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How to cite:

Jehlička, Petr and Smith, Joe (2012). Sustainability and the “urban peasant”: rethinking the cultural politics of food self-provisioning in the Czech Republic. In: Zahrádka, Pavel and Sedláková, Renáta eds. *New Perspectives on Consumer Culture Theory and Research*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 78–96.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Sustainability and the “urban peasant”: Rethinking the cultural politics of food self-provisioning in Czechia

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1. Introduction

The system changes in 1989–1990 that saw the end of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the initiation of what has widely been figured as a “transition” coincided with a high-tide mark for discourses of sustainable development within international political discourses. The UN Earth Summit of 1992 proclaimed sustainable production and consumption as key areas for attention.

Food systems are a prominent feature of these discourses about progress towards sustainability. The impacts associated with production, distribution and consumption and waste were all identified as requiring urgent attention in western societies. While agro-industrial efficiency has long been seen as one component of sustainable food systems, more recently there have been efforts – such as those within the UK Transition Town movement - aimed at the promotion of food self-provisioning as a form of sustainable production and consumption.

Given the concurrence of the “transformations” in CEE with the dramatic explosion of mainstream political enthusiasm for “sustainable development” it might have been expected that, as part of CEE countries’ accession to the European Union (EU) the policy community in CEE and EU institutions might have paused to reflect on those aspects of CEE societies that sustained or nurtured sustainable societies, in particular those aspects of transport and food provision that western societies were seeking to advance. These included extensive collective transport systems and relatively high rates of walking and cycling in the transport sector and dramatically higher rates of food self-provisioning in the food sector.

Alber and Kohler’s (2008) Europe-wide research shows that, with a few exceptions, the proportion of the population in west European countries growing their own food does not exceed ten per cent. By contrast between 35 and 60 per cent of the population in CEE countries grow some of their own food. But rather than being studied and protected by an EU whose constitution was the first in the world to integrate sustainable development as a goal, or by CEE polities that were designed at precisely the time that international political community was casting around for “paths to sustainability” these practices were ignored or met with disdain. “Plan SAPARD - The Plan for the Development of Agriculture and the Countryside for the Period 2000–2006” prepared in 2000 by western consultants under the auspices of the EU-sponsored Programme SAPARD¹ for the Czech Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Regional Development is a case point. On three

occasions the document mentions food self-provisioning – always in a negative light:

Ineffective self-provisioning habits (eggs, poultry, potatoes, vegetables, fruit) hang over from the past, which contributes to the relatively low purchasing power of the countryside” (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj a Ministerstvo zemědělství 2000, 18).

Food self-provisioning, which provides households involved in this activity with a basic livelihood, can sometimes contribute to decline and exclusion” (ibid., 43).

Statistics do not include occasional self-provisioning carried out by rural populations, the unemployed, women and the retired“ (ibid., 53).

Research in this field has more often than not followed these readings, framing these practices as backward, and contrasting them with western modernity. Food self-provisioning is read as an index of path dependency, an economic coping strategy or as a faintly embarrassing cultural remnant. The chapter will track back to see how CEE food self-provisioning has come to be understood as a survival strategy of the poor. We identify entrenched western readings of Eastern Europe and to specific developments in post-socialist Russia as being significant. Over a century of “othering” of Eastern Europe has combined with a more recent western myth of the Russian “urban peasant”. Despite the lack of evidence or justification we argue that these framings have proven influential in shaping interpretations of CEE food self-provisioning in policy and academic discourses.

Far from being a necessity, our case shows how self-provisioning is rather a complex bundle of practices that hold cultural and social significance that far outweighs economic explanations. These practices support and are supported by extensive networks based in sharing. Food hence reinforces community and family bonds and cooperation. We find it interesting, and of significance to sustainability debates in western Europe and north America, that sustainability is clearly not a motive for these growers and sharers, despite the fact that there are clearly substantial environmental benefits that can result. We conclude the chapter by proposing that the new framing of food self-provisioning in CEE we present is of significance to sustainability debates far more widely. By contrast with technocratic or constraining accounts of sustainability the food culture we explore points to an attractive, exuberant and socially inclusive version of sustainability.

