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## Is local (food system) beautiful?

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**SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND ALTERNATIVE AGRI-FOOD SYSTEMS**  
**An International Working Conference for Social Scientists**  
**(2nd conference on sustainable consumption)**

*27-30 May 2008*

Liège University, Dept. of Environmental Science and Management

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This second working conference will focus on agri-food issues and examine in which way the practices of Alternative Food Initiatives contribute to sustainable consumption.

**Scientific Committee**

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**General Presentation of the Conference**

The notion of “sustainable consumption” emerged in a particular institutional context, one in which the countries of the South placed those of the North before their responsibilities when it came to orienting their citizens’ consumption habits. By this very fact, the principle of sustainable consumption holds the promise of a double reversal of perspective: First, it offers the prospect of examining the forms of market relations that develop between Southern producers and Northern consumers. Second, it contains explicitly the idea that sustainable development actions must not focus exclusively on production. Sustainable consumption thus places the Northern consumers’ responsibility for their actions at the heart of both national and international governmental action schemes.

This questioning of North/South responsibilities, while not the sole origin, is nevertheless connected to the increasingly numerous and varied initiatives aimed at organizing alternative food production and trade patterns to those characterizing the huge international conventional systems. This issue is now the focus of increasing numbers of research projects in the social sciences. Alternative Agri-food Networks (AAFNs), as they are known in the English-speaking world, have provided the raw

material for massive scientific investigation from various standpoints, ranging from their contributions to rural development strategies via short food supply chains (SSFCs) to the AAFNs' potential to resist the consumer/producer relations that are imposed on society by conventional agri-food systems. Some of these initiatives have been analyzed from a more territorial perspective. This is the case of Localized Agri-food Systems (LAFSs). Despite being a minor trend, however, such research has led to great advances and the hindsight that we now have for some of these experiences should enable us today to link these initiatives to forms of sustainability that are very often widely debated in either the scientific community or more directly by the agents of such initiatives.

The use of the term “alternative” has prevailed because it makes it possible to pit studies of alternative agri-food networks against those of conventional agri-food systems. However, it is problematic because it erases the key question of food systems' resiliency and abilities to change and cope with a changing environment. This capacity for change concerns agri-food systems' abilities to change their production and consumption patterns in favor of greater sustainability but also the social sciences' abilities to allow for the complexity, contradictions, and dead ends of such movements (Dupuis, Goodman 2005). The principle of following pathways or trajectories thus appears particularly appropriate as a way to allow for the dynamics that these alternative agri-food systems trigger. Moreover, these initiatives also seem to carry the seeds of a redefinition of the forms of labor with which they are associated, either because they call upon consumers to make more serious commitments, including in the form of actual work, or because the content and very organization of the producers' work are redefined. Besides the issues of trajectories and work, the conference will tackle two other, more theoretical, topics: the issue of the many ways in which consumers act within the system, which should contribute to the development of an explicit theory of “the consumer,” and the research postures that are most suitable for studying these alternative schemes.

## **The conference's four strands**

### ***1. The initiatives' trajectories towards greater sustainability***

These initiatives' (communities, collectives, AAFNs, etc.) practices and time frames can enable us to grasp the sustainable development perspective as a resource for creating social experiments. Sustainable development then becomes a research subject that enables us to set up observation schemes but also empirical practical intervention schemes concerning the practices of players with specific sustainable development targets. Following the distinction made by Thompson (1997) between a normative assessment approach (resource efficiency) and a comprehensive learning approach (functional integrity), we ask about sustainable development by asking about the abilities of the schemes that the players set up to build awareness and learning procedures. How do these schemes influence the sustainability of production systems in particular? Seen from this perspective, the question of *time* must be envisioned more specifically, in particular because it enables one to understand better the dynamics of these initiatives, which can combine various both normative and cognitive resources.

The initiatives under study may (or may not) tie in with the ecological modernization project, a project that relies on scientific rationality (technical innovation) and democratic procedures (roles of pressure groups). They can also aim for different forms of extension, each of which also carries a

strongly normative vision of their sustainability potentials. They may also involve negotiating with, working within, or opposing conventional systems to various degrees. The principle of following trajectories makes it possible both to allow better for the diversity of these initiatives' forms but also to understand better their orientations and origins.

## 2. *Workers and consumers*

Social science theorization about conventional agri-food systems gradually abandoned the issues of work and workers in the food chain over the past thirty years (Porcher, 2002). Similarly, the issue of work is often absent from or secondary in research on AFNs, although, paradoxically, it appears to be a particularly rich framework for understanding the players' commitments, be they producers or consumers. This strand of the conference thus aims to allow for the worker in the food chain, the producer's work, and the forms of solidarity that are forged between workers and consumers. The link with work appears to be a very good way to tackle the issue of social justice as well (Allen 2003). This perspective also makes it possible to connect contemporary initiatives with other, older, practices (boycotts, actions of cooperatives, and consumers' leagues movements), in the course of which strong bonds of solidarity formed between workers and consumers to win basic rights for consumers and workers alike. Papers that shed light on the issues from this perspective will be more than welcome.

