

Fracture in food and agriculture as urban and rural areas integrate:

Searching for new horizons where the old stalls

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This debate is translated from its original (Turkish) by Begüm İçelliler

We are at a time when old definitions are being shaken up. Here I will track these splits and try to see what traces are shaping in their place.

Let's start with the city and the rural area. There is a credo of a definition in urban sociology. Despite changes in the social reality and notwithstanding those sociological approaches with a critical perspective, this definition does not change and is repeated through generations. The definition says: "City is the place where non-agricultural economic activities take place." It is difficult to assert the validity of this definition in any particular time in history, and one does not know where to begin to explain that it does not stand today either. If you live in a medium-sized city like Mersin it is especially difficult to tell apart the city and rural areas, which one violates the other, what exactly is a rural area and which way it falls.

The kinds of stories we witness in such a city go something like this: the seller travelling from site to site early in the morning with his produce, the elderly whose produce from the municipality hobby garden holds a strategic importance in her livelihood, the agricultural worker living in the house that he's built on a shared property in the centre of the city and drives across the city every day to work on citrus farms, the service worker living in the outskirts of the city right in the middle of farms and commutes every day to the city, the large property owning producer who lives in the most expensive housing development, exports his produce and is raising his children to become good agricultural producers/merchants, the small property owning producer who's toiled to get her children out of the village as soon as possible, and her children working at white-collar jobs commuting to the centre from their parents' house, the entrepreneur who's entered the

construction industry after long years of saving up in the agricultural sector, has built a name for herself but has turned towards agriculture again with the recent financial crisis, the villager who's made significant profit from the repurposing of all land – arable or not – around his village for farming, the Syrian agricultural worker working in the toughest conditions at greenhouses on this land, the agricultural middleman who's doubled his profit and the agricultural producer his produce thanks to Syrian agricultural workers, the bourgeois who's dreaming of spending his savings to get into clean agriculture in the countryside but whose dreams fall through because of these greenhouses...

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It is possible to multiply these examples, but I think my point has been made clear. While refraining from giving a uniform definition that holds true in all circumstances, let me explain my position: firstly, it is incredibly deceiving to define urban economics as "the totality of non-agricultural activities". Secondly, the rural area is not self-enclosed, (a kind of "productive self-sufficiency") with minimal contact with the city. Third and relatedly, socially and culturally speaking, too, a rural area is in a close relationship with the city. In short, the terms urban and rural sociology may well become defunct, as the rural area and the city are not places with entirely distinct consumption and behavioural patterns. It would be more realistic to conceptualize the relationship between the city and the rural area not as oppositional or contradictory but as 'continuity'. What is meant here is not geographical continuity, although especially in metropolitan areas geographical continuity often holds. The point I am rather trying to emphasize is the sociological dimension of the matter.

The reason for this emphasis is that while on one hand integration is taking place from the sociological point of view, on the other a tremendous fracture in food and agriculture is occurring, with this fracture corresponding to a spatial shift. Stated more clearly, in today's world a dual structure exists in agricultural production and more generally in food: on one hand is industrial agricultural production (a giant global system of agroindustry with large property owning profiteers and dexterous hands exploiting the fertile upper layer of the soil and all natural resources with little responsibility, the subsistence agricultural farmer in major debt due to increased input costs, who eventually becomes propertyless or an urban or agricultural worker) and on the other hand is a kind of prosumption (production+consumption) which acts responsibly towards the planet and the future, cares about local and seasonal consumption and how, by whom and in what conditions food is produced. On the side of the spatial shift, while industrial agricultural production and the global seed/fertilizer/pesticide sector that makes it take place in the 'rural area', consumers of this kind of production reside in the city but also rural areas.

What can be termed as "responsible food prosumption", which can take many different forms and content is an urban and upper-middle class phenomenon. The production that makes this kind of consumption possible takes place in limited edition in cities and mostly in select farms. The relationship between these farms and the villages that they inhabit or are nearby is in most cases one of separation. So, those rural areas that once were – and in minds still are – responsible for "health foods production" are not the rural areas we now know.

We need to hear what Emel Karakaya Ayalp has to say about alternative food systems to understand the general framework that displays this scene: "the changing-transforming place of both producers and consumers in the current agricultural food system and consumers' doubts towards the conditions, nutritiousness and healthiness of food.

Multidimensional problems such as the increasing cost of the now mandatory agricultural input expenditure from seeds to irrigation systems, the disappearance of state subsidy, the corporatization of cooperatives and the disappearance of state institutions that purchase or guarantee wholesale purchase have all necessitated a new kind of organizing for the producer.”

At this very juncture that the state has abandoned its old roles, the global market has captured all corners of agriculture, and consumer-urbanites are questioning their role as passive consumers, producers and consumers alike have started devising different production/consumption/organization models. In many countries this search for new models has been triggered by economic crises. For instance, the already existing area of cooperatives (and its variants) that has gained speed since the Occupy movements have made possible, with the economic crisis, solidarist production/consumption models in the food sector.

So, what kind of possibilities does the fact that these processes are happening at the same time present? This short piece was written not so much to answer this question but rather to ask new questions.

At a time when rural areas and cities have come closer to the point of continuity, can one hope that the search for alternative food will have a significant effect on agricultural production, and can this be put forward as a political goal?

Can this search save the entire planet from being destroyed by the colossal machine called the “global-industrial system”?

Can a much smaller-scaled alternative production/consumption model stop the productive class, already caught in this machine, from being crushed beneath its wheels?

Can similar pursuits around the world cease to be the responsibility of the wealthy (those with economic and/or cultural capital), while uniting and meeting with producers who are quite literally fighting for their lives for a different model of production?



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