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COMMENTARY



## Complicating conventionalisation

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### ABSTRACT

A central theme of the literature on alternative food and drink markets is whether these efforts maintain their alterity as they grow, or whether they conventionalise. We argue that conventionalisation is not inevitable. Furthermore, analysts of the consumer version of this process, co-optation theory, often fail to recognise that alternative entrants often transform both sides of a market. In research at a food swap, we found that the desire to enact alterity became so exaggerated that participants were forced to ‘thread an oppositional needle’ as they rejected many offerings. We theorise that oppositional identities can at times be a bar to new markets. We conclude with reflections on the relevance of this finding for the larger ‘sharing’ economy.

### KEYWORDS

Food; cooptation;  
conventionalization;  
alternative foods; sharing  
economy

A central theme of the literature on alternative food and drink markets, including a number of papers in this special issue, is whether these efforts can maintain their alterity as they grow. Known on the production side as the ‘conventionalisation’ thesis, and most commonly associated with the work of Michael Pollan (Pollan, 2001), Julie Guthman (2004) and other agro-food scholars in California (Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2011), the conventionalisation thesis argues that as organic production expanded it came to look increasingly like the industrialised farming it intended to supplant. Over time organic meant little more than pesticide free, and early commitments to biodynamic farming principles were abandoned as factory farms attempted to minimise costs and maximise output.

On the consumer side, the discussion has been about ‘co-optation’, (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Willis & Schor, 2012), the idea that consumers are duped by corporations into believing that their ambitions to consume in alternative ways can be satisfied by commodified offerings. Whole Foods Market (<http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com>) positions itself as the vehicle through which consumers can shop to ‘change the world’. In this case as well, some scholars are dismissive that a consumer-oriented approach can do more than promoting new profit-making opportunities (Biro & Johnston, 2007; Johnston, 2008).

Both the conventionalisation and co-optation approaches promote an un-dialectical assumption of one-way influence. In the case of conventionalisation, the literature has

been dominated by research on California. But California is a unique, albeit important case, in which high land values alone are likely sufficient to explain the pressure to conventionalise. As even Guthman admits, in her account conventionalisation is overdetermined. This suggests that alternative production methods may be more viable in other parts of the country where the pressure to achieve high profitability is less intense. For example, research in New England suggests that Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms are growing rapidly, and scaling up without losing their alternative character (Fitzmaurice & Gareau, 2016; Wengronowitz, 2016). Conventionalisation is not inevitable, as its analysts often seem to imply.

But what about the consumption side? Is the story different there? In this short commentary, we will address some aspects of the conventionalisation/co-optation story from the demand side. After a discussion of co-optation theory, we attempt to complicate the discussion through the case of a recent innovation – the food swap. Based on new research from my project on the ‘sharing economy’, we discuss some of the ways in which a commitment to alterity can be a limiting factor in the ability of an innovation to succeed.

### Co-optation theory

Scepticism that consumer culture is a potent site for social change has a long history, particularly in progressive discourse. In their discussion of the politics of alternative food, Craig Thompson and Gokcen Coskuner-Balli (2007) describe this view as ‘co-optation theory’, noting its origins in the literature on subcultures (Hebdige, 2005) and general analyses of how mainstream culture has appropriated countercultural movements (Frank, 1997; Potter & Heath, 2004).

In its early guise, co-optation theory had a functionalist bent – ‘cooptation theory conceptualises the commercial marketplace as an ideological force that assimilates the symbols and practices of a counterculture into dominant norms’ (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p.135). But even without an explicitly ideological or systemic objective, individual corporations have been adept at profiting from the marketing of countercultural styles, attitudes and products. They seek to *Commodify Your Dissent*, in the words of Tom Frank and Matthew Weiland, who argue that since the 1960s, advertisers and marketers have found that resistance to the dominant culture is a gold mine of brand value (Frank, 1997; Weiland, 1997). Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2004) claim that a strategy aimed at changing consumer culture through counterculture or cultural rebellion is not only ineffective, it is a major force enabling consumer capitalism. In their view, ‘cool’ has become a key to status distinction and just another way to sell products. Similarly, “‘fair trade’ and “ethical marketing” ... certainly represent no threat to the capitalist system’, they are just new profit opportunities for firms.

