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Stories around food, politics and change in Poland and the Czech Republic

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Stories around food, politics, and change in Poland and the Czech Republic

This study of the politics of food production/consumption in Poland and the Czech Republic brings together food and post-socialist studies. The food stories explored in the paper, relating to packaging, restaurant dining, self-provisioning and the emergence of an organic food sector open up the politics of everyday life in these significant cases. We show that there are diverse responses to 'transition' that are resistant or alternative to dominant narratives of linear progression towards western 'normality'. This finding is of wider significance at a time when debates about globalization and sustainability are promoting searches for alternative economic forms and practices.

key words: the Czech Republic; Poland; post-socialism; food; consumption; everyday

Introduction

This paper brings together thinking from two fields of inquiry: the study of consumption, specifically relating to food, and the analysis of experiences of post-socialism. Our aim is to work from an analysis of the food politics and culture of Central and Eastern European countries to contribute to a reframing of the experience of 'transition'. Our findings point away from linear and essentialist accounts of post-socialism. Instead we want to draw attention to practices that suggest variously irony, resistance, independence, or revisions in response to, and in the midst of, the rapid introduction of a capitalist political economy of food. We think that these findings are relevant to debates about how the food system can be made more ecologically and social sustainable.

The importance of understanding consumption practices is moving centre stage in a number of fields, including environmental policy and food research. Those that have entered this territory have found themselves pressed into open and interdisciplinary thinking. Similarly, recent work on post-socialism has demanded more considered and critical approaches to determining the meaning and significance of the prefix. This work is one outcome of a new study of the politics of food consumption in two new member states of the EU - the Czech Republic (CR) and Poland.¹

¹ This paper represents one of the first outcomes of a research project that considers issues of food consumption, politics and environmental sustainability in Central and Eastern Europe. The research is based on periods of field study in Poland and the Czech republic in 2004 and 2005, including qualitative and quantitative survey work.

The CEE states that joined the EU in May 2004 represent intriguing laboratories of consumption change. They have seen dramatic trend breaks in both consumption patterns and relationships between state and citizen over the last fifteen years. We explore some of the diversification of food systems and food consumption practices, and consider what these tell us about the condition of post-socialism. We are concerned with how households and actors in the food system think about current food provisioning and consumption and past experiences (specifically pre- 1989/1990). Mainstream political discourses both within these countries and the EU have tended to see the trajectory of CEE countries as fixed - locked into a linear temporal and developmental trajectory towards a western neo-liberal modernity.

This modernity rests on comforting assumptions about the symbiotic relationship between democracy, economic development and the expansion of a prosperous electorate (figured as middle class). We are informed by recent work on post-socialism, including work by Alison Stenning (2005), Adrian Smith (2000; 2002), Smith and Stenning (2006) and Ingrida Geciene (2004). We start from a perspective that sees CEE countries as distinctive political and social contexts following their own (multiple) trajectories. We have been informed by Smith's proposal that research in CEE be 'historically situated and culturally inflected'. In similar vein, but with a wider perspective, we also take up Peter Jackson's invitation to view globalisation as 'an incomplete, uneven and contested process: an unfinished project whose contours are shaped by locally specific social and cultural practices (2004, 166).

The first part of the paper charts the increasing interest in consumption within food research. It goes on to discuss some of the opportunities and demands of studying these issues in post-socialist contexts. The main body of the paper discusses the empirical findings, deployed as a set of three food stories. We refer to food stories or, following Cook et al (1998), biographies of food, to suggest life-stories not just of people but also of the inter-relationships between people, food and nature/environment. The plurality implied in the concept of biographies also allows us to demonstrate the diversity of trajectories within what is often characterised as a singular transition. Above all we want to illuminate food practices that we think suggest forms of resistance or deviation from the 'received script' of transition to 'normal' western capitalism. These are forms of food economy and culture that are either beyond capitalism, or represent a substantial revision of some of the cultural or economic consequences that that system is held to imply.

Turning to consumption

Scholarship on food has in recent years looked up from its more or less exclusive focus upon production to consider consumption. David Goodman's (2002) demand for a more integrated approach to production-consumption, including consideration of cultural dimensions, builds on early work that demanded research that looks at whole systems of provision as opposed to clearly delineated and separated spheres of production and consumption.

Tovey's study of alternative agriculture movements, such as the movement for organic farming, also critiques the consumption/production divide in analysis of food. Tovey suggests that study of such movements provokes researchers to look at food in a new way, as 'something whose meaning and value is not exhausted by its nutritional content, its economic cost or political agreements... but which is 'part of our way of life'' (1997) . Such approaches to food research offer a good basis for our exploration of the politics of food systems that continue to blend self-provisioning, barter and use of local markets for primary goods, with the increasing extension of Western European/North American mainstream patterns. These include supermarket food shopping and fast food consumption but also nascent western-inspired alternatives such as organic food production and, to a very limited degree, consumption and shopping of fairly traded products.

There are echoes here of Joseph Murphy's (2001) demand for relational approaches to sustainable consumption, for example in Goodman's request that we should 'acknowledge consumers as relational actors in recursive, mutually constituted circuits' (2002, 272). But these new approaches to researching and theorising food are not simply about breaking down the barriers between production and consumption. In their entangling of the material and the social they also point to the need for much more sophisticated accounts of the social world. For example, Sarah Whatmore makes a critique of geographies of food that suggest an uncomplicated linear flow of socio-material value 'from field to plate' (and proposes work that acknowledges the full complexity of food systems. Whatmore recognises that '(t)he potency of this vector of incorporeality seems to grow as the moments and spaces of cultivating and eating, animal and meat, plant and fruit, become ever more convoluted' (2002, 120). The emergence of new kinds of moments and spaces of food consumption within just a few years makes the CEE a particularly interesting place to try to engage with this complexity.

Food is a compelling but difficult research area. Yet even those investigations that have succeeded in integrating discussion of food with wider global economic and political change continue, in the view of some researchers 'to fail to acknowledge, and to incorporate, the symbolic role of food, which arises from its natural and moral content. In short, the food research literature has tended to treat food as just another commodity' (Miele and Pinducciu 2001, 150). Working from human geography, anthropology and science and technology studies, a body of food research has developed that makes it impossible to ignore the symbolic and cultural aspects that are threaded along the interwoven chains of production and consumption.