2. Urban peasants?: Othering the East

The notion of food self-provisioning as survival strategy had its origins in survey data that showed that two-thirds of Russian households, 48 per cent of Polish households, and 62 per cent of Bulgarian households grew some of their food in the years immediately after the end of state socialism (Clarke et al. 2000; Rose and Tikhomirov 1993). It is worth noting that we do recognise

that there are circumstances where food self-provisioning is one element of a coping strategy for the lowest income groups in CEE countries, and that this involves a blurring of boundaries between capitalism “and its outsides” (Smith and Stenning 2006). Smith and Rochovská (2007, 1174) “emphasise the continuing importance of the economic practices of food production in both providing resources for domestic consumption and, in doing so, enabling other engagements in the formal economy – such as higher expenditure – than might otherwise be possible”.

Nevertheless, the media have tended to tell the story of this “economy of jars” (Cellarius 2004) purely in terms of the “rise of the urban peasant”. This representation has fed directly into public policy, such as the structuring of social assistance provision funded by the World Bank’s loan in Russia (Clarke et al. 2000). The highly influential Western consultants who did so much to shape the post-socialist “transition” tended to view post socialist societies as an undifferentiated mass (a “bloc”). Their prescriptions for treating the patient assumed not just Eastern otherness, but also backwardness, and food self-provisioning was considered a marker of this.

Influential research in public policy, development and economics (e.g. Rose and Tikhomirov 1993; Seeth et al. 1998; Alber and Kohler 2008) followed the same lines. Alber and Kohler (2008) drawing on Rose and Tikhomirov’s (1993) used a Europe-wide survey of 27 countries to conclude that food self-provisioning was a coping strategy with direct descent from the socialist past. We want to suggest however that to portray CEE food self-provisioning as anti-modern and as a survival strategy is both inaccurate, and potentially very harmful to attempts to promote more sustainable food systems. We want to draw attention to the fact that self-provisioning by CEE household food systems can and should be respected both as a valid form of modernity, and one with substantial claim to being much more sustainable than its western variants.

A starting point for understanding the limited vision that we are critiquing is to recognise the maintenance of a mental separation of Europe and Eastern Europe. Kuus (2004) identifies an orientalist discourse founded in an assumption of an essential difference between Europe and Eastern Europe. Such othering of Eastern Europe has long influenced the construction of European identity, with the region being figured as “not yet European”. Wolff (1994) points to more than two hundred years of ‘advice’ flowing from West to East. Kuus finds that these portrayals do not dismiss Eastern Europe out of hand “as irredeemably alien but as halfway house between Europe and Asia” and that “Eastern Europe was not simply backward, but a learner, an experiment and testing ground” (2004, 474). These accounts are not held only outside the region, but also widely shared in CEE societies. The collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe in 1989 served to dramatically reinforce the region’s latent status, and its role as needy recipient of western advice:

In the early 1990s, East-Central Europe was indeed not upgraded but “downgraded” in the scale of development. It was no longer treated as a second world – antagonistic but capable of industrial innovations – but as

a variant of third world - and hence a space under Western tutelage (ibid., 475).

Hence where we have approached CEE's cultural politics of food as being a resource of ideas and practices of value to any pursuit of social and ecological sustainability the dominant regional and western accounts of the same have been at best dismissive.

The trope of the urban peasant supports the representation of food self-provisioning as a backward and anti-modern. The figure of the peasant has long troubled attempts to give account of social progress and the development of capitalism. Leonard and Kaneff (2002, 6) suggest that peasants "embody a mode of production and a way of thinking that was felt to be antithetical to capitalist and socialist development alike". Food self-provisioning in CEE countries does not equate to professional farming. Nevertheless, the association with cultivation, growing and sharing and barter is strongly redolent of peasant practices and offers the "modernisers" a short step to the generation of negative representations of food self-provisioning.