Organic food is the classic co-optation example. (On the food case, see Biro & Johnston, 2007; Pollan, 2001; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Originally a small scale, alternative movement in the 1960s, as it grew, it was taken over by industrial farms and giant food processors, who now dominate the market. On the retail side, this transformation was achieved in large part by the growth of Whole Foods Market. Whole Foods pushed the pesticide-free part of the agenda, but jettisoned the emphasis on

small scale, social justice and local. At best, Whole Foods is seen as a slightly kinder, gentler Wal-Mart, relying on the same exploitative global commodity chains, but with high prices. And then of course, Wal-Mart itself entered the organics market, to considerable fanfare. This history has led some to be critical of attempts to reorient the food industry through ethical consumption. For example, Biro and Johnston take the view that it is 'irresponsible' to assume 'that the growth of a niche market can substitute for a social movement or for state regulation' (Biro & Johnston, 2007).

The core of co-optation theory is that if a resistant attitude, alternative product or practice is appropriated by a profit-making corporation, it is stripped of its ability to make change, of either a revolutionary or evolutionary type. Commodification *ipso facto* squelches genuine dissent. At its extreme, this view applies not only to corporate commodification, or the activities of powerful transnationals but also to small, independent, socially responsible businesses.

Deconstructing the assumptions behind the strong co-optation view suggests that this approach adopts a peculiar attitude towards consumption (Willis & Schor, 2012). If workers organise into unions to gain power and a higher share of the economic surplus, that is a noble attempt to make capitalism more equitable. If those same individuals organise as consumers to promote ecological sustainability or fair wages for others, they're dupes who are merely strengthening the system. As the consumer movements of the early twentieth century were eclipsed, and consumer culture grew more pervasive and encompassing, it is not surprising that efficacy of consumer action came to be doubted. But to single out the consumer marketplace as the one place incapable of becoming a viable site of political activity mistakes a historical moment during which consumption was depoliticised as an essential quality of the activity. We have elsewhere termed this a 'category error' (Willis & Schor, 2012).

The weaknesses of this view can also be seen when it is contrasted with its mirror, what we have called the 'CEO version' of co-optation theory. The managers of the most ambitious of the 'alternative' companies believe in their own power to co-opt the market, but for good. They envision strong market growth because they are responding to emerging values and consumer demands. In this scenario, competitors will mimic ethical practices, and eventually the values-driven consumption that their firms espouse will dominate. John Mackey, the founder of Whole Foods Market, notes that the company 'is not a business for the elite. We wanted the philosophy of the stores to spread throughout the culture. We wanted to change the world' (cited in Fishman, 2004). Such a philosophy is common with social mission brands, whose premise is their ability to transform the markets they operate in.

Both versions of co-optation theory are frequently essentialist and un-dialectical. In the progressive version, dissent is left with only a *faux* appearance, its authenticity overwhelmed by the much more powerful essence of capitalism. In the business version, resistance from the dominant paradigm just withers away, and yields no influence on the challenger, who remains pure. But in reality, both sides of the market change when viable alternatives to dominant practices emerge. As Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) have noted about the progressive view, it sees the market as far too monolithic, without differentiating between types of business, ownership structures and the consumer environment. A similar point applies to the CEO version. Far from

opposing the industrialisation of organics, Mackey's company has been its biggest enabler.