The food research discussed to this point has been undertaken in Western European or North American societies. Our research has sought to carry something of the richness of these engagements with food practices into the context of post-socialist societies. Experiences of transition, westernization, privatization and rapid economic restructuring have brought turbulent social change. But the recounting and analysis of everyday experiences of change have been relatively neglected compared with (generally celebratory) accounts of macro-economic transition in media and policy fora. Hence we

have sought to uncover something of the nature and significance of these everyday engagements with food with the aim of further developing work (such as Smith 2002 and Stenning 2005) that has suggested that the experiences of change are more plural and nuanced, and perhaps more politically open, than mainstream accounts suggest.

Stories of food

Why food? Ian Cook, summarising current trends in food research, finds that food is 'noisy'. He quotes Stassart and Whatmore who have found that 'a farm chicken, a bunch of onions, and a pound of flour do not "speak" to consumers in the same way' (2003, 451). Similarly Bryant and Goodman, writing on fairtrade, suggest that goods 'veritably shout to consumers about the socio-natural relations under which they were produced' (2004, 348). Cook summarises all the complexity and opportunity of making food the core of a research project: 'It's simultaneously molecular, bodily, social, economic, cultural, global, political, environmental, physical and human geography (2006, 656). But critically, given our concern with acknowledging the particularities of CEE experiences, the production of food stories 'not only takes different technical and discursive forms, but also *takes place* within particular political-economic and regulatory contexts' (Freidberg 2004, 516: emphasis in the original).

Freidberg (2003; 2004) and Cook (2004), and most of the cases in Hughes and Reimer's (2004) edited collection of commodity chain studies, told the stories of individual products. These case studies were often engaged in, amongst other things, the surveillance of environmental and labour conditions across extended supply chains. Others have engaged in historical and political-economy based analyses of individual food products, such as Redclift's (2004) monograph on chewing gum or Drummond and Marsden's (1999) study of the concept of sustainable development through a case study of sugar. Hence '(f)rom fashion and food to furniture and flowers... the commodity has emerged as a particularly effective vehicle for exploring reciprocal relations between the 'cultural' and the 'economic' (Bridge and Smith 2003, 258).

Here we take a much briefer look at a wider range of food practices than most of the other food and commodity studies cited. Some of these practices represent the introduction of western consumption patterns. But we are particularly interested in considering some of the newer practices alongside the maintenance and revision of some of the everyday food cultures and politics that pre-date transition. These are often much shorter supply chains – or, through local barter or self-provision, represent something other than markets.

We have found that food is one of the most tangible ways in which people in CEE societies have made sense of, and placed themselves (or found themselves placed) within the dramatic social, political and economic upheavals during and after the fall of the state socialist system. The empirical

research includes in-depth interviews with both the policy community and people involved economically or politically in food systems (in both Poland and the CR); in-depth household interviews and quantitative public opinion research (in the CR solely). The work has sought to trace biographies of food consumption within these societies over the last fifteen to twenty years, and in so doing to help to reveal changes not just in relation to food systems and the environment, but also offer ways of summarising and interrogating wider social cleavages and political and cultural changes.

Why food stories or biographies? There are three reasons for adopting this approach: first, it allows us to note continuities of human life experiences under markedly different political/economic systems that have been erased by dominant 'transition' narratives. Even if the hegemonic narratives of 'progress towards' erases both the diverse and unequal experiences of the present, and positive experiences in some areas of life in the state socialist period, listening to personal biographies of people's relations to food allows us to fill out those stories. Second it allows us to keep at the front of our minds the fact that: 'foods have lives before and after they appear on the supermarket shelves... This perspective has a number of elements, but at its centre is a concern with the many different places, people and social institutions foods travel through as they move "from farm to fork"' (Cook et al. 1998,162). Thirdly, related to this, the 'bio' of biographies acknowledges the presence and roles of non-human actants in food systems. There is a well-established literature that uncovers the ways in which goods such as food have 'social lives' (see Bridge and Smith 2004 for a brief review). Although we don't explore this last point within this paper, we also want the term to signal our interest in the 'liveliness' of food.

These biographies are, to the Western European and North American experience, exceptional. Poland and the CR have experienced significant trend breaks in both consumption and governance, not just in 1989/1990, but over the last six decades – and as such represent rich cases for an exploration of interrelations between food systems, the social world and political and economic systems. But they defy generalization. Haukanes and Pine's individual and joint anthropological work in the region shows how 'negotiations over continuity, rupture and innovation take place'. Their material suggests 'that modernity and the traditional are always ambiguous and always relational' (Haukanes and Pine 2004). The different meanings of modernity and the traditional are of particular significance in countries that have seen dramatic changes in their political and economic systems, and consequently in food production/consumption. Our decision to study Poland and the CR is guided not by a desire to establish case studies for comparison, or, on the contrary to suggest that these are one case bound together by the shared experience of state socialism, but rather to allow sufficient breadth in our following of biographies of consumption that we can claim to be saying something about the shared CEE experience, while acknowledging the distinctive socio-historical contexts of individual countries, and regions within them.

Under state socialism 'modernity' was claimed for 40 years as the domain of a political system that shaped almost all aspects of the formal economic sphere. In a startlingly swift inversion, modernity is now claimed as an exclusive property of an economic system that appears to dominate almost all aspects of the polity. But in the gaps, in a dense web of private, informal or associational activities, tradition has been a powerful reference point throughout the state socialist and post-socialist eras. At the same time there have been some interesting revisions and re-framings of food within the capitalist food system of post-socialist economies.

For these reasons and more we concur with several authors that have recently pointed to the hazards of a hasty transplanting of western social scientific models to post-socialist societies and the 'risk(s) of overlooking the particularities and diverse cultural patterns found across Western and Eastern European contexts' (Geciene 2004, 235). Geciene's wider argument, but also her specific object of study – the application of a cluster of concepts surrounding 'the middle class' and the link between the existence of a middle class and a well-functioning democracy – are of direct relevance to this work. Her argument builds on Mokrzycki's suggestion that the use of the concept of the middle class, with its implied virtuous relationship with democratization, is as much an ideological artefact as a theoretical tool (Mokrzycki 1995, 232). Hörschelmann makes a parallel argument in noting 'the relative absence of a theoretically informed critique of the almost teleological belief in 'liberal democracy' and free market reforms as adequate cures for the 'ails' of the socialist system' (2002, 53).