Despite the dominance of economistic and Western framed and focused accounts of appropriate development path alternative approaches to research have worked to explore food self-provisioning via more cultural informed approaches to understanding habits, practices and identities identities. These have tended to be based upon qualitative research at the "micro" level, most notably social anthropology. These less deterministic approaches are showing results that contradict the previously accepted explanations.

3. Anthropologies of food self-provisioning

The high levels of food self-provisioning and sharing of fruit and vegetables in CEE have consistently puzzled researchers both during (Gábor 1979; Hann 1980) and after the state socialist period (Sik 1992; Skalník 1993; Czegledy 2002; Torsello 2005; Acheson 2007). Acheson's (2007) work on household food production and exchange networks in Slovakia between 1993 and 2006, noted that the phenomenon could be considered to be anomalous, given that exchange networks are a feature of tribal and peasant societies, and are not anticipated in a modern industrial society such as Slovakia. She concluded that these exchanges are motivated by a mixture of altruism and self-interest. They embody egalitarianism and some deeply rooted moral norms, including the stigmatisation of self-centredness and the promotion of mutual help and sharing. Similarly Torsello's (2005) research conducted in a rural Slovak village showed how food self-provisioning plays a role in creating and maintaining strong ties between kin members and friends by establishing mutuality, reciprocity, task sharing and trust.

In similar vein anthropologist Snajdr's (2008) research into the relationship between Slovak city dwellers and their access to gardens on the fringes of cities shows how, on these "tiny garden plots, which were often within sight of a factory or along railroad tracks, they grew a variety of vegetables, fruits, and

herbs... Most gardens included small *domceky* or *chaty* (cabins)". Some

were quite elaborate, with trestles supporting grape vines, or rows of slender fruit trees so skillfully pruned that their curling branches formed a virtual wall along the footpath. If a family did not own a garden plot themselves, they had access to one through relatives. Whether elaborate or bare bones, these private spaces were visited frequently, to tend to vegetables, have a family cook-out, or throw a small evening party. The garden was a sanctuary, if only for a few days, that provided relief from the city and from the system (ibid., 34–35).

Snajdr quotes Paulina Bren's conclusion that *chata* culture "thrived on the fantasy of the weekend getaway as a private retreat where one was left to one's own devices" (Bren 2002, 127, quoted in Snajdr 2008, 35).

This point allows us to dwell on what we think is one of the most important "exportable" findings about food and sustainability in CEE. Where Acheson and Torsello focus on how familial obligation plays a role in supporting self-provisioning, Czegledy's interpretation of Hungarian food self-provisioning and sharing allows pleasure to play a more central role. Home grown food and drinks (including wine and fruit brandy) are shared with guests and friends. This sharing celebrates the relationship of hospitality, but it also serves as an opportunity to appreciate the time, effort and skills invested in growing and preparation. Sharing these goods is to share "a distinct colour, a specific texture, and certain taste" that shop-bought produce cannot offer (Czegledy 2002, 213). Enthusiasm for these appears to relate to how they can support a reaffirmation of cultural identity and help people to cope with the unrootedness of international capitalist production (ibid., 214).

We want to go further than these anthropological studies and propose that these practices have far wider significance in pointing to some of the ways that sustainable practices might be valued and nurtured elsewhere.

4. Food self-provisioning as a sustainable practice: the Czech evidence

We cannot argue for food self-provisioning as a leading sustainability practice without demonstrating that it is not a coping or even survival strategy, as Rose and Tikhomirov 1993; Seeth et al. 1998 and Alber and Kohler 2008 have posited. Our counter-argument is drawn from the findings of long-term qualitative and quantitative research (2004–2010) into household food production conducted in Czechia. Our conclusions fall more closely into line with Czegledy's (2002) than Acheson's or Torsello's. Where their work was based in anthropological qualitative research in a single or a small number of locations we have combined quantitative surveys of a representative sample of the Czech population with a limited number of in-depth interviews. These interviews have been conducted in a range of places from the national capital to a small village. Our goal with this mixed methodology approach has been to derive from the qualitative data underlying motivations and to probe

causalities and explanations behind some of the data gathered in quantitative surveys.

