2006). However, Bowen (2010) argues that much of this scholarship takes a fairly acritical stance towards the political and social implications of the underlying power dynamics, the unequal distribution of costs and benefits, and the particular challenges associated with implementing these types of arrangements in the global South. Compared to SYAL scholars, AFN researchers have developed a more thorough critique of the north-centric character of alternative agrifood chains in terms of value accumulation and regulation (Gibbon and Ponte 2008), the imposition of higher costs and impractical production norms on participating southern communities (Mutersbaugh 2005), and the lack of shared governance, economic democracy, and gender equality (Lyon 2011; Jaffee 2007; Jaffee and Howard 2010) within these initiatives.

Countering reformist tendencies, an important strand within both SYAL and AFN approaches also focuses on more radical critiques. Here again, the SYAL solution is to embrace territorially embedded foods and drinks; however, scholars emphasize more strongly the importance of democratic governance of *terroir* and cooperative ownership of the means of production in processing and at least initial distribution (Sanz Cañada and Macías Vázquez 2005; Bérard and Marchenay 2008). In its most radical form, SYAL scholars mount a strong defense of “defensive localism” as a potent means by which to counter global corporate intrusion championing cooperatively managed GIs as sites of local food cultures that eschew market integration into transnational commodity chains (Bouche et al. 2010). Though vulnerable to critiques that its visions

of “authenticity” may too easily stand in for cultural, racial, and gender exclusions (see also Bowen and De Master 2011), this version of SYAL scholarship does highlight the importance of cooperative management in a Chayanov (1925) agrarian-populist sense. As such, SYAL researchers are more likely to “voice” opposition from the standpoint of single-commodity producer cooperatives. This standpoint may reflect the history of collective organizations of producers, who have long banded together to protect their local—and profitable—products in the places in which this perspective is strongest (France, Italy, Spain).<sup>10</sup> In addition, even these more radical approaches are frequently ambivalent with respect to regulatory engagements. For instance, some of the SYAL research on cooperatives includes aspects of environmental and landscape conservation (e.g., Sanz Cañada and Macías Vázquez 2005), dovetailing with a growing EU regulatory focus on agricultural “multifunctionality” that likewise integrates heritage and conservation as guiding principles.<sup>11</sup>

In comparison, radical and oppositional AFN scholars critique short supply chains and voluntary labeling schemes as fundamentally linked to a neoliberal model in which initiatives classed as “alternatives” reinscribe the notion that responsibility for social change is simply a personal matter resting on problematic notions of consumer choice (Guthman 2007; DeLind 2011). Some AFN scholars have argued that “defensive” (Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003) or “unreflective” localism (Dupuis and Goodman 2005) has the potential to become elitist and reactionary, appealing to narrow nativist sentiments (Hinrichs 2003), and potentially to lead to undemocratic or unrepresentative leadership by powerful interests (Harris 2009). Allen et al. (2003, p. 74) express concern that the local food movement, “through [its] silence about social relationships in production,” may “inadvertently assume or represent that

<sup>10</sup> Fonte (2008) makes an agrarian-historical argument that these regions were relative latecomers to industrial development and thus never fully completed their “great transition,” thus allowing the persistence of unique social and environmental characteristics that endowed these products with distinctive quality attributes, helped foster successful peasant political opposition, and stymied the expansion of large-scale capitalist agriculture (Goodman and Watts 1997; Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000; Murdoch et al. 2000). These factors left this region with a relatively robust, yet economically marginalized smallholder class that is now attempting to use these persistent qualifications to improve farm economies via strategies of territorial development (Sanz Cañada 2008). Some scholars also argue that SYAL-type GI development and regional product valorization promotes an ambiguous “re-peasantization” in agricultural communities (Knicker and Renting 2000; van der Ploeg and Roep 2003; also see Gilarek et al. 2003; Granberg et al. 2001; Tovey 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Multifunctional farming “not only produces food but also sustains rural landscapes, protects biodiversity, generates employment, and contributes to the viability of rural areas” (Erjavec et al. 2009, p. 45; also see Potter and Burney 2002).



rural communities and family farmers embody social justice, rather than requiring than they do so.” And most broadly, DeLind (2011, p. 276) questions the fundamental fairness of a movement that focuses on allowing everyone to “vote with his or her dollars” and argues that it is time to address the “relationality of difference” (Kandaswamy 2008) and inequality that are inherent in the local foods movement.