Stenning similarly notes how talk of the 'end of transition' with EU accession erases the difference of this part of the world 'regardless of the enormity and profundity of this region's diverse histories, not only during socialism but before (and, of course, after)'. She argues that '(p)ost-socialism exists in combination with... other social forms and is... partial and hybrid... (P)ostsocialism cannot be reduced to neoliberal economic restructuring, nor just to the legacies of socialism (and pre-socialism), nor indeed to the passage of 'transition'. It is all of these' (2005, 124).

There has been a tendency for policy and analysis to be carried along by charged deployments of western notions of class and democracy in the CEE context. There has been a simplistic clustering of concepts of citizenship, consumer choice, democratic expression and economic development. This clustering has underpinned a view of CEE societies as locked into linear processes of development – their destination being facsimiles of West European political and economic forms. This trajectory is embodied in their identification by the prefix 'post' and as 'societies in transition'. It is precisely their liminality that interests us, and we want to play with the thought that their experience of constant change, of unfinished economic, political and cultural turbulence, is not an interesting exception to the way contemporary developed societies are, but a useful way of thinking about all experience of late or advanced capitalism.

Having studied CEE food cultures we want to turn back to the apparently settled political economies of, for example, Western Europe and suggest that all of us are engaged in unfinishable processes of revision, intervention and re-making of our economies, politics and societies. The everyday culture and politics of food is one of the more revealing places to play with Gibson-Graham's proposition that if "there is no underlying commonality among capitalist instances, no essence of capitalism like expansionism or power or profitability or capital accumulation, then capitalism must adapt to (be constituted by) other forms of economy as much as they must adapt to (be constituted by) it" (1995: 279). Their point is pushed too hard perhaps. If you stand on Nowy Świat in Warsaw, or Na Příkopěch in Prague and scan the new-born fascias of CEE's best shopping addresses there is more immediate evidence of an 'underlying commonality' than of other forms of economy. But our food stories do serve as correctives to any suggestion that their designation as 'post' is itself a kind of destination.

Rather than attempt an encyclopaedic summary of the diversification of the food systems in CEE over the last twenty years we have chosen to chart three revealing trends. Our three biographies of consumption will comprise: first, an account of the emergence of 'normal' western consumption – 'consuming normality', albeit with distinctive characteristics and revisions; second, of continuing practices of food simplicity – 'consuming tradition' and lastly of new forms of ecologically oriented production / consumption – 'consuming ecology'. The first is a story about how features of the newly introduced capitalist food system are subtly revised; the second is a story about practices that happen outside it, and the third points to innovations that seek to synthesise aspects of the other food stories.

Consuming normality

When over a thousand people meet in a car park by a meadow, lured by the promise of the opening of another hypermarket, they approach what appears to be the front of the building to find nothing more than a vast hoarding. The student filmmakers that produced the Czech documentary *Český sen* (Czech Dream) (Klusak 2004) worked with leading advertisers to test the extent to which people could be sold an illusion. The film worked the territory between identity, consumption and advertising media. The hoax was timed to coincide with the referendum on European Union entry, and made space for people to offer the camera their thoughts on the journey the country had made since 1989.

Many in CEE societies have, since the changes of 1989, sought to consume western products in a western way. Such consumption has functioned, among other things, as a demonstration that CEE countries were becoming 'normal' capitalist societies. Western companies were quick to make these opportunities available to them. Noting the opportunities presented by rising incomes and longer working hours a food industry analysis pictures a rosy future for processed and packaged foods in Poland: 'new manufacturers and new product formats are expected to efficiently stimulate the demand for

packaged food in the immediate future' (Euromonitor, 2005, Executive summary). Tesco are the biggest British investor in the country, and the biggest single private sector employer. The marketing spend for other Western European and American food companies has been aggressively high (interview Hallam 31/3/04).

While changes in food consumption introduces both more diversity and contrasts (fast food restaurants, convenience foods and supermarkets growing in parallel with vegetarianism, less meat consumption per capita and more purchase and preparation of fresh foods) the characterisation of all these trends as western is very clearly figured. The reasons for this are within easy reach: after several decades spent in 'economies of shortage' for large sections of CEE societies who can afford it 'there is a risk that consumption will become a substitute for culture' (Jung 1995, 304). Conspicuous consumption of western goods has not only become an important part of many people's identity and social status, but has also acquired an important symbolic meaning at the level of CEE societies as a whole. It has, Sigrid Rausing (2002) suggests, been used to construct 'normal societies'. Consumption of diverse and novel goods offers a symbolic break with the previous state socialist system and confirms the achievement of a normal western-ness.

A central feature of this break with the past is the introduction of choice. The diversification of food products and labels, of kinds of food and places to consume them, has been one of the most tangible expressions of the post-socialist transition. Warde and Martens argue that '(v)ariety is a primary talisman in the legitimation and celebration of consumer societies. Variety is commonly associated with choice, freedom, personal control and discretion' (2000, 14). They list a series of questions raised by this statement, and go on to suggest that the answers point to fragmentation and specialisation in response to a dissolving of the boundaries of high and popular cultures. But the distinctive point about the Czech and Polish cases is that the high and popular cultures referred to in their study (i.e. a range of established restaurant types) are, with very few exceptions, only recent introductions to their food cultures.

The explanations for this offered in our interviews with food system actors were consistent, and implied an acceptance of a linear account of the evolution of consumerism amongst commentators and others involved professionally in food systems. Interview respondents referred to Polish society in the state socialist period as being one of 'frozen consumers' (interview, Kassenberg, 4/04). He went on: '... because we are a very young consumer society ... we are using the eye, and the pocket, but we are not using the heart and the brain when we are buying something' (interview, Kassenberg, 4/04). Similarly, Bolesław Rok, a consultant in responsible business and one of the founders of the Green Party, acknowledges that: 'consumerism really is the growing trend... Here in Poland we are at the first page – primitive consumerism – not ethical or sustainable consumerism... From the theoretical point of view it is possible to say there is changing consumerism in the UK but not in Poland' (interview Rok, 4/04). *Český sen*

can be seen as a wry extended study of what it is to live on this 'first page' of consumption. The successful creation of a mirage of a hypermarket is only understandable in societies that went, in the space of just a few years, from having tightly rationed occasional offerings of non-domestic fruit, such as bananas or citrus, to having universal (urban) access to the biggest European supermarket brands.