The research characterises Czech household food production as primarily a voluntary activity imbued with deep social and cultural meanings and associated with feelings of exuberance, joy and a sense of achievement rather than with constraints, necessity and a sense of obligation. On the basis of three surveys of representative samples of the Czech population (2005, 2009 and 2010) we are convinced that 15 - 20 years after the fall of the Czechoslovak communist regime food self-provisioning should not be understood as a “coping strategy of the poor”. Our evidence comes from most directly from the reasons identified for self-provisioning by the respondents to the 2005 and 2010 national surveys. On both occasions, the main reason was not financial saving (which in 2005 came only as the third and in 2010 the fourth most important reason), but fresh food (the first reason in both 2005 and 2010) and secondly food self-provisioning was valued as a hobby (the second reason in both surveys). The third reason given in 2010 was “healthy food”.

We were able to investigate these findings further via in depth interviews. The respondents consistently placed emphasis on “healthy food” which to them primarily meant food grown with no or limited use of pesticides and other industrially produced chemicals and which contain, as a result, the least possible residua of industrially produced chemicals:

It's more like organic farming. We use almost no chemicals. We fertilise the garden with rabbit manure. And we hoe up weeds, for that we don't use any chemicals (Interview, Polička, 4/4/2005).

The reason why we grow our own food is that we do not use any sprays. Yes, the fruit is spotty, it certainly does not look like the fruit in shops. We are now running out of our own apples, so I wanted to buy some on the shop but my husband said: “Don't buy those chemical balls” (Interview, Stěžery, 29/3/2005b).

We can buy food with chemicals in shops. The point of growing food at home is to do it without chemicals (Interview, Stěžery, 29/3/2005a).

The notion of healthiness is related to food's provenance and freshness:

When I grow that tomato in my own garden, I consider it to be healthy (Interview, Stěžery, 29/3/2005b).

My family grows food because it's fun and because it gives us fresh food (Interview, Polička, 5/4/2005).

Self-provisioning of a range of commodities is very high compared, for example, to West European rates. The February 2005 survey showed that among productive gardeners about two thirds of the consumption of currants, strawberries and apples is accounted for by people's own production (see

Table 1). These productive gardeners also emphasise the natural state of their produce, and the absence of additives, for example:

The non-alcoholic cider we make from our apples is without added sugar. It is something different to the cider bought in shops. Ours is naturally sweet (Interview, Pardubice 30/3/2005).

Table 1: Proportion of self-grown produce in the total gardeners' household consumption of the fruit or vegetable (%) as reported by respondents to the February 2005 national survey.

Fruit or vegetable	Percentage	Fruit or vegetable	Percentage
currants	73	carrot	52
strawberries	68	plums	49
apples	62	onion	44
cherries	55	potatoes	44
tomatoes	53	pears	41

These results are confirmed in more extensive official data (see Table 2 & 3). The Czech Statistical Office carries out an annual survey of household budgets using a quota sample of 3000 households that is representative of the Czech population. One category of data gathered within the framework of household budgets is "consumption in kind". This denotes consumption of food that is not purchased but is either provisioned within the household (self-provisioning, foraging berries and mushrooms) or obtained as a gift. Hence consumption in kind does not equate with volumes of food produced by households, but the majority of the food in this category is the result of self-provisioning.

Although in the last decade the trend in the overall volume of consumption in kind has been mildly declining, this non-market source of food is still highly significant. In 2007, consumption in kind accounted for 34 per cent of the overall consumption of fresh fruits in Czech households (restaurants and canteens are excluded from this statistics), 32 per cent of eggs, 27 per cent of potatoes, 24 per cent of lard and 22 per cent of vegetables (Štiková, Sekavová and Mrhálková 2009). In terms of absolute indicators of consumption in kind, the data for Czech households in 2010 were as follows (in kg per person per year): potatoes 12.5 (15.4 in 2000), fresh vegetables 8.2 (12.9 in 2000), fresh fruit 11.1 (22.0 in 2000); and 67 eggs per person per year (71 in 2000). The figures for fruit and vegetables are affected by weather conditions – consumption in kind of fresh fruit in 2010 was markedly lower (11.1 kg per person per year) than the previous year (16.7 kg) (Štiková, pers. comm., October 3, 2011).