Overall, then, we view AFN scholars of seeking to resolve questions of inequality and power within local food systems via increased governmental regulation, e.g., of agrichemicals (Harrison 2011), attention to fundamental issues such as wages and workers’ rights (Alkon and Agyeman 2011), and, in some cases, a “decommodification” in which food activists would build alternative distribution networks to circumvent corporate channels altogether (Vail 2010). In contrast, SYAL researchers have tended to mount a rather concerted defense of localism as a vehicle for social struggle, arguing in effect that problems of power and inequality may be addressed via (critical) cooperative engagements and “localized” institution-building.

## Conclusions

In this article, we reviewed three key differences between AFN and SYAL approaches to local food systems, with the goal of offering new theoretical tools and concepts that may be of use to AFN scholars. First, we argue that how “local” is defined is important. Most AFN scholars understand locality in terms of systems of distribution and exchange, as markets, commodity chains, and relations of production and consumption. In contrast, SYAL scholars conceptualize locality as rooted in particular places and cultures, in the daily and seasonal round of emblematic activities and bound to social ritual, whether in production or consumption. Although it is important to recognize the evolving and negotiated nature of notions like tradition, heritage, and authenticity, we argue that a renewed focus on territory—including social, cultural, labor, and ecological characteristics—could generate new insights and opportunities for food scholars and activists in the United States and United Kingdom.

Second, we argue that SYAL scholars’ attention to cooperation and collectivity—both in terms of informal know-how and formal cooperative structures—is relevant for AFN researchers. At stake here is the question of whether the food “commons” that are co-constituted through collaborative processes provide an effective alternative to individuating and neoliberalizing dynamics of the market. Although this is an important question that has not yet been resolved, we stipulate that combining the AFN perspective’s focus on networks and rents with the SYAL

tradition’s attention to know-how and territory may open a fertile middle ground of investigation into qualities, one that combines conceptual and perhaps epistemological approaches in a multidimensional rethinking of the “local” as practice, know-how, governance, and discourse.

Finally, while we appreciate AFN scholars’ critiques of “defensive” localism and their warnings against the forms of elitism and inequality that play out at the local level, we argue that SYAL researchers’ attention to localized forms of cooperation and engagement may offer some potential for, as Hinrichs and Barham (2007, p. 345) put it, “informed, cautious hopefulness.” We suggest that combining the AFN perspective’s attention to inequality with the SYAL tradition’s focus on cooperatives may offer opportunities for creating more diverse, inclusive understandings of locality that are rooted in the complex environmental, social, and cultural dynamics as they play out in particular places. Given the growing global interest in territorially based initiatives and the expansion of associated regulatory protections around the world, the SYAL perspective’s analytical tools may prove useful to AFN scholars.

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### Author Biographies

**Sarah Bowen, PhD**, is Assistant Professor of Sociology at North Carolina State University. Her work focuses on food systems and the underlying power dynamics. One core theme in her research is quality labels for foods—in particular, geographical indications—and their potential to re-embed markets in their social and territorial contexts. Her work has included cases in Mexico (tequila, mezcal) and France (Comté cheese). She is currently working on several new research projects. One examines the possibility of “translating” the notion of terroir and territorially embedded food systems to the US context.

Another investigates the structural contributors to childhood obesity, examining how individual food practices and perceptions are situated within broader cultural, social, and economic contexts.

**Tad Mutersbaugh, PhD**, is Professor of Geography at the University of Kentucky. His current research examines issues of governance, political economy, and human–environment interactions in Latin American conservation networks. His field research in Oaxaca, Mexico, examines organic coffee unions and communities to understand how indigenous organizations can coordinate conservation activities at regional scales. Current research projects include an analysis of transnational agricultural certification practices (funded by the National Science Foundation), Migration and Conservation (funded by the Mexico–US Studies Center of the University of California), and a study of women’s participation in organic coffee production. He received his PhD from the University of California at Berkeley.