For the younger generations of educated and ambitious, usually urban Poles and Czechs that have worked to mesh their home and work lives with the tastes and life experiences of parallel Western Europeans the (public) consumption of international or innovative cuisines is an important part of their self-expression. Such displays of cosmopolitan tastes, nurtured through the national and international media or foreign travel, appear to support in the CEE context Warde and Martens's (2000, 222) suggestion that educational qualification is the most important discriminator in explaining differences in food practice. Referring to the Czech context, Krejčí and Štiková (2002) confirm this when they argue that it is education not income that is the main explanatory factor in considering the adoption of healthy, western-inspired eating habits on the one hand and the persistence of an unhealthy traditional diet on the other. These authors also emphasise the gender differences in eating habits. Women, including young women on low income, are much more enthusiastic about the western-inspired healthier diet than men (Krejčí and Štiková 2002, 9).

But Haukanes and Pine's (2004) account of the unsettled, constantly fluid, relations between modernity and tradition is evident in the diverse eating choices of these social groups. They do not reject 'traditional' foods. For many educated and ambitious younger people renewal and restoration are vivid strands of everyday experience. Our household interviews conducted in the CR in winter 2004/05 showed that Czech women of all ages and levels of education, from urban and rural areas alike, exchange recipes with colleagues and friends and often bring samples of their weekend meals – both traditional and 'experimental' - to their workplace to be exchanged with colleagues. Although it is clear that for younger urban populations the consumption of international brands, ethnic foods and fast food products has contributed to the construction of post-socialist identities, this has not led to a consequent dismissal of 'traditional' foods.

This is nicely illustrated by the success of a Polish chain of restaurants called Chłopskie Jadło® ('peasants grub'), www.chlopskiejadlo.com.pl. The design and decoration is based around a kitsch pastiche of Poland's peasant farming heritage, with faux-cottage exteriors inserted onto the ground floor fascias of office or apartment buildings, and interiors heavily decorated with the implements of traditional rural production, conservation and eating of traditional foods. Folksy touches - a generous free starter of sourdough bread, twarog (white cheese) and smalec (dripping), and immense upholstered mock-bedsteads as seat backs – contribute to the exaggerated performance of tradition. These moves suggest diners' participation in the getting, preparing and consuming of food in a manner that has shaped a culturally potent landscape over centuries. The menus gather the once-

regional favourites from across the country and offer a comforting and reliable experience of the nation's past. Although popular with tourists the staple year-round trade is from business people and wealthier students and young people. The chain bears the marks of North American business school models in the brand's occupation of a specific identity, the scaleable features of the concept and its consistency. The name is trademarked, the service uniformed, efficient and ever present. Portions are very large and the quality of cooking and presentation is high. For Poles, to visit Chłopskie Jadło® is to play a part in a measured negotiation between post-socialist modernity and conjurings of a pre-socialist tradition.

Aspects of food packaging follow the same path but respond to more explicitly political concerns about identity. Several respondents from the policy community acknowledged deep running ambiguity about relations with the West, and about joining the European Union ('another kind of takeover', interviews Kosinska 6/4/04; Slezia 7/4/04). Multinational companies that expanded into the new markets of CEE in the 1990s have sought to represent their products as in some sense 'local'. Several different multinational companies selling goods in supermarkets and local general stores acknowledge commitments to local (in this case indicating national) products with, in Poland, a *Teraz Polska* labelling scheme (interview Kosinska 6/4/04). The nature of the development of state socialist agriculture in the CR ensured that no parallel link between the image of traditional family farming and the perception of high quality products or the assertion of national identity occurred there. However as in Poland the label *Český výrobek* (Czech product) was introduced by the Ministry of Industry and Trade in the early 1990s in response to the deluge of mainly West European products entering the Czech market as a demonstration of the authorities' resolve to protect domestic jobs and sovereignty. For a similar reason but specifically in the area of food, the label *KLASA* (Class) was introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture to denote a product that is made with only Czech ingredients (Smolíková 2006b).

The presentation of a national flag on, for example, a dairy product made with Polish or Czech milk that was produced, packaged and marketed by a transnational company serves to locate the produce within a specifically national political economy of food. Such figurings of 'natural', 'local' and 'traditional' in marketing to Polish and Czech consumers are responses to the ambiguous, even tense, feelings that consumers hold for western brands and products:

'(a)fter some campaigns by NGOs and also by the media (there is the sense that) 'if you buy Polish products you can create jobs'... Attitudes to foreign companies are less positive than before. In the early 90s there was more positive view of foreign investment... So Phillips Poland or Monsanto Poland are Polish companies! They pay taxes in Poland, even if the products are imported they are seen as Polish products' (interview Rok 04/04).

What do the decisions by food marketing executives to flag products in this way represent? We suggest this flagging is an acknowledgement of two

different demands by consumers. First, the flagging serves to link food consumption of these products to 'typical' and 'local' production that allows pre-socialist tradition and post-socialist modernity to be held in one place. In the Polish context the intensive and larger scale agriculture of Northern and Western Poland supplies urban centres and export. The virtually subsistence farming of the South and East involves very low inputs of pesticides and fertilizers, and relatively little use of powered farm machinery. The farming in these regions is generally under-capitalised. The majority of production is consumed by the families or is traded/bartered locally – usually within a few kilometres. Despite their lack of profitability, these latter patterns of farming provide a stock of meanings and aesthetic values that have long been borrowed by Poland's intensive agriculture sector as a cipher for quality, tradition and forms of provision that preserve the Polish landscape. Multinational companies marketing products within Poland are continuing to draw on these associations as they expand their market share.