Table 2: Czech households producing fruit

Fruit	Proportion of households with fruit trees		No of trees in Czech households	Harvest of fruits in Czech
	Percentage	Percentage		

	of all households which grow their food	of the total number of households		households (in tonnes)
	%	%		
Apple trees	81.3	32.5	7 157 000	127 871
Pear trees	42.7	17.1	1 061 000	10 675
Peach trees	30.5	12.2	125 000	16 209
Apricot trees	28.4	11.4	998 000	17 056
Plum trees	43.5	17.4	713 000	30 289
Other types of plum trees	32.2	12.8	983 000	10 652
Cherry trees	46.7	18.7	1 031 000	13 213
Sour cherry trees	22.9	9.1	469 000	3 564
Currant trees	71.8	28.7	4 631 000	8 884
Gooseberry trees	41.1	16.4	1 421 000	2 057
Walnut trees	30.2	12.1	755 000	9 211

Source: Czech Statistical Office, 2006.

With the exception of apple trees and sour cherries, the proportion of the number trees in households is higher than in the commercial sector (between 50 per cent [currants] and 96 per cent [gooseberry and walnut trees]). In terms of the volume (tonnes) of produced fruits, with the exception of apples and sour cherries, Czech households produce over 80 per cent of the domestic production of all fruit commodities.

Table 3: Czech households producing vegetables

Vegetable	Proportion of households with land for growing vegetables		Total area for growing vegetables in Czech households (in hectares)	Harvest of vegetables in Czech households (in tonnes)
	Percentage of all households which grow their food	Percentage of the total number of households		
	%	%		
Potatoes	46.3	18.5	8 523	144 440
Strawberries	72.0	28.2	1 972	15 429
Root celery	35.1	14.0	207	3 238
Carrots	59.2	23.7	556	8 789
Root parsley	42.4	17.0	282	2 977
Kohlrabi	41.0	16.4	349	5 847
Sprout	12.4	5.0	71	1 185
Cauliflower	9.0	3.6	81	1 262
Cabbage	14.2	5.7	200	5 113
Pickled cucumbers	45.4	18.1	1 151	19 529
Cucumbers	39.6	15.8	383	10 295
Tomatoes	68.5	27.4	1 042	23 120
Onion	53.2	21.3	735	9 489
Garlic	22.4	9.0	301	1 982
Garden pea	34.3	13.7	327	1 497
Lettuce	13.2	5.3	93	1 553
Radish	8.6	3.4	34	410
Peppers	19.5	7.8	246	3 501
Courgette	16.3	6.5	308	7 453
Green bean	8.6	3.4	83	605
Other vegetables	5.7	2.3	53	118
Herbs – medicinal and aromatic	6.2	2.5	28	119

Source: Czech Statistical Office, 2006.

Czech households account for 30 per cent of the total area used for growing vegetables in the country, commercial farmers account for 70 per cent. In terms of the volume of produced vegetables, Czech households produce more than 50 per cent of the following commodities grown in the country: strawberries, kohlrabi, pickled cucumbers, cucumbers, tomatoes and garlic, ranging from 50 per cent (tomatoes) to 95 per cent (garlic).

The data on living standards and income levels helps us understand who is growing this food and why. It is striking to us, given the dominant framing of these practices, that it is economically secure rather than insecure

households who are predominantly growing their own food. For instance, 48 per cent of respondents who indicated in 2010 that the living standard of their households was “good” (44 per cent in 2005), are self-provisioning, whereas the percentage of respondents from households whose living standard was “neither good, nor bad” and from households with a “bad” living standard, were 43 and 33 per cent (42 and 35 in 2005). Similarly, amongst the most affluent quartile (according to household income declared by respondents) in the 2010 data contained 41 per cent self-provisioners and in the second highest quartile the figure was 46 per cent. In the lowest quartile, the rate of self-provisioning was 34 per cent and in the second lowest it was 43 per cent. Table 4 shows that in the second half of the 2000s more than 40 percent of Czech households were growing food to eat and share.