## 3. *The civic consumer's action theories*

Recent articles on AFNS have started to conceptualize consumers' roles. For example, they look at consumers' commitments in the context of their various roles as citizens, such as the "food citizen," as Wilkins puts it in *Moving from the consumer to food citizen* (Wilkins, 2005). These various research projects should thus be able to inform us more accurately about the nature and formats of consumers' actions, with the aim of developing one or more theories about the consumer. A first perspective is that of the supply that defines the consumer by her/his choices, whereby the supply develops an ability to influence the consumer's behavior based on the products and information that target the consumer. Such a capacity for individual choice may also be very broadly within reach of the community, too, as Micheletti (2003) suggests with the notion of individualized collective action. A second perspective is that of a consumer who is "secondarily a citizen", that is to say, a player in civil society who will influence the public policies that are supposed to influence or "moralize" citizens' behavior as consumers (Spargaaren, 2003).

Are other forms of involvement at work? Collective action can be considered one way in which the consumer *cum* citizen acts, as indicated by the notion of "food citizen." In that case, what forms of collective action strive to organize sustainable consumption and step into the fray as a political player? What are the forms of intervention and negotiation with production and market players, what are this collective action's impacts on the conditions under which products are produced and sold? Are these collectives trying to open up forms of deliberation around the sustainability of agricultural practices? What perspectives are opened up on the forms of governance that are implemented in such initiatives? Players in the field often rely on the principle of a possible consumers' democracy. How do these political objectives tie in with the market aspects of trade?

#### **4. Research posture**

The framework of development or sustainable consumption itself is probably an invitation to do research differently, notably because the field deals with concepts connected to practices that take a great many forms, even though certain normative frameworks would like to dictate their content (Godard and Hubert, 2002). Approaches and practices may be affected by such a positioning, especially in the question formulation and outcome discussion phases. However, the research method itself can be affected. What does the question of sustainability, more specifically that of sustainable consumption changes in the research postures that are adopted and methodologies that are developed? Do the interdisciplinary research designs and finalized research have special roles to play? What original methods may be envisioned to examine these issues and what problems or reflexivity do these methodological positions then generate? This strand will also enable us to take in contributions aimed at studying the issue of changes of scale or, more specifically, how the various research postures allow one to grasp the changes that are at work on a variety of scales, from local to global.

#### **Deadline for abstracts: 15<sup>th</sup> December 2007**

The abstracts that are submitted to the Scientific Committee must come under one or more of the four proposed topics. The abstract must be between 800 and 1000 words and be sent to [p.stassart@ulg.ac.be](mailto:p.stassart@ulg.ac.be). The abstract must include the paper's title, topic(s), authors' names, and name and address of the author for correspondence.

#### **Deadline accepted papers: 5th May 2008**

The accepted papers may be empirical or theoretical, but written in English. The methods used must be clearly stated and presented. A bibliography must be attached. Finally, they must be between 40,000 and 60,000 characters (including spaces) long.

#### **Deadline Papers 2008**

**December 15<sup>th</sup>:** abstracts due

**February 5<sup>th</sup>:** notification of acceptances emailed to participants

**April 15<sup>th</sup>:** registration fee due : 150 euros

**May 5<sup>th</sup>:** completed papers due

**May 26<sup>th</sup>:** reviews of two conference papers due

## A Working Conference

Although the conference extends an open invitation to all social scientists, this will be a small event, aimed at providing concrete feedback and, we hope, publishing opportunities to the attendees. It will be a *working* conference, rather than the usual stand up, give a 15-minute paper, and sit back down kind of event. To that end, it is limited to 30 participants. An extended abstract in the range of 1000 words *must be submitted by February 10<sup>th</sup>*, via email to [p.stassart@ulg.ac.be](mailto:p.stassart@ulg.ac.be). Each accepted participant *will submit a finished paper three weeks before* the conference begins. Conference papers will be posted on the web, and participants agree to reading them all *before* the conference. As well, participants will agree to provide a written review, via email to [p.stassart@ug.ac.be](mailto:p.stassart@ug.ac.be), of two of the conference papers *48 hours before the conference begins*. These reviews will be made available at the conference in booklet form, with the reviewer's name removed. Rather than the usual presentation model, we opt for a **SLOW TALK conference**. There will be a half hour discussion of each paper and the two reviews it received. Paper authors will be strictly limited to a 5-minute opening statement where they present their reactions to the reviews. No PowerPoint