Yet the overarching goal of government and EU agricultural policies is to replicate the economic efficiencies of intensive agriculture of the North and West (i.e. following the western European model) in the South and East of the country. NGO campaigners (from the Polski Klub Ekologiczny and organics entrepreneurs) are convinced that if successful the policy would end the relationship between production, consumption, tradition and landscape that the food industry seeks to evoke with such flagging of products (interviews Kosinska 31/3/04 and Góral 30/3/04). It is too early to tell whether these labelling strategies of multinational and large Polish companies will be able to carry the weight of consumers expectations as intensification of agriculture and the transformation of culturally and politically potent landscapes progresses.

The flagging of products also points to another kind of continuity, and that is the expression of national independence through food choices. Haukanes et al summarise a body of anthropological accounts since the early 1990s that show the spread of ambivalence towards the west in post-socialist countries: 'On the one hand there was the promise of a new consumer society, with new opportunities to express and display oneself and one's family through consumption. On the other hand, this promise carries alarming implications of cultural imperialism, as local products have been undermined, undersold, and generally swamped by western imports... in some contexts at least consumption of imported goods... are increasingly political issues' (Haukanes et al 2004, 109).

Respondents proposed that consumers want to deploy their food spending in ways that shore up a distinctive national identity at a time when many Poles perceive that one kind of domination (the state socialist system) is being exchanged for another (EU and foreign investors) (interviews Kassenberg 8/4/04; Kosinska 6/4/04; Rok 8/4/04). These respondents suggest that 'privately people are seeing EU as a kind of invasion not a partnership'. In the state socialist era national food traditions and newly adapted practices helped to mark out and defend an independent cultural space that was beyond the reach of an otherwise all-pervasive state. In the context of European

integration – often portrayed at the time of accession as another, albeit benign, ceding of sovereignty, food purchases and consumption are again serving this purpose.

These attitudes to foreign owned multinationals, combined with limited purchasing power amongst substantial portions of urban populations has sustained small Polish-owned or independent neighbourhood shops and supermarkets, and less formal open markets (confirming Stenning 2005, 119).

The result, then, of consuming modernity, of aspects of food culture following those of normal western societies, has not been a simple reproduction of Western European or North American tastes and modes of consumption. Rather it has involved a renegotiation of what it means to eat out or to read a product label in ways that acknowledge the distinctive setting of post-socialist political economies and, stretching further back, the culture of food systems over preceding decades. Such revisions of 'normal' western consumption, however modest, mark out these societies as having their own life stories, and individuals as having power of choice within them. This includes the power to revise the terms on which western normality would be experienced. This theme is made even clearer in an exploration of the persistence of self-provisioning and barter.

Consuming tradition

While supermarket shopping has grown substantially a very different kind of food provisioning and consumption has enjoyed continuity over several decades. In the years preceding the political changes of 1989 there were widely shared practices of 'thrift' and self-reliance at the individual household level in many spheres of everyday life in CEE countries (including key sectors relating to environmental sustainability such as energy, water, food, clothes and transport). This had been practiced alongside very wasteful use of resources at the state or company level (Kornai 1981). What might now be seen in Western European environmentalist discourses as sustainable patterns of consumption were rarely environmentally motivated in the sense that this phrase is understood in Western Europe. They were largely the result of state socialist governments' public policies, which resulted, in the case of food, in high costs or unavailability of fresh fruit and vegetables. This resulted in the widespread practice of self-provisioning and barter.

Self-provisioning on allotments or smallholdings outside the cities had developed in the state socialist period in both Poland and the CR as a necessity, although in many cases it was a continuation of existing practices. Fresh foods were expensive; quality was poor, and availability unreliable. But self-provisioning in this period also worked at a political-cultural level to make space for an (safe) element of independence from state organisation and provision of both food and work: 'In both countries... things that lay outside of the control of the state were highly valued locally, and were often used as symbols of what was pure, real and "ours"' (Haukanes and Pine 2004, 108).

Many people's state-related work was unfulfilling and undemanding, permitting extensive leisure time / alternative work, making space for them to meet some food needs through their own labour. This self-provisioning provided both for a satisfaction of needs and represented a space of resistance (Pittaway 2004).

But there are pressures that one might have anticipated would end these practices. Since the changes of 1989-1990 urban populations have pursued higher incomes and access to 'western' foods and modes of provisioning. As a consequence, employed city dwellers have less leisure time and, in families, higher frequency of two parents in work. Polish respondents involved in the food system suggested that there has been a consequent drop in self-provisioning. A Czech report on food consumption practices and eating habits also confirmed that growing vegetables and fruits for consumption in growers' households decreased considerably at the end of the 1990s (Krejčí and Štiková 2002, 10). There is increasing pressure on allotments for development land (Vágner interview 14/4/05), in some cases leading to political conflicts and charges of corruption.

Wealthier families who own what has for decades been productive land for the growing of food for a family network can now consider converting these into homes – more modern and spacious than the simple accommodation that had often been sited on these plots previously. With rapid expansion of car ownership and improvement of infrastructure provision (water, electricity) the consequent suburbanisation is seeing former rural smallholdings becoming primary dwellings. In 2004, out of 588 Prague allotments recorded in the 1997 register, less than half (47 per cent) were still used primarily for growing fruit and vegetables: 15 per cent were used mainly as sites of second homes, 9 per cent were converted to permanent housing, and 29 per cent were abandoned or abolished, often due to development projects (Vágner 2004).

But, counter to what might have been expected, suburbanisation and the growth of supermarket shopping has not eradicated widespread systems of barter and self-provisioning. Evidence from our survey conducted in February 2005 in the CR showed this style of provisioning is still widely practiced. 41.5 per cent of respondents use a garden or allotment to produce vegetables and fruits for their own consumption. Some accounts have offered a narrow economic definition of how these practices meet needs, suggesting that the hardships of transition mean that many people sustain these practices out of necessity. Adrian Smith (2002) has demonstrated the inadequacy of this account in his study of productive gardening in two Slovakian communities. He shows how both during state socialism and in the years since the non-economic reasons for these practices have been at least as prominent as the economic. Smith suggests that 'household food production can only be understood in relation to the constellation of household, cultural/historical and economic (not only capitalist) forces' (2002, 244).