Table 4: Percentages of respondents growing some of their food in Czechia.

Country	1991	2003	2005	2009	2010
Czechia (Czechoslovakia ^a)	70 ^a	30	42	43	43

Sources: 1991: Rose and Tikhomirov (1993)
 2003: Alber and Kohler (2008) (our reading of the chart in the article)
 2005 and 2010: National surveys commissioned by us
 2009: National survey conducted by Median Agency

Despite the fact that the poorest in Czech society appear to be growing less, the fact that around a third of the lowest quartile are self-provisioning demonstrates that this remains a socially inclusive activity. This also applies to educational levels: respondents with the lowest (9 years of school attendance up until the age of 15) and with the highest (university degree) educational level were equally likely to grow their food – 35 per cent of these respondents declared in 2005 that they did so. The percentages of respondents with secondary education - without and with *maturita* (the school leaving examination usually taken at the age of 18) - growing their food were also similar: 45 and 44 per cent respectively. There is also fairly even distribution of the practice across urban and rural areas: of the respondents, self-provisioning takes place in villages (65 per cent of our 2005 respondents living in settlements with less than 2000 inhabitants grew their food), in mid-size towns (41 per cent) yet also in the capital Prague, albeit at reduced rates (21 per cent). We know from the qualitative research that some households do not grow food in their primary dwelling, but rather in gardens at their recreational cabins and cottages. The social inclusiveness of self-provisioning is an essential component of our argument that these practices promote both social and ecological principles of sustainability, including the strengthening of local bonds of trust (Smith and Jehlička 2007) beyond family relations.

In terms of environmental sustainability, barter or gifting of self-provisioned food serves as a way of distributing surplus production which might otherwise go to waste. The Czech household interviews from 2005 established that there was a lot of barter going on:

I have plenty of eggs and rabbits and it is quite unhealthy to eat too much of these. As I have a lot of friends, I give a couple of eggs or a

rabbit and exchange them for, say, lettuce and other vegetables or for leftovers which I then feed to the rabbits (Interview, Stěžery, 29/3/2005).

This is going on through family and friendship networks in large cities as much as rural areas. Furthermore both urban and rural dwellers forage for e.g. wild berries (for example bilberries and alpine strawberries) and mushrooms.. When explaining the role of foraging, self-provisioning, allotments or smallholdings, people emphasised that these practices “help to sustain dense webs of connection between the rural and urban in ways that are now comparatively rare in Western Europe” (Jehlička and Smith 2011, 367) (confirming Stenning 2005, 122–123):

We grow leek, lettuce, radish, peas and spinach... Some fruits do not grow well here, so we get it from relatives, from my mother-in-law, or we bring it from Moravia. Apricots and plums. We have relatives there, so we go there quite regularly. I make compotes. This year [I made] about 15 kg [of compotes], I freeze some of it and I also made marmalade this year. We also grow tomatoes - we have plenty – and also cucumbers... My mother-in-law lives 5 km away from us and there are slightly different climate conditions, so they have cherries, pears that we do not have because the conditions here are not favourable to them (Interview, Polička, 4/5/2005).

Only one respondent out of 15 household interviews was not involved in such networks of food exchange. The exchanges are not restricted to extended families: neighbours, friends and co-workers frequently participate. The 2010 interviews gave us a chance to probe the extent and meaning of sharing and barter further. They provided rich evidence:

We consume the produce from our garden when it's fresh, and all surplus is preserved as marmalades, jams and syrups. And we have so much that we don't manage to preserve everything: we give it to friends and other people including work colleagues (Interview, Dolánky, 12/11/2010).

When you have, you give (ibid.).

We don't have cherries, but we don't buy them. We usually get them from friends... We don't have plums either, but I almost never buy them. I get them from friends (Interview, Boskovice, 20/11/2010).