Of course, the literature does include dialectical formulations. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) argue that the organic foods movement *was* co-opted by industrialised agriculture and corporate distribution, but that led to a second wave of resistance in the form of a community agriculture movement made up of farmers markets, CSAs and local sourcing. They show that 'co-optation can generate a countervailing market response that actively promotes the oppositional aspects of a counterculture attenuated by the process of commercial mainstreaming'. The transformative and continuing alterity of CSAs is supported by more recent accounts (Fitzmaurice & Gareau, 2016; Thompson & Press, 2014; Wengronowitz, 2016). And dialectics can also be seen in 'real time', for example, in the back and forth between Whole Foods Market and its critics. In response to critiques by Michael Pollan, the corporation responded by changing its policies and defending itself. (Pollan's claim and Mackey's detailed response, can be found at [http://www.wholefoods.com/blogs/jm/archives/2006/06/detailed\\_reply.html](http://www.wholefoods.com/blogs/jm/archives/2006/06/detailed_reply.html).)

Likewise, Sam Binkley's account of the relation between countercultural and mainstream lifestyle businesses in the 1970s shows that transformation works both ways (Binkley, 2007). And Douglas Holt's alternative to the accounts of Frank and Heath and Potter traces a shift from cultural authority resting largely in the hands of advertising and marketing, to the backlash to that authority and a more dialectical relationship between the grass roots and corporations. In Holt's formulation, the reliance of the corporations on cultural innovation from the bottom makes them vulnerable to consumers' demands for authenticity and accountability to countercultural ideals (Holt, 2002).

Of course, these accounts raise their own questions and these issues are far from settled. From Thompson and Coskuner-Balli's analysis, it is unclear whether community agriculture can emerge from its status as a rearguard action to become a more dominant player. Binkley acknowledges that the counterculture was 'diluted'. In Holt's story, consumers operate as a powerful force disciplining corporate actions they don't like, yet they are unorganised. While this may have worked for the New Coke (the canonical example of consumers disciplining a company that dared to disregard their wishes), it strains credibility to think that spontaneous consumer outrage is sufficient to maintain the market's adherence to a set of ethical norms and principles.

### **The food swap: a Goldilocks problem**

Research from an ongoing project on the 'sharing economy' raises another set of questions for the future of alternative food and drink markets, namely the ways in which a commitment to alterity itself can be a limiting factor in the success of alternatives. In this case, the research site was a food swap (Carfagna et al., 2014; Fitzmaurice & Schor, *in press*; Schor, Fitzmaurice, Attwood-Charles, Carfagna, & Poteat, 2016). A food swap is a barter economy in which people bring prepared, but home-made foods to exchange with each other. The food swap we studied was an attempt to help people 'take-back their pantries', that is, to empower them to eat locally, cook healthily and to support alternative food production. Indeed, the swap was founded by

single people who found it difficult to use up vegetable shares in the CSAs they were members of. Thus, the swap was a consumer-side innovation designed to support an alternative production-side institution.

Over the course of an 18-month ethnography carried out by Connor Fitzmaurice, the food swap failed. Attendance flagged. Swaps were frequently cancelled. Even when they did occur, on some days only a small volume of trades occurred and participants went home with the food they had brought. As we argue in our forthcoming paper (Fitzmaurice & Schor, *in press*), a key aspect of that failure was the inability to articulate a positive vision of appropriate home-made food. In part, the difficulties people had in making trades were due to distinguishing practices by participants who attempted to gain status for themselves by excluding many categories of food, showing their 'foodie' knowledge, and rejecting items that were tainted by low-class meanings (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Schor et al., 2016). But our research also suggested that another dynamic impeded trades. Participants, and in particular the founders and core members, were forced to 'thread the needle' in terms of what they were looking for. On the one hand, the swap was animated by the commitment to oppose the industrial food system. This meant that characteristics such as seasonality, localness, production on small-scale farms and of course, organicness were highly valorised. In addition, ingredients that had more than minimal levels of processing were shunned. At the same time, participants were also concerned about issues of social justice and access. They wanted to differentiate themselves from overly foodie identities (Johnston & Baumann, 2007), and communicate a down-to-earth, common sensibility. This meant they looked for 'everyday' foods, rather than special occasion or overly alternative offerings. One way this second criterion asserted itself was in the rejection of the high-end artisanal foods that are part of the alternative food movement (Ocejo, 2014). The result was that by rejecting foods that were both too mainstream and too alternative, they were left with a small set of acceptable offerings. This created frustrated would-be swappers and a low volume of trade. The food swap came to suffer from a Goldilocks problem: this food was too hard, this one too soft. It was almost impossible to find 'just right'.