Indeed the evidence from our Czech household interviews and quantitative survey work² supporting this study extend his Slovakian findings. Far from being directly related to austerity in the economy, the Czech evidence suggests that there are higher rates of self provisioning in more financially secure households than not. The proportion of people with high living standards that grow their own food is higher (43.6 per cent) than the proportion of people doing so with the lowest living standard (35 per cent). The unemployed and pensioners are not more likely than economically active people to grow their own food.

The proportion of people with tertiary and basic levels of education who do productive gardening are lower (35 per cent) than those with matura (equivalent to British A levels) (45 per cent) and 35 per cent of entrepreneurs have a production garden. The main motivation for production gardening is stated as being about having access to their own healthy food. The second motive offered is financial and the third is that it is a hobby. As a result, self-provisioning of many commodities is very high. The survey showed that among productive gardeners two thirds of the consumption of blackcurrants, strawberries and apples is accounted for by people's own production. The Czech household interviews also confirm that there is still plenty 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 friends, I give a couple of eggs or a rabbit or exchange them for, say, lettuce and other vegetables or for leftovers which I then feed the rabbits (interview Ryklová 29/3/2005).

Barter of fruit and vegetables is going on in large cities as much as rural areas. When people explained the role of self-provisioning, allotments, or sustaining smallholdings it became clear that these forms of provision help to sustain dense webs of connection between the rural and urban in ways that are now comparatively rare in Western Europe (confirming Stenning 2005, 122-123).

An important qualification to this argument needs to be made in relation to the poorer rural areas of the South and East of Poland. For older generations and for the substantial body of unemployed/underemployed or in poorly paid work self-grown food, barter and labour exchange is still an important way of meeting or supplementing basic needs. Available investment for these small-unit farms is very low. With high unemployment levels and poor life chances in the changing economic and social circumstances large sections of society in these parts of the country have no choice but to live simply.

However amongst a proportion of self-provisioners there is a novel political dimension – a commitment to voluntary simplicity driven by very different circumstances to the involuntary simplicity of the rural poor. Some working to nurture this kind of food system are sustained by ecological and

² We commissioned a national survey of a representative sample of the Czech population (1,100 respondents), conducted by CVVM in February 2005

communitarian commitments. These commitments are inspiring new generations of self-providers. The experience under communism of modest lifestyle practices has chimed with environmentalist beliefs in the importance of behavioural changes at the individual or household level. This is reflected in the phenomenon of 'voluntary simplicity'. While only being practiced in small sections of society it is nevertheless a familiar, and in some social groups relatively popular concept in CEE countries.

Inspired by traditions associated with early 20th century movements such as woodcraft and tramping³ some young, urban and highly educated Czechs moved in the 1990s to rural areas to lead a 'voluntarily simple' life. The movements had long promoted the value of self-sufficiency skills, ideally learnt while wild camping amidst romantic nature. These traditions had over time established a leisure culture of spending weekends and summer weeks in log cabins or in rural cottages converted to second homes (about 10 per cent of Czech households own a second home; in some large cities this proportion reaches nearly 30 per cent). An important part of this lifestyle is food self-provisioning, often including breeding animals such as rabbits, chickens and goats. Despite being highly educated, these people are content with lower level earnings and their average income is on the boundary of the poverty level (Librová 1999, 373). In part prompted by two widely publicised books by Czech sociologist Hana Librová (1994; 2003), this phenomenon attracts a fair amount of media attention, including coverage in mainstream magazines, newspapers (e.g. Feřtek 2006; Zachovalová, 2005) and TV documentaries.

Food simplicity, expressed through self-provisioning, continues to be a prominent part of the food cultures of Poland and the CR. But the reasons for this are not explained away by reference to poverty and need. On the contrary: we suggest that involvement in self-production and barter is working to meet a number of other cultural and social needs in a period of rapid change. These include expression of identity, tradition, community and family relations. But they are also concerned with the protection of spaces of exchange and consumption that are independent of transnational capitalist systems of production/consumption. They make political space within everyday practices for engagements with other people and with nature. These self-provisioning practices don't refer in an uncomplicated way to points on a timeline that refers to pre- and post-socialism: rather they seem to relate to widely held desires to find moments to step out of a political economy of 'trajectory'. In these moments and spaces of self-care and nourishment, and of non-economic exchange and gift, people are choosing in their everyday lives to write a different kind of script for themselves.

Consuming ecology

³ See Jehlička and Smith (2007 forthcoming) for an account of woodcraft and its role in shaping contemporary Czech environmentalism.

A distinct but related expression of the renegotiation of modernity and tradition in relation to food is reflected in the development within CEE food systems of an organic food sector. Ecologically founded conceptions of westernization and modernity are evident in the emergence of a commercial organic food production and consumption sector (illustrated for example by the 'eco-consumer' campaign, www.ekokosument.pl, and popular publications such as 'Dobre Zakupy', meaning both good and responsible shopping). NGO's have also had a prominent role in promoting ecological food production/consumption (Kamieniecka 2002). Organisations that parallel the food pioneers discussed in Miele and Pinucciu (2001) or the alternative food networks discussed in Murdoch et al (2000) or Venn et al (2006), such as the International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside (ICPPC) and Ekoland have been established to promote small-scale organic farming – often in association with eco-tourism and other forms of rural social and economic development. A number of bodies and companies, often relying on the commitment and entrepreneurialism of one or two individuals, have emerged to nurture the development of this sector in both countries.

Tovey describes organic farming as aiming to provide food that is 'not only 'good to eat' but also 'good to think' and in doing so, also to produce a certain type of society' (1997, 23). Certainly the food system actors who are engaged in generating an organic food sector in these countries carry ideological commitments. But these are complex. Commitments to animal welfare, rare breeds or low-input agriculture sit alongside a concern to preserve the rural communities and landscape through engagement in global markets. While this trend links to the more nationalistic impulses surrounding ideas of identity and tradition that were suggested by the flagging of industrial food products, it also relates to a commitment to environmental/ecological forms of modernization.

There is some evidence that a new body of expectations and demands are being made concerning food. It is possible to see early signs of a 'quality turn' (Goodman 2002) in some sections of CEE societies that follows the pattern of recent Western European experience, although this is not sufficient to represent a substantial or stable market. One substantial difference between the Polish and Czech cases is that the organic conversion journey is much shorter for many small farmers in Poland, particularly in the South and East where the small farm units and decades of under-capitalization make organic conversion above all a matter of information and certification.