When I have a surplus of, say lettuce, I give it to the (extended) family, to my female colleagues at work (altogether 15 percent) and a small part (5 per cent) for sale in the shop of the Gardeners' Union (ibid.).

It is not a (formalised) exchange. It depends on what people have, and they simply suggest in a conversation – “would you be interested?” (ibid.).

Why don't I sell all the surplus? I have friends who I know will be pleased to get apples for free. I do not need to profit from this....(ibid.).

We don't buy pears – the family helps each other. We get pears. And sour cherries we get from our neighbour's garden, so although we don't have our own, we do not buy them (Interview, Boskovice, 21/11/2010).

[Exchanges are not organised], it's quite random, when something ripens and becomes available, when people have enough of it, so they give each other a ring... (ibid.).

For example, we send something to my brother-in-law in Litomyšl, or sometimes we exchange things – he send us cucumbers and send something else in return (Interview, Telecí, 21/11/2010).

For example, there was a lot of plums this year. So I gave some to my (female) colleagues at work. They were pleased and cooked plum dumplings... (Interview, Prague, 8/11/2010).

There was a huge boom of cucumbers in the summer, so I picked them and took them to work... I did not want them to go to waste... (Interview, Prague 6/12/2010).

The amounts that self-provisioners give away varies: 26 per cent of growers give away less than 10 per cent of their produce; 30 per cent of growers give away 11-50 per cent of their produce and 4 per cent give away more than 50 per cent of their produce. Forty per cent of growers do not give away anything. But it should be noted that some respondents do not consider sharing their produce with the family (daughters etc) to be sharing. These findings confirm Acheson's (2007) research in eastern Slovakia (undertaken in 1993 and 2006). Although these networks around growing and sharing were well-established during the state socialist period (Torsello 2005), they pre-existed state socialism (Acheson 2007). The fact that they have been very resistant to change in the years of the post-1989 social and economic transformation in some senses provided the starting point for our research. We want to suggest that, by reinforcing family and community networks in ways that are not reliant on the formal economy or on the consumption of material goods, these practices serve a body of social as well as environmental dimensions of sustainability.

The perishability of much produce offers at least part of the reason for the high levels of sharing, but not all. Acheson's Slovakian research (ibid.) showed that exchanges were not confined to self-provisioned food, but that they also involved goods purchased in shops or commodities to which they have special access. People also exchanged labour, for example when building a house. The same practices were revealed in our 2005 interviews. The sharing and exchanging of food, and other commodities and services may be rooted in shared but implicit norms around egalitarianism and the negative perception of selfishness and self-centredness. We sense that

further focused research into the positive associations people hold regarding mutual help and the sharing of resources will be productive and important.

Another area that we feel would benefit from further research is the analysis of the environmental benefits of household food production. This is not easy, nevertheless even on the basis of our work to date we feel there are reasons to be confident that in comparison with conventional food marketing home-growing results in significantly reduce environmental impacts (Jehlička and Smith 2011). We knew from both the 2005 and 2010 surveys and the in-depth interviews of 2005 that most growers valued chemical-free cultivation (hence the emphasis on healthy food). Our 2010 survey addressed these environmental dimensions directly. The results confirmed that in terms of pesticide and fertiliser inputs and in terms of transport energy intensity in production and sharing, food self-provisioning greatly reduces the environmental impact of the food system (Jehlička and Smith 2012). We want to suggest that one of the reasons this may be interesting and important is precisely the fact that these environmental virtues go unmentioned by the self-provisioners. This hints at one of the reasons why it may be that the promotion of environmentally beneficial behaviours has often proven difficult when they are presented in these terms, rather than being justified by reference to other or wider social norms or benefits.

Elsewhere we have explored in some depth the puzzle as to why the sustainability policy communities at local, national and international levels have failed to take protect, promote or even acknowledge these sustainability-compliant practices in the development of policy initiatives (ibid.). Our purpose in this paper has been to further explore the data on self-provisioning to demonstrate its extent and socially inclusive and diverse nature. All of this data points to the potential for self-provisioning to continue to play an important role in environmental protection and social solidarity. However we want to go further and suggest that it serves as an exemplar that other developed world societies can study and seek to follow.