In the food swap case, the threat to a consumer-side food innovation did not come from the mainstream, but from dynamics within alternative networks. Attempting to carve out a viable identity in an increasingly crowded alternative foodscape proved impossible. I suspect this will become a more common problem as the foodscape continues to expand, especially on the consumer side. What our analysis shows is that it is now no longer sufficient to differentiate from one alternative – the conventional. A second axis of opposition is the overly artisanal, itself a response to the mainstream. As oppositions proliferate, the equivalent of product differentiation is occurring with food innovations. But unlike ordinary product differentiation, where 20 flavours of chips can easily coexist on a grocery shelf, values-based innovations are not so easily ecumenical. Threading the values needle involves core issues of morality, identity and meaning that are frequently exclusive. This case suggests a different conclusion than the findings of Kajzer Mitchell, Low, Davenport and Brigham (2017), in their interesting article on wild foods and foraging. They emphasise the importance of learning and pedagogy as a key to maintaining a strong (rather than weak) alternative institution or practice. Yet, the food swap also began with pedagogical ambitions, as it attempted to

help people learn to cook for themselves. But learning was overshadowed by boundary drawing, and adherence to standards of purity. This is a danger that a variety of alternative food initiatives need to be aware of.

### Concluding thoughts from the 'sharing' sector

The conventionalisation and co-optation stories are mainly about the power of markets, and how they exert a gravitational pull on attempts to create novel production and consumption institutions. The pressure to earn profits is generally an important part of these accounts. But it's also worth noting that not all alternative enterprises are compelled to maximise. As a result of their financial and personal relationships, New England CSA farmers feel greater freedom to 'farm with practices that, while not always directly profitable, support their vision' of sustainability. Through relational work with their customers, these farmers can display bunches of kale peppered with insect damage as a badge of honour. In the words of one farmer, they just need to 'try to stay in business so that they can keep doing what they love' (Fitzmaurice & Gareau, 2016, p. 231). These alternative values serve as important motivations and guiding principles in a region where CSA farmers generally make little money (Wengronowitz, 2016), especially if they factor in the opportunity cost of their time. Many are highly educated, with considerable earning power. (A CSA I belonged to was run by a man with a PhD-equivalent degree from Harvard Business School.) When profit maximising *is* a guiding principle, it becomes harder to avoid conventionalisation. We see this in our research on other sharing economic entities. As venture capitalists demand more growth and future profitability, platforms like Airbnb and TaskRabbit are changing in ways that they hope will yield higher returns, but at the same time are reducing the novel aspects of their platforms. They are reducing flexibility and autonomy for providers, and encouraging maximising behaviour. Personal connection, sociability and the moral imaginary which animated many early participants may be fading.

By contrast, the non-profits can go in the other direction, emphasising their alterity, particularly on cultural grounds. The food swap's Goldilocks problem is an example of cultural differentiation, which shows one kind of dynamic that can beset alternatives. In our study of a makerspace, we found another – a tendency to adopt culturally extreme styles that yielded maximum distinction and status value for participants (Attwood-Charles & Schor, 2016). Weirdness, deviance and a lack of economic rationality are highly valorised in this space. This cultural dynamic is another way of avoiding 'conventionalisation'. Indeed, self-described 'normies' in the space bemoan the lack of ordinary (i.e. conventional) making and activity. Unlike the food swap, this makerspace was a very successful initiative, but not necessarily one that is at risk of turning into TechShop (a for-profit makerspace chain).

At the present time, it is impossible to know how much conventionalisation will occur, not only in food and drink markets but also in the wide range of consumer areas where innovation is currently taking place. What does seem clear is that we cannot simply assume that all alternatives are doomed to morph into the very entities they were founded to oppose. While conventionalisation can and does occur, we need a more contextualised, historically informed and place-based analysis of when and where alternatives can succeed.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

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