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The practice and politics of food system localization

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Abstract

As an apparent counterpoint to globalization, food system localization is often assumed to be a good, progressive and desirable process. Such thinking rests on a localâ€“global binary that merits closer scrutiny. This paper examines the social construction of â€œlocalâ€“, by analyzing the practice and politics of food system localization efforts in Iowa, USA. It argues that desirable social or environmental outcomes may not always map neatly onto the spatial content of â€œlocalâ€“, which itself involves the social construction of scale. These contradictions in turn relate to differing political inflections discernible in food system localization. Localization can be approached defensively, emphasizing the boundaries and distinctions between a culturally and socially homogeneous locality needing protection from non-local â€œothersâ€“. But through the experience of new social and gustatory exchanges, localization can also promote increased receptivity to difference and diversity. More emergent, fluid and inclusive notions of the â€œlocalâ€“, however, may challenge the very project of crafting and maintaining distinctive food identities for local places. These themes are explored

maintaining distinctive food identities for local places. These themes are explored through a case study of food system localization efforts and activities in Iowa, an American state that has been a stronghold of conventional commodity agriculture. Demographic and agricultural histories are drawn on to understand recent food system localization practice that has come to emphasize a definition of "local" that coincides with sub-national state boundaries. The emergence and popularization of the "Iowa-grown banquet meal" and the shifting meaning of "local Iowa food" further illustrate the potential tension between defensiveness and diversity in food system localization.



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