Nevertheless, despite this comparative advantage in Polish agriculture it is notable that the Czech sector for certified organic produce has grown more quickly than the Polish from the mid 1990s onwards. While in 1989, there were only two organic farmers in the CR (Zidek 2000), their number reached 800 at the end of 2003 (Pokorný 2004). In 2004, six per cent (250,000 hectares) of farmland in the CR was under organic farming methods, while the average extent of organically farmed land in the old 15 member states of the EU was three per cent. However, most of this land – 92 per cent – were pastures grazed by cattle used for the production of organic meat, the great majority produced for export to neighbouring EU countries.

The impressive extent of growth of organically farmed land and the increasingly supportive approach of the government for organic farming contrasts with the miniscule share of organically produced food in overall food sales within the CR as well as with government inaction in the area of organic food consumption. While 81 per cent of Czech respondents (in the national survey of 1100 respondents) know the eco-label '*BIO - produkt ekologického zemědělství*' - introduced in 1992, only 27 per cent of Czechs ever go to a health food or organic food shop (usually, these shops sell both types of produce). The results of the 2005 national survey indicate that people spend only 2.26 per cent of their food expenditure in these shops. Only 0.06 per cent of food sold in the country in 2003 was organically produced (Pokorný 2004). People with higher levels of education, well-off people and professionals from caring professions (education, health care) and research spend more money in these shops than other groups of population. Two additional groups stand out: women on maternity leave (up to four years in the CR) and members of protestant churches.

This is a parallel, separate, food practice to self-provisioning. According to the Czech evidence there is no difference in frequency of visiting these shops between those who have their own production gardens and those who don't. Nor is there a difference between the urban and rural population. Ninety per cent (40 per cent definitely yes, 50 per cent probably yes) of respondents with tertiary level of education think that the government should give more support to organic farming. The demand for organic food is clearly growing, in particular in metropolitan areas. The largest Czech company selling organic food, Albio, opened its first shop in Prague in 2003. In the following year, the company opened a restaurant and two more shops in the city. Their clientele consists of business people, foreigners and well-to-do Czech families (Smolíková 2006a).

Within Poland the impetus for organics entrepreneurs has been more closely wedded to social and cultural commitments. Certified organic production remains very small, but percentage growth year on year has been very rapid. In 1989 there were 27 certified organic farms. By 2003 1287 farms (with a total surface area of just over thirty thousand hectares) (there were 800 farms in the CR in the same year – in a country whose population is four times smaller) and 23 food-processing plants held organic certificates (Metera 2005). The ICPPC is a body centred on the Małopolska region, but emphasises international links. These are specifically with the UK, but the initiators have also undertaken tours of Sweden and lobbied EU institutions. A report in advance of EU accession emphasised the breadth of vision underpinning the commitment to organic farming: '(t)he answer is simply: Most small Polish family farms are sustainable - ecologically, economically and socially. We must learn to understand that this form of farming is not an anachronism, but a picture of the farms of the future' (Rose 2003).

These food entrepreneurs have a broad scope both geographically and in terms of the way they view the food systems' role socially and politically. The initiators of the Polish organic certification scheme Ekoland explicitly relate

their agricultural and educational work. Links to Western Europe are again strong. The earliest seminars on organic certification in the late 1980s were led by German organic specialists (Mularczyk 2003). Higher education and experience of international travel and living was common to all the interviewees working in the organic sector. The respondents all referred to a history of initial tensions and social differences between themselves and their small-scale farming neighbours. Specifically they had been met with scepticism, although this had been softened by evidence of better tasting produce, successful diversification or of having achieved higher prices.

The organic entrepreneur organisations such as ICPPC or Ekoland, and the individual farmers we interviewed (e.g. interviews Pietruczuk 3/4/04; Smuk-Stratenwerth 22/4/04) work to demonstrate and communicate organic practice, environmental technologies, and promote eco-tourism. The bodies also campaign on specific policy issues such as GM agriculture. In addition to the grassroots organisations there is a QUANGO that pursues similar aims, but with backing from national and EU institutions. Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Środowiska (also with branches in the CR and Hungary) has sought to encourage partnerships based around small extensive and organic farming. Crucially, Partnerstwo has sought to overcome some of the market insecurities and bureaucratic complexities of the organics sector for small producers entering the system, by, for example, matchmaking farmers with new markets both near and far, including US based multinationals (interview Serafin 31/3/04).

As in the Tuscan case explored by Miele and Pinucciu (2001), it is felt that precisely those factors that have slowed the industrialization of farming in the past can be central to the development of high quality, high value, food production. But there are substantial challenges in terms of educating farmers in the value of modest changes in practices and the importance of investing in certification. Challenges also exist in terms of the scale of investment needed in achieving specific non-agricultural aspects of certification. The directors of Poland's Partnerstwo and the Instytut na Rzecz Ekorozwoju (Institute for Sustainable Development, ISD) both cite the paucity of adequate domestic wastewater treatment in the poorest regions of Poland as a particular problem (interviews Serafin 31/3/04 and Kassenberg 8/4/04).

Although none of our interview respondents viewed organic production as a panacea for the deep-seated challenges facing the poorest parts of rural Poland, they frequently complained that the Polish government and European Union had failed to capitalise on Poland's potential to become an 'organics breadbasket' in the run-up to EU accession. Interview respondents involved in policy work in this area divided responsibility for this failure fairly evenly across the two (interviews: Serafin 31/3/04; Kassenberg 8/4/04). The interview respondents from the environmental NGOs and organics sector all echoed the sense of missed opportunity voiced by one commentator:

'But never underestimate Poles' capacity to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Instead of getting Polish farmers to start a three-year application period (that is required to obtain organic certification) so that Poland is ready

for an onslaught on EU food markets when accession arrives, Poland's recent governments have been slow to promote organic farming' (Mularczyk 2003). This is perhaps the more surprising for the fact that a network of government-sponsored agricultural advisors survived the transition period. One NGO had worked with these advisors in some regions to explore a role for them in progressing organic agriculture but the results had been modest (interview Burkot 20/4/04).