5. Conclusion

When international (i.e. western) academia has approached the evidence of widespread household food production in post-socialist societies their accounts have tended to be subject to several myths about Eastern Europe. Development, social policy and economics disciplines (with their close links to policy worlds) have represented self-provisioning practices not as leading exemplars of localised food production and social capital, but rather as backward anomalies that need to be “brought in line” with western trajectories of development. They have occurred in the “wrong” place, and have to some degree originated in the “wrong” time.

We have drawn on work conducted by social anthropologists and on our own quantitative and qualitative research in Czechia to challenge this account. Our findings demonstrate that people’s self-provisioning is a component of their own construction of modernity, and one that valorises historical and cultural

references that have been otherwise erased in the aggressive pursuit of “transition”. Western official environmental policies, as well as environmentalist movements such as Transition Towns all promote self-provisioning as one strand in the development of a more sustainable society. Yet in Czechia the proportion of self-provisioners exceeds that in western Europe by several factors. Rather than seeking to depict these sustainable practices as backward to make them fit with the stereotypical image of Eastern Europe, we argue that this model should be nurtured, promoted and transferred to new social contexts.

Bockman and Eyal argue for a more open sense of the flow of ideas and policies in terms of understanding neoliberalism and post socialism. They propose that “it is impossible to divide this transnational dialogue into an active, Western ‘author’ of neoliberal ideas and policies and a passive, East European ‘recipient’. Neoliberalism was not simply disseminated from West to East, but was made possible and constructed through the dialogue and exchanges that took place within this transnational network” (Bockmann and Eyal 2002, 311). In similar, but far more positive, vein we propose that the “actually existing sustainability” demonstrated in the resilient high levels of self-provisioning and gifting/barter in CEE countries can and should form part of a flow of ideas and experiences from East to West.

Most obviously these practices help to reduce the environmental impact of food systems. The percentages of production in some categories (e.g. soft and orchard fruits) demonstrate how self-provisioning can make a substantial contribution to the reduction in food miles, packaging and industrial agricultural inputs, even in a country that is capitalist, “modern” and, in the consultants and economists’ terms “post-transition”. The socially diverse make-up of these self-provisioners shows that these are practices that are not driven by economic need.

On the contrary: our evidence points to these practices fulfilling a broader body of social benefits, including the expression moral norms (Acheson), and enjoyment at cooperation and interaction with other people through food (Czegledy). To understand, protect and extend these practices requires some practical policy measures, including planning protection for allotments and productive gardens, but it is also necessary to engage with the underlying norms that seem to be supporting them. These include the stigmatisation of selfishness and the extolling of mutual help and sharing. In other words food self-provisioning, despite its outward appearance as a “trivial” individualised and inner-directed hobby, seems to directly relate to the tending and nurturing of values that are of great significance to any discussion of how developed world societies might become more sustainable.

Acknowledgments: We wish to thank Jiří Vinopal for advice concerning the construction of the Czech national survey questionnaires, the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM) in Prague for conducting the 2005 and 2010 surveys and Tomáš Kostecký for assistance with the analysis of the survey results and for conducting some of the interviews. We gratefully acknowledge

research funding support from the Open University's Department of Geography and OpenSpace research centre as well as from the Czech Science Foundation via grant No. 404/10/0521, entitled "Environmental Values, Beliefs and Behavior in the Czech Republic in Historical and International Perspective". Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the conference "Consumer Culture: between aesthetics, social division and ecological activism" held at Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic, 7-9 October 2010, at the Nordic Geographers Meeting held at Roskilde University, Denmark, 24-27 May 2011, at the 24th Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology held in MAICh, Chania, Greece, 22-25 August 2011 and at the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers annual conference in London, 31 August – 2 September 2011. The authors wish to thank participants for their comments.

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ⁱ SAPARD stands for Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development.