### Basic principles of a **SLOW TALK conference**©

- *small size* (about 30 participants), allowing an intimate atmosphere; lots of time for *informal interactions* among the participants, plus group activities such as the bike tour we held the day before the conference;
- **45 minutes** of group attention given to **each paper**; *no Power Point*, or any other form of paper presentation, reserving all the time for discussion instead;
  - all papers available in written form a week before the conference, with the expectation that participants will have read *before the conference begins* all the papers whose discussions they plan to attend;
  - every paper receives a *written review* by two conference participants, to ensure detailed and committed feedback and to set the stage for the discussion;
  - *5-5-5-30 model*, in which the reviewers each orally present their comments for 5 minutes, the author responds for 5 minutes, and the whole group discusses the paper and the reviews for 30 minutes, with an eye to enhancing and developing the author's argument;
  - the *reviewers distribute written copies of their reviews* to the attendees at the paper session, and ideally ahead of time to the author, so as to keep their oral presentation of their review shorter, to provide some formal pressure to ensure that the reviewers do a careful job, and to give the author some more time to think over the comments
- Strictly *limit attendance* at the paper sessions by walk-in attendees so as to keep the atmosphere personal and informal, promoting social conditions in which critical commentary is delivered in a non-hostile way and is received without lo having loss of public face;
- Having a *presider* of each paper session (we had the same one for each stream over the two days) to keep some balance of voices in the discussion and to keep everyone on time, having the presider organize the discussion not merely by the order in which hands went up but in *conversational "threads"* in which comments are taken on a particular theme until it is exhausted, lending coherence and group creativity to the discussion.

© Michael Bell, 1st Susconf, Madison , 2006

**Rem RC24 will fund 3 grant of 300 euros for researchers coming from third world countries**

### **Background to the “2nd sustainable consumption conference, Arlon 2008 »**

The first Conference on Sustainable Consumption was held in Madison, Wisconsin, in May/June 2006. In the second conference we want to extend the work done at the first conference to an inclusion of the economic sociology and market sociology of the French-speaking world. In addition, the Madison conference’s participants were not focused specifically on the food issue, despite the fact that a good half of the papers that were presented did concern this issue. On the other hand, the community of researchers studying alternative agri-food networks was underrepresented in the discussion.

The main objective of the second conference will be to organize the dialogue between the research community working on Alternative Agri-food Networks (see the journals *Rural Studies - Sociologia Ruralis - Agriculture and Human Value*), the network of researchers working on sustainable consumption (Madison, 2006), and the positioning around consumer commitments that the C3D researchers <http://www.c3d.cnrs.fr/> are trying to work out within the Agriculture and Sustainable Development Program: A secondary objective is to permit exchanges between the French-speaking and English-speaking scientific communities.

### **Organisational comitee**

Pierre Stassart, Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier , Guilhem Anzalone (webmaster) , Mélanie Louviaux (contact), Françoise Dasnoy (logistic)

### **Alternative Arlon’s evenings**

To discover the countryside around Arlon and take in its smells, colors, and tastes, we propose taking part in a bike tour the day before the conference (Tuesday, 27 May, in the morning). This will also give us an opportunity to take the time to hobnob as we cycle along the trails and “break bread” together, as we did in Madison.

**Mi-orge Mi-houblon: slow beer!** The Arlon area is also renowned for its local products, especially beer! Mi-Orge Mi-Houblon opened in the center of the historic town of Arlon 15 July 2005 to ply its patrons with a carefully selected assortment of “home-brewed” beers. You can have a chance to discover beers from more than 35 small Belgian breweries and three foreign breweries.

Like other alternative events in Arlon, we shall take you into the world of the documentary *Our daily bread!* This fascinating, upsetting film questions the food industry and its production processes. An intimist film without commentaries directed by Nikolaus Geyrhalter that has won a number of prestigious prizes (Grand Prize, International Environmental Film Festival, Paris, 2006, EcoCamera Award, Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM), 2006 nomination European Film Award, Arte Prize, 2006; Best Film - Ecocinema International Film Festival, Athens, 2006.) ***You will not emerge unscathed!***

For the official reception to be held Thursday evening, May 29, we have a surprise in store for you, one that will without a doubt be flavored with a very local accent, the “Peiffeschof”.

### **Institutional support**

We benefit from the following institutions’ support:

Université de Liège (B)  
Centre de Sociologies des Organisation, CNRS – Science Po (F), [www.c3d.cnrs.fr](http://www.c3d.cnrs.fr)  
Fonds National de Recherche Scientifique (B)  
Agence Nationale de la Recherche (F),  
Institut National de Recherche Agronomique (INRA-F)  
Faculté des Sciences de l’Université de Liège (B)  
Département de Sciences et Gestion de l’Environnement (ULg)  
Province de Luxembourg  
RC24 : International Sociology Association, Research Committee on Environment and Society

### **Editorial partnership**

We benefit from the following journals’ editorial support:

- *Sociologia Ruralis*
- *Journal of Rural Studies*

### **Venue**

The conference will be held on Liège University’s Arlon Campus, Belgium, from May 27 through 30. Arlon is a 45-minute drive from Luxembourg Airport, which has links to all the capitals of Europe, and is 30 minutes from Luxembourg’s high-speed train station (there is a direct train link between Arlon and Luxembourg City).

### **Contacts : [www.suscons.ulg.ac.be](http://www.suscons.ulg.ac.be)**

If you have practical organizational questions, e-mail them to [mlouviaux@ulg.ac.be](mailto:mlouviaux@ulg.ac.be)

Webmaster suggestions and remarks: [g.anzalone@cso.cnrs.fr](mailto:g.anzalone@cso.cnrs.fr)

General questions: [p.stassart@ulg.ac.be](mailto:p.stassart@ulg.ac.be), [s.dubuisson@cso.cnrs.fr](mailto:s.dubuisson@cso.cnrs.fr)

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