Existing and envisaged markets for small organic producers are diverse. In an example of the longest production-consumption chain Partnerstwo has worked with US based food giant Heinz to source Polish organic produce for the US babyfood market (interview Serafin 31/3/04). An example of the shortest is the rare breeds and eco-tourism farmer based between Warsaw and Krakow, who sells all of her meat to the local community or cooks it for her family and visitors (interview Pietruczuk 3/4/03). This organic entrepreneur returned from Canada after many years away to buy the farm and establish a new kind of business promoting active holiday breaks in the Polish countryside, with the phrase 'ekologicznie, zdrowo, na ludowo' (ecological, healthy and folksy).

Her decision to return to Poland to base her income on eco-tourism and organic farming of rare breeds is just one of the food stories we followed that confirmed the relationality between tradition and modernity, and expressed the distinctive and ongoing re-negotiation between past and present in post-socialist societies. These alternative food networks share some of the properties of the 'consuming modernity' food stories that saw revisions and contextualisations of western food production/consumption. Yet they also contain a knowing engagement with the ways that economies of food overlap with ecological and social values so as to echo the 'consuming of tradition' in our second set of food stories. All three sets of food stories help to correct simplistic and linear accounts of everyday lives and their food cultures and politics. But we offer these food biographies not simply because they offer an interesting correction to a 'simple' account of transition in CEE. We think that they demonstrate how there are a multitude of everyday practices that seek, knowingly or otherwise, to mark out some space that is independent of and resistant to – even revises - a globalized economic system.

Conclusion: molecular revisions?

These biographies of food consumption – our food stories – represent attempts to capture some of the diversity and openness of processes of economic and political change. We did not set out with a particular notion of how food systems or consumer cultures should be in Poland and the CR. Rather we started with a fascination with unexpected aspects of the life of food in people's everyday practices of getting and consuming. We argue that these demonstrate that experiences of post-socialism have been far more diverse, and in some cases subversive, than popular accounts of 'transition-to' allow.

Post-socialist politics in the 1990s in Poland and the CR was founded upon consensus on two points: first, a commitment to de-communization, and to rolling back the role of the state in the life of the individual citizen, and second, a determination to have fast-paced economic development and a progressive integration with western economies and polities (including progress towards NATO and EU membership). There was little space available for the debate of, or experimentation with, alternative forms of economic, social or political development at the state level. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that mainstream media commentaries on post-socialist societies are strewn with what Mokrzycki termed ideological artefacts that conflate consumerism, democracy, the growth of the middle class and economic development (1995). But this uncomplicated clustering of concepts of citizenship, consumer choice and social progress is fractured by our research into the culture and politics of food production/consumption in these countries.

In looking at people's participation in food systems we have found evidence of distinctiveness, resistance and commitments to autonomy (at varying scales – from the household to the nation). This participation has often included the claiming or re-claiming of food systems as in varying ways 'local', whether it be the responsiveness to nationally or culturally resonant branding, maintenance of self-provisioning and barter or the nurturing of an organic food sector. One of our principle motivations in exploring these cases has been an interest in the degree to which post socialist CEE countries might have a capacity to progress towards food systems that escape some of the social and environmental costs of the western model of consumption. To talk of an alternative model in the manner of an alternative economic system would be a wild exaggeration. We acknowledge the cautionary note rung by Smith and Stenning in their observation that research on diverse and proliferative economies 'runs the risk of placing non-capitalism on a pedestal' and ignoring relations of power within them (2006, 208). We also note their problematising of overly positive accounts of diverse economies.

Nevertheless we do sense that in the midst of our body of food stories lies evidence of widespread attitudes, skills and commitments that suggest the impulse for other ways of doing things. Paul Ginsborg's *The Politics of Everyday Life* draws on de Certeau's interest in 'tactics' of resistance, and finds his method 'invaluable, for it poses in the most delicate of forms the central question: what each individual can do in the actions of daily life to reverse (this) highly damaging model of consumption' (2005, 78). He goes on to extend the point about the potential for 'a collective idea and general shape of an alternative model of consumption' (79) supporting his argument with reference to Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Diaries*. Gramsci argues for the potential for 'molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes' (1971, 109, quoted in Ginsborg).

Our findings extend studies that suggest that there is no one version of what it is to be western/developed that is hegemonic in Central and Eastern Europe. Zsuzsa Gille's (2000, 263) work on waste incineration plant planning

decisions in Hungary points to debates about 'who has the power to determine the meaning of powerful symbols in the transition discourse, such as "Europe" and "democracy"'. In similar vein Krista Harper's (1999) analyses of environmentalist responses to transnational corporations in Hungary points to widespread opposition and specific sites of resistance to threats to the distinctive history and culture of the country. Stenning's study of the Polish steel town of Nowa Huta concludes that more probing conceptualisations of post-socialism are not just interesting in themselves, but, connecting to the ambitions of post-colonial studies, 'call into question received wisdoms and open new understandings' (2005, 125).

Tracing biographies of food consumption demonstrates that there is no teleological route to a particular consumption style. Our life-stories of food tell of societies that are adapting and reworking western practices of food-as-identity to local histories, cultures and experiences. Some of the practices we have explored are sustaining long-standing and distinctive food production/consumption practices of self-provisioning and barter. The separate and relatively rare experiments based around organic and local production are also, in the context of anticipated dramatic increases in the costs of fossil fuels, potentially very significant.

The politics of food in Poland and the CR suggests the tending and growth of hybrids of modernity and tradition, and of pre- and post- transition economic practices in CEE. These biographies demonstrate self-determination that is beyond the reach of a narrow account of a transition to a prefigured western economic and cultural form. These everyday food practices either revise, or are independent of, western-style corporatised food systems. They introduce Gramsci's 'molecular' changes and in so doing assert a food culture, politics and hence economy that is more than purely capitalist-economic, other than 'transitional'; one that is diverse and open to change.

The biographies of food that we have followed demand that we attend to distinctive and ongoing negotiations between identity, environmental change, modernity and tradition in post-socialist societies. Our life-stories about food, culture and politics in Poland and the CR point to a conclusion of much wider significance: that our futures are not fixed by the seemingly pervasive and insistent characterisations of development as contained, controlled and predestined by a narrow and frequently destructive version of how economy and society might function.

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