

“La misma realidad de cada lugar es diferente”

(“The same reality of each place is different”):

Case study of an organic farmers’ market in Lima, Peru

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Alternative food movements in North America and Western Europe have proliferated in recent years as producers and consumers attempt to reform what is perceived as a fatally flawed industrial food system. Meanwhile, agricultural producers in the global South are increasingly dispossessed of land and livelihoods as agro-industrial processes take on increasingly global dimensions. Given that many of the challenges facing small-scale producers in the North and South stem from similar patterns of agro-industrialization, might they also share similar responses to these challenges?

In this article I make a case for broadening the geographic frame of reference for alternative food systems by comparing farmers’ market research from the US with an organic farmers’ market in Lima, Peru. Data is drawn from the experiences of agricultural exchange participants, and broadens the field of inquiry into alternative geographies of globalizations (Bebbington 2001). What lessons and insights gained from research into market-based agro-food initiatives in the US could be applied to the movement/market for organic produce in Peru? What makes the case in Peru distinct from alternative food movements in the US, and what lessons can be drawn from these distinctions?

Northern-based alternative food movements include a diversity of approaches from the building of community food security coalitions (Bellows and Hamm 2002), to community gardens (Draper and Freedman 2010) and direct marketing strategies (Thilmany and Watson 2004). In Northern scholarship, principally from the US, the farmers’ market (FM) has been championed for its social embeddedness, linking producers and consumers into an economic exchange that benefits the farmer, and is an expression of individual values about local (sometimes organic) food and environmental stewardship (Brown and Miller 2008). At the same time, many scholars caution against reading too much into these markets; they have been critiqued for being overly determined by market mechanisms (Delind 2002; Hinrichs 2000), reifying local and organic food as the domain of white privilege (Guthman 2008), and doing very little to address systemic social injustices (Hinrichs and Allen 2008).

The neoliberal tendencies ascribed to alternative food movements in the US (Guthman 2008a; Guthman and Allen 2006; Alkon and Mares 2012) reinforce the idea that consumerism and individual choice are sufficient drivers of progressive agrarian change. What is politically possible becomes inscribed by market mechanisms, diminishing the potential for fundamental change in the food system through state-based intervention (Guthman 2008a).

At first glance it would appear that the US-based neoliberal critiques align quite well with developments in Peru's organic sector. Upon closer inspection, however, it seems that the organic FM in Peru has opened up a variety of unforeseen opportunities to further social and ecological commitments within the organic movement. Harris (2008: 55) cautions against the "tendency to read neoliberal logics and subjectivities in AFN [alternative food network] initiatives." Doing so may inadvertently reinscribe these logics, "closing down possibilities for constructive socio-environmental change in and through food networks" (2008:55). Use of Gibson-Graham's (1996) "reading for difference rather than dominance" suggests that not only do possibilities exist for re-creating neoliberalism, but that activist/scholars have a role to play in cultivating alternatives through their theoretical engagements (Harris 2008).

Subjects of this research show a critical reflection around the projects with which they are engaged, and have helped shape the nature of these market-based initiatives. Doing so puts into question the nature of neoliberalism, and opens up the political possibilities afforded to emerging alternative food movements. The farmers' market in Peru replicates many of these tensions between movement values and market forces (Allen and Kovach 2000), yet the resolution of this tension is conditioned by local actors and institutions.

To conduct this research I interviewed and worked alongside subjects affiliated with the farmers' market in Lima who also participated in an international exchange program designed to promote sustainable agriculture. Each of these individuals spent a year or more living and working on a variety of small to mid-size organic farms throughout the US, and has been able to leverage these experiences in their current work. Two exchange participants work as farm laborers on a small organic farm south of Lima, growing many of the same varieties found in markets on the West Coast of the US. Another has been instrumental in helping a cooperative of organic growers supply wholesale distribution outlets. And the fourth subject runs a successful dairy operation making cheese, yogurt, and butter, among other niche products for both the FM and a newly opened storefront in Lima.

The most influential players at the FM, however, are the "organic" NGOs. In effect, the international development community has joined forces with Peruvian NGOs and small-farmer advocates to promote an organic sector designed to improve farmer livelihoods and create a domestic market for their products (Castro-Aponte 2013). This trend of supporting market integration of small-scale producers follows broader trends in the development sector, which has itself responded to the increased neoliberalization of global markets (Ortiz 2006). Organic NGOs with stronger direct participation by producers tend to focus on additional goals related to household food security and rural development. However, they have all converged on one particular strategy, to varying degrees—encouraging farmers to adopt organic methods of production as a way get better prices for their products. These products are being sold in the newly emerging markets for organic produce that the NGOs themselves have helped create.

Findings from this research illustrate numerous points of convergence between alternative agro-food scholarship in the US and the organic FM in Peru. These relate to the neoliberal tendencies of market-oriented, consumer-driven initiatives to support broader social and environmental values of the burgeoning organic sector in Peru. However, organic NGOs and producers in this study recognize bottlenecks for the growth of the domestic organic sector. They include: a lack of awareness/knowledge by both consumers and producers; a lack of consumer demand due to a relatively small affluent population; and challenges around the institutional sustainability of NGOs and producer co-operatives. These challenges are linked to deeper structural issues that are not necessarily being addressed by promoting organic farmers' markets.

What I see in Peru is not the totalizing and constrictive neoliberal market forces dictating the function and form of a burgeoning alternative food movement. The FM in Lima represents an opening, creating opportunities for critical reflection, expansion of consumer awareness, and recognition of potential for the economic exchange to address broader social concerns.

Expanding the geographic frame of reference of alternative food systems allows for a more nuanced understanding of their origins, salience, and potential success. Ultimately, I argue that while market forces will continue to shape, and possibly undermine broader movement values in Peru, development sector interventions, combined with individuals committed to a set of "organic values" create new forms of embeddedness that justify the theoretical and practical exchange of ideas and experiences.

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